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**RELATIONSHIPS WITH AGING PARENTS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR WELL-BEING IN MIDDLE-AGED COUPLES**

A Dissertation in  
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by

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## Abstract

Relationships with parents influence well-being across the life course. At midlife, these ties most often intersect with the offspring's marriage. Consequently, relationships with parents are likely to be a salient aspect of married life that affects each spouse's well-being and marital satisfaction. Such linkages, however, are not yet well understood.

This dissertation includes two studies that utilize a sample of 132 middle-aged married couples from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study. Study 1 examined how wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with their own parents are linked to their own and their partners' well-being. Study 2 considered how each spouse's views of relationship quality with their own parents influence the associations between support exchanges with parents and reports of well-being and marital satisfaction within couples.

Study 1 shows that wives' and husbands' reports of positive and negative relationship qualities with their own parents are associated with well-being. Husbands reported better well-being when wives had more positive qualities in the relationships with their own parents. In Study 2, wives reported greater life satisfaction when they gave more support to their parents and had less ambivalent feelings about these ties. Wives were less satisfied with their marriages, however, when they gave more support to their parents and their husbands reported less positive relationships with their own parents. Husbands were more satisfied with their marriages when they or their wives received more support from parents and had less ambivalence toward the parents; or when husbands received more support from parents and wives had more ambivalence toward their own parents. Finally, husbands reported lower depressive symptoms when wives received more support from their parents and husbands had less positive or more ambivalent ties with their own parents.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that wives' and husbands' affective evaluations of their own parent-child ties shape how their own and their partners' relationships with parents contribute to well-being and marital satisfaction. Findings underscore the mutual influences within couples and highlight the need for future work to gain a more nuanced understanding of how ties with parents affect individual and couple processes at midlife.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Relationships between children and their parents remain highly salient to both parties across the life course (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). The exchange of everyday assistance between parents and grown offspring (e.g., emotional support, practical help, advice) is prevalent among aging families (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Sutor, 2012). Likewise, the quality of the ties that adult offspring have with their parents has significant implications for health and psychological well-being (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992). The majority of middle-aged adults are married and living with their spouses (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), and so relationships with older parents most often occur within the backdrop of the offspring's marriage. Yet, beyond anecdote, little is known about whether and how relationships with parents are related to marital quality or well-being in one's partner. Given the interdependence between wives and husbands, the experiences and perceptions of both spouses may play a critical role in determining the degree to which ties with parents are beneficial or detrimental to well-being and marital quality at midlife.

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the implications of wives' and husbands' relationships with parents for their own and their partners' well-being and marital satisfaction during midlife. The two studies utilized data from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study (FES; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009) and explored mutual influences among middle-aged married couples. Study 1 examined associations between wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with their own parents and well-being in both partners. Importantly, analyses controlled for the variance in well-being explained by each spouse's report of marital satisfaction. Study 2 evaluated associations between wives' and husbands' everyday support

exchanges with their own parents and reports of well-being and marital satisfaction within the couple. The moderating roles of each spouse's report of relationship quality with their own parents were also considered.

This introduction chapter provides a review of the literature on relationships with aging parents and subjective well-being among middle-aged offspring, with a focus on the implications of relationship quality and support exchanges. I then discuss the rationale for expanding this line of research to examine the perspectives and outcomes experienced by one's spouse. Lastly, I conclude with a brief description of the key contributions of the present research.

### **Relationships with Aging Parents and Well-being at Midlife**

According to solidarity theory, relationships with parents are important to well-being throughout adulthood (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Two essential components of parent-child ties reflect the principle mechanisms through which intergenerational relations may influence well-being: (a) affective qualities of the relationship, and (b) the exchange of social support (Fingerman, Sechrist, & Birditt, 2013). These aspects of parent-child relationships are likely to influence whether such ties enhance or hinder offspring well-being. In this section, I emphasize the implications of relationship quality with parents and everyday support exchanges with parents for physical and psychological well-being among middle-aged offspring.

**Relationship quality with parents.** Affectional solidarity encompasses feelings of love, care, and understanding between children and their parents, and is reciprocally related to the frequency of intergenerational contact and support exchanges (Bengtson et al., 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Specifically, higher quality relationships are linked to more frequent association and involvement within parent-child ties. In addition to positive qualities, solidarity theory holds

that negative aspects of intergenerational relations (e.g., conflict and demanding behaviors) are common and can have a strong impact on well-being for each generation (Bengtson et al., 2002; Pillemer, Sutor, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006). Accordingly, scholars have proposed that positive and negative qualities of parent-child ties represent separate and distinct elements that both have significant implications for offspring well-being (e.g., Bengtson et al., 2002; Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Connidis & McMullin, 2002).

Furthermore, relationships with aging parents often involve a complex interplay of mixed emotions (Fingerman, 2001; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek 2008). The intergenerational ambivalence model posits that grown offspring may simultaneously experience positive and negative sentiments about their parent-child relationships (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Adult children, for example, may report coexisting feelings of warmth and antagonism toward their parents. Previous work suggests that ambivalence in interpersonal relations is highest within close family ties (e.g., those with parents), perhaps due to greater expectations for these relationships to be positive and supportive (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). More ambivalent ties with parents can also be highly unpredictable, and therefore may generate feelings of tension or stress (Fingerman et al., 2008; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004). Indeed, prior research has found that ambivalent relationships are more strongly associated with psychological distress than relationships with solely negative aspects (Uchino et al., 2004). Further, intergenerational ambivalence may be intensified at midlife, as parents incur increasing disability and offspring anticipate potential challenges related to their future care needs (Willson, Shuey, Elder, & Wickrama, 2006). Thus, highly ambivalent relationships with parents may have especially potent implications for well-being among middle-aged offspring. Collectively, the literature highlights the importance of considering multiple dimensions of

relationship quality in order to more fully capture the affective experiences within parent-child ties in later life.

*Associations with offspring well-being.* Given the long history and emotional nature of parent-child ties, it is likely that the quality of these relationships have lasting psychological and physical health consequences among adult offspring (Fingerman et al., 2013). Several studies indicate that affective qualities of the relationship with one's parents in early life are linked to well-being in adulthood. In a study of adults aged 25 to 74 years, retrospective evaluations of less supportive relations with parents during childhood were associated with a higher current risk of depressive symptoms and chronic health conditions (Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2004). Another study of young, middle-aged, and older adults found that reports of higher maternal affection in one's early years were related to higher current levels of positive affect, after accounting for a range of variables including parents' present status (i.e., living or deceased), individual and family demographics, and family structure (Davey, Tucker, Fingerman, & Savla, 2009). Likewise, negative elements of parent-child ties have been linked to persistent effects on well-being. For instance, physical abuse by a parent in childhood is related to poorer physical and psychological well-being in adulthood (Pitzer & Fingerman, 2010). Moreover, longitudinal research indicates continuities in the quality of parent-child relationships from middle childhood into young adulthood (Belsky, Jaffee, Hsieh, & Silva, 2001).

Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that parent-child relationship quality has an enduring influence on well-being across the life course, which may even transcend parental death. Strikingly, prior work indicates that the intensity of offspring reports of the parent-child bond (i.e., closeness, commitment, and influence) is not attenuated among those with deceased parents, and that the affective evaluations of these ties tend to be even more positive when both

mothers and fathers are no longer living (Shmotkin, 1999).

Specific to perceptions of relationship quality in adult intergenerational ties, research suggests that grown offspring who report feeling more loved and cared for by their aging parents experience lower levels of psychological distress (Bengtson et al. 2002; Umberson, 1992). Conversely, strain in the parent-child relationship is linked to poorer psychological well-being (Umberson, 1992; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). Similarly, greater closeness and affection in ties with older parents is related to better well-being, whereas high levels of conflict are associated with heightened distress (Levitt, Guacci, & Weber, 1992; Townsend & Franks, 1995). More ambivalent relationships with parents at midlife are also linked to diminished psychological well-being (Fingerman et al., 2008) and shorter telomere length, which may increase risk of chronic disease (Uchino et al., 2012). Together, these findings suggest that the quality of the relationship that children have with their parents during midlife has significant implications for their well-being.

**Everyday support exchanges with parents.** Solidarity theory proposes that the exchange of social support is an essential component of parent-child relationships throughout adulthood (Bengtson et al., 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Although the literature on adult intergenerational relations has largely focused on the unidirectional provision of caregiving support from grown offspring to their ill or disabled parents, everyday types of assistance given to aging parents are also important to consider. Compared with providing care in response to parents' illness or disability, giving everyday support to parents (e.g., emotional, practical, advice, financial) occurs more commonly and for a longer period of time (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013). Further, everyday help given to parents increases during midlife as parents experience the onset of chronic health conditions and age-related circumstances such as the transition to

widowhood (Kim et al., 2016). Likewise, middle-aged offspring frequently continue to receive everyday support from their parents. Research indicates that intergenerational support typically flows predominantly from parents to children until the parents near the end of their lives (Fingerman et al., 2013). Hence, support exchanges with parents are a defining feature of adult intergenerational ties, and therefore have the potential to impact the daily lives and experiences of middle-aged children.

*Associations with offspring well-being.* Despite the salience of everyday support exchanges with parents at midlife, few studies have examined whether and how these routine transfers are linked to well-being among middle-aged offspring (Fingerman, Kim, Tennant, Birditt, & Zarit, 2015). It is typically assumed that giving support has adverse implications for well-being, whereas receiving support is beneficial; yet, support exchanges with parents can elicit a host of complicated emotions (Fingerman et al., 2013). Although the provision of intergenerational support is often motivated by feelings of affection (Fingerman et al., 2011), for example, a son may also resent the demands that his parents place on him to help them with household tasks. Similarly, while a daughter may feel deep appreciation for her parents' financial assistance, this support could undermine her autonomy. Furthermore, while providing help to aging parents can be highly stressful (Aneshensel et al., 1995), research indicates that helping parents may have benefits for physical and psychological health (Roth et al., 2013). Thus, support exchanges with aging parents may have mixed implications for offspring well-being.

Previous research suggests that the provision of assistance to parents including practical help and emotional support is generally related to poorer well-being (Merz, Schulze, & Schuengel, 2010). These associations are modest, however, and may be attributed to differences

in sample characteristics as well as differences in how support is conceptualized and measured. A number of studies, for instance, consider the implications of caregiver role occupancy (e.g., whether one spent 100 or more hours in the past two years helping parents with personal activities of daily living) rather than the amount or type of assistance that is provided to parents (Amirkhanyan & Wolf, 2003, 2006; Marks, Lambert, & Choi, 2002; Marks, Lambert, Jun, & Song, 2008). Further, the vast majority of prior work has examined samples of parents with intensive care needs (i.e., functional disability), and so little is known about the associations between help given to parents and offspring well-being in samples with a more representative range of parents' cognitive and physical functioning. In a daily diary study examining a nationally representative U.S. sample, Savla, Almeida, Davey, and Zarit (2008) found that psychological distress among adult children was higher on days that routine assistance (i.e., instrumental and emotional support) was given to parents, even after accounting for time spent on daily paid work, leisure activities, and other types of helping activities. Similarly, in a nationally representative Dutch sample, offspring who provided more instrumental support to their parents (i.e., help with chores and odd jobs) reported poorer well-being; but those who gave more emotional support (i.e., showing interest or giving advice) reported better well-being (Merz, Consedine, Schulze, & Schuengel, 2009). These findings suggest that the nature of everyday support that is provided may play a part in these associations.

Still less is understood regarding the implications of support *received* from aging parents. Research indicates that young adults who receive more frequent everyday support from their parents report better psychological adjustment and well-being compared to those who do not receive such support (Fingerman, Pillemer, et al., 2012). At midlife, however, the benefits of receiving high levels of parental support may be attenuated due to changing developmental

needs. Relative to younger adults, middle-aged offspring likely perceive stronger personal and societal expectations to be autonomous. Consequently, receiving more frequent support from parents at midlife could be detrimental to well-being by threatening one's sense of self-worth and independence. In support of this possibility, Cichy, Stawski, and Almeida (2014) found that receiving more frequent emotional support from family members (e.g., parents, spouse/partner, children, or siblings) was associated with higher negative affect among middle-aged adults. Interestingly, this finding was evident for European Americans but not African Americans, which may reflect cultural differences in perceptions of received family support at midlife.

Most prior work is cross-sectional, and so it is not possible to draw conclusive inferences regarding causal relationships between everyday support exchanges with aging parents and well-being. Middle-aged offspring who have lower life satisfaction, for example, may give more support to parents because the provision of such support is a rewarding part of their otherwise unhappy lives. Likewise, adult children who report elevated depressive symptoms may receive more help from parents as a consequence of their heightened need for support. To date, two studies have examined the associations between everyday help exchanged with aging parents and well-being across time. Using a burst design over 7 days, Fingerman and colleagues (2015) found that middle-aged offspring reported more negative mood on days when they gave practical help, advice, or emotional support to an older parent. Nevertheless, help given to parents did not have a significant impact on the next day's mood, which indicates that these effects may be most evident over a relatively short time frame. Merz, Schuegel, and Schulze (2009) examined the implications of both support given to and received from parents for well-being among adult children across a 4-year period. They found that instrumental and emotional support exchanges were unrelated to changes in offspring well-being. Of note, however, this study assessed the

frequency of support exchanges within a limited response range (i.e., from 1 = *not at all* to 3 = *several times*) and without a specified time frame. Thus, the current literature underscores the need for additional research to explore associations between everyday support exchanges with parents and well-being among middle-aged offspring. Furthermore, a crucial direction is the examination of contextual factors (e.g., characteristics of parent-child ties) that may explain the conditions under which everyday support exchanges with parents have beneficial or harmful implications for offspring well-being (Fingerman et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2010).

**Potential differences between daughters and sons.** Traditional gender norms with regard to family ties suggest that relationships with aging parents may have stronger implications for well-being for adult daughters than for sons. Specifically, relative to sons, daughters are traditionally more involved in maintaining kin connections (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Indeed, research indicates that daughters give more frequent help (Chesley & Poppie, 2009; Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011) and are preferred by older mothers as a source of emotional and practical support (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). Moreover, sons' provision of support to aging parents is primarily driven by their normative beliefs about family support, but daughters' support is more motivated by the affective qualities of parent-child ties (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013). Whereas husbands are often highly dependent on their marriage to satisfy their social support needs, wives also tend to seek support from other family members (Antonucci, 2001; Westerhof & Stevens, 2006); thus, aging parents may represent a particularly strong source of support for wives. Finally, daughters' relationships with parents tend to be more emotionally intense, involving greater closeness, more interpersonal tensions (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001), and heightened ambivalence (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Given their frequent involvement in family support exchanges and the highly emotional quality of their ties with

parents, it is plausible that affective and behavioral characteristics of the parent-child relationship may be particularly salient to well-being among adult daughters.

Other research, however, indicates little differentiation in how sons and daughters experience the quality and nature of relationships with their aging parents (Fingerman et al., 2007, 2008; Logan & Spitze, 1996). Umberson and colleagues (1992, 1996) found, for example, that adult daughters and sons who reported greater support and less strain in relations with their parents both experienced lower psychological distress, and that there were no significant gender differences in these associations. Scholars have noted that more recent cohorts of daughters and sons are becoming less distinct in their intergenerational ties (Fingerman et al., 2013), which implies that relationships with aging parents may have similar implications for well-being among men and women. These findings suggest the need for additional research to gain greater insight into the potential role of child gender in these processes.

### **Relationships with Aging Parents and Well-being in the Context of Marriage**

The literature on aging families has largely focused on the implications of ties between grown children and their parents within the boundaries of the parent-child dyad. Scholars have begun to acknowledge, however, that a more complete understanding of intergenerational ties should consider the broader family context that often includes four or more parents with whom middle-aged couples divide their time and resources (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Ties with aging parents are most often situated within the offspring's marriage, and so it is critical to examine the implications of these relationships for both spouses (Polenick et al., in press).

To account for the wider impact of parent-child ties during adulthood, the perspectives and experiences of the offspring's spouse should be considered. Drawing from family systems theory, role theory, and interdependence theory, I next outline how relationships with aging

parents may influence marital quality and well-being for each partner in the marriage.

**Implications from family systems theory.** Family systems theory posits that tension will often occur between spouses surrounding interactions with a third party (e.g., a parent; Bowen, 1978). Building from this perspective, the relational dynamics among adult children, their parents, and their spouses have been conceptualized as challenging to navigate for all parties, given the involuntary nature of the in-law tie and the difficult negotiation of power and status within the family (Morr Serewicz, 2006a). Moreover, these relationships are inherently triadic in structure, and so mutual influences occur among the three parties. To illustrate this concept, research indicates that middle-aged married couples frequently encounter unresolved issues concerning their relationships with either or both sets of parents, such as balancing time spent with parents versus one's spouse or children, conflict related to honoring the wishes of parents versus the wishes of one's spouse, and the determination of boundaries and distance between the couple and their respective families of origin (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003; Silverstein, 1990).

In particular, a partner's lack of differentiation from his or her family of origin can be problematic for the marital system (Bowen, 1978). Powerful alliances between one's spouse and parents-in-law could either complicate or inhibit the autonomous functioning of the couple. A wife who receives frequent support from her parents, for instance, may be interdependent with them in a way that her husband feels is intrusive. Thus, he may be highly dissatisfied with their marriage. Adult children tend to have stronger bonds with their own parents than their parents-in-law (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift & Pitzer, 2012). Therefore, relative to relations with one's own parents, the everyday interactions that one's partner has with his or her parents may be more likely to be viewed as overinvolvement or interference in the marriage.

On the other hand, research indicates that parents-in-law are commonly considered as central members of one's own social network. In an ethnically diverse sample of couples, Santos and Levitt (2007) found that nearly half of respondents included their parents-in-law among their closest and most important ties. This was especially likely for wives and husbands who have been married for a longer period of time, which suggests that relationships with parents-in-law may even increase in importance during midlife. As a consequence, the benefits of positive and supportive parent-child ties for well-being may extend to both spouses. Likewise, negative or ambivalent relations with parents could have adverse implications for each partner.

**Implications from role theory.** Ties with parents may also contribute to well-being within the adult child's marriage through their actual or perceived impact on family resources. Role theory proposes that one's multiple role responsibilities are invariably in conflict over the distribution of one's limited resources (e.g., time, energy, money; Goode, 1960). Applied to family roles, role theory suggests that it is not possible for a person to sufficiently meet all demands to the full satisfaction of each family member. In support of this point, research indicates that spouses may view aging parents as competitors for time and affection within their marriage, which can contribute to feelings of jealousy and rivalry (Chasin, Gruenbaum, & Hertzog, 1990; Silverstein, 1990). A husband who gives more frequent help to his mother, for example, inevitably has less time to spend with his wife. Consequently, she may be dissatisfied with their marriage and may also experience psychological distress.

Furthermore, people may experience strain or pressure from a close third party (e.g., their spouse) when they devote more time and energy to one role (e.g., the adult daughter/son role) than the third party believes is normative or appropriate (Goode, 1960). In turn, the third party may attempt to change the patterns in this relationship. Supporting this perspective, a study of

daughters caring for aging parents found that caregivers' perceptions of their husbands' attempts to interfere with the caregiving role were linked to decreases in their marital satisfaction over the course of a year (Suitor & Pillemer, 1994). Further, interfering husbands tended to view wives' caregiving activities as hindering their performance in other family roles, particularly with regard to their marriage. Although not examined in this study, it is possible that more frequent support given by one's partner to his or her parents could also lead to greater (and perhaps unwanted) contact with parents-in-law and/or expectations to assist in the provision of this support.

**Implications from interdependence theory.** Roles have further been conceptualized as intrinsically embedded within the context of one's important social ties, such as the marital relationship (Peplau, 1983). According to interdependence theory, spouses mutually convey their own values, beliefs, and experiences with regard to a given role using direct and indirect means (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). In turn, each partner affects and is affected by the other party's engagement in numerous social roles.

It is therefore plausible that wives' and husbands' perceptions of their own adult child roles may impact whether and how ties with parents are related to well-being and marital quality within the couple. Indeed, a prior study of middle-aged couples indicates that each spouse's normative and motivational beliefs about helping parents condition the dyadic linkages between everyday support given to aging parents and marital satisfaction (Polenick et al., in press). Overall, this study found that husbands' more frequent support given to their parents was linked to wives' greater marital satisfaction when wives or husbands reported greater personal rewards from helping their own parents. Conversely, wives' more frequent support given to their parents was linked to husbands' lower marital satisfaction when husbands' filial obligation (i.e., feelings of responsibility to help aging parents) was low or when wives' filial obligation was high.

Views of the affective qualities of parent-child ties may also impact how support exchanges with parents are linked to the couple's well-being or marital quality. If a husband perceives more conflict in the relationship with his own parents, for example, more frequent support exchanged with his parents may be associated with poorer well-being in both spouses because of increased exposure to negative or unpredictable family interactions. Similarly, affective evaluations of the ties with one's own parents could influence how support exchanges between one's partner and parents-in-law are related to well-being and marital quality. A wife who reports a high quality relationship with her parents, for instance, may be happier in her marriage when her husband exchanges more help with his parents because she values supportive parent-child ties. In contrast, a husband who has a contentious relationship with his parents may view his wife's support exchanges with her parents less favorably. As such, he could experience greater distress when she gives more frequent help to her parents.

Furthermore, spouses depend upon one another to fulfill important relational needs, such as social support, emotional closeness, and affection (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Interdependence theory proposes that levels of marital satisfaction reflect the extent to which wives and husbands believe that their partner adequately fulfills these needs. Each partner's degree of dependence on the marriage, however, tends to be contingent on the availability and quality of other sources of social support. Thus, it is possible that poorer quality ties with parents may increase one's dependency on the marriage to satisfy social support needs. A wife who has highly negative ties with her own parents, for instance, may have lower marital satisfaction when her husband exchanges more support with own parents because these exchanges invariably take his time away from attending to her needs. Conversely, high quality relationships with one's parents may reduce such dependency on the marriage. A husband who has highly positive parent-child ties,

for example, may be more satisfied with his marriage when his wife exchanges more support with her parents because they both view parents as a valuable source of social support.

**Relationships with parents and marital quality.** Research suggests that the nature of parent-child ties may have an enduring influence on marital quality. Strikingly, perceptions of relationship quality with parents from one's early years may be consequential. Sabatelli and Bartel-Haring (2003) found that, in young newlywed couples, recalled patterns of interaction in wives' family of origin that reflected greater empathy, respect, and tolerance for individuality were linked to better marital adjustment in both spouses. Husbands' reports of family of origin experiences, however, were related only to their own adjustment. These findings are in line with prior work suggesting that wives play a more central role in maintaining a positive affective climate in the marriage (e.g., Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997).

Current relationships with parents may be a critical source of social support that enhances a marriage, but they may also be a source of strain (e.g., Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Reczek, Liu, & Umberson, 2010). Among wives and husbands, Reczek and colleagues (2010) found that greater support (i.e., feelings of being loved and cared about) and less strain (i.e., criticism or demands) in relationships with one's own parents were associated with more marital closeness and less marital distress, respectively. Importantly, this pattern of findings was evident across an 8-year period. Although support from parents in this study was linked to more marital closeness among young couples or those who were married for a shorter amount of time, greater parental support was associated with *less* marital closeness among middle-aged adults and those married for a longer period of time. These findings suggest that, for middle-aged couples in established marriages, highly supportive relations with parents may weaken the marital bond.

Similarly, negative aspects of ties with aging parents may have adverse implications for the marriage. In a sample of couples married for an average of two decades, Bryant and colleagues (2001) found that both partners' reports of relationship discord with parents-in-law (i.e., conflict, unhappiness, and demanding behavior) predicted lower levels of stability, satisfaction, and commitment in the marriage over the course of a 4-year period.

Turning to the linkages between support exchanges with aging parents and marital quality, current findings are somewhat equivocal. Research investigating the provision of caregiving support to disabled older parents suggests that caregivers who feel more burdened (Adamson, Feinauer, Lund, & Caserta, 1992; Ron, 2006) or have spent a longer time giving support (Bookwala, 2009) report lower marital quality, perhaps due to spillover from the caregiver role to the marriage. Conversely, Sutor and Pillemer (1994) found that declines in marital satisfaction among caregiving wives occurred only when wives felt that their husbands were not emotionally supportive or that they tried to interfere with care efforts. Other work indicates that having a supportive spouse can enhance marital satisfaction among wives caring for their parents. For instance, Franks and Stephens (1996) found that caregiving daughters who received more instrumental and emotional support from their husbands in response to their own needs and in response to the needs of their ill parent were more satisfied with their marriages. Notably, this study used reports from both spouses and found moderate to high levels of agreement in their assessment of husbands' support.

Relative differences in spouses' actual or ideal perceptions of support exchanges with parents may also be an important factor to consider. In a study of everyday support exchanges with older parents, the total amount of support exchanged by middle-aged couples was unrelated to marital satisfaction (Lee, Zarit, Rovine, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2012). Spouses were less

satisfied in their marriages, however, when they reported giving or receiving a greater amount of support than did their partners. Another study found that greater spousal dissimilarity in filial obligation was linked to lower marital satisfaction among middle-aged husbands (Polenick, Seidel, Birditt, Fingerma, & Zarit, 2015). Taken together, the current literature supports the value of accounting for the views and experiences of both spouses with regard to the implications of support exchanges with aging parents for their marriage.

**Relationships with parents and well-being within the couple.** Still less is known about the implications of support exchanges with parents for well-being within middle-aged couples. In a study of caregiving wives, receiving more instrumental support from husbands in providing care to an ill parent was found to buffer the association between greater care-related stress and poorer self-rated physical health (Franks & Stephens, 1996). Counter to prediction, however, receiving more emotional and instrumental support from husbands in response to *wives' own needs* exacerbated the negative impact of care-related stress on wives' positive affect. It may be that husbands' help in care-related activities is especially salient to wives' well-being, whereas husbands' attempts to be supportive in more general ways could be viewed as misguided or unhelpful. Other research has considered the associations between giving support to parents and psychological distress among middle-aged couples. Amirkhanyan and Wolf (2003) found that having a spouse who provided caregiving support to impaired older parents was unrelated to depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, in a subsequent study that separately examined the association between parental care needs and offspring well-being, having a parent-in-law with a functional disability was linked to increased depressive symptoms among husbands (but not wives) only when they were not directly involved in giving support (Amirkhanyan & Wolf, 2006). Conversely, caring for one's own parents was associated with elevated depressive

symptoms among wives but not husbands. Although these findings may not generalize to husbands and wives giving everyday support to parents, they underscore the value of considering the implications of helping aging parents for well-being in a couple context.

**Mutual influences among wives and husbands.** Two prior studies of midlife couples found no gender differences in the association between relationship quality with parents and marital quality (Bryant et al., 2001; Reczek et al., 2010). No known research, however, has explored gender differences in the dyadic linkages between parent-child relationship quality and physical or psychological indicators of well-being among middle-aged wives and husbands. Likewise, little is known about gender differences in the association between everyday support exchanges with aging parents and well-being. On the basis of women's traditional role as family kinkeepers, it is possible that wives' well-being may be more affected by husbands' relationships with parents rather than vice versa. Relative to men, women spend more time engaged in support exchanges with parents, parents-in-law, and other family members (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Gerstel, 2000; Kahn et al., 2011). Furthermore, women face stronger cultural and societal expectations to maintain close and supportive ties within their families (Blair-Loy, 2003; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Consequently, wives' relatively greater investment in family relationships may heighten their sensitivity to the quality and nature of their husbands' ties with parents. Hence, wives' well-being and marital satisfaction may be highly susceptible to the implications of the ties between their partners and parents-in-law.

Considering the irreplaceable nature of parent-child ties, it is likely that middle-aged spouses often choose to maintain these relationships even when doing so could have deleterious consequences for their well-being (Fingerman et al., 2013). Indeed, research suggests that middle-aged offspring give everyday support to their parents at least once per week (Fingerman

et al., 2015). Therefore, a critical area for future research is to determine whether and how relationships with aging parents affect well-being among wives and husbands, as well as the conditions under which these ties may be most beneficial or harmful within the marriage.

### **The Present Research**

This dissertation takes a dyadic perspective to gain greater insight into how ties with aging parents contribute to spouses' well-being and marital quality at midlife. Understanding the mutual influences that occur among married couples will provide a more complete picture of how ties with parents and parents-in-law may affect middle-aged offspring. Furthermore, examining reports from wives and husbands within the same couple will shed light on gender differences and similarities in these mutual influences. In sum, the following studies propose that affective and behavioral characteristics of the relationships that wives and husbands have with their aging parents have significant implications for *their own* and *their partners'* subjective well-being and marital satisfaction. Each spouse's affective evaluation of their own parent-child ties may be a lens through which relationships with parents are interpreted and experienced within the marriage.

## CHAPTER 2. STUDY 1

### Relationship Quality with Parents and Well-being in Middle-aged Couples

Affective evaluations of the ties with one's parents are linked to well-being across the life course (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Davey, Tucker, Fingerman, & Savla, 2009; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Ingersol-Dayton, 2004; Umberson, 1992). Parent-child relationships are among the most long-standing and emotionally intense social ties, and often involve complex positive and negative feelings (Fingerman, 2001; Fingerman et al., 2008). Remarkably, adult children's perceptions of relationship quality with parents continue to shape their well-being even after the parents' death (Davey et al., 2009; Shmotkin, 1999).

Most middle-aged adults are married and living with their spouses (U.S. Census, 2013), and so relationships with aging parents are most often situated in the context of the offspring's marriage. Consequently, an understudied possibility is that the quality of each spouse's ties with their parents may have implications for well-being in both partners. This study examined dyadic associations between middle-aged wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with their own parents and three indicators of subjective well-being (depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-rated health).

### **One's Own Relationship Quality with Parents and Well-being**

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have found that global perceptions of parent-child relationship quality are positively associated with offspring well-being (Merz, Consedine, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009; Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009). In order to gain a fuller understanding of how relationships with parents may influence well-being, however, scholars have argued that it is imperative to consider both positive and negative elements of these ties

(e.g., Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Birditt et al., 2009; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Such opposing qualities are likely to have different implications for interaction patterns with parents and their consequences for adult children's subjective well-being.

**Positive relationship quality with parents.** Prior research has found that positive components of social ties (e.g., emotional support, companionship) enhance mental and physical health. These findings may be attributed in part to increased social support and motivation to engage in self-care activities (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Croezen et al., 2012; Rook, 2015), better immune functioning (Uchino, 2006), and lower levels of inflammatory biomarkers (Uchino et al., 2015; Yang, Schorpp, & Harris, 2014). Further, close relationships can contribute to positive emotional states that have direct and indirect benefits for psychological and physical health, respectively (Charles & Mavandadi, 2004). Specific to parent-child relationships, several studies have found that adult children who report more rewarding and supportive (e.g., feeling loved and cared for) relationships with parents experience lower levels of psychological distress (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992; Bengtson et al. 2002; Levitt, Guacci, & Weber, 1992; Umberson, 1992). These studies suggest that positive aspects of parent-child relationships may benefit health and emotional well-being in middle-aged offspring.

**Negative relationship quality with parents.** Although the majority of parents and adult children perceive their relationships as supportive, interpersonal problems in these ties are also common and are a substantial source of distress for both parties (Pillemer, Suito, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006). Problematic aspects of social ties have consistently been associated with poorer mental and physical health (Newsom, Rook, Nishishiba, Sorkin, & Mahan, 2005). For instance, greater interpersonal conflict, criticism, and excessive demands

from significant members of one's social network can function as a direct source of psychosocial stress (Newsom et al.), which can lead to adverse physical health outcomes including poorer self-rated health, elevated inflammation, hypertension, and a greater likelihood of illness, disability, and mortality (Rook, 2014, 2015; Yang et al., 2014).

In a nationally representative sample of adults, Croezen and colleagues (2012) found that greater social strain was linked to an increased risk of worse psychological well-being and poorer self-rated health across a 10-year period. Importantly, negative emotional experiences in close relationships (e.g., parents and offspring) may be most deleterious to well-being, and could even outweigh the benefits of positive social support (Rook, 2015). Furthermore, conflict in close relationships may persist over time and represent a potential source of chronic stress (Rook, 2015). Indeed, strain experienced in the parent-child relationship is associated with worse psychological well-being (Umberson, 1992; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). Thus, current findings indicate that negative elements of relationships with parents may be detrimental to subjective well-being among middle-aged children.

**Intergenerational ambivalence.** Additionally, research indicates that parents and grown offspring experience ambivalence in their relationships; that is, the simultaneous existence of *both* positive and negative relational sentiments (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Willson, Shuey, Elder, & Wickrama, 2006). High levels of intergenerational ambivalence have been linked to poorer psychological well-being (Fingerman et al., 2008) and lower affectional solidarity within these ties (Birditt et al., 2009). Compared with negative relationship qualities, ambivalence in family relationships is more strongly associated with elevated depressive symptoms (Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004). Moreover, greater ambivalence in one's family network is linked to heightened physiological responses (e.g., cardiovascular reactivity) to stressors (Holt-

Lunstad, Uchino, Smith, Olsen-Cerny, & Nealey-Moore, 2003; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Uno, & Flinders, 2001) as well as higher levels of inflammatory biomarkers (Uchino et al., 2015). The link between ambivalence and poorer well-being may in part be due to stress generated from the unpredictability of relationships that are ambivalent in nature (Fingerman et al., 2008; Uchino et al., 2004). Taken together, these studies underscore the importance of examining associations between mixed emotions in parent-child ties and well-being among middle-aged offspring.

### **One's Partner's Relationship Quality with Parents and Well-being**

Relationships with parents may be a source of support or strain in a marriage (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Reczek, Liu, & Umberson 2010). In accord with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008), partners mutually convey their perceptions and experiences within a given social role (e.g., adult daughter/son). Thus, wives' and husbands' views of relationship quality with their own parents may have direct or indirect implications for subjective well-being in both spouses. Positive qualities in these ties, for example, may benefit each partner by instilling a sense of social belonging. Conversely, conflictual encounters with wives' or husbands' parents may lead to stress or other adverse emotional experiences in the marriage. Intergenerational tensions involving communication problems and disagreements over lifestyle choices or personal habits are common (Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengtson, 1999). Other frequent tensions include issues related to contact frequency, unsolicited advice, and decisions about child rearing (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003; Birditt et al., 2009). These tensions can directly or indirectly involve one's partner, and so they have the potential to affect the well-being of both spouses. Therefore, whereas positive aspects of parent-child ties are likely to enhance the quality of family interactions, negative aspects of these ties could compromise the affective climate of the couple's marriage as well as the broader family support network.

Consistent with a family systems perspective, relationships among adult children, their parents, and their partners are triadic in nature (Bowen, 1978). As such, interactions between one dyad (e.g., adult child and parent) have the potential to affect the third party (e.g., the adult child's spouse; Morr Serewicz, 2006b). When a wife has highly positive ties with her own parents, for instance, her parents may be a crucial source of advice, emotional support, and companionship that benefits each spouse. In contrast, when a wife perceives high levels of criticism or demands from her own parents, the couple may repeatedly be exposed to stressful circumstances that are difficult or impossible to resolve. Hence, wives' and husbands' views of relationship quality with their own parents may influence their partners' subjective well-being.

**Differences between wives and husbands in the associations between relationship quality with parents and well-being.** Considering the salience of parent-child relationships throughout adulthood (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002), it is likely that the quality of these ties is linked to subjective well-being for both men and women. Whereas some studies suggest that adult daughters have greater closeness and conflict than adult sons in their relations with parents (Birditt et al., 2009; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Fingerman, 2001), other work has found few gender differences in how parent-child relationships are experienced by grown offspring (Fingerman et al., 2007, 2008; Logan & Spitze, 1996; Umberson, 1992). This lack of consensus in the literature suggests the need for additional research to determine whether the associations between relationship quality with parents and subjective well-being are different for middle-aged wives and husbands.

Prior work has not examined the associations between *one's partner's* perceptions of relationship quality with parents and well-being. Given wives' traditional role as family kinkeepers, partners' reports of relationship quality with their parents may be more strongly

linked to wives' well-being. Compared with men, women face more cultural expectation to be successful at maintaining close and supportive relationships within their family networks (Blair-Loy, 2003; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In addition, women spend more time than men providing support to parents, parents-in-law, and other family members (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Gerstel, 2000; Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). Whereas husbands' positive ties with parents may support wives' efforts to sustain positive family interactions, husbands' negative or ambivalent ties with parents may complicate or thwart these efforts. Consequently, wives' well-being may be more impacted than husbands' well-being by positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of their partners' ties with parents.

### **The Present Study**

This study examined associations between multiple aspects of wives' and husbands' perceived relationship quality (positive, negative, and ambivalent) with their own parents and three indicators of subjective well-being (life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, and self-rated health). It was predicted that husbands and wives who reported higher positive relationship quality with their own parents would report better well-being. Conversely, it was hypothesized that husbands and wives who reported higher negative qualities or more ambivalent ties with their own parents would report worse well-being. Beyond these associations, it was predicted that reports of higher positive relationship quality with parents by one spouse would be linked to better well-being in his or her partner, whereas reports of higher negative relationship quality or greater ambivalence toward parents by one spouse would be linked to poorer well-being in his or her partner. It was hypothesized that one's own and one's partner's ambivalence toward parents would have particularly strong associations with well-being.

Furthermore, it was predicted that associations between relationship quality with parents

reported by *one's partner* and well-being would be significantly stronger for wives than for husbands. Differences between wives and husbands in the strength of associations between relationship quality with *their own* parents and well-being were examined without specific predictions.

## Methods

### Participants

The sample included heterosexual married couples drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study (FES; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). These couples were recruited in two steps. First, an eligible participant was identified within each household. Participants were recruited from the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (urban, suburban, and rural areas), which includes five counties in Southeastern Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). Individuals were eligible for the study if they were aged 40 to 60 years, and had at least one living parent and at least one child aged 18 years or older. Participants were contacted via telephone using lists purchased from Genesys Corporation and random digit dialing in regional area codes. An age-stratified sampling method was used (aged 40 to 50 years and aged 51 to 60 years), and screening interviews were conducted to determine whether each household included an eligible participant. Of the 845 eligible participants, 633 (75%) completed an interview at Wave 1.

Second, participants were asked to provide contact information for their spouse if the participant was married and spouses shared parenthood of the participant's adult offspring. Among the 633 participants, 335 (51%) were married and 287 (86%) agreed for their spouses to be contacted. Of the 287 spouses, 197 (71%) completed interviews. Thus, 197 married couples participated in the study at Wave 1. Relationship quality with parents could have different

implications for married couples when one or both spouses have no living parents. Therefore, this study focused on 132 couples in which wives and husbands each had at least one living parent. Participants from these couples reported having an average of 2.59 children of all ages ( $SD = 1.27$ ) and 1.84 children aged 18 years or older ( $SD = 0.93$ ). Table 1 shows demographic and background characteristics for the 132 couples.

## Measures

**Depressive symptoms.** Depressive symptoms were assessed with five items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Melisarator, 1983). On a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*quite a bit*), participants reported how distressed or bothered they were over the past 7 days by the following symptoms of depression: feeling lonely, feeling blue, feeling no interest in things, feeling hopeless about the future, and feelings of worthlessness. Mean scores were 1.49 for wives ( $SD = 0.63$ , range 1.00 – 4.60,  $\alpha = .80$ ) and 1.47 for husbands ( $SD = 0.64$ , range = 1.00 – 3.80,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was measured with one item adapted from a single item measure used in previous research (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000). Participants rated their overall life satisfaction on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*). Scores were 7.48 for wives ( $SD = 1.67$ , range = 1.00 – 10.00) and 7.53 for husbands ( $SD = 1.57$ , range = 1.00 – 10.00).

**Self-rated health.** Participants rated their overall physical health on a scale of 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Scores were 3.64 for wives ( $SD = 0.99$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00) and 3.73 for husbands ( $SD = 0.93$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00).

**Positive relationship quality with parents.** Positive relationship quality with one's own parent(s) was assessed with two items that reflect feelings of care and intimacy in the parent-

child relationship. Participants rated (a) how much they felt loved and cared for by their mother/father, and (b) how much they felt understood by their mother/father from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (Umberson, 1992). Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. Mean scores were 4.04 for wives ( $SD = 0.74$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00) and 3.98 for husbands ( $SD = 0.84$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00). The Spearman-Brown estimate is recommended as a more appropriate reliability coefficient than alpha for two-item scales (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). Spearman-Brown coefficients were .70 for wives and .72 for husbands.

**Negative relationship quality with parents.** Negative relationship quality with one's own parent(s) was assessed with two items that indicate perceptions of negative interactions within the parent-child relationship. Participants rated (a) how much criticism they receive from their mother/father, and (b) how much demands their mother/father makes on them from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (Umberson, 1992). Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. Mean scores were 1.93 for wives ( $SD = 0.77$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00) and 1.91 for husbands ( $SD = 0.77$ , range = 1.00 – 4.50). Spearman-Brown reliability coefficients were .57 and .61 for wives and husbands, respectively. Negative relationship qualities were significantly correlated with positive relationship qualities with parents for wives ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and husbands ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

**Ambivalence toward parents.** Scholars have proposed that an indirect approach of assessing ambivalence may be more effective than directly asking participants about their mixed feelings (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Sutor, 2002). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman et al., 2008; Willson et al., 2006), ambivalence regarding one's own parent(s) was calculated using Griffin's similarity and intensity of components formula:  $[(\text{positive} + \text{negative})/2 - |\text{positive} - \text{negative}|] + 1.5$  (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin,

1995). This formula accounts for both similarity and intensity of coexisting positive and negative feelings about the relationship. Thus, a high ambivalence score occurs when similarly high levels of positive and negative sentiments are reported. A wife with a positive score of 4 and a negative score of 1, for instance, has a low ambivalence score (1.00). In contrast, a wife with a positive score of 4 and a negative score of 5 has a higher ambivalence score (5.00), showing a greater mix of positive and negative feelings. Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. Mean scores were 2.28 for wives ( $SD = 1.14$ , range = 0.50 – 6.50) and 2.25 for husbands ( $SD = 1.13$ , range = 0.50 – 4.75), which reflect overall low similarity and intensity in reports of positive and negative relationship qualities on average.

**Control variables.** Based on research consistently showing significant associations between marital quality and well-being (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014), models controlled for the variance explained by own and partner reports of marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed with one item adapted from prior research (Umberson, 1989). Participants rated the overall quality of the marital relationship on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Mean scores were 4.11 for wives ( $SD = 0.95$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00) and 4.21 for husbands ( $SD = 0.97$ , range = 1.00 – 5.00). Although it is generally not ideal to use such single item measures, scholars have argued that the assessment of marital quality is best limited to an overall evaluation of sentiment toward the marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

Previous research suggests that positive and negative relationship qualities may be more intense (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001) and more strongly linked to offspring well-being (Umberson, 1992) in parent-child relationships that include aging mothers. Therefore, to adjust for potential variations in these linkages between spouses who have a living mother versus those

who do not, models controlled for whether or not each spouse's mother was currently living (1 = *mother living*, 0 = *mother not living*).

Lastly, demographic characteristics of husbands and wives were considered as potential covariates. These characteristics included age, minority status (1 = *racial or ethnic minority*, 0 = *non-Hispanic White*), and years of education (see Table 1).

### **Analytic Strategy**

To account for the nonindependence in married couples and to investigate mutual influences between husbands and wives, actor-partner interdependence models (APIM; Kenny, 1996) were estimated using the mixed model procedure in SPSS Version 22. The APIM pairs a conceptual model of relational interdependence with statistical techniques that facilitate the simultaneous estimation of each party's influence on outcomes within the dyad. Thus, associations between relationship quality with parents and well-being reported by both spouses were examined. In the present study, *actor effects* refer to the extent to which wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with parents are linked to *their own* well-being (e.g., wives' positive relationship quality with parents predicting wives' life satisfaction). *Partner effects* refer to the extent to which wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with parents are linked to *their partners'* well-being (e.g., wives' positive relationship quality with parents predicting husbands' life satisfaction). A simplified conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

**Covariates.** All models controlled for own and partner reports of marital satisfaction. In addition, bivariate correlations were conducted between other potential covariates (age, minority status, and years of education) and each well-being indicator. Self-rated health was significantly correlated with minority status ( $r = -.14, p = .02$ ) and years of education ( $r = .16, p = .01$ ). None

of the potential covariates were related to depressive symptoms or life satisfaction. Because covariates that are not significantly related to the outcome can result in spurious relations among variables (Rovine, von Eye, & Wood, 1988), only variables that were correlated with the outcome were included as covariates in the models. To avoid multicollinearity between spouses' reports of minority status, a variable was created to indicate whether the couple included at least one spouse who was a racial/ethnic minority (1 = *at least one spouse is a racial/ethnic minority*, 0 = *both spouses are non-Hispanic White*). Couple-level minority status was related to self-rated health ( $r = -.15, p = .02$ ). Therefore, models for self-rated health controlled for couple-level minority status and each spouse's years of education.

**APIM analyses.** Separate models were evaluated for the three well-being indicators. Each model estimated a separate intercept for wives and husbands to enable examination of actor and partner effects for both spouses. To determine actor and partner effects of relationship quality with parents, own and partner reports of relationship quality were entered in the models for each indicator of well-being. Positive, negative, and ambivalent relationship quality with parents were examined in separate models.

Whereas traditional models that consider the *person* as the unit of analysis (e.g., multiple linear regressions) estimate actor and partner effects in separate models for wives and husbands, the APIM considers the *dyad* as the unit of analysis. As such, significant differences in these effects between wives and husbands were tested in a single intercept model with the inclusion of spouse role as a distinguishing variable (-1 = *husband*, 1 = *wife*; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Interaction terms (e.g., Own positive relationship quality with parents X Spouse role) were entered to test whether actor and partner effects were significantly different between husbands and wives. Consistent with prior research, predictors and covariates were grand mean centered

(i.e., computed across the sample of wives and husbands combined; Kenny et al., 2006).

## Results

Table 2 presents bivariate associations among major study variables in preliminary analyses. Husbands' and wives' reports were significantly correlated for negative relationship quality with their own parents ( $r = .13, p = .03$ ), life satisfaction ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ), and self-rated health ( $r = .13, p = .03$ ), indicating spousal interdependence in these measures.

APIM parameter estimates for models evaluating associations between each spouse's reports of positive, negative, and ambivalent ties with their own parents and well-being are presented in Table 3 (wives' well-being) and Table 4 (husbands' well-being).

### Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents and Wives' Well-being

**Positive relationship quality with parents.** As shown in Table 3 and in line with the hypothesis, wives' higher positive relationship quality with their own parents was significantly associated with their own lower depressive symptoms ( $B = -.14, p = .05$ ) and better self-rated health ( $B = .27, p = .03$ ). Contrary to prediction, however, wives' higher positive relationship quality with parents was not significantly linked to their own greater life satisfaction ( $B = .30, p = .10$ ).

Counter to the hypothesis, husbands' higher positive relationship quality with parents was not significantly associated with wives' lower depressive symptoms ( $B = .06, p = .36$ ), greater life satisfaction ( $B = .10, p = .55$ ), or better self-rated health ( $B = -.03, p = .77$ ).

**Negative relationship quality with parents.** As presented in Table 3 and in accord with the hypothesis, wives' higher negative relationship quality with their own parents was significantly associated with wives' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = .19, p = .01$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.43, p = .02$ ), and poorer self-rated health ( $B = -.35, p = .003$ ).

Counter to the hypothesis, husbands' higher negative relationship quality with parents was not significantly associated with wives' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = -.10, p = .13$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = .06, p = .74$ ), or worse self-rated health ( $B = -.002, p = .98$ ).

**Ambivalence toward parents.** Table 4 shows that, counter to prediction, wives' greater ambivalence toward parents was not significantly associated with wives' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = .01, p = .79$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.11, p = .36$ ), or poorer self-rated health ( $B = -.09, p = .25$ ). Likewise, husbands' greater ambivalence toward their parents was not significantly linked to wives' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = -.05, p = .25$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.06, p = .61$ ), or poorer self-rated health ( $B = -.004, p = .96$ ).

### **Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents and Husbands' Well-being**

**Positive relationship quality with parents.** Contrary to prediction, husbands' higher positive relationship quality with parents was not significantly linked to their own elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = -.12, p = .06$ ), greater life satisfaction ( $B = .25, p = .07$ ), or better self-rated health ( $B = -.01, p = .90$ ).

As shown in Table 4 and in line with the hypothesis, however, wives' higher positive relationship quality with parents was significantly associated with husbands' lower depressive symptoms ( $B = -.15, p = .04$ ), greater life satisfaction ( $B = .41, p = .01$ ), and better self-rated health ( $B = .29, p = .01$ ).

**Negative relationship quality with parents.** Table 4 shows that, consistent with the hypothesis, husbands' higher negative relationship quality with their own parents was significantly linked to husbands' lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.43, p = .003$ ). But counter to prediction, husbands' higher negative relationship quality with parents was not significantly

linked to husbands elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = .11, p = .10$ ) or poorer self-rated health ( $B = -.07, p = .47$ ).

Contrary to the hypothesis, wives' higher negative relationship quality with parents was not significantly associated with husbands' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = -.06, p = .39$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.25, p = .09$ ), or worse self-rated health ( $B = -.19, p = .06$ ).

**Ambivalence toward parents.** As presented in Table 4 and in accord with the hypothesis, husbands' greater ambivalence toward parents was significantly linked to husbands' lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.21, p = .04$ ). But contrary to the hypothesis, husbands' greater ambivalence with parents was not significantly associated with husbands' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = .05, p = .32$ ) or worse self-rated health ( $B = -.03, p = .70$ ).

Counter to prediction, wives' greater ambivalence with parents was not significantly linked to husbands' elevated depressive symptoms ( $B = -.003, p = .94$ ), lower life satisfaction ( $B = -.16, p = .11$ ), or worse self-rated health ( $B = -.11, p = .12$ ).

### **Differences Between Wives and Husbands**

There were no significant differences between wives and husbands in the strength of associations between *their own* reports of relationship quality with parents and well-being (actor effects). Counter to prediction, the association between wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with parents and *their partners'* well-being (partner effects) was significantly stronger for husbands than wives in two of the models. Specifically, positive relationship quality with parents reported by one's wife/husband was more strongly associated with depressive symptoms ( $B = .10, p = .03$ ) and self-rated health ( $B = -.16, p = .03$ ) for husbands than for wives.

### **Post Hoc Tests**

It is possible that *one's partners'* reports of relationship quality with their own parents

may buffer or exacerbate the links between *one's own* reports of relationship quality with parents and well-being, or vice versa (Kenny & Cook, 1999). Therefore, two actor-partner interaction terms were added to each model (e.g., Own positive relationship quality with parents X Partner positive relationship quality with parents). To examine the nature of significant interactions, the statistical significance of links between relationship quality with parents and well-being were evaluated at one standard deviation above and below the grand mean of the relationship quality measures to represent high and low relationship quality with parents, respectively (Aiken & West, 1991).

Three significant interactions were found. First, there was an actor-partner interaction of positive relationship quality with parents for husbands' depressive symptoms ( $B = .19, p = .02$ ). As shown in Figure 2, the association between wives' higher positive relationship quality with parents and husbands' lower depressive symptoms was intensified when husbands' positive relationship quality with their own parents was low ( $B = -.29, p = .002$ ) but not high ( $B = .004, p = .96$ ). Second, there was an actor-partner interaction of ambivalence toward parents for husbands' life satisfaction ( $B = .19, p = .03$ ). Figure 3 shows that the association between husbands' more ambivalent relationships with parents and husbands' lower life satisfaction was exacerbated when wives' ambivalence toward their own parents was low ( $B = -.40, p = .003$ ) but not high ( $B = .03, p = .83$ ). Finally, there was an actor-partner interaction of ambivalence toward parents for husbands' self-rated health ( $B = -.12, p = .05$ ); but the link between husbands' greater ambivalence with parents and poorer self-rated health was not significantly different when wives' ambivalence with parents was high ( $B = -.17, p = .08$ ) or low ( $B = .09, p = .29$ ).

### **Discussion**

The present study indicates that relationship quality with aging parents significantly

contributes to subjective well-being during midlife. This study extends previous research by evaluating how wives' and husbands' perceptions of relationship quality with parents are linked to *their own* and *their partner's* well-being. Overall, findings indicate that views of relationship quality with one's own parents are related to well-being among middle-aged wives and husbands. Over and above these influences, the quality of the relationship that wives have with their own parents has beneficial implications for husbands' well-being. Strikingly, models controlled for reports of marital satisfaction, which accounted for a significant amount of variance in well-being for both wives and husbands. Relationship quality with parents therefore has robust associations with subjective well-being in middle-aged couples.

### **Implications of One's Own Relationship Quality with Parents for Well-being**

There were several differences between wives and husbands in the associations between *one's own* relationship quality with parents and well-being. For wives, their own reports of positive and negative qualities were linked to better and worse subjective well-being, respectively. Wives who reported more criticism and demands from their parents had elevated depressive symptoms, lower life satisfaction, and poorer self-rated health. These findings are consistent with prior work suggesting that negative aspects of social ties are particularly detrimental to women's well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Counter to prediction, however, wives' more ambivalent relationships with parents were unrelated to their well-being. Although it was anticipated that ambivalence toward parents may generate stress due to the unpredictability of these ties (Uchino et al., 2004), the present findings suggest that highly ambivalent relationships with parents do not have strong associations with well-being among middle-aged women. Rather, for women, positive and negative aspects of parent-child ties appear to matter more than the experience of mixed sentiments toward parents.

Turning to husbands, their own perceptions of higher negative relationship quality and greater ambivalence toward parents were linked to lower levels of life satisfaction. Notably, more ambivalent parent-child ties mattered for well-being among husbands but not wives. One possibility is that men may be less able to effectively cope with complex emotions in their family relationships. Compared with adult sons, research suggests that adult daughters report more intense emotions and more ambivalence in the relationships with their parents (Birditt et al., 2009; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Fingerman, 2001). Therefore, due to their lesser tendency for heightened positive and negative emotions within their parent-child ties, husbands may be more strongly impacted by high levels of intergenerational ambivalence than wives.

### **Implications of One's Partner's Relationship Quality with Parents for Well-being**

Distinctions in the associations between *one's partner's* relationship quality with parents and well-being were also found between wives and husbands. When wives reported higher positive relationship quality with their own parents, husbands had better scores on all three indicators of subjective well-being. This association was strengthened for husbands' depressive symptoms in post hoc tests when husbands reported *low* levels of positive relationship quality with their own parents. It therefore seems that positive qualities in relationships with wives' parents may play a compensatory role for husbands who lack care and understanding in the ties with their own parents.

Collectively, these findings indicate that positive aspects of the relationship that wives have with their parents during midlife may be a significant contributor to husbands' subjective well-being. It is likely that wives' positive relations with parents serve as a central source of social support for the couple that benefits well-being in both spouses. Previous research suggests that couples tend to be more involved in giving everyday support to wives' parents than to

husbands' parents (Polenick, Seidel, Birditt, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2015; Shuey & Hardy, 2003). In addition, husbands have more frequent contact with their parents-in-law by their wives influence than vice versa (Lee, Spitze, & Logan, 2003; Shuey & Hardy). More frequent contact with parents-in-law in turn predicts greater centrality of parents-in-law in one's social network (Santos & Levitt, 2007). Thus, wives' relationships with their own parents are likely to enhance husbands' well-being when these ties are caring and emotionally supportive.

The protective effects of wives' positive ties with parents appear to be especially beneficial for husbands who perceive low levels of care and understanding in the relationship with their own parents. Men tend to have fewer close relationships than women (Antonucci, 1994; Fuhrer & Stansfeld, 2002). Ties with wives' parents may therefore be an important source of emotional support for men in midlife, particularly when men have less positive ties with their own parents. Compared with women, prior work has found that being married has greater protective benefits for men's health and well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), including a lower likelihood of developing major depression (Scott et al., 2009) and reduced risk of suicide (Denney, Rogers, Krueger, Wadsworth, 2009; Fukuchi et al., 2013; Qin, Agerbo, Westergard-Nielsen, Eriksson, & Mortensen, 2000). This study raises the question of whether positive relationships with wives' parents may be one pathway through which these benefits are conferred.

Post hoc tests showed that the link between husbands' more ambivalent relationships with parents and lower life satisfaction was exacerbated when *their wives* had less ambivalence toward their own parents. It may be that wives are less able to empathize with their husbands' experience of mixed emotions toward parents when they do not share similar sentiments in the ties with their own parents. As a consequence, these husbands may feel less understood and less supported by their wives. Wives are often a primary source of social support for middle-aged

men (Antonucci, 2001; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006), and so husbands' perceived lack of empathy or understanding from wives regarding their ambivalence toward parents may contribute to lower life satisfaction.

Contrary to prediction, husbands' reports of relationship quality with their own parents were unrelated to wives' well-being. Therefore, it seems that partners' ties with parents may not affect wives' well-being beyond the strong influence of their own ties with parents. This may be due in part to couples' greater involvement with wives' parents than husbands' parents (Polenick et al., 2015; Shuey & Hardy, 2003) and/or to wives' more emotionally intense bonds with their own parents (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001) that minimize the influence of husbands' ties with parents.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this study include data collected on the same measures for husbands and wives, the use of dyadic data analysis to evaluate the interdependence within couples, and the examination of multiple indicators of parent-child relationship quality and subjective well-being. Notably, models accounted for the substantial variance in well-being that was explained by each spouse's report of marital satisfaction.

Despite these strengths, this study has several limitations. First, cross-sectional analyses precluded the inference of causal associations between wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with their own parents and subjective well-being. Wives with elevated depressive symptoms, for example, may be more likely to evaluate the relationship with their own parents as highly negative. Thus, future research is needed to determine the temporal ordering of these constructs. Second, data on reports of relationship quality with one's parents-in-law were not available. The examination of such data in future investigations would enable a

more complete rendering of how relationships with aging parents influence well-being within a marriage. Third, on average, wives and husbands in this sample reported high life satisfaction, low levels of depressive symptoms, and good self-rated health. Consequently, findings may not generalize to wives and husbands with poorer well-being. Lastly, findings are specific to the midlife sample, and therefore may not generalize to younger or older couples. Nonetheless, this study provides a foundation for future work to obtain a deeper understanding of how relationship quality with aging parents may impact subjective well-being within married couples.

### **Practical Implications and Future Directions**

This study informs future family-based interventions to promote subjective well-being among middle-aged adults in a number of ways. Traditional psychotherapy and family systems treatment approaches focus on the negative or problematic aspects of relationships with parents (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Silverstein, 1990). The findings in this study indicate, however, that relationships with parents may also be a valuable social resource that enhances well-being among middle-aged men and women. Further, the finding that husbands report more life satisfaction, lower depressive symptoms, and better self-rated health when the relationship between their wives and parents-in-law is highly positive suggests a couple-level approach that includes the consideration of *one's partner's* parent-child ties as a source of strength and social support. Such an approach may be especially beneficial for treatment and prevention activities targeting middle-aged men.

An especially valuable area for future work is to evaluate whether *changes* in spouses' views of relationship quality with parents are associated with concurrent changes in well-being. Adult children often perceive negative changes in the quality of their relationships with aging parents, which may arise with parents' health declines and increasing dependency (Kim et al.,

2016; Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009). Parents will likely rely upon their family members for support in later life due to functional disability and age-related normative circumstances such as the transition to widowhood, and so it is critical to determine the potential implications of adverse changes in parent-child relationship quality for adult children and their spouses. Future studies that explore strategies to enhance relationship quality with aging parents, prevent declines in parent-child relationship quality, or teach adult children to cope more effectively with these relational changes would have particular value for clinical applications.

Future research should also consider how each spouse's views of the quality of their relationships with *parents-in-law* may be linked to subjective well-being. Although wives and husbands tend to have stronger bonds with their own parents (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, & Pitzer, 2012), previous research indicates that parents-in-law are often included among one's closest and most important social ties (Santos & Levitt, 2007). Consequently, the quality of in-law ties may be salient for well-being among middle-aged men and women.

Finally, other perspectives on parent-child ties in later life may be useful to examine. Husbands' and wives' perceptions of *their partner's* relationship quality with parents or parents-in-law, for example, may also be associated with subjective well-being. Prior work suggests that there are few normative guidelines for relationships involving in-laws (Morr Serewicz, 2006a), and so spouses often experience differences of opinion with regard to the nature and frequency of relations with their respective parents (Beaton et al., 2003; Silverstein, 1990). As such, wives and husbands may have opposing views on whether older parents are caring and considerate or critical and demanding. Therefore, these perceptions may play a role in the linkages between relationship quality with parents and well-being reported by both spouses.

Relationships with parents are a centrally important source of social support and belonging

that can have a profound impact on well-being across the life course (Fingerman, Sechrist, & Birditt, 2013; Umberson, 1992). This study indicates that husbands' and wives' reports of relationship quality with their own aging parents have implications for subjective well-being. Wives' affective evaluations of ties with their own parents also appear to have distinct influences on husbands' well-being. Findings underscore the interdependence within couples regarding the consequences of relations with parents for various facets of well-being during midlife.

Table 1

*Demographic and Background Characteristics of Wives and Husbands*

Characteristic	Wives		Husbands	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age in years	49.75	4.58	51.45	4.98
Number of living siblings	2.98	2.20	3.08	2.53
Mother's age	77.07	7.29	78.92	6.94
Father's age	77.71	6.72	78.44	6.14
In-person contact with parents <sup>a</sup>	4.77	1.80	4.37	1.63
Electronic contact with parents <sup>b</sup>	6.19	1.58	5.40	1.71
Geographic proximity to parents <sup>c</sup>	262.23	697.50	266.61	565.02
	Proportions			
Non-Hispanic White	.86		.89	
Education level				
High school	.29		.24	
Some college	.24		.21	
College graduate (4-year degree)	.23		.33	
Post graduate	.23		.23	
Currently employed				
Full time	.61		.85	
Part time	.17		.03	
Mother currently living	.86		.86	
Father currently living	.49		.52	
Both parents currently living	.35		.38	
Parents' functional disability <sup>d</sup>	.38		.37	

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Mean frequency of in-person contact with one's own parents over the past year from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*). <sup>b</sup>Mean frequency of telephone or email contact with one's own parents over the past year from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*). <sup>c</sup>Mean geographic proximity in miles to one's own parents. <sup>d</sup>1 = At least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities (personal care, housework, shopping, managing finances, or transportation), 0 = Parents do not need help with daily activities.

*N* = 132 married couples.

Table 2

*Pearson Correlations Among Wives' and Husbands' Scores on Key Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Wife positive relationship quality <sup>a</sup>											
2. Husband positive relationship quality <sup>a</sup>	.02										
3. Wife negative relationship quality <sup>b</sup>	-.23**	-.08									
4. Husband negative relationship quality <sup>b</sup>	-.16†	-.25**	.13								
5. Wife ambivalence <sup>c</sup>	-.26**	-.11	.84***	.14							
6. Husband ambivalence <sup>c</sup>	-.11	-.35***	.10	.88***	.12						
7. Wife depressive symptoms <sup>d</sup>	-.15	-.002	.23**	-.12	.01	-.13					
8. Husband depressive symptoms <sup>d</sup>	-.22**	-.25**	-.02	.12	.03	.10	.02				
9. Wife life satisfaction <sup>e</sup>	.12	.14	-.21*	.04	-.08	-.01	-.61***	-.02			
10. Husband life satisfaction <sup>e</sup>	.24**	.29***	-.23**	-.21*	-.20*	-.18*	-.19*	-.62***	.27***		
11. Wife self-rated health <sup>f</sup>	.17†	.001	-.24**	-.01	-.11	.01	-.26**	.04	.30***	.16†	
12. Husband self-rated health <sup>f</sup>	.29***	.08	-.14	-.05	-.12	-.04	-.08	-.28***	.06	.39***	.13

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Mean of two items rating how much parents love and care for the respondent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). <sup>b</sup>Mean of two items rating how much parents are demanding or critical of the respondent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). <sup>c</sup>Similarity and intensity of positive and negative relationship quality with parents. <sup>d</sup>Mean of five items rating how much the respondent experienced symptoms of depression over the past week from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). <sup>e</sup>One item assessing overall life satisfaction from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*). <sup>f</sup>One item assessing overall physical health from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

*N* = 132 married couples.

† $p \leq .07$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Table 3

*Linkages Between Wives' and Husbands' Relationship Quality with Parents and Wives' Well-being*

Effect	Wives' Well-being					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Depressive symptoms						
Wife marital satisfaction	-.28***	.06	-.24***	.06	-.25***	.06
Husband marital satisfaction	.02	.06	.04	.06	.02	.06
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.14*	.07	.19**	.07	.01	.05
Husband relationship quality with parents	.06 <sup>t</sup>	.06	-.10	.06	-.05	.05
Life satisfaction						
Wife marital satisfaction	.82***	.16	.76***	.16	.80***	.16
Husband marital satisfaction	-.06	.16	-.05	.15	-.02	.15
Wife relationship quality with parents	.30	.18	-.43*	.18	-.11	.12
Husband relationship quality with parents	.10	.16	.06	.17	-.06	.12
Self-rated health						
Wife marital satisfaction	.20*	.10	.22*	.10	.22*	.10
Husband marital satisfaction	-.10	.10	-.10	.10	-.08	.10
Wife relationship quality with parents	.27*	.12	-.35**	.12	-.09	.08
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.03 <sup>t</sup>	.11	-.002	.11	-.003	.08

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality with own parents. Model 2 = negative relationship quality with own parents. Model 3 = ambivalence toward own parents. All models controlled for own and partner mother status (1 = *mother is living*, 0 = *mother is not living*). Models for self-rated health also controlled for own and partner years of education and couple minority status (1 = *one or both spouses is a racial/ethnic minority*, 0 = *both spouses are non-Hispanic White*).

*N* = 132 married couples.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

<sup>t</sup> Indicates a significant difference in the effect between wives and husbands at  $p < .05$ .

Table 4

*Linkages Between Husbands' and Wives' Relationship Quality with Parents and Husbands' Well-being*

Effect	Husbands' Well-being					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>						
Husband marital satisfaction	-.24***	.06	-.29***	.06	-.28***	.06
Wife marital satisfaction	.05	.06	.04	.06	.05	.06
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.12†	.06	.11	.07	-.003	.05
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.15**t	.07	-.06	.07	-.02	.05
<b>Life satisfaction</b>						
Husband marital satisfaction	.86***	.13	.92***	.13	.92***	.13
Wife marital satisfaction	.02	.13	.02	.13	.02	.13
Husband relationship quality with parents	.25†	.13	-.43**	.14	-.21*	.10
Wife relationship quality with parents	.41**	.15	-.25	.15	-.16	.10
<b>Self-rated health</b>						
Husband marital satisfaction	.36***	.09	.33***	.09	.37***	.09
Wife marital satisfaction	-.10	.09	-.06	.09	-.09	.09
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.01	.09	-.07	.10	-.03	.07
Wife relationship quality with parents	.29**t	.10	-.19†	.10	-.11	.07

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality with own parents. Model 2 = negative relationship quality with own parents. Model 3 = ambivalence toward own parents. All models controlled for own and partner mother status (1 = *mother is living*, 0 = *mother is not living*). Models for self-rated health also controlled for own and partner years of education and couple minority status (1 = *one or both spouses is a racial/ethnic minority*, 0 = *both spouses are non-Hispanic White*).

*N* = 132 married couples.

†*p* ≤ .07. \**p* ≤ .05. \*\**p* ≤ .01. \*\*\**p* ≤ .001.

t Indicates a significant difference in the effect between wives and husbands at *p* < .05.

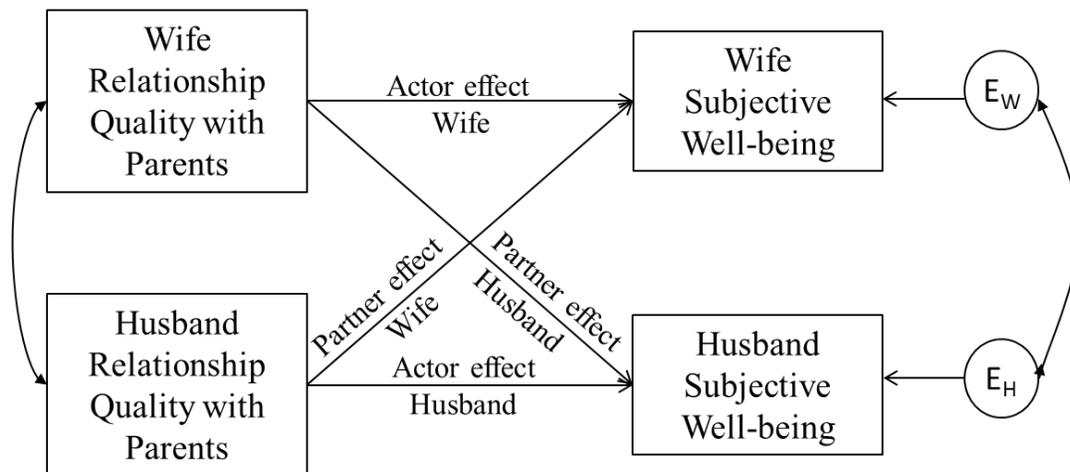
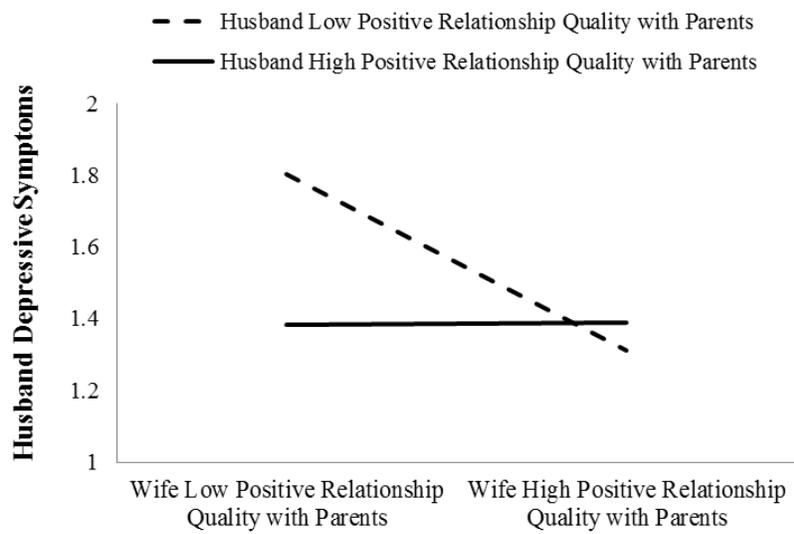


Figure 1. Simplified conceptual model of Study 1.



*Figure 2.* Actor-partner interaction of positive relationship quality with parents on husbands' depressive symptoms.

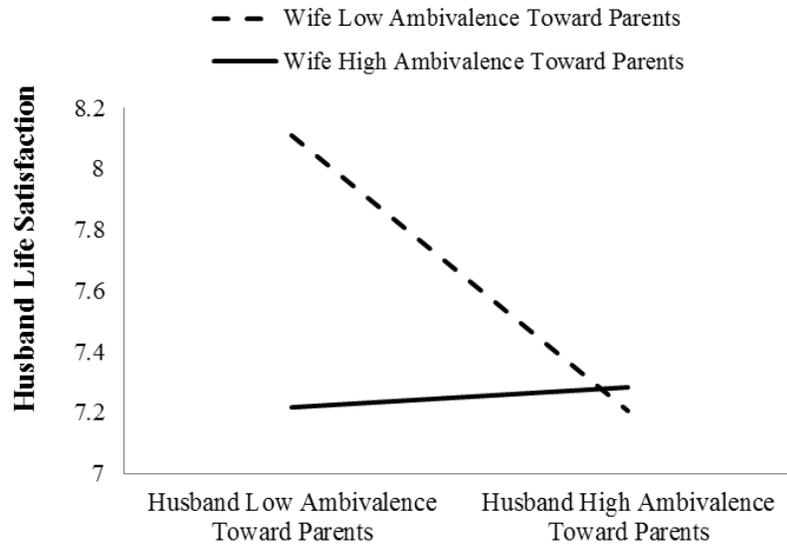


Figure 3. Actor-partner interaction of ambivalence toward parents on husbands' life satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 3. STUDY 2

### Intergenerational Support Exchanges and Spouses' Well-being:

#### Implications of Relationship Quality with Aging Parents

Parents and their offspring remain highly involved with one another across the lifespan (Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). Everyday types of support exchanged with aging parents (e.g., emotional, practical, financial) are common during midlife (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Suiitor, 2012) and are situated within other important family relationships, including the adult child's marriage. Yet, little is presently known about the implications of support exchanges with aging parents for subjective well-being and marital satisfaction within married couples. One possibility is that husbands' and wives' affective evaluations of the ties with their own parents may influence how they experience their own and their partner's intergenerational exchanges. This study examined dyadic associations between the everyday support that wives and husbands exchanged with their own parents and their reports of depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and marital satisfaction. The moderating effects of each spouse's perceptions of relationship quality with their own parents were also considered.

#### **Associations Between Support Exchanges with Parents and Well-being**

Solidarity theory posits that support exchanges between parents and their grown children have implications for the well-being of both parties (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Studies of adult children caring for impaired older parents suggest that giving support may be detrimental to offspring well-being through increased stress and burden (e.g., Aneshensel, Pearlin, Mullan, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 1995). Likewise, giving routine assistance to aging parents for everyday needs can be emotionally taxing (Savla, Almeida, Davey, & Zarit, 2008). Middle-aged offspring often feel pressured as they balance

giving support to parents with other competing social roles (e.g., spouse, parent, or employee), which may have adverse consequences for their well-being (Merz, Schulze, & Schuengel, 2010). Indeed, research indicates that the provision of practical help, advice, or emotional support to an older parent is linked to more negative mood experienced during the same day (Fingerman, Kim, Tennant, Birditt, & Zarit, 2015). Alternatively, offspring may derive rewards from helping aging parents (Fingerman et al., 2011; Goodman, Steiner, & Zarit, 1997). Adult children, for example, may view giving help to parents as a means to reciprocate past received support or to fulfill normative values about family assistance (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013).

Relatively less is known regarding the implications of everyday support *received* from parents for well-being among middle-aged offspring. In the U.S., however, parents continue to give largely unidirectional support to their adult children until parents near the end of their lives and require care (Fingerman, Sechrist, & Birditt, 2013). Help received from parents may enhance adult children's well-being, but this support can generate complex emotions. Receiving support from parents may lead to distress, for instance, if this support elicits feelings of incompetence or undermines one's autonomy (Antonucci, Birditt, Sherman, & Trinh, 2011). Furthermore, the manner in which support is given could affect whether help from parents is viewed as unconditional or as a means to place demands on the child to reciprocate (Fingerman, Cheng, Cichy, Birditt, & Zarit, 2013; Fingerman, Cheng, et al., 2012).

### **Support Exchanges with Parents and Well-being in the Context of Marriage**

Husbands' and wives' parents may be a central source of social support that benefits each partner in the marriage, but these ties may also be a source of strain (Bryant et al., 2001; Reczek et al., 2010; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Interdependence theory proposes that spouses affect and are affected by one another's experiences within and beyond the couple's relationship

(Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Given the long-standing emotional salience of parent-child ties for both women and men (Fingerman, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterman 2007; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek 2008; Umberson, 1992) along with the central role of parents-in-law in one's social network (Santos & Levitt, 2007), it is plausible that wives' and husbands' everyday support exchanges with parents may affect their own and their partners' perceptions of subjective well-being and marital quality.

Consistent with the family systems perspective (Bowen, 1978), tension between spouses often occurs as a result of their interactions with a third party. Support exchanged with parents, for example, may be viewed by one or both partners as intrusive or overinvolvement in the couple's lives. Nevertheless, the current literature on the linkages between support exchanges with parents and marital quality is somewhat mixed. Studies focused on caring for disabled older parents suggest that adult child caregivers who feel more burdened (Adamson, Feinauer, Lund, & Caserta, 1992; Ron, 2006) or have spent a longer period time giving care (Bookwala, 2009) report lower marital quality. Other research, however, indicates that caring for an aging parent has no significant impact on the offspring's marital quality over the course of a year (Suitor & Pillemer, 1994). The literature is largely constrained to the examination of adult children providing unidirectional support to parents with intensive physical care needs. In a notable exception, a study of everyday support exchanges between aging parents and their married offspring found that the total amount of support given to or received from parents by middle-aged couples was not linked to marital satisfaction (Lee, Zarit, Rovine, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2012). But husbands and wives were less satisfied in their marriages when they exchanged more frequent support with their own parents compared to their partners' exchanges with parents. It therefore appears that reports from both spouses are valuable to consider when

evaluating the implications of support exchanges with parents for marital quality.

Most prior research is limited to the assessment of marital satisfaction and well-being solely from the perspective of the spouse providing support. This approach fails to capture several critical nuances of these experiences within a marriage. First, each spouse's support exchanges with his or her own parents are likely to have a salient impact on the daily lives and routines of *both* partners. As such, well-being and marital quality may be affected by *one's own* exchanges with parents and by *one's partner's* exchanges with parents. Second, spouses may disagree on how frequently support should be exchanged with parents (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003; Silverstein et al., 1990), which may lead to differing views of its effects on their lives and marriage (Polenick, Seidel, Birditt, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2015). Third, in line with role theory (Goode, 1960), support exchanges with parents either draw from or contribute to available family resources (e.g., time, money), and so they have implications for the couple's current and future distribution of these resources. Hence, the frequency of support exchanged with parents by middle-aged wives and husbands is likely to influence both their own and their partners' well-being and views of marital quality.

### **The Moderating Role of Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents**

Social support is highly contextualized and dependent on roles, expectations, and norms that vary widely between and within families (Antonucci et al., 2011). Furthermore, one's social roles (e.g., adult daughter/son) intersect with other important relationships such as marriage (Peplau, 1983). Social roles within married couples are therefore reciprocal in that they both influence and are influenced by the views and experiences of each partner.

In accord with interdependence theory, spouses mutually convey their perspectives regarding one another's role behavior using direct and indirect means (Rusbult & Van Lange,

2008). Thus, each spouse's perceptions of relationship quality with their own parents may affect how they experience their own and their partner's exchanges of support with parents. A wife who perceives a high quality relationship with her own parents, for example, may be more satisfied with her life and marriage when she exchanges more frequent support with her parents. In addition, she may report better well-being and greater marital satisfaction when *her husband* exchanges more support with his parents because she has a favorable view of supportive intergenerational ties. Moreover, a high quality relationship between married adult children and their parents likely indicates a high quality relationship between the parents and the adult child's spouse (Golish, 2000). Relationships with parents may therefore be a critical source of social support for both partners in a marriage (Morr Serewicz, 2006b). Conversely, in the context of lower quality relationships with parents, intergenerational support exchanges are likely to be viewed as an unwelcome obligation or a drain on limited resources. As such, these exchanges may have detrimental implications for well-being and marital satisfaction when either partner has poor quality ties with his or her parents.

**Positive and negative relationship qualities.** According to solidarity theory, affective qualities of parent-child ties (e.g., love, intimacy, conflict) can influence offspring well-being (Bengtson et al., 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Positive aspects of relationships with parents are generally associated with better psychological outcomes, whereas negative aspects are associated with increased emotional distress (Pillemer, Sutor, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006; Umberson, 1992). Studies of adult children caring for impaired older parents have found that better relationship quality may offset the stress and burden related to giving support (Merz et al., 2010). Likewise, previous research indicates that receiving everyday help from older parents is linked to better well-being among offspring reporting high relationship

quality with parents but worse well-being among those with lower quality ties (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009). Hence, the degree to which spouses view their ties with parents as positive or negative may affect how they experience their own and their partners' intergenerational support exchanges.

Parents and adult children in a highly positive relationship, for example, may be more attuned to one another's support needs and preferences (Merz et al., 2009, 2010). Moreover, high quality parent-child ties may reflect more effective communication and the ability to adjust support patterns as needed without negative consequences for either party (Merz & Consedine, 2009). Therefore, when a spouse reports a highly positive relationship with his or her parents, more frequent everyday support exchanged with these parents may be related to better reports of well-being and marital quality in both partners. In contrast, more frequent exchanges of support within highly negative parent-child ties may be viewed as unhelpful or intrusive by both partners, and may come with "strings attached" or a price to pay (Fingerman, Cheng, et al., 2013). Consequently, support exchanges with parents under such circumstances may be related to diminished well-being and marital satisfaction in both spouses.

**Intergenerational ambivalence.** The intergenerational ambivalence model proposes that parent-child ties involve the simultaneous experience of positive and negative sentiments (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Research suggests that highly ambivalent relationships (i.e., those characterized by high levels of both positive and negative qualities) may be more detrimental to well-being than solely negative ties due to heightened feelings of stress or unpredictability (Fingerman et al., 2008; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004). Regarding wives' and husbands' support exchanges with parents, greater ambivalence toward parents may therefore generate higher levels of strain linked to these exchanges for both partners. Furthermore,

exchanges of help within highly ambivalent parent-child ties are likely to involve more emotional effort expended by each spouse. A husband, for instance, may hold back his frustration when his wife's critical or demanding parents give more frequent help because she perceives many positive qualities in these ties along with the negative aspects. Although the husband may suppress his emotions to maintain harmony in his marriage, these circumstances may ultimately have adverse effects on well-being and marital satisfaction for both partners (English, John, & Gross, 2013; Impett, Le, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2014). In contrast, he may more freely express displeasure with the support that his wife receives from her parents if these ties were primarily negative and harmful to the couple's lives. As a consequence, the former scenario may be linked to worse marital quality and well-being within the couple than the latter.

**Potential differences between wives and husbands.** Although more egalitarian family roles among middle-aged couples have emerged over the past few decades, wives continue to give more frequent support to parents than husbands provide (Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). Compared with men, women also tend to experience more pressure to prioritize their engagement in family support roles and greater strain in managing competing work and family demands (Stephens, Franks, Martire, Norton, & Atienza, 2009). Further, whereas men tend to rely on their wives for social support needs, women often seek support from relatives (e.g., parents) in addition to their husbands (Antonucci, 2001; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006). Given the greater centrality of family support exchanges for women than men, spouses' reports of relationship quality with parents may have more influence on the linkages between *one's own* support exchanges and well-being among wives. Regarding partner effects, however, wives' exchanges may have more impact on their husbands' well-being than husbands' exchanges have on their wives' well-being.

## **The Present Study**

This study examined associations between middle-aged wives' and husbands' everyday support exchanges with their own parents and each spouse's reports of subjective well-being (depressive symptoms, life satisfaction) and marital satisfaction. The moderating effects of one's own and one's partner's reports of relationship quality with parents were also considered. Among wives and husbands, it was hypothesized that more frequent support exchanged with parents by either party would be linked to poorer well-being and lower marital satisfaction. It was further predicted that these associations would be buffered when either spouse reported high levels of positive relationship quality with their own parents; but exacerbated when either spouse reported high levels of negative relationship quality or ambivalence toward their own parents. Additionally, it was hypothesized that ambivalence toward parents would have particularly consistent moderating effects due to the likelihood of heightened stress and instability within highly ambivalent relationships. Lastly, it was predicted that the links between *one's own* support exchanges and reports of well-being and marital satisfaction would be stronger for wives than for husbands, whereas the links between *one's partner's* support exchanges and reports of well-being and marital satisfaction would be stronger for husbands than for wives.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of heterosexual married couples drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study (FES; Fingerman et al., 2009). These couples were recruited in two steps. First, an eligible participant was identified within each household. Participants were recruited from the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (urban, suburban, and rural areas), which comprises five counties in Southeastern Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey

(Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). Individuals were eligible for the study if they were aged 40 to 60 years, and had at least one living parent and at least one child aged 18 years or older. Participants were contacted via telephone using lists purchased from Genesys Corporation and random digit dialing in regional area codes. An age-stratified sampling method was used (aged 40 to 50 years and aged 51 to 60 years), and screening interviews were conducted to determine participant eligibility. Of the 845 eligible participants, 633 (75%) completed an interview.

Next, participants were asked to provide contact information for their spouse if they were married and spouses shared parenthood of the participant's grown offspring. Among the 633 participants, 335 (51%) were married and 287 (86%) gave permission for their spouses to be contacted. Of the 287 spouses, 197 (71%) completed interviews. Therefore, a total of 197 married couples participated in the study at Wave 1. The present study focused on couples in which both spouses currently had at least one living parent ( $n = 132$  couples). Table 1 shows demographic and background characteristics for the 132 couples. Participants from these couples reported having an average of 2.59 children of all ages ( $SD = 1.27$ ) and 1.84 children aged 18 years or older ( $SD = 0.93$ ). Means, standard deviations,  $t$  tests, and Pearson correlations among key study variables for wives and husbands are presented in Table 2.

## Measures

**Depressive symptoms.** Depressive symptoms were measured with five items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Melisarator, 1983). On a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*quite a bit*), participants reported how distressed or bothered they were over the past 7 days by the following symptoms of depression: feeling lonely, feeling blue, feeling no interest in things, feeling hopeless about the future, and feelings of worthlessness. Alpha reliabilities were .80 and .84 for wives and husbands, respectively.

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was assessed with one item adapted from a single item measure used in previous research (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000). Participants rated their overall life satisfaction on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

**Marital satisfaction.** Marital satisfaction was assessed with one item adapted from prior research (Umberson, 1989). Participants rated the overall quality of their marriage on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Although it is typically not ideal to use single item measures, scholars have argued that the assessment of marital quality is best limited to a general evaluation of their feelings toward the marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

**Support exchanges with parents.** To determine the amount of support that each spouse exchanged with his or her own parent(s), six types of everyday social support were assessed using the Intergenerational Support Index (ISS; Fingerman et al., 2009): emotional, practical, socializing, advice, financial, and listening to the other talk about daily events. Participants reported how often they gave and received each type of support on a scale from 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*) to (8 = *daily*). In line with prior studies (Fingerman et al., 2009; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006), mean frequencies of support given to and received from parents were calculated. Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. Alpha reliabilities for given support were .87 for both wives and husbands. Alpha reliabilities for received support were .84 and .79 for wives and husbands, respectively.

**Positive relationship quality with parents.** Positive relationship quality with one's own parent(s) was assessed with two items that reflect feelings of care and intimacy in the parent-child relationship. Participants rated (a) how much they felt loved and cared for by their mother/father, and (b) how much they felt understood by their mother/father from 1 (*not at all*)

to 5 (*a great deal*) (Umberson, 1992). Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. The Spearman-Brown coefficient is recommended as a more appropriate reliability estimate than alpha for two-item scales (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). Spearman-Brown reliability coefficients were .70 for wives and .72 for husbands.

**Negative relationship quality with parents.** Negative relationship quality with one's own parent(s) was assessed with two items that indicate negative interactions in the parent-child relationship. Participants rated (a) how much criticism they receive from their mother/father, and (b) how much demands their mother/father makes on them from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (Umberson, 1992). Scores represented the mean of separate reports for mothers and fathers. Spearman-Brown reliability coefficients were .57 and .61 for wives and husbands, respectively.

**Ambivalence toward parents.** Consistent with prior research (e.g., Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Fingerman et al., 2008; Willson et al., 2006), ambivalence regarding one's own parent(s) was calculated using Griffin's similarity and intensity of components formula:  $[(\text{positive} + \text{negative})/2 - |\text{positive} - \text{negative}|] + 1.5$  (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). This formula takes into account both similarity and intensity of coexisting positive and negative relationship qualities. Therefore, a high ambivalence score occurs when similarly high levels of positive and negative feelings about parents are reported. A husband with a positive score of 5 and a negative score of 1, for example, has a low ambivalence score (0.50). Conversely, a husband with a positive score of 5 and a negative score of 4 has a higher ambivalence score (5.00), reflecting a greater mix of positive and negative feelings. Scores represented the mean of ambivalence scores using separate reports for mothers and fathers. Mean scores were 2.28 for wives ( $SD = 1.14$ , range = 0.50 – 6.50) and 2.25 for husbands ( $SD =$

1.13, range = 0.50 – 4.75), which indicate low similarity and intensity of positive and negative relationship quality on average.

**Control variables.** Everyday support exchanges with parents may be affected by parents' functional status. Therefore, models controlled for parents' functional disability with regard to activities of daily living including personal care, shopping, housework, managing finances, and transportation (1 = *at least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities*, 0 = *parents do not need help with daily activities*). In addition, research suggests that positive and negative sentiments may be more intense (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001) and more strongly related to offspring well-being (Umberson, 1992) in relationships with aging mothers than with aging fathers. To adjust for potential differences between spouses who had a living mother and those who did not, models controlled for whether or not each spouse's mother was currently living (1 = *mother living*, 0 = *mother not living*). Finally, demographic characteristics of wives and husbands were also considered as potential covariates: age, years of education, and minority status (1 = *racial or ethnic minority*, 0 = *non-Hispanic White*).

### **Analytic Strategy**

To account for the nonindependence in dyadic data and to explore mutual influences within midlife marriages, actor-partner interdependence models (APIM; Kenny, 1996) were estimated with the mixed model procedure in SPSS Version 22. The APIM incorporates a conceptual model of relational interdependence with statistical techniques that allow the simultaneous estimation of one's own and one's partner's influence on outcomes within the dyad. Thus, dyadic associations between each spouse's reports of everyday support exchanges with parents and well-being were examined. In this study, *actor effects* refer to the extent to which the frequency of wives' and husbands' support given to and received from *their own*

parents is associated with well-being (e.g., wives' support given to parents predicting wives' depressive symptoms). *Partner effects* in the present study refer to the extent to which the frequency of wives' and husbands' support exchanges with parents is associated with their partners' well-being (e.g., wives' support given to parents predicting husbands' depressive symptoms). Figure 4 presents a simplified conceptual model of this study.

**Covariates.** Models controlled for own and partner reports of parents' functional disability and mothers' status (i.e., living or not living). In addition, bivariate correlations between other potential covariates (age, years of education, and minority status) and each outcome were performed. None of the variables were significantly correlated with depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, or marital satisfaction. The inclusion of covariates that are not significantly related to the outcome can lead to spurious relations among variables (Rovine, von Eye, & Wood, 1988). Therefore, these variables were not included as covariates in the models.

**APIM analyses.** Separate hierarchical models were conducted for depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and marital satisfaction. Each model included spouse role as a distinguishing variable (-1 = *husband*, 1 = *wife*) to estimate separate intercepts for wives and husbands (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This enabled the examination of actor and partner effects for each spouse within the couple. To determine associations between support exchanges with parents and well-being, own and partner reports of given/received support were entered in the first step of the models for each outcome. Support given to parents and support received from parents were examined in separate models.

To consider the implications of relationship quality with parents, one's own and one's partner's reports of relationship quality with their own parents were entered in the second step. Separate models were used to examine each relationship quality moderator (positive, negative,

and ambivalence). In the third step of each model, four interaction terms were added to evaluate whether associations between support exchanges and well-being varied on the basis of own and partner moderator variables (e.g., Own received support X Partner positive relationship quality; Garcia, Kenny, & Ledermann, 2015). All predictors and covariates were grand mean centered (i.e., computed across the sample of husbands and wives combined; Kenny et al., 2006). To examine the nature of significant interactions, the statistical significance of associations between support exchanges and well-being was evaluated at one standard deviation above and below the grand mean of the relationship quality measures to represent high and low qualities, respectively (Aiken & West, 1991).

## Results

Bivariate associations among key variables were examined in preliminary analyses. Table 5 shows that significant correlations were found between wives' and husbands' reports of life satisfaction ( $r = .27, p = .001$ ) and marital satisfaction ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ). On average, wives gave ( $t(131) = 3.91, p < .001$ ) and received ( $t(131) = 5.40, p < .001$ ) more support from parents than husbands.

Tables 6 and 7 show the hierarchical APIM parameter estimates for associations between spouses' given support and received support, respectively, and wives' well-being. Likewise, Tables 8 and 9 present the models for associations between spouses' given support and received support, respectively, and husbands' well-being. In the first step of the APIM, there was one significant main effect of support and marital satisfaction. Table 7 shows that wives' more frequent support received from parents was linked to husbands' lower depressive symptoms ( $B = -.11, p = .02$ ). The moderating effects of relationship quality with parents on linkages between support exchanges with parents and well-being among wives and husbands are described below.

### **Moderating Effects of Relationship Quality with Parents**

**Wives' well-being and marital satisfaction.** As shown in Table 6, husbands' positive relationship quality with parents moderated the association between wives' support given to their own parents and marital satisfaction ( $B = .18, p = .05$ ). Figure 5 shows that wives' more frequent support given to parents was significantly associated with lower marital satisfaction when husbands' positive relationship quality with their own parents was low ( $B = -.24, p = .02$ ) but not high ( $B = .04, p = .66$ ). Wives' ambivalence toward parents moderated the link between their own support given to parents and life satisfaction ( $B = -.22, p = .02$ ). As shown in Figure 6, wives' more frequent support given to parents was significantly associated with greater life satisfaction when wives' ambivalence was low ( $B = .35, p = .04$ ) but not high ( $B = -.15, p = .33$ ). Finally, wives' ambivalence moderated the association between their own support given to parents and depressive symptoms ( $B = .07, p = .04$ ); but this association was not significant when wives' ambivalence was low ( $B = -.09, p = .18$ ) or high ( $B = .08, p = .16$ ).

Table 7 shows that wives' reports of negative relationship quality with parents moderated the link between the support wives received from parents and depressive symptoms ( $B = -.08, p = .02$ ). This association was not significant, however, when wives' negative relationship quality was low ( $B = .07, p = .21$ ) or high ( $B = -.05, p = .24$ ). Husbands' ambivalence toward parents moderated the link between husbands' support received from parents and wives' depressive symptoms ( $B = .11, p = .05$ ); but this link was not significant when husbands' ambivalence was low ( $B = -.15, p = .10$ ) or high ( $B = .10, p = .19$ ). Lastly, wives' ambivalence moderated the link between support received from their parents and marital satisfaction ( $B = -.09, p = .04$ ). But again, this link was not significant when wives' ambivalence was low ( $B = .06, p = .51$ ) or high ( $B = -.15, p = .06$ ).

**Husbands' well-being and marital satisfaction.** As presented in Table 8, there were no significant moderating effects of husbands' or wives' relationship quality with parents on the association between support given to parents and husbands' well-being. Table 9 shows that husbands' negative relationship quality moderated the link between husbands' received support from parents and marital satisfaction ( $B = -.25, p = .04$ ). More frequent support received by husbands from their parents was linked to greater marital satisfaction when husbands' negative relationship quality with parents was low ( $B = .27, p = .04$ ) but not high ( $B = -.11, p = .34$ ). Likewise, husbands' ambivalence toward parents moderated this association ( $B = -.23, p = .01$ ). As shown in Figure 7, more frequent support received by husbands from their parents was linked to greater marital satisfaction when husbands' ambivalence was low ( $B = .35, p = .01$ ) but not high ( $B = -.16, p = .17$ ). This association was also moderated by wives' ambivalence toward their own parents ( $B = .16, p = .03$ ). Figure 7 shows that husbands' more frequent support received from parents was associated with greater marital satisfaction when wives' ambivalence toward her parents was high ( $B = .28, p = .02$ ) but not low ( $B = -.09, p = .43$ ).

Husbands' positive relationship quality with parents moderated the association between wives' support received from parents and husbands' depressive symptoms ( $B = .10, p = .05$ ). Figure 8 shows that more frequent support received by wives from parents was associated with husbands' lower depressive symptoms when husbands' positive relationship quality with parents was low ( $B = -.13, p = .04$ ) but not high ( $B = .03, p = .68$ ). Husbands' ambivalence toward their own parents moderated the link between husbands' support received from parents and depressive symptoms ( $B = .14, p = .02$ ); but this link was not significant when husbands' ambivalence was low ( $B = -.16, p = .07$ ) or high ( $B = .13, p = .11$ ).

The association between the support that wives received from parents and husbands'

depressive symptoms was moderated by husbands' ambivalence toward their own parents ( $B = -.08, p = .04$ ). As shown in Figure 8, wives' more frequent support received from their own parents was associated with husbands' lower depressive symptoms when husbands' ambivalence was high ( $B = -.17, p = .003$ ) but not low ( $B = .02, p = .78$ ). Lastly, wives' ambivalence toward their parents moderated the association between support received by wives from parents and husbands' marital satisfaction ( $B = -.12, p = .01$ ). Wives' more frequent support received from parents was associated with husbands' greater marital satisfaction when wives' ambivalence was low ( $B = .19, p = .05$ ) but not high ( $B = -.09, p = .24$ ).

### **Discussion**

The present study demonstrates that wives' and husbands' perceptions of relationship quality with parents are valuable in understanding how everyday support exchanges with parents are related to well-being and marital quality at midlife. This study extends the literature by showing that each spouse's reports of positive, negative, and ambivalent qualities in their parent-child ties influence how the frequency of everyday support exchanged with parents is linked to well-being and marital satisfaction. Taken as a whole, findings suggest that perceptions of relationship quality with parents are a lens through which giving and receiving intergenerational support is viewed and interpreted within the couple. As predicted, ambivalence toward parents appears to have a more consistent influence than positive or negative elements of parent-child ties. But there were distinct differences in the pattern of findings for wives and husbands.

#### **Implications of One's Own Relationship Quality with Parents**

The moderating effects of one's own relationship quality with parents differed between husbands and wives in several ways. First, the link between *one's own* support given to parents and well-being was conditioned by relationship quality for wives but not for husbands. Wives

reported greater life satisfaction when they gave more frequent support to their parents and had low levels of ambivalence toward parents. Consistent with previous work (e.g., Birditt et al., 2009; Willson et al., 2006), ambivalence scores in this study reflected similarity and intensity of both positive and negative feelings about parents. Therefore, low ambivalence scores indicate either (a) ties that are primarily positive or negative, or (b) ties that are emotionally indifferent (Uchino et al., 2004). One possibility is that wives with low ambivalence scores experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationships with parents. Under these conditions, helping older parents may be a source of life satisfaction for wives. Conversely, wives' greater ambivalence toward their parents may heighten intergenerational tension that counteracts the positive aspects of giving support. That these linkages were not present for husbands suggests that giving support to parents may hold more salience for wives' well-being, perhaps due to the greater centrality of providing family support for middle-aged women (Stephens et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the association between *one's own* support received from parents and marital satisfaction was influenced by parent-child relationship quality for husbands but not for wives. Husbands were more satisfied with their marriages when they received more frequent support from parents and had low levels of negative or ambivalent qualities in these ties. Similar linkages were found for both relationship quality measures, which suggests that this association is largely driven by low levels of negative qualities. In other words, receiving more help from parents is linked to greater marital satisfaction when husbands perceive less criticism and fewer demands from their own parents. Receiving help that is not accompanied by parents' criticism or demands may enhance husbands' marital satisfaction because this support benefits the couple without contributing to strain in the marriage. Wives' perceptions of marital quality may be unrelated to help received from parents because wives are traditionally expected to participate in

family exchanges and serve as a bridge across generations (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Consequently, wives may view receiving help from parents as more normative and therefore less consequential for their marital satisfaction.

Lastly, the support that *one's partner* received from parents mattered for well-being in the context of relationship quality with parents for husbands but not for wives. Husbands who reported less positive or highly ambivalent ties with their own parents had lower depressive symptoms when *their wives* received more frequent support from their own parents. Of note, husbands' reports of negative relationship qualities did not influence this association. These findings are therefore counter to research showing that the adverse effects of intergenerational ambivalence on well-being are primarily attributed to negative feelings about parents (Gilligan, Sutor, Feld, & Pillemer, 2015). Thus, the support that wives receive from parents may benefit husbands who have less caring or more ambivalent ties with their own parents. Previous research consistently shows that men rely heavily on their marriage for social support, whereas women also seek support from their wider kin network (Antonucci, 2001; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006). The present finding complements prior work by suggesting that a supportive relationship between one's partner and parents-in-law may reflect another valuable source of social support for men in the absence of high quality ties with their own parents. In contrast, it is possible that wives gain comparatively less benefit from supportive relations between their husbands and parents-in-law because wives tend to have a broader social support network.

### **Implications of One's Partner's Relationship Quality with Parents**

One's partner's relationship quality with parents modified the link between *one's own* support given to parents and marital satisfaction for wives but not for husbands. Specifically, wives reported lower marital satisfaction when they gave more frequent support to their parents

and *their husbands* had less positive ties with their own parents. Prior research indicates that wives who provide help to aging parents experience decreased marital satisfaction when husbands are not supportive of such assistance (Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994). Husbands who report low levels of care and understanding in ties with their own parents may view wives' support provision less favorably or may attempt to discourage this help. Consistent with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), husbands may also be more dependent on their wives for social support when they lack support from their parents. In turn, husbands may resent the help that wives give to parents because this detracts from the time that wives devote to husbands' needs. Notably, however, husbands were not less satisfied with their marriages under these circumstances. This finding is in accord with previous work suggesting that wives perceive more interference of helping parents in their marital relationship than husbands (Kleban, Brody, Schoonover, & Hoffman, 1989; Stephens & Franks, 1995)

One's partner's views of their parent-child ties influenced how *the partner's* support received from parents was associated with marital satisfaction for husbands but not for wives. Husbands had greater marital satisfaction when *their wives* received more frequent support from their own parents and reported low ambivalence regarding these ties. Wives' negative feelings about parents did not influence this association, which suggests that mixed emotions regarding these ties are relatively more consequential for husbands' satisfaction with the marriage. Hence, the support that wives receive from parents may benefit husbands' marital satisfaction in the absence of wives' conflicting sentiments about their parents. These findings are counter to Western cultural perceptions that involvement from parents-in-law has predominantly negative implications for marital quality (e.g., Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007; Morr Serewicz, 2006b). Prior work indicates that husbands are drawn into more frequent contact with parents-in-law through

their wives' influence than vice versa (Lee, Spitze, & Logan, 2003; Shuey & Hardy, 2003). In turn, more frequent contact with in-laws predicts their greater centrality in one's social support network (Santos & Levitt, 2007). The ties that wives have with their parents are therefore likely to be an especially prominent aspect of married life for each spouse. Consequently, these ties may enhance husbands' marital satisfaction when they are supportive and emotionally stable.

When wives' ties with parents are highly ambivalent, however, the support received by husbands from *their own* parents appears to be more consequential for their marital satisfaction. The presence of mixed emotions in the relationships that wives have with their parents could indicate that wives' parents are a potential source of stress and tension for the couple. Husbands may therefore be happier in the marriage when *their own* parents are highly supportive. From the perspective of husbands, such support may help to counteract the adverse effects of wives' ambivalent ties with parents.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this study include data collected on the same measures for husbands and wives, the use of dyadic data analysis to evaluate interdependence between partners, and the examination of each spouse's perceptions of relationship quality with their own parents in moderating the associations between support exchanges with parents and indicators of well-being and marital quality among middle-aged couples. Furthermore, positive, negative, and ambivalent qualities were considered, which enabled a descriptive comparison of their effects. In support of the intergenerational ambivalence model (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), the findings suggest that ambivalence plays a key role in the determining the links between support exchanges with parents and reports of well-being and marital satisfaction within the couple.

It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that this study has several limitations. First and

foremost, it is not possible to infer causal associations between everyday support exchanges with parents and well-being in the context of spouses' reports of parent-child relationship quality. It is plausible, for example, that wives who have greater life satisfaction report low levels of ambivalence in their parent-child relationships because they are less likely to engage in conflict within these ties. Second, there were no available data on the everyday support that husbands and wives exchanged with their parents-in-law or their perceptions of relationship quality with parents-in-law. Yet these understudied elements of intergenerational relations likely play a critical part in explaining the associations found in this study. Third, parents in this sample had on average low levels of functional disability. It is therefore possible that the associations in this study may be different in the context of greater parental need for more extensive assistance. Finally, findings are specific to middle-aged couples and thus may not generalize to younger or older married couples. Nonetheless, this study provides a framework for future research to gain a more nuanced understanding of how each spouse's views of their parent-child ties may affect the linkages between everyday support exchanged with aging parents and multiple aspects of well-being and marital quality within couples.

### **Future Directions**

A crucial area for future work is to examine whether wives' and husbands' reports of relationship quality with parents influence the associations between long-term *changes* in the frequency of everyday support exchanged with parents and indicators of well-being and marital quality. Among middle-aged offspring, support received from parents tends to diminish over time, whereas support given to parents increases due to parents' greater need for assistance (Kim et al., 2016; Merz et al., 2009). Hence, longitudinal studies that evaluate how the associations in this study operate in the longer term would be particularly valuable.

Future research should also evaluate how the frequency of support that wives and husbands exchange with their *parents-in-law* may be associated with well-being and marital quality in the context of affective evaluations regarding in-law ties. Although wives tend to give more frequent emotional support to aging parents-in-law, research suggests that wives and husbands spend a similar amount of time giving practical and financial assistance to parents-in-law at midlife (Chesley & Poppie, 2009). Support exchanges with parents-in-law are therefore likely to represent a salient aspect of intergenerational ties for middle-aged couples. Indeed, research indicates that nearly half of middle-aged wives and husbands consider their relationships with aging parents-in-law as among their closest and most important social ties (Santos & Levitt, 2007). Of course, wives and husbands typically have stronger bonds with their own parents than their parents-in-law (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, & Pitzer, 2012). Consequently, the associations found in this study may differ when exchanges between spouses and their parents-in-law are considered.

Along with perceptions of ties with one's own parents or parents-in-law, other measures of relationship quality with parents may be valuable to examine. Wives' and husbands' views of *their partner's* ties with parents or parents-in-law, for example, may play a stronger role in moderating the linkages between support exchanges with parents and well-being or marital quality. In addition, each spouse's direct assessment of holding mixed sentiments toward parents is an alternative measure of intergenerational ambivalence that could be explored. Scholars have argued that the indirect approach of assessing ambivalence used in this study is likely more effective because people may have difficulty recognizing the presence of coexisting positive and negative feelings (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Suito, 2002). Nevertheless, direct perceptions of mixed emotions may have differential moderating effects on the associations in

this study.

In sum, this study suggests that wives' and husbands' affective evaluations of ties with their own parents may in part determine how each spouse's everyday support exchanges with parents affect well-being and marital quality at midlife. The findings highlight the value of exploring spousal interdependence with regard to the potential consequences of intergenerational support exchanges for both partners.

Table 5

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Wives' and Husbands' Scores*

Variable	Wives		Husbands		<i>t</i>	<i>r</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. Support given to own parents <sup>a</sup>	4.25	1.36	3.61	1.29	3.91***	-.02
2. Support received from own parents <sup>b</sup>	3.56	1.35	2.82	1.06	5.40***	.15
3. Positive relationship quality with parents <sup>c</sup>	4.04	0.74	3.98	0.84	0.57	.02
4. Negative relationship quality with parents <sup>d</sup>	1.93	0.77	1.91	0.77	0.13	.13
5. Ambivalence toward parents <sup>e</sup>	2.28	1.14	2.25	1.13	0.21	.12
6. Depressive symptoms <sup>f</sup>	1.49	0.63	1.47	0.64	0.31	.02
7. Life satisfaction <sup>g</sup>	7.48	1.67	7.53	1.57	-0.27	.27***
8. Marital satisfaction <sup>h</sup>	4.11	0.95	4.21	0.97	-1.22	.46***

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Mean frequency of six types of everyday support given to parents rated from 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*) to 8 (*daily*). <sup>b</sup>Mean frequency of five types of everyday support received from parents rated from 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*) to 8 (*daily*). <sup>c</sup>Mean of two items rating how much parents love and care for the respondent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). <sup>d</sup>Mean of two items rating how much parents are demanding or critical of the respondent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). <sup>e</sup>Similarity and intensity of positive and negative relationship quality with parents. <sup>f</sup>Mean of five items rating how much the respondent experienced symptoms of depression over the past week from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). <sup>g</sup>One item assessing overall life satisfaction from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*). <sup>h</sup>One item assessing overall marital quality on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

*N* = 132 couples.

\*\*\**p* ≤ .001.

Table 6

*Moderating Effects of Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents on Linkages Between Support Given to Parents and Wives' Well-being and Marital Satisfaction*

Effect	Wives' Outcomes					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>						
Wife support given to own parents	.02	.04				
Husband support given to own parents	.01	.04				
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.16*	.08	.24**	.08	.03	.05
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.01	.07	-.16*	.08	-.08	.05
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.03	.05	-.03	.05	.07*	.04
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	-.03	.06	-.06	.06	-.05	.04
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.003	.07	.04	.06	.04	.04
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	.004	.05	-.01	.06	.01	.04
<b>Life satisfaction</b>						
Wife support given to own parents	.04	.12				
Husband support given to own parents	.11	.11				
Wife relationship quality with parents	.25	.22	-.57**	.20	-.18	.14
Husband relationship quality with parents	.17	.19	.24	.20	-.06	.14
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.18	.13	-.09	.13	-.22*	.09
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.09	.16	.09	.15	.10	.10
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	-.11	.19	.12	.15	.02	.10
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.12	.14	-.17	.16	-.09	.11
<b>Marital Satisfaction</b>						
Wife support given to own parents	-.08	.07				
Husband support given to own parents	.05	.07				
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.004	.12	-.14	.12	-.07	.08
Husband relationship quality with parents	.22*	.11	.14	.12	.08	.08
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.02	.08	-.10	.07	-.09	.05
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.18*	.09	-.04	.09	.01	.06
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.13	.11	.09	.09	.03	.06
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.001	.08	-.11	.09	-.09	.06

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality moderator. Model 2 = negative relationship quality moderator. Model 3 = ambivalence moderator. All models controlled for each spouse's report of parents' functional disability (1 = at least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities, 0 = parents do not need help with daily activities) and mothers' status (1 = mother is living, 0 = mother is not living).

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

Table 7

*Moderating Effects of Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents on Linkages Between Support Received from Parents and Wives' Well-being and Marital Satisfaction*

Effect	Wives' Outcomes					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>						
Wife support received from own parents	.01	.04				
Husband support received from own parents	-.02	.05				
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.16†	.09	.24**	.08	.03	.05
Husband relationship quality with parents	.02	.07	-.14†	.07	-.08	.05
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.02	.05	-.08*	.04	.05	.03
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	-.04	.05	-.07	.06	-.03	.04
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	-.02	.08	.06	.07	-.001	.05
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.05	.07	.09	.08	.11*	.06
<b>Life satisfaction</b>						
Wife support received from own parents	-.07	.11				
Husband support received from own parents	.15	.14				
Wife relationship quality with parents	.40	.22	-.52**	.20	-.16	.14
Husband relationship quality with parents	.14	.19	.22	.20	.05	.14
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.13	.13	.08	.10	-.13	.08
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.23	.14	.28	.16	.11	.10
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	-.01	.20	.05	.18	.06	.13
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.04	.19	-.35	.21	-.19	.15
<b>Marital Satisfaction</b>						
Wife support received from own parents	-.07	.06				
Husband support received from own parents	.12	.08				
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.0003	.13	-.16	.12	-.08	.08
Husband relationship quality with parents	.20	.11	.14	.11	.08	.08
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.06	.08	-.06	.06	-.09*	.04
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.07	.08	.07	.09	.001	.06
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.01	.12	.07	.11	.05	.07
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.05	.11	-.17	.12	-.16†	.09

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality moderator. Model 2 = negative relationship quality moderator. Model 3 = ambivalence moderator. All models controlled for each spouse's report of parents' functional disability (1 = at least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities, 0 = parents do not need help with daily activities) and mothers' status (1 = mother is living, 0 = mother is not living).

† $p \leq .07$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

Table 8

*Moderating Effects of Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents on Linkages Between Support Given to Parents and Husbands' Well-being and Marital Satisfaction*

Effect	Husbands' Outcomes					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Depressive symptoms						
Husband support given to own parents	-.04	.04				
Wife support given to own parents	-.06	.04				
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.20**	.07	.12	.08	.06	.05
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.17*	.08	.02	.08	.04	.05
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.07	.05	-.01	.06	.03	.04
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	-.07	.07	.01	.06	.001	.04
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.01	.06	-.03	.06	-.03	.04
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.01	.05	-.05	.05	-.05	.04
Life satisfaction						
Husband support given to own parents	.06	.11				
Wife support given to own parents	-.01	.11				
Husband relationship quality with parents	.56***	.16	-.36†	.19	-.18	.13
Wife relationship quality with parents	.65***	.19	-.48*	.19	-.26*	.13
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	.10	.12	-.11	.15	-.13	.10
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.29	.17	-.01	.14	-.01	.09
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	-.03	.14	.26†	.14	.16	.10
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.001	.12	.07	.12	.01	.09
Marital Satisfaction						
Husband support given to own parents	.09	.07				
Wife support given to own parents	.001	.07				
Husband relationship quality with parents	.31**	.11	.04	.12	-.01	.08
Wife relationship quality with parents	.15	.12	-.23†	.12	-.10	.08
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	.10	.08	-.11	.09	-.11	.07
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.16	.11	.05	.09	.01	.06
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.11	.09	.15	.09	.08	.06
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.09	.08	-.02	.07	-.05	.06

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality moderator. Model 2 = negative relationship quality moderator. Model 3 = ambivalence moderator. All models controlled for each spouse's report of parents' functional disability (1 = at least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities, 0 = parents do not need help with daily activities) and mothers' status (1 = mother is living, 0 = mother is not living).

† $p \leq .07$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Table 9

*Moderating Effects of Spouses' Relationship Quality with Parents on Linkages Between Support Received from Parents and Husbands' Well-being and Marital Satisfaction*

Effect	Husbands' Outcomes					
	Model 1: Positive Quality		Model 2: Negative Quality		Model 3: Ambivalent Quality	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>						
Husband support received from own parents	.02	.05				
Wife support received from own parents	-.11	.04				
Husband relationship quality with parents	-.23**	.07	.08	.08	.05	.05
Wife relationship quality with parents	-.11	.08	.05	.08	.05	.05
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	-.13†	.07	.14	.08	.14*	.06
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	-.06	.07	-.05	.07	-.04	.05
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.10*	.05	-.12†	.06	-.08*	.04
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.01	.05	-.01	.04	-.01	.03
<b>Life satisfaction</b>						
Husband support received from own parents	.02	.13				
Wife support received from own parents	.08	.11				
Husband relationship quality with parents	.58***	.17	-.30	.18	-.15	.13
Wife relationship quality with parents	.57***	.20	-.53**	.19	-.29*	.12
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	.21	.17	-.26	.19	-.26	.14
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.28	.17	.16	.17	.11	.12
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	-.17	.12	.20	.15	.15	.10
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	.01	.12	.07	.09	-.03	.07
<b>Marital Satisfaction</b>						
Husband support received from own parents	.07	.08				
Wife support received from own parents	.03	.07				
Husband relationship quality with parents	.33***	.11	.08	.12	.01	.08
Wife relationship quality with parents	.13	.13	-.25*	.12	-.11	.08
Husband support X Husband relationship quality	.15	.11	-.25*	.12	-.23**	.09
Husband support X Wife relationship quality	.10	.11	.24*	.11	.16*	.07
Wife support X Husband relationship quality	.08	.08	.10	.09	.05	.06
Wife support X Wife relationship quality	-.06	.08	-.04	.06	-.12**	.05

*Note.* Model 1 = positive relationship quality moderator. Model 2 = negative relationship quality moderator. Model 3 = ambivalence moderator. All models controlled for each spouse's report of parents' functional disability (1 = at least one parent requires help with one or more daily activities, 0 = parents do not need help with daily activities) and mothers' status (1 = mother is living, 0 = mother is not living).

† $p \leq .07$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

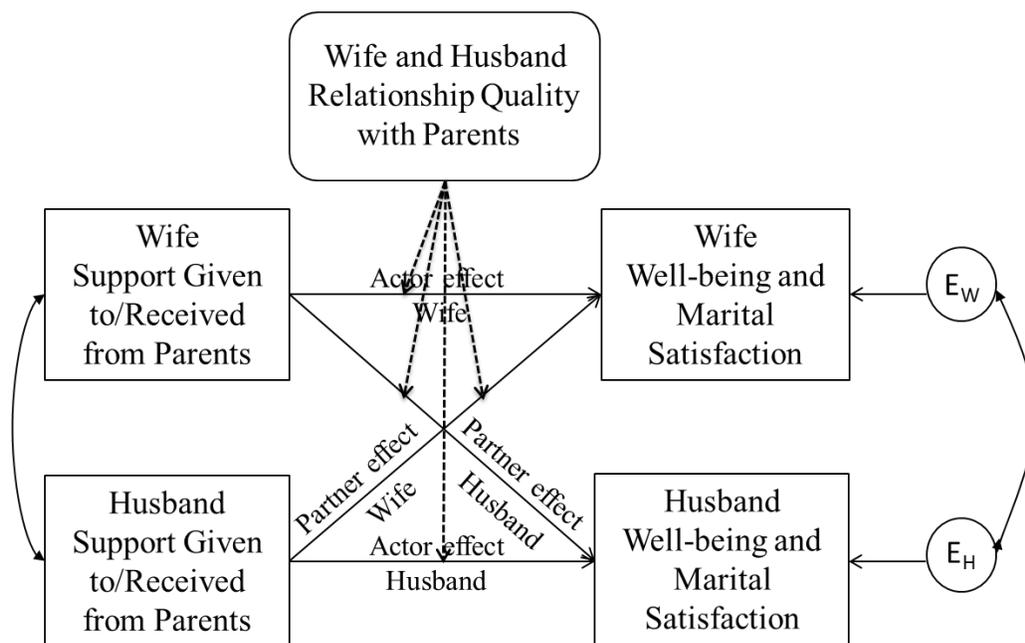
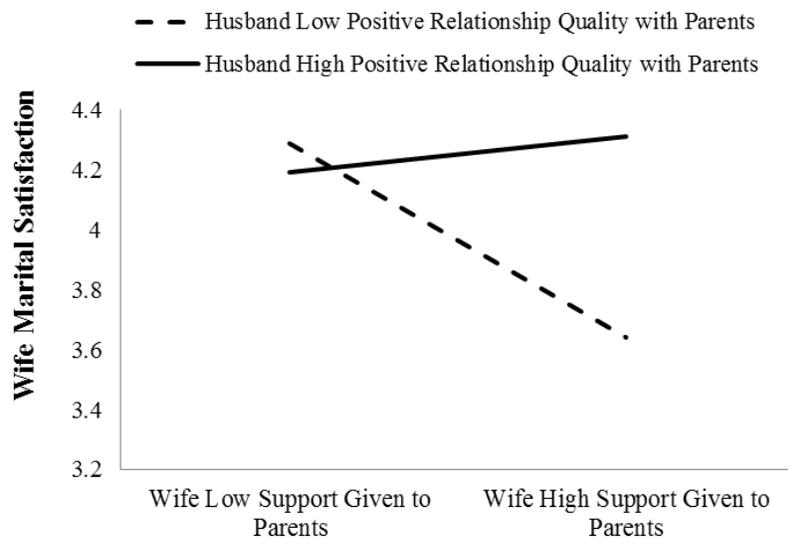
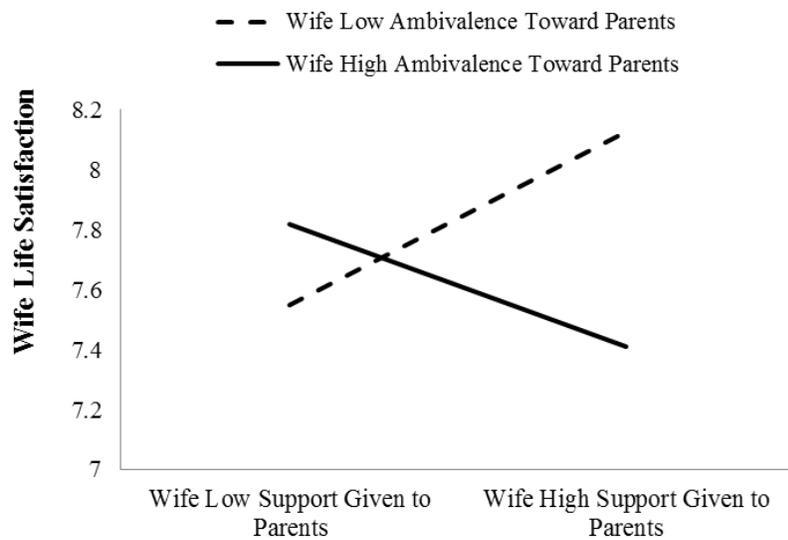


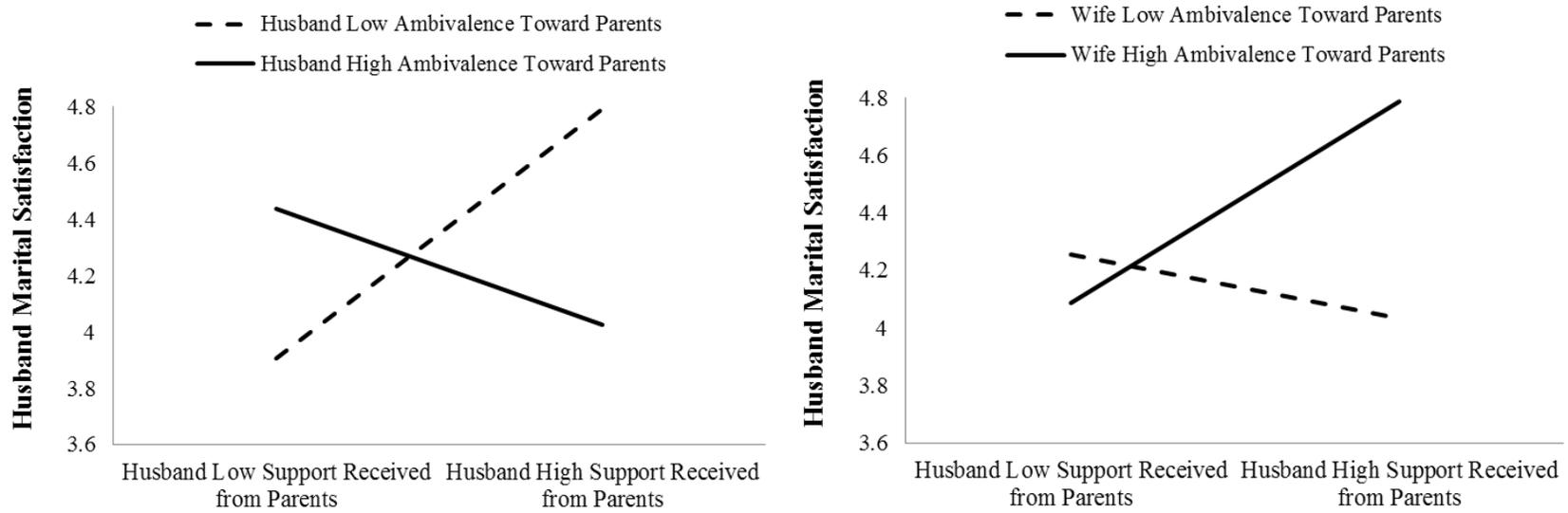
Figure 4. Simplified conceptual model of Study 2.



*Figure 5.* Moderating effect of husbands' positive relationship quality with parents on the association between wives' support given to parents and marital satisfaction.



*Figure 6.* Moderating effect of wives' ambivalence toward parents on the association between wives' support given to parents and life satisfaction.



*Figure 7.* Moderating effects of husbands' and wives' ambivalence toward parents on the association between husbands' received support from parents and marital satisfaction.

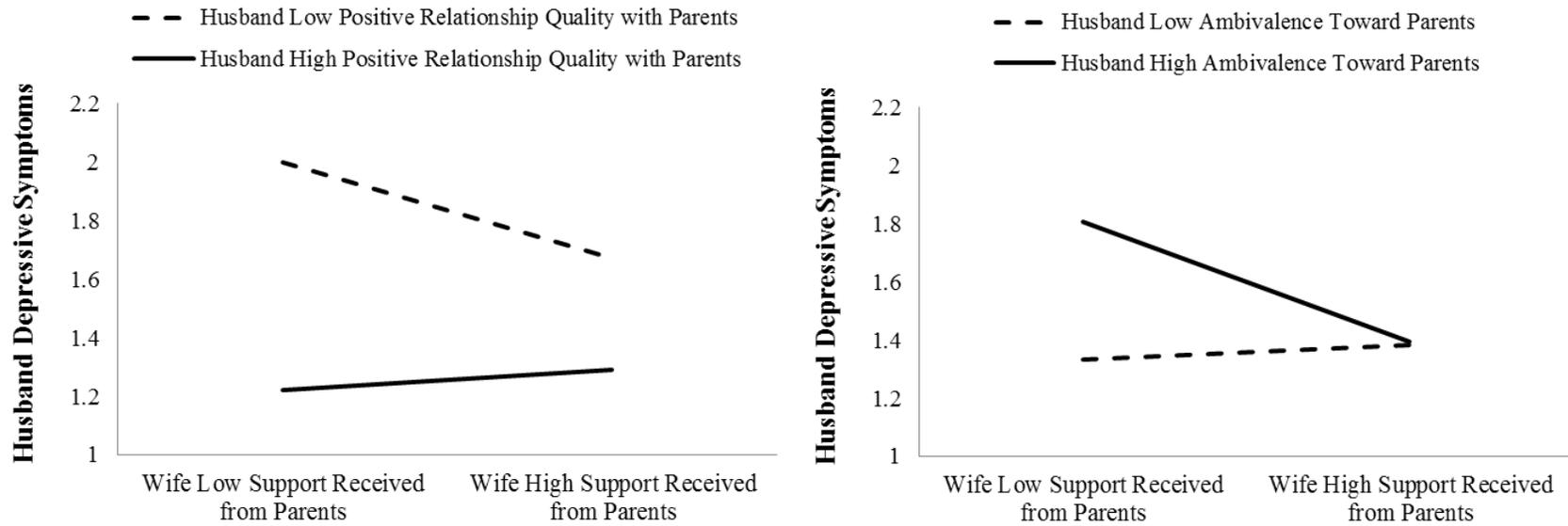


Figure 8. Moderating effects of husbands' positive relationship quality with parents and ambivalence toward parents on the association between wives' support received from parents and husbands' depressive symptoms.

## CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

Relationships with parents are arguably among the most long-standing and emotionally salient social ties (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). For middle-aged children, these ties are often embedded within the marital relationship. The relationships that wives and husbands have with their own parents are therefore likely to impact the lives of both spouses. This dissertation evaluated the mutual influences among middle-aged married couples with respect to linkages between each spouse's relationships with parents and their reports of well-being and marital satisfaction. Findings highlight the interdependence between husbands and wives, and imply that each spouse's affective evaluation of the relationships with their own parents may influence their own and their partners' experience of these ties. The two studies lay groundwork for future research to gain greater insight into how relationships with aging parents may affect well-being and couples' functioning.

In this conclusion chapter, I first discuss differences in the pattern of findings between wives and husbands across the two studies, focusing on the implications of *one's own* and *one's partner's* ties with parents for well-being and marital quality. I then outline the key contributions of this research to the wider literature on adult intergenerational relationships. Finally, I recommend future directions to continue this line of work.

### **Differences Between Wives and Husbands**

**Implications of one's own relationships with parents.** The two studies showed several gender differences regarding the influence of *one's own* relationship quality with parents. First, Study 1 revealed that one's own perceived positive relationship quality with parents was directly linked to well-being for wives but not for husbands. That is, wives who reported greater care and understanding in their ties with parents had lower depressive symptoms. Compared with

adult sons and their parents, adult daughters' ties with parents tend to be more emotional in quality and involve greater expression of intimacy and affection (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Fingerman, 2001). The findings from the present study suggest that wives' well-being may be more sensitive to positive qualities within these ties. Contrary to the hypothesis in Study 2, however, positive relationship quality with parents did not influence the associations between support exchanges with parents and reports of well-being or marital quality for wives or husbands. One potential explanation is that frequent support occurs most often between parents and adult children in close and affectionate relationships. Positive feelings toward parents tend to motivate the exchange of intergenerational support (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Fingerman et al., 2011). Positive relationship quality and support exchanges with parents may therefore have independent effects on offspring well-being.

Negative relationship quality with one's own parents also demonstrated different patterns between husbands and wives. Study 1 showed that negative qualities in these ties were directly related to well-being for both spouses, but had more pervasive direct associations with wives' well-being. Specifically, higher levels of perceived criticism and demands within parent-child ties were linked to lower life satisfaction among husbands and worse reports of depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-rated health among wives. Along with the likelihood of greater tension and conflict in relationships with parents for adult daughters than for adult sons (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001), these findings may in part be attributed to women's heightened vulnerability to negative aspects of social relationships (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Interestingly, in Study 2, husbands were more satisfied with their marriages when they received more frequent support from their parents *and* perceived low levels of negative qualities within their parent-child relationships. Hence, although negative relationship quality does not appear to

be detrimental to husbands' well-being or marital satisfaction, husbands may fail to derive benefits of receiving support from parents if they perceive these ties to be highly critical or demanding.

Notably, more ambivalent ties with one's parents were directly linked to lower life satisfaction among husbands but were not directly associated with wives' well-being (Study 1). Compared with men, women's intergenerational relationships tend to involve a greater mix of positive and negative sentiments (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Consequently, ambivalence in wives' ties with parents may be more normative and therefore have less influence on their well-being. For both wives and husbands, however, ambivalence toward parents appears to be a key contextual factor in determining how support exchanges with parents are linked to reports of well-being and marital quality (Study 2). Wives had greater life satisfaction when they gave more support to their own parents and reported *low* levels of ambivalence (i.e., fewer coexisting positive and negative sentiments) toward their parents. Similarly, husbands reported greater marital satisfaction when they received more frequent support from parents and had less ambivalent ties with parents.

Consistent with prior work (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004), it was hypothesized that more ambivalence toward parents would generate stress related to support exchanges within these relationships. Further, support exchanges within highly ambivalent parent-child ties were anticipated to involve more emotional effort than relationships with parents that are primarily positive or negative, which may in turn have harmful consequences for well-being and marital quality (English, John, & Gross, 2013; Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2014). In the relative absence of conflicting emotions (i.e., low ambivalence), it therefore appears that support exchanges with parents may

benefit wives and husband in different ways. These distinctions may in part be attributed to traditional differences in women's and men's social roles. Giving support to parents and other family members has traditionally been central to women's sense of identity and social responsibility (Blair-Loy, 2003; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Thus, it follows that providing everyday support to parents may enhance wives' overall life satisfaction. In contrast, the provision of family support is not typically central to men's identities or societal expectations. Rather, for husbands, *receiving* help from extended family members (e.g., their own parents) may contribute to increased satisfaction with their overall family lives. Consequently, such support may enhance husbands' perceptions of marital quality.

**Implications of one's partner's relationships with parents.** Likewise, distinctions between wives and husbands were found with regard to the influence of *one's partner's* ties with parents. Husbands' perceptions of positive relationship quality with their own parents were unrelated to their well-being; but husbands reported lower depressive symptoms, higher life satisfaction, and better self-rated health when *their partners* had more positive ties with parents (Study 1). Counter to prediction, these associations were not found for wives. Husbands may therefore derive more benefit than wives from their partners' positive ties with parents, perhaps partly because men typically have fewer close social relationships than women (Antonucci, 1994; Fuhrer & Stansfeld, 2002).

Husbands may especially benefit from their partners' positive intergenerational ties when they have poorer quality relationships with *their own* parents. In Study 1, the direct link between wives' more positive ties with parents and husbands' lower depressive symptoms was intensified when husbands reported low levels of positive qualities in the relationships with their own parents. Furthermore, Study 2 revealed that husbands with less positive or more ambivalent ties

with their parents reported lower depressive symptoms when wives received more frequent support from their own parents. Taken together, the two studies indicate that relationships with wives' parents may be a critical source of emotional support that enhances husbands' well-being. These findings are in contrast to Western cultural views that in-laws have a predominantly negative influence on well-being and marital quality (Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007; Morr Serewicz, 2006b). Instead, it appears that one's partner's supportive relationships with parents may be an important social resource during midlife, particularly for men.

Wives' views of their parent-child ties may also have implications for how the support that wives receive from parents affects husbands' satisfaction with the marriage. Study 2 found that husbands were more satisfied with their marriages when *their wives* received more frequent support from parents and reported less ambivalent ties with parents. Prior work indicates that couples tend to engage in more frequent contact with and provide more support to wives' parents than husbands' parents (Polenick, Seidel, Birditt, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2015; Shuey & Hardy, 2003). Consequently, the ties that wives have with their parents are likely to be an especially salient element of married life for both spouses. Compared with men, women are generally closer to their parents and give more help to parents as they age (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001; Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). Thus, middle-aged husbands may have more frequent direct and indirect involvement with their wives' parents than with their own parents. Study 2 suggests that support received from wives' parents in the absence of mixed feelings regarding these ties may contribute to husbands' greater marital satisfaction. Hence, this finding provides further evidence of the significant role of wives' ties with parents in their husbands' lives.

High levels of mixed emotions in wives' ties with parents, however, may increase the importance of husbands' own supportive ties with parents. When wives are highly ambivalent

about their parents, the support that husbands receive from *their own* parents appears to enhance their marital satisfaction (Study 2). Consistent with the hypothesis, wives' greater ambivalence toward their parents could indicate that these ties are a source of strain and uncertainty for the couple. Thus, when supportive and stable ties with wives' parents are lacking, husbands may be more satisfied with their marriages when *their own* parents are a strong source of social support.

Lastly, Study 2 indicates that one's partner's views of parent-child ties may influence how the help that wives give to parents contributes to their own marital satisfaction. Wives were less satisfied with their marriages when they gave more support to parents and *their partners* had less positive ties with their own parents. These links, however, were not found for husbands. In accord with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), husbands who report less care and understanding in their own ties with parents may be more dependent on their wives to meet their social support needs. Relative to women, men tend to rely more heavily on their partners as a source of emotional support (Antonucci, 2001; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006; Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007). Helping parents likely interferes with the time that wives spend giving support to husbands, and so wives may feel less adequate in their spousal role when their husbands are more dependent on them (Goode, 1960). Alternatively, husbands reporting less positive ties with their own parents may be less supportive of the help that wives give to their parents because these husbands have an unfavorable view of parent-child ties. In turn, this lack of support could contribute to wives' lower marital satisfaction (Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994). Of note, husbands who perceived fewer positive qualities in their relationships with parents were *not* less satisfied with their marriages when wives gave more frequent support to their own parents. It therefore appears that these circumstances may only be detrimental to wives' perceptions of

marital quality, possibly due in part to their feelings of guilt and strain related to managing multiple family demands (Stephens, Franks, Martire, Norton, & Atienza, 2009).

### **Key Contributions to the Literature on Adult Intergenerational Relationships**

The present research extends prior work on adult intergenerational relationships in at least four ways. First, the perceptions and experiences of both wives and husbands were considered. The vast majority of studies on intergenerational ties in adulthood have examined reports from only one family member (Bianchi, 2006). Most previous studies evaluating the implications of relationships with parents for marital quality have likewise focused solely on the perspectives and outcomes of one spouse (e.g., Adamson, Feinauer, Lund, & Caserta, 1992; Bookwala, 2009; Ron, 2006). Scholars have increasingly begun to acknowledge, however, that intergenerational ties are situated within the broader family system (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). As such, it is critical to assess reports of the nature and quality of these ties from multiple family members. Spouses are a central source of support for men and women, and so it is imperative to evaluate the potential consequences of intergenerational ties within the context of marriage. The studies in this dissertation utilize data from both spouses in the couple and consider the influence of ties with aging parents on the marital relationship. Furthermore, the present research suggests that both *one's own* and *one's partner's* relationships with aging parents have significant implications for well-being and marital satisfaction among middle-aged wives and husbands.

Second, the present studies examined a sample of middle-aged couples with parents reflecting a representative range of overall physical functioning. Most studies evaluating the associations between ties with aging parents and offspring well-being or marital quality have focused on adult children providing caregiving support to parents with intensive care needs due

to illness or disability (e.g., Adamson, Feinauer, Lund, & Caserta, 1992; Bookwala, 2009; Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994). Given worldwide demographic trends such increased longevity and rapid population aging, the implications of caregiving for adult children's well-being and marital quality is undoubtedly a crucial research topic. Nevertheless, examining how *everyday* types of intergenerational support (e.g., emotional, practical, or financial aid) affect offspring well-being is an understudied area that is also worthy of scholarly attention. Compared with caregiving support, providing everyday support to aging parents occurs more commonly and for a longer period of time (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013). Along with giving help, offspring also continue to *receive* everyday support from their parents during midlife (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Suitor, 2012). Hence, the everyday support that wives and husbands give to and receive from their own parents is a salient and long-term aspect of married life that may impact the daily experiences of both spouses. Exchanging support with parents may benefit the couple by enhancing feelings of social connectedness or may be a source of conflict that contributes to heightened distress and marital strain. The present research shows that wives' and husbands' perceptions of relationship quality with aging parents may influence how everyday support exchanges affect each partner's reports of well-being and satisfaction within the marriage.

Third, most prior research on the implications of ties with parents for the adult child's marriage have examined women and/or men in separate models or within one model controlling for gender (e.g., Bookwala, 2009; Bryant et al., 2001; Reczek, Liu, & Umberson, 2010; Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994; Timmer & Veroff, 2000; Ward & Spitze, 1998). The present studies are therefore innovative in that the *mutual influences* between wives and husbands were considered. Importantly, the dyadic data analysis enabled the simultaneous estimation of *one's own* and *one's partner's* influences within the marriage. This work provides compelling evidence that wives'

and husbands' perceptions of relationship quality with aging parents are linked to their own and their partners' reports of well-being and marital quality. These associations were either direct or occurred indirectly through interactions with the frequency of everyday support that each spouse exchanged with his or her own parents. The present findings build upon previous work demonstrating that husbands' and wives' beliefs about helping aging parents have implications for marital satisfaction that are direct (Polenick et al., 2015) or within the context of each spouse's everyday support given to their own parents (Polenick et al., in press). In line with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), this work collectively indicates that wives' and husbands' ties with parents during midlife are situated within both individual and couple processes that may affect and be affected by each spouse's relationships with his or her own parents and in-laws.

Finally, the present studies suggest that positive, negative, and ambivalent ties with parents have distinct implications for middle-aged couples. Study 1 showed that positive and negative qualities in ties with aging parents were directly associated with all three indicators of well-being for wives and husbands, whereas ambivalence toward parents was only linked to life satisfaction for husbands. Husbands' greater ambivalence and greater negative qualities in ties with their own parents were both linked to lower life satisfaction, however, which supports prior work indicating that the association between ambivalence and life satisfaction may be largely driven by high levels of negative relationship quality (Gilligan, Sutor, Feld, & Pillemer, 2015). As a whole, these findings indicate that positive and negative qualities within parent-child ties have more direct implications for well-being among middle-aged offspring than the experience of mixed sentiments toward one's parents. Thus, consistent with solidarity theory (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991), Study 1 suggests that both

positive and negative elements of ties with parents may have consequences for subjective well-being among middle-aged men and women. Notably, the models accounted for each spouse's report of marital satisfaction, which is strongly linked to both physical and psychological health (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014).

In the context of everyday support exchanges with parents, Study 2 revealed a different pattern. Ambivalence toward parents conditioned the associations between support exchanges with parents and reports of subjective well-being and marital quality more consistently than positive or negative qualities of parent-child ties. Overall, it appears that support exchanges with parents may provide psychological and relational benefits for middle-aged couples when these ties involve fewer conflicting emotions (i.e., low ambivalence) that could counteract the positive aspects of family support. These findings extend the intergenerational ambivalence model (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998) by demonstrating that mixed sentiments within parent-child ties have distinct implications for how wives and husbands experience their own and their partner's everyday support exchanges with aging parents.

### **Future Directions**

Future research could expand upon this preliminary work in several ways. First and foremost, it will be imperative to determine the generalizability of the present findings. The majority of couples in the current studies are non-Hispanic White and middle class. Therefore, it will be valuable for future studies to evaluate the associations in these studies among couples in which one or both partners is a racial or ethnic minority as well as couples with lower socioeconomic status. Furthermore, it will be important to consider other types of middle-aged couples. In the present studies, all men and women were in heterosexual marriages. Hence, it is not known whether the findings would apply to homosexual couples or to cohabiting men and

women. Additionally, all wives and nearly all husbands (99%) in the current studies had biological or adoptive parents. Considering that approximately one in five U.S. adults report having a stepparent (Pew Research Center, 2011), the present findings should be replicated to determine whether the implications of relationship quality with parents differ for couples in which wives and/or husbands have aging stepparents.

Another key direction for future research is to examine the implications of relationship quality and support exchanges with *parents-in-law* for well-being and marital quality. Although offspring tend to have stronger bonds with their own parents (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, & Pitzer, 2012), relationships with parents-in-law may have some influence on well-being and marital quality. Research indicates that the majority of wives and husbands consider parents-in-law to be among their closest and most important social ties (Santos & Levitt, 2007). Moreover, prior studies indicate that spouses' perceptions of greater closeness with parents-in-law are linked to better marital quality (Timmer & Veroff, 2000), whereas high levels of conflict or discord within parent-in-law ties are linked to worse marital quality (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). Future work comparing how affective evaluations of ties with parents and parents-in-law influence reports of well-being and marital quality within the couple would be particularly valuable.

In addition, the views and experiences of aging parents regarding their ties with middle-aged children and children-in-law could be considered in future studies. Prior work indicates that *one's own* and *one's parent's* reports of relationship quality within parent-child ties are linked to adult children's well-being (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birdit, & Mroczek, 2008). In line with the family systems perspective (Bowen, 1978; Morr Serewicz, 2006a), relationships among adult children, their parents, and their spouses are triadic, such that interactions and

outcomes within one dyad (e.g., adult child and their spouse) have the potential to influence interactions and outcomes within another dyad (e.g., adult child and their parent). Therefore, exploring the complex interrelationships among the dyads within these family triads would provide a more nuanced understanding of how ties with aging parents affect well-being and marital satisfaction in middle-aged couples.

Lastly, future work should examine longitudinal associations between wives' and husbands' perceptions of relationship quality with parents and their reports of well-being and marital satisfaction. Relationship quality with aging parents tends to decline over time as parents incur functional disabilities and require more assistance (Kim et al., 2016; Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009). Accordingly, the frequency of support given to parents tends to increase while the frequency of support received from parents tends to decrease (Kim et al., 2016; Merz et al., 2009). As a consequence, the associations evaluated in the present studies may be different for middle-aged couples across a longer period of time.

In summary, the present research provides evidence that wives' and husbands' views of relationships with their own aging parents play a role in shaping how they experience their own and their partners' intergenerational ties. Findings highlight the mutual influences within middle-aged couples and emphasize the need for additional research to explore how ties with parents affect individual well-being and couple processes during midlife.

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### Education

- 2016 Ph.D., Human Development and Family Studies, The Pennsylvania State University  
2011 M.S., Applied Behavior Analysis, Youngstown State University  
2007 B.S., Music Performance, Minor in Painting, Youngstown State University

### Awards

- 2016 NIMH funded Geriatric Mental Health Services Research Training Fellowship: T32 grant, University of Michigan  
2015 Joachim Wohlwill Endowment Dissertation Award, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, The Pennsylvania State University  
2015 Professional Endowment Award, College of Health and Human Development, The Pennsylvania State University  
2013-2014 Joseph and Jean Britton Graduate Fellowship, College of Health and Human Development, The Pennsylvania State University

### Selected Research Experience

- 2014 – 2016 Research Assistant, *Family Exchanges Study* (PI: Karen L. Fingerman)  
2013 – 2014 Research Assistant, *Healthy Partners Project* (PI: Lynn M. Martire)

### Publications

- Polenick, C. A.**, Zarit, S. H., Birditt, K. S., Bangerter, L. R., Seidel, A. J., & Fingerman, K. L. (in press). Intergenerational support and marital satisfaction: Implications of beliefs about helping aging parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.
- Martire, L. M., Hemphill, R. C., & **Polenick, C. A.** (in press). Harnessing the power of the marital relationship to improve illness management: Considerations for couple-based interventions. To appear in J. Bookwala (Ed.), *Couple relationships in mid and late life: Current perspectives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kim, K., Bangerter, L. R., Liu, Y., **Polenick, C. A.**, Zarit, S. H., & Fingerman, K. L. (2016). The emergence of disability among older parents: Implications for middle-aged offspring. *The Gerontologist*. Advance online publication.
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