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Enhancing Intergenerational Relationships Through Memory Activation and Photographic
Priming

By

JEFFREY TSIFAN TSENG
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

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in the

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of the

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DAVIS

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on theories of supportive communication and intergenerational relationships, this dissertation examines how memory activation and photographic priming function as communication-based mechanisms to enhance intentions to engage in supportive communication and supportive behaviors toward older adult family members. This work conceptualizes photographic priming as a form of memory activation that increases the accessibility of relationship-pertinent procedural records, thereby enhancing individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication. Based on this framework, the dissertation develops propositions regarding the effects of photographic priming as a form of memory activation on individuals' intentions to provide emotional, instrumental, and informational support to their elderly family members, as well as their engagement in relational maintenance behaviors toward those family members.

These propositions were tested through a pilot study and a controlled experiment. Pilot study (N = 30) employed an exploratory survey design to document how college students describe and enact supportive communication toward their grandparents. Building on these findings, main study tested the proposed mechanisms using a between-subjects experimental design with 240 participants. Participants were randomly assigned to either a photographic priming condition (n = 100) or a non-priming control condition (n = 140), in which exposure

to personally meaningful images involving a grandparent was used to activate relational memories prior to assessing supportive communication intentions.

Findings demonstrate that photographic priming significantly increases individuals' intentions to engage in supportive communication with their grandparents, particularly informational support. These results suggest that activating autobiographical and relational memories enhances psychological closeness and facilitates supportive communication readiness. Theoretical implications for supportive communication and intergenerational relationship research, as well as practical implications for scalable interventions to strengthen family-based support and reduce social isolation among older adults, are discussed.

CHAPTER 1. Overview of Research on Intergenerational Social Support

Substantial research has demonstrated that social support plays a critical role in promoting individuals' psychological, relational, and physical well-being across the lifespan (for review, see MacGeorge et al. 2011). Social support has been linked to a wide range of positive outcomes, including lower levels of psychological distress, improved emotional regulation, reduced maladjustment, and enhanced resilience during stressful life events (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House et al., 1988; Lakey & Orehek, 2011). High-quality social support helps individuals cope more effectively with life challenges and has been shown to strengthen social bonds, improve perceived belonging, and promote healthier behavioral patterns (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987). In later adulthood, receiving consistent support from family and close relational partners is associated with reduced loneliness, improved cognitive health, and enhanced overall well-being (Antonucci et al., 2014).

As the older adult population has grown, scholars have emphasized the importance of examining social support within intergenerational relationships, especially those involving younger and older family members (Harwood, 2007; Harwood & Lin, 2000).

Intergenerational social support encompasses the emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance exchanged across age groups and remains central to maintaining older adults' social integration as they encounter age-related changes (Antonucci et al., 2011; Carstensen et al., 2003). Communication within these relationships shapes not only the amount of

support exchanged but also its quality and effectiveness (Burleson, 2003; Fingerman et al., 2009; Harwood, 2007). Positive intergenerational communication can strengthen relational closeness, enhance mutual understanding, and reduce the negative effects of aging stereotypes (Giles et al., 2008; Harwood, 2007). On the contrary, strained communication can lead to misunderstandings, diminished support, and heightened feelings of isolation among older adults (Fingerman et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 1995; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

At the same time, contemporary social and technological changes have dramatically altered how generations interact. Although digital communication technologies offer new opportunities for maintaining contact across geographic distance (Tseng, 2025; Tseng et al., 2025), they also introduce challenges in communication preferences, literacy, and expectations between younger and older adults (Harwood, 2007; Kim & Feng, 2021; Quan-Haase et al., 2017; Vroman et al., 2015). These changes highlight the need to understand how intergenerational support is enacted across evolving communication environments and how communication processes facilitate or hinder supportive exchanges. This chapter begins with an overview of social support research from psychological, sociological, and communication perspectives, then examines how these perspectives inform our understanding of support in intergenerational contexts. Following this, I review research on the types of support commonly exchanged between generations and discuss existing intergenerational intervention designs aimed at promoting positive social support. I conclude by identifying key limitations

in the current literature on intergenerational interventions and introduce the present dissertation as an effort to address these gaps.

1.1. Definitions of Social Support and Perspectives within Intergenerational Relationships

Social support has been widely recognized as a central contributor to individuals' physical, psychological, and relational well-being, and scholars across disciplines have offered definitions that reflect its multifaceted nature (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House et al., 1988; Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Early work conceptualized social support as the information and communication that enable individuals to feel cared for, valued, and connected to others (Cobb, 1976). Other scholars emphasized social support as an exchange process, describing it as the transfer of resources intended to enhance the recipient's well-being (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Over time, research has identified distinct forms of support, most notably emotional, instrumental, and informational support, that reflect the diverse ways individuals assist during times of need (House et al., 1988). Emotional support centers on expressions of empathy and care, instrumental support involves tangible assistance, and informational support includes guidance or advice relevant to coping with challenges (Burleson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House et al., 1988). These categories have become foundational for examining how support is enacted in interpersonal relationships.

Before communication scholars began analyzing social support as an interactional process, much of the foundational work emerged from psychological perspectives. This research generally conceptualized social support in terms of *perceived availability*: the belief that supportive others can be relied upon when difficulties arise (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Drawing on appraisal theory, which emphasizes individuals' cognitive evaluations of stress and coping demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), psychologists demonstrated that perceiving support as available can buffer emotional distress, reduce maladaptive responses, and promote healthier physiological outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Uchino, 2004). As a result, measures of social support in this tradition typically focus on individuals' subjective sense of belonging, care, and emotional security rather than on the specific behaviors exchanged during interactions (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Uchino, 2004).

Sociological perspectives, in contrast, have approached social support as an outcome of social integration and network embeddedness. This research highlights that involvement in social roles, group memberships, and community structures increases opportunities to give and receive support, which in turn contributes to improved well-being across the lifespan (Antonucci et al., 2014; Berkman et al., 2000; House et al., 1988). Within this framework, the presence of strong social networks, such as family ties, functions as an indicator of support, and the mere existence of these relational structures is treated as evidence that supportive exchanges are likely to occur (Antonucci et al., 2014).

Although psychological and sociological perspectives have significantly advanced our understanding of why social support matters, they offer limited insight into how support is enacted in communication, particularly in relationships where expectations and relational histories vary across generations (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Goldsmith, 2004; Harwood, 2007). In light of these limitations, communication scholars have emphasized the importance of studying social support as an interactional, message-based process. This approach views support as collaboratively constructed through verbal and nonverbal behaviors, shaped by relational dynamics, situational contexts, and the communicative competence of the individuals involved (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). From this standpoint, the effectiveness of social support depends not only on the availability of supportive others but also on how support messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated during interaction (Harwood, 2007).

These insights are especially relevant for understanding social support within intergenerational relationships, such as those between adult grandchildren and grandparents. Intergenerational relationships are influenced by age-related norms, shifting family roles, and differing communication preferences, all of which affect how support is understood and exchanged (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007; Vroman et al., 2015). Research has shown that supportive behaviors in these relationships contribute meaningfully to older adults' emotional well-being, reduce loneliness, and foster relational closeness (Antonucci et

al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a). At the same time, differing expectations and interaction styles across generations may complicate supportive exchanges, making communication a critical lens for examining how intergenerational support functions in everyday family life.

1.2. Intergenerational Support

Research on social support within intergenerational relationships builds on the broader communication literature by emphasizing how supportive communication are enacted through interaction. From a communication perspective, intergenerational support can be understood as verbal and nonverbal behaviors that express care, assistance, or guidance between younger and older family members (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). These behaviors may be initiated by either generation and may include emotional reassurance, help with daily activities, or the sharing of knowledge and advice. In this sense, intergenerational support is an involvement-based, reciprocal process shaped through ongoing communication rather than a one-directional provision of aid (Burleson, 2003; MacGeorge et al., 2011).

This conceptualization highlights the interactional nature of intergenerational support. Support is not simply something a family member “has” by virtue of relational ties, but something constructed, negotiated, and interpreted during communication. This perspective stands in contrast to psychological models, which emphasize perceptions of available support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and sociological models, which view support as a product of social

integration and network membership (Berkman et al., 2000). In intergenerational contexts, support is heavily shaped by relational expectations, family roles, and age norms (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). For example, a grandparent may interpret emotional reassurance from an adult grandchild as highly meaningful, whereas a younger adult may see their assistance as routine or obligatory.

Communication scholars studying intergenerational support, therefore, often focus on how support messages are produced and evaluated within dyads, and how these messages influence relational closeness, satisfaction, and well-being (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). This message-based perspective allows researchers to examine not only whether support is exchanged but also how specific forms of communication contribute to or hinder positive outcomes (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge et al., 2002). For instance, the emotional tone of a conversation, the clarity of an instrumental request, or the sensitivity of an offer of advice can all affect how support is received and whether it strengthens or strains the relationship (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004).

Intergenerational support exchanges are also understood through frameworks such as the convoy model of social relations, which emphasizes that support flows within lifelong relational networks and is shaped by role expectations and life-course transitions (Antonucci et al., 2011). Communication research complements this model by demonstrating how the quality of these interactions depends on the communicative behaviors enacted during

supportive encounters. Positive supportive interactions have been shown to enhance older adults' emotional well-being, reduce loneliness, and reinforce relational bonds (Fingerman et al., 2012a). Conversely, poorly matched or insensitive support can lead to misunderstandings or feelings of dependency, limiting its effectiveness (Burleson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004).

Finally, understanding intergenerational support as an interactional process provides insights into how and why different forms of support are more or less effective across generations. Just as supportive communication research has examined which types of messages are most helpful in dyadic support episodes (Feng & Burleson, 2008; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000), intergenerational research explores how emotional, instrumental, and informational support vary in perceived helpfulness depending on the relational context (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). This body of work highlights the importance of studying intergenerational support not only as structural or perceived availability but as a dynamic communication process that shapes the well-being of both younger and older adults.

1.2.1. Different Types of Support and Their Effectiveness

In examining intergenerational support, scholars frequently rely on the foundational typologies of social support developed by Cutrona and Russell (1990) and House and colleagues (1981), which distinguish emotional, informational, and instrumental forms of

assistance (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House, 1981). These categories have been central in both social support and intergenerational communication research, as they capture the primary ways younger and older adults exchange help in familial relationships.

Understanding the effectiveness of these support types is essential because different forms of support can vary in perceived helpfulness depending on the relational context, developmental stage, and communication processes involved (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a).

Emotional support is commonly defined as “specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress” (Burleson, 2003, p. 552). In intergenerational relationships, emotional support includes expressions of empathy, warmth, reassurance, and relational affirmation communicated between younger and older family members (Burleson, 2003; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). Similar to research on highly person-centered emotional messages, emotional support is most effective when it acknowledges the recipient’s emotional experience and demonstrates sensitivity to their perspective (Burleson, 2003; MacGeorge et al., 2011). For older adults, emotional support from younger family members, such as listening, validating feelings, or expressing affection, can strengthen relational closeness and contribute to reduced loneliness and greater emotional well-being (Fingerman et al., 2012a). Thus, emotional support represents a key communicative process through

which younger and older adults maintain meaningful relational bonds and promote well-being across generations.

Instrumental support refers to tangible assistance such as helping with household tasks, providing transportation, offering technological help, or assisting with health or financial matters (House, 1981). In intergenerational contexts, instrumental support often becomes more salient as older adults encounter functional limitations or navigate increasingly complex technologies (Antonucci et al., 2011; Arpino et al., 2018; Fingerman et al., 2012a). The effectiveness of instrumental support depends on whether the assistance respects the older adult's autonomy and aligns with their perceived needs. When delivered sensitively, instrumental support can enhance feelings of independence and capability; however, when it is excessive or unsolicited, it may generate feelings of dependency or threat to self-esteem (Fingerman & Birditt, 2011; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Thus, instrumental assistance is most effective when it is negotiated collaboratively and communicated in a way that avoids implying incompetence.

Informational support includes the provision of advice, explanations, and guidance, forms of assistance that help individuals interpret or manage a situation (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Communication research has highlighted that informational support is most effective when messages are clear, relevant, and responsive to the recipient's concerns (Goldsmith, 2004). Within intergenerational relationships, informational support is often focused on areas

where younger adults have greater expertise, such as digital technologies, online services, or navigating bureaucratic systems (Arpino et al., 2022; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Vroman et al., 2015). Comparable to advice research in supportive communication, informational support is perceived as more helpful when it includes explanations, options, and collaborative problem-solving rather than directives (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010; MacGeorge et al., 2004). When delivered effectively, informational support fosters a sense of competence for older adults and reinforces the interdependence that characterizes strong intergenerational ties (Antonucci et al., 2011; MacGeorge et al., 2011; Vroman et al., 2015).

Although emotional, instrumental, and informational support each play distinct roles in intergenerational communication, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how well the support matches the older adult's needs and aligns with relational expectations. Poorly timed or mismatched support may be perceived as intrusive, unhelpful, or patronizing, reducing its intended benefits (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). Conversely, when support is communicated with sensitivity, responsiveness, and respect, it has the potential to enhance relational closeness, improve well-being, and contribute to more positive intergenerational experiences.

1.2.1.1. Additional Forms of Supportive Interaction

In addition to emotional, instrumental, and informational support, scholars have also identified several additional supportive interaction processes that are relevant to

intergenerational relationships. These include appraisal support, companionship support, and esteem or affirmational support, each of which captures distinct relational functions not fully encompassed by the foundational typologies (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House et al., 1988).

Appraisal support involves feedback that helps individuals evaluate themselves, their actions, or their situations, often through affirmation, reassurance, or validation (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). In intergenerational contexts, appraisal support may take the form of encouragement, expressions of pride, or reassurance regarding life choices, which can reinforce older adults' sense of competence and self-worth (Antonucci et al., 2011). Such support is closely intertwined with emotional communication but is analytically distinct in its emphasis on evaluation and affirmation rather than affect regulation alone.

Companionship support refers to the provision of presence, shared activities, and social engagement that foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation (Rook, 1987). Within intergenerational relationships, companionship support may involve spending time together, engaging in routine conversations, or participating in shared activities that reinforce relational continuity. Although companionship does not always involve explicit assistance or problem-focused communication, it plays a critical role in older adults' well-being by promoting social integration and emotional security (Antonucci et al., 2014; Fingerman et al., 2012; Fingerman et al., 2012a). Communication scholars note that companionship support is often enacted through everyday interactional practices, checking in, reminiscing, or

maintaining regular contact, making it especially relevant for understanding how supportive communication is embedded in routine relational maintenance rather than discrete support episodes (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004).

Within these broader support categories, scholars have examined specific forms of intergenerational support that emerge in the context of aging, caregiving, and family obligation (Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). For example, instrumental support may include tangible caregiving activities such as transportation assistance, help with daily tasks, or financial support, whereas emotional and informational support may emerge in the context of health-related concerns, coping, and decision-making. The enactment of these support behaviors is often shaped by structural factors such as geographic proximity, financial resources, health status, and family role expectations. As a result, some forms of support may be more constrained by situational opportunity structures, whereas others are more directly facilitated through communication processes and interpersonal interaction (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004).

These additional forms of social support stress the multifaceted nature of intergenerational assistance while reinforcing the centrality of communication in shaping how support is experienced and evaluated. Although emotional, instrumental, and informational support provide a foundational framework for understanding supportive exchanges, appraisal support, companionship support, and relational maintenance behaviors underscore that much

of intergenerational support is enacted through ongoing communicative presence and affirmation rather than discrete acts of help. Recognizing these distinctions allows for a more nuanced understanding of how supportive communication operates within intergenerational relationships and provides a conceptual basis for distinguishing between forms of support that are most responsive to memory activation and communicative readiness versus those that are more heavily constrained by structural factors.

At the same time, intergenerational support processes are often reciprocal and multidirectional, with both younger and older family members serving as providers and recipients of support across relational contexts (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2020). Given the complexity of these support exchanges, it is important to clarify the specific communicative context examined in the present dissertation. The present research focuses specifically on support provision from adult grandchildren to older grandparents. This directional focus was adopted for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a communication perspective, older adulthood is frequently associated with increased vulnerability to social isolation, health-related challenges, and reduced social support networks, making supportive communication from younger family members particularly consequential for well-being (Antonucci et al., 2014; Harwood, 2007). Additionally, the present research examines whether photographic memory activation can increase younger adults' readiness to engage in supportive communication behaviors toward grandparents.

Focusing on a single direction of support provision allows for clearer examination of how cognitive accessibility and relational memory activation shape supportive intentions within intergenerational relationships. Although grandparents also provide substantial emotional, informational, and instrumental support to younger generations, examining support from grandchildren to grandparents represents an important and underexplored communicative context in intergenerational support research.

1.3. Fostering Positive Intergenerational Social Support

Shifts in demographic patterns and changing family structures have transformed the ways younger and older adults maintain their relationships and exchange support. As families become more geographically dispersed and daily in-person contact becomes less frequent (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), new challenges emerge for sustaining meaningful intergenerational interactions (Fingerman et al., 2012a). At the same time, advances in communication technologies, evolving social norms, and greater awareness of age-related isolation have created new opportunities for younger and older adults to remain connected and engaged. These developments have motivated scholars and practitioners to explore strategies and interventions that can strengthen intergenerational bonds, enhance emotional and social support, and promote well-being across generations.

1.3.1. Intergenerational Programs and Interventional Designs

Intergenerational programs have emerged as a key strategy for addressing social

isolation, age-related bias, and declining opportunities for meaningful contact between younger and older adults. These programs are typically designed to create structured, intentional settings where individuals from different generations can interact, collaborate, and exchange support in ways that foster mutual understanding and relational growth (Kaplan et al., 2017a; Leedahl et al., 2019). Common formats include mentoring initiatives, shared learning environments, community service partnerships, and activity-based programs in schools, universities, and senior centers (Christian et al., 2014). Although the specific aims vary, most intergenerational programs share an underlying goal: to promote positive intergenerational communication and enhance the emotional, instrumental, and informational support exchanged between younger and older participants (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Jarrott et al., 2022).

Intergenerational intervention designs often rely on guided interaction, activities, or tasks that create structured opportunities for conversation, problem-solving, and relationship building (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Kaplan et al., 2017a). These programs typically incorporate structured activities designed to promote meaningful interaction and communication across generations (Hsiao et al., 2022; Tseng et al., 2023). By introducing intentional interactional pathways, programs provide a setting in which generational stereotypes can be challenged, empathy can be cultivated, and meaningful relational bonds can form (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018). Research has shown that participation in such

programs is associated with reduced ageism, increased positive attitudes toward older adults, and enhanced socioemotional well-being for both generations (Generations United, 2018; Krzeczowska et al., 2021).

Despite these benefits, intergenerational interventions face several design challenges. Traditional programs typically require physical proximity, scheduled meetings, and ongoing institutional support, all of which limit accessibility and scalability (Canedo-García et al., 2017). For younger adults, time constraints, academic or work commitments, and limited exposure to older populations can impede participation, while for older adults, mobility barriers, transportation needs, and health concerns may restrict engagement (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Jarrott et al., 2022; Leedahl et al., 2019). These constraints highlight the need for intervention approaches that are flexible, low-cost, and capable of functioning across geographic distance (Hsiao et al., 2022; Kaplan et al., 2017a).

Intergenerational communication scholars have, therefore, begun exploring alternative intervention models that depend less on physical co-location and more on activating cognitive, emotional, or relational processes known to enhance supportive interactions. Such designs include reminiscence-based tasks, storytelling prompts, collaborative digital activities, and emotionally evocative stimuli, each aimed at fostering engagement through memory activation, shared identity, or enhanced motivation to connect (Kiser et al., 2010; Tseng & Peña, 2025; Xu et al., 2023). These emerging designs illustrate a growing shift

toward interventions that activate relational processes through communication and memory rather than by requiring structured, in-person contact. To better understand how intergenerational interventions attempt to strengthen social support across generations, it is useful to examine both their core components and their demonstrated outcomes.

1.3.2. Existing Research on Intergenerational Interventions to Foster Social Support.

1.3.2.1. Describing Intergenerational Intervention Contents.

A substantial portion of research on intergenerational interventions focuses on describing the activities, structures, and communicative tasks that shape interaction between younger and older adults. These studies examine programs implemented across a wide range of contexts, including universities, community centers, adult day programs, and senior living facilities (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Jarrott et al., 2022). Much like early work on online supportive communication, this literature tends to emphasize the specific features of each program rather than establishing widely applicable design principles across settings.

Across these varied environments, several common program elements recur consistently. Many intergenerational interventions include structured, guided activities intentionally designed to prompt conversation, encourage collaboration, or promote shared reflection. These activities often take the form of collaborative projects, reminiscence exercises, goal-oriented tasks, or facilitated discussions meant to create opportunities for supportive communication to emerge naturally (Hsiao et al., 2022; Kaplan et al., 2017a; Tseng et al.,

2023). The structured nature of these activities reflects the assumption that meaningful support exchanges are most likely to occur when programs introduce clear pathways for engagement.

Technology-focused programs represent another common category within this literature. These interventions frequently involve younger adults helping older adults navigate digital devices, troubleshoot technical problems, or learn new online skills (Arpino et al., 2022; Tseng et al., 2023). Such settings create clear opportunities for informational and instrumental support, as younger adults provide explanations and guidance while older adults often respond with questions, reflections, or expressions of appreciation. Researchers note that these interactions can also foster relational connections, as technology tutoring often becomes a space for conversation, storytelling, and shared problem-solving (Tseng et al., 2023).

Other intergenerational programs incorporate mutual learning and reciprocal exchange as core features. In these programs, both generations serve as teachers and learners, contributing skills, knowledge, or life experiences that shape the interaction (Hsiao et al., 2022). This structure encourages emotional support through shared storytelling and fosters relational bonding by highlighting the complementary strengths of each generation (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Jarrott et al., 2022). By creating an environment in which expertise flows in both directions, these programs promote a sense of mutual respect and

shared investment in the relationship.

Some research has also examined the interactional strategies that participants use during intergenerational program activities. Younger adults often employ patience, clarification, repetition, or scaffolding techniques when providing guidance, especially in technology- or skill-based interventions (Arpino et al., 2022). Older adults, in turn, may draw on storytelling, questions, or reflective comments to build rapport and create emotional resonance within the interaction (Fingerman et al., 2012a). These strategies reveal how participants adapt their communication behaviors in response to generational expectations, relational norms, and the goals embedded within each program structure.

Taken together, descriptive studies of intergenerational intervention contents demonstrate the wide variety of activities and communicative structures used to promote engagement between younger and older adults. Although these interventions differ in their specific formats, they share a common reliance on guided interactional pathways designed to elicit supportive communication. This descriptive foundation provides an important basis for evaluating how these program components translate into measurable outcomes for intergenerational social support, an issue addressed in the next section.

1.3.2.2. Outcomes of Intergenerational Interventions for Social Support

Engaging in intergenerational programs has been consistently linked to improvements in older adults' emotional well-being, social connection, and perceived support (Generations

United, 2018; Leedahl et al., 2019). Much like research on online supportive communication, scholars have also examined broader forms of intergenerational contact, such as routine volunteering or informal community interactions, and found associations with enhanced perceptions of social support and reduced loneliness among older adults (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Tsai et al., 2013). However, these correlational findings fall outside the primary focus of the current project, which centers on structured intergenerational interventions designed with the explicit purpose of facilitating supportive communication rather than on general intergenerational contact that may incidentally influence perceptions of support.

A smaller body of research has used pre- and post-intervention assessments to evaluate whether structured intergenerational programs can causally improve support-related outcomes. Several studies demonstrate that participating in guided intergenerational activities increases perceived emotional closeness, reduces loneliness, and improves socioemotional well-being among older adults (Kaplan et al., 2017a; Leedahl et al., 2019). Research involving technology-based intergenerational partnerships similarly shows positive effects: older adults who receive consistent informational or instrumental support from younger adults during program sessions report greater confidence, reduced technology-related anxiety, and higher perceived autonomy (Arpino et al., 2022). These findings suggest that structured intergenerational engagement can meaningfully enhance individuals' ability to cope with daily challenges by increasing both access to and quality of social support.

Recent studies have also begun identifying which aspects of intergenerational communication are most predictive of these improved outcomes. Evidence from qualitative analyses indicates that emotionally expressive interactions, such as storytelling, affirmations, and shared reminiscence, are associated with decreased loneliness and more positive affect among older adults (Hsiao et al., 2022; Tseng et al., 2024). Interventions involving reflective dialogue or meaning-making activities often lead participants to reinterpret life experiences more positively, which contributes to enhanced emotional well-being and relational satisfaction (Kiser et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2023). Likewise, intergenerational programs that encourage positive emotional expression, mutual affirmation, or perspective-taking have been shown to foster greater psychological benefits and sustained engagement for both younger and older adults (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Krzeczowska et al., 2021).

1.4. Limitations of Current Research on Intergenerational Social Support

Although intergenerational interventions have been examined across a variety of contexts, current research on these programs is limited in several important ways. First, much of the existing literature focuses on isolated dyadic interactions within structured activities, emphasizing the immediate communication behaviors exchanged between a younger and an older participant (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Hsiao et al., 2022). These studies often analyze how specific conversational cues, task-related interactions, or supportive messages influence relational outcomes during a single session or encounter. However, supportive

communication in families and across generations is rarely episodic; instead, it unfolds over time and within relational networks that include multiple roles, expectations, and patterns of engagement (Fingerman et al., 2012a). This emphasis on single interactional moments limits our understanding of how intergenerational support develops, accumulates, and influences well-being across ongoing familial relationships.

Second, although some studies have identified program-level factors that may predict social or emotional outcomes, many of these findings are correlational rather than causal. Research examining how specific characteristics of intergenerational programs relate to support outcomes, such as activity structure, participant role expectations, or relational history, often relies on naturalistic observations or post-program assessments (Jarrott et al., 2021; Leedahl et al., 2019). Because interventions typically occur in community settings, researchers face limitations in experimentally manipulating program features or participant behaviors, making it difficult to determine the mechanisms through which supportive communication emerges. As a result, existing studies provide valuable descriptive insights but do not establish clear causal pathways linking particular interactional processes to observed improvements in social support (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Leedahl et al., 2019).

Third, extant research on intergenerational interventions tends to prioritize outcomes such as reduced ageism, increased positive attitudes toward older adults, or enhanced program satisfaction, rather than directly assessing the supportive communication processes

that these programs aim to foster (Generations United, 2018; Krzeczowska et al., 2021).

While these outcomes contribute meaningfully to understanding program benefits, they do not fully capture how emotional, instrumental, or informational support is enacted or experienced within intergenerational interactions. Moreover, relatively few studies have measured support-related outcomes beyond individual perceptions, for example, changes in communication patterns, relational functions, or support intentions over time (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Jarrott et al., 2022; Leedahl et al., 2019). Consequently, our understanding of what makes intergenerational support most effective remains incomplete (Fingerman et al., 2012a).

In sum, current research on intergenerational interventions is dominated by descriptive accounts of program activities and correlational evidence linking participation to positive relational or attitudinal outcomes (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Generations United, 2018; Jarrott et al., 2022; Leedahl et al., 2019). Although these studies provide an important foundation, they reveal limited insight into the communication processes through which social support is exchanged, the causal mechanisms underlying support-related outcomes, or the conditions under which supportive interactions are most likely to occur. Furthermore, the logistical constraints of traditional programs, such as reliance on physical co-presence, further restrict the ability to disentangle these mechanisms and limit the scalability of existing models (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Generations United, 2018; Jarrott et al., 2022; Leedahl et

al., 2019).

Overall, these limitations indicate that existing intergenerational intervention research provides limited insight into how supportive communication is generated, activated, and sustained within everyday family relationships. Although structured programs demonstrate that supportive interaction can be fostered through guided activities, they do not adequately explain the cognitive and communicative mechanisms that underlie individuals' readiness to engage in support outside formal intervention contexts. In particular, little research has examined how accumulated relational experience and memory-based processes shape supportive intentions within ongoing intergenerational relationships, highlighting the need for theory-driven approaches that move beyond co-present, activity-based intervention models.

To address these limitations, the present project examines supportive communication within intergenerational relationships using a two-part design that incorporates both qualitative exploration and an experimentally controlled intervention. The pilot study was conducted to investigate how college students define, perceive, and enact supportive communication toward their grandparents, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the naturally occurring communication processes that shape intergenerational support. The main study builds on these insights by testing a priming-based intervention that activates positive familial memories to encourage emotional, informational, and instrumental support intentions. This approach not only expands the methodological tools used to study

intergenerational communication but also offers a scalable, flexible alternative to traditional in-person programs by examining support processes that can occur independently of physical proximity.

The previously discussed limitations with prior research also highlight the need for a theoretical framework that explains how supportive communication is generated, activated, and sustained in intergenerational contexts. Traditional intergenerational programs reveal that supportive communication can emerge through structured interaction, but they do not fully account for the cognitive mechanisms that guide these behaviors or how they may be activated outside of in-person contact. To address this gap, the next chapter introduces Action Assembly Theory (AAT) (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), which provides a mechanism-based explanation of how stored procedural knowledge and memory structures shape communication and behavioral intentions.

1.5. Contributions of the Dissertation

1.5.1. Contribution 1: Theoretical (Mechanism-Based Explanation)

This dissertation advances communication theory by offering a mechanism-based explanation of how intergenerational supportive communication is generated. Extending AAT to intergenerational family relationships, this project conceptualizes supportive communication not as a situational response or structural resource, but as a behavior shaped by the activation of stored procedural knowledge derived from accumulated relational

experience, thereby positioning supportive communication as a cognitively guided process rather than a situational reaction.

This dissertation, therefore, contributes to communication theory by specifying a cognitive mechanism through which supportive communication readiness emerges in intergenerational relationships. By demonstrating how accumulated relational experience is stored as procedural knowledge and activated through memory-based processes, this work explains how supportive communication intentions can be shaped prior to interaction. In doing so, it advances supportive communication scholarship by clarifying how and why supportive communication become accessible to individuals beyond immediate situational demands.

Findings related to social connectedness further extend this theoretical contribution by demonstrating that memory activation processes may influence not only discrete supportive intentions but also broader relational perceptions. From an AAT perspective, increases in social connectedness reflect heightened accessibility of relationally grounded procedural records that organize individuals' overall orientation toward the relationship. This suggests that memory activation operates across multiple levels of abstraction, shaping both specific behavioral readiness and more global relational states within intergenerational relationships.

1.5.2. Contribution 2: Conceptual (Reframing Intergenerational Support)

This dissertation reframes intergenerational social support by shifting scholarly attention

away from structured, co-present intervention programs toward naturally occurring family relationships. By examining how supportive communication readiness can be activated outside of direct interaction, this work challenges prevailing assumptions that supportive behavior must be taught or facilitated through institutional designs. Thus, the dissertation contributes conceptually by redefining intergenerational social support as a memory-guided communication process embedded in everyday family relationships. Rather than conceptualizing supportive behavior as dependent on formal programming or repeated co-present interaction, this project highlights how supportive communication readiness is shaped through ongoing relational experience and activated through memory accessibility. This reframing broadens intergenerational communication research by foregrounding naturally occurring relational processes as central to the development and enactment of support.

1.5.3. Contribution 3: Methodological (Memory Activation as Intervention Logic)

Methodologically, this project introduces memory activation, operationalized through photographic priming, as a theoretically grounded intervention logic for communication research. Rather than teaching new behaviors, this approach demonstrates that activating existing relational memories can increase individuals' readiness to provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support. In this sense, the dissertation contributes methodologically by advancing memory activation as a scalable, theory-driven approach to studying supportive communication processes. By operationalizing photographic priming to

increase the accessibility of existing relational knowledge, this project offers an alternative to traditional intervention models that rely on sustained instruction or co-present interaction.

This approach extends methodological possibilities in communication research by enabling experimental examination of supportive communication readiness while remaining grounded in participants' lived relational experience.

Overall, this dissertation advances research on supportive communication by identifying memory activation as a cognitive mechanism that increases individuals' readiness to provide support. By extending AAT to intergenerational relationships, this work demonstrates that supportive communication is not solely a situational response or structural resource, but a behavior shaped by the activation of stored relational knowledge. This mechanism-based perspective provides a novel explanation for how supportive communication are generated and offers a scalable alternative to traditional intergenerational intervention models.

CHAPTER 2. Theoretical Framework: Memory Activation and Intergenerational

Support

In this chapter, I introduce Action Assembly Theory (AAT; Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993) as a theoretical framework for addressing the limitations in existing research on intergenerational social support identified in the previous chapter. Specifically, I argue that AAT provides a mechanism-based explanation for how supportive communication behaviors are generated, activated, and sustained within intergenerational relationships. Building on AAT's emphasis on procedural records and memory-based action production, this chapter outlines how past interactional experiences shape individuals' readiness to engage in emotional, instrumental, and informational support. I further integrate research on memory activation and priming to extend AAT to intergenerational contexts, offering a conceptual foundation for understanding how supportive communication can be encouraged beyond structured, in-person interventions.

2.1. Action Assembly Theory

AAT provides a cognitive-communication framework for understanding how individuals generate communication behaviors in social interaction (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). Rather than conceptualizing communication as the execution of fixed plans or scripts, AAT proposes that communicative action emerges through the activation and assembly of procedural knowledge stored in memory. From this perspective, communication behaviors

are not produced spontaneously or randomly; instead, they are constructed from previously learned action components that have been shaped through past interactional experiences.

Central to AAT is the concept of procedural records, which are memory structures that link specific communication behaviors with their associated outcomes and situational features (Greene, 1984). Procedural records encode not only what actions were taken in prior interactions, but also the contextual conditions under which those actions occurred and the consequences that followed. Over time, individuals accumulate a repertoire of procedural records that reflect their communicative history across different relational contexts. When individuals encounter a new interactional situation, relevant procedural records are activated based on their perceived similarity to the current context, providing the building blocks for behavioral production (Greene & Geddes, 1993).

According to AAT, communication behavior is generated through a process of activation and assembly. Activation refers to the retrieval of procedural records from memory, while assembly involves combining activated components into a coherent communicative response suited to the immediate interactional demands (Greene, 1984). The likelihood that a procedural record will be activated depends on several factors, including its strength, recency of use, and relevance to the current situation. Procedural records associated with successful or emotionally salient outcomes are more likely to be strongly encoded and more readily activated, increasing their influence on subsequent communication behavior.

Importantly, AAT conceptualizes communication as both goal-directed and adaptive.

Individuals do not simply reproduce past behaviors; rather, they assemble actions dynamically in response to situational constraints, relational expectations, and desired outcomes (Greene & Geddes, 1993). This process allows communicators to adjust their behavior across contexts while still relying on stored knowledge derived from prior experience. As a result, communication competence emerges not from rigid scripts but from the flexible use of procedural knowledge tailored to specific interactional contexts.

AAT has been applied across a range of communication contexts to explain how individuals acquire, retain, and enact social skills, including supportive communication, conflict management, and interpersonal adaptation (Greene & Geddes, 1993). Its emphasis on memory-based action production makes it particularly well suited for examining communication behaviors that are learned and reinforced through repeated interaction, such as supportive communication behaviors within close relationships. By focusing on how past experiences shape present communicative action, AAT offers a mechanism-based account of how communication patterns become stable over time while remaining responsive to contextual variation.

In the context of intergenerational relationships, AAT provides a valuable framework for understanding how supportive communication behaviors are generated through accumulated relational experiences. Interactions between younger and older family members are

embedded in long-term relational histories characterized by recurring roles, expectations, and emotional significance. These repeated experiences contribute to the formation of procedural records that guide how individuals interpret situations and respond communicatively within intergenerational contexts. Thus, AAT offers a theoretically grounded approach for examining how supportive communication behaviors are learned, activated, and enacted within ongoing intergenerational relationships.

2.2. Procedural Records, Memory, and Communication Behavior

AAT conceptualizes procedural records as the primary cognitive units through which communication behavior is stored and later enacted (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). These records are formed through repeated interactional experiences and encode not only behavioral actions but also contextual cues, relational expectations, and associated outcomes. From a memory perspective, procedural records function as a form of experience-based knowledge that guides future communication by linking past interactional success or failure to present situations. As individuals accumulate communicative experiences over time, their procedural records become increasingly differentiated, allowing them to respond flexibly to a wide range of social contexts.

Procedural records are shaped by general memory processes, particularly those related to repetition, emotional salience, and autobiographical relevance (Bietti, 2010; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Cognitive research demonstrates that experiences associated with strong

affect or personal significance are more likely to be encoded as durable memory representations and to remain accessible over time (Denkova et al., 2006). Within interpersonal communication, interactions involving care, affirmation, conflict, or vulnerability are therefore especially likely to contribute to robust procedural records that guide future communicative action (Delia et al., 1982). Because supportive communication often occurs in emotionally meaningful contexts, such interactions are well-positioned to generate procedural knowledge that shapes later behavioral readiness (Denkova et al., 2006; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Relational context further plays a critical role in the formation and activation of procedural records. Communication behaviors are embedded within ongoing relationships characterized by shared history, role expectations, and patterned interaction (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). Over time, individuals develop partner-specific procedural records that reflect accumulated knowledge about how to communicate effectively with particular relational partners (Burleson & Denton, 1997; Greene & Geddes, 1993). These records are informed not only by prior behaviors but also by relational meanings and expectations that emerge through repeated interaction (Greene, 1984). As a result, the same supportive communication behavior may be enacted or interpreted differently depending on the relational context in which it occurs.

Procedural records also vary in their activation thresholds, or the ease with which they are retrieved and incorporated into behavior production. Records associated with repeated success, positive emotional outcomes, or strong relational relevance tend to have lower activation thresholds and are more likely to influence communication behavior when relevant situational cues are present (Greene & Geddes, 1993). In contrast, records that are weakly encoded or associated with ambiguous outcomes may require stronger contextual prompts to become activated. This variation helps explain why some communication behaviors occur automatically, while others require greater cognitive effort or conscious deliberation.

From a communication perspective, this memory-based account highlights that supportive communication is not solely the result of momentary intention but is often guided by previously established procedural knowledge (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). Individuals rely on stored records of prior supportive interactions to determine how to respond when opportunities for support arise (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). These records shape not only whether support is offered but also the form it takes, such as emotional reassurance, instrumental assistance, or informational guidance. In familial and intergenerational relationships, where interactions accumulate across time, such memory-guided processes are particularly influential in shaping supportive communication patterns (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007; Hinde, 1996).

This emphasis on procedural records and memory accessibility provides a foundation for examining how supportive communication behaviors may be activated beyond direct interaction. If communication behaviors are guided by stored procedural knowledge, then factors that influence memory accessibility, such as exposure to emotionally meaningful cues or reminders of past relational experiences, may play a critical role in shaping individuals' readiness to engage in support. In the next section, I build on this foundation by examining research on priming and memory activation, which offers insight into how external cues can increase the accessibility of relevant procedural records and influence communication behavior (Denkova et al., 2006; Tulving & Schacter, 1990).

2.3. Priming and Memory Activation in Communication

Research on priming and memory activation provides insight into how stored cognitive and procedural knowledge becomes accessible and influential in guiding behavior. Priming refers to the process by which exposure to a stimulus increases the accessibility of related memory representations, thereby shaping subsequent perception, judgment, or action (Tulving & Schacter, 1990). From a cognitive perspective, priming does not introduce new information; rather, it activates existing knowledge structures, making certain memories or behavioral tendencies more likely to influence ongoing responses (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Higgins, 1996; Tulving & Schacter, 1990).

Within communication contexts, priming has been shown to affect how individuals interpret social situations and select communicative actions. Exposure to relational cues, emotional stimuli, or reminders of past interactions can activate associated memories, which in turn shape communicative expectations and behavioral readiness (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Denkova et al., 2006). These activated memories influence not only what individuals think about an interaction but also how they prepare to respond communicatively, highlighting the role of memory accessibility in communication behavior.

Priming operates by lowering the activation thresholds of relevant memory representations, allowing previously stored procedural records to be retrieved more readily when situational cues are encountered (Tulving & Schacter, 1990). When individuals are exposed to stimuli that resemble or evoke prior interactional experiences, related procedural records become more accessible and more likely to be incorporated into action assembly. As a result, behaviors associated with those records may be enacted with less cognitive effort and greater immediacy. This mechanism aligns closely with AAT's emphasis on activation processes in communication behavior production (Greene & Geddes, 1993).

Importantly, priming effects are especially pronounced when activated memories are emotionally meaningful or personally relevant. Emotionally salient cues have been shown to enhance memory accessibility and increase the likelihood that associated knowledge will guide subsequent behavior (Denkova et al., 2006). In interpersonal communication, stimuli

that evoke feelings of care, closeness, or shared history are particularly likely to activate procedural records linked to supportive communication behaviors, as emotionally salient and relationally meaningful cues enhance the accessibility of associated memory representations (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Denkova et al., 2006). This suggests that priming processes may play a critical role in facilitating supportive communication by increasing individuals' readiness to draw upon previously established patterns of supportive interaction (Greene & Geddes, 1993; MacGeorge et al., 2011).

From a communication perspective, priming offers a mechanism through which supportive communication behaviors can be activated without direct interaction or explicit instruction. By increasing the accessibility of relevant procedural records, priming can shape individuals' communicative orientations and behavioral tendencies prior to or outside of interpersonal encounters (Greene & Geddes, 1993; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). This perspective moves beyond viewing supportive communication solely as a situational response and instead conceptualizes it as a behavior influenced by memory accessibility, cognitive readiness, and prior interactional experience (Goldsmith, 2004; MacGeorge et al., 2011).

Overall, research on priming and memory activation complements AAT by specifying how procedural records become accessible and influential in communication behavior production. By identifying mechanisms that lower activation thresholds and increase behavioral readiness, priming research provides a theoretical foundation for examining how

supportive communication behaviors may be encouraged through indirect cognitive activation rather than structured, face-to-face intervention. In the next section, I build on this foundation by examining how memory activation processes operate within familial and intergenerational contexts, where shared history and emotional significance play a central role.

2.4. Memory Activation in Familial and Intergenerational Relationships

Memory activation processes are especially consequential in familial and intergenerational relationships, which are characterized by long relational histories, repeated interaction, and strong emotional significance. Unlike many peer or task-based relationships, family relationships develop across extended periods of time and encompass multiple life stages, roles, and shared experiences (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Hinde, 1996). These accumulated interactions provide a rich foundation for the formation of procedural records, as communicative behaviors are repeatedly enacted, evaluated, and reinforced within enduring relational contexts.

Research on autobiographical and relational memory suggests that memories involving close family members are particularly durable and readily accessible due to their emotional salience and personal relevance (Bietti, 2010; Denkova et al., 2006). Intergenerational relationships, such as those between adult grandchildren and grandparents, are often embedded in shared narratives, family stories, and emotionally meaningful events that span

decades (Coupland et al., 1991; Fingerman et al., 2020). These memories not only reflect past interactions but also contribute to how individuals understand their relational roles and expectations in the present (Harwood, 2007). As a result, cues that evoke family relationships or shared history are especially likely to activate memory representations associated with prior communicative experiences.

Within intergenerational contexts, supportive communication is shaped by these activated memories and the procedural records they contain. Family members draw on accumulated knowledge about past supportive exchanges to guide their communicative responses, including decisions about when to offer support and what form that support should take (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). Because intergenerational relationships are often marked by asymmetries in age, experience, and perceived responsibility, memory-based processes also help individuals navigate expectations regarding care, guidance, and emotional reassurance across generations (Fingerman et al., 2020; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007).

Importantly, memory activation in familial relationships does not require immediate interpersonal interaction. Reminders of family members, shared experiences, or relational roles can activate relevant procedural records even when individuals are not currently engaged in direct communication (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Greene & Geddes, 1993; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Such activation may increase individuals' readiness to engage in

supportive communication by bringing past relational experiences and associated communicative patterns to the forefront of awareness. In this way, memory activation processes may influence supportive communication orientations prior to interaction, shaping how individuals approach subsequent intergenerational encounters.

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that familial and intergenerational relationships provide a particularly fertile context for examining memory-based mechanisms of supportive communication. The combination of repeated interaction, emotional significance, and shared history increases the likelihood that priming and memory activation will meaningfully influence communicative behavior. In the next section, I build on this insight by extending AAT to explain how memory-activation processes can be leveraged to foster supportive communication in intergenerational relationships.

2.5. Extending Action Assembly Theory to Intergenerational Support

AAT research on procedural records and memory, and scholarship on priming and memory activation, provide a useful framework for understanding supportive communication within intergenerational relationships. AAT conceptualizes communication behavior as emerging from the activation and assembly of stored procedural records shaped by prior interactional experiences (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), while research on priming specifies mechanisms through which these records may become more accessible and influential in guiding behavior (Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Integrating these perspectives

allows for a conceptualization of intergenerational supportive communication as a behavior shaped by accumulated relational experience and influenced by memory accessibility rather than solely by situational demands.

Within intergenerational relationships, repeated interaction across time contributes to the formation of procedural records that encode expectations about care, guidance, and emotional support. These records reflect not only specific communicative behaviors but also relational meanings associated with age, family roles, and prior interaction outcomes (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007). As individuals encounter cues related to family members or shared history, relevant procedural records may be activated, increasing readiness to engage in supportive communication. From this perspective, supportive communication emerges from cognitive and memory-based processes that shape how individuals interpret relational situations and assemble appropriate communicative responses (Goldsmith, 2004; Greene & Geddes, 1993).

Extending AAT to intergenerational support highlights the role of activation thresholds in shaping supportive communication behavior. Procedural records associated with emotionally meaningful or relationally successful interactions are more likely to have lower activation thresholds and to influence behavior when relevant cues are present (Denkova et al., 2006; Greene & Geddes, 1993). In intergenerational contexts, where interactions are embedded in long-standing emotional bonds and shared narratives, such records may be

particularly accessible (Bietti, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2012a). As a result, memory activation processes may increase individuals' propensity to engage in supportive communication by facilitating the retrieval of previously established supportive interaction patterns.

This theoretical extension also helps address limitations in prior intergenerational intervention research, which has often focused on structured activities and immediate outcomes. By emphasizing memory-based activation rather than direct instruction or co-present interaction, this framework suggests that supportive communication may be encouraged through mechanisms that operate outside formal intervention settings. Rather than teaching entirely new behaviors, activating existing procedural knowledge may increase individuals' readiness to enact supportive communication in everyday intergenerational encounters (MacGeorge et al., 2011; Tulving & Schacter, 1990).

Conceptualizing intergenerational supportive communication through the lens of AAT and memory activation offers a framework for understanding how supportive communication are generated, sustained, and potentially encouraged across time. This approach foregrounds the importance of relational history, emotional significance, and cognitive readiness in shaping supportive interaction (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). Positioning AAT within the context of intergenerational support highlights its unique explanatory value relative to alternative theoretical approaches. Whereas prior research has emphasized perceived support availability or structural features of intergenerational programs (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018;

Antonucci et al., 2014; Kaplan et al., 2017b; Leedahl et al., 2019), AAT foregrounds the cognitive mechanisms through which supportive communication behaviors are generated from accumulated relational experience. By conceptualizing supportive communication as the activation and assembly of stored procedural records, this framework explains how supportive intentions can be influenced prior to interaction and outside of structured program settings. This mechanism-based perspective is especially well-suited for examining intergenerational relationships, which are characterized by long relational histories and emotionally salient memories that shape communicative readiness over time.

Notably, this framework does not suggest that memory activation creates new supportive communication behaviors or guarantees that support will be enacted. Rather, consistent with AAT, memory activation is conceptualized as a process that increases the accessibility of existing procedural knowledge associated with prior supportive interactions. By lowering activation thresholds for these records, memory activation enhances individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication when opportunities arise, without implying behavioral determinism or replacing situational influence. In the following chapter, this theoretical framework informs empirical studies examining how memory activation processes may influence supportive communication in intergenerational relationships.

Overall, this theoretical framework contributes to communication scholarship by specifying a cognitive mechanism underlying intergenerational supportive communication.

Whereas prior research has emphasized perceived support availability, structural features of intergenerational programs, or attitudinal outcomes, the present framework explains how supportive communication readiness emerges from memory activation and accumulated relational experience. By extending AAT to intergenerational contexts, this dissertation positions supportive communication as a function of procedural knowledge accessibility rather than immediate situational demand.

Importantly, this dissertation extends AAT by specifying priming as the mechanism through which procedural records become activated. Although AAT identifies activation as a necessary precursor to action assembly, prior work has largely treated activation as implicit or situationally driven. By theorizing memory-based priming as an identifiable process that lowers activation thresholds for relationally relevant procedural records, this project renders the activation stage of AAT explicit, testable, and empirically observable. In summary, memory activation increases supportive communication by enhancing the accessibility of relational procedural records, thereby increasing individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication in intergenerational relationships.

CHAPTER 3. Pilot Study: College Students' Supportive Communication Toward Grandparents

3.1. Purpose of the Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study is to provide an exploratory, descriptive examination of supportive communication behaviors within grandparent–grandchild relationships from the perspective of college students. As discussed in Chapter 1, much of the existing research on intergenerational support has focused on structured interventions or outcome-based assessments, offering limited insight into how supportive communication is defined, enacted, and experienced within naturally occurring family relationships (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Jarrott et al., 2021; Leedahl et al., 2019). In particular, there is a need for foundational research that captures individuals' own examples of supportive communication and the meanings they attach to these interactions.

Guided by the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, the pilot study is designed to document the types of supportive communication college students report providing to their grandparents and the contexts in which these behaviors occur. Action Assembly Theory (AAT) suggests that supportive communication behaviors are shaped by accumulated relational experience and stored as procedural knowledge that guides future communication (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). However, before examining how such behaviors may be activated or influenced, it is necessary to first understand what forms of support are

salient within this relationship and how younger family members describe their supportive interactions with older relatives.

Accordingly, the pilot study employs an exploratory survey approach to gather descriptive data from college students regarding their experiences providing emotional, instrumental, and informational support to their grandparents. By eliciting participants' self-reported examples and perceptions of supportive communication, this study aims to identify common patterns and themes that characterize supportive interactions in this intergenerational context. The findings from pilot study serve as a foundational step in the dissertation by clarifying how supportive communication is conceptualized and enacted within grandparent–grandchild relationships, thereby informing the design and focus of subsequent empirical work. Importantly, these findings suggest that supportive communication toward grandparents is grounded in accumulated relational experience, providing a theoretical basis for examining how memory activation processes may influence individuals' readiness to engage in such behaviors, a focus of the main study.

3.2. Research Questions

Given the exploratory and pilot nature of the pilot study, the research questions are intentionally broad and descriptive. Rather than testing specific hypotheses, these questions are designed to document how college students define, enact, and interpret supportive communication in their relationships with grandparents. This approach allows for the

identification of patterns in supportive communication and meanings that can inform subsequent theory-driven investigation.

RQ1: *How do college students describe the supportive communication behaviors they provide to their grandparents?*

RQ2: *What forms of supportive communication (e.g., emotional, instrumental, informational) do college students report providing to their grandparents?*

RQ3: *In what contexts or situations do college students report engaging in supportive communication with their grandparents?*

RQ4: *How do college students interpret the meaning or purpose of their supportive communication toward their grandparents?*

3.3. Method

3.3.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduate college students recruited from a large university in the United States. Eligibility criteria required that participants be at least 18 years old and have at least one living grandparent. A total of 30 students participated in the study, consistent with the exploratory and pilot nature of the research. Because the purpose of the pilot study was to provide a preliminary, descriptive examination of supportive communication behaviors rather than to conduct inferential or comparative analyses, detailed demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) was not collected. All participants were enrolled as undergraduate

students, resulting in a relatively homogeneous age range appropriate for the goals of the study. The focus of the analysis was on identifying patterns in reported supportive communication behaviors rather than examining demographic differences.

3.3.2. Procedures

Participants were recruited through the University of California, Davis SONA research participation system. Eligible students enrolled in the study through the online system and were directed to an informed consent page prior to participation. After providing informed consent, participants completed an online survey administered via Qualtrics. The survey took approximately 5 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Students received 1 SONA credit in accordance with SONA and course requirements. All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

3.3.3. Survey Instrument

The pilot study employed a survey instrument consisting of 21 open-ended and closed-ended questions designed to examine adult grandchildren's experiences providing supportive communication to their grandparents (Appendix A). The instrument was organized into seven sections: relationship background (5 items), emotional support (4 items), instrumental support (4 items), informational support (3 items), additional support-related behaviors (1 item),

challenges and adaptations in providing support (2 items), and perceived differences in support provided to different grandparents (2 items). This structure was designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of both relational context and specific supportive communication behaviors.

Participants were asked to describe concrete instances in which they provided support to their grandparents, including what they did or said, the circumstances surrounding the interaction, and their perceived intent or meaning of the supportive communication. Prompts encouraged respondents to focus on actual experiences rather than hypothetical situations, allowing for greater depth and specificity in responses. This emphasis on lived interactional experiences was intended to capture how support is enacted in everyday grandparent–grandchild relationships.

Additional questions invited participants to reflect on multiple forms of support they may have provided, such as emotional reassurance, instrumental assistance, and informational guidance. While these categories were informed by established social support typologies, participants were not constrained to predefined definitions or examples. This flexibility allowed respondents to describe support in ways that reflected their own understandings and communicative practices.

The open-ended sections of the survey were intentionally selected to align with the pilot study's exploratory goals. Rather than measuring the frequency or intensity of predefined

supportive communication, this approach allowed participants to articulate supportive communication in their own words. As a result, the instrument facilitated the collection of rich, descriptive data concerning how supportive communication are defined, enacted, and interpreted within intergenerational family relationships.

The survey instrument was designed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data regarding participants' supportive communication experiences with their grandparents. Closed-ended questions provided descriptive information about participants' relationships with their grandparents, the frequency and contexts of supportive communication, and the types of support commonly provided. Open-ended questions elicited detailed narratives that allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and variations in supportive communication across participants. Together, these data provided a comprehensive understanding of how adult grandchildren perceive and enact supportive communication with their grandparents and informed the development of the measures and photographic priming intervention used in the subsequent study.

3.3.4. Analytic Strategy

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics for closed-ended questions and qualitative thematic analysis for open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' supportive communication experiences with their grandparents, including the frequency, contexts, and forms of support reported across survey items.

Qualitative analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and themes in participants' descriptions of supportive communication experiences and supportive interactions with their grandparents.

Given the exploratory and pilot nature of the study and the modest sample size, responses were analyzed manually by the researcher to allow for close, iterative engagement with the data. An initial round of open coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns related to supportive communication behaviors, forms of support, situational contexts, and the meanings participants attributed to these interactions. Codes were subsequently refined through an iterative review process, during which conceptually similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories aligned with the research questions. Throughout the analytic process, coding decisions and theme development were documented to enhance transparency and consistency.

The analysis was intended to identify preliminary patterns in participants' supportive communication experiences with their grandparents rather than to achieve thematic saturation or generate exhaustive categorizations. Together, the quantitative summaries and qualitative themes provided a descriptive foundation for understanding supportive communication within grandparent–grandchild relationships and informed the development of the subsequent experimental study.

3.4. Results

The results of the pilot study are organized according to the four research questions guiding the analysis. Consistent with the exploratory and pilot nature of the study, the findings are presented descriptively to highlight common patterns in college students' reports of supportive communication toward their grandparents. Representative examples are used to illustrate themes where appropriate.

3.4.1. Descriptions of Supportive Communication Behaviors (RQ1)

In response to RQ1, participants described supportive communication toward grandparents as a set of routine, everyday behaviors embedded in ongoing relational interaction. Rather than framing support as rare or extraordinary, many participants emphasized regular communication practices such as calling, texting, visiting, and exchanging small gestures of care. These behaviors were often described as habitual ways of staying connected and expressing concern for their grandparents' well-being.

Several participants highlighted the importance of frequent mediated communication in maintaining supportive relationships, particularly when geographic distance limited in-person contact. As one participant succinctly explained, "*I call them, text them, send them messages and gifts*" (Participant 3). Such descriptions suggest that supportive communication toward grandparents is commonly enacted through consistent, relationally focused contact rather than isolated supportive acts.

3.4.2. Forms of Supportive Communication (RQ2)

Addressing RQ2, participants' responses reflected multiple forms of supportive communication, including emotional, instrumental, and informational support. Emotional support was especially prominent and frequently involved verbal expressions of care, reassurance, affection, and presence. Participants described offering encouragement, expressing love, and providing comfort during times of stress or vulnerability.

In addition to emotional support, participants also reported engaging in instrumental behaviors such as helping grandparents with physical tasks, errands, transportation, or everyday needs. Informational support appeared less frequently but included offering advice or explanations when grandparents were confused or distressed. Often, these forms of support overlapped within a single interaction. One participant described emotional reassurance as a routine practice, noting, "*Usually when we're hanging up a phone call, I always tell her to take care of herself and that I miss her and I love her and I hope to see her soon*" (Participant 11). This example illustrates how emotional support was commonly embedded in everyday communication rituals.

3.4.3. Contexts of Supportive Communication (RQ3)

With respect to RQ3, participants reported engaging in supportive communication across a variety of situational contexts, including everyday interactions as well as periods of heightened emotional or physical distress. Supportive communication were frequently

described in response to health-related challenges, illness, injury, or family crises, during which participants increased the frequency or intensity of their communication with grandparents.

Several participants emphasized providing support during moments of uncertainty or anxiety, particularly when grandparents or other family members were experiencing stress. One participant described escalating supportive communication during a medical emergency, explaining, *“Recently my grandpa had complete heart block and almost died... I made sure to hang out with my grandma and call her and text her a lot to make sure she was okay”* (Participant 5). This account highlights how situational factors, such as illness or crisis, shaped when and how supportive communication was enacted.

3.4.4. Meanings and Perceived Purpose of Support (RQ4)

In response to RQ4, participants articulated a range of meanings and perceived purposes associated with their supportive communication toward grandparents. Many framed their behaviors as expressions of love, care, and familial responsibility, emphasizing the relational value of being emotionally present. Support was often described as a way to maintain closeness, provide reassurance, and contribute positively to their grandparents’ emotional well-being.

Rather than focusing solely on problem-solving or assistance, participants frequently emphasized the importance of presence and emotional connection. One participant reflected

on this relational meaning, stating, “*I think they just liked me being there and being happy, which would make them happy*” (Participant 14). Such interpretations suggest that supportive communication was understood not only as helping behavior but also as a means of sustaining emotional bonds and fulfilling perceived family roles.

3.5. Summary of the Pilot Study Findings

The pilot study provided a preliminary, descriptive examination of how college students report engaging in supportive communication toward their grandparents. Consistent with the exploratory purpose of the pilot study, the findings highlight common patterns in how supportive communication is enacted, the forms it takes, the contexts in which it occurs, and the meanings participants associate with these behaviors. Across responses, supportive communication was most often described as a routine and relationally embedded aspect of grandparent–grandchild relationships rather than as a response limited to isolated or exceptional events.

Participants described supportive communication primarily through ongoing relational maintenance behaviors, such as regular phone calls, text messages, visits, and expressions of affection. These behaviors were frequently framed as habitual practices that sustained connection and conveyed care across time. In addition to routine interaction, participants reported providing emotional, instrumental, and informational forms of support, often within the same interaction. Emotional support, including reassurance, expressions of love, and

emotional presence, was especially salient, while instrumental and informational support tended to emerge in response to specific needs or challenges.

Supportive communication was reported across a range of situational contexts, including everyday interactions as well as periods of heightened emotional or physical distress, such as illness, injury, or loss. During these moments, participants often described increasing the frequency or intensity of their communication with grandparents. These contextual patterns suggest that supportive communication are shaped both by ongoing relational expectations and by situational demands that activate existing supportive communication practices.

Participants' interpretations of their supportive communication emphasized relational meaning rather than task completion alone. Support was commonly understood as a way of expressing love, fulfilling perceived familial responsibilities, and maintaining emotional closeness. Many participants highlighted the importance of presence, reassurance, and shared interaction, suggesting that supportive communication toward grandparents is deeply tied to relational identity and accumulated family experience.

Importantly, the findings from the pilot study informed the development of the survey instrument used in the main study. Patterns identified in participants' open-ended responses guided the construction of items assessing intentions to engage in supportive communication toward grandparents. Specifically, the survey items reflect the forms of supportive communication most frequently described in the pilot study, including emotional reassurance,

instrumental assistance, informational guidance, and relational maintenance behaviors. By grounding the main study survey in participants' reported experiences, the instrument captures supportive communication intentions that are contextually relevant and theoretically aligned with the framework outlined in Chapter 2.

Since the pilot study was not intended to generate generalizable conclusions but rather to establish a foundational understanding of supportive communication toward grandparents from the perspective of college students. The insights gained from this exploratory analysis provided an empirical basis for refining the focus and measurement approach of the main study, which examines factors associated with individuals' readiness and intentions to engage in supportive communication within intergenerational relationships.

CHAPTER 4. Main Study: Enhancing Intergenerational Relationships Through

Memory Activation and Photographic Priming

4.1. Purpose of the Main Study

The purpose of the main study is to examine whether memory activation through photographic priming influences college students' intentions to engage in supportive communication toward their grandparents. Building on the exploratory findings of the pilot study and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, this study extends prior work by moving beyond descriptive accounts of supportive communication to experimentally examine factors that may enhance individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication within intergenerational relationships.

In this sense, photographic priming is not treated merely as a stimulus manipulation, but as a theoretically specified mechanism that activates procedural records proposed by Action Assembly Theory (AAT) prior to interaction. From a theoretical standpoint, the main study tests a core implication of AAT: that increasing the accessibility of relationally relevant procedural records enhances individuals' readiness to engage in associated communication behaviors (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). If supportive communication toward grandparents is guided by stored relational knowledge, then activating memories tied to prior supportive interactions should increase intentions to engage in social support. Accordingly, the main study conceptualizes photographic priming not merely as an intervention technique,

but as a theoretically grounded test of memory-based mechanisms through which accumulated relational experience shapes supportive communication readiness.

The main study employs photographic priming as a memory activation technique to examine its influence on supportive communication intentions toward a specific grandparent. By activating relational memories outside of direct interaction, this approach aligns with theoretical arguments that supportive communication can be facilitated through mechanisms that operate prior to or independently of face-to-face contact. Rather than teaching new behaviors, the study examines whether activating existing relational knowledge increases individuals' intentions to engage in supportive communication.

The survey instrument used in the main study was informed directly by the findings of the pilot study. Specifically, items assessing supportive communication intentions were developed based on patterns identified in participants' open-ended descriptions of emotional, instrumental, informational, and relational maintenance behaviors toward grandparents. By grounding the measurement of supportive intentions in participants' lived experiences, the main study maintains continuity across studies while advancing a theory-driven examination of memory activation and intergenerational support.

4.1.1. Rationale for Photographic Priming as a Memory Activation Mechanism

Photographic priming was selected as the memory activation mechanism in the main study because photographs are uniquely effective cues for activating autobiographical and

relational memories (Bietti, 2010; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Research on memory accessibility demonstrates that visual stimuli associated with personally meaningful experiences can activate stored memory representations without requiring direct interpersonal interaction (Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Unlike abstract prompts or verbal instructions, photographs often function as rich, multimodal cues that evoke emotional, contextual, and relational information simultaneously, making them particularly well suited for activating memory structures linked to close relationships (Bietti, 2010; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Denkova et al., 2006).

From the perspective of AAT, photographs can be understood as external cues that lower the activation thresholds of relevant procedural records. Procedural records associated with prior interactions with a grandparent, including past supportive communication, emotional exchanges, and relational routines, are more likely to be activated when individuals are exposed to stimuli that resemble or symbolize those experiences (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). Importantly, activation strength is shaped not only by emotional and autobiographical relevance but also by reactivation through repeated exposure. Memory research indicates that re-exposure to the same autobiographical cue can further strengthen accessibility by lowering activation thresholds for existing representations (Bietti, 2010; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Thus, repeated exposure to the same photograph may increase the

likelihood that relationally relevant procedural records will influence subsequent communicative readiness.

Photographs depicting family members, shared moments, or relationally significant contexts may therefore increase the accessibility of procedural knowledge relevant to supportive communication, shaping individuals' readiness to engage in such behaviors (Bietti, 2010; Greene & Geddes, 1993; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). Photographic stimuli are also particularly effective in familial and intergenerational contexts because family photographs are often embedded in shared narratives and emotionally meaningful life events. Research on autobiographical memory suggests that photographs linked to family relationships can cue memories that are emotionally salient, temporally extended, and relationally grounded (Bietti, 2010; Denkova et al., 2006). In intergenerational relationships, where interactions accumulate across time and are embedded in shared family history, photographic cues may activate not only specific memories but also broader relational schemas associated with care, responsibility, and emotional connection (Bietti, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007).

Importantly, photographic priming aligns with theoretical arguments that supportive communication can be facilitated through memory activation rather than explicit instruction. Rather than teaching new behaviors or requiring co-present interaction, photographic priming operates by making existing relational knowledge more accessible. This approach is

consistent with prior research demonstrating that priming can influence communicative orientations and behavioral tendencies by increasing the accessibility of relevant memory representations (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Tulving & Schacter, 1990). In the context of intergenerational relationships, activating memories associated with prior supportive interactions may increase individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication toward grandparents.

Taken together, photographic priming provides a theoretically grounded and contextually appropriate mechanism for examining how memory activation influences supportive communication intentions. By activating stored relational experiences rather than introducing new information, photographic priming offers a means of enhancing supportive communication that aligns with AAT and addresses limitations of prior intergenerational intervention research that has relied primarily on structured activities or direct instruction.

4.2. Hypotheses

Guided by AAT and research on memory accessibility and priming, the main study examines whether photographic memory activation influences college students' intentions to engage in supportive communication toward their grandparents. As argued in the preceding section, supportive communication behaviors are shaped by accumulated relational experience and stored as procedural knowledge that guides communicative readiness. When relevant procedural records are made more accessible through memory activation, individuals

should exhibit greater readiness to engage in associated supportive communication.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Photographic priming is expected to activate relational memories associated with prior interactions with grandparents, including memories of emotional connection, care, and supportive exchanges. Because photographs function as rich, relationally meaningful cues, exposure to such stimuli may lower the activation thresholds of procedural records linked to supportive communication, increasing individuals' readiness to enact such behaviors.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

4.2.1. Photographic Priming and Supportive Communication Intentions

H1: *Participants exposed to photographic priming related to their grandparent will report higher overall intentions to engage in supportive communication toward that grandparent than participants in a non-priming control condition.*

This hypothesis follows from AAT's claim that increasing the accessibility of relationally relevant procedural records enhances individuals' general readiness to engage in communication consistent with those records (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). By activating memories tied to prior supportive interactions, photographic priming is expected to increase the accessibility of procedural records associated with prior supportive interactions, thereby enhancing readiness to engage in supportive communication.

H2a: *Participants exposed to photographic priming will report higher intentions to provide emotional support to their grandparent than participants in a non-priming control condition.*

H2b: *Participants exposed to photographic priming will report higher intentions to provide informational support to their grandparent than participants in a non-priming control condition.*

H2c: *Participants exposed to photographic priming will report higher intentions to provide instrumental support to their grandparent than participants in a non-priming control condition.*

Emotional support emerged as a central form of supportive communication in the pilot study and is especially likely to be associated with emotionally salient procedural records.

Because photographic cues are well-suited to activating emotionally meaningful relational memories (Bietti, 2010; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Denkova et al., 2006), priming is expected to exert a particularly strong influence on intentions to provide emotional reassurance, expressions of care, and emotional presence. At the same time, the pilot study's findings indicated that participants frequently described providing practical assistance and informational guidance to grandparents, particularly in response to situational needs. These instrumental and informational behaviors reflect procedural knowledge developed through repeated supportive interactions. Activating memories of such interactions through

photographic priming is therefore also expected to increase intentions to engage in instrumental and informational support.

4.2.2. Photographic Priming and Relational Maintenance Behaviors

H3: *Participants exposed to photographic priming will report higher intentions to engage in relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., checking in, spending quality time) toward their grandparent than participants not exposed to photographic priming.*

Relational maintenance behaviors were commonly described in the pilot study as routine practices embedded in ongoing grandparent–grandchild relationships. Because these behaviors are closely tied to accumulated relational history and shared family narratives (Bietti, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Harwood, 2007), photographic priming is expected to activate broader relational schemas associated with care, responsibility, and emotional connection, resulting in higher intentions to engage in relational maintenance behaviors.

4.2.3. Photographic Priming and Social Connectedness

In addition to examining supportive communication intentions, the main study examined whether participation in the study was associated with changes in participants' perceived social connectedness with their focal grandparent. Social connectedness reflects participants' subjective sense of relational closeness and emotional bond with their grandparent and was assessed at both pretest and posttest (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Prior research suggests that reflecting on relational experiences and engaging with relationally salient cues can increase

feelings of closeness and relational salience over time. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H4: *Participants will report greater social connectedness with their focal grandparent at posttest than at pretest over the course of study participation.*

4.2.4. Photographic Priming and Exploratory Supportive Communication

In addition to emotional, informational, and instrumental support, the present study examined participants' relational engagement intentions toward their grandparents. Relational engagement intentions constitute an integrative subscale within the broader social support measure and capture participants' overall intentions to remain engaged in supportive interaction and maintain a close and supportive relationship with their grandparent. Rather than representing a distinct form of support behavior, this subscale reflects a higher-order orientation toward continued relational investment and supportive communication.

From the perspective of AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), relational engagement intentions may be particularly responsive to photographic priming because they are grounded in accessible procedural records associated with recurring interpersonal interactions. Exposure to a personally meaningful photograph may activate memories of prior positive experiences with a grandparent, increasing the accessibility of relational goals and supportive communication scripts. As a result, participants may become more motivated to maintain contact, strengthen the relationship, and engage in future supportive interactions.

Because relational engagement intentions reflect a broad orientation toward relationship maintenance rather than a specific behavioral outcome, analyses involving this construct were conducted exploratorily. These analyses were intended to assess whether photographic priming influences participants' overall willingness to remain engaged in a supportive relationship with their grandparent beyond the specific forms of support examined in Hypotheses 1–4.

RQ1: *How does photographic priming influence participants' relational engagement intentions toward their grandparent?*

4.2.5. Qualitative Examination of Cognitive Activation During Photographic Priming

The main study included a qualitative component designed to assess the cognitive and emotional content activated at the moment of photographic exposure. Immediately following the priming task, participants were asked to describe their thoughts and emotions in response to the photograph. This qualitative component was intended to provide process-level evidence relevant to the theoretical assumptions of AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), rather than to test behavioral outcomes. Although this qualitative analysis does not test behavioral outcomes, it provides complementary evidence regarding whether the cognitive activation processes presumed by AAT were elicited by photographic priming manipulation, thereby offering contextual insight into the mechanisms underlying the hypothesized effects on supportive communication intentions.

Guided by AAT, this analysis focuses on whether participants' responses reflect the activation of relational memories, emotional connections, and prior supportive interactions, forms of cognitive content consistent with procedural records associated with supportive communication. Examining participants' immediate reactions to the photographic stimulus allows for an assessment of whether the priming manipulation elicited cognitive material aligned with the mechanisms presumed to underlie the hypothesized effects on communicative intentions.

RQ2: *What thoughts, emotions, and memories do participants report immediately following exposure to photographic priming related to their grandparent?*

4.3. Method

4.3.1. Study Overview and Two-Part Procedure

The main study was implemented as a two-part online study separated by a minimum two-week interval. Part 1 (pretest) collected baseline information and obtained participant-provided photographic materials. Part 2 (posttest) implemented the experimental manipulation and assessed participants' post-manipulation responses.

4.3.2. Participants

Participants were 338 undergraduate students recruited through the UC Davis SONA participant pool. Eligibility criteria required participants to have at least one living grandparent and be willing to upload a personal photograph depicting a positive memory with

that grandparent during Part 1 of the study. In addition, individuals who had participated in the pilot study were not eligible to participate in the main study. Participants received five course credits for completing both parts of the study.

Of the 338 participants who began the study, 98 were excluded from the final analyses. Specifically, 41 participants did not complete Part 2 of the study, 33 participants reported that their uploaded photograph did not appear during the posttest, and 24 participants were excluded due to missing data on key study variables. The final analytic sample consisted of 240 participants.

The final sample consisted of 240 participants who completed both parts of the study, with 100 participants who completed the photographic priming condition and 140 participants who completed the non-priming control condition. The unequal group sizes reflect variation in participant recruitment and data retention across conditions following standard data screening procedures. The sample included 83.8% women, 14.6% men, and 1.7% identifying as another gender identity. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 years ($M = 19.45$, $SD = 1.8$). Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

4.3.3. Design

The main study used a two-wave mixed-method design. The experimental factor was condition in Part 2 (between-subjects): (a) personal photograph priming versus (b) neutral photograph control. Social connectedness with grandparents was assessed at both Part 1 and 2

(Lee et al., 2001a) as a baseline measure, enabling evaluation of equivalence between conditions across time, and enabling evaluation of change across time. The primary post-manipulation outcomes were (a) supportive communication intentions toward the focal grandparent (emotional support, instrumental, informational support; relational maintenance) and (b) open-ended reflections elicited immediately after image exposure.

4.3.4. Procedure

The study employed a two-part, longitudinal experimental design consisting of a pretest and a posttest administered via Qualtrics.

Part 1 (Pretest). Participants first completed an online Qualtrics survey that included an informed consent form. After providing consent, participants reported demographic information and background characteristics related to their relationship with their grandparents, including past relationship quality and frequency of contact. Participants also completed a measure assessing social connectedness with a focal grandparent. At the conclusion of the pretest survey, participants were instructed to upload a photograph depicting a positive or meaningful memory shared with that grandparent. Participants were informed that the photograph would be used solely for research purposes and would not be retained or viewed beyond the study procedures. Completion of the pretest survey took approximately 5–10 minutes.

Part 2 (Posttest). At least two weeks after completing Part 1, participants were invited via email to complete the second part of the study, which was also administered through Qualtrics. Upon entering the posttest survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Participants in the photographic priming condition viewed the photograph they had uploaded during Part 1, whereas participants in the control condition viewed a standardized image depicting the University of California, Davis logo. Immediately following image presentation, participants completed an open-ended thought-listing task in which they were asked to write down all thoughts that arose while the image was on the screen. Instructions emphasized that thoughts could pertain to the self, the situation depicted, or others involved, and that responses could be positive, neutral, or negative. Participants in the photographic priming condition also completed a manipulation check indicating whether the focal grandparent selected at the beginning of the study appeared in the uploaded photograph. This procedure was included to verify that participants were exposed to a relationship-relevant image associated with the intended intergenerational relationship. Participants who indicated that the selected grandparent did not appear in the photograph were excluded from subsequent analyses. After completing the thought-listing task and manipulation check, participants completed a posttest survey measuring their intentions to engage in supportive communication and relational maintenance behaviors toward the focal grandparent, as well as the same social connectedness measure administered in Part 1.

Participants then completed any remaining items and were debriefed. Completion of the posttest survey took approximately 5–10 minutes.

4.3.5. Stimulus Materials

The photographic stimulus in the personal priming condition consisted of a participant-provided photograph uploaded during Part 1 depicting a positive memory shared with the focal grandparent. The use of participant-generated photographs was intended to activate autobiographical relational memories that are personally meaningful and grounded in lived experience. Prior research suggests that self-relevant visual stimuli are particularly effective in eliciting autobiographical memory retrieval and emotional engagement, as they cue richly encoded episodic and relational information (Bietti, 2010; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Denkova et al., 2006). From the perspective of AAT, viewing a personally meaningful photograph is expected to increase the accessibility of procedural records associated with prior supportive interactions, thereby enhancing readiness to engage in related communicative behaviors (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993).

The control stimulus consisted of a standardized image depicting the University of California, Davis logo. This image was selected to provide visual stimulation comparable to the personal photograph condition while minimizing activation of familial, relational, or autobiographical memories. Research on autobiographical memory suggests that memory activation is most likely when cues are self-relevant and embedded in personal relational

experience, whereas generic or non-social stimuli are unlikely to elicit such retrieval processes (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Rubin, 2006).

In experimental studies of priming and memory accessibility, neutral visual stimuli are commonly used as control conditions to equate attention and perceptual processing while avoiding activation of target-relevant cognitive or relational schemas (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Higgins, 1996). Because institutional logos do not depict interpersonal interaction or emotional exchange, they are unlikely to activate procedural records associated with supportive communication or intergenerational relationships (Greene, 1984; Harwood, 2007). Using a neutral institutional image, therefore, allowed the present study to control for visual exposure, attention, and task engagement while isolating the effects of autobiographical memory activation elicited by the personal photograph. Across conditions, images were presented in the same size and format and for the same duration.

4.3.6. Measures

4.3.6.1. Demographics and Background Characteristics (Part 1)

Participants reported demographic information, including age, gender identity, academic year, major, and ethnic heritage. Participants also answered a series of questions assessing characteristics of their relationship with their grandparents, including which grandparent they felt closest to, perceived emotional closeness, geographic proximity, frequency of in-person interaction, frequency of mediated communication, and recency of last in-person visit. These

items were used to describe the sample and, where appropriate, as control variables in supplementary analyses.

4.3.6.2. Social Connectedness with Grandparents (Part 1 and Part 2)

Social connectedness with the focal grandparent was assessed using the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee et al., 2001b). The scale consists of 20 items assessing individuals' sense of closeness, belonging, comfort, and relational involvement. In the present study, all items were adapted to refer specifically to participants' focal grandparent. Sample items include "I feel close to my grandparent," "I feel understood by my grandparent," and "My grandparent feels like family." This measure was included as a control variable at both pretest and posttest, serving as an indicator of participants' general relational orientation toward their grandparent.

Participants responded to each item using a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Item wording and response ordering were arranged such that higher scores consistently reflected greater social connectedness, eliminating the need for reverse coding during analysis. The scale was administered at both Part 1 (pretest) and Part 2 (posttest), allowing for assessment of baseline levels of social connectedness as well as post-manipulation change. The Social Connectedness Scale has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in prior research examining interpersonal relationships (Lee et al., 2001a). The reliability of the pretest and posttest scale is presented in Table 2.

4.3.6.3. Supportive Communication Intentions Toward Grandparents (Part 2)

Intentions to engage in supportive communication toward the focal grandparent were measured using a multi-dimensional scale developed for the present study based on findings from the pilot study (Appendix B). The scale assessed participants' likelihood of engaging in a range of supportive communication toward their grandparents in future interactions.

Participants were asked to indicate how likely they would be to engage in each behavior within the next six months. The reliability of the overall scale and the subscales is presented in Table 2.

Emotional support intentions assessed participants' willingness to provide affective and empathic support to their grandparent. Items captured behaviors such as listening when the grandparent wished to talk about feelings or life experiences, offering comfort or reassurance during difficult times, and expressing care and affection (e.g., verbal expressions of love, appreciation, or emotional presence).

Informational support intentions assessed participants' likelihood of offering advice, guidance, or knowledge to address everyday needs or problems. Items included providing advice related to health, transportation, or daily decision-making, sharing useful information or resources (e.g., community services or programs), and explaining or teaching skills the grandparent wished to learn.

Instrumental support intentions measured participants' willingness to provide tangible, task-oriented assistance. Items assessed intentions to help with practical tasks such as errands, household chores, or appointments, assist with the use of technology (e.g., smartphones, video calls, or online services), and provide logistical support such as organizing daily activities, schedules, or important information.

Relational engagement intentions assessed participants' general motivation to increase and sustain supportive engagement with their grandparent. Items measured intentions to increase the amount of support provided in the near future, continue maintaining a close and supportive relationship, and make greater efforts to communicate more frequently and meaningfully.

Relationship maintenance intentions assessed participants' likelihood of engaging in behaviors aimed at sustaining an ongoing relational connection. Items included spending quality time together (e.g., shared activities or visits), reaching out regularly to check on the grandparent's well-being (e.g., phone calls, video chats, or messages), and sharing personal updates, photos, or stories.

Participants responded to all items using a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely), with higher scores indicating stronger intentions to engage in each form of supportive communication.

4.3.6.4. Thought-Listing Reflections (Part 2)

Immediately following image exposure in Part 2, participants completed an open-ended thought-listing task designed to capture spontaneous cognitive responses elicited by the stimulus. Participants were instructed to write down all thoughts that arose while viewing the image, whether related to themselves, the situation depicted, or others involved. Instructions emphasized that responses could be positive, neutral, or negative and did not need to be written in complete sentences (Appendix C). This procedure is consistent with established cognitive-response and thought-listing methodologies used to examine activation of mental representations following stimulus exposure.

4.3.7. Analyses

4.3.7.1. Quantitative Analytic Strategy

Quantitative analyses were conducted to examine whether photographic priming influenced participants' intentions to engage in supportive communication and relational maintenance behaviors toward their grandparents. All analyses were performed using SPSS version 3.1, and preliminary screening was conducted to assess scale reliability, missing data, and distributional properties of the variables. Composite indices were created by averaging items within each support domain, consistent with prior supportive communication research and the measurement design of the present study.

To test Hypothesis 1, a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with overall supportive communication intention as the dependent variable and experimental condition (photographic priming vs. non-priming control) as the independent variable. This analysis provided an omnibus test of whether photographic priming influenced participants' general readiness to engage in supportive communication toward their grandparents.

To test Hypotheses 2a–2c and Hypothesis 3, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with emotional support intentions, informational support intentions, instrumental support intentions, and relational maintenance intentions entered simultaneously as dependent variables. Condition served as the independent variable. This multivariate approach was selected to assess the overall effect of photographic priming across conceptually related support domains while controlling for the inflated Type I error associated with multiple univariate tests. Following a significant multivariate effect, follow-up univariate ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable to examine domain-specific effects of photographic priming. These analyses corresponded directly to the theoretically specified hypotheses regarding emotional, informational, instrumental, and relational maintenance intentions. Effect sizes were examined alongside significance tests to aid interpretation of the magnitude of observed effects.

To test Hypothesis 4, which examined changes in social connectedness over time, a 2 (time: pretest vs. posttest) $\times$ 2 (condition: photographic priming vs. control) mixed-design

analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Time was treated as a within-subjects factor, and condition was treated as a between-subjects factor. This analysis allowed for assessment of overall changes in social connectedness from pretest to posttest as well as evaluation of whether changes in social connectedness differed as a function of experimental condition.

To address Research Question 1, which examined whether photographic priming influenced participants' relational engagement intentions toward their grandparent, an integrative subscale within the broader social support measure. Analyses for this outcome were conducted to assess whether memory activation shaped participants' global orientation toward engaging in supportive interaction, complementing findings for specific support behaviors. Across all quantitative models, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were examined and found acceptable. Statistical significance was evaluated using an alpha level of .05, and all tests were two-tailed.

4.3.7.2. Qualitative Analytic Strategy

In addition to the quantitative analyses, a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine the cognitive and emotional processes elicited by the photographic priming manipulation. This qualitative component addressed Research Question 2 and focused on participants' open-ended written responses describing their thoughts and emotions immediately following exposure to the photographic stimulus. The purpose of this analysis was to provide process-

level insight into whether the priming task activated relational memories and affective content consistent with the assumptions of AAT.

A thematic analysis was conducted to examine participants' open-ended responses. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, responses were analyzed iteratively to identify recurring patterns of meaning reflecting participants' spontaneous thoughts about their grandparents. The analysis began with repeated readings of the data to achieve familiarity, followed by inductive open coding to capture salient features of participants' reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes encompassed emotional reactions, recalled interactions, expressions of closeness, perceptions of relational responsibility, and memories of prior supportive exchanges with grandparents.

Through an iterative process of constant comparison, codes were refined and grouped into higher-order themes representing shared forms of cognitive and emotional activation. Particular attention was given to identifying content indicative of activated procedural records, such as references to habitual communication practices, recurring supportive communication, and emotionally meaningful relational scripts. Coding decisions were reviewed to ensure internal consistency and conceptual coherence across themes.

This qualitative analysis was process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented and was not intended to test directional hypotheses or compare experimental conditions statistically. Instead, it served to contextualize the quantitative findings by examining whether the

photographic priming manipulation elicited cognitive and emotional material aligned with the theorized mechanisms underlying supportive communication readiness. The qualitative findings are therefore used to triangulate and enrich the interpretation of the quantitative results, rather than to establish causal effects.

4.4. Results

4.4.1. Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 3. Results of the univariate analysis testing H1 are presented in Table 4. Results of the univariate analyses testing H2–H3 are presented in Table 5. Results of the repeated-measures ANOVA for H4 are presented in Table 6.

H1 predicted that participants exposed to photographic priming related to their grandparent would report higher overall intentions to engage in supportive communication toward their grandparent than participants in a non-priming control condition. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on overall supportive communication intention, $F(1, 238) = 4.12, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants in the photographic priming condition reported significantly higher supportive communication intentions than those in the control condition. **Thus, H1 was supported.**

H2a predicted that participants exposed to photographic priming would report higher intentions to provide emotional support to their grandparent than participants in the non-

priming control condition. A follow-up univariate analysis of variance revealed that condition did not have a significant effect on emotional support intentions, $F(1, 238) = .47, p = .49, \eta^2 = .002$. Therefore, H2a was not supported.

H2b predicted that participants exposed to photographic priming would report higher intentions to provide informational support to their grandparent than participants in the non-priming control condition. Results indicated a significant effect of condition on informational support intentions, $F(1, 238) = 5.88, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$, such that participants in the photographic priming condition reported higher informational support intentions than those in the control condition. Therefore, **H2b was supported**.

H2c predicted that participants exposed to photographic priming would report higher intentions to provide instrumental support to their grandparent than participants in the non-priming control condition. The effect of condition on instrumental support intentions was not statistically significant, $F(1, 238) = 2.74, p = .10, \eta^2 = .01$. Therefore, H2c was not supported.

H3 predicted that participants exposed to photographic priming would report higher intentions to engage in relational maintenance behaviors toward their grandparent than participants in the non-priming control condition. Results indicated that condition did not have a significant effect on relational maintenance intentions, $F(1, 238) = 2.32, p = .13, \eta^2 = .01$. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

H4 predicted that participants would report greater social connectedness with their focal grandparent at posttest than at pretest. To test this hypothesis, a 2 (time: pretest vs. posttest) $\times$ 2 (condition: photographic priming vs. control) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 238) = 10.25, p = .002$, indicating that participants reported significantly higher social connectedness at posttest compared to pretest. The main effect of condition was not significant, $F(1, 238) = 1.97, p = .162$, nor was the time $\times$ condition interaction, $F(1, 238) < .01, p = .975$, indicating that increases in social connectedness did not differ between the photographic priming and control conditions. Thus, **H4 was supported**, demonstrating an overall increase in social connectedness over time across experimental conditions.

RQ1 examined whether photographic priming influenced participants' relational engagement intentions. A univariate analysis of variance indicated that relational engagement intentions did not differ significantly by priming condition, $F(1, 238) = 0.97, p = .325, \eta^2 = .004$. Thus, photographic priming did not significantly influence participants' global orientation toward engaging in supportive interaction with their grandparent.

4.4.1.1. Discussion: Interpretation of the Quantitative Findings

The pattern of quantitative findings from the main study can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), which conceptualizes communication behavior as emerging from the activation and assembly of stored memory

units, or procedural records. From this perspective, supportive communication intentions reflect the accessibility of action-relevant cognitive structures shaped by prior relational experiences rather than immediate situational cues alone. Photographic priming, as implemented in this study, can therefore be understood as a mechanism for activating relationally relevant memories that guide individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication.

Consistent with this framework, the significant effect of photographic priming on overall supportive communication intentions (H1) suggests that exposure to positive intergenerational imagery activated generalized supportive action tendencies toward grandparents. AAT posits that when relational memories are made salient, individuals are more likely to assemble communicative responses consistent with those memories (Greene, 1984; Higgins, 1996). In this case, priming appears to have increased the accessibility of supportive orientations broadly, even in the absence of explicit behavioral instruction. This finding supports the central theoretical claim of the dissertation that supportive intentions are shaped by memory-based communication processes rather than solely by stable attitudes or external prompts.

At the level of specific support types, the selective effect of photographic priming on informational support intentions (H2b), but not emotional (H2a) or instrumental support intentions (H2c), further clarifies how AAT operates in intergenerational contexts.

Informational support is closely tied to cognitively organized role expectations, such as offering advice, explaining tasks, or helping solve problems (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House et al., 1988). From an AAT perspective, activating positive intergenerational memories may have increased the accessibility of procedural records associated with competence, guidance, and knowledge-sharing, thereby making informational support intentions particularly responsive to priming (Greene & Geddes, 1993). This interpretation aligns with prior communication research emphasizing that certain supportive communication are more directly linked to cognitive scripts than to situational constraints (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004).

In contrast, the non-significant effects for emotional and instrumental support intentions suggest important boundary conditions for memory-based interventions. Emotional support may already be strongly routinized within close family relationships, leaving less room for short-term cognitive activation to produce measurable change (Antonucci et al., 2014; Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). Instrumental support, similarly, may be constrained by structural factors such as time availability, geographic proximity, or physical capability, which are less susceptible to momentary shifts in cognitive accessibility (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a; House et al., 1988). These findings do not indicate that priming is ineffective for these support types, but rather that their enactment may depend on conditions beyond the activation of relational memories alone.

The absence of a significant effect on relational maintenance intentions (H3), together with the non-significant effect on relational engagement intentions (RQ1), further supports this interpretation. Relational maintenance behaviors and broader readiness to engage in supportive interaction often reflect long-standing interaction patterns, habitual practices, and more stable orientations toward the relationship, which may require sustained reinforcement to change (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dindia & Canary, 1993). From the perspective of AAT, while photographic priming can activate specific action tendencies, repeated activation or prolonged exposure may be necessary to reorganize more stable communicative routines or higher-order orientations toward supportive engagement (Greene, 1984). Thus, the null findings for both relational maintenance intentions and relational engagement intentions highlight the importance of considering temporal dynamics and level of abstraction when applying AAT to intergenerational support interventions.

Findings for H4 further clarify the temporal dynamics of relational activation observed in the main study. Although photographic priming did not produce differential changes in social connectedness across conditions, participants reported significantly higher social connectedness at posttest than at pretest. This pattern suggests that relational salience may have increased over the course of study participation rather than as a function of the experimental manipulation alone. One plausible explanation is that the pretest procedure required all participants to locate and upload a meaningful photograph of their grandparent, a

process that likely prompted autobiographical memory retrieval and relational reflection.

Prior research indicates that repeated measurement and self-focused reflection can themselves alter attitudes and relational perceptions, a phenomenon described as panel conditioning or measurement reactivity (Dillman et al., 2014; Strack & Schwarz, 2007). From an AAT perspective, this shared activation may have increased accessibility of relational and procedural records for all participants, producing a general increase in perceived connectedness over time while limiting the ability to detect condition-specific effects at posttest (Greene, 1984). Thus, the results for H4 highlights the sensitivity of relational outcomes to early and shared activation processes and highlight the importance of considering pretest-induced salience when designing and interpreting memory-based communication interventions.

Overall, the quantitative findings provide theory-consistent evidence that photographic priming influences supportive intentions by activating relationally grounded cognitive structures, as proposed by AAT. In addition to shaping specific intentions to provide support, memory activation was also associated with increases in broader relational perceptions, as reflected in participants' heightened social connectedness with their grandparents over time. Rather than producing uniform effects across all support behaviors or subscales within the broader social support construct, memory activation appears to selectively shape outcomes that are most closely aligned with accessible relational roles, procedurally grounded cognitive

scripts, and overarching relational orientations. This pattern highlights the value of using AAT as a framework for understanding when and how communication-based, memory-focused interventions are likely to influence intergenerational support processes at multiple levels of relational functioning.

4.4.2. Qualitative Results

Qualitative data from the thought-listing task were analyzed using thematic analysis to explore the cognitive responses activated during exposure to the photographic stimuli. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, responses were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring patterns of meaning reflecting participants' spontaneous thoughts about their grandparents. Analysis focused on themes relevant to the activation of procedural records, as conceptualized in AAT, particularly those related to emotional bonding, role conceptualization, and support-oriented cognition. Themes were developed inductively from participants' responses and refined through repeated comparison across cases to ensure that they reflected shared patterns rather than isolated expressions.

Responses in the photographic priming condition appeared substantially more emotionally and relationally oriented than responses in the control condition. Participants exposed to grandparent photographs frequently reflected on affection, nostalgia, gratitude, relational closeness, aging, and concerns regarding loss or separation. In contrast, responses in the control condition were primarily observational and descriptive, focusing on campus

scenery, weather, academic experiences, and general reflections about UC Davis. These qualitative differences suggest that photographic priming successfully activated autobiographical and relationship-relevant cognitions associated with participants' grandparents, consistent with the assumptions of AAT regarding the activation of stored procedural records.

4.4.2.1. Emotional Bonding and Relational Warmth

Participants frequently expressed emotionally laden reflections centered on affection, nostalgia, and gratitude toward their grandparents. Many described feelings of warmth, closeness, and appreciation, often anchored in vivid shared memories evoked by the photographs. These reflections suggest the activation of relational schemas emphasizing emotional connection and interpersonal closeness. For example, one participant recalled a reunion moment following a period of separation, noting:

“This picture was taken the first time I went back home from college, during my first year. My grandma was very happy to see me again. It was a very happy moment.”

(Participant 11)

Others articulated a longing to preserve the emotional and relational qualities captured in the photograph, reflecting both nostalgia and awareness of aging:

“I feel nostalgic and sometimes wish that we never grew older and that we could be the age, health, and happiness we were in that photo forever.”

(Participant 55)

Similarly, another participant described embodied feelings of comfort and affection associated with the image:

“The photo makes me feel warm and loved.”

(Participant 54)

Together, these responses indicate that photographic priming activated affective memories tied to familial bonding, emotional warmth, and a sense of enduring closeness, bringing emotionally salient relational representations to the foreground of participants’ awareness.

4.4.2.2. Role-Based Responsibility and Care Orientation

Another prominent theme involved participants’ reflections on their perceived responsibilities and roles as grandchildren. Many responses conveyed a heightened awareness of grandparents’ aging, vulnerability, and care needs, alongside a sense of moral obligation to be more attentive and present. For example, one participant reflected on fear of loss and the need for greater involvement, stating:

“It makes me think that my grandparents are getting older and older now, and they have to say goodbye forever which I’m very scared of. It made me realize that I should spend more time with them and be more appreciative.”

(Participant 231)

Similarly, another participant explicitly articulated responsibility tied to availability and distance:

“I feel guilt. Guilty that she is a million miles away and I am unable to be there for her.”

(Participant 235)

Others framed responsibility in terms of increased emotional presence and attentiveness as grandparents age:

“It made me realize that I should make the most of my time with them in the future when the opportunity arises.”

(Participant 242)

Collectively, these reflections suggest that photographic priming reactivated role-based procedural records associated with caregiving, obligation, and attentiveness, reinforcing participants’ identities as responsible and supportive grandchildren.

4.4.2.3. Informational and Problem-Solving Orientations

Participants also frequently described thoughts related to offering guidance, explanations, or informational assistance to their grandparents, particularly in situations involving knowledge gaps, communication barriers, or everyday problem-solving. One participant described recalling a shared learning experience and their role in supplementing information:

“We spent the time perusing the halls of the small museum and discussing the revolutionary war... my sister and I were able to fill in the gaps of knowledge they had with what we had more recently been taught in school.”

(Participant 195)

Others highlighted communication challenges that activated thoughts about helping grandparents navigate practical barriers:

“I have a limited proficiency in Cantonese which is one of the reasons I don’t speak to her as much, and it makes me wish I could communicate with her better.”

(Participant 121)

Another participant connected informational support to practical assistance shaped by life transitions:

“Grandma made sure I had a great summer. She also made sure I did my summer reading assignment.”

(Participant 16)

These responses reflect the activation of knowledge-based procedural records for explaining, guiding, and assisting grandparents, aligning closely with the quantitative finding that photographic priming significantly increased informational support intentions.

4.4.2.4. Behavioral Readiness and Future-Oriented Intentions

Finally, several responses reflected an increased readiness to engage in future supportive communication. Participants frequently expressed intentions to reconnect, visit more often, or take concrete steps to strengthen their relationships. For instance, one participant stated:

“It made me realize that I should be closer to my grandma now.”

(Participant 261)

Others framed behavioral readiness through regret and anticipated action:

“Regret for not saying ‘I love you’ enough, for not lingering longer.”

(Participant 237)

Although exploratory, these reflections suggest that photographic priming may foster a cognitive state oriented toward future supportive action, consistent with AAT’s emphasis on the accessibility of procedural records guiding behavioral readiness.

Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that photographic priming activated a constellation of cognitive records associated with participants’ grandparents and their relational roles as grandchildren. Participants’ spontaneous reflections revealed the activation of emotionally laden relational schemas, role-based expectations of care and responsibility, and knowledge-oriented procedural records related to providing guidance and assistance. In line with AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), these activated records appear to have increased the accessibility of stored representations linking grandparents with affection,

obligation, and support-oriented action tendencies. Rather than generating entirely new intentions, photographic priming appeared to cue existing cognitive structures and past interactional experiences, bringing them to the foreground of participants' awareness. This pattern helps explain why priming selectively enhanced intentions for certain forms of support, particularly informational support, while leaving other domains less affected, underscoring the role of cognitive accessibility in shaping readiness for supportive communication within intergenerational relationships.

4.4.2.5. Discussion: Interpretation of the Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from the thought-listing task provide important insight into the cognitive processes activated by photographic priming and help explain the pattern of quantitative results observed in the main study. Consistent with AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), participants' spontaneous reflections indicate that exposure to intergenerational photographs activated stored relational and role-based procedural records associated with grandparents. These activated records shaped how participants interpreted the photographs, recalled past interactions, and oriented themselves toward future supportive communication.

The theme of emotional bonding and relational warmth illustrates how photographic priming activated affective relational schemas grounded in shared history, closeness, and affection. Participants' descriptions of warmth, nostalgia, and gratitude suggest that the

photographs cued emotionally salient memories that reinforced the relational significance of grandparents. From an AAT perspective, these affective memories function as procedural records that inform communicative readiness by linking relational partners with emotional meaning (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). Rather than generating new feelings, the photographs appeared to bring existing emotional representations to the foreground of awareness, increasing their accessibility at the moment of reflection. This activation helps explain why photographic priming increased overall supportive communication intentions, even when effects varied across specific support categories.

The theme of role-based responsibility and care orientation further demonstrates the activation of procedural records related to identity and relational roles. Participants frequently articulated heightened awareness of their grandparents' aging, vulnerability, and need for care, alongside feelings of obligation, guilt, or urgency. These reflections suggest that priming activated cognitive records associated with the "responsible grandchild" role, including expectations of attentiveness, presence, and support. Within AAT, such role-based procedural records provide organizing frameworks that guide action readiness by defining what types of communicative behaviors are appropriate or expected within a given relational context (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). The activation of these records helps explain why participants expressed increased readiness to engage in supportive

communication broadly, even when specific forms of support were constrained by situational factors.

The informational and problem-solving orientation theme is particularly notable given its alignment with the quantitative finding that photographic priming significantly increased informational support intentions. Participants' recollections of teaching, explaining, or assisting grandparents with knowledge gaps indicate the activation of cognitively organized procedural records associated with advising and guidance. Informational support has been conceptualized as a knowledge-based form of support tied to advice-giving, explanation, and problem-solving roles (Burleson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House et al., 1988). From an AAT standpoint, these records are readily assembled into action tendencies when activated, which helps explain why informational support intentions were especially responsive to photographic priming, whereas emotional and instrumental support intentions were not.

The theme of behavioral readiness and future-oriented intentions provides additional qualitative evidence that photographic priming influenced participants' action readiness rather than merely eliciting emotional responses. Participants' expressions of regret, motivation to reconnect, and intentions to spend more time with grandparents suggest that activated cognitive records extended beyond reflection and into anticipatory planning. This pattern is consistent with AAT's emphasis on the accessibility of procedural records as a determinant of

readiness for future communicative action (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993).

Importantly, these reflections support the interpretation that priming increased participants' general orientation toward supportive action without prescribing specific behaviors.

Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that photographic priming activated a constellation of interrelated cognitive records, including emotionally laden relational schemas, role-based expectations of care, and knowledge-oriented procedural records. In line with AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), these activated records increased the accessibility of support-relevant representations already present in participants' cognitive systems. Rather than producing uniform effects across all support domains, priming selectively enhanced intentions associated with records that were most cognitively salient and role-consistent, particularly informational support. This interpretation helps reconcile the mixed quantitative findings and underscores the value of qualitative data in revealing the cognitive mechanisms underlying memory-based communication interventions in intergenerational relationships.

CHAPTER 5. General Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of the present dissertation through the theoretical framework of Action Assembly Theory (AAT; Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993) and the limitations in existing intergenerational support research identified in Chapter 1. Rather than reiterating results, the discussion focuses on what these findings reveal about the cognitive and communicative mechanisms underlying supportive communication readiness in intergenerational relationships. Specifically, the findings are used to explain how memory activation and accumulated relational experience shape individuals' orientations toward social support prior to interaction.

This dissertation began by identifying key limitations in existing research on intergenerational social support, particularly the emphasis on structured, non-familial intervention programs and the relative lack of attention to naturally occurring supportive communication within familial intergenerational relationships. To address these gaps, the present project advanced a communication-centered perspective that conceptualizes intergenerational support as an interactional and relational process shaped through everyday exchanges between adult grandchildren and grandparents. Drawing on scholarship on supportive and intergenerational communication, this dissertation focused on emotional, instrumental, and informational support as central forms of assistance within these relationships and proposed that strengthening naturally occurring familial ties, rather than

relying solely on formalized programs, offers a scalable and meaningful pathway to enhance older adults' social well-being.

In advancing this perspective, the current project is among the first to conceptualize intergenerational familial support as an interactional exchange process, rather than treating support solely as an outcome of relationship closeness or as a byproduct of structured intervention programs. Although previous research has examined social support within intergenerational relationships and documented its benefits for older adults' well-being (Antonucci et al., 2014; Fingerman et al., 2012a), much of this work has emphasized perceived support or programmatic support delivery, with limited attention to how supportive communication are enacted and understood within everyday family interactions (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004; Harwood, 2007). To address this gap, this dissertation examined intergenerational support as an interactional process shaped through social support exchanges between adult grandchildren and grandparents. By foregrounding communication as the mechanism through which support is produced and interpreted, this project extends existing support frameworks by highlighting how relational meaning and shared history differentiate familial intergenerational support from more formal or task-oriented support contexts. In particular, the findings suggest that intergenerational support is characterized by heightened relational sensitivity and affective engagement, which may shape both how supportive communication are perceived and how they influence subsequent relational intentions.

The conceptualization of intergenerational support as a communicative and relational process provided the foundation for the research questions and study designs advanced in this dissertation. By foregrounding how supportive communication are enacted, interpreted, and remembered within grandparent–adult grandchild relationships, this project challenged approaches that treat support primarily as a static perception or as the outcome of structured intervention programs. I argued that everyday familial interactions, shaped by shared history, relational norms, and emotional connection, constitute a critical but underexamined context for understanding how support influences relational intentions and well-being. The findings from both studies support this claim. The pilot study demonstrates that adult grandchildren define supportive communication within their relationships with grandparents in ways that emphasize emotional presence, relational attentiveness, and meaningful engagement, underscoring the importance of communication processes rather than isolated acts of assistance. Building on this insight, the main study shows that activating positive intergenerational memories through photographic priming can meaningfully influence relational perceptions and supportive communication intentions. In particular, the main study demonstrated that participants’ perceived social connectedness with their grandparents increased over time, indicating that engaging with relationally salient cues can shape broader relational states in addition to specific support intentions. Together, these findings highlight the value of focusing on communicative processes embedded in everyday family interactions,

which is an approach that has been largely overlooked in past intergenerational support research.

The findings of this dissertation have broader implications for understanding intergenerational support across family relationships, but the present project focused specifically on how communication processes shape relational perceptions and supportive communication intentions within grandparent–adult grandchild relationships. Rather than examining support outcomes solely in terms of message content or behavioral frequency, this research emphasized how supportive interactions are perceived and remembered. Particularly, the findings suggest that shifts in relational perceptions and supportive intentions can occur independently of changes in the objective quality or quantity of supportive communication. Consistent with this interpretation, the observed increase in social connectedness from pretest to posttest suggests that relational perceptions may shift through memory activation and reflection alone, even in the absence of changes in enacted support behaviors. This finding highlights social connectedness as a dynamic relational outcome responsive to communicative and cognitive processes rather than solely to behavioral exchange. In the main study, activating positive intergenerational memories influenced participants’ relational evaluations and intentions to engage in supportive communication, even though the intervention did not directly alter the content of ongoing interactions. This pattern underscores the importance of perception and meaning-making in intergenerational support

processes and emphasizes the role of memory and relational framing in shaping how support is experienced. These findings offer practical implications for the design of communication-based interventions to strengthen intergenerational relationships. Rather than relying exclusively on intensive or structured programs, relatively low-cost and scalable approaches that activate positive relational memories, such as visual prompts, storytelling, or shared reminiscence activities, may meaningfully enhance feelings of support and commitment within family relationships.

The current dissertation adopts an innovative approach to studying intergenerational social support by shifting attention away from isolated supportive acts and toward the communicative processes through which support is understood, remembered, and enacted within ongoing family relationships. As reviewed in Chapter 1, much of the existing research on intergenerational support has focused on the outcomes of support provision, such as perceived availability, frequency of assistance, and well-being benefits (Antonucci et al., 2014; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House et al., 1988), or has emphasized structured intervention approaches aimed at promoting supportive behavior (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Kaplan et al., 2017b; Leedahl et al., 2019), with comparatively less attention to how support is communicatively enacted and interpreted in everyday family interactions (Burleson, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004; Harwood, 2007). Implicit in these approaches is the assumption that intergenerational support can be understood as the accumulation of discrete supportive

behaviors or intervention-driven interactions (Fingerman et al., 2012a; Goldsmith, 2004; Kaplan et al., 2017b). In contrast, the present project conceptualizes support as a relational and communicative process embedded in everyday family life, shaped by shared history, emotional connection, and memory. This perspective allows for the examination of outcomes that are more directly tied to relational functioning, such as supportive communication intentions, rather than focusing exclusively on the immediate effectiveness of individual support episodes. By foregrounding communication processes and relational meaning, this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how intergenerational support operates within families and how it may be strengthened through scalable, communication-based interventions.

Methodologically, a key strength of the current dissertation lies in its use of mixed-methods, sequential design that integrates qualitative conceptualization with experimental intervention testing. The pilot study employed an inductive approach that allowed adult grandchildren to define supportive communication in their relationships with grandparents in their own terms, thereby grounding the conceptualization of intergenerational support in participants' lived experiences rather than imposed theoretical categories. This approach strengthened the ecological validity of the project and provided a critical foundation for the main study. Building on these findings, main study adopted an experimental design to assess the effects of a memory activation intervention on relational perceptions and supportive

communication intentions. The experimental method enabled a more rigorous examination of causal relationships between the intervention and key relational outcomes, enhancing confidence in the observed effects. Together, the complementary use of qualitative grounding and experimental testing strengthens the robustness of the findings by balancing depth of understanding with internal validity. The convergence of results across the pilot study and the experimental design, linking naturally defined supportive communication with experimentally induced changes in relational perceptions, highlights the project's methodological rigor and supports the conclusion that communication-based, memory-focused interventions can meaningfully shape intergenerational support processes.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Overall, the findings of this dissertation advance communication theory by demonstrating that supportive communication readiness in intergenerational relationships is shaped by memory accessibility and accumulated relational experience rather than by immediate situational demand alone. This dissertation contributes to communication theory by advancing a mechanism-based account of intergenerational supportive communication. Rather than treating support as a situational response or a function of structural opportunity, the present findings demonstrate how overall supportive communication intentions can be shaped through memory activation processes grounded in AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993). In doing so, this project shifts scholarly attention to the cognitive mechanisms

underlying individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication across intergenerational relationships.

The effects of the memory-activation intervention observed in the main study can be understood through the lens of AAT (Greene, 1984; Greene & Geddes, 1993), which provides a useful framework for explaining how memory activation shapes communicative intentions and behavior. AAT posits that communication behaviors are generated through the activation and assembly of stored memory units, or procedural records, which guide individuals' responses in social situations. From this perspective, supportive communication is not produced spontaneously but emerges from the activation of relationally relevant memories that inform how individuals interpret situations and select appropriate actions.

By extending AAT to intergenerational family relationships, this dissertation demonstrates that these activation processes operate not only within immediate interaction but also in shaping communicative readiness outside of direct contact. In the context of this project, the photographic priming intervention used in the main study can be understood as activating positive intergenerational relational memories, thereby increasing the accessibility of supportive action tendencies toward grandparents. These findings illustrate how stored relational experience can influence individuals' supportive orientations even in the absence of direct interaction or situational demand.

Consistent with AAT, the activated memory structures observed in the main study influenced participants' relational perceptions and supportive communication intentions without requiring changes to the immediate interaction context or explicit behavioral instruction. This theoretical account helps explain why relatively subtle, low-intensity interventions, such as exposure to positive intergenerational imagery, can meaningfully shape supportive intentions by altering the cognitive and relational resources individuals draw upon when considering future interactions. Notably, this contribution moves intergenerational communication research beyond descriptive accounts of support or evaluations of structured programs by specifying memory activation as a mechanism through which supportive communication intentions are generated across time.

Conceptually, this dissertation reframes intergenerational social support as a memory-guided communication process embedded in everyday family relationships. Rather than positioning support as dependent on structured, co-present intervention programs, the findings suggest that supportive communication readiness can be activated through cues that evoke accumulated relational experience. This reframing challenges prevailing assumptions that supportive behavior must be taught or facilitated through institutional designs and instead highlights the role of naturally occurring relational histories in shaping intergenerational support. By foregrounding memory accessibility and relational experience, this dissertation broadens how scholars conceptualize the origins and enactment of intergenerational

supportive communication. By specifying priming as the mechanism that activates procedural records, this dissertation advances AAT from a primarily descriptive account of action production to a more precise explanation of when and why particular communicative tendencies become accessible prior to interaction.

5.2. Boundary Conditions and Interpretive Scope

The findings of this dissertation should be interpreted within clearly defined boundaries. The results do not suggest that memory activation creates new supportive communication behaviors or guarantees that supportive actions will be enacted. Rather, consistent with AAT, memory activation is conceptualized as a process that increases the accessibility of existing procedural knowledge derived from prior relational experience. Supportive communication remains contingent on situational opportunities, relational norms, and individual agency. Accordingly, memory activation is best understood as enhancing readiness and orientation toward support rather than determining behavior.

5.3. Practical and Intervention Implications

The findings of this dissertation have practical implications for the design of intergenerational interventions and communication-based support initiatives. Rather than relying exclusively on structured, co-present programming, interventions may benefit from incorporating memory-based activation strategies that leverage existing relational histories. For example, the use of photographs, shared narratives, or other relational cues may increase

individuals' readiness to engage in supportive communication without requiring sustained instruction or physical proximity. Such approaches may be particularly valuable in contexts where geographic distance, time constraints, or mobility limitations restrict participation in traditional intergenerational programs.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the theoretical and methodological contributions of this dissertation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the main study employed an experimental design that enabled stronger causal inference about the effects of memory activation on supportive communication intentions, the online nature of the study raises concerns about contextual variability. Participants completed the study in uncontrolled, naturalistic environments, which may have influenced attention, engagement with the photographic priming stimuli, or response patterns. At the same time, conducting the study online enhances ecological validity by allowing participants to respond in settings that more closely resemble their everyday communication contexts. Future research could examine how memory activation effects vary across different situational contexts or levels of engagement, including longitudinal or repeated-exposure designs embedded in daily life.

Second, the primary outcomes examined in this dissertation focused on relational perceptions and supportive communication intentions rather than enacted supportive behaviors. Although intentions are theoretically meaningful and align with AAT's emphasis

on action readiness, they do not guarantee subsequent behavior. Future studies could extend this work by incorporating behavioral measures, such as follow-up reports of interaction frequency, communication diaries, or observational data, to assess whether memory activation translates into sustained changes in enacted intergenerational support over time.

A third limitation concerns the level of cognitive processing assessed in relation to AAT. Importantly, the main study incorporated a qualitative component that captured participants' immediate reflections and interpretations as they viewed the photographs depicting a good memory with their grandparent, providing direct insight into the cognitive and relational meanings activated at the moment of exposure. These qualitative findings offer evidence that the priming stimuli elicited relational memories, emotions, and action-relevant thoughts consistent with the memory activation processes proposed by AAT. However, while these data illuminate participants' conscious cognitive and interpretive experiences, the study did not assess cognitive activation at a more fine-grained or implicit level, such as the relative accessibility, activation strength, or automaticity of specific procedural records. Future research could build on the present findings by integrating qualitative self-reports with additional process-oriented measures, such as response latency, implicit activation tasks, or repeated priming paradigms, to more precisely examine how memory activation unfolds over time in intergenerational support contexts.

A fourth limitation concerns the demographic composition of the sample. Participants were recruited from a single university and consisted primarily of undergraduate students, resulting in a sample that may not be representative of the broader population of adult grandchildren. Additionally, the sample was disproportionately composed of women and Asian participants, reflecting the demographic characteristics of the university participant pool. Because gender and cultural background may influence family communication patterns, caregiving expectations, and intergenerational relationship norms (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other populations. Replication with more demographically diverse samples would help establish the robustness and generalizability of the present findings.

Finally, the pilot study focused on adult grandchildren's perspectives on defining supportive communication, which was appropriate given the main study's focus, but limited insight into grandparents' interpretations of these behaviors. Intergenerational support is inherently relational, and future research would benefit from dyadic or multi-perspective designs that examine alignment and divergence between grandchildren's intentions and grandparents' perceptions of support. Such approaches could further illuminate how communicative processes shape intergenerational support outcomes across generations.

5.5. Future Research Directions

Future research can build on the present findings by adopting a wider range of methodological approaches to further examine memory-based intergenerational support processes. In particular, studies that draw on naturally occurring data from family communication contexts, such as text messages, shared photographs, social media interactions, or communication diaries, would provide stronger ecological validity and allow researchers to assess whether the effects observed in the current online study extend to everyday intergenerational interactions. Observational or longitudinal designs could also examine how repeated exposure to memory cues influences supportive communication and relational trajectories over time.

Another important direction for future research concerns the role of gender, ethnicity, and cultural background in shaping intergenerational supportive communication and memory activation processes. Prior research suggests that women are more likely than men to engage in emotional support provision, relational maintenance, and caregiving-related communication within family relationships (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012a; Silverstein et al., 2006). Similarly, cultural values such as familism, filial obligation, interdependence, and respect for older adults have been shown to influence family communication patterns and support exchanges across generations (Antonucci et al., 2011; Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). From the perspective of AAT, these

differences may shape the development and accessibility of relational procedural records, thereby influencing how individuals respond to memory-based interventions. Future research should therefore examine whether the effects of photographic priming vary across gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups and explore how family communication norms and relational histories moderate memory activation processes in intergenerational relationships.

Mixed-method approaches may be especially promising for advancing this line of research. Combining qualitative analyses of participants' in-the-moment interpretations with quantitative measures of relational perceptions, behavioral intentions, and enacted support would allow for a more comprehensive examination of how memory activation operates across cognitive, communicative, and behavioral levels. Such designs could also integrate process-oriented measures, including response timing or repeated priming exposure, to more closely examine the mechanisms proposed by AAT. By leveraging diverse methods, future research can strengthen both external validity and theoretical precision, providing a deeper understanding of how communication-based, memory-focused interventions can be used to support intergenerational relationships in everyday family life.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to advance understanding of intergenerational social support by shifting attention away from structured, non-familial intervention models and toward the communicative processes through which support is naturally enacted within family relationships. As populations age and concerns about older adults' social well-being increase, scholars and practitioners alike have emphasized the importance of fostering supportive intergenerational ties. However, much of the existing research has focused on support outcomes, perceived availability, or formal intervention programs, with comparatively less attention to how support is defined, interpreted, and sustained through everyday communication between family members. This dissertation addressed that gap by conceptualizing intergenerational support as an interactional and relational process embedded in ongoing communication between adult grandchildren and grandparents.

Across two studies, this project offers several key contributions. Conceptually, it reframes intergenerational support as a communicative exchange shaped by relational history, emotional connection, and meaning-making, rather than as a series of discrete supportive acts or program-driven interactions. Empirically, pilot study demonstrated that adult grandchildren define supportive communication in terms of emotional presence, attentiveness, and relational engagement, highlighting the centrality of communication processes in familial support. Building on these insights, the main study showed that

activating positive intergenerational memories through photographic priming can meaningfully influence relational perceptions and supportive communication intentions. Together, these findings provide evidence that relatively subtle, low-cost interventions targeting relational memory and meaning can shape how individuals think about and orient themselves toward supportive communication.

This dissertation also contributes theoretically by demonstrating the value of Action Assembly Theory (AAT) for understanding intergenerational support processes. By framing supportive intentions as emerging from the activation and assembly of relational memory structures, AAT helps explain why memory-based interventions can influence intentions and perceptions without directly altering interaction content. Methodologically, the mixed-methods, sequential design strengthened the project by grounding experimental intervention in participants' lived understandings of support, while also allowing for causal inference regarding the effects of memory activation. This approach illustrates how qualitative and quantitative methods can be productively integrated to study communication processes that unfold across cognitive, relational, and behavioral levels.

By centering communication, relational history, and memory-based processes, this dissertation advances understanding of how intergenerational support is generated and sustained within family relationships. Rather than treating supportive communication as a static resource or a product of structured programming, this work conceptualizes support as a

communicative action shaped by accumulated experience and cognitive readiness. In doing so, it provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for future research and intervention efforts to strengthen intergenerational relationships in an aging society.

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Tables

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Characteristic	n	%
Age (18-33)		
Gender		
– Female	201	83.8
– Male	35	14.6
– Nonbinary/Other	4	1.7
Ethnicity		
– Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	122	50.8
– Hispanic/Latinx	49	20.4
– Caucasian/White	41	17.1
– Multiracial	14	5.8
– African American/Black	7	2.9
– Middle Eastern, North African	6	2.5
– Other	1	0.4

Table 2. Internal consistency reliability for study measures

Measure	Items (n)	Scale Range	α
Overall Supportive Communication Intentions	18	1–6	.95
Emotional Support Intentions	3	1–6	.83
Informational Support Intentions	3	1–6	.88
Instrumental Support Intentions	3	1–6	.90
Relational Engagement Intentions	3	1-6	.89
Relational Maintenance Intentions	3	1–6	.83
Social Connectedness (Pretest)	20	1-6	.96
Social Connectedness (Posttest)	20	1-6	.97

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. Overall Supportive Communication Intentions score represents a higher-order composite comprising 15 items across five subscales. All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency in the current sample.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of key variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Overall Supportive Communication Intentions	1							
2. Emotional Support Intentions	.81***	1						
3. Informational Support Intentions	.89***	.62***	1					
4. Instrumental Support Intentions	.86***	.53***	.83***	1				
5. Relational Engagement Intentions	.87***	.75***	.66***	.61***	1			
6. Relational Maintenance Intentions	.83***	.73***	.6***	.56***	.83***	1		
7. Social Connectedness (Pretest)	.55***	.53***	.39***	.34***	.63***	.64***	1	
8. Social Connectedness (Posttest)	.62***	.61***	.45***	.39***	.70***	.72***	.91***	1
M	4.23	4.69	3.93	4.11	4.69	4.38	4.33	4.42
SD	1.14	1.28	1.43	1.52	1.18	1.26	.99	1.02

Table 4. Hypothesis test results for H1 (overall supportive communication intentions)

Dependent variable	Priming condition (n)	Control condition (n)	Test	F(1, 238)	p	η^2
Overall Supportive Communication Intentions	100	140	One-way ANOVA	4.12	.04	.02

Note. η^2 = eta squared. The priming condition involved exposure to a photo depicting a positive memory with a grandparent; the control condition involved a non-priming task.

Table 5. Hypothesis test results for H2–H3

Dependent Variable	Priming M (SD)	Control M (SD)	F	p	η^2
Emotional Support Intentions (H2a)	4.76 (1.34)	4.64 (1.23)	.47	.49	.002
Informational Support Intentions (H2b)	4.20 (1.50)	3.75 (1.35)	5.88	.02	.02
Instrumental Support Intentions (H2c)	4.31 (1.57)	3.98 (1.48)	2.74	.10	.01
Relational Maintenance Intentions (H3)	4.53 (1.35)	4.28 (1.20)	2.32	.13	.01

Note. η^2 = eta squared. The priming condition involved exposure to a photo depicting a positive memory with a grandparent; the control condition involved a non-priming task.

Table 6. Hypothesis test results for H4

Effect	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Time	1, 238	10.25	.002	.04
Condition	1, 238	1.97	.16	.01
Time $\times$ Condition	1, 238	< .01	.98	.00

Note. Time (pretest vs. posttest) was treated as a within-subjects factor, and condition (photographic priming vs. control) was treated as a between-subjects factor. Higher scores indicate greater social connectedness.

Appendix A. Pilot Study Survey Instrument

The following questions ask about your interactions and supportive communication behaviors with one of your grandparents. Please answer the questions based on the grandparent relationship you feel most comfortable describing.

Relationship Background

1. Which grandparent are you answering about in this survey?
 - Paternal Grandfather
 - Paternal Grandmother
 - Maternal Grandfather
 - Maternal Grandmother
2. How would you describe your relationship with this grandparent?
 - Very close
 - Somewhat close
 - Neutral
 - Somewhat distant
 - Very distant
3. How often do you interact with your grandparent?
 - 1 = Once a month or less
 - 2 = A few times a month

3 = Once a week

4 = Several times a week

5 = Daily

4. In what contexts do you usually interact with your grandparent? (Select all that apply)

- In-person visits
- Phone calls
- Video calls (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime)
- Text messages/social media
- Other

5. Where do you currently live relative to this grandparent?

- Same household
- Same neighborhood/town/city
- Different town/city, same state/province
- Different state/province, same country
- Different country

Emotional Support

6. How often do you provide emotional support to your grandparent?

- Never

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost always

7. How do you usually express affection or care toward your grandparent? (Select all that apply)

- Verbal expressions of affection (e.g., saying “I love you” “I miss you”)
- Physical expressions of affection (e.g., hugs, holding hands, kissing on the cheeks)
- Spending time together
- Checking in regularly (e.g., calls, texts)
- Giving gifts or buying things
- Other

8. Please share a specific example of a time when you provided emotional support.

(Open text response)

9. Have you ever wanted to provide emotional support but did not know how?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

- Almost always

Instrumental Support

10. What kinds of practical assistance do you provide for your grandparent? (Select all that apply)

- Household chores
- Transportation
- Running errands
- Financial help
- Technology help
- Other
- None

11. Which type of assistance does your grandparent most often request?

- Household chores
- Transportation
- Running errands
- Financial help
- Technology help
- Other

- None

12. How often do you assist your grandparent with everyday tasks?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost always

13. Have you experienced challenges in providing instrumental support to this grandparent?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost always

Informational Support

14. How often do you give advice or guidance to your grandparent?

- Never
- Rarely

- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost always

15. What type of informational support do you most often provide?

- Health-related advice
- Technology advice
- Daily life advice
- Emotional advice
- Financial advice
- Other
- None

16. Has your grandparent ever had difficulty understanding your explanations?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost always

Other Types of Support

17. Besides emotional, instrumental, and informational, what other support have you provided? (Open-ended)

Challenges and Adaptations

18. What challenges have you faced when offering support? (Select all that apply)

- Lack of time
- Physical distance (living far away)
- Miscommunication or misunderstandings
- Grandparent resists or rejects help
- Emotional strain/stress
- Financial strain
- Other

19. Have there been times when your grandparent did not perceive your actions as supportive?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

- Almost always

Differences Between Grandparents

20. Do you interact differently with your grandfather(s) versus your grandmother(s)?

- Very differently
- Somewhat differently
- Not different; about the same
- Not applicable (e.g., having only interacted with one grandparent)

21. If yes, what are the main differences in your interaction with grandfather(s) vs.

grandmother(s)?

Appendix B. Supportive Communication Intentions Toward Grandparents Scale

The following items assess your intentions to provide different forms of support to your grandparent in the future. In the next 6 months, how likely are you to engage in the following behaviors toward your grandparent? (1 = Very unlikely, 6 = Very likely)

1. Emotional support intentions

- Listen to my grandparent when they want to talk about their feelings or life experiences.
- Offer words of comfort or reassurance if they are going through a difficult time.
- Express care and affection toward my grandparent (e.g., saying “I love you,” giving compliments, or showing appreciation).

2. Informational support intentions

- Provide advice or information to help solve everyday problems (e.g., health, transportation, news).
- Share useful knowledge or resources that could make my grandparent’s life easier (e.g., services, community programs).
- Explain or teach my grandparent how to do things they want to learn (e.g., using new tools or accessing online services).

3. Instrumental support intentions

- Help my grandparent with practical tasks such as errands, chores, or appointments.
- Assist my grandparent with using technology (e.g., smartphone, video call, online services).
- Provide logistical support, such as helping them organize daily activities or manage important information (e.g., schedules, documents, reminders).

4. Relational engagement intentions (1 = Strongly disagree, 6 = Strongly agree)

- Increase the amount of support I provide to my grandparent in the near future.
- Continue maintaining a close and supportive relationship with my grandparent.
- Make an effort to communicate more frequently and meaningfully with my grandparent.

5. Relationship maintenance intentions

- Spend quality time with my grandparent (e.g., shared activities, visits, family trips).
- Reach out regularly (e.g., phone call, video call, message) to check in on their well-being.
- Share personal updates, photos, or stories to stay connected with my grandparent.

Appendix C. Experimental Stimuli and Priming Instructions

Photographic Priming Condition

This is a photo of you and your grandparent. Take a moment to closely observe the photo. As you do, jot down all the thoughts that arise, whether they are about yourself, the situation depicted, or others involved. These reflections can be positive, neutral, or negative. Don't worry about forming complete sentences; any fragment or impression is valuable.

[text]

Control Condition

This is a photo of UC Davis. Take a moment to closely observe the photo. As you do, jot down all the thoughts that arise, whether they are about yourself, the situation depicted, or others involved. These reflections can be positive, neutral, or negative. Don't worry about forming complete sentences; any fragment or impression is valuable.

[text]