

Lost in transmission? Comparing emotional profiles in transmitted vs. remembered family memories

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Abstract

This research investigated the emotions associated with intergenerational memories within families. Across three studies, we examined the perspectives of transmitters (parents and grandparents) and receivers (children and grandchildren) regarding important family memories. In Studies 1 and 2, transmitters selected memories they had previously shared with a specific family member, whereas receivers independently selected memories told by the same family member. Study 3 combined these datasets to compare emotional patterns across generations. Across studies, transmitters reported higher emotional intensity than receivers, consistent with the idea that lived experiences evoke stronger emotions than vicarious memories. Differences in valence and discrete emotions emerged depending on generational roles: grandparents' stories were less negative than parents' stories, while grandchildren recalled grandparents' stories as eliciting greater admiration, happiness, pride, and respect than children recalled parents' stories. These findings highlight how the emotional characteristics of intergenerational memories reflect both the storyteller's experiences and the receiver's perspective, and they provide new insights into the socioemotional functions of family storytelling.

Keywords: *Autobiographical memory; vicarious memory, family; transmission; emotions.*

1 Introduction

Storytelling emerges early in familial interactions, shaping how the family comes to understand themselves and their social world. Human cognition is inherently narrative; individuals tend to interpret and organize their experiences through storied frameworks. Such narratives contribute to the development of personal identity and worldviews (McAdams & Manczak, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pasupathi & Adler, 2021), facilitate the transmission of family knowledge (Bohanek et al., 2006; Fivush & Merrill, 2016), and support the emergence and consolidation of autobiographical memory (Farrant & Reese, 2009; Reese et al., 2017). Despite extensive research on these functions, comparatively little is known about the emotional content embedded in intergenerational narratives. It remains unclear whether older generations selectively transmit stories with particular emotional characteristics and whether these align with the emotional characteristics remembered by younger recipients.

1.1 Autobiographical memory and family

Research on intergenerational memory transmission within families has expanded significantly in recent decades. Numerous authors examine how memories from an older generation shape the development of autobiographical memory among children (e.g., Fivush, Bohanek, & Marin, 2010; Reese & Fivush, 2008). Autobiographical memory is a reflective form of memory that goes beyond the recall of experienced events, to include interpretation, evaluation, and integration of the events into a coherent life story (Conway, 2005;

Fivush, Bohanek, & Marin, 2010). It relies on meaning-making processes and reasoning. Previous studies showed that autobiographical reasoning (that is, the way one creates and reflects on its life story) is highly inherited from early reminiscence, especially from the mothers (Fivush & Merrill, 2016; Marshall & Reese, 2022; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Children with more elaborative and encouraging mothers also seem to show more elaborative and coherent life stories (Marshall & Reese, 2022). Stories from older generations, and especially parents, help rooting one's own autobiographical memory and give more meaning-making tools to make sense of our own experiences.

Family memory exchanges are a natural and frequent part of everyday family interactions (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). In their study of family reminiscence, Bohanek et al., 2009 observed that families evoke past experiences (including stories about their day or older stories about the family) roughly every five minutes during routine family meals. These narratives allow families to co-construct meaning, validate emotions, and strengthen a sense of belonging both at the collective and individual levels (Fivush, Duke, et al., 2010). More recently, Baudet et al., 2025 reported that members of three generations (grandparents, parents, and grandchildren) view intergenerational memory sharing as a relatively common feature of family life. By sparking conversations, imparting lessons, or communicating values, shared memories provide opportunities for listeners to engage empathetically with the storyteller (Bluck et al., 2013). However, more than benefiting the youngest generations, memory transmission also contributes to parents' and grandparents' well-being.

In middle adulthood, individuals often experience an emerging desire to contribute to the well-being of future generations. Erikson (1963) conceptualized this developmental concern as *generativity*, an interest in guiding and nurturing the next generation. Although there are multiple pathways to express generativity, parenting represents a particularly salient context for fulfilling this role. Engagement in generative behaviors has been consistently associated with enhanced psychological well-being among adults (An & Cooney, 2006; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Grossman & Gruenewald, 2017; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). Similar benefits have been observed in older adults, who report greater life satisfaction (Scott et al., 2023), improved psychological health (Gruenewald et al., 2012), and reduced functional decline (Herrera et al., 2022). One meaningful expression of generativity is the intergenerational transmission of personal and family memories.

Intergenerational family stories are one type of story shared in the family, which refers to the narrative of a memory lived by an older generation and told to a younger one

(Fivush & Kellas, 2025). Past research highlights the unique role of grandparent narratives in this process. For instance, Pratt et al. (2008) found that grandchildren frequently recalled emotionally resonant and value-laden stories shared by grandparents, often carrying distinct themes from those transmitted by parents. More recently, Stephan (2024) identified three primary functions of grandparent storytelling for young adults: fostering emotional closeness between grandparents and grandchildren, conveying family history, and preserving the legacy of the grandparents themselves. These narratives serve not only to reinforce intergenerational bonds but also to transmit enduring family values and traditions, connecting younger generations to more distant familial roots. Importantly, intergenerational communication of this kind has been shown to promote psychological well-being in both grandparents and grandchildren (for reviews, see Swartz, 2009; Thomas et al., 2017).

1.2 The role of emotions in autobiographical memory

Emotions play a central role in the encoding, consolidation, and retrieval of autobiographical memories (see Luminet & Cordonnier, 2024a, for a review). One of the most robust findings in this domain is the emotion-enhanced memory effect (EEM), which demonstrates that emotionally charged events are more likely to be remembered than neutral ones (Cahill & McGaugh, 1998; Luminet & Cordonnier, 2024a; Steidl et al., 2011). Within the context of autobiographical memory, research has shown that different dimensions of emotionality (e.g., valence and intensity) influence memory processes in distinct ways.

On a methodological level, several authors have emphasized the importance of integrating emotional measures more thoroughly into memory research (Luminet, 2022). Emotions are typically assessed using either dimensional models—such as valence (pleasantness) and intensity (bodily activation) (e.g., Barrett et al., 2007)—or discrete emotion models, which classify emotions into basic categories such as happiness, sadness, or disgust (e.g., Izard, 2007). Although these frameworks originate from distinct theoretical traditions, there is growing consensus that combining both perspectives yields a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of emotional experience (Barrett, 1998; Harmon-Jones et al., 2017). Traditional autobiographical memory studies often focus on valence and intensity, thereby overlooking the richness offered by discrete or multidimensional evaluations of emotion (Luminet & Cordonnier, 2024a, 2024b). This methodological inclination could conceal important nuances in the findings. For instance, different discrete emotions may share similar valence levels, potentially obscuring distinct emotional and

mnemonic processes. Therefore, we adopt a multi-dimensional approach and consider various dimensions of emotion in the context of intergenerational memory transmission.

First, regarding dimensional measures of emotions, both valence and intensity have been shown to contribute to the emotion-enhanced memory effect (EEM; see Luminet & Cordonnier, 2024a, for a review). Whereas these results were initially observed in studies using lists of words (Kang et al., 2014; Kensinger & Corkin, 2003), EEM effects also extend to autobiographical memory research, where valence plays a central role. In particular, positive life events show a systematic advantage in recall: an effect known as the *positivity effect* (e.g., Ritchie et al., 2017)¹.

One possible explanation for this enhancement is the human tendency to maintain a coherent and favorable self-image, which makes positive events more easily integrated into one's life narrative (Matlin & Stang, 1978). This bias becomes more pronounced with age. Compared with younger adults, older adults' autobiographical memories tend to be predominantly positive in valence (e.g., Fernandes et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2004). According to the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, 2006), this bias reflects a shift in motivational goals with age: as individuals grow older, they increasingly prioritize emotion regulation and the pursuit of emotional well-being (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Consequently, older adults may preferentially recall and share positive memories, especially in intergenerational contexts where narratives serve both emotional and identity-related functions.

Beyond differential recall for positive events, another phenomenon shaping emotional memory over time is the *fading-affect bias*, which refers to the tendency for negative memories to become less intense over time compared with positive memories (Walker & Skowronski, 2009). Similar to the positivity effect, the fading-affect bias contributes to a more positive self-perception.

However, the link between emotion and memory is not exclusively driven by positive valence. Under certain conditions, negative information exhibits its own memory advantages. For instance, the *negativity effect* has been observed when judging moral behavior (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987) and among individuals experiencing depression (Holland & Kensinger, 2010). Because depression is associated with a negatively biased self-view, individuals with depression are more likely to recall negative experiences than positive ones (Holland & Kensinger, 2010). It has been proposed that a general attentional inclina-

¹Note that replication of the positivity effect varies across paradigms (Schaefer & Philippot, 2005; Siedlecki et al., 2015; Waters et al., 2013)

tion toward negative stimuli may be adaptive, as ignoring potential threats could increase danger from an evolutionary perspective (Baumeister et al., 2001).

While emotional valence yields mixed patterns depending on context, emotional intensity represents another key dimension influencing memory performance. Ack Baraly et al. (2016) reviewed strong evidence supporting an association between arousal and better performance in episodic memory, while also noting the mixed findings reported in autobiographical research. Talarico et al. (2004) demonstrated that when participants generated, recalled, and rated autobiographical memories differing in valence and intensity, intensity predicted memory properties to a greater extent than valence. Greater emotional intensity was linked to higher levels of vividness, narrative coherence, specificity, and rehearsal.

Taken together, these results indicate that both valence and intensity contribute to EEM, but at different levels. Bohanek et al. (2005)'s findings support this idea. After asking women to narrate one intensely positive and one intensely negative memory (high-intensity conditions), as well as one moderately positive and one moderately negative autobiographical memory, the authors analyzed the content and structure of the recalled events. They found that high-intensity memories were longer than moderate-intensity ones, and negative memories were longer than positive ones. Negative narratives also contained more cognitively oriented language, particularly in the high-intensity condition, whereas positive narratives were structurally more complex. These results align with other findings showing that children aged 5 to 12 used more descriptive details about people and objects when narrating positive memories than negative ones, while negative events were recalled with more internal states and greater coherence (Fivush, Hazzard, et al., 2003). Beyond shaping the qualities of personal memories, emotional factors also influence how stories are remembered when they are transmitted by others.

Research on vicarious memory provides important insights into how emotional content is transmitted through narratives. Vicarious memories refer to recollections of events not experienced firsthand but conveyed by others, often through storytelling (Kirkegaard Thomsen et al., 2025; Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024). Although these memories lack direct experiential grounding, they can still evoke phenomenological and emotional responses and serve similar psychological functions, although typically with less intensity than personally experienced events (Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024). Steiner (2023) found that vicarious memories do not show a positivity bias and that negative vicarious memories, much like negative personal memories, serve directive functions to a similar extent. Indeed, Pillemer et al. (2024) emphasizes the adaptive function of vicarious memory: by learning from oth-

ers' experiences (particularly negative ones), individuals can acquire important life lessons without undergoing the adverse events themselves. This mechanism may be particularly relevant in intergenerational contexts, where stories are often shared with the intent of guiding or protecting younger family members.

Other work has explored how perceived meaning and emotional valence influence which memories are transmitted and retained within families. For example, Gu et al. (2020) found that when parents and children concurred on the personal significance of a parental life event, the corresponding memories were more likely to display a positive emotional valence. Moreover, such memories (particularly those diverging from culturally normative life scripts) were rated as more emotionally intense. Taken together, these findings underscore the pivotal role of emotional factors in the selection, transmission, and retention of family memories.

Despite these insights, surprisingly few studies have directly examined the emotional characteristics of intergenerational narratives through the lens of discrete emotions. Merrill et al. (2017) compared pride and transgression memories shared by parents and recalled by college students, finding that pride narratives contained a higher proportion of emotional language and evaluative content than transgression narratives. These results suggest that emotional qualities may play a central role in determining which memories are remembered and transmitted across generations, a question that warrants further empirical investigation.

1.3 The present studies

The present research aims to examine the emotional characteristics of memories transmitted across generations within families. Specifically, we compare the emotional qualities of autobiographical memories recounted by older generations with those of the vicarious memories retained by younger family members. Despite the central role of emotion in memory transmission, no prior study, to our knowledge, has directly compared the emotional content of significant family memories as recalled by different generations while simultaneously integrating both emotional valence and discrete emotion dimensions.

Across three studies, we examined the emotions embedded in the memories that grandparents and parents chose to transmit and the emotions present in the vicarious memories that grandchildren and children retained from their grandparents or parents. Study 1 focused on parent–child dyads, and Study 2 applied a similar design to grandparent–grandchild

dyads, in which grandchildren were also adults. Study 3 combined both datasets to investigate generational differences by comparing emotions in parents' versus grandparents' transmitted memories, and in children's versus grandchildren's vicarious memories. As an exploratory goal, we also examined whether the expression of specific discrete emotions is associated with the perceived functions of transmitted memories.

Our design intentionally captures the subjectivity of intergenerational transmission by allowing transmitters and receivers to independently select memories they perceive as transmitted/received. This approach examines intergenerational transmission by focusing on the memories older generations see as transmitted and younger generations perceive as received rather than tracking the emotional evolution of identical autobiographical events across generations.

Based on prior work on the positivity bias in autobiographical memory (Luminet & Cordonnier, 2024b; Ritchie et al., 2017), the tendency for autobiographical memories to be more emotionally intense than vicarious ones (Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024), and the possibility that negative intergenerational memories may be preferentially retained when they carry directive or learning value (Pillemer et al., 2024; Steiner, 2023), we expected:

- *Study 1: Parent–child comparison*

1. Parents' autobiographical memories will be more positive in valence and more emotionally intense than the vicarious memories recalled by their children.
2. Children's vicarious memories will be more negative and lower in emotional intensity than the autobiographical memories reported by their parents.

- *Study 2: Grandparent–grandchild comparison*

1. Grandparents' autobiographical memories will be more positive than the vicarious memories recalled by their grandchildren.
2. Grandchildren's vicarious memories will be more negative and less emotionally intense than the autobiographical memories reported by their grandparents.

- *Study 3: Intergenerational comparisons across dyads*

1. Grandparents' autobiographical memories will be more positive than parents' autobiographical memories.
2. Among younger generations, vicarious memories of grandparents will be more positive than vicarious memories of parents.

Because our paradigm compares the emotional characteristics of important memories transmitted by older generations with the emotional characteristics of vicarious memories recalled by younger generations, and because most existing research focuses on emotions in self-experienced autobiographical memories, our hypotheses were primarily exploratory.

Beyond these hypotheses, an additional goal was to provide an exploratory account of the discrete emotions embedded in transmitted and recalled memories across three generations. Finally, we examined whether the most prominent positive and negative discrete emotions were systematically related to the perceived functions of these memories.

2 Study 1: Transmission from parents to children

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Fifty-seven parent-child dyads were recruited to participate in a study investigating intergenerational memory transmission in the family. The children's ages varied from 16 to 30 years ($M = 22.6$, $SD = 3.0$), with 39 (68.4%) identifying as women. The parents' ages ranged from 38 to 66 years ($M = 53.1$, $SD = 5.3$), with 42 (73.7%) identifying as women.

The target sample size was determined via an a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2007). Under the initially planned ANOVA framework, a minimum of 64 data sets per group was required to detect medium-sized main effects and interactions ($f = 0.25$, $d = 0.5$) in a 2x2 design (with $\alpha = .05$ and $\beta = .80$). Although the final analyses were conducted using linear mixed-effects models, which are more appropriate for the repeated-measures structure of the data, this analysis provided the initial sample-size target for recruitment.

Participants were Belgian French-speakers who were recruited by word of mouth. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, which included agreement to be audio-recorded during the experiment. Each participant received 20 euros as compensation for their time. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculté de Psychologie, Logopédie et Sciences de l'Éducation (FPLSE) at the University of Liège.

2.1.2 Procedure and materials

This study was part of a larger data collection effort conducted by the authors, aiming at investigating intergenerational memory. However, only data relevant to the current research questions are presented and discussed in the present article.

For participants' convenience, sessions were conducted either in person at the GIGA-CRC-Human Imaging Centre (University of Liège), at the participant's house, or online using Microsoft Teams. Twenty-seven parents (47%) chose the online option against 22 (39%) for the children.

Phase 1: Memory Selection

Participants were first invited to generate a list of important memories they transmitted (for the parents) or remembered (for the children). Parents had to list at least three autobiographical memories they transmitted to their child, and the children had to list at least 3 vicarious memories they knew about their parent. For both generations, these memories had to meet specific criteria: to be episodic (i.e., referring to personally experienced events that occurred at a specific time and place), to have taken place before the parent's 30th birthday, and to have been directly transmitted from the parent to the child. The age criterion was used to ensure that the child had not experienced the event themselves or was too young to recall it firsthand. This constraint is also consistent with the phenomenon of the reminiscence bump, whereby adults tend to recall a disproportionate number of autobiographical memories from between the ages of 10 and 30 (see Munawar et al., 2018). In cases where the parent had their child before the age of 30, participants were instructed to recall events that occurred before the child turned four, in line with findings that most individuals' earliest memories begin around age four, due to childhood amnesia (see Jack & Hayne, 2007, for a review). Importantly, parents and children selected memories on their own, so the recollections typically reflected distinct experiences rather than shared events.

Following the generation of the list of memories, participants rated each memory using an adapted version of the Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen and Rubin, 2006), which assesses how central a given event is to a person's self-concept or family narrative. An example item from the CES is: "I believe this event is central to my personal and/or family history." The three events rated as most central were selected for the following phase of the study.

Phase 2: Measures of Emotions and Functions

In the second phase, participants were asked to orally narrate each of their selected

memories in as much detail as possible. These narrations were audio-recorded by the experimenter. Following each narration, participants responded to a series of questions assessing both the emotional and functional aspects associated with the memory. Although the narratives were recorded, the present analyses focus exclusively on participants' post-narrative emotional ratings (questionnaires) rather than linguistic content or emotional language in the narratives themselves.

The experimenter guided each participant through the questionnaire, which was administered via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2020). Participants were interviewed individually.

Emotional valence and intensity. Participants rated the emotional tone of each memory using items that assessed both valence and intensity. Valence was measured separately for positive ("When I think about this event, I feel positive emotions.") and negative ("When I think about this event, I feel negative emotions.") emotions. Emotional intensity was evaluated with the item: "This event was intense for me". Participants responded using sliders ranging from 0 (do not agree at all) to 100 (completely agree).

Discrete emotions. To provide a more fine-grained view of the emotional landscape of transmitted memories, participants rated the intensity of 16 discrete emotions. The set was chosen to cover both positive and negative emotions, as well as basic and moral/social emotions relevant to intergenerational memory transmission. Specifically, participants evaluated the extent to which they felt when thinking about the memory: (a) sadness, shame, anger, disgust, guilt, fear, contempt, indignation, and debt, and (b) desire², happiness, pride, admiration, compassion, gratitude, and respect. Items reflecting positive and negative emotions were mixed rather than presented consecutively. Participants responded using sliders ranging from 0 (no emotion) to 100 (high intensity).

Functions of the memory. To measure why memories were transmitted or remembered, participants also completed an adapted version of the Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS; Robitaille et al., 2010). It included one representative item for each of the eight dimensions: boredom reduction ("To pass the time"), death preparation ("To help me cope with my mortality"), identity ("To know where I come from"), problem-solving ("To remind me that I have the skills to cope with my problems"), conversation ("To create/facilitate discussion"), intimacy maintenance ("To remember someone who has passed away"), bitterness revival ("Not to forget old hurts"), and teaching/informing ("To pass on values to younger generations"). Although

²"Desire" translates French "*envie*" (desire/longing), though no perfect English equivalent exists. It shows consistent positive correlations with positive valence (receivers: $r_s = 0.48$; transmitters: $r_s = 0.25$) and negative correlations with negative valence (receivers: $r_s = -0.25$; transmitters: $r_s = -0.06$). Full Spearman correlation matrices available in Supplementary material.

functions were not the central focus of the present study as they were analyzed in detail in another article (Baudet et al., in press), these measures enabled exploratory analyses of their connections with discrete emotions, which were conducted by pooling data from Studies 1 and 2 in Study 3 (see *Exploratory analysis: Correlation with functions*). Participants responded using sliders ranging from 0 (do not agree at all) to 100 (completely agree).

This procedure was repeated for each of the three selected memories.

2.1.3 Analysis

Participants rated the valence, intensity, and presence of discrete emotions on visual analog scales ranging from 0 (“completely disagree”) to 100 (“completely agree”). The data were then considered as continuous.

Initial data inspection revealed that the ratings were not normally distributed. Given their robustness to non-normally distributed data (Jacqmin-Gadda et al., 2007; Li et al., 2012; Sainani, 2012), we used linear mixed models (LMMs) to account for both the non-normal distribution of the data and the repeated-measures structure of the design. As each participant rated three memories, LMMs were well-suited to capture within-subject variability. To account for variability across participants and items, we included two random effects, consistent with current recommendations for mixed-effects modeling (Brauer & Curtin, 2018). We fitted two separate models: one for emotional intensity, negative valence and positive valence, and one for the discrete emotions.

The LMMs were implemented in R (R Core Team, 2021) using the *afex* package (Singmann et al., 2024).

As our main interest was the generational differences in emotional dimensions, the models tested the interaction between generation and emotion scores. The models also included random intercepts for each participant and for emotion items, which were repeated three times per participant. The final model specification was: $Emotion.score \sim Emotion.type:Generation + (1|Participant.ID) + (1|Memory.ID)$.

Parameters were estimated using restricted maximum likelihood, and partial epsilon squared (ϵ^2) was used as the effect size, following current recommendations (Iacobucci et al., 2023). However, while reported, effect sizes for fixed effects in linear mixed models should be interpreted with caution due to ongoing debates about their reliability and meaning (Iacobucci et al., 2023). The p -values were corrected using Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

Given the gender imbalance in our sample, we re-estimated both models (emotional intensity and valence, and discrete emotions) including gender as a covariate. Gender effects were non-significant ($p > 0.05$), and their inclusion did not change the direction or significance of any other predictors. Consequently, gender was not retained in the final models.

2.2 Results

Detailed fixed-effect estimates and random-effect parameters for all models are reported in the Supplementary Material.

2.2.1 Emotional valence and intensity

Table 1: Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for the parent-child dyads.

Emotion	Parents	Children	p	$\varepsilon_p^2[95\%CI]$
Intensity	60.6 (38.3)	21.3 (27.0)	<.0001	0.15 [0.10, 0.20]
Positive valence	59.3 (39.8)	46.7 (38.6)	.0011	0.02 [0.00, 0.04]
Negative valence	31.7 (37.1)	22.4 (28.3)	.0297	0.006 [0.00, 0.03]

Note. Scores were collected using 0 to 100 visual analog scales. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. p -values are corrected using the Bonferroni method.

Data are presented in Table 1.

Parents reported significantly higher emotional intensity than children ($\beta = 39.30$, 95% CI [5.02, 20.10], $t(591.53) = 10.25$, $p < .0001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.20]), indicating that the memories parents reported transmitting were experienced as more emotionally intense than the vicarious memories children recalled about them.

Regarding emotional valence, significant generational differences also emerged. Parents reported slightly higher levels of positive valence than children ($\beta = 12.55$, 95% CI [4.83, 20.27], $t(591.53) = 3.27$, $p = .0011$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04]). A smaller but significant difference was also found for negative valence, with parents again reporting higher levels than children ($\beta = 8.36$, 95% CI [0.83, 15.90], $t(591.53) = 2.18$, $p = .0297$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03]).

Taken together, these findings suggest that parents tended to report transmitting memories that were not only more emotionally intense but also slightly more positive and more

negative than the memories children recalled from their parents.

2.2.2 Discrete emotions

Table 2: Scores of discrete emotions according to generation for the parent-child dyads.

	Emotion	Parents	Children	p	$\varepsilon_p^2[95\%CI]$
Positive	Happiness	55.7 (41.6)	40.1 (37.8)	<.0001	0.02 [0.01, 0.04]
	Pride	38.9 (40.4)	26.5 (35.4)	.0004	0.01 [0.01, 0.03]
	Gratitude	34.5 (39.6)	18.6 (31.3)	<.0001	0.02 [0.01, 0.03]
	Respect	33.4 (39.0)	31.5 (34.6)	.5491	
	Admiration	26.3 (36.6)	31.3 (35.7)	.1402	
	Desire	20.9 (34.2)	16.2 (29.1)	.1501	
	Compassion	16.5 (31.2)	28.1 (33.0)	.0007	0.01 [0.00, 0.03]
Negative	Sadness	23.8 (35.0)	19.6 (28.3)	.2337	
	Anger	13.6 (27.9)	11.2 (23.7)	.4685	
	Fear	17.2 (30.4)	10.6 (21.5)	.0542	
	Indignation	11.9 (26.3)	10.9 (24.3)	.7310	
	Guilt	11.6 (25.2)	3.5 (12.0)	.0184	0.00 [0.00, 0.01]
	Disgust	10.0 (24.7)	10.3 (23.3)	.9430	
	Shame	8.9 (21.8)	5.5 (15.8)	.3220	
	Contempt	5.3 (17.9)	6.8 (20.2)	.6980	
	Debt	4.1 (14.4)	3.3 (11.9)	.7985	

Note. Scores were collected using 0 (no emotion) to 100 (high intensity) visual analog scales. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Statistically significant differences between generations are indicated in bold, p -values are corrected using the Bonferroni method.

Out of the 16 discrete emotions assessed, parents' memories were primarily linked to positive emotions—most notably happiness, followed by pride, gratitude, and respect. Children's vicarious memories of their parents similarly centered on happiness, respect, and admiration. Negative emotions received lower ratings overall: when they appeared, sadness was the most frequently endorsed, followed by anger and fear.

Among these emotions, four positive and one negative reached significant generational differences (see Table 2). Compared to children, parents reported higher levels of happiness ($\beta = 16.03$, 95% CI [9.30, 22.76], $t(1157) = 4.67$, $p < .0001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.04]), pride ($\beta = 12.21$, 95% CI [5.47, 18.94], $t(1157) = 3.55$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$,

95% CI [0.00, 0.02]), gratitude ($\beta = 15.49$, 95% CI [8.75, 22.22], $t(1157) = 4.51$, $p < .0001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.03]), and a slightly higher level of guilt ($\beta = 8.11$, 95% CI [1.38, 14.84], $t(1157) = 2.36$, $p = .0184$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.01]).

In contrast, compassion was significantly higher among children than among parents ($\beta = -11.63$, 95% CI [-18.37, -4.90], $t(1157) = -3.38$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]).

Taken together, these findings suggest that parents tended to use intergenerational memories to express self-evaluative, moral emotions (guilt, pride) as well as positive ones (e.g., happiness, gratitude), whereas children's vicarious recollections were marked by more empathetic emotions such as compassion.

2.3 Discussion

In this study, we compared the emotional characteristics of intergenerational stories as reported by the transmitter (the parent) and the receiver (the child). By asking parents and children to independently select memories they perceived as transmitted or remembered, we captured the subjective emotional profiles of intergenerationally important family stories rather than tracking the evolution of any single shared memory. Both groups then rated the emotions associated with each memory. We examined differences in emotional intensity, positive and negative valence, and discrete emotions.

Consistent with our expectations, stories selected by the parents were rated as more emotionally intense than those selected by the children. This finding is in line with vicarious memory research, which shows that firsthand memories tend to be experienced with greater emotional and phenomenological intensity than memories learned indirectly (Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024).

Parents also reported more positive emotional content overall, both in terms of valence and discrete emotions. Specifically, their narratives contained higher positive valence and were more strongly associated with happiness, pride, and gratitude than the stories recalled by the children. This pattern suggests that transmitters may intentionally select and pass on stories that present themselves in a positive light and highlight meaningful, formative experiences (Merrill et al., 2017). Such self-evaluative positive memories may serve not only to promote a positive image of themselves but also to provide key values and life lessons, as important memories often correspond to experiences that drive psychological change (Svob & Brown, 2012).

Interestingly, parents' stories also showed slightly higher negative valence and greater expressions of guilt than children's recollections. Although the effect sizes were small, this runs counter to our predictions. Based on Steiner (2023), who found that negative vicarious memories serve directive functions similar to personal memories, we expected young adults (motivated to learn from others) to recall more negative stories. Instead, parents transmitted more negative memories, possibly reflecting their role in teaching and warning about potential threats. Sharing negative guilt-laden experiences may thus fulfill social functions such as moral guidance or caution (Merrill et al., 2017). Nevertheless, effect sizes and overall levels of guilt expression were very small. Whereas parents' narratives occasionally emphasized self-evaluative emotions, children's recollections tended to convey more empathy.

Children selected stories that were associated with higher levels of compassion compared to parents. This finding supports prior research suggesting that vicarious memories (especially those transmitted within families) play a key role in helping children understand and empathize with their parents' experiences (Fivush et al., 2019; Merrill et al., 2017; Pillemer et al., 2024). The increased compassion in children's recollections may reflect their emotional perspective as recipients, emphasizing empathetic engagement with their parents' stories.

3 Study 2: Transmission from grandparents to grandchildren

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Fifty-four grandparent–grandchild dyads took part in this study on intergenerational memory transmission within families. The grandchildren were between 16 and 30 years old ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 3.5$), with 29 (53.7%) identifying as women. The grandparents ranged in age from 65 to 89 years ($M = 77.0$, $SD = 5.12$), with 35 (75.9%) identifying as women.

Recruitment was carried out by students collaborating on the project, who approached potential participants within their networks and communities.

Grandparents completed the French version of the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA; Nasreddine and Patel, 2016) to screen for potential mild cognitive impairment. A score of 23 or higher was required for inclusion, in line with established guidelines (Carson et al., 2018).

As in Study 1, all participants were French-speaking residents of the Liège region (Belgium). They provided informed consent and agreed to be audio-recorded during the session. Each participant received 20 euros as compensation. The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, and Educational Sciences (FPLSE) at the University of Liège.

3.1.2 Procedure and materials

This study follows the same procedure as Study 1 but with dyads of grandparents and grandchildren.

As in Study 1, participants completed the study either online or in person. In this sample, 6 grandparents (11%) and 19 grandchildren (35%) chose the online option.

3.1.3 Analysis

Because the data followed the same distribution than data in Study 1, we applied the same modeling strategy. Specifically, we used a linear mixed-effects model (LMM) including fixed effects for the interaction between generation and emotion scores. The random structure comprised intercepts for participants and for memories (*Memory.ID*), allowing us to account for repeated measures within both individuals and items.

The resulting model was specified as: $Emotion.score \sim Emotion.type:Generation + (1|Participant.ID) + (1|Memory.ID)$.

The p -values were corrected using Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

As in Study 1, we re-ran the models with gender included as a covariate. The gender effect was non-significant and did not change the model fit or the significance of the other predictors. Consequently, we retained the models without gender.

3.2 Results

Detailed fixed-effect estimates and random-effect parameters for all models are reported in the Supplementary Material.

3.2.1 Emotional valence and intensity

Table 3: Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for the parent-child dyads.

Emotion	Grandparents	Grandchildren	p	$\varepsilon_p^2[95\%CI]$
Intensity	57.5 (42.7)	25.1 (31.0)	<.0001	0.11 [0.06, 0.16]
Positive valence	63.8 (38.4)	58.2 (35.6)	.2558	0.00 [0.00, 0.01]
Negative valence	22.1 (35.1)	17.2 (28.0)	.2392	0.00 [0.00, 0.01]

Note. Scores were collected using 0 to 100 visual analog scales. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. p -values are corrected using the Bonferroni method.

Data are presented in Table 3.

Grandparents reported significantly higher emotional intensity than grandchildren ($\beta = 31.73$, 95% CI [23.72, 39.8], $t(486) = 7.78$, $p < .0001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.16]), indicating that the memories grandparents believed they had transmitted were experienced as more emotionally intense than the memories grandchildren recalled from their grandparents.

No significant generational differences emerged for positive valence ($\beta = 4.81$, 95% CI [-3.21, 12.80], $t(486) = 1.18$, $p = .2392$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.01]) or for negative valence ($\beta = 4.64$, 95% CI [-3.38, 12.7], $t(486) = 1.14$, $p = .2558$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.01]). This suggests that, although grandparents selected more emotionally intense stories, these stories were not perceived as more positively or negatively valenced than those selected by grandchildren.

3.2.2 Discrete emotions

Table 4: Scores of discrete emotions according to generation for the grandparent-grandchild dyads.

	Emotion	Grandparents	Grandchildren	p	$\varepsilon_p^2[95\%CI]$
Positive	Happiness	61.7 (39.6)	49.4 (35.5)	.0002	0.01 [0.00, 0.03]
	Pride	43.7 (42.0)	33.1 (38.3)	.0026	0.01 [0.00, 0.02]
	Respect	37.8 (41.5)	40.9 (38.3)	.2921	
	Admiration	31.2 (40.1)	39.5 (38.2)	.0095	0.01 [0.00, 0.02]
	Gratitude	26.7 (37.8)	23.6 (33.8)	.4110	
	Desire	10.4 (26.7)	18.2 (30.7)	.0146	0.00 [0.00, 0.02]
	Compassion	10.1 (24.7)	29.3 (33.1)	.0007	0.01 [0.00, 0.03]
Negative	Sadness	15.8 (30.3)	15.4 (27.6)	.9645	
	Fear	13.9 (29.5)	7.1 (18.5)	.0781	
	Anger	8.6 (23.2)	7.5 (17.9)	.8026	
	Indignation	5.7 (19.4)	7.8 (19.9)	.5157	
	Guilt	5.2 (16.7)	3.9 (12.9)	.7319	
	Shame	4.4 (16.0)	3.4 (12.4)	.7797	
	Disgust	3.0 (12.8)	6.7 (18.8)	.2410	
	Debt	3.0 (13.6)	2.6 (10.0)	.9042	
	Contempt	1.4 (8.6)	3.5 (13.4)	.5301	

Note. Scores were collected using 0 (no emotion) to 100 (high intensity) visual analog scales. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Statistically significant differences between generations are indicated in bold, p -values are corrected using the Bonferroni method.

For discrete emotions (see Table 4), both grandparents and grandchildren selected memories primarily associated with positive feelings. Grandparents most often described stories imbued with happiness, pride, and respect, while grandchildren's vicarious memories emphasized happiness, respect, and admiration. Negative emotions were rated much lower overall. Among them, grandparents most frequently reported sadness and fear, whereas grandchildren recalled stories marked mainly by sadness.

Regarding generational differences, grandparents reported significantly higher scores than grandchildren for happiness ($\beta = 12.32$, $SE = 3.33$, $t(1082) = 3.70$, $p = .0002$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03]) and pride ($\beta = 10.07$, $SE = 3.33$, $t(1082) = 3.02$, $p = .0026$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]). In contrast, grandchildren reported significantly higher levels of desire ($\beta = -8.15$, $SE = 3.33$, $t(1082) = -2.45$, $p = .0146$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI

[0.00, 0.02), admiration ($\beta = -8.65$, $SE = 3.33$, $t(1082) = -2.60$, $p = .0095$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02), and compassion ($\beta = -19.65$, $SE = 3.33$, $t(1082) = -5.90$, $p < .0001$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.05) compared to grandparents.

No significant generational differences were observed for anger, contempt, debt, disgust, fear, guilt, indignation, respect, sadness, shame, or gratitude (all $p > .05$).

Overall, grandparents tended to associate the stories they transmitted with more self-focused positive emotions (happiness, pride), while grandchildren more often linked the stories they received to other-oriented positive emotions (admiration, compassion) and, to a lesser extent, desire.

3.3 Discussion

In this study, we asked grandparents and grandchildren to recall memories that the grandparents had directly transmitted to the grandchildren. By having grandparents and grandchildren individually select stories they viewed as transmitted or remembered, our design focused on the emotional characteristics of subjectively important intergenerational memories from each generation's perspective, rather than examining changes in specific memories. All stories were then rated for emotional valence (positive and negative), emotional intensity, and discrete emotions. We expected grandparents' stories to be more emotionally intense and positive, and grandchildren's stories to be more negative.

Results showed that grandparents' stories were indeed more emotionally intense than those recounted by grandchildren. This finding is unsurprising given that grandparents' memories were lived experiences, whereas grandchildren's accounts were vicarious. While vicarious memories can retain many of the qualities of personal memories, they are typically associated with lower emotional intensity (Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024).

Based on the positive bias in aging (Fernandes et al., 2008), we expected grandparents to select more positive stories. Indeed, transmitted memories were rated as mainly positive, but surprisingly, the positive valence of grandparents' stories did not differ from that of grandchildren's accounts. Previous research on grandparent–grandchild memory transmission suggests that grandchildren remember their grandparents' stories primarily because of the values they convey (Pratt et al., 2008; Stephan, 2024). Pratt (2008) emphasizes that these values often differ from those transmitted by parents. One such value is the reinforcement of intergenerational bonds and the connection of younger generations to more distant family roots, sometimes conveyed through positive or humorous narratives.

This focus on transmitting values may help explain why grandparents' stories elicited more admiration, compassion, and slightly more desire from grandchildren, rather than simply stronger positive valence. Such emotions may be more reflective of the moral or relational significance of the stories than of their positive valence. However, we did observe higher happiness and pride ratings in memories grandparents selected, consistent with socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), which suggests that older adults prioritize sharing positively valenced stories that highlight meaningful and affirming aspects of their lives.

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of assessing both emotional valence and discrete emotions. Relying solely on valence would have hidden more fine-grained intergenerational differences. Although overall positive and negative valence appeared comparable across generations, three positive emotions were more pronounced among grandchildren, whereas two were higher among grandparents.

Moreover, we did not observe the expected difference in negative valence. Because vicarious memories often contain important learning values and do not benefit from positivity bias (Steiner, 2023), we anticipated that grandchildren would recall more negative events compared to grandparents. However, this was not the case. Previous studies have shown that younger generations may feel uncomfortable when grandparents disclose painful experiences (Barker, 2007; Fowler & Soliz, 2010). Grandchildren may avoid remembering—or choose not to recount—such stories, thereby reducing the prevalence of negative memories in their narratives.

4 Study 3: Comparing grandparents and parents transmission

4.1 Method and participants

For this study, we combined the participant pools from Studies 1 and 2, resulting in a comparison between 57 parent–child dyads and 54 grandparent–grandchild dyads. The two types of dyads came from different families, so this analysis reflects a between-sample, role-based contrast rather than a within-family intergenerational comparison. Although they differed significantly ($t(104.8) = -2.20, p = .030$), children and grandchildren were close in age ($M_{grandchildren} = 21.3; M_{children} = 22.6$).

4.1.1 Analysis

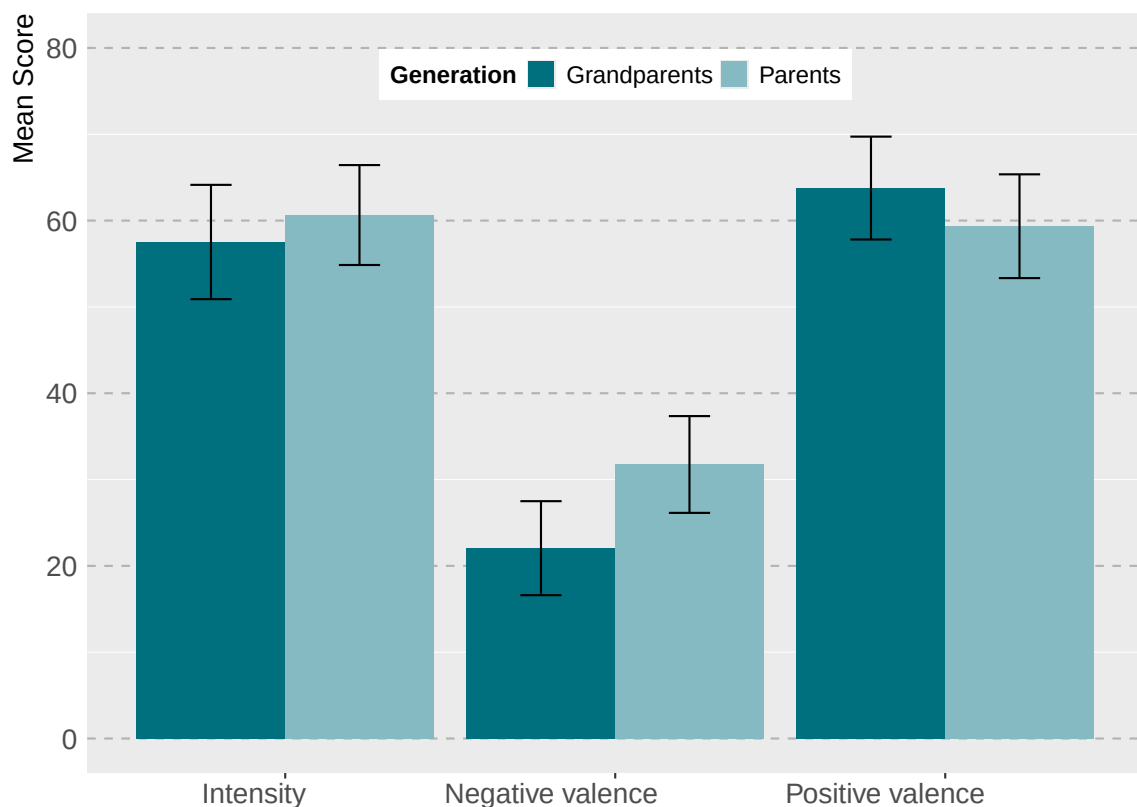
We ran four linear mixed models (LMMs) to compare emotional ratings across generations. Two models examined continuous measures (positive valence, negative valence, and emotional intensity) comparing parents with grandparents and children with grandchildren. The other two models focused on discrete emotions, using the same generational contrasts. In all cases, we included random intercepts for participants and for memories to account for repeated measurements within both individuals and items.

4.2 Results

Detailed fixed-effect estimates and random-effect parameters for all models are reported in the Supplementary Material.

4.2.1 Grandparents vs. parents

Figure 1: *Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for grandparents and parents.*

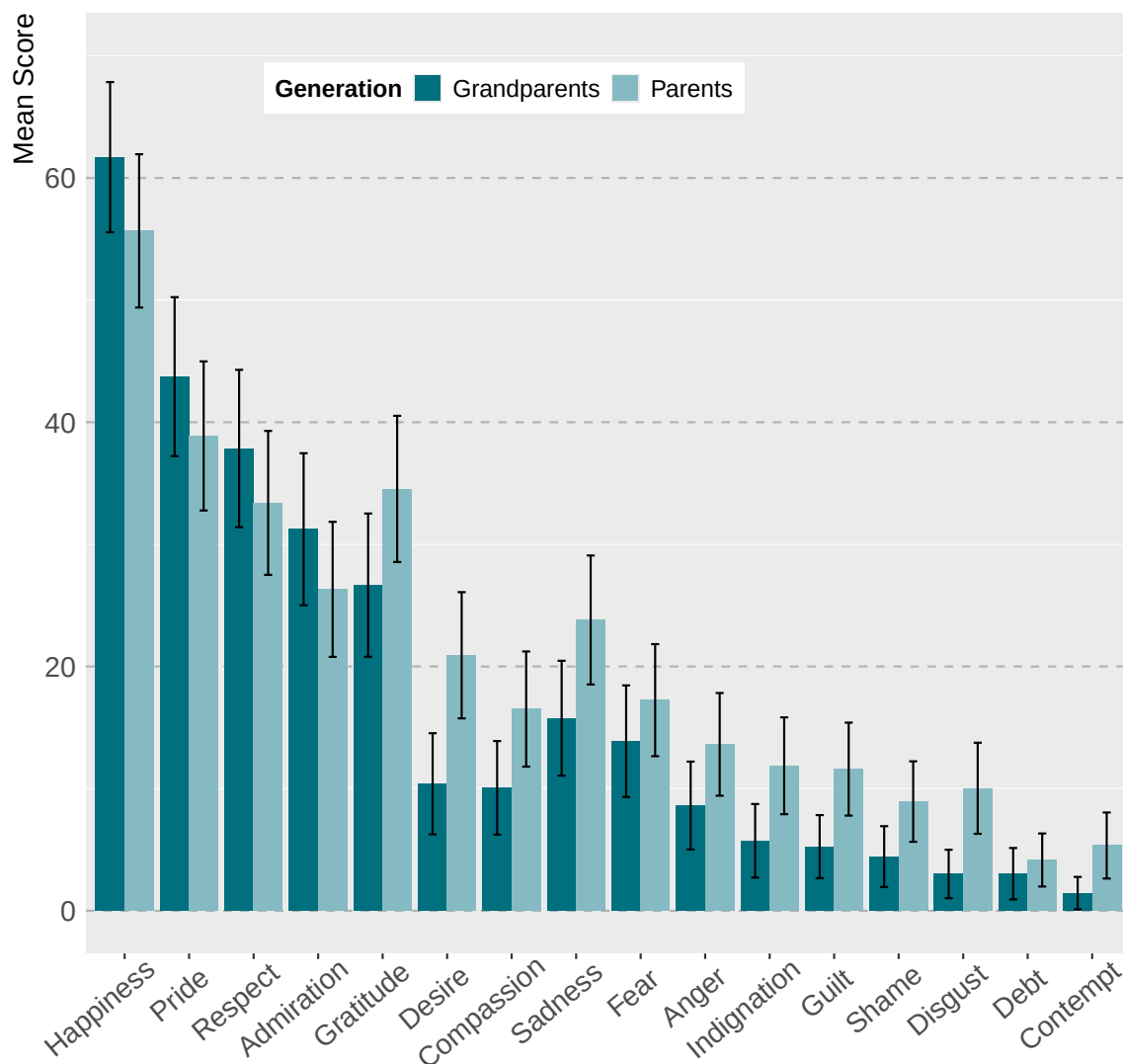


Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Measures ranged from 0 to 100.

For continuous emotion ratings (Figure 1), no significant generational difference emerged for emotional intensity ($\beta = -3.07$, 95% CI $[-11.70, 5.56]$, $t(497) = -0.70$, $p = .4848$) or positive valence ($\beta = 4.49$, 95% CI $[-4.15, 13.13]$, $t(498) = 1.02$, $p = .3077$). However, grandparents reported significantly lower scores of negative valence compared to parents ($\beta = -9.71$, 95% CI $[-18.42, -1.00]$, $t(506) = -2.19$, $p = .0289$), although the effect size was small ($\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.03]$).

In summary, emotional intensity and positivity were comparable across the two older generations. However, parents described the stories they transmitted as having more negative valence than the grandparents did.

Figure 2: Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for grandparents and parents.



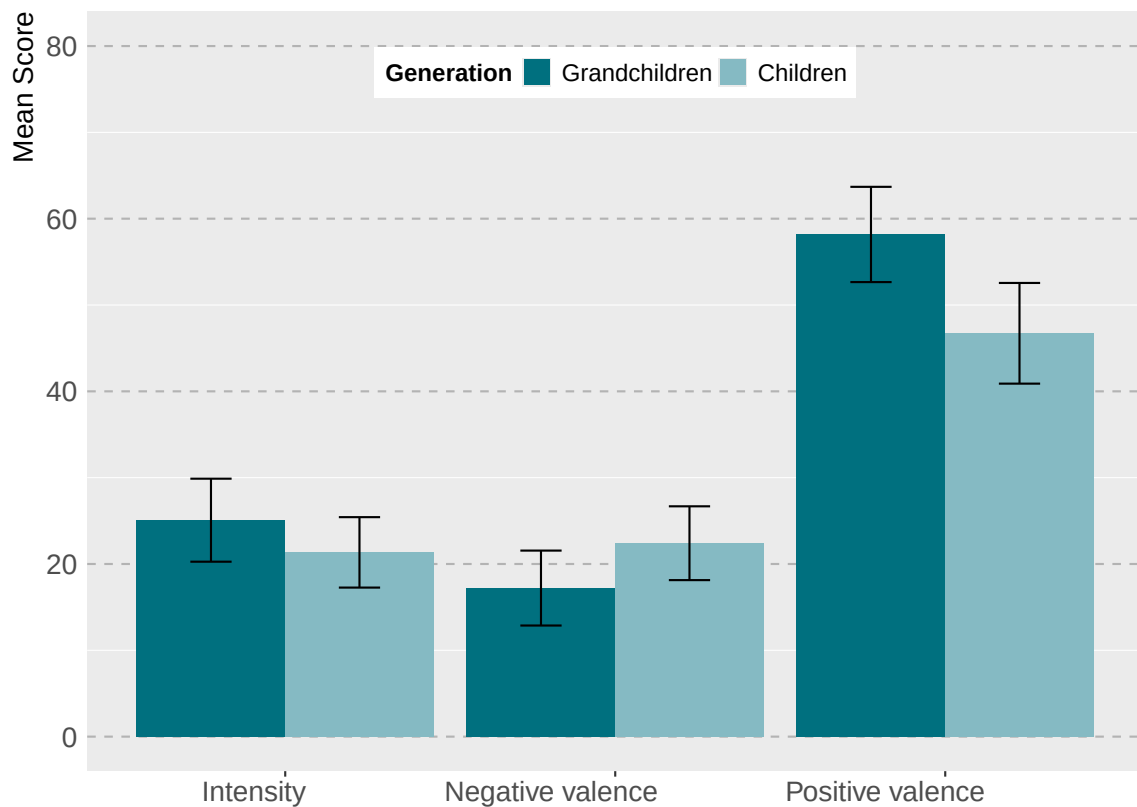
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Measures ranged from 0 to 100.

For discrete emotions (Figure 2), parents reported significantly higher scores than grandparents for desire ($\beta = 10.21$, 95% CI $[-17.26, -3.15]$, $z = 2.84$, $p = .0046$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.02]$), sadness ($\beta = 7.91$, 95% CI $[-14.99, -0.83]$, $z = 2.19$, $p = .0284$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.01]$), and gratitude ($\beta = 7.92$, 95% CI $[-14.97, -0.87]$, $z = 2.20$, $p = .0276$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.00$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.01]$). No other differences reached significance after Bonferroni correction (all $p > .05$).

In short, while most discrete emotions were rated similarly across generations, the stories selected by parents were associated with higher levels of desire, sadness, and gratitude than those chosen by grandparents. It is important to note that the effect sizes were relatively small for these differences.

4.2.2 Grandchildren vs. Children

Figure 3: Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for grandchildren and children.

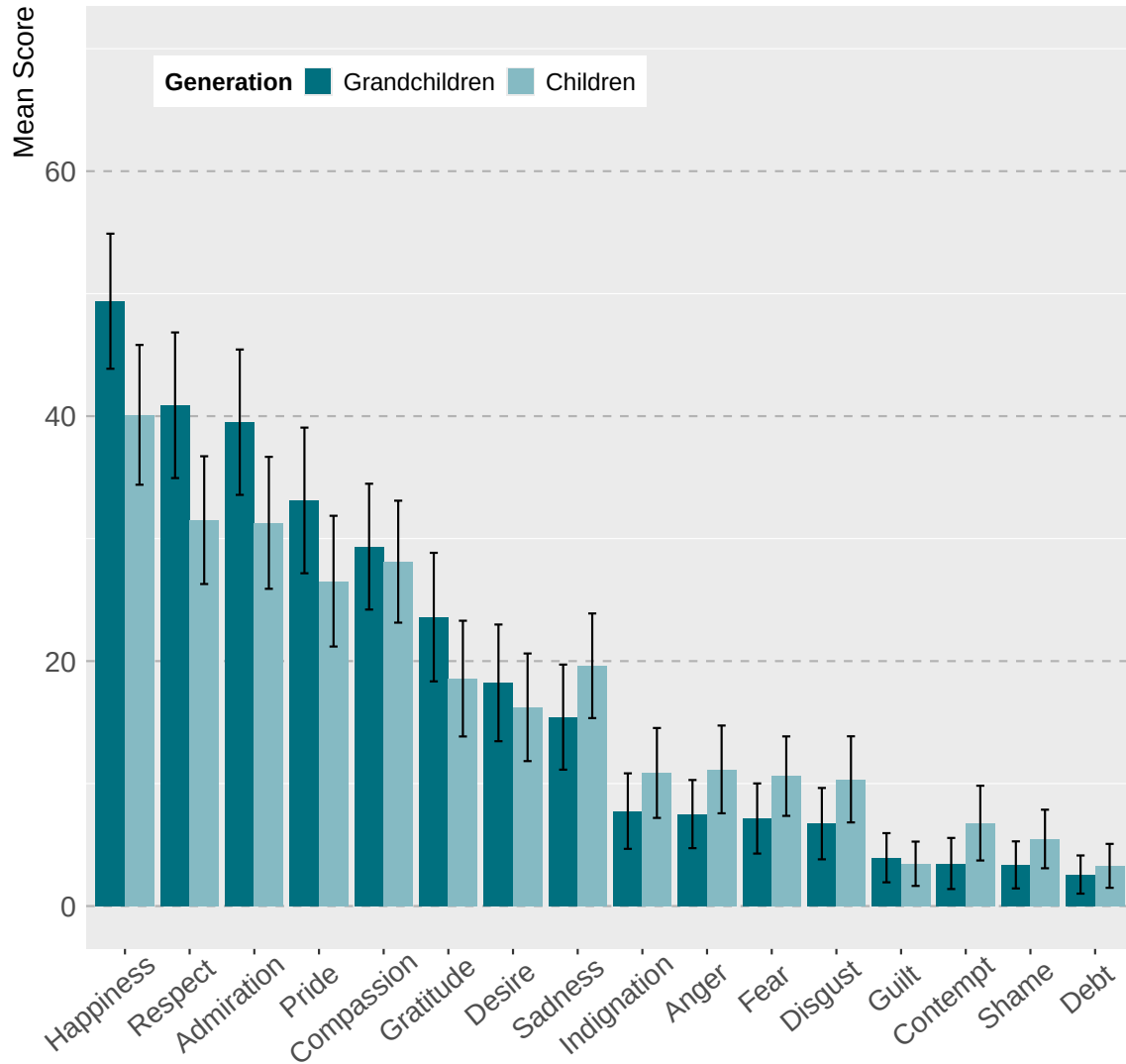


Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Measures ranged from 0 to 100.

For valence and intensity (Figure 3), young adults remembering memories from grandparents reported significantly higher positive emotional valence than young adults re-

membering parents' memories ($\beta = 11.45$, 95% CI [4.52, 18.38], $t(553) = 3.25$, $p = .0012$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04]). No significant generational differences were observed for negative valence or emotional intensity (both $p > .05$).

Figure 4: Scores of emotional intensity and valences according to generation for grandchildren and children.



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Measures ranged from 0 to 100.

For discrete emotions (Figure 4), grandchildren selected memories associated with significantly higher levels of admiration ($\beta = 8.08$, 95% CI [1.68, 14.48], $z = 2.48$, $p = .0135$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]), happiness ($\beta = 9.25$, 95% CI [2.86, 15.65], $z = 2.84$, $p = .0047$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.008$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]), pride ($\beta = 6.55$, 95% CI [0.16, 12.95], $z = 2.01$, $p = .0449$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.003$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.01]), and respect ($\beta = 9.36$, 95% CI [2.96, 15.75], $z = 2.87$, $p = .0043$, $\varepsilon_p^2 = 0.008$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]) compared to children. These effects

were associated with relatively small effect sizes. No other differences reached significance.

In summary, young adults remembering stories from their grandparents tended to associate their chosen memories with more positive valence and with greater admiration, happiness, pride, and respect than young adults remembering their parents' stories.

4.2.3 Exploratory analysis: Correlation with functions

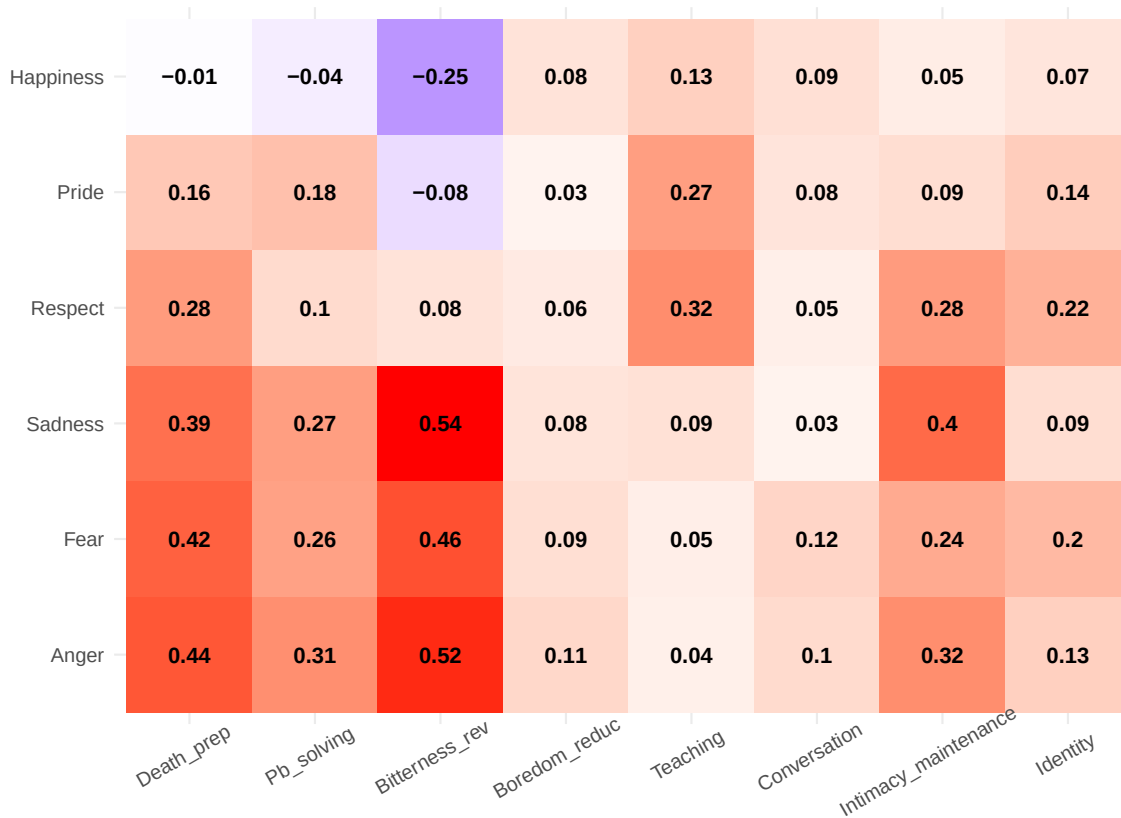
We examined whether some discrete emotions were correlated with the functions of intergenerational memories. To do so, we selected the three positive and three negative emotions with the highest mean ratings for both transmitters and receivers. We chose to analyze the three emotions with the highest scores to prevent a possible floor effect and because of the correspondence of emotions among transmitters and receivers. As a preliminary step, we verified that positive emotions correlated with positive valence and that negative emotions correlated with negative valence, which was indeed the case.

For the *transmitters*, the three positive emotions with the highest scores were happiness, pride, and respect, while the three negative emotions with the highest scores were sadness, fear, and anger. We then used Spearman correlations to investigate whether these six emotions were associated with the RFS functions. Correlations for transmitters are presented in Figure 5.

Among transmitters (grandparents and parents), negative emotions showed the strongest correlations with the functions of bitterness reduction, death preparation, and, to a lesser extent, intimacy maintenance and problem-solving. In contrast, respect and pride were primarily associated with teaching functions. Happiness showed generally weak associations, including a moderate negative correlation with the bitterness revival function.

Overall, these patterns suggest that negative emotions are more strongly linked to coping processes (e.g., problem-solving, preparing for death, and recalling painful events such as the loss of a relative), whereas memories associated with pride and respect are connected to teaching, intimacy maintenance, and, to a lesser extent, identity.

Figure 5: *Correlations between discrete emotions and functions among transmitters.*



Note. Data from parents and grandparents were combined. Red indicates positive correlations (darker shades reflect stronger correlations), whereas blue indicates negative correlations (darker shades reflect stronger correlations).

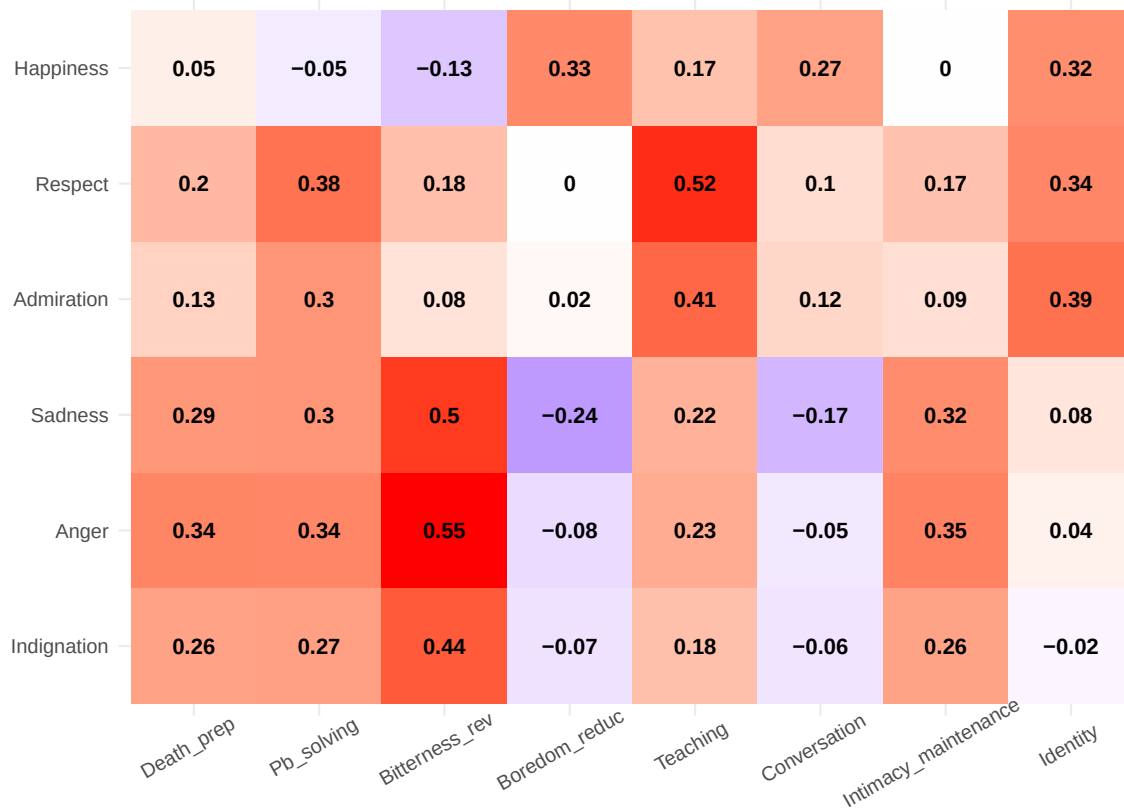
For the *receivers*, the three positive emotions with the highest scores were happiness, respect, and admiration, whereas the three negative emotions with the highest scores were sadness, anger, and indignation. Again, Spearman correlations were used to examine whether these six emotions were associated with the RFS functions. Results are presented in Figure 6.

Among receivers, negative emotions (indignation, anger, sadness) were positively associated with bitterness reduction, death preparation, and problem-solving, suggesting that children connect negative emotions with coping functions. However, respect and admiration showed strong links to teaching and identity functions, highlighting the role of positive, other-oriented emotions in learning family values.

Interestingly, happiness correlated positively with boredom reduction, conversation, and identity, pointing to its role in fostering everyday interactions and maintaining a

sense of belonging. These patterns suggest that, while negative emotions in receivers still serve coping purposes, positive emotions more strongly support functions related to family bonding, teaching, and identity transmission.

Figure 6: *Correlations between discrete emotions and functions among receivers.*



Note. Data from grandchildren and children were combined. Red indicates positive correlations (darker shades reflect stronger correlations), whereas blue indicates negative correlations (darker shades reflect stronger correlations).

4.3 Discussion

In Study 3, we combined the samples from Studies 1 and 2 to compare emotions in stories told by transmitters (parents and grandparents) and receivers (children and grandchildren). We hypothesized that grandparents would select more positive stories than parents, and that the younger generation would recall more positive memories about grandparents than about parents. We also investigated correlations between discrete emotions and the reported functions of the memories. It is worth noting that children and grandchildren were of similar age in this comparison.

Contrary to our expectations, grandparents did not choose more positive stories than parents. However, they selected less negative ones. This pattern may reflect the different functions of their storytelling: grandparents' narratives often focus less on educating about everyday challenges and more on transmitting family history (Stephan, 2024). As a result, they may avoid negative topics and favor stories that enhance positive self- and family-identity.

Some discrete emotion differences also emerged. Gratitude was higher in parents' stories, likely because they often included child-related events such as meeting the other parent, marriage, or the birth of a child. Sadness was also more prominent in parents' stories, possibly because such narratives carry important life lessons. For young adult children, who are often navigating formative life challenges (Munawar et al., 2018), these cautionary tales may hold particular relevance.

The finding that grandchildren associated grandparents' stories with greater admiration, happiness, pride, and respect compared to children recalling parents' stories aligns with prior work on the unique socioemotional role of grandparents in family storytelling. Grandparents' narratives often serve not only to entertain but also to connect younger generations with distant family roots, reinforce intergenerational bonds, and transmit moral or identity-relevant values (Pratt et al., 2008; Stephan, 2024). Such functions may naturally elicit emotions like admiration and respect, which reflect acknowledgment of the narrator's life experiences and wisdom, as well as pride and happiness, which can emerge from hearing stories that affirm family achievements or cherished older traditions.

From a lifespan perspective, the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006) suggests that older adults are more likely to prioritize emotionally meaningful goals, often choosing to share positive, self-affirming experiences. These selective storytelling practices may explain why grandparents' memories (especially when remembered by grandchildren) are imbued with positive valence and esteem-related emotions rather than negative affect. In contrast, parents' stories, which may be more focused on guidance about immediate life challenges, might evoke a more mixed emotional profile.

Exploratory correlations further highlighted how emotions serve different storytelling functions. For transmitters, negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness were most strongly tied to coping-related functions (bitterness reduction, death preparation, problem-solving), whereas respect and pride were linked to teaching. For receivers, positive emotions (happiness, respect, admiration) were instead associated with identity- and teaching-related functions. These patterns suggest that while transmitters often draw on

negative emotions to convey lessons about challenges, receivers emphasize positive emotions when interpreting stories as sources of family identity and guidance. This aligns with Pillemer et al., 2024's suggestions, emphasizing the learning adaptive role of negative vicarious memories.

5 General discussion

In this research, we explored which emotions color the memories shared across generations within families. Across three studies, we compared the perspectives of transmitters (parents and grandparents) and receivers (children and grandchildren) regarding important memories. Study 1 focused on parent–child dyads, and Study 2 on grandparent–grandchild dyads, each comparing transmitters with their respective receivers. Study 3 combined these datasets to examine differences within generations, comparing transmitters (parents vs. grandparents) and receivers (children vs. grandchildren) with one another. By analyzing the memories each generation chose to recount or recall, we captured the emotions that emerge in the important stories older generations thought they transmitted, as well as the emotions found in the vicarious memories that younger generations remembered. Because transmitters and receivers selected memories independently, the present design was intended to capture the personal and generational differences in the memories that were transmitted, to examine the emotional profile of intergenerational family memories from each generation's perspective. Accordingly, the observed differences reflect selective transmission by storytellers and selective retention by receivers rather than a single shared memory representation. Results will therefore be discussed in terms of both family role differences and age-related differences, which are closely intertwined in intergenerational contexts.

Overall, transmitters' memories were consistently more emotionally intense than those of receivers, reflecting the firsthand nature of their experiences. Grandparents' stories were characterized by lower negative valence compared to parents' narratives, while parents' stories elicited slightly higher levels of discrete emotions such as sadness, gratitude, and desire. Receivers' recollections varied by generation: young adults remembering grandparents' stories associated them with more positive emotions—including admiration, happiness, pride, and respect—than when recalling parents' stories. These findings highlight systematic differences in both the selection and the emotional characteristics of intergenerational memories, suggesting that the role of the storyteller and the generational distance

shape how family narratives are emotionally experienced and remembered.

The present findings extend existing research on autobiographical and vicarious memories by showing that the emotional characteristics of family narratives are shaped not only by the teller's lived experience but also by their generational role. Consistent with prior work on vicarious memories (Pillemer et al., 2015, 2024), receivers' accounts were less intense than transmitters', supporting the idea that firsthand experience imbues events with greater emotional salience. At the same time, the observed generational patterns align with the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), which suggests that older adults prioritize emotionally meaningful and positive content in communication. Grandparents may selectively transmit stories that reinforce positive self-views, family cohesion, and shared pride, thereby explaining the lower negativity and the heightened admiration, respect, and pride reported by grandchildren. Parents' narratives, in contrast, may serve more directive or cautionary functions (Fivush, 2008), containing a greater mix of positive and negative emotions—such as gratitude or sadness—that reflect lessons learned or challenges overcome. These patterns suggest that intergenerational storytelling is not only a vehicle for transmitting family history but also a means of shaping emotional and moral development in ways tailored to the teller's generational position.

For receivers, emotional ratings varied systematically with the generational position of the transmitter. When recalling grandparents' stories, grandchildren reported higher levels of overall positive valence and of positive discrete emotions such as admiration, happiness, pride, and respect compared to when recalling parents' stories.

Intergenerational memories play different roles for different dyads (Baudet et al., 2025). The exploratory analyses examining links between discrete emotions and reported functions revealed clear patterns. For receivers, positive emotions (happiness, respect, admiration) were associated with identity and teaching functions. This supports prior findings that strong intergenerational relationships (such as grandparent-grandchild relationships) foster identity construction and a sense of belonging within the family (Bernhold & Giles, 2017; Soliz & Lin, 2014).

Among transmitters, negative emotions such as sadness, fear, and anger were predominantly associated with coping-related functions, including revisiting painful experiences, preparing for mortality, and problem-solving. Sadness and anger were also moderately related to memories of deceased relatives, highlighting their role in processing loss. Supporting children in navigating negative emotions is also a key aspect of parents' role (Fivush, Berlin, et al., 2003). Although these findings reveal theoretically interesting links between

specific emotions and memory functions, their exploratory and post-hoc nature warrants cautious interpretation. They should be viewed primarily as hypothesis-generating rather than providing confirmatory evidence.

Conversely, positive moral emotions appeared connected to more constructive functions. Respect and pride were strongly linked to teaching, and respect additionally showed associations with stories aimed at identity development and preserving the memory of deceased family members. Taken together, these findings extend previous research (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009), indicating that negative memories often serve directive or coping purposes, while positive memories contribute to personal well-being and the reinforcement of a positive self-concept. Our results suggest that these functional patterns might apply to the intergenerational transmission of memory.

Among receivers, negative emotions—such as indignation, anger, and sadness—were again positively associated with coping functions. This aligns with Pillemer et al., 2024's suggestion that vicarious negative memories allow individuals to learn valuable lessons without directly experiencing adversity. These results also resonate with Merrill et al. (2017), who found that children recall both self-positive and self-negative stories, with the latter often fostering meaning-making. In contrast to transmitters, however, positive other-oriented emotions such as respect and admiration were strongly linked to teaching and identity functions, emphasizing their role in transmitting family values and supporting learning through observation.

These results also emphasize the distinct roles that different generations play in the intergenerational transmission of memory. Each generation appears to derive unique benefits from the process, underlining the constructed nature of autobiographical memory. Rather than simply reproducing past experiences, memories undergo a meaning-making process that unfolds in social contexts, particularly through conversations with family members and peers. In this sense, autobiographical memory may often be more closely aligned with the act of memory reconstruction than with straightforward recollection (Fivush, 2008).

5.1 Limits and future directions

While these studies provide novel insights into the emotional characteristics of intergenerational memories, several limitations should be noted. First, our analyses focused on emotional ratings and discrete emotions without examining narrative content. A qualita-

tive analysis could reveal how specific themes and values shape emotional responses.

Second, our memory selection procedure, asking participants to report their most important memories, likely overrepresented highly emotional events and underrepresented more routine family stories. Thus, our findings may reflect peak emotional moments rather than the full range of intergenerational storytelling. It is interesting to note that, whereas it could have been the case, scores of negative valence were still low.

Third, individual factors such as gender, cultural background, and family roles may influence both the content and emotional characteristics of memories. For example, women, and especially grandmothers, often emphasize relational themes (Bakir-Demir et al., 2023), which may shape how younger generations respond. Uneven gender representation in our sample limited the exploration of these effects and may constrain the generalizability of the findings. A more detailed assessment of family roles could also yield more nuanced interpretations. For instance, prior research indicates that grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren can differ substantially when they are directly involved in custodial care (see Thiele & Whelan, 2006, for a review).

Finally, longitudinal research could clarify how emotional responses to intergenerational memories evolve over time. It remains unknown whether the admiration, desire, or compassion observed in younger generations' recollections persist, fade, or transform with age, and how such changes influence identity and family bonds.

5.2 Conclusion

This work underscores that intergenerational storytelling is not merely a transmission of events but a socially constructed process that conveys values, fosters identity development, and strengthens family bonds. By examining emotional patterns across generations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how family narratives shape both personal and collective memory, highlighting the dynamic interplay between experience, emotion, and generational role. Overall, this study demonstrates that intergenerational storytelling is a complex, emotionally rich process that plays a central role in both shaping individual development and sustaining intergenerational connections.

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