

# Relationship tensions and mood: Adult children's daily experience of aging parents' stubbornness

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## Abstract

This study examined middle-aged individuals' reports of parents' behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness. Middle-aged adults ( $N = 192$ ) completed a 7-day diary reporting their mood and how often they felt their parents ( $N = 254$ ) engaged in behaviors often described as "stubbornness" (insistent or risky). Thirty-one percent of middle-aged children reported insistent behaviors, and 17% reported risky behaviors by their parent(s). Daily reports of parent behaviors attributed to stubbornness were positively associated with parent-child relationship quality, parent functional limitations, and child neuroticism. Reports of perceived parent insistent behaviors were also associated with greater daily negative mood among adult children. Findings highlight the impact of adult children's daily perceptions of parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness on the individual and relationship.

As individuals age, they experience declines in health and physical functioning, simultaneously encountering a need for cultural and

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social supports to maintain levels of functioning (Baltes, Freund, & Li, 2005). In light of these changes, theorists argue that it is adaptive for older adults to shift their efforts away from primary attempts of control on their environment to more secondary control mechanisms (i.e., change in perceptions or responses to a goal; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Hoppmann & Blanchard-Fields, 2010) or to depend on support from others to maintain a sense of self-direction in life as they age (Krause, 2003). However, reliance on others for support in daily life can become complicated due to a lack of understanding of each other's values (Reamy, Kim, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 2011, 2013) and the differential timing of developmental experiences for each individual involved (Fingerman, 1996). Differences in opinions and conflict that result in relationship tensions (i.e., irritations experienced in social ties) are likely to ensue (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009).

Specifically, social partners' goals for daily life and care may not always match. Given the increasing power adult children have in

relationships with aging parents (Pyke, 1999), adult children may be inclined to interpret situations when a parent insists or persists in acting toward a goal that does not align with the child's own goal as "stubbornness." These goal differences can lead to a lack of cohesion and the experience of relationship tensions, which can contribute to daily stress (Birditt, Cichy, & Almeida, 2011) and impact psychological well-being (Pearlin, Mullan, Semple, & Skaff, 1990; Piazza, Almeida, Dmitrieva, & Klein, 2010). Although adult children often complain about older parents' "stubborn" behavior, aging parents self-perceive themselves as acting in this way (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016), and responses to such behaviors by adult children have been associated with their experience of depression, relationship quality, and support provided to parents (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2017), stubborn interactions have not been addressed empirically on a daily level. Daily measures, however, may be particularly useful for assessing frequency and reactions to behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness. Retrospective reports from the past week or month are more likely to be filtered through long-standing feelings and beliefs about one's relationship with a parent that affect the recall of the frequency and impact of these interactions (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Thomas & Diener, 1990).

This study explores the daily experience of instances where adult children perceive aging parents' as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness. Furthermore, the study examines individual and relationship characteristics associated with daily perceived parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness and the associations between daily parent "stubborn" behaviors and adult children's daily mood.

#### *Implications of goal differences between adult children and aging parents*

Parents and adult children engage in support exchanges throughout their lives, providing emotional, practical, and social support to each other (Fingerman et al., 2010). However, as parents age, they may experience physical

and cognitive losses and increasingly rely on their adult children for additional guidance and support (Baltes et al., 2005; Krause, 2003; Pescosolido, 1992). The declining health of an aging parent may specifically increase a child's sense of filial obligation to support a parent, particularly daughters (Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006). The transition in support roles later in life may impact how the parent and adult child relate to one another and the quality of their relationship (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). During this time, adult children and parents may not always agree on what is best for the parent or how the parent should act, as individuals are simultaneously relating to one another and engaging in their own goals in an effort to achieve interpersonal competence (i.e., satisfaction of goals in social situations; Lakey & Canary, 2002). As a result, theory purports that developmental schisms may occur (Fingerman, 1996) in which there is a gap in understanding between two individuals because they are experiencing different development processes at a given point in time. The difference in the developmental experience and role of each party in the relationship can result in misunderstanding and tension (i.e., irritations in relationships, minor or overt conflict) between the two individuals (Birditt, Miller, et al., 2009; Fingerman, 1996). For example, an aging parent may wish to exercise his independence and walk to the store on his own to pick up a few groceries. Meanwhile, the adult child may fear a fall risk and, instead, wish to drive the parent to the store or pick up the groceries for the parent. Given increases in loss experienced by the older person, whereas an adult child retains capabilities, the child holds power in the relationship (Pyke, 1999). This differential power may result in the parent engaging in a chilling effect or avoidance of a conflict (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005; Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004) or, of interest if the parent insists on pursuing his preferred action (i.e., walking to the store), he may meet resistance and his continued action may be perceived as acting with "stubbornness."

Popular media (Mayo Clinic, 2014), clinical experiences (Zarit & Zarit, 2007), and initial empirical evidence (Heid et al., 2017;

Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016) support the occurrence of such goal differences within families that are commonly termed “stubbornness.” Unique from trait or state conceptions of having a “stubborn” personality, whereby one is seen as rigid, obstinate, persistent, resistant, defiant, demanding, or strong-willed (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Chen, 2010; Davey, Eaker, & Walters, 2003; Demiris et al., 2008; Dong et al., 2011; Holland & Roisman, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1987; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006), behavioral “stubbornness” represents a pattern of interactions whereby one person acts, meets resistance, and then continues to insist, persist, or resist an action to achieve his or her goal that is in conflict with what the other party would want (Heid et al., 2017; Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). This pattern of behavior is akin to work that describes persistence in relation to control efforts (Wrosch, Heckhausen, & Lachman, 2000) and goal pursuit (Ford & Smith, 2007), although what makes it unique is that the behavior occurs in the context of goal conflict with another person.

Quantitative work indicates that 77% of adult children, as well as 66% of their aging parents, perceive the parents as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness—insisting, persisting, or resisting on a course of action—sometime in the past month (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). Qualitative research additionally affirms that adult children and aging parents frequently navigate goal differences in day-to-day life and that these situations are perceived as frustrating and difficult to manage (Heid, Zarit, & Van Haitsma, 2016). Furthermore, how an adult child responds to behaviors commonly perceived as parent stubbornness (i.e., just letting go, arguing) is linked with adult children’s reports of depressive symptoms, relationship quality, and the amount of support adult children provide to their parents (Heid et al., 2017). For example, when adult children respond to behaviors commonly classified as parent stubbornness with an indirect approach of letting their requests go, they experience higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower levels of positive relationship quality. Or when adult children respond in a direct

way of rewording a request or arguing, they experience more negative relationship quality, whereas responses characterized as reasoning with the parent are associated with higher positive relationship quality, less negative relationship quality, and more support provided (Heid et al., 2017). However, the implications of behaviors that are commonly perceived as stubbornness in the family on daily functioning have not been addressed by relationship scholars.

Other forms of relationship tension that may result from differences in daily life goals (i.e., annoyance, irritation) between aging parents and adult children occur and are associated with negative outcomes in the relationship (Birditt, Miller, et al., 2009; Fingerman, 1996; Fingerman & Charles, 2010). These tensions are more generally associated with how well the dyad members (parent–adult child) relate to one another (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Birditt, Rott, & Fingerman, 2009; Merz, Consedine, Schulze, & Schuenengel, 2009; Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005). It is likely that in the context of an adult child and parent relationship, perceptions of parental behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness also impact a grown child’s daily functioning, specifically his or her daily mood. The communication literature supports this notion that goal conflicts spark emotional responses (Zhang, Andreychik, Sapp, & Arendt, 2014). Additionally, similar work examining demand/withdraw patterns of conflict interaction within marriages and adolescent/parent dyads, whereby one party places an expectation and the other withdraws, also finds negative implications for health (i.e., substance use in adolescents), stress, and mood (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Malis & Roloff, 2006). Initial work on aging parents and adult children find that withdraw patterns of response, such as avoidance, are associated with increased adult children’s depressive symptoms (Birditt et al., 2017).

#### *Factors associated with daily perceived stubbornness*

Limited initial work on global ratings (i.e., reported frequency of behaviors in the past

month) of behaviors commonly perceived as stubbornness by aging parents has found that these perceptions are more common when parents suffer disability, when the parent and adult child have poor relationship quality, when specific personality indicators are present (more neuroticism, less agreeableness), and when the adult child and aging parent reside in the same household (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). It is likely that these characteristics also impact perceptions of stubbornness on a daily level. As individuals age, they experience biological declines that impact physical and cognitive functioning (Baltes et al., 2005). These declines can result in impairments that cause disability (Verbrugge & Jette, 1994). The presence of disability is hypothesized to impact the occurrence of stubbornness due to the limitations it puts on the parent (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). Aging parents who are adjusting to disability may try to carry out activities that they may no longer have the ability to accomplish within their environment. In such cases, however, the parent may insist on carrying out these activities as a way of trying to maintain self-direction in the face of growing limitation (Baltes, 1995), but the adult child may see this persistent behavior as inappropriate or unsafe. This process unfolds on a daily basis as parents navigate activities of daily living (ADL).

Beyond individual capability, the way an adult child and parent relate more generally may impact whether they encounter goal conflicts that result in behaviors perceived as stubbornness and the frequency with which they occur. When a relationship is described as functioning well by an aging parent or adult child, the parent may be more receptive to the child's suggestions on a given day, and the child may better understand the parent's needs, which would limit the perception of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). Additionally, some individuals may be predisposed to seeing more conflict in a relationship, which may alter their expectations of their social partner, particularly those that experience greater neuroticism (Costa, McCrae, & Norris, 1981). Daily interactions may perpetuate negativity and result in perceptions of additional tension.

Last, perceived parent stubbornness is likely associated with living arrangements (if the individuals live together, they must navigate a greater number of differential goals on a daily basis) and other demographic characteristics that impact family composition and the way individuals relate to one another (gender, marital status, education, physical health, race/ethnicity, and number of siblings and living parents).

### *Daily diary designs*

Daily diary survey designs are a methodologically rigorous way to examine the effects of social interactions on a person's well-being or mood for a given individual over time, whereby the individual acts as his or her own control in examining change (Bolger et al., 2003; Hamaker, 2012). Recent work has employed such a methodology to capture the effects of daily stressors in caregiving on daily affect and physiological indicators of stress (Klein et al., 2016; Salva et al., 2013; Zarit, Kim, Femia, Almeida, & Klein, 2014). The use of daily diaries with standardized daily surveys to study the occurrence of relationship tensions can advance our understanding of the day-to-day associations of behaviors with mood (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005; Fingerman, Kim, Birditt, & Zarit, 2016). Such empirical designs limit retrospective bias and allow for a closer real-time assessment of impact.

### *This study*

This work builds on prior research that has tracked the experience of daily relationship tensions within families but uniquely focuses on daily relationship tensions that are commonly attributed to parent stubbornness—parental insistence and risky behaviors. We examine these two forms of behavior as they represent instances of goal conflict where an older person is acting, and the adult child makes an appraisal of the parent's behavior that suggests the child does not agree with the goal of the parent. For example, if an aging parent decides to walk to the store on his own, this in and of itself is not necessarily risky. If the child agrees with

this goal of the parent, no attribution of risk or insistence will likely be made. If the adult child does not agree with this goal and instead has a goal of preserving safety and sees this action as unsafe, he or she will indicate that the action is “risky.” Or if the child expresses his or her goal for the parent to not walk to the store and the parent continues to act, the child may perceive the parent as insisting on acting. In both instances, these behaviors are commonly attributed to stubbornness. We advance our current understanding of such perceived behaviors by adult children of aging parents by examining the frequency of such reports on a daily basis and the association of such perceptions with individual and relationship constructs and mood.

This study utilizes daily diary survey data collected as a component of a longitudinal follow up to the Family Exchanges Study (FES2; Fingerman et al., 2010), a survey study examining intergenerational support exchanges across three generations within families over two points in time (Birditt, Polenick, et al., 2017; Huo, Kim, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2017; Jensen, Whiteman, Rand, & Fingerman, 2017; Kim et al., 2017). This data set includes survey reports on family exchange processes, including relationship tensions over the course of 7 days by middle-aged, adult children about interactions with aging parents (Bangerter et al., 2017; Birditt, Manalel, Kim, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2017; Fingerman, Kim, Birditt, et al., 2016; Fingerman, Kim, Tennant, Birditt, & Zarit, 2016; Huo, Graham, Kim, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2017). This study uniquely draws on reports of adult children’s daily perceptions of parent behaviors and addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1: How often do adult children report experiencing relationship tensions with parents that are commonly attributed to parent stubbornness (i.e., insistent behavior, risky behavior) over the course of 7 consecutive days?*

*RQ2: What individual and relationship factors are associated with the report of perceiving parental behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness on a daily basis?*

*RQ3: Is the daily experience of parent behaviors that are commonly attributed to stubbornness associated with increased daily negative mood and decreased daily positive mood among adult children?*

The findings of this work are critical to understanding the impact of relationship tensions around goal pursuit on daily mood within multigenerational families and learning how to support families who are providing care to their aging parents. Furthermore, understanding different types of tensions in the parent–child relationship can help build understanding of how individual parties function within a relationship.

## Method

### *Participants and procedures*

The sample included 192 middle-aged adults (aged 45–65), drawn from a larger pool of 490 middle-aged adults who participated in the second wave of the FES2 (see Fingerman et al., 2010, for details regarding FES Wave 1). The 490 middle-aged adults interviewed for FES2 represented 79% of the middle-aged adults who participated in Wave 1 of the study. All participants completed a telephone or web-based survey, answering questions regarding their support behaviors and relationships with each living parent and adult offspring.

A subsample of FES2 participants was randomly invited to participate in a diary study that included brief standardized telephone interviews for 7 consecutive evenings. Of the middle-aged adults invited, 270 (87%) agreed to participate in the diary study, and 248 participants completed daily interviews. Of these diary participants, 192 (77%) who had at least one living parent were included in the current analysis (86 males, 106 females). The middle-aged adults were asked about each of their living parents ( $N = 254$ ; 90 fathers, 164 mothers; see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Participants in this diary sample reported more years of education than those who only participated in FES2 or did not have any living parent ( $M_s = 14.58$  vs.  $14.20$ ),  $t(488) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .038$ . This sample did not differ from the

**Table 1.** Characteristics of middle-aged adults and their parents

	Middle-aged children <i>M (SD)</i>	Parents <i>M (SD)</i>
Age	55.90 (4.87)	81.53 (5.98)
Male, %	45	35
Years of education	14.58 (2.00)	12.33 (2.74)
Physical health <sup>a</sup>	3.32 (0.95)	2.67 (1.02)
Neuroticism <sup>b</sup>	2.64 (0.72)	—
Racial/ethnic minority, %	30	—
Marital status, %		
Married/remarried	72	42
Divorced/separated	18	11
Never married	6	2
Widowed	3	44
Number of siblings	3.04 (2.21)	—
Both parents alive, %	32	—
Relationship quality with parents <sup>c</sup>		
Positive relationship quality	—	3.99 (0.96)
Negative relationship quality	—	1.95 (1.01)
Parent disability		
Have any ADL needs, %	—	57
Number of ADL needs <sup>d</sup>	—	1.38 (1.44)
Coresiding, %	—	8

Note. Participant (child)  $N = 192$ ; parent  $N = 254$ . ADL = activities of daily living.

<sup>a</sup>Rated 1 = poor to 5 = excellent. <sup>b</sup>Mean of four items rated 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal. <sup>c</sup>Mean of two items rated 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal. <sup>d</sup>Count of four ADL items.

larger FES2 sample with regard to age, gender, income, or race/ethnicity.

### Measures

#### Individual characteristics

Adult children provided information about their own background characteristics: age, gender (1 = male, 0 = female), marital status (1 = married or remarried, 0 = not married), years of education, physical health, race/ethnicity (1 = racial/ethnic minority, 0 = non-Hispanic White), numbers of siblings and living parents, and neuroticism. Physical health was rated from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Trait neuroticism was assessed using four items (i.e., "Please indicate the extent each of the following terms describes you: moody, worrying, nervous, calm" [reverse coded]) rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal; Lachman & Weaver,

1997). A mean score was calculated across the neuroticism items ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

Participants also provided background information about each living parent: gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age, marital status (1 = married or remarried, 0 = not married), coresidence (1 = coresiding with the participant, 0 = not coresiding), and disability. Parent disability was assessed using four ADLs (i.e., personal care, housework, transportation, and finances) from the Community Disability Scale (Bassett & Folstein, 1991; Rovner, Zisselman, & Shmuely-Dulitzku, 1996). Each item was coded as 0 (no help is needed) or 1 (help is needed). The sum scores of four items were used to indicate older parents' disability ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

#### Relationship characteristics

Middle-aged participants provided ratings on relationship quality with each living parent.

Two items were used for positive relationship quality (i.e., understand and love/care) and negative relationship quality (i.e., criticize and make demands), respectively (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Umberson, 1992). Responses were on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). A mean score of two items was created ( $\alpha = .78$  for positive relationship quality;  $\alpha = .72$  for negative relationship quality; Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013).

#### *Daily contact and perceived parent stubbornness*

For each of the 7 days, middle-aged adults indicated whether they engaged in three different modes of contact with each parent (i.e., in person, phone, and text/e-mail). The answers were coded 1 (*yes*) or 0 (*no*). If participants had any type of contact with a parent on a given day, they also indicated whether they perceived the parent as (a) insisting on doing something her or his own way and (b) whether the parent did anything that put himself or herself at risk, including financial or physical risk or omitting something like medication (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). The impact of each of these two behaviors that are commonly attributed to stubbornness was analyzed independently.

#### *Daily mood*

Middle-aged adults provided ratings of daily negative and positive mood using nine negative emotions (e.g., upset, distressed, lonely, nervous) and six positive emotions (e.g., excited, relaxed, happy, calm) drawn from prior assessments of daily emotions (Birditt, 2014; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Participants rated each emotion from 1 (*none of the day*) to 5 (*all of the day*). A mean score of items was created for negative ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and positive mood ( $\alpha = .68$ ), respectively. We also calculated reliability at each level (i.e., day and person level) and found that the mood scales were more reliable between persons ( $\alpha = .95$  for negative mood;  $\alpha = .78$  for positive mood) than within persons ( $\alpha = .75$  for negative mood;  $\alpha = .51$  for positive mood). ICCs were .72 for negative mood and .64 for positive mood.

#### *Analytic strategy*

We examined descriptive information regarding the frequency of daily behaviors that are commonly perceived as parent stubbornness (Research Question 1). Specifically, we considered how many days participants reported parents acting with insistence or in a risky manner and the proportion of adult children who reported each type of parent behavior at least once across 7 days (i.e., participant level). Because we asked about behaviors of each parent (i.e., mother and father, separately), if participants reported either behavior with any of their living parents, we counted the day as experiencing parental insistent or risky behavior. We also calculated the proportion of days for which each type of behavior (i.e., insistence, risky) occurred (i.e., participant-day level) and the proportion of days each behavior occurred out of days where the adult child reported contact with his or her parent(s).

To examine individual and relationship characteristics associated with daily perceptions of behaviors that are commonly attributed to parent stubbornness (Research Question 2), we estimated logistic multilevel models (Proc Glimmix in SAS). Models included two parents (mother/father; Level 1) nested within days (Level 2) and days nested within adult children (Level 3). We used the two types of behaviors commonly attributed to parent stubbornness (i.e., insistent or risky behaviors) as separate outcome variables (1 = *experienced*, 0 = *did not experience that day*). We examined individual and relationship characteristics as predictors (i.e., adult child's neuroticism, parent disability, and positive and negative relationship quality of the adult child and parent). We also controlled for other demographic characteristics of the parent and adult child that may impact the adult child's perception of behaviors attributed to parental stubbornness (i.e., parent's gender, age, marital status, coresidence with child, and grown child's gender, education, physical health, race, and number of siblings). Given a high correlation between parent age and child age ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), we only included parent age in the models. All continuous predictors and control variables

were centered at the relevant upper level (i.e., child or parent level).

Finally, regarding perceived daily behaviors commonly attributed to parent stubbornness and adult children's daily mood (Research Question 3), we used two-level multilevel models with negative and positive mood as separate outcome variables (Proc Mixed in SAS). Because daily mood was reported at the participant-day level, if the participant has two living parents, we used insistent or risky behaviors, combining reports on mother and father (i.e., whether they perceived each behavior with "any" parent) as predictors. Given the potential for a lagged effect of daily experiences (Hamaker, 2012), whereby prior-day behaviors and mood can impact current day mood and behaviors, we controlled for parent behaviors and mood on the prior day. We also included adult children's characteristics as controls (i.e., age, gender, education, physical health, neuroticism, and number of living parents). All continuous control variables were centered at the participant level.

## Results

### *Frequency of daily reports of parent stubbornness*

Descriptive analyses revealed that 88% of adult children reported contact with a parent during the study week. Regarding perceptions of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness, 31% reported a parent engaged in insistent behaviors and 17% perceived risky behaviors by their parent(s) at least once over the 7-day period (see Table 2); 11% of participants perceived both stubborn behaviors by their parent(s) during that week. Insistent behaviors were reported on an average of 0.70 days ( $SD = 1.36$ ) and risky behaviors 0.30 days ( $SD = 0.84$ ) across families, which equates to behaviors occurring on 12.2% of days across the sample. Of days where parents and adult children had contact ( $n = 614$  out of 1,268 days), insistent behaviors by parents were reported on 22% ( $n = 135$ ) of days, and risky behaviors were reported on 9% ( $n = 57$ ) of days, which equates to occurrence of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness on

25% ( $n = 155$ ) of contact days. On 6% ( $n = 37$ ) of contact days, insistent and risky behaviors co-occurred.

### *Individual and relationship factors associated with daily parent stubbornness*

Next, utilizing logistic multilevel models, we examined the associations of parent-child relationship quality, parent functional disability, and adult child personality (i.e., neuroticism) with daily reports of parent insistence and risky behaviors (see Table 3). In so doing, we also controlled for other demographic and individual characteristics of the parent and child. The probability of reporting daily stubbornness behaviors was 0.06 for insistent behaviors and 0.03 for risky behaviors. Adult children who reported more positive relationship quality ( $OR = 1.53$ ,  $p = .008$ ), more negative relationship quality ( $OR = 1.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and higher levels of neuroticism ( $OR = 1.96$ ,  $p = .003$ ) were more likely to report insistent behaviors of their parent(s). Adult children were more likely to report risky parent behaviors when they reported more negative relationship quality ( $OR = 1.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or their parent was experiencing greater functional limitation ( $OR = 1.33$ ,  $p = .016$ ). Regarding control variables, we found a significant effect of coresidence on perceptions of both insistent and risky behaviors and a significant effect of minority status on perceptions of risky behaviors. Adult children were more likely to report behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness when they were coresiding with the parent (insistent:  $OR = 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ; risky:  $OR = 3.64$ ,  $p = .018$ ) or if the grown child was White/not of racial or ethnic minority status ( $OR = 0.37$ ,  $p = .038$ ).

### *Association of daily parent stubbornness with child's daily mood*

Finally, we used two-level multilevel models with negative and positive mood as separate outcome variables and asked whether the same-day experience of parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness were associated with increased negative mood and

**Table 2.** Daily measures of contact and perceptions of stubborn behaviors with parents

	Participant level		Participant-day level	
	Number of days <i>M (SD)</i>	Children who perceived stubborn behavior with any parent at least once across 7 days	Days that perceptions of stubborn behavior occurred Proportion	
		Proportion		
<b>Stubborn behaviors</b>				
Insistent behavior	0.70 (1.36)	.31	.11	
Risky behavior	0.30 (0.84)	.17	.04	
<b>Any contact</b>				
In person	3.20 (2.37)	.88	.48	
By telephone	1.41 (2.03)	.51	.21	
By text, e-mail, or online	2.18 (2.10)	.74	.33	
	0.17 (0.63)	.10	.03	

Note. Participant (child)  $N = 192$ ; participant-day  $N = 1,268$ .

decreased positive mood for the adult child, controlling for adult child characteristics and prior-day mood and reports of parent behaviors (see Table 4). Reports of perceived parent insistent behaviors, but not risky behaviors, were associated with greater daily negative mood ( $B = 0.12, p = .006$ ) after accounting for significant effects of previous day negative mood ( $B = 0.82, p < .001$ ). No significant associations of parent daily stubbornness were found for positive mood after accounting for the impact of prior-day positive mood ( $B = 0.14, p < .001$ ). We reran models for daily mood by including only days where participants reported any contact with their parent(s). The effect of parent insistent behaviors on daily negative mood remained significant ( $B = 0.09, p = .039$ ; not shown in table).

## Discussion

This study examined whether middle-aged, adult children perceive their parents as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness in an everyday context by asking whether adult children perceived their parent(s) as insisting on a behavior or engaging in risky behaviors across 7 days. Approximately one third of adult children perceived parents as engaging in risky behaviors and/or behaviors of insistence in a given week. Furthermore, the perception

of these behaviors was positively associated with positive and negative relationship quality, parent disability, and adult child personality (neuroticism). Interestingly, parent insistent behaviors, and not risky behaviors, were then associated with adult children's greater daily negative mood. These findings highlight that as parents age, every day, some adult children encounter behaviors that are difficult to manage and that increase their negative mood. However, even when relationships are positive, parental disability may be associated with a greater likelihood of perceiving such "stubborn" behaviors.

Prior research on this topic has documented that adult children retrospectively report fairly frequent occurrences of perceived parent behaviors that are commonly attributed to stubbornness over the past month (Heid et al., 2017; Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016). By using a daily diary approach here, we extend these prior findings by demonstrating that when adult children and aging parents are interacting in a given week, behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness are perceived to occur on 25% of days. This finding confirms popular media and common anecdotal concerns that navigation of such tensions in adult child-parent relationships are occurring. Many adult children see their parent as insisting on acting in his or her own way or engaging

**Table 3.** Logistic multilevel models for parents' daily stubborn behaviors

	Insistent behaviors			Risky behaviors		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
<b>Fixed effects</b>						
Intercept	-2.76***	0.42		-3.37***	0.53	
<i>Parent characteristics</i>						
Male	-0.23	0.34	0.79	0.19	0.48	1.22
Age	0.03	0.02	1.03	-0.00	0.03	1.00
Re/married	-0.45	0.39	0.64	-0.56	0.60	0.57
Coresiding with offspring	1.74***	0.39	5.69	1.29*	0.54	3.64
Positive relationship quality <sup>a</sup>	0.43**	0.16	1.53	0.33	0.22	1.39
Negative relationship quality <sup>a</sup>	0.68***	0.12	1.98	0.60***	0.16	1.83
ADL limitations <sup>b</sup>	0.14	0.10	1.16	0.29*	0.12	1.33
<i>Child characteristics</i>						
Male	0.14	0.29	1.15	0.39	0.44	1.48
Re/married	-0.35	0.34	0.70	-0.53	0.37	0.59
Years of education	-0.01	0.08	1.00	-0.02	0.11	0.98
Physical health <sup>c</sup>	-0.27	0.17	0.77	-0.04	0.21	0.96
Racial/ethnic minority	-0.21	0.34	0.81	-0.99*	0.47	0.37
Number of siblings	-0.07	0.07	0.93	-0.06	0.10	0.94
Neuroticism <sup>d</sup>	0.67**	0.23	1.96	0.40	0.24	1.49
<b>Random effects</b>						
Intercept VAR (Level 2: day)	0.87	0.50		0.42	0.85	
Intercept VAR (Level 3: participant)	0.26	0.16		0.13	0.21	
-2 log (pseudo) likelihood	9,306.79			10,530.54		

Note. Participant (child)  $N = 192$ ; participant-day  $N = 1,268$ ; parent  $N = 254$ . ADL = activities of daily living; OR = odds ratio; VAR = variance.

<sup>a</sup>Mean of two items rated 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*. <sup>b</sup>Count of four ADL items. <sup>c</sup>Rated 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*.

<sup>d</sup>Mean of four items rated 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*.

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

in risky behaviors multiple days in a given week. This descriptive finding is a critical next step to advancing our understanding of relationship tensions that are commonly characterized as stubbornness and expanding our understanding of daily negative interactions (Birditt et al., 2005; Fingerman, Kim, Birditt, & Zarit, 2016). Such tensions in families may have a corrosive effect on how adult children and their parents interact with one another over the long term and in negotiating parents' potential increasing disability.

Consistent with initial prior cross-sectional research (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016), this study confirmed characteristics of individuals and families that are associated with daily reports of perceived parental risky

and insistent behaviors. In families where the adult child reported more negative relationship quality, parents were perceived as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness more often (both risky and insistent behaviors). Greater positive relationship quality and adult child neuroticism were also associated with greater frequency of insistent behaviors at the daily level, and greater parent disability was associated with more risky behaviors. The impact of relationship quality on the perceived daily occurrence of parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness appears complex. The association with negative relationship quality may indicate that when the adult child sees the relationship as functioning badly, the child sees the parent as being more resistant

**Table 4.** Multilevel models for middle-aged children's daily mood

	Negative mood		Positive mood	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>				
Intercept	0.21***	0.06	2.72***	0.13
Parent insistent behaviors	0.12***	0.04	0.02	0.05
Parent risky behaviors	-0.08	0.05	-0.06	0.06
<i>Prior day (lagged effect)</i>				
Parent insistent behaviors	-0.01	0.04	-0.07	0.05
Parent risky behaviors	-0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.07
Mood <sup>a</sup>	0.82***	0.04	0.14***	0.04
<i>Child control variables</i>				
Male	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.06
Age	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.01
Years of education	0.00	0.00	-0.04*	0.02
Physical health <sup>b</sup>	-0.00	0.01	0.14***	0.04
Racial/ethnic minority	0.01	0.02	0.12	0.08
Neuroticism <sup>c</sup>	0.03**	0.01	-0.12**	0.04
Number of siblings	-0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.02
Number of living parents	-0.01	0.01	-0.14*	0.07
<b>Random effects</b>				
Intercept VAR	0.01**	0.00	0.15***	0.02
Residual VAR	0.10***	0.01	0.13***	0.01
-2 log-likelihood	496.7		1,250.1	

Note. Participant (child)  $N = 192$ ; participant-day  $N = 1,268$ . VAR = variance.

<sup>a</sup>Same mood measure as the outcome. <sup>b</sup>Rated 1 = poor to 5 = excellent. <sup>c</sup>Mean of four items rated 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal.

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

and engaging in risky behaviors. Or it may be that the occurrence of goal differences that lead to attributions of stubbornness result in decrements of relationship functioning. Relationship quality has been linked in prior research to the occurrence of other forms of tension and conflict (Fingerman, 1996). A similar phenomenon may be occurring here. Interestingly, however, greater occurrence of daily insistence is also associated with greater positive relationship quality. This finding may reflect that when the parent-child relationship is stronger, the adult child is more attuned to the parent's behavior and more concerned with a parent acting in a way that seems contrary to what the adult child perceives as the parent's best interest (Hay, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2007); relationships that are very close can also be highly negative. When the adult child voices his or her concern

about the parent's behavior, he or she may meet resistance from a parent who is asserting his or her own different goal. Interventions designed to strengthen relationships may help improve communication, specifically goal sensitivity (i.e., recognition of a partner's conversational goals; Lakey & Canary, 2002), across dyad members and, in turn, impact the perceived experience of parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness.

Regarding disability, when a parent is perceived to lack the ability to perform an activity, the adult child may advocate more for a different course of action (i.e., not to do something) due to concerns of safety (Heid, Zarit, & Van Haitsma, 2016). The dyad must navigate the parent's potential dependence on the adult child or others to complete actions while still hoping to retain a sense of autonomy

(Baltes, 1995). The changing ability of the parent may then result in the parent persisting in actions that the adult child sees as futile or risky more frequently. Such a finding indicates that efforts that help families navigate parental dependency in adaptive ways, for example, helping the parent to select and optimize behaviors he or she can independently manage while compensating with support in other domains (Baltes, 1997), may also impact the occurrence or perception of daily parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness.

Furthermore, the finding that adult child neuroticism is associated with greater reports of parent insistent behaviors may reflect the child's propensity to see more negative characteristics in everyday encounters, or the child's neuroticism may contribute to greater conflict within the relationship (Costa et al., 1981). This finding is similar to work looking at worry as a relationship tension (Hay et al., 2007). Some individuals may thus be more prone to seeing parents as acting in ways attributed to stubbornness.

Finally, perceived parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness, at their core, represent a difference in goals that likely results from a developmental schism. If an adult child and parent share the same goal, there will not be conflict, tension, or perception of "insistence"; the preferred action by the parent simply occurs (Heid, Zarit, & Van Haitsma, 2016). However, when the behavior of the parent does not align with the adult child's goal or expectation, conflict can arise (Zhang et al., 2014), and the parent's behavior can be perceived as "insistent" or "risky"—it is a sequence of behaviors where a disconnect in communication is present in understanding each other's goals. This challenge of navigating such differences in goals is likely trying and may build frustration in the relationship, which results in the experience of a more negative mood for the adult child, as found here. This finding is consistent with work that documents the impact of relationship tensions on mood and well-being outcomes (Birditt et al., 2011; Birditt & Fingerman, 2003) and conflict on emotional reactivity (Zhang et al., 2014) and further supports the importance of

intervening at the level of the relationship to bring about positive well-being changes (i.e., Berg & Upchurch, 2007; McGilton, 2002; Shellenberger, Watkins, & Drake, 1989). Dyadic-based interventions can improve quality of life, family communication, and mental health (Martire, Lustig, Schulz, Miller, & Helgeson, 2004). Adult children are often called on to serve as advocates of aging parents, particularly as parents' needs increase and their sense of autonomy is challenged in late life (Baltes, 1995); as a result, the development of psychosocial support programs or interventions that help them understand parents' goals more fully would be meaningful.

This study is strengthened by its use of rigorous daily-level assessments of mood and behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness that allow participants' reports to act as their own control. However, it is not without limitation. The sample is restricted to middle-aged adults drawn from the FES2 sample who agreed to participate in a 7-day diary study. Examining these associations with another sample or across a greater number of days may yield different findings. Two single-item constructs were used to assess perception of parent behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness and relationship quality; using multiple items that load as a scale for each construct may provide further insight into these processes. Third, the examination of the perception of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness by adult children was limited to reports on days the adult child reported interacting with the parent. It is possible that adult children perceive their parent(s) as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness even on days when they do not interact, which may lead to further decrements in mood or experiences of worry in the relationship. Fourth, this study is restricted to adult children's perceptions of parents' behaviors. It may be that adult children are inclined to view parents as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness because of general stereotypes about aging or their own efforts to take control of the situation. More could be learned from examining parent perceptions of their own daily behaviors. Prior work does document that parents self-perceive

themselves as acting in ways attributed to stubbornness (Heid, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016); thus, examining their own daily perceptions may offer insight into how families can better navigate such daily goal tensions. This work, furthermore, does not examine the continuity of responses to a given goal conflict across the 7 days (i.e., how the child responds to the parent's perceived persistence for a task on Monday, same persistence on Tuesday, same persistence on Wednesday). More could be learned about behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness by looking at the effects of repeated encounters of perceived stubbornness regarding the same goal and potential changing the nature of the goal as the encounters progress (Bevan, 2014; Keck & Samp, 2007). Finally, this study was centered on understanding the reports of adult children about aging parents; however, older adults have multiple relationships in their lives, and perceptions of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness may also present as tensions in relationships with spouses, friends, or other family members. Additional work should explore how perceptions of behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness, or lack thereof, by multiple individuals in an older person's social network impacts the aging individual's development and vice versa.

Overall, this study is the first to examine aging parents' behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness on a daily basis. It demonstrates that the perceived occurrence of such behaviors may in fact be detrimental to the emotional well-being of the adult child, specifically when adult children indicate the parent is "insisting on acting his or her own way." Additional research and practical work is needed to help families understand how they can respond to each other to minimize such relationship tensions and build consensus around goals for daily living.

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