


# Generativity and Engagement in Grandparenting Activities Among Older Adults in Northern Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

Generativity refers to the desire to pass on one's skills, knowledge, and wisdom to future generations; this may be a clear indicator of the likelihood of older adults investing time and effort in engagement with their grandchildren. This cross-sectional study examines the relationship between generative beliefs and an index of multiple potential grandparenting activities. The data come from a convenience sample of 79 grandparents (aged 55+) living in Sri Lanka, a society experiencing rapid growth in its population of older adults. Regression analyses demonstrate that more endorsement of generative beliefs among older adults is associated with increased engagement in various grandparenting activities, with the strongest associations with reading, singing songs, and helping grandchildren with schoolwork or teaching them. Our findings suggest that generativity may be important for understanding the relationship between grandparenting and improved well-being for older adults.

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As individuals age, their investments in their social networks and motivations for different behaviors change. Importantly, older adults are more likely to rely on existing familial relationships for social engagement, including investing in existing bonds with children and grandchildren rather than developing new relationships (Carstensen et al., 2003). Grandparent–grandchild relationships in particular may facilitate intergenerational learning, promote healthy behaviors, and reduce social isolation among older adults (Hale et al., 2021; Strom & Strom, 2011).

Investment in existing family relationships is a natural manifestation of generativity (Condon et al., 2020; Thiele & Whelan, 2008). Generativity is defined as the desire to pass on one's skills, knowledge, and wisdom to future generations and impart a legacy and benefit society at large (Erikson, 1950; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). Originally theorized by Erikson (1950) as a key developmental marker of the transition to midlife, generativity can manifest through subjectively measured beliefs as well as generative actions, behaviors that are presumed to be driven by generative beliefs (Condon et al., 2020). Individuals with strong generative beliefs may behave in selfless, altruistic ways to support others; in return, they gain personal satisfaction and bolster their self-image (McAdams, 2005). Moreover, these individuals may contribute to various activities beneficial both to their children and grandchildren as well as to the neighborhood and community through volunteering, civic engagement, and participation in public life (De St Aubin et al., 2004).

There is a growing body of literature examining the positive implications of generativity for older adults. Generative beliefs have been linked to a positive experience of aging, life satisfaction, and well-being for older adults (Cheng, 2009; Østbye et al., 2018; Thiele & Whelan, 2008; Ying et al., 2020). Moreover, the Midlife in the United States Study demonstrated that generativity lowered older adults' risk of experiencing functional limitations and mortality over a 10-year period (Gruenewald et al., 2012).

There are several potential health and well-being implications of generative beliefs when they translate into specific behaviors. One such area of growing interest is the connection between generativity and grandparenting (Condon et al., 2020; Grundy et al., 2012; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). Being a grandparent encompasses both the identity and the specific behavior of engaging in grandparenting activities, each of which might have different determinants and impacts on health. Most existing research on this topic has focused on how generative beliefs may affect grandparent well-being and/or role satisfaction, rather than focusing on specific behavioral manifestations of generative beliefs that grandparents may take part in with their grandchildren. However, holding generative beliefs may be an important factor in the relationship between grandparenting and its effects on the

well-being of older adults (Cheng, 2009; Hale et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2020). To date, there is only one study that examined the relationship between generative beliefs and specific grandparenting behaviors (Moore & Rosenthal, 2015). In their sample of 1205 non-custodial grandmothers in Australia, Moore and Rosenthal (2015) found that generativity was positively correlated with participation in various grandparenting activities, including educational activities, playing sports, providing emotional support, and communicating via phone, email, or through letters. However, Moore and Rosenthal's (2015) study was limited to grandmothers, and so is not able to shed light on the relationship between generative beliefs and specific grandparenting behaviors among both genders of grandparents.

Additionally, most studies of generativity and grandparenting have been conducted in the United States, Europe, and Australia, where grandparents may "follow a rule of non-interference," and are less likely to engage in activities that are traditionally performed by parents, such as discipline (Villar, 2012). In Sri Lanka, multigenerational households are common; as of 2008, 77% of Sri Lankan adults aged 60 or older resided with their adult children (Kamiya & Hertog, 2019). While multigenerational households are prevalent within certain communities in the United States, Australia, and Europe, multigenerational households are less common overall, with recent estimates of less than 20% of adults aged 65 and older in the US living with their children (Kamiya & Hertog, 2019; Raymo et al., 2019). It is possible that the impact of generative beliefs on social activities and engagement with grandchildren may differ in a setting where multigenerational households are normative, and grandparents are more likely to interact with their grandchildren daily or have regular caregiving responsibilities.

Sri Lanka, where our study is located, has one of the most rapidly aging populations globally (Kaluthantiri, 2015). Throughout South Asia, there is a strong expectation that children support their elderly parents (Østbye et al., 2010; Risseeuw, 2012; Watt et al., 2014). While acknowledging variations across families, a culture of respect for older adults and the centrality of family in social life are key factors that likely influence the role of grandparents in this region (Shwalb & Hossain, 2017). These dynamics contribute to grandparents' active participation in childcare, influence over family decision-making, and the transmission of cultural values (Shwalb & Hossain, 2017).

The current study thus explores the relationship between generative beliefs and specific grandparenting activity categories in a convenience sample of grandparents in Sri Lanka. We hypothesized that generative beliefs would be positively associated with a greater number of grandparenting activities overall, and specifically with those that have a high likelihood of contributing to a child's socioemotional development or educational goals (reading, helping with schoolwork/teaching, and providing emotional support).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants come from an exploratory study focused on grandparenting behaviors in Northern Sri Lanka and comprise a convenience sample of 79 community-dwelling

older adults who self-identified as grandparents or great-grandparents. To capture both urban and rural residents, participants were recruited from the city of Jaffna and a rural village outside the city. Jaffna is divided into 435 local administrative units called Grama Niladhari Divisions, each of which typically consists of approximately 1,000 people. Two divisions were selected and a register of persons at least 55 years old was created in collaboration with Grama Niladhari officials, who are responsible for maintaining residency records. In each division, a starting household was selected at random from the list. Local research assistants approached this index household to assess further eligibility, invite them to participate, and obtain consent. Supplemented with the registry, snowball sampling was then used to identify other potential participants in the area. Eligibility criteria included age 55 and older and self-identification as a grandparent or great-grandparent. Research assistants administered the survey in an oral interview format. All interviews were conducted in Tamil, and participants received a small packet of sweets and fruit as a token of appreciation. This study was approved by the IRB at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the IRB of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Jaffna.

## Measures

*Generative beliefs.* The Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) is a self-reported scale developed by McAdams and de St Aubin (1992) to assess Erikson's (1950) theory of generativity, which encompasses measures of generative beliefs, namely the desire to pass on knowledge, skills, and a legacy to the next generation, to care and take responsibility for others, and to take part in activities that will have a lasting impact on one's community or society. The LGS has been validated across various populations and contexts and has been used in previous research among the elderly in South Asia (Østbye et al., 2018; Rahmaniah & Krisnatuti, 2016). The LGS contains 20 items such as "I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences" and "I think that I will be remembered for a long time after I die." Response options utilize a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = "never applies to you" to 4 = "applies to you very often or nearly always," with six items being negatively worded and reverse coded. The generativity score is then summed from all 20 items to create a scale from 0 to 60, where 60 indicates high generativity. In this sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.87, demonstrating good internal consistency.

*Grandparent–grandchild activity scores.* We devised a grandparent–grandchild activity scale to measure various instrumental and socioemotional activities that grandparents may engage in with their grandchildren. Drawing on previous literature on different activity categories, which were then adapted to fit the local context, we generated a scale that consisted of 10 activity categories (Dunifon et al., 2018; Hale et al., 2021). The activities included in the scale were (1) eating meals together, (2) reading with/to their grandchildren, (3) playing games, (4) telling stories, (5) singing, (6) helping with schoolwork tasks or giving advice/passing on knowledge, (7) holding/soothing (or providing emotional support, depending on the age of the grandchild), (8) general "watching" grandchildren, (9) dropping off/picking up from school or other activities, and

(10) “not much,” which could include passive activities such as watching TV together. We ultimately excluded the “not much” category from the analysis due to its ambiguity and low endorsement among the sample (6%).

We asked grandparents to describe how often they engaged in each activity with each grandchild; they answered this question regarding individual relationships with up to three grandchildren or great-grandchildren of their choice. If the grandparent lived with the grandchild or great-grandchild, we asked whether they participated in the activity with the child “never,” “rarely,” “at least once a month,” “at least once a week,” or “every day.” However, such options were not as applicable to grandparents who did not co-reside with the grandchildren, so they were adapted: the categorical options were “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” and “often.” To be able to conduct a combined analysis that included both co-resident and non-co-resident grandchildren, for each activity, we collapsed these categories such that “never” or “rarely” received a score of zero and other responses received a score of one, creating a “sometimes/often” category. Grandparents who reported “sometimes” or “often” with at least one grandchild or great-grandchild received a one for that activity. Those who reported “never” or “rarely” received a zero for that activity. We then calculated a total activity score for each grandparent in our sample by summing all individual activity scores. This score ranged from 0 to 9.

*Demographic Variables.* We also collected various sociodemographic variables, including age, gender, educational attainment, marital status, employment status, and whether participants lived in an urban or rural setting.

## **Data Analysis**

We conducted descriptive statistics first to characterize the study sample and to better understand the distributions of variables of interest. In preparation for the regression modeling and to increase the interpretability of the results, we standardized the LGS score such that the mean LGS score was zero and the standard deviation was one. We then constructed a series of Poisson regression models with robust standard errors (Barros & Hirakata, 2003; Petersen & Deddens, 2008) to understand the association between generativity and the binomial outcome for the level of engagement in each activity (never/rarely vs. sometimes/often) and to estimate prevalence ratios. The resulting prevalence ratio (PR) is interpreted as the increased/decreased prevalence of a grandparent engaging in a specific activity associated with a 1 standard deviation (*SD*) change in the LGS score.

We used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationship between the standardized LGS score and the summary activity score, which represents the number of activities that the grandparent engages in sometimes or often with one or more grandchildren. We examined variable assumptions to ensure that there were no clear violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and independence. To account for potential confounding, our models also included age, gender, urban/rural residence, engagement in paid economic activity, grandparent–grandchild co-residence, and the number of grandchildren discussed. We conducted all analyses in Stata (v. 14.2).

## Results

In our sample ( $n = 79$ ), the mean age of study participants was 67.5 (range: 55–90 years old), and 70% of the sample had completed at least secondary education (Table 1). Over three-quarters (77%) were female and roughly half (49%) were widowed. While all study participants were grandparents, only about half (52%) were co-residing with at least one grandchild under the age of 18. Less than a quarter (22%) of

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Grandparents and Correlates With the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) ( $n = 79$ ).

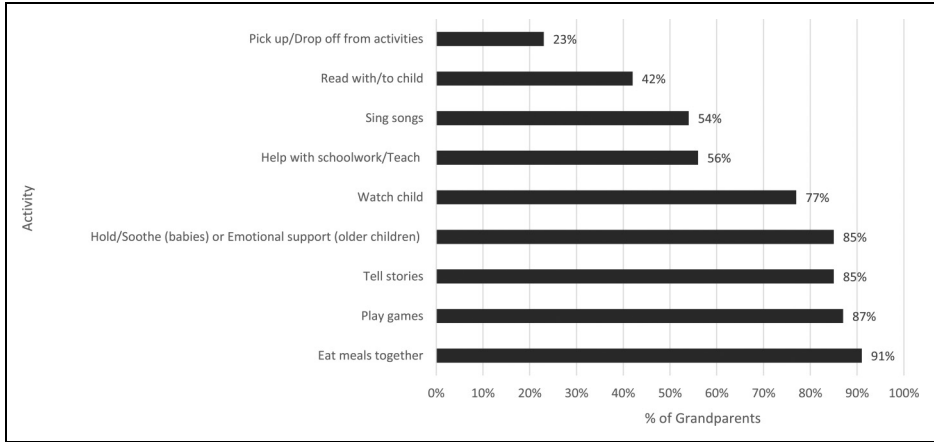
Grandparent demographics	Count (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Mean LGS score ( <i>SD</i> )
Age		67.46 (7.82)	
55–67	40 (51%)		45.35 (10.55)
68–90	39 (49%)		41.18 (10.61)
Gender			
Female	61 (77%)		41.70 (10.76)
Male	18 (23%)		48.67 (8.88)
Education			
None or Primary	24 (30%)		37.46 (10.62)
Secondary	33 (42%)		43.70 (10.19)
GCE or higher	22 (28%)		49.05 (8.43)
Marital Status			
Married	38 (48%)		48.32 (8.85)
Widowed	39 (49%)		38.46 (10.30)
Divorced	1 (1%)		
Never married	1 (1%)		
Co-resides with grandchildren under 18			
No	38 (48%)		43.27 (11.17)
Yes	41 (52%)		43.12 (10.50)
Engaged in paid economic activity			
No	58 (73%)		41.88 (10.70)
Yes	21 (27%)		47.19 (10.01)
Urban/Rural			
Urban	40 (51%)		45.10 (9.71)
Rural	39 (49%)		41.44 (11.50)
Number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren talked about			
1	9 (11%)		42.67 (12.32)
2	14 (18%)		41.36 (9.55)
3	56 (71%)		43.88 (10.87)

grandparents were engaged in paid economic activity. Half of the study participants lived in urban vs. rural areas, reflecting the sampling scheme. Before standardization, generativity scores among the sample were normally distributed with a mean of 43.29 (*SD* 10.72) and a range of 23–60. Overall, generative beliefs were higher among men, those who were married, and those who were engaged in paid economic activity.

The average number of activities that grandparents participated in sometimes or often with at least one grandchild was 6 (*SD* = 2.34) out of the nine possible listed. Grandparents ranged in the total number of activities they reported, from 0 activities (1 grandparent) to all nine activities (8 grandparents). On average, grandfathers and grandmothers reported similar numbers of activities (5.95 vs. 6.17; *p* = .73).

The most common activities that grandparents reported engaging in sometimes or often with at least one grandchild included eating together (91%), playing games (87%), telling stories (85%), and holding/soothing them or providing emotional support to their grandchildren (85%) (Figure 1). The least common activities included picking up or dropping off children from school or other activities (23%) and reading with or to grandchildren (42%). The small number of grandfathers (*n* = 18) limits our ability to formally compare these frequencies by gender; however, the proportions were generally similar among grandmothers and grandfathers (data available upon request).

Overall, we found that generative beliefs were consistently associated with reports of a higher prevalence of frequently engaging in multiple grandparenting activities (see Table 2). For example, a 1 *SD* increase in the generativity score (10.72 points) was associated with a doubling of the prevalence of grandparents reading with/to their grandchildren (adjusted prevalence ratio aPR: 2.06; 95% CI: 1.41, 3.00). We also



**Figure 1.** Proportion of grandparents who report engaging in each activity sometimes or often with one or more grandchildren (*N* = 79).

found positive associations for singing songs (aPR: 1.57; CI: 1.22, 2.01), helping grandchildren with schoolwork or teaching them (aPR: 1.43; CI: 1.13, 1.81), holding/soothing them or providing emotional support depending on age (aPR: 1.14; CI: 1.02, 1.28), and watching them when their parents are busy (aPR: 1.15; CI: 1.00, 1.32). Estimates of the association between generativity and the remaining activities were weaker but generally in the same direction; these included eating meals together, playing games, telling stories, and picking or dropping off children from school/other activities. For the summary activity score, each *SD* higher in the LGS score was associated with a 0.98-point higher activity score (CI: 0.49, 1.46), meaning that roughly a 10-point increase in the LGS correlates with engagement in one additional grandparenting activity.

## Discussion

The present study sought to explore the relationship between generative beliefs and grandparenting behaviors in a sample of older Sri Lankan grandparents. The findings from this exploratory study supported our hypotheses that (1) generative beliefs are positively associated with grandparenting activities that potentially contribute to both older person well-being and their grandchild's intellectual and socioemotional development and (2) generativity is positively associated with engagement in grandparenting activities overall.

The grandparenting activity patterns we observed suggest that higher generative beliefs were positively associated with higher levels of engagement in grandparenting behaviors that may contribute to the socioemotional development of their grandchildren or have clear educational value (providing emotional support, reading, helping with schoolwork/teaching), as well as active leisure pursuits (singing songs). Generative beliefs had the strongest effect on the likelihood of reading with the grandchild, which suggests that educational activities may be a particularly potent manifestation of this trait. Interestingly, reading with grandchildren was engaged in by less than half of the grandparents in the sample (about twice as many endorsed storytelling, for example). Overall, LGS scores were positively associated with grandparent educational attainment. The relatively lower prevalence of reading as well as helping with schoolwork/teaching suggests that these activities might be influenced by grandparents' own skills in addition to their generative beliefs. Although the overall education level in our sample is relatively high, future work could shed light on other skill-based grandparenting activities, such as cooking together, that are less tied with formal education and culturally salient. Other socioeconomic, health, or cultural factors are also likely influencing the likelihood of specific behavioral manifestations of generative beliefs.

The associations between generativity and more instrumental types of support, such as picking up/dropping off grandchildren and eating meals together, were weaker. These activities may be more associated with familial obligation rather than a desire to actively engage with one's grandchildren through leisure activities or behaviors with a self-evident benefit for the child's development. On the other hand, generative



**Table 2.** The Relationship Between the Generativity Score (LGS) and Frequent Levels of Activity Participation (n = 79).

		Read with them/to child	Play games	Tell stories	Sing songs	Help with schoolwork/teach	Hold/Soothe (babies) emotional support (older children)	Watch child	Pick up/drop off from activities	Summary activity score <sup>a</sup>
Crude models	Prevalence ratio (PR)	2.16	1.12	1.02	1.54	1.49	1.20	1.20	1.36	
	95% CI	0.94, 1.04	1.504, 3.109	1.01, 1.24	0.92, 1.12	1.22, 1.95	1.20, 1.87	1.06, 1.35	1.04, 1.40	0.90, 2.06
	Coefficient									1.11
Adjusted models	Prevalence ratio (PR)	2.06	1.09	1.06	1.57	1.43	1.14	1.15	1.09	0.64, 1.58
	95% CI	0.93, 1.05	1.41, 3.00	0.99, 1.20	0.96, 1.17	1.22, 2.01	1.13, 1.81	1.02, 1.28	1.00, 1.32	0.74, 1.61
	Coefficient									0.98
	95% CI									0.49, 1.46

Note. adjusted model for age, gender (grandmother/grandfather), employment status, urban/rural status, presence of co-resident grandchildren, and the number of grandchildren talked about.

<sup>a</sup>Coefficients and confidence intervals for the summary activity score calculated using OLS regression.

beliefs were positively associated with watching the grandchild when parents were busy; this could also be perceived as a familial obligation. However, this activity may also indicate that they spend a lot of time together, which may lead to a closer relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

Our results are broadly consistent with findings from Moore and Rosenthal's (2015) study of Australian grandmothers that demonstrated positive correlations between various grandparenting activities and generativity, particularly those that could be considered active leisure pursuits. In addition, the findings from our analysis suggest that generativity may be a determining factor in the type and number of activities grandparents participate in with their grandchildren. Generativity may be important for understanding grandparenting and social connection for older adults in a global context, particularly as it may have relevance to the health of older adults (Gruenewald et al., 2012; Maselko et al., 2014; Warburton et al., 2006). For example, Gruenewald et al. (2012) found that generativity was positively associated with physical activity and predicted lower odds of increased physical impairment and death over a 10-year period for a sample of U.S. adults aged 60–75. Additionally, previous research in South Asia has demonstrated a relationship between generative leisure activities and cognitive function among older adults (Maselko et al., 2014). The activities that were most strongly associated with generativity (reading, singing songs, and helping with schoolwork) have clear implications for grandparent well-being in that they provide both mental stimulation for older adults and the potential for social connection. Moreover, generativity in grandparents or other caregivers may positively contribute to a child's social and emotional development (De St Aubin et al., 2004). As the activities with the strongest relationships to generativity were performed by about half of the sample, it is possible that increasing participation in these activities may have benefits for both children and older adults.

There are several strengths of this study. It is the first to include both grandmothers and grandfathers in an analysis of the relationship between generative beliefs and specific grandparenting activity behaviors. Moreover, we extend the current literature on generativity in South Asia, a region characterized by strong intergenerational familial bonds and an increasing aging population. Nonetheless, this study also has several limitations. The study was designed to be exploratory and relied on a convenience sample. Our results are therefore not meant to generalize to individuals beyond our study sample and should be considered as hypothesis generating. Future qualitative studies would also provide insights about the grandparents' subjective experience of generative beliefs and grandchild interactions in this specific cultural context. Participating grandparents reported their level of engagement with up to three grandchildren or great-grandchildren. This may have led participants with several grandchildren and great-grandchildren to select those with whom they felt most close, and we cannot assess how their level of engagement with their closest grandchildren and great-grandchildren compared with their level of engagement with other grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Slightly more than half (51.9%) indicated that they have more than three grandchildren or great-grandchildren under 15, indicating that there

were a significant number of grandchildren or great-grandchildren who were not captured by our approach.

Moreover, social desirability bias may have encouraged participants to report a higher level of engagement with their grandchildren than is true; many participants reported that they engaged in most grandparenting activities “often/every day.” Other methods, such as activity diaries, might more gather such information more accurately. Additionally, there is the potential for unmeasured confounding as we did not include any health measures in this analysis. It is possible that poor health or functional limitations may affect both generative beliefs and grandparenting activities.

Finally, the study’s cross-sectional design means we cannot draw conclusions about the directionality of the relationship between generativity and grandparenting activities. While we have conceptualized higher generativity as leading grandparents to participate in active leisure pursuits or behaviors that promote child development, it is possible that participation in these activities leads to older adults reporting more generative attitudes and beliefs or that this relationship is cyclical in nature. Future research on this topic could examine the directionality of this relationship through an analysis of longitudinal data. Moreover, longitudinal analyses could examine how generative beliefs change over time or further examine if and how these changes affect grandparenting, mental health, or child development.

## **Conclusion**

Our results from this exploratory study among Sri Lankan grandparents indicate that generativity was associated with engagement in several grandparenting activities, with the strongest relationship with generative beliefs observed for reading, singing songs, and helping with schoolwork and/or teaching activities. This study has practical implications for our understanding of factors that may contribute to positive aging; older adults who desire to pass on knowledge, skills, and a legacy to the next generation (as measured by generative beliefs) may be more likely to maintain familial bonds and social networks and invest in health-promoting behaviors.


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