

# Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Parental Regret and Longing for Grandparenthood

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In this article, we examine parental regret, which is a domain-specific regret about one's own parenting history. In Study 1, we present a short questionnaire on parental regret and determine its construct validity and short-term stability in a sample of parents of adult children ( $N_{T1} = 286$ ,  $N_{T2} = 120$ ; 10-day interval; 71.5% women; age range = 42–74 years). The factor structure of parental regret was best depicted by a general and omission parental regret model. Furthermore, we found that parental regret was related to but not interchangeable with other regret concepts or dispositional pessimism. Study 2 examines parental regret's association with the longing for grandparenthood ( $N = 450$  parents of adult children; 73.0% women; age range = 40–81 years; no grandchildren yet). We argue that regrets about how one behaved during one's children's childhood can lead one to resort to fantasies about idealized realities with future grandchildren, expressed in a longing for grandparenthood. As hypothesized, stronger parental regret was associated with stronger longing for grandparenthood.

## Public Significance Statement

This article puts parental regret (i.e., regret concerning one's parenting history) to the fore. It demonstrates the psychometric properties of a short parental regret scale. Furthermore, it shows that greater parental regret goes hand in hand with a stronger longing for grandparenthood.

**Keywords:** parental regret, life regrets, longing for grandparenthood, life longing, *Sehnsucht*

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“Midlife appears to be a time to look back and a time to look ahead, a time to ask how are things going and what is left to do” (Lachman & James, 1997, p. 3). In lifespan research, one function of people's life reflection is to deepen self-insight, which, in turn should help to regulate future development (Staudinger, 2001).

Life reflection draws people's attention to what they have enjoyed and achieved but also to what they have missed and where they have failed or made mistakes. The latter refers to “life regrets.” Life

regrets are typically related to experiences within specific life domains. Parental regret, which is the subject of this article, represents such a domain-specific life regret.

In the family domain, when looking back, middle-aged parents might (re-)evaluate the years when they were younger and raising their children and there might be things they wish they had done differently during those years (e.g., Blieszner et al., 1996; DeVries et al., 2007; Erikson et al., 1986). But once the children have grown up,

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Deidentified data and analytic code used to calculate the analyses in this article are available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/ZJB8E>. Parts of the data used in Study 2 of this article, that is, the items on longing for grandparenthood for the main analysis and a subset of the items on life satisfaction for an ancillary analysis, have already been used in a previous publication (Dorry et al., 2023).

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these parents can no longer return to their offspring's childhood. The next and second chance in the individual family life cycle to prove oneself as caring and loving toward the youngest family members comes with grandparenthood. Clearly, people cannot bring about the transition to grandparenthood themselves, they can only hope for it. Still, in their imagination, they might see themselves flourishing in the role of a loving and beloved grandparent in the future. In that way, parental regret and the longing for grandparenthood can be functionally connected. Although lifespan scholars have speculated about a positive relationship between regrets and longing (Scheibe & Epstude, 2016; Scheibe et al., 2011), to the best of our knowledge, there has not been published any empirical research that has actually tested it, either in relation to the family domain or in relation to other domains or life in general.

The present article has two purposes: In Study 1, we introduce a compact scale to assess self-reported parental regret (i.e., regret concerning one's parenting history). In Study 2, we examine the relationship between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood, hypothesizing that middle-aged parents may respond to the experience of parental regret with such a longing.

### Parental Regret as a Life Regret

Regret is a common human experience, which denotes negatively toned, backward-looking thoughts (Landman, 1987). But not every look back that is accompanied by negative affect is a regret. Regret implies both counterfactual and a sense of personal responsibility (i.e., things could have been different if one had behaved differently; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). We might think of a deceased aunt and miss her; this is not a regret. However, we may regret that we did not stay in closer contact with her in the years before her death.

Landman (1987) described regrets as a "more or less painful cognitive/affective state" (p. 153). Not all regrets are accompanied by strong or hot emotions, sometimes regrets have a more wistful and nostalgic quality (Gilovich et al., 1998). Regret is partly related to but also distinct from concepts such as undoing or guilt (Landman, 1987). Sometimes, regret can lead to undoing, but there are also cases in which undoing is no longer possible. Guilt involves a legal or moral transgression (Landman, 1987). In this sense, guilt may or may not be part of the experience of regret. Regrets have been studied in applied psychology and economics primarily concerning short-lived decisions, such as consumer regrets (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). By contrast, lifespan research has focused on longer term regrets, subsumed under the label "life regrets" (e.g., King & Hicks; Landman, 1987; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Parental regret belongs to the latter group. The contents of life regrets often reflect age-graded developmental themes, and regrets related to family are relatively salient among middle-aged and older adults (Jokisaari, 2004). As pointed out by Torges et al. (2005), life regrets "involve some sense of being irretrievable located in the past" (p. 151). They give the example of "I wish I had spent more time with my kids when they were young" as clearly being a life regret, whereas "I wish I had taken my child to the park last night" is not (Torges et al., 2005, p. 151), and argue that only if the latter repeats and generalizes across family-related situations, it might become a life regret.

Parental regret refers to negatively toned thoughts concerning one's parenting history when the now adult children were younger. It is the counterfactual thinking about things that could have been different looking back on an earlier family phase. It includes

thinking about mistakes of commission (e.g., pushing children into growing up; DeVries et al., 2007) and omission (e.g., not spending more time with children when they were young; Hattiangadi et al., 1995). Clearly, parental regret must be distinguished from regretting parenthood, as the latter refers to regret about having children at all (Donath, 2015; Piotrowski, 2021). By contrast, middle-aged parents with parental regret are (re)evaluating earlier family phases and recognizing that they could have behaved differently regarding some aspects back then.

Why should lifespan research pay attention to parental regrets? Roese and Summerville (2005) found in their meta-analysis that parenting (i.e., interactions with offspring) is a common regret topic and that family-related regrets are particularly intense (Morrison et al., 2012). Young parents have a lot to deal with, such as raising children, financing family life, and building and maintaining a career. Time spent at work cannot be devoted to family life and vice versa, which might cause regrets (see DeVries et al., 2007; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Some of these regrets might emerge rather immediately (e.g., return-to-work regrets of postpartum mothers; Wiese & Ritter, 2012; Wiese & Stertz, 2023), while others may surface years later. Kinnier and Metha (1989) found that regretting not having spent more quality time with the family and the subjective importance of being a good parent was particularly prevalent among older adults. In a qualitative part of a study with parents whose children had finished school, DeVries et al. (2007) found that they regretted spending too little time with their children and not supporting their children's development sufficiently. Similarly, in a qualitative study by Hattiangadi et al. (1995), "Should have spent more time in family relationships" and "Should have spent more time with children when they were young" were examples of family-related regrets. Indeed, it could be argued that evaluating and coming to terms with the previous active parenting role is a developmental task for those who have adult children.

### Study 1: Psychometric Properties and Construct Validity of a New Parental Regret Scale

In order to include parental regret in quantitative surveys, an instrument needs to be developed that captures this form of regret in a concise, reliable and valid way.

#### Objectives of Study 1

The research aim of Study 1 is to introduce a compact scale for parental regret. We present a set of items indicating parental regret, suggest and test alternative measurement models, determine the scale's reliability (i.e., internal consistency, retest stability) and construct validity. The validation comprises a test of the factorial structure and the concept's placing into the nomological network of other regret(-related) constructs. Therefore, parental regret is put into relation to occupational regret and general life regret and with dispositional pessimism as a more general negatively toned trait.

#### Other Regret Constructs: Occupational Regret and General Life Regret

Occupational regret refers to the regret associated with having entered one's current career path. Its counterfactual character arises from thinking about an alternative occupation one could have

chosen that is now considered more suitable than the current one (Obodaru, 2012). Similar to parental regret, it is a common regret topic (Morrison & Roese, 2011; Roese & Summerville, 2005) and has a comparable long-lasting effect on one's life. However, occupational regret concerns work and career, which are different but equally important life domains similar to family and parenting.

Life regrets refer to a generally perceived discrepancy between the present and ideal life realities, that is, they involve highly valued counterfactual scenarios of personal development. They concern life domains that are central to the lives of most people and where decisions have widespread and long-lasting consequences, that is, major biographical pathway decisions (e.g., King & Hicks, 2007; Landman, 1987; Roese & Summerville, 2005; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). We speak of general life regret as a reflection on life in which one wishes one had done things differently in various areas of life, whereas parental regret puts a specific facet of family experiences to the fore. Since regrets emerging from different life domains (e.g., family, education, work, friendships) might all fuel the overall experience of life regret, it is expected that any domain-specific regret shares some variance with a person's life regret reports. However, although one might assume that general life regret and parental regret are positively correlated, we assume that they are not interchangeable.

### **Dispositional Pessimism**

Dispositional pessimism refers to a biased view in which one expects things not to go one's way and tends to anticipate bad outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Similar to parental regret (and regrets in general), it involves negatively toned thoughts. Pessimism as a personality trait is a general disposition to negative thoughts, especially about the future, independent of the specific area about which a person is thinking. By contrast, parental regret focuses explicitly on the negative consequences of one's past (in-)actions regarding one's parenting history. In other words, we assume that parental regret and dispositional pessimism reflect different facets of negatively toned thoughts.

## **Method**

### **Transparency and Openness**

This online study has been approved by the university's ethical board (study title: "Everyday experiences and wishes when children are grown up II," protocol number: 2023\_04\_FB7\_RWTH AACHEN), and all participants provided informed consent. Deidentified, fully anonymized data and the analytic code are available (see Author Note; Dorry et al., 2025). The self-developed measure can be found in the measurement description. The design, hypotheses and analyses of Study 1 were not preregistered.

### **Procedure and Participants**

The sample size required for the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) procedure, which was applied to examine the psychometric properties of parental regret, was determined by a Monte Carlo simulation with 1,000 models (Muthén & Muthén, 2002) using R (Version 4.1.1; R Core Team, 2022). A sample size of  $N = 84$  participants was necessary to keep the power constantly above .80 at  $\alpha = .05$ .

The final sample consisted of  $N_{T1} = 286$  parents (71.5% women) and  $N_{T2} = 120$  parents (71.6% women) of at least one adult child ( $\geq 18$  years) who has not (yet) had offspring. Participants were between 42 and 74 years old ( $M = 56.1$  years,  $SD = 5.6$ ). Most participants (90.6%) were employed, 5.3% were retired, 1.1% were homemakers, 3.0% were other or unemployed, and 88.1% were married or in a committed partnership. Participants had one to six children. The age of the oldest child ranged from 18 to 51 years ( $M = 25.3$  years,  $SD = 4.2$ ). Among the adult children, 50.9% were daughters, and 65.7% were in a committed partnership. Participants' gender distribution as a function of age at T1 and T2 is given in Supplemental Material S1 and S2. The racial identity/ethnicity of participants was not assessed. Data were collected in Germany between April 2023 and July 2024.

The study consisted of two measurement time points (T1 and T2) with an interval of 10 days. T2 served to replicate the measurement model for parental regret and analyze its retest stability. Participants were recruited at a consumer fair, via online fora, their adult children (e.g., by announcing the study in university lectures and asking students to pass it on to their parents), and flyers (e.g., in shops and leisure facilities). They were informed that the study investigates the everyday experiences and wishes of parents with adult children who are not (yet) grandparents (inclusion criterion). They could receive a summary of the study results as an incentive to participate.

## **Measures**

**Parental Regret.** As the aim was to develop a short and compact self-report instrument to assess parental regret, we formulated six items reflecting a critical evaluation of one's parenting history when the children were young (see Table 1). The aspects of commission and omission were explicitly considered in item development. In doing so, we took into account findings that suggest that the emotional consequences of errors of omission unfold more strongly in the long term compared with errors of commission (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995) and have a different emotional quality (more wistfulness, nostalgia, and despair compared with hotter emotions in the case of commission; Gilovich et al., 1998). This more differentiated approach is valuable because parental regret is a long-term retrospective and emotional qualities such as despair and wistfulness are conceptually particularly close to longing (see Study 2). Items 1–3 were phrased to capture the overarching "counterfactual aspect" of parental regret, and Items 4–6 were phrased to capture the "omission"/"missed opportunities" aspect of parental regret. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) and measured at T1 ( $M_{T1} = 1.4$ ,  $SD_{T1} = 0.9$ ) and T2 ( $M_{T2} = 1.4$ ,  $SD_{T2} = 1.0$ ).

As women were overrepresented in this sample, we conducted unpaired *t* tests at T1 and T2 to investigate whether the scale's mean differed between women and men. Men ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) reported higher manifest scale scores of parental regret than women ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) at T1,  $t(282) = 3.83$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = 0.51$ . At T2, the manifest scale scores of parental regret did not differ between men ( $M = 1.7$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ) and women ( $M = 1.3$ ;  $SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(44.4) = 1.65$ ,  $p = .107$ .

**Occupational Regret.** We used four items to measure the thoughts and feelings of regret concerning occupational choices (e.g., "I feel I made a mistake choosing my career path," "I wish I had chosen a different occupation back when I was starting my career"; 5-point Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*),

**Table 1**  
Items to Measure Parental Regret (Study 1)

No.	German	English
1	Es gibt Dinge, die ich in Bezug auf mein volljähriges Kind/meine volljährigen Kinder hätte tun sollen.	There are things I have failed to do concerning my adult child/children.
2	Es gibt Dinge, die ich in Bezug auf mein volljähriges Kind/meine volljährigen Kinder <i>nicht</i> hätte tun sollen.	There are things I should <i>not</i> have done regarding my adult child/children.
3	Ich wünsche mir, dass ich in der Beziehung zu meinem volljährigem Kind/meinen volljährigen Kindern Dinge anders gemacht hätte.	I wish I had done things differently in my relationship with my adult child/children.
4	Ich habe früher zu wenig Zeit mit meinem Kind/meinen Kindern verbracht.	In the past, I did not spend enough time with my child/children.
5	Ich bereue es, früher keine liebevollere Mutter/kein liebevollerer Vater gewesen zu sein.	I regret not being a more loving mother/father in the past.
6	Ich bedauere es, bei meinem eigenen Kind/meinen eigenen Kindern etwas von der Entwicklung verpasst zu haben.	I regret having missed out on some of the development of my child/children.

*Note.* Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*). German instruction: Im Folgenden finden Sie einige Aussagen zu der Beziehung mit Ihrem volljährigen Kind/Ihren volljährigen Kindern. Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit die folgenden Aussagen Ihrer Einschätzung nach zutreffen. English instruction: Below you find several statements regarding the relationship with your adult child/children. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements.

partly adapted from Budjanovcanin et al. (2019). McDonald's Omega ( $\omega$ ) as a measure of internal consistency was  $\omega = .93$ .

**General Life Regret.** We used four items ("I would do a lot of things differently today if I could," "If I could turn back time, I wouldn't do certain things," "There were certain opportunities that I should have taken," "If I could, I would change many of my decisions"; 7-point Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Howard and Smith (2023) to measure general life regrets. The scale had an internal consistency of  $\omega = .88$ .

**Dispositional Pessimism.** Initially, we used three items to measure dispositional pessimism ("If something can go wrong for me, it will," "Things never work out the way I want them to," "I rarely count on good things happening to me"; 5-point Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) of the German version (Glaesmer et al., 2008) of the Life-Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985). However, since we found that internal consistency improved from  $\omega = .59$  to Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$  (essential tau equivalent model) when the first item was removed, we decided to use the two-item version in our subsequent analyses.

Descriptive statistics and latent correlations between the study variables are given in Table 2.

## Results

### Measurement Model for Parental Regret

We examined CFA models of the scale to determine the most suitable measurement model for parental regret; first at T1, then we

examined whether the measurement model can be replicated at T2. All analyses were conducted using Mplus (Version 8.10; Muthén & Muthén, 1998/2017). We fixed the factor variance at 1.0 in all CFA models to obtain freely estimated loadings for all items. Table 3 displays the model fits of the respective CFA models. The one-factor model, in which all items load on a single factor, did not fit the data well. This lack of unidimensionality was due to additional covariances arising from the common content of Items 4–6 with regard to omission/missed opportunities. We addressed this item heterogeneity by splitting up items' variances into a general regret as well as a specific omission factor, that is, by specifying a bifactor CFA model. Technically speaking, we followed Eid et al.'s (2003) recommendations for the simultaneous modeling of trait and method factors in the context of multitrait–multimethod analyses. The general regret factor captures the covariances inherent in all six items, while the independent specific factor reflects the remaining covariance of the omission-related Items 4–6. This measurement model fit the data well (see Table 3). Therefore, we decided to use a general and omission parental regret model as the measurement model for the new scale. Concerning content, this means that parental regret is a unified phenomenon that coexists with a specificity, namely, the missed opportunities aspect of parental regret. The standardized factor loadings for the general and omission parental regret model at T1 and T2 are given in Table 4. When applying the general and omission parental regret model to T2, the fit indices (comparative fit index [CFI] = .985; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .963; standardized root-mean-square-residual [SRMR] = .038; and root-mean-square

**Table 2**  
Descriptive Statistics (Manifest Values) and Latent Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables at T1 (Study 1)

Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	1	2	3	4	5
1. General parental regret factor	1.4 (0.9)	—				
2. Omission factor parental regret	0.9 (1.0)	.00	—			
3. Occupational regret	1.0 (1.1)	.12	.03	—		
4. General life regret	2.9 (1.4)	<b>.70***</b>	<b>.17**</b>	<b>.26***</b>	—	
5. Dispositional pessimism	1.0 (0.9)	<b>.22*</b>	.07	<b>.18*</b>	<b>.39***</b>	—

*Note.* Scale scores are calculated with manifest averages of items; correlations apply to latent variables; since variables 1 and 2 are specified as orthogonal, their correlation is  $r = .00$ ; significant correlations are shown in bold. T = time.

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

**Table 3**  
*Comparison of Fit Indices in CFA Models of Parental Regret at T1 (Study 1)*

Model	$\chi^2$			RMSEA			CFI	TLI	SRMR	AIC	BIC
	Value	df	<i>p</i>	Value	95% CI	<i>p</i>					
One factor model	196.22	9	<.001	.27	[.24, .30]	<.001	.72	.54	.12	5203.69	5269.50
General and omission parental regret model <sup>a</sup>	10.35	6	.111	.05	[.00, .10]	.432	.99	.98	.02	5023.82	5100.60

*Note.* CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; T = time; *df* = degrees of freedom; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; CI = confidence interval; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square-residual; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

<sup>a</sup>With Items 4–6 as omission factor.

error of approximation [RMSEA] = .093, 90% CI [.000, .168], *p* = .150) indicated an acceptable fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

Bollen's Omega ( $\omega^*$ ; Bollen, 1989) was calculated to measure the internal consistency. Employing the measurement model outlined above, it was satisfactory with  $\omega^*_{T1} = .88$  and  $\omega^*_{T2} = .92$  for the two factors combined (i.e., for the total model).

### Short-Term Retest Stability of Parental Regret

The retest stability of the parental regret scale was determined by calculating the latent bivariate correlation between the two general parental regret factors at T1 and T2. The loadings of the two general and omission parental regret models were set equal. The general parental regret factors were highly positively correlated ( $r = .90$ , 95% CI [.83, .97],  $p < .001$ ), attesting the scale's short-term stability.

### Construct Validity of Parental Regret

The general and omission parental regret model was employed as the underlying measurement model to examine the construct validity of parental regret. The general parental regret factor was modeled in the structural models because the overall sense of regret regarding one's parenting history was of interest here. The following steps were taken: First, the measurement models for the validation variables were determined. Unidimensional models (tau congruence models) fitted the data well for occupational regret (CFI = .994; TLI = .981; SRMR = .012; RMSEA = .111, 90% CI [.045, .189],  $p = .061$ ) and life regrets (CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.000; SRMR = .004; RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000, .084],  $p = .850$ ). The two-item version of the dispositional pessimism scale (essential tau equivalent model) was perfectly identified. Second, latent correlations with each validation factor were calculated to examine the construct validity of the general parental regret factor. Third, the Wald test of parameter constraints was calculated to test whether the respective correlations differed significantly from 1.0. A significant Wald test indicates that both scales measure different constructs.

Table 5 depicts the latent correlations of the general parental regret factor with the respective validation variable. Parental regret was not significantly correlated with occupational regret, and the Wald test confirms that the two scales measured different constructs. Parental regret was significantly and highly positively correlated with general life regret. However, as indicated by the Wald test, both scales measured different constructs. Parental regret was significantly positively correlated with dispositional pessimism.

Again, the Wald test indicates the measurement of distinct constructs.

### Short Discussion of Study 1

This study examined the psychometric properties and construct validity of a short scale to assess parental regret. We determined the most suitable measurement model for parental regret, its internal consistency, and retest stability. Furthermore, we investigated its construct validity and examined it in the nomological network of other regret concepts. The factor structure of parental regret was best depicted by a general and omission parental regret model. The scale's internal consistency was satisfactory, and it had strong short-term stability. Parental regret showed a considerable positive association with general life regret, but the two constructs were not interchangeable. It also showed a small positive association with dispositional pessimism, but again, the two constructs were not interchangeable. Parental regret was not associated with occupational regret. In summary, the concept of parental regret can be placed into the nomological network of other regret constructs and represents a specific type of regret.

Based on these results, parental regret can be characterized as a unified phenomenon, as reflected in the general parental regret factor. This overall sense of regret regarding one's parenting history coexists with a specificity, namely, the missed opportunities aspect of parental regret. Because the general parental regret factor and the missed opportunities aspect are independent, parental regret may or may not result from the admission of negligence.

Parental regret is not associated with occupational regret, and both measure different regret facets. By definition, these regrets evolve in different life domains, which involve different tasks and social partners. Looking back on their development in the respective life domain, people seem to come to different assessments. The scales used in the present study are suitable for capturing some of these differences in regretful thoughts. Furthermore, parental regret is closely related to general life regret but represents something distinct. General life regret refers to an overall view on the past, whereas parental regret concerns counterfactual thoughts about one's parenting history. However, the relatively high positive association between these forms of regret could exist because child-rearing is such a central element in a person's life that parental regret fuels generalized feelings of regret.

It has been shown that parental regret was weakly correlated to dispositional pessimism, but both reflect different forms of negatively toned experiences. This result shows that parental regret is not simply an expression of a tendency toward "negative thoughts." It

**Table 4**  
Standardized Factor Loadings for the General and Omission Parental Regret Model at Both Measurement Time Points (Study 1)

Item	$\lambda_{\text{general parental regret factor T1}}$	$\lambda_{\text{omission factor T1}}$	Selectivity $_{T1}^a$	$\lambda_{\text{general parental regret factor T2}}$	$\lambda_{\text{omission factor T2}}$	Selectivity $_{T2}^a$
There are things I should have done regarding my adult child/children.	.74***		.74***	.88***		.88***
There are things I should not have done regarding my adult child/children.	.78***		.78***	.81***		.81***
I wish I had done things differently in my relationship with my adult child/children.	.85***		.85***	.84***		.84***
In the past, I did not spend enough time with my child/children.	.46***	.66***	.46***	.49***	.70***	.49***
I regret not being a more loving mother/father in the past.	.43***	.50***	.43***	.55***	.36***	.55***
I regret having missed out on some of the development with my child/children.	.35***	.78***	.35***	.55***	.77***	.55***

Note. T = time.

<sup>a</sup>Selectivities (correlation of the respective item with the sum of the other items; latent values) refer to the general parental regret factor.  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

focuses specifically on the negative consequences of one’s past (in-) actions regarding the upbringing of one’s children.

The parental regret scale is relatively compact. A more comprehensive measurement instrument on parental regret could be developed in future research. Ideally, it would measure omissions, commissions, emotions and cognitions concerning one’s parenting history at different stages of the family life cycle and different life stages. Nevertheless, our results support the psychometric quality of the newly developed parental regret scale, making future use promising. As a first application, we now turn to Study 2, in which we examined how parental regret is related to longing for grandparenthood.

### Study 2: Parental Regret and Longing for Grandparenthood

In Study 2, we examine the relationship between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood. For parents with adult children, the time when they were the mother or father of a young child cannot be brought back, and whatever has happened and is now regretted cannot be changed or undone. In most cases, they will not have another child, which does not give them a second chance to spend more time with a child of their own, for example. However, as another chance to live-up to their caring ideal self, they might start to dwell in fantasies about how they might flourish in their role as a loving grandparent in the future. Thus, middle-aged adults with parental regret might be prone to imagining an optimal future life in a new family stage with grandchildren. Thereby, the opportunities missed while raising their children may translate into a *Sehnsucht* (life longing) for grandparenthood.

### Objectives of Study 2

The functional relationship between regret and *Sehnsucht* has not yet been investigated empirically. This study aimed to contribute to aging research by examining the association between parental regret and the longing for grandparenthood.

### *Sehnsucht—Longing for Grandparenthood*

A life longing (*Sehnsucht*) is defined “as an intense desire for alternative states and realizations of life and as the search for an optimal or utopian life” (Scheibe et al., 2007, p. 789). Life longings operate on the mental level, rather than on the behavioral one. They have the potential to promote personal growth without being equal to active goal setting and pursuit (Scheibe et al., 2009), although there might be cases in which longings are translated into concrete goals (Scheibe & Freund, 2008). Life longings play a particularly interesting role for developmental regulation when goals and specific identity-relevant roles turn out to be out of reach (as it becomes more likely in the second half of life) because then it becomes a “strategy to manage the changing gain–loss dynamic of development on the level of fantasy and imagination” (Scheibe et al., 2007, p. 791). The content of life longings changes as people age (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009) because life longings often reflect age-specific identity themes (Erikson, 1980) and developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972). The transition to grandparenthood is an important normative family-related life event of middle and later adulthood that can be hoped for but not acted upon. By combining two prerequisites of the emergence of life longings, that is, high

**Table 5**  
*Latent Correlations of Validation Variables With Parental Regret (General Parental Regret Factor; Study 1)*

Variable	<i>r</i>	95% CI for <i>r</i>		<i>p</i>	<i>W</i>		
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>		Value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Occupational regret	.12	-.01	.25	.060	<b>184.35</b>	1	<.001
General life regret	<b>.70</b>	.62	.78	<.001	<b>56.19</b>	1	<.001
Dispositional pessimism	<b>.22</b>	.06	.38	.007	<b>95.27</b>	1	<.001

*Note.* Significant values are shown in bold. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *W* = Wald test of parameter constraints; *df* = degrees of freedom.

subjective importance and a lack of controllability, grandparenthood is a prime example of a longing domain (Dorry et al., 2023).

At the conceptual level, *Sehnsucht* is a holistic and multidimensional phenomenon. Its holistic *Gestalt* can be understood as a global (G) factor that coexists with six specificities (S factors), which are (a) personal utopia, (b) a feeling of incompleteness, (c) tritime focus, (d) ambivalent emotions, (e) reflective and evaluative processes, and (f) symbolic richness (Baltes, 2008). A general description of the six longing characteristics is provided by Scheibe et al. (2007, pp. 780–782) and their application to the longing for grandparenthood can be found in Dorry et al. (2023).

### **Relationship Between Parental Regret and Longing for Grandparenthood**

Life regrets and life longings are both counterfactual, that is, they concern imagined alternatives to reality (Scheibe & Epstude, 2016). Concerning contents, both often reflect age-graded developmental themes (Kotter-Grünn, Wiest, et al., 2009; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). An important difference is that regret focuses on the negative consequences of past behavior, whereas longing focuses on imagined positive outcomes (Scheibe & Epstude, 2016). Moreover, regret requires a sense of responsibility for past (in-)actions, whereas the realization of longings is (mostly) uncontrollable (Scheibe & Epstude, 2016). In addition, as discussed in previous research, both fulfill partially different regulatory functions in human development. Life regrets can provide deeper insight into oneself (e.g., King & Hicks, 2007; Saffrey et al., 2008) and—if the developmental context still provides the appropriate opportunities—stimulate the correction of future behavior (e.g., Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Life longings can be functional by providing directionality (which might also entail the transformation of longings into goals, see above) or by helping to cope with unattainability (e.g., as partially compensation for something a person cannot have in reality; Scheibe et al., 2007).

Still, the functional connection between life regrets and life longings needs to be clarified. Some thoughts on it have been outlined in the literature, though. Scheibe and Epstude (2016, p. 2) have argued that “life plans that could not be (fully) executed can give rise to life longing” and that it is sometimes not possible to completely distance from lost opportunities that might then be translated in a life longing. Building on the motivational

theory of lifespan development (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen et al., 2010), Bauer (2011) suggested two routes for regulating life regrets (see also Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002): Using primary control strategies to undo regret or using secondary control strategies to change the internal evaluation of regret. Middle adulthood is a particularly relevant age period for the shift from the predominant capacity for primary control strategies (i.e., *changing the world* to bring the environment into line with one’s wishes) to striving for compensatory secondary control strategies (i.e., *changing the self* to bring oneself into line with environmental forces; for more details, see Heckhausen et al., 2010). Bauer (2011) gives several examples of secondary control strategies (e.g., reappraising the meaning and significance of the regret, blaming external factors, and downward social comparisons), one of which is to focus on what people can still attain even if they cannot undo what they regret. In the present case, we refer to the longing for grandchildren as a personal orientation that could have a compensatory function when facing parental regret, though, as outlined above, a longing should not be equated with a goal that a person can work on for achievement.

Turning to parental regret, the counterfactual thought of, “If only I had spent more time with my children when they were younger, I would have enjoyed more of their development,” in principle, could fuel the activation of corrective behavioral intentions. But time, of course, cannot be turned back. What seems desirable for the early family phase in retrospect cannot be made up for. In this case, the grandparent–grandchild relationship could offer a second chance to live the ideal of caring for a young child in their own family and to watch this child’s development with curiosity and pride. The transition to grandparenthood, however, cannot be pursued as a personal goal, that is, the middle-aged parent does not have primary control over becoming a grandparent. Therefore, they might resort to the longing for grandchildren, which might be considered as a specific form of secondary control. Secondary control strategies for dealing with regrets are generally beneficial if opportunities are scarce (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002), and the opportunity to spend more time with one’s children when they were young has passed forever for parents of adult children.

Following this line of reasoning, we hypothesize a positive association between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood. Moreover, but only in an exploratory manner, we examine whether there are any differential effects of parental regret on the six longing characteristics.

## **Method**

### **Transparency and Openness**

This online study has been approved by the university’s ethical board (study title: “Everyday experiences and wishes when children are grown up”; protocol number: 2020\_010\_A-B\_FB7\_RWTH AACHEN), and all participants provided informed consent. Deidentified, fully anonymized data and the analytic code are available (see Author Note; Dorry et al., 2025). The design, hypothesis and analyses of Study 2 were not preregistered. The questionnaire data on longing for grandparenthood were used as predictors of life satisfaction in a previous publication (Dorry et al., 2023).

These data are reused in the present article to explore whether feelings of regret are associated with the longing for grandparenthood.

### Procedure and Participants

The sample size required for the structural equation modeling procedure, which was applied to test the research hypothesis, was determined by a Monte Carlo simulation with 1,000 models (Muthén & Muthén, 2002) using R (Version 4.1.1; R Core Team, 2022). A sample size of  $N = 420$  participants was necessary to keep the power constantly above .80 at  $\alpha = .05$ .

The final sample consisted of  $N = 450$  parents (73.0% women) of at least one adult child ( $\geq 18$  years). The adult children did not (yet) have offspring. Participants were between 40 and 81 years old ( $M = 56.1$  years,  $SD = 6.4$ ). Most participants (77.3%) were employed, 9.1% were retired, 7.1% were homemakers, 6.4% were other or unemployed, and 81.6% were married or in a committed partnership. Participants had one to six children ( $M_{\text{all children}} = 2.1$ ,  $M_{\text{adult children}} = 1.9$ ) with a mean age of  $M_{\text{all children}} = 21.9$  years ( $SD = 6.9$ ). Among the adult children, 50.9% were daughters, and 50.4% were in a committed partnership. Participants' gender distribution as a function of age of the sample is given in Supplemental Material S3. The racial identity/ethnicity of participants was not assessed. Data were collected in Germany between October 2020 and April 2021.

Participants were recruited via online fora, their adult children (e.g., by presenting the study to them in university lectures and asking them to pass it on to their parents), posters, and flyers (e.g., in shops and leisure facilities). They were informed that the study investigates the everyday experiences and wishes of parents with adult children who are not (yet) grandparents (inclusion criterion). The participants could take part in a lottery for ten cash prizes of 50 euros each (about U.S. \$53) as an incentive to participate.

### Measures

**Parental Regret.** We used the six items described in Study 1 to measure thoughts and feelings of regret regarding one's parenting history. The measurement model was based on a general and omission parental regret model, which comprises a general parental regret factor on which all items load and an omission factor on which Items 4–6 load additionally (see Study 1). The fit indices (CFI = .986; TLI = .966; SRMR = .029; RMSEA = .073, 90% CI [.042, .108],  $p = .105$ ) indicated a satisfactory fit of the measurement model. Bollen's Omega ( $\omega^*$ ; Bollen, 1989) was calculated to measure internal consistency. It was  $\omega^* = .88$  for the total general and omission parental regret model. The selectivities of the six items on the general parental regret factor were satisfactory (from .43 to .82).

**Longing for Grandparenthood.** We used a 21-item scale (Dorry et al., 2023), which is an adaptation of the Life Longing Questionnaire (LLQ; Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, et al., 2009) to the context of grandparenthood. All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The questionnaire consists of six subscales: feeling of incompleteness (e.g., "My wish for a grandchild means that I am missing one of the most important things in my life"), personal utopia (e.g., "The reality of having a grandchild will never be as enjoyable as I imagine it to be"), and tritime focus (e.g., "My wish for a grandchild links memories of my past with fantasies about my future") with three items each.

Ambivalent emotions (e.g., "My wish for a grandchild is painful and beautiful at the same time"), reflective and evaluative processes (e.g., "My wish to have a grandchild makes me think a lot about the meaning of my life"), and symbolic richness (e.g., "My wish for a grandchild is symbolic of something that is important to me") were measured with four items each. The complete list of items is given in Dorry et al. (2023).

Based on the theoretical and methodological considerations outlined in Dorry et al. (2023), we employed a bifactor exploratory structural equation model (ESEM; Morin et al., 2016) as the underlying measurement model for the grandparenthood LLQ. The bifactor model is the conceptually most suitable representation of the LLQ because a global (G) factor as an overarching construct that reflects the total covariance shared among all items (Chen et al., 2006; Reise, 2012) measuring *Sehnsucht* represents the general component of longing for grandparenthood. It captures the overall thought of and feeling toward desiring grandchildren, which lies at the core of the phenomenon. This G factor of *Sehnsucht* coexists with the six specific longing characteristics (Scheibe et al., 2007). The latter can be represented in groupings of items (S factors), which reflect specificity that remains unexplained by the G factor. The ESEM approach fits the LLQ because the items carry information beyond the single S factor they were assigned to, that is, they show low but meaningful cross-loadings (Morin et al., 2016). Summarizing, due to the phenomenological *Gestalt* of *Sehnsucht* and the interrelation of its six characteristics, we suggest a bifactor ESEM (Morin et al., 2016) to best capture the holistic and multidimensional *Gestalt* of the LLQ and longing for grandparenthood, respectively. The fit indices (CFI = .988; TLI = .970; SRMR = .014; RMSEA = .041, 90% CI [.030, .052],  $p = .904$ ) as well as the strong and significant target loadings on the G factor (varying from  $|\lambda| = .35$  to .80,  $M = .54$ ) and on the six S factors (varying from  $|\lambda| = .38$  to .79,  $M = .60$ ) indicated a satisfactory fit of the bifactor ESEM.

**Sociodemographic Control Variables.** We included participants' gender and age to account for gender- or age-specific effects. Table 6 displays descriptive statistics ( $M$ s,  $SD$ s) and latent bivariate correlations of the study variables and covariates.

### Analytical Approach

The LLQ bifactor ESEM was reexpressed in the CFA framework based on the procedure and Mplus code outlined by Morin et al. (2016). Here, both the correlations between the S factors, and between the S factors and the G factor were fixed at zero (i.e., set orthogonally) to ensure the interpretability and identifiability of the solution (Chen et al., 2006). We fixed the factor variance at 1.0 in all CFA models to obtain freely estimated loadings for all items in the LLQ bifactor ESEM. The hypothesis was tested by applying a latent multivariate regression analysis using Mplus (Version 8.10; Muthén & Muthén, 1998/2017).

The G factor of longing and the six longing characteristics, that is, the complete bifactor ESEM measurement model, were modeled as seven dependent variables in the same latent regression analysis. This allowed the exploratory examination of differential effects of the general parental regret factor on the six longing characteristics. The two covariates were included as predictor variables. The latter were allowed to correlate.

**Table 6**  
*Manifest Descriptive Statistics and Latent Bivariate Correlations (Study 2)*

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	8	9	10	11
1. G factor longing for grandparenthood	1.3 (0.9)	<b>.12*</b>	<b>.16*</b>	.00	.00
2. Personal utopia	1.1 (1.1)	<b>.21**</b>	-.02	.03	-.01
3. Feeling of incompleteness	1.2 (1.2)	-.01	.05	.00	<b>.12*</b>
4. Tritime focus	1.8 (1.5)	.09	-.06	.02	-.01
5. Ambivalent emotions	0.7 (1.0)	<b>.16*</b>	.03	-.02	.02
6. Reflective and evaluative processes	1.1 (1.2)	.01	.01	.02	.03
7. Symbolic richness	2.0 (1.4)	-.05	-.03	<b>-.11*</b>	-.10
8. General parental regret factor	1.4 (0.9)	—	.00	.12	.03
9. Omission factor	1.9 (1.1)	—	—	.01	.01
10. Gender <sup>a</sup>				—	<b>.22***</b>
11. Own age	56.1 (6.3)				—

*Note.* Significant correlations are shown in bold. Scale scores are calculated with manifest averages of items; correlations apply to latent variables; correlations between latent variables 1–7 are not displayed because they are specified as orthogonal in their respective underlying measurement models and therefore their  $r = .00$ . Orthogonality also applies to variables 8 and 9.

<sup>a</sup> Women = 0, men = 1.

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

## Results

Table 7 depicts the results of the latent multivariate regression analysis. As hypothesized, higher levels of general parental regret predicted significantly stronger longing for grandparenthood (G factor).

Examining the six longing characteristics as specific factors, which carry true variance over and above the G factor variance, the general parental regret factor predicted significantly higher personal utopia of an optimal life with grandchildren and higher ambivalent emotions regarding grandchildren. The covariates own gender and age showed no influence.

### Ancillary Analyses

As regrets sometimes are gendered (DeVries et al., 2007) and as the sample comprised 73.0% of women, we examined whether gender had a moderating effect when considered in the main

**Table 7**  
*Multivariate Latent Regression Analysis Predicting Longing for Grandparenthood With the General Parental Regret Factor (Study 2)*

Dependent variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>		
Longing for grandparenthood <sup>a</sup>	<b>0.14*</b>	0.02	0.26	0.06	0.04
Personal utopia	<b>0.21**</b>	0.07	0.36	0.07	0.02
Feeling of incompleteness	-.01	-0.15	0.13	0.07	0.01
Tritime focus	0.10	-0.03	0.23	0.07	0.03
Ambivalent emotions	<b>0.16*</b>	0.03	0.29	0.07	0.00
Reflective and evaluative processes	0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.01	0.02
Symbolic richness	-0.06	-0.19	0.08	0.07	0.02

*Note.* Significant coefficients are shown in bold. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE* = standard error; it was controlled for gender (women = 0, men = 1) and own age.

<sup>a</sup> G factor.

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

analysis. The moderation term (G factor parental Regret  $\times$  Gender) was not significant,  $b = -.02$ , 95% CI  $[-.42, .09]$ ,  $p = .204$  (see Supplemental Material S4).

The age range in the sample was quite large (41 years). This allowed us to examine whether various life stages were relevant for the association between regret and longing for grandparenthood. The basic idea is that age is relevant for the availability and functionality of different strategies of developmental regulation (Heckhausen et al., 2010) as well as for different themes in life longings (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009). First, we examined whether participants in early midlife (until 55) had a differential pattern of results than those in late midlife (starting at 55). Adding this dummy-coded variable in the main analysis did neither affect longing for grandparenthood (G factor) nor the pattern of results (see also correlation of own age with G factor longing for grandparenthood and own age with general parental regret factor in Table 6). As a first test of whether the association between parental regret and longing for grandparent might be a side effect of major issues and life events encountered in midlife, we added retirement status (vs. being still employed) as a context-related dummy-coded moderator variable in the main analysis. The moderation term (G factor parental Regret  $\times$  Dummy-coded retirement status) was not significant,  $b = -.02$ , 95% CI  $[-.19, .14]$ ,  $p = .807$  (see Supplemental Material S5).

To consider the identity aspect of family life, we included a short scale on family identity (four items adapted from Kanungo, 1982) in a supplementary moderation analysis. The underlying idea was that if a person's identity is strongly influenced by family life, the association between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood might be stronger than for a person whose identity is not so strongly dependent on family life. The main effect of family identity on longing for grandparenthood (G factor) was significant ( $b = .18$ , 95% CI  $[.08, .27]$ ,  $p = .001$ ), but the moderation term (G factor parental Regret  $\times$  Family identity) was not,  $b = -.02$ , 95% CI  $[-.05, .20]$ ,  $p = .231$  (see Supplemental Material S6).

Further, in a first attempt to probe into the adaptiveness of longing for grandparenthood as a secondary control strategy regarding psychological well-being (see Jokisaari, 2004), we tested whether longing moderated the association between parental regret and life

satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). In addition to significant main effects with negative signs (both strong regrets and strong longing are associated with lower life satisfaction), there is a significant interaction effect,  $b = -.13$ , 95% CI  $[-.24, -.03]$ ,  $p = .013$  (see Supplemental Material S7). Contrary to the idea that this interaction may unfold a positive association with life satisfaction, the negative effect of regrets on life satisfaction was strengthened as soon as it was coupled with a strong longing for grandparenthood.

### Short Discussion of Study 2

As expected, stronger parental regret was positively associated with a stronger longing for grandparenthood. These two counterfactual phenomena appear to be linked. The exploratory examination of differential effects on the six longing characteristics (S factors) revealed that the personal utopia of an optimal life with grandchildren and ambivalent emotions regarding grandchildren were predicted by parental regret beyond the overall thought and feeling of desiring grandchildren (G factor). The insight from what could have been different concerning one's parenting history arouses a desirable but, at the same time, never quite attainable (i.e., utopian) fantasy of a future ideal life with grandchildren. The item that shows the highest loading on the S factor personal utopia reads, "The reality of having a grandchild will never be as enjoyable as I imagine it to be." It illustrates the counterfactual character of *Sehnsucht* very well. In addition to the compensatory function of longing for people with parental regret, there might also be an understanding that things will not always go so well (after all, they have already had this experience with their children, as reflected in their regrets). This not only points to the personal utopia aspect but also brings the ambivalent, "bittersweet" taste (with an emphasis on "bitter") of longing to the fore.

Another reason may be the meaning of the residual variance that makes up the two S factors: It may be less unique to parenthood or grandparenthood, respectively, but, instead, may represent the more generalized personal characteristic and disposition to reflect on life's ambivalent shortcomings, which one wishes would come closer to a personal utopia. In the context of the present article, this means that parental regret has a predictive value for the general disposition to utopian and ambivalent thinking, even among those with a low longing for grandparenthood (low G factor).

This finding could also have the following reason: If a person experiences strong parental regret, they might doubt whether the adult children will allow a (close) relationship with the future grandchildren. At the same time, it could also be that there is an ambivalent tension in the air in the relationship with the adult children. These two thoughts could originate in a negatively perceived relationship quality with the adult children. In order to approach this argument empirically, we conducted an ancillary analysis in which the perceived relationship quality with the adult children was included in the main analysis. However, it was found that the perceived relationship quality did not affect the association between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood (G factor) (see Supplemental Material S8).

Based on the results of this study, future research could compare participants without grandchildren and grandparents to examine whether the transition to grandparenthood makes a difference in parental regret. It is possible that the new phase of life as a grandparent leads to a milder view of one's past, but it could also be that—

especially if contact with the grandchildren is less than desired—self-reproach regarding one's parental history becomes stronger. Indeed, to understand developmental regulation, it is important to look more closely at how changing life circumstances affect appraisals of regrets (which, again, is an expression of secondary control in dealing with regrets; Bauer, 2011).

### Overall Discussion

This article placed the concept of parental regret into the nomological network of already established regret concepts, examined its psychometric properties, and its functional relationship with longing for grandparenthood, which we suggested as a secondary self-regulatory strategy that helps deal with thoughts and feelings of regret.

A certain amount of regret in life might be unavoidable. Considering parental regret, the possibility of a future life with the third generation, for one thing, might offer the opportunity to make amends for regrettable "mistakes" with the middle generation (Findler et al., 2013; Robinson, 1989). The longing for grandparenthood might, therefore, be an expression of having learned from one's past as a parent. For another thing, the possibility of a future life with the third generation might offer the opportunity to approach life with young children in a more relaxed and enjoyable way than was possible in the past with one's own children (Benedek, 1970; Clarke & Roberts, 2004; Erikson et al., 1986; Robinson, 1989).

Although the transition to grandparenthood is a counter-transition (i.e., a transition that is produced by other people's role changes; Hagestad & Lang, 1986) and therefore cannot be pursued as a personal goal, there might be opportunities to use some kind of primary control strategies in this context. Putting adult children under pressure to become parents is not considered socially acceptable, at least in Western cultures. However, late middle-aged parents might encourage their grown-up sons and daughters to have children by offering them instrumental support (e.g., help with childcare, financial support), which could be seen as an expression of an indirect personal agency.

### Limitations and Future Research Prospects

A major limitation of Study 2 is its cross-sectional design. It cannot be excluded that the longing for grandparenthood gives rise to regret concerning one's parenting history. Longitudinal studies are highly warranted to, first, further establish the hypothesized relationship between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood. Second, these studies are important to examine developmental trajectories of parental regret, longing for grandparenthood and their interplay. Beyond longitudinal survey studies, future research could use interviews to investigate whether people perceive their parental regret as a causal source of their longing for grandparenthood, and to gain qualitative insights into whether or not people intentionally use their grandparenting fantasies as a strategy for coping with parental regret.

Women were overrepresented in both samples (ca. 70% women). This might be one reason that we could not see a moderating effect by gender. Future research could take a differentiated look at the significance of traditional versus egalitarian gender role attitudes in women and men. For example, both family-related regrets and family-related longings could be more pronounced in women with

more traditional attitudes who subordinate their careers to their families. On a theoretical level, it seems necessary here to distinguish between influences that are based on personal values and those that are based on motivational strategies that change systematically throughout a person's life. Future research could also consider personal priorities in other areas of life as a potential moderating factor in the relationship between parental regret and the longing for grandparenthood, which may be less pronounced among individuals who prioritize their work life. Our supplementary analysis on retirement status found no evidence that individuals who are already retired would show a different result pattern than those who are still working. However, we did not consider the importance attached to work by those still working.

One limitation concerning the parental regret scale is that it is not a simple, unidimensional scale. Therefore, future research should specify the general and omission parental regret measurement model to ensure a good fit. Another limitation concerning the parental regret scale is its relatively low manifest mean value, which could indicate a possible floor effect. One might assume that longing for grandparenthood mainly evolves when parental regret grows strong. Exploratory analyses without participants who indicated that they feel no parental regret at all showed that their exclusion did not change the pattern of results of the main analysis. The theoretically expected effect was found even with relatively low mean values of parental regret, which speaks against an overarching floor effect. Another future research question could concern subgroups characterized by a particularly strong or weak association between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood. From a psychological perspective, interindividual differences in needs and motives might be particularly important in this context. Here, one might speculate that a strong need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) intensifies the association between parental regret and longing for grandparenthood. By contrast, a strong need for control over their future (e.g., Burger, 1984) might attenuate this association. Furthermore, people might have differential personal life histories of self-regulation with different capacities for self-regulation and different degrees of inclination for self-reflection and/or rumination. This offers another route to take in future research on regret and longing.

In an ancillary analysis, the interaction of regret and longing was predictive of life satisfaction, but in such a way that the negative association between regrets and life satisfaction was strengthened as soon as it was coupled with a strong longing for grandparenthood. However, life satisfaction might not be ideal for testing the adaptiveness of longing for grandparenthood when facing parental regret. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to acknowledge that functionality should be conceptualized beyond happiness. As outlined for both regrets and life longings, they might have more to offer when it comes to long-term personal growth. King and Hicks (2007) argued that regrets, although being related to lowered well-being, promote complexity (or ego development), which they consider a valuable developmental outcome. With respect to life longings, they are seen to play a role in maintaining a person's identity and the experience of meaning (Scheibe & Freund, 2008).

When parenting one's children, nobody is perfect. Parents commit and omit things they might wish to have done differently. The longing for a possible future life with grandchildren might offer a fantasy-based way to deal with these regret-related thoughts and feelings. "It is precisely this process of reconciling the past today in

order to live better tomorrow that remains the essence of living with the tensions and challenges of a lifetime" (Erikson et al., 1986, p. 104). However, as shown by Dorry et al. (2023), longing for grandparenthood comes with costs as it is associated with reduced well-being, whereas the actual experience of the transition to grandparenthood is known to be perceived as being much more positive in valence (Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005). To get a fuller picture, we need to combine evaluations of the past when having been a young parent, the present (e.g., relationship quality with the adult children), projections of the future (e.g., the fantasy of becoming a loving and beloved grandparent), as well as actual experiences of generativity as they accompany grandparenthood. The present study provides a small part of this picture, which future research needs to complement.

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