Older adults increasingly rely on support from others to attain their goals in daily life. Adult children often offer support and become surrogate decision makers. However, children and their aging parents do not always see eye-to-eye on daily care goals. When goals clash, an older adult may be perceived as insisting, resisting, or persisting in their ways or opinions, or acting in a way commonly attributed to stubbornness. Such situations likely affect relationship and individual outcomes of families; yet, they are not well understood.
This dissertation compiles three studies that examine elders’ behaviors commonly attributed to stubbornness. Study 1 uses semi-structured interviews with aging parents and their adult daughter caregivers (N = 10 dyads) to develop a broad understanding of how elders influence their care (including through stubbornness). Study 2 (N = 88 dyads) and Study 3 (N = 221 adult children) use survey data to examine the association between elders’ persistent behaviors and individual and relationship-based characteristics, as well as the effect of children’s responses to such behaviors.

Study 1 demonstrates complex patterns of responses within families when there is conflict in care goals. Parents most commonly let go of their requests, while daughters reason with their parents and make decisions when they perceive safety or health-related needs. However, parents also display insisting and persisting behaviors. Study 2 confirms that adult children perceive their parents as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness fairly often, and aging parents also self-report acting in this way. However, perceptions are linked to differential individual and relationship-based factors, and there are systematic differences in perceived parent “stubborn” behaviors by adult children and their aging parents. Last, Study 3 shows that it is not just the perception of behavior that matters, but how adult children respond to their parents’ persistent behaviors that affect children’s depression, relationship quality, and support provided.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that micro-level processes of responses to goal conflict within families affect care and support. Intervention work that addresses positive ways of responding to one another and encourages shared goal setting could prove useful in supporting elders into their latest years.