



## The Social Construction of the Image of Mother-in-law – the Perspective of the Daughters-in-law

Very often, the stereotyped image of a phenomenon generates effects by itself. The individuals are poorly evaluated by a formal assessment based on clichés, labels and stereotypes, their effect being the risk of producing relational jams, even before the existence of a relationship.

In social relationships, blinded by the wide legitimacy of stereotypes, the individuals tend to show attraction or rejection towards a certain state, or even person, based on the set of socially associated clichés. In this regard, the access to a person appears to be intermediated by the cliché image a certain person or community attributes it, fact which may insurmountably affect the direct and objective relationship with the other.

Today, the issue of in-laws and the way they understand to support the young family has many valences: there are young people who accept the in-laws co-participation in the role dynamic of the young couple, others consider any form of external intervention of the in-laws to be an abuse, as well as there are a wide range of in-laws ideologies regarding their „natural duty” to manage the conjugal relationships of their own children. The research is based on Thomas’ theory (1982) which states that when people consider a situation to be real, it becomes real through its consequences.

Our study aims to analyse the image of the mother-in-law in the eyes of the daughter-in-law, based on a quantitative research, the method used being the sociological inquiry and the research instrument – the survey. The study was conducted on a sample of 200 women with conjugal experience of at least 3 years, 100 being unmarried and 100 – married. The unmarried women were selected from the age group between 25 and 29 years old, being the age category before the marital peak, and the married women from the age category comprising the tip of marriage, namely between 30 and 40 years old.

**Keywords:** stereotype, mother-in-law, daughters-in-law, communication, conflict

### In-laws – a resource for support or family conflict

Although many sociological studies discuss about the modernity of the Romanian conjugal couple, the traditional influences can still be found in the functionality of current couples. The majority of young people in stable couple relationships, or those who are already married, were educated in families where the distribution of roles and the gender reports had a greater traditional accent. The update of modernity cannot be closely followed at the level of large communities, but rather at a microsocial level, each individual differently assimilating the benchmarks of new values. Therefore, starting from the theory of systems regarding family as a set of relational patterns which considers the family group involves concentrating on the interaction between the family members, rather than on the individuals’ personality (Nichols, Schwartz, 2005, p. 110), the analysis of this general communication structure becomes more important, including individuals in the extended family because their orientation may positively or negatively influence the stability of the young couple. There are scientific opinions which state that young people join their destiny when getting married, because this merge not only refers to a future together, but first of all to the

past of their families, more precisely the union not only occurring between the two partners, but also between their full genealogical trees (Benoit, 2009, p. 20). From this point of view, the opinion about the in-laws, and at the same time the in-laws opinion on the young family and the way it should be supported, influences the consistency of the nature of relationships between the young couple and the adult one and, by extension, to the young people with the general structure of the two genealogies.

Traditionalism transmitted a mechanic type of solidarity where the individuals’ adapting to culturally pre-established rules is prior to any individual will. In this context, accepting the „patriarch” is a normality justified by the wider marital experience, but also the experience of obeying the social imperatives of the community of belonging.

All this assimilated cultural dowry produced effects on the way in which the in-laws understand their role in supporting young families in naturally constructing the marital fulfillment.

The reason for which the in-laws can truly become a problem is based on three aspects: not accepting the parent in their lives, which censors the partner’s access to their own parents, the potential disorientation of parents who are afraid that through marriage they can lose the love of



their child, and the parents' dependence on their children.

In her studies, Susan Forward explains the complexity of the issue of in-laws, from the perspective of a triangle which forces man and women to fight with their partner over loyalty and support.

Starting from real stories of men and women who struggle to free themselves from the in-laws destructive behaviour, Forward identifies many types of toxic in-laws: the critic, who can hardly wait to turn the partner into the scapegoat, the authoritarian, who considers the child is incapable of making his own decision, takes the lead and directs all couple's actions, the engrossing, who considers it the young couple's duty to take care of the in-laws, the master of chaos, the one with numerous problems related to addictions, marital conflicts and financial difficulties, overwhelming the partners who are trying to solve them, and the grumpy, who has an abusive behaviour, permanently trying to destroy the marriage. (Forward, Frazier, 2010, p. 26).

Dismantling a conflict between the young couple and the in-laws is not a simple process, because the psychological and social variables arising from the nature of the relationships are multiple. They are provided by nature of the direct relationship between the child and the parent, of the social perception of the concept of in-laws, the nature of financial or housing dependence, etc. The issues that emerge in the relationship with the in-laws are difficult to deal with because they are part of a triangle (Ibidem, p. 27).

Although the triangulation tends to stabilize the relationships, being used as a valve that removes the negative energies, the existence of a long-term triangle only intensifies the conflicts between the parts.

Regarding the social projection of the concept of mother-in-law, the majority of the individuals don't evaluate it as being positive. Along time, the mothers-in-law inspired many jokes, conversations, folk tales („The mother-in-law with three daughters-in-law"), comedy shows, the name of a plant („the mother-in-law's tongue"), etc.

The expanded marital space is full of such stereotypes. Most of the times, the social stereotype prevails in labeling certain person, especially those in the conjugal space. Men are more unfaithful than women, women are weaker than men, mothers of boys are more possessive than mothers of girls, mothers-in-law are always bitter, etc.

Usually, they are called witches, bitches, nasty, crabby, and always have their nose stuck in the newly-formed family, and the tensions between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law are well-known, satirized and mentioned in the literature, the folklore, traditions and customs, from the traditional times up until nowadays. In a funny statement highlighted by Alin Ciupala, it is shown that in

the XIXth century, „The constitution of modern marriage", based on the separation of powers in the state, the man represented the executive power, the woman was the legislative power, and the mother-in-law was the Court of Justice and Control (Ciupala, 2003, p. 34).

„The mother-in-law syndrome", as called by the psychiatrists, still appears as one of the greatest challenges of newly-weds who really, symbolically or just apparently feel the permanent evaluation or dissatisfaction of the mother-in-law, fact which becomes a source of stress for the young couple.

Although it appears as a cultural issue, the problems with the in-laws were treated separately from several perspectives: as a sum of the exterior influences on the functionality of the young couple, as a set of psychological consequences on each of the partners (for example, the triangulation), as a type of functional conditioning generated by the cohabitation with the in-laws, and as a direct effect of socializing with their own child.

Motivated by the desire of their own child's happiness, the in-laws sometimes pretend that the daughter-in-law or the son-in-law would have a certain lifestyle, and also that she or he would play specific roles that would guarantee the comfort and happiness of their own child. Although, in essence, the purpose of building happiness is a good and moral, imposing their own lifestyle or set of values is rather difficult to tolerate by the young couple, specifically for the daughter-in-law or the son-in-law. Influenced by traditional models of conduct, which in most situations has different concepts according to their generation, the in-laws tend to turn the new family into a „child family", for them to run based on the principles of their choice (Apostu, 2015).

The mother of the man, namely her mother-in-law, causes real family dramas, fact confirmed by the researches conducted by Utah State University which showed that over 50% of marriages faced serious issues between the daughter-in-law and the husband's mother (Pease, Allan, Pease, Barbara, 2003, p. 157). Also, a gender approach for this situation showed the relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is more tensioned than the one between the son-in-law and the father-in-law (Apter, 2010).

In the same context of conflicts with the mothers-in-law, Therese Benedek talks about „the overinvolvement of mothers in the conjugal life of their children" as a defensive reaction of the fact that they are no longer needed. Although they should get involved less in the new family, due to their will to remain indispensable, they become dominating, all-knowing, invading their children's home and expecting their advice to be followed (Viorst, 2009, p. 187).

It seems it is not always an easy task for mothers to see their mature children as adults, as separate individuals who have the right to make decisions about their own life.



Often, the reason for the mother-in-law's behaviour is hidden in her subconsciousness, given the fact that from her point of view, it is perfectly normal to behave like that. The in-laws can see love as a „consumable“ resource, and the feeling that someone receives part of the love that should be exclusively theirs determines them to fight for what they consider is theirs, using the argument that they were together with their child for an entire life, and the partner is nothing but an intruder (Forward, Frazier, 2010, p. 176).

Certainly, not all mothers-in-law are bad, the relationship can be neutral, cordial, of respect and keeping the distance, or on the contrary, very close, the mother-in-law become a real mother for the daughter-in-law, being generous, loving, willing to help the new couple when they are in need, keeping their intimacy and autonomy intact.

### Social opinions on the in-laws

The analysis of the results shows that the opinions are somewhat antithetical. The study identified the fact that women have a reluctance to the partner's family. However, this is also seen both in a positive and negative perspective. From the point of view of validating the relationship, it is a positive aspect, but from the perspective of accepting the idea of a wider family, it is regarded negatively. As far as validating the relationship aspect is concerned, the gesture of presenting their own family is seen as a proof of serious projections regarding the marital future of the relationship (82% of the respondents). Therefore, the partner shows a form of openness of his own family for the other who, technically, opens the gate to a side of family intimacy which could bring direct effects on the partner's trust, on building their feeling of solidarity, etc. Perhaps from a paradigmatic perspective, the openness towards the family of one of the partners stimulates the other one's trust, but not the actual interaction with them. This prevails the more detailed image of the partner, but doesn't lead to the fusion with his/her family. Many times, the social construction of the image of in-laws distorts or even compromises the direct relationships between the man/woman and the in-laws. For this reason, 31% of the individuals who saw the gesture of their lover presenting their family in a positive manner, considered that gesture itself is a dangerous one, because this type of interaction makes the couple become vulnerable. In the same regard, 36% of the people interviewed consider that keeping a distance from the partner's family is the first rule that eliminates the risk of the in-law's bad influence.

Also, the young people's option for answers regarding the gesture of the partner presenting the other to the family mostly targeted the different ways of validating the partner, instead of the interaction with the extended family. A number of 64% of the respondents consider it important to

meet the partner's family because, understanding the functional structure of the family, the mentality of role and gender, they get to better know their partner.

The assessment of the statistical data on the two social categories in the study (married/ not married) shows that the „investment“ of trust in the in-laws isn't directly correlated with that of functionality of the extended group. Therefore, for young women not married, 22% of the „potential daughters-in-law“ declared that they never let anyone interfere in their relationship, so from the very beginning, they found a way of filtering the relationship with the exterior. The „success“ recorded by this category shows that 20% of the couples describe another series of continuous conflicts, and 58% of them said that they had minor conflicts who got solved over time. Of the total number of unmarried women, 62% declared that the openness towards the partner's family was stimulated by them, and was not a relationship personally desired.

The perspective of the daughters-in-law is a bit different – accepting the extended family no longer has that freedom of choice. For married couples, the conjugal harmony also has a social projection – the moral obligation of the young couple to have minimally functional relationships with the extended family. However, this „imperative“ may develop (for real or symbolically), the duty of assuming a relationship which involves buckling the young couple's intimacy who, naturally, wishes to project their happiness and functionality according to their own dreams and functional needs. As such, in itself, this „accepted disclosure“ is regarded with reluctance from both parts: for the daughter-in-law – as a form of invading the couple's intimacy, and for the mother-in-law – as a refusal of receiving her love and support. For this reason, the psycho-social mechanisms which build the relationship with the mother-in-law artificially develops in the direction of self-generated conflict, their relationships being, also, in antithesis – the daughters-in-law' reluctance to interact versus the mothers-in-law wish for fusion. In consequence, 14% of the daughters-in-law said that they secured their relationship from external interventions or influences. The social indicators resulting from the data analysis showed the fact that young married couples have persistent conflicts with the mothers-in-law in a proportion of 54%, and 32% of them had minor conflicts who got solved over time. Of all the women interviewed, 81% said that opening to the husband's family wasn't voluntarily, but stimulated by their partner, which shows the same social reluctance regarding the relationship with the in-laws.

Comparatively analysing the two categories, the percentage difference of 19% shows that the psychosocial mechanisms involved by marriage may artificially stimulate the conflicts if the multiple statuses defining the relationships in the extended



family are taken from social cliches which bear, through their generality, the idea of legitimacy.

For unmarried women, the report between the initial opinion of rejecting the relationships with the mother-in-law (62%) and the direct experience which lead to solving the conflicts (58%) show a level of functional coherence which demonstrates that in a process of reconstructing the roles and functions where the number of members and reports modify, the polemic of the reactions is not the same with the orientation towards conflict, but to the functional re-organizing.

Negotiating relationships from the perspective of the daughters-in-law has assimilated the projection of securing the couple from the „well-known vulnerability of the mothers-in-law”, fact which substantially modifies the structure of the relationships and the level of functionality of the extended family. From the other perspective, of the mothers-in-law, the tendency of unconditional good has its own subjective side, and in the same time, the dose of traditionalism, according to the socializing environment of the mothers-in-law. Therefore, the bidimensional tendency of self-defense is subject to the same sin, from both senses – the social construction of the image of the mother-in-law (for the daughter-in-law, as an authority which breaks the couple's intimacy while trying to assess and manage the young relationship, and for the mother-in-law – as moral responsibility of offering unconditional support for the young family).

The involvement in a relationship requires the removal of the individual from the initial family plan, in order to integrate in a new system. Forming a new couple doesn't make the extended family's connections disappear, but creates new ones, between a partner and the other partner's relatives. Either it is about a friendship relationship, or the relationship is founded by marriage, the members of the extended family find it almost impossible not to watch over the welfare of the person who entered the couple.

In a causal report, the conflicts' only source is not only accepting the conflict between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law a priori, but also the relational quality of the young couple. A number of 64% of the respondents stated that solving or avoiding conflicts happened because the partner was there for them, mediating the relationship between the family and the partner.

Another cause could be the need for inter-generational cohabitation, generated by the limited resources of the young couple in assuming rent or buying a house. In this case, the plan of integrating in a new system appears a triple challenge: the need for functionally adapting to the in-laws doubled by a reorganizing of the living space (with direct impact on the intimacy of the adult couple), the need for adapting of the young people to a system of functional co-participation and the need for a strategic management of leveling the

cultural differences between the two generations. However, the median of this triple challenge many times involves self-conditioning, censorship and a voluntary acceptance of the restriction of the personal space. On this background of co-dependence and inter-dependence, a negative image of the status of „mother-in-law” a priori anticipates the relationship failure of the entire system.

The reluctance of cohabitation is a general fact, 84% of the total sample acknowledging the fact that they don't agree living under the same roof with their parents. This aspect highlights the urgent need for intimacy that the women feel, expressing their need to have their own space to share with the partner only, among the many motivations being the need for protecting themselves from the alleged „violence” of the mother-in-law's potential actions (69% of the total of women stated that they don't want to live in the same house with their in-laws).

Regardless of the nature of the conflict (real, symbolic, anticipated or without any reasons), the negative appreciation of the concept of mother-in-law seem „legitimate”. The generality of the negative orientations no longer requires the individuals to objective assessments, the labeling being sufficient in anticipating the relationships and stimulating the self-protection from the „unwanted environment”. According to the data collected from the sample, 92% of women confirmed the fact that they know persons who faced problems in their relationship with the mother-in-law, only 9% of them considering that such situations can be generalized, the rest of them believing that such conflicts are rare, or short and of low intensity. These data highlight once again that the social opinions regarding the image of the mother-in-law are a negative projection and, in building this image, the artificial (and not the authentic) is the element with a considerable influence. Therefore, directly associated to the negative image of the concept of mother-in-law are the strategies of reacting to the anticipated aggression of the mothers-in-law. Most times, the relationship blockage occurs between the two women even before the actual relationship, because the image of conflict is culturally predefined in the very concept of mother-in-law.

Also in this regard, the analysis of the multiple answers (9 choice-answers, of which 4 are stereotypes taken from previous researches) regarding the strategy of the daughters-in-law to react to the mother-in-law shows, with priority, stereotyped formulations: 54% - stay away from those that don't agree with you, 42% - when two fight, who keeps quiet first is the wisest, 40% - divide in order to conquer, etc. Analysing these frequencies, we could say that anticipating the relationship with the extended family is somehow about a form of conflictual latency, because later on, the relationship itself risks to become the optimal environment for discharge.



Internalizing these negative images of the mothers-in-law is risking. It not only risks to arise dysfunctions in the relationship with the mother-in-law, but also in the couple's relationship. Being in the middle between two family sub-systems, the relationship with the wife and the young man's relationship with his own mom), the emotional costs and the ones of settling the conflict can hardly be managed by the husband, as long as both the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law expect their validation. According to the statistics, 34% of the daughters-in-law declared that they felt the husband's support, 18% declared that their husband prefers to not get involved in the conflict, 17% said that the husband tried to mediate the conflict „but usually, he makes us both mad”, and 31% of them said that the husband defends the mother.

### Conclusions

Often, between the actual behaviour and the expected one there are differences of attitude. The tendency to label becomes a risk, both for others and for oneself. The tendency to assimilate an image, predefined by a certain culture, is subject to the risk of limiting the knowledge which demotivates people to explore situations, persons, beyond the appearances of certain stereotypes.

Meanwhile, internalizing certain negative projections artificially evolves into a self-defense behaviour towards the potential „aggressions” that a mother-in-law might develop in the relationship with her daughter-in-law. From the experience of the mother-in-law, the „daughter-in-law” stereotype hits a double influence: the image of the

young woman who lacks experience in developing a psycho-psysical secure environment for the husband, and the subjectivity of the mother-in-law's relationship with her own child. Hence the moral of her interventions is about the subjective way of understanding her instrumental role in the relationship with the young couple.

Most of the times, the „mother-in-law” stereotype is doubled by the „daughter-in-law” one, having the same negative connotations. Therefore, the mother-in-law is for the young wife what the daughter-in-law is for the mother-in-law – they each have to convert the other.

Although the importance of the relationship with the mother-in-law is acknowledged and desired, the young women rather see it as ideatic, because the fear of conflict leads more to self-protecting their own relationship, rather than the wish for fusion.

Without any doubt, there are cordial relationships between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law! The study couldn't demonstrate real conflicts, strongly argumented, although they exist. The study analysed a set of opinions who, paradigmatically, are not the sum of the direct experiences between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law, but actually projections about the mother-in-law, mostly influenced by stereotypes.

The relationship between the young couple and the mother-in-law will always be an equation with three variables, so that the mother-in-law cannot always be guilty, the daughter-in-law cannot always be the victim, the man cannot always be objective in determining the guilt or establishing the protective measures.

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