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## ARTICLES

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# In-Law Relationships Before and After Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and Their Mothers-in-Law

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Relationships with in-laws can play an important role in individuals' lives. Dimensions of the early relationship and expectations of the future relationship may affect subsequent in-law ties. Men and women engaged to be married and their mothers ( $N = 240$ ) completed interviews prior to and 6 to 8 months following the wedding. At time 1, participants reported behavioral emotional and cognitive dimensions of the relationship and open-ended expectations of their future tie. Multilevel models revealed that when the parties had individual contact and positive feelings before the wedding, ties were stronger following marriage. For coded open-ended descriptions, if family members expressed concern that their in-law relationship would not be close or if they mentioned other social partners as causing potential future problems, they reported more negative relationship quality after the wedding.

Most Americans consider relationships with in-laws important (Fingerman & Hay, 2002; Santos & Levitt, 2007). The significance of these relationships is evident in many facets of life, including the quality of romantic relationships (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000; Timmer & Veroff, 2000), grandparents' ties to grandchildren (Fingerman, 2004), and as a source of stress or support (Fischer, 1983; Morr Serewicz, 2006). Yet a content analysis of studies published in family and relationship journals revealed that fewer than 1% examined in-law ties (Fingerman & Hay, 2002). This study fills a significant gap in the literature by examining the formation of in-law ties.

Dynamics of the early in-law relationships may help explain subsequent in-law relationship qualities. Several features of the formation of the tie are distinct. In-law ties are nonvoluntary (Morr Serewicz & Hosmer, 2011), arise in adulthood, and are predicated on a third party (i.e., the romantic partner; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Sechrist, Sutor, Kim, & Pillemer, 2012). The in-law tie involves a formal demarcation not evident in friendships or many other ties, a discrete ritual—the wedding. Before the marriage, the individuals may have a relationship, but the “in-law” label is acquired when the spouses marry.

Mothers-in-law warrant special consideration because they are more involved with married children and children-in-law (Fingerman & Hay, 2002; Fischer, 1983; Lee, Spitze, & Logan, 2003) and engage in more frequent contact with the couple (Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003) than fathers-in-law. Stereotypes stemming back 50 years portray the mother-in-law as the most problematic family tie (Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007). As a result, mothers-in-law evoke stronger emotional reactions than fathers-in-law (Willson et al., 2003).

In sum, this study included romantic couples and each of their mothers-in-law. We collected data a few months before, and a few months after the wedding. We considered two pathways through which early relationships may affect subsequent relationship qualities: (1) dimensions of the early relationship and (2) expectations of the future relationship. Behaviors, emotions, and cognitions evident while the tie is formed may persist in subsequent in-law ties. Further, individuals' expectations of the tie may shape future relationship qualities.

### Dimensions of the Early In-Law Relationship

Although relationships with in-laws share some characteristics of relationships with parents, ties to in-laws must be formed in adulthood and do not share the long history of parent/child ties. Theorists have identified factors during the “getting acquainted” stage that may provide a platform for future intimacy in other types of relationships (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). These dimensions include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive factors. That is, to form a relationship, individuals must behave in ways that allow them to get to know one another (behavioral), they must develop affection or intimate feelings about the other (emotional), and they must

acquire basic information about the other (cognitive). These dimensions are not discrete but serve as a heuristic for studying the formation of in-law ties.

*Behavior in the relationship.* Theorists posit that frequency of contact is an important indicator of interpersonal closeness (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 2004). Foa and Foa (1974) argued that several behavioral conditions are necessary for an “acquaintance” to become a close relationship, particularly regarding contact. Two specific conditions apply to in-law ties: opportunities to get together (i.e., repeated encounters to develop trust) and a degree of privacy (to allow formation of intimacy).

For in-law ties, contact may occur due to a close tie between the child and his or her own mother, rather than the in-law’s desire to be with the future mother-in-law. Thus, it is important differentiate contact in general (that may include one’s romantic partner) from contact that occurs alone with the in-law.

Here, we considered whether the bride and groom had met their future in-law, how often they visited in person and by phone, and whether they visited individually or with the romantic partner present. We expected parties that had more frequent contact, particularly solo contact without the romantic partner, to report better quality relationships after the wedding.

*Emotional qualities of the relationship.* In general, relationships that start with positive feelings grow closer over time. Early positive and negative qualities of romantic ties tend to persist into later years of marriage (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Similarly, emotional qualities of early in-law ties may endure. In retrospective studies, individuals report continuities in qualities of ties to in-laws from the early relationship to years after marriage (Merrill, 2007; Prentice, 2008). Family systems theory also suggests it is difficult to alter established emotional patterns in family ties (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Therefore, we expected early positive or negative qualities of the tie to persist.

*Cognitive aspects of acquaintanceship.* When establishing a tie, individuals must become acquainted and gain basic knowledge about the other party (Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Foa & Foa, 1974). Indeed, intimacy arises when individuals share and disclose information about themselves and the social partner expresses interest in learning this information (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

Because the in-law tie involves a third party, relationships could evolve in the absence of basic knowledge of one another. We expected the amount of personal information (e.g., birthdate, childhood history) one party knows about the other to serve as an indicator of early interest and investment in the tie.

## Future Expectations of Positive and Negative Changes

Two research perspectives suggest individuals' beliefs about the future tie also shape subsequent qualities of that tie: (1) stereotypes and (2) possible selves. These perspectives suggest a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who believe their ties will be positive develop strong ties. Likewise, for those with negative expectations, anticipated problems may materialize.

A variety of studies have shown that cultural stereotypes can be internalized and unconsciously shape subsequent outcomes (Levy, Chung, & Canavan, 2011). In the United States, stereotypes and media portrayals of mothers-in-law are predominantly pejorative (Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007). If individuals embrace negative expectations of their future in-law, the tie may manifest negative qualities. In this study, we focused on expectations of the actual relationship rather than broader stereotypes about in-laws.

More specifically, we drew on the possible selves literature. Psychologists have shown that expectations for positive or negative "possible selves" shape individuals' goals, hopes, and fears (Eagly, Eastwick, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986). That is, when individuals hold positive images of what they may become in the future, they are motivated to behave in ways that support (and lead to) those images of the self. Likewise, individuals may harbor expectations about future relationships, particularly in the acquaintanceship stage.

Individuals may hold positive and negative expectations of how their in-law ties will develop and change once the wedding takes place. Based on stereotypes and media presentations of mothers-in-law (Merrill, 2007), brides and grooms may harbor fears that the other party will be intrusive and critical. Mothers-in-law may worry about exclusion by the child-in-law (Morr Serewicz & Hosmer, 2011). Such worries may be associated with negative relationship qualities after the wedding. By contrast, a study of the in-law tie found most children and mothers-in-law described the early relationship with positive expectations (Turner, Young, & Black, 2006). The hope for a warm and close relationship may manifest in stronger bonds after the wedding.

## Other Variables Associated with Relationship Patterns

We also considered variables associated with differences in in-law ties. Brides, grooms, and their future mothers-in-law may approach this tie with distinct expectations, emotions, and behaviors due to their generation, gender, or individual characteristics.

Perceptions of the tie may differ by generation. The older generation typically values the intergenerational relationship more than the younger generation (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 2001; Martini, Grusec, & Bernardini, 2001). Similarly, mothers-in-law may be more knowledgeable of their future

child-in-law, rate the relationship more positively, and have more positive expectations of the tie.

Differences also may be evident in ties involving sons- versus daughters-in-law. Wives typically feel closer to their mothers than husbands feel to their own mothers and likely assimilate their husbands into their own family (Lopata, 1999; Santos & Levitt, 2007). Additionally, parents-in-law rate ties to sons-in-law more positively than ties to daughters-in-law (Fingerman, 2004). The shared gender between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law may heighten emotions (Kivett, 1989; Willson et al., 2003). Due to these differences, the bride's mother and groom may begin the relationship with more positive feelings, fostering closer ties.

Third party relationship factors also might influence ties. The period of courtship prior to engagement varies, and some in-laws may be recently acquainted whereas others may have known one another for years. Therefore, we considered how long the party had known the in-law. Further, because the ties are triadic in nature (Morr Serewicz, 2006) the quality of the partner's relationship with his or her own parent may influence the in-law tie.

Structural factors also influence relationships. Distance may affect the ability to get together with in-laws in person (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994). Higher levels of education are associated with increased distance between generations and increased support exchanges (Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002). Therefore, it is important to consider education's effects on the in-law relationship as well.

In sum, this study prospectively examined the formation of the in-law tie by collecting data from couples engaged to be married and each of their mothers. We predicted that (1) early behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of the relationship and (2) individuals' beliefs about the relationship would be associated with qualities of the relationship after the wedding. More specifically, we expected individual contact, positive feelings, and knowledge of the other party to be associated with better quality relationships. We expected family members who anticipated warm and loving relationships would manifest more positive relationship quality whereas fears that the other party would be demanding or exclusive would be associated with poorer quality relationships.

## METHOD

### Sample

This convenience sample included couples engaged for their first marriage and each of their mothers. Analyses focused on families in which each member participated in two interviews approximately 6 months prior to the wedding and approximately 6 months after the wedding. For simplicity, we refer to the parties as "bride/wife," "groom/husband," "wife's mother," and "husband's mother."

The romantic couples resided in the greater Indianapolis area. Recruitment strategies included (1) notices posted at stores, in public venues, and on college campuses; (2) flyers at wedding shows; (3) contacting individuals from bridal registries at local department stores; (4) contact with couples who announced their engagement in local newspapers; (5) African American hair stylists and radio; and (6) word of mouth.

Initially 66 families participated, and of those, 60 families included all four members at both Times of data collection ( $N = 240$ ). Of the families who completed Time 1 interviews: two families were missing the husband, two families were missing the husband's mother, one family was missing the wife's mother, and one family was missing both mothers at Time 2 ( $n = 6$ ).

The majority of the participants included in the final sample ( $N = 240$ ) had a high school education, were employed for pay, in good self-reported health, and Protestant. More than 90% were White (not Hispanic origin). See Table 1 for descriptive information about the sample.

## Procedure

Each family member completed individual telephone interviews at Times 1 and 2. At Time 1, the bride and groom answered questions regarding their romantic relationship, their own mother, and their relationship with their future mother-in-law. Mothers answered questions about relationships with their own child and

TABLE 1  
Sample Characteristics at Time 1

	<i>Brides</i> ( $n = 60$ )	<i>Grooms</i> ( $n = 60$ )	<i>Brides' Mothers</i> ( $n = 60$ )	<i>Grooms' Mothers</i> ( $n = 60$ )
Means ( <i>SD</i> )				
Age	24.47 (3.53)	25.13 (4.28)	50.80 (5.36)	51.71 (5.39)
Years of education	16.53 (1.89)	16.44 (2.02)	14.67 (2.89)	14.90 (2.60)
Self-rated health <sup>a</sup>	3.90 (0.80)	4.05 (0.83)	4.03 (0.78)	3.95 (0.87)
Distance to mother-in-law in miles	305.67 (759.67)	253.34 (447.35)	—	—
Months has known mother-in-law	34.46 (29.22)	29.47 (20.11)	—	—
Proportions				
African American	.05	.03	.05	.03
White not Hispanic	.92	.97	.93	.95
White Hispanic	—	—	.02	.02
Asian	.02	—	.02	—
Other	.02	—	—	—

<sup>a</sup>Self-rated health rated: 1 (*poor*) 2 (*fair*) 3 (*good*) 4 (*very good*) 5 (*excellent*).

future child-in-law. At Time 2, interviews included similar or follow up questions from Time 1. Participants received \$15 for each interview.

### Dependent Variables

*In-law relationship quality.* At Time 2, participants completed the 12-item Relationship Qualities Scale (Newsom, Morgan, Nishishiba, & Rook, 2000) with regard to their in-law. Six items assess positive qualities of the relationship and six items assess negative qualities of the relationship. The six positive items were used to create a positive relationship quality scale that ranged from 7 to 30 ( $M = 23.75$ ,  $SD = 4.46$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ) and the six negative items were used to create a negative relationship quality scale that ranged from 6 to 22 ( $M = 7.84$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ). Example items included: "How often has your [mother-in-law/daughter/son-in-law] acted warm or affectionate toward you?" "How often has your [mother-in-law/daughter/son-in-law] done favors or other little things for you?" "How often has your [mother-in-law/daughter/son-in-law] not given you help when you wished he/she would?" and "How often has your [mother-in-law/daughter/son-in-law] acted angry or hostile toward you?" Responses to these questions ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

### Dimensions of In-Law Relationships

*Behavioral dimensions.* At Time 1, we asked whether participants had met their future in-law (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*) and if so, how long they had known them. Most participants (98.75%) had met their future in-laws, but two grooms had not. Participants indicated they had known the in-law from one month to 16 years ( $M = 2.51$  years,  $SD = 1.86$  years).

We assessed frequency of in-person and telephone contact with the mother or own child and the future in-law in the past year using a scale of 1 (*never*), 2 (*once*), 3 (*2 to 5 times*), 4 (*6 to 10 times*), 5 (*more than 10 times*). We refer to these indicators as "general contact." Participants also indicated how often they had such contact on their own (without the romantic partner) on the same scale. We refer to this as "individual contact."

*Cognitive dimension.* We assessed familiarity with the in-law prior to the wedding. At Time 1, participants answered 18 questions regarding their own mother/child and their future in-law. For example, the bride and groom reported their mother's and mother-in-law's marital status, occupation, whether her parents were currently living, and so forth. Coders scored the number of questions the participants answered correctly, using the target's responses to these questions as the answer key. The proportion of responses scored correctly served as the index. Scores for knowledge of one's own mother or child served as a proxy for

validity of the measure (i.e., we expected participants to have more knowledge of their own child or mother).

*Emotional dimension.* Participants rated the quality of their relationship with their future in-law at Time 1. The first item, "How would you rate the overall quality of your relationship with your mother-in-law at this Time?" was rated 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Three other items "How much do you like your mother-in-law?" "Think of your ideal image of a mother-in-law. To what extent does your mother-in-law fit that image?" and "How much do you think your mother-in-law likes you?" were rated 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), for the four items,  $\alpha = .85$ .

### Expectations of Positive and Negative Change

Participants responded to open-ended questions about positive changes and problems in their relationships with their in-law. At Time 1, we asked: (1) "Marriage introduces new opportunities for you in your relationship with your in-laws. What do you expect to like best about your relationship with your mother-in-law after you are married?" and (2) "Marriage also introduces challenges dealing with your in-laws as you establish a new life. What do you expect to be the biggest problem in your relationship with your mother-in-law as a result of your marriage?" Questions were altered to address the appropriate party (e.g., daughter-in-law).

We transcribed participants' answers verbatim during the interview. The coding scheme reflected the data, as well as theory regarding these ties. Parallel themes were coded for positive and negative expectations, including: relationship qualities (e.g., contact, intimacy), adult relationship (e.g., equality in the relationship)/autonomy (e.g., unsolicited advice), assistance/support (e.g., emotional or financial help), other family relationships (e.g., grandchildren, the romantic tie), and personal comments (e.g., individual attributes, behaviors, or personality). We included codes for negative comments during a positive-target section, and positive comments given during a negative-target section. A code for "No change" encompassed reports for no expected changes.

Independent raters determined whether each code was present in the transcripts (i.e., codes were not mutually exclusive). Each coder engaged in 4 weeks of training and attended twice weekly meetings during the coding process. Reliability was established on 74 participants' positive responses and 72 participants' negative responses. Coders decided on final coding of disputed cases during weekly meetings. Descriptions of the codes are found in Table 2. Average reliability in coding was high, mean kappa = .89; and ranged from .74 for "personal comments" to .92 for "more adult relationship" in response to expected positive changes.

*Background information and covariates.* Participants provided standard background information such as age, gender, ethnicity, years of education, and



TABLE 2  
Proportion of Expected Relationship Changes at Time 1

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Bride (n = 60)</i>	<i>Groom (n = 60)</i>	<i>Bride Mom (n = 60)</i>	<i>Groom Mom (n = 60)</i>
Positive changes				
Closer/positive relationship	0.83	0.57	0.57	0.68
Other relationships	0.50	0.37	0.58	0.60
More adult relationship <sup>a</sup>	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Assistance/support	0.08	0.12	0.02	0.07
Personal comments	0.18	0.27	0.37	0.32
Negative comments	0.12	0.05	0.07	0.10
No change/no response	0.02	0.22	0.08	0.08
Negative changes				
Less close relationship	0.37	0.25	0.23	0.28
Other relationships	0.53	0.43	0.50	0.42
Autonomy/dependence <sup>a</sup>	0.40	0.38	0.33	0.30
Assistance/support	0.08	0.10	0.15	0.02
Personal comments	0.22	0.13	0.30	0.22
Positive comments	0.08	0.10	0.17	0.15
No change/no response	0.12	0.17	0.28	0.23

<sup>a</sup>Comments for positive changes typically referred to a more adult or peer-like relationship. The comparison code for negative changes pertained to increased dependency or lack of autonomy.

work status. Mothers also provided their marital status. We measured distance in miles between parties using home addresses provided for participant payment and entered the deidentified miles in the database.

*Couple's relationship.* The couple provided information regarding their relationship including when they met, length of dating relationship and Time until wedding at Time 1. The length of time since the couple had met ranged from 6 months to 16 years ( $M = 3.47$  years,  $SD = 2.43$  years). Time dating prior to interview ranged from 4 months to 8.4 years ( $M = 2.52$  years,  $SD = 1.57$  years). The average time to the wedding was 5.57 months ( $SD = 5.23$ ; range = 0.5–56 months). Further, 40% of the romantic couples were cohabitating.

*Relationship with own child/mother.* Participants also completed the Relationship Qualities Scale with regard to their own child or mother at Time 2. The positive relationship quality scale ranged from 7 to 30 ( $M = 26.09$ ,  $SD = 3.56$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ) and the negative scale ranged from 6 to 24 ( $M = 9.25$ ,  $SD = 3.16$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ).

## Analytic Strategy

We first provide descriptive information regarding the dimensions of the relationship and the open-ended expectations of positive and negative changes after the wedding. We considered possible differences between family members on these variables and gave examples of the types of responses participants provided regarding expected changes.

In analyses, for continuous outcomes, we used multilevel modeling in SAS PROC MIXED (version 9.2) due to possible dependence in responses among family members. That is, sons-in-law and their mothers-in-law would be expected to report frequency of contact scores that are highly correlated, the couple's reports of quality of tie to the reciprocal mother-in-law might be correlated and so forth. By taking into account the dependence among the individual responses within the same family, we estimated standard errors more accurately. Multilevel models (MLM) accounts for within-family dependence by incorporating a unique random effect for each family. The variability in the random effects is taken into account when estimating the standard errors.

Analyses controlled for participants' ages, education level, relationship duration with the mother/child in-law, and physical distance between mother-in-law and child in-law. We also controlled for the quality of the relationship between the mother and her own child.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Overview of Variables

*Dimensions of the in-law relationship.* Table 3 presents the descriptive information for each family member reporting on his or her relationship with his or her in-law. As can be seen in Table 3, family members reported having contact 6 to 10 times in the past year. More than one half of family members reported having contact with the future in-law alone (as opposed to with the romantic partner present). Participants generally rated the quality of their relationship high at Time 1. Average scores for participants' knowledge of their in-laws was 75% correct ( $SD = .14$ ). In comparison, average knowledge of their own child or mother was higher, 89% correct ( $SD = .07$ ); paired  $t = 15.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (results not shown).

Preliminary analyses examined within family differences with regard to all Time 1 predictors and Time 2 relationship qualities. Predictor variables were generation (1 = *mother-in-law*, 0 = *child-in-law*), participant gender (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*), and side of family (1 = *bride* or *bride's mom*, 0 = *groom* or *groom's mom*). With control variables, multilevel models (i.e., SAS 9.2 PROC MIXED) revealed no difference between the family members, that is, either mother-in-law, sons and daughters, on the cognitive predictor quiz score, or the affective predictor (relationship quality) at Time 1, or positive and negative

TABLE 3  
Descriptive Information for Dimensions of In-Law Relationships at Time 1 and In-Law Relationship Qualities at Time 2 by Family Member

Variable	Wife (n = 60)		Husband (n = 60)		Wife's Mother (n = 60)		Husband's Mother (n = 60)	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Time 1								
Contact <sup>a</sup>	4.43	(0.79)	4.45	(0.73)	4.31	(0.79)	4.42	(0.77)
Individual contact <sup>b</sup>	0.66	(0.34)	0.54	(0.35)	0.55	(0.41)	0.71	(0.34)
Affective quality <sup>c</sup>	4.09	(0.79)	4.01	(0.72)	4.20	(0.65)	4.24	(0.61)
Quiz score <sup>d</sup>	0.77	(0.12)	0.72	(0.12)	0.76	(0.15)	0.76	(0.16)
Time 2								
Positive Relationship Quality <sup>e</sup>	24.30	(4.28)	23.30	(4.63)	23.50	(4.41)	23.90	(4.58)
Negative Relationship Quality <sup>e</sup>	8.30	(3.22)	8.42	(3.52)	7.02	(1.65)	7.62	(2.68)

<sup>a</sup>Contact rated 1 (*never*) 2 (*once*) 3 (*2–5 Times*) 4 (*6–10 Times*) 5 (*over 10 Times*).

<sup>b</sup>Proportion that had individual contact.

<sup>c</sup>Relationship quality ranges from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating greater positive relationship quality.

<sup>d</sup>Proportion of items correctly answered about in-law mother/child.

<sup>e</sup>Time 2 relationship quality scales range from 6 to 30 with higher numbers indicating either greater positive or negative relationship quality.

qualities of the relationship at Time 2. Because behaviors (i.e., contact) involve two parties, we did not test for differences in contact.

**Expected positive changes.** We also examined the open-ended responses. As can be seen in Table 2, many participants described expectations of a closer relationship with their in-laws. Some of these responses referred to gaining a new parent or child. A bride commented, “It’s just like having another mother that I’m close enough to that I can confide in.” Other responses focused on more personal issues. A bride’s mother remarked, “We share a love of music and that is what I always enjoy with him. I think this shared love of music will help bring us closer.”

A second dominant positive theme involved relationships other than the in-law tie, especially future grandchildren. A bride sought advice, “My fiancé has a bigger family and I was an only child. We plan to have more children like her family and learn from her.” Some participants commented on the marital tie (rather than the in-law tie). A groom’s mother stated, “They look forward to starting a new life together and I think it is pretty exciting. She makes him happy and so she makes me happy.”

Some participants made negative comments in discussing positive changes. One bride explained, “.I think our relationship will grow more because she’ll want

to talk more since she doesn't really get along with her other daughter-in-laws very well." Several participants indicated they did not expect changes, particularly grooms, "Just because you get married doesn't mean there has to be tons of changes. Especially, since we have lived together anyway. Things shouldn't change either way."

*Expected negative changes.* Responses regarding expected problems varied. Some participants feared the relationship wouldn't grow close. A bride explained, "It's just harder for me to talk to her than it was to talk to some of my other friends' parents. She doesn't give a lot of feedback."

Another dominant problem theme involved autonomy. A groom expressed this concern, "The biggest challenge will be to have her trust us enough to know that we can do things on our own." Mothers-in-law were aware of stereotypes they hoped to avoid. A groom's mother explained, "And I don't want to butt in and I want to be sensitive to them and not impose on them. That would be the only place that we could have problems is if they think I am imposing."

### In-Law Relationship Quality at Time 2

We estimated models to ascertain whether prewedding relationship dimensions (behavioral, affective, cognitive) predicted postwedding Time 2 positive and negative relationship quality scales.

*Positive relationship quality.* Table 4 shows that general contact with the in-law (i.e., contact with the romantic partner present) at Time 1 was significantly negatively associated with Time 2 positive relationship quality. By contrast, Time 1 individual contact ( $b = 1.88, p < 0.05$ ) and positive relationship quality ( $b = 3.49, p < 0.001$ ) were each significantly *positively* associated with Time 2 positive relationship quality.

*Negative relationship quality.* At Time 2, general contact with the in-law ( $b = 0.83, p < 0.01$ ) was significantly associated with negative relationship quality. By contrast, Time 1 positive relationship quality ( $b = -1.91, p < 0.001$ ) was significantly and negatively associated with Time 2 negative relationship quality. In other words, better relationships at Time 1 predicted fewer conflicts or demands at Time 2.

### Open-Ended Expectations and Relationship Quality at Time 2

We estimated multilevel models examining each code (with at least 20% of participants' responses fitting the code) as a predictor of relationship quality at Time 2. Based on distributions (see Table 2), we estimated 3 models for positive changes

TABLE 4  
In-Law Relationship Quantitative Measures at Time 1 Predict Time 2 Relationship Quality<sup>e</sup>

<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Positive Relationship Quality</i>		<i>Negative Relationship Quality</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	6.15*	3.06	13.69***	2.21
Behavioral				
Contact <sup>a</sup>	-0.92*	0.41	0.82**	0.29
Individual contact <sup>b</sup>	1.95*	0.78	-0.68	0.56
Affective				
Time 1 relationship quality <sup>c</sup>	3.27***	0.39	-1.90***	0.28
Cognitive				
Quiz score <sup>d</sup>	1.95	1.87	1.51	1.34
Control variables				
Age	-0.02	0.02	-0.03*	0.01
Education	0.07	0.10	-0.06	0.07
Distance to in-law	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Relationship duration with in-law	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Relationship quality with own mother/child	0.19*	0.08	-0.01	0.05

<sup>a</sup> Contact rated 1 (*never*) 2 (*once*) 3 (*2–5 Times*) 4 (*6–10 Times*) 5 (*over 10 Times*).

<sup>b</sup> Had individual contact 1 (*yes*) 0 (*no*).

<sup>c</sup> Relationship quality from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating greater positive relationship quality.

<sup>d</sup> Proportion of items answered correctly about in-law.

<sup>e</sup> Time 2 relationship quality scales range from 6 to 30 with higher numbers indicating either greater positive or negative relationship quality.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

(i.e., close relationships, other people, and personal comments), and 4 models for expected problems (i.e., less close relationship, other people, lack of autonomy, and personal comments).

Although we had expected anticipation of a warm and close relationship at Time 1 to be associated with better relationship quality at Time 2, this was not the case. No code was significantly associated with the positive relationship quality subscale at Time 2.

Associations between descriptions of problems and subsequent negative relationship quality were found for two codes: (1) fears that the relationship would not grow closer, and (2) situations involving other parties (see Table 5). Our initial predictions had included concerns about autonomy or intrusion by the mother-in-law, but these concerns were not associated with poorer relationship quality at Time 2.

Examples of concerns about the closeness of the relationship included comments that the other party was sensitive or expected more closeness than possible. Several responses also pertained to dividing time or holidays. A bride remarked,

TABLE 5  
Expectations of Changes at Time 1 Predict Time 2 Negative Relationship Quality<sup>e</sup>

<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	12.23***	2.05	13.10***	2.03
Codes				
Less close relationship	1.04**	0.37		
Other relationships			1.18*	0.48
Control Variables				
Age	-0.04**	0.01	-0.04**	0.01
Education	-0.06	0.08	-0.08	0.08
Distance to in-law	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Relationship duration with in-law	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Relationship quality with own mother/child	-0.09	0.06	-0.09	0.06

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

“Sharing time, definitely not spending holidays and important dates with her. She will get very jealous.” Other responses included geographic distance. A groom’s mother indicated, “Like I said before, each of us getting enough time with them. I just want a little piece of them. I am not asking for a lot, but . . . I hope she remembers and comes and visits me.” These types of comments were associated with more negative relationship qualities at Time 2.

With regard to other relationships, a variety of concerns were associated with poorer quality relationships at Time 2. Some concerns pertained to the romantic relationship. For example, a bride worried her mother-in-law would side with the groom in an argument, “And if James and I get in a fight . . . then I think it might be a sticky situation . . . she might want to take his side when we are in an argument.” Grandchildren also figured in these responses. For example, a groom’s mother lamented that she might not have grandchildren, “They don’t want any kids and so that would be a place we could bond, but we won’t be able to.” A groom mentioned the relationship between his mother-in-law and his wife’s sibling, “The conflict between her treating my fiancé differently than her sister. . . . That is a problem between them and subsequently could be for me as well.”

### Post-Hoc Tests

Finally, to examine stability in findings, we estimated the multilevel models for Time 2 relationship quality separately for each dimension of the relationship at Time 1: (1) emotional (relationship quality), (2) cognitive, (knowledge of the other party), and (3) behavioral (contact). In these models, the quiz scores for knowledge of the other party were significantly associated with Time 2 positive and negative relationship qualities in expected directions.

We also estimated regression models separately for wife, husband, wife's mother, and husband's mother to ensure patterns were the same for each family member. Because data were no longer nested within families, we computed multiple regression rather than MLM. Due to diminished power in these models, we considered each predictor individually. Results from these regressions showed the pattern as a whole was consistent for each individual family member. Thus, in this study, our overall pattern of results appears to be robust across gender, across generation, across side of family, and across specific family members. Observed effects in Tables 4 and 5 do not appear to be driven by one member of the family, or by any dimension on which the members of the family necessarily systematically differ (e.g., generation membership).

Finally, it is possible that qualities of the couple's relationship shape the in-law relationship. We assessed the quality of the couple's relationship after the wedding. We found that couple's relationship was significantly associated with both positive and negative in-law relationship quality in bivariate tests. When we added this variable as a covariate to the models presented in Tables 4 and 5, however, the overall patterns do not change (i.e., those predictors that were significant before remained significant, and those predictors that were nonsignificant before remained nonsignificant). Thus, more factors pertaining to the in-law relationship (contact, feelings of affection) shape this relationship above and beyond the marital tie.

## DISCUSSION

This study presents unique data examining the formation of mother-in-law and child-in-law relationships over time from the perspective of four family members. Findings support retrospective studies of the in-law tie that have found early emotional qualities are associated with reported relationship qualities after marriage (Merrill, 2007; Prentice, 2008). We found that early relationship qualities and contact alone with the future in-law facilitated better relationships after the wedding. Individuals' beliefs about positive changes in the future relationship did not appear to set the stage for self-fulfilling prophecies, but two types of expected problems were associated with poorer quality relationships.

### Relationship Qualities and Expectations

The majority of brides, grooms, and mothers-in-law did not endorse negative feelings about their in-law relationships portrayed in media images and cultural stereotypes (Merrill, 2007). Rather, findings were consistent with a qualitative study showing mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law reported positive expectations and feelings in the relationship (Turner et al., 2006).

Surprisingly, there were no significant generation, gender, or side of family differences on the relationship dimensions (behavioral, affective, cognitive) at Time 1 or in the positive and negative relationship qualities scales at Time 2 (after controlling for age, education, time known the in-law and other variables). Theory on the topic of in-law ties typically considers the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law dyad to be more conflict ridden than the son-in-law/mother-in-law dyad (Fischer, 1983; Kivett, 1989). Methodological differences may help account for the discrepancy in patterns of findings. The vast majority of studies of in-law ties have been qualitative in nature (e.g., Merrill, 2007; Prentice, 2008; Turner et al., 2006), and relationship indicators examined here were quantitative in nature. Thus, we were able to include control variables, and to examine potential differences systematically.

Nonetheless, we may have missed subtle nuances. One study did find gender differences in quantitative ratings of in-law ties, with daughters-in-law rating greater conflict and ambivalence with their mothers-in-law (Willson et al., 2003). That study examined a distinct population, however, encompassing rural farm families in Iowa in the late 1990s. Gender differences in in-law ties may have waned in more recent cohorts, particularly among non-rural populations such as the participants in this study. Alternately, gender differences may have less to do with mean differences in relationship qualities and more to do with the components of those qualities.

### Early Relationship Dimensions and Postwedding Relationship Qualities

Findings revealed that behavioral and emotional aspects of the relationship formation stage were associated with postweddings quality of the in-law relationship. The patterns fit research and theory on the formation of friendships and romantic ties (Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Berscheid et al., 2004; Foa & Foa, 1974).

Findings involving contact with future in-laws revealed interesting complexities. Having more contact in general was associated with lower positive relationship quality and increased negative relationship quality after marriage. This finding is surprising; more contact typically is associated with increased intimacy and positive feelings (Lawton et al., 1994). Yet individual contact was associated with more positive feelings about the relationship after the wedding. These findings may reflect the triadic nature of the in-law relationship (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Sechrist et al., 2012). That is, contact in general includes the romantic partner. In some instances, the reporting family member may have felt coerced to interact with the future in-law. By contrast, contact that is individually initiated may be chosen and foster intimacy.

Positive relationship qualities during the relationship formation period were associated with more positive feelings and fewer negative feelings after marriage. Retrospectively, mothers-in-law and children-in-law have reported continuity in



qualities of their tie from before the marriage (Merrill, 2007). The findings also are consistent with a study that documented stability in romantic, family, and friend relationships before the wedding into the early years of marriage (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Moreover, family systems theory suggests relationship patterns involving multiple family members are difficult to change (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Here, we controlled for the relationship between the mother and own child; thus, the stability in the in-law tie is above and beyond that involving the grown child.

Knowledge of the other party was associated with Time 2 relationship qualities when it was included as the sole predictor in bivariate analyses but was not associated with Time 2 relationship qualities when we included relationship qualities and behaviors in the same model. These findings suggest that knowledge of the other party may be a facet of relationship quality; relationship quality was associated with subsequent positive and negative aspects of the tie.

### Expectations of the In-Law Tie and Postwedding Relationship Qualities

This study also included a unique feature by examining expectations of the future relationship. Literature regarding possible selves suggests expectations motivate behaviors and generate self-fulfilling prophecies (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Interestingly, expectations of the relationship were not associated with positive relationship qualities, but a limited set of expectations was linked to negative qualities of relationships.

Methodological issues such as the selection of codes or phrasing of the questions may partially explain the paucity of findings, but the pattern is consistent with the literature. Most individuals enter the in-law relationship with positive expectations of their future relationship (Turner et al., 2006), making it difficult to detect differences in positive qualities. The ability to detect negative qualities of the relationship may reflect Tolstoy's famous quote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Two anticipated problems distinguished negative relationship quality. Fears that the relationship would not be close were prescient of a more conflicted relationship. Notably, many such responses pertained to feeling torn between the two families, particularly with regard to holidays. Holidays may play a key role in relationships because they make visible otherwise unspoken feelings (Fingerman, Buckser, & Turiano, 2009), in this case, family loyalties.

Moreover, mentioning other parties, such as birth family members, as a potential source of problems was associated with increased negative feelings about in-laws. These findings substantiate the important role network members play in shaping marital ties (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000) and in-law ties early on.

It is notable that anticipated problems with regard to autonomy and boundaries were not associated with the subsequent qualities of the tie. Prior research on

mothers and daughters has found that problems involving exclusion and criticism or intrusion were associated with conflict in the relationship (Fingerman, 1996). Similarly, theory regarding in-law ties led us to expect that anticipating such problems would predict poorer relationships (Morr Serewicz & Hosmer, 2011). Findings from this study suggest that anticipated problems extending to the larger family (e.g., divided loyalties, mentioning other people) may be more indicative of future conflict. Individuals may master the ability to deal with boundaries of their dyadic tie, but the larger constellation of family members.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The study is limited in several respects. The challenges of recruiting four family members in the throes of planning a wedding were daunting, and people who participated may represent a biased group, favorably inclined toward their in-laws. Likewise, the sample was homogenous. The scant literature on in-law ties suggests patterns differ across racial and cultural groups. For example, ties to mothers-in-law are highly valued in Black families (Goodwin, 2003; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). In-law relationships also may vary by other demographic factors such as economic status. Future studies should attempt to capture a broader cross-section of the population. Further, father-in-laws deserve attention in future research because findings indicate that gender of the parent-in-law affects this tie (Willson et al., 2003).

In sum, this study added a unique perspective by assessing in-law relationships before and after the wedding and using all four family members' perspectives. Findings revealed that the relationship between mothers-in-law and children-in-law may not be as conflict ridden or difficult as media stereotypes. There were also fewer differences between daughters-in-law and sons-in-law than expected. Moreover, in general, early positive relationship dimensions were associated with more positive and fewer negative relationship qualities after the marriage. Expectations of the future tie were less important for the future relationship than the actual early qualities of the tie. Nonetheless, anticipating certain problems were associated with increased conflict with in-laws. Thus, it is important for scholars to consider the relationship of in-laws before and after a wedding to understand how a tie unfolds over time.

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