

Daughters-in-Law and Mothers-in-Law Seeking Their Place Within the Family: A Qualitative Study of Differing Viewpoints

M. Jean Turner

Carolyn R. Young

Kelly I. Black*

Abstract: Within the framework of individual developmental theory and intergenerational ambivalence, we examined the complex dynamics of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Using focus group and semi-structured interview data, we explored mothers-in-law's and daughters-in-law's perceptions of "being part of the family." The diversity among the perceptions of the unrelated 23 daughters-in-law and 19 mothers-in-law countered the validity of stereotypes often held about the women in these roles. The women described the ambivalence many of them felt as they searched for their place in the family. Findings suggest that women of all ages may benefit from education about this critical relationship and need to develop skills to express themselves to their mothers-in-law/daughters-in-law to facilitate adequate management of the ambivalence prevalent in this relationship.

Key Words: daughters-in-law, extended family, family relationships in adulthood, in-laws, intergenerational ambivalence, intergenerational relationships, mothers-in-law.

For women, family relationships are tied to their sense of well-being and quality of life. Theorists (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) and researchers (e.g., Baber & Allen, 1992; Fingerman, 2003; Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 1999; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003) alike emphasize the importance of connectedness in women's lives. The role of family relationships becomes increasingly important as the life span lengthens and family size shrinks. The complexity of these relationships increases as children enter adulthood and build their own families. A son's marriage creates perhaps the most ambivalent and yet one of the most critical relationships, that of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Fischer, 1983, 1986). Using focus group and semi-structured interview data, we examined both mothers-in-law's and daughters-in-law's perceptions of the quality of this in-law relationship and how it shaped their struggle to find their place within the family.

Women have been described as the kinkeepers of family relationships, the bridge between generations

(Fischer, 1983; Willson et al., 2003). Married women are expected to create bonds and maintain the ties and traditions of both sides of the family (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Cotterill, 1994; Fischer; Willson et al.). Although the mother-daughter bond remains the central connection between women of different generations (Fischer; Willson et al.), the bond between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is also critical in kinship management (Fischer). It is often the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship that maintains the bridge between the mother and her son as well as determining the mother-in-law's access to her grandchildren. However, the asymmetry of the relationships between a mother and daughter and a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can lead to increased stress for both generations of the in-law relationship as each seeks to maintain close connection to their own family members (Fischer). On the basis of their findings that women have significantly more personal contact with their

*M. Jean Turner is Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the School of Environmental Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701 (jturner@uark.edu). Carolyn R. Young is a Psychotherapist at Ascent Counseling, 3256 W 111th Loop Unit C, Westminster, CO 80031 (carolynryoung@comcast.net). Kelly I. Black, M.S., 118 HOEC, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701 (kiblack@sbcglobal.net).

own parents than with their parents-in-law, Lee, Spitze, and Logan (2003) asserted that the kin-keeping role for women applies only to the matrilineal kin network. Further, Lopata (1999) contended that the loss of the obligatory ties to the patriarchal side of the family strengthens the daughter-in-law's connection to her own mother. Similarly, Shuey and Hardy (2003) found that the primary filial obligation for women and their husbands follows the matrilineal line. Thus, this relationship often determines each woman's ability to find her place in the family once a son marries.

Theoretical Foundation

Erikson (1965) and Gilligan (1982) concurred that relationships played an important role in women's development. Further, Erikson contended that a woman's identity was shaped by her relationship with her husband and that women must resolve intimacy and identity issues simultaneously. If the younger woman's identity evolves from her husband her task at this stage is to establish her autonomy and identity within her husband's life. Mothers-in-law would likely be in the midlife stage of generativity or the later life stage of ego integrity, which may lead them to want to share the wisdom they have gained across the years with the daughter-in-law. From this life-stage model, it is not surprising that tensions may arise between daughters-in-law who are seeking independence and autonomy and mothers-in-law who are striving to have an influence on the lives of their families.

Gilligan (1982) agreed that women identify themselves through their relationships; however, she contended that identity was shaped by all relationships, not just the marital relationship. A woman's "identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 160). This feminist framework emphasizes the continuation of the interactions between identity, intimacy, and responsibility throughout adulthood. Having a positive relationship with her mother-in-law/daughter-in-law is essential to a daughter-in-law's/mother-in-law's sense of well-being. Discord in the relationship creates stress for both women because of failure to adequately include the other in their sense of identity, establish intimacy, and care for the other.

These two perspectives clearly portray how young women's developmental tasks to differentiate

themselves from their families of origin, establish a sense of individual identity, and build bonds with all members of their informal network combine with mothers-in-law's efforts to share their knowledge and to redefine their identity as mothers without losing their relationships with their sons give rise to challenges to each woman's identity and sense of self. The linkage both theorists make between intimacy, identity, responsibility, and caring reveals that establishing a positive in-law bond is essential for personal and relational development.

Ambivalence, however, often occurs in the formation and maintenance of intergenerational family relationships (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Intergenerational ambivalence derives from social structure and individual role norms combined with subjective perspectives arising from cognitive were emotional responses (Willson et al., 2003). Willson et al. contended that in-law relationships were an "important structural arrangement of kinship that holds the potential for producing ambivalence" (p. 1058), especially between women whose identity and evaluation of adequacy resides in maintaining successful relationships. In addition to the social ambivalence, Luescher and Pillemer proposed that a psychological ambivalence, grounded in the individual, was a major factor in understanding intergenerational family relationships. Psychological ambivalence includes "contradictions at the subjective level, in" terms of cognitions, emotions, and motivations (p. 416). Examples of intergenerational contradictions adults encounter with older family members include the contradiction between dependence and autonomy or expectations and norms for intergenerational interactions.

Previous Research

The often conflicting developmental challenges mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are dealing with from the inception of their relationship, combined with the socialization of women as intergenerational kinkeepers, suggest that both women perceive themselves to be vulnerable when conflict arises in their relationship. The major transition each faces while establishing the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, simultaneously with building new marital and family roles, indicates the importance of this relationship for both women's

personal and marital well-being. Yet, little research has explored the nature of the dynamics of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship.

Children-in-law in general, and daughters-in-law in particular, often assume the role of caregivers for aging parents-in-law (e.g., Globerman, 1996; Goetting, 1990; Guberman, 1999; Lee et al., 2003; Peters-Davis, Moss, & Pruchno, 1999; Shuey & Hardy, 2003). Close emotional bonds determine the assistance that children-in-law provide to their parents-in-law. For example, Peters-Davis et al. (1999) determined that the quality of the relationship between children-in-law and their parents-in-law was the most salient factor for predicting intergenerational exchanges. Children-in-law are more likely to perceive that providing assistance to their parents-in-law is a choice rather than an obligation.

A few researchers have examined the relationship dynamics of in-law relationships outside of the caregiving relationship (e.g., Bryant et al., 2001; Cotterill, 1994; Fischer, 1983, 1986). Cotterill's interviews with British women explored mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship quality. She described women as both the "kinkeepers" and "peacekeepers" in charge of the emotional energy within the family. They are charged with maintaining contact as well as mediating "the emotional energy invested in relationships and the feelings of expectation, fulfillment, and disappointment involved" (p. 62).

The complexity of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, and the fact that it is mediated by so many other family relationships, challenges researchers to find appropriate methods for examining this relationship. Another factor contributing to the limited research available regarding this relationship (e.g., Cotterill, 1994; Fischer, 1983, 1986) is that most family researchers focus on primary family relationships, such as marriage partners or parent-child relationships, rather than secondary or "quasi-kin, quasi-maternal" (Fischer, 1986, p. 191) family relationships such as the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Therefore, few researchers have attempted research on this specific family relationship. When they do, the ambivalence and vulnerability both women feel relative to this relationship make it difficult for them to adequately describe both the positives and the negatives in their relationship. Indeed, it is difficult for mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to discuss the relationship.

Seminal work by Fischer (1983, 1986) broadens our understanding of the many triads formed with

these two women and their long-term impact on numerous other family relationships. In describing the differences in complexity of the mother-daughter and the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship and how the daughter-in-law serves as the gatekeeper determining her mother-in-law's access to her son as well as her grandchildren, Fischer noted that a mother-daughter relationship is often strengthened with the birth of a child. However, the relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law often experiences increased ambivalence with the birth of a child because of the different kinds of assistance mothers and mothers-in-law provide. Mothers tend to provide service whereas mothers-in-laws tend to give gifts of things, possibly because they do not know how services will be accepted by their daughters-in-law, and daughters-in-law are ambivalent about asking them to provide household and caregiving assistance (Fischer, 1986).

The focus of our research was to provide an in-depth examination of mothers-in-law's and daughters-in-law's relationships from their perspectives, exploring the nature of their relationship and the factors that shape it across time. In this paper, we focus on the perceptions of the quality of the in-law relationship and its role in women's struggle to find their place within the family that is so central to their husband's/son's life.

Methods

Qualitative research methods provide an avenue for developing an in-depth understanding of individual and relationship dynamics. The use of focus groups was particularly appropriate for our research because this approach allowed us to validate the experiences of the women in the groups as they identify with others' experiences and use them to explore their own. This approach allows researchers to understand the level of consensus and diversity among focus group participants and provides an excellent means for examining complex behaviors and motivations because of the group effect of interacting with others (Morgan, 1996).

Our use of focus group and semistructured interview data as well as quantitative data from the questionnaires, which included demographic, family structure, and quantitative relationship quality assessments, provided the multimethod approach recommended by Mancini and Bleiszner (1989) as

a means for effectively examining complex family relationships. The use of one family member each of two different generations, the combination of quantitative data with focus group data, and the use of three independent coders to analyze the themes in the focus group transcripts provided the triangulation that supports trustworthiness and indicates the rigor of our methodological approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sample Selection Process

The sample for this study resulted from convenience sampling of women in a large western city, two small southern cities, one small town in the south, and a small town in the southwest. Sites for the focus groups and interviews were selected because of where the authors lived or where they had family or friends willing to organize focus groups. One group evolved from a research experience one of the authors had at another university.

Women who identified themselves as either a mother-in-law or a daughter-in-law were contacted and asked to participate in a focus group discussing their relationship with their mother-in-law or their daughter-in-law. Contact was made in one of several ways. For the first focus groups, letters were sent to women one of the authors knew through her professional or social contacts asking them to participate in a focus group. Subsequent groups were recruited through contact information provided by earlier participants in the focus groups or through word of mouth resulting from friends or family members of the authors who were aware of the project. The focus groups differed in the extent to which the participants knew one another. One young woman brought her close friend with her to the first daughter-in-law focus group but did not know any of the other women. All of the focus groups in the small town in the southwest were composed of women who taught at the same elementary school. Thus, they were all acquainted at some level but generally only through professional relationships. A daughter-in-law put one group together from women in her new church that she had just met. Acquaintance among other women in focus groups was purely coincidental.

Although some of the focus group women may have served in both roles at the time of the group meetings, the focus group sessions emphasized either their role as a mother-in-law or as a daughter-in-law.

If women wanted to share their story but could not meet at the time established for the focus group, they were interviewed individually using the same discussion guide used for the focus group they would have attended.

The focus group sessions primarily took place in a private home. One occurred in a private room at a restaurant and two others in a school classroom at the end of the school day. As the women arrived, they were offered refreshments and given written questionnaires to complete as they got acquainted. The questionnaire consisted mostly of demographic information but also included contact and quality of relationship questions. In addition, the packet contained a request for permission to contact their respective mother-in-law or daughter-in-law or other acquaintances that fit in either category to ask for their participation in the research activity. Ideally, we would have had some mother-in-law daughter-in-law pairs in their respective focus groups; however, our final sample included only two-matched mother-in-law daughter-in-law pairs in the data set. To protect confidentiality, we will not discuss these two pairs of women in reference to one another.

Several factors explain why we did not have more participation by mother-in-law daughter-in-law pairs. Many of the daughters-in-law gave us their mothers-in-law's contact information. However, among some of our early daughter-in-law participants, the negative nature of their relationship with their mother-in-law, of which the mothers-in-law were aware, led the mothers-in-law to decline to participate. In our largest mother-in-law group, the focus group itself consumed more time than most had allowed. The women were eager to leave and indicated they would mail or e-mail us the contact information; however, we never received the information necessary to follow up with their daughters-in-law. Geography and timing were the primary reasons many of the other pairs did not both participate. Often the mother-in-law or daughter-in-law of the women involved in our study lived too far away from the focus group sites or were not available to be interviewed at the times the researchers had available.

Background Characteristics of the Women

Daughters-in-law. We interviewed 23 daughters-in-law through eight different focus groups or individual interviews at four different locations. Because

we wanted to examine how the length of time in the role could affect the dynamics of the relationship, we did not limit the number of years each participant had been in the role of daughter-in-law. Daughter-in-law marriages ranged from 1 to 35 years. Daughters-in-law ranged in age from 22 to 54 years ($M = 35.65$). Five of the women reported being in their second marriage. All of the daughters-in-law had at least some college with 73.9% of them having at least a bachelor's degree. Two of the daughters-in-law were Hispanic, the remaining were White, non-Hispanic.

We also asked the daughters-in-law demographic questions about their mothers-in-law. The mothers-in-law described here did not participate in one of our focus groups or an interview. Their mothers-in-law ranged in age from 49 to 87 years with a mean of 63.4 years. Three of the daughters-in-law's mothers-in-law were Hispanic. Seven of the mothers-in-law had formal education beyond high school.

Mothers-in-law. Nineteen mothers of married sons participated in four focus groups in three different locations. Two of the mothers-in-law failed to submit their demographic questionnaires. Therefore, we have complete quantitative data for only 17 of the 19 participants.

Eleven of the mothers-in-law were married, three divorced, one remarried, and two were widowed. Of the 11 married women, the length of marriage ranged from 1 to 52 years ($M = 31$ years). All but two of the women were in their first marriage. The mothers-in-law ranged from 45 to 84 years of age ($M = 62$ years). All of the mothers-in-law had some college or above with nine of them reporting that they had graduate degrees. Three of the mothers-in-law were Hispanic; the other mothers-in-law were White, non-Hispanic.

The mothers-in-law were asked specific questions about their sons' marital relationships. The length of marriage of the sons ranged from less than 1 to 25 years ($M = 8.5$ years). Eight of the mothers-in-law lived 1 hr or less from their sons, three lived 10 hr or more from their sons.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

Audio tape recordings were made of every focus group and interview session. The tapes were then transcribed verbatim. During the focus group sessions, one of the researchers took detailed notes, whereas the other asked questions from an established but flexible discussion guide that provided an

overarching structure to the session. When issues arose that were not on the guide, that line of discussion was pursued. Immediately following the session, researchers reviewed notes and added additional comments to the notes. The discussion guides were revised following each focus group to incorporate concepts that surfaced because of the interactions within the group.

The interview sessions followed the same format as the focus groups. All but one interview occurred in a private home or in a meeting room suitable for the process. The exception was an interview with a daughter-in-law during her lunch break from work. One researcher and a friend of the daughter-in-law met and talked at a restaurant. All of the interviews included a minimum of three people. In two cases, the third person was a friend of the young woman being interviewed who was also a daughter-in-law who had participated in a focus group. In the other case, both researchers were present for the interview. The interview sessions were often shorter and more structured than the focus group sessions simply because of the lack of others sharing their experiences; but the responses were at least as in-depth as the responses of focus group participants. Conversely, the comments of the focus group participants often encouraged further reflections and provided insights to others in the group. The absence of those exchanges in the interviews changed the interview data in that the interviews lacked some of the breadth of the focus group experiences. The same themes were consistent across both focus group and interview data. The flexibility of the qualitative process enriched the data acquired through these processes.

Three researchers participated in coding the transcripts of the focus groups and the interviews using the open coding process to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involved word by word review of the focus group transcripts that allowed us to determine consistent patterns expressed by the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. We used these themes to establish categories for scoring all the focus group data. The continual comparison between statements and categories provided a broader understanding of the similarities and differences between the women in all of the focus groups as well as differences between themes found among mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. One of the coders was involved in all of the focus groups and interviews, another participated in most of the focus groups. One of the coders had not been involved in any of

the interviews or focus groups. Two of the coders were mothers-in-law and had been daughters-in-law. The third coder did not have any personal experience in either role. The differing levels of involvement in the data collection process and the roles allowed us to have both a subjective and a more objective perspective as we coded the transcripts. It also provided triangulation between the coders to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Each coder independently read each transcript multiple times and determined major themes and subcategories. Once the themes were identified, the three researchers independently read through each transcript again and identified line numbers that fit within the themes and subcategories. Contact was then made via telephone conference calls and ratings were compared. Each discrepancy in scoring was discussed until 100% agreement was reached.

Although their perspectives and interpretations often differed, the data reported in this paper are themes apparent in both the mothers-in-law's and the daughters-in-law's responses. Because we wanted to focus on the connectedness of intergenerational families, the major themes we chose to discuss in this paper include expectations and disillusionment around being part of the family.

Results and Discussion

We gained many insights from the women of our study about the promises and the challenges of the mother-in-law and daughter in-law relationship. Specifically, both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law enter the relationship with expectations for a positive relationship as well as anxiety about the future of the relationship. Even those who reported excellent relationships with their mothers-in-law or daughters-in-law expressed some hesitancy about trusting the relationship. Because we found similar events were sometimes interpreted very differently by daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, we use examples to illuminate the different perspectives. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of the women in our study.

Expectations

We asked mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to describe their relationship with the other prior to

marriage. The daughters-in-law expressed a variety of experiences. Several had a positive sense of the relationship prior to marriage. Sara (daughter-in-law) described her mother-in-law as a "kinder, gentler person to me before we were married and immediately right afterward." The close up view of her husband's family because marriage had provided a "more real" picture of her mother-in-law. Sara suggested that the positive dynamics in her relationship with her mother-in-law prior to marriage were because she worked so hard to please her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law disguised her real thoughts and feelings about Sara and the upcoming marriage between Sara and her son.

Some daughters-in-law saw an ideal family in their future husband's family. Carol's parents, for whom she is the only living child, were divorced when she was 3 years old. She (daughter-in-law) looked forward to belonging to her husband's large, always together family. "I think I thought in the beginning, before we were married, 'this would be fun' you know, to have this family because they are all very supportive of each other and this is just this great thing." Now, 10 years after the wedding Carol and her husband are very isolated from his family and rarely attend family events because of their perception of the very negative manner his family relates to Carol. After years of leaving family events in tears, Carol now chooses not to participate. Her husband joins her in that decision.

Many of the daughters-in-law described a strained relationship even prior to marriage. Several talked about the effort they made to try to begin the relationship on a positive note. Judy (daughter-in-law) describes her attempt.

I feel like that prior to marriage I was putting a lot more effort into the relationship, trying to be accepted, trying to be a part of it. . . . I was just more accommodating and like not as true to myself as I should have been. . . . I was trying to be acceptable to them.

Sally (daughter-in-law) talks about never feeling comfortable. She states, "I always felt like a second-class citizen when we were over there. It just became worse when we got married."

The sense of insecurity and fear that they were not acceptable is evident in many of the daughters-in-law's comments about the relationship prior to

marriage. Yet, most wanted desperately to establish a warm, comfortable relationship with the mother of the man they were about to marry. Most entered the marriage believing they could win their mothers-in-law's approval and love.

Mothers-in-law were more cautious in their assessments of the relationship prior to marriage than the daughters-in-law. The majority of the mothers-in-law indicated that although they really did not know their future daughter-in-law well enough to know what they had in common, they had a positive, somewhat close relationship with their daughters-in-law prior to their sons' weddings. Shannon (mother-in-law) speaks of the ideal many mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law expect, "... never really talked about it [the relationship]. I have no need—there was just a closeness that was nice, it was . . . felt very good and we share a lot of the same interests. We both love her husband, I guess." From our focus group experiences, it became apparent that few mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships begin this way or ever achieve this level of mutual appreciation and closeness.

Some mothers-in-law suggested the relationship began positively then became a disappointment after their sons' marriages. Cathy (mother-in-law) said, "... it was really kind of easy with her because I knew her before, that part of it was easy. [It was] the things that happened later that didn't make it easy." Cathy was surprised by what she perceived to be her daughter-in-law's hostility and possessiveness that began immediately after the wedding. Others indicated that the relationship was strained from the beginning. The first time they met, Jan's daughter-in-law told her of the lifestyle that she had lived prior to meeting Jan's son. The prior lifestyle contradicted Jan's (mother-in-law) value system and continues to interfere with the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship years after the marriage. "I'm still not dealing real well with that and not that, I, I don't know, just maybe I have a little bit of a problem with that. And so it's been a somewhat rough relationship."

In sum, when the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law first meet, they often have very mixed emotions about the future of the relationship. The daughters-in-law are beginning their journey of integrating identity and intimacy as they shape who they are becoming (Gilligan, 1982). As they look forward to beginning life with their soon-to-be husband, they are anxious to please and at the same time wish

to exert their autonomy and independence in the relationship. Simultaneously, mothers-in-law are facing the end of, or at the very least, a drastic change in the role that has formed the core of their identity as a mother and a woman across much of their adult life. They are struggling with their desire to "let go" without losing the connection to their sons that has defined their sense of self for many years. At the same time, their developmental task is to mentor younger adults and to pass on their values and wisdom for the good of future generations (Erikson, 1950). It is within the context of this shifting foundation that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship begins to take shape. Conflicting wants and needs between the two women increase the challenge of this life transition.

Realities and Disillusionment

Regardless of expectations, once the wedding is past the relationship is set. It is a role that must be navigated. One of the emergent themes from both the daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law was how different the reality was from what they had expected. The daughters-in-law seemed to expect that the wedding ceremony would create a loving family waiting to accept them. They often looked to the new husband's family to provide the family experience they had not previously had in their lives. If they did have close family relationships with their families of origin, they expected the in-law family experience to be either just like being home with Mom or to never be able to measure up to their expectations for a happy family life.

For some, the disillusionment is very painful. Carol (daughter-in-law) described her disappointment when she realized,

That like kind of my ideal family isn't as great as I thought it was. Like his family isn't as great as I thought they were . . . and that, evidently we aren't going to be a part of this. . . . I also saw that [husband] was treated badly. . . . I would get angry and then the family turned on me and not [him] and now that I pulled out, they started doing those things to him and he was like, "wait a minute." And that's when he finally said "you know what, I've had enough" and we kind of both took a while to start talking to his parents again.

The intensity of her disillusionment was expressed when she said,

I think they always kind of hoped that this relationship, though we've been married longer than anyone in the family . . . wouldn't work. So I think that's been the hard part and I've always felt that way. . . . I also have the feeling of, if I died tomorrow she really . . . it would be fine.

Not all the daughters-in-law felt so hopeless. Amy (daughter-in-law) felt very fortunate to have her mother-in-law in her life.

She makes it so known to us that . . . that she loves us and she is unconditionally there and will do anything but doesn't have to do anything. . . . She's just so, so good at relationships. . . . I don't think I could have gotten a better mother-in-law if I had created her myself. She's very, very selfless is the biggest part of it.

The majority of the daughters-in-law described the quality of their relationships with their mothers-in-law somewhere between the two statements above. Several described their efforts to keep the avenues open in order to allow them to build a stronger relationship over time. Nancy (daughter-in-law) talked of the gradual change in her relationship with her mother-in-law.

I'm sure she thought I was hard to get to know. Here I was smiling all the time. . . . She's very idealistic . . . but . . . fairly cynical. She also knows exactly what is wrong with the situation and I was just so positive. . . . but she calls in the middle of the day now and talks. She knows [my husband] isn't there. . . . We've had discussions and I think that we are getting closer.

After 6 years of marriage, Nancy's comment speaks of the time it sometimes takes to build the bridge that many daughters-in-law thought was automatic with the marriage. Her comments reflect the effort and willingness on both her and her mother-in-law's part to try to build a relationship.

Although her husband's relationship with his mother is very strained because of a midlife divorce from his father, Jessie (daughter-in-law) takes her role as kinkeeper for her husband's family very seriously. She described the effort she has invested to try to build a better relationship with her husband's mother.

I just try to go wherever people are. She might not be very good at relationships, but I know that if I find out what she's interested in and then be interested in it myself, . . . [for example, there is my son/her grandson] so that's pretty easy. There's other things, too, like cooking . . .

In another part of the discussion, Jessie talked about the summer she took her young son to her mother-in-law's family reunion even though her husband could not attend. She described how hard she worked throughout the weekend to keep communication with her mother-in-law open. She clearly accepts the responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the "connectedness" that Gilligan (1982) described between her small family group and her husband's extended family, especially his mother. She fulfills the kinship management role for both sides of the family (Bryant et al., 2001; Cotterill, 1994; Willson et al., 2003).

The mothers-in-law found it easier to characterize the current relationship than the premarital relationship. However, many of their descriptions of the current relationships are rooted in things that happened around the wedding. For example, Joyce (mother-in-law) describes an event that happened in preparation for the wedding that still gets in the way of their relationship.

They brought the invitations over to show us, and we both looked at it and said, "Well, it's very nice but . . ." and they didn't know why we were upset and finally I said, "Well, you know . . ." They didn't put our name on it and that really upset us. . . . She said, "I didn't even think of it. The gal in the store suggested this and we went with the format." We were supposed to pay for the invitations. . . . They didn't want to re-order them but they paid for them, instead we paid for something else. It was a very difficult night for us. . . . To this day, it still bothers me.

Other mothers-in-law reported a similar experience with the wedding invitations containing the bride's parents' but not the groom's parents' names. We asked daughters-in-law in later focus groups about this issue. We were told that the preferred style today included the bride's but not the groom's parents' names and that it did not carry any specific meaning about the importance of the groom's parents. However, apparently, the meaning it held for mothers-in-law relative to the daughters-in-law's acceptance of them and recognition of their contributions as "part of the family" was very significant.

Ann (mother-in-law) had the opposite experience. She spent the year prior to the wedding planning the wedding with her daughter-in-law because the daughter-in-law's mother was not available for the task. Although sometimes stressful, this interaction formed the foundation for building a very positive and loving relationship with her daughter-in-law.

Julie (mother-in-law) also described a request from her daughter-in-law that shaped their relationship. Shortly after the wedding, Julie's daughter-in-law asked her mother-in-law to decorate their home for them. Julie had designed her own home and others but was somewhat anxious about the complications that might arise if she agreed to do her son's and his wife's new home. However, her daughter-in-law insisted so she followed through giving her son and daughter-in-law all the final say on design choices and costs. Julie contends that the very positive relationship she and her daughter-in-law have today is built on the trust her daughter-in-law showed her by asking her to decorate the younger couple's home.

When asked about the relationship prior to marriage, Suzanne (mother-in-law) said, "I was waiting for some maturity in her." Now, 3 years after her son's wedding she says,

I can honestly say I want to get to know her better and yet I feel like there is a certain amount of control that goes on. I'm sure a lot of that is being newly married and getting established and just learning and growing and just trying to figure out relationships herself and I don't know if she has quite figured that out yet.

At another point in the discussions Suzanne said, "It's still a work in progress all the way around."

Her comments express another potential difference in perspectives between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law—that of time. Daughters-in-law who have been married for three years talk about having been married for such a long time that their mothers-in-law should be used to them by now. This differing perception of time and how the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law describe their relationship in the context of this difference is an opportunity for conflict that often leaves the daughter-in-law feeling unappreciated and not accepted as an adult in her own right. At the same time, because of her "wait and see" attitude, the mother-in-law might be perceived as distant and uninvolved, which likely leaves her feeling unaccepted and unwanted.

Pat (mother-in-law) spoke of behavior by her daughter-in-law that left her feeling very hurt and alienated.

When she had left over tickets she would invite all her family and our family to join with her if it was a dinner theater or whether it was a sports event or whatever. . . . But, we would show up and she wouldn't even acknowledge us, come up and say "Hi. Hello. How are you?" Nothing. And we would go home feeling despondent and . . . rejected. . . . She would be friendly with everyone in the room but totally ignore us. . . . So we were very despondent and angry when we would come away from her.

Pat's comments suggest the need to feel part of the family is not just something with which the daughters-in-law struggle. It was very important to Pat that she be valued and acknowledged as an important person in her daughter-in-law's life. She was very hurt when that did not happen. In addition, her daughter-in-law's failure to acknowledge her interfered with the connectedness she had developed with her son and threatened her critically important identity as a mother.

Other mothers-in-law celebrate the role their daughter-in-law has played in building bridges between them and their sons. Betty (mother-in-law) talks of being very grateful for what her daughter-in-law did for her son's life.

. . . Our relationship with our son was very strained for a while. There were about five

years when . . . it was baby steps and constant support, you know, never giving up. Then this girl came into his life and not only changed his life, but it is real important [to her] that he have a relationship with his dad and I and she calls us Mom and Dad. . . . I thank her every day.

Betty not only appreciates her daughter-in-law for what she terms “saving my son for me,” but she also credits her daughter-in-law with providing the means through which she and her husband can now have a relationship with their son. This daughter-in-law is truly engaged in the kinship management essential to the well-being of intergenerational family relationships (Cotterill, 1994; Fischer, 1983, 1986; Willson et al., 2003).

Both developmental transitions and intergenerational ambivalence are clearly evident from the focus group data. Par’s hurt from not being acknowledged as an important part of social gatherings reflects her struggle with her role as the “other mother.” Her daughter-in-law’s inability to acknowledge her mother-in-law in social gatherings when the daughter-in-law’s family was around may well result from the daughter-in-law’s struggle to differentiate from her own family while establishing herself as an independent adult.

The approach—avoidance many of the daughters-in-law talked about related to wanting to be part of the family, while also protecting and isolating their nuclear family, is indicative of intergenerational ambivalence (Willson et al., 2003). For example, Carol (daughter-in-law), who wanted so badly to be part of this family, removed herself from family gatherings and even stopped speaking to any of her in-laws because she did not feel accepted by her husband’s family. At another point in our focus group discussion, she talked of having recently stopped by her parents-in-law home with her young child because she wanted her child to be a part of the larger family connection she had envied prior to marriage. Her husband refused to go to his parents’ house with them. Carol’s comments clearly illustrate the simultaneously positive and negative dimensions often seen in intergenerational families, especially between daughters-in-law and their mothers-in-law.

The conflicting developmental challenges daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law face, combined with the ambivalence common in intergenerational

relationships, provide the foundation on which the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is established. These relationships are often mediated by other roles in the larger family system. It is apparent from our women’s responses that the daughters-in-law’s mothers, the husbands/sons, and children/grandchildren add to the complexity of the relationship between these two women. Although space does not allow us to expand on the role of others in this relationship here, it is an important avenue for future research.

The Perspective of the Other

Both the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law of our study understood to some degree the struggles of the other woman in this relationship. When talking about the pain of feeling excluded from certain events by her daughter-in-law, Helen (mother-in-law) said, “. . . and then I stop and think—my daughter would do the same thing because of her relationship with me.”

From the daughter-in-law’s perspective, Jessie (daughter-in-law), the mother of a young son, articulated what many of the daughters-in-law seemed to feel:

I hope that I have a daughter, just because I think if I’m a mom of only sons, your sons leave, and then there seem to, it really is different, the way, I mean, the way that [my husband’s] mom gets to spend time with my son [her grandson]. . . . My mom was there when he was born and I talk to my mom all the time. I have to think and remember to call her [my mother-in-law] to tell her things. I think it is very different to have a son and try to deal with a new daughter-in-law than to have a daughter and try to deal with a son-in-law.

Although this insight brought some understanding of where the other was coming from, it seemed to do little to lessen the pain and discomfort many of our mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law felt as they negotiated their ambivalent role in the intergenerational family network. Their personal perspectives of the particular challenges relative to being part of their husband’s family limited their ability to apply this insight to their own mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative data of this study provides a rare in-depth look at a central relationship in the extended family that is rarely studied. However, it does have some limitations that one must be aware of when interpreting the results. Overall, the women of our study are better educated than a general cross section of women. It may well be that those who agreed to participate in our interviews and focus groups present a certain level of awareness about the issues in their relationships and are more willing to talk about their differences and similarities than a more representative sample would be. Further research is needed with a cross section of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law pairs to determine the role these differences exert in our study. In addition, because these are not matched pairs of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law it is difficult to determine if our daughters-in-law's comments are the same as those the daughters-in-law of our mothers-in-law would make. The demographic differences between our daughters-in-law's mothers-in-law and the mothers-in-law who participated in our study suggest there might be significant differences in these two groups of mothers-in-law. For example, our mothers-in-law reported much higher levels of education than our daughters-in-law reported for their mothers-in-law. This difference in education between the two groups of mothers-in-law might lead to different approaches to understanding and negotiating mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship challenges. It could be that the comments of our daughters-in-law about their mothers-in-law are very different from those that the daughters-in-law discussed by the mothers-in-law in our study might make.

Although the majority of the daughters-in-law were in early adulthood and in their first marriage, about one third were in marriages lasting longer than 10 years and five had been married more than once. We did not see major differences between the young daughters-in-law and the midlife ones. In fact, many of the daughters-in-law's responses were very similar, regardless of length of marriage. We did not have sufficient numbers of remarried women in the sample to examine the relationship differences that might occur in second or third marriages. Both length of marriage and number of times married would be expected to impact the women's responses. Future research needs to more carefully

examine how length of time married and whether or not the woman is the first daughter-in-law are related to the daughters-in-law's report of the quality of their relationships with their mothers-in-law.

Conclusions

The complexity of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship challenges both researchers and theorists as we examine its role within the family. Because of the central role this relationship between women holds in the kinship support network (Bryant et al., 2001; Fischer, 1983, 1986; Willson et al., 2003), it is essential that we understand the dynamics between these two women. Within the context of developmental theory (Erikson, 1950, 1965; Gilligan, 1982) and the framework of intergenerational family ambivalence (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Willson et al.), the findings highlight the importance of being part of the family and the very diverse perceptions of the joys and pains of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship.

The role of connectedness that Gilligan (1982) contends is central to women's identity is a prominent theme throughout our discussions with these women of two different generations. All of the women in this study talked about their relationships as defining their identity; therefore, their comments centered around relational themes of trust, reliance, acceptance, affection, rejection, betrayal, and alienation. As became clear from the women we talked with in our focus groups and interviews, intergenerational ambivalence is the essence of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Their stories clearly express the simultaneously positive and negative dynamics symptomatic of intergenerational ambivalence (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Willson et al., 2003).

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings of this study have implications across a variety of fields. From a theoretical and research perspective, the women of this study clearly reinforce the concept of family as a context in which development occurs. As Fingerman and Bermann (2000) asserted we cannot study individual development outside the context of family nor can we examine family development without considering the developmental trajectories of the individuals within

the family. Clearly, individual and family development is an interactive whole and must be studied as such.

The findings also have implications for practitioners engaged in enriching marital and family life. Marriage and family therapists can improve their effectiveness with intergenerational families by understanding the developmental differences and the multiple roles involved in shaping the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship as well as the impact that relationship has on the rest of the family system.

Premarital counselors and family life educators can assist new couples and their parents in understanding the dynamics of the intergenerational relationships developed when one marries. They can develop and provide the tools each family member needs in order to begin these relationships in a healthier manner. Community workshops and presentations can provide a forum to help sensitize each generation to the developmental transitions and individual dynamics for each person in the multiple relationships affected when one marries. Such education and training will enable the development of strong and more effective communication skills, which will assist in eliminating many of the miscommunications we witnessed as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law talked about the challenges of their relationship. Further, professionals involved in developing instruments and programs to assist in the adjustment to and enrichment of marriage relationships, especially those related to communication and conflict, can support couples in strengthening intergenerational relationships by discussing the dynamics of in-law relationships in their materials. Family life educators and others who teach about individual and family development can assist future generations of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in understanding the dynamics facing each individual and each generation when the intergenerational family is extended through the marriage of a son.

Often, what seems so obvious is not apparent to those individuals in the midst of cross-generational interactions. Much of what the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law shared in our discussions about events or communications that caused them pain resulted from a lack of understanding of the other person's perception of a specific event. For example, the daughters-in-law talked of feeling that their mothers-in-law were not accepting them as part of their husband's life or accepting the couple as a unit

when the mother-in-law did not use the daughter-in-law's name as well as the son's name on answering machine messages. Mothers-in-law were very surprised that such a simple act could cause so much pain. However, for the daughters-in-law it felt like a lack of acknowledgment similar to that expressed by several of our mothers-in-law above, like leaving the groom's parents' name off the wedding invitations or not saying "hello" when the mother-in-law arrived at a social gathering. Practitioners working with families can do much to eliminate misperceptions between these two generations of women. Educating all family members about developmental differences between generations, about how to understand and acknowledge their own issues relative to their mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, how to clarify perceptions, and how to speak and listen effectively so that misperceptions can be avoided can all help other women avoid some of the challenges the women of our study experienced.

Perhaps, the most significant finding of this study is that there is no such thing as a "typical" mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. It was very clear from the voices we heard that the stereotypical image of the daughter-in-law or of the mother-in-law does not match the reality of the women of our study. Each individual and each relationship is different and each has its own style and message. Recognizing the uniqueness of each mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is the first step in assisting individuals and families in developing healthy intergenerational relationships that meet the needs of the whole kinship network.

References

- Baber, K. M., & Allen, K. R. (1992). *Women and families: Feminist reconstructions*. New York: Guilford.
- Bengtson, V. L., & Roberts, R. E. L. (1991). Intergenerational solidarity in aging families: An example of theory construction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 856-870.
- Bryant, C. M., Conger, R. D., & Meehan, J. M. (2001). The influence of in-laws on change in marital success. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 63, 614-627.
- Connidis, I. A., & McMullin, J. A. (2002). Sociological ambivalence and family ties: A critical perspective. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 64, 558-567.
- Cotterill, P. (1994). *Friendly relations? Mothers and their daughters-in-law*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1965). Inner and outer space: Reflections on womanhood. In R. J. Lifton (Ed.), *The woman in America* (pp. 1-26). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Fingerman, K. L. (2003). *Aging mothers and their adult daughters: Mixed emotions, enduring bonds*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Fingerman, K. L., & Bermann, E. (2000). Applications of family systems theory to the study of adulthood. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 51(1), 5–29.
- Fischer, L. R. (1983). Mothers and mothers-in-law. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45(1), 187–192.
- Fischer, L. R. (1986). *Linked lives: Adult daughters and their mothers*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Globerman, J. (1996). Motivations to care: Daughters- and sons-in-law caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease. *Family Relations*, 45(1), 37–45.
- Goetting, A. (1990). Patterns of support among in-laws in the United States: A review of research. *Journal of Family Issues*, 11(1), 67–90.
- Guberman, N. (1999). Daughters-in-law as caregivers: How and why do they come to care? *Journal of Women & Aging*, 11(1), 85–102.
- Lee, E., Spitze, G., & Logan, J. R. (2003). Social support to parents-in-law: The interplay of gender and kin hierarchies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 396–403.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Lopata, H. Z. (1999). In-laws and the concept of family. *Marriage and Family Review*, 28(3/4), 161–170.
- Luescher, K., & Pillemer, K. (1998). Intergenerational ambivalence: A new approach to the study of parent-child relationships in later life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 413–425.
- Mancini, J. A., & Bleiszner, R. (1989). Aging parents and adult children: Research themes in intergenerational relations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 275–290.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22(1), 129–153.
- Peters-Davis, N. D., Moss, M. S., & Pruchno, R. A. (1999). Children-in-law in caregiving families. *The Gerontologist*, 39(1), 66–75.
- Roberto, K. A., Allen, K. R., & Blieszner, R. (1999). Older women, their children, and grandchildren: A feminist perspective on family relationships. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 11(2/3), 67–84.
- Shuey, K., & Hardy, M. A. (2003). Assistance to aging parents and parents-in-law: Does lineage affect family allocation decisions? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 418–431.
- Silverstein, M., & Bengtson, V. L. (1997). Intergenerational solidarity and the structure of adult child-parent relationships in American families. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 429–460.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
- Willson, A. E., Shuey, K. M., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (2003). Ambivalence in the relationship of adult children to aging parents and in-laws. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65, 1055–1072.

Copyright of Family Relations is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.