

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF A MOTHER-IN-LAW AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP: A CASE STUDY PERSPECTIVE

Aler L. Pagente

University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Oroquieta Campus, Mobod, Oroquieta City

Correspondence: aler.pagente@ustp.edu.ph

ABSTRACT: *There have been many studies in the social sciences about relationships dealing with genetic relatives, but affinal relationships, i.e., in-laws, have received much less attention. Relatively, humans, on the other hand, have extensive interactions with their mates' kin, providing numerous opportunities for collaborative and conflictive interactions with extended family structures. To contribute to the limited studies, this research aims to determine the relationship between mother-daughter in-law relationships using the case study as a qualitative research design. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique in selecting the participants and a semi-structured questionnaire for the face-to-face interviews. The researcher analyzed the recorded and transcribed data through thematic content analysis. The study interpreted the phenomena through the theories of family systems and social exchange. Based on thematic content analysis, the first impression creates an enduring impact, there is dynamic communication experienced within the relationship, and the management of resources like money was never discussed with both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. With these results, both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are working hard together towards good relationships in order to avoid conflict and develop a well-established home and harmonious family life.*

Keywords: mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, relationship, social construction, family system, social exchange

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Families have been traditionally formulated through birth, marriage, or adoption [1]. When one marries, the concept of in-laws enters the picture. In-law relationships, more specifically the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, are often the subjects of interest in making assumptions that these relationships are greatly problematic [2]. This kind of relationship is predominant, and they have been vilified and have been the subject of conversation, portraying their relationship as negative, distant, and something that should be avoided [3].

Gender is considered a reason in this relationship, as there seems to be greater conflict and competition between parents and parents-in-law of the same sex. Daughters and daughters-in-law usually have more difficulty with their mothers and mothers-in-law than their fathers or fathers-in-law because of the so-called Oedipal Complex—an attachment of the child to parents of the opposite sex. Relatively, because mothers are by nature more involved with family [4], women have been described as the ones who usually assume the social role of promoting and protecting relationships between family members [5].

For a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the benefits of maintaining a close relationship cannot be overstated since women play a big role in the family system as the so-called “kin keepers.” The dynamics of these two also affect intergenerational relationships [6].

Studies show that a negative in-law relationship and subsequently strained paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship become major risks for family well-being. The quality of in-law relationships affects a couple’s marital satisfaction. The relationship between mother-in-law and son also suffers, as the son or spouse is expected to take sides and may hurt his mother’s feelings when remaining loyal to his wife [7].

Additional studies show that conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law arise because of a competition between them for the affection of the son or husband, especially if the mother feels that she is losing her son to her daughter-in-law [8].

However, mother-daughter-in law relationships are not always in trouble; they often provide very positive relationships. When in-law relationships are good, they offer an additional member in the family [10].

Hence, the study aims to determine the social construction of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship in order to understand and interpret phenomena within the context of the family system and social exchange theories.

2.0 METHODS

The study used a qualitative, descriptive case study. We purposely selected four participants who met the criteria of being a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. The study was conducted in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, and Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, through a face-to-face interview. We conducted interviews separately using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. Below are the research questions that were asked:

Table 1: Research questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. How was your relationship with your mother/daughter-in-law?	1.Tell me about your relationship with your mother/daughter-in-law. 2.How was your mother/daughter-in-law relationship changed over the years? 3.How comfortable are you with your mother/daughter-in-law relationship?
2.What influences the mother/daughter-in-law relationships?	1.What role does your mother/daughter-in-law relationship play in your family? 2.What are the experiences you had with your mother/daughter-in-law in terms of employment, parenting, management of resources and others?

Thematic content analysis involved using the recorded and transcribed interviews for data collection. The data used the two theories—the family system and social exchange to

understand and interpret the phenomena of the relationship between the two.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: First impression creates an enduring impact

Studies show that the mother-daughter-in law relationship did not start well in the beginning. They have concluded that this relationship is conflictual and a stressor for both women [10]. In the transcribed interviews, the daughters-in-law summed up the idea that she should make a good impression on the future mother-in-law during their first meet-up:

Table 2. The daughters-in-law perspectives during first meet up with their mothers-in-law

DIL 1	DIL 2
<p><i>“At first, I am afraid to commit a mistake and just does everything that she says so as not to cause conflict. I know she only like me because of my husband, but I can feel she does not really like me. For me, a mother-in-law should accept daughter-in-law and should not think of us as an additional burden”.</i></p>	<p><i>“My mother-in-law seemed to very distant to me at first. Aside from it she is very cold to me. I can only tell that she likes me whenever my boyfriend (now my husband) is with me when we meet with her. I am afraid of her and just talk to her when she asks something but sometimes, I initiate conversation with her to get to know her. It’s when I gave birth to my first child, she changed and her treatment towards me and my child really changed.”</i></p>

Note: DIL = Daughter-in-law

Notably, the results above showed that DIL and MIL relationships are ideally very dynamic. No one starts with a good relationship based on first impressions, but this would create an enduring impact. Someone has to take effort and action to develop a good and healthy one. The daughters-in-law ideally tell us that a daughter-in-law should be a follower, respectful, communicate often with her mother-in-law, and be the one to initiate activities to be able to get to know her mother-in-law better and be able to spend time with her. These assumptions support the theory of family dynamics that every family is composed of patterns with several interactions among family members in order to have strong emotional, physical, and economic support [11].

Table 3. The mothers-in-law perspectives during first meet up with their daughters-in-law

MIL 1	MIL 2
<p><i>“I do not like her for being so young and I am afraid because she is also pregnant and just 17 years old. I believe she knows nothing about handling a family. She is someone who will get along with my son for security maybe because she came from a broken family; her mother and father were separated when she was a child. She doesn’t even know how to cook but I can see in her that she is trying hard to get to me and that she loves my son!”.</i></p>	<p><i>“I am actually shocked when my son introduced me his girlfriend. I never heard of him having relationships with someone. When my son brought her at home, I do not really like to entertain her but because I know how to respect, ideally just had tried to communicate her. Really at first, I cannot accept her but as time goes by and I can sense that she is nice, and she did everything nice, she asks for help... so I slowly accepted her”</i></p>

From the perspective of the mother-in-law, a daughter-in-law should always seek ways to get attachment from her mother-in-law.

Note: MIL = Mother-in-law

The MIL thinks of her DIL as someone who should be nurtured by the many things and responsibilities of being a mother and a wife. She needs to learn a lot in order to better understand how to manage her family and household. Additionally, specifically for the first meetup, it is necessary to communicate often with the MIL in order to get to know each other well. These assumptions are related to the social exchange theory of understanding that exchanges between family members affect relationships among groups [11]. The MIL tries to make an effort to teach the DIL household activities because she knows that in the future, her son and her grandchildren will in turn benefit from them. The other DIL finds ways to seek help from her MIL in order to get advice and build a good rapport with her.

Theme 2: Dynamic Communication Experienced

The experiences shared between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law often become an issue in a family system. In some of the studies, this kind of relationship did not start well in the beginning. A daughter-in-law must show an attractive communicative attitude to her mother-in-law in order to be accepted at the start of the relationship, while the mother-in-law must persistently demonstrate a challenging demeanor [12].

From the analysis of the transcribed interviews, the researcher finds that there was a predominance of conflicting aspects between the mother-and-daughter-in-law relationships, mostly in communicating with each other. From the answers of the daughters-in-law, they did not have much communication with their mothers-in-law:

Table 4. The daughters-in-law communicative experiences towards their mothers-in-law

DIL 1	DIL 2
<p><i>“During my first meeting with her, I knew she was strict but as time went by, I knew she was kind and finally we understood each other. She said she wanted me to be her daughter-in-law, but apparently, we are not that close. I also do not usually reach out to her. I just talk to my husband and my husband just relays my message to her”.</i></p>	<p><i>“When I lived with them (my in-laws) of course, I have to be good and work for being labeled as good. Because I am working, I only talk to her during dinner or weekends. We talked about school because she is also a teacher but on other matters such as her son’s character or our relationships, she rarely asks and I never shared”</i></p>

In a relationship, communication is the process of getting in touch with others through the use of speech, writing, or physical contact in order to meet their needs. Understanding one another’s viewpoints, offering support, and letting someone know you exist are all important components of communication. It is in communication that someone can clearly define what kind of person he or she is and the relationship that they are having.

For the DIL and MIL to be able to communicate, studies revealed that most communication happens during family gatherings, special occasions, or family events. The main

reason why the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law only often communicate in the presence of the mediator, like the husband or the child, is because presence is what ties the family together in nuclear families [8].

In response to the questions asked of the mothers-in-law with regard to how frequently they communicate with their daughters-in-law, the results show:

Table 5. The mothers-in-law communicative experiences towards her daughters-in-law

MIL 1	MIL 2
<i>"Yes, we do have constant communication, but we do not talk about negatives. I just let it pass so I would not get high blood pressures"</i>	<i>"I do not talk with her often only those times when they had conflict with my son. I ask her why and how then literally give advices but sometimes those advices were not followed"</i>

For some MIL and DIL relationships, communication may seem very important. This communication resulted in harmonious family living and improved the quality of other relationships. A study conducted in China revealed that having poor relationships with mothers-in-law is more likely to increase the risk of postpartum depression [13]. Several variables can affect family dynamics. According to several experts, these variables influencing healthy family dynamics include mutuality, adaptability, stability, clear communication, and role reciprocity. Mutuality, defined as a shared sense of togetherness and warmth, has been determined as the strongest influencing component. Relatively, this constant communication opens up mutual understanding, acceptance, and value. These characteristics often result in the good well-being of individuals and families [14].

Theme 3: Topics Never Talked About

The majority of conflicts between spouses and their mothers-in-law revolved around financial resources and childcare. This should come as no surprise, as finances and children are common among the top stress factors in many relationships [15]. However, in this case study, both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law did not find financial and childcare as eminent reasons for conflict. Both of them set these aside and focused on overcoming relationships by fulfilling their responsibilities as respective mothers to their own children.

Table 6. Topics they never discussed

DIL 1	DIL 2	MIL 1	MIL 2
<i>"We do not talk about money matters, instead we talk about health, achievement of children, my mother's health, my health, and my children's schooling"</i>	<i>"I am afraid to open up to her about finances and parenting. I only told her with regards to these matters when the need arises. But never did she ignore for help"</i>	<i>"I do not talk about money. During our gatherings, I only ask her about their family activities, and it is during dining we usually talk about"</i>	<i>"I do not intrude with their relationship, but as I mother I can sense that there is problem between the two, so that is the only time I ask. Usually when their child is sick but when about finances, I rarely ask"</i>

The MIL taught her DIL some tips on childcare, financial management, and providing strategies for taking care of the family. In the transcribed interview, the daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law shared:

DIL and MIL relationships were affected by the idea that most mothers-in-law interfered with the daughter-in-law's family living conditions like childbearing, nurturing, parenting, managing the household, and handling family finances [16]. However, in this case study, the mother-in-law did not cross the daughter-in-law's way of handling resources and child rearing, considering the thought that they come from different backgrounds, life experiences, and family dynamics. One differs from the other.

Application to the Family Systems Theory

Family Systems is a theory of human behavior that defines the family unit as a complex social system [16]. In this system, family members interact to influence each other's behavior. Additionally, this theory is an approach to understanding human functioning that focuses on interactions between people in a family and between the family and the context(s) in which that family is embedded [11].

In the case study, it clearly shows that both interviewees want to have a good relationship with each other. They may not have a very close relationship, which we may consider an ideal mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, but they both are doing their best not to cause conflict between their families. It shows that they may not adore each other too much, but their answers to the questions show that they try to influence each other in their day-to-day lives, but not to the extent of being a stressor to one another.

Additionally, both the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law support each other's way of raising their kids based on their beliefs, values, traditions, and available resources. Supporting their own families sustains good relationships and affects the living conditions of the family. Thus making the family close enough to each other and being able to avoid conflicts at the same time.

Application to the Social Exchange Theory

The genesis of social exchange theory was built on a combination of behaviorism and basic economics. This theory of "Social Behavior as Exchange" was published by George Homans in 1958. This concept is based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis. When one gives, the other can take, and vice versa. The assumptions of this theory are based on rewards and punishment, interactions to gain profit at a minimal cost, and an individual tends to calculate the profit before engaging, and finally, in "payoff," it varies from person to person. [17].

Applying the social exchange theory in this case shows that indeed, the daughters-in-law show effort to get in touch with the mothers-in-law. The daughters-in-law showed enough strategies to get attention and be liked by the mothers-in-law in their first meeting. Even if the mothers-in-law showed different actions, it can be clearly seen in their answers that they both wanted to be engaged and accepted.

Another thing is that since both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law did not interfere in utilizing resources, particularly in money matters, both of them are working towards the same goal: being respected in the way they

handle family resources. Apart from it, different ways of nurturing children and family upbringings are not interfered with between them. This shows that both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are aiming for a good and harmonious relationship between families and the extended family. Moreover, in the interview, there were no personal motives reflected. Both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law work together to create harmony at the beginning and at home. They may have experienced a dynamic relationship towards the process, but both of them are careful not to hurt everyone's feelings.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The definition of family becomes multidimensional when in-laws enter the picture. These relationships are created by marriage, not just for the married couple but also for others. The importance of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship to family life and women's well-being needs to be better understood to understand the nature of the relationship.

The most significant findings of all research conclude that there is no such thing as a "normal" mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Each individual and each relationship are different. Society should recognize the uniqueness of each individual and the uniqueness of each mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in assisting individuals and families in developing a healthy intergenerational relationship that meets the needs of each family.

In other words, there is no be-all-and end all solution to such conflicts arising out of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationships. The importance of love and other emotions that influence behavior and well-being should be better incorporated into the family. No two people are the same, and no two families of origin are the same. Each family has its own beliefs, attitudes, values, mores, myths, and traditions, so the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law should take this into consideration before interfering or feeling bad when one does not want to follow what the other one tells her to do.

Finally, since the study is limited to Philippine cultural settings and types of families, it suggests exploring studies based on diverse cultures to deeply assess and evaluate family cultures, family structure, and family dynamics and how these latent variables affect multidimensional perceptions of family relationships towards attaining family well-being and quality of life.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Murdock, G. P. (1949). *Social structure*. Oxford, England: Macmillan.
- [2] Marotz-Baden, R., & Cowan, D. (1987). Mothers-in-Law and daughters-in-Law: The effects of proximity on conflict and stress. *Family Relations*, 36(4), 385. <https://doi.org/10.2307/584488>
- [3] Woolley, M. E., & Greif, G. L. (2018). Mother-in-Law reports of closeness to daughter-in-Law: The determinant triangle with the son and husband. *Social Work*, 64(1), 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy055>
- [4] Jean Turner, M., Young, C. R., & Black, K. I. (2006). Daughters-in-Law and mothers-in-Law seeking their place within the family: A qualitative study of differing viewpoints. *Family Relations*, 55(5), 588-600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00428.x>
- [5] Sekścińska, K., Trzcińska, A., & Maison, D. A. (2016). The influence of different social roles activation on women's financial and consumer choices. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00365>
- [6] McCann, B. R. (2012). The persistence of gendered Kin work in maintaining family ties a review essay. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 4(3), 249-254. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2012.00130.x>
- [7] Zheng, Ruiwen, "The Relationships between Confucian Family Values and Attitudes toward Divorce in Mainland China: An Exploratory Study" (2016). *Dissertations - ALL*. 611. <https://surface.syr.edu/etd/611>
- [8] Thomas PA, Liu H, Umberson D. Family Relationships and Well-Being. *Innov Aging*. 2017 Nov;1(3):igx025. doi: 10.1093/geroni/igx025. Epub 2017 Nov 11. PMID: 29795792; PMCID: PMC5954612.
- [9] Galam, R. (2016). Relational autonomy: Kinship and daughters-in-law negotiating affinity with their mothers-in-law. *Families Relationship and Societies*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14534751747450>
- [10] Adler, L. L., Denmark, F. L., & Ahmed, R. A. (1989). Attitudes toward mother-in-Law and stepmother: A cross-cultural study. *Psychological Reports*, 65(3_suppl2), 1194-1194. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1989.65.3f.1194>
- [11] Watson, W. H. (2012). Family Systems. *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior (Second Edition)*, 184-193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-375000-6.00169-5>
- [12] Jabbari, B., & Rouster, A. (2022). *Family Dynamics*. National Library of Medicine:National Center for Biotechnology Information. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK560487/>
- [13] Peng, S., Lai, X., Qiu, J., Du, Y., Yang, J., Bai, Y., Jia, Y., Meng, L., Wang, K., & Zhang, X. (2021). Living with parents-in-Law increased the risk of postpartum depression in Chinese women. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.736306>
- [14] White, M. A., Elder, J. H., Paavilainen, E., Joronen, K., Helgadóttir, H. L., & Seidl, A. (2010). Family dynamics in the United States, Finland and Iceland. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 24(1), 84-93. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2009.00689.x>
- [15] Thakur, S. (2022, September 22). Mother-daughter relationship: Importance and ways to improve. MomJunction. https://www.momjunction.com/articles/mother-daughter-relationship_00516514/
- [16] Fischer, L. (1983). Mothers and mothers-in-law. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 45, 187-192. [9] Galam, R. (2016). Relational autonomy: Kinship and daughters-in-law negotiating affinity with their mothers-in-law. *Families Relationship and Societies*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14534751747450>
- [17] Tulane University. (2022, September 15). *What is social exchange theory?* Tulane School of Social Work. <https://socialwork.tulane.edu/blog/social-exchange-theory/>