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Communicative and Relational Dimensions of Shared Family Identity and Relational Intentions in Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Relationships: Developing a Conceptual Model for Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Research

Christine Rittenour
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, critten1@bigred.unl.edu

Jordan Soliz
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jsoliz2@unl.edu

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Christine Rittenour and Jordan Soliz

Corresponding author – Christine Rittenour, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Communication Studies, 433 Oldfather Hall, P.O. Box 880329, Lincoln, NE 68588-0329, USA, email critten1@bigred.unl.edu

Abstract

From the perspective of daughters-in-law (N = 190), this study examined communicative and relational factors associated with positive and negative mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. A structural model tested perceptions of shared family identity as a mediator between communicative factors (supportive communication, nonaccommodation, self-disclosure), family-of-origin factors, and daughter-in-law intentions regarding caregiving and future contact with the mother-in-law. Further, open-ended responses were content analyzed to identify additional relational aspects associated with satisfying mother-in-law relationships. Results from both analyses were integrated into a conceptual model to guide future research on this relationship.

Keywords: accommodation, caregiving, daughter-in-law, in-law relationships, intergroup, mother-in-law, shared family identity, support

The term "in-law" makes a distinction between relationships with members of the family-of-origin and those relationships that are formed through marriage. Certainly, such a distinction begs the question of whether in-law relationships are perceived by the involved parties as being a part of or separate from the primary family unit. Further, popular culture

is inundated with depictions of problematic in-law relationships, most notably involving mothers-in-law (e.g., movies such as *Monster-in-Law* and *Meet the Fockers* and shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond*). Although managing in-law relationships can create stress for the married couple (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001) these relationships are not inherently negative and understanding characteristics of positive and negative in-law relationships is an important area of inquiry for family scholars. Further, research on in-law relationships has been limited in attending to the practical later-life outcomes such as caregiving and the continuing of the parent-in-law relationship in the absence of the spouse. Due to the notion that mothers- and daughters-in-law have a potentially tumultuous relationship (Fischer, 1983), they are the focus of this study. However, the study is not limited to studying negative in-law relationships, as our purpose is to explore both positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

To this end, the current study has two primary goals. First, we aim to extend research on mother-in-law relationships by testing a model which (a) focuses on *communication* characteristics of the relationships as well as more general family-of-origin factors, (b) investigates relational and caregiving intentions associated with relationships, and (c) introduces shared family identity as an important construct to consider in in-law research. Second, through open-ended data, we aim to assess some of the more intuitive yet empirically unsupported elements of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. Based on these two goals, we conclude this study with an empirically and theoretically derived conceptual model of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships with the purpose of guiding future research. We begin with a discussion of existing research on mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships.

Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Relationships

Researchers have established the impact that the in-law relationship has on the entire family unit, particularly on the quality of the children (in-law)'s marriage (Bryant et al., 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Of all the in-law dyads, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is the most frequently studied (e.g., Fischer, 1983; Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Vera-Sanso, 1999), which may be attributed to the assumption that this particular relationship is the most turbulent. Empirically, there is evidence to support and refute this assumption. Some studies indicate that both sons- and daughters-in-law have potentially problematic relationships with their parents-in-law (e.g., Pans, 1998), with additional reports of both feeling closer to the parents who raised them than to their parents-in-law (Euler, Hoier, & Rohde, 2001). Other studies indicate that wives are not as close as husbands with their respective parents-in-law (Taylor, Chatters, & Mays, 1988; Wallin, 1954) with many researchers placing particular emphasis on the problems surrounding the daughter-in-law's relationship with her mother-in-law (e.g., Fischer, 1983; Pans, 1998; Turner, Young, & Black, 2006).

Compared to other personal and family contexts, communication in in-law relationships is relatively understudied (Morr-Serewicz, 2006; Yoshimura, 2006). As such, Rittenour (2006) investigated family communication surrounding the relational turning points with in-laws and identified a clear trend in that the majority of participant complaints regarding

in-law behavior were directed towards the mother-in-law. Despite these and other findings that the daughter- and mother-in-law relationship is problematic, there is also evidence that in-laws, and particularly many mothers- and daughters-in-law, exchange high levels of social support (Hung, 2005; Kurdek, 1999) and are highly satisfied with their relationship (Wallin, 1954). In other words, contrary to popular perception, this relationship can have positive as well as negative attributes.

Although not all negative, perhaps in-law relationships are stigmatized because neither party has a complete choice in the matter. In essence, marriage marks the joining of two separate and distinct families, each with their own familial identity. Hence, at the heart of in-law relational development is the management of intergroup boundaries. Although the intergroup perspective has traditionally examined interactions between strangers, families present an interesting arena for intergroup communication research (Harwood, 2006), particularly because both intergroup and intragroup boundaries may exist among family members (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006). For example, social identities related to ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, age, and the like can create a relational context where family members manage divergent social identities and their common family identity. Although there are exceptions, intergroup distinctions are typically characterized by more negative attributes whereas more interpersonal, or *intra* group distinctions, are more positive in nature (Gaertner et al., 2000; Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). In the case of mothers- and daughters-in-law, the struggle to maintain the different familial groupings (i.e., family-of-origin vs. family-in-law) creates a basis for potential conflict.

As demonstrated in Banker and Gaertner's (1998) study on stepfamilies, positive stepfamily functioning can be attributed to perceptions of a common ingroup identity. Hence, extending this research to the in-law context, we propose that harmonious mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are characterized by high levels of a *shared family identity*. This contention is based on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 2000), which suggests that conceptualizing a common ingroup can lessen or even diminish some of the negative implications of intergroup distinctions: in this case, in-law vs. family-of-origin distinctions. In this particular relationship, an intergroup orientation would be characterized by a clear distinction between family-of-origin and in-law-family. Conversely, perceiving a sense of shared family identity is indicative of intragroup and, hence, a more interpersonal and positive orientation. In fact, daughters-in-law in Rittenour's (2006) study alluded to the intergroup dynamic of this relationship, primarily expressing feeling "caught in the middle" on many levels with an overarching effect on the satisfaction and success of the in-law relationships.

Hence, extending theorizing on a common ingroup identity in the family context (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Soliz & Harwood, 2006), harmonious and satisfactory mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are characterized by high levels of shared family identity as intergroup distinctions (i.e., family-of-origin vs. in-law family) are superseded by perceptions of a shared family identity.

> H1: Daughters-in-law's perceptions of shared family identity with their mothers-in-law are positively associated with relational satisfaction.

Although shared family identity highlights the cognitive orientation of this relationship, the categorization of the in-law relationship is contingent on interactions as well as other relational factors. Hence, the following discussion introduces important communicative and family-of-origin factors and the corresponding theoretical impetus.

Communicative and Family-of-Origin Predictors of Shared Family Identity

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001), a guiding principle in intergroup communication research, highlights the relationship between communication and group-based categorization. In other words, through communication, psychological distance between relational or conversational partners is negotiated. Specifically, accommodative behaviors (e.g., sharing personal thoughts and feelings, discussing topics of interest, taking into account partner's conversational needs) are more personalized and, hence, are typically perceived as more positive. Conversely, nonaccommodative behaviors (e.g., patronizing communication, showing disrespect, not accounting for partners conversational needs, talking about topics not of interest) are typically perceived as more negative (Harwood & Williams, 1998; Williams & Giles, 1996). In fact, in the intergroup context, accommodative behavior is indicative of more personalized communication whereas nonaccommodative behavior is associated with group salience (i.e., divergent social identities are evident in interactions). Extending this to the family context, accommodative behaviors are associated with a common family identity (which is more personalized in nature) whereas nonaccommodative behaviors are negatively associated with shared family identity (Harwood, Raman, & Hewstone, 2006; Soliz & Harwood, 2006).

Although not employing CAT as a theoretical framework, Rittenour's (2006) research on daughter-in-law's accounts of the mother-in-law behaviors reflect tenets of an accommodation framework. For example, daughters-in-law complained that mothers-in-law gave unsolicited advice, overlooked personal religious views, refrained from including daughters-in-law in the telling of family stories, and made it clear that they did not embrace daughters-in-law as true members of the family. Whereas these behaviors are perceived as nonaccommodative, daughters-in-law also discussed more positive behaviors such as self-disclosure and supportive communication that represent specific accommodative aspects on interaction.

Both self-disclosure and supportive communication are essential components within the formation and development of interpersonal relationships (Burleson, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994), and are related to perceptions of relational quality (Rook & Ituarte, 1999; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004; Weber & Patterson, 1996) and solidarity (Weber, Johnson, & Corrigan, 2004; Wheeless, 1978). In her review of support across the lifespan of the in-law relationship, Goetting (1990) found that many parents-in-law provide a great deal of financial and instrumental support to their children and children-in-law, particularly during the first 10 years of marriage. Due to the lack of research on intangible support, however, we do not yet know whether couples are also receiving emotional support and what impact that is having on the family system.

Additionally, although not researched specifically within the context of in-law relationships, self-disclosure has been shown to be an important factor in positive contact in general (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Moreover, from a CAT perspective, self-disclosure and supportive communication represent specific accommodative behaviors and, therefore, are important to consider when assessing the degree to which family members feel connected to each other within the family unit (Soliz & Harwood, 2006), establishing that individuals who exchange higher levels of social support and self-disclosure are more apt to conceptualize each other as members of the same family unit. Hence, based on the tenets of CAT, we propose the following hypotheses.

> H2: Daughters-in-law's perceptions of self-disclosure in the relationship and mothers-in-law's supportive communication are positively associated with perceptions of shared family identity.

> H3: Daughters-in-law's perceptions of mothers-in-law's nonaccommodative communication are negatively associated with perceptions of shared family identity with their mothers-in-law.

As previously discussed, in-law relationships can be conceptualized as a merger of two families and, hence, are inherently an intergroup process. In fact, some of the difficulties associated with in-law relationships may stem from loyalties to their family-of-origin and, in the case of a daughter-in-law's relationship with her mother-in-law, loyalty to her mother. This sense of loyalty is manifest in several studies. For instance, Jorgenson (1994) found that many married couples are hesitant to call their parents-in-law "mom" and "dad" out of loyalty to their own parents, claiming that parents have particular "rights" that parents-in-law can never have. Further, research has shown that a majority of daughters feel closer to or a stronger affinity for their mothers compared to their mothers-in-law (Datta, Poortinga, & Marcoen, 2003; Fischer, 1983). Moreover, some men and women perceive closeness with their mother-in-law as a potential act of betrayal against the mothers who raised them (Rittenour, 2006). All of this suggests that a more harmonious relationship with a mother-in-law may also be contingent on family-of-origin factors.

First, the extent to which a daughter-in-law identifies with her own family may be associated with how she perceives her spouse's family. Specifically, strong identification with one's own family may serve as a barrier to identifying with the in-law family. Conversely, a weak identification with one's family may be associated with more willingness to identify with the family-in-law. Second, because much of the "struggle" for daughters-in-law is associated with the tension of loyalty toward a mother vs. closeness to a mother-in-law, the actual relationship between a daughter and her mother may be an important factor in a harmonious relationship with her mother-in-law. Third, in traditional theorizing on intergroup contact, Allport (1954) introduced institutional support (i.e., the extent to which one's ingroup supports outgroup contact) as a facilitating condition for positive interactions. Within the family, this institutional support can take the shape of family member support of contact. For example, parental support is significant in transcending age

and stepfamily barriers in family interactions (Soliz, 2007; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Like-wise, children-in-law report the amount of time and energy dedicated to their parents-in-law corresponds with the encouragement they receive from their parents-of-origin. In fact, maternal encouragement may very well "trump" any negative influences of family identification and maternal relationship on a sense of shared family identity with the mother-in-law. Based on these three family-of-origin factors, we put forth the following hypotheses.

> H4: Daughters-in-law's family-of-origin factors (family identification and re-lational satisfaction with their mothers) are negatively associated with per-ceptions of a shared family identity with their mothers-in-law.

> H5: Maternal encouragement of mother-in-law contact is positively associated with perceptions of daughters-in-law's shared family identity with their mothers-in-law.

Whereas the discussion thus far illuminates and extends some of the existing knowledge on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships and overall family functioning (e.g., Bry-ant et al., 2001; Euler et al., 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003) by focusing on percep-tions of a shared family identity as well as relevant communicative and family-of-origin characteristics, the study also addresses potential relational and caregiving outcomes in this context.

Relational and Caregiving Outcomes

Although identifying communicative and relational influences on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships provides a better understanding of family functioning, it is also im-portant to investigate how the dynamics of this relationship are associated with pragmatic outcomes. One of these outcomes is intentions of caregiving, a growing concern for all families as our population ages. Further, this is especially important to the mother-in-law relationship as daughters and daughters-in law often become caregivers (Globerman, 1996; Shuey & Hardy, 2003). The task of primary caregiver is a tall one, which can create stress and feelings of negative burden for the adult children (Pearlin, 1989; Starrels, Ingersoll-Dayton, Dowler, & Neal, 1997) based on the financial and personal resources allocated to caregiving. Many scholars have researched the sense of obligation that children and children-in-law feel toward caring for their in-laws (e.g., Cicirelli, 1983; Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Finley, Roberts, & Banahan, 1988), which in turn may be affected by the communication that surrounds such a large decision. Because shared family identity represents a common ingroup and because intergroup theorizing suggests that we are more likely to allocate resources to ingroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we expect more inclination to allo-cate financial and personal resources associated with caregiving to mothers-in-law with whom shared family identity is high.

A second outcome is intention of future contact. Research shows that, following the death of their spouse, many widows drastically decrease the frequency of contact with their in-laws (Lopata, 1970). Similarly, postdivorce literature suggests that many children-

in-law quickly lose contact with their parents-in-law following the separation. Although the trend exists for children-in-law in general, it is particularly the case for males and those who do not have children (Ambert, 1988). Although children may be responsible, in some families, for the continuing relationship between in-laws, the grandparent-grandchild relationship may be impacted by the quality of the in-law relationship. Fingerman (2004) found that, in terms of the quality and extent of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, grandparents' relationships with their children-in-law were more influential than their relationships with children.

Despite the contributions of these studies in identifying important outcomes of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, they are limited in that there is little focus on the relational communication that existed before and, hence, potentially impacted the state of the relationship during these often unforeseen events. Therefore, the study explores the association between current communicative/relational factors and these later-life outcomes. Although there is little evidence as to the factors contributing to daughters-in-law's intentions of either caring for their ill mothers-in-law or continuing a relationship with mothers-in-law following the death of a spouse, it is likely that these intentions are influenced by mother-in-law/daughter-in-law interaction. Specifically, it is likely that daughters-in-law will be more apt to engage in both behaviors if their mothers-in-law communicate in ways that make the daughters-in-law feel satisfied with the relationship, but, more importantly, make them feel as if they are members of the same family. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

> H6: Shared family identity mediates the relationship between communicative and family-of-origin factors and relational intentions: caregiving and future contact.

Our current understanding of in-law relationships is based on a body of literature that is relatively sparse and societal perceptions of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship that may or may not reflect actual experiences. Given these limitations, our goal is to identify other potential communicative and relational factors that daughters-in-law perceive as having positive and negative influences on the relationship.

> RQ: What are the communicative and relational factors that daughters-in-law identify as having a positive or negative impact on their relationship with their mothers-in-law?

Method

Participants
Participation was solicited through network sampling and recruitment in undergraduate classes at a large Midwestern university as well as online groups focusing on mother-in-law relationships. Traditional and online questionnaires were administered with 190 participating daughters-in-law between the ages of 19 and 59 (M = 33.75, SD = 8.21). The daughters-in-law had been married from 1 month to 420 months (M = 98.16; SD = 90.49)

and had known their mothers-in-law from 1 month to 216 months (M = 33.62; SD = 33.2). The women reported on their mothers-in-law, who were between the ages of 39 and 86 (M = 60.57, SD = 9.27).[1] Most daughters-in-law were White/European-American (89.5%). The remaining were African American (3.7%), with 4.1% representing other racial/ethnic groups, and 3.7% nonreports. Most mothers-in-law were White/European-American (81.6%). The rest were African American (3.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.7%), and multiple identity (.5%), and 5% represented other racial/ethnic groups, with 6.8% nonreports. The frequency of contact for the others was as follows: almost daily (3.2%), weekly (20.0%), monthly (32.6%), every 6 months (22.6%), yearly (8.4%), less than yearly (12.6%), and .5% nonreports.

Procedures

The questionnaire included a variety of measures and one open-ended question. Unless noted, all items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Shared family identity

This six-item scale was developed by Soliz and Harwood (2006; e.g., "I am proud to be in the same family as my mother-in-law," "Above all else, I think of my mother-in-law as a member of my family") to measure the extent to which individuals identify as members of the same family (alpha = .93; M = 2.56, SD = 1.22). Higher scores indicate a greater shared family identity between daughters-in-law and their mothers-in-law.

Supportive communication

Developed by Weber and Patterson (1996; e.g., "She helps me work through my thoughts and feelings about major life decisions," "She patiently and sensitively listens to me 'let off steam' about an outside problem that I am having") to assess specific emotion-based communication behaviors, this 13-item scale was modified for this particular relationship (alpha = .96; M = 2.13, SD = 1.04). Higher scores indicate greater perceived communication-based emotional support from the mother-in-law.

Self-disclosure

This six-item scale (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; e.g., "How much do you express your feelings?" "How personal is the information she discloses?") measures reciprocal self-disclosure in the relationship (alpha = .83; M = 2.68, SD = .78) with higher levels indicating greater self-disclosure from both women.

Nonaccommodation

The authors developed a seven-item measure for the study. Specifically, items were based on previous studies of nonaccommodative behaviors in the family (Harwood, 2000; Soliz & Harwod, 2006) and adapted to address findings in the existing in-law research and Rittenour's (2006) study (e.g., "She often shares their personal family stories with me,"[1] "She rarely explains family customs and rituals," "She makes a clear distinction between me and the rest of her family," "She disagrees with me about political views"). Higher scores indicate greater nonaccommodative communication by the mother-in-law (alpha = .78; M = 3.33, SD = .91).

Relational satisfaction

The eight-item semantic differential (Huston, McHale, & Couter, 1986; e.g., "'Miserable/ Enjoyable," "Helpful/Discouraging") was modified and used twice, once to measure relational satisfaction with the mother and once to measure relational satisfaction with the mother-in-law. Each measure achieved acceptable reliability: mother = .85 (M = 5.63, SD = 1.37) and mother-in-law = .96 (M = 3.03, SD = 1.78). Higher scores indicate greater relational satisfaction from the mother (in-law).

Family identification

Four items developed by Soliz and Harwood (2006; e.g., "I am committed to my family," "I do not feel a sense of belonging to my family") assessed daughters-in-law's identification with their family-of-origin (alpha = .83; M = 4.08, SD = .93). Higher scores represent higher levels of identification.

Maternal encouragement

Adapted from Soliz and Harwood's (2006) measure of parental encouragement, five items assessed the mother's encouragement of contact with the mother-in-law (e.g., "My mother often asks about the well-being of my mother-in-law," "My mother encourages me to have a relationship with my mother-in-law"; alpha = .76; M = 3.42, SD = .88). Higher scores indicate greater encouragement from the mother.

Relational intentions

A five-item scale developed by the authors assessed the level of daughter-in-law intentions of being a primary caregiver and intentions of continuing this particular relationship following the death of the daughter-in-law's spouse (e.g., "If my mother-in-law was to become ill, I would offer to serve as a primary caregiver," "I would be willing to have my mother-in-law live with us in our home"; alpha = .85; M = 2.6, SD = 1.11).

   In addition to the completion of the various survey measures, there was an open-ended portion of the questionnaire in which participants provided a response to the following: "In your own words, can you explain what you like and what you don't like about your relationship with your mother-in-law? Regardless of the quality of your relationship, think about both positive and negative aspects of the relationship in answering this question." Of the 190 participants, 159 responded to the open-ended question. Responses ranged from a few sentences to multiple double-spaced pages.

Results

As a test of the common ingroup identity model, H1 was supported in that there was a strong, positive relationship between shared family identity and relational satisfaction (r = .83, p < .001). With our goal of assessing the mediating role of shared family identity, the remaining hypotheses were analyzed as a structural model using LISREL 8.8. Following standard SEM procedures, a measurement model was tested to verify the relationship between the indicators and latent constructs. The model consists of seven latent constructs:

supportive communication, self-disclosure, nonaccommodation, family-of-origin influence, maternal encouragement, shared family identity, and relational intentions. For family-of-origin influences and relational intentions, indicators were the relevant dimensions of each latent construct. For the remaining latent constructs, the items measuring each construct were randomly parceled into three indicators. A parcel is an "aggregate-level indicator comprised of the sum (or average) of two or more items, responses, or behaviors" (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002, p. 152). Parcels are beneficial in that they possess better psychometric qualities compared to item-level indicators while also allowing for the estimation of measurement error in the model. As part of the measurement model, all relationships between latent constructs were free to vary.

The measurement model showed acceptable goodness of fit $\chi^2(n = 190, 118) = 252.65$, $p < .01$, $\chi^2/df = 2.14$; NNFI = .97; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .073. Because of a large covariance between nonaccommodation and supportive communication, we ran a measurement model with equality constraints on these two latent constructs to test a six-factor solution. Model fit was significantly worsened, $\chi^2(6) = 30.27$, $p > .05$. Thus, results support validity of the seven-factor model (Kline, 2005; Rigdon, 1998).[2] Standardized loadings and intercorrelations for indicators (including their respective latent constructs) are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Lambda (λ) Loadings for Indicators of Latent Constructs

Latent construct/indicator	Lambda (λ) loadings (residual)
Supportive communication/parcel 1	.95 (.10)
Supportive communication/parcel 2	.95 (.09)
Supportive communication/parcel 3	.91 (.16)
Self-disclosure/parcel 1	.87 (.25)
Self-disclosure/parcel 2	.93 (.13)
Self-disclosure/parcel 3	.94 (.12)
Nonaccommodation/parcel 1	.88 (.23)
Nonaccommodation/parcel 2	.53 (.72)
Nonaccommodation/parcel 3	.61 (.62)
Family-of-origin influence/identification with family-of-origin	.91 (.08)
Family-of-origin influence/relational satisfaction with mother	.66 (.40)
Maternal encouragement/parcel 1	.96 (.09)
Maternal encouragement/parcel 2	.78 (.40)
Shared family identity/parcel 1	.94 (.12)
Shared family identity/parcel 2	.89 (.20)
Shared family identity/parcel 3	.94 (.11)
Relational intentions/caregiving intentions	.80 (.35)
Relational intentions/maintaining the relationship	.79 (.37)

Table 2. Intercorrelations of Indicators

Parcel	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Communication-based emotional support 1	—																	
2. Communication-based emotional support 2	.91**	—																
3. Communication-based emotional support 3	.86**	.88**	—															
4. Self-disclosure 1	.46**	.45**	.36**	—														
5. Self-disclosure 2	.41**	.42**	.31**	.80**	—													
6. Self-disclosure 3	.42**	.42**	.31**	.80**	.88**	—												
7. Nonaccommodation 1	−.73**	−.76**	−.73**	−.40**	−.42**	−.42**	—											
8. Nonaccommodation 2	−.38**	−.35**	−.32*	−.25**	−.26**	−.26**	.46**	—										
9. Nonaccommodation 3	−.54**	−.50**	−.48**	−.25**	−.22**	−.24**	.50**	.66**	—									
10. Identification with family-of-origin	−.03	.00	−.04	−.07	−.06	−.12	.02	.04	−.08	—								
11. Relational satisfaction with Mother	−.02	−.02	−.06	−.10	−.01	−.04	−.01	−.01	−.06	.59**	—							
12. Mother encouragement 1	.19**	.18*	.20**	−.02	.08	.05	−.17*	−.14	−.18*	.27**	.41**	—						
13. Mother encouragement 2	.16*	.14	.12	−.02	.00	−.03	−.10	−.14	−.13	.30**	.34**	.76**	—					
14. Shared family identity 1	.81**	.76**	.75**	.30**	.29**	.26**	−.68**	−.34**	−.45**	−.04	−.11	.17*	.13	—				
15. Shared family identity 2	.77**	.73**	.72**	.33**	.31**	.28**	−.67**	−.37**	−.44**	.06	.01	.27**	.21**	.83**	—			
16. Shared family identity 3	.82**	.78**	.76**	.38**	.36**	.33**	−.71**	−.43**	−.47**	−.02	−.09	.20**	.21**	.89**	.87**	—		
17. Relational intentions 1	.68**	−.66**	.62**	.31**	.29**	.31**	−.58**	−.34**	−.43**	.07	.01	.27**	.17*	.69**	.69**	.64**	—	
18. Relational intentions 2	.64**	.61**	.62**	.32**	.26**	.26**	−.55**	.26**	−.38**	.08	.00	.23**	.25**	.70**	.70**	.66**	.65**	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Results of the structural model also demonstrate acceptable goodness-of-fit, $\chi^2(n = 190, 123) = 265.83$, $p < .01$, $\chi^2/df = 2.16$; NNFI = .97; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .072. Following standard procedures, exogenous variables were free to vary. Because our hypotheses proposed shared family as a full mediator between the communicative, family-of-origin factors and relational intentions, we tested for direct paths from these exogenous variables to relational intentions. For each path, we examined changes in model fit through the χ^2 statistic. Model fit was not significantly improved after adding any of the direct paths. Results are presented in Figure 1.
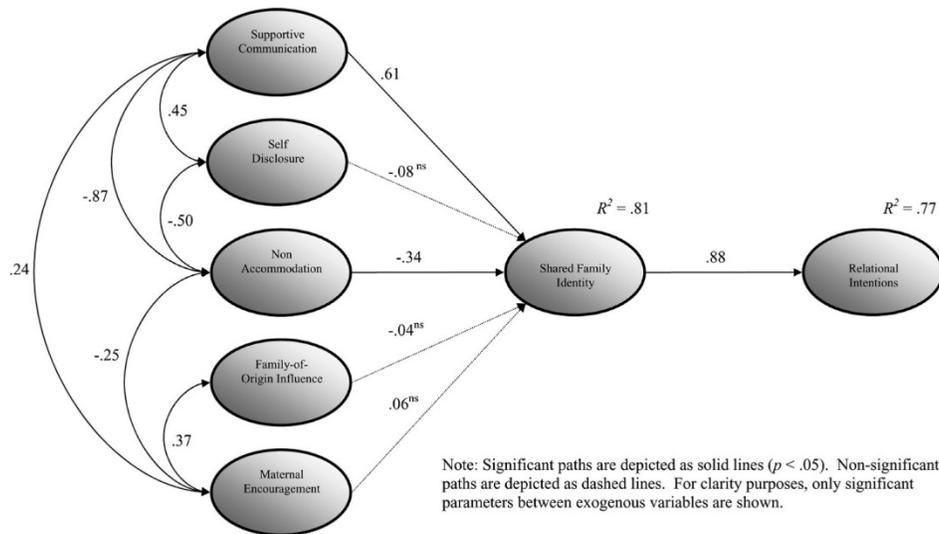

Figure 1. Structural Model of the Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Relationship

H2 was partially supported in that there is a strong, positive relationship between supportive communication and shared family identity. However, self-disclosure is not a significant predictor of shared family identity. Supporting H3, nonaccommodation is negatively associated with shared family identity. Neither family-of-origin influences nor maternal encouragement (H4 and H5) were associated with shared family identity. Overall, the model accounted for 81% of the variance in shared family identity.

We hypothesized that shared family identity mediated the relationships between communicative and family-of-origin factors and relational intentions (H6). Further, freeing paths for partial mediation did not improve model fit. Supporting this hypothesis for supportive communication and nonaccommodation, the model accounts for 77% of the variance in relational intentions.

To address the research question, participant responses to the open-ended question were analyzed. Responses to each question were examined independently for themes based on guidelines described by Owen (1984). After reviewing and discussing commonalities and minor discrepancies among the themes, we collectively identified 18 categories of relational and communicative factors of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships.

Given that participants were instructed to report on both positive and negative aspects of their relationship and many responses included multiple categories, each response was coded based on the presence or absence of each of the 18 categories. To establish intercoder reliability, we coded 20% of the sample. A majority of the remaining responses were split evenly and coded independently. Finally, the remaining 10% of responses were coded by both authors to check for coder drift.

Many of the 18 categories focused specifically on characteristics and behaviors of mothers-in-law, which is not surprising given that these data are from the daughters-in-law's perspectives. Further, a majority of categories were characterized by distinct positive or negative relational implications in the descriptions provided by respondents. Reliability coefficients and frequencies are reported in Table 3. Our discussion of these categories includes a description of the content as well as the potential influence on the relationship. *Mother-in-law's exclusive behavior and mother-in-law's negative personality traits* emerged as the most frequently mentioned factor. Exclusive behaviors represent actions in which the mother-in-law communicatively creates distance from the daughter-in-law (e.g., making clear distinctions between the mother-in-law's family and the daughter-in-law's place in it) as well as patronizing communication (e.g., giving unwanted advice). Hence, this category essentially represents nonaccommodative behaviors and was often portrayed negatively by the participants. *Negative personality traits* refer to general descriptions of the mother-in-law's negative personal characteristics (e.g., insensitive, selfish) void of a specific behavior. Conversely, there were also relatively high frequencies of *mother-in-law's inclusive behaviors* (e.g., sharing family stories) and *positive personality traits* (e.g., sweet, warm). Although inclusive behavior represents an enacted desire for familial solidarity on the part of the mother-in-law and was typically described as a positive attribute, it was not inherently positive as a few participants indicated a desire for minimum familial inclusion. Participants also indicated their own *inclusive behavior* as a positive factor in the relationship. Mother-in-law's involvement in the daughter-in-law's other relationships was both described and evaluated as negative—*mother-in-law interference*—and positive—*mother-in-law support of son/daughter-in-law relationship*—depending on how the behavior is enacted by the mother-in-law and/or perceived by the daughter-in-law. Further, the relationship between a daughter-in-law's child and her mother-in-law (i.e., *positive* or *negative grandparent-grandchild relationship*) seems to be relatively important to the daughters-in-law's perception of the relationship.

In addition to mother-in-law behaviors and characteristics, remaining categories attest to the role of other family members in this relationship. The most notable of these is the spouse. Specifically, the quality of the *spouse/mother-in-law relationship* (whether positive or negative) was put forth as a factor in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. Further, perceptions of *spouse's loyalty* to the mother or daughter-in-law may be a significant contributor to the quality of the relationship as well as *spousal support of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship*. Likewise, other *in-law relationships* (e.g., father-in-law, sister-in-law) emerged as *positive* or *negative* factors in the relationship.

Table 3. Factors Influencing the Mother- and Daughter-in-Law Relationship

Categories	Initial reliability		Coder drift		
	κ	% Agree	κ	% Agree	N (%)
Mother-in-law's exclusive behaviors (–)	.88	93.75	.68	88.24	74 (46.5)
Mother-in-law's negative personality traits (–)	.81	90.63	.77	88.24	72 (45.3)
Mother-in-law's inclusive behaviors (+)	.86	93.75	.88	93.75	35 (22)
Mother-in-law's positive personality traits (+)	.92	96.88	.88	94.12	34 (21.4)
Frequency of contact with mother-in-law (+ or –)	1.0	100	.85	94.12	24 (15.1)
Negative spouse/mother-in-law relationship (–)	1.0	100	.77	94.12	23 (14.5)
Mother-in-law interference (–)	.87	96.88	1.0	100	19 (11.9)
Positive grandparent-grandchild relationship (+)	.87	96.88	1.0	100	16 (10.1)
Negative grandparent-grandchild relationship (–)	.77	93.75	1.0	100	14 (8.8)
Daughter-in-law's inclusive behavior (+)	.87	96.88	.77	94.12	13 (8.2)
Negative influence from other in-law relationships (–)	.87	96.88	1.0	100	12 (7.5)
Divergent values/cultural orientation (–)	.78	96.88	1.0	100	11 (6.9)
Positive spouse/mother-in-law relationship (+)	.84	96.88	1.0	100	9 (5.7)
Mother-in-law support of son/daughter-in-law relationship (+)	1.0	100	1.0	100	8 (5)
Spouse's loyalty to mother-in-law (–)	.65	96.88	1.0	100	6 (3.8)
Spouse's loyalty to daughter-in-law (+)	.65	96.88	1.0	100	4 (2.5)
Spousal [Spouse's] support of mother-in-law/ daughter-in-law relationship (+)	1.0	100	1.0	100	4 (2.5)
Positive influence from other in-law relationships (+)	1.0	100	1.0	100	3 (1.9)

Note: Symbols next to each category indicate whether this type of behavior or characteristic was typically positively (+) or negatively (–) associated with the relationship based on the participants' descriptions.

Two final factors relevant to the relationship are *amount of frequency of contact with mother-in-law* and *divergent values/cultural orientation*. The influence of the frequency of contact depends on the expectations of the daughter-in-law in that, for example, minimal contact could be perceived as positive or negative depending on the amount of contact desired by the daughter-in-law. Finally, participants indicated that different values (e.g., religious, political) and/or cultural backgrounds serve as barriers to quality relationships.

These categories represent general themes emerging from the open-ended responses. However, many of the participants provided detailed accounts or descriptions of how the relationship was strengthened or impaired by specific experiences or interactions. Thus, we incorporate some of the insight gleaned from these responses into our general discussion.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate communicative and relational factors associated with (dis)satisfying mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. To this end, we tested a structural model positioning shared family identity in a mediating role between

aspects of this relationship and relational outcomes. Further, open-ended responses addressing aspects of the relationship were content analyzed to identify factors and circumstances associated with positive and/or negative perceptions of the relationship. Incorporating results from the structural model, categories from the open-ended responses, and extant literature on in-law relationships, our discussion delineates a conceptual model presented in Figure 2 that outlines important communicative, relational, and personal factors relevant to mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. Hence, the model depicts *proposed* relationships to consider in future inquiry on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships.
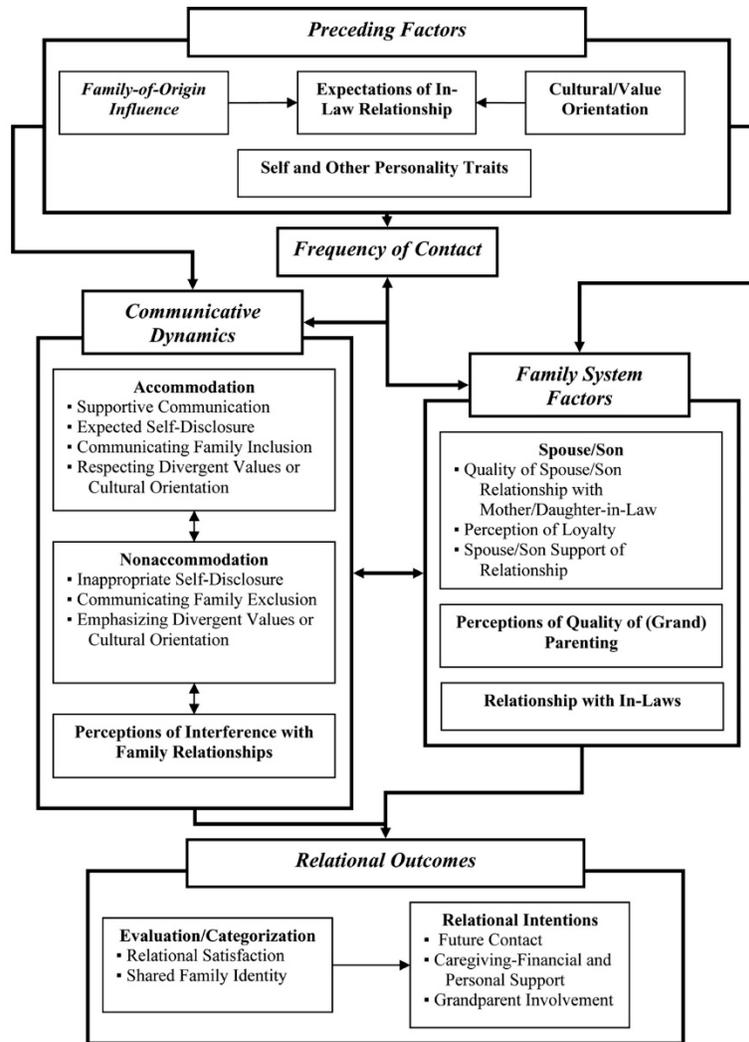

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Relationship

Relational Outcomes

Whereas the previous research has focused on relational satisfaction, interpersonal solidarity, or similar constructs to address harmonious mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, we introduced shared family identity as an assessment of relational evaluation because shared family identity gets at the heart of the development of parent-in-law relationships. Although we found that relational satisfaction and shared family identity have a strong positive relationship, we assert they conceptually represent different constructs in that shared family identity is a categorization that applies only to certain relationships. From an intergroup perspective, shared family identity represents a common ingroup categorization, which has relational as well as practical implications. Specifically, in conceptualizing the relationship as intragroup and, hence, sharing a common identity, social identity theorizing (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that individuals are more likely to commit resources to ingroup members. For this particular relationship, these resources may be associated with caregiving, maintaining the relationship following divorce or death of a spouse, encouraging grandparent-grandchild contact, and the like. As demonstrated in this study and in support of our hypothesis, the extent to which a daughter-in-law perceives a sense of shared family identity with her mother-in-law was associated with these types of relational intentions from the perspective of the daughter-in-law. As we only assessed intentions, future research should examine *actual* behaviors associated with caregiving and future contact as well as longitudinal studies that could better assess the relationships between communication behaviors preceding and proceeding the potential events of caregiving and maintaining a relationship in the absence of a spouse.

Our structural model demonstrates the role of certain factors in predicting shared family identity and, indirectly, relational intentions. However, findings from the open-ended responses put forth additional constructs that may be influential in daughters-in-law's (and mothers-in-law's) relational evaluations and intentions. The remaining discussion outlines these factors as depicted in Figure 2. Although the current study focused on the perspective of the daughter-in-law, our contention is that these factors are relevant to *both* mother and daughter-in-law behavior and relational evaluation.

Communicative Dynamics

Based on the tenets of CAT, accommodative behaviors are typically perceived as more personalized and are subsequently evaluated positively (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005). Hence, in this relational context, as is demonstrated in some of our findings, these behaviors are more likely to engender a sense of a familial identity. Specifically, in the structural model, supportive communication was shown to be positively associated with shared family identity. Likewise, open-ended responses point to communicative factors indicative of accommodative behaviors. In particular, participants discussed the importance of the mother-in-law's inclusive behavior which included such acts as sharing stories about the family, appropriate disclosure about personal or life events, making sure the daughter-in-law felt comfortable at family events, and respecting different cultural or religious views. Although to a lesser extent, mothers-in-law's support of their marriage (e.g., solicited or desired advice, emotional support) was rated positively by daughters-in-law.

Like social support, self-disclosure is typically perceived as an indicator of close relationships as well as an important aspect of quality intergroup contact (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). But, surprisingly, in the structural model this behavior was not a significant predictor of shared family identity when considering the other communication factors. However, self-disclosure was mentioned frequently in daughters-in-law's open-ended discussions of inclusive behaviors as well as a negative component of mothers-in-law's exclusive behaviors. For instance, research shows that painful self-disclosures (e.g., giving information about their own ailments, illnesses, and physical strain) are often deemed inappropriate (Bonnesen & Hummert, 2002). Because individuals vary on the extent to which certain levels of self-disclosure are considered appropriate, perhaps the perception and role of self-disclosure depend greatly on the type of disclosure and, more importantly, the *expectations* of appropriate topics and disclosure depth (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974).

Whereas accommodative behaviors are theoretically associated with a common ingroup identity, nonaccommodative behaviors often highlight differences. Hence, in this context, as predicted, nonaccommodation was negatively associated with shared family identity. Further, many daughters-in-law referred to nonaccommodative behaviors in their explanation of important factors in the relationship. Specifically, exclusive behaviors such as making clear distinctions between the daughter-in-law and the rest of the family, failing to explain family rituals, excluding the daughter-in-law from family activities, not taking into account the daughter's personal opinions and/or values were frequently cited as problematic. Likewise, as previously mentioned, excessive or inappropriate self-disclosure was also construed as negative interaction quality as it does not take into account the desires of the daughter-in-law or the appropriateness of the context and relationship. Additionally, the structural equation model showed that nonaccommodation and supportive communication share a strong negative association suggesting that mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are typically not characterized by both types of behaviors.

Further, perceptions of mother-in-law interference were put forth as negative behavior by many respondents as this behavior is perceived as stemming from mothers-in-law's motivations to undermine the spousal or maternal role of the daughter-in-law. These mother-in-law behaviors include negative comments to the husband and child about the ways the daughter-in-law behaves, lying and manipulating in order to end the marriage, and interfering with the daughter-in-law's parenting and/or closeness with her own children. These examples represent a more excessive form of what many children-in-law have described as the mother-in-law's tendency to interfere to the point of intrusiveness (Rittenour, 2006).

Although there are obviously additional communicative behaviors and styles that factor into mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relational solidarity, we depict (see Figure 2) the factors that were evident in the relevant literature and/or that may be potential influences on the relationships based on the open-ended responses provided in this study. Hence, we view these as important factors to be considered in theorizing and investigating interactions in this relational context. Moreover, as these factors apply to both mothers- and daughters-in-law, we expect some level of reciprocity in the behaviors. Recognizing that

families are systems (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006), our discussion now turns to the role other family relationships play in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships.

Family System Factors

In discussing positive and negative factors in their relationships with mothers-in-law, participants also mentioned the involvement or role of other family members, reiterating the importance of analyzing this dynamic outside of the context of the dyad. Many of these factors involved the spouse/son, which intuitively makes sense considering that this family figure is the link between the two women, perhaps making the spouse/son a primary basis of tension or relief. In fact, a notable number of participants indicated that the negative nature of the spouse/mother-in-law relationship decreased the likelihood of a quality relationship with the mother-in-law regardless of the nature of their personal interactions with the mother-in-law. Moreover, this evaluation could be based on past experiences as well as present circumstances. Conversely, and to a lesser extent, positive spouse/mother-in-law relationships were described as positive factors in the relationship. Although not a focus of the study, we speculate that a mother-in-law's perception of the son/daughter-in-law relationship has similar effects.

Supporting previous research (Rittenour, 2006), perceptions of spouse's loyalty emerged as a positive factor in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. For example, a husband who responds to a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law disagreement by immediately siding with his mother acts as a hindrance to that conflict, at least from his wife's point of view. Although wives who report their husbands' loyalty lies with them instead of their mothers-in-law commonly cite this loyalty as having a positive impact on their relationship with their mothers-in-law, it is possible that this loyalty may also create problems such as the repercussions of mother-in-law jealousy or resentment. In sum, the perceived allegiance of the spouse may incite jealousy, distrust, and resentment that manifests in negative communication patterns or relational instability between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Yet, a spouse can also act as a gatekeeper between the two family members as indicated by a minimal amount of the participants. Although it may be useful for these women to utilize the spouse as a "go between," this dynamic may bring an unnecessary burden to the spouse and/or may further the divide between them as it thwarts their opportunity to grow closer. Further, it is possible that acting as a mediator may create tension through its interruption of direct communication between parties.

In addition to the role of the spouse, participants also discuss the role of their children, and, specifically, the manner in which their children's relationship with their mother-in-law influenced their relationship. Not surprisingly, perceptions of good grandmothering were listed as a positive behavior. Conversely, poor grandmothering was perceived negatively, with some respondents writing that these behaviors created distrust, resentment, and extreme negative attitudes. From the perspective of the mother-in-law, one could assume that her perceptions of the quality of the daughter-in-law's parenting practices would be associated with her perception of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relational quality.

Finally, daughters-in-law also indicated the actions of or relationships with other in-laws as positive and negative factors in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship.

Though relatively understudied, the father-in-law was cited most frequently in the dynamic of these relationships. Further, responses demonstrate that other in-laws (i.e., husbands' siblings, aunts/uncles, and stepfamily members) also play a role in how the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law perceive and act toward each other. Based on these factors, a more comprehensive understanding of in-law relationships will be attained if researchers and practitioners adopt a family systems approach in which perspectives from multiple family members are taken into account.

Notably missing from the discussion of family system factors are those associated with the daughter-in-law's family-of-origin. Because much of the previous research on in-law relationships has identified issues of loyalty and tension between family-of-origin and in-law relationships, maternal encouragement of contact, family identification, and satisfaction with the maternal relationship were hypothesized to be associated with shared family identity. However, contrary to the contention of this previous research, these family-of-origin factors did not emerge as significant predictors of shared family identity. Further, family-of-origin factors did not emerge in the open-ended responses of the participants. However, our structural model showed direct or indirect associations (i.e., exogenous parameters) between these family-of-origin factors and communicative dimensions of the relationships. Thus, family-of-origin factors may play an indirect role in relational quality in their association with the communicative dynamics and the family system factors. In addition to family-of-origin factors, our final component of the conceptual model outlines other preceding factors of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship.

Preceding and Additional Factors
In addition to family-of-origin factors, we have also put forth expectations of specific communication behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) as a preceding factor. Building on this, one would assume that expectations about mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, in general, would be associated with evaluations of the behaviors and actions. Further, for the daughter-in-law, these expectations could easily be associated with family-of-origin factors (e.g., memorable messages about in-law relationships, witnessing other in-law relationships). Moreover, these expectations may be attributed to cultural norms and beliefs concerning family boundaries and communication (Sillars, 1995). As the current study is limited by the racial/ethnic homogeneity of the current sample, we believe these expectations are important to consider in identifying cultural differences and similarities in in-law relationships.

In accordance with and justification of the ingroup approach to in-law relationships, the participants reported on the influence of divergent values or cultural orientation, highlighting the potential differences based on group membership as well as divergent value orientations (e.g., religious, political). Specifically, women cited differences in culture, religion, race, and ethnicity as well as differing values, beliefs, and general ways of interpreting the world. Not only do we expect cultural and value orientations to create potential intergroup barriers, but these inherent beliefs may also be associated with expectations concerning familial identity and, in turn, in-law relationships. Further, general personality traits were frequently cited as important considerations.

Finally, contact with the mother-in-law plays an important role in the relationship. As previously discussed, the extent to which frequent contact or minimal contact is evaluated positively or negatively is dependent on the expectations and desires of the parties involved. Although it is noted that quality, not quantity, of contact may be the important issue, the degree to which daughters-in-law *want* to interact with their mothers-in-law may be both a predictor and a symptom of other relational and communicative problems.

The preceding factors are presented in Figure 2 with their corresponding associations. The constructs depicted in this model are based on the existent empirical evidence, results from the current study, and theorizing on in-law relationships. However, we also realize that additional factors may emerge in subsequent studies or theorizing, and, thus, this model should be viewed as an initial step in a developing framework that can guide further research on this family context.

In sum, these findings add to the existent in-law literature while highlighting the importance of communication on daughter-in-law perceptions of the current and future state of their relationship with the mother-in-law. In addition, this study shows that although there are undoubtedly in-law relationships that are just as tumultuous and problematic as many of our popular perceptions, in-law relationships can be extremely beneficial and may even be as satisfying as the family-of-origin relationship. Considering that parent-in-law relationships are often long-lasting and carry similar familial expectations (e.g., grandchildren contact, caregiving) as family-of-origin parents, they should receive attention from family scholars and practitioners. Moreover, as we contend in this study, understanding communicative and relational dynamics associated with the negotiation of a shared family identity may be a heuristic framework for this research.

Notes

1. To explore any potential age influences, bivariate correlations were run between age and each variable. All but the following two correlations were nonsignificant: mother-in-law age and relational satisfaction with the mother ($r = -.19$, $p < .01$) and daughter-in-law age and mother-in-law accommodation ($r = .152$, $p < .05$).

2. Despite the results of the tests of equality constraints, model fit may still be driven by the large relationships between some of the constructs.

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