

ABSTRACT

Communication Expectations with a Future Mother-in-law Examined via Memorable Messages

Mary E. Stevenson, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson: Mark T. Morman, Ph.D.

The mother-in-law is one of the most common subjects for a joke and is often used dramatically in the media, but a relationship with a mother-in-law remains an understudied relationship in family communication. The current study examines the communication expectations individuals have for a future relationship with a mother-in-law through an assessment of 76 memorable messages, the sources of these messages, and an assessment of desired closeness with a mother-in-law to further our understanding of this unique relationship.

Communication Expectations with a Future Mother-in-law Examined
via Memorable Messages

by

Mary E. Stevenson, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication Studies

William B. English, Ph.D., Interim Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

Mark T. Morman, Ph.D., Chairperson

David W. Schlueter, Ph.D.

Sara J. Stone, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
May 2007

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Copyright © 2007 by Mary E. Stevenson

All rights reserved

CONTENTS

List of Tables	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Dedication	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Mother-in-law Relationships	2
Memorable Messages	6
2. METHOD	10
Participants	10
Measurement	11
Analysis	12
3. RESULTS	13
4. DISCUSSION	18
Message Content	19
Message Sources	21
Closeness Assessment	22
Implications	23
Appendices	
1. SURVEY	29
2. MEMORABLE MESSAGES	33

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Message Content	26
2. Message Sources	27

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Mark T. Morman for first sparking my interest in graduate study of interpersonal and family relationships. His mentoring during the survey process and thesis writing process was invaluable. I would like to thank David W. Schlueter for serving on my thesis committee and for his experience with memorable message surveys. Dr. Sara J. Stone has also been helpful in giving feedback and support through this process. I would also like to thank my mother, Kathleen Stevenson for her continuing love and for supporting my academic pursuits.

DEDICATION

To Mom

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Of all family relationships, perhaps none is so feared or overly dramatized as the relationship with a mother-in-law. Societal jokes about the “evil” mother-in-law take on larger than life proportions throughout the media; for example, popular television programming like *Everybody Loves Raymond*, chronicles the lives of the Romano family including the reoccurring theme of the “war” between Debra and her mother-in-law, Marie. In the recent film, *Monster-In-Law*, bride-to-be Charlotte and her future mother-in-law Viola, quite literally duke it out to be the alpha-female of the family. While these are clearly exaggerations of the mother-in-law relationship, nevertheless, they beg the question of how much truth is present in such portrayals? It is possible that these dramatic representations are just that, representations of what is experienced in real life; but what affect, if any, do they have on “real life” relationships? Even though a relationship with a mother-in-law is apparently fertile ground for a multitude of jokes, in-law relationships remain one of the most understudied areas in family communication (Serewicz, 2006). And while many might believe that the mother-in-law relationship is good for nothing but a joke, it is, in fact, a potentially highly consequential relationship within the family system, particularly for an engaged and/or newly married member of the family dynamic.

Mother-in-law Relationships

An investigation into the mother-in-law relationship is particularly salient due to its potential longevity, the involuntary nature of the relationship itself, the potential consequences a mother-in-law can have upon the marital harmony and satisfaction of her son or daughter's marital union, and due to the perceived beliefs surrounding the difficult and tenuous nature of the mother-in-law relationship. For example, in one of the pioneering studies of in-law relationships, Duvall (1954) reported that the "most difficult" in-law connection was found to be with the mother-in-law. Despite the potential significance of this unique triadic family affiliation, the extant research in this area is limited at best.

The relationship with a mother-in-law is unique because it actually begins before the marriage of a son or daughter, is usually relevant during the marriage, and in some cases, extends past the life of the marital connection because of any children produced, i.e., the grandmother-grandchild relationship. Furthermore, parents-in-law often provide financial assistance early in their child's marriage and may actually assist with child care following the birth of grandchildren (Goetting, 1990). In contrast, because an increasing number of adult children are becoming instrumental in providing care for their elderly parents (e.g., health care, assisted living, or end-of-life care), the mother-in-law relationship has the potential to influence the family until the very end of her life. The U.S. census reported in 2000 that 72% of the American population 15 and older has been married at least once (Kreider & Simmons, 2003), with the typical in-law relationship reported to last an average of 10 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). Therefore, because a majority of the population will marry at some point, most people

will face the reality of the mother-in-law relationship in some form and at some stage in their lives.

Another tension contributing to the perceived volatility of the mother-in-law relationship is its involuntary nature. While most individuals have a choice in whom they marry, no choice exists in the mother-in-law relationship. In American society, most expect that the newly married couple will begin life together independent from their family of origin (Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992). However, even though the new couple is starting a new family unit, each partner remains the son or daughter of their original nuclear family. Navigating the levels of independence/dependence a couple wishes to have with their parents and in-laws can be stressful, mainly because relationships of this type are triadic in nature; in other words, they do not occur without the child/spouse component. Serewicz applies Thiabaut and Kelley's (1959) social exchange perspective to the in-law relationship. For example, the relationship of the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is triadic and exists only because of the husband/son variable. Problems arise when any member of the triad would prefer to have only a dyadic relationship (Serewicz, 2006) i.e., if the mother-in-law prefers a dyadic relationship with only her son to a triadic relationship with her son and his wife, but her son does not reciprocate this desire, much stress is incurred. Often what results is that each individual must decide that a relationship with one member is worth a relationship with all members. For many, severing an unwanted relationship with an in-law could potentially damage the remaining desired relationship with a spouse, primarily because of the perception that there is no plausible way out of the unwanted in-law relationship. If a mother-in-law ceases a relationship with her daughter-in-law, she most likely will spend

less time with her son. The high costs of dissolving the relationship usually will keep the triad in existence (Serewicz, 2006).

Moreover, when a son-in-law or daughter-in-law enters into a new relationship with a mother-in-law, there are no predetermined rules or structures to follow; therefore, newly married individuals must often rely on relationship templates that mimic the mother-child relationship. As a result, the potential exists for the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law or the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship to be perceived as secondary or proxy in nature in comparison to their “real” mother-child relationship; yet to compare a life-long relationship with a biological, step, or adopted mother to that of the newly established relationship with a mother-in-law hardly seems appropriate. With a mother, a long-term history of love, care, and nurturing usually overshadows the involuntary and newfound relationship with a mother-in-law. Furthermore, while in the early stages of marriage there may not be much difference between perceptions of parents and parents-in-law, the matter potentially changes with the birth of any children (i.e., grandchildren). A parent will often choose the parenting style and child care advice of their own parents over their parents-in-law (Fischer, 1983). Additionally, proximity to the mother-in-law when the daughter-in-law has children is associated with more familial conflict in comparison to the childless daughter-in-law living in close proximity to her mother-in-law (Fischer, 1983).

Another issue unique to the mother-in-law relationship surrounds the acceptance of a child’s spouse or mate selection. Golish (2000) found that acceptance of the child’s mate choice was a significant turning point of closeness between the parent and child and conversely, rejection of the spouse decreased parent/child closeness. Additionally,

disclosure from in-laws about private family information was positively correlated with the newlywed's feelings of satisfaction and acceptance (Serewicz, 2004). In a study of marriages lasting an average of 20 years, the quality of the in-law relationship was predictive of the son or daughter-in-law's marriage stability, satisfaction, and commitment as reported by the spouses (Bryant et al, 2001). For both the son and daughter-in-law, their marriage is influenced by the relationship with their mother-in-law. Wives' perceptions of discord with their mother-in-law were found to be a predictor of marital success and discord between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law also predicted husbands' perceptions of marital success (Bryant et al., 2001).

A relationship with a mother-in-law is perhaps most similar to a relationship with a step-mother because both relationships are involuntary in nature and both adopt the role of the perceived secondary or substitute mother. Typically, when a stepmother enters the family, a biological mother is still present. The presence of a biological mother can make a relationship with a stepmother or a mother-in-law seem inferior or even unwanted or unnecessary. A desire may also exist to resist closeness with a mother-in-law because it might be hurtful to the "real" mother. The mother-in-law relationship with her son or daughter-in-law is wrought with relational dialectics that potentially inhibit a close relationship; for example, a recent study of step-parent/step-child relationships identified the children's desire to be both close with, and maintain distance from, the step-parent out of loyalty to the non-residential parent (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). Furthermore, in a study of affinity-seeking and affinity-maintaining strategies within step-families, research reported that step-parents who genuinely established and maintained close relationships with their step-children were later reported to have step-

children who reciprocated the efforts of their step-parents to establish closeness within the step-family (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Similar to that of a step-parent and step-child relationship, the connection between a mother-in-law and her son or daughter-in-law also is not a consensual relationship and therefore, potentially similar tensions might arise in efforts to establish closeness and intimacy. For all of these reasons, the mother-in-law relationship potentially is encountered with trepidation and apprehension.

Memorable Messages

Women are considered the “kinkeepers” of the family, i.e., women take on the self-appointed responsibility within the family to communicate in order to keep family members connected, informed, and socialized (Hagestad, 1986). As a kinkeeper, the mother-in-law is in an extremely powerful position. She has the ability to regulate what information is passed down to the son or daughter-in-law and she also holds the responsibility of socializing and acculturating any new member into the family system. From this perspective, the family can be examined as a group or organization with a focus on how newcomers are welcomed and assisted in their attempts to become a new group member. One particularly useful method employed in group or organizational communication is the assessment of any memorable messages received before or during this newcomer phase of group association (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986). By assessing the family as a group or organization and assigning the mother-in-law the role of socializing agent for any new group members, additional insights into perceptions of the role of the mother-in-law within the family dynamic might be uncovered as well as how and when these beliefs are shaped and formed.

To date, there are no memorable message studies of in-law relationships. This relationship is often treated with disdain or talked about in jest and an examination of the expectations toward the relationship, via memorable messages, could be helpful to understanding relationships with a mother-in-law. A memorable message can be defined as any message, that can be recalled after a long period of time, and a message that is perceived to impact one's life (Knapp et al., 1981). Memorable messages are a study of discourse and as such provide a model for how individuals should perform in their new group (or relationship).

Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981) defined the five strengths of a memorable message. First, memorable messages are short verbal statements. The brevity of the memorable messages allows them to be remembered over the course of time and easily recalled. Second, the messages are personal in nature and often occur in relation to a difficult, stressful, or ambiguous situation. Because the mother-in-law relationship is perceived to be at least potentially difficult, advice given on the subject is likely to be remembered. Third, the messages offer advice on how to handle a situation. Fourth, the messages reflect the conservative social values of the new group or organization and typically advocate maintaining the cultural norms already in place within the group. Fifth, the sender of the message is considered to be in the more knowledgeable/higher status position. Because the receiver of the message believes the sender of the message is wiser or of higher status within the group, they are likely to take the advice and commit it to memory (Knapp et al., 1981).

Examining new member socialization processes via memorable messages is beneficial because it has the potential to determine the type of messages that individuals

receive and remember, as well as the influential sources of these important and memorable messages. As noted above, the sources of these messages are considered to be more knowledgeable and therefore, the message is retained. Examining beliefs about a future relationship with a mother-in-law is relevant because it exposes expectations of this relationship, which can in turn potentially affect the quality of the relationship when it is realized. Particularly before a couple gets engaged or married, the mother-in-law relationship assumes a high level of uncertainty and ambiguity. And yet for any couple anticipating a deeper level of closeness or intimacy perhaps leading to marriage, beliefs about the mother-in-law relationship during this stage might prove to be particularly influential in the developmental process of their relationship. A study of memorable messages about the mother-in-law relationship before it begins will provide insight into where such messages come from, how they are shaped, and why they are so influential.

Much of the extant literature on relationships with a mother-in-law highlights the negative effects of the relationship. Our society makes fun of the mother-in-law relationship and as such, expectations of this relationship are made long before this relationship commences. An examination of these expectations via the vehicle of memorable messages is beneficial because it does not pre-determine that the messages will be negative. The memorable message format allows for subjects to respond in any way that represents what is true for them.

With previous memorable message studies, the subjects used have been members of an organization asked to reveal a memorable message about their entrance into the organization. While their anonymity was guaranteed, there could have been some trepidation in participating honestly in such a study. One highlight of this study is that

because the relationship is not yet occurring, there should be no fear to express honestly expectations about a future relationship. In other words, there is no relationship member to offend or hurt by participation in this study.

Therefore, this line of thought and reasoning generates the following two research questions:

RQ1: What is the content of memorable messages concerning a future relationship with a mother-in-law?

RQ2: What are the sources of memorable messages concerning a future relationship with a mother-in-law?

CHAPTER TWO

Method

Participants

Both male (n=12) and female (n=64) participants for this study included students from a private university in the South. Participants were recruited through upper level communication classes and graduate level classes offered in communication studies and were offered extra credit for their voluntary participation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 27 with an average age of 20.9 years. The only requirement for participation in the current study was that all subjects should be currently single and have never been married. This was to insure that all subjects were reporting on their *expectations* for a future relationship with a mother-in-law and not basing their answers on a past experience.

Participants were asked their marital status and any who self-reported themselves as married, were to be excluded from the study. All 76 participants reported themselves to be single and to have never been married. Dating status was assessed to determine participant's proximity to marriage and 59.2% self reported to be dating casually, 31.6% were in a serious relationship, 5.3% were engaged to be married, and 3.9% did not identify a dating status. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (n=64). African Americans (n=6), Native American (n=1), and Hispanic (n=5) participants were included in this study. Educational level was assessed and 63.2% of participants had completed high school at the time of the survey and 22.4% had completed their Bachelor's degree. A total of 6.6% of participants self reported to have an Associate's degree, 3.9%

identified as “other,” 2.6% had some high school education, but no diploma, and 1.3% failed to identify their educational level.

All of the respondents had a mother that was living, and 9.2% (n=7) had a current or previous stepmother relationship. Only one person noted that she was adopted and a majority of respondents still had one or more grandparents alive (n=74).

Measurement

The current study was administered through a questionnaire distributed by faculty members of the communication department to their students. Students were asked to voluntarily participate and if they agreed, they were given a four-page pencil-and-paper survey. The questionnaire took between ten and fifteen minutes to complete. The first page of the questionnaire was a cover letter and consent form. The letter informed participants that they would be participating in a study of family communication, specifically communication with a future mother-in-law. Participants were guaranteed of their anonymity and confidentiality. They were then asked to sign the consent form demonstrating that they had read and agreed to participate.

Participants were provided with a brief description of a memorable message followed by two specific requests.

This is a study of what individuals expect for their future relationship with their mother-in-law. This study will ask you to recall a memorable message you have received in regards to a relationship and communication with a mother-in-law. A memorable message is a statement you have heard in the past that you thought was important and can easily remember.

1. What is a memorable message you remember concerning the relationship with a mother-in-law?
2. Please tell us where or from whom you acquired this message.

Relational closeness was assessed with the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale consists of a set of Venn-like diagrams, each representing different degrees of overlap of two circles. One circle in each pair is labeled “self” and the other circle is labeled “other.” For example, participants were instructed to select the pair of circles that best depicted the nature of perceived closeness in the relationship with their own mother (biological, step, or adopted). Another set of circles was presented and this time participants were asked to mark the pair of circles that best represented their *expected* closeness with a mother-in-law. The IOS scale has been extensively validated in both experimental and correlation research paradigms (see Aron et al., 1992).

Analysis

A total of 76 memorable messages on expectations concerning a relationship with a future mother-in-law were received. The messages were coded using a modified version of the constant-comparison analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through this process, themes and patterns emerged. A total of six categories were developed to analyze the message content about communication expectations with a future mother-in-law.

CHAPTER THREE

Results

Research Question #1: *Content of Memorable Messages about Future Relations with a Mother in Law*. Content categories for the memorable message responses were inductively derived based on the written responses provided in the first research question. Table 1 contains specific examples for each content theme and the corresponding percentage of the total number of received messages. The memorable messages themes are listed in descending order of frequency.

1. *Maintenance* (n=23). Messages in the maintenance category centered on the notion that a relationship is work and that effort is required to perform or to engage this relationship successfully. Common themes in this category were use of distance/closeness to keep the relationship running smoothly. Messages in this category emphasized that the son or daughter-in-law is an equal component of the relationship and that the effort they bring, can be matched by a mother-in-law, e.g., “Mother-in-laws can either be a greatest source of encouragement or a huge source of pain.” Many of these messages were positive, but were based in reality and could be advice for any type of relationship. Reoccurring elements included patience, liking, understanding, approval, and respect.

2. *Socialization* (n=22). This category was comprised of issues related to how a new member is socialized into the new family unit. Roles, positions, and duties within the family system were mentioned. Some of the messages mentioned the

stress that can be incurred due to the involuntary nature of a relationship with a mother-in-law and how the mother-in-law is in the “kinkeeper” role and has a responsibility to socialize the new member into the family, e.g., “A new wife has to ‘fill the shoes’ of a mother-in-law, and she may not immediately like her ‘shoes filled.’ The boundary lines can be messy.” Many of these messages stressed that marrying is not just the addition of a spouse, but includes their entire family, e.g., “You’re not just marrying the son, you’re marrying the WHOLE family, so act accordingly.” Roles and status in the family were included in the stronger messages in this category and demonstrated that the mother-in-law or the son-in-law or daughter-in-law can display possession of the child or spouse and the battleground for the role of most important in child or spouse’s life.

3. *Negativity* (n=17). For messages in this category, participants recalled messages that focused on the negative implications of a relationship with a mother-in-law. Reoccurring messages included that mother-in-laws are pushy, nosy, and difficult to have a relationship with, e.g., “They are overbearing and unrestrained.” The focus solely on the mother-in-law is present in this category. In other words, there is little to no recognition of a relationship with the mother-in-law, instead the mother-in-law herself is the only source of negativity, e.g., “Mother-in-laws are difficult to get along with, meddle in your life, criticize you, etc.” The son-in-law or daughter-in-law becomes the victim or target of the mother-in-law’s cruelty and these messages portray the son or daughter-in-law as innocent bystanders.

4. *Communication* (n=7). This category included messages that focused on how to relate with a mother-in-law via good communication skills. Respondents differentiated what topics were appropriate to talk to your mother-in-law about and when to simply listen, e.g., “Realize that your future husband is his mother’s baby. Listen to her, acknowledge her, let her feel she is a part of your life, but still feel free to do things your own way. However, you never know, her advice might actually be good.” These messages included phrases like point of view, getting along, listening, and advice. They focus on the act of sending and receiving messages with a mother-in-law and how, when, and what to communicate during the task, e.g., “Always complain about your husband to your mother-in-law and NOT your own mother because they have to love him, but your mother doesn’t.” While these messages could have been included in the category of maintenance, they remain isolated due to the quantity and similarity of the messages.

5. *Other* (n=4). Some of the messages received were on topic, but could not be coded into any of the available categories, e.g., “How a guy treats his mother is how he will treat his wife.” Some of these messages could be construed as applying to relationships or life in general, but for the sake of maintaining the integrity of the current study, they were included so as not to assume too much about what the participants were reporting.

6. *Media* (n=3). This category was comprised of messages that cited a specific media outlet such as television or movies that offered portrayals of a mother-in-law, and usually in a negative fashion, e.g., “Sometimes mother-in-laws are not

perceived well on TV, and in many homes they are portrayed as nagging, negative roles.” It is important to differentiate between the media as the memorable message and the source of the memorable message. In the included messages, participants wrote the movie, television series, or song lyrics in response to the first research question. While media was reported as a source of many messages, this was not part of the memorable message, but was attributed as being the source of the message.

Research Question #2: *Sources of Memorable Messages of Relationships with a Mother-in-law.* Women comprised the primary source of memorable messages about mother-in-law relationships (n=35), followed by a joint sender (e.g., parents) or a sender whose sex was undetermined (e.g., family) (n=19). Media was cited as the second most popular source of memorable messages (n=12) and these included television, movies, or music. Finally men (n=7) and personal observation (the respondent observed an instance of an individual interacting with their mother-in-law) (n=3) accounted for the remaining message sources.

Table 2 has additional information on the roles of the sources of the messages. Of the female senders, participant’s own mothers were cited as the most frequent source of a memorable message of mother-in-laws (n=17). Participants also received messages from their grandmothers (n=7). The nonspecific category of parent(s) was cited in 7% (n=6) of the message sources, while father was only cited in 2% (n=2) of the received messages. Many other message sources were mentioned and are listed according to frequency in Table 2.

Differences in degrees of closeness were found for relationships with a mother versus an expected relationship with a mother-in-law. The Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale ranges from a level 1 (separate) to a level 7 (very close with little information/experiences that are not shared). The reported mean for the current relationship with a mother was 5.31 in comparison with the reported mean for the desired level of closeness with a future mother-in-law at 4.01. The ANOVA found a significant difference between the closeness with a mother and the desired closeness with a mother-in-law ($F(6, 69) = 10.0, p = .000; \text{Eta squared} = .47$), indicating that participants in the current study felt closer to their own mothers than they expected to feel in a future relationship with their mother-in-law.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion

Regardless of the results of this study the mother-in-law will continue to be feared, victimized, and joked about. The lack of scholarly information regarding the relationship with a mother-in-law does little to put the mother-in-law in a better light. The current study was aimed at gathering honest feedback as to what individuals expected their future relationship with their mother-in-law to look like. Through analysis of this information and the sources of the messages, scholars will be adept at further research in this area of family communication. By identifying the messages and their sources, researchers will then be able to study the quality of these relationships and determine if the expectations are unfounded.

Using memorable messages as the instrument to gather information on the expectations of mother-in-law relationships is powerful because often the message, story, or piece of advice an individual chooses to pass along, speaks volumes about his or her experience with a mother-in-law. It is easy to see how these memorable messages can become family lore. Memorable messages have been previously used to assess new member enculturation and socialization in studies by Stohl (1986) and Barge and Schlueter (2004). To date a memorable message has not been used in a family unit or to determine the themes of messages surrounding communication expectations with a member. Utilizing a memorable message format is applicable because communication expectations are predicated on the ambiguity of performing a future role (to be a future son or daughter-in-law) and memorable messages are recalled because they lessen future

role ambiguity. This study of the received memorable messages, their sources, and the expected levels of closeness with a future mother-in law, suggests the following conclusions regarding communication with a future mother-in-law.

Message Content

First, the majority of the messages received were concerned with maintenance of the relationship (30.26%). Many of these messages were based in “reality.” They acknowledged the stress of the relationship, i.e., that it is involuntary and that you end up “sharing” someone that you both love. These messages focused on the hard work needed, but many emphasized that effort would result in a happier family unit. A reoccurring theme in the maintenance category was using physical distance to manage the relationship. *In-Laws, Pro and Con* (1954) is the landmark study of in-law relationships. In a voluntary study procured through written responses to a contest, the “most difficult” in-law relationship was reported as with the mother-in-law (36.8%). It was also determined that distancing was the most common method for navigating an involuntary relationship with a mother-in-law (Duvall, 1954). While this study reports on marriage occurring at a different time in history, the same tactics for negotiating the relationship appear to be engaged today. Also, messages in this category differentiated between what information to share with a mother-in-law and what information should be considered private and confined to the marriage. This is similar to the resistance in desiring closeness in a step-mother/step-child relationship because it could cause implications for the closeness felt with the spouse or mother (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004).

Second, 17% of the memorable messages were negative in nature. This pessimistic focus on an unrealized relationship can only cause an individual to be on guard when entering into a relationship with a mother-in-law and will most likely result in a distant relationship. Of the messages received in the negativity category, 35.29% of the messages were received from the media. In other words, individuals are remembering a fictionalized and over-dramatized relationship as the prototype for a relationship with a mother-in-law. While negativity was the second most frequently reported memorable message, a frequency of 17% is low overall considering how this relationship is portrayed in the media. This might be reflective of the sample utilized or it might be circumstantial as to acquiring information from a sample whose relationship status is single. A portion of respondents might consider themselves and their futures from an optimistic standpoint and prefer to reserve judgment until the fruition of the relationship with a mother-in-law. Barge and Schlueter (2004) reported in their survey of new member enculturation that a positive bias was present, and this could be at play in the current study. The positive bias refers to the large percent of positive reported messages received that they attribute to the time at which the survey was obtained. Their survey focused on messages received during new member entrance and they report that the purpose of these messages is to mold the new member into a satisfactory member of the organization. The current study focuses on messages prior to entrance into a new family, but depending on the message source, the positive bias could be a factor. It is still imperative that this category and the sources of this category be reported because for some respondents, their memorable message was negative.

The category of Socialization also bears mentioning because 28.2% of the memorable messages received fell into this category. Stohl (1986) and Barge and Schlueter (2004) based their memorable message surveys on new member socialization specifically. Responses in this category were the second most frequently reported and in the current study further support examining communication expectations through a memorable message study. The entry into a family can be tense because the rules and roles to be performed are not explicit, but because they become part of a memorable message, it demonstrates one of the tenets of memorable messages. As Stohl (1986) outlined, memorable messages are used in conjunction with a difficult event, such as new member entrance.

Message Sources

While the messages received are very important and beneficial to further study, the source can offer insight into communication expectations. The majority of the messages were sourced from females (46%). While this category was comprised of many female members in different relation to the participants in the study, the mother (22.36%) and the grandmother (9.21%) were credited as being the source of the memorable message. What is of value is that respondents are placing the title of “mentor” on women who have had a relationship with a mother-in-law, are engaged in being a mother-in-law, or anticipate being a mother-in-law. These messages are coming from personal experience, thus becoming a pattern of how to engage with a mother-in-law and how to eventually be a mother-in-law.

Males accounted for a small percentage of the overall messages received (9.2%), but a few factors are at play here. First, males could be included in the category that was

unable to isolate to a specific sex (25%). Some respondents attributed the message source to be “a parent” or “family.” It is probable that males were responsible for some portion of those responses. Second, the sample surveyed must be considered. Large portions of participants were female (84.21%). Because a relationship with a mother-in-law is affected by sex, i.e., whether you are a son-in-law or a daughter-in-law, it is possible that a message is less likely to be memorable if the source’s sex is different from the subject. In other words, a daughter may hear and experience her father’s relationship with his mother-in-law, but because she can never be a son-in-law, she may not choose her father’s message as her memorable message.

Media as a source of memorable messages about communication expectations is an interesting territory to enter. The current study found that 15.78% of the messages stemmed from the media, including television, movies, or music. The power of these entertainment vehicles has long lasting and significant impact in what people anticipate a relationship to resemble. A few of the respondents commented that the media (television or movies) made mother-in-laws look bad, implicating that on some level the participants recognized that the role was being dramatized by an actor and a bevy of creative writers. Messages from the media have the power to beat out other messages based on personal observation or a message from an expert and that could have consequences for those that later encounter a mother-in-law.

Closeness Assessment

Relational Closeness was used to determine the level of closeness currently felt between the participant and his or her mother (biological, adopted, or step-mother) and to decipher what expectations he or she had in regards to a future relationship with a

mother-in-law. Of all of the 76 responses, only 5 participants reported desiring a closer relationship with a future mother-in-law based on the current level of closeness identified for their relationship with their mother. Additionally, another 9 respondents desired to have the same level of closeness with a future mother-in-law as currently experienced with their mother. To paraphrase these findings, 81.57% of participants desire to have a relationship with a future mother-in-law that is less close/more distant than their current relationship with their mother. With the majority of participants desiring a less close relationship with a mother-in-law, it reaffirms the relational dialectics highlighted in a study of step-parent/step-child relationships by Baxter et al., (2004). A child may choose to maintain distance with a mother-in-law out of loyalty to his or her mother. Furthermore, distance was a tool in relationship maintenance as reported in this study as derived from memorable messages of which a source (a mother) may be a member who would benefit from her child's distance from a mother-in-law.

Implications

The current study has revealed useful information for family communication and communication studies. While this study was limited due to the sample, it provides a springboard for further research of in-law communication. The value of the current study is that it reveals that memorable messages on the topic of mother-in-laws do exist. The memorable messages demonstrate that individuals are receiving various messages from a multitude of sources and are choosing to adopt one as a memorable message. Individuals are thinking about a relationship that has not yet materialized. Furthermore, the memorable message they adopt could affect the quality of the future relationship with a mother-in-law and in turn affect the health of their marriage.

The content of the memorable messages exhibits the variety of received messages. The collected messages included messages that were positive, negative, broad, and specific. They speak volumes about what society thinks about mother-in-laws and the participant's outlook on the relationship. Further study of memorable messages within a larger sample could be beneficial in further solidifying the categories of memorable messages received in the current study and in uncovering new message categories. A non-university sample would also be beneficial in uncovering diversities to include a more representative sample of society at large. A majority of the sample used in the current study were white and had completed some level of college coursework and gaining the insight of other educational levels as well as ethnicities would provide more vivid data.

Further study of the sources of memorable messages in relation to communication expectations should also be gathered. Media as a source of messages is a vast and colorful vehicle to be explored. Clearly, the overly negative representation of a mother-in-law is not a subject that society has grown tired of yet, but the lack of alternative representations of the role should be examined. Not providing an audience with options creates further negative stereotypes of the mother-in-law, does nothing to create positive expectations for engaging with a mother-in-law, and provides relationship members with evidence and excuses to not attempt a meaningful relationship with a mother-in-law. In addition, the way in which the memorable message is communicated to the respondent is also important and has been used in past studies. Understanding if the accepted memorable message is received in a face-to-face interaction, in a formal or informal written document, or over the phone can further determine the vehicle for memorable

messages. This study determined that the sources of memorable messages were more often than not received from a human source, i.e., not from the media. This speaks to the power of human experience and the lasting impression of storytelling in relationships. The perceived intention of the message, from the perspective of the respondent, would be useful in further understanding how respondents perceive the message and how that alters their expectations for the relationship. Lastly, the setting of the memorable message is important in uncovering the derivatives of memorable messages of a future relationship with a mother-in-law. Distinguishing between formal family gatherings, informal conversations with peers, or in a darkened movie theatre could make available the settings that prohibit or encourage the making of a memorable message.

Further study of memorable messages in a study of communication expectations could better be undertaken in an interview format. While the current pencil-and-paper survey did provide much needed useful data on the subject of in-law communication, interviewing participants would allow for clarification by further questioning of the message and the sources. While an interview study is more time intensive for researchers, the shortage of research on in-law communication could be reduced through further concentrated study.

In conclusion, recognition of the mother-in-law figure as human and as a relationship member who could provide participants with a loving and caring relationship can be restored through further investigation. While it can be argued that portrayals of a mother-in-law in the media or in a joke passed through e-mails is only using comedic depiction as a source of entertainment, the current study demonstrates there is a connection between the media and the recalled memorable message about mother-in-

laws. The majority of people will have the opportunity to have a relationship with a mother-in-law and continually set themselves up for a relationship that is downgraded to that of a proxy mother. In addition, anyone who is a mother has the potential to be a mother-in-law herself and should care about the mother-in-law stereotype.

TABLE 1
Content of Memorable Messages about Mother-in-law Relationships

Theme	Frequency	Percentage of Total	Example
Maintenance	23	30.3%	“Keep your distance.” “Try and get along with her.”
Socialization	22	28.9%	“Your mother-in-law should be like a second mother.” “When you marry him, you also marry his family.”
Negativity	17	22.4%	“That it is a pain.” “As a wife, you’re good if your husband’s mother is dead and he has no sisters.”
Communication	7	9.2%	“That no matter what, you won’t get along all the time.” “When planning a wedding, listen to all your m-i-l’s ideas, say thank you and then do what you want.”
Other	4	5.3%	“My brother-in-law always boasts about my mom coming to town.” “Be prepared!”
Media	3	3.9%	“Sometimes mother-in-laws are not perceived very well on TV, and in many homes they are portrayed as nagging, negative roles.”

TABLE 2

Content of Memorable Messages about Mother-in-law Relationships

Source	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Mother	17	22.36%
Media	12	15.78%
Friend	8	10.52%
Grandmother	7	9.21%
Parents	6	7.89%
Personal Observation	5	6.57%
Family	3	3.94%
Aunt	3	3.94%
Father	2	2.63%
Brother	2	2.63%
Relationship Partner's Mother	2	2.63%
Brother-in-law	1	1.13%
Cousin	1	1.13%
Boyfriend	1	1.13%
Future Mother-in-law	1	1.13%
Sister-in-law	1	1.13%
No Response	1	1.13%
Peer's Mother	1	1.13%
Teacher	1	1.13%

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Survey

Expectations for Communication with a Future Mother-in-Law

This is a study of what individuals expect for their future relationship with their mother-in-law. This study will ask you to recall a memorable message you have received in regards to a relationship and communication with a mother-in-law. A memorable message is a statement you have heard in the past. A memorable message could be described as a “piece of advice” or “words of wisdom.” It should be something that has stuck with you over the years and impacts your expectations towards this relationship.

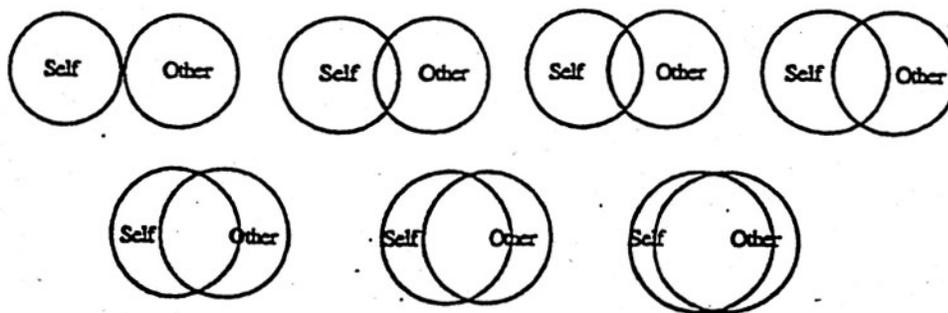
Once you have completed your questionnaire, please return it to an administrator of the survey. The information you provide will help family communication researchers to better understand this relationship. *Thank you for your participation!*

1. Based on the description of a memorable message above, what is a memorable message you remember concerning the relationship with a mother-in-law?

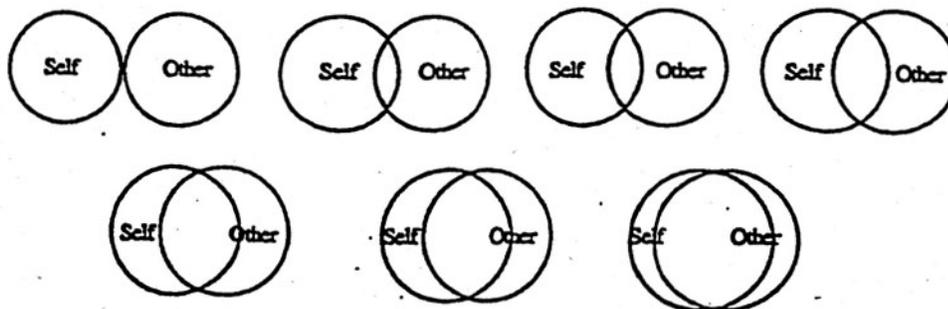
2. Please tell us from whom you heard/received this message.

3. Is your biological mother living? (circle one) Yes No

4. How close is your relationship with your mother right now? The circles below are meant to depict you ("self") and your mother ("other"). Please draw an "X" through the pair of circles that best illustrates *how close you and your mother feel toward each other*.



5. How close do you expect to be with your future mother-in-law? The circles below are meant to depict you ("self") and your mother-in-law ("other"). Please draw an "X" through the pair of circles that best illustrates *how close you expect you and your mother-in-law to feel toward each other*.



We appreciate your time and effort in completing this questionnaire. The information you have provided will help researchers to better understand the nature and dynamics of the mother-in-law relationship.

Once you have finished filling out this survey, please return it to a survey administrator. If you have comments or questions for the researchers you may include them on a separate note. However, please be certain you have not written your name or any other identifying information on the questionnaire itself.

APPENDIX B

Memorable Message Content

Maintenance, n=23

1. A friend once told me that to have a close relationship with my mother-in-law, as a friend but to keep details regarding the relationship with my husband private (i.e. arguments or agreements) otherwise she would interfere and form an opinion usually favoring her son.
2. Forming a good relationship with your mother-in-law is hard work.
3. For the first five years she is always right, after that you can stand up to her if you disagree.
4. Be polite but keep some distance. She is not your mother.
5. Don't tell them anything you might want repeated. Most definitely don't live close to them after you are married.
6. Keep your distance.
7. Mother-in-laws can either be the greatest source of encouragement or a huge source of pain.
8. Try and get along with her.
9. Be patient. They really just want the best for you.
10. Mother-in-laws do not have to be your enemy.
11. It can be tricky. She can be amazing, but you also stole her baby so there might be a great deal of possessiveness.
12. Get their approval.
13. A relationship can be wonderful, close, and intimate with a mother-in-law until there is a conflict between you and her child.
14. Have patience with your mother-in-law.
15. To make sure that she likes you.

16. She has always been uplifting and understanding.
17. Be nice, respectful and strong; But most of all attend only to your own life, and don't get caught up in the drama.
18. Get on her good side in the beginning and she will be an ally in the future.
19. You get as much out of a relationship as you put into it. If you come with an idea you won't get along and she will be your worst nightmare, she probably will.
20. Someday when you have a mother-in-law, make sure you stay on her good side.
21. Love with all your heart. Fully forgive a person so that you can move on and build in your relationship. Don't hold grudges.
22. Aside from the classic view that mother-in-laws are evil, I have one piece of advice that has resonated with me. I have been told that it is very important that you have a good, healthy, and strong relationship with your mother-in-law. I think that is because she was probably the closest woman to your husband, so in order to have a successful marriage, you must be close to her. She can help things go well or she can make things difficult.
23. My gym teacher in high school was a loud funny guy. He used to call his mother-in-law, "the troll" and his advice to us was "get married and move far, far away."

Socialization, n=22

24. I have always been told a man treats his wife like he treats his mother. Their relationship is a good indicator of how ya'lls will be. So connecting that with mother-in-laws, I have been told she is probably going to require from her son around the same amount of attention that I will since our relationships with the man are similar. I don't know if this is true but I know many guys are attracted to women who are and treat them like their mothers do.
25. A new wife has to "fill the shoes" of a mother-in-law, and she may not immediately like her "shoes filled." The boundary lines can be messy.
26. When you marry someone, you don't just marry them, you marry their whole family. Make sure that you can love and get along with his family. Make sure that you can love and get along with his family.
27. Don't get between your spouse and their mother. (don't take sides or interfere during conflicts between them) Don't try to shut out your spouse's mother from your relationship.

28. The message isn't actually words, it's the actions of my mom always taking care of and looking after her mother-in-law.
29. Once you get married, you marry the whole family.
30. You're not just marrying the son, you're marrying the WHOLE family, so act accordingly.
31. "You are like a daughter to me."
32. Always try to be her friend, not her daughter.
33. I actually have experience with my boyfriend's mom who I believe will be my future mother-in-law. She has told me several times that she sees me as a daughter and that she is very proud of what all I have accomplished.
34. What the family thinks affects the entire relationship.
35. Your mother-in-law should be almost like a second mother.
36. She is very protective of her son. Also, guys look for wives that are similar to their mothers.
37. When you marry him, you also marry his family.
38. To be gracious and have good manners- be respectful and tasteful.
39. Every woman turns into her mother, so get to know the mother-in-law.
40. She's not losing a daughter, she's gaining a son.
41. Mother-in-laws feel threatened because another female has become most important in the life of their "little boy."
42. When you marry a guy, you marry his mother too!
43. That the daughter-in-law is not "true family" and has no real authority or position in the new extended family.
44. Remember whoever you marry, you marry their family too, so make sure you are aware of what your getting yourself into.
45. I've heard that she may feel like her "control: over her son is being taken and oftentimes she will do things to "prove" her control. This is terrifying to think that a woman me mother's age would feel threatened by me in this way.

Media, n= 3

46. A quote from Monster-in-law: “You don’t have to like her, but you have to love her.”

47. Sometimes mother-in-laws are not perceived very well on tv, and in many homes they are portrayed as nagging, negative roles.

48. “The worst person I know-Mother-in-law-she worries me so-Mother-in-law-If she leaves us alone, we could have a happy home-sent from down below-Mother-in-law”

Negativity, n= 17

49. “That it is a pain.”

50. I have been given the message that mother-in-laws are unpleasant and annoying and I should stay away from them.

51. You always hear jokes and jabs made at relationships with the mother-in-law. (Why father-in-laws aren’t under so much scrutiny is a different issue). I have personally like the mother of every boyfriend I have had, but the prevalent message I have always received is that the good relationship ends after the wedding and the mother-in-law turns into a nagging lunatic.

52. As a wife, you’re good if your husband’s mother is dead and he has no sisters.

53. They are overbearing and unrestrained.

54. My mom always told me that if you marry a man with all brothers, your mother-in-law will probably be a nightmare.

55. Mother-in-laws are difficult to get along with, meddle in your life, criticize you etc. My soon to be mother-in-law, however, is like a second mom to me and has none of the above stated qualities.

56. I have always been told by my aunt to keep your husband close and your mother-in-law closer. That she can make your life easier or can make it hell.

57. My mother doesn’t like her mother-in-law. She’s really mean to her (my grandmother to my mother) so I’m a little scared. But I do want a good relationship with my mother-in-law.

58. Mother-in-law portrayed as nosy, always trying to give advice even if not wanted. Also portrayed as being obsessed with the well being of their son (or daughter).

59. Mother-in-laws have always been explained to me as controlling, invading, and eye-roller. The words, “they just don’t get that I don’t need their help, let alone want it for that matter,” has often been viewed.

60. That they can be controlling when trying to plan a wedding.

61. They often have an agenda, they are uncompromising, and push on people.

62. I used to think all the bad things about mothers-in-law were just people trying to give me a hard time. Now I know they were right. Holidays are really difficult to coordinate with my mother-in-law.

63. My mom’s mother-in-law and my mother will always argue on cleaning. They both are stubborn, aggressive women with their ways of doing things. Someone has to be right, neither of them can be wrong.

64. The mother-in-law can be a pain to deal with, but you have to put up with it just a few times a year.

65. If you marry a “momma’s boy” your mother-in-law will be consistently in your life and business.

Communication, n=7

66. That no matter what, you won’t get along all the time.

67. This person is my future mother-in-law. She always has a different point of view than I have had especially with religion. She has told me that everyone is a special person, and no one is wrong for what they believe. I think she came to this point of view out of compromising because her husband is Muslim and she is Catholic.

68. Always complain about your husband to your mother-in-law and NOT your own mother because they have to love him but your mother doesn’t.

69. The daughter-in-law must get along with her mother-in-law or there will be trouble. When planning a wedding make sure the daughter-in-law updates the mother-in-law frequently.

70. “You are a wonderful mother.” (She said it at dinner in front of everyone else in the family)

71. When planning a wedding, listen to all of your mother-in-law’s ideas, say thank you and then do what you want.

72. Realize that your future husband is his mother's baby. Listen to her, acknowledge her, let her feel like she's a part of your life, but still feel free to do things your own way. However, you never know, her advice might actually be good.

Other, n=4

73. The message is that my brother-in-law always boasts about my mom coming in town, while all his co-workers go, "Are you kidding? You're actually excited to see her?!" Surprisingly, he always says yes!

74. Be prepared!

75. How a guy treats his mother is how he will treat his wife.

76. "My mother is the sweetest person in the world, but she is very strict and she doesn't feel comfortable around someone unless she really knows them."

WORKS CITED

- Altman, I., Brown, B.B., Staples, B., & Warner, C. M. (1992). A transactional approach to close relationships: Courtship, weddings, and placemaking. In W.B. Walsh, K.H. Craik, & R.H. Price (Eds.), *Person-environment psychology: Models and perspectives* (pp. 193-242). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of other in the self scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 596-612.
- Barge, K.J., & Schlueter, D.W. (2004). Memorable messages and newcomer socialization. *Western Journal of Communication*, 68, 233-256.
- Baxter, L.A., Braithwaite, D.O., Bryant, L.E., & Wagner, A. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of the contradictions in communication with stepparents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 447-467.
- Bryant, C.M., Conger, R.D., & Meehan, J.M. (2001). The influence of in-laws on change in marital status. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 63, 614-626.
- Duvall, E.M. (1954). *In-laws: Pro and con*. New York: Association Press.
- Fischer, L.R. (1983). Mothers and mothers-in-law. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45, 187-192.
- Fischer, L.R. (1991). Between mothers and daughters. *Marriage and Family Review*, 16, 237-248.
- Floyd, K., & Morman, M. T. (Eds.) (2006). *Widening the Family Circle*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ganong, L.H., & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily relationships: Development, dynamics, and interventions*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Goetting, A. (1990). Patterns of support among in-laws in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 11, 67-90.
- Golish, T.D. (2000). Changes in closeness between adult children and their parents: a turning point analysis. *Communication Reports*, 13, 79-98.

- Hagestad, G.O. (1986). Adult intergenerational relationships: Parents and children. In L.E. Troll (ED.), *Review of human development* (pp. 191-226). New York: Wiley-Interscience.
- Knapp, M.L., Stohl, C., & Reardon, K. (1981). Memorable messages. *Journal of Communication*, 31, 27-42.
- Kreider, R.M., Simmons, T. (2003). *Marital status: 2000* [U.S. Census Bureau Brief Number C2KBR-30]. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Census. Retrieved August 9, 2004, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-30.pdf>
- Montgomery, B.M., & Baxter, L.A. (Eds.). (1998). *Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- National Center for Health Statistics. (2003). *Table 27. Life expectancy at birth, at 65 years, and at 75 years of age, according to race and sex: United States, selected years 1900-2001*. Retrieved August 9, 2004, from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/tables/2003/03hus027.pdf>
- Serewicz, M. C. M. (2006). Getting Along with the In-Laws. In K. Floyd & M. Morman (Eds.) *Widening the family circle: New research on family communication* (pp. 101-116). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Strauss, C. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stohl, C. (1986). The role of memorable messages in the process of organizational socialization. *Communication Quarterly*, 34, 231-249.
- Thibaut, J.W., & Kelley, H.H., ((1959). *The social psychology of groups*. New York: Wiley.