Getting Along With the In-Laws

Relationships With Parents-in-Law

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In December 2004, The Jerusalem Post reported that musician Woody Guthrie “left behind a little-known legacy of Hannuka, Holocaust, and Jewish children’s songs, and the inspiration was Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt, his mother-in-law” (Tugend, 2004, p. 24). The article goes on to describe the relationship between Guthrie and his in-laws. When Marjorie Mazia left her Jewish husband to marry the non-Jewish Guthrie, her father, Isidore Greenblatt, refused to acknowledge the couple until their first child was born. But Aliza Greenblatt accepted her new son-in-law right away, perhaps because of their shared interests in poetry and politics. Seeing the tension his presence in the family caused between his parents-in-law, Guthrie began to study Judaism and eventually wrote a series of songs inspired by the Jewish religion and culture. Although the Greenblatts moved to Israel in the 1950s, they returned to the United States to help care for their grandchildren when Guthrie became seriously ill. The story of Woody Guthrie and the Greenblatts illustrates the complexity of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship and highlights the potential the relationship holds for conflict, respect, and mutual aid.
Although parent-in-law/child-in-law relationships are very common, they have received little attention from researchers. The vast majority of individuals will have a relationship with at least one parent-in-law at some point in their lives. According to 2000 U.S. census statistics, 72% of Americans age 15 and older have been married at least once (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). Based on data for median age at first marriage (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003b), median age of mothers at the birth of a child (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003a), and life expectancy (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003b), couples who married at the median age at first marriage in 2002 would be likely to have living parents-in-law on both sides. Furthermore, based on these same data, a median-aged couple marrying for the first time in 2002 could expect to have parent-in-law relationships lasting at least 10 years. Evaluating the nature of parent-in-law/child-in-law relationships in Western, and particularly American, culture clarifies the reasons for the paucity of research into this very common relationship. Although most people will have parents-in-law, the importance of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship is downplayed in Western culture. Furthermore, this relationship is seen as being distant and negative.

The example of Woody Guthrie’s relationship with his parents-in-law hints at the bigger picture of in-law relationships. In his case, a relationship that began in tension and conflict grew into an interdependent, respectful relationship that benefited all of the family members. Indeed, the existing research on in-law relationships indicates that the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship is influential and more complex than the stereotypes suggest. Accordingly, this chapter will consider the defining features of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship before reviewing the aspects of the relationship that are most relevant to understanding the communication between parents-in-law and children-in-law. Finally, directions for future research will be proposed.

**Defining the Relationship With Parents-in-Law**

To bring up the subject of parents-in-law—and especially mothers-in-law—in casual conversation often invites an onslaught of jokes, negative stereotypes, and horror stories. The Web site www.motherinlawstories.com (B A Squared, Inc., 2004) catalogs contributors’ mother-in-law stories and mother-in-law jokes. Some children-in-law who post their stories on the site have established their own “Frequent Fry-Her” pages to update readers on their ongoing mother-in-law strife. For instance, a woman posted her complaints about her mother-in-law’s habit of playing favorites with her children, and now her
grandchildren. The woman has two daughters, and her mother-in-law has always ignored the older girl but now dotes on the younger child. The woman’s husband, who is his mother’s acknowledged favorite among her own children, doesn’t see the problem (B A Squared, Inc., 2004).

Stories and jokes in American culture tend to depict parent-in-law/child-in-law relationships as distant, negative relationships that are overshadowed in importance by marital and parent-child relationships. Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that in-law relationships are understudied. If parents-in-law are relatively unimportant and distant, how significant can they be as subjects of research? Actually, what little research exists shows that in-law relationships do affect the in-laws and their extended families in significant (though not always negative) ways. Though in-law relationships are likely to be regarded as less important than marital and parent-child relationships, their effects on those more central relationships should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the relationships of parents- and children-in-law are much more complex than these dismissive depictions would have us believe. Before moving on to consider the complexity of parent-in-law relationships, it seems appropriate to spend some time considering the research evidence related to the popular characterization of relationships with parents-in-law as distant and negative.

The distant nature of in-law relationships is understandable in Western cultures, in which couples are expected to be relatively independent of their family (e.g., Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992) and spouses are expected to remain closer with their own family of origin than with their in-laws (Datta, Poortinga, & Marcoen, 2003). For instance, Altman et al. (1992) presented case studies of courtship, weddings, and placemaking (i.e., establishing a home for the newlyweds) in different cultures, including the practices used in one Western culture. This detailed description of 1960s Welsh culture included couples who dated, got to know each other, and became engaged with little involvement of the family. Their wedding festivities involved the parents in some respects (with the bride’s parents often paying for the wedding and her father “giving her away”), and they set up their home apart from either spouse’s family. The general picture of the Welsh wedding holds true in many respects for couples in the United States. That is, family involvement in courtship and selection of a spouse is often limited, the couple is very much involved in planning (and, more often today, contributing payment for) their wedding, and the spouses usually have a residence separate from their parents. The independence of the couple from parental involvement sets the stage for relationships with in-laws that are not particularly close.

Furthermore, when married couples are involved with their extended families, it is generally expected that they will be closer with their own
family of origin than with their in-laws. Datta et al. (2003) conducted a study cross-cultural study of women’s in-law and parent-child relationships. In the Western culture they studied, modern-day Belgium, women were likely to see their own mothers more frequently than their mothers-in-law, feel more attachment and responsibility for providing care to their own mothers than to their mothers-in-law, and live closer to their mothers than to their mothers-in-law. Judging from the research on parents-in-law in Western cultures, distance is built into cultural expectations for in-law relationships. But distance also can result from the other feature prevalent in popular impressions of parents-in-law: negativity.

There seems to be some empirical basis for the stereotypes of in-law relationships as negative. In her investigation of in-law relationships, Duvall (1954) asked 1,337 individuals to nominate the in-law with whom they had the most difficult relationship. Of the individuals who participated, 74% were able to name a troublesome in-law. Tension in the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship was common among this group, with 59% of those with at least one difficult in-law naming a parent-in-law or a child-in-law as the most problematic. And the mother-in-law was the most common focus of discontent: the 59% was distributed unevenly among family members, with 49% naming the mother-in-law, 5% naming the father-in-law, 4% naming the daughter-in-law, and 1% naming the son-in-law as most difficult.

In-law relationships, therefore, are known to often involve trouble or negativity. Furthermore, in-laws are involved in a nonvoluntary relationship; though in Western cultures a person typically chooses his or her spouse, that person does not have a choice about the relatives who come with that spouse. Recent research on nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners indicates that distancing is a common method for handling maintenance of such relationships (Hess, 2000). Not surprisingly, Duvall (1954) found that a common theme among responses from participants in a national radio competition who complained about their mothers-in-law was the use of distance to manage the relationship. Cross-cultural research comparing attitudes in the United States, Kuwait, Egypt, and Sudan has found that even across cultures, mothers-in-law are generally perceived to be interpersonally distant for participants, and the authors of that study argue that interpersonal distance is a result of negative relationships (Adler, Denmark, & Ahmed, 1989). Perhaps the independence of Western couples from their extended family allows them to use distancing behaviors, such as geographical distance and reducing frequency of contact, to manage the negativity of their obligatory in-law relationships.

In general, research on adults’ relationships tends to focus on their relationships with their romantic partners or spouses and with their children,
with little emphasis on other types of relationships. For example, in their analysis of research on conflict in adult friendships, Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995) argue that research on adult friendships is lacking in part because friendships are thought to be less salient for adults than are relationships with romantic partners and with their family of procreation. Similarly, research on relationships with parents-in-law likely suffers from a belief that these relationships are much less important than the romantic or marital relationship and relationships between parents and young children. Moreover, the independence of Western marital couples from the extended family and the common negative perception of in-laws contribute to a characterization of in-law relationships as distant. It is not surprising that a relationship thought to be distant, negative, and relatively inconsequential should be understudied.

But none of this discussion gets at the root of the difficulties with parent-in-law relationships. Questioning the source of these problems, challenges, and stereotypes can help to explain why parents-in-law are the way they are—and why some fit the stereotype and others don’t.


In the film About Schmidt, Warren Schmidt’s daughter, Jeannie, is about to marry Randall, a water bed salesman with a bad haircut who tries to interest Warren in a business opportunity that he insists is not a pyramid scheme. Warren can’t stand his future son-in-law because he thinks Randall isn’t good enough for his “little girl.” Warren begs Jeannie to call off the wedding, but she marries Randall anyway. At the wedding reception, tension builds as Warren approaches the microphone to give a toast, but he proceeds to compliment Randall and his entire family, even though his personal feelings toward Randall haven’t changed at all.

Although the film is fictional, Warren’s actions ring true. The story works because it illustrates the key elements that make in-law relationships challenging: parents- and children-in-law are bound together in a triadic, nonvoluntary relationship. Based on Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) social exchange perspective, Serewicz (in press) argues that the nature of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship as triadic and nonvoluntary makes the relationship difficult to maintain and negotiate.

First of all, these relationships are triadic in that the connection between the parent-in-law and child-in-law exists through their mutual connection to a third party: the child/spouse. And the in-laws are likely to value their
relationships with the child/spouse more highly than they value their relationship with each other. Some parent-in-law/child-in-law relationships are good examples of Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) description of a common tension in triadic relationships (Serewicz, in press). This tension is played out when one member of the triad (A) would rather have a dyadic relationship with another member (B) than have a triadic relationship between all three members (A, B, and C). However, member B doesn’t reciprocate A’s preference.

In the example of Warren Schmidt, Warren would much prefer his father-daughter relationship with Jeannie over the triad that includes Randall, but Jeannie clearly rejects Warren’s preference. Thus, in order to maintain the desired relationship with the child/spouse, the in-laws must maintain a relationship with each other, whether they like it or not. Because triad members’ actions affect the triad as a whole, Warren engages in positive behavior toward Randall so that he can keep his relationship with his daughter. Warren realizes that since he, Jeannie, and Randall are in a triadic relationship, his actions toward Randall (toward whom he feels no great affection) also affect Jeannie (toward whom he does feel great affection).

A second aspect of the relationship between parents- and children-in-law that contributes to the difficulties is the nature of in-law relationships as nonvoluntary. The key aspect of Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) definition of involuntary relationships is that the costs of dissolving the relationship would be so great that members are forced to remain in the relationship. In the case of the triadic in-law relationship involving a couple and a parent-in-law, the triad could be dissolved if any link in the triad is broken: the parent-in-law and child-in-law could refuse contact with one another, the spouses could divorce, or the parent and child could disown each other. Usually, the costs inherent in dissolving any of these links would be great enough to keep the members in the triad (Serewicz, in press). For instance, Warren Schmidt failed to dissolve the triad through his pleas that his daughter call off her wedding. At that point, his choices would be to maintain the triadic relationship or end his relationship with his daughter. Disowning his daughter would cause such pain that he doesn’t even consider the option.

The combination of the triadic and the nonvoluntary aspects of the parent-in-law relationship helps to explain the potential negativity between parents- and children-in-law. The uniqueness of the in-law relationship lies in this combination of features, distinguishing it from other relationships that are nonvoluntary but not triadic or triadic but not nonvoluntary. In Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) discussion of nonvoluntary relationships, they explain that the stronger the forces holding a person in the relationship, the more negative outcomes the person can be forced to endure. Forces keeping
children-in-law in the triad include factors like love for the spouse or financial dependence on parents-in-law. Forces keeping parents-in-law in the triad include similar factors, such as love for the child or dependence on the child and child-in-law for care. The stronger these forces become, the greater the possibility that a person would endure a miserable in-law situation. But variations in the strength of the forces holding the parent- and child-in-law in the relationship, as well as differences in the ability of the parent- and child-in-law to affect each other’s outcomes directly, will lead to different results (Serewicz, in press).

If in-laws are roughly equal in their power to influence each other’s outcomes and both experience strong forces keeping them in the relationship, they are less likely to engage in negative behavior toward each other. Equality of power, combined with the mutual influence of triad members, would reduce negativity for two main reasons, from a social exchange perspective: the potential for retaliation, and the possibility to maximize one’s own outcomes by maximizing the outcomes of the triad (Serewicz, in press).

To go back once more to the About Schmidt example, Warren is tied in to the triadic relationship by forces including his love for his daughter and his loneliness following his retirement and the death of his wife. He recognizes that Randall is also tied to the triad by the strong force of his love for Jeannie. Given that Jeannie refuses to leave Randall and actually has little contact with Warren, who lives in the next state, Warren’s ability to influence Randall’s outcomes is relatively low. By giving a nice toast at the wedding, Warren uses the small opportunity he does have to influence the outcome of the whole triad for the better.

If, however, the situation were different, with an in-law who is not so strongly bound to the triad and who has great power to influence the other in-law’s outcomes, the potential for negativity is great. For example, if a mother has a conflictual relationship with her daughter, is financially independent, and has other close relationships in her life, she may be tied to the triad with her daughter and son-in-law only weakly. If, on top of this, the son-in-law is tied into the triad strongly and is dependent on the parents-in-law financially, the mother-in-law would be in a position to make his outcomes quite negative if she so chose. An imbalance between in-laws in terms of power and ties to the triad can be a fertile ground for negativity.

The qualities of parent-in-law/child-in-law relationships as triadic and nonvoluntary can help to explain the negativity possible between in-laws. But whether the in-law relationship is negative or not, these characteristics make the relationship complex and difficult to manage. Even when in-law relationships are positive, the interdependence of the in-law relationship with the marital and parent-child relationship raises the stakes of interaction
between two people who didn’t choose each other and can’t leave their relationship. Although *About Schmidt* provides a useful illustration of some of these theoretical concepts, the real support for these ideas comes from the research investigating interaction between parents- and children-in-law.

**Interaction Between Parents-in-Law and Children-in-Law**

Research into the relationships of parents- and children-in-law illustrates the ways that the triadic, nonvoluntary relationship affects the lives of the in-laws, the child/spouse, and their extended families. First, the mutual assistance exchanged by parents and adult children/children-in-law emphasizes the ways that triad members’ actions affect the whole triad—in this case, for the better. Second, interdependence and nonvoluntariness of the relationship are shown in the ways that interaction between two members of the triad involve and affect relationships with the third member. Finally, researchers have investigated ways that the triad is embedded in the extended family.

**Patterns of Mutual Aid**

Whenever I need help—and the mother of four lively youngsters ages 14 months to 5 years often needs help—she [mother-in-law] never hesitates—just says, “All right, what’s to be done?”—and does it. When I had the last baby she came and took over the other three and my housework for the week I was in the hospital . . . She stayed on, doing most of the work, for almost three weeks after my homecoming (Mrs. C., Wisconsin). (Duvall, 1954, p. 145)

The story told by “Mrs. C.” might be a bit dated (how often do mothers and newborns stay in the hospital for a week these days?), but help given by parents (-in-law) to their children (-in-law) has followed a consistent pattern over the years. The reciprocal nature of the help and support given and received ensures the good of the whole family. So, assistance given and received within the triad exemplifies the influence of triad members upon each other and the ways that triad members can often maximize their own benefits in the relationship by providing benefits to others.

The help and support given by parents (-in-law) and children (-in-law) tend to peak according to major life events. Times of particular significance for giving and receiving support occur in early years of marriage, preschool years of children/grandchildren, and when aging parents need assistance.
(Goetting, 1990). The types of help and support vary according to the needs of the support receiver and the resources of the support giver. For instance, in the early years of marriage, parents/parents-in-law give lots of support—especially financial support—to children/children-in-law (Goetting, 1990). Of course, financial support is dependent upon the parents’ (-in-law) circumstances: parents in lower socioeconomic classes are less able to give their children (-in-law) financial support, and give more support in the form of services instead (Sussman & Burchinal, 1962). In general, support given in early marriage focuses on launching the young couple by supplying them with money, a home, and furnishings.

Not surprisingly, at the point of early parenthood/grandparenthood, the types of support given and received shift. In Mrs. C.’s story, she and her husband didn’t need financial help or help setting up a home anymore—they needed help taking care of the children and the house. Support in the form of services (like childcare) peaks when the young couple has been married three to nine years, commonly the time when children/grandchildren are in their preschool years (Goetting, 1990). Of course, new mothers need more help from their own mothers and their mothers-in-law after their first child is born than they did before (Fischer, 1983b). Both the mother and the mother-in-law of the new mother are likely to help by babysitting and giving needed money and gifts. However, mothers are somewhat more likely to babysit and perform other needed tasks, whereas mothers-in-law are more likely to give gifts. It comes as little surprise that new mothers are also much more likely to ask their mother than their mother-in-law for advice about childrearing (Fischer, 1983b).

Finally, the pattern of aid shifts in the parents’ later years as they come to need more help from their children and children-in-law. Bengtson (1993) explains that a “set of shared expectations and obligations” (p. 4) between generations includes the expectation of family caregiving when the older generation needs help from the younger generation. Kivett’s (1985) research on help older, working class adults received from family members indicates that older adults receive assistance from many family members, but children and children-in-law gave the most aid and the most varied types of aid. As Goetting (1990) points out, even when children-in-law are not direct caregivers, they may provide indirect support to parents-in-law because their spouse is a caregiver. In most cases, a daughter gives the most care to her parents, and the son-in-law might contribute indirectly by giving up shared time with his wife and family. However, other research found that husbands of caregiving daughters also contributed a significant amount of help to their widowed mothers-in-law (for a review, see Goetting, 1990). The most help is probably given in the situation where an aging parent moves in with an
adult child, and this relationship most often involves aging mothers living with a daughter and son-in-law (Goetting, 1990).

This brief description shows the significance of the support exchanged between children-in-law and parents-in-law. Besides demonstrating the ways that triad members can contribute to the good of the triad as a whole, this research contradicts the idea that in-law relationships are insignificant. It’s interesting to note that the type of aid given and received is affected by a wide range of factors. As mentioned, gender of the parent (-in-law) and child (-in-law) plays a role in caregiving relationships, and socioeconomic class affects the kinds of support given. Furthermore, proximity of the parents-in-law influences the type of assistance given to children and children-in-law. For example, geographically distant parents-in-law are able to send money and gifts more than they are able to provide childcare or other services. In fact, proximity influences the amount of help received by older adults across all types of kin (Kivett, 1985). As will be discussed later, qualities of the marriage between the child and child-in-law also influence the type and amount of aid exchanged. Despite the considerable variation these factors introduce, the existence of these commitments to provide instrumental aid to one another shows the significance of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship for the well-being of the family.

Effects of In-Law Interactions on Relationships with the Child/Spouse

When at last it was decided that I should tell the folks of our engagement the mother quietly said to me that she thought it proper that I not see my intended for one year. There was no protest. It was an ultimatum not to be ignored and for a whole year to the day I was banished as completely as though I had been sent to Siberia. (Duvall, 1954, p. 56)

This unnamed participant in Duvall’s study had an unusually dramatic story to tell about how his interaction with his mother-in-law affected his relationship with his wife. Most in-law relationships exert a more subtle influence on the marital and parent-child relationships within the triad.

Because of the links between members of the triad, interactions between the parent-in-law and child-in-law have the potential to influence the marital relationship. The therapeutic literature indicates that problems with in-laws are likely to develop (Silverstein, 1990), especially around major changes in the family structure, including marriage, birth of a child, divorce, or death of a family member (Meyerstein, 1996). Not surprisingly, existing research supports the argument that problems with in-laws are
relatively common in unhappy marriages (Terman, Buttenweiser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, cited in Gottman, 1982). Specifically, discord with in-laws is negatively related to both spouses’ marital quality over time (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001).

Proximity also appears to have some interesting effects on in-law conflict. Bryant et al. (2001) found that the wife’s conflict with her in-laws had greater influence on the marriage than did the husband’s conflict with in-laws. Interestingly, in this rural sample, men tended to farm with their fathers, so the couple likely had more frequent contact with the husband’s family (Bryant et al., 2001), in contrast to the more typical pattern in which married couples have greater contact with the wife’s family (Sussman & Burchinal, 1962). Marotz-Baden and Cowan (1987), on the other hand, found that daughters-in-law’s stress increased with distance from their mothers-in-law. The sample for this study consisted of mothers- and daughters-in-law in two-generation farming or ranching families. The authors suggested that the sons and daughters-in-law may have chosen to live as close to the parents (-in-law) as they could tolerate—so the daughters-in-law who were most stressed chose to live furthest from their mothers-in-law (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987).

Of course, research also documents positive effects of in-law relationships on marriage. Timmer and Veroff (2000), in a study of black and white married couples, found that closeness to one’s spouse’s family was positively related to marital happiness and that low levels of conflict with one’s in-laws was related to greater marital happiness. Moreover, a wife’s closeness to her husband’s family predicted increasing marital quality over time (Timmer & Veroff, 2000). Similarly, Serewicz (2004) found that satisfaction with one’s in-laws was positively related to satisfaction with one’s marriage. On the other hand, Meyerstein (1996) points out potential benefits that in-law conflict may have on marriage. For instance, conflict between a child-in-law and a parent-in-law may work out latent parent-child conflicts while allowing the child to avoid confronting the parent directly. Furthermore, the in-law conflict can distract from marital tensions for both the parents (-in-law) and the child and child-in-law as the spouses show loyalty to each other in the face of the parent-in-law/child-in-law conflict.

Although the influence of in-law relationships on marriage has received more research attention than the influence of in-law relationships on the parent-child relationship, some evidence exists to show an influence on the parent-child connection. Golish (2000) found that acceptance of a child’s spouse was a turning point in relationships between parents and their adult children. From the child’s perspective, acceptance of the spouse tended to increase closeness between the parent and child, whereas rejection of the
spouse decreased parent-child closeness (Golish, 2000). Similarly, Fischer’s (1983a) research found conflict between sons and mothers increased with the birth of a grandchild, and Fischer explained this finding by arguing that the tension between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law causes the increase in mother-son conflict. From the parent’s perspective, approval or disapproval of the child’s marriage influences the likelihood of the parent providing aid to the child and child-in-law (Sussman & Burchinal, 1962). In these ways, the quality of the in-law relationship can affect the quality of the relationship between parent and child.

Furthermore, research on post-divorce relationships shows the complex influence of the marital relationship on in-law relationships. The triadic relationship dissolves when the child and child-in-law divorce. Therefore, the connection between former parent-in-law and former child-in-law is no longer involuntary in the way it was when the couple was married. Rather, the relationship between ex-in-laws can become more complicated after divorce. Former in-laws are no longer obligated to each other because of their family connection (Coleman & Ganong, 1998); however, they may continue their interaction depending on the quality of the relationship they developed with one another during the marriage (Duran-Aydintug, 1993). Although people expect former in-laws to interact with each other only by choice, depending on the quality of their interpersonal relationship with one another, they perceive obligations of grandparents to their grandchildren (Coleman & Ganong, 1998) and expect that the custodial parent will strive to maintain his or her children’s relationship with his or her former parents-in-law (Duran-Ayduntig, 1993).

Many divorced individuals report that they receive support from their former in-laws. In Duran-Ayduntig’s (1993) study, participants who interacted frequently with their former in-laws cited the quality of the relationship with their ex-in-laws as the reason for their continued interaction. Those participants who interacted with their ex-in-laws rarely or never indicated that their reasons for the lack of interaction were either poor relationship quality with in-laws during the marriage or negative treatment by in-laws during the process of the divorce. Similarly, Serovich, Price, and Chapman (1991) found that considering a former parent-in-law to be a relative predicted the amount of support participants received from the former parent-in-law, as did the former parent-in-law’s approval of the divorce. When the defining factor of the in-law relationship, the marriage of the family member and the in-law, ceases to exist, the relationship between parents-in-law and children-in-law must be redefined.

That many divorced individuals continue to maintain relationships and support each other attests to the complexity of the relationship between
parents- and children-in-law that forms over time. The research literature again refutes the notion that in-law relationships are relatively insignificant by showing that in-law relationships influence other, more intimate relationships.

The Triad and the Larger Family System

I love my mother-in-law because we share the love of her son—my husband. She makes me feel as welcome as her own daughters. She doesn’t play any favorites and all of her daughters and sons-in-law love her (Mrs. E., Tennessee).

(Duvall, 1954, p. 120)

The testimonial from “Mrs. E” hints at the broader context of the in-law triad. The triad of Mrs. E., her husband, and her mother-in-law does not exist independent from the larger family context. By acknowledging their embeddedness in the family system and comparing their in-law triad with the triads involving the mother-in-law and her other children and children-in-law, Mrs. E. can see that she’s loved and valued equally with other members of the family. Research indicates that parents- and children-in-law often perceive and evaluate their relationships by placing them in the context of other relationships within the family.

One area that illustrates the way the in-law triad is situated within the larger family is in the way children-in-law address their parents-in-law. In her investigation of the terms used to address parents-in-law, Jorgenson (1994) found that sons- and daughters-in-law referred to considerations involving extended family on both sides. That is, in deciding whether to call one’s parents-in-law “Mom and Dad,” individuals considered claims of other family members to those titles. Not only were they concerned about the implications of calling the in-laws “Mom and Dad” for their loyalty to their own mother and father, they were also wary of offending their siblings-in-law by using an address term to which their spouse and siblings-in-law might claim exclusive rights (Jorgenson, 1994).

Comparisons with “true” parents and children give parents-in-law and children-in-law a framework to evaluate their relationship with each other. However, expecting duplication of a parent-child relationship might be detrimental for the in-law relationship. For example, some of Pfeifer’s (1989) participants had difficulty in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship because the daughters-in-law “expected that their mothers-in-law would grant them the same code of behavior and/or share the same type of information as other ‘in blood’ family members” (p. 206), whereas others had difficulty because the mothers-in-law wanted to have a closer relationship than
did the daughters-in-law. Daughters-in-law did seem to use comparison with extended family members in evaluating the quality of their relationships with their mothers-in-law, comparing the mother-in-law’s contact with them to her contact with her other children and children-in-law (Pfeifer, 1989). Interestingly, daughters-in-law who described their relationships with their mothers-in-law as a parent-child relationship tended to be happy with that relationship, while also recognizing a respectful distance in their relationships with their mothers-in-law that did not exist in their relationships with their own mothers.

A crucial factor in the development of the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship involves granting of family member status to the in-law. Of course, when a marriage takes place, in-laws become members of the same family by definition. But although family membership status of an in-law may be a matter of legal fact, the communication of family members does not necessarily reflect family members’ recognition and acceptance of the new member. In fact, Jorgenson’s (1989) research, which asked newlyweds to identify their family members and explain their criteria for inclusion, found that people were considered to be family members according to criteria like time spent together and participation in important family events. In other words, membership in the family is not established simply by a person’s position in the family’s structure, but by the person’s interpersonal behavior with family members. This argument lines up with Petronio’s (2002) assertions in her Communication Privacy Management theory. Petronio explains that membership in a group is conferred, at least in part, when existing members share the group’s private information with the new member. Although a person might be made a member of a group or family in a legal or structural way, true interactional membership is established in a negotiated process of communication. By their shared time, participation in events, and exchange of information, new and existing family members come to see each other as family.

The complexity of the process of gaining and granting family membership status poses challenges for the family. Difficulty in identifying appropriate roles for and drawing boundaries around family members can result in problems for the family, whereas clearly defined roles and boundaries seem to affect families positively (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Disappointing family relationships are sometimes connected with unrealistic or unfulfilled expectations about the roles in-laws should play, as in Pfeifer’s (1989) finding that some mothers-in-law wanted closer relationships than did their daughters-in-law and that some daughters-in-law were unhappy with their mothers-in-law because they expected to be treated the same as “blood” members of the family. Similarly, Jackson and
Berg-Cross (1988) found that a woman’s desire for inclusion (that is, for others to take the initiative to begin interaction and to invite her to participate in activities) was negatively related to her adjustment to her mother-in-law, perhaps because the high desire for inclusion resulted in unrealistic expectations for her mother-in-law to seek out her company. Thus, difficulty in establishing whether an in-law is a family member, along with incongruous role expectations among in-laws, likely poses problems for the family.

Difficult though the process may be, successful negotiation of membership for the new in-law is tied to positive relationships in the family. In research on ex-in-law relationships, considering one’s former parents-in-law to be “relatives” is a factor closely related to the quality and continuation of the relationship (Serovich et al., 1991). Furthermore, research has identified acceptance as a key component in a good in-law relationship (Duvall, 1954; Pfeifer, 1989). In recent research on the communication between newlyweds and their in-laws, a focus group investigation supported the notion that disclosure of private information belonging to the family was significant for the new family member (Morr, 2003). A second study, surveying newlyweds about their marital and family relationships, found that disclosure from in-laws about the family’s private information was positively related to the newlywed’s satisfaction with the family and feelings of acceptance as a family member (Serewicz, 2004). In turn, family satisfaction and acceptance together were strong predictors of marital satisfaction (Serewicz, 2004).

As complex as the triadic relationship of the parent-in-law, child-in-law, and child/spouse may seem, the relationship becomes even more complicated when the triad’s ties to the larger family system are considered. In-laws often gather information about their relationships with each other by comparing them with other family relationships. As the relationship between in-laws develops over time, the status of the in-law as a member of the family is negotiated, and this complex process has the potential to affect the family positively or negatively.

Conclusion

Although there are some productive lines of research directly addressing or indirectly relevant to the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship, future research is needed to explain the complexities of this important relationship. Although many possibilities exist, a few areas demand particular attention. First, more research attention should be focused on communication between parents- and children-in-law. For instance, further investigation along the
lines of Jorgenson’s (1994) study of names children-in-law use to address their parents-in-law would provide important insights into the actual communication that constitutes the relationship. In addition, research on the ways that interaction and specific messages in the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship affect the outcomes of all triad members would be useful.

Next, research needs to expand the scope of in-law relationships to include multiple members. Much of the existing research focuses on relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, with little research on other relationships between parents- and children-in-law. The perspective of the parent-in-law is rarely investigated, with most research focusing on the perspective of the child-in-law. More research considering the perspectives of both parent- and child-in-law is needed. Furthermore, although the in-law relationship is triadic in nature, very little research has been conducted with all members of the triad. Finally, although the research becomes more theoretically complex and pragmatically difficult as more family members are added, investigating the influence of extended family relationships on relationships with parents-in-law is also needed.

Finally, research on family membership status of in-laws deserves further attention, and research should be extended to investigate changes in membership status over time. Similarly, research tends to focus on significant turning points in the lives of family members, including marriage, divorce, childbirth, and health crises. Although this research is important and should be continued, more research into the relationships of in-laws at less critical moments should be undertaken to understand the full range of experience of the relationship with one’s parents-in-law. In general, much research on in-law relationships is cross-sectional, with longitudinal research involving in-law relationships often focusing primarily on the marriage of the child and child-in-law and including a small number of variables related to the in-law relationship. More longitudinal research studying a wide range of variables relevant to the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship is needed.

The common perspective on in-law relationships in American culture is that they are negative and distant. Existing research paints a much more complex picture of the in-law relationship. Because in-law relationships are triadic and nonvoluntary, they can be difficult to manage. But research shows that relationships with parents-in-law can be sources of support, can affect marriage and parent-child relationships in both positive and negative ways, and play an important role in defining family membership. Future research will fill in the details yet to be discovered about this often-overlooked relationship.