"YOU'RE NOT PART OF THE FAMILY": UNDERSTANDING THE TURNING

POINTS AND FAMILY SYSTEM CONSEQUENCES OF HIGH CONFLICT

MOTHER-/DAUGHTER-IN-LAW RELATIONSHIPS

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"You're Not Part of the Family": Understanding the Turning Points and
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ABSTRACT

Popular culture representations of in-law relationships are frequently negative, and research has affirmed the communication difficulties associated with these non-kin, nonvoluntary relationships. Mother-in-law/daughter-in-law (MIL/DIL) relationships face unique challenges, as these women compete for the position of "kinkeeper," or the person who manages relationships throughout the family. When MIL/DIL relationships are characterized by conflict and negative feelings toward one another, the family system suffers. To better understand the implications of "high conflict" MIL/DIL relationships on entire families, 27 DILs were interviewed about the turning points they had experienced with their MILs and the repercussions of the MIL/DIL relationship throughout the family system. Nine turning point categories emerged inductively from the data, along with several consequences for relationships throughout the family system, including DIL/husband, MIL/grandchildren, and husband/mother. Findings indicate high conflict MIL/DIL relationships do not just lead to negative outcomes for the two women involved, but also for other members across the family system.

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This research is dedicated to the courageous participants who shared their stories. The quotations featured in this dissertation illustrate the hurt and disappointment associated with a negative mother-in-law relationship. It is not easy to talk about this relationship, and I appreciate the candor of the participants in this study. I hope this research increases the knowledge we have about this unique dyad and helps mothers- and daughters-in-law build more successful and fulfilling relationships.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Domestic accord is impossible as long as the mother-in-law lives.
- *Juvenal, Roman satirist, 100 AD*

The word mother-in-law has a terrible sound.
- *Henry Fielding, 18th century English novelist*

For centuries, mothers-in-law have been portrayed as one of the most difficult and

frightening family members. This perception has been readily confirmed through personal

experiences shared enthusiastically among family members and friends, popular culture

representations, and scholarly work on in-law relationships. In 1954, Evelyn Duvall completed

the first comprehensive study of in-law relationships and found the mother-in-law was the most

disliked family relationship. More recently, the behavior of mothers-in-law, often perceived as

unreasonable, unkind, ridiculous, and maddening, has provided material for websites solely

devoted to belittling women who hold this role (e.g., motherinlawstories.com). Although men

and women may experience poor relationships with both fathers- and mothers-in-law (Pans,

1998), the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship has been identified as the most problematic in-

law dyad (Cotterill, 1994; Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007; Sandel, 2004).

Colloquially, troublesome mother-/daughter-in-law relationships are a hot topic, with a

Google search on "mother-/daughter-in-law relationships" resulting in foreboding article titles

including, "Mothers-in-law vs. daughters-in-law: A doomed relationship?" and "5 biggest

mistakes of mothers-in-law." The topics of these articles, coupled with countless movies and

television shows depicting difficult mothers-in-laws, demonstrate daughters-in-law *expect*

unsavory relationships with mothers-in-law (Adler, Davis, Ahmed, Mrinal, Mukherji, & Morgan,

1989). Empirical evidence, too, has identified several problematic aspects of mother-in-law

relationships, including daughters-in-laws' perceptions of mothers-in-law as both intrusive and

unwelcoming (Duvall, 1954; Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Turner, Young, & Black, 2006). In sum, the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law is generally perceived as a bleak one, with 60% of relationships described with undesirable terms such as "strained" and "depressing" (Apter, 2010).

Daughters-in-laws' perspectives dominate literature because they are typically portrayed as the subjects of mothers-in-laws' wrath (Merrill, 2007). In other words, society and literature portray mothers-in-law as the instigators and daughters-in-law as the victims. Daughters-in-law, however, may not be victims at all; instead, they hold the most power in mother-/daughter-in-law relationships because they control access to other family members. Upon their entrance into a family, daughters-in-law become "kinkeepers," or those who maintain contact with both their in-laws and their families of origin (Turner et al., 2006; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Mothers-in-law maintain kinkeeping responsibilities as well, but daughters-in-law arguably hold more power as they play a pivotal role in controlling the access mothers-in-law have to their sons and grandchildren (Cotterill, 1994).

If daughters-in-law are unhappy with their mother-in-law relationship, they may choose to restrict contact with the mother-in-law, which has consequences for entire families. This example indicates the repercussions of a negative mother-/daughter-in-law relationship extend far beyond these two women. Family systems theory, an offshoot of General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1933, 1968, 1975), views family relationships as *interdependent,* with singular relationships affecting members throughout the family. Thus, one dysfunctional relationship— such as a contentious mother-/daughter-in-law relationship—affects the entire family system. Based on their kinkeeping role within families, daughters-in-law are uniquely positioned to understand not only the personal repercussions of a high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law

relationship, but also the effects on their children, their marriages, and their husbands' relationship with his mother.

This study examines the influence of "high conflict" mother-in-law relationships on family systems from the perspective of daughters-in-law. Before understanding how these relationships affect entire systems, it is necessary first to understand why daughters-in-law assess the relationship as high conflict. Despite the propensity for high levels of conflict in the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship, little is known about daughters-in-law's perception of the transformative events that contribute to high conflict mother-in-law relationships. Turning points, or events connected with change in a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), provide a helpful framework for identifying *how* daughters-in-law come to assess their mother-in-law relationship as "high conflict." Turning points identify episodes of transformation over the life of a relationship to examine periods of both relational growth and deterioration. Although scholarship identifies discrete sources of conflict between mothers- and daughters-in-law, such as exclusion (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015), unsolicited advice (Dun, 2010; Duvall, 1954; Shih & Pyke, 2010), or competition (Silverstein, 1990), there are two gaps in the literature. First, given the turning point literature on other types of conflicted interpersonal relationships (see Graham, 1997; Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008), there are likely periods of relative peace along with discord in mother-/daughter-in-law relationships, yet the complex interplay between harmony and conflict has not yet been studied in this relationship type. Second, for daughters-in-law who ultimately perceive their mother-in-law relationships as high conflict, events that led to this assessment are unknown. From daughters-in-law's perceptions, a high conflict relationship with mothers-in-law could be due to a series of smaller events that

gnawed at the relationship, or a single hurtful turning point followed by strained interactions as both women attempt to cope with the new status of their relationship.

In addition to determining the turning points that create high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships, this study seeks to understand how these relationships influence family members beyond the dyad. The paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship could be negatively impacted if the daughter-in-law experiences high levels of conflict with her mother-in-law. The strength of the grandparent/grandchild bond depends on the "middle generation" (i.e., daughter-in-law and spouse) to thrive (Euler, Hoier, & Rohde, 2001; Fingerman, 2004; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998), and children's perceptions of grandparents are heavily influenced by their mother's feelings (Fischer, 1983b; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). Other relationships, too, could suffer from a high conflict mother- and daughter-in-law relationship, including the marriage between the daughter-in-law and her spouse and the relationship between a daughter-in-law's husband and his mother (Morr Serewicz, 2008; Prentice, 2008, 2009).

This dissertation is an interpretive study aimed at understanding high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships from the perspective of daughters-in-law. The goals of the study are two-fold. First, the study will determine the turning points in high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships from the perspective of daughters-in-law. Second, the study will examine the communicative repercussions of a high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationship on various individuals and dyads within the family system, including grandchildren, the daughter-in-law's marriage, and the relationship between daughters-in-law's husbands and their mothers.

Significance of the Problem

The turning points that lead to a high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationship do not only influence the women in this dyad, but also other family members. The paternal

grandmother/grandchild relationship, in particular, may suffer if the daughter-in-law chooses to limit contact between her children and mother-in-law, speaks poorly of her mother-in-law in front of the children, or engages in other verbal or nonverbal communication to express her opinion of her mother-in-law. A negative in-law relationship and subsequently strained or nonexistent paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship is a major risk factor for families, as the grandparent/grandchild relationship is one of the most important emotional bonds for children other than the one they have with their parents (Kornhaber, 1985).

In addition to the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship, the daughter-in-law's marriage could experience the deleterious effects of a high conflict mother-in-law relationship. The quality of in-law relationships affects couples' marital satisfaction (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Mikucki-Enyart, 2011; Morr Serewicz, Hosmer, Ballard, & Griffin, 2008; Timmer & Veroff, 2000), so a high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationship is likely to have far-reaching effects beyond these two women. Triadic communication, or communication among daughter-in-law, her spouse, and mother-in-law, is a common occurrence within in-law relationships (Morr Serewicz, 2008). When there is conflict between two members of the triad, the third is also affected (Morr Serewicz, 2008). The relationship between mother-in-law and son/spouse could also suffer, as the son/spouse is expected to take sides and may hurt his mother's feelings when remaining loyal to his wife (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Ultimately, a high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationship could yield multiple negative "ripple effects" throughout a family. These effects deserve exploration so the system-wide influences of difficult in-law relationships can be identified and addressed.

Overview of Study

A qualitative interpretive approach was utilized to achieve the study's goals by inductively analyzing the semistructured interview data of 27 daughters-in-law who assessed their mother-in-law relationship as "high conflict." Semistructured interviewing allows participants to play a role in shaping the interview, as researchers are able to adapt their line of questioning based on participants' responses (Smith, 1995). In the first portion of the interviews, participants were asked to identify turning points with their mother-in-law as if they were titling chapters in a book about their relationship, in line with the approach used by Baxter (1990). In the second half of the interviews, participants answered questions about system-wide repercussions of high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships, including the consequences on the paternal grandmother/grandchild, husband/wife, and husband/mother relationships.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter One states the problem and its significance and overviews the study. Chapter Two, the literature review, begins with the historical background and assumptions of family systems theory. This discussion is followed by an overview of research on mother-/daughter-in-law relationships, the focus of the present study. Next, turning points are introduced as a framework for understanding change in the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship. The role of in-laws as grandparents is described, followed by challenges faced by daughters-in-law when coping with their mothers-in-law as grandmothers. The literature provided in Chapter Two presents an argument for pursuing five research questions. Chapter Three describes the semistructured interview approach, participant demographics, and steps involved in data analysis. Chapter Four provides detailed analysis of the data resulting from 27 semistructured interviews. Exemplar quotations are provided to illustrate

the themes that emerged to answer each of the five research questions. Chapter Five discusses

the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter Two describes theory and literature relevant to in-law relationships to build a foundation for the research questions posed in this study. First, the study will identify the turning points that led daughters-in-law to characterize their mother-in-law relationships as "high conflict." Establishing the events that contribute to a negative, conflict-ridden mother-/daughter-in-law relationship will provide insight to the breakdown of this dyadic relationship before pursuing the second goal of the study: examining the repercussions of high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships in three family subsystems beyond this dyad.

This chapter begins by introducing family systems theory as an orienting framework for the proposed study with information about the history and development of the theory. Each assumption will be paired with an example from in-law relationships to illustrate the unique ways these relationships align with the theory. This initial section provides information about parents- and children-in-law in general (i.e., mother-/father-in-law and daughter-/son-in-law) to broadly introduce this relationship type. Next, the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship is presented as the focus of the present study. This section discusses characteristics that make the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship distinctive from other in-law relationships. Next, turning points are introduced as a structure for understanding pivotal events in high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships. Following this section, the role of in-laws as grandparents is described, along with the challenges faced by daughters- and mothers-in-law when children are introduced to family systems. Five research questions are posed at the conclusion of this chapter.

Family Systems Theory

Research has established the wide-reaching influence of in-laws on entire families. "Ripple effects" from in-law relationships extend throughout different stages in the family life cycle. For example, a child's marriage and the subsequent assimilation of new in-laws present a significant change to family structure (McGoldrick, 2005; Merrill, 2007; Minuchin, 1974; Prentice, 2008). Beyond this initial period of change, the quality of in-law relationships influences couples' marital satisfaction over time (Bryant et al., 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Timmer & Veroff, 2000). Grandchildren, too, are influenced if a troublesome relationship exists between one of their parents and their grandparent, as this discord may result in a strained or nonexistent grandparent/grandchild relationship (Drew, Richard, & Smith, 1998). Communication within in-law relationships does not occur in a vacuum, but instead permeates throughout entire families. Family systems theory provides insight into the implications of in-law communication by conceptualizing family members as interrelated parts of a unified whole. The following sections discuss the historical foundation of family systems theory, the application of the theory in communication scholarship, and the assumptions underlying the theory. Relevant challenges experienced within in-law relationships are introduced in conjunction with each theoretical assumption. This section closes with a description of the potential strengths in-laws bring to family systems.

Historical Foundation

Family systems theory is a descendent of General Systems Theory (GST), a perspective originated by von Bertalanffy (1933, 1968, 1975). Von Bertalanffy, a biologist, conceived GST as an alternative to the mechanistic thinking that dominated science in the World War II era (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Von Bertalanffy perceived weaknesses in this type of

thinking, also termed linear or causal reasoning, because it focused on models and equations for situations involving a limited number of moving parts but was an inadequate model for addressing more complex problems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). He argued for viewing phenomena as *systems,* defined as "set[s] of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment" (von Bertalanffy, 1975, p. 159). "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts," a well-recognized phrase associated with systems theory, demonstrates von Bertalanffy's emphasis on *connection* and *unity* rather than isolation (Smith & Hamon, 2012, p. 146). GST revolutionized thinking in the sciences and eventually in other disciplines, including mental health and family therapy (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006).

Bateson's Mental Research Institute (MRI) pioneered the application of systems principles to families by examining schizophrenia from a systems perspective where all family members play a role in the illness through the creation of "double binds," or situations where individuals are faced with two opposing demands that are both undesirable (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956; Jackson, 1965). Later work used systems theory to study communicative systems, including marriages and families (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Minuchin (1974) further realized the utility of a systems approach in family therapy with the development of structural family therapy as an offshoot of GST. Minuchin recognized the role every family member in a system can play in mental health problems. To illustrate the basic tenet of structural family therapy, Minuchin (1974) wrote, "Family members relate according to certain arrangements, which govern their transactions. These arrangements, though not explicitly stated or even recognized, form a whole—the structure of a family. The reality of the structure is of a different order from the reality of the individual members" (p. 89).

The work of these pioneers demonstrated the diverse applications of GST, later referred to as family systems theory or family process theory, in understanding family communication. Scholars studying interpersonal and small group communication later made explicit connections between family systems theory and communication (e.g., Mabry, 1999), as groups were no longer conceptualized as arrangements of disparate individuals but instead as interacting wholes linked through their communication. Similarly, the principles of family systems theory have influenced communication scholars' understanding of families as units in which each person contributes to overall family functioning (Galvin et al., 2006).

Applying Family Systems Theory in Communication Scholarship

Recent scholarship has identified family systems theory as a fruitful framework for studying a variety of diverse family communication problems. In a review of research on communication in families where one member has been diagnosed with cancer, Harris, Bowen, Badr, Hannon, Hay, and Sterba (2009) argued for more research using family systems theory to understand the ways all family members respond and function following a cancer diagnosis. Recently, Årestedt, Persson, and Benzein (2014) addressed this call, but instead of studying families affected by a cancer diagnosis, their sample consisted of families coping with the chronic illness of one member. *Family systems nursing*, an approach focused on caring for the needs of the entire family along with the patient, was identified as a beneficial practice to increase family welfare (Årestedt et al., 2014).

Other recent family communication scholarship used a systems perspective to study the involvement of both parents and children in therapy programs for children struggling with substance abuse (Dickerson & Crase, 2005). Parental involvement was associated with better relationships, communication, and closeness with mothers and better communication with

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fathers, indicating the value of a "whole family" approach to what is traditionally considered an individual problem (Dickerson & Crase, 2005). Another study used family systems theory to examine repercussions of military deployment across family members (Paley, Lester, & Mogil, 2013). The study identified consequences of deployment at various levels of the family; for example, potential strain in the spousal relationship could negatively influence the parent-child relationship, and stressful parent-child relationships could be especially detrimental for the marital relationship before and after deployment (Paley et al., 2013). Importantly, a common theme among these studies is the usefulness of family systems theory in studying difficult situations and relationships experienced within families, as it considers multiple pathways across multiple family members when studying communication problems.

Theoretical Assumptions of Family Systems Theory

The premise behind all theoretical assumptions in family systems theory is *the whole is greater than the sum of the parts*. For a system to be fully understood, it must be viewed as a whole rather than a collection of individuals (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Cox & Paley, 1997; Jackson, 1965; Klein & White, 1996; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). The process used to bake a cake is a common analogy illustrating this principle of family systems theory. Although single ingredients are placed in the mixing bowl, the cake that results transforms these individual parts into an entirely different entity (Smith & Hamon, 2012). In other words, as the personalities of family members interact, the family becomes much more than single individuals; the behaviors of these members are understood by examining the context of the family as a whole (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Minuchin (1984) described the importance of context in a mental health setting, arguing, "Decontexted individuals do not exist" (p. 2). This has important implications for family communication because it means the *locus of pathology*, or the site of a

given problem in a family, is due to an impaired family system (i.e., context) rather than an individual (Smith & Hamon, 2012).

This overarching assumption—that a whole family system forms a unique entity separate from its individual members—emphasizes the role of interaction and communication within families. Family members are continually interacting and influencing one another, and these interactions combine to form distinctive systems. Communication drives these interactions and serves as the mechanism for change within family systems, as "relationships are established, maintained, and changed by communication interaction among members" (Duncan & Rock, 1993, p. 48). Understanding systems as unified, interactive entities constituted in communication provides a foundation for four other theoretical assumptions. First, systems are considered interdependent units in which changes to one component affect all other parts of the system. Second, the connections between and among members make it difficult to identify a single cause for a problem. Third, boundaries play an important role in managing communication across generations. Fourth, families develop patterns in their interaction to establish communication routines. These assumptions align well with the defining characteristics of in-law relationships, explained in detail below. An example from in-law relationships is provided in conjunction with each assumption to illuminate the unique links between family systems theory and this relationship type.

Systems are interdependent. The theoretical concept of *interdependence* argues that modifications to any part of the system affect the whole system (Galvin et al., 2006). This includes changes in individual members, dyads, or triads (Galvin et al., 2006). For example, when a child has a problem, siblings and parents are influenced, and when couples experience conflict in their marital relationships, their children also experience spillover effects of strain,

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unhappiness, and dysfunctional communication (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006). Likewise, a child's misbehavior could occur in response to witnessing arguments between his or her parents, and couples' marital strife could be due to stress with one another, their children, and their in-laws. Ultimately, interdependence demonstrates the reliance of family members upon one another and the wide-reaching effects both positive and negative behaviors can have on family functioning (Galvin et al., 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2002).

Changes to family membership, such as the addition of in-laws, may challenge interdependence within a family. First, due to the prioritization of *consanguinal* (i.e., blood) relationships in Western cultures, individuals may not consider their in-laws as relatives (Lopata, 1999) and may be hesitant to rely on them. In-laws are *affinal* relationships, or those created through affiliation such as marriage (Fingerman, 2004; Fischer, 1983a). Second, in-law relationships are also *nonvoluntary* (Morr Serewicz, 2008). In-law relationships are referred to as *nonvoluntary* rather than *involuntary* because nonvoluntary relationships are often perceived as forced upon those involved, whereas an involuntary action refers to doing something by instinct or reflex. Defining in-law relationships as nonvoluntary does not mean individuals are unfamiliar with their in-laws prior to entering into marriage. Rather, daughters-/sons-in-law and mothers-/fathers-in-law would not have any sort of bond without their mutual relationship to one person: the spouse/child (Morr Serewicz, 2008). Nonvoluntary relationships are also characterized by the minimal choice parties have in maintaining them. Hess (2000) explains this feature of nonvoluntary relationships, writing, "A nonvoluntary relationship is a relationship in which the actor believes he or she has no viable choice but to maintain it, at least at present and in the immediate future" (p. 460). Although nonvoluntary relationships can be successful and satisfying for both parties (Hess, 2000), individuals in these relationships may always see them as non-

blood and obligatory, and often have a much closer connection to their families of origin (Bryant et al., 2001). Yet despite these potentially negative qualities of nonvoluntary relationships, neither party is likely to dissolve the relationship due to shared interest in the relationship with the spouse/child (Morr Serewicz, 2008).

For individuals to function as part of interdependent systems, there is an assumption of membership in that system, or at least an acceptance from system members that an individual is associated with the system. Individuals may be less willing to accept in-laws as interdependent members of their family systems when these relationships are perceived as affinal and nonvoluntary. For example, instead of being analogous to close, familial relationships such as parent-child or extended family, most mothers- and daughters-in-law in Pfeifer's (1989) study perceived in-laws as affiliates through marriage. This poses unique problems for family members who are assimilating new in-laws into their family systems *and* for in-laws themselves. Family members may communicate their hesitance in accepting in-laws into the routines and rituals of their family system through verbal and nonverbal messages of exclusion (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015). In-laws experience a sense of devaluation when they are consistently treated as "outsiders" of a family system (Turner et al., 2006). According to family systems theory, individuals are continually interacting and influencing one another to create an intricate system (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1988). This perspective, however, assumes individuals in a given system accept all relatives—whether consanguinal or affinal, voluntary or nonvoluntary—as members of their systems. Due to the non-blood, nonvoluntary nature of in-law relationships, individuals may be reluctant to accept in-laws as interdependent members of their "whole," and instead may perceive in-laws as disparate "parts" on the periphery of the system. Although there is a cultural expectation eventually to accept in-laws as members of family systems, in-laws are

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introduced to families as strangers with no blood tie or shared history (Fischer, 1983a; Prentice, 2009).

Circular causality governs behavior. Circular causality argues, "in human interactions, there are a number of forces moving in many directions simultaneously" (Smith & Hamon, 2012, pp. 147-148). In contrast to linear causality, which assumes direct cause/effect relationships (e.g., husband makes a negative comment [cause] → wife becomes upset [effect]), circular causality does not seek one isolated cause for a problem. In this sense, it is futile to blame an individual for the problems within a family, as the patterns of interaction are continually changing among family members, and it is counterproductive to identify who "caused" a problem (Galvin et al., 2006; Jackson, 1965). Patterns of interaction within family systems are studied to identify and correct destructive sequences, as it is easy for actors to perform repetitive damaging behaviors. Smith and Hamon (2012) advance an example about in-law relationships to explain circular causality, noting that when a couple marries, they may feel stifled by their parents' and in-laws' desire to call and visit frequently. Parents and in-laws, though, would not pester their children if the children would interact with them on a semi-regular basis (Smith & Hamon, 2012). This example clearly illustrates the complexity of in-law relationships, the misunderstandings that can ensue, and the influence of circular causality on family communication difficulties.

In-law relationships provide a unique illustration of circular causality because they involve three people (i.e., a triad) who mutually influence one another. In-law relationships are classified as triadic because two nonrelated parties are held together by a joint interest in one person. In her triangular theory of the communication and relationships of in-laws, Morr Serewicz (2008) terms the three people involved in in-law triads as the *linchpin, linchpin's spouse,* and *linchpin's relative.* In other words, a man could serve as the linchpin, while his wife

is the linchpin's spouse, and his mother is the linchpin's relative. The linchpin's spouse and

linchpin's relative are *only* connected through their relationship with the linchpin, and thus, the

spouse and relative have the weakest relationship (Fischer, 1983b; Morr Serewicz, 2008; Morr

Serewicz et al., 2008). If negative relationships exist in the triad, crisis is likely to occur (Morr

Serewicz, 2008). Many scenarios could result from crisis within the triad, including marital

discord for linchpin and spouse, communication breakdown for spouse and relative, or

estrangement between linchpin and relative (Morr Serewicz, 2006). For ease, the terms

"linchpin," "linchpin's spouse," and "linchpin's relative" are used hereafter when referring to

individuals in in-law triads.

The triadic organization of in-law relationships is important to circular causality for a

variety of reasons. Triadic communication is a hallmark of in-law relationships, representing a

common pattern of interaction. The triad is composed of three dyads—familial

(linchpin/relative), marital (linchpin/spouse), and in-law (spouse/relative)—and communication

between and among these dyads and the complete triad can influence family functioning in a

variety of positive and negative ways (Morr Serewicz, 2008). For example, using one member of

the triad (typically the linchpin) to mediate communication between the other two members can

serve a protective function within families (Prentice, 2008). Mediation is a successful

communication tactic when it allows the linchpin to communicate important information about

family norms or routines to his or her spouse or to prevent explosive exchanges between spouse

and relative about difficult issues (Prentice, 2008). Although mediation is a comfortable,

nonaggressive communication pattern within in-law triads, it ultimately represents the

communication between two dyads (linchpin/spouse and linchpin/relative) rather than direct

communication among all triad members. Cycles of dysfunctional behavior are likely to occur.

For example, when a daughter-in-law becomes upset with her mother-in-law, she speaks with her husband, who addresses the issue with his mother. His mother is angry with her daughter-in-law for refusing to communicate directly about the situation. Ultimately, both women see the other as instigators of an uncomfortable situation, while the linchpin is caught in the middle.

The aforementioned scenario is one of many ways triadic communication leads to blame within in-law relationships. Circular causality is based on the premise that interactions occur in never-ending "loops," with each actor contributing to the interaction and the outcomes that result from it. Members of in-law triads, however, are unlikely to view their interactions as circular; instead, a dyad may perceive the remaining member of the triad as the problem. The marital and familial dyads are the strongest within the in-law triad (Morr Serewicz, 2008), and thus, these dyads may "team up" against either the relative or the in-law. There is evidence the relative is most likely to be blamed by the marital dyad when a conflict occurs, especially if the linchpin is male. Upon marriage, a son's relationship with his mother is a source of competition for the husband/wife relationship (Fischer, 1983a). Wives expect their husbands to show loyalty to them, not their mothers-in-law. When conflict arises between women and their mothers-in-law, women are dissatisfied when their husbands "side" with their mothers (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Regardless of their personal feelings, male linchpins may express their loyalty to their spouses by blaming their relative for a given problem, creating a scenario of linear rather than circular causality by isolating a single person as the cause for a problem.

Boundaries govern family life. Systems can be extremely complex, involving a hierarchy of parents, children, and various members of extended family, and although these people are all connected, smaller groups within the system are necessary for ease of communication and family functioning (Galvin et al., 2006; Klein & White, 1996). As

individuals marry and children are born, family members break into *subsystems,* or smaller segments of the family composed of two or more people (Cox & Paley, 1997; Galvin et al., 2006; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). For example, within a given family system, there could be dyadic subsystems for parents, children, and grandparents, but also a larger subsystem composed of parents and their children (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Subsystems change as families change. Siblings may form coalitions against the parental subsystem at one point, but at a later point, a sibling may coexist in a subsystem with one or more parent (Galvin et al., 2006). When a couple marries to form in-law relationships, a minimum of three subsystems typically exists: the couple, the wife's family of origin, and the husband's family of origin. The subsystem structure becomes increasingly complex when children are born, as the couple becomes a parental subsystem separate from their children, and in-laws on both sides become grandparental subsystems.

Instituting and maintaining healthy boundaries between subsystems is one of the biggest challenges facing in-law relationships at all stages of the family life cycle. When in-laws enter a family system, families can welcome them into the system or create an explicit or implicit boundary between the family and in-law (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Conversely, when an individual marries and creates a new subsystem with his or her spouse (i.e., the in-law), the families of each of the individuals may become overinvolved with the new couple to deny the existence of a boundary between marriage and family of origin (Linn & Breslerman, 1996; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015). As Cox and Paley (1997) argue, "For effective family functioning, boundaries must be clear but flexible" (p. 246).

For married couples, forming a new subsystem and maintaining healthy boundaries with their families of origin and in-laws can be difficult (Meyerstein, 1996), and parents-in-law may

also struggle with respecting the boundaries the linchpin/spouse have formed. A boundary violation in an in-law relationship refers to any action that, from the perspective of individuals involved in the relationship, does not align with the desired level of involvement from an in-law in a given situation. In other words, boundary problems result when in-laws threaten individuals' independence or in-laws grant individuals *too* much independence, resulting in seclusion and loneliness. Boundary challenges within in-law relationships are separated into three camps: parents-in-law being intrusive in the lives of sons- and daughters-in-law (i.e., boundary crossing), parents-in-law excluding the child-in-law by enforcing impermeable boundaries around the family, and sons- and daughters-in-law feeling disconnected or isolated when parents-in-law are overly cautious of maintaining healthy boundaries.

A primary challenge faced by sons- and daughters-in-law occurs when parents-in-law, and mothers-in-law in particular, want to be involved in the decisions of the child-in-law and spouse (Linn & Breslerman, 1996). Mothers-in-law must grapple with decreased influence in sons' lives after marriage, a difficult adjustment when their connection to sons has been a source of identity for many years (Turner et al., 2006). In Duvall's (1954) seminal study on in-law relationships, one of the primary complaints about mothers-in-law was intrusiveness and other issues related to boundary violation, including invasion of privacy and meddling. Similarly, a recent study by Rittenour and Koenig Kellas (2015) reported the most common types of hurtful messages daughters-in-law received from mothers-in-law were those related to *overinvolvement*, including the mother-in-law overstepping boundaries by speaking to her son negatively about the daughter-in-law or trying to exert control over the daughter-in-law by expressing unwanted opinions on parenting and marriage.

Impermeable boundaries are equally challenging. When families are in the process of adding a new in-law to the family, members may be initially hesitant to accept the in-law, and this hesitancy positions the new in-law as an outsider trying to get "in" with the family (Prentice, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). These impermeable boundaries are understandable in the early stages of in-law socialization given the strength of family of origin loyalty and the desire of family members to "wait and see" about an in-law's character (Prentice, 2009, p. 80), but if the in-law continues to feel unwelcome within the "exclusive" family, shared family identity is weakened (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). This type of exclusivity is related to another category of hurtful message identified by Rittenour and Koenig Kellas (2015) titled *underinvolvement.* In contrast to overinvolvement, underinvolvement occurred when mothers-in-law created boundaries around the family that purposefully excluded the daughter-in-law by communicating the daughter-in-law was not part of the "real" family. These messages included those where the mother-in-law ignored the daughter-in-law, made her feel like an outsider, or excluded her from family activities.

A third type of boundary management challenge exists in the feelings of separation and loneliness that may result from married couples forming their own family unit. Although it is important for both spouses to create an independent unit from their families following marriage (Minuchin, 1974), this newfound liberation from family can be isolating (Servovich & Price, 1994). This type of boundary management issue creates a unique double-bind: the married couple is likely to desire *some* involvement from in-laws while still maintaining their independence, but the in-laws may be unequipped to find the "correct" level of involvement, either erring on the side of under-involvement to combat cultural depictions of intrusive in-laws or maintaining the same level of involvement they have used as parents (Merrill, 2007).

Feeling left out of family rituals is linked to boundary issues, as a family's willingness to educate in-laws on rituals and include in-laws in these activities is evidence for the permeability of the family's boundaries (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008). Involvement or lack of involvement in family rituals is not a boundary issue related to independence; instead, these boundaries relate to a family's privacy orientations and the levels of comfort family members have in sharing information with in-laws (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008). For example, individuals experience more satisfying relationships when their in-laws are willing to disclose *historical identity*, or family stories and rituals (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008). Interestingly, though, this is only true for individuals who grew up in families with moderately to highly permeable privacy boundaries, indicating individuals expect the same sorts of disclosure from their in-laws that they experienced from their families of origin (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008). Negotiating rituals with in-laws is not only problematic when in-laws are left out purposefully or unintentionally. Sons- and daughters-in-law may experience strain when they and their spouses attempt to deviate from the traditions of the spouse's family of origin, such as deciding to practice a new religion or having political or social beliefs that do not align with the family's values (Prentice, 2009).

In sum, the development and maintenance of boundaries is a salient issue for in-laws. This is because when couples marry, they are members of three families, including their new family of procreation (i.e., the subsystem created through their marriage) and both partners' families of origin (Bryant et al., 2001; Duvall, 1954). Ineffective boundary management can contribute to a spectrum of competing emotions for in-laws, including suffocation and isolation.

Families develop patterns of interaction. To increase predictability of communication among members, family systems create rules to guide behavior (Galvin et al., 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). These rules may be explicit (e.g., members

discuss and decide upon a chore schedule within the family) or implicit (e.g., children know not to speak to their father until he has had his morning coffee). Rules can also aid in maintaining subsystems with unique values and rituals that may deviate from members in the broader family system. For example, particular standards for parenting or specific holiday traditions differentiate a given subsystem from others (Smith & Hamon, 2012).

Rules are changed, modified, and maintained through feedback processes (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Galvin et al., 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012). *Negative feedback* is delivered when a member violates the standards for behavior within a family, while *positive feedback* is granted when a member's behavior aligns with acceptable standards (Cox & Paley, 1997; Klein & White, 1996; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Importantly, negative feedback is used to maintain homeostasis in a system by preventing change (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). "Change," in this context, means any deviation from the family's standards for behavior. When in-laws are introduced to a family system, they come with their own standards for communication and interaction and may disrupt the homeostasis of their "new" family. The change spurred by in-laws could be met with negative feedback. Even if system members recognize marriage as the appropriate action for a fellow member, a marriage is also accompanied by irreversible change to the system. The exit of an individual due to marriage and the entrance of a new in-law requires *adaptive self-organization* from the family, or acclimating to new circumstances caused by individuals or situations external to the family (Cox & Paley, 1997). Although these transitions may be uncomfortable for system members, ideally families will adapt to meet the new reality of the system (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Due to undesirable portrayals and beliefs about in-law relationships in society, individuals may be predisposed to approach in-law relationships with pessimism and deliver

negative feedback. In-law relationships are frequently accompanied by negative expectations. Popular culture depictions of in-law relationships are generally negative. Movies (e.g., *Monster-in-Law, Meet the Parents*), television shows (e.g., *Everybody Loves Raymond*), websites (e.g., motherinlawstories.com), and self-help books portray in-laws as interfering, hostile, and inappropriate (Merrill, 2007; Rittenour, 2012). Mothers-in-law, in particular, are demonized in popular media. Daughters-in-law are frequently portrayed as the victims of mothers-in-laws' wrath, while mothers-in-law are depicted as intrusive and overly possessive of their sons (Merrill, 2007).

In-laws may be perceived negatively because their roles are highly ambiguous, at least in Western cultures (Bryant et al., 2001; Lopata, 1999; Merrill, 2007; Servovich & Price, 1994). In contrast, Eastern cultures have clearly defined power dynamics for mothers- and daughters-in-law (Lopata, 1999). For example, in Taiwan, mothers-in-law hold a great deal of power, and daughters-in-law are expected to listen to and obey mothers-in-law without question (Sandel, 2004). Likewise, in China, mothers-in-law are at the top of the family hierarchy and daughters-in-law must uphold the values of filial piety, or respect for elders (Song & Zhang, 2012). Mothers-in-law train daughters-in-law on their new "role" within the family, which includes daughters-in-law moving in with her husband's family and serving her in-laws (An, 2014; Shih & Pyke, 2010).

Conversely, in Western cultures, new in-laws are thrust into relationships with daughters- or sons-in-law that have no clear behavioral expectations (Lopata, 1999; Servovich & Price, 1994). This ambiguity creates fertile ground for conflict (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). To counteract this ambiguity, in-laws often pick a familiar relationship (e.g., parent-child or friendship) and model their actions as in-laws after this relationship (Cotterill, 1994; Morr Serewicz, 2006).

Picking a comparable relationship, while well intentioned, can create challenges when in-laws disagree about preferred roles in the relationship. For example, a father-in-law may think his daughter-in-law prefers a relationship similar to the one he has with his own daughter, when in reality the daughter-in-law views her father-in-law as a friend (Morr Serewicz, 2006). As Goetting (1990) writes, "an in-law is someone we should feel attached to somehow – but we are uncertain as to how to express this closeness" (p. 68).

When individuals have negative or unclear expectations of in-law relationships, their experience within the relationships may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. To illustrate, Linn and Breslerman (1996) found 94% of daughters-in-law who had negative expectations of their mother-in-law relationship prior to marriage did indeed experience unsatisfying relationships. Daughters-in-law may approach their mother-in-law relationships with the same cycle of destruction that occurs in distressed marriages: the relationship is viewed negatively, precipitating negative interactions and in turn confirming initial expectations (Baucom, Epstein, Daiuto, Carels, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996). Although some individuals may silently cope with a negative in-law relationship, others will deliver negative feedback. For instance, in her qualitative study on the assimilation of new in-laws to the family system, Prentice (2008) found parents-in-law delivered negative feedback to new in-laws who did not adapt to the family's routines and rituals. In-laws bring significant change to family systems and can disrupt a family's pattern of interaction. "Families develop expectations about members' attributes and ways of being, and are upset when these patterns are violated, even in adulthood" (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000, p. 18). In response to jarring changes within the system, individuals may express negative feedback directly to an in-law or via a mediator to "mold" the in-law to the family's interaction patterns (Prentice, 2008).

Combined, the four assumptions of family systems theory position family functioning as a product of interactions *among* family members. Members rely on one another to develop communication routines and use feedback to teach one another appropriate ways of relating. The addition of in-laws to a family system, a natural and expected part of the family life cycle, provides a unique context with which to study family systems theory. Although many of the aforementioned examples underscore the challenges associated with in-law relationships, these relationships are undoubtedly important to the family system. The following section describes the benefits both parents- and children-in-law reap from their relationships with one another.

Strengths of In-Law Relationships in the Family System

Although the challenges associated with in-law relationships have gained significantly more notoriety than the positive aspects, in-laws do indeed play an important role in family systems. When examining family functioning, family systems theory calls for a holistic assessment of the interaction among members to avoid placing blame; thus, only identifying the challenges posed by in-law relationships provides an incomplete picture. Individuals can experience positive in-law relationships with high levels of support, respect, and satisfaction (Goetting, 1990; Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Servovich & Price, 1994).

In-law relationships are undeniably important, and positive relationships can yield multiple favorable outcomes within families. Servovich and Price (1994) found participants of both sexes were generally highly satisfied with their in-laws, leading the authors to question whether predominantly negative characterizations of in-law relationships were warranted. When in-law relationships are positive, they can provide a "replacement family," offering an additional source of support or even providing positive experiences individuals lacked within their own families of origin (Silverstein, 1990, p. 410). Further, when in-laws are inclusive and

appropriately disclosive about family history and rituals, individuals are more likely to

experience shared family identity, or a sense of belonging within the in-law relationship and

broader family (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). In addition to these general positive attributes,

previous scholarship has focused on three primary strengths of in-law relationships within

families: the provision of support to married couples, the positive influence of quality in-law

relationships on couples' marital satisfaction, and the ability of children-in-law to provide care

for parents-in-laws in later life.

Support. In-laws are a vital source of support for couples, especially early in their

marriages. This support includes gifts, money, and services such as childcare and help around the

house (Goetting, 1990; Morr Serewicz et al., 2008). Parents-in-law provide the most assistance

over the first 10 years of marriage, indicating a long-lasting pattern of support (Adams, 1964;

Goetting, 1990). The type of support delivered, however, differs based on whether the husband

or wife's family is providing the support. The husband's family is more likely to provide

financial support whereas the wife's family is more likely to provide gifts or services (Adams,

1964; Fischer, 1983a). For married couples, the importance of in-law support goes far beyond

receiving extra cash or help with babysitting; these types of support help married couples

perceive in-laws as fundamental people in their social networks (Santos & Levitt, 2007).

Marital satisfaction. A wealth of research supports the association between fulfilling in-

law relationships and marital satisfaction (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Bryant et al., 2001; Mikucki-

Enyart, 2011; Morr Serewicz et al., 2008; Timmer & Veroff, 2000). For better or worse, in-laws

are members of married couples' *psychological networks*, or networks including trusted

individuals such as parents, other relatives, and friends (Bryant & Conger, 1999). As network

members, in-laws' opinions and expressions of support can influence couples' perceptions of

their own marriages (Bryant & Conger, 1999). More generally, the presence or absence of discord with in-laws plays a role in couples' marital satisfaction, as Bryant et al. (2001) found the quality of in-law relationship was a predictor of marital satisfaction.

Affection from in-laws is one specific variable studied in association with marital satisfaction. In a longitudinal study over the first three years of marriage, Timmer and Veroff (2000) found affectionate relationships with in-laws was a predictor of higher levels of marital satisfaction in the first year of marriage. In the second year of marriage, only wives' closeness with husbands' families predicted marital happiness, and wives' closeness to husbands' families in the third year of marriage predicted higher levels of marital happiness for husbands. In other words, wives' level of affection with husbands' families, in particular, is important to both wives' and husbands' marital happiness. Affection between mothers- and daughters-in-law is especially influential for marital happiness. Norwood and Webb (2006) found interpersonal solidarity between mother- and daughter-in-law increased marital satisfaction for both husband and daughter-in-law.

Caregiving intentions. The previous two strengths primarily yield positive outcomes for the child and child-in-law. Caregiving intentions, however, benefit mother- and father-in-law. Although filial piety has primarily been studied in Eastern cultures (An, 2014; Sandel, 2004; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Song & Zhang, 2012), filial responsibilities are also part of North American culture, as children often feel a sense of obligation toward their aging parents (Stein, 1992). The intention to provide care for in-laws, however, is influenced by a variety of factors. Daughters-in-law typically serve as caregivers (Shuey & Hardy, 2003). When daughters-in-law perceive a sense of shared family identity and view mothers-in-law as part of their ingroup, they may be more likely to provide care to the mother-in-law if necessary (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009).

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Daughters-in-laws' assessments of shared family identity, however, are closely linked to a *satisfying* relationship with their mothers-in-law (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Thus, parents-in-laws who foster positive relationships with sons- and daughters-in-law could improve the probability of receiving care when they are ill or elderly (Santos & Levitt, 2007).

Although the provision of support is certainly a positive aspect that can aid in-laws during difficult periods in life, daughters-in-law serving as primary caregivers may experience a range of emotions. For example, when caring for an in-law in comparison to a parent, daughters-in-law may struggle with having limited autonomy to make care-related decisions (Willson et al., 2003). Daughters-in-law may perceive their caregiving responsibilities as an obligation, knowing that "someone has to do it" (Globerman, 1996, p. 43). Caregiving may also come with feelings of ambivalence from daughters-in-law (Willson et al., 2003). In-laws, as affinal ties through marriage, rarely mimic the closeness and loyalty of consanguinal ties. Not surprisingly, women have greater awareness of their own parents' needs for caregiving and are more likely to deliver this assistance to members of their family of origin (Shuey & Hardy, 2003).

In sum, in-law relationships present both challenges and benefits to family systems. Helping in-laws find ways to communicate more effectively and experience satisfying relationships is a significant application of in-law scholarship. For mothers- and daughters-in-law, in particular, the relational weaknesses may outweigh the strengths, and it is necessary to gain a better understanding of these complex and frequently distressed relationships. Although in-laws of both genders may experience both the troublesome and happy aspects of in-law relationships, the experiences of the mother-/daughter-in-law dyad have garnered the attention of scholars in recent years. Scholarship has favored this dyad because it is frequently the most contentious in-law relationship. Relevant to the present study, however, is the importance of the

mother-/daughter-in-law relationship to the family system, as the communication between these women can influence a variety of other system members. The following section describes this relationship, along with the reasons why it is so often characterized by discord.

Mother- and Daughter-in-Law Relationships

Previous scholarship on in-law relationships has primarily focused on the tensions between mothers- and daughters-in-law (e.g., Cotterill, 1994; Fischer, 1983b, Linn & Breslerman, 1996; Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Merrill, 2007; Norwood & Webb, 2006; Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Song & Zhang, 2012; Turner et al., 2006). Although both sons- and daughters-in-law have potentially difficult relationships with their in-laws of both genders (Pans, 1998), competition between in-laws of the same gender may contribute to conflict (Silverstein, 1990). Daughters-in-law may compete with their mothers-in-law for husbands' attention, and sons-in-law will likewise compete with fathers-in-law to become the new "most important man" for their wives (Silverstein, 1990). Most often, though, studies have focused on discord within the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship (Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Song & Zhang, 2012).

The reasons for the emphasis on the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship are not surprising: both colloquially and empirically, the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship has been identified as the most troublesome in-law relationship (Cotterill, 1994; Duvall, 1954; Merrill, 2007; Sandel, 2004). More specifically, out of all relatives, mothers-in-law are disliked the most (Duvall, 1954). Across cultures, a negative bias exists against mothers-in-law, and because of this, daughters-in-law may expect conflict within the relationship (Adler et al., 1989).

Relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law, however, are not always negative. Duvall (1954) identified mothers-in-law as the most challenging family member, but she also received thousands of responses to the question, "Why I think mothers-in-law are wonderful people." Responses portrayed mothers-in-law as caring individuals who welcomed their new sons- and daughters-in-law into the family and sometimes even fulfilled the role of a second mother (Duvall, 1954). These responses, though drawn from a non-random sample of motivated listeners who likely had atypical mother-in-law experiences (Fischer, 1986), illuminate the fulfilling aspects of a mother-in-law relationship. Further, both mothers- and daughters-in-law can provide social support to one another (Kurdek, 1999), and mothers-in-law serve as a source of information and comfort when the daughter-in-law is having problems with her spouse, the mother-in-law's son (Cotterill, 1994). Overall, the discord between mothers- and daughters-in-law may not be as prominent as once thought. Merrill (2007) found over one-third of her sample of daughters-in-law experienced little conflict with their mothers-in-law, and in a study by Marotz-Baden and Cowan (1987), 34% of mothers-in-law and 17% of daughters-in-law had no difficulties in their relationship. Further, in a typology of in-law relationships developed by Merrill (2007), 30% of daughters-in-law and 65% of mothers-in-law classified their relationship as "tight knit," the highest-rated category. The "estranged" category, however, was the second-highest ranked category for daughters-in-law with 23% classifying their mother-in-law relationship as such.

Despite the findings that highlight potentially positive bonds between mothers- and daughters-in-law, there continues to be a strong focus on the toxic nature of these relationships. The following sections discuss major themes in previous literature on mother- and daughter-in-law relationships, with special focus on the reasons why this relationship is unique and

frequently conflict-ridden. These themes include the "kinkeeper" role of both mothers- and daughters-in-law, the strength of the mother/daughter relationship and its influence on the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship, and finally, the primary sources of conflict between mothers- and daughters-in-law. For ease and brevity, daughters-in-law are referred to as DILs, and mothers-in-law are referred to as MILs.

MILs and DILs as Kinkeepers

Women are "kinkeepers" within families, or those who assume primary responsibilities for maintaining relationships with immediate and extended family (Euler et al., 2001; Fischer, 1983b; Stein, 1992; Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003). Kinkeeping emerges as part of female gender socialization, as women are taught to value family ties by facilitating communication among family members, coordinating family gatherings, and overseeing family rituals (Fingerman, 2001). For many women, kinkeeping is a key part of their identity, as family relationships provide a sense of security and happiness (Fingerman, 2001; Turner et al., 2006). Additionally, women take a sense of pride in their kinkeeping role and may be possessive of these responsibilities. As Globerman (1996) writes, "Women do kinkeeping because they know what to do, and they find it intolerable when it is not done or it is not done right" (p. 43).

Although MILs serve as matriarchs and primary kinkeepers within families prior to the inclusion of a DIL, a DIL's entrance shifts the power dynamic (Cotterill, 1994; Limary, 2002). When their sons marry and DILs become part of the family, MILs are faced with several changes to their roles and identities, including changes to their kinkeeper role. The DIL emerges as another kinkeeper within the family, requiring the MIL to share this role she had once solely maintained (Willson et al., 2003). As sons often become less attached to their families of origin after marriage (McGoldrick, 2005), their loyalty rests with their wives, who control the

frequency and type of communication with their own families of origin and in-laws (Fischer, 1983b; Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003). The son is the linchpin in the MIL/DIL relationship and may mediate conflict in triadic communication (Morr Serewicz, 2008), but the DIL is the ultimate gatekeeper in controlling contact between MIL and son (Prentice, 2009), along with other family members including grandchildren (Drew et al., 1998; Matthews & Sprey, 1985).

Shared kinkeeping responsibilities between MIL and DIL illuminate the difficulties of the MIL/DIL relationship in a variety of ways. Arguably, DILs become the *most* important kinkeepers within families because they manage communication in a variety of directions: with their in-laws (including between in-laws and son and in-laws and grandchildren), with their family of origin, and with other extended family members. Due to the far-reaching influence of DILs, they have been characterized as the more powerful member of the MIL/DIL dyad (Cotterill, 1989; Limary, 2002). There is a cyclical pattern to kinkeeping within families: MILs served in this power position when they were DILs, but then must be willing to allow their own DIL to assume this role after their son marries. Allowing DILs to play a greater role in kinkeeping may be difficult for MILs (Merrill, 2007). Ultimately, changes in kinkeeping are linked to other significant changes for MILs, including the decreased influence they have in their sons' lives (Cotterill, 1994; Prentice, 2009; Turner et al., 2006).

Another challenge exists in the partiality toward kinkeeping on wives' side of the family (Euler et al., 2001). Research has shown women have particularly strong ties to their families of origin, especially their mothers (Fingerman, 2001; McGoldrick, 2005), and after marriage, couples are more likely to spend time with the wife's family (Timmer & Veroff, 2000). MILs may experience anxiety knowing their DILs are not only assuming kinkeeping responsibilities,

but are also "removing" sons from their families (Merrill, 2007). Fischer (1983a) provided a folk saying to summarize the closeness of daughters to their families of origin in comparison to sons: "A daughter is a daughter the rest of her life; a son is a son until he takes a wife" (p. 393).

Strength of Mother/Daughter Relationships

The strength of the mother/daughter relationship adds complexity to the development and maintenance of a healthy and satisfying MIL/DIL relationship. Mothers and daughters tend to share a long-lasting and powerful bond (Fischer, 1986; Miller-Day, 2004; Willson et al., 2003). Daughters' sense of identity is strongly linked to their relationship with their mother (Fingerman, 2001). Miller-Day (2004) writes, "To understand themselves, whether they like it or not, many women feel they have to first look to their relationship with their mother, achieving selfhood in a relational context" (p. 4). One of the contributing factors to the strength of mother/daughter ties is the similarity in roles shared by the two women. Women recognize they have very different experiences than those of their sons (Cotterill, 1994), but the mother/daughter bond is defined by shared experiences, including similar responsibilities within the family such as kinkeeping and motherhood (Fischer, 1986). More generally, families of origin are the most enduring groups in most individuals' lives (Socha, 1999), and the behaviors and values experienced within families of origin are long-lasting representations of what families "should" look like (Cotterill, 1994; Silverstein, 1990). Inevitably, individuals make comparisons between their families of origin and their in-laws, particularly with regard to standards for suitable conduct within families (Cotterill, 1994).

The MIL/DIL relationship, although closest to the mother/daughter relationship when examining similar roles in the family structure, differs greatly from the mother/daughter bond in several significant ways. Across cultures, research has found DILs have stronger relationships

with their mothers than with their MILs (Datta, Poortinga, & Marcoen, 2003). Fischer (1986) refers to the MIL/DIL relationship as "quasi-kin" and "quasi-maternal," indicating these relationships may share some similar terminology with mother/daughter relationships yet often fall short of achieving bonds that exist in this relationship (p. 191). Beyond lacking a consanguinal tie, MIL/DIL relationships are met with the difficult task of building emotional ties (Fischer, 1986). Whereas mothers and daughters are inextricably joined from the moment a daughter is born (Cotterill, 1994), MILs and DILs are strangers upon meeting without any shared history (Fischer, 1986). DILs, in particular, are acutely aware of the difference between mothers and MILs. Merrill (2007) found DILs did not model their relationship with their MIL after the one had they with their mother, because even if they desired a close relationship with their MIL, they recognized the distinct differences between MIL and mother/daughter relationships. Although DILs may intuitively understand the differences between MIL and mother/daughter relationships, comparisons between the two may be inevitable. DILs discuss MILs in comparison to their own mothers to clearly establish their bond to their own family of origin (Fischer, 1986).

DILs may be hesitant to address their MILs with maternal terms, and their reluctance is a potential source of tension with MILs. It is common practice for parents-in-law to refer to sons- and daughters-in-law by first name, but no such norms exist for addressing parents-in-law (Fischer, 1986). Determining the appropriate term of address for in-laws can be stressful for DILs in particular. Women may struggle more than men in deciding what to call their MIL, because although the MIL/DIL relationship is most closely related to the mother/daughter relationship, DILs are unlikely to view their MILs with the same loyalty and closeness as their mothers (Cotterill, 1994; Fingerman, 2001; Miller-Day, 2004). Thus, calling a MIL "mother" constructs a family relationship the DIL may not want (Jorgenson, 1994), yet calling the MIL by

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her first name or with a "Mrs." prefix emphasizes distance. Interestingly, though, both MILs and DILs were more satisfied with their relationship when the MIL was referred to as "mother" (Linn & Breslerman, 1996). In general, parents-in-law perceive "mom and dad" as a suitable term of address, but despite this preference, sons- and daughters-in-law view the use of these terms as impinging on the sanctity of their families of origin (Jorgenson, 1994).

Sources of Conflict Between MIL/DIL

The sources of conflict between MIL and DIL are numerous and widely varied. Generally, the sources for conflict in MIL/DIL relationships stem from the characteristics of in-law relationships: they are ambiguous, non-kin relationships accompanied by negative expectations that do not compare to family of origin relationships (Merrill, 2007). Two primary themes, however, have emerged in the literature as unique elements that make the MIL/DIL relationship particularly susceptible to conflict. First, DILs perceive MILs as intrusive in their everyday lives, and second, MILs and DILs have differing expectations about what their relationship should look like.

MIL as intrusive. Overwhelmingly, literature on in-law relationships reports on DIL perceptions of MIL behavior (Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Song & Zhang, 2012; Turner et al., 2006). One of the biggest complaints DILs express about MILs is MILs' intrusiveness. When couples marry and establish their own subsystem within the broader family system, a sense of independence typically accompanies their departure from their families of origin (Cotterill, 1994). MILs, however, may struggle with allowing this independence, leading to the stereotype of the "interfering mother-in-law" (Cotterill, 1994, p. 83). Even in one of the earliest studies of in-law relationships, Duvall (1954) identified MILs' tendency to intervene as a complaint of DILs. DILs perceive this intrusiveness

as lack of trust in their abilities as wives and mothers (Shih & Pyke, 2010), or as an attempt to

encroach on the marital relationship by maintaining inappropriately close ties to the son/husband

(Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015).

Differing expectations between MIL/DIL. Negative or unclear expectations are a

defining characteristic of in-law relationships, but for MIL/DIL relationships, *differing*

expectations is another barrier to relating. Both MILs and DILs may find their relationship

differs greatly from what they were expecting (Pfeifer, 1989; Turner et al., 2006). In addition,

MILs and DILs may differ in their perceptions of whether their relationship is positive or

negative. Linn and Breslerman (1996) found 75% of DILs were unsatisfied with their

relationships with their MILs, but only 25% of MILs were unsatisfied. Further, when asked

about the improvement or deterioration of the MIL/DIL relationship in future years, DILs

attributed any potential relational improvements to distance or separation within the relationship

(i.e., seeing the MIL less frequently would improve the relationship), whereas MILs linked

potential improvements to DILs becoming more attached to MILs (i.e., the DIL is able to see the

MIL's positive attributes by spending more time with her; Linn & Breslerman, 1996).

Expectations are closely related to standards, or "characteristics that an individual

believes should occur in a relationship" (Rittenour, 2012, p. 95). In her study of DIL standards

for MIL communication, Rittenour found DILs do indeed have standards for MILs regarding

supportiveness and appropriate disclosure about the family, and discrepancies between a MIL's

behavior and DIL's standard is negatively associated with relational satisfaction. These findings

call into question the ambiguity of in-law relationships as they indicate DILs have clearly

defined standards for what a MIL relationship "should" look like (Merrill, 2007; Rittenour,

2012). This research also corroborates previous findings about the power of the DIL in the

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MIL/DIL relationship (Cotterill, 1994; Limary, 2002), with Rittenour (2012) stating, "For MILs striving for successful relationships, the path of least resistance might be working toward DIL standards" (p. 106). Meeting these standards can be problematic for MILs, however, if they are unaware of DILs' standards or disagree with DILs' standards (Rittenour, 2012). Differing expectations, then, may be an unavoidable part of the MIL/DIL experience, but reconciling these differences is a difficult process requiring direct communication about standards, which may be uncomfortable for both parties (Rittenour, 2012). Regarding the complications that can result from discrepant expectations in MIL/DIL relationships, Pfeifer (1989) writes, "Poor and tolerable relationships are associated with those in which one or both partners expected positive interaction but perceived negative behavioral outcomes, had unfulfilled needs, and did not recognize the dimensions associated with the multidirectionality of the in-law relationship" (p. 208).

In sum, both MILs and DILs face several barriers to achieving a successful relationship. Negotiating appropriate interaction with DILs is potentially difficult for MILs, as MILs may grapple with maintaining an ongoing connection to their sons while coping with the cultural narrative of MILs as intrusive and domineering (An, 2014; Merrill, 2007). MILs are also faced with meeting DIL standards, which may be unknown or even unacceptable by MILs' perceptions (Rittenour, 2012). DILs struggle with expressing loyalty to their own mothers while accepting MILs as new members of their families (Merrill, 2007). Both women in the relationship will likely struggle with new kinkeeping responsibilities, as DILs adjust to their new role and MILs learn to share kinkeeping tasks.

When MILs and DILs are not able to establish and maintain healthy, satisfying relationships, there are consequences not only for these two women, but also for members of the

broader family system. For example, the quality of in-law relationships is related to both marital satisfaction (Bryant et al., 2001) and grandchildren's perceptions of closeness with their grandparents (Matthews & Sprey, 1985). When high levels of conflict characterize MIL/DIL relationships, entire families suffer. Yet, before deciphering the ways family systems are affected by problematic MIL/DIL relationships, it is necessary to understand the pivotal events that create high conflict MIL/DIL relationships. The first goal of this study is to understand the pivotal events—referred to as turning points—DILs identify in "high conflict" MIL relationships. DILs may assess MILs as intrusive, unreasonable, or competitive, but the specific acts that lead to these assessments have been largely unstudied. As DILs hold the most power in MIL/DIL relationships (Cotterill, 1994; Limary, 2002) and their standards play a role in establishing a positive relationship with MILs (Rittenour, 2012), learning about turning points with MILs that lead to a high conflict relationship is especially illuminating in understanding how and why these relationships become problematic.

<div align="center">**Turning Points in MIL/DIL Relationships**</div>

Turning points are "any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship" (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470). Bolton (1961) coined the term "turning point" to represent these events, noting that turning points do not need to be intense or sensational incidents; instead, a series of several smaller turning points may ultimately have the most significant influence on a relationship. When a turning point occurs in a relationship, individuals reassess the meaning and importance of the relationship and also consider future interactions (Graham, 1997). Constituted in communication, turning points are the "substance of change" in relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470). Graham (1997) succinctly summarized the importance of turning points to individuals' understanding of relationships: "Individually

identified, socially construed, and evidenced in communication, turning points provide insight into important relational dynamics by bringing certain characteristics about the relationship into focus" (p. 351).

Turning points have been used to study change in a wide variety of interpersonal relationships and contexts, including heterosexual relationship development (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Surra & Hughes, 1997), the development of blended families (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), immigrant experiences (Erbert, Perez, & Gareis, 2003), and changes in closeness within both parent-child relationships (Golish, 2000) and friendships (Johnson, Wittenberg, Haigh, Wigley, Becker, Brown, & Craig, 2004). Using turning points to identify changes within interpersonal relationships is a departure from stage-based models of relationship development. Stage-based or life cycle models of relationship development conceive relationships with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, with discrete steps experienced by relational partners as they proceed through these stages (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Duck, 1982; Knapp, 1984). Conceiving relationships in this way does not allow for diverse routes for development and negates the possibility of multiple stages occurring at once (Baxter et al., 1999). Stage models also view relationship development as a linear process, when in fact relationships might vary in closeness at different points in development (Johnson, Wittenberg, Villagran, Mazur, & Villagran, 2003). For example, conceptualizing relationships in stages of "coming together" or "coming apart" (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992) does not account for the communication that may occur *after* a relationship terminates (i.e., comes apart; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008).

Although stage-based models have been lauded for their clear and straightforward approach to relationship development, these models do not account for the ways communication

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leads to reevaluation of relationships (Graham, 1997). Graham addresses the potential for reevaluation, writing, "Recognizing that relationships sometimes dissolve in one form only to be reborn in another is an important step in the way we conceptualize and think about relationships" (p. 351). Previous research has examined turning points in estranged or terminated relationships, including post-divorce relationships (Graham, 1997), terminated friendships (Johnson et al., 2004), and post-breakup romantic relationships (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). These studies indicate communication does not cease during times of difficulty and conflict, or even when the relationship terminates entirely. Instead, communication transforms with the relationship.

Turning points provide a heuristic framework for studying events contributing to high conflict MIL/DIL relationships. Merrill (2007) identified three MIL/DIL relationship types with high levels of conflict: *obligatory*, *estranged*, and *conflicted but affectionate*. Combined, 48% of DILs described their MIL relationship under one of these three relationship types. Only 6% of MILs labeled their DIL relationship under the *conflicted but affectionate* category; no MILs described their DIL relationship as *obligatory* or *estranged*. These findings demonstrate DILs and MILs can have vastly different perceptions of the quality of their relationships (Linn & Breslerman, 1996), and DILs are likely to have a much more negative perception of the MIL/DIL relationship. This difference in perception is noteworthy because a DIL could assess her MIL relationship as "high conflict" when the MIL perceives the relationship under much more positive terms. DILs may be unwilling to communicate openly with MILs about conflict, instead choosing to "suffer in silence" or discuss these conflicts with their husbands, mothers, or friends (Prentice, 2009). Thus, overt arguing or yelling may not characterize a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship; instead, these relationships may result from repeated annoyances that build over time for DILs without being voiced.

Studying turning points leading to "high conflict" MIL/DIL relationships can shed light on these complex relationships. Other than the parent/child and marital relationship, in-law relationships are potentially one of the longest-lasting relationships in an individual's life. These relationships last at least as long as a marriage lasts, and sometimes even beyond divorce. After divorce, individuals with children are likely to maintain contact with in-laws to sustain the grandparent/grandchild relationship, and relationships with the former MIL are maintained with greater frequency than other in-laws (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2009). Difficult MIL/DIL relationships are unlikely to sever entirely when the DIL's marriage with her spouse is still intact because both DIL and MIL have relationships with the linchpin (i.e., spouse/son). Thus, DILs who experience high levels of conflict in their MIL relationship likely still need to communicate with their MIL. Identifying turning points that manifest in high conflict MIL/DIL relationships is valuable because DILs cannot "escape" this relationship, but instead must communicatively cope with the condition of their MIL relationship for the sake of their husband and children.

In addition to being a long-lasting relationship, MIL/DIL relationships are especially sensitive to various types of relational changes over time. Research has identified two major life transitions—a DIL's marriage (i.e., entry into her husband's family) and the birth of a first child—as major life transitions where the MIL/DIL relationship is at risk of turmoil. Prior to marriage, both MILs and DILs experience multiple competing emotions, including a DIL's desire to be part of her future husband's family while still maintaining loyalty to her family of origin, and a MIL's hesitancy toward accepting the DIL while still remaining supportive of her son's choice in a spouse (Turner et al., 2006).

Childbirth is another transformative time for MILs and DILs. While women become closer to their own mothers after they have children, they experience more conflict with MILs

(Fischer, 1983b). MILs must adjust to their roles as grandmothers while deciphering the type and amount of help to give DILs (Drew et al., 1998). These examples indicate the MIL/DIL relationship is fraught with change, and the emotions that accompany these changes are often negative, but marriage and childbirth are two transitional periods within which several turning points could occur. Current research has thoroughly discussed the challenges faced by MILs and DILs during these time periods, but has not identified specific turning points within these transitions or turning points that may exist at other points in life. Difficult relationships are unlikely to occur in one "big bang," but instead become that way over time with a series of events.

Identifying turning points within high conflict MIL/DIL relationships is the first step in understanding the ways these relationships can affect other subsystems within the broader family system. The grandparent/grandchild dyad is one such subsystem that is likely influenced by a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship. The following section describes challenges in-laws face when children are introduced to a family system, along with the role DILs play in facilitating grandparent/grandchild relationships.

In-Laws as Grandparents

The addition of children to a family is a significant transition for parents and grandparents with the potential for multiple influential turning points (Cotterill, 1994; Dun, 2010; Minuchin, 1974). Similar to the addition of in-laws to the family, structural changes result, and both parents and grandparents are faced with learning new roles and ways of relating (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). For first-time parents, the transition is a complex time associated with a plethora of positive and negative emotions (Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Couples may experience newfound satisfaction with their identity as parents and relish the

connection they share with the new child (Nelson et al., 2014), but they may also experience decreases in marital functioning (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009) and satisfaction (Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008), violated expectations from their idealistic view of parenting (O'Laughlin & Anderson, 2001), depressive feelings postpartum for both mothers and fathers (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014), and sleep deprivation and financial strain (Nelson et al., 2014). Although the birth of a first child has distinctive challenges, parenting is accompanied by some level of stress but also significant reward regardless of whether the child is the couple's first, second, or third (Deater-Deckard, 2008).

Grandparents reap multiple benefits in their role, including an emotional connection to the child, companionship, and "tremendous joy" (Breheny, Stephens, & Spilsbury, 2013, p. 176). Personal growth is also associated with grandparenthood, including a newfound understanding of priorities and relationships (Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, & Ben Shlomo, 2013). Grandparents, who may be retired or close to retirement when grandchildren are born, enjoy the freedom of spending time with their grandchildren without having sole responsibility to parent or financially support the children (Breheny et al., 2013). Yet, despite these positive aspects of grandparenthood, grandparents may also wrestle with their lack of control over the lives and upbringings of their grandchildren (Ben Shlomo & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2012) and must negotiate their desire to foster a connection with grandchildren and provide childcare while protecting their own independence and needs (Breheny et al., 2013). Grandparenthood is also associated with aging, which can provoke stress for grandparents (Gauthier, 2002). Beyond adjusting to their relationship with the child and coping with changes on a personal level, parents and grandparents must navigate new roles with one another. Similar to the period when new in-laws enter a family,

the grandparent/parent relationship is ambiguous, without clearly defined roles in Western culture (Servovich & Price, 1994).

The grandparent/grandchild relationship is not only an important one for grandparents, but for grandchildren as well; grandparents represent the most powerful family bond for children other than their parents (Kornhaber, 1985). Perhaps most importantly, grandparents serve as significant sources of support for grandchildren, both directly and indirectly (Breheny et al., 2013; Drew et al., 1998; Gauthier, 2002; Servovich & Price, 1994). For example, direct sources of support can include caring for grandchildren, offering mentorship and emotional support, and giving gifts. Indirect support is facilitated through a third party, usually the parents, and may include serving as parenting role models and providing financial support (Drew et al., 1998).

In sum, the arrival of children irreversibly changes a family's structure and ways of relating. The daughter- and son-in-law must adjust to new roles as parents just as the mother- and father-in-law adapt to being grandparents, but all individuals must also learn to get along with one another in their new roles. When a child is born, in-laws become more than in-laws: they become grandparents who have the potential to shape the attitudes and values of their grandchildren significantly (Gauthier, 2002). A high conflict MIL/DIL relationship, then, is not limited to the two women and their husbands, but can also negatively affect the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship. The MIL/DIL relationship after the arrival of children has the potential for increased conflict. DILs with children report lower levels of conflict with their own mothers but increased conflict with MILs (An, 2014; Fischer, 1983b; Fischer, 1986; Shih & Pyke, 2010). The two primary sources of conflict between MILs and DILs after the birth of children are DILs' increased closeness with their own mothers and the perception of MILs as intrusive. Although these sources of conflict mirror the general annoyances DILs experience

with MILs even when children are not involved, the arrival of children adds new complexity to these two categories of conflict.

DILs' Closeness with Mothers and MILs after Baby Arrives

DILs are more likely to discuss their pregnancies with their own mothers, and after the child arrives, DILs have more contact in-person and via telephone with their mothers in comparison to MILs (Fischer, 1986). When DILs become mothers, the depth of the bond with their own mothers intensifies as they can relate to the trials and joys of motherhood (Fischer, 1981). In contrast, DILs may further detach themselves from relationships with MILs (Fischer, 1983b). Husbands are unlikely to advocate for closer relationships with their own families during the transition to parenthood, as males often decrease their contact with their families of origin and become closer to wives' families (Fischer, 1983a; Timmer & Veroff, 2000).

DILs are also more likely to depend on their mothers for support, particularly instrumental support such as childcare. Cotterill (1994) found DILs preferred grandmothers to provide childcare, but ultimately desired help from their own mothers. This choice is rooted in unwavering trust in mothers, with Cotterill arguing, "Strong affective bonds between mothers and daughters meant that the maternal grandmother either shared her daughter's views on childcare, or at least could be trusted to carry out her instructions" (p. 47). This reliance on mothers' instrumental support may explain the disdain DILs have over gifts provided by MILs. MILs are more likely to give material gifts, whereas mothers are more likely to provide tangible assistance (Fischer, 1983b). Fischer (1986) found gifts were perceived negatively by DILs and set a standard of obligation between DIL and MIL (i.e., DILs "owe" MILs in some way to repay them for the gift). More recent scholarship, however, found the opposite trend, with expectant mothers happily receiving gifts from parents and in-laws (Dun, 2010). "Gifts," however, were

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classified as both favors and material items (Dun, 2010), in contrast to Fischer's (1983b) definition of gifts as presents.

MILs as Intrusive After Baby Arrives

The stereotypical "intrusive mother-in-law" takes on a new form after children alter the family structure. With children involved, intrusion not only threatens the DIL and her husband, but the DIL's authority as a mother. MILs are perceived as intrusive when they challenge or ignore DILs' parenting choices or try to control the way their grandchildren are raised, resulting in DILs feeling undervalued, attacked, and defensive (An, 2014; Cotterill, 1994; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Silverstein, 1990). A closely related complaint is unsolicited advice from MILs (Dun, 2010; Duvall, 1954; Shih & Pyke, 2010). This advice, rather than being helpful to DILs, is used to veil criticism about DILs' parenting style and choices (Shih & Pyke, 2010). DILs are much more likely to follow the childrearing advice of their own mothers (Fischer, 1986), reinstating the reliance DILs have on their mothers after children arrive.

Parenthood is a unique context posing distinctive challenges to DILs' relationships with MILs, but parents-in-law, too, face contradictory feelings about their role as grandparents. Grandparents are uncertain how to express the proper level of support, with Drew et al. (1998) observing, "Overall grandparents are faced with a double-bind, since they are expected to be supportive without interfering" (p. 466). Harnessing the desire to interfere can be especially difficult when grandparents believe the child isn't being raised to their standards (Fingerman, 1998). So, when DILs perceive MILs as interfering, a MIL may back off only to be perceived as distant (Dun, 2010), yet parenting advice regarded as intrusive by DILs could be MILs' method of establishing connection with both DIL and grandchild. Thus, conflict between MILs and DILs

after children are born is potentially rooted in misunderstanding by both women about their new roles and how best to help one another (Servovich & Price, 1994).

Unfortunately, though, any struggles faced by MILs are unlikely to hold much weight in comparison to the goals and desires of the DIL in establishing the grandmother/grandchild relationship. Scholars have established the important role the "middle generation" has in facilitating grandparent/grandchild relationships. This generation has been referred to as the "bridge" or "gatekeeper" between grandparents and their grandchildren (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998, p. 277), with others referring to this generation as "mediators" for the grandparent/grandchild relationship (Euler et al., 2001, p. 151). Fingerman (2004) expanded these characterizations by referring to the grandparent/grandchild relationship as a "contingent" one reliant on a "direct path" between generations (p. 1026).

DILs, in particular, hold a great deal of power in enabling the grandparent/grandchild relationship for a variety of reasons. First, when mothers serve as primary caregivers, they influence their children's perceptions of other family members. Fischer (1983b) writes, "Ties with grandchildren, however, are likely to be *filtered through* the child's mother" (p. 192, emphasis mine). It is important for MILs to establish positive—or at least tolerable— relationships with DILs to maintain a connection to both their sons and grandchildren (Fischer, 1986). Although DILs may share kinkeeping responsibilities with MILs, DILs are the ultimate gatekeepers for their own families and possess a great deal of control over the interactions among MIL, son, and children (Cotterill, 1994).

Second, MILs are already at a disadvantage in establishing a relationship with their sons' children because maternal grandparents (i.e., the DIL's family of origin) are favored over the paternal (Matthews & Sprey, 1985; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). This preference again stems

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from women's loyalty to their families of origin (Fingerman, 2004). This can lead to decreased contact between paternal grandparents and their grandchildren (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998), which could be especially true when DILs experience high conflict relationships with MILs. Third, the MIL/DIL relationship plays an important role in the grandmother/grandchild relationship because grandchildren's perception of their grandmother's relationship with their parents strongly influences closeness with grandmothers (Matthews & Sprey, 1985). This demonstrates the significant influence of the middle generation in facilitating closeness in the grandmother/grandchild relationship from grandchildren's perspective (Matthews & Sprey, 1985). Children are perceptive, so any explicit or implicit discord perceived between their mothers and their grandmothers could cast a negative light on their relationship with their grandmother.

It is evident any problems in the MIL/DIL relationship are not limited to this dyad, but instead have consequences for others within the family system, including grandchildren. As Drew et al. (1998) writes, "A partnership between parents and grandparents can be of benefit to the entire family; conversely, conflict between generations can lead to distress for grandparents and loss for grandchildren" (p. 466). Others in the family, too, are influenced by a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship, including the MIL's husband, DIL's husband, siblings-in-law, and other extended family members (Song & Zhang, 2012; Turner et al., 2006).

Rationale

This study has two goals: first, to understand the turning points that lead DILs to assess their MIL relationship as "high conflict," and second, to identify the system-wide consequences of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship. To achieve these goals, DILs' perspectives are sought because DILs serve as dominant kinkeepers within families and have the unique ability to control

communication between their families and in-laws (Cotterill, 1989; Limary, 2002). It is

necessary to study turning points in high conflict MIL/DIL relationships because understanding

these events illuminates *why* DILs assess the relationship this way. Turning points provide a

foundation for understanding the repercussions of a conflict-ridden MIL/DIL relationship on

other family subsystems. Using a turning point approach is valuable as it allows DILs to recall

influential events over the course of the relationship with their MILs. Individuals have

remarkable recall for significant turning points (Miell, 1984), and allowing DILs to reflect on the

entirety of their MIL relationship will provide a rich understanding of the relationship. Second,

turning points can designate relational growth or deterioration, and examining the bright and

dark periods provides a more holistic picture of the relationship and the reasons why the

relationship is assessed as "high conflict." To understand the events that lead DILs' to assess

their MIL relationships as high conflict, the following research question is posed:

> RQ$_1$: From DILs' perspectives, what turning points characterize high conflict MIL
>
> relationships?

The present study also seeks to understand the influence of a high conflict MIL/DIL

relationship beyond this dyad. Logically, the two women in the dyad will experience negative

outcomes, but the repercussions for children require further explanation. When the MIL/DIL

relationship represents a high conflict subsystem within the family, individual family members

and other subsystems can suffer, including the paternal grandmother/grandchild subsystem

(Fischer, 1983b, 1986; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). As the grandmother/grandchild relationship is

a "contingent" one primarily controlled by the DIL (Fingerman, 2004), DILs' opinions of MILs

may play an important role in the frequency of contact between paternal grandmother/grandchild

and the quality of this relationship. Yet, qualitative accounts about the ways DILs manage a high

conflict MIL/DIL relationship in the context of other family relationships is missing in current literature. When child(ren) are involved, it is especially important to understand how a high conflict relationship between the child's mother and grandmother affects the child's grandmother relationship, as grandparent relationships can be extremely influential in children's lives (Breheny et al., 2013; Drew et al., 1998; Gauthier, 2002; Kornhaber, 1985; Servovich & Price, 1994).

From a family systems perspective, it is not only important to understand the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the paternal grandmother/grandchild subsystem, but also the ways DILs control the boundaries between grandmother and grandchild. When DILs do not get along with MILs, they may manage boundaries between their children and MILs in a variety of ways. For instance, they may enforce impermeable boundaries to separate their children from the influence of their MILs. Conversely, even though a high conflict relationship exists, DILs may recognize the importance of the grandparent/grandchild bond and encourage interaction from MILs. DILs could also vacillate between impermeable and open boundaries based on the level of conflict experienced with MILs during a given period. Understanding the ways in which DILs control or monitor the boundaries between their children and MILs when the MIL/DIL relationship has high levels of conflict provides insight into the pivotal role of DILs in the family system. To explore these issues, the following research questions are posed:

RQ2: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship?

RQ3: How do DILs manage the boundaries between paternal grandmother/grandchild when the MIL/DIL relationship has high levels of conflict?

The paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship is not the only subsystem potentially affected by a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship, however; the marital relationship and mother/son relationship is also at risk. Triadic communication (Morr Serewicz, 2008) emphasizes the interrelatedness of all three members of the triad—linchpin, linchpin's spouse, and linchpin's relative—so discord between the spouse (DIL) and relative (MIL) likely influences the linchpin, as well. The linchpin may be asked to take sides or mediate conflict (Morr Serewicz, 2008; Prentice, 2008, 2009), both of which could lead to negative implications for the marital relationship and the mother/son relationship. To identify these potential consequences, the following research questions are posed:

RQ4: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on their marriages?

RQ5: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the relationship between their husbands and his mother?

CHAPTER THREE. METHOD

Chapter Three discusses the methodological approach used to learn about turning points in high conflict MIL/DIL relationships and the ways these relationships influence the family system. First, the research design is overviewed, including a definition of interpretivist-oriented qualitative research and an explanation of the interviewing technique used in the present study. The participants, recruitment plan, and data collection procedures are explained in the following sections. The chapter closes with a discussion on the processes used for data verification and analysis.

Research Design

This study utilizes *interpretivist-oriented qualitative research* (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) to explore the research questions. Interpretivism is a paradigm focused on individuals' interpretations of their own and others' behavior, and qualitative research attempts to understand these interpretations through open-ended methods of data collection, such as interviews and focus groups (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The purpose of this type of research is to learn more about a given phenomenon through participants' voices instead of developing a predictive model (McCracken, 1988). Rather than seeking objective truths about the world, interpretivist-oriented qualitative research seeks fine-grained understanding of the way individuals describe their experiences and negotiate meaning within themselves and with others (Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Tracy & Munoz, 2011).

In-depth semistructured interviews were used to learn more about the complex relationships between DILs and their MILs and the far-reaching effects of these relationships within the family system. As an interpretivist, I focus on learning about complicated family relationships from the perspective of individuals who are currently involved in these

relationships. Semistructured interviews provide an ideal method to achieve this goal for a variety of reasons. First, semistructured interviews allow participants to serve as experts on a given topic by openly sharing their experiences and opinions (Esterberg, 2012; Kvale, 1996; Smith, 1995). The semistructured approach allows participants to play an important role in shaping the interview, as researchers come with an interview protocol but develop additional questions based on participants' responses and reactions. Smith (1995) summarizes the interplay between researchers and participants during the semistructured interview, writing, "The investigator has an idea of an area of interest and some questions to pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try to enter, as far as is possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent" (p. 12).

In addition to allowing participants to play an active role, semistructured interviewing gives researchers the freedom to ask probing follow-up questions as interesting information emerges from the participant (Smith, 1995). In contrast to structured interviewing, semistructured interviews allow the participant's responses to influence the line of questioning (Esterberg, 2002). By exploring participants' stories and examples through additional questions, researchers are able to collect rich data (Esterberg, 2002). In sum, by privileging the authentic voice of participants, interviews are appropriate for addressing complex communication problems because they allow for verbal reflection on the past, present, and future of relationships.

Participants

Participants were married heterosexual women who had at least one child and described the relationship with their living MILs as "high conflict." Given the unique gender-related challenges related to in-law relationships within heterosexual marriages, such as MILs'

perception of DILs' "removing" sons from their families (Merrill, 2007), heterosexual

relationships are an appropriate focus when studying discord in the MIL/DIL relationship. The

characteristics of a "high conflict" relationship were left purposefully vague in participant

recruitment materials, as women had the opportunity to decide whether they perceived their MIL

relationship as one with high conflict. These inclusion criteria met goals of this study in two

ways. First, participants who assessed their MIL relationship as "high conflict" were able to

describe the turning points that led to this evaluation. Second, being married and having children

allowed women to explain the repercussions of their MIL relationship beyond the MIL/DIL dyad

(e.g., for the grandmother/grandchild, husband/wife, and husband/mother subsystems).

To recruit participants, I used a variety of methods, including hanging flyers, posting

information on social media channels, and distributing the study information via email listservs.

First, I placed flyers advertising the research in well-traveled establishments within the mid-sized

Midwestern city where the study took place, including grocery stores, college campuses, and

local businesses (see Appendix A). Second, I posted information about the study and criteria for

participation on social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn (see Appendix B).

Viewers of these social media notices were encouraged to share the study information with

others who met the criteria. Third, the study information was distributed via the student and staff

email listservs at a local university and the listserv of the Communication Research and Theory

Network (CRTNET).

I also utilized purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2002). I engaged in purposeful sampling by reaching out to members of my personal

network about the study to determine if any of my acquaintances meet the study criteria.

Additionally, all participants were invited to share the names and contact information of others

who fit the study criteria and were interested in participating. Combined, these methods represent common recruitment tactics used in recent in-law scholarship (see Prentice, 2008, 2009; Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Song & Zhang, 2012; Turner et al., 2006). The most effective recruitment method was the university and CRTNET email listservs, followed by social media posts.

A total of 27 women volunteered to participate in an interview about their high conflict MIL relationship. Upon arriving for the interview and reading the consent form, one participant realized she did not qualify for the study as she did not have children; however, she asked to continue with the interview as her decision not to have children had caused significant strife with her MIL. Over half of participants (n=16) reported they were the only DILs on their husband's side of the family. The majority of participants reported their MIL was their husband's biological mother; however, four MILs were adoptive mothers of DILs' husbands. The distance MILs lived from DILs varied greatly, ranging from five blocks to thousands of miles. Nearly half of participants (n=12) reported their MILs lived between one and five hours from their homes. The frequency with which DILs saw their MILs was also highly variable, ranging from "never" for two participants who were estranged from their MILs, to "most days." Most participants reported seeing their MILs every few months. The frequency of communication between most DILs and their MILs ranged from daily or weekly (n=6) to rarely or never (n=9). The remaining participants generally reported communicating with their MILs bi-weekly, once a month, or once every few months. Text messaging and phone calls were used most frequently to communicate with MILs, followed by social media. The majority of participants (n=19) reported they did not receive any form of support from their MILs. The remaining participants reported several

different types of support from MILs, including childcare, gifts, and money. Please see Table 1

for a summary of other demographic information for DILs and their MILs.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Age of DILs	Range: 27-56 years Average: 38 years
Educational level	Bachelor's degree (n=13) Master's degree (n=8) Some college (n=4) Ph.D. (n=2)
Length of marriage	Range: 2 years to 34 years Average: 12.59 years
Number of children	Range: 0* to 4 Average: 1.81
Ages of children	Range: 1 month to 32 years Average: 10.67 years
Husband's birth order	Oldest (n=10) Middle (n=5) Youngest (n=5) Only child (n=4) Other (third of six, third of four; n=3)
Number of grandchildren on husband's side of the family	Range: 1 to 21 Average: 4.77
Age of MIL	Range: 47 to 80 Average: 63.77 years
MIL's marital status	Married (n=17) Widowed (n=2) Remarried after being widowed (n=2) Divorced (n=6)
MIL's education level	6th grade (n=1) High school (n=12) Some college (n=5) Associate's degree (n=1) Bachelor's degree (n=8)

*One participant did not meet study criteria as she did not have children but asked to continue with the interview.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews took place in person at a location of the participant's choosing (n=16) or over the phone if distance or scheduling was a barrier (n=11). Prior to beginning the study, participants were informed about study procedures and signed a consent form. When participants completed the interview over the phone, they were sent the consent form in advance and were asked for their verbal understanding and agreement prior to starting the interview. First, participants completed a demographic questionnaire including questions on their age, sex, number of children, length of marriage, and basic characteristics of their MIL relationship (see Appendix C). Due to the length of the demographic questionnaire, it was distributed to participants prior to the interview for completion if at all possible.

After completing the demographic questionnaire, participants engaged in a digitally recorded semistructured interview. The Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT; Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981) is commonly used to identify turning points in relationships (see Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Erbert et al., 2003; Golish, 2000; Graham, 1997; Johnson et al., 2004). Traditionally, the RIT has required participants to reflect on turning points within their relationships by identifying them on a grid and discussing the details surrounding each event (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). In previous studies on turning points in interpersonal relationships, the *x*-axis of this grid denoted time intervals from the relationship initiation to the time of the interview, and the *y*-axis reflected the level of commitment in the relationship from 0-100% (for romantic relationships, see Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & Pittman, 2001) or level of closeness (for families or friendships, see Golish, 2000; Johnson et al., 2003, 2004).

For high conflict MIL/DIL relationships, using time intervals or level of closeness when recalling turning points is problematic for various reasons. First, the time interval from first meeting to present day could be unwieldy for DILs in long-term marriages. If DILs grew up with their spouses, they may have met their MILs long before getting married and labeling this time period on a graph could be difficult. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to know the exact year a certain turning point occurred. Second, "level of closeness" is not an appropriate indicator for high conflict MIL/DIL relationships because they may never attain a close relationship.

For these reasons, the grid activity was replaced with a "book chapter" prompt to help DILs recall turning points over the course of their MIL relationships. This prompt, adapted from Baxter (1990), asks participants to reflect on a given relationship as if they were writing a book about it. As they compose the table of contents for this book, the titles of each chapter represent the turning points in their relationship. Participants were invited to share as many chapters (i.e., turning points) as they found necessary from the time they first met their MIL to present day.

Before initiating the book chapter prompt, I thoroughly defined turning points to help participants understand the intent of the exercise. Turning points are "major relational events that capture a critical moment, event, or incident" (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008, p. 28). Participants were invited to describe turning points in their MIL relationship from the time they met the MIL to present day. As participants introduced each turning point, I asked questions adapted from Baxter and Bullis (1986) to better understand the characteristics of each event (e.g., What happened during this turning point? Did you anticipate this turning point or did it come as a surprise?). In line with the semistructured interviewing technique, additional questions about each turning point were asked based on the details surrounding the event and participants'

individual reactions (see Appendix D for semistructured interview protocol). A pilot interview was completed prior to beginning data collection to test the interview protocol and ensure the interview could be completed within 60 minutes.

Following the retrospective portion of the interview, participants were asked to discuss, in a semistructured interview format, the ways their MIL relationship affected other relationships within the family system. These questions first addressed the grandmother/grandchild(ren) relationship, followed by the DIL/husband relationship and husband/mother relationship. For each dyad, participants were asked to describe the general consequences their MIL relationship has had (e.g., How has the relationship with your mother-in-law impacted her relationship with your child(ren)? Your marriage? Your husband's relationship with her?). Additional probes garnered specific information about the system-wide effects of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship (e.g., What level of contact does your mother-in-law have with your children? Does your husband "side" with you or his mother when conflicts occur? How does your husband perceive his mother's behavior toward you?). At the conclusion of the interview, participants were thanked for their time and were given an opportunity to add any information that had not been covered about their MIL relationship.

Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. I transcribed each interview verbatim, resulting in 302 pages of typed, single-spaced data. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, MILs, and any other individuals mentioned during the interview.

Data Verification and Analysis

Several steps were taken during data collection and analysis to ensure procedures met standards for rigor in qualitative research. Aligning with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendation to engage continuously in data analysis, I took detailed notes during and

immediately following each interview. I also asked specific follow-up questions about themes and ideas that appeared salient and were recurring among participants. After interviews were completed, I engaged in Creswell's (2007) guidelines for qualitative research, including consistent transcription, thick description, and member checking. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to retain participants' authentic perspective. While transcribing, I noted when participants paused, laughed, or showed any sign of emotion, as these changes in demeanor are important to understanding their perspective. Notes were taken during the transcription process to record initial impressions about themes and notable quotations. When presenting the data, I selected detailed quotations that were properly situated within the context or story provided by the participant, allowing a rich representation of her experience with her MIL. Further, after all interviews were completed, I contacted 20% of participants to ensure the identified themes and related excerpts matched their experiences. These participants were diverse in their ages and experiences. All participants confirmed the write-up was representative of their experiences.

After all interview data were transcribed, I read transcripts in their entirety to become familiar with the entire body of data. While reading, I continued to expand on the analytic memos started during the transcription process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following a thorough review of the transcripts, the data were split into two documents to be coded: one with turning point data and one with family systems data. The interview protocol provided an easily identifiable transition between the turning point and family systems portions of the interview, as I asked the participants to confirm the turning points they had just explained before moving on to questions about other relationships in their family. The data were segmented in this manner because a research assistant coded half of the turning point data, so it was necessary to separate the two bodies of data. Despite this clear transitional point, qualitative data is frequently

nonlinear and complex, and as expected, participants sometimes referenced the ways their MIL relationship influenced the family system while discussing turning points or remembered a turning point during the family systems portion of the interview. Thus, I anticipated data in the turning point file would influence the research questions about family systems and vice versa. While analyzing the turning point data, data pertaining to family systems was retained and analyzed in the next phase of data analysis. Likewise, any turning point data that appeared within the family systems data file was retained and analyzed using the coding scheme developed for this data.

There are several coding schemes available to analyze turning points occurring within parent-child relationships (Golish, 2000), romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & Pittman, 2001), and friendships (Johnson et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2004). These schemes, however, were not a good fit for the data in this study. Previous studies on turning points within understudied relationships including military marriages (Parcell & Maguire, 2014) and post-dissolutional relationships (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008) have developed coding schemes inductively and trained a research assistant on the scheme for a reliability check. With this standard in mind, I coded the turning point data using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was an iterative process in which I defined initial categories within the turning point data, and when a new category emerged, I checked all previous data for incidence of the new category. After developing initial categories, the data were read several more times and categories were collapsed, combined, and sometimes removed (i.e., axial coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Similar categories that had initially emerged in the data were combined and renamed into a category that best reflected the data. For example, data categorized under "MIL's reaction to engagement" and "MIL's behavior during wedding ceremony" were

combined into the "engagement and marriage" turning point category. As categories were

collapsed, the overarching definition of the category was reevaluated to describe all the data

included in the new category that had emerged. The new definitions of each category captured

the full scope of the data. A comprehensive coding scheme with categories and definitions of

each turning point was produced based on the aforementioned analysis procedure.

A second coder trained on this scheme coded 50% of the data to establish intercoder

reliability. The research assistant was provided with a data file with 13 of the 27 interviews, and

all follow-up questions were removed to avoid influencing her analysis. Reliability analysis

indicated acceptable reliability with a kappa value of .73. Any discrepancies were discussed in

detail until agreement was reached.

The family systems data were also coded inductively using the constant comparative

method described above. For both turning point and family systems data, Microsoft Excel was

used to organize data into categories using methods similar to those described in Meyer and

Avery (2009). As I was reading transcripts, I copied lines of data directly from the electronic

transcript into an Excel table. Each excerpt was labeled with the participant's name and line

numbers. A column was added and labeled if the data represented a new category or a hash mark

was made in a previously labeled column. Consistent with the constant comparison method,

previous data were reviewed whenever a new column was added. Extensive notes were taken

when new data excerpts were added to record my interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

Chapter Four provides detailed analysis of the five research questions posed in this study: (1) From DILs' perspective, what turning points characterize high conflict MIL relationships? (2) From DILs' perspective, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship? (3) How do DILs manage the boundaries between paternal grandmother/grandchild when the MIL/DIL relationship has high levels of conflict? (4) From DILs' perspective, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on their marriages? (5) From DILs' perspective, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the relationship between their husbands and his mother? Data from 27 DILs were inductively coded to answer the research questions. This chapter will answer each question in order by thoroughly describing the themes that arose from the data and providing exemplar quotations from participants.

RQ1: From DILs' perspectives, what turning points characterize high conflict MIL relationships?

Participants provided between one and eleven turning points, with an average of 4.26 turning points reported across participants. Nine turning point categories emerged in the data with 117 total turning points reported. Table 2 illustrates the percentage of participants who reported turning points in each category, along with the associated codes and themes within each category. In the "engagement and marriage," "children," "confrontation," and "rituals" turning point categories, some participants reported multiple turning points as they had experienced more than one event in the category (i.e., the relationship changed in different ways with the birth of each of their children, they had more than one confrontation, etc.).

Table 2

Summary of Turning Point Results

Turning Point	% of Participants Reporting Turning Point	Themes
1. First interaction	33%	- DILs had expectations for their first meetings with MILs (and perceived expectations from MILs). - Violated expectations powerfully influenced the MIL/DIL relationship.
2. "Living in sin"	15%	- DILs' choice to live with their partners before marriage drove a wedge between them and their MILs due to religious differences. - DILs perceived MILs' opinions of their living situation as intrusive and outdated.
3. Engagement and marriage	56%	- MILs expressed disapproval of the union between DIL/son before, during, and after the wedding. - MILs' involvement in the wedding planning and ceremony was on a spectrum from over-involvement to disinterest. - DILs perceived MIL behavior during key wedding-related events as bizarre and inappropriate.
4. Children	63%	- DILs perceived MILs as *too* involved in their lives and the lives of their children or not involved enough. - DILs perceived MILs as overstepping boundaries by "mothering" their children. - MILs provided unsolicited advice but did not heed DILs' advice for childcare.
5. Proximity	22%	- Proximity had a variable effect on the MIL/DIL relationship; for some, physical separation was healthy for the relationship, but for others, this distance also contributed to emotional distance.
6. Rituals	26%	- DILs bonded with MILs during family deaths as by helping with meals/tasks. - Family weddings and holidays strained the MIL/DIL relationship due to differing opinions on how the rituals "should" be run.
7. Confrontation	37%	- Confrontations involved all members of the in-law triad. - MILs' dislike for DILs became readily apparent.
8. Family trip	15%	- Extended time between MIL/DIL allowed DILs to understand MILs' character to a greater extent, which was often damaging to their relationship.
9. Other turning points	52%	- Idiosyncratic events ranged from MILs' reaction to DILs' infertility to DILs eventual apathy about their MIL relationship.

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First Interaction

The "first interaction" turning point, reported by 33% of participants, was representative of the impression DILs formed of MILs during their first meeting. For the majority of participants who reported turning points in this category, these first meetings were memorable because they were overwhelmingly negative. DILs typically approached the first meeting with their MILs with anticipation, as meeting a significant other's parent is a milestone in romantic relationship development. For DILs, the first interaction represented a notable change in their relationship with their future MIL because their expectations of what the meeting would be like were violated. Cassandra relates the ways her expectations were violated when she first met her MIL.

> We were only about a month into our relationship. Everything was very new and exciting and optimistic, at least it was for me. We went up to visit her and she was very dismissive, cold, wouldn't interact with me unless my husband prompted it. Would use her body to disclude me [sic] from conversation. It really stuck out with me and hurt me that day.

In addition to their own expectations being violated, DILs also perceived their MILs had certain expectations about what their future DIL "should" be like. When DILs did not fit this profile, they sensed disappointment from their MILs. Claire explained her MIL's misunderstanding of who she was during their first meeting.

> What I found out later was she thought I was the other girl who was taller or something, she said. "I thought she was the taller one!" I don't know what it all was. Just kind of immediate, like, I wasn't who she thought I was.

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Claire goes on to explain that her MIL mixed her up with one of Claire's friends who was, in Claire's words, "taller" and "gorgeous." MILs' violated expectations also went beyond physical appearance, extending to their ideas about DILs' religious preferences. For example, when MILs desired their future DILs to have the same religious backgrounds as their sons and vocalized this to the DIL, DILs of different faiths had a negative first impression. Mya stated,

> One of the first questions she asked me…was what Knights of Columbus my father was a part of. My husband, my boyfriend at the time, had to tell my mother-in-law that I wasn't Catholic. And my mother-in-law is extremely religious. I felt like that was the first judgment, or turning point, that she had already pinpointed me as the probably not the right one for her son because I wasn't Catholic.

Laura related a similar situation about religious differences and explained how this interaction from when she was 16 had stuck with her even after being married to her husband for nearly 20 years.

> I think one of the first times just even meeting her, I don't think she was really happy with me even at that time. Which was strange when you're a 16-year-old girl, and you're meeting your—well, you don't even know you're meeting your mother-in-law for the first time. And she just kind of pointed out a lot of ways that I was different from her family right away. Like I was Catholic and they were Lutheran. And so I always felt a little bit on edge whenever I was around her. […]I never really matched up with what she hoped me to be.

The religious differences that appeared during the first meeting turned out to be enduring sources of tension for both Mya and Laura. Cultural differences between MIL and DIL also led

to violated expectations for MILs. Abigail explained the first interaction with her MIL over the phone.

> Being from the West Coast, I'm pretty casual. I grew up calling my friends' parents by first names and teachers by first names. I didn't understand that people from the East Coast might have a different level of formality. My very first thing that I said to her was, "Hi, Delores! It's so nice to have a chance to chat on the phone with you." The only thing she said back to me was, "Please hand the phone back to my son." Didn't say anything else. I was like, OK, maybe she forgot to tell him something. I still didn't think there was something wrong. Then she proceeded to get very upset with him about how I didn't address her by Mrs. and her last name.

In this case, regional differences in formality led to a negative first impression for both MIL and DIL. Additionally, the limited nonverbal communication cues afforded by the telephone led to further complications in this interaction. Although the majority of "first interaction" turning points were negative, two participants described first interactions that were very pleasant. Interestingly, though, these participants seemed to identify these first interactions as turning points because their initially positive experiences with their MILs were a stark contrast to their current exchanges. For instance, Holly described the difference between her MIL's behavior during this first interaction and their present-day interactions.

> I think what stood out to me was I felt like she was really trying to get to know me. Now, a lot of our conversations are geared around her. The fact that she was invested in me and getting to know me was a really positive experience.

Likewise, Tasha explained her first interaction with her MIL in very positive terms, expressing her gratitude at joining a family headed by her MIL, saying, "I thought she was very

gracious. I enjoyed his mother immensely. […] I thought, wow, I'm very lucky to meet a very nice family with the man that I've fallen in love with." Later, Tasha described her MIL with terms like "selfish" and "uppity," in contrast to the positive language used above to describe her MIL. In sum, DILs generally reported negative first interactions with MILs. Their expectations of a warm and welcoming MIL were violated when they were met with exclusion and judgment. DILs also perceived MILs to be disappointed with them, particularly in terms of religious preference. When DILs identified their first interaction as positive, they were quick to note that their MILs' initial cordial behaviors were no longer part of their interactions.

"Living in Sin"

The "living in sin" turning point, reported by 15% of participants, occurred when DILs faced judgment from their MILs when they stayed overnight or moved in with their boyfriends or fiancés prior to marriage. The DILs in this study perceived "moving in together" almost as a rite of passage within modern-day relationships, yet MILs did not share this same perspective. From DILs' perspective, MILs' opposition to living together before marriage was rooted in conservative religious beliefs. Brynn, who described her MIL as a deeply religious woman, described her MIL's reaction—and her own response—when she would stay overnight with her fiancé.

> We lived in different towns when we were engaged, so we would go and visit each other on the weekends. She would make quips about us staying together. It was hard for me to say anything. I didn't want to stand up to her for some reason. […] Finally I did say, "You know what, Kristine, some people do stay together and don't have sex." She was very taken aback by that, but I was really proud that I actually stood up to her.

For Brynn, this was a turning point not only because of her MIL's negative comments about staying with her future husband, but also because Brynn confronted her MIL about the situation. The other DILs who reported this turning point moved in with their boyfriends or fiancés prior to marriage and experienced different types of negative reactions from their MILs. To demonstrate her opposition to "living in sin," Hannah's MIL did not speak to Hannah or her husband for an extended period.

> We did move in together before we got married. His parents did not agree with that whatsoever. His mom stopped talking to us for probably two or three years maybe. His dad would still talk to us, but his mom just refused to even acknowledge that she had a son or anything like that. So that was probably the first time I think that I was like, oh my gosh, who is this lady and what is her problem?

Like Brynn, Hannah described her MIL as very religious, and the choice to "live in sin" was hurtful enough for an estrangement to occur. Hannah later explained her MIL ended the estrangement after she and her husband married. Amelia, who moved from Germany to the United States to be with her husband, was met with disapproval from her future MIL when she decided to move in with her boyfriend upon arriving in the states, saying, "My mother-in-law was definitely problematic because being rather conservative, for her, the notion that her son would live with a woman before they got married was very problematic for her. She had conversations with me about that." Amelia's MIL offered suggestions to modify their living arrangement, which were not received kindly by Amelia or her boyfriend.

> If I remember we had this long conversation where she proposed to my husband that his apartment had two bedrooms, and at some point she had proposed that Patrick set up a room for me in the spare bedroom. Not just as an office but also for me to sleep. I just

looked at her like she was crazy. We're not talking 16-year-olds. We're talking mid-

twenties. We both dismissed that idea.

Mya's MIL also wanted Mya and her fiancé to have separate spaces while living

together, but unlike Amelia, the MIL's mandates were followed rather than dismissed.

My mother-in-law was upset with my fiancé at the time because we were moving in

together and she wanted him to live at home before we were married, so we couldn't live

in the same house. So we ended up having to have separate bedrooms to make sure that

we were following the Catholic rules of living together before we were married.

For both the "first interaction" and "living in sin" turning points, clashes between the

religious preferences of MIL and DIL contributed to negative experiences. When MILs

expressed their disapproval at DILs' moving in with their future husbands, DILs saw this

perspective as antiquated, naïve, and intrusive. In most cases, DILs and their future husbands

continued with their plans to stay together or move in together despite MILs' objections, but

MILs' comments and behaviors surrounding the decision to live together left DILs feeling that

their choices were not acceptable to their MILs.

Engagement and Marriage

Turning points related to engagement and marriage were reported by 56% of participants.

For DILs, the formalization of their relationship with their husbands through engagement or

marriage led to changes in their MIL relationships. For the majority of participants, these

changes were negative, with only one participant reporting a positive turning point when her

MIL expressed support of her marriage. Several themes emerged in association with this turning

point, including MILs' lack of excitement about the impending marriage or vocal disapproval of

the DIL entering their family, MILs' expectations for involvement in wedding planning and the

wedding itself, and MILs' behaviors during important events related to the engagement and wedding. First, DILs were hurt when MILs were openly disapproving or did not appear excited about their upcoming weddings. Anna explained her MIL's reaction when her fiancé told her he had proposed to Anna.

> He called his parents and told them that we were engaged. They never congratulated him. […] He told his mom and I don't know her exact words, but a couple days later my fiancé had told me that she pretty much said, "You're still wasting your time with her."

Cassandra's MIL also vocalized her disapproval when she learned her son was planning to propose to Cassandra. "So she was very upset that he was going to propose. She said things along the lines of, 'I don't want you to get a divorce. I don't think she's the right person. I don't know that she's adventurous enough.'" For Grace, her MIL's disapproval was evident in her nonverbal behavior. "She never looked excited. She never sounded excited. The only thing she ever said was, 'I hope you don't expect me to do any food the day of the wedding.'"

For some DILs, their MILs' unhappiness with the DIL's new position in their family was not communicated until after the wedding. Chloe, who had been married for 34 years, shared a significant exchange that occurred early in her MIL relationship where her MIL was transparent about Chloe's lack of fit in the family.

> I said to Martha soon after we were married, "So are you happy with who your son chose?" My little girl's heart is begging for acceptance, and just begging for affirmation. A stupid question. Who asks that question? She just really told me everything she felt was wrong. Just like, "You could have been more like this. To fit into our family, you could have been more like this." Just like, what? It just had such an impact on me. I'm already wanting to be the perfect daughter-in-law, the perfect wife.

For Chloe, her MIL's open condemnation about her entrance into the family was an important turning point because she recognized she was an outsider. This interaction set the tone for her experience in her husband's family, as even after 34 years of marriage, she referenced a continued struggle with being accepted by her MIL. Cassandra, who was quickly married to her husband in a courthouse ceremony due to her husband's military deployment, experienced increased hostility from her MIL after the MIL learned about her marriage.

And when he told her that he was married, even more of a drastic change in behavior. She had kind of an explosive reaction to him telling her that we were married. "Well, you guys were shacking up for I don't know how long, so I guess that makes sense." Just a lot of anger. At first directed towards him, but then slowly directing it towards me.

When Cassandra and her husband held a wedding reception months after their courthouse ceremony, Cassandra's MIL did not attend due to her negative feelings toward Cassandra. When MILs expressed their opposition to DILs' marriages, either verbally or nonverbally, DILs approached their MIL relationships with extreme caution because they were aware of MILs' negative feelings toward them. For the majority of DILs, feeling unwelcome in their new family upon their engagements or marriages presented an overwhelming barrier to achieving a positive and fulfilling relationship with their MIL.

The second theme that emerged within the engagement and marriage turning point was MILs' expectations for involvement in wedding preparation and the wedding ceremony. MILs' expectations for involvement were often at odds with DILs' desired level of participation for their MILs. For instance, Holly referenced the level of involvement she expected from her MIL in comparison to her own parents' contributions when planning her wedding.

With her daughter, she [MIL] was very involved, because I think a mother has a different

relationship with her daughter when she's getting married. […] My mom was very

involved, but Connie couldn't really be as involved. […] But even my vision was, I don't

really feel like you get that much of a say in this wedding day. My mom and my dad get

priority.

Both Claire and Emily struggled with the level of involvement their MILs had during the

wedding planning process. Claire had trouble maintaining control over the wedding plans as she

was planning the ceremony from a distance.

When we got engaged, she kind of took a lot of control over some of the wedding plans.

Which at first I thought would be fine because we were out of state. Help would be

appreciated. But when I asked her details on what she was doing, she wouldn't really tell

me. She'd just say, "Don't worry about it! I'm taking care of it."

For Emily, her MIL's behavior during wedding preparation was a major turning point in

their relationship because Emily recognized her MIL's desire to manipulate plans to get her way.

Right after we got engaged and we were trying to pick the whole shebang, the date, the

where, the how, she started to say things that would try to get what she wanted, that

would negatively affect my husband and I, but we didn't even really realize it was

happening until it was too late, if that makes sense. At that point, I realized that she was

going to be a handful.

DILs continued to grapple with MILs' desire for too much involvement when

approaching the logistics of the ceremony itself. Katie's MIL had expectations for participating

in significant ways during the wedding ceremony.

She had very specific ideas of what she wanted, how she wanted to participate in our

wedding day. She apparently had this idea that she always wanted to sing at her son's

wedding, and I wouldn't allow it. That was definitely a point of contention.

Katie's MIL's desire to be involved in the wedding ceremony did not transfer to her

desire for financial involvement in the ceremony. Trying to secure a financial commitment to the

ceremony caused significant stress for Katie in the period before the wedding.

Her paying for anything, or his parents paying for anything for the wedding, even the

groom's dinner…I mean, it was about a couple weeks before the groom's dinner that I

thought my parents would have to pay for everything. They were going back and forth

and not wanting to really do anything, and it was…we were trying to plan, and I was

planning it and it was just not easy.

Mya had a similar experience when trying to share the financial burden of a wedding

with her MIL, but unlike Katie's MIL, Mya's MIL had no desire to be involved in the wedding,

financially or otherwise.

When it came to planning a wedding, she didn't want anything to do with it. She didn't

help at all. We ended up paying for more of the wedding than what we originally had said

we were going to. They said that they would pay for the alcohol for the wedding, and we

had said that we wanted an open bar the whole night versus just having it for a few hours,

and they refused to pay for it then. We ended up just covering the cost. Just really not

engaged in the whole process of being married.

When considering the type and level of involvement DILs wanted from their MILs when

planning a wedding, financial contributions were welcomed but other types of involvement were

approached with hesitancy. A struggle for control was evident in this theme, as DILs desired

autonomy over their wedding plans, or perceived their wedding plans as something that should be managed by themselves and their mothers rather than by MILs.

MILs' behaviors during certain key events associated with the engagements and weddings was a third theme associated with this turning point. Two primary events that led to change in the MIL relationship were wedding dress shopping and wedding photos. MILs' comments and behavior during these important events left DILs with negative memories and apprehension about the MIL relationship. An incident with her MIL during wedding dress shopping changed Brynn's positive impression of her MIL.

> My mother-in-law asked me if I was going to wear the veil over my face. And I said, "No, I didn't really think about it, but I don't think so." And she looks at me and two of my bridesmaids and my mother that were there and said, "Well, you're a virgin, right? Virgins wear their veil over their face." So right away, that just gave me the feeling that she was really prying into my business and she wanted that answer. She wanted that reaction from me. I just felt like that was none of her business. I honestly couldn't believe she had said that. Up until that point, I had thought very highly of her. That was kind of a red flag in my mind.

Again, the theme of religion is prominent in the perceived judgment passed by Brynn's MIL. For Brynn, this judgment was not only unexpected, but also embarrassing and meddling, as it was shared in a public setting where her mother and friends were present. Dana shared an experience in which wedding dress shopping led to the realization of her MIL's self-esteem issues.

> She just started talking in circles about how she was really grateful to have been able to come along and it was a great experience, but she just thought that after meeting my mom

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and how my mom is such a tiny, cute, petite fashionable woman, Rhonda didn't know

how I would ever be able to accept her as a mother-in-law. She's this frumpy farm wife.

Just kind of rambled on and on. I just had to keep saying to her, "Rhonda, I'm glad you

could come along. I'm glad you could spend time with me and my mom." But I got off

the phone and I remember saying to my mom, oh my god. I don't know what that was

even about. Where did that even come from?

In this situation, Dana's fiancé had asked her to invite his mother along for the wedding

dress shopping excursion to begin building relationship between the two women, but the time

together had backfired when Dana's MIL began comparing herself to Dana's mother. Wedding

photos also led to tension between MIL and DIL. To Holly's disdain, her MIL used the time for

wedding photos as an opportunity to get as many photos of her family as possible.

She kept saying, "One more. One more photo. I want one more photo. I never get my

family together. One more photo." 3:00 hit and we didn't have time to do any more of the

photos that we had wanted to do because Connie had wanted to continue doing her family

photos. That was really upsetting as well, because I felt again she was kind of prioritizing

herself over what was actually going on, of her son and myself getting married.

Holly later referenced her disappointment upon receiving her wedding photos and seeing

she had not been able to get some of the shots she had wanted because her MIL had monopolized

the photographer's time. For both Beth and Natalie, tension arose over their involvement in

family photos. Beth sensed her MIL was unhappy with Beth's entry into the family based on her

MIL's negative nonverbal communication.

Every single picture except for two, she looks like someone's gonna kill her. She just has

this sour look on her face. I mean, she looks so miserable, except for two pictures. Two

pictures she is smiling ear to ear, and those are the two pictures that are just her and Peter

[son]. Otherwise every other picture when it's group pictures…horrible. Horrible.

In Natalie's situation, a comment made by her husband's grandmother made her nervous

about her future with his family.

When we went to get family pictures…this is the wedding day, so everybody's supposed

to be together. When we went to get a wedding picture with his side of the family, it was

his grandmother, said, "No, I don't want you in the picture. You're not part of the

family."

Although this comment was not made by Natalie's MIL, she later explained her MIL was

very close to her husband's grandmother (i.e., her MIL's mother), so Natalie wondered if the

grandmother's perspective was also shared by her MIL. As Natalie had expected, this comment

foreshadowed future events where she was made to feel like an outsider within her husband's

family.

Engagement and marriage represented one of the top three turning point categories

reported by participants because it marked their official entry into their husband's family. A

proposal and subsequent marriage represent very happy occasions for couples, but these

occasions are often accompanied by a great deal of stress and strain with immediate and

extended family members as the family structure changes. When DILs experienced little to no

excitement from their MILs, blatant disapproval of their marriage, or inappropriate behavior in

relation to important wedding-related events, they realized their role within their husband's

family could be a challenge.

Children

Turning points associated with children occurred for 63% of participants, the largest percentage of any turning point category. The "children" turning point occurred when DILs experienced changes to their MIL relationships after they had children (i.e., the MIL's grandchildren). This turning point was the most frequently reported, and most DILs reported this turning point prompted negative change in their MIL relationship. Four themes emerged within this turning point, including MILs' expectations for involvement with their grandchildren, MILs' desire to usurp the maternal role from DILs, MILs' propensity to provide unsolicited advice and judge DILs' parenting decisions, and tension related to MILs providing childcare.

First, DILs were often uncomfortable with the level of involvement their MILs wanted after their children were born. MIL involvement manifested in a variety of ways. From DILs' perspective, their MILs frequently wanted to be too involved in their grandchildren's lives, and this expectation for involvement was often overwhelming for DILs. MILs also wanted to be more involved in the lives of their DILs after children were born, as DILs were their link to their grandchildren, and they attempted to help DILs with various child-related tasks to increase their level of involvement. This "help," however, was not always welcomed by DILs. For Holly, her MIL's involvement was a source of stress before her child was even born. For instance, her MIL's insistence on Holly finding a pediatrician before her baby was born was a form of involvement Holly did not want.

> She went on and on and on about how important it was to know who your pediatrician is
> ahead of time. So then that caused excess stress, 'cause I'm going, oh my gosh. We don't
> know who our pediatrician is. She had even said, "Do you want me to look into

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pediatricians for you?" Which I quickly shut down, 'cause I didn't want her to be

involved in that. So that kind of caused more stress.

The offer to find a pediatrician, an expression of help, was not received kindly by Holly

as she perceived this level of involvement as inappropriate for a MIL. DILs were not opposed to

receiving help from their MILs, but they had expectations as to how MILs should offer help.

Dana described a situation where her MIL came to her house uninvited to watch her young son.

When she does come, she didn't say, "Hey, I want to help you. Here, I brought supper for

tonight so you don't have to worry about it. You go have the afternoon to yourself." She

just kind of showed up and basically said, "I'm here to hold the baby. Are you staying or

not?"

In this instance, Dana perceived her MIL as fulfilling her personal need to hold her

grandson without thinking of what she could have done to reduce Dana's stress related to meal

preparation. For Jane and Amelia, MILs' desire for involvement immediately after their children

were born was intrusive and unwelcomed. For Jane, her in-laws' presence at the hospital was in

direct violation of her wishes.

The first thing I remember happening is when my son was born, they were on their way

to the hospital while I was still in labor. I said, "I do not want them here." They did not

care. They stayed at the hospital.

Amelia related a similar experience where her in-laws rushed to the hospital and wanted

to meet her son immediately after he was born. She felt uncomfortable restricting access to her

son, especially as he was the first grandchild for her in-laws, but she was deeply affected by their

unwelcomed presence during the period after his birth. "I think it put me ill at ease right from the

start. I felt robbed of some very precious time and very precious moments right after I'd given

birth to him." Amelia struggled with the expectations both her in-laws had for seeing and interacting with her son after his birth, calling it "grandparent entitlement."

> I think it has to do with a certain sense of entitlement, grandparent entitlement perspective. I don't know if that even makes sense, or if there is such a thing. There are a lot of expectations that come from having grandchildren, and it's not necessarily the expectations are geared towards our son, but towards them being grandparents and being able to do certain things and be around him a lot.

Claire described a situation where her MIL repeatedly offered to stay with her after the birth of her twins when her husband was away, and despite Claire's firm refusals of these visits, her MIL showed up anyway.

> She said, "We're going to come stay with you." I said, "No, I'll be fine." "No, we are going to come stay with you." It was like, three times where I said no, I'm fine, I really don't want you to come. I appreciate your offer but it's just a couple nights and I have daycare and we're good. She showed up anyway with her husband, and they walked in with a bottle of wine in each hand, said something like, "We're ready to party!" And I said, "No, you're not! I don't have anywhere for you to sleep." We had a two bedroom apartment, and I'm not giving up my bed for you. Sorry. And they had to get a hotel. It was an uncomfortable weekend.

In this case, the offer to help caused more stress than relief for Claire, as her MIL disregarded her wishes and seemed more focused on "partying" than childcare. The expectation for involvement relates to the second theme within this turning point: MILs assuming the maternal role. Much like popular culture representations of grandmothers, DILs wanted their MILs to be warm, engaging companions for their children. DILs were very clear, however, that

MILs should not try to parent their children or make decisions that are typically left to mothers. Chloe, whose father-in-law had an explosive temper, saw her MIL disciplining her children so they would not misbehave and upset her father-in-law.

> Martha knowing that David [father-in-law] could at any minute blow up, she would take a part of the discipline. Just have fun with them! But no, they felt they were part of the parental role. David would spank them. It was a problem.

> Beth relied on her MIL to provide after-school care for her children, but realized this

extended time with her children led her MIL to push the boundaries between "grandma" and "mom." Beth said, "It's almost like she's coming into our home and wants to take over the mom role. That's mine. She got to play the mom role. She needs to be the grandma role." Katie struggled with her MIL assuming the maternal role with trying to potty train her son when her MIL watched him once a week, despite Katie expressly telling her MIL not to do this.

> So even though I've told her not to potty train him, when she watched him this summer for one day a week, she would try to potty train him. That one day a week, when we weren't doing it at all any other time.

> When Katie's son was being taught to use the toilet at her MIL's house but not at home,

he became confused and upset, leaving Katie to try to explain why he was receiving inconsistent instructions. Emily explained her MIL's frequent comments about the health and medical care of her children, which Emily perceived as overstepping.

> She nags on us. So like, "Did you do this? Did you take them to the doctor? You really need to take them to the doctor." We are the parents! We will figure it out! We're not going to let the children die.

Although several DILs coped with MIL involvement that pushed the boundaries of what they perceived was appropriate, others experienced very little involvement from MILs in their children's lives, which was also cause for concern. Caroline explained the contradiction between the level of involvement her MIL said she wanted and the involvement that actually occurred.

Like she really wanted to be involved. She was so excited to be a grandma. And then basically fell off the face of the earth after I had Molly. And so there were some real frustrations there, of like, you said you wanted to be involved, and you're never around. We ask you to come over and then you get sick at the last minute.

Dana referenced similarly low levels of MIL involvement with her son. For Dana, the limited involvement was not only limited to grandmother/grandchild interaction, but also to expressions of help such as meal preparation.

She was very excited to have another grandchild in the family, but she has not gone out of her way to help us outright with any kind of real childcare or even after I had the baby, she's never brought a meal over to our house.

Finding the "right" level of MIL involvement in their children's lives was difficult for DILs. When MILs expressed interest in their grandchildren and made attempts to be involved in their lives, DILs often felt smothered or perceived MILs' help as "too much." Limited MIL involvement, however, was also received negatively, as DILs saw MILs as disinterested and disengaged. The third theme, unsolicited advice and judgment of DILs' parenting decisions, was most likely to occur when MILs were perceived as too involved, testing the boundaries of what the DIL considered suitable for MILs. DILs reported receiving unsolicited advice upon the birth of their children, with examples ranging from MILs' opinions on children's health, breastfeeding, and childcare in general. For example, Mya said, "She [MIL] gave me nursing

advice, even though she never nursed. She nursed for a few days." Claire provided another

example of unsolicited advice from her MIL, saying, "If the kids are fussy and I'm going to try

to feed them, [MIL says] 'Oh, they don't need feeding. They just need whatever.'"

Katie's MIL was vocal about Katie's decision to allow her young son to drink pop. Her

MIL would explain negative consequences of consuming aspartame from diet pop based on what

she had heard on a medical television show.

> Sometimes he'll ask for like, a drink of my pop. I'm pretty lax when it comes to that
>
> stuff. "Here you go, buddy. Have a drink." Whatever. And she's like, "Oh, that has
>
> aspartame in it." She's at home a lot during the day, so she watches *The Doctors*, or
>
> whatever. "That can cause him to be paralyzed, or hyperactivity," or whatever.

The overarching theme with MILs' unsolicited advice was the feeling of inadequacy it

sparked in DILs. When MILs made comments about DILs' parenting choices, DILs felt insecure

in their abilities and began second-guessing themselves. Holly related a conversation with her

MIL where Holly perceived judgment about her choice to put her son in daycare.

> Connie would talk about her experience and say, "It was just really important to raise my
>
> own kids and not miss these big moments, like when they roll over for the first time or
>
> when they say their first word. I don't want somebody else to have those experiences."
>
> And I remember saying to her, "Connie, you know that I'm going to be putting my child
>
> in daycare. That I'm not going to stay home with him. That I'm gonna continue
>
> working." And her saying, "Well, Holly, *of course* you're gonna do that. *Of course*
>
> you're not gonna stay home. I never thought you would do that." And for me that was
>
> really tough, because just the inflection in her voice. And this judgment of, what does it
>
> mean that you said of course you knew I would do that?

After this conversation, Holly wondered if her MIL thought she was "less maternal" because she wanted to work. When MILs were vocal about their opinions, DILs felt their MILs did not trust them to make good choices for their children. Brynn explained the unsolicited advice she received from her MIL and how these comments made her feel disrespected as a parent.

> She would just make these small comments about the way we were raising him. It really kind of got under my skin. For whatever reason, I felt firmly about, you don't put bottles in the microwave. That was just my thing. She just didn't agree with that, so she would be like, "Oh, I drank [alcohol] all the time with my kids and they turned out fine! You can put bottles in the microwave." […] I just felt like she didn't respect my parenting, or my parenting style, for example.

Beth and Laura echoed Brynn's feelings, as they also felt demeaned by the comments their MILs made. DILs were sensitive to the comments their MILs made about their parenting styles, and they were protective of the decisions they made for their children. MILs' unsolicited advice threatened the confidence DILs had in themselves as mothers. For instance, Beth referenced her MIL's comments and noted that they made it difficult for her to see any positives in her parenting.

> I think probably within the first couple years of us being married, I gave her her first grandchild. Then it seemed like I was OK for a short time. And then it turned into I was not a good enough mother. I constantly was hearing, "Well, you should be doing this, and this, and this." It just made me feel like I wasn't doing anything right.

Laura had similar feelings, noting that the constant questioning from her MIL made her feel as she was failing.

And then when we had kids, it just kind of amplified everything. "How are you disinfecting your bottles? How are you taking care of the clothes? Don't you want to use special baby detergent?" All of those things, just continually like I'm doing something wrong.

MILs' propensity to deliver unsolicited advice demonstrates a certain level of confidence and expertise related to parenting, having raised DILs' husbands and perhaps other children. Yet, despite the parenting experience of MILs, DILs reported having little faith in leaving their children in the care of MILs. The reasons for distrusting MILs with childcare were widely varied. For Claire, a negative experience leaving her children with her MIL had influenced her opinion of her MIL as a caretaker. She said, "I don't think she fed Michael [son] much or something, because I think he ended up getting slightly dehydrated. I don't know what it all was. I think she thinks she's super grandma, but I don't feel like she is."

Likewise, Chloe reported an experience where she had left her three young children with her MIL while her husband was in the hospital recovering from a serious accident. As she was under intense stress due to her husband's health, she had hoped her MIL could accommodate the children's needs rather than trying to "toughen them up" as she had in the past. This was not the case, as her MIL had required the children to eat foods that were not "kid friendly."

The kids said, "Mom, Grandma made me eat this tomato soup and I almost threw up!" I just thought, we are in survival mode here at the hospital and that's going on at home! Why can't she just make macaroni and cheese?

Other DILs cited MILs' living conditions or refusal to follow their instructions as reasons for not trusting them with childcare. For example, Siri felt her MIL's house was inappropriate for her toddler.

I also don't have a lot of trust, faith, in her watching him by herself. Now that he's

getting a little older, it's not as bad, but at her place, her dad has pills, glass, kitchen

utensils…it's like that show *A Million Ways to Die*. It's all I see when I'm there. She's

never babysat.

Mya described the difference between leaving her children with her mother versus MIL,

noting that her mother would respect her instructions and her in-laws would not. Her in-laws

used their experience as parents as a defense for making childcare decisions with their

grandchildren.

With my mother, I feel like I can have her watch my children and I can tell her, "Mom,

do not do this." And my mom will respect me. But I've had times where I've asked my

in-laws to do something, and it's the opposite. Or they'll say, "Oh, I know how to be a

parent. I've done this before. I don't need any help. I don't need your direction."

The entrance of children marked a significant turning point for DILs. Like engagement

and marriage, the arrival of children signifies a change to the family structure, and the

adjustments that accompany this change can be challenging for DILs. Seven DILs in this study

(25%) were first-time mothers with children three years old or younger, so they were still

learning how to be parents and were especially sensitive to comments made by MILs about their

parenting. Yet regardless of the age of their children, DILs took ownership and pride in their

parenting experiences, and felt threatened when MILs tried to assume the maternal role or

became involved in ways DILs found unacceptable.

Proximity

The "proximity" turning point, reported by 22% of participants, represented a change

within the MIL/DIL relationship due to one of the following situations: the MIL moved in with

the DIL or vice versa, or the MIL moved closer or further away from the DIL or vice versa. First, the turning point was negative when the MIL and DIL shared living space. Caroline described a situation where her MIL lived with her and her husband for a short period and the tension that resulted.

> So I'd come home for lunch and just kind of want to decompress a little bit and let the dogs out, and all she wanted to do was talk. Needless to say, she only lived with us for about a week. We just couldn't handle living with each other.

> Like Caroline, Stella did not enjoy having her MIL as a houseguest because lifestyle differences between the two became readily apparent. When her MIL neglected to keep her living space clean, Stella asked her MIL to leave, and later found out both her MIL and father-in-law had been deceiving her about needing to live in her home.

> So I kicked her out. Threw her out. […]Here while they were staying with us and claiming not to have any money and were destitute [sic], that's why we needed to take them in. Well, he [father-in-law] was addicted to scratch-off tickets. He had won $10,000 off the Wisconsin lottery, not once but three times while they were living with us.

> Sara and her son moved in with her MIL while Sara was waiting for her husband to secure employment in a new location, and after personality differences between Sara and her MIL led to tension between the two women, Sara became frightened of physical aggression from her MIL, stating, "My son and I were actually scared living in the house with her. She was so angry I was afraid she was going to push me off the balcony sometime."

In addition to the tension that resulted from sharing living space, the physical distance separating MILs' and DILs' homes influenced their relationships. The DILs in this study had competing opinions about whether having a MIL who lives close or far away contributed to a

more successful relationship. Hannah's in-laws lived close to her home, allowing ample opportunity to build a relationship through frequent visits, but the disinterest her in-laws had in visiting her family negatively influenced their relationship.

> They were maybe 20 minutes away from us. I think we lived there for about four years, and I think they came over twice in the whole four years. And we lived in town and they lived just on the outskirts of town, so they had to come into town at least once a day. So they would never come over, and the two times they did come over, one was just 'cause she wanted to drop something off, and the second was because our first son was born and she stopped by for maybe 10 minutes after we got home from the hospital.

In this case, proximity could have contributed to a closer connection for MIL and DIL (and MIL/son and MIL/grandchildren), but this was a missed opportunity. Natalie provided a different example of how proximity to her MIL influenced her relationship. In Natalie's case, thousands of miles separating MIL and DIL not only led to a physically and emotionally distant relationship, but also the perception that Natalie was "taking" her husband from her MIL. When Natalie had started her graduate school career, her husband had lived with his mother, but he eventually joined her in Texas for the duration of her studies.

> I always kind of got the impression that I was the one that was taking him away. I was the one that was taking him out of the home and away from her. That was always a concern for her. To me, that's always been part of the tension, is who gets to have him, you know what I mean?

Danika discussed three different moves she and her husband had undergone, all of which influenced her relationship with her MIL in different ways. The first move took Danika and her family thousands of miles away from her in-laws, but she and her MIL fostered a very positive

relationship during this time due to her MIL's investment in staying connected despite distance. A second move made the MIL relationship even stronger, with Danika stating, "We had moved to Dallas, which we were close to them. They loved that, so we could see each other much more frequently." The next move, however, took Danika and her family several states away once again, and the MIL relationship began to turn sour. "So when we moved north, I don't know, you just talk less. I had gotten sick. […]She would call Kyle [husband] and ask, 'How's she doing?' But I thought, that's so weird to just kind of disconnect." After the move north, Danika experienced a series of negative turning points with her MIL that damaged their relationship.

Ultimately, proximity had a variable influence on the MIL/DIL relationship. Sharing space had negative consequences for the MIL/DIL relationship, as personality and lifestyle differences became readily apparent. Distance can contribute positively to the MIL/DIL relationship. Katie did not reference proximity as a turning point in her MIL relationship but offered an explanation of the benefits of living three hours away from her MIL: "So we lived away, which was, I think, nice and made things a little easier for the first couple years we were married. There would be a little drama but we were removed from it so it was nice." Distance can also hurt the MIL/DIL relationship when a MIL perceives the DIL to be "removing" her son from her, as explained by Natalie, or when a MIL becomes more disconnected, as explained by Danika.

Rituals

The "rituals" turning point, reported by 26% of participants, occurred when family deaths, weddings, or holidays changed the MIL/DIL relationship. Importantly, this turning point is distinguished from the "engagement and marriage" turning point because the rituals DILs described here related to other family members, whereas the former turning point occurred

during DILs' own engagement and/or marriage. When family members spent extended time together for events that are inherently stressful, the MIL/DIL relationship changed for better or worse. Three themes emerged within this turning point: DILs "serving the family" when someone dies, conflict during family weddings, and holiday strife.

First, when someone passed away on their husbands' side of the family, DILs were able to help the family by taking care of necessary details. In the situations described by DILs, they knew the person who had passed, but they were not emotionally connected to the person so they could "serve the family" while others grieved the loss. This was a positive turning point for DILs because they could help their MILs during a stressful time. Caroline explained the ways she helped when her husband's grandfather (her MIL's father) passed away.

Grandpa passed away while I was at church, and then I took that whole week off from work to really just help with the little details. […]Organizing the wake and making sure that we had food. Finding people to volunteer to help out…just things like that. Helping to run stuff around town. That was…being able to help out there was really positive for our relationship.

Danika shared a similar experience, noting that when her MIL's sister died unexpectedly, she was unsure if she should travel to Texas for the funeral as her relationship with her MIL had been unpleasant. She had thought her presence would cause additional stress for her MIL, but when her husband asked his mother if she wanted Danika to attend, she said yes. Attending the funeral was a significant positive turning point in the MIL/DIL relationship for Danika.

It was a way I could be a servant to the family. I was the one doing dishes and writing thank you cards and cleaning and just serving the immediate family, making sure the

daughters didn't have to do dishes and those kind of things. So that felt good as a way of

kind of getting back in the fold.

Although funerals were surprisingly a positive turning point when they allowed DILs to

serve the family, deaths could also lead to discord in the MIL/DIL relationship when DILs

attended funerals for family members with whom MILs did not associate. Katie's MIL, who was

estranged from her own mother, was upset when Katie and her husband attended the mother's

funeral. "The death of her mother was really hard, more on my husband than me, but also caused

kind of a big rift 'cause we went to the funeral and she did not."

In addition to funerals, which represented both positive and negative turning points,

family weddings were a ritual that contributed to change within the MIL/DIL relationship. All

wedding turning points were negative. MILs' opinions about family weddings led to tension

within the MIL/DIL relationship. For example, two specific events related to her son's wedding

were negative turning points in Danika's relationship with her MIL. First, her MIL was vocal

about who she thought should be included on the guest list for the wedding. "During the process,

she kept questioning their choices [grandson and fiancée]. 'Well, what about inviting so and so?'

These would be my husband's second cousins. I'm sorry, Seth's [son] never met them. They

don't want a wedding of 500 people." When Danika supported her son's choice to limit the guest

list, her MIL became upset. Later, Danika's MIL proposed having her husband's 80th birthday

party the day after the wedding, and when Danika suggested having a joint birthday party for

both her mother and her father-in-law, her MIL reacted negatively and shunned Danika.

We [Danika and husband] just sat down and talked to them [in-laws] and said, it's going

to be this way. They did not like that at all. So even upon leaving that last day when

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we're hugging everyone goodbye, her sister and my mother-in-law refused to

acknowledge me, give me a hug.

Conflict within the MIL/DIL relationship during family weddings was not limited to

MILs' opinions about the event. For Tasha, the conflict was about her new sister-in-law and the

warm welcome her MIL had given to this woman. Upon the wedding of Tasha's brother-in-law

to his new wife, Tasha reflected on her distant MIL relationship, which she attributed to her new

sister-in-law.

I kind of felt like I was losing a connection with my mother-in-law, and I didn't know if

it was because every time I was around her, Sydney [sister-in-law] was around her and

Sydney was in her face wanting to talk to her and occupy every ounce of her. I thought,

maybe it's just because she's here.

Holidays were the third ritual DILs reported. For Grace, the lack of pomp and

circumstance surrounding her husband's family holidays was in stark contrast to the elaborate

holidays she experienced growing up. It was difficult for her to adjust to subdued holiday

celebrations.

So I come from a family where holidays are over the top. Christmas at my house is like

Christmas at the Griswold's. […] My husband grew up very poor and in a family

that…they don't celebrate things big like my family does.

During one Christmas, the lackluster celebration in combination with an argument that

broke out among family members led Grace to leave her MIL's house and travel home for the

holidays.

I'm just like, I'm outta here. I gave up big Christmas at my family with real food, mashed

potatoes that weren't instant, gravy that didn't come out of a packet that you mixed water

with and heated up, for this. And so I went home and I called my mom and I said, "I'm

coming home tomorrow. I bought a train ticket."

Jane shared a competing example where she perceived she was purposely excluded from

holidays on her husband's side. Due to the nature of the business she owned, she often had to

work during holidays, and she believed her MIL and father-in-law insisted upon family holidays

at their house because they knew she would be unable to attend. "And they would be very

manipulative about convincing my husband that the kids needed to be at their house with the

whole family. […]And I would be home alone while he [father-in-law] brought them to whatever

for Christmas."

Although DILs shared diverse experiences about the ways rituals influenced their MIL

relationship, several commonalities emerged among the data. First, rituals are stressful and

frequently emotional events that can increase tension within relationships. Second, rituals lead to

increased time together while experiencing heightened emotions, which can be a negative

combination for the MIL/DIL relationship. Third, there are expectations for what should happen

during specific rituals, especially weddings and holiday celebrations. When DILs' expectations

were violated, or when they perceived their MILs' expectations were violated, tension resulted.

Confrontation

The "confrontation" turning point, reported by 37% of participants, occurred when a

verbal conflict happened between two or more members of the in-law triad (i.e., DIL, MIL, and

husband). These exchanges represented the darkest side of the MIL/DIL relationship.

Confrontations most frequently occurred between MIL and DIL; however, husbands were not

left unscathed, as they were sometimes directly involved in the confrontation or had to do

damage control after the exchange had taken place. For Cassandra, burgeoning tension with her

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MIL came to a head during Thanksgiving, where her MIL treated her poorly. After her husband

acted dismissively toward Cassandra during a conversation with his mother, Cassandra's

frustration with her MIL and her husband's attachment to his mother overflowed.

> I got in the car and I waited for him to get done with his mom. I didn't say goodbye to
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> them, didn't say anything. He leaves and I threw my wedding band at him and was like,
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> "If you want to be married to your mom and go be married to your mom, but I'm not
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> doing this anymore."

This example demonstrates the influence a negative MIL/DIL relationship can have on a

marriage, especially when a DIL perceives her husband is contributing to the problem by

"choosing" his mother over his wife. In Cassandra's case, this initial confrontation had a cascade

effect, as her husband confronted his mother upon their return home.

> We got back from that trip and he automatically called his mother and was like, "Hey, I
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> noticed some of your behavior when we were home, and I just wanted to address it." She
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> just completely flipped out. She started yelling and screaming on the phone, saying, "You
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> should have never married her. She's worthless."

Like Cassandra, Leah's MIL openly communicated her dislike of Leah during a

confrontation, along with her disagreement about the ways Leah managed the household. "It was

just…she was just so mean. How I didn't keep up with the laundry or the housework, even

though I was a full-time working mother. […] Just really critical." Later in their relationship,

Leah experienced another confrontation with her MIL. During this confrontation, her MIL was

upset that Leah had asked her husband to help with housework. When her husband explained to

his mother that this was the nature of their relationship, a conflict escalated among Leah, her

husband, and her MIL. "It blew up to the point where he [husband] said, 'You have to leave right

now.' That's when I actually acknowledged to my mom, I said, 'Mom, Elizabeth [MIL] hates me.'"

When engaged in a verbal confrontation, DILs perceived their MILs' behavior as childish, sarcastic, and unreasonable, and this perception fueled malicious exchanges. Stella, who is now estranged from her MIL, described a situation where she had offered her condolences to her MIL after her husband had died and her MIL had twisted her words, leading to a public confrontation during the wake.

> She stands up and says, "Oh my god, I can't believe you said that to me at my husband's funeral. What do you mean, you're glad he's dead?" And I stood up and I looked at her and I said, "You, my dear, are going straight to hell."

When Anna decided to confront her MIL about previous behaviors that had upset her, her MIL's sarcastic laughter was perceived as complete disregard for what Anna had to say. "There was one time that I said something and she flat out laughed. I can't remember what it was because I was so blown away. I can't remember what it was, but she thought it was a joke." When Beth picked up her children from her MIL's house and saw her son was upset, she was taken aback when her MIL refused to explain what had happened, leading to a confrontation between the two.

> I go, "Why is he so upset?" And she's like, "I'm not going to tell you. No." What? She goes, "You're going to have to ask them." What? And I go, "I'm asking you. You're the adult here. So I'm asking you. What happened with my kids? I'm leaving to go home. I just want to know what happened so I can talk to them about it." She wouldn't look at me.

When confrontations occurred in the MIL/DIL relationship, they were typically the result of tension that had been building for some time. From DILs' perceptions, confrontations were pivotal moments because they revealed MILs' true character and feelings for DILs. Confrontations confirmed DILs' suspicions that their MILs did not like them, and it took considerable time for the MIL/DIL relationship to recover from a confrontation. For example, confrontations led to MIL estrangement for both Cassandra and Stella, and Beth did not speak to her MIL for several weeks after the confrontation described above. Even when the MIL/DIL relationship "recovered," both women continued to engage in an awkward, high conflict relationship, due in part to the negative behaviors both had displayed during the confrontation.

Family Trip

Spending extended time together on a family trip marked a significant turning point for 15% of DILs. As evidenced by previous turning points, being in close proximity to one another can be detrimental to the MIL/DIL relationship. Although DILs faced some of the same challenges in this turning point as they did in the "proximity" and "rituals" turning points, family trips are distinctive because DILs could not escape their circumstances. The purpose of family trips is to spend time with one another, so when conflicts arose, DILs could not go back home to avoid the tension; instead, they were faced with more one-on-one time with their MILs. Three of four reported turning points in this category were negative. For Chloe, a fishing trip led to conflict with her in-laws and her husband.

> And so we were in a boat in this Canadian lake, and from the minute you get up until the boat comes in at night, you're out on the water fishing for eight hours. […] So I thought, this is my vacation, I'm just going to sit back and soak up some rays. And I actually got told, "Get up and do your fair share." I could not sit down in the boat. And we're in this

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boat that we could fit in this area right here [very small], and my husband even says,

"Chloe, suck it up," in front of his parents. It was a slap in my face. I really just wanted to

take my wedding ring off and throw it in the water.

During Tasha's family trip, a conflict broke out between Tasha's husband and his

brother. When Tasha's MIL defended her other son over Tasha's husband, Tasha began to notice

a pattern of favoritism within her husband's family and this negatively influenced her

relationship with her MIL.

And she looks at my husband, "Why do you always have to do this?" It was all just

directed towards him. […] And I'm like, you know what, just get out of the way. If

they're gonna fight, let them fight. They're brothers, that's what they do. She had to be

right in the middle of it.

In this instance, the conflict and resulting realization of favoritism may not have

happened without the family trip. Abigail explained a conversation her MIL initiated during a

family trip in which the MIL wanted to smooth over their troubled relationship.

She brought up the topic of how sort of awkward and hurtful maybe our first few years

were together. Just really direct and said, "Look, it bothers me that we don't get along

better. It bothers me that you don't call me mom." […] She said, "I would really like you

to be more comfortable with me. I apologize for my part in this." She said the things I

think she needed to say in that conversation, but she didn't necessarily own what I see as

the majority responsibility, because I don't know that I did anything to really provoke the

way that I've been treated. […] For her, I think it was very cathartic and healing. She

would probably say it was a turning point in the positive, but for me it was very much

like, just a confirmation that it's not necessarily me.

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Again, this conversation may not have taken place if Abigail and her MIL had not shared time together during a family trip. Although the majority of family trip experiences were negative, Emily saw a family trip as a positive turning point in her MIL relationship due to her MIL's welcoming attitude.

> She treated me as one of her own through that whole 15 hours there, the week we were
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> there, and the 15-hour drive home. At that point in our relationship, I thought, huh! This
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> is someone I could put up with.

Family trips had the potential to change the MIL/DIL relationship for better or worse. In the best case, DILs become closer to their MILs when they felt part of the family, but more frequently, DILs saw a negative side to their MIL that they wouldn't have experienced without extended time together on the trip.

Other Turning Points

There were several other turning points reported within this category by one or two participants. Please see Appendix E for a summary of other turning points and related quotations.

Summary of Results: Research Question One

Nine turning point categories emerged from DILs' accounts of their MIL relationships. The frequency of "children" and "engagement and marriage" turning points suggests alterations to the family structure contribute to stress within the MIL/DIL relationship. DILs often felt they were not accepted or welcomed by their MILs upon getting engaged to their husbands, and even after formalizing their relationship through marriage, DILs continued to struggle with integrating fully into their husbands' families. Yet when children arrived, DILs' roles changed as they became mothers to MILs' grandchildren, and this change prompted MILs to take a greater interest in DILs' lives. In sum, turning points often resulted from MILs behaving in a way DILs

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did not find appropriate, whether it was by treating the DIL cruelly, excluding the DIL from the family, or overstepping boundaries by becoming too involved in lives of DILs and their children.

RQ2: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship?

Research question two sought to understand the ways a conflicted MIL/DIL relationship influenced the relationship between MILs and their grandchildren. From a family systems perspective, conflict within the MIL/DIL dyad is not limited to these two women; instead, the conflict may "spill over" to other family members, including grandchildren. Two themes emerged in relation to this research question, including DILs' desire to "shield" or isolate their children from conflicts they were experiencing with their MILs, and the influence of the MIL/DIL relationship on the quality of the grandmother/grandchild relationship. These themes are presented below, along with exemplar quotations from participants.

"Shielding" Children

When asked about the ways their troubled MIL relationship influenced the relationship between their MILs and their children, DILs fervently expressed their desire to shield their children from any conflicts they experienced with MILs. DILs wanted their children to form their own opinions of their grandmothers without being influenced by the negative relationship they themselves experienced with their MILs. Even DILs of young children were concerned about the potential ways they could influence the opinions their children had of their grandmothers. Holly, the mother to a five-month-old son, had already set a goal to shield her son from MIL/DIL conflict, stating, "So for me, no matter what my relationship is with my mother-in-law, with Connie, I will always want my son to have a relationship with her. Because my issues can't influence, or I don't want them to influence him."

Caroline, the mother to a 21-month-old daughter and one-month-old son, had similar sentiments to Holly and explained the importance of protecting her children from any problems she experienced with her MIL.

> Whatever issues Alicia [MIL] and I have are between Alicia and I and not Alicia and me and my kids. So from the very beginning, I have been very intentional about giving my kids the opportunity to form their own opinion of grandma.

Later, Caroline discussed the importance of modeling good behavior for her children, even if this meant attempting to get along with her MIL for the sake of a positive grandmother/grandchild relationship. She was concerned with the way her children would interpret her behavior, and did not want her children to mimic disrespectful or hateful behavior, especially toward their grandmother.

> And to think, my kids are going to be like me. Is that a good thing or is that a bad thing? And so, almost everything I do I have that in my mind. If my kids were to repeat this, is that what I would want? […]Do I want my kids growing up hating their grandma? No. I don't want to be the cause of that.

Caroline recognized the significant influence she exerted over her children and the great responsibility that comes with being a parent. Katie also discussed the importance of positive modeling for her two-year-old son, contrasting the way her husband was raised with the way she hoped to raise her son.

> I think that with Doug's [husband] upbringing with how he seemed to know at a very young age exactly what his mom thought about everybody in his family, negative or positive, I really try to not do that with Jake [son] and keep it positive. […] So it seems like with my relationship with her, I just have to swallow it a lot more, especially since

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having kids. Just sucking it up for the greater good, trying to keep things at peace even though I don't want to.

The idea of "sucking it up for the greater good" was a common one among DILs. Despite the tumultuous relationship they had with their MILs, they also saw themselves as adults who were responsible for shaping their children in a positive way. Chloe expressed a sense of pride in protecting her grown children from the decades-long difficult relationship she had with her MIL, stating, "I think it's the way that we raised them because even though all these things happened, I would never tell the kids. I would never say derogatory things about Kurt's parents in front of the kids."

DILs saw the grandparent relationship as an important one they wanted to foster regardless of any personal differences they had with their MILs. Anna stated, "I don't ever want her to be a monster in their eyes. I want her to be the lady that brings them cookies." Likewise, Natalie discussed her desire for her children to know about their heritage, saying, "Despite my relationship with her, I do feel it's important for them to know where they came from and know their grandmother."

Both Caroline and Dana discussed the positive grandparent relationships they had experienced during their childhoods and adult lives and their desire for their own children to have similarly close grandparent relationships. For Caroline, the grandparent relationship was a distinctive one with qualities unlike any other relationship. She said, "Grandparents, no matter how flawed they are, no matter how much what they do annoys me, they still provide experiences and relationship opportunities that I can't mimic. You can't double them with any other relationship." Dana shared a similar perspective, stating, "I think it's important for all kids to have really good relationships with their grandparents, because grandparents can teach kids

things that their parents can't." DILs perceived grandparents as unique and integral parts of the family system, which sometimes led them to swallow their disdain for MILs for the sake of their children. For example, Amelia allowed visits from her in-laws so her son could form a relationship with them, even though these visits were often stressful and uncomfortable for her. She said, "I accommodate, but that's also because I believe that he needs to have a good relationship with at least one set of grandparents."

Overall, DILs were diligent in their efforts to prevent their children from knowing about their tumultuous MIL relationship. They refrained from speaking poorly of MILs in front of their children, hoping their children could form their own impressions of their grandmothers without being negatively influenced by MIL/DIL conflict. For DILs, fostering a positive grandmother/grandchild relationship was more important than any differences they had with MILs. Yet, despite these efforts, DILs frequently reported poor relationship quality between their MIL and their children, as described in the second theme below.

Lack of Closeness in Grandmother/Grandchild Relationship

Although DILs recognized the vital role grandparents play in children's lives and were intentional about isolating their children from MIL/DIL strain, DILs frequently reported the relationship between their children and MILs lacked closeness. Half of DILs in this study reported a distant relationship between their MILs and children. DILs attributed the aloof grandmother/grandchild relationship to different reasons based on the ages of their children. DILs with young children perceived their MILs were disinterested in developing a close grandmother/grandchild relationship or did not put forth the effort to build a fulfilling relationship; whereas, DILs with older children reported their children had little interest in fostering a relationship with their grandmothers. DILs were uncertain if the reason for the lack of

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closeness between their MILs and children was due to a closer relationship with maternal grandparents or if their conflicted relationship with MILs had influenced their children.

First, DILs with young children described their MILs as disengaged in developing a grandmother relationship, and due to the ages of their children, DILs saw it as MILs' responsibility to foster the relationship. Their children were too young to call or initiate any other type of contact, so it was up to MILs to connect with their grandchildren. Interactions between MILs and grandchildren were not necessarily strained, but they were also not close or warm. Dana described the distant relationship both her in-laws had with her two-year-old son. "If he talks to him, they'll acknowledge it, but it's not like they come to sit on the floor and read a book to Dalton for an hour, or play outside with Dalton for an hour." Later, Dana explained the obligatory nature of grandparent visits.

Now it all just feels very…it just seems more like they feel obligated to stop by and say hello. "Oh, he's gotten so big!" Or, "Oh, he's grown!" It doesn't ever feel like, I really wanted to see my grandson, so I'm here to play with him. I want to read his favorite book.

Brynn, the mother of four children under the age of eight, felt her MIL was disinterested in spending time with her children, even though her children were eager to form a relationship with their grandmother.

I do always get the feeling like if we need her and we ask her for a favor like to help babysit, she'll always come back with, "Well, have you asked all your babysitters yet?" I always get the feeling she doesn't want to spend time with them.

DILs referenced a lack of effort on the part of MILs, and noted that MILs would often voice the desire to see their grandchildren more frequently but would not act on this desire. Even

after her children bought her a more reliable vehicle so she could easily travel to see family, Siri perceived little effort from her MIL in seeing her two-year-old son. "There's a lot of talk on her part, that she would like to see John [son] and maybe Sam [grandson] more, but there's not any real effort." Hannah echoed this impression, as the requests her in-laws made to see her and her two young children were not matched by actual effort.

> I just don't get the impression they even want to be around us, even though they talk about, "Oh, we've missed you and the boys," and wanting to see them. They wish we lived closer. It doesn't make any sense because they don't ever make the effort, so I don't get why they're complaining about it.

For DILs with middle- and high-school-aged children, limited effort continued to be a barrier within the grandmother/grandchild relationship. At this age, children had spent years getting to know their grandmother and were old enough to form their own opinions of her. These opinions were usually quite positive, yet the relationship still stopped short of being close due to perceived lack of effort from MILs. Laura explained the relationship between her MIL and three teenaged children, stating, "It's not very friendly. They definitely love their grandma and want to make her happy and do things with her, but not very loving interactions. Kind of distant." For Claire, a closer relationship between her MIL and her 14-year-old twins would be quite easy to achieve if her MIL would reach out to do simple activities.

> I feel like she really cares about them, I just don't feel like they're very close. But I don't think it would take a whole lot either. Maybe just, hey, let's make some cookies, and they would be all over that. Let's go to a movie, and they'd be fine with that.

Grown children who were old enough to independently manage their relationships continued to experience distant grandmother relationships. Notably, DILs who had adult children

explained that their MILs wanted to have more contact with their grandchildren, but the grandchildren did not make the effort. In this sense, the responsibility for staying in touch was relegated to grown grandchildren rather than grandmothers. Danika said, "My kids don't email, call, or write letters. They kind of disconnected. They just don't have an interest any more." Similarly, Denise's college-aged daughter did not frequently connect with her grandmother, despite going to college in the same town where her grandmother lived. "We've encouraged her, like when she's in college or even when she was in high school, call grandma! Just talk to grandma. Email grandpa. She's just not very compelled to do that because she's just not close to them."

Chloe, the mother of three children in their late twenties and early thirties, explained a situation where she and her husband gave money to their children after selling their in-laws' condominium. Her children, who did not enjoy visiting their aging grandparents, were told to make a better effort upon receiving this money.

> You should not give money with strings attached, but we said, "Since it's their money and since you will be benefitting from it, we would like to know you're making the effort to see them." […] I think it's almost a relationship out of obligation.

Although DILs attributed limited effort on the part of both MILs and their children as the primary reason for detached grandmother/grandchild relationships, they also wondered if their children's closeness with maternal grandparents played a role. One-quarter of DILs in this study said their children shared a closer relationship with their own parents than with their in-laws. DILs perceived their parents took greater interest in developing a bond with their children in comparison to their in-laws. When explaining the relationship her young son had with her MIL, Hannah stated, "It's a different relationship than what he has with my mom and my dad. My

mother-in-law does not play with him or get down on his level or anything like that." Anna's three adopted children shared a closer bond with her parents because of their investment in forming a relationship and making a personal connection. "My second girl and my dad have a thing with the sherbet push-ups. […] Just that little connection. That's important, those little connections. They don't have anything like that with Phil's parents."

The disparity in closeness between maternal and paternal grandparents was difficult for DILs to manage, as they had to observe their children choosing one set of grandparents over the other and also had to negotiate how to split time between grandparents. Dana discussed a situation where her young son did not recognize his paternal grandparents.

> They walked in, he didn't know who they were. He was a year and a half by that age. He had been recognizing my dad, his grandpa, since he was 11 months old. He knew who his grandpa was, was saying grandpa. Here he was, a year and a half old, he didn't know them. He didn't recognize them.

Later, Dana explained that when her son was upset with her and her husband, he would ask for his grandparents, but both she and her husband knew he was asking for his maternal grandparents as he had virtually no relationship with her in-laws. Chloe reflected on the positive relationship her children, now grown, had with her father when they were young. Her father, referred to as "Granddad," was the quintessential portrait of a fun-loving grandparent, in stark contrast to the militant nature of her in-laws.

> They would just beg to go over to Granddad's where they could do whatever they wanted to do. So that was a problem because David and Martha thought, "Oh, well, you're taking them to their house. They're going to like them better." I wanted to say, what do you

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think? They can do whatever they want and get played with over there. Here they have to

be seen and not heard. Why do you think they want to go over there?

The envy that arose within paternal grandparents when they were cast aside in favor of

maternal grandparents was another consequence DILs had to manage within the family. Dana,

who shared a close relationship with her paternal grandparents but not her maternal and noticed

the opposite trend in her own son, reflected on whether or not children could have equally close

grandparent relationships on both sides of the family.

Having seen both of those relationships even in my own life, I wonder if it's possible to

have a really good relationship with both sets of grandparents, or if one just always ends

up being better because of either proximity or effort or time.

Another potential contributor to lack of closeness between MILs and their grandchildren

was DILs' influence over the grandmother/grandchild relationship. This sub-theme is in

opposition to the first theme discussed for this research question, DILs' desire to "shield"

children from MIL/DIL conflict. DILs noted that even though they *tried* to shield their children

from troubles within their MIL relationship, it was difficult to leave children unscathed. Dana

described the influence of her MIL relationship on the grandparent/grandson relationship.

I've seen the fact that I'm not close to either of them, and especially his mom, has started

to impede their ability to have a relationship with their grandson. Whether they blame me

for it, I don't know. But it's very evident.

Denise wondered if her young daughter recognized Denise's dislike for her MIL based on

her tone of voice, and whether these early impressions had ramifications for the

grandmother/grandchild relationship for her now college-age daughter.

We'd go visit my in-laws and then I'd get on the phone with a friend and our daughter was little. Not even in school yet. She's playing. I would just be ranting to one of my friends over the phone, but she was around, and I was just thinking she's too young to understand. No, I've learned that even though she may not know specifically what everything is that I'm talking about, she still gets the idea that I'm angry. […] She understands mommy's talking about grandma and she's not talking in a kind tone of voice. I believe that she picked up on that and it may have affected how she feels about grandma just because I was not modeling a loving attitude about her grandma.

For DILs with older children, it became increasingly difficult to protect them from MIL/DIL conflict. Beth, the mother to a 10- and 12-year-old, explained how her children were well aware of the poor relationship she had with their grandmother. "There have been more situations where Jason [son] has been present where Janie [daughter] has said to Jason, 'Well, you know, Jason, grandma doesn't like mom.' Jason's like, 'Well yeah, that's obvious.'"

Natalie, whose husband asked her not to attend family functions when his mother was present due to the explosive relationship between the two, realized her children would no longer believe her excuses for her absence as they got older.

I think at first it was more that…"Oh, Mommy has to work, so Mom can't come with us." So Dad would use that as an excuse for me not showing up. After awhile, they started questioning. They would take pictures and stuff while they were visiting. "Why aren't you ever in any of these pictures?"

It is important to note that although several DILs described a distant relationship between their children and MILs, eight participants said their MILs had involved, loving relationships with their grandchildren. For instance, Holly's MIL attempted to stay as engaged as possible in

her grandson's life even though she lived thousands of miles away. "I think that that's really hard for her, to be so far away, 'cause it's the first grandchild as well. So I think being the first grandchild, she wants to be as involved as she possibly can." Katie and Leah, both moms to young boys, saw the excitement and love their children had for their grandmothers. Katie said, "He loves her, and she loves him, and I want them to have a good relationship." Leah echoed this sentiment, stating, "He loves her. *Loves her.* She is super fun. […] She dotes on him." Emily appreciated the ways her MIL helped her children foster their interests, providing the following example.

> At the theater, we hosted a mosaic art class. My mother-in-law found out about it, called me and paid the $80 entrance fee so my 13-year-old could go to this art class. I didn't ask. I didn't even tell her about it. She saw it online and then called me and made that happen. She's always looking for ways to make her grandkids feel thought of and cared about.

Summary of Results: Research Question Two

DILs wanted to prevent their children from experiencing any negative repercussions from their relationship with their MIL, but protecting them was a difficult task. DILs reported varying levels of closeness within the grandmother/grandchild relationship and attributed low levels of closeness to lack of MIL effort, lack of effort on the part of adult children, and greater connection with maternal grandparents. Additionally, DILs recognized that their MIL relationship could have influenced the grandmother/grandchild relationship. Young children were perceptive enough to sense a negative relationship, and as children grew older, they were even more likely to pick up on MIL/DIL discord.

RQ₃: How do DILs manage the boundaries between paternal grandmother/grandchild when the MIL/DIL relationship has high levels of conflict?

Research question three investigated the types of boundaries DILs maintained between MILs and their children. As kinkeepers, DILs facilitate contact (or lack thereof) between MILs and their children. DILs with high conflict MIL relationships could choose to enforce impermeable boundaries between their MILs and children. They could also allow as much contact between MIL and grandchildren as possible if they believe the grandmother relationship is important to foster. Finally, they could alternate between these two types of boundaries based on the quality of the MIL/DIL relationship at a given time.

This research question was partially answered in research question two. DILs were very clear about their desire to keep their problems with their MILs separate from the grandmother/grandchild relationship. DILs also emphasized the importance of positive grandparent relationships. Overall, DILs wanted MILs involved in their children's lives, and instead saw MILs' behaviors as barriers to achieving successful grandparent relationships. Although research question three was partially answered, DILs did make interesting comments about the inherent difficulties in allowing contact between MILs and their children despite a conflicted MIL/DIL relationship. For example, Katie's MIL was very involved in her grandson's life and took him to a music class once a week, but Katie had to be firm when her MIL suggested taking him out of daycare ("school") so she could watch him.

> She offered to keep watching him, and I was like, no. It's almost like it's more for her than it is for Jake. And I think that's kind of a theme with my mother-in-law. It's usually always about her, how it makes her feel, and not necessarily what's best for Jake. He does need to be in school, and he does need a routine.

In this case, her MIL's eagerness to spend as much time as possible with Jake led Katie to enact stricter boundaries so her son could maintain a routine and social engagement in daycare. DILs also foreshadowed limiting contact between MILs and their children if MILs continued to engage in certain behaviors. Abigail was concerned that her son would see her MIL's manipulative behavior as the standard for interaction, and was clear about limiting the contact between the two if this happened.

> I won't let Micah be exposed to that sort of manipulation and confrontational dynamic as a norm. If it happens as a one-off, I feel like I can explain that to him, but if it starts happening in a way that feels like he thinks that that's an appropriate way to act, I feel like I will sort of be protective with that and step in and say, "This is not a normal way of interacting."

Later, Abigail referenced a change in her MIL's behavior after both she and her husband had warned her MIL about behaving badly following the birth of their son.

> I would say that it's probably relaxed her somewhat in the way that she interacts with me. I think she knows that if she doesn't create a positive setting for me, that I'm the type of person that would just say, "OK, well then, you don't get to be around us if it's not going to be a positive thing for my son."

As the kinkeeper, Abigail has the ability to allow or restrict her MIL's access to her grandson. Anna, the mother to three young children, also foreshadowed using her power as kinkeeper to restrict access to her children unless she was present. In Anna's situation, her in-laws would contact her husband to see their grandchildren only when Anna was away at military commitments. She did not feel it was appropriate for her in-laws to have a relationship with her children but not with her.

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If they want to have a relationship with my kids, I think they should have a relationship with me, too. It just doesn't make sense for me not to be a part of everybody's life. I talked to my husband about that a lot, too. I was like, "It's not fair that they get to see my kids when I'm not there because then they don't have to have a relationship with me. They're getting their cake and eating it, too. They get a relationship with their son and their grandkids, and I don't have to be in that picture."

In her perception, by choosing to interact with their grandchildren only when Anna was absent, her in-laws were achieving two goals: excluding her from their family and building a relationship with their grandchildren without having to build a similar relationship with her. When Eleanor's relationship with her MIL became too volatile for them to have any sort of contact, Eleanor's husband stepped in to communicate with his mother about the boundaries between her and their children. Eleanor's MIL had become increasingly involved in Eleanor's marriage after learning Eleanor had been unfaithful to her husband, and by interjecting herself into the marital dyad, she risked losing contact with her grandchildren. Eleanor stated, "He [husband] told her that if she [MIL] continued to insert herself that she wouldn't see our kids, that she wouldn't have the access to our family that she has enjoyed for the past couple years."

It is worth noting that two DILs in this study had estranged relationships from their MILs and thus, their children did not have relationships with their grandmothers. Although this situation was a rare occurrence, these DILs made insightful comments about the effects of a nonexistent grandmother relationship in their children's lives. Due to Stella's estranged relationships with her own parents and her in-laws, her children were left without a model for what grandparent relationships look like. She stated, "My kids will grow up now as adults not having any idea what a grandma and grandpa is supposed to be like. So therefore, when it's their

turn to be grandmas and grandpas, it will be hard for them." After experiencing several confrontations with her MIL, Cassandra was happy to continue the estrangement from her MIL for the sake of both Cassandra and her daughter. Although Cassandra's MIL had never met her young daughter, Cassandra explained that she would allow supervised visits only if the estrangement ever ended.

> I feel like communication is so important. I think that Tamara [MIL] has some really
> unhealthy communication styles. What she finds acceptable and where she feels like she
> is in her relationships with her family, I feel like is unhealthy [sic]. While I do want
> Camille [daughter] to have a relationship with her, I am concerned about it as well. I
> wouldn't leave her unsupervised with Tamara because of some of that.

Summary of Results: Research Question Three

DILs generally wanted to set aside the conflicts with their MILs so a positive grandmother/grandchild relationship could be fostered. Some DILs, however, anticipated limiting contact between their children and MILs if MILs continued with certain behaviors. Ultimately, DILs felt it was their responsibility to limit contact between their MILs and their children if they feared MILs' behaviors would negatively influence their children.

RQ4: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on their marriages?

Research question four explored the consequences of a conflicted MIL/DIL relationship on DILs' marriages. Two primary themes emerged to answer this research question, along with a variety of sub-themes. First, DILs described the strain their MIL relationships had caused within their marriages. Sub-themes included using their husband as an intermediary and their husbands' defense of MILs in times of conflict. Second, DILs also discussed the ways their MIL

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relationship had strengthened their marriage or had limited negative impact. Sub-themes included DILs and their husbands being on the "same page" in their interpretation of MILs' negative behaviors and husbands' defense of their wives during MIL/DIL conflicts.

MIL Relationship Causes Marital Strain

Twelve DILs in this study said their MIL relationship had caused stress within their marriages. In some cases, the contentious MIL/DIL relationship was one of the only sources of conflict in DILs' marriages. Holly said, "Brady and I don't argue very often. There's a couple things that have caused tension in our relationship. Money is one of them occasionally, and his mom." For Dana, her MIL relationship was the sole reason behind marital arguments. "Most couples fight about finances or their house. No, we fight about his mom. […] If it weren't for his mom and the fact that we don't have a very good relationship, we probably wouldn't fight!"

The ongoing strain of the MIL relationship on DILs' marriages was stressful because it was a frequent topic of conversation as both DILs and their husbands attempted to navigate the conflicts that arose. A high conflict MIL/DIL relationship was considered an unsolvable dispute because DILs and their husbands struggled to find any long-term solution to "fix" the relationship. Consistent discussion about the MIL/DIL relationship between husband and wife was unsuccessful at remedying the tension between the two women. Anna stated,

> So as far as the strain on our marriage, we've had ups and downs with that because you can "solve" it all you want, but it's still going to sneak up and you have to talk about it. We've had huge blowouts.

For Mya, her MIL relationship became so stressful that her husband would no longer take calls from his mother in Mya's presence.

It has gotten to the point where I just don't talk when they're [in-laws] around. But definitely at first, I would get into a huge argument with my husband. We would argue about what she said, how it made me feel. So my husband every Sunday has to call his mom because that's a tradition that they have. And it got to the point where…he used to be in the room with me or I could hear the conversation, and I'd get so upset about what was said that he takes the call when I'm not around, and he doesn't recap anything that was said.

Holly summarized the overarching strain her MIL relationship had on her marriage, referencing a balance between her own negative feelings and her husband's desire for a relationship with his mother.

So it's this balance that I try to strike between, I don't want Brady to have a ruined relationship with his mom because I can't stand her, but at the same time, I can't stand her. So how do we balance Brady having a relationship with his mom and me having these issues that he has this relationship with his mom? And I don't think we've quite figured out how to balance it yet.

Although DILs shared many general comments about the marital strain that resulted from their MIL relationship, their comments on using their husbands as conduits between them and their MILs provide specific insight into the far-reaching consequences of a negative MIL/DIL relationship.

Using husbands as conduits. Nearly half of DILs in this study made direct reference to using their husbands as conduits between them and their MILs during both day-to-day communication and conflict situations. For some DILs, communicating to their MILs through their husbands was simply the most practical option given the difficult MIL/DIL relationship.

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Although DILs were fully capable of contacting their MILs, they had made a choice not to as this communication was typically unpleasant for them. Hannah stated, "I do feel comfortable contacting her directly if need be, I just prefer not to." Likewise, Laura said, "It's just easier and better [for husband to serve as conduit], even though he does get frustrated with that. It's much easier and concise when he takes care of it."

After offending her MIL and learning about her MIL's sensitivity to criticism, Caroline began using her husband as a conduit when she needed to communicate sensitive information to her MIL. Her husband's intimate knowledge of her MIL's behaviors helped him communicate more effectively. She said, "I feel like she would not take it [criticism] very well from me. She would take it much better from Justin because he knows how to talk to her. […] She needs delicate handling that I can't do."

In most cases, using the husband as a conduit brought out the worst features of the in-law triad, as the husband/son (i.e., linchpin) was relied on to facilitate communication between his wife and mother. Using husbands as conduits had several consequences. Husbands typically did not appreciate being used as go-betweens because they had to address sensitive issues between two women who were important to them. Husbands were often put in the position of picking sides between wife and mother. Dana explained the catch-22 her husband faced when used as a middleman in her relationship with his mother.

> He's always playing this terrible position of middleman, slash diplomat, slash peacemaker. And it's hard for him because he is a people pleaser by nature, so he doesn't want either of us to be upset about what's happening or what's going on or the decisions made.

Emily further explained the complications involved in using her husband as a conduit, as he was forced to show his allegiance to one woman over the other.

And I make a comment and then I get upset, and I get defensive and angry, he kind of feels stuck because he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to cause tension with his mom, but he definitely doesn't want his wife to be upset at his mom, because he's kind of in the middle 'cause it is his mom.

DILs often had expectations for the ways their husbands should handle communication with MILs, and when husbands did not meet these expectations, there was additional tension within the marriage. Holly explains this below.

I think sometimes Brady tries to wait me out and see if I'll get over it. And that definitely causes tension in our relationship because I always tell him, "If you don't say something about how her attitude isn't appropriate, it's never going to change."

Although using husbands as conduits between DILs and MILs was often the most pragmatic choice due to the negative nature of their relationship, husbands did not appreciate being put in this position. When husbands served as conduits, DILs and MILs were able to avoid potentially awkward or emotional exchanges, but by avoiding direct communication, the MIL/DIL relationship remained negative. In addition to using husbands as conduits, the repercussions to DILs' marriages were amplified when their husbands defended their mothers during MIL/DIL conflict.

Husbands defending MILs. Marital strain intensified when DILs' husbands took the side of MILs. Conflicts with MILs were very isolating experiences for DILs when they felt their husbands were not advocates for them. Upon marriage, DILs expected their husbands' loyalties to shift from their mothers to their wives, and when this did not happen, DILs were hurt and

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confused. When her husband supported his parents over her, even when they publicly berated her, Chloe became very upset. She explained the expectation she had for her husband to come to her defense instead of his parents. "I was like, but I thought I'm #1 now. It always felt like it was them over me."

From Holly's perspective, her husband Brady would immediately jump to defending his mother without considering the merits of what she had to say.

He would be so quick to defend her that I felt like he wasn't even trying to see it from my perspective of why. Maybe I am overreacting, but can you try and understand why I'm reacting this way? And he would be so quick to defend her and defend her actions, or try to justify it, that he was failing to take into account why something she said might be upsetting to me.

Early in Cassandra's relationship with her husband, she noticed he frequently made excuses for his mother's behavior. After a negative first meeting where her future MIL physically excluded her from conversation by wedging her body between Cassandra and her future husband, her husband defended his mother's erratic behavior with several excuses. Cassandra said, "He's like, 'She's just tired.' Or after the market when we met, 'She had a lot going on at the market, so she couldn't talk to you.' More excuses and explaining it away."

Although Denise appreciated her husband's loyalty as a positive character trait, his devotion to his mother left her feeling isolated when involved in conflict with her MIL.

I do appreciate his loyalty and how he will side with his mom, but against me. On one hand I appreciate that, but on the other hand, it's like, you're not supporting me. I'm out here on an island all by myself and you're over there agreeing with your mom about stuff that's bothering me. You're caring more about her feelings than mine.

When engaged in conflict with their MILs, DILs had expectations of how their husbands should act. First, they wanted their husbands to be loyal partners, or at least someone who could identify with the frustrations they were feeling. Second, they wanted their husbands to help in managing the conflict. DILs were apt to use husbands as conduits when in conflict with MILs because DILs felt uncomfortable addressing MILs directly. When their husbands did not fulfill the roles of partner and conduit, DILs were left with few resources to cope with the conflict.

MIL Relationship Strengthens Marriage

Eleven DILs reported their conflicted MIL relationship had not negatively influenced their marriages, or in some cases, had even strengthened their marriage. DILs who referenced little to no negative impact on their marriage had reached a state of acceptance, realizing that their MIL relationship would likely never be close. Stronger and more fulfilling marriages resulted when DILs and their husbands relied heavily on one another for support in the face of a negative MIL relationship. Cassandra, whose husband eventually decided to cease all communication with his mother after she repeatedly treated Cassandra poorly, felt a strong connection with her husband because of his choice to privilege the needs of his wife and child over his mother. In the early stages of their relationship, Cassandra felt there were nonexistent boundaries between her husband and his mother, so his choice to sever their relationship was an important step in instituting boundaries around his family. She said, "I would say that it has allowed me to…allowed us to really function as a nuclear unit. I trust him wholeheartedly to protect me in any situation."

Abigail also felt her marriage was strengthened by the conflicted relationship she shared with her MIL, as she and her husband had learned to depend on one another during trying times rather than solving problems independently, saying, "I think as we've spent this time both

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growing up together and then also this last year and a half becoming parents together, I think what it has done…we've turned to each other." Eleanor, whose marriage and MIL relationship were tested when she was unfaithful to her husband, thought her MIL's aggressive behavior toward her had strengthened her marriage due to her husband's unwavering support.

> For my husband and I, we've always been a team, that united front. This has really tested that. So if anything, I think that it's brought us closer and helped strengthen that bond. He's had to step up and be there for me in ways I don't think either of us ever imagined.

In addition to these general observations about the ways DILs were able to escape damage to their marriages, two specific themes emerged in the data to explain the reasons why their marriages were left unscathed. First, DILs referenced their husbands being on the "same page" about MILs' behavior. In other words, their husbands realized their mothers' behavior was unacceptable and understood their wives' frustration. Second, DILs appreciated when their husbands defended them during conflict with MILs and prioritized their needs over their MILs.

"Same page." DILs felt less alone in their struggles with MILs when their husbands identified with the way they were feeling. When DILs voiced their frustrations with MILs to their husbands, they felt a sense of support and security when their husbands validated their feelings and expressed the same frustrations. For example, Caroline, who said her MIL relationship had not negatively influenced her marriage, knew her husband identified with the problems she was experiencing with her MIL. She said, "Whenever I say something, he's like, 'Yeah, I know. I get it. I was thinking it, too.' I mean, I've never brought up a concern where he's like, 'Oh, that hadn't occurred to me.' He's always right there." Likewise, Siri's husband understood the irritations she had with her MIL.

Most of the things that are frustrating in Alice and my relationship are frustrating in John's relationship with her, too. That makes it easier for us to deal with in our marriage. She doesn't have that many behaviors that are directed at me that aren't directed at other people, too.

When DILs knew their husbands understood the challenges they faced in relating to their MILs, they felt that their feelings had merit and were not simply petty complaints. Hannah's husband did not share a close relationship with his mother and was well aware of her faults.

Jeremy has pretty much known that this is the way his mom is. He's always kind of said, "I don't know, my mom's crazy. I don't know what to tell you." He's dealt with it a lot of his life with her just acting bizarre and doing weird things. So no, it has not put a strain on our marriage, I don't think.

Abigail summarized the importance of knowing her husband identified with her feelings for her MIL, stating, "I think if I had to feel these feelings alone about her, it would be a very different experience. Clearly, he calls her out on it, too." In sum, DILs felt secure in their marriages when their husbands identified with the struggles they were experiencing with MILs. DILs were happy to know their husbands recognized MILs' behavior as unacceptable, and they felt their husbands were partners in coping with the conflicted MIL/DIL relationship. DILs' marriages were also positively influenced when husbands defended them and prioritized their needs.

Husband defends and prioritizes wife. In contrast to the DILs who felt strain in their marriages because their husbands defended their mothers, DILs who experienced no impact or had stronger marriages because of their MIL relationships said their husbands would defend them and were vocal about DILs' needs being more important than MILs. Caroline, who said her

husband tried to examine both sides logically when she had a conflict with her MIL, knew he would defend her if he had to take sides. She referenced marriage as a relationship of choice rather than blood.

If he had to, though, I know he would take my side because I'm his wife. It's a relationship he's chosen as opposed to a relationship he was born into. He prioritizes our relationship over his relationship with his mother.

Both Danika and Beth explained an evolution in their marriages where their husbands had once defended their mothers but had since begun to defend their wives. Danika explained the importance of having a "united front" in their marriage when her MIL was trying to come between her and her husband.

He's always had my back, so that's the best thing. When things first started going a little bit awry, he was siding with his mom and I just said, we gotta make this distinction right now. United we stand, divided we fall, and she is trying to divide us by certain things she was saying.

Beth's husband was clear in his devotion to her and their family. She said, "Peter has always told me that, 'You're my number one priority. She [MIL] takes a back seat to you.' Do I believe that? Yes." Abigail was grateful for her husband's support despite the close relationship he shared with his mother, stating, "I couldn't even imagine a world where he didn't always side with me, or see my perspective at least and acknowledge that I didn't bring this on myself."

Leah's husband vehemently defended her when her MIL behaved inappropriately. His loyalty to her was never something they had to discuss in their marriage.

There's never been a time where he's taken her side ever. He's always been like a champion for me. And I don't feel like I've ever told him, "You better defend me or

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else." It's never been like that. It's just been…he just does it. The right thing to do. When

he kicked his mom out that one day, he said, "Listen, I'm not going to let you stand here

and treat my family like this. She's number one. If you can't figure that out, that's just

how it is."

DILs were grateful when their husbands defended them during MIL conflicts. Although

high conflict MIL/DIL relationships were unpleasant for DILs no matter the behavior of their

husbands, husbands' defense of DILs did buffer their marriages against some of the potential

negative repercussions of MIL/DIL conflict. DILs appreciated their husbands' loyalty and knew

they could rely on their husbands for support and understanding no matter what their MILs did.

Summary of Results: Research Question Four

The influence of a conflicted MIL/DIL relationship on DILs' marriages had little to do

with the behavior of either MIL or DIL. Instead, the linchpin's (i.e., DILs' husbands) choices

during MIL/DIL conflict were most significant in determining whether the marriage of

DIL/husband would be positively or negatively influenced. Linchpins who served as conduits

could help DILs remove themselves from potentially awkward confrontations with MILs, but

linchpins usually disliked this role as they were forced to side with either their mother or wife.

The conduit role hurt marriages, as did linchpins' defense of their mothers. Conversely, when

linchpins identified with the frustrations their wives had with MILs and defended wives against

MILs, marriages suffered little to no negative impact, or were even strengthened by a high

conflict MIL/DIL relationship. The data from this research question reflect the linchpin's crucial

role in exacerbating or reducing the marital repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL

relationship.

RQ₅: From DILs' perspectives, what are the repercussions of a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship on the relationship between their husbands and his mother?

Research question five explored the consequences the husband/mother relationship experienced, from DILs' perception, in relation to a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship. Three themes emerged to answer this research question. First, DILs explained the ways the negative relationship with their MILs had decreased closeness within their husband's relationship with his mother. Second, DILs referenced the ways their husbands "saw the light" about their mothers' behaviors. DILs perceived their husbands were once oblivious to their mothers' negative habits or communication styles but later recognized these traits after witnessing DILs' experiences with their mothers. Third, DILs "replaced" the role their husbands' mothers had once played, as DILs now had greater influence over their husbands than their mothers did. MILs often had a difficult time accepting the role DILs' played in their sons' lives.

Relationship Crossover

DILs described the ways their negative MIL relationships "crossed over" to their husbands' relationships with their mothers. Although DILs were sometimes uncertain about the roles their high conflict MIL relationships played in the relationships between their husbands and mothers, they recognized their discord with MILs likely didn't help it. For example, Holly was unsure if physical distance or the strained relationship with her MIL contributed to the increasingly distant relationship her husband had with his mother.

> He acknowledges that he's not as close with his mom. And sometimes I feel bad about
> that because I don't know if it's because physically there's states in between them or if it
> does have something to do with me. I mean, I'm sure I'm an influence on that, but he
> even acknowledges that he's not as close with his mom anymore.

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Dana was more confident in the influence of her MIL relationship on the relationship between her husband and his mother, stating, "I would say that his relationship with his mom has suffered because she and I don't get along for the sole reason that, like I mentioned, he is always caught in the middle." Conversely, Caroline reported her husband's relationship with his mother was beginning to improve as Caroline began to communicate more consistently with her MIL, limiting her husband's role as conduit. The MIL relationship, although still difficult for Caroline, had slowly begun to improve, and this improvement crossed over to the mother/son relationship. "I think Justin watching Alicia's and my relationship improve also helps their relationship improve. Because he doesn't have to be the mediator as much."

Cassandra's husband experienced a drastic change in his relationship with his mother after observing his mother's negative treatment of Cassandra. After his mother openly communicated her dislike for Cassandra to her husband, the mother/son relationship became considerably strained.

> He came in and was like, "I've had this epiphany. She told me everything." I was like, yep, OK. It didn't bother me at all. I was relieved that she had finally come clean with it. But it started to challenge his relationship with her.

In most cases, DILs observed a change in the mother/son relationship because of the stressful role their husbands assumed as conduits or because husbands were upset with the negative way their mothers treated DILs. In Anna's situation, however, her MIL referenced a changed opinion of her son because of Anna's influence in his life.

> I gave her a compliment and she threw it back in my face. I said, "You have raised a wonderful person, a wonderful son. Very caring, loving person." And she goes, "He *was*

wonderful." Meaning I changed him so he's no longer what she remembers or wants to

remember.

Consistent with family systems theory, DILs' troubled relationships with MILs also

influenced the mother/son relationship. Although DILs' assessments of the ways their negative

MIL relationships led to a strained mother/son relationship are based on their observations of the

ways their husbands interacted with their mothers, DILs were able to provide specific examples

to illustrate changes in closeness in the mother/son relationship. DILs also explained the ways

their husbands "saw the light," or recognized negative behaviors in their mothers with the help of

DILs.

"Seeing the Light"

From DILs' perspectives, husbands were frequently blind to the negative behaviors of

their mothers—at least until DILs pointed them out. Their husbands' "blindness" was attributed

to the mother-son bond and the uncomfortable feeling that comes with recognizing parental

flaws. For example, Stella's husband initially listened to his mother when she disparaged Stella

and tried to break up their marriage. Despite her frustration, Stella understood her husband's

loyalty to his mother, saying, "She had this hold on him forever because the bottom line is, it's

still your mom. And I totally understood it because my mom had the same hold, too." Dana

offered a similar assessment of her husband's bond with his mother.

> I think that he'd never really acknowledged that his mom had any kind of flaws. He loves
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> his mother. He worshipped the ground she walked on because she was the main woman
>
> in his life as far as who was taking care of him, who was helping him with things.

Yet, as DILs had more and more conversations with their husbands and explained why

they thought MILs' behaviors were inappropriate, their husbands' impressions changed. Both

Anna and Abigail's experiences with their MILs had led their husbands to think of their mothers differently. Anna said, "His eyes kind of opened up to how she…I don't want to say played the game, but how she perceived his life and what he should do with it. I don't think he realized that." Over the course of their marriage, Abigail's husband had slowly begun to realize that Abigail was not the "cause" of his mother's behaviors; instead, these negative behaviors were an integral part of her personality that had been there all along.

> He's definitely connecting that there's patterns of behavior that aren't just because I'm the denominator. Oh yeah, she did that here, and she did that here, and she's doing that now. You know, there's a common thread here in terms of the way that she's approaching similar situations. I think he's understanding that there's definitely some recurring behaviors.

Katie believed the troubled relationship she had with her MIL influenced her husband's relationship with his mother, primarily because Katie had helped him realize his mother's actions were not "normal."

> And so he kind of started realizing all this kind of stuff. So I think that caused more problems with his mom. Probably because of me, but just because I actually pointed out things that were not right, which he didn't think about.

Prior to marriage, MILs had been the primary female figure in husbands' lives, so their ways of communicating were perceived as the standard. Dana explained the realization her husband had about his mother's misgivings after hearing Dana's perspective.

> I think that until he got into a serious relationship with somebody else…then I started talking about some of these things that I've noticed with her, or the way she says things,

the way she treats people, the way she treats me. I think that was his eyes opening to, oh,

OK, yep, my mom definitely has flaws. He will readily acknowledge that now.

Natalie's husband began making comparisons between his family and the way her family

interacted. Natalie explains how people can become conditioned to think certain patterns of

interaction are normal when they've grown up with them.

He's always kind of making those comparisons of, wow, maybe this isn't normal, so to

speak. When you live that experience with a family, you think, this is how all families

are. As we've grown together and have been married, he's starting to realize, OK, maybe

that's not the way everybody else is.

From DILs' perspectives, their husbands were initially oblivious to MILs' behaviors

because they were unable to grasp the imperfections of the women who had raised them. After

hearing their wives' observations of their mothers' behaviors, husbands reassessed their

impressions of their mothers and became aware of damaging behaviors. When DILs married

their husbands, they became the kinkeepers within the family and could exert considerable

influence over their husbands, including the impressions their husbands had of their mothers.

DILs observed the shifting roles that accompanied their entrance into the family as a major

contributing factor to changes within the mother/son relationship.

DILs "Replacing" Mom

Upon marriage, DILs assumed a pivotal role in husbands' lives, essentially "replacing"

their husbands' mothers by becoming the most important female figure in their lives. DILs at

varying stages in their marital relationships believed the role they fulfilled challenged the

mother/son bond and contributed to the complexity of the MIL/DIL relationship. DILs perceived

a sense of jealousy and competition from MILs based on the role they fulfilled in their husbands'

lives. For example, Stella attributed her MIL's "vendetta" against her to the role she had in her husband's life, stating, "And what I honestly believe the deal is with Jack's mom is I think she's jealous. I think she blames me for him finally having the backbone to stay away from her." Leah reflected on similar feelings about the role struggle between her and her MIL, saying, "Seth's [son] her number one. She needs to take care of Seth. She's probably jealous of the relationship that we have, and then she's probably also thinking I'm not doing a good enough job taking care of him."

Dana spoke at length about the ways her spousal role had been problematic in her relationship with her MIL and in the mother/son relationship. She recognized the importance of the mother/son relationship, but felt her MIL needed to let go of her adult son.

It just becomes evident that a mother/son relationship is very special and I recognize that, but there's also something to be said for being a really good mother-in-law who recognizes while that relationship is important and will always be important, there comes a point in life, in your son's life, that it won't be the only important male/female relationship that your son is going to have. That's something I've always felt like Rhonda did not like, the fact that she was no longer the main woman in Keith's life.

Later, Dana explained the power struggle that she experienced in her MIL relationship due to the role she fulfilled in her husband's life. "She's trying to see how much influence she can still exert over him, despite the fact that he's married and our immediate family, me, Keith, and Dalton [son], is what's important. Every other relationship is beyond that." Cassandra, whose husband had fulfilled a quasi-spousal role in his single mother's life by providing advice and managing finances, felt as if she and her MIL were rivals for the wife role.

I felt that I was competing with my mother-in-law for the wife position in my marriage. And I would say that to him and say, "I don't feel like I should be feeling competitive right now. She is a mother. She fulfills the mother role. She will always be your mom. And I don't want to be your mom. I want to be your wife. Why are we competing right now?" It didn't make sense to me.

An unavoidable change to the mother/son relationship occurred when sons married DILs: DILs "replaced" MILs as the primary female figure in their husbands' lives, as they spent more time with husbands and had significant influence on his decisions. From DILs' observations, this inevitable change sparked a power play as MILs attempted to retain the same level of influence in their sons' lives as they had before marriage. A high conflict MIL/DIL relationship only intensified MILs' desire for authority in sons' lives.

Summary of Results: Research Question Five

DILs observed a variety of changes to the mother/son relationship, and they attributed many of these changes to the troubles they experienced with their MILs. When husbands started their own families with DILs, they learned about the flaws in their families of origin from the perspective of their wives. As DILs and their husbands worked together to form the standards of communication within their own families and DILs voiced their concerns about MILs' behavior, husbands made new assessments of their mothers' behavior.

Post-Hoc Analysis

Two additional themes emerged from the data after all five research questions were answered. The first theme, religious differences, describes the ways religious preferences influenced the MIL/DIL relationship. The second theme, DILs as outsiders, explains the ways DILs were made to feel they were not part of their husbands' families.

Religious Differences

Contrasting religious beliefs contributed to tensions within the MIL/DIL relationship. Religious differences appeared within the "first interaction," "living in sin," and "engagement and marriage" turning points, but DILs who did not share MILs' religious preferences perceived this as a significant contributing factor to tension in the relationship beyond these three turning points. Mya, whose MIL had asked if she identified with the Catholic faith when she first met her, explained her MIL's cold behavior when she and her husband began attending a nondenominational church, saying, "She's been very disappointed and very distant to him [husband], […] and I believe it's been because of the religion." In line with the family systems perspective, her MIL's treatment of her husband also negatively influenced Mya, especially when her MIL made comments about the choices Mya and her husband were making for the religious upbringing of their children. Brynn, who converted to Catholicism before marrying her husband, believed her MIL shared a close relationship with her other three sisters-in-law because their religious convictions were much stronger than Brynn's.

> I wouldn't consider myself a devout, strong Catholic, just because I have a lot of disagreements with the Catholic faith. My three other sister-in-laws are very devout Catholics. They follow the teachings of the church to a T.

Laura's Catholic faith and conservative political beliefs were at odds with her MIL from the moment they met when Laura was 16 years old. The tension resulting from their religious differences had been a source of contention over the course of Laura's 18-year marriage. Tensions spiked when Laura's MIL confronted her daughter about her involvement in a religious event.

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My daughter Hadley is really into the pro-life movement. She went on the March for Life [an anti-abortion event]. […]When she came back from that event, my mother-in-law pretty much took her to task, saying how terrible that event was and how she should never do those things. Really was kind of berating to the point where I took the phone away and said, "We're going to have to not have this conversation."

Hannah and Amelia had slightly different experiences with religion in their MIL relationships. Their religious differences with MILs were not based in varying faiths; instead, their secular beliefs were at odds with MILs' devotion to a given religion. Hannah was irritated when her in-laws discussed religion with her young son.

We're not religious, but I know that they have said things to Grady where Grady has then come to us, like, "Well, I don't understand who God is. What does he do?" I mean, I'm fine if he wants to talk about it and stuff, but I want him to make his own choices and not have somebody influencing him and telling him, "Well, you have to listen to God. Whatever God says is what you do."

Amelia shared the Catholic faith of her husband's family, but as a "lapsed Catholic," her lack of involvement in the church was starkly different from her in-laws' religious engagement.

We're all Catholic and I was baptized and had my first communion and I am Catholic, but I'm not deeply rooted in the church. They are very much rooted in the Catholic church. We at least have the right religion, but the fact that I'm not a church-going person has been an issue before.

Religious differences, and the communicative difficulties that resulted as part of these differences, led DILs to feel an even greater sense of alienation from MILs. Differences in religious faith were powerful forces within the MIL/DIL relationship because they went beyond

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personality conflicts or behavioral annoyances. DILs' beliefs, whether based in a deeply-rooted religious faith or attitudes that opposed organized religion, were very important to them. When they felt their belief system was not being accepted by MILs, they were offended and upset.

DILs as Outsiders

DILs felt their MILs never welcomed them into their families. This was difficult for DILs who had dreamt of joining a family where they were accepted and treated as family, despite the lack of a blood tie. Cassandra described the disappointment that accompanied her MIL's rejection of her as a "real" family member.

> I was trying so hard to get her to like me. I always had this vision of the perfect family with everybody together and caring for one another. In-laws counted as family to me. To not be accepted like that was really hard for me.

Dana, who had been married to her husband for seven years, continued to feel as if she wasn't part of her husband's family.

> It can be really tough to be in a family where you know that you aren't close to people. It's really a hard feeling to always feel like you're on the outside, you're on the periphery of everybody else. It's just really hard.

Other DILs who had been married for several years felt they would never be considered part of their husband's family, no matter how long they had been married. For example, Beth, who had been married to her husband for 14 years, said, "Six months ago, she [MIL] said I'm not part of the family. I said [to husband], 'How long do I have to be married to you before I'm part of the family? Really?'"

Natalie, whose husband would not allow her to interact with his mother because of the tension that existed between the two, explained her "outsider status" with the clash in beliefs that

existed between her and her MIL, stating, "I think part of this always feeling like not part of the family and excluded came from just different beliefs and different ways of approaching problems and change." Siri had a similar take on her exclusion from her husband's family, as she disagreed with her MIL's negativity and racist comments. For Siri, exclusion meant watching conversations but not participating in them.

> I'm not engaged in conversation at all. The conversation is very one-sided. She just needs someone to talk at. It doesn't matter if it's me. I'm not a part of what's going on. I'm more of an outsider. More of an observer rather than being part of what's happening.

> When two individuals marry, families are faced with the decision of whether they will embrace in-laws as they do consanguinal (i.e., blood) relatives or if in-laws will forever remain "on the outside" as affinal relationships (i.e., those formed through marriage). DILs who see themselves as outsiders despite the longevity of their marriages feel they are insignificant within their husband's family. When MILs institute clear boundaries between their families and DILs, DILs have little hope for improved MIL relationships in the future, as MILs' forceful attempts to exclude DILs from the family have left an indelible impression on DILs.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the turning points that led DILs to assess their MIL relationship as high conflict and to discover the repercussions of negative MIL/DIL relationships throughout the family system. Nine turning point categories emerged from the data, and from DILs' perceptions, high conflict MIL/DIL relationships had numerous consequences for relationships throughout the family system, including MIL/grandchildren, DIL/husband, and mother/son.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the uniqueness of MIL/DIL relationships, followed by detailed interpretation of the results presented in Chapter Four. Each research question will be discussed in order, but special attention will be paid to the connections among research questions. The turning points participants identified were not distinct from the family systems repercussions of high conflict MIL/DIL relationships; instead, changes to the family system frequently emerged as turning points for DILs. After discussing the themes and theoretical implications of each of the five research questions, practical implications will be addressed, along with the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

The Distinctiveness of the MIL/DIL Relationship

This study establishes the uniqueness of the MIL/DIL relationship within the family system. DILs expressed an ongoing sense of uncertainty about their roles and the roles their MILs "should" fulfill. Many roles within the family involve a period of adjustment and learning, such as becoming a new parent or grandparent, yet there are established scripts for the ways individuals should behave in these roles. The assimilation of in-laws into families and the ongoing management of in-law relationships, however, can be confusing and difficult to navigate. For participants in this study, the ambiguity of the MIL/DIL relationship created

enduring problems, and little to no communication between the two women intensified these problems. DILs expressed frustration at the over- or under-involvement of MILs during key events such as marriage and childbirth, yet rarely mentioned communicating directly with MILs about their expectations. DILs were comfortable communicating their needs to their own mothers, but struggled with having the same candor with their MILs. The unclear expectations associated with the relationship and reluctance to communicate directly are two factors that differentiate MIL/DIL from mother/daughter.

Rather than communicating directly, DILs in this study used their husbands (i.e., linchpins in the in-law triangle) as conduits between them and their MILs. This triadic communication is another unique feature of the MIL/DIL relationship. Morr Serewicz (2008) argues the triadic and nonvoluntary aspects of in-law relationships are what make them most distinctive and problematic, yet the in-laws are unlikely to end their relationship with one another due to a mutual investment in the linchpin. Data from this study generally support Morr Serewicz's argument, as only two DILs reported being estranged from their MILs, and in these cases their husbands (linchpins) had also dissolved their relationships with their mothers. Certainly an estrangement is not the ideal outcome for a MIL/DIL or mother/son relationship, but the majority of DILs who still communicated with their MILs had used their husbands as conduits at some point, a choice that had its own set of consequences. For some, husbands' roles as conduits made day-to-day communication easier, but other DILs perceived problems for all members of the in-law triad when husbands were used in this way. Decisions about loyalty are inherent in triadic communication, especially when husbands are used as conduits during conflicts between MIL and DIL. Husbands are pulled between two important women in their lives—their wives and mothers—and face penalties if they side with either one. By using

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husbands as conduits, the MIL/DIL relationship can exist without the women ever directly

addressing the communication problems they are experiencing, as husbands are the primary

channel to relay information and negotiate conflict.

Broadly, this study demonstrates the importance of in-laws to the family system. In-laws

are frequently portrayed as a "lesser" family relationship, a necessary accompaniment to

marriage but rarely enjoyed. Rather than viewing in-laws as an unavoidable evil, it is more

productive to view in-laws as important relationships that will function differently within every

family system. Embracing in-laws as "true" family members is often an unrealistic expectation

for those involved in conflict-ridden relationships. Instead, families might consider having open

communication about how in-laws will be treated when they join the family system, and what the

standards are for involving them in family events and other functions. Determining ways to

communicate civilly with in-laws despite differing personalities and backgrounds can set

positive examples for the next generation.

Turning Points

Events related to birth and childrearing composed the largest turning point category,

reported by 63% of participants. Children change the composition of the family system as

parents and grandparents learn new roles (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974), and the

prevalence of the "children" turning point demonstrates the overlap between pivotal events and

changes to the family system. Previous scholarship has identified children as a turning point

within the MIL/DIL relationship as DILs become closer to their own mothers but more

disconnected from MILs (Fischer, 1981). When they become mothers, DILs may perceive MILs'

advice and involvement as judgmental and intrusive (An, 2014; Cotterill, 1994; Rittenour &

Koenig Kellas, 2015; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Silverstein, 1990). These themes were echoed in this

turning point. DILs had difficulty managing MILs' involvement in their lives after children were born. Although they understood the desire their MILs had to be involved in the lives of their grandchildren, DILs balked at the types of help MILs offered, as this "help" was often an inconvenience to DILs or made them feel smothered. Consistent with research by Rittenour and Koenig Kellas (2015), DILs felt their MILs were *too* helpful. DILs perceived MILs' help as a form of control, as their forced physical presence and the completion of uninvited tasks allowed them to maintain involvement with their grandchildren (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015).

DILs also felt threatened by the unsolicited advice provided by MILs. Unsolicited advice from MILs has been a chief complaint of DILs in previous scholarship (An, 2014; Dun, 2010; Duvall, 1954; Shih & Pyke, 2010). DILs experienced a wide range of emotions when their MILs provided unsolicited advice, including feelings of inadequacy, disrespect, and judgment. Interestingly, DILs did not perceive MILs' advice as helpful, despite MILs' years of parenting experience. Instead, DILs saw the advice as an affront to their parenting style. They were sensitive to these comments as they made DILs feel as if they weren't doing a good job as mothers. Participants in Shih and Pyke's (2010) study reported similar feelings as they perceived MILs "using the guise of offering suggestions to give orders and criticize the way they [DILs] manage their households and perform certain domestic tasks" (p. 344). After a child is born, women are more likely to approach their mothers for childrearing advice, but MILs may see childbirth as an opportunity to become a maternal figure for DILs by providing suggestions (Fischer, 1983b). This may be especially true in this study, as over half of the DILs reported their children were not the first grandchildren for their MILs. Although their DILs were navigating new motherhood and determining how to interact with grandparents, MILs had already experienced this role in their other grandchildren. DILs who are establishing their identities as

parents and relying on their own mothers for advice may rebuff MILs' attempts to provide guidance.

Sensitivity to judgment was a recurring theme among DILs. Feeling judged or insecure about motherhood is common, especially for new mothers (Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005). Seven DILs in this study were first-time mothers with children three years or younger, and four additional DILs had two children who were five or younger and were arguably still learning about their roles as mothers. Combined, these women represent 40% of the sample. New mothers may experience a range of emotions, including feelings of inadequacy (Choi et al., 2005), anxiety (Behringer, Reiner, & Spangler, 2011), and isolation (Dun, 2010). Although asking for help with their children contributes to new mothers' wellbeing (Currie, 2009), requesting assistance may be difficult because women see it as a sign of failure (Mauthner, 1999). Further, regardless of whether the child is their first or fourth, women want others to think they are good mothers (Heisler & Ellis, 2008).

DILs in this study may have waited for their MILs to offer help rather than asking for the help they needed because they feared MILs would think they were poor mothers. Despite the negative relationship they shared with their MILs, the majority of the DILs in this study still sought MILs' approval, and this may have prevented them from reaching out to MILs for help. Further, DILs may not have known what kind of help they needed. While mothers may have an idea of what to expect from motherhood, their expectations are sometimes violated, leaving them feeling ill-equipped to care for their child (Choi et al., 2005). The ongoing learning process of becoming a mother may leave women unsure of what they need at particular times. New mothers may desire different kinds of help, ranging from meal preparation (cited by DILs in this study) to emotional support (Currie, 2009). In many cases, DILs in this study perceived their MILs as

"pushing" help on them rather than trying to discover the specific tasks DILs would like them to complete. It may be most helpful for MILs to express their help with an open-ended question, such as, "What can I do to help?" MILs, too, may be uncertain about how to help their DILs, and this question could open a dialogue between the two women.

In sum, the themes that emerged within this turning point describe DILs' ongoing negotiation of the level of involvement MILs should have in their lives after their children were born. It was difficult for DILs to find a satisfactory level of involvement. DILs in this study seemed to experience contradictory feelings about MIL connection. When MILs made attempts to become more involved, DILs recoiled, but when MILs were distant, DILs wondered if they were invested in their grandchildren. Both over-involvement and under-involvement from MILs can contribute to hurt feelings for DILs (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015). For example, MILs' perceived over-involvement can be perceived as a form of control, but under-involvement can be equally as hurtful as DILs feel left out of the family (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015).

From a family systems perspective, the concerns arising from the "children" turning point are rooted in boundaries between MILs and DILs' family subsystems. Two individuals form a new family subsystem upon marriage, and it is natural for the couple to become even more concerned with building and maintaining the identity of that subsystem when they have children (Minuchin, 1974). The ownership DILs have over their subsystem is threatened when MILs are perceived as assuming the maternal role or becoming overly involved in day-to-day childrearing.

Engagement and marriage was another common turning point within the MIL/DIL relationship. "Serious commitment," including living together and making plans for marriage, has been identified as a significant turning point in developing romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Pittman, 2001), and this commitment logically leads to change within the

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MIL/DIL relationship as well (Meyerstein, 1996). Engagement and marriage represent the formalization of the MIL/DIL relationship (Turner et al., 2006). There is no longer a question of whether or not MIL and DIL will have to cope with one another on a long-term basis. This may be difficult for both women to accept given the non-blood, nonvoluntary nature of the relationship (Bryant et al., 2001; Morr Serewicz, 2008). Marriage cements the MIL/DIL relationship as one that will last for the duration of the DIL's marriage, or after divorce if children are involved (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2009).

In this study, turning points related to engagement and marriage were associated with one of two scenarios for high conflict MIL/DIL relationships. First, for DILs who had never gotten along with their MILs, engagement and marriage did not help the relationship; instead, the relationship remained negative or sometimes became even more conflicted. Second, for DILs who had positive first impressions of MILs, engagement and marriage was the first turning point that led them to reassess the relationship in a negative light. With either scenario, negative change in the MIL/DIL relationship was based in the lack of excitement displayed by MILs upon the announcement of DILs' engagement, disagreements between MIL and DIL about the level of involvement MILs should have in the wedding, and MILs' behaviors during important events related to the wedding. When MILs were unenthusiastic or expressed explicit disapproval about the engagement of their sons and future DILs, DILs immediately recognized the challenges they would face with effectively integrating into their husbands' families. DILs, who were thrilled about their impending marriages, were unable to share their excitement with MILs who were openly hostile or disapproving. MILs' verbal or nonverbal expressions of dissatisfaction with DILs set clear standards for the future of the relationships, as DILs perceived MILs as unwilling to accept them as members of their families.

DILs also described MILs' intrusiveness in wedding planning and the ceremony itself. MILs may realize that following marriage, they will likely have a less intimate relationship with their sons (Turner et al., 2006). Perhaps by becoming involved in wedding planning and the ceremony, MILs are pursuing a goal: to become closer to the DIL and thereby closer to their sons post-marriage. MILs may think getting "in" with the DIL while planning one of the most important events in her life could lead to similar levels of involvement in the lives of the DIL and son after the marriage. After marriage, MILs' role as kinkeepers becomes precarious as DILs assume primary responsibilities for maintaining relationships across the family system (Fischer, 1983b; Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003). MILs may anticipate the shift in roles that comes with marriage and find ways to become involved in an effort to maintain their centrality in sons' lives (and throughout the family). Conversely, other DILs reported MILs wanted little to do with the wedding, and wedding finances in particular were an uncomfortable topic within the MIL/DIL dyad. In this case, MILs may understand the "hands-off" roles they are generally expected to play in comparison to the bride's parents, yet DILs may see this limited involvement as a lack of interest or investment in the success of the marriage.

Lastly, MILs' behaviors during key events related to the wedding was perceived by DILs as inappropriate or bizarre. DILs described several unique situations where MILs expressed unwelcomed opinions, appeared uncertain or uncomfortable with their new role as MILs, or continued to make DILs feel as if they were not part of the family. MILs' comments about exclusion are particularly notable. Although marriage is usually associated with the merging of two families in Western cultures, in-laws may see each other only as acquaintances formed through marriage (Pfeifer, 1989). As affinal relationships, in-laws may not be mutually invested in learning about each other, as they do not have a blood tie or shared history. Without this

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investment, in-laws may feel like they are on the outside of the family system looking in (Turner et al., 2006). Exclusionary comments made during a unifying ritual such as marriage foreshadowed the difficulty DILs had in integrating with their husbands' families.

A relatively large percentage of turning points did not fit into the eight turning point categories, composing the ninth category of "other" events. The diversity of experiences discussed within this category range from MILs' lack of support for DILs' infertility, to MIL deceit, to MIL favoritism of various family members. The large number of turning points in this category underscores the distinctiveness of the MIL/DIL relationship, supporting Turner et al.'s (2006) contention that "there is no such thing as a 'typical' mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship" (p. 599).

Notably, 21 of the 24 turning points reported in this category were associated with negative change in the MIL/DIL relationship, reiterating the predominantly negative nature of the turning points in other categories. Although difficult to categorize, many of these idiosyncratic turning points shared a common thread: DILs' feelings of devaluation based on treatment from MILs. For example, one DIL who reported a turning point in this category felt as if she didn't matter when her MIL did not offer support after her husband's life-altering car accident, and another felt her MIL favored other family members over the DIL and her family. Hurtful messages are grounded in a perception of devaluation by the receiver (Vangelisti, 1994). The specific conditions surrounding the turning points reported in the "other" category may be idiosyncratic, but the prevalence of feelings of devaluation is a vivid representation of the hurt that accompanies negative MIL/DIL relationships.

In sum, DILs described several turning points that contributed to their assessment of their MIL relationships as "high conflict," leading to a richer understanding of the pivotal events

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within negative MIL/DIL relationships. Importantly, DILs did report some positive turning points. Although these events only represented 14% of all turning points, they illustrate the non-linear nature of MIL/DIL relationships. For some DILs, an initially positive first impression was followed by a sharp decline in relationship quality, and for others, negative events were punctuated by positive instances of support and reconciliation. These complex patterns support the use of turning points to study family relationships that have few culturally defined roles for relating (Servovich & Price, 1994), and thus may develop in nontraditional ways. Additionally, the prevalence of the "children" and "engagement and marriage" turning points demonstrates the connections between pivotal events and changes to the family system. A new subsystem forms when individuals marry, leading to a revised family structure, and this structure is further altered with the birth of children (Minuchin, 1974). Based on the interdependence of family systems, changes to one part of the system lead to changes in other parts; thus, marriage and children affect not only the couple, but also the families of origin for both individuals (Galvin et al., 2006).

Family Systems

Grandmother/Grandchild Relationship

DILs were vocal about the importance of grandparent relationships in their children's lives, so they tried to shield their children from knowing about any negative feelings they had toward their MILs. DILs' desire to protect their children from conflicts with MILs is understandable given the potential influence of grandparents. Grandparents fulfill a variety of emotional and instrumental roles for grandchildren, including advisor, playmate, and comforter (Kornhaber, 1996). Further, grandparent relationships today are likely to have long-lasting

influences into grandchildren's adult lives, as the average age of a first-time grandparent is only 47 years old (AARP, 2012).

Although the grandmother/grandchild relationship was perceived as an important one that DILs wanted their children to experience, half of the DILs in this study reported a distant relationship between MILs and grandchildren. DILs with younger children felt the onus was on MILs to foster relationships with grandchildren. Conversely, the grandparent/grandchild relationship may be contingent upon the parents rather than grandparents when grandchildren are young (Euler et al., 2001; Fingerman, 2004; Sprey & Matthews, 1982). As the "middle generation," parents mediate the grandparent/grandchild relationship for young children; with age and increasing independence, children eventually assume the primary role for maintaining the grandparent relationship (Sprey & Matthews, 1982).

The portrait of grandmother/grandchild closeness is a complicated one. In the "children" turning point, DILs referenced contradictory feelings about MIL involvement, noting that they wanted MILs to have a presence in their children's lives, but on DILs' terms. If MILs' efforts for involvement after grandchildren were born had been met with negativity from their DILs, MILs may be cautious about future involvement. Both the MIL and paternal grandmother roles are ambiguous (Bryant et al., 2001; Lopata, 1999; Merrill, 2007; Servovich & Price, 1994), and MILs could be uncertain about how to connect with both DILs and grandchildren. DILs may be equally as uncertain about how to effectively integrate their MILs as grandmothers, and thus may relegate the responsibility of the grandmother/grandchild relationship to MILs. If both MILs and DILs are coping with these feelings, a communication stalemate results: MILs may wait for invitations for involvement that will never come, leading DILs to become increasingly frustrated that their MILs will not reach out for meaningful interaction with their grandchildren.

From DILs' perspectives, the lack of closeness in the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship continued into adulthood. As children age, they generally experience a decrease in closeness within the grandchild/grandparent relationship (Creasy & Kaliher, 1994; Hakoyama & MaloneBeach, 2013). Grandchildren who have a close relationship with grandparents during their childhood, however, are more likely to maintain closeness in adulthood (Geurts, Van Tilburg, & Poortman, 2012; Hakoyama & MaloneBeach, 2013). If a close grandchild/grandparent relationship fails to develop when grandchildren are young, either through efforts of parents or grandparents, the relationship will often face barriers in achieving closeness when children get older. For instance, Geurts et al. (2012) found grandchildren who had "intense" relationships with their grandparents during childhood, characterized by regular visits and overnight stays, were more likely to remain in grandparents' personal networks as adults. Ultimately, grandparents who emerge as prominent adult figures for young grandchildren are more likely to remain a part of grandchildren's lives as adults.

DILs also recognized the potential influence of their negative MIL relationship on the paternal grandmother/grandchild relationship. Despite their efforts to protect their children from their negative feelings about their MILs, DILs realized their children were likely aware of the animosity even at a young age. DILs hold significant power in influencing whether or not their children experience a close grandparent relationship. Grandchildren's perceptions of their parents' closeness with grandparents influence their own level of closeness in the relationship (Folwell & Grant, 2006; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). As their children grew older, DILs found it was increasingly difficult to shield them from negative verbal and nonverbal exchanges with MILs. An in-law triad is traditionally composed of the linchpin (i.e., son/husband), linchpin's spouse, and linchpin's relative (Morr Serewicz, 2008). Yet, when children begin to recognize

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MIL/DIL conflict, a new triad emerges: DIL, MIL, and child. This triangle may lead the child to feel "caught" between his/her mother and grandmother. The dangers of triangular communication for children with divorced parents have been extensively documented (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), and children may experience similar tugs of loyalty between mothers and grandmothers when there is a high conflict MIL/DIL relationship. Divorce and hurtful in-law relationships do not create identical triad situations, as children are likely to feel more powerful loyalty conflicts when choosing between their parents versus choosing between a parent and grandparent. At the same time, given the potential influence of grandparents in children's lives, feeling pulled between parent and grandparent is a negative situation for children.

With the exception of DILs who were estranged from their MILs, DILs maintained open boundaries between MILs and their children to allow the grandmother/grandchild relationship to develop, answering research question three about boundary management. DILs' negative feelings toward MILs were overshadowed by DILs' sincere desire for their children to have fulfilling grandparent relationships. At the same time, DILs said they would limit contact between their MILs and children if they perceived MILs' behaviors as destructive. As kinkeepers, DILs are in the powerful position of controlling MILs' access to both their sons and grandchildren (Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003). Given the critical role grandparents can play in influencing grandchildren's values and beliefs (Kornhaber, 1996), DILs were clear in their intent to limit contact if they thought MILs were serving as poor role models for behavior. DILs' ability to limit contact between MILs and grandchildren illustrates the grandparent/grandchild relationship as one that relies on the parent, or middle generation (Fingerman, 2004). Interestingly, some DILs recognized the pivotal role they played in fostering

the grandmother/grandchild relationship, whereas others placed the responsibility of relationship development solely on MILs. Varying perceptions of who is responsible for facilitating the grandparent relationship further illustrates the ambiguity both MILs and DILs may experience within their relationships.

The themes that emerged from research questions two and three depict several assumptions and concepts within family systems theory. First, when discussing the repercussions of a negative MIL/DIL relationship on the grandmother/grandchild relationship, DILs wanted their MILs to make more concerted efforts to become involved in grandchildren's lives. MILs were not interviewed for this study, so it is not possible to understand their perspectives on the relationship, but given DILs' descriptions, circular causality may be at play. Circular causality posits that it is impossible to blame an individual as the "cause" of a problem because multiple people contribute to recurring sequences of behavior (Galvin et al., 2006; Jackson, 1965; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Thus, rather than blaming MILs for a distant grandmother/grandchild relationship, it may be more productive to examine the behaviors of both parties. MILs may wait for DILs to initiate communication about visits and other forms of grandchild involvement so the MIL is not perceived as pushy or intrusive. In other words, MILs would become more involved if DILs communicated the standards for involvement, which conflicts with DILs' desire for MILs to initiate communication and engage in activities with grandchildren.

Additionally, DILs explained their efforts to protect children from knowing about their negative feelings toward MILs, but also recognized the inevitable spillover to the grandmother/grandchild relationship. DILs' desire to "shield" their children is in opposition with a primary assumption of family systems theory: systems are interdependent. Thus, the MIL/DIL relationship has repercussions for the two women in the relationship, along with DILs' children,

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husbands, and likely other extended family members. Although the purpose of this study was not to determine cause and effect relationships, DILs searched for direct paths when trying to understand the repercussions of their MIL relationships throughout their families. They wondered if the negative relationships they had with their MILs was the cause of the distant grandmother/grandchild relationship, or if other systemic factors were to blame (i.e., closeness with maternal grandparents). Ultimately, though, family systems theory discourages assigning blame to one family member (Galvin et al., 2006; Jackson, 1965). Instead, there are likely multiple individuals and factors contributing to the distant grandmother/grandchild relationship.

Finally, DILs' comments about the boundaries between grandmother/grandchild offer new insight into the ways extended family boundaries are managed. Although the majority of DILs allowed open communication between their MILs and children, they foreshadowed closing these boundaries if MILs were not positive models of behavior. This indicates boundary negotiation is a continuous process that extends far beyond marriage and the arrival of children in the family system. Although a period of negotiation is natural following systemic changes such as marriage and childbirth, these boundaries are continually evaluated based on the behavior of family members. As kinkeepers, DILs are responsible for not only managing family relationships, but also restricting communication and even ending destructive family relationships.

DIL/Husband Relationship

DILs reported a spectrum of marital consequences stemming from their high conflict MIL relationships. Nearly half of DILs said their MIL relationships had put strain on their marriages, and one of the primary reasons for the tension was husbands' role as conduits between MIL and DIL. Using husbands as conduits is a consistent theme in previous MIL/DIL

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scholarship (Prentice, 2008, 2009; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Turner et al., 2006). Husbands were put in the position of choosing sides between mother and wife. Although using husbands as conduits can prevent potentially fierce conversations between MIL and DIL, it also hinders relationship development between in-laws (Prentice, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Further, this practice allows the status quo to continue within the MIL/DIL relationship, as the two women are unlikely to effectively work out their differences without direct communication.

When husbands expressed loyalty to their mothers over their wives during MIL/DIL conflict, DILs felt betrayed and isolated. Experiencing intense conflict with MILs was accompanied by a host of emotions for DILs, including exclusion, anxiety, and defeat. In the face of this emotional turmoil, they wanted a partner to support them. DILs saw the marital relationship as one that should be distinctive from MILs, with the bond between spouses as significantly more important than the mother/son bond. Married couples are faced with finding a delicate balance between establishing their own subsystem while also maintaining relationships with both families of origin (Minuchin, 1974). This can be especially difficult given the central role mothers play in their children's lives (Morman & Whitely, 2012).

From a communication perspective, linchpins are put in a very difficult position when managing conflict between two women they value. Agreeing with either woman will likely upset the other. Wives, however, are husbands' primary source of emotional support (MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002). By supporting wives, husbands are reciprocating the support wives provide to them. Husbands' support and agreement empowers wives and strengthens marriages (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015; Shih & Pyke, 2010). The husband/wife bond is often privileged over the husband/mother bond, and decreased closeness that accompanies a son's

marriage is met with conflicted emotions from mothers. For instance, mothers in Merrill's research (2011) understood the important role wives played in their sons' lives, but also struggled with redefining the mother/son relationship after their sons had married. Based on the findings from this study, various members of the family system were affected when MILs did not recognize the primacy of the husband/wife relationship or were unable to embrace a new and different mother/son relationship post-marriage.

Although the MIL/DIL relationship contributed to strain in the marriages of some DILs, others reported their MIL relationships had limited negative impact or even strengthened their marriages. This occurred when DILs felt their husbands were on the "same page" about MILs' inappropriate behavior sand when husbands defended their wives against MILs. When husbands were on the "same page" as DILs toward MIL behaviors, DILs enjoyed a variety of positive feelings to combat the inherently negative experience of engaging in conflict with MILs. Agreement is important for successful relationships, as couples who share similar emotional responses are more united and less likely to end their relationship (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003). For DILs in this study, agreement and support from husbands served several purposes. First, DILs felt less alone in their struggles with MILs when husbands identified with their feelings. DILs appreciated the validation they received from their husbands as it helped mitigate the feeling that the poor relationship was "their fault." Second, DILs perceived agreement as more than just a sense of understanding from their husbands; it was an expression of loyalty. Loyalty between husband and wife may have positive consequences for the MIL/DIL relationship as well. DILs in Rittenour and Soliz's (2009) study reported their MIL relationships were positively affected when their husbands were loyal to DILs over MILs. The authors note, however, that faithfulness to DILs could have a variety of negative repercussions for the MIL,

including jealousy and anger. Like Rittenour and Soliz's research, this study gathered perspectives from DILs only, so the positive impacts of husbands' loyalty may have the opposite effects for MILs.

According to family systems theory, the marital dyad is one of great importance within the system (Minuchin, 1974). DILs in this study saw their marriages as sacred relationships and relied on their partners for strength and support. In many ways, husbands' defense of their mothers was a boundary violation, as the parental subsystem was perceived as privileged over the marital subsystem. Minuchin (1974) addressed the ways subsystem boundaries could either incite or discourage support within the marital dyad, writing, "The adults must have a psychosocial territory of their own—a haven in which they can give each other emotional support. […] If the spouses maintain loose boundaries, other subgroups, including children and in-laws, may intrude into their subsystem functioning" (p. 57). When husbands supported their mothers over their wives, DILs perceived this behavior as a threat to the security of their marriages, because in the "hierarchy" of family relationships, DILs wanted to be first in the minds of their husbands.

Husband/Mother Relationship

The final research question addressed the repercussions of high conflict MIL/DIL relationships on the relationship between DILs' husbands and their mothers. Although neither MILs nor husbands/sons were interviewed for this study, DILs' role as kinkeepers affords them unique insight into relationships throughout the family (Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003). From DILs' observation, the negative relationships they had with their MILs "crossed over" to the mother/son relationship by decreasing closeness between the two. As the majority of previous scholarship on in-law relationships has focused on the perspective of DILs or MILs,

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there is a dearth of research on the experiences of male linchpins caught between their wives and mothers. Yet research on the changes to the mother/son relationship after the son marries may explain some of the observations made by DILs. Sons are generally not as close with their mothers, or families of origin as a whole, following marriage (Fischer, 1983a; Morman & Whitely, 2012; Timmer & Veroff, 2000). From mothers' perspective, a son's marriage was the third most frequently reported "critical incident" affecting closeness in the mother/son relationship, with most mothers experiencing a decrease in closeness (Morman & Whitely, 2012). In other words, a conflicted MIL/DIL relationship may cross over to decrease closeness in the mother/son relationship, but changes to the mother/son relationship could also be indicative of a natural relationship progression that occurs after a child marries (Merrill, 2011).

After leaving their mothers' households and hearing about MILs' bad behaviors from DILs' perspective, DILs believed their husbands "saw the light" and could better understand the flaws of MILs. DILs perceived their husbands to be unaware of the negativity of MILs' comments and behaviors because their upbringing had conditioned them to believe these actions were normal. It is natural for individuals to believe the practices they are exposed to in their families of origin are "normal," and when individuals see the routines of their spouse's family of origin, they may reevaluate what they've experienced. Prentice (2008) found individuals reassessed the communication standards within their own families after seeing the way their in-laws interacted, writing, "through the routines of their in-laws, they learned new values about what it meant to be a family" (p. 88). DILs in this study believed their husbands had a similar "awakening" moment in which they realized their mothers' behaviors were not appropriate. Family systems develop patterns of interaction, including explicit and implicit rules (Galvin et al., 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Individuals mutually form

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their own rules for interaction after they marry and form a new subsystem, but both individuals enter this subsystem with rules from their families of origin. As individuals negotiate new rules, there are likely realizations about healthy and unhealthy patterns within their families of origin.

The final theme that emerged in relation to this research question was DILs' feeling that they had "replaced" their husbands' mothers, and this had contributed to distancing within the mother/son relationship (and also within the MIL/DIL relationship). Some DILs saw the mother/son relationship as one-sided, where the mother's perceived closeness with her son was not reciprocated by the son; whereas, other DILs observed mutual reliance between mother and son. DILs raised concerns about boundaries between the marital dyad and mother/son dyad, as they experienced a sense of competition with MILs for husbands' attention. The situations reported by DILs represent parent-child relationships that struggle with separation after the child marries. Mother-child relationships that are too close are associated with dysfunction and dependency within families (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002). When mother-child relationships lack effective boundaries, they are referred to as *enmeshed* relationships (Minuchin, 1974; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Olson, 2000). When the mother tries to insert herself in the marital relationship or when mother/son have a mutual dependency on one another, boundaries are weak within the greater family system, and the marital subsystem is unable to differentiate itself. From a systems perspective, diffuse boundaries can lead to intrusion from in-laws in the marital subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). When DILs are at odds with MILs to become the "most important woman" in husbands' lives, the marital dyad morphs into a triad where the MIL is intimately involved in the decisions of the husband and wife. MIL intrusion not only contributes to marital strain, but also to negativity within the MIL/DIL relationship (Linn & Breslerman, 1996).

Post-Hoc Analysis

Post-hoc analysis explored two additional themes that emerged in the data: religious differences between MIL and DIL and DILs' perceptions of being an "outsider" in their husbands' families. First, DILs perceived their MILs were aloof and judgmental if DILs either deviated from MILs' faith tradition or did not hold religious beliefs. Religious differences in romantic relationships are significant for individuals and their social networks. Individuals may be hesitant to engage in interfaith relationships due to limited support from their families or other network members (Yahya & Boag, 2014). Although most DILs in this study did not reference feelings of doubt about marrying a partner of a different faith, they believed their religious differences were a significant reason why their MIL did not like them. Religious beliefs give families a sense of identity, and when in-laws differ on these beliefs, there are barriers to achieving a sense of shared family identity (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009).

Religious differences are difficult to navigate in any relationship because religion—or the lack of religious faith—represents a belief system that may be held with deep conviction. Although Americans are becoming less religious, three-quarters of adults say religion is "somewhat" important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, in recent Pew research (2015), 72% of respondents who identified as Protestant and 58% of those who identified as Catholic rated religion as "very important" in their lives. Interestingly, DILs who reported religious differences with their MILs said MILs were very religious, while DILs had a different faith, were less zealous in their religious beliefs than MILs, or were not religious at all. If MILs see religion as an important part of not only their personal identity, but also the identity of their family, they may also struggle with embracing DILs with differing values as members of their family.

Along with perceiving religion as a barrier to acceptance with their MILs, DILs also made other general observations about feeling like an "outsider" in their husbands' families. DILs are unhappy when MILs exclude them from family activities (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015), and DILs' sense of shared family identity is negatively affected when MILs position DILs as "separate" from the family (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). One of the challenges inherent in in-law relationships is that in-laws are affiliates through marriage rather than blood. While some MILs may struggle with accepting their DILs as relatives (Lopata, 1999), others may want nothing to do with DILs because of personality differences or anger about the role DILs fill in sons' lives. In these cases, MILs are not only resistant to accepting DILs as members of their families, but also unwilling to involve DILs in any family-related event.

Several DILs in this study said they had never felt welcomed into their husbands' families, despite being married for many years. Others felt their connection to their husbands' families was a "contingent" one, with boundaries opened only so the MIL could have access to her grandchildren. From a family systems perspective, these findings raise important questions about family membership and boundary management. For instance, who is considered "family"? What conditions contribute to individuals' propensity to include or exclude in-laws as family members (e.g., upbringing, observations of in-law acceptance or exclusion in other parts of the family system, etc.)? Given DILs' contradictory feelings about the "appropriate" level of MIL involvement in their lives, what degree of boundary permeability contributes to successful MIL/DIL relationships?

The arbitrary nature of boundaries has been a critique of family systems theory (Broderick, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1994). There are challenges in determining who is and is not part of a family. This is especially true today, when family arrangements go far beyond the traditional

structure to include non-blood members such as "fictive kin," or close network members with no blood affiliation (Muraco, 2006). DILs in this study frequently felt they were on the margins of family functioning, peering in to a family that would never fully embrace them. Yet, at the same time, being "in" with a family can come with its own consequences. When MILs attempted to become more involved in DILs' lives by communicating advice or becoming involved with childrearing, DILs desired separation from MILs. This indicates there may be a very small window of "appropriate" overlap between the MIL and DIL's family subsystem. Due to DILs' hesitance in communicating directly with MILs about their needs, boundary violations frequently occurred for participants in this study.

This study indicates boundaries between MIL and DIL are continuously in flux, changing in permeability based on a variety of system factors such as presence and age of children and divergence or similarity of communication routines between MIL and DIL. DILs may want to be "in" the family at certain times (e.g., holidays) but "out" for others. Rosenblatt (1994) questioned the distinctions of members being strictly "in" or "out" of a family, writing, "What may be more appropriate is to think in terms of degree of 'inness' and 'outness,' […] so that one may be more 'in' the family on some dimensions and less 'in' on others" (p. 55). This reflects the perspectives of DILs in this study and the desire to be involved in certain family functions and decisions but not in others.

Practical Implications

This study provides insight into high conflict MIL/DIL relationships from DILs' perspectives. DILs painted a complicated picture of contradictory feelings, opposing communication styles, unspoken "rules" of relating, and expectations for boundary management across the family system. Although DILs frequently framed their conflicts with MILs as

divergence in personality, the conflict may be rooted in differing communication routines (Prentice, 2008). Both MIL and DIL enter their relationship with preferences for how communication "should" occur, and these preferences may be particularly strong with regard to rituals, such as marriage and holidays. MILs and DILs who communicate about the ways their families manage these events would reap two benefits: first, by telling one another about their families, they would get to know one another, and second, they could stave off conflict by mutually negotiating the ways to accommodate routines from both the MIL's and DIL's family. With this in mind, it may be beneficial to re-conceptualize marriage as a "collaboration" between families rather than a "merger." It is unreasonable for either MIL or DIL to change their routines entirely to accommodate the other; instead, a dialogue about existing routines and routines for the "new" family that results from marriage would allow both women to share their perspectives.

Negotiating logistics for family events requires direct communication, and several DILs in this study were unsure how to communicate productively with their MILs. Learning healthy communication techniques is the first step in fostering a civil MIL/DIL relationship. Premarital counseling is frequently part of the wedding preparation process for couples, and sessions about effectively managing in-law relationships could serve as a preventative measure within families. Further, given the prevalence of negative turning points surrounding the birth of children, couples should consider the ways their in-law relationships might change as their families expand. Even determining minute details such as the times in-laws will be able to visit the DIL in the hospital after childbirth could prevent conflict. Many couples today complete "birth plans" to prepare for the arrival of their children, and the preparation of this plan provides an opportunity to discuss how in-laws will be involved as grandparents.

Another practical implication from this study is the importance of reevaluating blame in high conflict MIL/DIL relationships. From DILs' perspectives, MILs were often portrayed as the instigators of undesirable experiences for the DIL. Although DILs were intentionally chosen as the sample for this study due to their kinkeeping status within the family (Turner et al., 2006; Willson et al., 2003), it is important to recognize the mutual responsibility for relational success or failure between MIL and DIL. DILs rarely reflected on the ways their communication choices may have influenced their MIL relationships. Both MILs and DILs need to be invested in fixing broken communication patterns and evaluating the attributions they are making for each other's behavior. Blaming MILs as the sole cause for a negative MIL/DIL relationship is an unproductive approach. From a family systems perspective, assigning blame to a single person is futile because all family members play a role in creating and maintaining dysfunctional patterns (Minuchin, 1974, 1985). For more positive in-law relationships to occur, families and society as a whole must shift away from placing blame on the mother-in-law as the guilty party. Instead, a "whole family" approach is required to correct negative patterns of interaction. Data from this study demonstrate the contributions various family members make to high conflict MIL/DIL relationships, including DILs who refuse to communicate with MILs, MILs who are cold and aloof, and husbands who negotiate conflict between the two rather than encouraging direct communication. By removing the blame from MILs, family members may be able to adapt their communication patterns on a personal level rather than relying on modifications from the MIL only.

Additionally, addressing mental health issues within in-law relationships is an important step in understanding why and how these relationships collapse. Several DILs suggested their MILs were mentally ill. DILs may also struggle with mental health issues, and it is unproductive

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to blame MILs' mental health problems as the sole "cause" for MIL/DIL discord. Therapeutic interventions may be necessary for whole families to remedy ongoing problems within in-law relationships.

Finally, this study indicates the role of culture in managing in-law relationships. The sample was primarily drawn from white, middle-class women from the upper Midwest. These women may face distinct challenges in their MIL relationships due to regional communication norms and cultural values. Women from this region may not communicate directly with their MILs to avoid offending them or creating an uncomfortable interaction, instead favoring passive-aggressive techniques, such as using their husbands as conduits or complaining to friends or family members. In premarital counseling sessions on in-law relationships, cultural differences in in-law relationships should be discussed. Such knowledge could help DILs evaluate their communication choices and also help them understand why their MILs might communicate in certain ways.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insight into high conflict MIL/DIL relationships, it is not without limitations. First, this study only solicited DILs' perspectives, so the reports on MILs' behavior cannot be corroborated by MILs themselves. MILs have been underrepresented in in-law scholarship. It is important to understand their perspectives, especially because they generally perceive the MIL/DIL relationship more positively than DILs (Linn & Breslerman, 1996). Comparing perspectives of MILs and DILs would shed light on the attributions both women make about one another. The fundamental attribution error was evident in this study when DILs attributed MILs' behaviors to character flaws (i.e., internal attribution) rather than to external circumstances (i.e., external attribution; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). DILs who are less

satisfied with their MIL relationship are more likely to make internal attributions when MILs treat them poorly (Rittenour & Koenig Kellas, 2015). Additional research is needed to uncover the types of attributions both MILs and DILs are making about their relationships, along with the steps both women can take to heal their relationships and recognize external factors that are potentially influencing their relationships.

Second, the DILs who participated in this study were well-educated Caucasian women. Although the participant pool was reflective of the cultural and economic landscape of the community where the study was conducted, future research should target women from varying ethnic backgrounds. Extant literature indicates MIL/DIL relationships in Eastern cultures are accompanied with unique challenges and power struggles (An, 2014; Shih & Pyke, 2010). Further research is needed to articulate the challenges of MIL/DIL relationships for women around the world. Third, by focusing solely on the MIL/DIL dyad, the questions in the interview protocol did not uncover the difficulties DILs may have experienced with other in-law relationships, such as fathers-in-law and siblings-in-law. In line with the systems perspective, several DILs did reference troubles with these other individuals, indicating the connections among family relationships. Future research should examine understudied in-law relationships, such as DIL/father-in-law, son-in-law/MIL, and relationships among siblings-in-law.

The gendered aspects of in-law relationships are a particularly fruitful area for future research. While engaged in conflict with MILs, DILs had specific expectations for their husbands' behaviors, especially regarding expressions of loyalty. It is uncertain whether the same loyalty expectations exist when husbands are engaged in conflict with *their* MILs. Delving into the loyalty challenges faced by both husbands and wives during in-law conflict would provide insight into the complicated gender dynamics of in-law relationships.

In addition to these directions for future research, this study uncovered a theoretical question about turning points that should be explored further. Two DILs described one of their turning points as "neutral." Based on the details surrounding the event, I made a judgment on whether the turning point was more positive or negative, but this raises an interesting question about the valence of turning points. Is it possible to have a neutral turning point if these events are rooted in some sort of change within a relationship? Future research should examine dialectic turning points, or those that evoke contradictory feelings in individuals. Turning point analysis lends itself to a dialectical approach (see Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Dun, 2010; Erbert et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2003), and future research should continue to explore the contradictions inherent in in-law relating.

One participant volunteered for an interview without realizing she needed to have children to participate. She asked to continue with the interview as her decision not to have children because of health reasons was a source of tension with her MIL. The entrance of children into the family system was the most frequently reported turning point, but couples' decision not to have children could also serve as a pivotal point in the MIL/DIL relationship. Nearly one in five American women's "childbearing years" end without having a child (Livingston & Cohn, 2010), and the number of couples who are "voluntarily childless" is increasing (Durham, 2008). Future research should explore the in-law relationships of voluntarily childless couples to determine if childlessness reverberates throughout the family system in the same ways as childbirth does. Further, future research should study in-law relationships in other diverse family arrangements, including LGBT couples and stepfamilies.

Conclusion

This study provides new insight into the challenges of MIL/DIL relating. Although many of the quotations depict a bleak outlook for MIL/DIL relationships, understanding the types of communication problems facing this relationship helps to build tangible steps for improving the interactions between these two women. Instituting healthy patterns of communication within the MIL/DIL relationship will also contribute to healthier interactions in other areas of the family system. The impassioned and often heartbreaking quotations from DILs demonstrate the MIL relationship is indeed an important one within the family system, and conflict within the MIL/DIL relationship can send negative waves throughout the family.

As communication scholars, it is important to address the implications of this relationship. Research on the far-reaching consequences of MIL/DIL relationships helps women understand the enormity of the relationship, ideally inspiring intentions for positive communication. Additionally, this study and previous scholarship has established the MIL/DIL relationship as one accompanied by negative societal representations and unrealistic expectations by both MILs and DILs. Recognizing the fallacies in media portrayals and accepting the MIL/DIL relationship as one with challenges and joys similar to any other interpersonal relationship may help both women approach the relationship with hopefulness and a commitment to engaging in consistent and positive communication.

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APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLYER

ATTENTION:
Do you have a negative relationship with your mother-in-law?

If you struggle to get along with your mother-in-law, Whitney Anderson, an NDSU graduate student, wants to speak to you about your experiences! For sharing your perspective, you'll have a chance to win a $50 gift card!

Participants must meet the following criteria:
- Heterosexual females at least 18 years of age
- Currently married with at least one child
- Has a living mother-in-law
- Considers the relationship with the mother-in-law as negative and full of conflict (this is from YOUR perspective, not your mother-in-law's!)

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a 60-minute interview at a time and location of your choosing. You will be entered in a drawing to win a $50 gift card!

Contact:
Whitney Anderson, NDSU Graduate Student Researcher
whitney.a.anderson@ndsu.edu

Mother-in-law study whitney.a.anderson@ndsu.edu

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APPENDIX B. RESEARCH INFORMATION FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Do you have a negative relationship with your mother-in-law? Do you struggle to get along with her and find yourself frequently frustrated with the relationship? If so, I want to talk to you! My dissertation research focuses on high conflict mother-/daughter-in-law relationships. I am looking for heterosexual females 18 years of age and older who are married, have at least one child, have a mother-in-law who is still living, and describe their mother-in-law relationship as "high conflict." If you meet these criteria and would like to participate, please send me a personal message (*for Facebook/LinkedIn*) or contact me via email at whitney.a.anderson@ndsu.edu. You will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview at a location of your choice, over the phone, or via Skype. For your participation, you will be entered in a drawing to win a $50 gift card! If you do not meet these criteria but know people who do, please share the study information with them! Thank you!

APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Background
1. How old are you? _____
2. What is your highest level of education? (ex: high school diploma, some college, bachelor's degree, master's degree, etc.) _____

Marriage and Family
3. What year did you meet your spouse? _____
4. How long after meeting your future spouse did you meet your mother-in-law? (ex: six months after meeting spouse) _____
5. What year did you get engaged? _____
6. What year did you get married? _____
7. How many children do you have? _____
8. What are the ages of your children? _____

Family System
9. How many siblings does your husband have? _____
10. What is your husband's birth order in his family? (ex: oldest child, middle child, etc.) _____
11. Are you the only daughter-in-law on your husband's side of the family? (y/n) _____
12. If no, how many daughters-in-law are there? For example, if your husband has two brothers who are married, there are three daughters-in-law total (including you). _____
13. How many grandchildren are there on your husband's side of the family, including your child(ren)? _____

Mother-in-Law
14. How old is your mother-in-law? If you don't know her exact age, please estimate. _____
15. What is your mother-in-law's marital status? (ex: married, divorced, separated) _____
16. What is your mother-in-law's highest level of education? (ex: high school diploma, some college, bachelor's degree, master's degree, etc.) _____
17. Is your mother-in-law your husband's biological mother? (y/n) _____
18. How far away does your mother-in-law live? _____
19. How often do you see your mother-in-law? _____
20. How often do you communicate with your mother-in-law? _____
21. What means do you use to communicate with your mother-in-law (for example, phone, text messaging, social media, etc.)? Please list below.

22. Does your mother-in-law provide you or your family with any support, such as financial help or childcare? If yes, please list the types of support you receive below.

23. This study is seeking participants who meet the following criteria:
   - Heterosexual females 18 years of age or older
   - Married with at least one child; mother-in-law is living
   - Describe mother-in-law relationship as highly negative and full of conflict

If you know of women who meet these criteria and may be interested in participating in this study, please provide their contact information below.

Name   *Contact Information (Phone or Email)*

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I.   Getting started
    a. Welcome participant
    b. Explain study procedures and informed consent
    c. Obtain signed consent form
II. Distribute demographic form for completion (if form has not already been completed)
III. Preview interview process
IV. Turning points
    a. Define turning point: major relational events that lead to a positive or negative change in a relationship (provide examples for illustration – marriage, childbirth, etc.)
    b. Introduce "book chapter" activity
    c. Procedure: Think about the turning points in your mother-in-law relationship as chapters in a book. I'm going to ask you to describe these chapters from the beginning of your relationship to present day. Remember, these turning points may not be all negative.
    d. Have participants thoroughly explain each "chapter"/turning point (probes adapted from Baxter & Bullis, 1986)
        i.   What happened during this turning point?
        ii. Did you anticipate this turning point or did it come as a surprise?
        iii. How did you react when this turning point happened? How did your mother-in-law react?
        iv. Is there anything else you can tell me about this turning point that would help me better understand what happened?
    e. Transition: Now that I understand the events that have led you to assess your mother-in-law relationship as "high conflict," I'd like to understand how this relationship impacts other people in your family.
V.   Family system impacts
    a. Grandmother/grandchild
        i.   How has your relationship with your mother-in-law impacted her relationship with your child(ren)?
        ii. How do you talk about your mother-in-law with your children?
        iii. Do your children recognize conflict between you and your mother-in-law? Do they talk to you about this? (*adapt question based on child(ren)'s age*)
        iv. What level of contact does your mother-in-law have with your children?
            1. Are you satisfied with the current level of contact?
            2. Do you actively try to facilitate or reduce contact between your mother-in-law and your children? Why? How do you do this?
        v.   How important do you think it is for your children to have a relationship with your mother-in-law (their grandmother)?
    b. Daughter-in-law/husband
        i.   How does your husband perceive his mother's behavior toward you?
        ii. How has your relationship with your mother-in-law impacted your relationship with your husband?

        iii. Do you talk to your husband about your mother-in-law? What do you talk about?

        iv. How does your husband respond when you and your mother-in-law have a conflict?

  c. Husband/mother

        i. In your view, how has your relationship with your mother-in-law impacted your husband's relationship with her?

        ii. What situations or nonverbal/verbal communication have signaled change in the relationship between your husband and his mother?

  d. Now that we've discussed all these relationships in your family, how has your relationship with your mother-in-law affected your family as a whole?

VI.   Closing

APPENDIX E. SUMMARY OF "OTHER" TURNING POINTS

Turning Point	Sample Quotation
MIL is perceived as insensitive to DILs' infertility struggles	"I thought it was so great that she stopped by like she cared. I was crying and I told her I felt like I was being punished, which I know after going to counseling is a common feeling after you have a miscarriage. She looks at me and she goes, 'Well, what did you do?' To me, it reiterated to me that it was my fault that I had been having these miscarriages." – *Brynn*
DIL becomes apathetic about her MIL relationship ("stops caring")	"So then I think that I finally was able to be OK with it, because I stopped caring. I stopped caring what she thought about me. I stopped trying to please her. I just stopped, because I knew no matter what I did, it didn't matter." –*Beth*
MIL visits daughter's family more often than son/DIL	"Instead of coming to town to see both of us, to see both Kyle and me and then her daughter and husband who also live here in town, it was always just them." –*Dana*
MIL is jealous of maternal grandparents	"She [MIL] starts crying. 'I don't get time with him [grandson]! It's not fair. He loves the park in my town.' And I'm like, 'Do you want me to sit down and do the math? We can add up all the days you've seen him and we can add up all the days my parents have…'" – *Leah*
Husband's younger sister moves in and relays personal information to MIL	"Things would happen in our house and she [sister-in-law] would then go to her parents' house and tell her mother everything that went on at our house, so we had no privacy whatsoever. My mother-in-law just didn't see anything wrong with that." –*Grace*
MIL deceit (several instances reported from one participant, including lying about funeral arrangements, telling lies about the DIL in order to have her power disconnected, stealing money from the DIL in two separate instances, telling lies to sabotage DIL/husband relationship)	"My dad had made me this cabinet […] that lifted up and it was a stash where you could hide stuff. […]Well, she frickin' found it, needless to say. [MIL] stole that whole envelope, and it was about $900." –*Stella*

Turning Point	*Sample Quotation*
Accidents that affect the DIL's husband and/or in-laws	"So when he [husband] came home from the hospital, and he was in a hospital bed in our home for three months, they [in-laws] never came. I believe they came one time. It's just like…ahh. At that time I was in survival mode." –*Chloe*
MIL will not stand up to her husband on her DIL's behalf	"I remember getting really mad at my father-in-law and cursing at him, and him lecturing me on cursing. And she's like, 'Yeah, you shouldn't do that.' I think she was afraid of him too." –*Jane*
MIL shows favoritism to husband's brother	"I saw it, other family members saw it, that she [MIL] very much picked the side of Keith [brother] and not my husband." -*Tasha*
Father-in-law has an affair, sparking negative feelings in DIL for the new MIL	"He left his second wife on Valentines Day, telling her he no longer loved her. […]She was family and it was hard to see that happen to somebody that we considered family. It was a challenge from the beginning to accept the third wife, the second stepmother." –*Sara*
DIL has significant religious differences from MIL*	"I am very involved at church and nowhere near perfect or doing everything that God wants me to do with my relationship with Him. […]She's just so not there. She doesn't go to church anymore. It affects her attitudes about herself and about relationships, and that is one of the things that I have a hard time with." –*Denise*
DIL receives book from therapist about coping with addiction (MIL is an alcoholic)	"The therapist that I've been seeing now for several years gave me a book about how to understand people who drink or are addicts of whatever kind and what they get out of it. That was a light bulb for me." –*Denise*
DIL feels remorseful after her mother dies as she is "stuck" with a bad MIL	"My mom died in 1996 […], I was mad at God. How could you take my mom and I'm stuck with my mother-in-law that I don't like and I don't get along with?" –*Denise*
DIL's infidelity changes MIL relationship	"One thing led to another and there was a little bit of infidelity that occurred and my mother-in-law found out. As you can imagine, that made the relationship much, much worse. After all that happened, she basically told me that I've never been good enough for her son and she never wanted me with him in the first place." –*Eleanor*

Turning Point	Sample Quotation
MIL/DIL reunite after lengthy estrangement (husband does not want his mother and wife seeing each other because of the tension between the two)	"I kept asking him [husband] during that five-year period, like, 'You need to tell her [MIL] that it's not me that is not coming. It's not my choice, it's your choice that I'm not coming.' It never seemed like that got communicated, because when we were there, she kept saying, 'I'm so glad you came!' It just didn't seem like that message had come across." –*Natalie*
MIL/DIL reconcile after a previously troubled relationship	"Her eyes have deteriorated and she couldn't see to put on her makeup. She's realizing that mortality of things. 'Is my hair OK? Is my blush even enough?' And it was really tender to be able to help her put on makeup. So we ended up just sitting together in her hotel room for about three hours. It was really nice. It was a way we reconnected." –*Danika*

*The theme of religious differences was embedded in other turning point categories, but in this instance, Denise's realization of significant religious differences between her and her MIL was a turning point in and of itself.