

THE ASSIMILATION OF IN-LAWS:  
THE IMPACT OF NEWCOMERS ON THE STRUCTURATION OF FAMILIES

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Doctor of Philosophy

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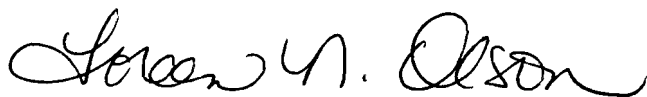
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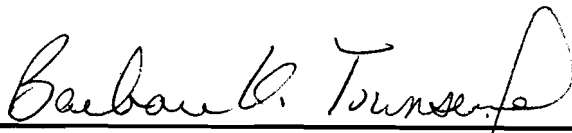
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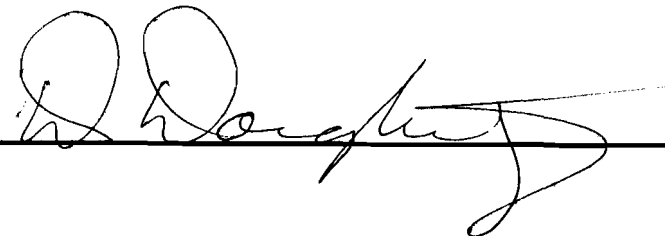
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THE ASSIMILATION OF IN-LAWS: THE IMPACT OF NEWCOMERS ON THE  
STRUCTURATION OF FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

In this study, 42 participants (including newlyweds, parents of newlyweds, and siblings of newlyweds) were interviewed about their relationships with their in-laws. Most of the participants reported that they liked their in-laws and wanted to maintain good relationships with them, while only four of the participants reported problematic in-law relationships. However, participants reported differing levels of discomfort with their in-laws when their routines differed for everyday life, holiday celebrations, religious practice, gift-giving, and interpersonal interactions. Families rarely communicated their routines directly. Instead they continued with their everyday routines and expected the newcomer to fit in. The newcomers found it easy to adjust to some routines that were similar to their own, but they felt confused or rebellious in response to other routines. The newcomers attempted to create roles for themselves in their spouse's families, and sometimes both the newcomer and the family of the spouse learned new values, created new routines, and found new ways to interact. Participants also reported that tensions existed between the married couple and their larger families regarding how much time the couple should spend with their families. These findings suggest that problematic in-law relationships may be due to differences in family routines and communication patterns.



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *Rationale*

In the 21st Century Americans can expect to live into their 70s and 80s, and thus parents can expect a rather long period of their lives in which both they and their children are healthy adults. In fact, parents can expect to enjoy family life with their children as adults longer than as minor children (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Although many parents and adult children may live far away from each other, through technology, modern affluence, and convenient travel, families stay in touch (Bengston, 2001). Despite these trends, most studies of family communication have focused on the nuclear family and have for the most part ignored extended family kinship (Bengston, 2001; Lopata, 1999). This rather myopic concern with the family of childhood evolved after World War II when American families fled the cities and populated the suburbs. Society began to view the American family as nuclear, with few ties and responsibilities to their families-of-origin (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). However, family life does not usually end at age 50, and older family members still provide emotional, physical, and financial support to their children (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Nevertheless, the family events that researchers have chosen for study tend to be those that occur in the nuclear family in the first half of life (Bengston, 2001; Cohler & Altergott, 1995; Lopata, 1999).

This trend has begun to change with the attention given to blended families, also called stepfamilies. The family institution has changed to reflect a more complex post-modern society, as evidenced by the fact that one of every six children under the age of 18 is a stepchild (Braithwaite, Olson, & Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Scholars

have examined the special tensions experienced by blended families as they renegotiate their family rituals and roles (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1998; Baxter, Braithwaite, Nicholson, & Demo, 1999), thus extending family communication research beyond the traditional nuclear family. However, family communication scholars have overlooked another important transition of a family's life—the later years when parents experience their children marrying and introducing their spouses into their family-of-origin as new members. Although popular culture as reflected in the ubiquitous mother-in-law joke suggests that in-laws can have a great impact on family life, these relationships have been understudied by family researchers.

The in-law relationship is an important focus in anthropological studies of other cultures because kinship is the major way of organizing many societies (Nydegger, 1986). But here in the United States, these relationships have been understudied in fields such as psychology, sociology, and family studies (Lopata, 1999), and are almost non-existent in the field of communication, although many researchers have noted that research into in-law relationships would yield useful insights into American families. In a text from 1954 cited by almost all existing in-law studies, Evelyn Duvall bemoaned the lack of research on in-law relationships even then, and outlined modern trends that suggested that American in-law relationships might be changing and therefore worthy of study. Many of her identified trends from 1954 are still operative today, fifty years later, at least for some couples:

1. *Couples marry young.* Although this may no longer be generally true, nevertheless, many couples still marry young.

2. *Wives balance employment with babies.* This is even more prevalent today, and it may draw in-laws into the family care circle.
3. *Military service for some forces spouses back into living with their in-laws.*  
Although the numbers are relatively small at present, this is true today during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.
4. *Since families are smaller, parents experience the empty nest sooner and may want to continue a family relationship.* Families in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are even smaller, and modern parents can be expected to desire closer family relationships with their adult children.
5. *Married children sometimes live with parents.* This trend continues today, with many parents experiencing the return of adult children to living at home.
6. *Our modern focus on psychological understanding of people has led to a different view of intra-family contact—less of an obligation, and more on personal growth and fulfillment.* Since our culture has no strict expectations for in-law relationships and obligations, people choose to maintain close in-law ties for their own benefit and fulfillment. This trend has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as families become more geographically dispersed, yet have more opportunities to stay in touch through technology and travel.
7. *Parents are expecting to live longer, and through pensions, social security, and insurance, are able to take care of themselves; thus the fear of “having to take care of Mom and Dad” wanes to some extent, and so parents, parents-in-law, and children can enjoy each other as people, not obligations.* Modern parents can

often remain financially independent of their children and focus on good relationships, not obligation.

8. *Although traditional stereotypes and taboos for in-laws exist globally, Americans have forged new understandings of many social problems, such as race and gender, and this should also extend to reconsidering the issue of in-laws* (Duvall, 1954). This trend in the U.S. is slowly spreading to other societies through the globalization of Western values.

As Duvall stressed in 1954, in-law relationships in the United States are in flux, but are nevertheless important in our understanding of marriage. Almost 50 years later, Bengston (2001) similarly stressed that multigenerational bonds beyond the nuclear family would become increasingly important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even as these relationships are becoming increasingly diverse.

Similarly, Cohler and Altergott (1995) noted that previous studies of family have failed to include extended family kinship, and they advocated the adoption of a multigenerational perspective. The family developmental approach has focused on the first half of life, not recognizing that people age 65-74 are about as healthy as younger counterparts, financially better off, and still working and contributing in the community (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). For the first time in the baby boomer generation, large numbers of men may actually have time to spend with grandchildren, even great grandchildren, and therefore have more to contribute as fathers-in-law. Thus, the post modern family is unusual in that it is “characterized as never before by relations across four and even five generations within the family, by provision of both forward and reverse socialization across the course of life” (Cohler & Altergott, 1995, p. 83). Thus

American family research has overlooked in-laws at a time when they may in fact be becoming more important.

More recently, Lopata (1999) has also noted how social changes in the Western world have altered the attitudes toward in-laws. She points out that in patriarchal and patrilinear societies, the woman's family-of-origin has no official relationship to the woman's offspring. Thus the fact that the term *in-law* is used to recognize the relationship of both sides in modern Western society in some ways equalizes the status between the husband family and the wife family. Nevertheless, in-laws are seldom referred to in the literature on the American family, in part because we no longer stress the importance of the male line, and instead emphasize more autonomy for the married couple. Since we as a nation are geographically dispersed, kinship relationships, including those with in-laws, are maintained more by choice than by necessity or social norms. Because the job of keeping ties with family usually falls to the women of the family (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Lopata, 1999), the mother-daughter relationship is often maintained more strongly than the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship [Note: The term *mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship* is used throughout the literature and in this study to denote the relationship between the wife and her husband's mother]. However, these changes in American in-law relationships may not apply to specific ethnic groups that maintain specific cultural norms for in-law relationships. Similarly, these changes may also not apply to upper-class families, where the relationship of importance is the family that has greater status or wealth (Lopata, 1999). In general, Lopata (1999) agrees that in-law relationships are worth studying today because our heterogeneous society leads to marital matches of diverse couples, mixed in

background, socio-economic status, religion, education, etc., who may have differing expectations for in-law relationships.

The few existing studies of in-laws have suggested that in-law relationships are complex and therefore often problematic. The foundational work by Duvall in 1954 found that mothers-in-law were the most problematic of in-laws, followed by daughters-in-law, because they were both seen as meddling. Duvall suggested that mothers-in-law refrain from meddling in their children's marriage because the couple would do better if they established their own identity as a couple, apart from either set of parents. Almost 30 years later, Fischer (1983) found that the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law became more problematic with the birth of a first child, although it is worth noting that this finding has since been disputed by another study (Timmer & Veroff, 2000). Nydegger (1986), an anthropologist, is the lone voice suggesting that the father-in-law/son-in-law relationship may actually be more problematic because of the father's concern that his daughter be protected and taken care of. Other researchers in fields such as family therapy and psychology have identified specific issues that problematize the in-law relationship, such as attachment and loyalty to parents, unrealistic expectations for in-laws, and even family business arrangements (Christensen & Johnson, 1971; Horsley, 1996, 1997; Marotz-Baden & Mattheis, 1994; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). To complicate these already complex and problematic relationships, in-laws can be acquired at almost any stage in our lives when our parents, our siblings, or our children forge new marriage bonds (Lopata, 1999). Thus, research from a variety of fields indicates that in-law relationships can create complex tensions in families.

Although much of the research on the relationships among in-laws has focused on specific dyadic relationships, families are not simply a series of dyads but are also small groups. Small group scholars have called for researchers to move away from studying ad hoc, zero-history laboratory groups, and instead to focus on bona fide groups in natural contexts (Frey, 1994a, 1994b; Socha, 1999; Stohl & Putnam, 1994). This call has fostered the recognition that families are small groups, in fact, our first group and that our understanding of families has been limited because we have not studied them as groups (Socha, 1997; Stafford & Dainton, 1995). Socha (1999) called for studying families from the small group perspective because what we learn from families may be applicable to all groups, and what we already know about groups may be applicable to families. He also called for researchers to widen the diversity of the family group studied, and study them as a whole, not just the individual relationships within them. Similarly, Barker et al. (2000) suggested that research should emphasize the family members as a system and that structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) might be useful in exploring how the underlying rules and norms of a family maintain and reproduce family systems. Frey (1994a) noted that studying the socialization of family members might yield useful insights into both families and small groups.

The term *socialization* is a widely used term in sociology, anthropology, communication, education, and family studies, usually designating the process through which human beings learn the behavior patterns of the culture or community in which they live. This process is usually accomplished in the early years of life. I use the term in the more narrow sense of assimilation into a group or organization. In-laws enter the family through a process similar to a model proposed by Moreland and Levine (1982) to

describe how a new member enters a group and how that relationship changes over time. First is investigation in which both the group and the individual assess whether forming a relationship will be beneficial. When the group feels that the entry criterion has been met, it offers membership to the individual, which the individual accepts if his/her entry criterion is also met. Then is the period of socialization, during which “the group attempts to teach the individual ‘appropriate’ behaviors, thoughts, and feelings” (p. 152). If the group is successful, the individual shows assimilation. But also the individual attempts to alter the group, with some accommodation by the group. When the acceptance criterion is reached, the individual is considered on both sides to be a full member. In the maintenance phase, a specialized role is defined for each member, which balances the needs and obligations of the group with the needs and obligations of the individual. If these roles are unrewarding to one side or the other, the divergence criterion is reached and the member becomes a marginal member. The process of socializing an in-law differs from this model in that usually only one member has the privilege of offering group membership to the newcomer through a proposal or acceptance of a proposal of marriage.

Because much of the research on in-laws has focused principally on dyadic relationships, the process of how new in-laws are socialized by the whole family as a small group has received little attention as a separate process. Although Cotterill (1989) noted that “The extended family is an agent of adult socialization which is wholly different from the socialization of the child” (p. 571), she did not explore this socialization process in depth. Instead she reported that the patterns that develop during the courtship period lay the foundation for subsequent in-law relationships. Cotterill



ignored the impact that in-laws other than the mother-in-law may have on the assimilation of the new family member. Similarly, Pfeifer (1989) limited her exploration of socialization to the first meeting between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, without probing how the socialization process continued, which of the other family members might be agents of this process, and how the entry of the new in-law affected the whole family. In addition, other than Jorgenson (1994) and Limary (2002), communication scholars have not explored communication in relationships among in-laws. In general, research into in-law relationships has not been approached from a small group perspective nor from a communication perspective.

#### *Purpose of this Study*

The assimilation of a newcomer into a group has been shown to be a two-way process. Not only does the group attempt to mold the newcomer to the group's norms and routines, the newcomer also attempts to mold the group to his or her own needs and preferences (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999; Mignerey, Rubin, & Gorden, 1995; Moreland & Levine, 1984). This two-way process may be an unacknowledged source of in-law tensions. Although other researchers have focused on specific dyadic in-law relationships as problematic, such as between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law (Cotterill, 1989; Fischer, 1983; Jackson & Berg-Cross, 1988; Kivett, 1989; Limary, 2002; Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1984; Marotz-Baden & Matheis, 1994; Nydegger, 1986; Pfeifer, 1989), these tensions may actually reflect an inadequate process of socializing newcomers into the adult family and the complementary process of the newcomers changing the adult family. Specifically, tensions among in-laws may be interpreted as

individual inadequacies, conflicts, or personality differences between members, when in fact the real issue may be a matter of change, a disruption in family routines.

A newcomer in the family creates change, whether it be a newborn or an adult in-law. Whereas children usually enter families as infants without prior family experience and are therefore fairly malleable, in-laws enter their spouse's families as adults who have their own routines and preferences regarding how family life should be conducted. Since modern American families often have only one or two offspring, children enter families that are themselves immature and not completely settled in their routines in dealing with their new family members, i.e., their children. In contrast, in-laws enter families that already have a long history and established norms and routines that feel comfortable to the family members. This process of change is the subject of my study as it manifests in and is negotiated through the communicative practices of the family.

Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) can be mobilized to understand how family structures and routines are recreated and renegotiated through the day-to-day communication behaviors among the family members as they assimilate new in-laws. Giddens (1984) theorized that social activity consists mostly of day-to-day routines. People enact and re-enact routines because they provide a sense of stability which Giddens terms "ontological security"—meaning that people feel assured of and comfortable with their roles in a world that makes sense to them. I think that people look to their families-of-origin to provide a basic ontological security, and therefore they tend to re-enact their past roles and routines when they interact with their families-of-origin even when they are all adults (Cassell, 1993). However, as the family embraces new members through the marriage of children, these routines and roles are adjusted and

renegotiated, disturbing the individual members' sense of ontological security. It is this disturbance that may cause many of the problems in-law relationships. Although previous studies have suggested that the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is the most problematic, a structuration theory perspective would suggest that all family members are affected as they see their once stable and predictable family routines change to accommodate a new adult family member. The tensions caused by change in routines are easily blamed on deficiencies or strangeness in the in-laws. What is often overlooked in studying in-law relationships, however, is that these changes can be positive, leading to a greater or more satisfying sense of ontological security for all members.

Relational dialectics also provides another useful perspective for understanding the factors that influence the communication of and negotiation of norms in families as they assimilate newcomers. Opposing forces represented by the routines of both in-law families, the newlywed couple's own preferences, the maturing of the other siblings in the family, as well as the forces present in the greater society—all interact to pull the family in different directions as they seek to reproduce their family routines to assimilate the newcomer. Because of the focus of previous researchers on only specific in-law relationships, the influence of these dialectic forces have not been examined in research on in-laws, although they have begun to be examined in small groups (Benoit, Kramer, Dixon, & Benoit, 2003; Kramer, 2004, Prentice & Kramer, 2004).

The two-way process of assimilating the newcomer upsets the predictability and comfort of family routines. To understand how in-laws affect a family's routines and norms, I studied how families assimilate new members and how the new members affect the families. In order to do this, I approached the family as a small group rather than as a

series of dyadic relationships. My purpose in doing this study was to uncover and better understand how communication routines within a small group, in this case, a family, are affected by the introduction of newcomers, how various dialectic forces impact the group, and how the group and the newcomer use their communicative practices to assimilate the newcomer.

### *Importance of this Study*

This study has the potential to broaden our understanding, not only of in-law relationships, but also of how the family as a small group experiences assimilation and norm renegotiation. This study adds to the body of knowledge in the field of communication in several ways. First, it broadens our understanding of communication within in-law relationships. Second, it approaches the study of in-laws and families from a small group communication perspective rather than simply examining dyadic relationships within families. Third, because of the small group approach, the findings about assimilation of in-laws may be applicable to other bona fide groups that occasionally acquire new members. Finally, this study mobilizes Giddens' structuration theory (1984) and Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics (1996) in a small group communication study, which may lead to greater utilization of these theories in other small group communication studies and lead to new insights into family communication. Practically, this study offers a fresh perspective for clinical practitioners and family counselors who seek to guide their clients through in-law difficulties.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how this study differs from other studies of in-laws, the body of research on in-law relationships must be reviewed. Given that this has been a largely ignored area of study, the literature spanning 50 years is somewhat sparse. This section will first review the foundational published studies of in-laws and some unpublished but extensive studies of in-laws in order to review what past research has focused on and discovered. After that I will more thoroughly explore how structuration theory and relational dialectics can be applied to understand how in-laws are assimilated into families and how their entrance impacts family members. Finally I will discuss what the research on in-law relationships suggests about assimilation and norm negotiation in families, leading to my research questions.

### Comprehensive Studies of In-Law Relationships

Since in-laws have so seldom been the focus of study in any discipline outside of anthropology, a very limited number of works form the nucleus of in-law research dating back to the 1950s. This section describes in detail these comprehensive works that have broadly examined and theorized about in-law relationships, and which are cited in almost all later literature. In addition, some more recent unpublished dissertations have explored broad perspectives on in-law relationships. They are not as well-known nor as frequently cited, but they offer important perspectives. Studies that were narrowly focused or were compilations of other works are not included in this section, but will be discussed topically in later sections, or have been cited earlier in this paper.

The term *in-law* reflects the bilateral family system of modern European and American society in which both the husband and wife maintain ties with their families-of-origin. In a patrilineal society, since only the males are important, the family of the wife/mother has no connection with offspring from the marriage. The term *in-law* is used in bilateral family systems to indicate that the relationship is not biological but a legal relationship through the institution of marriage (Lopata, 1999). Originally, this definition also included what we now call step-relationships, which of course, are also created through marriage (Lopata, 1999). The functional difference between step and in-law relationships, as I see it, is that step relationships involve no blood ties across generations, while in-law relationships result in blood relations with descending generations. For example, although I may acquire a step-son or step-niece through marriage, neither I nor my natural grandchildren will ever be related by blood to the children of my step-relatives. However, when I acquire a daughter-in-law or brother-in-law through marriage, I will be blood-related to their offspring if they reproduce.

*Foundational and/or Comprehensive Studies of In-Law Relationships*

*Duvall: In-laws in general.* The single resource that forms the foundation of what we know about American in-law relationships is Evelyn Duvall's book, *In-Laws: Pros and Cons* (1954), which used a novel method to garner research participation. Duvall invited listeners on a national network radio show, as part of a contest, to write letters on "Why I think mothers-in-law are wonderful people." Then she conducted a content analysis of the 3683 responses. In addition, she conducted what she termed "group interviews" with 17 groups of men and women all over the country (1337 total participants), asking them to identify the in-law relationship that was most difficult for

them and to list the three things that made the relationship difficult. From this group, Duvall solicited 60 personal interviews in which she explored the finer details of the in-law relationship. Three-fourths of the respondents were women, and the majority came from younger marriages, although all ages were represented in the study. Of 1337 people surveyed, 37% said the mother-in-law relationship was the most difficult, followed by the sister-in-law (20%), while the brother-in-law and father-in-law were seldom mentioned as difficult (5%).

Almost 25% of those interviewed indicated no problems with in-laws; however, of the 992 people who reported difficult relationships with in-laws, 50% identified mothers-in-law as the problematic relationship. Most of these complaints came from women, with only 10% coming from men. Younger women mentioned the mother-in-law as difficult more often than older women. Daughters-in-law were mentioned as difficult by less than 3% of the participants, reflecting the sample comprising younger people who did not have married children. Although Duvall did not specifically mention it, this fact in itself suggests that there may be some basic asymmetry of perception in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, i.e., that daughters-in-law experience problems that their mothers-in-law do not perceive. Troublesome mothers-in-law were characterized as meddling, nagging, and possessive—reflecting the stereotyped hostility and negative conditioning against mothers-in-law in our media. Contrary to this stereotype, however, mothers-in-law rarely criticized their children-in-law but were criticized by them often. Daughters-in-law were irritated more by their mothers-in-law's behavior than the mothers-in-law were irritated by their daughters-in-law's behavior. As a result, many mothers-in-law felt estranged, had mixed feelings, and tried to mind their

own business. Nevertheless, Duvall found that actual experience with mothers-in-law diminished the stereotype, and some people in her study were actively attempting to combat it, indicating that as early as 1954, the role of the mother-in-law in the U.S. was beginning to change.

Duvall offered some insights into why in-law relationships are problematic. She theorized that married couples belong to three families—their two families-of-origin and then also the family they make together. To be successful as a family, the couple must feel the strongest tie to their own new family rather than their families-of-origin. According to Duvall, couples experience problems with in-laws as they struggle to find the balance between independence and dependence. Establishing their own autonomy from their parents leads to stronger cohesion as couple, which is important to establish in the early years of marriage. Any family member who meddles, interferes with or threatens the autonomy of the couple may be perceived as a difficult in-law. Duvall recommended that mothers-in-law stop meddling, get a job, take care of aging relatives, volunteer—which were all good options for the 1950s—but they may also indicate why the mother-in-law relationship has been changing in the U.S.; i.e., women in general have been getting jobs and volunteering in increasing numbers since the 1950s, numbers which would presumably include mothers-in-law (United States Department of Labor, 2004). Central to Duvall’s study is that the new couple must establish its own autonomy—and when they achieve this, they are able to transcend the tensions among in-laws.

*Fischer: Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.* Despite Duvall’s calls for continuing research into in-law relationships, little follow-up research was undertaken until the 1980s, reflecting the continuing modern focus on the nuclear family. In 1983,



Fischer (1983) compared the mother-daughter and the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships and how the birth of a grandchild impacted each. Family researchers have found that the birth of a child often brings new tensions to a marriage (McGoldrick, 1989), but it has been unclear how in-laws contribute to those tensions. In a study of 33 daughters, 30 mothers, and 24 mothers-in-law, Fischer (1983) found that the birth of the first child created strain on the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in two ways. First, after the birth of the grandchild, mothers-in-law talked more with their daughters-in-law than with their own sons, resulting in the daughter-in-law mediating the relationship between her husband and her mother-in-law and also between the mother-in-law and the grandchildren. In addition, after her first child is born, the new mother strengthens her bond with her own mother, preferring her to the mother-in-law, which in turn accentuates the asymmetry in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship.

Fischer's study also contrasted mothers and mothers-in-law. Although both mothers and mothers-in-law were reported to assist the new mother with the child, mothers-in-law were found to be more likely to give goods rather than service. The mother-in-law's offer of service was seen sometimes as control and intrusion. Thus, Fischer found that after the birth of a grandchild, the mother-daughter relationship improved, while the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship became more distant, formal, and ambiguous. Daughters-in-law perceived criticism from their mothers as natural due to the intimate knowledge shared between mother and daughter. However, the criticism of mothers-in-law was perceived by daughters-in-law as a rejection of the son's choice of wife. Daughters-in-law were more likely to ask their mothers-in-law for

insights into their husband's behaviors rather than to ask for childrearing advice. Similar to Duvall's findings, Fischer reported that daughters-in-law were irritated more by their mothers-in-law's behavior than the mothers-in-law were irritated by their daughters-in-law's behavior.

*Nydegger: Focus on the father-in-law.* Nydegger (1986) departed from the focus on mothers-in-law by theorizing that the father-in-law/son-in-law relationship was actually the principal source of tension in married children. Reporting from the Fatherhood Project (in which 250 men, aged 45-80 years old in the San Francisco Bay area and 124 of their sons and daughters were studied), Nydegger found that fathers rarely complained about their daughters, but when they did, it was more likely to be about the daughter's marriage. In contrast, fathers complained to their sons about their lack of achievement. Usually fathers-in-law liked their daughters-in-law, but sometimes the daughter-in-law was perceived as alienating the son from the family by pulling him too much toward her own family, so that the father-in-law felt that he had lost his son. However, the fathers were likely to be more critical of their sons and sons-in-law than their daughters and daughters-in-law. Nydegger suggested that the father-in-law/son-in-law relationship might be more problematic because the father did not want to see his daughter hurt, neglected, or abandoned.

In the same article, Nydegger (1986) continued her focus on the father-in-law by describing kinship in other societies, which clarifies why the in-law relationship has been traditionally viewed as problematic in many cultures. First, kinship is the principal pattern for organizing many other societies; therefore, kinship and how it is reckoned is very important. In many societies certain lines are preferred, and most families prefer

that there is some blood relationship (albeit distant) between marriage partners because in this way the potential new family member is known and pre-socialized into the family.

Kinship in these societies is reckoned by how groups of people are related to one another, usually through a particular descent lineage, either patriarchal or matriarchal. In contrast, in the United States we have an ego-centered way of reckoning kin: what matters is the relationship to the individual, not to the whole family. Thus in the U.S. individuals have unique groups of kindred who may not be related to each other except that they are in some way related to the individual who claims them as kin.

Nydegger (1986) suggested that there are four critical questions to understand in-law relationships in any society: (a) Where in relation to parents-in-law will the new couple reside? (b) Is the child-in-law known (or related) to either parent prior to marriage? (c) How much autonomy do the new conjugal unit and the child-in-law enjoy? (d) What are the expectations regarding the severance of birth ties and the child-in-law's incorporation into or affiliation with the spouse's kin group (in terms of loyalty, property, authority, etc.) (p. 114). Nydegger then described patriarchal, matriarchal, and bilinear kinship systems—and noted the sources of in-law tensions. For example, in a patriarchal system, the new bride resides with her husband's family and breaks ties with her natal family. As a result, the primary tension for the new bride is with the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. These traditional systems contrast with the American dispersed kindred system, in which the couple resides near neither set of parents, the spouses are often unknown to the parents, the new couple enjoys full autonomy, and neither family is rejected.

Following up on her theory about the father-in-law, Nydegger (1986) suggested that resulting tensions were between father-in-law and son-in-law because the wife visits her family more often, and the achievements of the son-in-law are obvious. The major method of reducing these tensions is avoidance—which simply aggravates the problem. The daughter can visit her parents without her husband, claiming his job requirements keep him from visiting, etc. However, the husband cannot often visit his parents without his wife because this kind of avoidance would be more obvious.

Despite Nydegger's interesting points, she stereotyped American families and overlooked the fact that her four critical questions are answered in a multitude of different ways in the United States, as other studies have indicated. For example, in many farming communities, couples live in close proximity to, sometimes even on the same farm as their in-laws and operate the farm together (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Marotz-Baden & Mattheis, 1994). This also happens to other people who marry into families that run family businesses (which make up 90% of American businesses) (Cole, 2000; Kaslow & Kaslow, 1992). Therefore, as opposed to what Nydegger suggests, many Americans do live close to their in-laws and do not experience much autonomy because their livelihoods are entwined. On a different issue, contrary to Nydegger's suggestion, American families often are acquainted with the child's spouse before marriage (Pfeifer, 1989). In fact, surveying American families on Nydegger's questions of in-law relationships might give a clearer picture of just how diverse Americans are. That however is not the topic of the present study. Moving beyond theories and descriptions of in-law relationships, family therapy practitioners have addressed how to help families with problematic relationships with their in-laws.

*Horsley: A family therapy perspective.* Gloria Horsley (1996, 1997), a family therapist followed up on Duvall's work by describing typical in-law problems:

1. Lack of marital approval.
2. In-law blaming: daughter-in-law keeps the husband from visiting his parents; spends more time with her family.
3. Loyalty issues: demanding equal time.
4. Holding grudges for a family transgression
5. Care and financial support of elderly in-laws: daughter-in-law is assumed to care for parents-in-law because she is a woman.
6. Life cycle stresses: birth, death, retirement
7. Holidays from hell that involve visits with extended families and attempts to blend different family traditions.
8. Undefined roles: "How do I go from being a mother to my son to being a mother-in-law to his wife?"

Horsley theorized that family therapy issues involving in-laws have often been framed as issues arising from the couple's dysfunctional families-of-origin. However, if these problems were framed as in-law issues, that new perspective would remove the stigma of the dysfunctional family. Instead, as in-law issues, they could be seen as part of the normal life cycle of family transitions. Thus people could begin to view their extended family conflicts as normal transitions rather than as signaling that their families-of-origin were dysfunctional. Horsley (1997) believed that it is important for individuals to understand who they are within the boundaries of their families, and that family therapists could help people do this by exploring in-law relationships with their clients.

*Summary.* These foundational studies, which are cited by almost all later studies, have suggested that relationships with in-laws can be expected to be problematic for a variety of reasons. Both mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law have been implicated as meddling in their children's marriage and critical of their children's spouses (Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Nydegger, 1987), while mothers-in-law feel misunderstood and villified (Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983). Relationships with in-laws can involve power struggles, loyalty issues, autonomy issues, and stressful life events (Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Horsley, 1997; Nydegger, 1987). These studies have explored dyadic relationships between in-laws rather than viewing the families as groups. Missing from these descriptions are insights into the communication behaviors that contribute to misunderstandings and conflicts, and examinations of the assimilation processes used successfully or unsuccessfully by families and the new members. Some of these topics are explored in part in other unpublished comprehensive studies.

*Unpublished Comprehensive Studies of In-Laws*

*Cotterill: Mother-in-law as principal agent of socialization.* In an extensive unpublished British dissertation Pamela Cotterill (1989) reported on a three-year longitudinal study of 35 women and 9 men about their changing relationships with their in-laws. What Cotterill extracted from this rich data is that marriage is a unique form of socialization that is unlike the socialization of the young child because it is ambivalent with no clear-cut roles for in-laws in modern Western society. However, she did not explore this socialization from a theoretical perspective. In contrast to Nydegger (1987), Cotterill reiterated the theme of the importance of the mother-in-law because of women's traditional role as kinkeeper and principal controller of social relations in the private

realm. Thus the socialization of new in-laws falls to the mother-in-law, which renders her role problematic by definition. Cotterill examined life-events, such as the first meeting between future mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the marriage plans themselves (which usually have no place for the mother-in-law), power struggles between wife and mother-in-law, and the issue of how to address the new in-laws. Her study provided extensive thick rich description about the in-law relationship and explored ways the mother-in-law found to balance her own needs with those of her daughter-in-law.

*Pfeifer: Exploring how the mother-in-law socializes the daughter-in-law.* In another unpublished dissertation Pfeifer (1989) found, like Duvall (1954), Cotterill (1989), and Fischer (1983), that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law had different perceptions of their relationships. Pfeifer conducted interviews with 53 mother-in-law/daughter-in-law pairs who lived within 45 minutes of each other in the Midwest.

Contrary to what Nydegger (1986) proposed about American in-laws, Pfeifer (1989) found that 32% of her participants knew each other before marriage, with both positive and negative consequences. Like Cotterill (1989), Pfeifer asked participants to describe the first meeting between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and found that they had different perceptions of the meeting. Daughters-in-law felt it was important to make a good impression because they were well aware that they might be joining this family. Mothers-in-law, on the other hand, restrained themselves from viewing this new person as a potential daughter-in-law, preferring to remain neutral until the son actually declared his intentions. Mothers-in-law did this because they did not want to influence their sons' decisions nor get too emotionally invested in a relationship that may end. Unfortunately the prospective daughter-in-law perceived this coolness on the part of the

mother-in-law as rejection or criticism, which began the assimilation process on a negative note.

Although most of the participants assessed their relationship as good to excellent, they nevertheless thought of each other as *associates* rather than parent-child, friends, or extended family. Seventy percent of the pairs in Pfeifer's study were able to meet with each other more than ten times before the marriage so that some relationship was established, but the number of meetings did not predict any level of closeness in the relationship because both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law had a sensation of needing to be on their best behavior. Mothers-in-law tended to underestimate or simply not perceive the differences between their families and the daughters-in-law's families, probably because only the daughters-in-law actually experienced both families. Nevertheless, both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law felt that they shared similar life philosophies, even if they did not characterize their relationship as particularly close.

Pfeifer found that both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law preferred to deal with the conflicts in their relationships indirectly by discussing them with their son/husband and allowing him to resolve or mediate the conflict. Although mothers-in-law felt that they restrained themselves from criticizing their daughters-in-law, the daughters-in-law nevertheless felt criticized in subtle ways, as Fischer (1983) discovered. Thus Pfeifer's study illustrated how misunderstandings and misperceptions can occur in relationships between in-laws.

Pfeifer also found that there were several vehicles for socialization into mother-in-law/daughter-in-law roles. The principal vehicle was through direct experience with in-laws. Mothers-in-law drew on their observation skills and their role models from their



own mothers-in-law. Daughters-in-law, however, were more likely to be influenced by stereotypes and in-law jokes, as well as by their friends' experiences and opinions.

Mothers-in-law, however, interpreted these stereotypes and jokes as messages that their role was not valued in American society. Similar to Duvall's (1954) advice, the majority of both groups felt non-interference was the best tactic to improving relationships among in-laws. Thus, as Pfeifer pointed out, the role set aside for American mothers-in-law is a non-role of non-interference and in some respects being an outsider to her son's family.

*Limary: Narratives and power issues between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.* In her unpublished communication dissertation Limary (2002) used the conceptual lenses of identity and narratives to explore communication in the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Limary defined identity as a community-based practice grounded in the interplay between similarities and differences. Narratives are stories that teach individuals how the world works, one's place in the world, how to act in the world, and how to evaluate what is going on in the world. Limary was specifically interested in how mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships develop, how identities manifested themselves in these relationships, and the benefits and challenges of these relationships.

From her interviews with daughters-in-law of different ages, three basic stories of relational evolution emerged: (a) My mother-in-law is intrusive: The daughter-in-law feels that the mother-in-law is controlling and violates family boundaries by showing or voicing disapproval or criticism. (b) My mother-in-law is a stranger to me: There is no common background between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. (c) I feel like a stranger: The daughter-in-law does not feel part of the family. Similarly, mothers-in-law

narrated three basic stories about their relationship with their daughters-in-law: (a) My loved ones are not taken care of: (this was often expressed when daughters-in-law had divorced). (b) My daughter-in-law is different from me. (c) I am cut out of the family. Thus, both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law perceived differences and estrangement between them and had developed strategies to cope with these differences with varying outcomes.

Although Limary pinpointed exactly what the conflictual issues may be between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, it is difficult to explain why Limary uncovered so much negativity in the narratives of both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Other researchers have shown the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship to be the most problematic of in-law relationships (Cotterill, 1989; Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Pfeifer, 1989), but nevertheless, they reported generally positive relationships. Limary's study is unmatched in focusing principally on the negative tensions of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship.

Echoing what Fischer (1983) and Cotterill (1989) hinted at, Limary (2002) proposed that the daughter-in-law actually holds the power in the relationship because she mediates the relationship between the mother-in-law and her son, as well as between the mother-in-law and her grandchildren. The daughter-in-law has the power to exclude the mother-in-law. Nevertheless, the daughter-in-law often is unaware of her power and in fact feels powerless because of her perception of the mother-in-law as meddling and influential. Because she does not recognize her own power, the daughter-in-law feels powerless in contrast to the mother-in-law.

*Summary.* These unpublished dissertations have more deeply explored issues between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, unveiling some of the subtleties of assimilation processes and power struggles in those relationships. The mother-in-law has been proposed as the principal agent of socialization of the daughter-in-law, but misunderstandings often arise early in the relationship because the mother-in-law does not truly understand the differences between them. In addition, the initial meetings are characterized by formality and coolness on the part of the mother-in-law, and thus can get the relationship off to a tepid start. The daughter-in-law has more power in the relationship than she recognizes and thus does not take an active role in her own assimilation into the family.

These comprehensive works, then, have underscored the continuing salience of in-law relationships and the need for further study. With the exception of Nydegger (1986), they have focused on the mother-in-law as the most problematic of in-law relationships. However, they all agree that the modern Western in-law relationship is undefined at best, vilified at worst. As reported in these studies, much of the conflict experienced among in-laws can be traced to differences in family traditions and expectations. Avoidance and non-interference seem to be the preferred method of dealing with conflicts, and the relationships do seem to improve over time.

As interesting as these insights are, however, these studies exclude the roles of other family members from the assimilation process and particularly ignore how other family members and the family as a group are impacted by the entry of the newcomer. What is missing from these works is an exploration of how the whole family adjusts to the addition of an in-law, and what specific communication behaviors are used to attempt

to assimilate new in-laws. In addition, most studies of relationships among in-laws have focused on the problems encountered by the entry of the newcomer, rather than positive outcomes. By studying these relationships from a more neutral perspective of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) with some additional insights from a dialectical tension perspective, we could achieve a greater understanding of the dynamics of how the adult family changes in response to the introduction of new in-laws.

### Theoretical Foundations

#### *Structuration Theory*

Structuration has been suggested as a theory that could illuminate family interactions (Barker et al., 2000; Baxter & Clark, 1996). Structuration theory proposes that the production and reproduction of social systems lies in the day-to-day routines and interactions of agents as they use rules and resources to reproduce the structures that make these routines possible (Giddens, 1984). As Giddens originally redefined the terms, “system” refers to an observable pattern of relations within a group, while “structure” refers to the rules and resources used to maintain the group (Poole, 1999). The basic assumption of structuration theory is the duality of structure: that human beings act within the confines and guidelines of their social structures, and their actions then reproduce those social structures. In other words, social structures are both the medium (starting conditions) and the outcome (result) of social interactions.

Giddens postulated that the structure of society and group life does not exist except as “memory traces” within the individual. That is, the human being remembers what has routinely been done—and this memory is the only form in which societal structures exist. Because the memories of these routine practices make day-to-day life

and interactions predictable, human beings feel a sense of “ontological security”—a feeling of comfort and safety in a world that makes sense to them (Cassell, 1993; Giddens, 1984).

Although he is a sociologist, Giddens emphasized the importance of communication because it is through communicative acts that people produce and reproduce society (Banks & Riley, 1993; Cassell, 1993). Poole and others have used structuration theory to understand groups and how climate and norms are created and changed (Bastien, McPhee, & Bolton, 1995; Kirby & Krone, 1992; Poole, Desanctis, Kirsch, & Jackson, 1995). Although several communication scholars have called for using structuration theory to explore families as groups (Barker et al., 2000; Keyton, 1999; Poole, 1999; Socha, 1999), only recently have scholars begun to do so (Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2004). Thus although scholars have recognized the applicability of structuration theory to families, the theory remains largely unused in this context.

But people do not simply reproduce the same social structures mindlessly. Structuration theory recognizes the agency of the individual, that people can choose to act in different ways within the constraints of their circumstances. Individuals are able to make choices and act within their social lives because they possess three kinds of knowledge: (a) practical knowledge learned from the experience of everyday routines and norms, (b) rationalized knowledge acquired when they monitor their own behavior and explain it to others, and (c) knowledge of the motivation of action, which is usually an unconscious response to the unacknowledged conditions within which one must act (Banks & Riley, 1993; Giddens, 1984). To differentiate these three types of knowledge, I

will use an example: Part of my daily routine is that I take a shower. I do it routinely and don't think about it, and most people of my acquaintance would not question my routine because they do the same thing (practical knowledge: people should take showers daily). However, if a friend from a different culture asked me why I shower every day, I would rationalize it to her by saying that I like to feel fresh and clean, and it helps me get to sleep every night (rationalized knowledge in an effort to explain it to others). But if I thought about it more deeply, I would recognize that for me, showering every day is a badge of belonging to middle class American society, a way of demonstrating that I am a civilized person who is aware that looks and cleanliness are important cultural values in my society (knowledge of the motivation of action, my unconscious response to the class conditions in which I act).

According to structuration theory, most of daily life is routine and not motivated, but human agents can and do monitor their behavior and adjust their routines when they perceive that their routines are not adequate in new circumstances (Banks & Riley, 1993). In the example above, if I found myself in a situation where daily showering is not possible, I could adjust my routine to still feel fresh and clean by some other means, and thereby restore my sense of ontological security. If my cultural values changed so that I was motivated to value saving water over looking "mainstream," I also might adjust my routine so that I felt right with the world by saving water.

In primitive societies, an individual's needs were met through localized systems of routines such as kinship networks, but as society has advanced, it has replaced the smaller localized systems with expert or abstract systems. For example, education, government, and industrial systems have largely replaced many of the responsibilities

that once belonged to the family and kinship systems (Giddens, 1984). Nevertheless, society has not pre-empted the need for the ontological security that comes from forming trusting relationships that “remain essential for the integrity of the self” (Cassell, 1993, p. 31). People still seek out those trusting relationships in their families, which nevertheless change as the members age and as new members are added. Structuration theory has the potential of helping researchers understand how modern individuals act as agents of change in their daily lives as they seek to reproduce their family routines and structure to provide ontological security in ways that meet their changing needs. Structuration theory can also illuminate how tension and conflict may erupt when the routines and structure of a family are disrupted through the addition of new in-laws.

People navigate their daily lives by using their routine knowledge derived from their experience with norms (Banks & Riley, 1993). Looking at the family as a group, we see that the norms and routines in a person’s family-of-origin have developed over the course of children growing up and parents adjusting to the demands of family living. These routines crystallize as the family identity, the way a particular extended family operates and does things. In seeking ontological security, individuals enact certain routines when in the presence of certain others (Cassell, 1993), which in part explains why people tend to revert to the routine child-parent relationship when visiting or interacting with their family-of-origin. The routine of family life is re-enacted in family settings even though the actors themselves have matured and evolved. However, when the group acquires new members through marriage, the routines may be disrupted, pitching the group into ontological insecurity. They don’t feel right with the world because the routines of their family-of-origin have changed. In addition, the new

members have difficulty identifying and assuming their roles in the family that is different from their own family-of-origin. Thus the introduction of in-laws into the family can be expected to produce tensions, changes, and adjustments for all family members as they attempt to create a new family-of-origin out of the routines of the old one.

Specifically, when a child marries, three things happen that impact the family-of-origin: First the adult child enters another family-of-origin (the spouse's) and gains intimate insight into how a different family operates. Within that new family, the adult child may assume new roles and accept new routines that were not experienced in his/her own family-of-origin. This new family experience gives the adult child a different perspective on his/her own family-of-origin and how it might be improved or influenced, and may lead to monitoring and rationalizing one's own family behavior, and even to the recognition of the motivation and unacknowledged circumstances behind family routines. Second, at the same time, the adult child brings a new member into his/her own family-of-origin, with the expectation that this spouse will be assimilated and treated as one of the family and that the family will make some accommodations for the new member. The adult child also expects the spouse to enter the family with acceptance and willingness to make accommodation. Third, the members of the family may be reluctant to change their routines to welcome the newcomer; they may feel that their ontological security is threatened when their routines change. In adjusting their routines to welcome the newcomer, the members may come to recognize unacknowledged circumstances that motivate their families' behavior. Thus families often experience tension and change when children marry. The family may evolve new routines or reinforce the old ones, or



they may perhaps come to a clearer understanding of who they are as a family and why they do things the way they do.

The term *routine* specifically refers to activities or procedures that are performed in a customary, sometimes mechanical way. Routines are invoked to deal with events that recur in cycles. Some routines may be used for everyday circumstances, while others may be used only on specific occasions. In this study, I have used the term *routine* to describe these regular, habitual procedures. In some cases, fine distinctions could be drawn between *tradition* and *routine*—for example, the activities surrounding holidays or special events might be termed *tradition* rather than *routine*. However, since these so-called *special* activities are enacted in the same habitual way, for the purposes of this study, I considered them *routines*.

### *Relational Dialectics*

In addition to structuration theory, a dialectical tension perspective may help to understand how people specifically rationalize their behaviors and make the choice to change or remain the same in the process of assimilating newcomers. Dialectical tensions present opposing or contradictory forces experienced by people in interpersonal relationships, such as the simultaneous need for both independence and interdependence, for both open sharing and privacy, for both change and stability (Baxter, 1990). From a dialectical perspective, healthy relationships do not ever reach stasis; their opposing forces are always fluctuating to some extent as the relational partners experience change and growth both internally and externally (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). People use different communication strategies to deal with these fluctuations and to achieve flexible attitudes toward them (Baxter, 1994; Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002; Wood,

Dendy, Dordek, Germany, & Varallo, 1995). Thus relational dialectics can add insights into the process that people go through as they [re]produce the structures and routines of their family lives.

A number of common dialectical tensions have been identified. Baxter originally conceived of these tensions as occurring along specific dimensions of a relationship, such as autonomy-closeness, openness-closedness, and predictability-novelty (Baxter, 1990). Many researchers have attempted to explore specific binary oppositions such as distance and closeness (Hess, 2000) and openness and closedness (Wood et al., 1995). In addition, some dialectical theorists (Baxter 1993; Baxter & Montgomery 1996) have suggested that the relational dyad also has a relationship to a larger group, and that these interrelationships are also the site and source of dialectical tensions. Specifically, Baxter (1993) proposed a typology of what she termed *external* contradictions, those that occur between the dyad and the social network. This typology is related to the internal contradiction typology: *Inclusion/seclusion* concerns the tension over how much involvement the dyad needs or desires with others, as well as how much involvement others need or desire with the couple. *Conventionality/uniqueness* concerns the tension of the dyad over fulfilling and perpetuating conventional roles for the couple, while at the same time expressing their uniqueness as a couple. *Revelation/concealment* focuses on how much information about their private lives that the couple reveals to others. Baxter (1993) noted that these external dialectics might often co-occur with internal dialectics in a myriad of different combinations. For example, couples that exercise a high degree of openness with each other might maintain a high level of concealment about their relationship with others. Baxter and Erbert (1999) and Erbert (2000) later included these

external tensions in their studies of dialectical contradictions in romantic and marital relationships and found that the inclusion/seclusion contradiction was salient to both males and females particularly with negotiating time to spend with family and friends during the holiday celebrations. These researchers did not, however, focus specifically on how the external dialectics operate between the couple and their families-of-origin.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) themselves provided a rationale for tying relational dialectics with structuration theory, particularly when considering the relationships of couples to culture:

We must attend to the communicative interface between couples and cultures, an interface that is knowable through the *routines* of everyday social life, and we must attend to the contradictions in those *routines*. (p. 162) [emphasis added]

Broadening the concept of dialectical tensions, Baxter and other researchers have reconceptualized dialectics as a “knot of contradictions”—overlapping centripetal or centrifugal forces that are inter-related rather than existing as simple binary oppositions (Baxter, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1998; Brown, Werner, & Altman, 1998). Brown et al. (1998) particularly emphasized that these contradictions may exist in individuals, dyads, groups, and society as whole, and that these different contexts each impact particular relationships in a variety of ways. Conville (1998) advanced the idea that relationships are unique and therefore have what he called “indigenous tensions” that are specific to the relationship and not experienced in other relationships. In addition, some communication researchers have begun to apply relational dialectics to small groups and have found both the basic tensions, as well as indigenous tensions (Benoit et al., 2003; Kramer, 2004, Prentice & Kramer, 2004). In the present study, I expected to find dialectical tensions, some that are similar to those in other relationships and other that are

indigenous to in-law relationships. The external contradictions proposed by Baxter (1993) might be particularly salient in this study because I approached the in-law relationship from a small group perspective, and thus the tensions between the dyad and family-of-origin might emerge as the most prominent tensions discussed.

Since relationships are maintained through individuals learning to balance the dialectical tensions they experience, researchers have moved beyond simply identifying dialectical tensions to exploring how people manage them. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) proposed a list of these management strategies from the findings of various researchers. Although they did not consider their list exhaustive, Baxter and Montgomery identified six functional strategies and two dysfunctional strategies. In spiraling inversion, the dominance of one pole may change, either with time or history of the relationship; similarly in segmentation, the dominance of a particular pole changes with the activity of the moment. Some people strive for a midway point between the poles by favoring neither one. Integration—the simultaneous recognition of both poles—is sometimes reached through rituals or ambiguous language. In recalibration, people can temporarily reframe or recalibrate the tensions so that they do not seem oppositional. A final functional strategy is reaffirmation, in which people accept the reality of the tensions and celebrate them. The dysfunctional strategies involve either denying their existence (denial) or tolerating them as inevitable unpleasantness (disorientation). Another strategy identified by Kramer (2004) was venting to other people, which does not resolve the problem, but provides an outlet for releasing tension.

As families welcome new members through marriage, they experience tensions between the security of re-enacting their old routines and the upheaval of learning and

creating new routines for their family. At the same time, they may recognize that all the members have grown and thus the old routines may no longer meet their needs. In addition, the new family members may feel tensions between loyalty to the traditions of their own family-of-origin and loyalty to their spouse and new family. At the same time, other tensions may operate such as the need of the newlywed couple to both receive support from their families and yet be autonomous, counterbalanced by the desire of the parents to both let go of their children and yet still be close to them as adults. Examining these conflicts from the perspective of dialectical tension may add a richer understanding to how people make the choice to change their routines or remain the same. Thus, relational dialectics can add another dimension to structuration theory by more minutely examining how people specifically monitor and rationalize their communication routines in an effort to manage the dialectical tensions experienced in relationships with their in-laws.

### Dynamics of In-Law Relationships

Researchers have suggested that in-law relationships are fraught with difficult dynamics simply because of the nature of the relationships. First of all, they are nonvoluntary relationships that are entered into because one of the family members has chosen a spouse, therefore requiring a process of assimilation into the family. Second, each of the family members may have different expectations for in-law relationships, both positive and negative, which affect their willingness to adjust their routines. Further, couples experience the pull of the dialectical tensions of allegiance and emotional connection to both of their families and to their spouses, as well as the need for autonomy and distance. This section examines the literature about the potential

problematic dynamics of in-law relationships and how they affect the assimilation process, leading to my research questions.

### *The Assimilation of In-Laws*

In the past and in other cultures through the practice of arranged marriages, engaged couples seriously considered the repercussions of kinship ties. However, modern American couples may consider in-law relationships only as an afterthought, thereby creating nonvoluntary relationships (Berg-Cross & Jackson, 1986; Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). A couple decides to marry, and this intensely personal decision brings with it a whole new set of complex relationships. Newlyweds may think of marriage as starting fresh, but in fact, they are both entering families that have already established rituals, values, and visions of themselves (Berg-Cross & Jackson, 1986). These new allegiances require renegotiating emotional allegiances with one's own family-of-origin (Lopata, 1999).

The key process in negotiating in-law relationships is admitting strangers into the family and accepting and tolerating their differences (Limary, 2002; Meyerstein, 1996). Pfeifer (1989) suggested that the modern American family should be viewed as a small group that extends by allowing individual members to select new members. However, it is often difficult for newcomers to identify and assume roles in the family because there is no specific ritual of socialization into a family, other than the marriage ceremony itself (Pfeifer, 1989). The new in-laws are forced into relationships that have no clear-cut roles or expectations (Pfeifer, 1989). Complicating the process is that the married children want to be seen by their parents and parents-in-law as adults—a process that may not have been completed before the marriage (Duvall, 1954; Horsley, 1997). Thus the

routines of the family may be perplexing to the newcomer, and at the same time, the adult children themselves may seek changes in their families to reflect their adult status. A variety of specific issues complicate the assimilation process.

*Issues of address.* One problem that arises with the introduction of these new family members without definite roles is the problem of how to address the parents-in-law. Two studies have reported that four basic forms of address are used for parents-in-law: their first names, their Mr./Mrs. titles, “Mom and Dad,” and no names (Jorgenson, 1994; Limary, 2002). The choice of no name was made when children-in-law avoided using a name because they all seemed inappropriate: “Mom and Dad” was reserved for their own parents, first names seemed too personal and rather disrespectful, while Mr./Mrs. seemed too formal. Therefore, the choice was often no name until grandchildren were born and the in-laws could be addressed as grandparents. Jorgenson (1994) suggested that these forms of address reflect how in-law relationships are socially constructed—that is, that in-laws can be strangers or formal acquaintances (Mr./Mrs.), friends or casual acquaintances (first names), parents (Mom and Dad), or undefined (no name). These choices reflect status differences, loyalty issues, and family solidarity—all routines that must be renegotiated as the group accepts new members.

*The initial meeting.* Daughters-in-law are especially sensitive about their assimilation into their husband’s families, desiring approval and acceptance. Cotterill (1989) found that a daughter-in-law approached the initial meeting of her future in-laws with the recognition that a good impression was essential because she may be joining this family. Young women in Pfeifer’s (1989) study viewed the initial meeting as kind of an application process, an opportunity for the family to look over the proposed new member.

In contrast, mothers-in-law approached the first meeting more noncommittally, postponing emotional involvement with the young woman until the son had more formally announced his intentions (Cotterill, 1989). This difference in attitude toward the initial meeting may at the outset create tension in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship because the younger woman may sense a kind of aloofness and distance in her boyfriend's mother and interpret it as a routine of non-acceptance—“No one is good enough for her son”—in this early stage of socialization. The mother, on the other hand, withholds her complete welcoming into the family because she does not want to invest too much in a relationship that is as yet undeclared (Cotterill, 1989). In addition, she does not want to establish a routine of treating the girlfriend like a family member, which may pressure her son to marry (Cotterill, 1989). Thus what the younger woman perceives as “Your mother doesn't like me” may actually be the mother's desire to let her son make his own choice—a misunderstanding that starts off the assimilation process on a conflictual note and fulfills the expectation that in-law relationships will be problematic. In some families, however, this initial aloofness is real because families oppose the match.

*Opposition to the marriage.* When families oppose the marriage, they may squander the early assimilation stages by attempting to break up the couple. In an effort to prevent marital problems that come from perceived differences between the couple, parents may attempt to break up the courting pair or express displeasure at the planned marriage (Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993; Surra, 1990; Surra, Batchelder, & Hughes, 1995). Although possibly done with good intentions of enhancing the success of their child's marriage, parents who attempt to interfere with the marriage decision may create



tensions between them, their child, and their son- or daughter-in-law, leading to problems in the in-law relationship. Thus at a time when the family should be assimilating the new member into the group, they are actively trying to bar the member from entry. The new member thus may perceive the family routine as one of rejection and criticism—even when feelings have later changed to acceptance (Cotterill, 1989; Limary, 2002; Pfeifer, 1989).

The opposition to a potential marriage may be founded on the perception that the future son- or daughter-in-law is just too different from the family and may therefore not produce an enduring marriage. Research into the differences in communication practices among couples and families has suggested that these differences do produce tension and instability in marriages. For example, Fitzpatrick (1988) has proposed that couples usually fall into three types—Traditional, Separates, and Independents—based on perceptions of closeness, interaction and roles for spouses. One group is not more successful than another, but Fitzpatrick suggests that mixed-type marriages are usually less satisfying (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Similarly, Gottman proposed three couple types based on conflict styles—Volatile, Accommodating, and Avoiding—and reported that mixed types marriages are usually less satisfying (Gottman, 1994, May/June). Similarly, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (1997) have suggested that families can be typed by their conversation and conformity orientation, in terms of how focused the family is on encouraging open expression of individual ideas. Parents may foresee that their child's romantic partner will not fit in with their own established family routine, one that the parents think is worthy of being replicated in the new marriage of their children. Thus they oppose the marriage and create a hostile environment instead of assimilating the new

member. However, even if they continue to oppose the marriage, they soften their attitudes when grandchildren are born.

*Birth of grandchildren.* Although in-laws may limit contact with a newlywed couple so that they can establish autonomy, another step in the assimilation process occurs when the first grandchild is born, which may lead to additional relational stress. As McGoldrick (1989) points out, the transition to parenthood may be the biggest transition of marriage for the newlyweds as well as for the new grandparents. Both sets of parents desire contact with their grandchild, and usually contact between them and their children increases after the birth of the first child. In addition, the birth of a child may mark the real passage of the married child into adulthood, and thus be accompanied by the need for recognition that the adult children are autonomous adults. Fischer (1983) found that although bearing a child usually increased mother-daughter contact, it did not enhance the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship; in fact having children seemed to increase perceived distance and conflict with the mother-in-law. Although both mothers and mothers-in-law assisted with the grandchild, the wife felt more ambivalent about the mother-in-law's help because it seemed like intrusion and control, as if the mother-in-law were attempting to force her childrearing routines on her daughter-in-law.

*Other family members.* Another factor in the assimilation of in-laws is that relationships with family members other than the mother-in-law may also be problematic. Duvall (1954) reported that after the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law was often considered the most difficult in-law, characterized as meddling, jealous, and gossipy. Sometimes sibling rivalry still operates and married siblings struggle with each other for recognition by their parents. A wife may sometimes feel accepted by the mother-in-law,

but rejected by the sister-in-law who views her as a rival for family position (Duvall, 1954). Few studies have examined these other in-law relationships, focusing instead on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. Thus how other family members contribute to and are affected by the assimilation of new family members remains unexplored.

*Expectations and Stereotypes that Influence Norm Negotiation*

A second issue that makes the in-law relationship problematic is that sometimes families have unrealistic expectations of their in-laws or expectations that are influenced by cultural stereotypes. These expectations influence how family members perceive and negotiate the norms of family living. For example, newlyweds from dysfunctional families may look to their in-laws as a “second-chance family”—i.e., another chance to achieve a real family that was always beyond their reach as children (Berg-Cross & Jackson, 1986; Horsley, 1997; Silverstein, 1990). Specifically, a new wife may hope to achieve a relationship with her father-in-law that is closer than she was ever able to achieve with her own father. But the father-in-law and other family members may perceive this closeness as inappropriate. When the father-in-law does not want to be close to his son’s wife, the daughter-in-law may experience disappointment and feel rejected, and she may project those feelings onto her mother-in-law too (Berg-Cross & Jackson, 1986).

*Expectation of closeness and norm continuity.* Because woman-to-woman closeness is an expected norm in families and in society in general, the mother-in-law may seek closeness with her new daughter-in-law. However, the daughter who is close to her own mother may reject the mother-in-law’s overtures because she feels a close

relationship with the mother-in-law would represent disloyalty to her own mother (Henwood, 1993). As a result, the mother-in-law's expectation of closeness is disappointed, and she finds that her ideal of the adult family has been disrupted by her son's new wife. On the other hand, parents-in-law may view the marriage of their child as a way to complete their family, and may be disappointed when their son- or daughter-in-law prefers his/her biological parents (Berg-Cross & Jackson, 1986; Silverstein, 1990). As Nydegger (1986) pointed out, the father-in-law may particularly have high expectations for his son-in-law because the father still feels a need to insure the continued protection of his daughter. Similarly, families that run family businesses may view new in-laws as needed employees who can fill important positions in the family business and insure its continuity (Kaslow & Kaslow, 1992)—and are then disappointed when the in-law has no interest in the business. In these situations, the in-laws change the families they enter by renegotiating long-standing norms within the family, which may lead to tensions in the relationships. Nevertheless, some families are able to approach negotiate these changes smoothly.

*Choosing among family rituals.* The couple often experience tensions concerning which rituals and routines to adopt or adapt from their families-of-origin, feeling somehow that they are betraying their own family traditions or drawing away from them if they prefer the family traditions of their in-laws (Horsley, 1996, 1997; Silverstein, 1990). Since women tend to be the transmitters of family culture, the tradition from the wife's family-of-origin may become the new family tradition, leaving the mother-in-law feeling estranged or even betrayed (Christensen & Johnson, 1971; Horsley, 1996, 1997). On the other hand, sometimes the adult child wants to address specific family issues and

change a family routine, but characterizes the need for change as an accommodation for the spouse (Meyerstein, 1996). For example, a son may be tired of the way the family celebrates Christmas with so much emphasis on gifts. In order to move his family toward change, he may choose to attend Christmas festivities later in the day when the gift exchange is over, but blame his absence on his wife's reluctance to participate. This scapegoating of the spouse may influence the family to have negative feelings toward the wife, when actually it is their own family member who wants the change. These negative feelings fulfill the expectation of tensions among in-laws.

*Expectations of problematic in-laws.* Our larger culture also complicates the negotiation of norms because mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships have traditionally been expected to be problematic. In the past, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships were fraught with conflict because the nuclear family focused principally on maintaining and continuing the male line (Lopata, 1999). Therefore, the traditions and routines of the daughter-in-law's family of origin were ignored, creating an unequal status for the daughter-in-law. Although this tradition has changed for the most part in American families, the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dyad remains problematic, in part because of the negative stereotypes of mothers-in-law in the media, which Pfeiffer (1989) suggested do influence young wives' expectations of their mothers-in-law. Connidis and McMullin (2002) described how contradictions between norms and expectations of both society and family create social ambivalence and how tensions result as individuals struggle to find a comfortable balance. This social ambivalence may come into play in in-law relationships because of the stereotypes and expectations for in-law interference created by society. Thus difficult in-law relationships become the expected norm.

*Expectations of stereotypical roles.* Other cultural factors that can influence norm negotiation in in-law relationships are the traditional stereotypes and expectations of what wives and husbands should do. The new wife is easily compared to the mother-in-law in terms of how she fulfills traditional wife roles, such as cooking, housekeeping, etc. (Christensen & Johnson, 1971), even if the husband does not expect his wife to enact those traditional roles. For example, an offer by a mother-in-law to help with housework might be perceived by the daughter-in-law as disguised criticism (Fischer, 1983). Similarly, fathers-in-law expect their sons-in-law to enact the traditional husband role by taking care of their wives (Nydegger, 1986). Parents exert subtle pressures on their married children to live up to traditional stereotypes. For example, Goetting (1990) found that parents give financial and service support in the early days of their child's marriage, but the parents of the wife tend to give indirect financial aid in the form of gifts, so as not to threaten the son-in-law as a provider. The parents of the husband are more likely to give direct financial aid to strengthen the son's role as a provider. Sometimes, however, the problem is that there is misunderstanding between the generations regarding these expectations (Fingerman, 2001). The mother-in-law may appreciate the non-traditional roles assumed by her daughter-in-law, while the daughter-in-law is totally unaware of her mother-in-law's feelings (Pfeiffer, 1989). Researchers have found that often daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law have entirely different perceptions of their relationships and interactions because they never specifically talk about them (Cotterill, 1989; Duvall, 1954; Pfeiffer, 1989), which may make role and norm negotiation problematic.

*Summary.* As evidenced by these studies, relationships with in-laws involve assimilating a newcomer into one's family and adjusting the family routines, norms, and expectations. Because of the differences between families, individuals, and their routines, as well as the nonvoluntary nature of in-law relationships, these adjustments can prove to be problematic. As we have seen, the differing expectations and stereotypes that in-laws bring to the new family relationship may influence how people communicate about norms and family routines. Because these expectations and stereotypes may not be explicitly addressed in their family interactions, they do not even realize what makes their relationships problematic.

Although researchers have identified specific dyadic relationships that seem to be the most problematic, namely the mother-in-/daughter-in-law relationship, they have not studied how the introduction of newcomers impacts the whole family and its routines. Also, researchers have not examined specific communication strategies used by individuals and families to assimilate and socialize new members. Since assimilation is a two-way process, we should also study how the new members perceive and react to these assimilation strategies and use strategies of their own to adjust to their spouse's family. In addition, the underlying assumption of many studies of in-law relationships is that these relationships are problematic, and that the changes they bring to families will be perceived as negative; ignoring the fact that change wrought by newcomers although initially threatening, may be welcomed and transforming to the family. I suggest a more neutral approach to the study of these relationships, focusing on the process of assimilation and negotiation of norms and routines within the family. Interest in these issues leads me to my first research questions:

RQ1: How does a family communicate its norms and routines to new in-laws?

RQ2: What specific communication routines may need to be renegotiated or adjusted among families and newcomers?

RQ3: How does the newcomer perceive and respond to these norms and routines?

RQ4: How do the communication routines change in response to this newcomer? And what are the repercussions of those changes?

### *Dialectical Tensions in Relationships Among In-Laws*

Another factor that problematizes in-law relationships is that family members may experience dialectical or other tensions in trying to meet the needs of all the members of the family. These tensions threaten the ontological security that people feel in their families. Relationship tensions may manifest around specific issues between the couple and their families-of-origin, such as inclusion/seclusion, conventionality/uniqueness, and revelation/concealment (Baxter, 1993) or may reflect tensions that are indigenous to the specific family (Conville, 1998). Family researchers have principally identified tensions involving loyalty, closeness, and autonomy. These tensions can create a knot of contradictions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998; Brown, Werner, & Altman, 1998) that interact to problematize the relationships among in-laws.

*Family loyalties.* Many spouses experience specific tensions in having to balance loyalty between their families-of-origin and their in-law families (Horsley, 1996, 1997; Meyerstein, 1996). Kinkeeping is usually a female role in the family, and thus the daughter-in-law may prefer to maintain kin with her own family rather than her husband's family (Fischer, 1983; Rosenthal, 1985). Related to this loyalty conflict is the



tension that results from husbands and wives sometimes differing in their needs to remain emotionally attached to their parents, in part because of the particular routines/norms of their families and of society. For example, the wife may prefer to stay closer to her mother because that is the norm in her family, but her husband may feel the need to withdraw from his mother because that is the cultural norm for men in our society. Therefore, the husband may expect his wife to maintain the family relationship with his mother (Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). This expectation may be difficult for the new wife to fulfill because drawing closer to her mother-in-law also invites more influence from the mother-in-law in the marriage, thereby reducing the autonomy of the couple. These tensions are dialectical in that all the poles are desirable to some degree, in some contexts. The couple desires autonomy but also connectedness with their families-of-origin. The new wife wishes to remain close to her mother, but also to become closer to her mother-in-law, if only to please to her husband—and finds that being closer to one takes time from the other. The husband wants to remain close to his family, but may expect his wife to maintain that relationship because of social pressures for him to be independent of his family. Thus all these tensions can interact to problematize the in-law relationship.

Although non-interference, even avoidance, has been suggested as the usual way to maintain positive in-law relationships (Duvall, 1954; Nydegger, 1989), greater contact between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law seems to be beneficial. In a study of 75 African-American middle-class women, Jackson and Berg-Cross (1988) found that women who frequently talked to their mothers-in-law on the phone had better relationships with them than those who did not. However, this pattern may simply reflect

the contact patterns between in-laws who like each other, rather than a technique for improving them. However, a different study has suggested that when wives fulfill the kinkeeping routine by maintaining contact with their mothers-in-law, their husbands report greater love for their wives (Burger & Milardo, 1995). Thus a new wife may face a number of conflicting tensions in her relationships with her mother-in-law. She may want to be close to her husband's mother and yet feel the need to be loyal to her own mother. She wants to be involved with her husband's family, yet remain autonomous. She wants to please her spouse while also choosing her own relationships; and ultimately she prefers to keep peace with both families. Thus she finds herself having to balance the pull of a variety of different goals, all of which are desirable to some extent—classic dialectical tensions.

Other loyalty issues may surface in the extended family. For example, Silverstein (1990) described various kinds of triangular relationships that form with the married couple and create conflicting loyalties. For example, one spouse and set of parents may form a coalition that makes the other spouse feel like an outsider. Similarly, grandparents may bond with grandchildren in a way that makes the parents feel like the outsiders. Another possibility is that the spouses of siblings-in-law, for example the wives of a set of brothers may form a subgroup in the family and may exert substantial leverage on their shared parents-in-law (Silverstein, 1990). In addition, individuals may feel torn between pleasing their parents and pleasing their spouses (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003).

*Jealousy.* Another tension occurs when the wife and mother-in-law compete for attention of the husband-son. Thus, the mother-in-law may be jealous of the closeness of the daughter-in-law with her son (Christensen & Johnson, 1971; Silverstein, 1990). As

both Cotterill (1989) and Limary (2002) have suggested, the daughter-in-law actually holds the position of power in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship because she is able to mediate the contact between her husband and his mother. The mother-in-law may experience multiple tensions of wanting to remain close to her son and seeking closeness with her daughter-in-law, at the same time recognizing their need for autonomy and distance, but still seeking to maintain her controlling role in the family. The daughter-in-law in response may feel similar tensions. As a result the husband-son, feeling the pull of these tensions between his wife and mother, must find an appropriate way to balance and manage these tensions.

*Summary.* When people get married, loyalty, autonomy, and other issues create dialectical tensions that undermine the ontological security they experience within their families. In order to have positive in-law relationships and family interactions, they must learn to balance and manage these tensions in ways that also create balance for other family members, thus restoring ontological security. These balance points materialize as new routines. Other researchers have reported tensions that manifest because of the presence of in-laws, but have not explicitly explored them as dialectical tensions or how family members manage these tensions to create new family routines. Thus I ask my final research questions:

RQ5: What dialectical tensions emerge as families communicate about and re-create norms and routines with new in-laws?

RQ6: How do family members manage these dialectical tensions?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, employing interviews with people regarding their in-law relationships, followed by thematic analysis and various verification steps. Small group researchers have recommended using qualitative methodologies to break away from studying zero-history laboratory groups and to understand the lived experiences of bona fide groups (Frey, 1994b; Socha, 1999). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach is appropriate in this study because I am studying the lived experiences of bona fide groups in order to understand the essence of the in-law assimilation experience rather than to predict its outcomes. This chapter describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology and how it informs the methods used in this study.

### Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested that phenomenology could be used to analyze social routines and to interpret constructs of communicative experience (p.237). Phenomenology is the study of lived experience, asking “what is experience like?” in an attempt to gain insightful descriptions of persons’ experiences “pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach does not propose to create theory to explain the world, but rather to offer plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is the study of the essence, what make an experience what it is, how the human being constructs and makes sense of the experience.

Hermeneutical phenomenology, as described by van Manen (2002), and as its name suggests, combines phenomenology with a hermeneutical approach.

Phenomenology, as originally proposed by Edmund Husserl, is literally the study of phenomena, that is, how human beings experience things and the meaning that they have in our experience, from a firsthand point of view (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). According to phenomenologists, consciousness does not exist on its own, but is always intentionally directed towards something, which gives that object meaning. Taken together, all these intentionally constructed objects constitute our life world (Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology describes how human beings relate to their lived experiences, and hermeneutics describes how human beings interpret these lived experiences. At the heart of hermeneutic phenomenological research is the desire “to know the world in which we live as human beings” (van Manen, 1990, p. 5).

*Hermeneutic phenomenology*, as described by van Manen (1990), seems at times synonymous with *interpretivism* and *qualitative research*. However, hermeneutic phenomenology is distinctive in that it is a “systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience,” “the attentive practice of thoughtfulness,” and “a search for what it means to be human” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10-13). Hermeneutic phenomenology is especially appropriate for this study because it focuses on the life world and the experiences of the subjects, and seeks to discern the essential meanings in those experiences (Kvale, 1996). At the heart of phenomenological research is the desire to gain insight into the essence of what it means to be human, in a sort of dialectical tension between the universal and the individual. Phenomenology does not solve problems, but asks questions of meaning.

In this study, I did not seek to generalize about how often specific kinds of behaviors occur in in-law relationships. Instead, I wondered about what is the essence of the in-law experience, of how in-laws are assimilated into families' routines and serve to re-create a new family structure from the old structures and routines. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach, as outlined by van Manen (1990), emphasizes turning to the nature of lived experience, investigating experience as we live it, reflecting on essential themes, writing and rewriting (pp. 31-33). Hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate choice for examining this question and therefore guided how I designed my research methods.

### Participants

In an effort to understand the lived of experiences of people as in-laws, I chose my participants from a theoretical construct sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), which identified participants according to the key constructs of the theoretical basis of the study. I recruited participants from my own circle of acquaintances, through snowball sampling. Because I wanted to understand the impact of the assimilation of in-laws on the whole family, I chose my participants from three specific groups that provided different perspectives that represent different roles within the family. My target was to include at least 10 subjects from each group.

### *Selection Criteria*

One overarching criterion for participants is that they be American citizens who did not retain a close cultural identity with their families' countries of origin. The reason for this criterion was to eliminate potentially confounding variables because different cultures have different expectations for relationships among in-laws (Lopata, 1999;

Nydegger, 1989). Although the United States is a culturally diverse country, it was not my purpose in this limited qualitative study to represent all perspectives. When immigrants have lived in this country for three generations, they usually begin to adopt the practices of the larger culture. Thus although I welcomed participants of all races and national origins, I sought those that have become more assimilated into the larger American culture (Glazer, 2001). Therefore, I screened my participants by simply asking them if they were third generation Americans. If their parents or grandparents were born in a different country, they were not included in this study. Therefore, all participants in this study were at least third generation Americans, although they came from various ethnic backgrounds.

Another consideration was that males and females might have different experiences with their in-laws. Previous research as discussed earlier has focused mainly on the relationships between the wife and the husband's mother. To expand the body of knowledge about in-law relationships, I included both males and females in this study, in their roles as parents-in-law, children-in-law, and siblings-in-law. Although an even distribution would have been ideal, 14 of the 42 participants were male, which is one third, evenly distributed across all groups.

*Group one.* This group included only unmarried participants whose sibling had married within the last five years or who was engaged to be married within six months. This group was included in order to gather insights from those family members who were experiencing the influence of an in-law for the first time. These participants, since they themselves were unmarried and the addition of the in-law was recent, were expected to

acutely experience the impact on their family-of-origin routines. They were in the transition when their family of childhood was changing to the family of adulthood.

I drew this sample from current undergraduate students, whom I recruited through students I had taught in previous semesters, through other participants, and through my own acquaintances. Females were easier to recruit, and I was reluctant to turn them down when they volunteered to participate, a pattern which was repeated in the other two groups as well. After specifically recruiting male participants, the final sample of 13 for group one included 9 females and 4 males. All of these participants were Caucasians were in the age group of 18 to 24.

*Group two.* The second group of participants included only married people who had been married within the last five years or engaged people who planned to marry within six months. These participants were asked questions about both their own family-of-origin and their spouse's family-of-origin. The purpose of including this group was to gather insights about how the newcomer feels when entering a family, as well as how they perceive the changes that happen in their own family-of-origin. I was able to enlist five married couples, both partners, by approaching the wives first and then after interviewing them, asking them if their husbands would be willing to participate. I also recruited seven more female participants, two of whom were engaged to be married. In addition, one of the male Group 1 participants was also engaged to be married, and therefore, after his interview as a Group 1 participant, he also addressed the interview questions for Group 2. Thus, I have also included him in Group 2, for a total of 18 participants, 6 male and 12 female. One of the participants in this group was African-American; the rest were Caucasian. Three were in the age group of 18 to 24, only two



were in the age group of 31-40, and the remaining thirteen were in the age group of 25-30.

*Group three.* The third group consisted only of parents of children who had married within the last five years or whose children were engaged to be married within six months. They were asked to reflect on how their family routines had changed and what they had done to assimilate the new in-law. They were not asked about their relationships with other in-laws, such as their own parents-in-law, although sometimes they volunteered this information because it was salient. I drew this sample from people with whom I am acquainted and the greater community, through a snowball sampling technique. I recruited 12 participants in this group, 5 male and 7 female. Two participants were in the age group of 55 or older; the other 10 were in the age group of 41-55. Three married couples participated. With one married couple I was able to interview the husband and wife separately. For the two other married couples, I interviewed both the husband and wife at the same time because of their time limitations. This joint interview had its benefits and its drawbacks. On one hand, sometimes the presence of the spouse seemed to inhibit the other's responses to some degree; however, at other times, the pair also helped each other to remember events more precisely. Although sometimes their joint reconstruction of events resulted in agreement, sometimes it resulted in their disagreeing about what had happened and how they interpreted it. Sometimes, too, one volunteered information that the other did not know. This juxtaposition of different perspectives provided an interesting insight into family dynamics.

To aid the reader in understanding which participants belonged to which group and how they were interrelated, I have included a chart, Figure 1. In total, there were 42 participants, 28 female and 14 male. The median and the mode for the length of time they had known their in-law was 4.8 years, although in the case of some parents-in-law, they had known the child-in-law for his or her entire life. All but three participants had at least a college education or were currently enrolled in college. However, their in-laws often did not have similar educational backgrounds. Seven of the Group 2 (newly married/engaged) participants had parents-in-law who had only a high school education or some college. Four (two pairs) of parents-in-law (Group 3) had a son-in-law who did not have a four-year college degree, and one Group 1 (sibling-in-law) participant had a sister-in-law with only a high school education.

All of the participants were at least third generation American citizens. However, among the in-laws that they discussed, four did not match their spouses in race or ethnicity. Of the four exceptions, one in-law was born in Spain but raised in the United States, one in-law came from a Mexican-American family, another in-law was African-American, and the other exception was the son of a European-American father and an Asian mother, who was raised in the United States. None of these in-laws was a participant in the study but was the in-law that had married a participant's child or sibling. The only in-law relationship in which this mismatch in race or ethnicity was described as an issue in the in-law relationship was that of the African-American married to a European-American.

A final consideration in selecting participants was that many American couples choose to cohabitate before marrying, sometimes for many years which may even include

the birth of children. Therefore, they may interact with their partners' families in ways that are similar to being in-laws without being officially wed or planning to wed.

Including such couples or their in-laws in this study might confound the results.

Although they may report being married less than five years, in fact they may have been together as a couple for much longer. Therefore, I chose to include only those people who were in in-law relationships that encompassed five years or less of married life, less than one year of cohabitation, and no children born in the cohabitation period. I determined this by directly asking them if they or the in-law they were discussing had cohabited for less than a year before marriage and had no children during that time, indicating that a simple yes or no answer was all that was needed, rather than details. Some participants or the in-laws they spoke about had cohabited for less than a year before marriage.

Despite the seemingly clear-cut parameters of the participants outlined above, I found it difficult to separate them in meaningful ways. For example, some couples had had a long courtship, but did not cohabit, and had been married less than five years, but nevertheless, they had been a part of their in-law families for much longer. I chose to include some engaged couples because assimilation is an on-going process that starts before marriage. Additionally, some of the siblings-in-law and parents-in-law reported not only on their married child or siblings, but also on other children or siblings that were engaged. One participant whose older son was engaged also had four stepdaughters-in-law. In other words, I discovered that human relationships are messy and do not necessarily follow clear-cut boundaries. But that is the beauty of phenomenological research. Real lived experience presents endless commutations of family relationships.

## Data Collection

In keeping with the approach, through a series of active interviews, I explored with the participants how they perceive and enact their in-law relationships in their everyday lives. According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), the active interview recognizes that both the interviewer and respondent collaboratively make meaning, that both are participants in the interview. Thus both their contributions should be acknowledged and incorporated into the production and analysis of the interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). This approach contrasts with the conventional approach to interviewing in which the respondent is viewed as a passive vessel of answers that must be tapped through techniques in which the researcher remains neutral. The active interview examines the *whats* and *hows* of experience, that is, the contingencies of everyday life and the methods through which those contingencies accumulate meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 15). In keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the qualitative interview “gives a privileged access to our basic experience of the lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 54).

A variety of other methods might have been useful to explore these research questions, such as participant-observation, diary/diary interview, and focus groups. However, given the logistics of in-law relationships, interviews were the best choice because I was able to contact a wider variety of participants with this method. If I had chosen participant-observation, I would have been limited to a few groups who might allow me to attend their family gatherings. Even so, as an outsider, I would probably not have witnessed nor correctly interpreted family interactions. Also the process of assimilating in-laws may have occurred principally in the past or in private encounters,

and the family may have already reached a stasis. Therefore, I might not have witnessed any specifically assimilating behaviors among family members. Similarly, the diary/diary interview method (Schrodt et al., 2004) would have proven difficult for the same reasons, with the additional issue of infrequency of family gatherings. Participants might not have interacted with their in-laws within the period given for this study; thus they would have had no diary entries. Focus groups might have been useful if they could have been arranged, but family members as a group might be reluctant to participate in discussing their family life with a stranger. I personally prefer the privacy, confidentiality, and the conversation-like quality of the active interview.

Kvale (1996) noted that in an interview we seek to understand how the participants view their lived experiences. Although it is similar to a conversation, the interview is more highly structured because it focuses on a specific pre-planned and previously agreed-upon topic. In the course of an interview, the researcher can clarify ambiguous responses and may even find that the participants change their attitudes and gain new insights as they discuss the topic during the course of the interview (Kvale, 1996). This is similar to what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) described as expanding the *horizons of meaning* with participants, encouraging them to look at the topic from different perspectives. In my study, participants often had not consciously considered how the family norms and routines were communicated to the newcomers, nor how those routines may have been impacted or changed by the addition of new in-laws. Thus, the active interview was a particularly useful tool for gaining phenomenological descriptions of in-law relationships without attempting to taxonomize or abstract them (van Manen, 1990).

## Questions

Using a nondirective but active approach, I worked from an interview schedule (Appendix A) with basic questions for each participant, asking probing questions as needed. The questions were designed to explore how the introduction of in-laws into the family caused people to monitor their behavior, to question their established routines, and to adjust their behavior to restore ontological security within their families. I used several types of questions to explore different facets of their lived experiences: *Grand tour questions* asked the participant to describe an entire process or event from beginning to end (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, “Describe your present relationship with your in-law.” *Example or experience questions* asked the respondent to describe a particular event in more detail (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as, “Describe a recent event when your entire family gathered, including your in-law.” In *posing the ideal*, participants were asked to speculate about what they thought would be the best situation in an effort to uncover their ideological foundation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as, “What were your hopes for an ideal in-law relationship?” I employed the *compare-contrast question* in which I asked the participant to look at the differences and the similarities between two situations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as, “How was this event different from how it would have been before your brother/sister was married?” or “How is your family-of-origin different from your spouse’s family-of-origin?” In addition to these planned questions, I listened carefully and asked my respondents probing questions that further clarified their responses.

### Conducting the Interviews

I interviewed the participants in a location that was convenient and comfortable to them. For two of the participants whom I had known previously and who lived out of state, I did telephone interviews, which I arranged in advance. But I preferred to conduct face-to-face interviews, particularly with participants who were previously unknown to me. The interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on how much they had to say. I met most of the participants in a local coffee shop or the lobby of a public building, a setting that established a casual social atmosphere and an equal power dynamic between the two of us. I met three participants in my office or their office on campus because that was the most convenient meeting spot. I also met five participants in their homes at their invitation.

Each interview was recorded on a high quality cassette recorder that I have used in some of my previous qualitative studies. The tape recorder is disguised as a woman's handbag and has a separate microphone that reduces the noise picked up from the tape recorder itself, producing a high quality tape. I have found that although the participants know the handbag is a tape recorder, they do not see the tape turning, and thus feel more at ease with the recording, and even forget about it. However, sometimes participants talked more after the tape was turned off, and therefore, I took notes after completing each interview to record any additional comments they made, and also to report nonverbal behaviors and other impressions of the interview, as well as preliminary thematic analysis.

After some introductions and light conversation, I began the interview by showing the participants the tape recorder, and then obtaining the oral consent of the participant

from a prepared script which I recited conversationally, covering the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the interview, their voluntary participation, and their choice of withdrawing at any time. In addition, I told them that I would use pseudonyms to label the tapes and to refer to them in my written research, and that their real names would never appear on any research material, thus insuring their anonymity. After they understood and had agreed to participate and be taped, I turned on the tape recorder. I chose to use oral consent rather than written consent because in this way there is no written record of the participants' names.

In my own life I have experienced some of the same relationships about which I interviewed my participants. Therefore, at times in the interview I shared some of my own in-law experiences, in order to build rapport and trust with the participant (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I kept these digressions to a minimum because I wanted to focus on the participants' experiences, and they seemed more interested in talking about themselves than hearing about my experiences.

#### Transcribing the Tapes

I personally transcribed the tapes because listening to these tapes so slowly and repetitively helped me to remember what was communicated in each interview and brought themes to the foreground. When I transcribed, I recorded every word and disfluency uttered by both me and the participant. If I could not precisely hear a word or comment even after repeated attempts to understand it, I indicated my uncertainty by placing brackets around the unintelligible phrase or word. Later, I listened to those occurrences again and found that in most cases I could make sense of them later when I understood the greater context.



The transcriptions were typed single spaced with one-inch margins. When I transcribed my comments such as “Uh-huh” or “Okay,” I simply placed these in brackets and embedded them in the interviewee’s script without beginning a new line. Thus many pages of the transcripts were very dense paragraphs. The shortest interview was 8 pages and the longest was 26. The total number of pages transcribed from the 42 interviews was 534 pages.

In order to maintain confidentiality, I assigned an arbitrary pseudonym to each participant, which is the only way I identified the tape and the transcript. If the participant referred to other people by name, I also replaced those names on the transcript with pseudonyms or simply the relationship described in brackets, e.g., “[her brother-in-law].” I prefer pseudonyms for my participants to generic descriptions or numbers because the names remind of the individual personalities and insights of my participants. This method worked so well for me that I cannot remember the real names of some of my participants, yet I remember them vividly by their pseudonyms!

#### Data Analysis

In qualitative research, analysis of the data is continuous, beginning during the collection stages and finishing only when the final report is written (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As an alert interviewer, I began thematizing the data during the interview itself, by connecting ideas and probing for more details on particular productive themes that were identified while the participant was speaking (Kvale, 1996; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also made notes after each interview, recording my general impression of the interview and how it enlarged my vision of the in-law relationship, similar to what van Manen (1990) terms the *wholistic*

*orsentitious approach* to thematizing. Then I continued thematizing as I transcribed the interview tapes, making notes about possible themes, which I sometimes used to direct my probing questions during subsequent interviews with different participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After each interview was completed, transcribed, and checked for accuracy, I used *Nvivo* software, a qualitative research analysis package, to do what van Manen (1990) terms the *selective or highlighting approach*. I analyzed the interviews by reading the transcription of each interview and tentatively identifying the theme of specific passages and coding them as a particular node. This is similar to open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and its purpose is to keep the process open and flexible and flowing from the data, rather than rigidly formulaic and imposed by the researcher. I created new nodes as needed, generating a total of 68 nodes in all. Many passages were cross-coded as more than one theme.

To continue this process, I returned to the *Nvivo* program and electronically pulled up all the passages coded as a particular node (theme). I sorted through these nodes and recoded some, created some new nodes, and merged some nodes. This process was similar to the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed the themes to emerge from the data, rather than my imposing set themes upon the data. The constant-comparison method requires that the researcher simply group data together that seem to be related. When a new datum is added to a group, the other data in the group are reviewed to ensure that they all still share a common concept that is still unnamed. After all the data have been sorted, the researcher then attempts to identify and label the theme common to each group (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, by using the

*Nvivo* program I assigned arbitrary and generic names to the themes as I coded them and did not review them as a group until later. Sometimes during this kind of coding, I did stop and review all the items in that node, to assure that they belonged together.

After identifying tentative themes, I read through the interviews and the nodes/themes several more times to see if other themes emerged or merged. At this point, having exhausted my expertise with the software program, I began to work on paper, outlining my themes. When the themes seemed to overlap, I collapsed them into one group, or found a different way of sorting them. As I read through the interviews, I also looked for specific quotations that were succinctly emblematic of the themes, to be used as exemplars in my written analysis. Through this rather tedious process, I became intimately familiar with the interviews and began to be able to locate passages directly from the interviews rather than from using the analysis software.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasized that data gathering must be continued until the researcher reaches *theoretical saturation*, which they define as “during analysis, no new properties and dimensions emerge from the data, and the analysis has accounted for much of the possible variability” (p. 158). I ensured theoretical saturation in two ways. First, after I had met my minimum target number of participants for each group, several more individuals came forward who volunteered to participate. I included them in the study and found that their experiences reflected the themes that were emerging from the previous participants. Still later, after I had completed the majority of my thematic analysis, I returned to the field to recruit and interview more male participants; however, I did not find any new themes emerging from this new data. Indeed, the additional participants corroborated the themes that had already emerged in the analysis and

presented different exemplars of those themes; however, they did not introduce any new themes. Thus I achieved theoretical saturation.

### Verification

Unlike data obtained through quantitative methods, phenomenological data is expected to be biased and not generalizable to a larger population. As a qualitative researcher I seek to understand lived experiences, which by their nature are individual and reflect “multiple, changing realities” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 239). Therefore, phenomenological research relies on verifying that the interpretation provides a good fit with the data. A standard of quality in interpretive research is to include verification by at least two other methods to demonstrate *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* (Creswell, 1997). To verify my results, I used three methods: (a) rich, thick description, (b) member checking, and (c) examining my own biases.

#### *Rich, Thick Description*

In my written analysis of the themes that emerge from these interviews, I have provided rich, thick description of my participants and their salient life circumstances. In addition, I have included quotations from the participants that are good exemplars of the themes that I identify and discuss. Although lengthy quotations require a lot of space in the final text, they more clearly represent the reality of the participants’ responses than do truncated pithy quips taken out of context.

The purpose of this rich, thick description is to verify for the reader that I have interpreted the participant’s words accurately, and also to convey a sense of the unique personhood and experiences of my participants. By reading the participant’s own words and a description of the circumstances, the reader can make his/her own assessment of

whether my interpretation is accurate. Also the thick description allows readers to judge when and where my findings may be transferable to other situations that share similar characteristics (Creswell, 1997).

### *Member Checks*

In member checks the researcher shares the data, analyses, and conclusions with the participants and asks for their judgment regarding the authenticity and trustworthiness of the project (Creswell, 1997, p. 203). After completing a rough draft of the analysis section, I contacted four participants, one female from group one, one male and one female (who were not married to each other) from group two, and one female from group three, to ensure that the themes I identified in my results actually captured their experiences. I prepared a 4-page summary of the themes that emerged from the data, a sort of layman's explanation of the findings as might appear in a popular press account of my research. After an initial contact by email asking if they wanted to see the results and would be willing to comment upon them, I emailed this summary to those participating in the member check. I asked them if they felt that the summary accurately reflected their experience as they related it to me in the interview, or reflected what they knew about other people's in-law relationships. I reminded these participants that since there were 42 participants in the study, some of my findings might not specifically reflect their own experience. The four member checks emailed me back indicating that although their own experience did not reflect all the aspects that I discussed in my summary, they felt that my summary was accurate. Sometimes they specified how their experiences were different or gave a testimony about how participating in the study had helped them think about their in-law relationships in a different light. Through this verification procedure

of member checking, participants became more than simply informants, but also directors, critics, and co-creators of the research.

### *Examining My Own Standpoint and Biases*

A research interest often arises out of questions that come from one's personal life, and these experiences may bias a researcher in ways that should be examined at the beginning of the project (Creswell, 1997). I am no exception. As a married person with children, I have grappled with the dynamics of relationships with in-laws from several perspectives. In my first marriage, I entered my spouse's family that still had young minor children, and I was expected to maintain the in-law family's routines for the sake of the younger siblings—routines that were radically different from my own family-of-origin. Later when I remarried, I entered an established mature adult family that nevertheless had its own routines, although not so centered on minor children. Thus I have twice experienced the dual directions of assimilation as these families sought to both welcome and mold me to their routines, while I have struggled to bring my own routines and expectations into these families. In my own family-of-origin, now all adults, we have also gone through two stages because my siblings also have all remarried and have changed the dynamics in our family-of-origin by the addition of their new spouses, so different from their original spouses. Finally, my children have reached marriageable age, and I am beginning to foresee the changes that will occur in my own nuclear family as my children introduce new spouses into our group. Thus I undertook this study with a sense of mission not only as a researcher but also as in-law and future in-law myself, struggling to make sense of my own lived experiences.

In examining my own biases, I realize that I believe that it is the change that in-laws bring to a family that problematizes the relationships. In each in-law relationship I have experienced, my in-laws have been basically decent people with ostensibly similar backgrounds, whom I would ordinarily like and get along with in normal social settings and friendships. Nevertheless, because they entered my family and changed some of our routines, their presence created some tensions. To be fair, however, I see that in some cases, the changes were neutral and in many cases, the changes were overwhelmingly and refreshingly positive. My bias is that I think in-laws have been unfairly scapegoated as responsible for a variety of normal developmental issues in families such as change and growth.

Recognizing my own bias was an important step in employing a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Phenomenologists must “bracket” their pre-conceived biased interpretations of the phenomena under study in order to truly get at the essence of the phenomena as experienced by other people (Kvale, 1996). Having identified my own bias, I kept this in mind as I analyzed my data. I found that my bias was confirmed, and therefore I re-examined my data to insure that I had not simply ignored data that pointed to some other explanation. Thus, by identifying at the start what I thought was true, I could play the devil’s advocate with myself, and attempt to argue for a different explanation rather than the one I preferred. In this way, I was able to stand outside of my own bias because I knew what it was, and thus I could see if the themes truly emerged from the data or whether they simply reflected my initial bias. This re-examining of the data led to me include an additional section on problematic in-law relationships. I found that most of the participants characterized their relationships with their in-laws as good

and that they hoped and expected them to improve. Their experiences could reasonably be attributed to the tension caused by changing family routines and adjusting to different family routines. However, a few participants described in-law relationships that were much more problematic and which pointed to greater differences, open hostility, and possibly dysfunctional behavior in the relationships among in-laws. Thus by examining and re-examining my bias, I was able to see that there are some in-law relationships that simply are problematic.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overall most participants reported generally good or satisfactory relationships at present with their in-laws, with only four characterizing their relationships as problematic or worse. Nevertheless, all of the participants described some tensions created by change in their family communication routines, and almost all of them could readily summon up one thing that they would change in their in-law relationships. Most participants viewed the in-law relationship as something that would evolve over time and circumstance, and expressed their willingness to keep working to improve their relationships.

In their interviews, the participants described how they and their families had adjusted to becoming in-laws, using their everyday routines as both the medium for that adjustment and the outcome of that adjustment. The reason for enacting their routines and for adjusting was to maintain, restore, or finally achieve ontological security in their families. Specifically, seven themes emerged which describe how families used to communicate their norms and routines to new in-laws. Participants identified five specific communication routines that could be the source of discomfort between them and their in-laws. Four themes emerged in how the newcomers perceived and responded to these communicated norms and routines in an effort to reduce the discomfort. Participant responses suggested five patterns of how the communication routines were recreated and changed to restore the ontological security of the family. In addition, as they grappled with ontological security, participants experienced dialectical tensions, which they managed in a variety of functional and dysfunctional ways.

This chapter is organized by research questions, followed by a short section on problematic in-law relationships. For the purpose of clarity, I have indicated which group each participant belonged to by placing a subscript letter after their names: “s” signifies the siblings-in-law from Group 1; “m” signifies the newly married participants from Group 2; “e” signifies the engaged participants from Group 2; and “p” signifies the parents-in-law from Group 3. One participant, Justin, had a married sister and was himself engaged to be married, and thus at times he is identified as “s” or “e,” depending on which relationship he was referring to.

#### Research Question One: Communicating Norms and Routines to Newcomers

The first research question asked, How does a family communicate its norms and routines to new in-laws? All the interviews with participants contained rich examples of how the families communicated their norms and routines as they assimilated the newcomer. They communicated these norms both verbally and nonverbally, directly and indirectly, through modeling normal routines, directly communicating about the norms, giving gifts, explaining the family history and relationships, mediating the relationship with the in-law, reacting to media messages about in-laws, and practicing their religious routines.

##### *Modeling Normal Routines*

Many of the participants reported that they or their families had done nothing special to help the new in-law fit in. They simply carried on with their everyday family routines, and the in-law simply adapted to it.

Tina<sub>p</sub>: I guess we just kind of did what we always did, and figured he'd learn to like it. I don't know. [laughs]

Courtney<sub>s</sub>: She just blends in, you don't even notice that she's there when she's over there.

In these cases, the families appreciated the willingness of the newcomer to accept the routines of the families, that the families did not have to make special accommodations to help the newcomer adjust. In some cases when this happened, the newcomers reported how they felt welcomed by families because of the willingness to include the newcomers in their everyday family routines. This openness and acceptance made the newcomers feel like a part of the family:

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: I think that maybe the thing that was the easiest is that they were just very inclusive with me, they included me in everything. . . . They they made it known to me you know that I was included and so that was probably the very, the best thing that they did, was just being very inclusive and open with me.

Thus, many participants felt that the best strategy for assimilating the newcomer was to include the newcomer in the normal routines of their family, which the newcomer could interpret as acceptance.

When newcomers came from families-of-origin that had similar values, routines, and traditions, the newcomers and the families adjusted to each other easily because the family routines felt familiar already:

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: Uh Ted and I, we both grew up in similar churches, with similar uh backgrounds. Uh that was one of the things about us that we find interesting, is that we have, we have such similar histories, in everything, I mean. So the way that we celebrate is pretty much the same. . . . And uh, our similarities in religion and in um, in the way that we all grew up and the way our families practice things, uh, probably has made our transition with each other easier. In a way, because we don't have to get used to each other's customs, there's, we have the same customs.

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: And loves playing games of course, because that's what he does with his family. So it was very, it was, like, I imagine it was very similar to what he would have done with family. And in fact we called his family on Thanksgiving day and asked them what they were doing, and they said, "Well, we just finished

our big meal, and we're playing games now." Which is exactly what we were doing . . .

As these quotes illustrate, newcomers readily achieved a sense of ontological security in the new family when it had routines similar to their own families-of-origin.

On the other hand, sometimes the in-law came from a very different kind of family, a less demonstrative one, and expressed gratitude at having found a family that acted in a loving, cohesive way.

Holly<sub>s</sub>: He's the oldest of four. So he's just. His his mom kind of doesn't treat him very well and things like that. And so he has said, to my sister, like, "Your family, I feel like more of a part of than my own."

Tyler<sub>m</sub>: They spend a lot more time [together] than I'm used to. Although that worried me at first, it's actually turned out to be a blessing and turned out to be a good thing because uh, it's an aspect of my family life that is lacking. Uh, so it seems almost, I don't know, it just seems weird that I was so lucky to marry into a family like that.

These newcomers expressed how good it felt to be welcomed into a family that was openly affectionate and caring.

These exemplars illustrate how newcomers experienced ontological security when the family they entered had routines similar to their own or routines that they perceived as more desirable than their own. When the family simply carried on as usual with these routines, the newcomer felt welcomed, included and accepted.

Parents-in-law particularly noted how their children had made good choices by bringing home a spouse who fit in with the family, who would accept the family routines and not seek to change them. Charlie<sub>p</sub> and Tina<sub>p</sub> talked about how their daughter had made a good choice and brought home a boyfriend who would fit with the family:

Charlie<sub>p</sub>: But I I attribute a lot of that to Lucy. . . Lucy was just such a good kid.  
Tina<sub>p</sub>: She was always responsible, sensible . . . She did what she was supposed to do.

Charlie<sub>p</sub>: And she was mature about it. . . And and I expected and I expected that Lucy would uh hook up with somebody the same or very similar. . . . And I guess that's what I expected [laughs]. But, so . . . I just put it on Lucy.

Similarly, Roger<sub>p</sub> and Ann<sub>p</sub> spoke about how and why they trusted their daughter's decision:

Roger<sub>p</sub>: I think one of the reasons that we had so much uh, it was so easy to accept Allen, uh as a friend is because Leslie was a unique person. She was very mature early. . . . She didn't, when she needed advice, she asked it, but she needed advice on things like where to get her car repaired or something like that. You know. She always had her life so well in in hand. . . . And so I think our relationship with Leslie would reflect on our relationship with Allen too.

Ann<sub>p</sub>: I think it comes down to us realizing that our girls are smart enough not to end up with somebody that's not suitable for them

Thus some parents attributed the ease of transition for the child-in-law to their child's ability to choose a suitable partner. This suitability then made it easier to communicate the norms and the routines of the family to the newcomer, and thus maintained the sense of security within the family.

A related subtheme mentioned by several participants was that previous boyfriends or girlfriends had not fit in, were less than desirable, were problematic from the start, or had changed the family member in a negative way. Therefore, the fact that the family member remained the same and brought home someone who immediately seemed to fit in with the family was taken as a welcome sign. Josh<sub>s</sub> talked about how his sister's first fiancé had changed her and had made the family uncomfortable:

Josh<sub>s</sub>: I mean just her being, her, the change that she went through, it wasn't fun to be around her. And it wasn't um, you know, it wasn't her. It wasn't the [sister] that I knew, and that my family knew. And so. Um, when when we, she told us that she was calling it off, I think there was kind of a little bit of a relief.

Josh<sub>s</sub> and his family were much more comfortable with his sister's current fiancé.

Similarly, others talked about how previous beaus had been unacceptable in some way:

Ellen<sub>s</sub>: Oh, there was, I mean there were psychotic ones, there were suicidal ones. There were snobby rich girls. . . . [my sister-in-law is] the only girl he ever brought home that's really fit with our family. And I saw so many of those that I mean, it took me a while to bring somebody home. . . . Because none of [my brother's] girlfriends ever fit.

Mark<sub>p</sub>: We had several people who my daughter had dated, just intermittently . . . who we just shook our heads . . . you know, that they were just kind of weird.

Tess<sub>e</sub> learned that she was accepted by her future in-laws when they remarked how much more skilled Tess<sub>e</sub> was in helping at the family business than a previous girlfriend. These comments suggest that potential in-laws were more acceptable when the family perceived that they would fit into their family routines without disruption or much effort, thus maintaining their ontological security.

Nevertheless, although families were often similar and had similar routines that were easy to adjust to, almost all the participants noted differences in the families' routines that caused some tension and adjustment. When families carried on with "business as usual," the newcomer sometimes felt surprised, confused, and anxious, feelings that made them feel like outsiders because their family norms and routines were different. For instance, Naomi<sub>e</sub> and Leslie<sub>m</sub> found that life in their spouses' families was somehow more formal than in their own families-of-origin, which made them uncomfortable.

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: sometimes when I'm around them, it just seems like it's kind of, kind of formal. . . . And I'm just not used to that. We don't have a lot of that in my family. Not at all. So I guess I just wish that things would be a little more laid back.

Leslie<sub>m</sub>: Allen's parents like to go out to eat, rent movies, things like that. And my parents like to well, do those same things, but it's just, I don't know. It all feels less formal with my parents. . . . The TV's always on . . . for one thing at my house. . . . it's not as clean, definitely. I don't know. That's just how it feels to me.

These differences in everyday routines disturbed the ontological security of the newcomers when the family just carried on as usual without any attempt to adjust to the newcomer.

Thus some families tended to proceed normally with their family routines, expecting the newcomers to adjust, and assuming that what they did was normal for families and therefore would make the newcomer feel secure. When the family routines were similar or a welcome change for the newcomers, they were smoothly absorbed into the family. These families were operating under their practical knowledge of everyday routines and norms. They simply did what they always did and felt that they did not need to explain their routines to the newcomer. However, perceived differences in family routines could make the newcomer confused and anxious because they did not experience the expected ontological security of family. So in some cases, families had to directly communicate to the newcomers about the norms and expectations in their families.

#### *Directly Communicating Norms and Routines*

In many families, spouses and parents-in-law directly communicated their expectations and norms to the newcomers, thus demonstrating their rationalized knowledge about their routines. For example, fathers particularly communicated directly to their future sons-in-law regarding their expectations for taking care of their daughters. This often, but not always, occurred in the meeting with the father in which the son asked permission to marry the daughter.

Ted<sub>m</sub>: There was a conversation between her father and I uh before the wedding. And he expressed to me uh what he felt my role would be, as as her, as her husband. . . . he expressed what he felt our roles were and how he he wanted to make sure that I understood that I was taking care of his pride and joy from now on. And and, uh, I don't know. It was mainly religious based. Um and the belief that our faith, the faith that we have expressed uh a husband and a wife. Uh

outside of that there really wasn't, uh there was some uh conversation that was around the sexual aspect. Uh, but that was still sort of semi tied in with the faith-based. Uh, he he expressed uh some wisdom that he had learned from from being married for 30 plus years to Ginny's mother.

Bob<sub>p</sub>: There were, there were a couple of things that I discussed with him, just father-type things. Um, I had, well, one was a letter that I had written to him a couple of months before but then had decided not to send for a couple of reasons. But it was you know, encouraging him to spend a little more time with our family. And for several reasons I didn't do that. But when he came to say "I'd like to marry Lindsay," I said, "Well, I wrote this letter. And this is what was in that letter." And I was, "I understand that your family dynamic is different from ours. But you know, we'd like to see more of you."

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: I mean her father, her father when I had, I I asked permission from both her brothers and from her mother and her father to to marry Megan before I proposed. And her father said, you know, "family has to be the most important thing." And I, in around the clock way, I knew that he was telling me, you know, "Don't take Megan away from us."

Justin<sub>s</sub>: And for a long time [my brother-in-law] would never make eye contact with anybody. . . . And my dad actually talked to him about it one time and told him to start looking at people. You know, he took him aside when nobody else was around, things like that. I think actually after he, after that happened he started being a lot more open and feeling more comfortable too.

These examples demonstrate how families felt that they needed to be explicit at times about the routines and norms in their families. In these cases the participants indicated that direct communication was helpful and appreciated, and that they were able to explain why they did what they did or expected certain behavior.

Often the direct message communicated was not explicitly about the routines and norms of the family, but simply a message of general acceptance of the newcomer:

Barb<sub>m</sub>: What was the thing [my mother] said? Uh, just something about that, oh, "He's a keeper."

Tess<sub>e</sub>: It's traditional that when [my parents] leave [after visiting me], they put a thank-you note on my whiteboard. This time it said something like, "Just so you have it in writing, we really like Ben!"



Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: One of my dad's brothers said when we got married, you know. He's he's seen all this, a lot of marriages, obviously in our family, and several have not worked out so well. And he said, "But there's something between you two. I think that this this one will last for a long time."

Justin<sub>e</sub>: [talking about the relationship between his fiancée and his mother] My mom has red hair too, and so my mom's always talking about how nice it is to have another redhaired person in the house [laughs].

The participants remembered these direct messages as a means of articulating that the newcomer was acceptable and would be expected to fit in with the norms and routines of the family. The purpose of these messages seemed to be to create ontological security for both the newcomer and newlywed child or sibling.

Families often verbally expressed their routines and norms to their new in-laws through direct comments to the in-law or to other people including the spouse, who then passed the comment on to the in-law. Sometimes this took the form of kidding, while others were very serious.

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: And um, and she appreciates [my helping her in the kitchen], and she's vocalized that to me and to Ted, and to others. She's said that to others in front of me, and so I know she appreciates that kind of thing.

Ginny appreciated the recognition she got when her mother-in-law bragged about her to others.

However, not all direct communication was positive. Sometimes the direct message was that of disapproval. For example, Babette's future parents-in-law directly expressed how she did not fulfill their expectations:

Babette<sub>e</sub>: And over Christmas break they told me that I was going to be a bum living off of him for the rest of my life. To my face [sighs] and that I need to get a job.

R: Under what circumstance did they tell you? This this is over dinner or?

B: Oh, I was just sitting watching TV.

R: Okay. And they actually said those words to you?

B: Yeah.

Babette<sub>e</sub> was shocked by her future in-laws' open hostility, and worried if she could ever fit in with their expectations. In a different situation, Michelle's husband finally spoke frankly to their daughter's fiancé when the two had just broken up:

Michelle<sub>p</sub>: I wasn't there. And you know, some things in life you tend to, it's so painful to discuss, you don't. You just don't bring them back up. But [my husband] became angry . . . I think it was the protective father sort of thing. . . And actually [my husband] never really discussed this conversation. I just had bits and pieces from [my children] And apparently [my husband] shouted at Jason.

Michelle<sub>p</sub> was reluctant to even discuss the scene with her husband. Apparently her husband had shouted and told the fiancé that he was lazy and had taken advantage of them. Specifically, the husband complained about the fiancé regularly coming to visit and bringing his dirty laundry and not helping around the house. Despite the breakup, the couple reunited and eventually married, but the son-in-law did not help around the house. Instead, those direct words created an on-going barrier between the son-in-law and the parents-in-law. In both of these cases, the family used direct messages to hopefully bring the newcomer in line with their expected norms and routines, and thus restore their family's ontological security.

As these examples illustrate, sometimes families used direct messages to communicate their family norms and routines to their new in-laws. This practice reflected their rationalized knowledge about their family's routines and what behavior they felt they could accept or not accept to maintain the ontological security of their families. Although in some cases, these direct messages were useful and appreciated, in other cases, the messages could create long-standing barriers between them and the newcomer.

### *Giving Gifts*

Another way of directly communicating acceptance was through the routine of gift giving. Although gifts are not given as a daily routine, they are exchanged cyclically at specific times of year, and most families have specific norms that govern the practice. Some of these norms may imbue the practice with higher meaning, and therefore signal a gift giving ritual. However, many of the gift-giving norms pertain only to the number and expense of gifts exchanged, as well as who is expected to participate in the exchange. The exchange of gifts followed specific routines in the families of the participants, and every participant reported that as the in-law became accepted into the family, they participated more fully in the gift routines. This process differed with the specific routines of the families. For most families, gifts were given to mere boyfriends and girlfriends of the family, but they changed dramatically when the couple became engaged. Before marriage, gifts tended to be gift certificates and small items of clothing or CDs because the beau was not well-known by the parents.

Justin<sub>e</sub>: They gave me socks! [laughs] . . . which I needed. [My fiancée] always complained because all my socks had holes in them. . . . And also a \$30 gift certificate to the mall.

Thus the family felt that they needed to give a gift, but did not give a truly personal or substantial gift until the fiancé was truly a member of the family.

For many families, at the first Christmas after the wedding or engagement the families expanded their routine of gift giving to more directly express acceptance of the newcomer. One routine reported by many participants was the practice of giving the new family member a Christmas stocking. In addition, other family members began to give the newcomer presents.

Patty<sub>p</sub>: Uh, just this Christmas uh one of our traditions with our kids, or my traditions with kids was that I was going to make Christmas stockings. So I made him a Christmas stocking too. So and uh, it was so neat, you know, shopping for boy things rather than just for girl things! . . . because I have four daughters.

Ellen<sub>s</sub>: The stocking was the big thing because they are engaged. Um, I think, I mean, they got her you know, a cookbook or something little like that. But this was the first year my grandparents got her a present.

Tricia<sub>s</sub>: And it was really hard picking out presents for a boy, because we always had three sisters, . . . and so it started off with him only getting like a few presents, you know. And each Christmas it's become like [my brother-in-law is] part of the family kind of thing. . . . Like last Christmas and this Christmas he got a lot more presents from everybody.

These families were very conscious of the fact that more extended gift-giving and the Christmas stocking definitely signaled that the newcomer was considered part of the family.

Another reported change was that after marriage, the couples began to receive “couple gifts” that signaled acceptance of their connected status:

Amanda<sub>s</sub>: I think they got some dishes, or you know, maybe something for the house. . . . Something more for both of them, for both of them.

Leslie<sub>m</sub>: I guess they give, they started giving us presents together, “This is for Leslie and Allen.”

In addition, the newcomer began to receive more personally selected gifts as his/her interests became better known:

Audrey<sub>p</sub>: In fact, I'm really learning what he's got in common with [my husband]. They both like, they are both Titanic nuts, like anything to do with it. So [we] gave him a couple things on the Titanic for Christmas, and I must say [my son-in-law] got the better stuff.

Even Babette<sub>e</sub>, who had suffered through several years of odd gifts from the disapproving parents of her boyfriend, finally received an affirming signal the Christmas before her marriage— a honeymoon album.

Babette<sub>e</sub>: I I was kind of taken aback wondering like, hmm, so they'd actually recognized that it was more than a family vacation, which is what they refer to it as [instead of saying it's a honeymoon].

Babette<sub>e</sub> thought this gift was perhaps a sign that the parents were finally recognizing the inevitability of the marriage and perhaps softening their attitude toward her.

Parents-in-law particularly reported making the effort to show no special favoritism to their own children when giving gifts to married couples, so as to make the newcomer feel like a member of the family.

Michelle<sub>p</sub>: But I try try not to, when we're giving gifts, to make an ob, you know, an obvious sort of difference in it. I try to give them fairly equal sort of things and and treat them you know, equal in that respect.

Tyler<sub>m</sub>: Now this year, this year, she she gets the same kind of gifts that I would get from my family and I get the same kind of gifts that she would get from her family.

Mark<sub>p</sub>: We pretty much concluded from the time they put on the ring, that they're both equal to our kids in anything we do . . . whether it's a gift or whatever it might be, we're treating them like another child. Because they're just like our kids now. . . . My wife and I consider them pretty much like a member of the family.

Most of the participants recognized that full acceptance of the newcomer would be signaled by giving the newcomer the same kind and amount of gifts as the other children in the family. In this way, the newcomer was assimilated into the family and learned the gift-giving norms of the family.

Two couples reported the bestowal of a special family gift to signal acceptance and to push the couple toward marriage. For example, Michael<sub>m</sub> was asked by his wife's grandmother if he wanted to have her family's heirloom wedding set to propose:

Michael<sub>m</sub>: And so then [after we had been dating for several months], her grandmother kind of sat us down and was like, "Well, I've got your great grandmother's wedding rings, and I want to know. I was wondering if you wanted to give them to Beverly." . . . And and while we already kind of knew that

that's we were going, it it was pretty special to see her, you know, recognize it too.

Similarly, Ginny's grandfather gave a large diamond to Ted<sub>m</sub> so that he could create an engagement ring for Ginny<sub>m</sub>. In both cases the young men were touched by the recognition and acceptance that these gestures signaled, which made them feel assimilated into the family as well as taught them a norm of the family of passing on heirlooms.

These changes in gift-giving routines appear to be designed by the family and are perceived by the in-laws to signal the acceptance and inclusion of the in-law into the family. These examples give evidence of the rationalized knowledge families have about their gift-giving routines, indicating that they are very much aware that the routine demonstrates to the newcomers that they are considered full members of the family.

Beyond holidays and birthday, families often made other kinds of gifts to help out the newlyweds, sometimes in the spirit of "this is just what families are supposed to do for their married children":

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: Um, and a lot of the things that [father-in-law] and [mother-in-law] do now for Megan and I, a lot of times, I'm like, you know, "I'll never be able to, I thank you so much." And [the parents-in-law respond], "Don't worry about it, this is stuff that [mother-in-law]'s family did for us when we were far away," and things like that, and so I think they're doing that now um because it was done for them. They, they recognize the importance of it, and the appreciation behind it, and so they are free and willing to give and and to do those things.

But this parental generosity was sometimes problematic for the married couple because the two families might not be equally capable of contributing:

Barb<sub>m</sub>: That is kind of one issue that my husband kind of has . . . because his parents give us bigger monetary gifts. Like at our wedding and at Christmas time and birthdays they give more money than my family does. And so I think because my parents, er I think my family is a little better off economically than his family, and so he kind of resents, not really resents that, but um, whenever we need some

money, his parents usually give more. . . . And my parents give other ways, and so. Um, like they helped considerably when we bought my car, and so I think there's some things like that that my my husband forgets. That they give at other times of the year. Not just at Christmas time or birthdays.

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: [My parents are] not rich, but they they have money and . . . my um dad gives me money, and my dad gives us money sometimes if if we need it, or even if we don't need it. . . . And so his parents have always I think um felt kind of inferior . . . They're struggling. I mean right now, my in-laws are struggling . . . . And I think it's that inferior thing though because they compare themselves to my dad or whatever. And I I said to [my husband], "I just think that they need to help themselves. I don't want help from them."

Thus although the practice of giving gifts communicated approval /acceptance and helped the couple get established, at the same time, the practice sometimes created difficulties for the couple, particularly when the families differed in these routines. In these cases, the newcomers interpreted the routine of gift-giving by the routines by different models, possibly by models from their own family-of-origin.

The practice of giving gifts communicates routines in two distinct ways. First, the practice is itself a routine that is either simply modeled or directly communicated in the family. That is, newcomers learn the routines and norms of gift-giving by receiving gifts and also by being told specifically how the gift-giving routine works. At the same time, the actual gifts given communicate and emphasize expectations and values of the family (such as having nice clothes, driving a decent car, helping each other out), as well as recognition and approval for the interests and talents that the newcomer brings to the family (such as musical and mechanical talents, interests in hobbies, etc.). In addition, participants recognized that the routine of gift-giving was a way to demonstrate the full-membership status of the newcomer. The families and the newcomers achieved a sense of ontological security when the gift exchange proceeded in a way that signaled full acceptance.

The participants in this study were very aware of what messages were communicated through their gift-giving routines, which demonstrates their rationalized knowledge about those routines. They also demonstrated their rationalized knowledge when they took the time to explain the family history and relationships to the newcomers.

*Explaining the Family History and Relationships*

Families assimilated the newcomer by taking the time to sit down with the newcomer and explain the family's history and relationships. Besides providing useful information about family members and what to expect, these explanations enabled families to communicate the norms and routines of the family and also directly or indirectly discuss important family values, thus passing on their rationalized knowledge of their family routines.

Most participants reported getting these history lessons. Often these sessions occurred before or during big family gatherings.

Allen<sub>m</sub>: Like usually when I met like her extended family, um, they'd usually give me the low-down first, you know. Um, such-and-such is really cool. Um, such-and-such is going to ask you this. Uh, watch out for, you know, so-and-so is totally insane. Such is a good crazy, such-and-such is a bad crazy. You know, so they always, you know, they never let me walk into anything cold.

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: And his dad like forewarned me about some of his uncles that are not as nice. And and uh said, "Now don't you worry if they start teasing you, then I'm going to take care of you." You know, he's just, that's how his dad is, you know.

Justin<sub>e</sub>: [My fiancée] had been prepping me. Making sure you know, that I don't talk about politics and I don't talk about religion.

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: He always does a really good job of before we get there, telling me what it will be like, what to expect. . . . So, so, he always, and I always ask, just because I'm interested in that sort of thing. So that happens before.

These participants indicated that they appreciated getting this information because it helped them to better understand the dynamics of the family.



However, sometimes the information volunteered was upsetting:

Megan<sub>m</sub>: He and I had a talk about it, and he explained to me that's how they show their love in their family, is buying presents. Like the first present that Nathan bought for his sister when we were together for her birthday was a \$500 camera. . . . Yes, and he's just like, "I just have to do it, I have to do it. She's done all this stuff for for me."

Megan<sub>m</sub> was upset by this information because it foreshadowed a potentially problematic relationship in which one's love was measured by how much money they spent on presents. In other cases the information was just not explicit enough to be useful:

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: He's joking to me in the car ride the whole time before we get there, "Well you know, if my mom doesn't you know, like you, you're out the door." And . . . he was joking. . . . And you know, it was just really funny because I didn't really know, I didn't really know what to think.

Barb<sub>m</sub>: He didn't tell me very much, no. Yeah, . . . I didn't get to know very much about her before then. . . . Um, he just kind of said that she was shy, like I am. [laughs] So. We had similar personalities, and that sort of thing.

These participants indicated that the sparse information they received about their spouse's families was enough to cause them anxiety rather than comfort. Thus selective information about the family sometimes disturbed the participants' ontological security.

Another method of telling the newcomer about the family was to sit down together and go through family pictures or artifacts so that the newcomer understood the significance of family relationships and routines.

Barb<sub>m</sub>: And his dad had recently too, whenever we went up one time, he uh, he knows I'm interested in genealogy, so he had some old photos and some books about his background that he gave to me to look through. . . . And so as far as family history, I've been able to get familiar with it that way.

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: And she put out like his baby pictures. . . . And uh some pictures of her other kids when they were little. And she showed me some pictures of her first wedding of when she got married to his real father.

In both these cases the sharing of old family photos provided the opportunity for the newcomer to understand the timing and significance of the divorces of their in-laws. Thus photographs were the catalyst for talking about family history that might not otherwise be broached.

Sometimes the family revealed family secrets or private information to explain relationships and behavior of certain family members:

Ted<sub>m</sub>: And [my mother-in-law] kind of explained . . . some of the events . . . just history. So that I can better understand feelings and stuff like that. And, for example, the aunt cannot uh bear children because of a heart condition. And uh, she she just explains that. And explains why.

This private information helped Ted<sub>m</sub> to better interpret the interactions in the family. Sometimes too, this private information was about past relationships of the spouse—which was received as a mixed message.

Beverly<sub>m</sub>: Michael had been dating a woman for like three years. And he they had been broken up for like ten months when we started dating. Ten months a year, whatever. . . . But his dad would like throw pictures of the two of them when they were together, in front of me when we would be sitting at the table. Weird stuff like that. Well, that was kind of a lot to swallow. . . . But he used to talk a lot about his ex-girlfriend, and [the parents-in-law] thought they were going to get married.

Beverly<sub>m</sub> wasn't sure what her future father-in-law was trying to communicate. On one hand, she interpreted it as he felt comfortable enough to share the information about the former girlfriend. But at the same time, his message also seemed to suggest that he liked the other girlfriend better. Later her future mother-in-law made an effort to “clean up” family pictures and remove the old girlfriend:

Michael<sub>m</sub>: I had had a girlfriend for two years. So there's a section of the photo albums that has pictures of her. So um, [after we had dated a few months] . . . uh, my mom was coming to this you know, deciding point, “Do I edit the photo albums so she can see these? Do I just leave it as it is, we'll see what happens?” So uh. She started edited, she started editing the photo albums.

In this case both Michael<sub>m</sub> and Beverly<sub>m</sub> understood the editing of the family albums as acceptance of Beverly into the family routines and relieved the ambiguity caused by the father sharing the private information about Michael's previous girlfriend.

Thus the sharing of family pictures was another opportunity for articulating to the newcomer the rationalized knowledge behind the norms and routines of the relationships of the family, as well as to communicate acceptance. For most newcomers, this sharing of family photos was helpful and appreciated, although it could create some ambiguous messages.

In general, newcomers were happy to get direct information about the family and its history because this information helped them better understand the routines and values of the family. The act of directly sharing pictures and stories also communicated acceptance to the newcomers. When the families felt they had explained their family routines and history to the newcomer and the newcomers felt they understood the family, both groups achieved a sense of ontological security.

#### *Mediating the Relationship with the In-law*

Although all participants indicated that they usually had good direct relationships with their new in-laws, nevertheless, most of them reported the practice of mediated relationships in some contexts, particularly between parents-in-law and newcomers, and especially when dealing with problematic issues concerning routines and norms. The usual form of this mediation was that the family communicated with the newcomer through the spouse rather than directly with the newcomer. This mediation was another form of passing on the rationalized knowledge about the families' routines, and the practice itself became routine for several reasons.

First, parents- and siblings-in-law reported that they found it difficult to establish a direct relationship with the in-law because he/she was always with the spouse.

Sometimes this was because the married pair preferred to always be together because they simply liked to be with each other, because the couple's ontological security depended, in part, on being together:

Tricia<sub>s</sub>: [talking about her sister-in-law] Like before the baby, like seriously I never saw her without [her husband]. Because when they're not together, she just wants to be with him. Like I mean they're very attached.

Ellen<sub>s</sub>: [talking about her sister-in-law] Maybe if she was a little more comfortable just being with me. . . Like definitely she can talk to me and she'll hang out with me, but she still likes to have Ian in a really close proximity. Like I don't know if she would be able to like just the two of us like go out to dinner, or something like that. . . But I think that'll come. It just takes a while, but maybe that, that like just a little more independence from Ian.

Both these siblings-in-law felt that they would like to get to know the newcomer, but it was difficult because the couple was always together and did not seem to want to establish separate relationships with the in-laws.

Another reason for the mediated relationship was simply personality differences in shyness and talkativeness. For example, Tess<sub>e</sub>, Leslie<sub>m</sub>, and Barb<sub>m</sub> reported that they were just quiet or shy and didn't know how to keep the conversations going with their mothers-in-law. Sue<sub>p</sub> described her son's fiancée as "painfully, painfully shy." Siblings-in-law realized that their families-of-origin were sometimes overwhelming to the newcomer because the families were just so talkative and outgoing in contrast to the shyer, quieter in-law. For example, Ellen<sub>s</sub> reported that her sister-in-law's first comment to her was "Your family's a little much!" and that the sister-in-law retreated to the basement to get away from them. For others, from their previous negative experiences, they had learned to fear direct private communication with the in-law. For example,

Babette<sub>e</sub> had endured outright hostile remarks from her fiancé's parents throughout their courtship. As she and her fiancé approached marriage, she simply avoided being alone with her future mother-in-law:

Babette<sub>e</sub>: No, I am deathly afraid of that. I I request that [my fiancé] is there all the time. I I just can't even imagine how [my future mother-in-law] would let loose when he's not there for extended periods of time.

Thus, many newcomers preferred to have a mediated relationship because they were shy, afraid, or simply different from their in-laws, and they felt insecure when dealing with their in-laws directly or by themselves.

On the other hand, many participants felt that the child-in-law, parents-in-law or siblings-in-law simply preferred the relationship to be mediated:

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: I really don't want to see them alone. I guess it's just because, I think it would be okay. Like I've considered it . . . I I guess one part of it is I'm not sure that they want to see me without him. . . . Like I think they do, but I'm not completely sure if they do. You know. I think his mom would enjoy it. But I'm not sure that [my husband] and his dad would.

Leslie<sub>m</sub>: usually if we need to talk to [my parents-in-law], [my husband] will call. . . . And and I'll talk to them if they call, but I don't, I don't call them very often. I have before, but not very often. . . I guess just because I figure they're his parents.

These daughters-in-law felt that their mothers-in-laws were not interested in talking to them directly and really preferred to communicate directly with their sons. On the other side, parents-in-law also felt that their children's spouses did not desire a direct relationship with them. For example, even though Mindy<sub>p</sub> made a special effort to have lunch with her daughter-in-law alone, her son also always ended up coming along because the daughter-in-law invited him:

Mindy<sub>p</sub> : Well, I say that [my son] can come along too, but I frame it that it could just be she and I. But [my son] has joined us every time . . . But any way is okay. I think she she might be more comfortable with him there.

In many cases, this mediated relationship maintained the routine of direct communication being between the child and parent. For example, most participants reported that when they called each other, they spoke directly to a member of their family-of-origin (i.e., their child, parent, or sibling). Seldom did daughters-in-law and sons-in-law spend more than a few cursory moments talking on the phone with the parents-in-law. In part this was attributable to Caller ID and cell phones, which made it easy to direct the calls to the specific family member.

Michelle<sub>p</sub>: Yes, because [my son-in-law and I] virtually never talk on the phone. . . Um, if the phone rings in their house, they have caller ID, and it must be, "Okay, it's your call."

In this way, parents and their children retained their old routines of communicating with each other directly, which seemed to bring them the comfort of established close relationships. Most did not complain about the mediated quality of their relationships with their new in-laws, but acknowledged it as an acceptable routine, one which maintained their ontological security.

Another normal routine for most in-laws was that spouse was expected to mediate the relationship with his/her family-of-origin on problematic issues. In some cases, these issues came up when the in-law didn't understand the family expectations, and the spouse was expected to explain it to him/her:

Bob<sub>p</sub>: And uh my brother was here from [another state] and we had a get together over at my parents, and [my married daughter] was there. And we had invited her and [her husband] Tyler, but he didn't come. And uh, I asked, I asked, "Well, what happened to Tyler?" "Well, he need needed to get something painted." . . . So I didn't say anything then, and then I went back a few minutes later and I said, uh, "I don't I won't bring it up again, but if he made a choice to paint instead of meeting your favorite uncle . . . he didn't make a very good choice." And I just left it that.

Bob's daughter then called her husband, and the son-in-law showed up a half hour later to meet the uncle. Similarly, Allen<sub>m</sub> described a time when his wife mediated an argument between him and her parents regarding expectations about spending time with family.

Allen<sub>m</sub>: Well, it was a, it was a blow, it wasn't a face-to-face. Like it wasn't me and, it wasn't [my mother-in-law] and I face to face, but it was like [my mother-in-law] pretty much saying to [my wife], "Well, here's what you're going to do, and you can't do this." . . . And then it's me turn around and saying, "Well everyone can stuff it." . . . I mean it wasn't a screaming match in one, I mean . . . I think there was, might have been some yelling but it wasn't two people yelling at each other; it was some yelling here, and then some yelling there.

In both these cases the mediation of the spouse prevented the in-laws from having to directly confront each other about a problematic issue. Although their anger may have been recognized, it was not openly expressed to the other in-law, and thereby maintained at least the semblance of peace and cordiality among the in-laws.

With other couples or at other times, the issue that needed mediation was that the child had grown and changed but had not addressed or renegotiated those changes with the parents, and so the newcomer was sometimes blamed for changing the child or creating problems. In these cases, the newcomer expected the spouse to mediate the relationship by confessing to the change in values or opinions. For example, Beverly<sub>m</sub> and her husband Michael<sub>m</sub> shared political views that were at odds with his family's traditional views. But Michael<sub>m</sub> had not broached the subject with his parents. Instead, Beverly<sub>m</sub> became embroiled in a political argument with her in-laws:

Beverly<sub>m</sub>: I'll never do that again [argue politics with her in-laws]. Now Michael does it, not me. . . I stay out and Michael's gotten, Michael's gotten very good at being very . . . So he he always does the arguments now, and not me. I stay out of it. . . . Because I think they thought all of these things he started saying were MY opinion. I'm like, "No, that that's why I like your son."

Similarly, Jennifer<sub>m</sub> felt that her father-in-law had not really recognized that his son had become a married adult man. She encouraged her husband to directly address this with his dad, rather than her having to deal with it.

Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: uh the fact that I didn't see his dad respecting him as a 43-year old man who was married with a wife. And that he needed to sit his dad down and say, "Listen, I love you, we spend time together. But I'm married now, and my priority is now my wife." . . . But he's he's accepted his role as the the go-between, or stepped up into that role a little bit more, where he was really uncomfortable with it before. So I kind of had to nudge him along.

In this way the mediated relationship forced the child to be honest with his/her parents about how he/she had changed and grown, rather than scapegoating the son or daughter-in-law.

In many cases, this mediation between spouse and parents on problematic issues was simply considered good practice to keep the relationships cordial between in-laws:

Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: If if there's an issue that comes up, I I see, I kind of see that as [my husband's] responsibility to handle. . . . It's his dad, he should handle it. If my mom creates a problem, I'll handle it.

Many couples resorted to this practice of routinely mediating the problematic issues between their spouses and their parents, apparently because on many different levels, the practice maintained the ontological security of both the family and the couple.

However, in some cases, the sibling-in-law also became the mediator, so as not to put the spouse on the spot, while still avoiding direct communication with the in-law. For example, Brandy<sub>s</sub> reported somewhat strained relations between her mother and her married brother. As a result, Brandy<sub>s</sub> often could get in touch with her brother and his wife, while her mother couldn't reach them, and as a result began to see herself as the go-between:



Brandy<sub>s</sub>: I don't know if it's just schedules, but they like always cross, they leave messages, they play phone tag, you know that kind of thing. . . I usually get a hold of them, and then when I talk to my mom, she's like, "I can't get a hold of them." So, I'm like, "Well, I'll tell them." I think I'm one of the go-betweens too, pretty much. . . . I'm or the peacemaker kind of thing. Like, I'll try, if my mom's upset about something, I'll let her vent to me about it. You know, the same with my brother and sister-in-law. Like I can understand where everyone's coming from. And you know, I try to give my point of view.

Similarly, Sarah<sub>s</sub> was the go-between in her family, describing herself as the "mini-counselor" for everyone in the family. Justin<sub>s</sub> also was the go-between in his family for the problematic brother-in-law:

Justin<sub>s</sub>: With my parents it's, I don't know, I guess it's hard to explain because I feel like I have to be diplomatic about it. And I can't just tell them that, you know, "You're acting weird around him. Stop making him uncomfortable." So I don't know exactly. I've talked about how you know, how after talking to him, getting to know him better myself, he's a lot more comfortable and things like that. . . . And I've tried to just encourage them to talk to him more. And at least with my mom especially I would like to tell her anyway. To you know, either do something about . . . not liking him, tell him you're [angry at] him, or you know, do a better job of . . . hiding it.

The siblings-in-law became mediators when no one else in the family felt comfortable enough to do it. Thus the families and couples maintained their ontological security by keeping direct communication and conflict between them at a distance through the practice of mediated relationships.

Most participants indicated that the relationships between parents-in-law and children-in-law were routinely mediated to some extent, although many acknowledged that they hoped that they would move beyond this and establish closer, more intimate ties with their in-laws. This practice of the mediated relationship was not that of absolute avoidance of contact with the in-law as is often practiced in other societies (Lopata, 1999). Participants reported friendly direct face-to-face interactions with their in-laws on casual social matters. Nevertheless, the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship was

routinely mediated in phone calls, problematic issues, and personal matters. On one hand the mediated relationship maintained the routine of a close relationship with their child or parent, and when time and contact was limited between them, they preferred to communicate directly with their child, returning once again to the familiar ontologically secure routines of their family life. However, participants also recognized that they were missing out by not establishing a closer relationship with their in-law.

*Reacting to Media Messages and Negative Family Examples of In-Laws*

As part of their rationalized knowledge, participants also recognized that some of their expectations for routine in-law relationships had been communicated to them through messages from the media and other people. These messages colored the participants' expectations for in-law relationships and impacted the way they approached assimilation, making them monitor their own behavior toward their new in-laws:

Roger<sub>p</sub>: I I would be very very unhappy to have one of these uh TV relationships where you know, it's "Oh God, here comes Thanksgiving, we've got to go see our parents and" . . . Or "we've got to do this because of my father-in-law or because of my mother-in-law." I would hate that.

All participants recognized that media and popular culture portrayals of in-laws were usually negative, and they hoped their own experience would be the exception rather than what they considered "the rule" as portrayed in media messages and from many of their acquaintances.

Many participants also expressed low expectations for in-law relationships because of prior exposure to stories from friends or family members about in-law relationships.

Tyler<sub>m</sub>: Because I mean I have friends that, friends, colleagues, whoever, that I talk to and dealing with in-laws, it sounds like a nightmare.

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: Everything I had heard from my friends about their in-laws were negative. How they didn't like their in-laws or didn't get along with their in-laws, or their in-laws were very critical of them. And so I kind of had that very pessimistic outlook on the whole situation.

These young men were not expecting to enjoy having in-laws because of what their married acquaintances had told them. Similarly several participants revealed that they or a close family member had unsatisfactory relationships with their in-laws or in several cases, that their own parents had been problematic as in-laws.

Michelle<sub>p</sub>: My mom in past years wrote me hateful, hateful letters, and after we got married. We had been married about ten days, my, this was my birthday. And my dad came to see me. My mom wouldn't come to see me. She wrote this hateful letter. Mark comes home from work, you know, and his new bride is just sitting there with tears flowing down.

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: My parents got married really against the approval of my mom's parents. They thought that she could do better than my dad, and between. And it was always tense between my dad and her dad. Her mom came to realize that he was a great guy, and that was fine. But that was always hard. And it wasn't because of anything dad did. Because he wanted to be a part and accepted. But it was more of his father-in-law's side.

Fred<sub>p</sub>: I grew up in a lot of family controversy, a whole lot of it . . . And uh, you know, I I'm just not going to let that happen. Yeah. And my my sister has a terrible amount of it . . . my sister and her daughter-in-law . . . And they're like a couple of cats.

Allen<sub>m</sub>: Uh, I was involved with a a girl before Leslie, and we were together for quite a long time. And her family was really difficult. Her dad was a really good guy, but um, the rest of the family, it was really tough.

These participants were well aware that in-law relationships could be problematic because not only had they heard stories, but also they had witnessed or experienced these problematic relationships first hand.

Although most had heard such horror stories, some believed that their families or they themselves as individuals were different and could create good in-law relationships.

Allen<sub>m</sub>: And so I think I really, you know, I've said a lot . . . you have this romantic notion that "Damn the in-laws! I can, I can, you know, if I really love someone, I can deal with whatever comes along!"

But then having gone through some rough experiences with their in-laws or potential in-laws, they felt that maybe they weren't that strong. As Allen<sub>m</sub> continued:

Allen<sub>m</sub>: But then having in-laws that you you get along with, that are easy to get along with, and are, really really help things out a lot. That's one huge. Because having ones that aren't good to you or good to deal with are, really can cause a lot of problems.

Similarly, Megan<sub>m</sub> believed her inherently sweet and friendly nature would triumph over any in-law difficulties. Unfortunately, she found that she was wrong:

Megan<sub>m</sub>: I thought that any family put in front of me I could get along with. But that's just not the case.

Thus even though they originally believed that they could overcome in-law difficulties, a few participants came to realize through firsthand experience that in some respects the media messages and passed-down stories represented some of the reality of in-law relationships.

Parents-in-law who had endured poor in-law relationships with their own parents-in-law were crusaders for wanting to create good relationships with their child's spouse by not communicating too many norms and routines.

Audrey<sub>p</sub>: The one thing I hope I don't ever put pressure on them to come over or or to spend Thanksgiving with us . . . Because uh, my mother would guilt people into coming over and I don't want to do that to him. . . That's one hope I have is that I don't put that kind of pressure on them. Because they're going to have, they have three families to juggle as it is, they don't need that!

Patty<sub>p</sub>: My parents had had issues, and I kind of look at the sets of our parents now and I think, "I want to be in-laws like my husband's parents, not like my parents." Because uh, my parents uh had this attitude that if you weren't a member, if you weren't, if you were married into the family, you really weren't a member of the family. And they never really embraced the outlaws, as they liked

to call themselves, because you know, they always knew that in my parents' mind, well they really don't carry the weight.

Similarly some children had seen what their parents had gone through and were determined to create better relationships through different routines.

Beverly<sub>m</sub>: And I also believe that I was socialized to not get along with my in-laws, because my mother doesn't get along with her, my grandparents. And I, I remember being little and my mom having like shouting fights with my dad's brothers and sisters . . . so I wasn't socialized very well to get along with my in-laws, to be quite honest. And I think that I had to get over that and realize that in life it's really important that you spend equal amount of time with both families, and we, I really try super hard, I mean I know it's not perfect, but I try to spend as much time with Michael's family as we do with mine.

Thus messages from the media and from other family members influenced the way families communicated with the new in-laws. Although many expected poor relationships with in-laws because of media messages and experiences among their families and friends, they themselves worked hard to create a different routine of communication in their in-law relationships. However, others expressed how good models had impacted them and, as a result, they set out to create positive routines with their in-laws.

Mindy<sub>p</sub>: I do think of how how [my mother-in-law] helped me to know how to love my babies. . . . And she really taught me, not by trying to show me how, but just by doing it. So . . . I think there, there's, there are things like that, not necessarily that very thing, but there are things like that that I can help [my daughter-in-law] if she wants. Maybe lead by example.

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: It was just something, as I was little growing up, that was something my mom told me I needed to do, whenever I got married, I needed to help my mother-in-law, if she was in the kitchen, or whatever. And my mom uh showed me that through her relationship with her mother-in-law. I mean, whenever we were at their house, she was always up doing everything, working and helping. And uh, she showed me that by example, and then she told me that's what I needed to do.

Bob<sub>p</sub>: Many years ago before I had any children I worked with an older man who had two married daughters. And I was maybe in my mid-twenties when he told me this. He said, "There are few things more enjoyable for a father than for your

daughter to marry some young man you really approve of.” . . . And and both of his daughters had. And I I remembered that.

Some of the participants had seen both the good and the bad modeled and talked about in their own families and acquaintances, and they were determined to create positive routines in their own in-law relationships.

This acknowledgement and response to the prior messages from the media, other people, and their own experience represent the third kind of knowledge that underlies people’s routines, that of the motivation of action. People recognized the unacknowledged circumstances that affected their actions, in this case, that in some respects their attitudes about in-laws were influenced by media messages and other people’s experiences. Recognizing these circumstances moved them to engage in more directly motivated action when they sought to change their behavior in order to influence their in-law relationships in a different way.

### *Practicing Religious Routines*

One of the biggest routines in family life that impacted in-law relationships in this study was religion. Although I asked no specific question about religion, religion came up in the overwhelming majority of the cases. Several participants expressed how the fact their families shared similar religious beliefs and traditions helped them bridge the other differences between their families.

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: And uh, our similarities in religion and in um, in the way that we all grew up and the way our families practice things, uh, probably has made our transition with each other easier.

Since religion is often one of the foundational routines in family life, if the newcomers share that routine, the assimilation is easier for them. Nevertheless, in this study because

families often had different standards for living their religion, sometimes the similarity in religion did not equate to similarity of routines and norms:

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: We're Muslim and he's Muslim too. And I think [my fiancé's family] probably wanted someone that, I think that just acted a little different and maybe dressed some different than I do. So I don't know. I just feel like that kind of, kind of threw them off. . . Just, probably like wear my scarf all the time, or uh, that's probably the main thing. Because like when I first met them, I didn't wear it at all.

Lena<sub>m</sub>: They're also very, they're hard workers, but in a different sense than [my husband's] parents. I notice [my in-laws] more working hard for their family. Um, I notice my parents working harder for other families. Like within the church, they're very involved within their church. Um, so are Tom's parents, but kind of more at arm's length.

Roger<sub>p</sub>: We're Catholic. And he's Catholic in theory. But uh, he doesn't care to go to church. And I wish he did, but it's it's really, it's not an issue. You know, I realize that, in my mind, he's he's working things through right now, but um, if for some reason if. Then even Christmas Eve, he's just not going to go. . . . I wish he did, but it's not a problem for [our daughter]. It's not going to be a problem for us.

Therefore, even though in-laws shared a religious faith, they sometimes expressed and practiced it in different ways. When they were confronted with people of similar faith who nevertheless had different routines in practicing that faith, the participants were propelled from the practical knowledge about their religious routines into the other levels of knowledge.

The majority of participants in this study reported being in "mixed marriages" where they had different religious traditions. The division caused by this difference seemed to be more acutely experienced by the parents than the married couple or their siblings. For a few parents, the issue was very directly a concern for the child's religious soul.

Michelle: [My son-in-law] has no Christian upbringing, which is perhaps as absolutely important to me as anything . . . We had concerns because once again,

his lack of a Christian faith, disturbs me considerably . . . I guess one of my biggest hopes and dreams would be that he would accept Christ, and [he and my daughter] would have a Christian family.

Michelle's concern did not focus on the family routine of Christianity, but that her son-in-law seemed to have no religious faith whatsoever. Other parents, however, felt that despite their child's change in religious routine, the child was still a religious person, and in the interest of keeping the relationship positive, the parents tried to accept their child's veering from the family's religious tradition. The parents avoided discussing it in order to avoid the conflict:

Charlie<sub>p</sub>: It's not a big problem. I mean they're good people . . . Lucy is more religious now than she ever was younger . . . Um and she's, she doesn't put her foot down and say, she doesn't say, "I'm not going to go to the Catholic church when I'm visiting [her parents]" . . . If I had this discussion with my dad, you know, I might have to get into some other issues, about you know, what's she's doing and whether she should go to communion and whether and. But I'm I'm not going to have that conversation with my dad if I can avoid it. He probably will avoid it too because they love Lucy and they know what she's like. And they love Brian.

Still, the parents mourned this change in their family's routines:

Ann<sub>p</sub>: There are things I'm going to miss . . . I'd like to go to my grandchild's baptism. I'd like to you know, get them a First Communion present. I'd like if they had a daughter, for her to wear Leslie's First Communion dress, you know. But they didn't get married in the church either. And it was a disappointment, but I'm not going to let it ruin our relationship.

Thus, whether the parents-in-law perceived the change in religion as a spiritual concern or simply a cultural concern, they did not want to intervene to the point of causing problems in their child's marriage, and thus they chose to no longer address the issue at all. In these cases, the parents-in-law had to move beyond their practical understanding of their religious routines. They had to rationalize their expectations to the newcomers, and when this did not bring them into compliance with their religious



routines, they sought the greater understanding of how their unacknowledged circumstances affected their routines. They came to recognize that although the newcomers had different religious practices or different reasons for their religious practices, they might still be acceptable spouses. In any case, too, since the marriage had occurred, the security of the marriage was more important than their own ontological security of all being the same faith. How the newly married participants and their siblings responded to and negotiated these religious differences will be discussed later.

### *Summary*

In this section, I discussed the ways in which families communicated their norms and routines to newcomers in an effort to maintain the ontological security of their families. Specifically, most participants indicated that the principal methods for communicating their routines were indirect. They simply carried on with their everyday routines and expected the newcomer to adjust. At times they communicated about their routines by directly communicating with the newcomer about expectations, and at other times, the family explained their past and present relationships in the family. Families also indirectly communicated their routines through exchanging gifts and through their religious practices. Participants also felt that the expectations and routines for in-laws were in part communicated to them from media messages and from narratives of acquaintances about their in-law relationships. One practice that seemed particularly pervasive among families was that the relationship with the newcomer was often mediated by the spouse or another go-between, apparently in an effort to reduce tension and conflict with the married pair.

These different ways that families communicated their routines represent the different kinds of knowledge that underlie people's routines (Giddens, 1984): practical knowledge, rationalized knowledge, and the knowledge of the motivation of action. In adjusting to the newcomers in their families, participants were called on to examine their rationale and motivation behind their routines, rather than simply enact them with the newcomer. Thus the entry of newcomers disturbs a family's ontological security not only by changing the family routines, but also by making them question their own routines.

In the next section, I examine specific communication routines that confront newcomers when they enter families through marriage.

#### Research Question Two: Specific Communication Routines Needing Adjustment

Many participants reported that most of the norms and routines of the family that required adjustment were not physical routines, but communication norms for family interactions. These communication norms included amount of interaction, the acceptable level of emotional responses in interactions, the topics considered suitable for discussion, different patterns of reserve, and simply different styles. In some respects many of these communication routines were more difficult to articulate and negotiate than physical routines because they reflected more deeply embedded family values. These communication norms again demonstrate how routines are the foundation for ontological security in families and how the presence of newcomers in the family can disrupt that security by disrupting the routines.

##### *Amount of Interaction*

Families differed significantly in how much they wanted to interact. Sometimes when families were problematic, the children broke off relationships with their parents

when they became adults and created a routine of avoidance and distance. Other families simply accepted that their children were adults and had other obligations to work, friends and spouses, as well as to other in-laws, and therefore relaxed their expectations of frequent interaction. But some families expected the newcomer to maintain the routine of regular contact with their families because this routine was one of the foundations of the ontological security of their family. In cases where the expected amount of interaction differed between families, in-laws experienced some stress in communicating and negotiating these routines.

Bob<sub>p</sub>: Getting together doesn't seem to be a priority in [my son-in-law's] family. I mean, I, to my knowledge, they're all on good terms with one another, but that you know, in our family you know, if one person's doing something kind of significant, everyone will know about it. Well, that same buzz doesn't doesn't go on in in their family. So uh, he is used to something very different.

When he realized that his son-in-law did not maintain close communication with his parents, Bob<sub>p</sub> wondered how the son-in-law would fit in with Bob's very connected family.

These differences in expected amounts of interactions between families created the most common stressor for newlyweds—that of having to negotiate how much time and contact to allot to each family. Both families wanted to see their married children and desired more contact with them. Some participants described how they or their parents felt jealous of the time the newlywed pair spent with the other family.

Tina<sub>p</sub>: [I wish they] would live closer so we would see each other more. I'm a little envious. I would prefer they lived in my backyard instead of his parents' backyard.

Megan<sub>m</sub>: In our second year of dating and our first year of marriage, we had all these problems with his mom saying, "You know, you're just using my place, as a hotel. You're spending all this time with her family." And that really, you know, we weren't. We were trying to as much as possible to spend time with her.

Brandy<sub>s</sub>: I think that's what's hard for my mom because it's like, they're in the same town, and it's, they'll talk to my brother and my sister-in-law, because both the parents are in the same town. . . . It's hard for them to split up time equally because they're in the same vicinity

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: [My parents] raised me to be independent. . . . and so, I am. And I enjoy seeing them and I want to be with them, but I never really went home much . . . but it wasn't like I went home every weekend. . . . And so, the fact that [my husband] would want to go home almost every weekend, and when we got to be very seriously dating and then engaged and then married, I would go with him. And the fact that we would be there two or three times a month, hurt my parents' feelings . . . because I would be there and not with them. And so we had to start splitting the time more and making those adjustments. [My parents] would say things like, "We just want our share of the time." And they still say things like that.

This difference in family expectations of interaction created a high degree of conflict for the newlyweds, thus disturbing their ontological security—a fact that was recognized by almost all participants. But newlyweds felt torn between creating their own pattern of interaction with their families as a couple and maintaining the established routine of interaction in each family. These contradictory forces represent a dialectical tension, and thus specifics of this conflict will be discussed later from the perspective of dialectical tensions.

#### *Level of Displayed Emotion*

Families had different levels of how much emotional display was acceptable. Some families had a routine of openly expressing emotion, which made the less expressive newcomer feel overwhelmed and unable to live up to the family's expectation. For example, Amanda<sub>s</sub> commented on how her brother-in-law had difficulty adjusting to the emotional intensity of her family:

Amanda<sub>s</sub>: He kind of laughed and he was like, "That was a little overwhelming, Amanda! I'm sorry!" He's just like, "Oh!" I mean we're just very uh, affection, we're very talkative. Very open with each other.

Similarly, Allen<sub>m</sub> dreaded announcing their engagement—even though it was expected—because his fiancée’s family had a big emotional response to everything:

Allen<sub>m</sub>: I remember the day we told them we were going to get married. . . . And we decided we were going to tell them, you know . . . and of course it will be a big deal because Leslie and her mom and all her sisters, they’re very very emotional. They react to everything very strongly. You know, there’s always either crying . . . or screaming or hugging or something, you know. And their mom’s like that. And I’m not trying to say that in a negative way, that’s just the way they are. . . . So we knew it would be a big, there’s no such thing as a little deal. You know, if it’s a big deal, it’s a big deal.

Lindsay<sub>m</sub> explained how the routine in her family-of-origin was different from her husband’s family in terms of physically and verbally expressing affection:

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: My family is very touchy, very “I want to hug you, let me give you a kiss on the cheek.” His family is not at all that way, naturally. They wouldn’t even, they rarely say “I love you” to one another, whereas with my family, we’re just all the time, “love you, love you.”

When Lindsay<sub>m</sub> married into the family, however, she simply began hugging everyone, and the family responded by becoming more huggy themselves.

On the other hand, sometimes the norm in the family was for less emotional display. For example, Michelle<sub>p</sub> who came from a stoical farm family that accepted everything in stride, was stunned by her son-in-law’s emotional outburst over a minor injury:

Michelle<sub>p</sub>: And he starts really throwing a fit kind of loud. . . . “Omigod! Look at my toe!” He has sandals, you know, it’s bleeding all over the place. He’s really fussing. And then he calls his mom on the cell phone, “I think I’m going to have to go to the emergency room before I come because this bull stepped on my toe, and it’s bleeding everywhere.” . . . And he’s showing his foot. And everybody around’s looking at him. . . . And I just, I don’t deal well with whining. I mean, our kids didn’t whine when they were little. You know, this is an adult. Don’t whine.

Having raised her own children to restrain themselves emotionally, Michelle<sub>p</sub> was surprised to find that her daughter had married a man who did not restrain his emotions.

So the acceptable level of emotional display was a norm that was communicated in families, but caused feelings of difference and disturbed both the family's and the newcomer's level of ontological security. In most cases, families and newcomers simply had to learn to accept and function with each other's level of emotional display because it was not something that could be negotiated, much less talked about.

### *Suitable Topics for Discussion*

In many families, some topics were considered taboo for conversation, so when newcomers joined the families, they sometimes brought up topics that were routinely not discussed in the family, or on the other hand, they found themselves embarrassed by topics normally discussed in the family. Often these encounters caused discomfort and left the family uncertain about how to communicate their discomfort. For example, Mindy<sub>p</sub> was embarrassed when her new daughter-in-law talked about sex:

Mindy<sub>p</sub>: because she she will talk about sex. And I, of course that's not a discussion I would have with [my son] very often, and I certainly did not have it with her while she was dating my son! . . . So it was like, okay this topic is not—and of course you know my upbringing. . . . this is not a topic of discussion EVER! . . . I I still want to maintain some distance there, even for [my son's] sake. You know . . . I don't want him to feel like, "My mommy knows what I'm doing!"

So Mindy<sub>p</sub> didn't know how to tell her daughter-in-law that she didn't want to hear about her sex life. On the other hand, Beverly<sub>m</sub>, who had been raised in a politically liberal family, found that political discussions became arguments with her husband's parents. On a different level, Leslie<sub>m</sub> found that her mother-in-law's conversational interests were different from her own; for example, that her mother-in-law liked to talk about shopping.

As a counselor, Sue<sub>p</sub> realized that her communication routine included having deep conversations, and thus she felt rejected when her stepdaughter-in-law didn't want to discuss her family history:

Sue<sub>p</sub>: [My stepdaughter-in-law is] kind of a closed person. Knowing her family background, . . . you'd think we'd have something in common. . . . But her mother was divorced from her father, and I believe her father committed suicide. . . . And my thoughts on this. . . is that because I'm a counselor, they're almost afraid to talk to me about it. . . . It's like they don't want to deal with it . . . and they don't want me to ask questions. . . . And early on I tried to talk with Kelly, you know, get to, "How's your mother, how's your father, do you have siblings?" You know, all that kind of stuff. And that's when that first came out, and she has never really talked to me about it since. . . . And so I view a lot of her behavior as avoidance. She doesn't want to get real close because I might ask deep questions.

As a carryover from her professional life, Sue<sub>p</sub> had a routine of having deep probing conversations with people, which for her, signaled closeness. But her stepdaughter-in-law was a more reserved person who did not want to share intimate details about her family life.

In the opposite direction, Lindsay<sub>m</sub> found that her routine of sharing her thoughts and experiences with her sister had to be adjusted somewhat:

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: And when we had been dating, Tyler and I, just a few months, Tyler told me something, said something about how something made him feel. It wasn't anything hugely significant. I thought it was funny, it was cute what he said. So I got together with [my sister] the next weekend and I told her. . . . So then that weekend in church, . . . [my sister] saw Tyler and mentioned this to him, and he realized that she had found out through me. And so that came up a little bit later. He said, "I wonder, sometimes I have to think twice about what I say to you because I don't know what I'm go to hear from [your sister] the next week at church." So that was an adjustment for him, realizing how close we all were. And it was an adjustment for me, realizing just because you tell everyone everything does not mean that you need to tell [your sister] everything about what you and Tyler talk about.

Lindsay<sub>m</sub> realized too late that in order to maintain her husband's ontological security, her routine of closeness with her sister should no longer include her sharing stories about his idiosyncrasies.

In these instances these participants found that their conversation topics needed some adjustment in their interactions with their in-laws, although they were not always sure how to affect that change. Again, these examples illustrate how the family's or the newcomer's sense of ontological security can be disrupted by differences in communication routines. Also, the participants found they had to move beyond their practical knowledge of their routines, and consider the motivation behind them.

#### *Conversational Techniques*

All participants described how conversation was the main activity when they got together with their families and in-laws. But how the families managed those conversations differed among the participants. Several participants noted that the differences in their family communication routines were directly related to the difference in the sizes of their families. Smaller families tended to have single conversations in which everyone participated, while larger families were more chaotic. For the newcomer whose family-of-origin had a different number of people, this change caused them some stress:

Michael<sub>m</sub>: You know, there are more of us, so, I'd say [my wife's] family is more intimate, so when they do things, they do things. Like, it seems more like family gatherings are that everybody gets together and talks, specifically with everyone, kind of thing. . . . Whereas in my family, it's kind of fend for yourself, sort of. You can have a you know, a two-person, three-person conversation all day and um, whether or not people get included . . .

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: Our families, mine and Ted's, are so different in terms of people. Our customs are the same. But my family, with Ted, is eight people. We all sit around the table, we talk with one another. . . . We'll laugh and joke with each



other, but it's not like this big, you know. We just sit and talk with each other. I grew up around adults pretty much, and so it's kind of a big adult thing. We . . . we just have conversations. We don't have kids running around at all. Uh, you know, that's just, that's just how it is. So there we are. Well then his family, you know, you're talking about 20, 30, 40 people at a gathering, tons of kids.

These participants noticed how the difference in family size affected how they and their spouses interacted with each other's families and influenced the kinds of conversations at family gatherings.

Beyond the obvious differences in family size, some participants noted that their in-laws simply had different techniques for conducting conversation, to which they did not know how to respond effectively. For example, after Tess's mother suffered a stroke, Tess<sub>e</sub> appreciated that her future mother-in-law would always ask about her mother's health. However, the mother-in-law usually opened the conversation with this inquiry, and Tess<sub>e</sub> didn't want to address that painful topic early in the conversation. She didn't know whether to answer the questions truthfully or just to brush them off. Similarly, Leslie<sub>m</sub> also experienced a different conversational pattern with her mother-in-law which she didn't know how to bridge:

Leslie<sub>m</sub>: I don't feel like I make much conversation with her, it's more following along. . . . And I would rather that there was more back-and-forth there. . . . She doesn't let conversations drop. And I think there has to be a lull. A little bit of a lull before I'll come up with something [to say].

It's interesting to note that Leslie<sub>m</sub> also recognized that perhaps her mother-in-law also felt awkward, but that her conversational pattern was to fill up the pauses so that Leslie<sub>m</sub> wouldn't feel awkward—a habit which in fact exacerbated Leslie's awkwardness. Other participants also indicated that they simply did not know how to make conversation with their in-laws, but that they wanted to both feel comfortable and make the other person feel comfortable. Unfortunately, they did not know how to resolve this problem because

people do not usually talk about how to talk together. Again, these examples illustrate how the newcomer and the family can experience these different routines as threats to the ontological security of their family life.

### *Differing Routines for Joking*

For many families, joking was the routine way of communicating with each other and communicating acceptance of the newcomer. However, sometimes the newcomer was not accustomed to being kidded with, and therefore it took a while before learning what the joking meant.

Lena<sub>m</sub>: I think [my husband had] had to learn how to be more sarcastic with [my family]. . . . And how to take it better. [My husband's] family really isn't sarcastic. [My husband] can be, but his family really isn't.

Sarah<sub>s</sub>: My dad is a big teaser, he just he loves to tease people. And that is kind of how he welcomed Ginny [my sister-in-law] into the family. He started picking on her. And the amazing thing is after Ginny figured out what he was doing, she just shot right back.

Barb<sub>m</sub>: Somebody's always the butt of the jokes. . . . That's kind of how my family helps my husband feel comfortable is by making fun of him. . . . Whenever my dad made a joke to him, he knew that he was welcome in the family. [He didn't take it personally] because I had warned him ahead of time that that's how my dad is. . . . He has kind of a dry sense of humor.

Courtney<sub>s</sub>: [talking about the relationship between her dad and her sister-in-law] Oh, he loves her! He jokes with her all the time. My dad's just a big, they're all jokesters! But my dad just has inside jokes all the time, and he just, they just get along really really well. . . . He just jokes with her all the time.

Joking and teasing in families often communicated acceptance, but some participants came from a less jovial background and did not quite understand the message communicated, which led to discomfort with joking.

*Summary*

As illustrated in this section, participants recognized that families had different communication routines, including norms for amount of interaction, level of displayed emotion, appropriate topics, conversational techniques, and joking. All these differences in family communication routines led to discomfort, alienation, and misunderstandings at times because they disturbed their sense of ontological security. Participants realized that they had to be more tolerant of their communication differences and maybe learn to adjust their own communication habits. All the participants longed for greater understanding between them and their in-laws and recognized that some of their tensions were simply the result of divergent communication routines. Lena<sub>m</sub> articulated how she would like to change the communication routines between herself and her in-laws:

Lena<sub>m</sub>: So if I could change one thing, it would just be that we understood each other better. You know, that if I say something as a joke, she'd know it was a joke. If if she you know, wants to be helpful, that I would take it as being helpful, instead of intrusive. . . . . Because I think some of [our tension] is just not understanding each other . . . not getting who each other really is.

Almost all of the participants sincerely hoped that over time, they and their in-laws would become accustomed to each other's communication routines and feel more comfortable together, thereby re-establishing ontological security in their families. In their effort to create a new family routine through the medium of their old routines, they had to move beyond their simple practical knowledge and look for the unacknowledged circumstances that created the real motivation for the routines. These participants who reflected on the routines, the causes of discomfort, and the possible solutions demonstrated their willingness to create a different routine.

In the next section, I discuss how newcomers perceived and responded to the norms and routines that were communicated to them by the families they entered.

### Research Question Three: Newcomers' Perceptions of and Responses to the Norms and Routines

As reported by participants from all groups, newcomers to the family had different perceptions of and responses to the norms and routines that had been communicated to them. Many found the routines similar to their own family routines, and experienced no difficulty in adjusting and finding a place in those routines. Thus they felt secure in the families they had entered. On the other hand, some newcomers viewed the norms and routines as controlling, and because they could not find a place of ontological security with those routines, they responded by rebelling against them in different ways, including simply avoiding contact. Others found that although the routines and norms were different and at first unsettling, they sought to understand the motivations behind those routines, and came to realize that the routines represented different values that might be a good addition to their own families' routines. In some cases the reverse was true where the newcomer introduced new values into the family. Some of the newcomers also accepted or created specific roles for themselves in the family that made them feel comfortable in the new routines. These differing responses are discussed in detail below. Since norms and routines encompass all phases of family living, many newcomers experienced different responses and adjustments to different facets of family life.

*Routines are Similar; Easy to Accept*

Some newcomers discovered that the families that they had entered had routines and norms that were very similar to those of their own families-of-origin. Therefore, the adjustment was very simple. This was particularly true among families that shared a routine of playing games and watching movies. Tina<sub>p</sub> and Charlie<sub>p</sub> related how their son-in-law just fit into their tradition of playing board games and cards, and became very competitive. Courtney<sub>s</sub> and Holly<sub>s</sub> described how their siblings-in-law blended in and participated on family nights:

Courtney<sub>s</sub>: And we watched those a ton [of home movies] over Christmas break, and [my future sister-in-law] wanted to come and like watch them all with us. All the time, so we had like family nights, all the time, when we were watching these. . . . and uh, so she loved to do that. So we had a bunch of nights where she'd come over and do that. . . . She just blends in, you don't even notice that she's there when she's over there.

Holly<sub>s</sub>: We always play games together and just do whatever, I mean, we really like to play games where like all of us can play. . . . Board games [laughs], like stupid things, like Trivial Pursuit or you know. Stupid games like that, we play all the time. I mean, we'll all watch like a movie together, and things like that . . .

Thus when entering families that had similar routines when they hung out together, such as playing games or watching movies, newcomers had no problems assimilating into this part of family life. The newcomers felt a sense of ontological security with their new families and did not seek further understanding or explanation for those routines. And thus the routines for the new family that included the newcomer was almost identical to the original family.

*Routines are Controlling or Reflect Wrong Values*

Some of the newcomers were not happy with the level of control implied by the routines and norms of the families they had entered, or the values reflected in them. In

some cases, this was because the routines were markedly different from their own families-of-origin. Amanda<sub>s</sub>, for example, reported how her brother-in-law at first didn't like her family's celebrations:

Amanda<sub>s</sub>: I remember a specific incident um, it was my little niece's birthday. . . . and um, you know, all my aunts and uncles, tons of presents, tons of decorations. Like it was this huge ordeal. . . . And I know . . . his family doesn't make a huge deal out of birthdays. . . . Where my mom's like, "You have to have a birthday cake. What are you talking about! Of course you're having a birthday cake!" . . . And I remember him wanting to leave because he felt like, "This is ridiculous, I can't believe this. This is so materialistic."

The brother-in-law felt the family's celebrations were excessive and put too much emphasis on things. He did not like the pressure to participate in a routine that did not reflect his own values.

But another issue was that many of the newcomers felt they were adults, some of the routines were suitable for younger family members, and they wanted to exert their independence from family expectations. Many of the newly married participants expressed conflict with being expected to spend weekends, holidays or vacation time with their in-laws in very specific ways.

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: And for a while, especially in the beginning, we went to his parents' house every weekend. And that just drove me nuts. And I and I told him, I was like, "I love your family, but if we keep going home every weekend to see them, I'm going to get to where I don't love your family as much because I'm just there all the time." You know, and I said, "I'm working all week and then as soon as I get home from work, we leave to go there, we stay there all weekend. We get home late Sunday night and go to work all week."

Allen<sub>m</sub>: I'm still not a big fan of Thanksgiving or Christmas, just because it seem, it's like an obligation, you know. . . . And I love to see my parents, and I love to see her parents, and I love to see all these people. They're all fine, and I don't have any problems with any of them. . . . But it's like, you know, I got a day off, so why do I have to go to 14 different places, and why do I have to be here to spend time? Why can't I just sit around in my sweat pants all day and not take a shower? . . . I remember at one point thinking, you know, well I don't care if I ever do a Thanksgiving again, you know.

The response of the newcomers when they felt this pressure and control was to rebel against it, which might be expressed in direct communication, passive-aggressive behavior, avoidance, or mediated communication through the spouse. These behaviors, however, did not restore the ontological security of the relationship.

Some newcomers mentioned that specific routines among their in-laws did not recognize their status as separate and independent adults. For example, when Jennifer<sub>m</sub> got married, she moved in with her husband and his father, who had always lived together. As she described it, nothing changed for her husband when she moved in except that he got to sleep with a woman. Jennifer felt inhibited about moving her knick-knacks and furniture into the house and changing their routines. Her ontological security was restored only when all of them moved to a new house and established new routines that recognized her marriage as a change in the relationship between son and father.

Other participants also reported family expectations that impacted the newlywed couple's identity as a separate unit or as adults. For example, Nathan<sub>m</sub> felt pressure to limit his job search to a small area of the country because his in-laws wanted to keep their daughter close:

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: A lot of the decisions that are being made for Megan and our future right now, have to do with the location of where her family is. That we'll be moving back closer to home because of that family bond. And, if I was on my own, I could move to you know Japan and and not worry about it. And there are some times where I have my selfish moments, where I'm thinking, my I'm not getting the best for myself because I'm being limited by having to return there.

Nathan<sub>m</sub> had not expected how much his in-laws would influence the life choices that he and his wife were making about where to live. Thus when he realized that his choices

were being inhibited by his in-laws desire to remain in close contact with his wife, he felt resentful and wanted to make his own decisions.

In contrast, Ted<sub>m</sub> did not mind remaining near to his wife's family because that also meant remaining near to his family. However, he did not like his father-in-law's routine of nagging his wife about her studies and undermining her self-confidence:

Ted<sub>m</sub>: Early on it was hard for me to adjust to Ginny's father's negative reinforcements of Ginny's accomplishments. . . . For example, . . . he would constantly badger her with, "Do you got your homework done? Do you got your homework done? What's going on? You know, why don't you have your homework done? How's it coming?" . . . But he would constantly do that uh with her nearly every time they talked on the phone. . . . And it has actually gotten a whole lot better here lately because because early in our relationship, she would just take it. . . . She would just kind of take it, to keep things smooth. And I would constantly suggest to her, "You know, you can you can stand up for yourself and still do it in a loving way and in a kind way." And she she wouldn't.

Rather than approach his in-laws directly about their communication routines with his wife, Ted<sub>m</sub> tried to encourage his wife to rebel and stand up for herself, which she was reluctant to do.

Similarly, Melissa<sub>m</sub> was angry with her in-laws' routine of giving money to the newly married couple, even when the in-laws were financial insolvent themselves.

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: It's this whole thing with the putting money in your purse when you're visiting thing. . . . It's really frustrating, especially when we visit, they try to pull things like that. . . . So we're at the point now where we're trying to tell them and I had, I did get in a little argument with his dad, which I've never done before. "Yes we have problems. But we don't want your help because," I didn't come out and say it, but we really don't want their help because they have their own problems. . . . I I got mad about it.

Similar to Ted, Melissa<sub>m</sub> tried to get her husband to openly address this routine with his parents and initiate change.

These examples illustrate how newcomers sometimes perceived the communicated family routines as restrictive, controlling, or just unhealthy. The



newcomers recognized that the particular problematic routines of their in-laws disturbed their own sense of ontological security for themselves as individuals and also as a couple trying to establish their own identity. In response to these disturbing routines, the newcomers felt rebellious and angry and considered ways to change or simply not conform to those family routines. These acts and feelings of rebellion led to strained relationships with the in-laws until they were resolved. Sometimes, however, the newcomer eventually came to realize that the restrictive or different routines were actually valuable.

#### *New Values to Teach and Learn*

Exposure to new family routines caused some newcomers to re-evaluate their own family experiences and question the underlying values. They sought for the motivation of the action and the unacknowledged circumstances that influenced the families' routines. After exploring this higher level of knowledge about the family's routines, the newcomers came to realize that what they had deemed acceptable or unacceptable communication routines within their own families-of-origin could be reframed and re-evaluated within the value systems of their new families. For example, from interacting with her more upbeat in-laws, Lena<sub>m</sub> realized that her mother's negative and cautious approach to life might not be that useful in everyday life. Similarly, what Lena<sub>m</sub> had previously judged as superfluous "touchy-feely" verbal affirmation between family members in her husband's family actually felt good and helped her feel more confident and secure.

Although both Tyler<sub>m</sub> and Nathan<sub>m</sub> were at first concerned at how much everyday or weekly contact was expected by their wives' parents, they came to appreciate the value

the family placed on connectedness and came to enjoy having a place in a close family that wanted to share their daily struggles and triumphs.

Tyler<sub>m</sub>: And it's interesting how it's worked out because, as we as we uh as we went through [premarital] marriage counseling and all of that, and you know, the counselor, who is one of the pastors in our church, talked about how, you know, "This could be good for for you, Tyler. Because you know their family is good. And and this could be a blessing for you." . . . And so . . . it's good because I'm kind of learning, I'm kind of getting more of an appreciation not only for her family, but my own family.

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: I hadn't grown up in that type of family where [family contact] was such a necessity. And so more and more I'm really understanding it, the more I spend time with them, the more that I'm starting to feel that too, the importance of it. I'm I'm buying in, but being able to buy into it fully . . . I mean I have a close relationship with [father-in-law and mother-in-law]. You know, I consider [mother-in-law] a second mother, I certainly consider [father-in-law] a father figure to for me. . . . Um, I guess I've get gotten kind of spoiled over five years with that, because with my family, it's not there so much, you know. So if things turn, if they changed, it would become more like my family, and that would definitely, that would, I think that would create more problems than good.

Tyler<sub>m</sub> and Nathan<sub>m</sub> both realized that there was something lacking in their routines of their own families-of-origin concerning the importance of family togetherness and contact. Thus through the routines of their in-laws, they learned new values about what it meant to be a family.

Through exposure to her in-laws, Melissa<sub>m</sub> came to appreciate the lifestyle of blue-collar workers and rural living—which was so different from her own upbringing:

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: I do remember seeing the house for the first time because it it was a small little house. I mean, it's basically like an old farm house that was, looked, I mean, that looked smaller than . . . anything that I've lived in. And any, you know, and and it was really neat, it was like made with all like brick and stone. And I thought that was really neat. And I do appreciate things that are different than me. . . [They've] taught me some things too, I think. Because even though . . . I might have all these degrees, it's made me actually think less of having the degrees since I've known them. You know, it it's more about what are your skills, and what can you do, . . . and how can you make a living at it.

Melissa<sub>m</sub> had grown up in a much more affluent and well-educated family that did not value simple country living and so-called non-professional labor. Through her relationships with her less-educated and less-affluent in-laws, Melissa<sub>m</sub> began to re-evaluate her parents' values and came to realize that her parents' remarks and values often could be interpreted as elitist. She began to realize that lack of a college education did not necessarily mean that people had no specialized skills.

As the examples above suggest, by being exposed to new routines and norms in family life, newcomers sometimes began to re-evaluate their own family routines and came to realize that there was more than one way to conduct family living. Thus by seeking a higher level of understanding the troublesome routines, they experienced a different sense of ontological security.

*Creates or Accepts New Communication Role in the Family*

In response to the perceived different routines, some newcomers found an opportunity to create or accept a role in their spouse's family that they did not hold in their own family. Almost all the participants in all groups described the primary role for the newcomer in the family as supporter of the spouse, a role which the in-laws usually accepted. As long as that primary role was suitably executed, all participants expressed that they should be and would be satisfied with the newcomer, no matter what the other shortcomings or differences were. This role of supporter/protector was defined along traditional gender demarcations, particularly for the men, who were expected to "support a family" and protect their wives. For women, the role of supporter was not so specific as to include housework, cooking, and chores, or even childbearing, but just in general "to support the husband." The male role was more physical, while the female role was

described as more communicative and emotional, although this may have been a Politically Correct response, which when operationalized might also include housework, cooking, and childbearing. However, I did not ask participants to more specifically define the female role of supporting her husband.

Beyond those basic primary roles, participants also reported other roles for the newcomer, often created by the newcomers as they themselves sought to place themselves in the family and experience ontological security. For example, Amanda's brother-in-law and Allen<sub>m</sub> both positioned themselves as family entertainers by often playing their guitars and singing at family gatherings. Ginny<sub>m</sub> volunteered to help her mother-in-law in the kitchen, when she realized no one else in the family helped her. Both Nathan<sub>m</sub> and Michael<sub>m</sub> found that the way to lighten up family interactions was by playing the jokester, and keeping the conversation light and moving. Allen<sub>m</sub> and Beverly<sub>m</sub> both started hanging out with the children at extended family gatherings and found they felt most comfortable entertaining and playing with them. Sue's future daughter-in-law showed an interest in learning horsemanship, something Sue<sub>p</sub> couldn't share with her son. Although Marissa<sub>s</sub> had been the tomboy in the family, she was relieved when her new brother-in-law showed an interest in fishing and hunting with her dad. Holly<sub>s</sub> however felt displaced when her brothers-in-law took her spot on golf outings with her father. Jennifer<sub>m</sub> reinstated Christmas traditions for her husband and father-in-law who hadn't celebrated the holiday since the death of their mother/wife.

Many of the families had children of only one sex, and so when a child married, the newcomer stepped into a gendered role, which changed the dynamic for the underrepresented gender, a change usually reflected in the communication routines and

welcomed by both sexes. Mindy<sub>p</sub>, who had two sons, appreciated her daughter-in-law for introducing more consideration for her feminine outlook and interests in the family.

Sue<sub>p</sub>, who had two sons and four stepsons, welcomed daughters- and stepdaughters-in-law as talkative contrasts to her stoic and taciturn male family members. Similarly, both Patty<sub>p</sub> and Tyler<sub>m</sub> recognized how Tyler's marriage into a family of four girls had brought "a voice or reason" (Patty<sub>p</sub>) into the family so full of the "silliness of girls" (Tyler<sub>m</sub>).

Allen<sub>m</sub> noted that when he married the eldest of three daughters, his father-in-law finally had someone to whom he could tell a dirty joke. Tricia's father appreciated gaining a hunting partner when the eldest of his three daughters married. But Holly<sub>s</sub>, whose father had wanted four sons instead of his four girls, had become even more distant to his daughters when he acquired two sons-in-law. Thus by changing the balance of gender roles in the family, newcomers often changed the communication dynamics.

Some newcomers found their roles in the family by using their occupational or vocational talents to help their spouse's families. For example, Tina<sub>p</sub> and Charlie's son-in-law was an auto body technician who helped the family by skillfully restoring several of their cars after collisions. Ted<sub>m</sub> found that he was more mechanically inclined than anyone in his wife's family, so he often did household maintenance for them. Melissa's husband was in medical school, so he was often consulted for advice on his parents-in-law's injuries and illnesses. Tricia's brother-in-law and Babette's fiancé both endeared themselves to their in-laws by fixing their computers. By assuming these very physical roles in the family, the newcomers raised their status and value in the their spouses' families and created more avenues for direct communication with their in-laws.

The newcomers accepted or created these roles as a way to make themselves useful to and maintain positive relationships with their spouse's families. In these ways, they saw themselves fitting into the routines of the family and being accepted, as well as positioning themselves to affect change in those routines and norms. In this way, the newcomers established a routine in the family that gave them a sense of ontological security.

### *Summary*

Newcomers to families, like newcomers to any other groups, are confronted with a variety of norms and routines that affect them in different ways. In some cases, they simply accept them as the most desirable routine because they conform to their own sense of ontological rightness. In other cases when the routines conflict with their concept of acceptable adult family life, they openly rebel against them in some way. Sometimes exposure to differing routines makes them rethink their own values and explore the motivation and unacknowledged circumstances of the routine, and then they come to accept the new routine. And finally, sometimes they create a new role or routine in the family in an effort to fit it and possibly be able to influence the family in the future. In all these responses, the newcomers are seeking to better understand the routines and establish a sense of ontological security with their spouse's families. In the next section, I discuss how families and newcomers adjust their routines to accommodate each other.

### Research Question Four: Change in Communication Routines and Its Repercussions

As might be expected, the introduction of newcomers into the family resulted in changes in communication routines, many with positive repercussions. Through the

medium of the routines from both of their families-of-origin, the new couple often instituted new routines for themselves and for their families-of-origin. In many cases, both sets of in-laws joined forces to create new routines that embraced their conjoined families. Siblings often forged their own new routines with their married brothers and sisters to establish their individual adult identities and to renegotiate their family-of-origin routines. Children and parents also found new ways to communicate, sometimes leading to closer relationships, but also sometimes leading to more distant relationships.

### *New Routines Instituted*

In many cases the new couple instituted new routines for themselves and their families-of-origin. In some cases the new routines were aimed at communicating their status as a separate unit apart from either set of parents. For example, when Jennifer<sub>m</sub> married and moved into the house her husband shared with his dad, she found it difficult to change their routines and establish an identity as a couple with her husband because her husband and father were very set in their routines. What helped them change was that they moved to a new house and were able to reorganize their personal territories that communicated a different relationship between father and son, and created new communication routines for all of them:

Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: And there's a master bedroom downstairs, and there's a master bedroom upstairs. And we've given [my father-in-law] the upstairs. . . . So there is kind of a division of living arrangements. Um, however, when we first moved here, I don't think he recognized . . . the need for separate living space. He just, he hadn't, I don't think he recognized the relationship had changed. And uh, that Tom and I needed kind of to identify ourselves as our own unit, um. It's not that he wasn't welcome downstairs, it would just be like, "You know, if you want to come downstairs, don't just be-bop downstairs. Maybe halfway down the hall say, 'hey, can I come down?'" He's gotten much better about that. Because that allows Tom and I some private time.

After moving to the new house, Jennifer's father-in-law had to learn a new communication routine—that he needed to ask permission before entering the married couple's private space.

Sometimes however, it was the parents that instituted the change in order to help the couple establish their own identity. After Lindsay<sub>m</sub> married, her parents stopped calling her as frequently, in order to give her and her husband some time to be together by themselves:

Lindsay<sub>m</sub>: Which is good. Because now that we're married, my primary goal is my, I mean my primary focus is my relationship with Tyler, as opposed to my relationship with them. It's a healthy difference, but it's just different. So I'm adjusting to that.

Mindy<sub>p</sub> did the same thing when her son got married; she cut back on the calling and visiting in order to communicate to them that they were their own family now.

Mindy<sub>p</sub>: I don't see him as much. I don't have the opportunity. He is, his attention is diverted to her, as it should be. . . . And therefore, I don't have as much connection with them.

In these examples, the new communication routine concerned a reduction in the amount of contact between parent and child.

In other cases, newly-weds planned to institute new routines, not only as a way to establish themselves as a couple, but also as a way to mitigate the tension of having to honor and include both of their families-of-origin. For example, Beverly<sub>m</sub> was tired of the busyness of Christmas, which they spent shuttling between the two families. She looked forward to a time when she and her husband would just have Christmas together as their own family:

Beverly<sub>m</sub>: I think I've learned it's much more important that we're happy as a couple. We are our own family. I always joke that when I have kids, on Christmas Days, we can just stay where we are.



Babette<sub>e</sub> similarly planned to institute a new routine at Christmas:

Babette<sub>e</sub>: Actually we've talked to my parents about starting a new [routine] of our own, where everyone, his family and my family, you know just immediate family, come to our place for Christmas. Because obviously we uh have no [extended] family ties anymore, . . . and his family doesn't get together with any extended family. It's just their immediate family. And so we thought, two immediate families that only get together with their immediate families. So why not all get together at our house? A neutral zone . . . so to speak. So we might be starting a new [routine] next Christmas.

These participants recognized that although they would have to change the family routines in order to establish their own ontological security as a couple.

These examples illustrate how various members of the families recognize the need to adjust their routines so that both they and the newcomers feel comfortable, so that their family life offers ontological security to all the members, including the newcomer, because they realized that this security was the best way to help the new couple.

Newlyweds also instituted new routines for their religious practice. For some, they simply chose not to have religious routines at all because religion had been only marginally practiced in their families. Others embraced one or the other's religion, while often still attending the other church to honor the other family's routine. For example, Tina<sub>p</sub> and Charlie<sub>p</sub> raised their daughter Catholic, but when she married the son of a non-denominational Christian minister, she began to attend church with her husband. However, when she visited her parents, she and her husband attended the Catholic church. On the other hand, Babette<sub>e</sub> came from an atheist background, and her fiancé felt no desire to continue his religious practice, and yet sometimes they both attended church with his parents, just to appease them. Some participants indicated that having a baby had or would change the couple's religious routines. For example, Tricia<sub>s</sub>'s brother-in-

law finally joined the Catholic church after the birth of his daughter. Similarly, Ellen<sub>s</sub> recounted how although her sister-in-law came from a strong Lutheran background, the married couple planned to have more open attitude toward religion and educate their children with ideals from many religions. Thus couples instituted new religious routines for themselves, but also tried to honor their families' traditional religious routines.

Other participants instituted a new routine just for themselves as individuals. For Jennifer<sub>m</sub>, religious routine was an issue because her husband chose to attend church with his father rather than with her. Jennifer<sub>m</sub> was unwilling to attend a church that had such different religious ceremonies. Although she recognized this practice as a way for her husband to maintain a close relationship with his father, she also mourned the fact that she and her husband were thus not creating their own religious tradition. She accepted the loss as a necessary adjustment to marriage and created her own routine of making Sunday dinner while her husband and father-in-law were at church. She also embraced this time as her only time to be alone in the house.

The newcomers were also able to teach new values and thereby to affect change in the families of their spouses. For example, Amanda<sub>s</sub> found that when her sister married a musician rather than a corporate-ladder-climber, her parents rediscovered their artistic roots, and began to encourage the arts more in their own nuclear family. Similarly, Barb<sub>m</sub> had a gay brother, and when her in-laws met the gay brother and liked him, the in-laws altered their former behavior of making disparaging remarks about gay people. Mindy<sub>p</sub> found that her daughter-in-law created a new dynamic in her family with regard to feminine interests:

Mindy<sub>p</sub>: And definitely when she's around there, it's definitely a more feminine presence in the house. . . . I I think there is some some more . . . uh, concession,

not concession, but if I wanted to do something frilly, it might be received as, “Why are you doing that?” But if she’s doing it, then we all just go do it. You know, if I wanted to go play cards, it would be pulling teeth to get everybody in there to play cards. And because she’s there, [my husband] will sit down and play cards.

Mindy appreciated that the presence of her daughter-in-law changed her husband and sons’ attitude toward what they saw as frivolous activities.

Thus newcomers and families recognized that family life is evolving and that routines needed to change in order to accommodate the growth of the family and their own personal growth. Therefore, in many cases they instituted new routines to accommodate and honor the changing family and to restore ontological security for all the members.

#### *Both In-Law Families Join Forces*

One of ways that in-laws changed their family routines to accommodate newcomers was that they often embraced the newcomers’ families-of-origin and began to include them in their family celebrations. Often this was because the newcomer came from a small family and the parent of the newcomer was single.

Nathan<sub>m</sub>: My mom was going to be on her own on Thanksgiving. And Megan’s mom e-mailed my mom, and just, you know, said, “Why don’t you come by our family’s house for Thanksgiving?” And so my mom did. And that was totally unexpected, one that [my mother-in-law] would invite her. That’s not too unexpected because [my mother-in-law]’s that kind of person. But I was completely surprised that my mother accepted the invitation. And she came, and it was actually quite a pleasant experience. I think my mom really enjoyed herself and Megan’s family and her extended family were very welcoming to her and things like that. And then uh, and then her, Megan’s aunt, um has an extended family Christmas on Christmas day, and again my mother was going to be alone on Christmas day, and so Megan’s aunt was like, “Why you don’t come by my house for our family Christmas, hang out with us, and play games, and have fun with us.” And I think my mom will take her up on that as well, now that my mom’s becoming more comfortable.

Josh<sub>s</sub>: [speaking about his brother-in-law's mother, who was recently widowed] So a lot of times we'll do stuff together. . . . so his mom um, since then, she comes to all our Christmas get-togethers. And um, you know, for the boys' birthdays, we're always together. . . . I mean, she's, it's very natural, she's you know, just a part of the family as well, so.

Thus it was easy to include the other parent-in-law, who would otherwise be alone on a holiday.

For other families, they found that liked each other and had similar interests, or that it was just easier to share their children and grandchildren by having joint celebrations. For example, since Lena<sub>m</sub> and her husband lived far away from their parents, when they drove back to visit at Christmas, one set of parents would invite the other set over the first evening so that they did not have to wait to see their child. Similarly, Leslie's parents and parents-in-law jointly came to her birthday party and graduation. In the same vein, when Becky's sister-in-law hosted Christmas at her new house, the sister-in-law also invited her own mother and brothers, as well as Becky's family.

This joining of the in-law families was a particularly interesting finding to me for several reasons: First, I have personally experienced this practice in the various in-law relationships I have been part of. For example, my sister's mother-in-law became a kind of third grandmother to my children because she so often attended our family functions and also invited me and my children to her home—even after my sister's marriage broke up. In fact, when I was discussing this finding with my now adult son, he responded with, “Oh, so that's how we're related to Grandma Tobin. I never really thought about it!” Second, when I shared this finding with acquaintances who had not participated in this study, many of them also reported that their families had also embraced their in-laws.

For example, one of my friends said that her husband is an only child. At Christmas her in-laws host the family celebration at their home, and her parents attend, along with my friend's married brother, his wife, and their three children. In other words, her parents-in-laws invite her entire family-of-origin—seven extra people—to their celebrations. And the final reason that this finding is interesting is that other research on in-law relationships has not recognized this as a common occurrence in families.

This joining of the in-law families also represents another attempt to provide ontological security for all those involved. The practice is often motivated by the recognition that pressure for more interaction from two families can disturb the ontological security of the young couple, which becomes a dialectical tension for the families, that of balancing their own needs with their children's needs.

*Direct, Unmediated Relationships among Siblings-in-Law*

Although as discussed above, parents-in-law often instituted mediated relationships with their children-in-law, siblings-in-law often reported direct relationships with the spouses of their siblings. In part this practice helped to establish ontological security because newcomers and younger siblings-in-law were able to experience relationships they had missed in their families-of-origin previously. In addition, the newcomer often singled out one particular sibling for a close relationship because his/her communication routines were more similar to their own. Also these direct relationships were important to the siblings-in-law because they served to help transform the family-of-origin from a child-centered family to an adult-centered family.

Some participants were excited about gaining a sibling relationship that they had not experienced in their own family-of-origin:

Melissa<sub>m</sub>: I thought [my husband's brother] was kind of neat, I mean, I just took him as like, wow, a younger like brother-type figure. This is kind of neat because also, I'm the youngest of my entire family too, . . . so I I haven't really been able to be around people that are younger than me, hardly ever . . . and so I thought it was kind of neat that he was, you know, ten years younger than me.

Holly<sub>s</sub>: [third of four daughters] Like I always wanted that brotherly like protection and things like that. And I have that now [because of my sister's husband].

Michael<sub>m</sub>: Because I've never had any other younger siblings before, so now I do, so that's kind of nice, so. . . . I'm the eighth of eight [children]. . . . So it's kind of nice to have a younger . . . . I guess it's the status change, that you know, like, I'm not the youngest anymore.

Because they had not previously experienced certain sibling relationships in their family-of-origin, these participants felt drawn to direct relationships with their new siblings-in-law.

Sometimes the newcomer found one particular sibling to establish a close relationship with, often because they shared similar joking routines that made them both feel comfortable:

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: [My fiancé has a] brother who's 18. Like, he's really, he's really cool. Like I think we have a good relationship. Like when I see him, we just joke. Like I I feel a lot more at ease with him, I don't know why. . . . We joke a lot. Like I can say stuff to him that I wouldn't say to his sisters. Like, "shut up, you're stupid." Just playing. But also, if I said that to his sisters, they might think I'm serious or something.

Courtney<sub>s</sub>: [My future sister-in-law has] just come to relate to each one of us, because we all have really different personalities. . . . Like my younger brother, . . . definitely doesn't like get very close to people very quickly at all. . . . he and our future sister-in-law] have their own special little section of like dumb corny jokes and they like understand each other. . . . Like she'll joke with him, and he'll like know what she's talking about. And she knows what he's talking about. . . . Everyone's noticed that because he's really outgoing around her and will say anything. And he's usually kind of again, more reserved so.

The newcomer found someone in the family that shared the same communication routines for joking, and thus they felt more comfortable interacting in the in-law family.

Many siblings-in-law discovered that the spouse of their sibling became a new adult voice in their lives, one that was accepted and trusted by the parents, but often in contrast to the parents. For example, many of siblings-in-law participants mentioned how the spouses of their siblings had become mentors and advisers on such things as the transition to college, where to go for spring break, workout routines, trip directions, servicing the car, etc. Many younger siblings called their brothers- or sisters-in-law instead of their parents when they needed advice or help on specific matters.

Holly<sub>s</sub>: Something's wrong with my car, and I called my dad and he yelled at me about it. So I was like, okay, that really wasn't an answer. . . . So I called my oldest brother-in-law and I was like, "There's something wrong with my car." And he's like, "What's wrong with it, what did you do?" And I'm like, "I didn't do anything." And so I was you know explaining. Things like that, or my other brother-in-law I'll ask him questions about. Like I was looking for internships. And I was asking about companies, several companies, if he had known of them, what he thought. . . . Things like that. I mean they've always been really helpful.

Courtney<sub>s</sub>: [my future sister-in-law] went here, when she went to [this college] for undergrad, and so last year, my first freshman year, I would go over to her house all the time. And always call her up and ask her, where to you know, get stuff done around [city] because I didn't know the area at all.

Amanda<sub>s</sub>: [My brother-in-law] is just, always just takes care of everyone. . . . If ever, you know, if anything would ever happen to me, he's always like, "You know you can call me." . . . One night my sister actually uh got arrested for a stupid reason. And I called my dad. And [my brother-in-law] flipped out. He's like, "Why didn't you call me, why did you call your dad?" . . . You know, he just always kind of likes to be in on everything and uh take care of everyone and.

These younger siblings found they could turn to the newcomer for advice and be treated like an adult, in contrast to their parents who might not recognize the adult needs of their younger children.

These direct unmediated relationships resulted in the siblings creating new routines among themselves that often did not involve the parents at all. For example, in

many families the married children and their spouses began to visit and interact without the parents, and thereby establish their own routines.

Mark<sub>p</sub>: [My youngest son] has really gotten along well. . . . He's enjoyed having a, like another sister and brother. [My son-in-law and daughter-in-law] have really accepted him, and that's been nice. He is the younger one, he's you know, ten years younger than my son-in-law, seven years younger than my daughter-in-law, but they always try to include him, as a matter of fact, probably even more so than his own brother and sister would. They always took him along with them.

Sometimes the sibling-in-law was a welcome alternate opinion when parents seemed old fashioned:

Allen<sub>m</sub>: I don't know if I was necessarily a good influence. . . . I don't think it was I was trying to, but I ended up, like their parents would say something, and I was always the one [rolling my eyes]. You know. So I I think we got along pretty good, you know. . . . But maybe I wasn't a good, overly good influence on them but, nobody got in, went to jail or anything.

Justin<sub>e</sub>: [My fiancée's] mom and . . . sister, and even her little brother, somewhat. . . . They both, well they kind of ignore their dad now. He's he's not the authority that he used to be. . . . In in a weird sort of way. I felt like they sort of placed some of that on me. . . . But they just seemed, well, much more centered on me, . . . they would you know, close the door so that the dad couldn't hear things they were saying and that kind of thing.

These newcomers found that their younger siblings-in-law welcomed them into the family because the newcomers brought new ideas and attitudes that reflected the growing adult awareness of the younger siblings-in-law.

In hanging out with and having direct, unmediated relationships with their siblings' spouses, younger siblings seemed to find a space to become adults under the influence and protection of the in-law. Many of the newcomers were perceived as being able to communicate with their spouse's siblings as adults and take them under their wings as protégés. In this way, the newcomer acted as a catalyst for transforming the family of childhood into a family of adults. Thus the direct relationship between the



newcomer and the spouse's siblings established the ontological security that the family would continue as the children became adults, and that the adult children would be recognized as adults in this transformed family.

*Changed Communication between Parents and Married Children*

Another re-created routine that some participants experienced was that of changed relationships between parents and married children. Most of these changes were positive. Some parents reported that when their children married, the parents were then able to establish adult relationships with them. Audrey<sub>p</sub> and Patty<sub>p</sub> both commented on how when their daughters married, as mothers they could talk more intimately with them about being wives and their own experiences in marriage:

Audrey<sub>p</sub>: This has given me a new relationship with my daughter. . . . We're more equal. . . . Well the last election was real interesting because it brought up topics that I normally wouldn't have talked to her about. But since she's a wife, and she's dealing with work and everything else, it was uh, interesting to see where she was coming from.

Patty<sub>p</sub>: I think it has opened up a whole new area of things we can talk about. Because before, you know I might address some issues with her, but because they were out of her experience, it was like, "Okay, okay." But now she's comes back, and she's "Mom, now I remember what you told me about this, but you know." . . . Before she got married, I said, ". . . I want to share with you my experience, so you will understand, or just have have a basis for understanding, you know, what some of your feelings might be like." And you know, after the wedding she called me, "We got to get together to talk."

Similarly Charlie<sub>p</sub> commented on how he was able to talk more openly now with his married daughter:

Charlie<sub>p</sub>: Well, I think it's improved, just because she's acts and is more mature, and not that she was ever immature. She wasn't even immature when she was 14 really. . . . But she just has more you know, trying to stay alive and pay the bills, is just more in common with what we have than what had she had as a college student, or as a high school student. . . . I think it broadens the whole . . . uh, you can talk about um, childhood things a little more openly and and less from a parent-child kind of point of view to an equal point of view.

These parents appreciated how marriage had matured their children and given them new topics of conversation.

Although this transformation to adult relationships might have occurred eventually without the child's marriage, these and other participants noted that even though their children had lived on their own before marriage, they noted the real change in their relationships occurred when their children married. In some cases, the transition was not so smooth. For example, Jennifer<sub>m</sub> who had lived apart from her parents for a long time before marrying, had to make an explicit demand to her mother to be treated as an adult after she married:

Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: The first summer we went back after we were married. Um, we were all getting ready for someplace. And my parents have one bathroom, . . . The time that we were supposed to be ready by, wasn't really clearly stated. And my mom yelled at me saying to go get get ready or whatever. And she did it in a tone of voice where she made me feel like I was 12. You know, that tone. . . . And oh, it infuriated me. Just infuriated. Here I am. My first trip home with my husband. . . . And so, I went and got ready and came back out and when he went in to get ready, I looked her in the eye, just as cold as stone, and said, "Don't you ever talk to me like that in front my husband, ever again!" Which was a big thing for me. And to this day, she's she's never done. And that was three years ago. She's been very respectful.

For Jennifer, who married in her late 20s, she was finally able to claim adult treatment from her parents when she got married.

Some newlyweds also commented on how contact with their spouses' families had encouraged them to improve the communication with their own families-of-origin. Sometimes the impetus to renew communication was that being exposed to their spouse's close loving family made newly married people appreciate their ties to their own families. But also for some participants, their new in-laws encouraged them to reach out and heal

problematic relationships in their own families-of-origin. Nathan, for example, found that his mother-in-law encouraged him to see his own mother more often.

However, not all families experienced changes for the better in the communication between parent and child. Some daughters, particularly, felt a new reticence about discussing their marital relationships with their parents. For example, when Michelle's daughter broke up with her fiancé the first time, the father and fiancé had a big blowup that was never resolved. As a result, the daughter never officially announced their re-engagement, but quietly made plans to get married. After marriage, although Michelle<sub>p</sub> saw her daughter frequently, the daughter never discussed her marital relationship with her mother, apparently because she thought her parents did not quite approve of her husband. Similarly, after marriage Ginny<sub>m</sub> experienced a reticence with her mother because of tension over how much time the married pair spent with the husband's parents:

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: My mom and I are very close. We've always been close my whole life. I used to feel like I could talk to her about pretty much anything, within reason. But when Ted and I became very serious, and she kind of was jealous, for lack of a better word, of the of the splitting of the time and all of this, and was dealing with you know, me getting married, what all that means. . . . I felt like she didn't like Ted. Because I felt like anytime I said anything to her about him, that she would answer me in such a way that it made me feel like she disliked him.

So Ginny<sub>m</sub> found that although she had been very close to her mother, she could not talk to her mother about her husband. She saw this as a loss, but did not know how to change it.

Many of the participants had experienced changes in the communication routines between parents and their married children. For most participants, these changes evolved smoothly into closer adult relationships and re-established the ontological security of

close parent-child relationship, but for some, the transition was rockier, and sometimes resulted in more distant relationships in which strained communication became the norm.

### *Summary*

This section described how families and newcomers affected changes to the routines and norms in the families. Sometimes the newly married couple instituted the new routine, although sometimes it was instigated by the parents. Sometimes, in-law families joined forces and became a kind of super-extended family. Families also evolved from families of childhood into families of adulthood by re-creating the communication patterns between the children and parents, and between younger and older siblings. The evolution of these routines demonstrate the basic tenet of structuration theory, that the routines of daily life that make life predictable and comfortable are both the medium and outcome of social structure, in this case family structure. Working through their basic routines, people reproduce those routines in similar or sometimes different forms in order to maintain their ontological security as the family changes. They mobilize three kinds of knowledge—practical, rationalized, and motivational knowledge—to reproduce those routines.

### Theoretical Analysis—Structuration

Structuration theory posits that social activity consists mostly of day-to-day routines and that these routines of everyday life are both the medium through which humans create their social structures and also the outcome, that is, the social structure that is created (Giddens, 1984). One of the basic tenets of structuration theory is termed *the duality of structure*. In enacting structures in their lives, human beings are simply following their memories of what they have always done, their routines, which make

everyday life and interactions predictable and comfortable, giving them a sense of “ontological security” (Cassell, 1993; Giddens, 1984). Human beings act within the confines and guidelines of their social structures and routines, which give them a sense of ontological security, and their actions then reproduce those routines and thus maintain their ontological security.

Through the use of structuration theory, the process of assimilation into the family emerged, specifically the process of communicating and negotiating routines and norms as the family assimilates a newcomer. This process illustrates how families communicate their routines to newcomers, how the newcomers respond to those routines, and how the whole family adjusts to the newcomer using different kinds of knowledge about their routines, while attempting to maintain or restore the ontological security of their family lives. A related outcome of the study was the identification of specific communication routines that exist in families that contribute to their ontological security.

### *Ontological Security*

The participants in this study often commented on the sense of comfort or discomfort between them and their in-laws. Participants rarely indicated that they actually disliked their in-laws, but rather that they experienced different levels of discomfort with them because of their routines and norms. Families usually tried to assimilate the newcomer simply by carrying on with their normal routines and hoping the newcomer would simply fit in and conform to their family routines, including their religious practices. The families usually expected the spouse of the newcomer to mediate the relationship between the family and the newcomer and to explain the family norms and routines. Sometimes—although rarely compared to the other methods—families directly

communicated about the routines in the family, what they expected of the newcomer, and their evaluation of the newcomer. More often, however, the family employed indirect methods to convey this information by explaining family history and relationships and signaling acceptance and recognition with gifts. At the same time, because of the messages they had received from the media and narratives from their acquaintances, participants were well aware that in-laws had the potential of disturbing the family's ontological security. Thus their hope—reiterated by most of the participants—was that the newcomer would fit in and they would all get along, signaling that the participants wanted to maintain the ontological security of their family lives.

For their part, newcomers were confronted by routines that sometimes were thankfully familiar, but that often felt strange, controlling, or just different to them, and as a result, they did not feel totally comfortable with their spouse's families. In an effort to restore their own ontological security, the newcomers tried to conform, but sometimes could not conform and instead suggested a change or an accommodation. Other times the newcomers re-evaluated their own routines and norms for family living, and attempted to learn or teach new values and routines, or created new roles in the family for themselves that would give them some ontological security. Thus, through their own routines and the routines of the family, the newcomers attempted to reproduce a routine for family living.

In response to the entry of the newcomers, all the participants in this study, whether parents-in-law, siblings-in-law, or children-in-law, discovered that their routines were not the only way to conduct family living and that there were different acceptable routines that could maintain the ontological security of their families. For example,

although families expected holiday celebrations, religious traditions, and family gatherings to continue as they always had, they were willing to make some concessions to accommodate the newcomer and also to recognize or even include the other in-law family. As the other children in the family entered adulthood, the married siblings, their spouses, and the unmarried siblings instituted new routines among themselves to create a new family of adulthood that created a new sense of ontological security because it recognized their adult status as well as maintained some of their familiar childhood routines.

However, for all participants, this process of adjusting to the newcomer and restoring ontological security was incomplete, and they all experienced some discomfort which they hoped would improve over time or which they simply accepted as an inevitable outcome of change. At the same time, however, most families experienced the expectation that they themselves would have to change in some way to accommodate the newcomer. Some routines were sacred to the family, while others were more easily negotiated. But against the background of the family's routines, various members of the family often recognized that the couple needed to be their own entity and establish their own routines, and that in the end, the couple's personal routines would and should become more important to the couple than those of their families-of-origin. Although all the participants recognized that this autonomy of the couple was the ideal in theory, nevertheless, many parents-in-law particularly pined away for the re-establishment of their family routines and their own parental authority or power, wanting to see the spouses of their adult married children as simply "one of the kids." This changing of the power dynamics in the family disrupted the ontological security of the family.

Sometimes the married children themselves were implicated in contributing to the discomfort of the newcomer in entering the family. The married children often had not evaluated their own routines and had expected their newcomer spouses to simply fit in with their families-of-origin, with the attitude of, “You love me, you’ll love my family.” Although this attitude was appropriate regarding some family routines, nevertheless, the children had grown up, changed and learned new routines, but they had not always revealed that change to their parents. These adult children maintained their ontological security associated with *home*, by continuing to enact their childhood relationships with their parents by continuing the same routines. The child was therefore reluctant to broach changes in those routines that needed to be made in order to accommodate not only the newcomer spouse, but also the new adult status of the married child. So sometimes the newcomer was placed in the uncomfortable position of appearing to be the one that objected to the family routine, the one that wanted a change, when actually the change was necessary to recognize the adult status of the married child. Therefore, the newcomer could easily become the scapegoat, being blamed for changes in family routines. The newcomer had to ask the spouse, as one participant phrased it, to “step up” to a new relationship, that of adult on equal footing with the parents and worthy of respect and deference in recognition of his/her adult status. This new status of the child changed the power dynamics within the family, as well as the routines.

The siblings-in-law however, were more likely to openly welcome the changes wrought by the newcomers as acceptable and even desirable because the changes moved the whole family toward recognizing the burgeoning adult status of all the members. Younger siblings recognized that holiday celebrations and family get-togethers would not



maintain their childhood charm and excitement, as the children of the family became adults. The younger siblings expected and accepted the changes in their families-of-origin because they recognized that they all had to grow up, were growing up, and that was the way of the world. In other words, although younger siblings might feel some awkwardness in changing their longstanding routines of holiday celebration or other family traditions to accommodate a new sibling-in-law, the younger siblings also recognized that these changes would eventually accommodate them and their future spouses when they reached full adult status.

The evidence from these participants illustrated how family communication routines can be the most problematic routines for in-laws because for the most part the communication routines are implicit, that is, not openly discussed or negotiated. It is relatively easy to openly negotiate how to alter holiday celebrations in terms of times and rituals or how to split time between two in-law families, but people do not usually negotiate how much emotional display, how much joking, what conversational topics, and what conversational patterns are appropriate. Interactants may not even be sensitive to the differences between them, much less know how to adjust their own behavior to make each other comfortable. Thus newcomers and their in-laws may long feel uncomfortable and never establish ontological security because their communication routines remain at odds, even though they have worked out time-sharing, holidays, and religious routines. Thus by maintaining the communication routines of the earlier family-of-origin when the offspring were minors, families may not fully assimilate the newcomer spouses. The successful assimilation of newcomers depends on the ability of the family to reproduce the family structure through adjusting their communication

routines to accommodate ontological security needs of the newcomer, as well as themselves as a changing family.

Thus the evidence from these participants demonstrates the relationship between routines and ontological security as proposed by structuration theory, particularly the role of communication routines. In addition, by analyzing the three kinds of knowledge that structuration theory proposes underlie routines, we can more clearly understand how people process and come to understand their experiences with negotiating routines with or as newcomers in the family.

### *Three Kinds of Knowledge Underlying Routines*

Structuration theory also proposes that individuals are able to make choices and act within their social lives because they possess three kinds of knowledge: (a) practical knowledge learned from the experience of everyday routines and norms, (b) rationalized knowledge acquired when they monitor their own behavior and explain it to others, and (c) knowledge of the motivation of their action, which is usually an unconscious response to the unacknowledged conditions within which one must act (Banks & Riley, 1993; Giddens, 1984). In this study, examples of each kind of knowledge emerged from the interviews as participants tried to articulate and make sense of their own and their in-laws' routines. These three kinds of knowledge outline the emerging levels of understanding that people experience as they adjust their routines to assimilate a newcomer.

The first level of understanding is that of practical knowledge of everyday routines and norms. Families tend to enact their everyday lives through unquestioned routines that have simply been the norm for as long as they can remember. As a result, in

response to a newcomer, most families attempted to assimilate the newcomer by exposing him/her to their everyday routines and norms and expecting the newcomer to learn, adjust, and fit in. The implicit message from such behavior is “If you want to be one of us, then act like us”—an attitude that embodies the concept of practical knowledge. People think their routines make sense and speak for themselves, needing no explanation. As the participants in this study described, when the newcomer came from a similar background, the assimilation was easy. Similarly, if the newcomer came from a different background, but perceived the new family as having more desirable routines, the assimilation process was also easy. However, that was not always the case.

In many cases, the routines did not make sense to the newcomer, and the family had to share their rationalized knowledge about their behavior and explain it to the newcomer along with their expectations for compliance. This occurred when the family explained the family history and relationships to the newcomer, stressed the importance of family religious routines, and directly told the newcomer what was expected of him or her. In addition, the routine of creating a mediated relationship with the newcomer was a way of passing on rationalized knowledge. In this practice, the spouse of the newcomer was put in the position of having to explain the routines of the family to the newcomer and vice versa.

But the third kind of knowledge, that of the motivation of action, also was evident in some cases. Families actively sought to act against the stereotypes of problematic in-laws that they received from media messages and narratives from acquaintances. In an effort to combat those stereotypes, participants in this study attempted to engage the newcomer in healthy communication routines that recognized the newcomer’s presence

and power in the family. Similarly, the newcomers evaluated their own family routines and recognized the unacknowledged conditions in their families that influenced their routines. The newcomers then sought to change their own responses to the routines and learn something new, or possibly to teach a new routine to the in-law family. Thus in many families, the entry of the newcomer activated all three kinds of knowledge, and moved people to meta-levels of thinking about family behaviors and routines. In this study, when people moved to these higher levels of knowledge, they were able to react to the changes in their families in more positive ways and began to seek understanding of the in-law rather than simple compliance or assimilation.

The next section explores the dialectical tensions that were evident as participants discussed how their family routines were impacted by the entry of newcomers. The dialectical tensions perspective provides another way for understanding how families adjust to the entry of newcomers.

#### Research Questions Five and Six: Dialectical Tensions and their Management

Baxter (1993) described how dialectical tensions can be both internal to the individual and the dyad, as well as external, that is, existing between the dyad and the greater society. Most research into dialectical tensions, however, has focused on the tensions that are internal to the dyad. In this study, dialectical tensions that emerged in the interviews with the participants reflected the external tensions more than the internal tensions. In other words, because I was exploring their in-law relationships from a small group assimilation perspective, participants described the external tensions that existed between the newly married couple and the family. Although internal dialectical tensions

were mentioned by participants, the ones more salient to this study are the external tensions, and therefore I will focus on them. These tensions fall into the three basic categories as described by Baxter (1993) of *inclusion/seclusion*, *conventionality/uniqueness*, and *revelation/concealment*. In addition to these previously identified external tensions, participants also experienced a tension that manifested as both internal and external which seems to be indigenous to the in-law assimilation process. This tension of *expression/withholding of approval* will be discussed after the external tensions.

#### *Inclusion/Seclusion*

The concern in the tension of *inclusion/seclusion*, similar to the *connection/autonomy* tension on the internal dyadic level, is how much the married pair is allowed to be a separate entity by themselves and how much they are expected to be included in and have responsibilities to their families-of-origin. This was a significant tension mentioned by most of the newlyweds and siblings-in-law, which was observed principally in the splitting of time between the two in-laws families, while also trying to establish themselves as an independent married couple.

This importance of this tension was directly related to how much contact the couple had with their families. For Jennifer<sub>m</sub>, who moved into the house that her husband shared with his father, this tension was a daily struggle. For other participants, such as Melissa<sub>m</sub> and Lena<sub>m</sub>, who visited with their families only once or twice a year, this was a relatively minor tension except during those times of actual visiting. In between these two extremes, many couples tried to visit their families every couple months, and therefore they had to deal with this tension regularly.

Exacerbating this tension was the fact that most couples had more than one family with which to balance this tension, and so the inclusion/seclusion tension became a three-way struggle involving loyalty issues and personal preferences. Participants usually preferred their own families-of-origin, wanting to remain in close contact with them and feeling somewhat uncomfortable with their in-laws' routines. Several participants had not foreseen this struggle because they had envisioned only one family, their own, as in-laws, and had not even considered the fact that their spouses would have families also:

Ginny<sub>m</sub>: My family had always, my family's close and we'd always talked about when I got married, you know, my husband would come on our vacations, and you know, and we'd do this and we'd do that. And here's all this family stuff. And I just never thought about his family, and that there would be another family. And that there would be other things to work out that way. That just really never crossed my mind.

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: I never, I mean before like I even met his family. I never thought about it. . . . Like I just always thought, oh I'm going to get married, and I would have a husband and stuff. And I always thought about how my parents would interact with him, and hope that they would get along, but I never really even thought about the fact that he has parents too. I just kind of felt like, there would just be this man, he would come and join my family, and that's it. And then he started to say something about his parents, and I was like, "Oh I guess you do have parents." Because I just never thought about it at all.

This oversight created its own set of problems because the participants had perceived the in-law adjustment from only one perspective, that of their own family-of-origin. Thus they were not prepared for the issue of how they would adjust to their spouse's family and split time between them. The example of these two participants also demonstrates how it is easy to envision marriage as a continuance of one's own family-of-origin without considering that the married couple becomes its own entity. Thus at first newlywed people may not even recognize that there may be a tension of seclusion/inclusion.

The strategies for managing this tension included spiraling inversion, segmentation, and transcendence. In spiraling inversion, the married couples balanced the tension through honoring each pole at different times (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, during the holidays and on visits, they accepted that they were expected to take part in the routines of their families-of-origin, and that they would have to balance the time between the two families in a way that satisfied each family. Although this practice exacted a big price on couples in terms of time and stress, this is a strategy most participants used in the early years of marriage. As Michael<sub>m</sub> answered when asked to describe what holidays were like:

Michael<sub>m</sub>: Actually *drive* would be a better word. Um because, well they live in [a town] which about a half an hour from [other town], and both [my parents-in-law's] families are from [another town], so . . . we drive home to [town], and then . . . drive to [my mother-in-law's mom]. . . . We'll uh drive to their family celebration and then drive across town to um, [father-in-law's] family Christmas and then we have to drive to my parents.

However, married couples also carved out some private time as a couple during these family gatherings:

Michael<sub>m</sub>: [My wife and I] walked the dog, we went and walked the dogs and talked . . . while [the parents-in-law] watched a movie. So I I guess we just kind of unplugged from them and and talked about what's going on.

In this way the couple could be alone together and relieve the tension of having to be included in the family activities.

Married couples and their families-of-origin also foresaw that inclusion/seclusion was a tension that would have to be renegotiated when they had children or finished school and relocated closer to or farther away from their families. They accepted that different times of the year and different times of their lives would involve more or less inclusion with their in-laws. However, one of the most common responses that

participants made for changing their relationship with their in-laws was that they wished they all lived closer so that they could interact without the tension of having to choose and do a lot of driving.

Couples also used segmentation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) to manage this dialectical tension, which involved choosing which activities they would be included with their families, and which activities they would do by themselves as a couple. For example, Lindsay<sub>m</sub> and Tyler<sub>m</sub> celebrated Thanksgiving with Lindsay's family and Christmas with Tyler's family. Outside of the holiday season, they limited their contact with either family in an effort to enjoy just being newlyweds. Lindsay's mother, Patty<sub>p</sub> helped her daughter adjust to this seclusion by directly telling her daughter not to feel guilty about it:

Patty<sub>p</sub>: I just tell her, you know, “[your husband] he's his own person. You guys are in in in the process of establishing your own family. And you don't . . . have to borrow guilt from anywhere.”

Similarly, Bob<sub>p</sub> also counseled his daughter not to feel guilty about not spending enough time with the family, but instead to focus on being a married woman:

Bob<sub>p</sub>: You know, just let him be him, and let him warm up to us and warm his way into our family on his schedule, and not mine. . . . It is still their time. To to be the two of them, and to them kind of set the pace, and things that they want to do. . . They didn't live together before they were married, and that sort of thing. And so they, this is their time.

Both Patty<sub>p</sub> and Bob<sub>p</sub> realized that they had to give their daughter and her husband some space to become a couple. They recommended that the couple practice segmentation—doing only certain activities with the larger family—as a way to manage this tension of seclusion/inclusion. Even the siblings of the married couple recognized how difficult but also normal this tension was, and they saw that their siblings were only doing what they



themselves would be doing in a few years when they married. Thus the couple themselves and other family members helped the newlyweds use segmentation to manage the tension of inclusion/seclusion with the extended family.

On the other hand, some families had instituted transcendence or integration as a management strategy for this tension. Integration is the simultaneous recognition of both poles, which in this case manifested as bringing together both in-law families as a means of reducing the tension for the married pair concerning which family to spend time with. In this way, the couple did not have to address loyalty issues because they could share a holiday or celebration with both families simultaneously. This was a particularly powerful way to manage the tension when the newlywed couple began to host these joint celebrations in their own homes, which established them also as a couple in their own right. Many couples mentioned this as a goal for the future. This practice also helped to balance the tension of inclusion/seclusion because the newlywed couple also gained more time for their own secluded time because they did not have to celebrate twice, once with each family, and spend hours on the road at holidays. By having a joint celebration with both families, they also achieved more time for themselves as a couple.

#### *Conventionality/Uniqueness*

In the tension of *conventionality/uniqueness*, the married pair experienced the pull of having to maintain and fit into their families' routines on one hand and wanting to create their own routines on the other. Similar to the internal tension of *predictability/novelty*, the married couples found that they were expected to find their own solutions for the problems of living, as long as they also fit into acceptable social

conventions from the family. One of the principal ways this tension manifested was in the practice of religion.

Beyond the personal spiritual aspects of religion, group religious practices also operate as conventional behavior in families. Most of the participants who mentioned differences in religious practices as an issue in their in-law relationships approached them from this conventional perspective. For many of the newlywed couples, choosing a religious practice needed to reflect their own unique shared beliefs as a couple, rather than reflect the conventional religious practice of their parents. In some cases, this meant personally choosing not to practice the religion of their families-of-origin, even though they often got married in a church and also continued to attend religious services with their families-of-origin during special holidays. This practice reflects the management strategy of segmentation, in which one pole is more salient than the other during certain activities. Other couples chose to manage the tension using the strategy of denial, which is professing that only one pole is important (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Considered a dysfunctional strategy, denial for many couples meant that they chose their uniqueness over conventionality with the larger family. They simply kept their religious practices to themselves, for example, by not telling their parents that one of them had converted to the other's religion. As Beverly<sub>m</sub> explained:

Beverly<sub>m</sub>: But I'm not going to give [my parents] the satisfaction of knowing that [my husband converted]. . . . I'm so evil. . . . I mean, we did it so we could have continuity for our family, but [my parents] don't know, and that's something that's between [me and my husband]. Once again, that's OUR decision, and his family doesn't know either. Like, it's just easier that way. It's just between us, and that's who we did it for and not for anyone else.

On the surface this couple seems to be making a conventional decision, i.e., to continue in the religious tradition of the wife's family. However, the fact that they made this

choice privately and kept it a secret from both families indicates that this was a way of exercising their uniqueness as a couple: They chose their own unique religious practice as a couple, which happened to be the religion one of them grew up in. In this way, the couple could maintain the guise of conventional behavior, while in fact exercising their own uniqueness—at least for a few years when they have children and openly bring them up in one faith or the other. This example also demonstrates how these external tensions sometimes co-occur with each other. In this case, conventionality/uniqueness co-occurred with concealment/revelation.

Other couples were more open about their religious uniqueness, but this openness did not always lead to easing of the tension. For example, Babette<sub>e</sub> was raised as an atheist and her fiancé had chosen to no longer attend church. Although both of them were open about this, his parents still wanted them both to attend church with them when they visited. Babette<sub>e</sub>, who had never attended church before, was very uncomfortable with this practice, but realized that it made her future in-laws happy. Thus, Babette<sub>e</sub> used disorientation to manage the tension—a dysfunctional management strategy that did not in reality ease the tension between them. Babette<sub>e</sub> and her fiancé accepted the tension as an unavoidable unpleasantness in the relationship.

In contrast, Leslie<sub>m</sub> and Allen<sub>m</sub> found a way to manage this tension by choosing to have a non-denominational minister marry them, thereby announcing in a very public way their unique approach to religion. Leslie's parents, although disappointed that they did not marry in the Catholic church, accepted the unique religious outlook of the married pair:

Roger<sub>p</sub>: And it's not that they're not spiritual people, either. . . . They had a minister at their wedding. . . . I'm just not sure what church he's from. . . . It

was essentially a non-sectarian, somewhat non-Christian, as far as that's concerned. . . . It was disappointing but maybe we're a little liberal in our beliefs. I'm not too worried about my daughter. Um, in the end times, I think she's going to score okay.

Roger's response represents the management strategy of reaffirmation, in which people accept the reality of the tensions and celebrate them.

Although the topic of religious practice provides rich examples of the tension of *conventionality/uniqueness*, the tension was also evident in other arenas of in-law relationships. For example, Jennifer<sub>m</sub>, whose father-in-law lived with her and her husband, felt constrained by the father-in-law's presence to limit the number and kind of people she invited over to the house:

Jennifer<sub>m</sub>: And [my father-in-law] has some traditional values that I don't agree with. . . . There are certain situations that I don't have in our house because he's there . . . I'm careful about which friends I have over . . . because he's old school. . . . If I was to bring . . . [my Asian friend] home or uh a gay friend, or, I would be uncomfortable sitting at the dinner table knowing that, knowing what he thinks.

Thus Jennifer<sub>m</sub> and her husband were using the management strategy of segmentation, choosing to express the couple's uniqueness at certain times away from their home and choosing to emphasize their conventionality when they were with at home with the husband's father.

Another example of how conventionality/uniqueness was managed by a family is that of Amanda's sister who had married a professional musician. The wife worked in the corporate world and the husband did gigs and regional tours in the hope of eventually making it big. Their arrangement was different from the social norm of the man having the steady job and being a provider:

Amanda<sub>s</sub>: I think he's just a good role model in that he's uh not um considering what other people might think of him, even though he, even though music is his

profession. . . . He's just an artist. He's just himself. He's simple. . . . He's loving, he's like just everything you need in [a brother-in-law]. . . . But I think so long as [my sister] has a good job, and that they both help support, [my parents are] fine. Who's to say that he has to be the provider the whole time?

As Amanda<sub>s</sub> recounted, her family accepted and celebrated the couple's uniqueness, because it ultimately reflected their family's interest in the arts and their commitment to reach beyond conventional roles. As these examples illustrate, families and couples experienced the tension between them to be both unique and conventional, and they managed these tensions using both functional and dysfunctional strategies.

#### *Revelation/Concealment*

In the dialectical tension of *revelation/concealment*, similar to the internal tension of *openness/closedness*, couples experienced the pull of being expected to share their married life with their families, while also feeling the desire to keep some of the details of their married life private. As discussed earlier, some participants reported that after marriage the communication between mother and daughter became constrained because of the daughter's reluctance to discuss her marriage for fear of disapproval from her mother. Similarly, mothers-in-law Sue<sub>p</sub> and Mindy<sub>p</sub> experienced opposite poles of this tension with their daughters-in-law. Sue<sub>p</sub> found her daughter-in-law did not want to disclose details about her marriage, while Mindy's daughter-in-law wanted to talk about intimate details of her sex life. All these women managed this tension through disorientation, which is simply accepting the tension as a necessary unpleasantness in the in-law relationship and doing nothing to directly address the issues (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

But the *revelation/concealment* tension manifested in other ways in the accounts from other participants. For example, Leslie<sub>m</sub> did not like her in-laws to come over

unannounced because she felt that her housekeeping habits were inferior to her mother-in-law's habits. Leslie<sub>m</sub> preferred that her in-laws did not see how messy her house was on a regular basis:

Leslie<sub>m</sub>: It would make me nervous if they showed up unannounced because I don't keep a very clean house. . . . And [my mother-in-law's] house is like immaculate. . . . And it always has been the whole time they were growing up, and my house was trash the whole time I was growing up, so. I I feel like I'm not as domestic or as girly as she is . . . . And so that's getting better with me, but I still feel the need to straighten up before they come over, . . . get everything as as nice as I can before they get here.

Leslie<sub>m</sub>, therefore, managed this tension by segmentation, by cleaning up the house when the in-laws were coming over, thus concealing from mother-in-law how messy her house really was. In a similar vein, Becky<sub>s</sub> described the behavior of her sister-in-law when she hosted the family Christmas celebration:

Becky<sub>s</sub>: [My sister-in-law] was cooking a lot of it . . . in her house. Uh she wanted everything to be you know, perfect. . . . I mean like little things like, you know, use the nice silverware, other things, not a huge difference. But uh, you know, you could tell that she was trying to put a lot of effort into it.

Both Leslie and Becky's sister-in-law apparently were nervous that their housekeeping skills might not measure up to those of their mothers-in-law, and they therefore made a special effort to model good practices on those occasions when the in-laws were present, while keeping their everyday housekeeping routines concealed.

Sometimes couples managed this *revelation/concealment* tension differently with different parts of the in-law family. They tended to conceal more from their parents and were more open with their siblings, another form of segmentation.

Ellen<sub>s</sub>: I think my boyfriend and I are going to try to get up there maybe like this May or something, just to hang out with them, without our parents around. . . . I just think we'll be able to go out a little bit more. Um. Just let loose a little more. . . . You know, my parents, yeah, they're really cool, but they're still Mom and Dad, . . . so you've got to kind of stay within certain boundaries. . . . I doubt [my

brother and his fiancée] ever would have told me of the whole story of the first night, of their first date in front of my parents. . . . They told me one night when we had all gone out to dinner and then we all grabbed a beer and went and walked on the beach. . . . And they told . . . the whole story then.

The couple were more open about their life and history when interacting with their siblings(-in-law) than with their parents(-in-law) because they realized that the younger family members might be more accepting of their unique characteristics. Newly married couples experienced the dialectical pull of wanting to share the facts of their married life with their families-of-origin and their in-laws, while at the same time wanting to keep some of those facts private.

*Tension Indigenous to the In-Law Relationship*

In this study, a dialectical tension emerged that appears to be indigenous to the relationship of in-laws, one which I term *expressing/withholding approval*. The process of assimilating a new family member begins as soon as the couple starts dating and begins discussing and introducing each other to their families-of-origin. But until the couple themselves commit to one another, the family is uncertain whether or not to completely assimilate the newcomer. The family feels it is best to hold back on fully assimilating the newcomer because the decision belongs to their child/sibling, and they don't want to put too much pressure on the child/sibling to marry. Also the family may have some reservations about the newcomer, and thus have a "wait-and see" attitude toward assimilating the newcomer. If the pre-engagement period is prolonged, this withholding by the family can be perceived by the newcomers as ambivalence toward them personally, uncertainty that they are acceptable as family members, or outright disapproval.

Parents and siblings experienced this tension as a recognition that the couple had to make this decision on their own; therefore, although family members could communicate approval or disapproval of the newcomer, they were reluctant to be too open and approving or too disapproving to the newcomer lest the couple make a different decision. The motive behind this reluctance was twofold: (a) to save face and limit disappointment for themselves and the couple if the marriage did not ensue (or in the case of disapproval, if the marriage nevertheless took place), and (b) to allow the couple to make their own decisions at their own pace. For example, Patty<sub>p</sub> described how her first meeting with her daughter's boyfriend set the tone in the relationship that continued up to their engagement and marriage:

Patty<sub>p</sub>: It was a little awkward, because I wanted to express a a level of of warmth and affection. But I didn't want to put any pressure on him, or anything like that. We were kind of the handshake, no, maybe we should hug, kind of a thing. . . . : And that continues a little bit. Now we're to the point that we don't bother handshaking, we we hug.

Parents limited their reaction to their child's engagement so as to communicate acceptance, but at the same time communicate that it was the child's choice, not subject to their approval. For example, Fred<sub>p</sub> and Audrey<sub>p</sub> both described how they reacted when their children announced their impending marriages:

Fred<sub>p</sub>: I remember we we had a little computer room. And uh, uh, again I wasn't paying a lot of attention, you know. And one night he looked up, and I forgot the words he used now, something about "Take the leap" . . . and that was about it. . . . He was he was an adult and you know, old enough to make up his own mind and and uh. So I I just said, "OK, if if that's what you want. It will be fine."

Audrey<sub>p</sub>: I didn't know how to react . . . Oh, um, I guess I was more concerned with reacting the right way . . . because otherwise I just wouldn't react, like, "Okay" [laughs]. You know, but for her sake I wanted to react surprised and pleased.



By limiting their enthusiasm about the child's marriage, parents-in-law reaffirmed that the choice was the child's and was not dependent on their approval.

Although most of the parents involved in this study were content with the choice their children had made, they admitted to having some reservations about the marriage beforehand and being reluctant to push their children toward marriage. For example, Mindy<sub>p</sub> described how she was not sure that her son was choosing the right woman, and so at one point in the relationship, when she thought they were going to break up, she had been secretly relieved:

Mindy<sub>p</sub>: And it's like, I thought maybe they broke up and that, my first thought was, "He dodged a bullet!" . . . because at that point she was being so critical of him . . . I was really concerned that this was really a bad thing. . . I think he's plenty young and and as as she got more critical, I was more concerned. But but that has fortunately and if nothing else, due to prayer, has ameliorated quite a bit.

Some siblings also expressed ambivalence about the newcomer. Josh<sub>s</sub> reported that his family was happy when his sister called off an engagement because although the fiancé was a nice person and from a wealthy family, he valued money and nice things too much, and this value began to change the sister:

Josh<sub>s</sub>: When we, she told us that she was calling it off, I think there was kind of a little bit of a relief. . . . And I mean, no one, you know, never showed any dislike to him, and he he's a very nice guy. . . . I I just think it was a big relief when he wasn't there. . . . so I I know it was very very hard for her to say no to [fiancé]. And. . . I I was very proud of her. I mean, that that takes a lot to call off a wedding, in my opinion.

Josh, along with his family, had been willing to accept the fiancé, and did not openly express his reservations or his acceptance because he realized his sister had to make her own decision. Therefore, he was happy when his sister made what he considered a better decision. James<sub>s</sub> also had ambivalent feelings about his brother's choice:

James<sub>s</sub>: I didn't think she was the greatest person ever. . . . I kind of hoped that he would find someone else, truthfully. So when they first got engaged, I was like "Oh, great" [sarcastically].

But James kept his disapproval of the newcomer to himself because he realized it was his brother's choice to make, not his.

Parents and siblings struggled with this ambivalence. They wanted to allow their child to make the decision, even if they themselves did not entirely agree with it. They did not want to be seen as meddling, but were also well aware that communicating nothing might also seem disapproving. A typical strategy for many parents was simply not to expect marriage between the two unless it was specifically mentioned by the couple. Amanda<sub>s</sub> reported how her family backed off on talking about her sister's engagement when the couple began to experience problems in their relationship. On the other hand Roger<sub>p</sub> at first did not realize how serious the relationship was until Allen<sub>m</sub> explicitly addressed it:

Roger<sub>p</sub>: And uh, this is probably after they dated for only about two years, and he he looks at me and says, "You know I'm going to marry your daughter." . . . And that's when it really sank in that he probably was going to do just that. And it uh, it did change then. I I think . . . I started taking him very much more seriously.

Roger<sub>p</sub> realized that his relationship with his son-in-law Allen<sub>m</sub> changed when Allen finally announced his intentions.

When the parents in this study openly expressed their misgivings or disapproval of the marriage, they did not change the couple's plans, but they did tarnish the relationship. Naomi<sub>e</sub>, for example, recounted how her future mother-in-law had acted disapproving of the match when they first met.

Naomi<sub>e</sub>: She just seems so mean to me. . . . Because she told my mother something like, “When [my son] and Naomi first started dating, I told him to dump her.” . . . And I was like, “why would you just say that?”

Similarly, Babette’s future in-laws also openly expressed disapproval of the engagement, which colored her future perceptions of all their communication with her:

Babette<sub>e</sub>: Their reaction was, “It’s too bad.” We got engaged in September. “It’s too bad you got engaged so soon, we were hoping you would at least wait until you came home for uh Christmas break because we were going to talk you out of being with her.” That is what they said.

Both of these women felt the sting of the future parents-in-law’s disapproval, but they nevertheless continued with their plans to marry.

It was easy for the messages to be misinterpreted even when the family approved of the choice. Ginny<sub>m</sub>, for example, often interpreted her mother’s reticence about Ginny’s husband as disapproval. Similarly, Lena<sub>m</sub> recognized that her parents’ lack of enthusiasm about her engagement reflected their reluctance to pay for the wedding and their feelings about her being too young to get married. However, at the same time, she also interpreted their coolness as disapproval of her fiancé. Thus parents were caught in a dialectical tension of how much approval of the potential spouse to communicate before engagement or marriage. Too much approval might pressure their child into marriage or lead the potential in-law to expect marriage, whereas too little or too open communication might change the relationship forever.

This tension results from the bi-directional pull of wanting to express approval and acceptance to the newcomer, while at the same time feeling the need to withhold this approval and acceptance because of uncertainty, the recognition of the autonomy of the couple, or a sense of decorum. Neither pole is totally desirable until the couple has either married or chosen not to marry. Thus the families in this study were uncertain about how

to proceed with assimilating the newcomer and what amount of acceptance and approval were appropriate to express. For the most part, families used disorientation, the sending of mixed messages that both included and excluded the newcomer as a full family member until after the commitment had been made. This practice manifested by including the newcomer in almost all facets of family life, but reserving some significant gestures of acceptance until the engagement or marriage had taken place. For example, they did not allow the couple to sleep together when they visited the family home or went on vacations together, or they expressed open disapproval of their living together before marriage. Others accepted these behaviors, rationalizing them as part of the assimilation leading up to marriage. Other families used more symbolic gestures, such as giving different kinds of gifts after engagement or marriage or even giving gifts that would move the couple toward commitment.

This indigenous tension may be similar to one that Kramer (2004) identified in community theatre groups, which he termed *inclusion/exclusion*. Kramer proposed that within groups there was a tension between the unity needed to accomplish the goal of the group (in his study, to successfully stage a play) and the inevitable boundaries that existed between group members, especially social ones, that prevented them from interacting as a unified group in all group-related activities. This *inclusion/exclusion* tension may also be operating among in-laws, but it did not emerge as a major tension in these relatively new marriages. How the *expressing/withholding approval* tension differs from *inclusion/exclusion*, is that there are the important factors of time and the sole decision-maker that impact the *expressing/withholding approval* tension. The tension was resolved when the couple made the decision to marry—and this decision was only

theirs to make. After the marriage, perhaps the *inclusion/exclusion* tension operated in terms of how far into the family the newcomer was really assimilated. For example, although parents-in-law may consider the newcomer “one of the kids,” would they really want the newcomer to make long-term health care decisions for them if needed—or would they consider only their biological children capable of making these decisions? Since my study focused on the early assimilation of the newcomer, this longer-term *inclusion/exclusion* tension was not explored.

This tension may be unique to the in-law relationship because, as pointed out by Pfeifer (1989), the entrance of the newcomer into the family is subject to the approval of only one member—a situation that is different from many other small groups. Another unique aspect of this tension is that it is both internal to the individual and also external to the dyad, existing between the couple and the larger family. In addition, the tension is both created and maintained through the recognition of other relationships rather than simply the one in which the people are involved, which suggests a different level of dialectical tension that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. However, an additional dialectical component appeared in this study that seems to be indigenous to the in-law relationship.

#### *Mediated Relationships as a Management Strategy*

In this study the participants gave evidence that the practice of maintaining a mediated relationship between the parents-in-law and the child-in-law was both widespread and widely accepted, particularly for negotiating family logistics and potentially problematic situations. The practice appears to be a strategy for managing the knot of contradictory forces (Brown et al., 1998) that operate between the couple and the

larger family. On one hand, the mediation perpetuates the position of the newcomer as an outsider, someone other than a full group member. On the other hand, this practice is also a means of recognizing the newcomer as a person independent of family routines and authority, a person in his/her own right. At the same time, the mediation also affirms the couple as their own separate family, and thus that the child is no longer really a full member of the family-of-origin because he/she has higher priorities to a new family now. Nevertheless, the child is also acknowledged as the boundary spanner between the families.

The practice of having an indirect mediated relationship with the child's spouse also recognizes the supremacy of the new couple as a separate family and their right to make their own decisions. However, this mediation also makes for strained relationships, and may make the child feel like an outsider in the family because he/she has to mediate for his or her spouse. At the same time, the married child must also step up into the role of being an adult distinct from the parents. If the child chooses to continue enacting the same childhood relationship with the parent, the parents will not fully acknowledge that the child has changed, and thus may scapegoat the newcomer spouse for demanding or creating change. This was evident in my study when the child did not address with the parent how he/she had changed in political, religious, or philosophical outlooks, and thus the spouse was blamed for changing the child's routines. Thus the practice of having a mediated relationship between the newcomer and the parents-in-law requires that both the newcomer and the spouse have to balance several dialectical tensions, a situation which does not fit easily into one simple binary opposition, but rather, reflects the "knot of contradictions" envisioned by Brown et al. (1998).

*Venting as a Management Strategy*

Another management strategy mentioned by participants was that of *venting*—a strategy previously identified by Kramer (2004) among members of a community theater group. Many participants indicated that they expressed their frustrations with their in-laws to other members of the family, in an effort to manage the tensions of the needs of the extended family and the needs of the couple. This often appeared to be one of the purposes of the mediated relationship. The frustrated person could safely vent to the spouse about his/her parents. For example, when Allen<sub>m</sub> became frustrated with his in-laws' expectations for holiday get-togethers, he vented to his wife, Leslie. In response, his mother-in-law also vented to Leslie, but the son-in-law and mother-in-law never had to face each other on this issue, although they both experienced the tension release of venting. Leslie did not comment on her feelings of being the recipient of both sides of venting.

However, in this study, other people were also the audience for venting. As seen in previous examples, siblings-in-law often reported how the newcomer vented to them about the pressure of the meeting the family and the intensity of family relationships. In addition, several participants mentioned in their interviews how cathartic it was to talk to me, the interviewer, about their in-law relationships. Although venting as a management strategy does not resolve the problem with the in-law, it does seem to release tension concerning the in-law while saving face for both parties.

*Theoretical Analysis—Dialectical Tensions*

Because I explored the in-law relationship from a small group perspective rather than as a series of dyadic relationships, the most salient dialectical tensions that emerged

from the interviews were those proposed by Baxter (1993) as external dialectical tensions. These tensions are experienced between the couple and the greater group, in this case, their families-of-origin. Couples and their families-of-origin experienced the tensions of *inclusion/seclusion*, *conventionality/uniqueness*, and *revelation/concealment*.

The most problematic dialectic for the couple, at least in the early years of marriage as these participants were, was *inclusion/seclusion*. As Baxter (1993) suggested, the inclusion/seclusion tension is similar to the connection-autonomy dialectic experienced in dyads, which focuses on the degree of integration or separation. In the external tension version, the couple experienced the desire to join with and feel connected to the larger group, their families-of-origin, while at the same time experiencing the need to be separate from the families and establish themselves as a separate entity, their own nuclear family. Their families-of-origin also experienced these tension regarding the couple, and recognized that the couple experienced this tension with the other in-law family also.

This tension was particularly evidenced by how the splitting of the time between families and the expected amount of interaction with their families were the stressors most often mentioned by married couples in this study, as well as other participants. Couples had difficulty balancing the time and inclusion with each family while also finding time to be with their friends or just by themselves. Parents-in-law often longed for greater contact with the pair or felt that the other in-law family got more time with the couple, while at the same time recognizing that the couple also needed to be by themselves. Although other researchers (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Erbert, 2000; see also Baxter, 1993) have focused on this tension as regards the couple and larger society, they



have not examined the tension specifically in in-law relationships. It is important to study in-law relationships, or the relationship of the dyad to the larger family, because the larger family also in some aspects mediates the relationship between the dyad and greater society. For example, by being included in too many extended family activities and having too many responsibilities to their extended family, the couple can become secluded from their friends and other social contexts, as was mentioned by some of the married participants.

At the same time, the other two external dialectical tensions can co-occur with this inclusion/seclusion tension as it plays out between in-laws. Sometimes society and extended families have different standards for conventional behavior, particularly for sexual, political, and religious practices. Therefore, if the dyad is not conventional by the standards of the extended family, they may choose to hide their unconventionality by limiting contact with their extended family, while sharing their unconventional behavior with people outside the family. Thus the inclusion/seclusion tension for the married couples co-occurs with the tensions of revelation/concealment and conventionality/uniqueness. These manifold dimensions that interact on the married pair and their in-laws illustrate dialectical tensions as a complex knot of opposing forces rather than simple binary contradictions (Brown et al. 1998).

In the next chapter, I discuss how relational dialectics and structuration theory interacted to provide a richer understanding of these lived experiences. But before I turn to that, we need to briefly explore the in-law relationships that did not provide ontological security or balance the dialectical tensions.

### Problematic Relationships

Although the vast majority of participants reported satisfactory, hopeful, and progressing relationships with their in-laws, I do not want to paint an overly rosy picture of in-law relationships. When asked the question of what one thing they would like to change in their relationship with their in-laws, most participants could readily summon a response, although a few claimed they wanted nothing to change. The things they wanted to change were for the most part to be physically closer, to see more of each other, and to become more comfortable with each other. In other words, they hoped that the relationship would evolve into something better. However, a few participants reported outright negative relationships for which they held out little hope of improvement. Although I trust the integrity of the participants as reliable witnesses, I am also well aware that for the most part I heard only one side of the story. Each of these relationships had its own unique patterns of miscommunication. I discuss each one to illustrate how tensions among in-laws can entail more than simply changes in routines and norms.

Megan<sub>m</sub> could not respect her mother-in-law because she had been and continued to be hurtful and deceitful in her relationships with her son, with Megan<sub>m</sub>, and with Megan's family. Megan<sub>m</sub> chose to withdraw emotionally from her mother-in-law, and no longer called her or spent time with her alone. At the same time Megan<sub>m</sub> recognized that she had the real power in the relationship because as Nathan's wife she could to some extent regulate her husband's contact with his mother, secure in her faith that Nathan<sub>m</sub> would choose her over his mother. This realization of her own power made Megan<sub>m</sub> more tolerant of her mother-in-law, but no less guarded. As a result, the relationship had no real hope of improving unless the mother-in-law altered her problematic behavior.

Justin<sub>s</sub> saw his brother-in-law, not as a bad person, but as someone who lacked the self-control to really organize his life. In this way, the brother-in-law and his wife were too much alike and therefore neither one could really support the other. In addition, the brother-in-law had different communication routines because he came from a different racial background than his wife. Although Justin<sub>s</sub> had come to like and guardedly respect his brother-in-law, he did not expect the in-law relationship to improve between the brother-in-law and his parents because of these fundamental differences. A few months after our interview, Justin's sister and brother-in-law divorced. But because they had children together, the communication between the family and the now estranged in-law would continue, and would continue to be problematic.

Michelle<sub>p</sub> recognized that something was missing in her relationship with her son-in-law, probably because of past communication differences between her husband and her son-in-law that had never been addressed. As she described their relationship, the son-in-law was polite, "But polite is never a good word in what we would like to be a good relationship." However, Michelle<sub>p</sub> felt unable to address the communication differences because she didn't want to complicate her daughter's life and cause her stress in her marriage. Therefore, although she hoped that the relationship would improve over time, she did not want to risk causing more damage by trying to address those issues.

Babette<sub>e</sub>'s future in-law relationship seemed to be of the classic pattern deemed typical in popular culture and media messages. Her future parents-in-law seemed determined not to like any woman their son married. From Babette's testimony it would be easy to blame the problem on the aloof and hostile behavior of the future parents-in-law, but since I only heard one side of the story, it is difficult to discern. Perhaps

Babette's communication behavior was also problematic for her future parents-in-law, or perhaps Babette, was also acting in a stereotypical way and was expecting conflict with her in-laws, which then materialized.

Those participants involved in truly problematic in-law relationships were not experiencing ontological security because the routines of their in-laws communicated disapproval, control, or insurmountable difference. Perhaps the problematic in-laws did not expect to experience ontological security with their in-laws because they had never experienced it in the past before with their own families, they perceived the routines of the newcomer as too different to assimilate acceptably, or they were unwilling to negotiate routines to assimilate the newcomer because they wanted to maintain their own power. These are explanations that participants volunteered as insights into their problematic relationships. I did not explore these issues extensively with those participants because they were not the focus of my study, and therefore they remain conjecture.

These four problematic relationships stand as testimony that although communication routines and other kinds of routines in families can create discomfort and conflict in the relationships among in-laws, not all in-law difficulties can be blamed on them. Real animosity toward in-laws, significant cultural and personal differences, and problematic behavior can and do create hostility between in-laws and prevent the amicable assimilation of the newcomer into the family. However, most of the participants in this study did not experience such negative relationships.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Summary/Overview

The in-law relationship has largely been ignored by family researchers, who have only recently begun to look at different forms of family and family relationships other than the nuclear family. The in-law relationship has rarely been examined from a communication perspective or from any theoretical perspective. This study was a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation using structuration theory and relational dialectics to explore how in-laws are assimilated into a family and how the family is affected by their entry. In an effort to understand the lived experiences of people who have or are in-laws, I interviewed 42 people who had gained or were about to gain in-laws through either their own marriage or the marriage of their child or sibling. The interviews explored how the families had assimilated the newcomers by communicating and adjusting their norms and routines, what specific communication routines were salient for newcomers, and how the newcomers responded to and influenced change to those norms and routines. The interviews also explored areas where couples might experience dialectical tensions between themselves and their families, and how they managed those tensions.

In their interviews, the participants described how they and their families had adjusted to becoming in-laws. Specifically, seven themes emerged as methods that families used to communicate their norms and routines to new in-laws, including both direct and indirect methods. Participants identified five specific communication routines that needed adjustment, such as amount of interaction and emotional display, suitable

conversation topics, and conversational patterns, such as joking. Four themes emerged in how the newcomers perceived and responded to these communicated norms and routines, including conforming to, rebelling against, and evaluating the routines, as well as creating new roles for themselves in the family. Participant responses suggested five patterns of how families re-created and changed their communication routines. Finally, the external dialectical tensions of inclusion/seclusion, conventionality/uniqueness, and revelation/concealment emerged as the most salient in the in-law relationships. In this chapter I analyze the findings in terms of how they contribute to our knowledge about in-law relationships, their implications for communication theory, the strengths and limitations of the study, and areas for future research.

#### Contributions to Knowledge about In-Law Relationships

This study adds to the body of literature on in-law relationships in several ways. First it studied the topic as a small group rather than as specific dyads. Previous studies have focused principally on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship and approached it from the perspective of a potentially problematic relationship (Cotterill, 1989; Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Limary, 2002; Pfeifer, 1989). In contrast, this study included married and engaged couples, parents-in-law, and siblings-in-law of both genders and sought to understand the process of how newcomers are assimilated into the family group. Previous studies of kinkeeping in families have emphasized that usually women in the family are more concerned with maintaining family connections (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985) and that mothers and mothers-in-law have more interest in the married pair (Cotterill, 1989; Duvall, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Limary, 2002; Pfeifer, 1989). However, the men in this study related their eagerness and interest in

assimilating newcomers and maintaining strong family ties as husbands, brothers-in-law, and fathers-in-law. What emerged from this broader perspective was that in-law relationships are not necessarily problematic, and that all family members contribute to and are affected by the assimilation of the newcomer.

The study also provides evidence that in-law relationships of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be different from those in the past. Our media stereotypes perpetuate the expectation of problematic in-law relationships that may have been more common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her 1954 book which found the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship to be the most problematic, Duvall made some suggestions to mothers-in-law to improve the relationship, specifically to stop meddling, get a job, take care of aging relatives and do volunteer work. In other words, the mother-in-law should focus on her own life and let the couple become an autonomous pair. All the mothers-in-law that I interviewed for this study, and all but one of the mothers-in-law referred to in this study were employed. Our societal values also have been changing expectations for the couple to become more autonomous. Therefore, people who are newly married may be forging a different kind of in-law relationship than their parents did.

By using structuration theory, the study focused on understanding the process that the family undertakes to assimilate the newcomer. The communication of norms and routines, as well as their reproduction and adaptation, proved to be a critical element in assimilating the newcomer. This study also identified specific communication routines that differed among families, which could be the source of much of the discomfort for the newcomer as well as for the family. These routines included the amount of interaction expected, the appropriate topics for conversation, the conversational styles, the

appropriate level of emotional display, and the amount of joking in the families.

Identifying these communication routines provides future researchers specific routines to explore in studies of larger samples.

Structuration theory and relational dialectics also provided neutral frames for understanding the process of adaptation and change in families in contrast to focusing on the potentially problematic relationship of a specific dyad. Structuration theory focused on the reproduction of family routines, while dialectical tensions added the insight that contradictory forces are normal in the relations between in-laws and cannot be resolved but must be balanced. The conjunction of these two theories revealed the process of in-law assimilation instead of focusing simply on the problems associated with in-laws.

In addition, the study provided evidence of how the family-of-childhood transforms into the family-of-adulthood. Evidence from this study suggests that the in-law may be positioned as an important catalyst for this change. In family lifespan development analysis, this period has been understood as the “empty nest period” when children go out to form their own nuclear families and parents must find new interests (Meyerstein, 1996; Troll, 1989). Although relationships between parents and adult children have been studied (Bedford, 2000; Fingerman, 2001; Fischer, 1983; Nydegger & Mitteness, 1996; Silverstein, Lawton, & Bengston, 1994), little research has explored how all the children, their spouses, and their parents interact as a family of adults. What emerged in this study was that the new in-law provided another adult voice in the family that influenced younger siblings and helped them to transition to adulthood. The accommodations in routines made for the in-law also opened the door for other transformations in the family for the younger siblings and their spouses.



A final contribution of the study is suggested by the fact that the participants were eager to talk about their in-law relationships. Their eagerness emphasizes that these relationships are important to modern Western families and therefore worthy of more extensive research attention in all family study fields, as suggested by other researchers (Bengston, 2001; Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Taken together, all of these contributions suggest that in-law relationships are an aspect of modern Western family life that should be explored by family researchers.

### Implications for Communication Theory

Most of the previous research on in-law relationships has been conducted without regard to a particular theory and has also not contributed any theories. Previous research focused on specific behaviors and issues, usually between particular dyads of in-laws, rather than underlying causes and patterns in that behavior. In this study I used a different tactic, applying two theoretical perspectives to study communication in relationships among in-laws. As a result, the study contributes to communication theory in several ways. In this section, I examine how structuration theory, relational dialectics and other communication theories contribute to our understanding of the assimilation of in-laws, and also how the findings may contribute to research in other bona fide small groups.

#### *Structuration Theory*

One of the strengths of structuration theory, according to Poole (1999), is that it can bring to the foreground the unrecognized forces that drive groups. By using structuration theory to examine in-law relationships, this study goes beyond simply uncovering typical tensions and stereotypical reactions among in-laws, as other studies

have. Instead, this study explored the importance of communicating routines and norms in the process of assimilating the newcomer into the family. Although the participants in this study were not aware of formal structuration theory, some of them were keenly aware of how their routines were the raw material of their family life, as well as the outcome of their family life, and that comfort could only be re-established through reproducing routines to meet all the family members' needs.

In an effort to improve their relationships with their in-laws, the participants negotiated their routines to assimilate and adjust to the in-laws, and recognized the importance of communication in this process. They had to move beyond simply reproducing the exact same routines to explaining those routines, and examining the motivation behind them. Thus this study gives evidence not only that structuration theory is useful in understanding the assimilation of in-laws, but also that real people recognize the basic process proposed by the theory and consciously move through the three levels of knowledge in an effort to improve their group life. Thus the theory moves from being a textbook construct useful to researchers to actually being used, in a native intuitive form, by real people to make sense of their lives and adjust their structures and routines to make better living conditions for themselves.

Structuration theory has many more facets than simply the duality of structure, the kinds of knowledge, and the place of routines in everyday life. It was not my intent to mobilize all facets of structuration theory to understand in-law relationships. However, this bounded application of structuration theory enhances communication theory by highlighting the role of routines, particularly communication routines, and how

negotiating those routines can be a source of discomfort in family relationships as the family assimilates an adult newcomer.

The stereotypical antagonism that exists among in-laws has been framed as a holdover from ancient practice and taboo (Lopata, 1999) or the product of a new Western social order that diminishes the importance of the extended family (Silverstein, 1990; Lopata, 1999), or simply as a dysfunctional practice that needs to be addressed in family therapy (Horsley, 1997; Silverstein, 1990). By approaching the in-law relationship from the perspective of a communication theory, we have gained insights into the actual process of how families assimilate the newcomer through their communicative practices, and we have gained insights into how the participants in that process experience the assimilation, interpret and reflect upon their experiences, and then choose to act and communicate. In viewing these in-law tensions as deriving from differences in routines, particularly communication routines, we can reframe the stereotypical antagonism between in-laws perpetuated in popular culture and can begin to analyze the sources of discomfort and propose avenues for bridging differences, in the hope of creating more positive in-law relationships. The findings also have implications for studying newcomers in other small groups, other than families, which will be discussed later.

### *Relational Dialectics*

Because I explored the in-law relationship from a small group perspective rather than as a series of dyadic relationships, the most salient dialectical tensions that emerged from the interviews were those proposed by Baxter (1993) as external dialectical tensions. These tensions are experienced between the couple and the greater group, in

this case, their families-of-origin. Couples and their families-of-origin experienced the tensions of *inclusion/seclusion*, *conventionality/uniqueness*, and *revelation/concealment*.

The dialectical tensions that emerged in this study were managed in some of the ways discussed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). Two of the functional management strategies, such as balance and recalibration were not in evidence in the participants' accounts. However, since this study focused only on the early years of marriage, perhaps these other management strategies might appear as the marriage advanced. In the early years, the participants seemed particularly interested in gaining approval and getting along with in-laws. Many of them, including participants from all groups, expressed that things would probably be different when the newlyweds had children because then they would be focused on what is best for the young children, a projection corroborated by evidence from other studies (Fischer, 1983). The married couple, then, could also claim full status of adults, having families of their own, and therefore needing to enact their own routines. Therefore, the couples might become more proactive in using balance and recalibration as dialectical tension management strategies. At the same time, they might also begin to accept more completely that their families-of-origin are simply different, and that they cannot or perhaps don't want to change them, which would exemplify the management strategy of reaffirmation.

What is noteworthy, however, in the management strategies reported here is the frequent use of the dysfunctional management strategy of disorientation. This was basically an avoidance strategy in which the participants did not want to create more tension by directly addressing the tensions, which of course does not resolve the tension. Sometime the participants in this study seemed to choose to use disorientation because

the particular tensions came up so rarely as to render the situation not worth resolving, as in the case of when the couple had infrequent contact with the in-laws. More often, however, participants chose to use disorientation because they did not know how to resolve the tension or felt that addressing the tension would cause more tension. This avoidance occurred when couples felt the pressure to spend more time with their families or their in-laws, as well as when the parents recognized the pressure on the couple from the other set of in-laws. In other cases, participants simply believed that the in-law relationship was bound to be problematic and was therefore not resolvable. Therefore, they preferred to endure the unpleasantness of the situation rather than make an open effort to improve it.

*Dialectical Tensions and Management Strategies Indigenous to the In-law Relationship*

One of the questions of dialectical tensions research is whether the relationships under scrutiny devolve into the same basic tensions proposed in earlier research, or whether some relationships evidence new kinds of tensions that are indigenous to specific relationships (Conville, 1998). Although I identified the external dialectical tensions as the most salient that emerged in this study, as suggested above, I also recognized another dialectical tension and a pervasive management strategy that may be indigenous to the in-law relationship or that may simply not have been identified previously. These indigenous dialectical components manifested as *expression/withholding of approval* and the practice of mediated relationships between in-laws.

Other studies of in-laws have also indicated mediated relationships, but in different forms. For example, Cotterill (1989) found that the daughter-in-law mediated the relationship between her husband and her mother-in-law, a practice that gave the

daughter-in-law power over the mother-in-law because the daughter-in-law to some extent controlled the amount of contact between the mother-in-law and son. In my study, only one participant mentioned that she recognized this power dynamic, but she did not control it by mediating the communication between her husband and his mother. In contrast, the most common form of mediation in my study was that the spouses mediated the communication between the parents-in-law and the children-in-law, both routinely and when there was the potential for conflict. This practice is similar to the findings from Pfeifer (1989) who also reported that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law expected the son/husband to mediate the relationship when there was conflict. Limary (2002) found that daughters-in-law preferred that their husband mediate the relationship, while mothers-in-law did not like the practice. Since most previous studies of in-laws have focused on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, they did not turn up other instances of mediation, such as wives needing to mediate between their parents and their husbands or siblings mediating between the married couple and the parents. Therefore, my study adds to our understanding of the practice of mediated in-law relationships by expanding the kinds of relationships explored and focusing on the communication routines, thereby suggesting a previously unrecognized strategy for managing dialectical tensions. I also propose that this study provides evidence for another level of dialectical tension that has not been previously discussed, that of *altruism/egocentrism*.

#### *Altruism/Egocentrism*

The two dialectical components that emerged in this study indigenous to the in-law relationship suggest the existence of a different level of dialectical tension that seems to be missing in the literature. Taking a broader look at the dialectical tensions that

emerged in this study, I propose that people in in-law relationships exemplify a different order of dialectical tension. What makes this dialectical tension different from the other ones identified in the literature is that although it is an internal tension for individuals, the tension exists because it acknowledges the different oppositional forces *on the other person* in the relationship. It is a dialectical tension of concern for the other, balanced with concern for oneself. Although people might want an improved, closer or more honest relationship with the in-law or with their family member for their own satisfactions, at the same time they recognize the other relationships that the other person must balance, and thus are more willing to tolerate unresolved tensions in the relationship. Thus the superceding dialectical tension that operates in relationships among in-laws, as I envision it, is one of *altruism/egocentrism*. In other words, all the in-laws involved—parents-in-law, siblings-in-law, and children-in-law—balance the tensions between the desire to maintain private close relationships with family members or in-laws and the desire to do what is best for the other person and their other relationships. Obviously some people in problematic in-law relationships manage this tension in dysfunctional ways, often by denying the existence of the other pole. But many of the participants in this study exemplify sincere attempts to balance this tension.

This tension is by no means unique to the in-law relationship; it seems related to Buber's (1970) concept of the self's relationship to two kinds of others: the Thou-other and It-other. Basically according to Buber, when we see the other person only as someone available to fulfill our selfish ends or needs, the person becomes an It, something we can use. However, when we recognize the other as a whole person, one who has separate and different needs and tensions, then that person is a Thou, someone

with whom we can truly be in relationship. Buber envisions an ideal in which we can actually achieve I-Thou relationships with others. What I suggest here is that as human beings we are all struggling to balance the pull of these oppositional forces. People have both altruistic and self-centered goals in their relationships and both of them are desirable.

Researchers in dialectical tensions, however, seem to envision these tensions as operating only at the ego-centric level. In other words, when the basic dialectical tensions of autonomy/dependence, novelty/predictability, and openness/closedness are discussed, they are explored from a single perspective. For example, autonomy/dependence is the tension between the members of the dyad in wanting to be both connected and independent. However, no mention is made of the individual's concern for the other person's closeness and independence needs both inside and outside of the relationship. In other words, autonomy/dependence is constructed as only involving the individual needs of the partners involved, and not taking into consideration their concerns for each other's needs. This oversight seems to position dialectical tensions as selfish concerns, almost as what Buber calls I-It relationships. Yet most people in relationships are also motivated to some extent by altruistic concerns, and the two perspectives pull in opposite directions.

One of the factors that may contribute to overlooking this dialectical tension is that the names that can be used to describe the poles carry specific connotations that belie their dialectical nature. In true dialectical tensions, both poles are desirable, yet in normal usage, *altruism* is considered desirable, whereas *egocentrism*, or its synonyms, *selfishness* and *self-centeredness*, are considered undesirable. However, to truly achieve



Buber's I-Thou relationship, we must honor both poles, because to enter into true relationship, both people must be perceived as persons, not as Its. Even the great Christian admonition of the Golden Rule "Love thy neighbor as thyself" recognizes that the two poles must be balanced, that one cannot be honored at the expense of the other, that to love one's neighbor requires that one love oneself also.

Of course, recognition of this additional layer of dialectical tensions muddies the water considerably for communication scholars. But again this brings us back to the more complex vision of dialectical tensions, not as simple binary oppositions but as the knot of contradictions that Brown et al. (1998) proposed, which leads to a greater understanding and a more complex, and also more satisfying, model of the oppositions that influence human relationships.

#### Intersection of the Two Theories: An Exploration of Otherness

The intersection of these two theories to study in-law relationships has been a testing ground for an emerging awareness in my mind. As a communication scholar, I am interested in the concept of *otherness*, which I see as a dialectical tension. *Otherness* creates the need and the opportunity for communication, and at the same time, *otherness* is also the principal obstacle to communication, the principal frustration for communication. The entry of an adult newcomer in the form of an in-law into a family provides a case study for how we construct and bridge *otherness*. The two theories used in the study both contribute to exploring and understanding *otherness*.

Structuration theory provides an essential component for understanding human action. When we perceive an *other*, our animal instinct urges us to fight or flight, but as a human being we can instead make the choice to communicate with the *other*. This choice

reflects the fact that we recognize something familiar, something similar to us in the *other*. Our first attempt to bridge this *otherness* is to enact our own routines, in the hope that the *other* will recognize the intent of the routine and participate in them. This action is what Giddens (1985) calls the first kind of knowledge, practical knowledge extracted from the repetition of our routines—this is what we have always done. As human beings, we expect the *other* to prove that he/she is also human by immediately understanding and participating in our routines. After all, our routines, according to structuration theory, constitute the fabric of our life, our families, our organizations, our society. An *other* can communicate his/her membership by simply fitting in with our routines. If the *other* can oblige us in our routines, this is the easiest route to assimilation, inclusion, and acceptance. We have in some degree achieved communication with the *other* through our routines.

However, when the *other* fails to understand our routines or proves to have a will, desires, and routines of his/her own, we then have to explain the routine to the *other*. We invoke what Giddens (1984) considers another kind of knowledge, which is our rationalization of why we do things. This is not a very in-depth explanation because we are still working within the *duality of structure*, the routine of our routines—routines are the medium of our thoughts about our routines. Our explanation of the routine will either bridge the gap between us, or it will fail to bring the *other* to understanding. When it fails, if we are still interested in communicating with the *other*, then we search through the third kind of knowledge, our knowledge of the motivation behind our routines. We begin to examine the unacknowledged circumstances that underlie our routines. We begin to question the *other* about his/her unacknowledged circumstances. It is only when

we begin to explore and acknowledge our differences at this depth that we begin to really communicate beyond the routine level.

What is interesting about this process is that if the *other* just attempts to fit in, be the same, do the routines, we are not moved to greater understanding and we do not reach a high level of communication. We simply assume that s/he is like us, and as result, in some respects, we no longer have to communicate. The more we are the same, the less we have to communicate. It is our *otherness* that requires that we communicate.

But this process is impacted by additional forces, dialectical tensions. As individuals we struggle with the dialectical tension both to be known and to be private, to be similar and yet unique. This desire is for communion and yet at the same time for separateness. This is the basic tension of communication, although it has been parsed out into separate tensions of autonomy/connection, predictability/novelty, and openness/closedness, as well as others.

John Durham Peters (1999) has proposed that this very basic tension is the desire to be known and to know, and therefore to no longer be others and outsiders—but at the same time we want to be separate, different, unknowable, private. Complete knowing, complete understanding, at least on the human level, seems to imply unity of thought, sameness, identity. We cannot truly understand the other unless we have experienced the world from the other's perspective, or to use a cliché, have walked in the other's shoes. But we really cannot experience the other's perspective completely unless we are the other, that is, the only way to truly walk in the other's shoes is to have the same feet. But we have our own experience—and our own feet—and really, we would rather keep it that way. We don't want to be the other person. We want to be a different person. We only

want to understand the other and be able to communicate effectively with the other. So communication draws us near to the other, yet requires us to maintain a distance so that communication does not equate to sameness. I envision this tension as more basic than autonomy/connectedness and inclusion/separation; it exists at the very core of our humanity.

Returning to structuration theory, the very connotations of the word *routine* embody this basic tension. *Routine* is comfortable, desirable, secure. All of our society, according to Giddens (1984), depends on the routines of daily living, the routines of language, of knowledge, of interaction, of physical properties, of diet, of energy availability. And it is through these routines that we can live with others, communicate with them, build societies, have a daily life and a social life. To not have routine is to live in chaos and to be disconnected, uncommunicative. On the other hand, the other connotation of the word *routine* is sameness, boredom, confinement, restriction. To live by our own routines is to confine ourselves to acting only in a few circumscribed ways—but at least that is our own choice. However, to accept and participate in another's routines is to abrogate our freedom to be an individual. Thus we are confronted with a choice: to choose a life of freedom from the boredom and restraint of routine or to bind ourselves in routines of our own making and those of others. This choice at one extreme is insanity, to live disconnected not only from other people, but also disconnected from ourselves and our past, to be completely *other*. But the other pole, that of accepting the routines of self and others, is to be totally bound, to be exactly like the people who have formed those routines, to have no *otherness*.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, I have made a case for a higher level dialectical tension than those examined in the canon of dialectical tension research. This higher level tension recognizes the otherness of the other, as well as the otherness of the self—egocentrism/altruism. It is a recognition that I am not the only person in the world

Thus relational dialectics is a parsing out of the overriding tension of *otherness* that drives communication, the tension of *otherness/identity* enacted through our routines in our daily lives. (I personally like use of the word *identity* in this context because it so succinctly conveys the idea of complete sameness. However, I recognize the difficulty with the word because *identity* is more frequently used in a different context of personal uniqueness—perhaps that is also an interesting coincidence that points to this same tension.) The conjoining of structuration theory and dialectical perspective creates a meta-perspective of communication as a study of *otherness*. These two theories together explore and explain the tension in the desire to be understood and yet to be separate, to be a part and yet to be individual.

Drifting back down to earth, back down to the world of academic convention and theory, this tension and process is evident in other communication theories: feminist standpoint theory (Bullis & Stout, 2000), muted group theory (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981), family communication (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and organizational culture (Schein, 1992), to name a few. Rather than expand this dissertation with further explication, I encourage you the reader to contemplate these connections as your own interests dictate.

### Resonance with Other Communication Theories

The findings of this study also resonate with the communication theories of relational communication and closeness and distance. The findings may also contribute to our understanding of other bona fide small groups.

#### *Relational Communication*

The findings of this study may add to our understanding of relational communication. Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson (1967) first introduced the concept that messages contain two components. One component is the content or the topic of the messages, while the other component reveals something about the relationship between the two communicators. Keyton (1999) explored relational communication in groups, which she defined as “the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric of a group by promoting relationship between and among group members” (p. 192). According to Keyton (1999) families exist principally to satisfy relational needs, and therefore relational messages are essential in families. These relational messages impact the creation of norms and routines in a process that basically reflects structuration: messages affect the outcome of the interaction and thereby affect further messages in a cyclical process that occurs over the lifetime of the group (Keyton, 1999). Although some researchers (Burgoon & Hale, 1984) have identified 12 nuanced dimensions of relational communication, later researchers (Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999) proposed that the most important dimensions are affiliation and dominance. However, most of this relational communication is implicit (Hess, 2002; Keyton, 1999).

In this study of in-laws, most of the relational messages were communicated implicitly through enactment of their physical and communication routines. For

example, the giving of gifts was an important method for signaling full acceptance into the family. In families where joking was standard, including the newcomer in the jokes, or even making him/her the butt of the joke, was a way of communicating acceptance. The practice of simply carrying on with everyday routines also implicitly communicated the relational message of affiliation. On the other hand, the practice of routinely mediating the in-law relationship implicitly communicated the independent and outside status of the newcomer.

At times, however, the in-laws in this study did also communicate relational messages explicitly. This often occurred during the formal occasion when families directly acknowledged and addressed the role of the newcomer in the family, explained the roles and expectations for them, or verbalized approval of the newcomer, either directly to the newcomer or to the spouse. Another incidence of explicit communication of relationship occurred when in-laws chose the forms of direct address they used for each other. Jorgenson (1994) found that newlyweds struggled with how to address their spouse's parents, often choosing to call them no name at all because other forms of address were either too intimate or too formal. In my study, I asked participants how the newcomer addressed the parents-in-law. Almost all the married and engaged people referred to and addressed their in-laws by their first names, although many of them admitted that they usually tried to avoid actually using the names because it felt awkward. Those who felt awkward looked forward to the time when they had children and could then address the parents-in-law by grandparent names. Most of the parents-in-law were comfortable with being addressed by their first names, although some admitted that they would welcome being called "Mom and Dad," since they saw their child's

spouse as “just one of the kids.” One father-in-law specifically asked his son-in-law to address him as “Dad,” which the son-in-law struggled to do because he, of course, already had a father. In fact, this rationale—that of already having one set of parents—was offered by other participants to explain why they chose not to address their parents-in-law as “Mom and Dad.”

This issue of address represents a struggle between the dominance and affiliation components of relational communication (Dillard, et al. 1999). Addressing one’s parents-in-law by “Mom and Dad” directly positions the newcomer as both affiliated with and submissive to the authority of the parents-in-law, which may be why participants preferred not to use these terms. On the other hand using their personal first names was both comfortable and awkward for several reasons. First, since the young married people were working adults, they were accustomed to calling most other adults with whom they worked by their first names, in accordance with the current American casual, egalitarian culture. However, these young adults felt that use of the first name implied too much of an equal or intimate relationship between them, which did not feel comfortable to many of the participants. Thus they chose not to directly address their parents-in-law by any name, which sent a message of discomfort and uncertainty about their relational status.

#### *Closeness and Distance in Relationships*

Some interpersonal and family scholars have examined the management of closeness and distance in relationships. Kantor and Lehr (1975) theorized that the central feature of family life is the maintenance of distance, both spatial and psychological. Cotterill (1989) found that the formal boundaries between families in the relationship among in-laws create distance that does not occur in other family relationships. Limary



(2002) suggested that there was a real tension between boundaries and intrusions in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships.

Hess (2000) explored the management of distance in nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners. He hypothesized that people feel uncomfortable when they must be in relationship with others that they don't really like, and therefore, they would try to decrease their discomfort through distancing behaviors. Hess identified the most used distancing behaviors in these nonvoluntary relationships as expressing detachment, avoiding involvement, and showing antagonism.

In my study, although I asked no specific questions about closeness and distance, many participants talked about it. For example, the few people who openly admitted having problematic relationships with their in-laws described behavior—their own or the other's—that used these distancing techniques. They or their problematic in-laws avoided contact, acted like they really didn't care, and sometimes openly tried to antagonize the other. However, other participants in the study who did report good in-law relationships also described using avoidance behaviors that kept their in-laws at an optimum distance. For example, the practice of the spouse mediating the relationship between the newcomer and the parents-in-law was an avoidance behavior, and all parties involved contributed to this practice. In other words, the practice seemed to be a mutually agreed upon strategy to maintain distance in the relationship, which many of the participants directly acknowledged as the proper way to conduct the in-law relationship. No one involved in good relationships practiced showing antagonism or openly expressing detachment—at least not directly. Again the spouse was expected to mediate the relationship particularly if there was a potential for antagonism to flare up. The

spouse was also expected to mediate when the newcomer chose not to participate in a family routine, thereby expressing detachment through the spouse rather than directly.

As discussed above, this mediation was functional and beneficial in that it helped the married couple establish themselves as a new entity without openly expressing antagonism. Although the in-law relationship, as reported by the participants in this study, was not characterized as a nonvoluntary relationship with *disliked* partners (Hess, 2000), it was nonetheless a nonvoluntary relationship, which by definition does not leave room for choice. Therefore, even though most participants admitted to liking and having positive relationships with their in-laws, they had no choice in whether the relationship continued. Thus they preferred to keep the relationship cordial by practicing distancing behaviors; in this way, they avoided potentially problematic encounters in the family. These theoretical insights suggest practical applications that may guide individuals as well as therapists and counselors to improve family communication in relationships with their in-laws.

#### *Other Small Groups*

The insights gained from this study may also be applicable to other bona fide small groups, as well as other families in the throes of change. The participants in this study gave direct evidence of the bi-directional process of assimilation in which the group attempts to mold the newcomer while the newcomer also attempts to change the group, as researchers in small group communication have theorized (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999; Mignerey, Rubin, & Gorden, 1995; Moreland & Levine, 1984).

In addition, this study suggests the importance of communication routines in assimilating the newcomer, a concept that may be useful in understanding other small

groups. For example, examining both physical and communication routines in work groups and organizations might clarify the differences in how easily particular groups assimilate newcomers. In the interviews for this study, participants discussed the kinds of communication routines that made them comfortable or uncomfortable, but which were nevertheless not negotiable simply because the differences were difficult to articulate. Communication routines of emotional display, amount of interaction, joking, conversation topics and conversation patterns all exist inside other kinds of small groups, and may evoke difficulties for both the newcomer and the group. Exploring how perceptive group members are about their group communication routines might lead to greater insights into how newcomers are assimilated, leading perhaps to better recruitment and assimilation practices.

#### Practical Applications

This study does not point to any simple way to fix uncomfortable relationships among in-laws, but it does suggest that communication routines might be a key to recognizing and overcoming some of the discomfort in in-law relationships that cannot be attributed to other kinds of routines that are more openly negotiated. Communication routines in general are not talked about much nor openly discussed. However, I am not sure how much one would accomplish by trying a direct approach, such as going to one's in-law and saying, "I wish you didn't kid me so much" or "I need more time to think in our conversation, and if you would not jump in so quickly, I might actually think of something to say." However, armed with the knowledge of the kinds of communication routines that exist in families, in-laws of all types who are interested in improving their

communication could monitor their own behavior and that of their in-law and attempt different strategies for bridging the differences between them.

Simply building awareness of how the assimilation process is experienced by our in-laws may lead to greater understanding, an idea that was also proposed by Limary (2002). Several of my participants approached me after our interview and commented on how our conversation had made them think more deeply about their in-law relationships. They had begun to take the process of assimilation more seriously and examine their own experiences and reactions. These comments have sparked a hope in me that by looking at this relationship from a different perspective, by seeing it as a process of re-creating and adjusting our routines, rather than as a site for antagonism, we can move beyond the stereotyped media messages that form part of our expectations for relationships with our in-laws.

Through this research, more than anything I have come to realize that family relationships, like all relationships, are work. Even though we like to think that the concept of *family* and *home* conjure up pictures of ontological security and bliss, they really are construction sites, built through the hard work of the people involved, fraught with danger zones, and unfortunately sometimes the site of disabling accidents if we're not paying attention. When we use the cliché "It's working out," what we're really saying is that the relationship takes work, we're working at it, and we are committed to always working at it—because that's what it takes to build quality family and in-law relationships.

### Strengths of the Study

This study adds to the body of literature on in-law relationships by including a wider participant pool than previous studies. Whereas most of the earlier studies focused on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, this study included both husbands and wives, mothers- and fathers-in-law, as well as unmarried siblings-in-law. Thus the results provide a clearer picture of the process of how the in-law is assimilated into the family and how the whole family adjusts and changes in response to the in-law. This study also takes a look at how the family of childhood transforms into the family of adulthood, rather than viewing this period as the empty nest period when parents must find new interests besides raising a family.

Another strength of the study is that it applied a new perspective for understanding change in families. Structuration theory offers promising insights into family communication because of its emphasis on the role of family routines and the concept of ontological security. Other communication scholars (Barker et al., 2000; Frey, 1994a; Socha, 1997, 1999; Stafford & Dainton, 1995) have seen the potential uses structuration offers for study of small groups. In addition, the study extends the research on relational dialectics in the realm of small groups instead of merely focusing on dyads. This study demonstrates that these new perspectives can yield useful insights.

### Limitations

This study is limited in several ways, all related to the sample. First, the sample size was small and was rather homogenous in some aspects. Although many of the 42 participants came from both rural and urban areas in other states, the participants were nonetheless of similar ethnic and socio-economic status. Most of the participants had

college degrees, and many had graduate degrees, although at least a fourth of them also had in-laws with a different educational background, more or less education than their own. A different sample that included a larger sample with more diversity in background, socio-economic status, race, religion, and education, might yield a more complete picture of communication among in-laws.

Another limitation is that in order to focus on the early stages of assimilation into the family, the participant sample was limited to only those whose in-law relationships spanned less than five years of marriage. In addition, the information for this study was gathered principally through one-time, self-report interviews. Since the participants were in the early stages of their in-law relationships, they expected things to change over time, and they hoped that the changes would be positive. Nevertheless, within this sample, those with longer in-law relationships and those just embarking on them recounted many of the same issues, which suggests that the issues and life course of in-law relationships may be shared by many people.

An additional limitation is that 36 of the 42 participants characterized their relationships with their in-laws as good. At first glance, this fact seems to suggest that I recruited an unusual sample for this study, one that had unusually good relationships with their in-laws. Duvall in 1954 found that 75% of her 1337 interview participants indicated some problems with their in-laws. Limary (1989) also reported a similarly high rate of problematic relationships. However, Pfeifer (1989) found that although most of her participants assessed their relationship as good to excellent, they nevertheless thought of each other as *associates* rather than parent-child, friends, or extended family. In my study I did not specifically ask whether the relationship was problematic. I asked simply

to describe the present relationship with the in-law, and most people began by describing it as a qualified “good.” In our extended discussion during the interviews, almost every participant brought up an area that was problematic, had been problematic, or that they perceived as presenting the potential of being problematic. Therefore, I think that the high level of so-called “happy” in-law relationships in my sample is a function of how I asked the question as compared to how other researchers have asked the question.

Another possibility is that, as noted earlier, 21<sup>st</sup> century relationships among in-laws may be different from 20<sup>th</sup> century relationships. I did not examine relationships from the last century, but focused only on those that had been formalized within the last five years.

What I found uplifting about this study was that, although they perceived some problems in the relationships, the participants preferred to think of them as evolving rather than as settled at a particular level of discomfort. In addition, most of the participants, even those in seriously problematic relationships, were willing to keep working at the relationship.

A final aspect of this study can be viewed as both a limitation and a strength. Of the 42 participants, 21 were related through blood or marriage to another participant, either as a spouse, a sibling(-in-law), or a parent(-in-law). The study included eight married pairs, five pairs in the group of the newly married, and three pairs of parents-in-law.

There were two sets of four related participants, that is, a husband, wife, and the wife’s parents, as well as several other combinations. Therefore, these participants were talking about the same in-law relationships, although from different perspectives, which served to triangulate their experiences and reveal how different participants can interpret the same experiences in different ways. However, at the same time, this linking of participants limits the number of actual in-law relationships studied, rendering any

quantitative interpretation misleading at best. But in the spirit of phenomenological research, I offer my findings as a “mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). I make no claim that the findings are true of people in general, only perhaps transferable and therefore useful to others as insights into living and understanding their lives.

#### Directions for Future Research

This study focused on the early years of a first marriage and how the newcomer is assimilated into the spouse’s family. This process is intensive and potentially problematic for the first few years of courtship and marriage, but then usually the relationship plateaus and family members fall into routine behavior—positive or negative—which maintains the relationship at that level until other life changes come along. The relationships among in-laws undergo changes as the family moves through other life events: grandchildren arrive, couples divorce and remarry, the parents age and become dependent on their children. All of these changes present interesting opportunities for study into the in-law relationship. Fischer (1983) looked at how having children affects the relationship between a wife and her husband’s mother. The other two situations are more interesting to me, and are as yet under-explored in family communication studies.

Ambert (1988) has examined how relationships between in-laws are affected by divorce, finding that particularly when the couple has produced children, grandparents may seek to maintain positive close relationships with their child’s ex-spouse. But what has not been examined is how a family reacts to a series of spouses that their family member may introduce into the family. For example, I know from anecdotes among my



acquaintances that when a child divorces and remarries several times, the family-of-origin begins to anticipate the potentially temporary nature of later marriages and instead of thinking of the newcomer as a son- or daughter-in-law, brother- or sister-in-law, the family simply begins to refer to the newcomer as “so-and-so’s spouse.” Similarly, if a person has been married several times and remarries later in life, he or she usually does not expect the in-laws to truly be family and viewed in familial roles. Thus those relationships may be even more mediated than in first marriages. Thus it may be interesting to study the nature of these serial marriages and how in-law relationships are enacted within them.

In addition, the importance of in-law ties may come into play later in life when aging parents require support and care from their children and their children-in-law. Through the course of time, parents inevitably age and turn to their children for physical, mental, and sometimes financial support. How does the in-law relationship change for couples when this happens? Do couples who have married only once and who have a long history of interacting with the in-laws have an easier time adjusting to this role change than those who have married several times and may have not become fully assimilated into the family? Some of my acquaintances who heard that I was studying in-law relationships hoped that I would address these studies because they had stories they wanted to tell about their aging parents-in-law coming to live with them or demanding more care and attention.

Some of the basic concepts of structuration theory also discuss power dynamics (Giddens, 1984), particularly how the structurally less powerful use resources in such a way as to curtail the power of the structurally more powerful. In this study, there was

evidence that the newcomer, although structurally less powerful, could actually wield considerable power in the family by limiting access to the spouse and children. Since this was not the focus of my study, I did not explore it specifically, but I note that this power dynamic has been documented by other researchers (Cotterill, 1989; Limary, 2002) and may be worthy of more exploration.

Finally, beyond family communication, other small groups that have similar or related assimilation patterns might be fruitful areas for study. For example, since 90% of all businesses in the United States are family-run businesses, it might be interesting to study how an in-law is assimilated into the family business, and how both the family and the business adjusts to the presence of the newcomer.

I initiated this study to answer my own personal questions about how one builds and conducts good relationships with in-laws. Although I found no specific fixes or formulas, through this research project I achieved a growing awareness in myself of the forces that interact to make in-law relationships problematic but also rewarding. As I interviewed the participants and analyzed their responses, I looked back on my own experiences as a young newlywed, an older newlywed, and a sibling-in-law. I have also begun to monitor the assimilation process I am experiencing with my sons and their girlfriends, and I have begun to envision the future outcomes of that process. I found that many other people wondered about and struggled with the same questions, and it is my hope that by thinking about these questions together, we have moved in a positive direction and committed ourselves to improving our relationships with our in-laws. At the same time, in answering my questions, I found that more questions and more avenues for research opened up for me and other researchers to explore in the future.

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Group 1: People who have recently gained an in-law through the marriage of their sibling.

1. Describe the first meeting between you and your new brother- or sister-in-law (when you first realized that he/she/you might become part of the family).
  - a. What was the occasion?
  - b. What did you and the other person do?
  - c. What did you think/feel at the time? What do you think looking back on it?
2. Describe your present relationship with your new brother- or sister-in-law.
3. Tell me about a time when your relationship changed with your new in-law.
4. How is your relationship with your sibling different as a result of the marriage?
  - a. How do you feel about that change?
  - b. Specifically, how do you act differently when you interact?
  - c. How often do you see your sibling without the new spouse?
  - d. How are these interactions different from when the spouse is there?
5. How did you react when they became engaged?
6. Tell me about a recent but typical event where your whole family, including your new in-law were together.
  - a. How was this different from how it would have been before your sibling was married?
  - b. What were your feelings during the event?
  - c. What does your family do differently now because of the new in-law (for example, food that is served, family rituals of celebrations, change in the time or rhythm of the events, topics you discuss)?

7. What have you or other family members done to help the in-law adjust to your family?
  - a. How has the in-law responded to this help?
  - b. Why did you feel this help was needed?
8. What were your hopes and expectations for your in-law relationship?
  - a. How is the relationship different from your hopes and expectations?
9. I want you to think about your place in the family and what your new in-law's place is in the family.
  - a. What specific jobs, routines, and expectations do you associate with your places in the family?
  - b. How have you communicated these to your new in-law? And what has been his/her response?
10. How have your family routines changed in response to this new member? (Ask this if nothing has emerged from other questions.)
11. If you could change one thing about your relationship with your sibling's spouse, what would it be? Why?

Group 2: People who have recently married and have acquired new in-laws.

Part 1: Focus on spouse's family

1. Describe the first meeting between you and your new in-law (when you first realized that you might become part of the family).
  - a. What was the occasion?
  - b. What did you and the other person do?
  - c. What did you think/feel at the time? What do you think looking back on it?
2. Describe your present relationship with your new in-laws.
3. Tell me about a time when your relationship changed with your new in-laws.
4. Tell me about a recent but typical family gathering/event with your whole in-law family.
  - a. Has your spouse mentioned or have you noticed anything that has changed since you became a member of the family?
5. What have your in-laws or spouse done to help you adjust to the family?
  - a. How have you responded to this help?
6. What were your hopes and expectations for your in-law relationship?
  - a. How is the relationship different from your hopes and expectations?
7. Think about your place in your new in-law family.
  - a. What specific jobs, routines, and expectations do your in-laws have for you?
  - b. How do you know what these jobs, routines, and expectations are?

- c. What are your feelings about those jobs, routines, and expectations? Have you tried to change them? If so, how?
8. If you could change one thing about your relationship with your in-law family, what would it be? Why?

*Part 2: Focus on participant's family-of-origin.*

9. How is your family-of-origin different from your spouse's family-of-origin?
- a. Celebrations? Routines? Food? Discussions?
10. Describe the first meeting between your spouse and your family (when they first realized that he/she might become part of the family).
- a. What was the occasion?
  - b. What did you and your family do?
  - c. What did you think/feel at the time? What do you think looking back on it?
  - d. How did they react to your engagement?
11. How has your relationship with your family-of-origin changed as a result of your marriage?
- a. How do you feel about that change?
  - b. Specifically, how do you act differently when you interact?
  - c. How often do you see your family without your spouse?
    - a. How are these interactions different from when the spouse is there?
12. Tell me about a recent but typical family gathering/event with your whole family-of-origin.

- a. How was this different from how it would have been before you were married?
  - b. What were your feelings during the event?
  - c. What does your family do differently now because of your new spouse (for example, food that is served, family rituals of celebrations, change in the time or rhythm of the events)?
13. What were your hopes and expectations for your family-of-origin's relationship with your spouse? How is the relationship different from your hopes and expectations?
14. What has your spouse done to adjust to your family-of-origin? How has your family responded?
15. How have your family routines changed in response to this new member? (Ask only if nothing else has emerged from the other questions.)
16. If you could change one thing about your family-of-origin's relationship with your spouse, what would it be? Why?
17. Ask about gifts.



Group 3: Parents whose child has recently married.

1. Describe the first meeting between you and your new in-law (when you first realized that he/she might become part of the family).
  - a. What was the occasion?
  - b. What did you and the other person do?
  - c. What did you think/feel at the time? What do you think looking back on it?
2. Describe your present relationship with your new in-law.
3. Tell me about a time when your relationship changed with your new in-law.
4. How did you react when they got engaged?
5. How has your relationship with your child changed as a result of the marriage?
  - d. How do you feel about that change?
  - e. Specifically, how do you act differently when you interact?
  - f. How often do you see your sibling without the new spouse?
    - a. How are these interactions different from when the spouse is there?
6. Tell me about a recent but typical event where your whole family, including your new in-law, were together.
  - a. How was this different from how it would have been before your child was married?
  - b. What were your feelings during the event?
  - c. What does your family do differently now because of the new in-law (for example, food that is served, family rituals of celebrations, change in the time or rhythm of the events)?

7. What have you done to help the in-law adjust to your family? How has the in-law responded to your input?
8. What were your hopes and expectations for your in-law relationship? How is the relationship different from your hopes and expectations?
9. I want you to think about your place in the family and what your new in-law's place is in the family.
  - a. What specific jobs, routines, and expectations do you associate with your places in the family?
  - b. Have they undergone any changes? How/why did those changes occur?
  - c. How have you communicated these roles to your child's spouse?
10. How is your family-of-origin different from your child-in-law's family-of-origin?
  - a. Celebrations? Routines? Food? Discussions?
11. How have your family routines changed in response to this new member? (Ask only if other questions have not worked.)
12. If there were one thing that you could change about your relationship with your child's spouse, what would it be? Why?
13. Ask about gifts.
14. Any comments on being a mother-in-law or father-in-law?

Figure 1: Pseudonyms, demographics, and relationships of participants

Group 1 Siblings-in-law	Group 2 Newly-wed or Engaged*	Group 3 Parents-in-law
Brandy	Jennifer <sub>a</sub>	Fred <sub>a</sub>
Justin <sub>b</sub>	Justin <sub>b</sub> *	Audrey
Courtney	Leslie <sub>c</sub>	Ann <sub>c</sub>
Holly	Allen <sub>c</sub>	Roger <sub>c</sub>
Sarah <sub>d</sub>	Ted <sub>d</sub>	Tina <sub>e</sub>
Josh	Ginny <sub>d</sub>	Charlie <sub>e</sub>
Ellen	Nathan <sub>f</sub>	Mindy
Amanda	Megan <sub>f</sub>	Patty <sub>g</sub>
Becky	Lindsay <sub>g</sub>	Bob <sub>g</sub>
Marissa	Tyler <sub>g</sub>	Michelle
Tricia	Beverly <sub>h</sub>	Sue
James	Michael <sub>h</sub>	Mark <sub>i</sub>
Doug <sub>i</sub>	Melissa	Group 3: All Caucasian; one 55+ years old; others 41-54 years.
Group 1: All Caucasian, 18-24 years old.	Barb	
	Lena	
	Babette*	
Matching subscripts indicate related participants	Naomi*	Group 2: One African-American; others Caucasian; three 18-24 years old, two 31-40; others 25-30.
	Tess*	

## VITA

Carolyn Prentice was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and moved to Quincy, Illinois at the age of 8, where she later graduated from Notre Dame High School as the salutatorian of her class. She received a scholarship to Loyola University in Chicago, which she attended for one year and then decided to pursue other interests, which included protesting the war in Vietnam, promoting peace, and living a simpler lifestyle, as well as exploring other options for what to do with her life. She returned to college a few years later and graduated from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale with a B.A. in English. She continued at SIU-C for a masters in higher education designed to qualify her to teach English in Community Colleges (1984). After that she taught a variety of courses at Linn State Technical College for 17 years before she enrolled in a Ph.D. program in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri—Columbia. She later found her academic home and transferred to the Department of Communication. She completed her doctoral program there in 2005. She currently is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of South Dakota at Vermillion. Carolyn is married to Jerry Prentice, and they have three sons.