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Chapter Ten

Power, Control, and the Mother-in-Law Problem: Face-Offs in the American Nuclear Family

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American society has placed great importance upon the roles and functions embedded within the nuclear family. Even the briefest of visits to a research library provides an abundance of published materials pertaining to subjects on marriage and the family in the United States. Yet, despite all the studies that have been done in this area of scholarship, very little research has been oriented toward the study of in-laws, and virtually no significant body of material has been published specifically on the mother-in-law problem. A recent computer bibliographical search on “mother-in-law” using two different social science data banks yielded a grand total of five pieces of research published on the subject of mother-in-law in American society.¹

As an anthropologist, I find this a most curious and puzzling phenomenon, given the fact that historically we have created a rather strong negative stereotype of this particular affinal relative. Yet, the nonexistence of a body of research on the subject raises the obvious question, “Indeed, does a mother-in-law problem really exist in American society?” In response to the question, this chapter will argue that not only does the mother-in-law problem exist in American culture, but that a specific form of the problem is dominant. Structurally, it is the dyadic relationship between wife and husband’s mother that appears to control the contours of the mother-in-law problem as opposed to the relationship between husband and wife’s mother. Like a talented actress, it is the husband’s mother who plays the starring role in this “Great American Drama” of family life.

In taking this position, there are three kinds of materials that support the suggested thesis. Initially, it might be noted that while our professional journals have not seen mothers-in-law as a topic of sufficient interest or importance for analysis, the same cannot be said of segments of the popular culture print medium, such as advice columns like “Dear Abby” and “Ann Landers.”

Indeed, one finds strong support for the prevalence of the mother-in-law problem in the writings of both columnists. It is interesting to note, that while there have been changes over the years in terms of the kinds of problems written about that reflect attitudinal changes in American society, the flow of letters involving mother-in-law complaints has remained steady. This would seem to indicate that the problematic mother-in-law relationship has not been an ephemeral one. In her last book, Eppie Lederer—alias Ann Landers—commented on the continuity and frequency of in-law problems in our society:

In 1961 I wrote my first book. . . . In that book, I dealt with the problem that produced the greatest number of letters. Chapter Six . . . was called "Must We Outlaw the In-Law?" Today, many years later, in-law problems still figure prominently. . . . My mail provides daily evidence that the in-law problem is no myth. (Lederer 1978: 643)

However, what is of greater interest are Ann Landers's comments that pinpoint the patterns found in the in-law complaints. First, in comparing mother-in-law complaints with those against fathers-in-law, she estimates that for every letter received about a father-in-law problem, she receives fifty letters dealing with mother-in-law problems (Lederer 1978: 643). Second, when the comparison is made within the general category of in-law, she states that 90 percent of all complaints against in-laws are directed specifically against mothers-in-law (1978: 650). Finally, and most significantly, she notes that of these mother-in-law complaints, fully 80 percent of them focus upon husband's mother as the troublesome relative (1978: 650).²

While Abigail Van Buren does not give the kinds of quantitative estimates provided by Ann Landers, nevertheless, her work leaves little doubt about her perception of the mother-in-law relationship. She has described it as being problematic and contentious, a kind of deadly contest between mother-in-law and husband's wife in which "luckily Mrs. Newlywed at least has sex on her side. Otherwise, any fair-minded referee would declare it no contest" (1958: 56).

In trying to put some scholarly clothing onto this body of advice column data, I did eventually come across some shreds and patches of material hidden in the sociological literature on marriage and the family published in the 1950s and 1960s. Studies that had looked at the question of in-law adjustment generally seemed to agree with the patterns suggested by the advice columns. Interestingly, the research indicated that the study of in-law problems again turned out to be primarily the study of the mother-in-law problem (Duvall 1954: 216, 318; Komarovsky 1964: 259–61; Landis and Landis 1963: 333; Thomas 1956: 235; Wallin 1954: 468). Duvall commented in her book, *In-Laws: Pro & Con*, "When men and women are given an opportunity to indicate who in their experience is the most difficult of in-laws, more mention mother-in-law than any other relative by marriage" (1954: 216). Of 992 persons in her sample having in-law difficulties of some kind, almost one out of

two respondents (49.5 percent) mentioned mother-in-law as being most problematic (1954: 187).³

However, of greater significance is the other pattern found in these works. Two of the studies also allude to the female-female nature of the mother-in-law problem in much the same way that the advice columns suggested. In a study to test for sex differences in attitudes toward in-laws, Wallin not only found that wives more than husbands disliked their mothers-in-law, but that they did so at a ratio of greater than two-to-one (1954: 468). In addition, when Duvall elicited the specific nature of complaints about mothers-in-law, she clearly struck a nerve, which tapped into intensity of feelings along gender lines. The figures in her study tell the whole story: of 1,369 separate mother-in-law complaints, 1,227 of these complaints came from women (1954: 187).⁴

Given the above findings, how can we explain the contours that the mother-in-law problem takes? After all, most marriages produce two mothers-in-law. Why is it that the dyadic link between wife and mother-in-law in particular is such a point of contention? To explain this phenomenon, we must turn to two other types of cultural materials. My basic approach will involve looking at the cultural notion of the nuclear family as an autonomous social unit and linking that perception with traditional sex role socialization patterns.⁵

In American society, most middle-class individuals play out their lives in two different nuclear families: the family of orientation—the family into which one is born, and the family of procreation—the family one creates through marriage and progeny (see fig. 10.1).

These families are drawn as overlapping for illustrative purposes, but it can be posited that there is a cultural value in American society that really says the overlap ought not to occur. For nuclear family organization in American culture stresses fission rather than coalescence. It calls for fragmentation at each succeeding generation and the emergence of new and independent nuclear

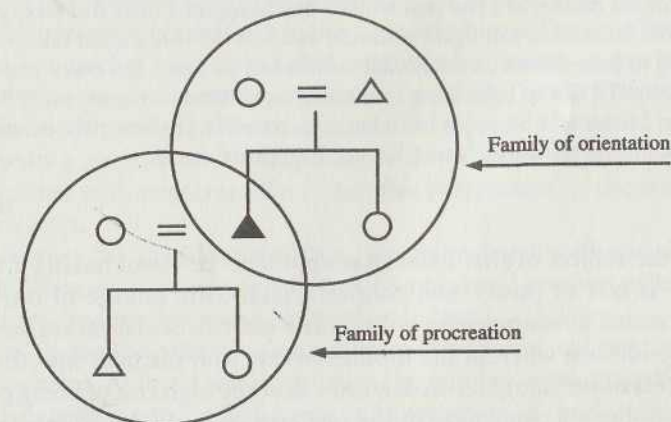


Figure 10.1 Overlapping Families of Orientation and Procreation

families. Initially, I would suggest that when one finds the husband's family of orientation overlapping with his family of procreation, then one of the necessary conditions for the development of the mother-in-law problem exists. This factor when linked to materials on sex-role socialization in our society allows us to begin to understand why the mother-in-law problem generally takes the specific form that it does.

Sex-role socialization materials clearly indicate that women in our society historically have received very different socialization cues from those received by males. Simply put, the major adult roles toward which women traditionally have been socialized in our society have been the roles of "wife" and "mother." All cultures make the distinction between adult and nonadult. In American society, female adulthood traditionally has been defined in terms of (a) marriage, (b) the establishment of a new household, and (c) the bearing and raising of children. Historically, young girls have been socialized to believe that the home will eventually be the focus of their adult activity and, more important, that the home will be the arena of their decision-making. If we correctly understand the social dynamics of family sex roles as traditionally defined by American culture, then the long-standing aphorism "A man's home is his castle" is really topsy-turvy. For it is females who have been socialized to perceive the home as *their* domain. When the implications of these cultural definitions and perceptions are fully grasped, then the most common complaint against mother-in-law becomes readily understandable. Mother-in-law is overwhelmingly seen as a problematic relationship because of the feeling that she interferes or is meddling in daughter-in-law's adult domestic domain. Indeed, letters to the advice columns strongly follow this pattern. How else can one explain the types of complaints written about, which I am sure often seem trivial or unimportant to many readers?

DEAR ABBY: In your opinion, whose place is it to bake a birthday cake for a man? His wife's or his mother's? I feel that when a boy becomes a man and takes a wife, that is where his mother's obligation should end and his wife should take over. I have been trying to bake Steve's birthday cake for the last 10 years, but every year when I tell his mother I'd like to bake Steve's cake, she says: "After I'm gone, you'll have the rest of your life to bake Steve his birthday cake, so while I'm here please don't deprive me of that pleasure." Now what am I supposed to do?

BUGGED

While the subject of that letter may appear to be about baking a cake, the real issue is one of power and control. Clearly, the linkage of our nuclear family-oriented kinship system with female sex-role socialization has created a set of conditions wherein the mother-in-law who intrudes into the household matters of her daughter-in-law does so at the high risk of being perceived as an interloper—a challenger in the one area of authority where, traditionally, American culture has led the daughter-in-law to believe she will have

power as an adult. Hence, it is posited that criticisms, suggestions, and "helpful hints" from mother-in-law functionally become kinds of challenges to daughter-in-law's adulthood—challenges to her ability to take care of husband, home, and family. The mother-in-law problem when placed within the context of daughter-in-law's home is a problem of power—a struggle involving control and decision-making within a culturally defined female domain.⁶

At this juncture, a very important point must be raised involving the dyadic delineation that has been presented thus far. At the surface level, the mother-in-law problem may well appear to be dyadic; in reality, however, it is triadic in nature. For I am firmly convinced that the crucial causal component of the mother-in-law problem involves husband behavior. In turning to the role of the husband within the kinship web of the mother-in-law problem, our focus shifts to the nature of husband's reaction to wife's complaints. The mother-in-law materials I refer to in this section of my study were collected from 106 people. Of these, there were 84 females and 22 males. In terms of race and socioeconomic status, the sample is essentially white and middle class—5 middle-class black females are included in the sample. All 106 people filled out a written questionnaire that emphasized open-ended responses; there were 54 face-to-face or telephone follow-up interviews.⁷

What emerges from the questionnaire and interview materials is that husband reactions follow a particular pattern. Since the mother-in-law problem is essentially one that involves husband's mother, in the best of all worlds he would like to disavow that any such problem exists. Material collected from wives with a mother-in-law problem suggest that once the nature of the difficulty is made known to husbands, a rather predictable response occurs. Generally, the way in which husbands attempt to deal with their wives' complaints focuses upon various forms of denial and noninvolvement. Most men do not want to become enmeshed in the differences between their wives and their mothers and—if given the opportunity—will gladly absent themselves. For the husband feels he is in a no-win situation. Indeed, he perceives *himself* as a victim. He sees himself caught between his wife and his mother, and senses that whatever he does is going to alienate one of them—or in his worst nightmare, possibly both of them! Hence, husbands in this triadic situation most often react to their wives' complaints with a variant of the response, "I don't want to get involved"—a phrase loaded with negative affect from the perspective of the wife, as will be shown later.

In collecting the questionnaire data, the following linked questions were asked: (1) "Have you ever attempted to get your husband involved with the problems you are experiencing with your mother-in-law? (___ Yes ___ No)," and (2) "If 'yes' is checked, what was your husband's response and reaction to your request for help?" At first, I was surprised at the number of women who checked "no" as their response to the first question. However, upon conducting some follow-up interviews, a most interesting pattern emerged. A number of the women

who were contacted indicated that when they first approached their husbands about their mother-in-law problems, their husbands' reactions were so negative that they gave up on any further attempts to work out their problems through discussion with their spouses. As one woman commented:

One evening after supper, when I first told my husband that I felt his mother was interfering in ways that I didn't like and that I wish he'd talk to her, I was shocked by his reaction. He just sat there and stared at me. He didn't say anything, just silence. I could see he was very angry with me and I could feel his hostility even though he wasn't talking. After a couple of minutes of this silent treatment, he got up and said some things in his mother's defense. Then he walked into the next room, and left me sitting at the kitchen table alone—end of discussion.

For these wives, the subject of the mother-in-law problem was surrounded by an air of taboo. It was a subject to be avoided; most certainly, something not to be confronted. One woman's voice spoke for many others when she remarked quite matter of factly, "I was *not allowed* to talk about it. My husband could not bear to listen to my complaints about his mother."

The research completed thus far leads me to conclude that among husbands there exists a pattern that might be alluded to as the "silent male" syndrome.⁸ By that, I do not necessarily mean total silence on the part of husbands, though in some of the instances reported—as those just noted—indeed, it was just that. Rather, what I would like to propose is that the "silent male" syndrome has as its focus an inability or unwillingness on the part of husbands to communicate to their mothers the problems that their wives are experiencing. I would suggest that the silence of the husband is essentially rooted in his desire to try to get himself into a disengagement mode. However, I would argue that there are really two versions of the disengagement pattern that are important to distinguish because of differences in the thrust and bluntness of the message the husband is sending to his wife.

The first version might be categorized as the "We're all reasonable people and should be able to work this problem out" response. From the interview materials, however, it appears that the "we" in "we're" more often than not does *not* include the husband. Many of the wives indicated that when push came to shove, a husband saw this position as a suggested discussion between his "reasonable wife" and his "reasonable mother," while his "reasonable self" was nowhere in sight. Indeed, in these cases, what the end result of this stance amounted to was that, whatever the problems were, the wife should be able to resolve them unilaterally through discussion with her mother-in-law.

Several points might be made here. First, the obvious difficulty with this problem solving suggestion is that the kind of issues around which the mother-in-law problem revolves usually are laden with very strong emotional and personal feelings—issues concerning husband, home, children, a sense of self. Issues that often cannot easily be discussed calmly and rationally, especially between the leading actors in this real-life domestic drama.

Second, we see that this stance is oriented primarily around husband disengagement. It becomes a vehicle by which husbands distance themselves from the mother-in-law problem, receding far into the background of the family setting. In essence, it is a type of "Where's Waldo" tactical maneuver—while husbands are present within the landscape of mother-in-law turmoil, they are very difficult to find. As a side note on this disengagement mode, in two cases, wives commented that their husbands indicated an unwillingness to become involved because—from the husbands' point of view—it was a "women's problem."

The second version of the "silent male" mode of adaptation to the mother-in-law problem might be called the "What's the big deal? You're making a mountain out of a mole hill!" response. This response, I would argue, is loaded with qualitatively different affect from the one discussed earlier. In reacting to wife's complaints about his mother, husband is forcefully showing his wife where his loyalties lie. Indeed, he is taking a very confrontational position on the issue of the mother-in-law problem that—unfortunately for his wife—turns the spotlight on her. In this instance, husband's response accomplishes two things simultaneously. It is not only a classic case of denial, but at the same time, it immediately disengages him from any discussion about his mother. For what husband is really saying to wife is, "My mother's not the problem, you are!" It is a response that embodies a saying from sports that men use all the time, namely, "The best defense is a good offense." This response is both hostile and aggressive with the result that wife is now put in a defensive posture, while at the same time, the object of the projected discussion—husband's mother—disappears from sight.

The negative effect of this response can be a devastating moment of truth in a marriage. For it may portend—in ways not earlier realized by wife—the nature of husband's maternal ties and support for mother.⁹ In the collection of mother-in-law materials, wives referring to themselves as being second best to husband's mother was a repeated theme. As one woman pointedly commented about her husband, "At some level, he never could tell his mother he was married and that meant his relationship with her had to change. He never made a choice that she was not the number one woman in his life."

For husbands caught in this familial web of tension, it is as if confrontation with their mothers becomes the equivalent of breaking some genetic nonaggression pact. For these men, silence and inaction appear to be the instruments of power with which they attempt to do damage control on behalf of their mothers. In approaching husbands about problems involving their mothers, wives are essentially seeking some type of support. They are asking for help, and to some degree, it is a testing of spousal loyalty. Rather than support, what they wind up experiencing is spousal alienation. The end result of this second mode of behavior has the same effect as the first. Once again, the burden of the resolution of the mother-in-law problem is placed squarely upon the shoulders of wife *alone*—it is *her problem*.

I think it can be asserted that the various "silent male" responses contain a message to wife that she really does not want to know, namely, that there are strong maternal ties that, in the end, both delimit and supersede husband's loyalties to her.¹⁰ It is this message that I would argue becomes a crucial facet in our understanding of the mother-in-law problem and forces us to come to terms with its triadic nature and structure. Ultimately, where husband's action—or in this instance, inaction—is perceived by wife as being unresponsive, one has the final hot ingredient for cooking up this fiery and steamy kinship stew known as the mother-in-law problem.

Notes

Modified versions of this paper were delivered at the annual meetings of the Popular Culture Association in San Antonio in March 1997, and the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., in November 1997. I should like to thank Karen Ehrlich, Jessica Kross, Marie Richmond-Abbott, Karen Sinclair, and Linda Stone for their collective critical eye and their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. I also wish to acknowledge a sabbatical leave granted by Eastern Michigan University that gave me the opportunity to turn my attention to writing up some of the mother-in-law research. Finally, I especially want to express my gratitude to David Aberle for the enthusiasm and encouragement he has shown me during several discussions of this kinship study.

1. This void has led to the fairly recent publication of a number of "how to" books on in-law relationships (Arnstein 1985; Averick 1989; Bilofsky and Sacharow 1991; and Strauss 1996). It might be noted that in 1951, a nonprofit educational organization named the Public Affairs Committee felt the need to publish pamphlet No. 174, entitled *How to Be a Good Mother-in-Law and Grandmother* (Neisser 1951).

2. It should be emphasized that this finding is not the result of females writing greater numbers of letters to advice columns than males. In an essay on Ann Landers, Stuppel has remarked that, "Lederer and her syndicate are reluctant to provide detailed circulation information but we do know that nearly half of the letters that come in are from males" (1975: 17). Also, Grossvogel makes a similar point in noting that the advice column "has been fed over the years by a fairly even distribution of male and female correspondents, according to Ann Landers—an estimate she has repeated on more than one occasion" (1987: 72).

3. Duvall (1954: 221, 231), Landis and Landis (1963: 333), and Lederer (1978: 644) all found that the second most difficult in-law was sister-in-law, with *husband's* sister filling the problematic kinship role. I cannot help but express the feeling that the Freudian implications of this finding are worthy of a study of its own.

4. There were only two pieces of research I found that did not conform to this pattern. A study by Hoye reported that "females scored [only] slightly higher on the mother-in-law adjustment test than did their husbands" (1971: 43). It should be noted, however, that the conclusions of this study were based on a rather small sample of thirty-nine couples who were all living in a single county in North Carolina. The other contrary finding was in Komarovsky's book, *Blue Collar Marriage*, where she noted that level of education appeared to be a factor among the men with in-law problems. In those blue-collar families where husbands did not finish high school, Komarovsky observed, "The surprising finding . . . is the prevalence of in-law problems among the less-educated husbands. One-third of these men experience strain in relation to their in-laws, the same proportion as that of women with in-law grievances, irrespective of the women's education" (1964: 259). Parenthetically, it might be noted that a later study of working-class families concluded that it was primarily wives who experienced mother-in-law problems (Rubin 1974: 88–89).

5. In the 1950s, a series of articles appeared in the sociological literature that asked the question whether it was men or women who have greater difficulty establishing their independence based upon family and gender role socialization patterns in American society. This discussion, in turn, had theoretical implications for the study of marriage and in-law adjustment patterns (Komarovsky 1950, 1956; Stryker 1955; Thomas 1956; Wallin 1954; Winch 1950, 1951).

6. While there has been some criticism involving the universality of Rosaldo's argument that all societies have organized themselves around a female domestic sphere versus a male public sphere (1974), the analysis of the materials on the mother-in-law problem strongly supports the utility of that opposition in American culture. For an overview of some of the criticisms of the domestic/public opposition along with Rosaldo's response, see "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding" (1980).

7. People included in this nonrandom sample primarily fall into the following four categories: (1) students at Eastern Michigan University and Washtenaw Community College, (2) people attending various professional meetings where I have presented papers on my mother-in-law research, (3) friends and their friends, and (4) anthropologists who responded to a call for mother-in-law materials through the "cooperation column" in *Anthropology Newsletter*.

8. In the book *Linked Lives: Adult Daughters and Their Mothers*, Fischer briefly comments on family role behavior, contrasting the silence of married sons with the mediative role of married daughters (1986: 152–53). However, after she makes this point, the silence pattern of sons/husbands is not developed any further, nor is it linked to the presence of the mother-in-law problem.

9. It might be noted here that the husband himself may well not comprehend the depth or the dimensions of this psychodynamic facet of his persona. In the book *The Secrets Men Keep*, Druck suggests that in most instances men are not consciously aware of their own strong maternal ties and feelings. While the focus of the book is on male–male relationships, nonetheless, one finds the following very poignant comments on the son–mother relationship (1985: 167): "Men do not often discuss their unresolved feelings about their mothers. While they play a key part in their relationships with other women, these emotions are often hidden away out of our awareness. Men's deepest feelings toward their mothers remain some of their best-kept secrets, even from themselves" (emphasis mine).

10. If one wishes to seek out possible factors underlying the strong maternal ties these husbands exhibit, I think one has to move to the psychological level of analysis. More specifically, one must look to the psychological literature that deals with the subject of early childhood socialization of males and focuses upon issues of the resolution of gender identity and separation that lead to the establishment of ego boundaries. Ever since the publication of the two groundbreaking books *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Chodorow 1978) and *In A Different Voice* (Gilligan 1982), we have become acutely aware of the experiential differences of males and females during the early childhood socialization period. In this literature, one finds a portrayal in which both males and females as infants experience mother as their first and most significant relationship. Yet, in the case of a male, there comes a time in his early childhood when he is expected to separate and give up his identification with the one person to whom he has the strongest ties, the greatest emotional attachment. He must turn away from mother and move towards what she is not—towards maleness. It is a separation filled with pain and differs from the separation process young females experience. Given the above material, it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that in those cases of the mother-in-law problem where husband's maternal ties appear to be stronger than those to wife, we are dealing with instances where the socialization issues of separation and individuation were never satisfactorily resolved. And so these earlier psychological patterns live on. As Rubin has noted, "And long after the conflict between our need for separation and our desire for unity has left center stage, these issues will live inside us to influence the next act" (1983: 52). For those readers who might wish to delve into this area of study involving insights from the object relations school of psychology, a good starting point is the chapter entitled "The Child Within," in the book *Intimate Strangers* (1983: 38–64).