



A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MOTHER-IN-LAW - DAUGHTER-IN-LAW COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship is one of the most complex relationships when one enters into marriage. Even though the relationship starts with a hope and happiness, for most of the people, it may not be so. Some psychological issues disconnect them. The study is an attempt to analyze the memorable communication between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law so as to explore their conflicts and its background in a psychoanalytic perspective. The sample consisted of two subsamples namely daughters-in-law (n=33) and mothers-in-law (n=45) which were drawn using purposive sampling from various districts of Kerala. All of them were ladies who reported without any background of mental disorders. Semi-structured interview schedule and personal information schedule were used for data collection. Qualitative and thematic analyses were adopted for analyzing the data. The results revealed that the in-law problems can be the result of Oedipus complex, especially from the maternal side. The analysis indicated evidences of the residual of Oedipus complex, even in middle age, from the maternal side which affects the marital relationship of the son.

Key words:- daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, Oedipus complex, psycho analysis, psychosomatic disorders.

Introduction

The mother-in-law - daughter-in-law relationship is one of the most complex relationships. A son's marriage creates perhaps the most ambivalent and yet one of the most critical relationships, that of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Fischer, 1983, 1986). Duvall's (1954) survey of married men and women identified the mother-in-law as the most difficult in-law, with wives experiencing the majority of the mother-in-law problems. A son for the mother is the outgrowth of her efforts and emotional involvement. The mother-in-law becomes the embodiment of all the stress which a bride suffers in adjusting to a new household and the new role of a married woman (Brink, 1987). That is why Nye and Berardo (1973) reported in-law problems as a female problem.

The kinship tie between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is initiated by the daughter-in-law's marriage. They are essentially "strangers" to each other whose relationship derives from the fact that they both have intimate bonds with the son/husband (Fischer, 1983). Even though in some cases the wife loves and shows respect to the mother-in-law, the psychological issues disconnect them. In-laws may fight for the love and care of the same man, the son/husband, dispute over residence and parenting style, or disagree on child reproduction (Liu, 2002). From a psychoanalytic point of view, it can be interpreted as a fight of two ladies for one man.

In the present study an attempt is made to analyze the memorable communication between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law participants so as to explore their conflicts and its background in a psychoanalytic perspective. The literature explored the gender role in such conflicts but here a psychoanalytic reading is also specified. The whole study comes under Indian, Kerala, Hindu cultural context; but even then other religion participants altogether had a general Hindu style of living conditions and culture.

Problem of the study

Psychological analysis of mother-in-law - daughter-in-law communication through psychoanalytic perspective.

Objectives of the study

1. To analyze the pattern of communication between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, in terms of their conflicts and familial inter relationship and interaction.
2. To explore the pattern of relationship, development of attachment and conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law

Method

Sample

The sample for the present study was drawn using purposive sampling. The population included married ladies who hailed/lived in Malappuram, Calicut, Ernakulam and Thrissur districts of Kerala. The total sample included two subsample namely mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Only ladies without any history of mental disorders were included in the present study.

33 married ladies between the age of 17 and 45 years included in the first sub sample namely daughters-in-law, and 45 married ladies between the age of 40 and 60 years whose sons were got married (who were playing the role of mothers- in-law) were the second subsample namely mothers-in-law.

Tools used

Semi-structured interview schedule and personal information schedule were used as tools. Most of the items of the interview were descriptive in nature. The schedule contained items that were related to major area of inter relationship, familial communication, interaction and so forth.

To fix the validity of the items, they were prepared in advance and evaluated by two experts in Psychology. Repetition of some of items were used during interview to verify reliability of items. But it was used in a few cases not to affect further results.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted in individual settings in the respondents' residence in most of the cases. As there were two subsamples, both of them were met separately and individually. Rapport was established with each participant after revealing the purpose of the study. Their personal consent was sought before the data collection and confidentiality was assured. The topic of the interview was disclosed in advance. Date, time and place were fixed as per their convenience. For recording of the responses, key note method was used with the consent of the interviewee. Important aspects of their answers were noted down. Each dialogue and responding behavioral context of the mother-in-law towards daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law towards mother-in-law, in the background of familial environment were identified and scored by putting the tally marks and counted frequency.

Analysis of the data

The data namely the communication between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, their interactions, contexts and content of conflicts and other information which were obtained through observation of non-participants such as young children were collected and analyzed through content analysis. Qualitative and thematic analyses were adopted.

Results and discussion

The present study was trying to explore the communication between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law participants, on the background of their family. From communication, at present and those in their memory were content analyzed and the themes were used for an in depth study. The data collected were read repeatedly to identify themes and to add evidences of the identified themes. There were supporting and contradicting evidences where the context also was considered in detail in unique cases. The data received in this study were descriptive in nature and it was analyzed to explore the communication patterns and the context received were mostly conflicting. In the power structure of either mother-in-law or daughter-in-law, the communication mainly included verbal assault and was provoking to reach up to physical attack (in 27 cases). Proclaiming of the ownership of the land, house property and so forth was prominent whereas the other party silently had to continue there. In the beginning of marital life, the young couple hadn't made enough preparation to start up a new home or in old age, the mother-in-law had to live and cope up with the offspring's family. Here as per the situation, the dominant figure happened to be the mother-in-law for newly married daughter-in-law participants, where it was the daughter-in-law (who was the powerful figure), when the case was of a middle aged daughter-in-law participant. Here moving into a separate house was equally prevented by the mother-in-law (for young daughter-in-law participants) by indirectly influencing son, not through direct blocking, but through emotional block, mainly communication (such as citing older sufferings to up bring the son, intensifying the caring provided for him in her parenthood, overestimating personal difficulties, and so forth). But it (blocking of youngsters moving away from home) was not widely evident to the daughter-in-law, rather she was even challenged whether to leave the home.

In 58 % cases when the daughter-in-law participants were studied, the communication from the side of mother-in-law was found to be highly supportive and sweet; but their husbands were abroad for job purposes at that time. 52 % cases from this also reported that the situation changed to the direct opposite kind when the son returned back. In contradiction to this, 33 % daughter-in-law participants reported that the assigning of household works were too much using hard works, continued irrespective of the presence of the husband, nearly or far; but astonishingly they were wives of the eldest son. 90% of the mothers-in-law complained or declared that "I lost my son", "she separated him from me", and so forth. In a close enquiry, daughters-in-

law added that mother-in-law not only intruded into their privacy, but also had made reasons to negatively influence their sexual life (not allowing the son to go to daughter-in-law's parental home for stay, reminding that son has to attend a religious function with fasting and abstinence, calling back son to take care of mother (-in-law) as she was ill, and so forth). Rather they also made complaints that "my son is not having a satisfactory sexual life from her". Similar reports were also added with the matter that the conflict was severe in the case of the eldest son, and it was less in intensity with next daughters-in-law (when there were younger brothers). The mother-in-law was ready to threaten in 27 % cases whereas the daughter-in-law participants continued their stay there, as they can't go back from loving husband. The gender stereotypical structure of family also provided an unwelcoming status for the married daughter, in their parental home. When there were more co-sisters in one house, the response of fight were found to be less than flight. They moved away (fly away) to escape than fight to gain the property, and might be due to diversion of attention, bringing up a new family was comparatively earlier in such families. The eldest son experienced more pressure to stay along with in-laws.

All the participants reported that the privacy of couple communication was something laughed at by their mothers-in-law, as silly and funny but rather she tried to control and avoid it, by assigning a third person (at least a child or sister-in-law) to include into it. It was reported as happened during their travel by 52 % participants. In this case, the blame was equally communicated to both of the couples. When the communication toward the wife was taken into consideration from the side of the husband, an entirely contradicting evaluation was made by the mother-in-law for the son and son-in-law. That is, the son was called as 'henpecked' by the mother whereas supportive son-in-law was appreciated as a gentle husband; 93 % reported. If the daughter-in-law was travelling alone, that was purposefully controlled and intervened by their mother-in-law, nine participants cited more than three examples from their life.

In 33 % cases, the mother-in-law compelled for separation or divorce, and conflict extended up to physical assault. Here the mother was not at all ready to leave the son or grand children. Even in their physical difficulties, they offered to take care of the young ones and were ready to call them as "our own blood". In the opinion of 67 % daughter-in-law participants, their mothers-in-law have compelled them to stop breast feeding, and suggested to give some semi-solid food, in the second month itself for the new born baby. They opined that, it was an attempt of the mothers-in-law to influence the mother-child relationship of the daughter-in-law. Also they may try to get back the grandchild as their own property. In the works of Masvie (2006) also, mothers-in-law see themselves as key providers of, and decision makers, in perinatal care practices. In none of the cases the daughters-in-law followed the advice. Kim (1996) also found a similar finding in which he found that college educated daughters-in-law did not blindly follow their "uneducated" mothers-in-law's advice or

life styles, including childrearing practices, house decoration and furniture arrangement, diet, and laundry methods. Instead, they were critical of them and insisted on their own ways of doing things even when they were advised to change them by their mother-in-law.

The daughter-in-law participants faced an approach-avoidance conflict whereas their own parents either supported or pacified the couple to continue the relationship. When a gender discriminating cultural aspect is seen in this parental behavior, the investigators are also interested to do a psycho analytical interpretation in the style and content of communication of the mother-in-law.

Mother-in-law was found to be happy when the daughter-in-law participants suffered out of continuous household works (not simply day to day works) whereas they were not allowed to take decision on that (fixing the menu of a meal, to invite a guest, deciding to dine out or going for a movie, and so forth). These were also not found in highly earning or rich daughter-in-law participants where the mother-in-law talked about decent culture, religious or family practices to control daughter-in-law. In the study of Brink (1987), it was reported that women reached their highest status when they became mothers-in-law and were able to direct the labor of their daughters-in-law. The power was exercised in terms of decision making and domination was over what the daughter-in-law do. If the son was adding on to this and supporting, the mother-in-law was found to be happy whereas sharing of the work of his wife was laughed at as henpecked nature. In Brink's (1987) work, it was also found that sons discussed plans with their mothers and in this way mothers were able to take part in family financial decisions. When the mother-in-law was doing household works, the daughter-in-law participants were given the role of helper such as cleaning the dishes, chopping food stuffs, grating coconut, and the like (in all cases). The study is consistent with the findings of Char, Saavala, and Kulmala (2010) in which they investigated that simple household decisions on daily chores like cooking and taking care of children were generally made by older women.

Mothers-in-law were also likely to influence the number of offspring their daughters-in-law had and the timing of their daughters-in-law being sterilized (Char, Saavala, & Kulmala, 2010). In the present study, similar kinds of experiences were reported by four daughters-in-law. They were forced to make abortions for their second pregnancy in the name of their inability to look after the younger ones, either due to laziness or mental illness (only in the opinion of mother-in-law), or due to health problems of the mother-in-law, which may cause reduced attention and care toward the daughter-in-law and younger ones. The noticeable observations in these situations were that the mothers-in-law exerted powerful decision making for abortion but kept herself away from such situations (such as accompanying to the hospital). For this purpose they assigned a close relative or the parents of the daughter-in-law. In another cases, the mother-in-law advised the son to have a second child immediately, even though the daughter-in-law was a professional student and

possessed a new born baby (elder one). In most of the cases the mother used to discuss about such things with her son, and not with the daughter-in-law; in the opinion of later. It was also reported by daughters-in-law that it was the mother-in-law who suggested the daughter-in-law to take precautionary methods to avoid or delay further pregnancy, by making remarks of ridicules of familiar people who have got immediate pregnancy.

When daughter-in-law participants of different ages were studied, older participants reported a power domination of mother-in-law whereas daughters-in-law in their middle ages were taking over this power slowly. A reversal of the power structure was evident on the basis of child birth, age and aging, financial control of the family, decision making capacity, networking, and so forth. That is, the daughter-in-law in her beginning of stay at in-law's home had less social networking and was taking a silent role in communication with mother-in-law, whereas by increase of contacts and network in family and friendship circle, the network became her power and she began to respond back. This pattern was evident in all the cases studied. Slowly the mothers-in-law were reported to become passive and silent. The less dominant figure suffered from psychosomatic complaints (asthma, ulcer, hypertension, diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, & so forth in the case of mothers-in-law, whereas tension head ache & back pain among young daughters-in-law) and they were less verbally communicating. Daughter-in-law participants reported that the illness of mother-in-law was just to attract the attention of the son, whereas mother-in-law participants reported that the daughter-in-law's illness was over estimation and attempts to enhance her health by making their sons to spend unnecessarily. Verbal as well as nonverbal communication from the side of in-laws were read as insulting, but more nonverbal communication was reported from the less dominant figure. The dominant (powerful) figure had verbal affluence so that they were ready to quote past events of similar sort.

The reversal in verbal attack can also be read with the support from Neuropsychology, as the daughter-in-law was too much emotionally affected due to the fights in the beginning, where she couldn't respond or communicate verbally effectively. She found it as very difficult to explain thing, as well as her own status and reactions. Slowly she overcame the emotionality and tried to attack back verbally. It may bring up a balance, but in the responses from the mothers-in-law, they suffered from worry of losing their son for a long time or accept it as their fate. Attribution from personal to situational factors were done here. This inability for verbal expression can be due to repression or due to role of unconscious in the behavior. In an equal level, the verbal responses were adopted by daughters-in-law only after a period of at least three years, where a child also had born for the daughter-in-law.

The daughter-in-law participants quoted symbolic connotations of the verbal communication from the part of mother-in-law. Most of them were closely related to sexuality.

All the mothers-in-law participants had reported that their daughters-in-law had the habit of buying food stuffs while going outside and eating it alone in the bedroom without sharing to mother-in-law. When asked to daughters-in-law regarding it, they revealed that they were not enjoying food along with in-laws in the family. But they enjoyed it alone or in the bedroom with the husband or children. In the presence of mother-in-law, they didn't feel taste for food which can be due to dryness in the mouth, with sympathetic arousal. Later, the mother-in-law was found to be enjoying the food alone in the kitchen or bedroom. Almost all the mothers-in-law have complained that their daughters-in-law kept distance with them by not talking much, especially in the early years of marriage. When the mothers-in-law used to tell lies about them (daughter-in-law), they react by not talking or keeping distance with them. In reverse, while talking to daughters-in-law who had been in marriage for years complained that now mother-in-law was keeping a distance with her. She used to be alone, looks aloof, depressed, or slightly away from others in the family for not interacting with daughter- in-law.

The mother was communicating and dealing with the married son like a baby (fondling, feeding, washing their undergarments, too much concerned in minor illness, and so forth), in the presence of newly married daughter-in-law (85 % cases). If the boy was expressive for his love by lying in the mother's lap, walking along with her, rubbing his face on mother's saree as if he was a young kid, the mother seemed to be very happy and well adjusted. This is a cool behavior of him, but felt as a challenge to daughter-in-law in the expression of love or restating the ownership of her son. Kakar (1997) has pointed out the activities from the mother to get the sexual attention of the son such as pulling the saree above her thighs while laying on the bed. Supportive information were obtained for the investigator from five daughters-in-law participants during the present study.

Though the present study was concentrating upon communication, another two evidences could be attained. One is identifying the person who was emotionally affected by the conflict. The young daughter-in-law participants were too much frightened or affected by the verbal assault received as they can't use fluent verbal communication. Their emotional or neural arousal made them less enjoyable at the in-law's place. When the adjustment capacity was attained, they slowly began the verbal communication and power structure was affected. These, the financial, developmental, emotional, neural backing of the person supported the situation. To denote the details, when the son handed over the financial management to the daughter-in-law or when she had a job, she became powerful. When she gave birth to a baby or reached her middle-ages, her emotionality was found to be decreased. Thus she could respond back verbally in later years.

The neurological control in the conflicting situation was also found, as the daughter-in-law participants reported that their mothers-in-law were having a foul smell. Their untidy behavior and lack of neatness was over estimated by 27 %

daughter-in-law participants. Children of family, if lacking loving relationship between mother and grand mother, they found to be hating the smell of grand mother from paternal side. Here another clarification became impossible due to the lack of variety vocabulary in olfactory sensation. The finding can be supported with the work of Plaut (2009) in which it was reported that we mask our ability to present differentiated sources of information regarding odour in descriptive analogy and metaphor. The daughter-in-law participants really tried to block further communication from others by citing about smell. In a neurological level, the inability to make verbal responses about smell can also may be due to the lack of direct connections between Broca's area and olfactory area. The touch was also unexplainable like smell. It may be due to the fact that they didn't like the bodily contact with sister-in-law/mother-in-law just as with their garments.

Summary and conclusion

In Eastern culture, marriage happens not only between two individuals but also as a tie of relation between two families. So the persons who are entering into marriage, not only have to adjust between themselves and own family members, but also with the in-law's family members, in terms of their new roles and positions. In the culture of India, especially where gender discrimination prevails mostly, a girl has to move toward boy's family where she has to stay till she starts an independent living. Here, the control of parents prevails even when the couple are in their middle age. The new adjustment with the in-law family members are always expected to extend from the bride's side, which can be contribution of gender discrimination. This always creates an extra duty for the girl, where even the own family members may compel her to suffer and sustain in the new family.

Of course the culture is undergoing social change and girls/ladies are getting educated as well as employed; but still in behind they suffer from double roles and unseen compulsions of culture, where she is still being 'dominated' by others. Power is less distributed to ladies in families and she has to fight too much to become visible. In the review of scientific and popular literature, the adjustment difficulties between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is usually viewed in this kind of a gender stereotypical point of view. The role of female member is usually discriminated and valued as secondary to that of male.

In the present study complex nature of interaction, especially between in-laws was revealed. Birth of a grand child, age of participants, interrelationship and expression of love between couples, socio-economic standards, education, formalities in culture, life style, religion and belief system, family system and family related culture, social customs, rituals, area of living, people to whom they interact and compare with, place of living-all are found to contribute for the in-law behavior, interrelationship and pattern of interaction. The commonalities and specific characteristics are also there. Psychological arena of the participants are still another

ocean to explore through research. So the limitations of a minor study like this was evident whereas even this kind of attempt was also found to be highly relevant. Present study could reveal and explore the in-law relation in terms of a psychoanalytic perspective. The memorable communications were related with conflicts. The powerful mother-in-law later on gradually became powerless and this time, daughter-in-law extending with her financial, well-adjusted, less emotionally affected with less neural sympathetic arousal was taking charge of the power, in her middle age, winning the support of husband and children. Slowly the verbal attack found to be in a reverse manner from the powerful daughter-in-law towards mother-in-law. The elder son's wife was more attacked through verbal assault and their privacy (between couples) was more affected due to the intervention of the mother (55 % cases). But in old age, the mother-in-law was getting depressed and aloof, if she was lacking a well-adjusted relation with the daughter-in-law, well in advance. The symbolic connotations and influence of relationship on smell need more explanations. Further scope of intense, in depth research studies in this regard is also evident. More qualitative approaches are necessary in this regard. Pattern of attachment and interaction between in-laws are significant for research and new inquisitive studies are necessary in this regard. Team of like minded researchers can contribute effectively to the development of new theories about the relationship, so that different social and psychological factors which moderate, influence and contribute for the attachment can be revealed, among different kinds of sample.

The present study had limitations of culture, religion, age, socio-economic background, living style and their influence on the family relations. Also most of the participants were from middle class families of Kerala where Hindu culture prevails.

The study can be conducted extensively, with in-depth analysis. Coping mechanisms, reactions to stress, pattern of sexual relationship, attachment to grandchildren, and so forth can be relevant variables for a study of this sort. A very interesting information found like the role of smell in attachments can also be explored and verified using further scientific tools. Passive participants such as grand children can also be included in this kind of studies.

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