

The Study of Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Conflict from the Perspective of Social Conflict Theory

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Abstract: Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts are a tangible reflection of the increasing complexity and diversification of family relationships within the processes of social modernization and changes in family structure. With the acceleration of urbanization and the growing cultural differences between generations, these conflicts have become increasingly public. The widespread use of social media has expanded them from the private sphere of the family into the public domain, leading to frequent misunderstandings, amplification, and polarization. This not only threatens family harmony but also prompts widespread reflection on social ethics and values. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts have become a trigger for family discord, further challenging the traditional ethical value system. Based on social conflict theory, this article examines mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships and calls for the establishment of these relationships on the foundation of equality and mutual respect. It argues that resolving familial ethical conflicts should become a societal consensus in order to achieve harmony and stability within both families and society at large.

Keywords: Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Relationship; Conflict Theory; Family; Intergenerational Relationships

1. Introduction

As the process of social modernization continues and family structures gradually evolve, the complexity and diversification of family relationships have become increasingly prominent. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts are a tangible manifestation of the clash between diverse family needs and traditional cultural values. According to Wang Lixin, in *Social Transformation and the Tension of Family Relations*, these conflicts reflect the

tension between changing family dynamics and long-standing cultural norms[1]. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts refer to verbal disputes or silent treatments that cause psychological stress for either or both parties involved. This type of conflict is not a new phenomenon and exists across various social and cultural contexts. In recent years, the issue of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships has gradually become a focal point in social discussions. On November 15, 2023, Family Life News reported: "Against the backdrop of accelerated urbanization and significant generational cultural differences, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts have become increasingly public. The widespread use of social media has expanded these conflicts from the private realm of the family into the public sphere, leading to frequent misunderstandings, amplification, and polarization. This trend not only threatens family harmony, gradually pushing once-happy marital relationships toward deterioration, but also prompts widespread reflection on social ethics and values." The article concludes by stating that "mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships must be based on equality and mutual respect, and resolving family ethical conflicts should become a societal consensus."

An ancient saying goes, "A harmonious family brings prosperity." Historically, the family has been the fundamental unit of social stability, with the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship often seen as key to family harmony. However, in modern society, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts frequently serve as a trigger for family discord, affecting the family atmosphere and further challenging the traditional ethical value system, which inevitably invites deep reflection.

Social conflict theory provides theoretical support for understanding and resolving family conflicts. As an important branch of social theory, social conflict theory shares similarities

with Marxist theory of contradiction, aiming to resolve social contradictions and maintain social order. It acknowledges that family conflicts are an inevitable part of family life. Among the various sub-theories, functional conflict theory emphasizes the mediation and functional aspects of conflict. It argues that the "positive function" of family conflicts lies in promoting communication among family members and strengthening internal awareness of family rules. Dialectical conflict theory, on the other hand, focuses on the dual nature of conflict, recognizing both its potential for destruction and its role in enhancing understanding and driving adjustments in family structure. Building on this, Pruitt and Kim's theory of the roots of conflict suggests that "the essence of family conflict lies not in the competition for power or control, but in the divergence of interests." These interests not only include material benefits but also encompass emotional needs, respect, and recognition. This theoretical framework provides an important logical basis and practical approach for analyzing and resolving mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts.

2. Manifestations of Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Conflicts

The development process of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts closely aligns with conflict escalation theory[2]. The phenomena observed in such conflicts — namely the expansion of conflict scale, emotional irrationality, and escalation of confrontational behavior — bear a strong resemblance to the characteristics of conflict escalation in social conflict theory, including the rapid spread of problems, increasing involvement of parties in the struggle, and the shift from specific issues to emotional concerns. These conflict phenomena not only reflect the divergence of interests within the family but also expose the deep contradictions between traditional family ethics and modern social values.

2.1 Concentrated Outbreak of Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Conflicts

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts often erupt at specific points in time, manifesting as intense disputes triggered by various family matters. According to statistics, between May and June 2023 alone, more than ten instances of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts

occurred in the X community. In the early stages, these conflicts mainly revolved around household chores, such as the mother-in-law accusing the daughter-in-law of being lazy and unwilling to share domestic duties, believing that "the daughter-in-law shouldn't leave all the housework to the elders." The daughter-in-law, on the other hand, argued that the mother-in-law was overly intrusive and had outdated management methods, retorting that "housework should be divided and negotiated between the two generations." However, these early disagreements were not resolved in a timely manner, and the conflict gradually escalated to deeper issues such as lifestyle habits, childcare practices, and even family financial arrangements. For instance, some mothers-in-law criticized the daughter-in-law's approach to parenting, arguing that it was too modern or inclined to "pamper" the children, while the daughter-in-law felt resentful of her mother-in-law's interference, viewing it as a challenge to her authority. As the conflict intensified, some mother-in-law and daughter-in-law pairs resorted to exposing their family disputes on social media in an attempt to gain public support. However, this only led to the publicization and complication of the issue, resulting in greater family and community distress[3].

2.2 Expansion of Conflict and Emotional Irrationality

In the escalation of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, the expansion of the conflict and emotional irrationality are particularly pronounced. The expansion of conflict is characterized by a shift from a single issue to a comprehensive negation of the other party. For example, the mother-in-law might initially raise concerns simply because the daughter-in-law failed to clean the room on time, but as the argument deepens, this criticism evolves into a wholesale condemnation of the daughter-in-law's character, educational background, and even moral qualities. Similarly, the daughter-in-law may retaliate by attacking the mother-in-law's lifestyle and traditional values. This spreading of conflict is often accompanied by emotional irrationality, making it difficult for both parties to engage in calm communication. Emotions run high, and extreme behaviors, such as harsh words, door-slamming, or even leaving home, become common responses. Research indicates

that when family conflicts enter an emotional phase, negative emotions like anger and resentment gradually replace rational discussion, directly impacting the capacity for conflict resolution. Such irrational behavior not only erodes the trust foundation within the family but also exacerbates the complexity of the conflict.

2.3 Breakdown of Family Order and Escalation of Confrontation

The prolonged escalation of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts often leads to a complete breakdown of family order. Some mothers-in-law, in response to the conflict, may adopt a "cold war" strategy, such as refusing to help with childcare or reducing financial support for the family, while the daughter-in-law counters by minimizing family interactions, suggesting separation, or even divorce. This back-and-forth confrontational behavior not only further alienates family members but also puts significant pressure on the marital relationship. Husbands often find themselves caught in the middle, unable to mediate effectively, and trapped in a "no-win" situation. In some severe cases, family conflicts may extend beyond the household, becoming community issues. For instance, some family members may seek intervention from neighbors or community organizations, hoping that external support will alleviate the conflict. However, such external involvement, when unable to effectively balance the interests of both parties, often exacerbates the tension, potentially leading to larger social disputes.

In summary, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts evolve from simple household disagreements into multifaceted confrontations. The expansion of conflict, emotional irrationality, and escalation of confrontational behavior not only disrupt family harmony but also impact social stability. As emphasized by social conflict theory, differences in interests and emotional confrontations are often the core drivers of conflict, and resolving mother-in-law and daughter-in-law disputes requires a multi-layered approach based on rational communication and the balancing of interests.

3. The Causes of Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Conflicts

In the theory of conflict origins, Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim define conflict as "perceived divergence of interests." [4]Mother-in-law and

daughter-in-law conflicts fall under the category of intergenerational conflicts within the family, reflecting the differences in interests and values between two generations. The manner in which these differing interests are addressed directly impacts the trajectory of the conflict—whether it will be resolved, stalemated, or escalated. In mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, these divergent interests mainly manifest in areas such as the division of household chores, parenting methods, and family decision-making rights. When these differences are not identified or addressed in a timely manner, they exacerbate the deterioration of the relationship. The formation of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts can primarily be attributed to three factors: the existence of intergenerational interest conflicts, the lack of conflict recognition mechanisms, and inappropriate conflict resolution strategies.

3.1 Existence of Intergenerational Interest Conflicts

The fundamental cause of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts lies in the divergence of interests. Therefore, to understand the root causes of these conflicts, it is essential to focus on the intergenerational differences in interests. Intergenerational interest conflicts refer to the contradictions in the expectations and needs of two generations within the family. For example, mothers-in-law typically believe that as elders, they should have greater decision-making power in the family, particularly when it comes to child-rearing and household chores. They often expect to maintain traditional family roles, such as the daughter-in-law shouldering most of the household responsibilities. On the other hand, the daughter-in-law tends to align more with the modern idea of gender equality in household duties, advocating for joint responsibility between spouses. Such interests also extend to differing opinions on child-rearing methods. While the mother-in-law may prefer traditional child-rearing techniques, the daughter-in-law may favor more scientific and modern parenting approaches. These differences in interests are not only widespread but also significant in scale, intensity, and potential for escalation.

Externally, conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law often manifest in relation to these intergenerational interest disparities. For example, in one community, several mother-in-law and daughter-in-law pairs had disputes over

the unequal division of household chores. The mother-in-law complained that the daughter-in-law was "lazy," while the daughter-in-law accused the mother-in-law of "interfering too much." The essence of these conflicts lies in the differing expectations regarding family roles and power structures. The traditional views of the mother-in-law collide with the modern aspirations of the daughter-in-law, leading to frequent disputes in daily family matters.

3.2 Lack of Conflict Recognition Mechanisms

In the theory of conflict origins, ignoring or antagonizing the interests of the other party leads to suspicion, which further exacerbates interest divergences and drives conflict formation. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships often lack an effective communication mechanism, meaning that their true needs are not understood or addressed in a timely manner. For instance, a mother-in-law's dissatisfaction with the division of household chores might stem from her limited energy, while the daughter-in-law's frustration with the mother-in-law's interference may be rooted in her need for personal space and decision-making authority. These unrecognized needs and interest divergences are often perceived as neglect or hostility, deepening suspicion between the two parties.

Studies show that the conflict recognition mechanism in mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships often relies on an "intermediary" within the family, such as the husband's mediation role. However, in some families, husbands avoid dealing with the conflicts between their mother and wife, failing to relay the real needs of both sides, which instead escalates mistrust. For instance, in one case, a conflict over child-rearing between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law worsened because the husband failed to communicate the genuine needs of both parties, leading to misunderstanding and ultimately escalating the conflict into a broader family dispute. The lack of an effective conflict recognition mechanism makes it difficult to alleviate tensions, accelerating the formation and escalation of the conflict.

3.3 Inappropriate Conflict Resolution Strategies

According to the "three-stage dispute theory," "coercion" is a primitive conflict management

approach where one party forces the other to comply through authority. This approach is generally considered inappropriate in modern society. In mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, resolution typically takes one of two extreme forms: either one party is coerced into submission through the assertion of authority, or the conflict is left to develop unchecked. For example, some mothers-in-law rely on their status as elders to demand unconditional compliance from the daughter-in-law, while some daughters-in-law avoid dealing with the conflict by cutting off communication altogether. Neither of these approaches effectively resolves the conflict; rather, they lead to an accumulation of resentment and further escalation.

Moreover, the mediation abilities of family members play a key role in conflict resolution. When the husband, as the family mediator, fails to handle the conflict impartially, the dispute often becomes stalemated. For instance, in one case, the husband sided with his mother's opinion, causing the daughter-in-law to feel neglected and eventually decide to leave the family. This biased approach to conflict resolution not only failed to ease the tension between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law but also worsened the relationship between the husband and wife. Thus, inappropriate conflict resolution strategies contribute to the escalation of the conflict.

4. The Key Principles of Resolving Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Conflicts

The long-standing existence of interest divergences not only leads to the further escalation of conflicts but also increases the cost and difficulty of conflict resolution. Therefore, timely identification, proper handling, and quick resolution of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts are particularly crucial. Both the parties involved and third parties outside the family must work together to establish a diversified, multi-layered conflict resolution mechanism, thereby breaking the deadlock as quickly as possible and promoting harmony and stability within the family[5].

4.1 Unilateral Formulation of Win-Win Solutions

Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim point out that when there are interest divergences between the conflicting parties, open and comprehensive

discussions are not always practically feasible. One party may fear that being completely open would give the other party an advantage or harm their own interests. In such cases, the unilateral formulation of a win-win solution becomes a pragmatic choice. In the case of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, unilateral resolution mechanisms are particularly effective for smaller, internal family conflicts. For example, the conflict between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can be resolved when one party privately understands the other's needs, identifies the real issues, and designs a mutually beneficial solution.

A win-win solution in mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships should be based on concern for the interests of both parties. First, the daughter-in-law can gain a deeper understanding of the mother-in-law's core needs, such as adherence to traditional family values or concern for the education of grandchildren, and actively adjust her behavior to meet those expectations. Second, the mother-in-law can reflect on her own actions and realize that excessive interference may provoke resistance from the daughter-in-law, thus reducing her involvement in family matters appropriately[6]. Research indicates that when family members are able to consider the situation from the other party's perspective, they are more likely to find a balance in resolving conflicts.

4.2 Integrating New Identities

In the context of societal changes, the role transformation faced by middle-aged daughters-in-law is also filled with challenges. "In the past, a daughter-in-law had to serve the mother-in-law wholeheartedly, but today's daughter-in-law seems to expect to be cared for by the mother-in-law." In traditional views, the daughter-in-law's patience and obedience were often seen as an investment for future authority in the family. However, after decades of family life, when they eventually step into the role of a mother-in-law, they find that the focus of the family has subtly shifted to the daughter-in-law. On one hand, mothers-in-law, through psychological adjustment, accept the ever-changing society, taking a strategic approach to their daily interactions with their daughters-in-law in order to maintain family harmony. Their emotional release often turns inward, with many mothers-in-law saying that they can feel refreshed by watching short videos or dancing in the public

square when they are upset. On the other hand, in a more rational intergenerational context, mothers-in-law begin to plan more for themselves, proactively establishing good interactions with their daughters-in-law to secure a peaceful old age. After limited intergenerational cooperation, they start saving to prepare for their retirement.

Meanwhile, younger daughters-in-law also show new behavior. On one hand, they skillfully maintain distance from their mothers-in-law in both space and time, avoiding direct conflict and minimizing unnecessary friction. Through relatively independent living spaces and staggered daily activities, potential points of conflict are effectively reduced. On the other hand, in interactions, they actively construct a positive relationship, exchanging gifts during festivals and showing mutual understanding and care in daily life, carefully maintaining this mother-in-law and daughter-in-law bond. In contemporary society, the standard for evaluating a "good mother-in-law" is to be "quiet but helpful, seldom interfere and more assist," while a "good daughter-in-law" is expected to be "low-key, handle matters well." Both parties maintain their independence while cooperating on limited family affairs, collectively weaving a beautiful picture of family harmony.

4.3 External Intervention in Two Types of Conflict

When mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts cannot be resolved through internal family efforts, external intervention becomes particularly important. The theory of conflict origins suggests that third-party involvement can provide more resources and perspectives, which aids in conflict mediation and resolution. Different types of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts may require different forms of external intervention.

For lighter conflicts, such as disagreements over household chores, intervention by neighbors or community mediation committees can be effective. These third parties, with a neutral stance, help ease the tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and offer impartial advice. For example, one community organized a "Family Communication Skills" seminar, using case studies to help family members improve their conflict resolution skills, which reduced the incidence of family disputes.

For more severe conflicts, such as those

triggered by economic disagreements or differences in parenting views, the intervention of professional counselors or family relationship experts may be necessary. These experts can provide specific communication and behavior adjustment suggestions based on scientific theories, effectively alleviating internal family conflicts. Furthermore, if the conflict escalates to the legal level, such as disputes over property distribution, legal measures may be required to ensure the legal rights of family members.

The resolution of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts requires multi-party collaboration. Through unilateral efforts, joint efforts, and external interventions, the deadlock can gradually be broken, leading to the harmony and stability of family relationships. Family members should focus on perspective-taking, rational communication, and positive interaction during conflicts, while also making good use of external resources to build a multi-layered conflict resolution mechanism, thereby promoting mutual understanding and support across generations.

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