Aging Mothers’ and Their Adult Daughters’ Perceptions of Conflict Behaviors

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Aging parents tend to perceive greater compatibility between themselves and offspring than do offspring, but there is little research examining differences in perceptions of conflicts. Ninety-six older mothers (M age = 76) and their daughters (M age = 44) together selected a conflictual incident, then individually rated the degree to which they and the other person had engaged in destructive, constructive, or avoidant conflict behaviors. Mothers and daughters reported using constructive approaches more than other approaches. Mothers claimed to engage in constructive behaviors more than daughters recognized. Daughters reported engaging in destructive and avoidant behaviors more than mothers realized. Mothers also thought daughters felt better about the incident than daughters reported feeling about it. Findings suggest older mothers' underestimate daughters' negative behaviors and feelings in conflict situations.

Parents' and offsprings' perceptions of their own and of the other's behaviors during a conflict situation may play a central role in each individual's understanding of what is communicated. An argument between intimates is more than a matter of substance; it is a matter of style. Not only the content of the problem that parents and offspring are each trying to communicate but the process through which they are trying to communicate is important to each party. Moreover, the degree to which individuals feel that their communication efforts are recognized by the other party may have an impact on feelings about the incident and about the relationship itself. The feeling of screaming at a blank wall or of trying to speak calmly in the face of a tirade may itself become a source of tension in a relationship.

Perceptions of conflict behaviors have not been examined in parent–child relationships in later life. Researchers have noted that parents tend to perceive greater compatibility between themselves and their offspring than do offspring (e.g., Bengston, Olander, & Haddad, 1976; Hagestad, 1982; Troll & Bengston, 1982). Bengston and Kuypers (1971) suggested that generational differences in perceptions of similarity are integrally related to the nature of parent–child relationships and coined the term developmental stake to explain such discrepancies. They argued that parents have an investment in their offspring as a symbol of their own continuity into the future. Parents may minimize differences between themselves and their progeny as a result of this stake. By contrast, offspring strive to make their own mark on the world and may exaggerate differences between themselves and their parents. There is an extensive literature addressing the developmental stake (Bengston, 1970; Bengston & Kuypers, 1971; Sussman, 1985). However, there has been little examination of how such perceptual differences may be related to communication patterns between aging parents and offspring when difficulties and conflicts do arise.

The present study involved an examination of intergenerational differences of perceptions of behaviors and feelings with regard to a specific conflict situation. The developmental stake (Bengston & Kuypers, 1971) suggests that communication of negative feelings may be impaired by general perceptual biases parent and offspring bring to conflict situations. Parents may maintain a positive view of their relationship with offspring at the cost of understanding their offspring's behaviors and feelings. Although parents may believe that they get along well with offspring, these perceptions may have a negative influence in situations in which offspring are upset, irritated, or hurt by their parents. For example, offspring may feel that there is no point in trying to express negative feelings or they may try to voice their dissent, but their parents may not perceive their efforts to do so. Thus, perceptual biases may also contribute to increased tension.

The purpose of the present study was to explore differences in aging mothers' and adult daughters' perceptions of their own and the other's behaviors in a conflict situation and the impact of those perceptions on feelings about the incident.

Conflict Tactics, Actual Similarity, Perceived Similarity, and Understanding

Interpersonal perceptions of self and other have been examined from many angles in the literature pertaining to marital conflict (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Kenny & Acitelli, 1989; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). Drawing on this work, I investigated congruence of aging mothers' and daughters' per-
ceptions using three types of comparisons: (a) the actual similarity of the behaviors mothers and daughters reported engaging in, (b) mothers' and daughters' perceptions of the similarity between their own and the other's behaviors, and (c) mothers' accuracy in reporting daughters' behaviors and daughters' accuracy in reporting mothers' behaviors.

In addition, the present study involved an examination of perceptual congruences of each of three types of conflict tactics. Research pertaining to marital relationships has found that interpersonal perceptions of conflict may vary as a function of the types of behavior, or conflict tactics, in which individuals engage (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Crohan, 1992). Individuals may perceive greater similarity of positive behaviors or more readily understand another party's use of shouting or aggression. Thus, perceptual differences must be examined in the context of specific types of behavior.

Conflict Behaviors

There is a large literature addressing conflict tactics used by parents and offspring in younger families (Straus, 1979; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1981). The present study drew on this literature and on the social psychological literature addressing conflict tactics (Deutsch, 1973; Gottman, 1979; Sillars, Coletti, Perry, & Rogers, 1982). Three approaches to resolution of interpersonal tension were derived from this literature: constructive, destructive, and avoidant behaviors.

Research pertaining to marital relationships has focused primarily on constructive and destructive conflict strategies (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Gottman, 1979; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Constructive approaches to conflict resolution involve sharing one's feelings openly and working with the other person in a cooperative manner to resolve difficulties. Destructive approaches to conflict resolution involve attacks on the other person, including verbal, emotional, and, in some cases, physical aggression.

In addition to the conflict behaviors traditionally investigated in the marital literature, avoidant approaches to conflict resolution were also considered in the present study. Constructive and destructive behaviors imply the presence of overt conflict. Avoidant approaches to conflict may involve efforts to circumvent the situation (Sillars et al., 1982). Avoidant conflict behaviors have been noted as strategies of choice in other studies of intergenerational tension. Hagestad (1981, 1987) used the term demilitarized zone to refer to the manner in which aging parents and offspring work to avoid issues that both parties know, through accumulated life experience, to be sources of tension for them.

Aging mothers and adult daughters, in particular, might be expected to engage in avoidant behaviors, as a function of age and gender. Women generally tend to have difficulty communicating their negative feelings to significant others and may rely more on indirect than direct communication strategies (Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Older women may be even more likely to use indirect behaviors in communicating interpersonal tension. In other contexts, overt conflict is less evident among older adults than it is among young or middle-aged adults (Levensen, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993, 1994; Fiefel & Strack, 1989; Quayhagen & Quayhagen, 1982). Maturity, coupled with a sense of diminished strength or resolution, may foster a stronger emphasis on avoidance of difficulties. Thus, inclusion of a class of conflict tactics involving avoidance was considered necessary to understand aging mothers' and adult daughters' perceptions of one another's behaviors.

Actual Similarity

The degree to which parents and offspring use the same conflict behaviors may have an impact on each individual's perceptions of the other's behaviors. The congruence between mothers' and daughters' reports of engaging in constructive, destructive, and avoidant behaviors will be referred to as actual similarity in this article.

General differences in perceptions of compatibility, such as those posited by the developmental stake (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971), may color self-reported behaviors in conflict situations. If an individual perceives high compatibility in a relationship, he or she might also report that he or she engages in direct approaches to conflict resolution when difficulties do arise. The assumption of existent compatibility may allow for the belief that difficulties can be resolved and that constructive approaches to conflict resolution can and should be used. Thus, mothers may report that on the rare occasions when they are upset with their daughters, they use constructive approaches to resolve their difficulties. By contrast, individuals who value a relationship but believe that an issue cannot be resolved may report using avoidant approaches to deal with conflict or tension (Hagestad, 1981, 1987). The developmental stake predicts that daughters may perceive more conflict with their mothers than do their mothers. However, daughters may also believe that their mothers are less aware of these problems and may feel that direct approaches to try to resolve these difficulties will not work. Thus, daughters may use avoidant behaviors when they are upset with their mothers. In fact, aging mothers may perceive their relationships in rosy terms because their daughters actively try to hide their negative feelings.

Hypothesis 1: Actual similarity. Intergenerational differences were anticipated in self-reported use of conflict behaviors. Mothers were expected to report greater use of constructive approaches to conflict than were daughters. Daughters were expected to report greater use of avoidant conflict strategies than were mothers.

Perceived Similarity

Even when mothers and daughters use the same tactics to resolve difficulties, their actions may not be perceived in the manner they are intended. Perceived similarity involves the degree to which one individual rates her own and the other's behaviors as being the same in that situation (Actetelli et al., 1993) and addresses the question "Does the target person perceive herself and the other as behaving in a like manner?"

In the marital literature, researchers have reported that perceived similarity tends to be greater than actual similarity (Actetelli et al., 1993; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; McFarland & Miller, 1990). Sillars (1985) posited that individuals draw conclusions about another's behaviors more from their own behavior than from that person's behavior. Although the general narcissistic reinforcement of perceiving a loved other as similar to oneself makes sense at a conceptual level across many types
of relationships, it is not clear that such a pattern would be found among older parents and their offspring. As I discussed earlier, intergenerational differences in perceptions of similarity may be normative in parent–child relationships. Although parents may enhance similarity between self and offspring, offspring may seek to minimize such similarity.

Moreover, if parents perceive offspring as their legacy, they may particularly seek to maximize similarity with regard to positive attributes. Previous studies have indicated that mothers tend to perceive greater attachment in their relationships with daughters than do daughters, thus emphasizing similarity in their own and their daughters' positive feelings (Sussman, 1985; Thompson & Walker, 1984). Parents' perceptions of stronger attachment may be related to a general bias to enhance similarity of positive features in the relationship. As was discussed previously, the ability to openly communicate feelings of annoyance is generally perceived as a positive feature of close relationships. Thus, mothers might be expected to emphasize parallels between their own and their daughters' use of constructive behaviors in conflict situations.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived similarity. In the present study, intergenerational differences in perceptions of similarity were expected. Mothers were expected to perceive greater similarity between themselves and their daughters than were daughters, particularly with regard to constructive behaviors.

Understanding

Finally, understanding involves the accuracy of one individual's perceptions of the other's behaviors in that situation (Acitelli et al., 1993). Understanding addresses the question "Is the behavior the target person reported doing the same behavior that the other person doing?" The degree to which one individual understands another's behaviors in a conflict situation may have strong implications for the relationship (Sillars & Scott, 1983).

Although the parental role in early life involves empathizing with children, parent–offspring relationships in later life may be characterized by parental misinterpretation of offspring behavior. Parents may look at the relationship through rose-colored glasses, which obscure their ability to accurately perceive negative aspects of the relationship. Hagestad (1987) found that older parents perceived their relationships with offspring as being more positive than offspring reported the relationship being. Parents may overestimate the positive features of their relationships with offspring at the cost of underestimating offspring's dissatisfaction. Such positive biases may lead to parental failure to perceive offspring's efforts to communicate negative affect accurately, particularly if those communication efforts take either a destructive or indirect form.

Hypothesis 3: Understanding. It was hypothesized that mothers would fail to perceive their daughters' approaches to conflict resolution accurately, particularly their destructive and avoidant approaches. Given daughters' socialization by their mothers, it was anticipated that middle-aged daughters would have greater understanding of their aging mothers' conflict behaviors.

Feelings About the Incident

Finally, I considered mothers' and daughters' feelings about a recent conflict situation as an outcome variable in the present study. Whether individuals feel good or bad about a conflictual incident may stem from their perceptions of how they and the other individual behaved in that situation. As I mentioned earlier, the degree to which one's efforts to communicate in a conflict situation are understood may have an impact on feelings about the situation.

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, it was not possible to hypothesize anticipated generational differences in feelings about the incident. Two competing patterns seemed equally probable with regard to generational differences in self-reported feelings about the incident: (a) Mothers might feel worse about the situation on the basis of their expectations that their relationships with offspring should be trouble free. (b) Mothers might feel better about the situation than would daughters because mothers consistently seem to feel better about everything in the relationship. Intergenerational differences in feelings about the incident were tested in the present study, to explore each of these patterns.

In addition, mothers' and daughters' understanding of one another's feelings was examined. In keeping with a general tendency to perceive their relationships with daughters in a positive light, I anticipated that mothers would underestimate the degree to which their daughters were upset by the situation.

Finally, the impact of perceptions of behaviors on feelings about the incident was examined. Individuals whose efforts to communicate are understood by the other individual may feel better about the way the situation turns out than do individuals whose very communication behaviors go misunderstood. The association between being understood and feelings about a situation may be stronger for daughters than it is for mothers, even in adulthood.

Hypothesis 4: Feelings about the incident. It was hypothesized that mothers would underestimate their daughters' negative feelings about the incident. In addition, mothers' understanding of their daughters' feelings, particularly their indirect or destructive behaviors, would predict how daughters felt about the situation. Daughters' understanding of mothers' behaviors were not expected to predict her feelings about the incident.

Assessment Issues and Perceptual Differences

In their decade review of the literature on parent–child relationships in later life, Mancini and Blieszner (1989) noted that it is difficult to conduct research on conflict and tension between older parents and offspring because parents do not report having problems with offspring. They attribute this failure to obtain information to methodological difficulties. Although methodological issues and social desirability considerations may contribute to the scarcity of information on intergenerational tension in later life, they may not fully account for the difficulties gerontologists confront in assessing this issue. Parents may not label conflictual situations with offspring as such. To try to address parental failure to respond to questions about negative incidents with offspring, a joint interview was conducted in the present study, allowing mother and daughter to establish a shared upsetting incident.
Tension between parents and offspring in later life has rarely been assessed from both parties' points of view. Studies have been limited to the parents' (Aldous, 1987) or the offspring's (Cicirelli, 1983; Troll, 1985) perceptions of difficulties. Thompson and Walker (1982) argued that some variables, such as power and conflict, should be examined only at the dyadic level, in which both parties' perspectives are considered, not at the individual level. The present study involved mothers' and daughters' individual perceptions of a shared negative incident.

The Aging Mother and Adult Daughter Relationship

The present study was limited to aging mothers and adult daughters rather than including other possible parent–offspring combinations. Elsewhere, research pertaining to affect between aging parents and children has focused exclusively on mothers and daughters (Boyd, 1989; Bromberg, 1987; Campbell & Brody, 1985; Walker, Pratt, Shin, & Jones, 1989). Although relationships between aging mothers and adult daughters are unique in many ways, the mother–daughter relationship might be said to epitomize intergenerational relationships in later life. Aging is the domain of women, on the basis of numbers alone; there are 50% more women over the age of 70 in the United States than there are men (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Women live longer than men and tend to have longer lasting, more intimate intergenerational relationships across the life span (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Thompson & Walker, 1982). Family lineages are said to be chained together through mother–daughter links (Troll, 1985). Understanding how aging mothers and adult daughters perceive one another’s behaviors in tense situations may inform a general understanding of later life family relationships.

In summary, the following hypotheses were examined in the present study:

1. With regard to actual similarity, it was hypothesized that mothers would be more likely to report engaging in constructive conflict resolution strategies and daughters would be more likely to report using avoidant behaviors.

2. With regard to perceived similarity, it was hypothesized that aging mothers would perceive greater similarity between their own and their daughters’ behaviors than would daughters, particularly with regard to constructive behaviors.

3. With regard to understanding of one another’s behaviors, it was hypothesized that mothers would have a better understanding of daughters’ positive behaviors than of their negative behaviors and that daughters would have a better understanding of mothers’ behaviors overall.

4. Finally, with regard to the impact of perceptions of behaviors on feelings about the incident, it was hypothesized that mothers’ understanding of their daughters’ behaviors, particularly their nonconstructive behaviors, would predict how daughters felt about the situation.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 48 dyads of older mothers (M age = 76.01, SD = 5.22) and an adult daughter (M age = 44.02, SD = 7.03). Mothers and daughters resided in southeastern Michigan. Of the dyads, 46 were European American; 2 were African American. Daughters were significantly more likely to be married or remarried than were mothers; McNemar’s test, exact p = .0001. Of the mothers, 29 were widowed or divorced, compared with only 2 unattached daughters. The mothers had an average of 3.06 children (SD = 1.83), of whom 1.96 resided in the area (including the participant daughter). The daughters had an average of 2.45 children (SD = 1.33), with 0.88 (SD = 1.00) residing in their homes.

Mothers and daughters shared similar economic backgrounds. Mothers and daughters were highly educated, although the daughters tended to be more highly educated than their mothers. Of the daughters, 38 had a college or graduate degree and 7 more had attended college for at least a few years, whereas 38 mothers had had at least some college education.

The older women were community dwelling and were defined by both themselves and by their daughters as active and healthy. Mothers reported being ill an average of 13.60 days (SD = 25.30) in the past year, compared with daughters’ reports of 6.45 days (SD = 11.6). Although there was variation in the number of days incapacitated, all of the women claimed that they and their mother or daughter were in good health at the time of the study. Mothers and daughters reported engaging in infrequent exchanges of instrumental aid. In fact, 93% of daughters reported providing care for their mothers less than once a year.

Although mothers and daughters resided in independent households and provided infrequent exchanges of instrumental aid, they reported having frequent contact with one another. Of mothers and daughters who participated in the present study, 90% claimed to have at least biweekly visits and weekly telephone calls. Visits between generations in this sample were somewhat higher than norms of 65%–80% reporting such frequent contact in other studies (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Shanahan, 1979).

Thus, the sample in the present study was not representative of the general population of aging women and their adult daughters. Rather, this sample provided a forum for investigating communication of negative affect in relationships based on expressive, emotional ties rather than on economic or physical-care necessities, and might be deemed optimal rather than normal in later life.

Procedure

Mothers were initially contacted through senior citizen groups and word of mouth. Mothers supplied the name of a daughter who was then recruited to participate in the study. At several senior functions, the coordinator or other group members identified those women with daughters in the area. Questions asked in the initial interview pertaining to preferences for family members revealed that mothers with more than one daughter did not appear to consistently select most favored nor least favored daughters.

The data in the present study were part of a larger study addressing different aspects of aging mother–daughter relationships. The women were given a broad overview of the study during the recruitment process. Potential participants were informed that the study involved mothers over the age of 70 and their daughters and that it focused on positive and rewarding aspects of their relationship as well as difficulties that might arise. The women were told that the study would include only mothers and daughters who were healthy and who had both volunteered to participate, and the interview process was then outlined.

Mothers and daughters were interviewed separately, were each given questionnaires to complete, and were interviewed again together 1 to 2 weeks later. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hr each. Interviews and questionnaires addressed individual and family background information; frequency, content, and communication of conflict and difficulties; individual well-being; relationship quality; and positive aspects of the relationship.

Data used in the present study were collected during the second interview. Mothers and daughters were first questioned together and then completed individual checklists. Participants were asked to discuss the
last time they had had a disagreement or difference of opinion or one of them had felt hurt or irritated by something the other had said or done. The question included experience of negative affect as well as open conflicts. The use of a broad question was based on findings pertaining to older parents' and offsprings' approaches to tension. When older mothers and adult daughters claim to be upset with one another, they do not necessarily describe the situation in terms of open disagreement or dispute. Discussion continued until mothers and daughters had chosen a situation that constituted their last conflict.

Analyses were conducted to assure that mothers and daughters both participated in the selection of a past conflict and that one party did not consistently dominate the discussion prior to reaching agreement. Mothers' and daughters' input into the discussion was coded from audio tapes of their conversation by two independent raters. Cohen's kappas were calculated to establish intrarater agreement on ratings of 21 of the 48 dyads coded. Chi-square analyses revealed that there were no significant differences in mothers' and daughters' likelihood to instigate discussion (x = .87), choose the situation (x = .87), or disagree with something the other said during that conversation (x = .72). However, daughters were more likely to narrate the scenario once the topic had been selected, x² = 12.84, p < .005 (x = .91).

Checklist of behaviors. Following their selection of a shared incident, participants were seated across the room from one another and provided with clipboards containing a 15-item checklist of conflict communication behaviors. Participants first indicated how true the statements were of their own behavior and then indicated how true the statements were of the other's behavior during the chosen situation. For example, participants rated how true it was that "I calmly discussed the situation" or "I yelled at her." After rating all 15 items for themselves, they rated them for the other. "She calmly discussed the situation" or "She yelled at me." Four rating categories were used: 1 = not very true, 2 = somewhat not true, 3 = somewhat true, and 4 = very true. The list of items was adapted from one used by Actetelli et al. (1993) to assess conflict communication styles between marital couples; several items thought to reflect an avoidant style were added. The items used to assess avoidant conflict behaviors were derived from previous research concerning the nature of avoidance in conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Hagestad, 1982; Rausch, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974) and from mothers' and daughters' individual reports of approaches they use to resolve intergenerational difficulties, obtained in pilot testing for the present study.

Three indices of communication styles were constructed, using correlation matrices of the 15 items on the checklists. Separate correlation matrices were calculated for mothers' and daughters' self-reports of their own behavior in the conflict situation. Items on both mothers' and daughters' correlation matrices that were correlated at the .01 level were combined to form an index. Parallel indices were created for mothers' and daughters' reports of the others' behavior. The indices included avoidant behaviors (I didn't call her; I became quiet; I avoided her), destructive behaviors (I yelled at her; I offended her), and constructive or appeasing behaviors (I listened to her point of view; I tried to find out what she was feeling).

Alpha coefficients for mothers were .59, .61, and .54 for each subscale, respectively; for daughters they were .64, .60, .75, respectively. Although these coefficients are lower than might be preferred in deriving indices—these alphas would be larger were more items included in each index—they indicate a strong association between the limited number of items in each index. Moreover, researchers elsewhere have commented on the need to accept depressed alpha coefficients in the use of data in which the rating of one behavior in a subscale may decrease the probability of engaging in other behaviors on that subscale (Moos, Cronkite, Billings, & Finney; 1984; Wallhagen, 1993).

Perceptual differences and congruence scores. Indices of perceptual differences are needed to test certain hypotheses. For example, to examine whether one individual's understanding of another's behaviors predicts how the other person feels about the incident, an index of understanding is needed. Such indices were calculated to allow comparisons of actual and perceived similarity and understanding of different conflict behaviors. These indices will be referred to as congruence scores throughout this article because they are derived by examining the congruence (or difference) in ratings of self and other. Again, drawing on the work of Actetelli et al. (1993), congruence scores were calculated, ranging from 1, complete incongruence, to 5, complete congruence.

The congruence scores were calculated to take into account the difference between true versus not true ratings. In calculation of the congruence scores, the gap between not true and true was larger than degradations of very and somewhat found within true and not true. Thus, perfect correspondence between items received a congruence score of 5. If a mother rated listening as very true of herself and somewhat true of her daughter, her perceived similarity score on that item was equal to 4. By contrast, if a daughter claimed that becoming quiet was somewhat not true of her own behavior but somewhat true of her mother's behavior, her perceived similarity score on that item was 3, taking into account the larger conceptual gap between somewhat true and somewhat not true.

Actual similarity, perceived similarity, and understanding scores were calculated for each item. Actual similarity involved congruence of mothers' and daughters' self-reported behaviors. Perceived similarity involved congruence of one individual's responses for self and other. Understanding involved congruence between mother's or daughter's report for self and the other person's report of her behavior. Separate averages were calculated for mothers and daughters for each of the congruence measures by type of conflict tactic: constructive, destructive, and avoidant.

Affective reactions. Finally, at the end of the checklists of behaviors, mothers and daughters individually answered paper-and-pencil questions about their feelings regarding the situation. Mothers and daughters were asked to describe how they and the other felt following the conflict situation. Responses were coded by two independent raters along a 4-point scale: 1 = positive, 2 = neutral, 3 = negative, and 4 = very negative. Interrater agreement was established across 24 mother and 24 daughter responses, a = .97.

Perceived understanding of the other's feelings during the incident was examined by comparing mothers' and daughters' reports of their own feelings with the others' report of how they felt. The correspondence between self and other's report was used as an indirect means of assessing communication of affect. If feelings are being communicated during a tense visit, the mother's self-reported affect might correspond to the daughter's report of the mother's affect, and vice versa, at least at the general level of positive, neutral, negative, and very negative.

Results

Perceptions of Own and Other's Behavior

Table 1 contains means and standard deviations of mothers' and daughters' reports of their own and the other's behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother's report</th>
<th>Daughter's report</th>
<th>Own behavior</th>
<th>Daughter's behavior</th>
<th>Own behavior</th>
<th>Mother's behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
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</table>
during the tense incident on the three indices assessing avoidant, destructive, and constructive or appeasing behaviors. Mothers and daughters generally indicated that it was somewhat true or very true that they listened to the other's point of view or tried to find out what she was feeling. By contrast, their ratings of their own behavior on the destructive and avoidant indices were between somewhat not true and not very true.

**Congruence of Reports for Self and Other**

The following strategy was undertaken in examining mothers' and daughters' reports of own behavior, reports of others' behavior, and perceptual congruences. First, mothers' and daughters' reports for self and other, found in Table 1, were compared. Comparisons involving these reports relied primarily on the nonparametric sign test, which is used for paired comparisons of ranked categorical data. Mothers' and daughters' ratings of their own and the other's behavior is ordinal in nature rather than continuous. As was mentioned in discussion of the derivation of the congruence indices, there is a gap between not true and true ratings of behavior.

To examine differences in perceptual congruence scores (actual similarity, perceived similarity, or understanding) for each of the three forms of conflict behaviors, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) and univariate analyses were calculated separately for mothers and daughters. The derived perceptual congruence scores were continuous variables, allowing for such multivariate analyses, whereas the self-reports and report of other are ordinal variables. Generational differences between mothers' and daughters' perceptual congruence scores were examined where applicable (mothers' and daughters' actual similarity scores were the same, and thus generational differences cannot be considered).

Table 2 contains means and standard deviations for mothers and daughters on each of the three types of congruence scores: actual similarity, perceived similarity, and understanding, by type of conflict behavior.

**Actual similarity** Analyses were first conducted to examine generational differences in self-reported behaviors. Sign tests revealed generational differences in mothers' and daughters' self-reports with regard to constructive behaviors. Mothers claimed to have engaged in constructive behaviors more than their daughters claimed to have engaged in such behaviors, \( z = 3.17, p = .0015 \). There were no generational differences in self-reports of destructive and avoidant behaviors.

Next, analyses were conducted to determine if the degree of actual similarity between mothers' and daughters' self-reports varied across the three behaviors. A MANOVA was calculated with actual similarity indices of constructive, destructive, and avoidant behaviors as the dependent variables. Mauchly test of sphericity was \( W = .99 \), indicating that the multivariate analysis was justified. The MANOVA was not significant, indicating that the congruence of mothers' and daughters' self-reports or actual similarity did not vary significantly by type of behavior.

**Perceived similarity** Differences in mothers' and daughters' perceptions of their own and the others' behaviors were examined by calculating sign tests comparing each individual's reports for self versus their reports for other for each behavior (found in Table 1). Mothers perceived differences in their own and their daughters' use of destructive behaviors. Mothers rated their daughters as being less likely to use destructive behaviors than they themselves were, \( z = 6.84, p \leq .0001 \). In addition, mothers rated themselves as more likely to engage in avoidant behaviors than they perceived their daughters displaying such behaviors, \( z = 5.40, p \leq .001 \). Mothers did not perceive differences in their own and their daughters' use of constructive behaviors. Daughters tended to perceive their mothers as using more constructive behaviors than they themselves had used, \( z = 2.23, p = .0258 \). By contrast, daughters claimed that they had used destructive approaches more than had their mothers, \( z = 5.96, p \leq .001 \). Daughters did not rate their mothers' avoidant behavior as significantly different from their own.

The next series of analyses focused on differences in perceived similarity indices across the three types of behaviors (Table 2). MANOVA comparing differences in perceived similarity of constructive, destructive, and avoidant behaviors were calculated separately for mothers and daughters. These analyses were not significant, indicating that perceptions of similarity did not vary as a function of the type of behavior rated. Nor were there significant generational differences in perceived similarity. Although mothers tended to perceive greater similarity between themselves and daughters than did daughters, these differences were not significant.

Differences between actual and perceived similarity were examined by type of conflict behavior. There were no significant differences between actual similarity and perceived similarity with regard to constructive and destructive behaviors. Mothers and daughters perceived more similarity between their own and the other person's avoidant behaviors than was actually the case.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Actual similarity</th>
<th>Mothers' perceived similarity</th>
<th>Daughters' perceived similarity</th>
<th>Mothers' understanding of daughters' behaviors</th>
<th>Daughters' understanding of mothers' behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
r(44) = −2.48, p ≤ .05, for mothers, and r(44) = −2.00, p ≤ .05, for daughters. However, note that differences between actual and perceived similarity with regard to avoidant behaviors tended to involve distinctions between somewhat not true and not very true.

Understanding. Initial analyses involved comparisons of each person’s self-ratings with her mother’s or daughter’s ratings of her behaviors. Sign test comparisons of self-report versus other’s report (Table 1) were calculated. Daughters tended to underestimate their mothers’ self-reports of constructive behaviors, z = 2.92, p ≤ .001. By contrast, mothers tended to overestimate their daughters’ use of constructive behaviors and to underestimate their daughters’ use of destructive and avoidant behaviors. Mothers reported that their daughters had used more constructive behaviors than the daughters claimed to have used, z = 2.5621, p = .0104. Furthermore, daughters reported engaging in destructive behaviors, such as yelling and offending, more than their mothers rated them doing so, z = 6.48, p ≤ .001. Daughters also reported engaging in avoidant behaviors more than mothers reported that the daughters had, z = 4.68, p ≤ .001.

Analyses were then conducted to determine if certain types of behaviors were more easily communicated than others. MANOVAs comparing understanding indices for each conflict behavior were calculated separately for mothers and daughters (Table 2). Mauchly test of sphericity was W = .82 for mothers and W = .94 for daughters, indicating that multivariate procedures were warranted. Mothers’ understanding of behaviors varied by type of behavior, Hotelling’s F(1, 45) = 7.12, p ≤ .01. To minimize the number of comparisons calculated, univariate comparisons were conducted within the MANOVA, using planned contrasts comparing differences between (a) understanding indices for constructive behaviors and avoidant behaviors and (b) understanding indices for avoidant and destructive behaviors. If significant differences were found in the first comparison, understanding constructive behaviors would also significantly differ from understanding destructive behaviors. Serial univariate comparisons of mothers’ understanding of daughters’ behaviors revealed that mothers’ understanding of daughters’ constructive approaches differed significantly from their understanding of daughters’ avoidant behaviors, F(1, 45) = 12.94, p ≤ .001, and thus, differed significantly from their understanding of daughters’ destructive behaviors. Daughters’ understanding of mothers’ behaviors did not vary significantly as a function of type of behavior. There were generational differences in understanding constructive behaviors. Mothers overestimated daughters’ constructive behaviors to a greater degree than daughters underestimated mothers’ usage, t(1, 46) = −2.17, p ≤ .05.

Affect Following Incident

Reports of own and other’s affect. Mothers and daughters reported a wide variety of feelings associated with the situation they discussed; examples of responses included “Disappointed,” “I knew she was right,” “Frustrated,” “OK,” “Very hurt and angry,” “I’d hoped for more resolution,” “Pretty normal,” “I was happy we’d had a chance to discuss our feelings,” “Terrible,” “Not too bad,” and “Glad we’d worked out such a nice compromise.” With regard to reports of the other’s affect, mothers and daughters listed comparable feelings.

Table 3 contains the proportions of mothers and daughters whose responses to the question about affect following the conflict was coded under the categories positive, neutral or negative, or very negative. Mothers tended to be less likely to report negative feelings than did daughters, although the difference was not statistically significant. Neither mothers nor daughters perceived the other as feeling significantly different than they themselves reported feeling.

Perceptions of own and other’s affect. Mothers tended to perceive their daughters’ affect as less negative than daughters reported. There were significant differences between daughters’ self-reported affect and mothers’ report of daughters’ affect, sign test exact p = .0491. These findings were even stronger when the negative and very negative feelings categories were condensed into a single category, sign test exact p = .0266. When mothers mispredicted their daughters’ emotions, they were more likely to list a positive feeling where she reported a negative one. By contrast, daughters’ perceptions of their mothers’ feelings following the incident were not significantly different from mothers’ self-reports.

Communication Style and Affect

Analyses were conducted to examine the association between communication style during the incident and affect individuals experienced as a result.

Self-reported behaviors predict affect. Table 4 contains results from analyses in which mothers’ and daughters’ affect, coded on a 4-point scale (1 = positive, 4 = very negative), were regressed on the three communication styles. Mothers’ self-reported behaviors significantly predicted their affect about the incident, F(3, 41) = 3.59, p ≤ .01, with destructive behaviors predicting more negative feelings about the incident, β = −.39, t = −2.39, p ≤ .05. Daughters’ self-reported behaviors also significantly predicted their feelings about the incident, F(3, 42) = 3.29, p ≤ .05, with self-reported use of avoidant behaviors predicting worse feelings, β = −.35, t = −2.21, p ≤ .05.

Feelings about the incident were regressed on perceived similarity of behaviors separately for mothers and daughters. The regression equations were not significant.

In addition, each individual’s affect following the tense incident was regressed on the other’s understanding for each of the three communication styles, controlling for self-reported behaviors on each index. As shown in Table 5, daughters’ understanding of mothers’ behaviors significantly predicted mother’s

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mothers Own affect</th>
<th>Mothers Other’s affect</th>
<th>Daughters Own affect</th>
<th>Daughters Other’s affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very negative</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Feelings Regarding Conflict Regressed on Conflict Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>-.39</td>
<td>-2.61*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mother's behaviors predict mother's feelings, \( F(3, 38) = 3.59, p \leq .05; r \) (adjusted) = .16.
* Daughter's behaviors predict daughter's feelings, \( F(3, 42) = 3.29, p \leq .05; r \) (adjusted) = .15.
* * \( p \leq .05. \)

feelings about the incident, \( F(3, 40) = 5.19, p \leq .005, \) with daughter's understanding of mother's destructive behaviors as a significant predictor, \( t = -.76, p \leq .004. \) It was not possible to calculate a regression examining the impact of daughters' understanding of destructive behaviors controlling for mothers' self-reported use of destructive behaviors, given the multicollinearity between these variables, \( r = .69, p \leq .001. \)

When daughters' feelings were regressed on mothers' understanding of all three approaches to conflict resolution (constructive, destructive, and avoidant), the regression equation was not significant. However, mothers' understanding of daughters' avoidant behaviors did significantly predict daughters' feelings about the incident, when feelings were regressed on understanding of avoidant behaviors alone, \( F(1, 43) = 4.65, p \leq .05. \) Again, it was not possible to calculate a regression examining daughters' self-reported avoidant behaviors and mothers' understanding of avoidant behaviors because of multicollinearity between variables, \( r = -.49, p \leq .01. \)

Discussion

The findings from this study are in keeping with the premise that mothers perceive their relationship with their daughters in a more positive light than do daughters. However, the data suggest a more complicated pattern of intergenerational differences in perceptions of behaviors in conflict situations than is suggested by a straightforward application of the developmental stake (Bengston & Kuypers, 1971). Mothers overestimated daughters' constructive behaviors and underestimated daughters' destructive and avoidant behaviors. Mothers also thought their daughters felt better about the conflict situation than was actually the case. However, mothers did not perceive greater similarity between their own and their daughters' behaviors than did daughters. In addition, there were generational differences in the impact that mothers' and daughters' understanding of the others' behaviors had on the other's feelings about the incident.

Actual Similarity

The initial hypothesis pertaining to actual similarity was only partially supported. As predicted, there were generational differences in self-reported use of constructive behaviors; mothers reported using constructive approaches to a greater extent than did daughters. Mothers' self-reported use of constructive approaches may be in keeping with an overall tendency to seek to view and maintain their relationships with daughters in positive terms. However, counter to the initial hypothesis, daughters did not report using avoidant approaches to conflict resolution to a greater degree than did mothers. Rather, the data suggest that mothers and daughters alike claim to use constructive approaches to resolve difficulties in their relationships, although mothers claim to do so to a greater extent than do daughters.

Perceived Similarity and Understanding

It was initially hypothesized that mothers would perceive greater similarity with their daughters than would daughters and that these generational differences in perceptions would be particularly strong with regard to constructive behaviors. However, in the present study, perceptions of similarity did not differ by type of behavior. Nor were there significant generational differences in perceived similarity. Rather, mothers and daughters perceived comparable degrees of similarity, including perceptions of dissimilarity with regard to certain behaviors.

Mothers' perceptions of similarity may be related to their generally favorable perceptions of their relationships with their daughters. Aging mothers rated both avoidant and destructive approaches to conflict resolution as significantly more true of their own than of their daughters' behaviors. That mothers perceived destructive and avoidant behaviors to be more true of themselves than of their daughters may reflect their willingness to admit to occasionally using these strategies but their unwillingness to believe their daughters would do so. Mothers' perceptions of similarity in their own and their daughters' use of constructive behaviors may be related to mothers' beliefs about their role in the relationship. Healthy, aging mothers may perceive themselves in a role of "mother" with the incumbent obligations of listening to their daughters and seeking to understand their daughters' feelings. At the same time, older mothers may be invested in perceiving their daughters in the best possible light and, thus, perceive similarity in their daughters' likelihood to engage in positive behaviors.

Daughters also perceived destructive behaviors as more true of their own than of their mothers' behaviors. That mothers and daughters both perceived destructive behaviors as more true of themselves than of the other may stem from different sources.

Table 5

Regressions Predicting Mother's Feelings From Daughter's Understanding of Mother's Conflict Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>-.41</td>
<td>-2.76**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( F(3, 40) = 5.19, p \leq .005; r \) (adjusted) = .29.
* * \( p \leq .01. \)
Their perceptions of similarity may be related to their understanding of the other's behaviors. For mothers, the lower rating of daughters' destructive and avoidant behaviors is related to a failure to accurately understand daughters' nonconstructive approaches to conflict resolution. Mothers seemed to have a rosier view of their daughters' behaviors overall than daughters reported. Mothers rated daughters' use of avoidant and destructive behaviors lower than did daughters on their self-reports. Mothers overrated daughters' use of constructive behaviors to an even greater extent. In the present study, mothers seemed to operate under the assumption that "I'm her mother. She tells me when something is bothering her."

Daughters also tended to perceive their mothers as trying to deal with the conflict situation in a constructive manner. Daughters reported that their mothers engaged in more constructive behaviors than they themselves had. Yet, daughters still underestimated the degree to which mothers themselves reported engaging in constructive behaviors. At the same time, daughters seemed to accurately perceive their mothers' nonconstructive behaviors. Daughters reported that their mothers were yelling when their mothers reported that they were yelling. Daughters also seemed to be aware when their mothers were trying to avoid trouble.

Social Desirability

Social desirability considerations may play a role in mothers' reports of their own and their daughters' behaviors. Mothers reported not only that their daughters felt good about the way things turned out, but that they themselves tended to use constructive approaches to conflict resolution to an even greater extent than their daughters were aware. At the same time, daughters were fairly accurate in their understanding of their mother's feelings about the situation, supporting the idea that mothers may, in fact, communicate their feelings about the situation in an open manner.

Moreover, there is evidence that mothers were not solely concerned with impressing the investigator in their ratings of their daughters' behaviors. They participated equally with their daughters in the discussion of the tense incident preceding the checklist ratings. Rather, mothers may honestly believe that their daughters were approaching the situation openly and generally felt good about the way things turned out in the end. Silsars and Scott (1983) claimed that one aspect of feeling intimate with another person lies in a sense of knowing how they feel. Thus, individuals in intimate relationships may fail to seek or to assimilate information that contradicts their beliefs about the other individual. This tendency may be exaggerated in intergenerational relationships. If parents perceive greater intimacy in their relationship than do offspring, they may fail to perceive offsprings' negative communication efforts. As was mentioned previously, the parental role may also lead the parent to believe that they are more aware of offspring's feelings than is actually the case.

Feelings About the Situation

Mothers' and daughters' feelings about the way things turned out did not differ significantly. However, mothers tended to feel better about things, and significant generational differences might be found in a study with a larger sample. In any case, mothers' overestimation of their daughters' positive feelings and underestimation of their negative feelings about the situation are in keeping with their general tendency to fail to accurately understand their daughters nonconstructive, nonpositive feelings and behaviors.

Mothers' and daughters' feelings about the situation were negatively associated with the use of, and the other's understanding of, nonconstructive approaches to conflict resolution. Although some mothers may use destructive conflict approaches, they end up feeling bad about the situation, particularly when their daughters accurately perceive these negative behaviors. Again, healthy aging mothers may perceive themselves in a maternal role. When they claim to have behaved in a nasty manner during a conflict with a daughter, they feel bad and even worse when their daughters pick up on it.

By contrast, daughters' feelings for the incident were worse when they reported using avoidant behaviors and when their mothers were unaware that they were trying to avoid the problem. Daughters may feel worse when their mothers fail to pick up on their avoidant behaviors because the situation remains unresolved. They may also feel bad because they, too, may hold expectations of their aging mothers' ability to know how they are feeling and may feel let down by their mother's failure to perceive that they are annoyed. Future research might include an examination of mothers' and daughters' normative expectations about the roles of aging mothers and daughters in communicating feelings.

Limitations of the Present Study

There are several factors that limit the generalizability of the present study. Some of the findings in the present study may reflect the highly select nature of the sample used. The present study was limited to mothers over the age of 70, who were highly educated, healthy, and required little instrumental or financial assistance from their daughters. In relationships involving more frail mothers and greater dependency on the daughter, mothers and daughters might report using different conflict tactics. Healthy older mothers and their daughters may avoid conflict situations unconsciously, by merely avoiding situations that are tension laden. Daughters and mothers in a caregiving relationship may be unable to avoid such situations. They may, instead, report greater reliance on avoidant conflict tactics when tense situations arise. Daughters in such situations may be more resentful of their mothers' failure to realize that they are upset.

The women in the present study were principally of European descent. It is unclear whether the perceptual differences in the present study stem from ethnically based communication patterns unique to mothers and daughters of European descent. Future research might include investigation of perceptions of communication in samples with wider ethnic diversity, including mothers and daughters of Asian or Latino descent.

The generalizability of the findings in the present study may also be constrained by methodological considerations. The data in the present study were collected using a self-report checklist of mothers' and daughters' retrospective perceptions of their own and the others' behaviors in a past conflict situation.
Different results might be obtained using observation methods. For example, mothers and daughters might show increased understanding of one another’s behaviors if they were asked to rate their own and the other’s behaviors from a videotape of a conflictual encounter.

The data in the present study were collected at a single point of development in the mother–daughter relationship. The findings in the present study suggest that mothers misperceive their daughters’ behaviors because they are behaving in a “motherly” manner. However, research including mother–daughter dyads of other ages or, preferably, longitudinal study of mother–daughter dyads across development is needed to substantiate this presumption.

Conclusion

The findings in the present study suggest that the perceptual biases aging mothers and adult daughters bring to conflict situations may stem from the aging mothers’ maintaining her role as a parent. Moreover, mothers’ and daughters’ understanding of the other’s behaviors, specifically nonconstructive behaviors, predicted how the other felt about the situation in the end. Healthy older mothers seem to remain mothers and see things through the lens of that role. Their daughters appear to strive to maintain the relationship as well, although their mothers’ perceptions of their behaviors may have an impact on their feelings about a given conflict situation.

References


AGING MOTHER-DAUGHTER PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT BEHAVIORS


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