Positive and Negative Emotional Feelings and Behaviors in Mother–Daughter Ties in Late Life

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Behaviors and emotions during specific visits may reveal the interpersonal processes of mother–daughter ties, yet most research uses global assessments of these ties. Forty-eight mother–daughter pairs participated in audiotaped conversations and completed surveys. All mothers were over age 70 and in good health. Daughters tended to take a central role in structuring the conversations. Conversations were characterized by high levels of felt and expressed positive emotions and behaviors for mothers and daughters. Nevertheless, mothers reported more positive and fewer negative emotions, whereas daughters expressed more positive behaviors than did mothers. Mothers' positive feelings and behaviors were associated with daughters'. Finally, mothers' and daughters' emotions and behaviors were associated with their destructive responses to being upset with each other, providing support for the ambivalence perspective of parent–offspring relationships.

Family scholars have focused considerable attention on parents' and offspring's value for one another in adulthood (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Umber- son, 1992). Findings suggest that older mothers and daughters have strong and binding relationships but that they also report negative feelings for each other (Barnett, 1988; Fingerman, 2001). Yet most research on intergenerational ties has involved self-reports of dimensions such as exchanges of help, frequency of contact, and overall feelings about the relationship, rather than assessments of interpersonal interaction. As a result, researchers know little about the emotional processes that underlie these aspects of the relationship.

Behaviors and emotions during specific visits may be indicative of the general positive and negative valence of mother–daughter relationships. By studying specific interactions, we hoped to obtain insight into how mothers and daughters feel and express positive and negative affect when together. Further, given the strength of the mother–daughter tie, older mothers and daughters may be particularly adept at handling tensions that do arise in their relationship. Therefore, we also examined whether these patterns during get-togethers are associated with the ways in which mothers and daughters manage problems in their relationships.

The Mother–Daughter Relationship in Late Life

Several features of the mother–daughter tie in late life distinguish it from other intergenerational ties. First, this tie is distinguished by its closeness and emotional context, in that women are socialized from an early age to maintain closer ties to generations above and below them than are men (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Walker & Thompson, 1983). These patterns intensify in late life, as mothers and daughters share an increasing investment in the larger family (Fingerman, 2001). Second, older mothers and daughters have more positive and negative feelings about their relationship than do younger mothers and daughters or fathers or sons of any age (Hagestad, 1987). Third, mothers and daughters tend to interact in dyads, whereas male relatives tend to interact in larger groups (Fingerman, 2001; Troll & Smith, 1976). Finally, the mother–daughter dyad is important for the family as a whole. Mothers tend to plan family gatherings, and daughters tend to encourage relatives to attend these events, thus sharing the "kinwork" of family life (Rosenthal, 1987). Thus, the affective quality of mother–daughter interactions may have implications for the larger family.

Further, it is important to understand ties between older mothers and adult daughters when mothers are healthy and independent. Throughout the majority of daughters' adult years, most mothers remain in good health. Yet, when the
mother's health does decline, daughters often provide her care, particularly if she is widowed and lives nearby (Stone, Cafferata, & Sangi, 1987). Behavioral and emotional processes between mothers and daughters when the mother is healthy may have implications for understanding how and why daughters step in to care for their mothers when the need arises.

To date, much work on mother–daughter ties has focused on dimensions of the relationship, rather than specific interactions (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Umberson, 1992; Walker & Thompson, 1983). Assessing day-to-day positive and negative emotions may capture the processes that underlie overall feelings about the relationship. In the current study, we assessed these processes in three ways: (a) We asked mothers and daughters the extent to which they experience positive and negative emotions when together, (b) we observed mothers' and daughters' positive and negative behaviors during interactions, and (c) we asked how mothers and daughters react when they are upset with the other person. By focusing on specific interactions rather than on general ratings of the relationship, our first goal was to assess processes that may underlie the strength of mother–daughter ties by describing behaviors during specific interactions.

Mothers’ and Daughters’ Positive and Negative Emotions

Much of what is known about cohesion in the mother–daughter tie has resulted from work on the solidarity perspective (McChesney & Bengtson, 1988; Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In particular, researchers have examined the ways in which association, affection, and consensus contribute to a sense of solidarity between parents and offspring (Roberts et al., 1991). Indeed, mothers and daughters report that they get together frequently and that they enjoy their interactions and conversations (Fingerman, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Therefore, examination of mothers’ and daughters’ feelings about their visits and behaviors in conversations may lend insights into how their solidarity develops.

Recent theory extends the solidarity perspective by suggesting adult parents and children experience ambivalence in their ties (Luescher, 2002; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). The ambivalence perspective deals with inherent positive and negative elements in intergenerational ties and may be particularly applicable to the mother–daughter tie in late life (Fingerman & Hay, in press; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). Older mothers and daughters greatly value their relationship and report low rates of overt conflict, but they also report negative feelings for the other party (Fingerman, 2001; Hagestad, 1987). A second goal of the current study was to examine mothers’ and daughters’ reported positive and negative emotions when they are together. In keeping with the ambivalence perspective, we expected that mothers and daughters would report strong positive feelings and some negative feelings during their visits.

Mothers’ and Daughters’ Positive and Negative Behaviors

We conceptualize ambivalence in the mother–daughter tie in two ways. As described above, ambivalence can be demonstrated by the coexistence of positive and negative emotions (Luescher, 2002; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Second, ambivalence may exist in that there may be a discrepancy among one’s feelings, perceptions, and behaviors. An individual may feel certain emotions but may not express those emotions. For example, a given mother or daughter may manage her negative feelings in ways that protect the relationship and, therefore, her perceptions and behaviors may be incongruent. To examine these issues, we considered mothers’ and daughters’ positive and negative behaviors when they are together in addition to their reports of their positive and negative feelings during visits.

There is little information about how mothers and daughters behave toward one another in late life. To date, studies of parents and grown children have relied primarily on self-reports and almost never use observational methods (Hammock, Richardson, Pilkington, & Utley, 1990; Umberson, 1992; for a review, see Allen, Bleszner, & Roberto, 2000). However, research suggests that people tend to perceive themselves as acting more positively than do outside observers (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998). Thus, the third goal of the study was to assess mothers’ and daughters’ behaviors during a conversation with observational assessment. We expected that mothers and daughters would express positively and negatively behaviors toward one another, in keeping with a general positive regard and their desire to maintain the relationship in good terms (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovak, & Lipkus, 1991).

Mothers’ and Daughters’ Responses to Being Upset

Mothers’ and daughters’ emotional feelings and behaviors in conversations may have implications for how they handle conflict or discomfort in the relationship. Elsewhere, we have argued that the feeling and expression of negative feelings may be distinct in close relationships. Mothers and daughters may experience tensions but may manage those feelings in ways that enhance rather than harm the relationship (Fingerman, 1996, 2001).

Researchers have classified responses people use to deal with conflicts as constructive (e.g., telling the other person how one feels), destructive (e.g., yelling), and avoidant (e.g., not talking about it; Aciello, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Our prior work suggests that mothers and daughters generally respond in either constructive or avoidant ways when they are upset with the other party and that both constructive and avoidant responses can be positive. However, destructive responses do occur and, thus, a given mother or daughter may use all three types of responses (Fingerman, 1998).

We were particularly interested in associations between emotions and behaviors in specific interactions and responses to interpersonal problems. Thus, our final goal was to examine the association between mothers’ and daughters’
positive and negative emotions and behaviors with their constructive, avoidant, and destructive responses to problems. From an ambivalence perspective, we would not expect feelings and behaviors to be associated with responses to problems in identical ways. That is, perceptions of responses to tensions (e.g., avoidance) would reflect mothers' and daughters' emotional feelings more than their behaviors in conversations because they would not always act in accordance with their feelings.

Intergenerational Comparisons

To understand the mother–daughter relationship, both parties' perspectives must be considered, but many prior studies have considered only one person's perspective (e.g., Morgan, 1989; Talbott, 1990). Some studies have examined more than one individual's perspective (e.g., Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 2001; Martini, Grusec, & Bernardini, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), and these studies find mothers portray relationships more positively than do daughters. Yet, it is unknown whether mothers' and daughters' observed positive and negative behaviors differ in the same manner. It is possible that intergenerational differences in beliefs about the relationship reflect other intergenerational differences in behaviors.

Shifts in the mother–daughter tie in late life may enhance the mother's perceptions of the strengths of the tie. As mothers begin to age, daughters feel solicitous toward them, even when the mothers are still healthy (Fingerman, 2001). As a result, daughters may avoid discussing issues that might upset their mothers or may protect their mothers by not telling them when they themselves are upset (Hagestad, 1987). Therefore, mothers' beliefs that the relationship is strong and positive may stem from their daughters' behaviors toward them.

Generally, research on intergenerational differences in later life has focused on differences concerning specific indicators, such as the finding that mothers desire more contact than do daughters. In contrast, research on parents and adolescents has examined differences in associations to determine whether the same emotions or behaviors have different meanings for parents and children (e.g., Fletcher, Fischer, Barkley, & Smallish, 1996; Lefkowitz, Boone, Sigman, & Au, 2002). For example, negative behaviors may be associated with worse feelings for mothers than for daughters. Therefore, in this article we examined intergenerational differences in emotions, behaviors, and responses to problems as well as intergenerational differences in associations among these variables. We expected to replicate earlier findings of more positive and less negative emotions reported by mothers as compared with daughters and sought to examine whether the same pattern held for behaviors.

In sum, in this study we provide a unique contribution by observing the ways in which mothers and daughters communicate, assessing their feelings during visits, and examining associations between these indicators and their self-reported reactions to problems in their ties. We address four questions about aging mothers and daughters, considering intergenerational differences for each issue: (a) What are the general characteristics of their conversations? (b) What positive and negative emotions do they feel when they visit? (c) How do they express positive and negative behaviors when together? and (d) How do their positive and negative feelings and behaviors when together relate to their reported responses when upset with the other person?

Method

Participants

These data are part of a larger study of 96 women (48 mother–daughter pairs). Mothers were over the age of 70 ($M = 72, SD = 5.2$, range = 70–93), and daughters averaged age 44 ($SD = 7.03$, range = 32–60). Study criteria were that mothers be in good health and that mothers and daughters reside within 50 miles of each other but not in the same household. Most (96%) of the dyads were European American, with 4% being African American. Mothers and daughters tended to be highly educated. Seventy-nine percent of the daughters had a college or graduate degree, and an additional 15% had attended some college. Seventy-nine percent of the mothers had attended at least some college. The majority (83%) of the daughters were married or remarried, 15% were single or divorced, and 2% were widowed. In contrast, 40% of the mothers were married, 4% were divorced, and 56% were widowed. Mothers had an average of 3 children ($SD = 1.8$), with 2 ($SD = 1.2$) residing in the area (including the participant daughter). Daughters had an average of 2.5 children ($SD = 1.3$), with 0.9 ($SD = 1.0$) residing in their homes.

Three pairs were excluded from observational parts of the study because of technical failures in audiotaping their conversations. These dyads did not differ in significant ways from the other 45 dyads and were included in the analyses based on questionnaire data only.

Daughters indicated that they rarely or never take care of their mothers. Mothers and daughters also indicated that they had frequent contact. Ninety percent of the women visited at least biweekly and spoke on the phone more often. This rate of contact is slightly higher than that found in national studies (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Sweet, Bumpass, & Vaughn, 1988) but is in keeping with the proximity between mothers and daughters (Lin & Roggerson, 1995).

This sample precludes generalization of findings to the larger population of aging women and their adult daughters. Rather, these women provided a forum for investigating mother–daughter relationships in the absence of losses sometimes incurred in late life, such as economic dependency, educational disparities, poor health, cognitive decline, or isolation.

Procedures

Recruitment took place through the mothers. Eligible older women were contacted through senior groups and activities, health clinics, and newspaper advertisements. Mothers then identified a daughter living nearby to participate. Mothers who had more than one daughter in the area did not appear to pick most- or least-favored daughters to participate (Fingerman, 1990). Mothers and daughters completed face-to-face interviews and questionnaires. One to 2 weeks later, they participated in joint interviews. Interviews took place in the women's homes, and the same interviewer conducted all three interviews.

During the joint interviews, mothers and daughters engaged in an audiotaped conversation in which they wrote a story together based on a picture of a younger and older woman (Card # 7 GF;
Murray, 1943). For this task, mothers and daughters were first seated apart and given a copy of the picture. The women were asked to write a brief story—containing a beginning, a middle, and an end—about the picture independently. After completing this task separately, they were asked to do the same thing again together. Conversations were audiotaped. Although this approach introduces questions about the validity of the conversation in which mothers and daughters engaged, it allows for between-dyad comparisons. By asking mothers and daughters to discuss the same artifact—a neutral picture—we could compare positive and negative aspects of their conversations. When mothers and daughters select topics for discussion, the emotional valence of these topics may vary, and it is difficult to draw conclusions from the conversation itself. Similar approaches to assessing family communication are well-established in the family systems literature (e.g., Reiss, 1981; Shapiro & Wild, 1976; Walsh, 1993).

**Measures**

**Self-Report Measures**

*Positive and negative emotions when together.* A checklist of 8 positive emotions (e.g., happy, capable, relaxed) and 8 negative emotions (e.g., nervous, criticized, sad) was developed from extant checklists that include emotions typically endorsed as part of daily life by middle-aged and older adults (Diener, Sandvik, & Larsen, 1985; Larsen & Diener, 1992; Lawton, Kleban, Dunn, Rajagopal, & Parmelee, 1992; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Mothers and daughters indicated how frequently they felt each emotion when they visit each other using a 3-point scale: 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), or 3 (almost always). The 8 items were summed for each subscale, providing a possible range from 8 to 24. The scales had adequate reliability (α = .76–.87).

*Constructive, destructive, and avoidant responses to being upset.* Mothers and daughters provided ratings of their general behavior in situations when they are upset with the other party. In keeping with theory pertaining to conflict in close ties (Acitelli et al., 1993; Canary et al., 1995), we considered constructive, destructive, and avoidant behaviors. Mothers and daughters indicated how often they generally (a) tell the other what is wrong and what she needs to do to make it better (constructive); (b) express their feelings in a way that could hurt the other person (destructive); and (c) avoid talking about what’s wrong (avoidance) in situations when they are irritated, hurt, or annoyed by the other using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Univariate assessments of behaviors introduce limitations, but given the length of the survey, it was not feasible to obtain self-reports using multiple indicators of behaviors.

**Observational Measures**

*Words spoken.* All audiotaped conversations were transcribed by three research assistants. Each transcript also was checked by one of the transcribers who did not do the initial transcript and was double-checked by Eva S. Lefkowitz. Transcribers then created separate files for each dyad, containing words spoken by either the mother or the daughter. The word count feature in Microsoft Word was used to calculate the number of words spoken by each person.

*Behaviors during conversations.* Three independent raters coded 10 scales of positive and negative behaviors (see Table 1).

Because little research uses observational methods with adults and their parents, the codes were developed on the basis of studies of positive and negative affect expressed in marital and parent–adolescent dyads (Gottman, 1994; Johnson, 2002; Lefkowitz et al., 2002; Montemayor, Eberly, & Flannery, 1993; O’Connor, Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1995). The selected codes included behaviors that might be expressed in the mother—daughter tie in late life or that the story writing task might elicit. Thus, certain behaviors used in other studies (e.g., disgust, sadness) were excluded because they were unlikely to occur in this relationship and context. Coders used a 5-point scale to rate mothers and daughters on each attribute. They used the transcripts while listening to the taped conversations. Raters were trained by meeting twice weekly with Eva S. Lefkowitz to learn the system and discuss discrepancies, and they coded approximately three tapes between each meeting. They continued this process until they reached the criterion intraclass correlation of .75 for 7 weeks (30 hr per rater). Once reliability was obtained, the coders rated the remainder of the tapes. All tapes were rated by at least two coders, and coders continued to meet weekly to discuss any discrepancies. Thus, final data were based on the results of these paired decisions rather than on simple means of the raters. Because at least two raters coded each individual, reliability was based on the entire sample and is reported as the means across the three pairs of coders. Intraclass correlations for the composite scales were .87 (mother positive), .82 mother positive, .80 daughter negative, and .58 mother negative. The mean mother-negative reliability was rather low because there was low variability. However, one of the three pairs had a reliability of .88, and given that at least one of these two coders rated each mother, we felt comfortable with these data. Alphas on the scales ranged from .75 to .91.

Two additional items were coded that were not included in the negative or positive scales. The first question, rated on a 5-point scale, was who was in charge of the conversation (see Table 1). The mean intraclass correlation for this item was .87. Raters also coded what happened first in the conversation, which could be one of five categories (see Table 1). Kappas were computed in pairs, and the mean kappa across the three pairs of coders was .77.

**Rating of joint story compared with mother’s and daughter’s stories.** The jointly written stories were coded to assess the degree of collaboration. Three raters read the three stories (mother’s, daughter’s, and joint) and determined whether the final story was more like the mother’s or the daughter’s. All three coders rated every story and met twice weekly with Eva S. Lefkowitz to discuss any discrepancies. There were six possible categories: The joint story could be completely the mother’s (e.g., in one dyad, rather than writing a new story, the mother wrote on the joint story, “We have agreed that our stories are so similar we would go with my story”), completely the daughter’s, more like the daughter’s, a compromise between the two, or a completely new story. Mean kappa across the three pairs of raters was .78.

**Results**

**What Are the Characteristics of Conversations Between Mothers and Daughters?**

Our first research question involved characterizing mothers’ and daughters’ behavior during a structured conversational task. Given scant information about mother–daughter interactions in late life, this goal was primarily descriptive in nature, but we also considered intergenerational differences in contributions to the conversation. Table 2 contains observer ratings of mothers’ and daughters’ behaviors at the conversation start. The majority of dyads began their con-
Table 1
Rating Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Example of statement rated high on item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourages participation</td>
<td>Works to keep other person involved in conversation by asking questions, probing feedback even when does not agree</td>
<td>D: Taking in consideration those two things, how do you see the picture now? What do you think . . .?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Listens, provides positive feedback even when does not agree</td>
<td>D: The, the, uh the daughter looks really totally disinterested, or depressed . . . M: Yeah, she's very young. You're, maybe you got something there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Involved in conversation and task, on task, shares ideas</td>
<td>M: I can see that. I can see that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive</td>
<td>Verbally responsive, including back channeling, responding to the other person's ideas</td>
<td>D: In my story . . . she was grieving herself D: I mean they're both having a hard time. M: Yes. D: So teaching or loving. M: I can see that. I can see that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Enthusiastic tone of voice, energetic, seems to enjoy interaction</td>
<td>M: [reading her story] And um, the girl agreed to do that and um, once the mother started to, ah, this is gonna be such fun to hear what you, what you said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks questions</td>
<td>Asks about other person's opinion</td>
<td>D: Um ok, so, how do we incorporate the beginning, middle, and end idea? M: I don't know. I'm not a writer. D: I can tell you what I put in my story, but . . . What'd you put in your story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>Laughs, playful, making jokes</td>
<td>D: If only, her parents, ok, I'm going to say [they're] from England [laughs] M: You could have made it Liechtenstein or something [laughs]</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Criticizes the other person's ideas, statements, behaviors</td>
<td>D: [writing] I better put, the, I better put the dinner on M: You don't put dinner, you gotta get dinner, you always say it [Sarah]* D: I'm writing, you don't have to write 'cause I'm writing for both of us. M: Oh yeah, I'm glad you put that. D: Mother senses this and she's hurt, okay, have it your way. Alright, um, well would you agree that the little girl doesn't realize that the mother is hurt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>Undermines other person's ideas with sarcasm, rude laughter, biting comments</td>
<td>D: Okay, well, the only way the mother would be hurt would be if the daughter said that she didn't want the story read. Now I didn't put anywhere that . . . the daughter told the mother that she didn't want the story read. You're assuming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgmental</td>
<td>Makes negative evaluation of other person's ideas</td>
<td>D: Today, she is more in charge than daughter M: You don’t put dinner, you gotta get dinner, you always say it [Sarah]* D: I’m writing, you don’t have to write ‘cause I’m writing for both of us. M: Oh yeah, I'm glad you put that. D: Mother senses this and she's hurt, okay, have it your way. Alright, um, well would you agree that the little girl doesn't realize that the mother is hurt?</td>
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</table>

In charge

5-point scale

1—Mother is fully in charge
2—Mother is more in charge than daughter
3—Mother and daughter share control
4—Daughter is more in charge than mother
5—Daughter is fully in charge

What happened first

5 categories (not a scale):

1—Daughter asks mother to read her story
2—Mother asks daughter to read her story
3—Daughter reads story without being asked
4—Mother reads story without being asked
5—Mother and daughter start discussing picture without reading their stories

Note. Statements in bold are those that were rated high for a particular category. M = mother; D = daughter.

*Names have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.
Table 2

Observer’s Scoring of What Happened First in Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Proportion of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daughter asks mother to read her story</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother asks daughter to read her story</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter reads story without being asked</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother reads story without being asked</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother and daughter start discussing picture without reading their stories</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents coders’ ratings of the final story in comparison with the mother’s and daughter’s stories. Thirty-one percent of the time the story seemed to be more or completely like the daughter’s, and 35% of the time the story seemed more or completely like the mother’s.

Table 3 presents coders’ ratings of the final story in comparison with the mother’s and daughter’s stories. Thirty-one percent of the time the story seemed to be more or completely like the daughter’s, and 35% of the time the story seemed more or completely like the mother’s.

**How Do Mothers and Daughters Experience Positive and Negative Emotions?**

The second goal of this study was to understand mothers’ and daughters’ self-reported positive and negative emotions when they visited. In keeping with our expectations, overall, mothers and daughters reported positive feelings when they were together. Thirty-one percent of mothers and 23% of daughters reported they “almost always” felt eight different positive emotions when they were with the other person. Similarly, 35% of mothers and 17% of daughters reported “never” feeling any of the eight negative emotions when they were together.

However, t tests revealed that there were intergenerational differences in these patterns, with mothers reporting feeling more positive and fewer negative emotions than daughters (see Table 4). Within dyads, mothers’ positive emotions when visiting with their daughters were correlated with daughters’ positive emotions, but mothers’ and daughters’ negative emotions were not significantly correlated. In other words, when a mother reported feeling good during visits with her daughter, her daughter was more likely to report the same. But when either party reported feeling bad during visits with the other, the other party did not necessarily reciprocate.

**How Do Mothers and Daughters Express Positive and Negative Behaviors?**

Our third goal was to describe mothers’ and daughters’ positive and negative behaviors during a structured task. Overall, mothers and daughters were relatively positive and displayed few negative behaviors. Seventy-one percent of mothers and 76% of daughters were rated at the lowest level (“none”) on all three types of negative behaviors. In addition, t tests revealed that there were also intergenerational differences in behaviors. Mothers were rated as significantly more positive than mothers were, but mothers and daughters did not differ on negative behaviors (see Table 5). As was true for emotions, mothers’ and daughters’ positive behaviors were associated with each other, but mothers’ and daughters’ negative behaviors were not significantly correlated.
How Do Mothers' and Daughters' Positive and Negative Emotions and Behaviors Relate to Their Reported Responses to Being Upset With the Other Person?

Our final goal involved understanding associations between mothers' and daughters' positive and negative emotions and behaviors and their reported responses to being upset with each other. Previously, we have published findings from mothers' and daughters' self-reports of responses to interpersonal tensions in this study (Fingerman, 1998, 2001). In sum, mothers and daughters alike claimed to use constructive and avoidant responses most often. Neither mothers nor daughters claimed to use destructive behaviors often.

We performed correlations to examine the associations between individuals' self-reported responses to tensions and their self-reported emotions and observed behaviors during visits (see Table 6). We were interested in understanding differences in associations for mothers compared with daughters. Therefore, we used r-to-z transformations to compare each correlation for mothers to each matched correlation for daughters. These transformations would reveal whether the correlations were stronger for one conversational partner than they were for the other.

Mothers' and daughters' reported use of constructive responses to being upset with the other did not relate to their positive and negative emotions or behaviors. For avoidant responses, there was one significant correlation. Specifically, daughters' reports of using avoidant responses were positively associated with their observed positive behaviors during the story task. This correlation was significantly larger than the same correlation for mothers (z = 2.69, p < .01). In other words, daughters who reported using avoidance more frequently when upset with their mothers tended to behave more positively in the story task than daughters who reported being less avoidant. For instance, one daughter who reported frequently avoiding talking to her mother when she was upset with her received a very high rating of positive behaviors. She consistently used back channeling in the conversation and followed up many of her mothers' descriptions of the story with questions such as "Oh, did the girl like it or not?" and "Then what happens?"

Six of the 8 correlations between destructive responses to being upset and emotions and behaviors were significant. Generally, there was a larger correlation for the daughters than there was for the mothers. Specifically, daughters who reported using destructive responses tended to report fewer positive emotions when with their mothers and demonstrated fewer positive behaviors in the interaction task. Follow-up r-to-z transformations revealed that the correlation between daughters' positive emotions and destructive responses was not significantly different from that for mothers (p > .05). However, the correlation between daughters' positive behaviors and destructive responses was marginally significantly different from mothers' (z = 1.89, p = .06).

Both mothers' and daughters' destructive responses were positively correlated with their negative emotions when together. Mothers and daughters who used destructive responses more frequently tended to feel more negative emotions when together. The magnitude of these correlations did not differ (p > .05).

Finally, mothers' destructive responses were negatively associated with their negative behaviors, whereas daughters' destructive responses were positively associated with their negative behaviors (these correlations were significantly different; z = 3.16, p < .01). Mothers who reported using destructive responses more frequently tended to express fewer negative behaviors in the interaction task. In contrast, daughters who reported using destructive responses more frequently tended to express more negative behaviors toward their mothers in the interaction task. For instance, one daughter who reported that she almost always responded to being upset with her mother by expressing her feelings in a way that could hurt her received a high negative behavior rating. She frequently corrected her mother and used a lot of sarcasm. When her mother said something she did not like, she replied, "Um hum, story of my life." To wrap up the conversation, she said in a sarcastic tone, "See, we can agree on something." This daughter expressed a fair bit of criticism and acted judgmentally toward her mother, which was in line with her self-report that she responded to being upset with her mother in destructive ways.

Discussion

The mother–daughter tie in late life is characterized by closeness and emotional involvement and has implications for the family at large. In the current study, we were particularly interested in how mothers and daughters behaved and felt during in-person interactions. We found the mother–daughter relationship to be characterized by warmth, positive regard and behaviors, and increasing status for the daughter. Nevertheless, mothers reported more positive and less negative emotions than did daughters, whereas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior expressed</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Daughter</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. *** p < .001.
daughters expressed more positive behaviors than did mothers. Mothers' and daughters' positive, but not negative, feelings and behaviors were associated. Finally, mothers' and daughters' positive and negative emotions and behaviors were associated with how they dealt with being upset with each other.

There are limitations to this study that preclude generalization to the population at large. The sample was predominately European American and well-educated. Research suggests that the quality of the mother–daughter tie varies as a function of cultural background (Bleszsner, Usita, & Mancini, 1996), and it is therefore possible that interactions vary by cultural background as well. Second, the measures used were developed for the current study. Most existing studies on the mother–daughter tie in late life have used self-report data. Therefore, when our findings differ from prior research, it could be due to differences in methodology. In future studies, new measures of responses to being upset, emotions, and behaviors might be developed in an attempt to replicate the current findings. Nevertheless, we found important associations and group differences that warrant discussion. Elsewhere, scholars have argued that work with small homogeneous samples may reveal patterns of association not evident in heterogeneous samples, particularly with older adults (Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, & Hobart, 1987).

What Are Mother–Daughter Conversations Like?

In general, observed conversations between mothers and daughters involved daughters participating equally or more than mothers. Daughters spoke more than mothers did, were more likely to direct their mothers, and were more likely to ask their mothers to read the stories they had written. It appears that daughters take a central role in structuring these interactions. These findings contrast with findings that mothers engaged in conversations with adolescent daughters tend to provide more of the structure (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996). Middle-aged women, then, whether with their mothers or their daughters, may be in the role of keeping the interaction going. Further, the finding that daughters were rated as expressing more positive behaviors than were mothers suggests that daughters are taking a caring and nurturing stance toward their mothers at this stage of life, even prior to any indicators of maternal health decline.

How Do Mothers and Daughters Feel and Express Positive and Negative Affect?

Aging mothers and daughters generally hold their relationship in high regard (Fingerman, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Our work extends this finding to specific interactions, showing that mothers and daughters both report feeling many positive and few negative emotions when together and express many positive and few negative behaviors toward each other. The low rates of negative emotions do not support prior findings that mothers and daughters report negative feelings for the other (Hagestad, 1987). However, it is important to distinguish positive and negative feelings about the other person from positive and negative feelings when together. Mothers and daughters may greatly enjoy their interactions, even though they have some ambivalence in their feelings about each other. Further, mothers and daughters may be able to avoid expressing these negative feelings about their overall relationship when they visit. By late life, mothers and daughters may have learned how to manage interactions to maximize the enjoyment gained and minimize overt negativity and conflict.

Intergenerational Comparisons

Researchers have found that mothers report more positivity in their relationship with their daughters than do daughters in their relationship with their mothers (Bengston & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). We replicated this finding within the context of specific interactions. However, when outside observers rated the behaviors, daughters were rated as expressing more positivity than were mothers. These contrasting findings for emotions and behaviors may reflect dynamic processes in the relationship. Mothers may feel more positivity than do
daughters because their daughters are behaving toward them in more positive ways. Thus, mothers may report higher levels of positive emotions when together as a direct result of their daughters’ behaviors.

Further, shifts in the relationship at this life stage may result in daughters’ behaving more positively, regardless of their feelings. Daughters, who are more likely to be working to structure these conversations, may experience less positive feelings than do mothers. Therefore, positive and negative emotions and behaviors may function in different ways in this tie. It is important to stress that, on average, mothers and daughters both reported very high levels of positive feelings and low levels of negative feelings. Thus, these differences are within a range of positive experiences, not differences between experiencing positive feelings and lacking positive feelings.

Within dyads, mothers’ and daughters’ positive emotions and behaviors were associated, but their negative emotions and behaviors were not associated. This finding contrasts with work on the mother–daughter tie in adolescence, at which time there are reciprocal associations for both positive and negative behaviors (Lefkowitz et al., 2002). As the relationship matures, mothers and daughters may gain the ability to respond to positive with positive but avoid responding to negative with negative. Research on mothers and adolescents suggests that mothers are less likely than adolescents to respond to negative behavior with subsequent negative behavior (Fletcher et al., 1996). Perhaps by later in life, both mothers and daughters have developed this ability to avoid responding to negativity with negativity.

How Do Mothers’ and Daughters’ Positive and Negative Emotions and Behaviors Relate to Their Reported Responses to Being Upset With the Other Person?

In prior work, we reported that there are mean differences in mothers’ and daughters’ responses to being upset with each other. In the current investigation, in an effort to examine underlying processes, we examined differences in the association between responses to being upset and emotions and behaviors when together. Neither mothers’ nor daughters’ emotions and behaviors related to their reports of using constructive responses to being upset with the other person. Constructive responses have been found to be relatively common for mothers and daughters when upset with each other (Fingerin, 1998), and it may be that they are less context-specific than destructive responses.

Similarly, mothers’ and daughters’ use of avoidance when upset with the other was rarely related to their emotions and behaviors during specific interactions. The one exception to this finding was that daughters who used more avoidant responses were rated as behaving more positively toward their mothers than were daughters who used fewer avoidant responses. Daughters who deal with problems by avoiding them may be those who generally engage in very positive interactions and therefore do not know how to respond in constructive ways when upset with their mothers. Thus, there is a fair bit of ambivalence between daughters’ emotions, behaviors, and responses. Daughters in midlife appear to struggle as they gain more equal footing in the tie and wish to protect their mothers.

In contrast to constructive and avoidant responses, there were a number of associations between responding to tensions by doing something potentially hurtful and mothers’ and daughters’ emotions and behaviors. Daughters who enjoyed their interactions with their mothers more, and who expressed this enjoyment, were able to avoid behaving in potentially hurtful ways when they were upset. Similarly, both mothers and daughters who reported negative feelings during visits also claimed to do destructive things when upset with the other party.

Yet, perhaps the most interesting finding was that the association between use of destructive responses to being upset and negative behaviors when together was in opposite directions for mothers and daughters. For daughters, use of more destructive responses to being upset was positively associated with negative behaviors in an interaction. Outside ratings may have picked up on the types of destructive responses that these daughters reported using. In contrast, mothers who reported using more destructive responses were rated as expressing fewer negative behaviors. Mothers who perceive themselves as responding in destructive ways when upset may make extra efforts to avoid negativity in general face-to-face interactions. As with daughters’ avoidant responses, this finding for mothers’ destructive responses may be evidence of ambivalence. Mothers who perceive that they respond to problems negatively may attempt to compensate by behaving less negatively in other interactions.

Implications for Application and Public Policy

The current study is a first step in understanding the context of mother–daughter interactions in late life. This study suggests many directions for future research on interactions between adult offspring and their parents. Future studies should examine these interactions in more diverse groups, including those from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, future work should test the generalizability of these findings to mother–son, father–daughter, and father–son dyads. The task used in the current study was specifically designed to elicit behaviors that would allow us to make comparisons across dyads. In the future, however, it is important to examine mothers’ and daughters’ behaviors across a variety of tasks. Nevertheless, this study is an important step in characterizing specific mother–daughter interactions in late life, suggesting that despite high levels of positivity, there is a degree of ambivalence in this relationship.

Previous research on parents and adult offspring has focused on the stress that offspring experience when parents’ physical or mental abilities decline (Zarit, Johansson, & Jarrott, 1998). We know daughters experience great stress in these contexts, but we know little about qualities of the mother–daughter relationships when the mothers are still healthy. Because they focus instead on the mother–adult daughter relationship before caregiving demands exert ef-
fects, the findings from the current study may be useful for psychologists, social workers, or practitioners who work with mothers and daughters in late life. For example, many interventions emphasize open communication to deal with interpersonal conflicts (Cordova, Jacobson, & Christensen, 1998; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996), but findings from the current study suggest that discussing negative feelings may not be the norm in this relationship. Expressions of negative behaviors were relatively uncommon in these mother–daughter interactions. In addition, associations between destructive responses and overt behaviors differed for mothers and daughters. By understanding these patterns, therapists may be better able to help mothers and daughters cope with their own, and interpret each other’s, emotions. Geriatric therapists might also help older women to understand that it is normal for their daughters to have ambivalent feelings about them. Understanding the complicated nature of the mother–daughter tie in late life may be important for therapists treating middle-aged and older women.

References

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**Call for Nominations: JPSP:Attitudes**

The Publications and Communications (P&C) Board has opened nominations for the editorship of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition* section for the years 2006–2011. Patricia G. Devine, PhD, is the incumbent editor.

Candidates should be members of APA and should be available to start receiving manuscripts in early 2005 to prepare for issues published in 2006. Please note that the P&C Board encourages participation by members of underrepresented groups in the publication process and would particularly welcome such nominees. Self-nominations also are encouraged.

David C. Funder, PhD, has been appointed to chair the search.

Candidates should be nominated by accessing APA’s EditorQuest site on the Web. Using your Web browser, go to [http://editorquest.apa.org](http://editorquest.apa.org). On the Home menu on the left, find Guests. Next, click on the link “Submit a Nomination,” enter your nominee’s information, and click “Submit.”

Prepared statements of one page or less in support of a nominee can also be submitted by e-mail to Karen Sellman, P&C Board Search Liaison, at [ksellman@apa.org](mailto:ksellman@apa.org).

The first review of nominations will begin December 8, 2003. The deadline for accepting nominations is **December 15, 2003**.