

# Aging Mothers' and Adult Daughters' Retrospective Ratings of Conflict in Their Past Relationships

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Retrospective accounts of past conflict between parents and offspring have been associated with a variety of implications for individual well-being and relationship quality in adulthood. The present study involved 48 dyads of healthy older mothers (mean age=76) and their adult daughters (mean age=44). Participants independently rated degree of conflict in their relationship when daughters were ages: 5–12, 13–17, 18–24, and 25–present. Mothers and daughters provided descriptions of the source of problems and their behaviors during the time period rated as most conflicted. Mothers' and daughters' memories of past difficulties were related to their roles in the relationship, but not to present relationship quality or individual well-being.

Key words—older women, conflict, interpersonal tension, mothers and daughters, adolescence, memory, retrospective

Relationships with offspring are central in the lives of older adults (Carstensen, 1995; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Sutor, Pillemer, Keeton, & Robinson, 1995). One factor that distinguishes the parent/child relationship from other types of relationships in adulthood lies in its past history. Relationships between parents and their offspring involve continuity and discontinuity. The relationship changes in marked ways over time. There is a progression from the period in which infants are completely dependent upon parents, to the adolescent years in which they may rebel against parents, to the adult years when offspring may establish their own families. Aging parents' and adult children's perceptions of their past relationship may play an important role in their present well-being. For example, attachment patterns in adulthood have been classified based on reminiscence of childhood attachment experiences with parents (Benoit & Parker, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). A grown child's perception of the early relationship with an aging parent appears to influence her willingness to care for that parent when needed (Whitbeck, L., Hoyt, D. R., & Huck, 1994; Whitbeck, Simons, & Conger, 1991). A variety of psychiatric symptoms in offspring, notably depression, are associated with memories of past conflict with parents (Amato, 1991; Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993).

As parents and offspring grow older, perceptions of past difficulties may also play an important role in current relationship functioning. Parents and offspring may frame the present relationship in more positive or in more negative terms based on their sense of the early relationship. Some parents may fault past difficulties as the reason

for present difficulties. Other parents may contrast the difficulties of the child-rearing years with the strong relationship they have at present. Offspring may blame parents for difficulties in their present life based on perceived or actual mistakes parents made in rearing them. Alternately, as they grow older, offspring may assume a position of maturity vis-à-vis their parents (Blenkner, 1963). In doing so, they may perceive their current relationship as stronger than the more conflict-ridden one they had with parents in childhood or adolescence.

### **MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS**

The present study was limited to mothers and daughters, rather than the range of possible parent/child dyads. The mother/daughter relationship tends to be the most enduring of parent/child bonds across the lifespan (Rossi, 1993; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Mother/daughter relationships have been found to be characterized by stronger attachment and greater intimacy than other parent/child combinations (Thompson & Walker, 1982; Troll & Fingerman, 1996). At the same time, mothers and daughters tend to report more conflict in their relationships than do fathers and sons (Troll, 1987).

The sample in this study was further limited to include only healthy older mothers. Previous research has suggested that offsprings' memories of parents become more positive when parents die. Researchers have argued that offspring may change their perceptions of their past relationship with their parents as their parents' death becomes real to them (Troll, 1995). Furthermore, researchers have reported that parents' poor health may be a factor in determining offsprings' perceptions of conflict (Litvin, 1992). The purpose of the present study was to examine dyadic perceptions of the relationship when mothers are still healthy, living, and actively a part of the relationship, rather than to examine possibly idealized retrospective perceptions of a deceased or dying parent.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC TIME PERIODS**

Ratings of current relationship are confined to a single point in time, namely the present relationship. By contrast, perceptions of past relationship involve memories of many different time periods. Although parents or offspring may generally rate the past relationship as trouble free, specific time periods (e.g., childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood) may stand out as having been more conflicted than other periods. Moreover, the nature of the relationship varies at different points in the child's development. Caring for an infant involves different demands than does caring for a school-aged child. Parent/child relationships involving young adult offspring are distinct from those involving adolescents. The young adult years often allow parents and offspring some physical distance from one another and involve different types of problems than the ones encountered on a day-to-day basis in childhood.

The present study involved ratings of conflict level at several different time periods in the past. The degree to which mothers and daughters perceive consistency in level of problems may be important for their conceptions of their present relationships. Do

mothers and daughters who consider their relationship to have been problem-ridden in childhood also rate their relationships as more troublesome in adolescence? It is possible that mothers who feel their daughters were difficult as children also found them to be difficult teenagers. In such cases, mothers and daughters might perceive the young adult years as relatively conflict-free. Daughters who had very close relationships with their mothers in childhood might rate their early years as easy, only to have encountered increased conflict in the teen and young adult years.

Ratings of the most conflicted time period were also specifically examined. Such ratings were used to determine if viewing a particular time period as especially conflicted was indicative of some aspect of the present relationship. For example, mothers and daughters who perceive the adolescent years as most-conflicted may differ from those who emphasize problems in more recent or more distant years. The popular culture and psychological literature emphasize the normative aspect of intergenerational tension during the teenage years (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). High ratings of conflict during these years may reflect perceptions of the relationship following the cultural norm.

Mothers and daughters who rated childhood as the most conflict-ridden were also expected to have strong relationships. Rating the childhood years as most conflict ridden suggests that mothers and daughters might perceive problem-ridden periods as taking place in a distant past. In such a rating pattern, even the stereotypically difficult teenage years are deemed less conflicted. It was hypothesized that mothers and daughters who considered the child or teenage years to be the most conflicted would report better present day relationships than mothers and daughters who claimed that there was more conflict in their relationship in recent years.

### DYADIC ASSESSMENT

Older mothers' retrospective reports of their relationship were compared to their adult daughters' reports. Dyadic assessment is needed to understand patterns of similarity and differences in each party's conception of a past relationship. Elsewhere, I reported that aging mothers' and adult daughters' perceptions of their behaviors in a recent conflict differed from their partner's perceptions of those behaviors (Fingerman, 1995). Moreover, the pattern of differences suggested that when mothers fail to perceive daughters' negative approaches to conflict resolution, daughters feel worse about the situation. Differences in perceptions of a recent conflict situation may be mirrored by differences in more distant memories of the relationship. Do mothers and daughters remember conflict in the same way? Do they describe the same types of tensions in the past? Do they agree on the time period that was most conflict-ridden?

Field (1981, 1989) examined the veracity of older adults' memories about personal events using longitudinal data from 60 parents who had been interviewed in their twenties, forties, and late sixties as part of the Berkeley Guidance Study. She found that parents remembered facts accurately over time, but that memories of attitudinal information revealed biases. Although there was considerable individual variation in consistency of reports over time, there were also systematic biases in distortions participants

made. Parents tended to over-rate the "positive" aspects of their relationships with offspring over time.

These findings are in keeping with research addressing the adult parent/child relationship. Parents tend to perceive greater compatibility in their present relationships with offspring than do offspring across studies (Bengtson, 1970; Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Sussman, 1985). Not only may parents enhance positive aspects of their relationship with offspring retrospectively, they may under-rate negative aspects of these relationships, particularly in comparison to their offsprings' retrospective accounts of this relationship. Generational differences were anticipated in the present study, with mothers recalling less conflict than daughters.

### ASPECTS OF TENSION

Elsewhere, I have argued that levels of tension, sources of tension, and tension behaviors are distinct aspects of interpersonal conflict (Fingerman, under review). In addition to examining reports of level of tension, this study involved a preliminary investigation of reports of sources of past tension and behaviors during the period considered to be the most conflicted.

#### *Sources of Difficulty*

The present study also involved open-ended questions about the causes of problems during the most conflicted time period. Perceptions of the sources of past difficulty may be relevant to present day relationship quality (Steinman, 1979). Using data from the same larger study of mothers and daughters, I reported that present tensions in the aging mother/daughter relationship may reflect developmental tasks they each face (Fingerman, 1996). The degree to which mothers and daughters perceive difficulties in their past relationship in terms of developmental tasks was also investigated here. When asked to describe the source of difficulty at the most conflict-ridden moment in their relationship, mothers and daughters were expected to describe issues related to discrepancies in their developmental needs at that period.

#### *Past Behaviors*

Mothers and daughters were asked to indicate the degree to which they engaged in three distinct behavior types during their most conflict time period: destructive, constructive, and avoidant approaches to conflict resolution. Destructive approaches to conflict resolution include yelling, screaming, or expressing one's feelings in a way that could hurt the other person. Such behaviors might be most common in the childhood and adolescent years. Reports of use of destructive behaviors in the childhood or adolescent years were not expected to be related to present quality relationship. However, reported use of destructive behaviors in more recent years was expected to be associated with worse relationships. Constructive behaviors involve telling the other

person what is wrong, listening, and working to resolve the situation. Such behaviors might be associated with parenting styles emphasizing respect for the child. Mothers and daughters who reported using these behaviors in the past were expected to report higher quality relationship and better individual well-being in the present. Avoidant approaches to conflict resolution involve not telling the other person what is wrong, circumventing the problem, or avoiding issues that evoke negative feelings. Women may use these behaviors more than men beginning in early life. Wodak and Schulz (1986) argued that mothers socialize their daughters to express their feelings of interpersonal tension indirectly starting in childhood. In this study, mothers and daughters who reported using avoidant behaviors in the childhood and adolescent years were expected to report lower quality relationship, based on an established history precluding communication. As is discussed elsewhere, mothers and daughters who rely on avoidant behaviors to deal with difficulties in their relationship in adulthood may fare better (Fingerman, under review), so long as they accurately perceive the other individual's behaviors (Fingerman, 1995).

### INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Perceptions of past relationship may have an impact on present individual well-being and relationship quality. Ryff and her colleagues (1994) reported that middle-aged parents' perceptions of how their grown offspring turned out had an impact on their own psychological well-being (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994). Given the emphasis in psychological theory on retrospection in old age, aging parents' perceptions of their relationships with their offspring in the past may also be important to present psychological well-being. At the same time, offsprings' retrospective perceptions of their relationships with their parents may be related to their present well-being. Given the emphasis on negative aspects of past relationship, the present study involved an assessment of psychological distress, rather than well-being.

The present study involved only cross-sectional data. Mothers and daughters who perceived their past relationship as more conflicted were expected to report decreased individual well-being. It was not possible to determine causality between these past memories and current relationship quality and well-being. It is possible that mothers and daughters who feel worse about their lives also remember their relationship as more conflicted. Research addressing the issue of stability and validity of memories of parent/child conflict have found mixed results, however. Some researchers have found that offspring who remember their relationships with parents as conflicted do so regardless of individual mood or of clinical depression (see: Brewin, Andrew, & Gotlib, 1993 for a review). Other studies suggest that even more mild mood shifts may influence memories of early family characteristics (Amato, 1991). In the present study, relationship quality and individual well-being are treated as "outcome" variables for the sake of convenience.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The present study was part of a larger study of aging mothers and adult daughters. Forty-eight mothers over the age of 70 (mean age=76.01, s.d.=5.22) and their adult daughters (mean age=44.02, s.d.=7.03) participated. The women resided in Southeastern Michigan in separate households. They reported having frequent visits with one another. Nearly all the mothers and daughters reported seeing one another on average once every other week and speaking on the phone more frequently.

Mothers were recruited through senior citizen centers and word of mouth. Once mothers agreed to participate, a daughter residing nearby was also contacted. The women were invited to participate in a study of positive and negative aspects of the aging mother and adult daughter relationship (for a more detailed description of the sample and recruitment process, see Fingerman, 1995).

The women who participated in the present study were defined by self and other as independent, healthy, and active. They tended to be more highly educated than the general population; thirty-eight daughters had a college or graduate degree and seven more had attended college for at least a few years, and thirty-eight mothers had had at least some college education. Mothers and daughters reported little exchange of instrumental aid or provision of care for one another. The sample provided a forum for investigating the role of retrospective perceptions of a relationship when older mothers are still healthy.

### *Procedure*

The data for the present study were derived from individual interviews with mothers and daughters lasting approximately an hour and conducted in their homes, and from questionnaires participants completed on their own. The interviews included information pertaining to the mothers' and daughters' social networks, family history, individual well-being, and present relationship (including positive and negative aspects of the relationship).

Ratings of past conflict took place in the following manner. Towards the end of the individual interviews, mothers and daughters were asked to rate the amount of conflict in their relationship at five distinct periods, when the daughter was between the ages of: 5 and 12; 13 and 17; 18 and 24; 25 and present; and at present. The years from birth to age 5 were excluded because daughters might have few clear memories of this period. The periods chosen were thought to represent distinct developmental periods: childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and adulthood. There was variation in daughters' ages, and thus, the period from 25 to present varied. In fact, mothers and daughters appeared to make a distinction between this period and what they considered to be the "present" period, emphasizing that daughters were adults at that time, but were "younger" than at present.

Mothers and daughters colored in bar graphs with 1 marked as little or no conflict

and 7 as very conflicted. A coloring task was used to provide variety in interview format and create a distinct response format for the present study. Pilot testing revealed that educated women, like those who participated in the present study, found the task of completing bar graphs a useful and interesting means of comparing relationship quality at different time periods.

Mothers and daughters then responded to open-ended questions pertaining to the nature of difficulties during the most conflicted period. The interviewer noted the period the participant had rated as most conflicted, stating, "I've noticed you colored in the period when your daughter was (you were) between the ages of \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ as the most conflicted. Can you tell me a little about what caused difficulties for you during this time?" An open-ended response format was utilized in which mothers and daughters discussed sources of difficulties. The following prompts were offered as necessary, "Tell me a little bit (more) about what happened" or "Can you describe that situation (a situation) a little (more)?" Qualitative data was obtained for only the most conflicted time period because pilot testing revealed that when asked to report sources of difficulties for all time periods, women reported having difficulty with the repeated format. When asked to concentrate on only the most conflicted period, and presumably most salient time period for conflict, pilot test participants reported greater ease in responding. If a mother or daughter rated the present as the most conflicted period, she answered the follow up questions based on the past time period they had rated as most conflicted (their second highest conflict rating). Mothers and daughters provided descriptions of present tensions at another point in the study battery. Data pertaining to present tensions are described elsewhere (Fingerman, 1996).

Finally, mothers and daughters were asked to rate how they handled past difficulties. They were asked how often they had: expressed their feelings by yelling or hurting the other person; calmly told the other person how they felt; or avoided talking about what was wrong using 5-point Likert Scales (1=almost never, 3=sometimes, 5=almost always).

*Regard for Relationship.* Positive regard for the present relationship was assessed using a modified version of the Bengtson (1973) Positive Affect Index, a ten item instrument comprised of two five-item subscales assessing perceptions of feelings for the relationship held by self and other with regard to: trust, respect, understanding, fairness, and affection (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not well to very well.

*Individual Well-being.* Present individual well-being was assessed using subscales from the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, commonly referred to as the CES-D Scale (Radloff, 1977; Radloff & Terri, 1986) administered during the first interview. The CES-D Scale was developed to assess depressive symptomatology in the general population rather than depressive syndrome. The original twenty-item scale included 4 subscales: depressed mood, positive affect, somatic disturbance, and interpersonal difficulties. There was little variance on the somatic disturbance and interpersonal difficulties subscales in the present study; participants tended to give very low endorsements for items pertaining to health problems or beliefs that others disliked them. For these reasons, only the CES-D positive affect and depressed mood subscales were used in this study.

### Coding

The responses to the open-ended questions about the most conflicted time period were coded by three independent raters. Examples of content codes from the individual interviews, and interrater agreement for each code, which was established on ratings of twenty-four randomly selected dyads are found in Table 1. The content codes were established post-hoc based on a progression of possible developmental tasks, loosely tied to Erik Erikson's developmental theory (Erikson, 1963). All content categories had been brought up in at least two mother and daughter interviews. Codes were not mutually exclusive, a given response could fall under one or more codes. Details of content codes are discussed below.

*Daily matters.* A code was developed to examine situations in which mothers and daughters claimed to experience tension over the daughters' disobedience. Such disagreements revolved around: making beds, eating food prepared for supper, not practicing the piano, or general misbehavior. It was hypothesized that such issues would be dominant sources of difficulty in middle childhood.

*Independence.* The independence code was used for situations in which disputes centered around the daughters' increasing autonomy, rebellion, and desire to separate from the mother psychologically. It was hypothesized that issues of this sort would be dominant sources of tension during the adolescent years.

*Opposite Sex.* Situations involving boyfriends, lovers, or attitudes towards marriage or pre-marital sex were included under the code "Opposite sex." These matters were expected to be dominant in the young adult years.

Additional codes were included to encompass matters related to the relationship itself, rather than specific developmental tasks.

*Arguments.* A response was coded under "arguments" if mother or daughter specifically stated that tension stemmed from overt confrontation, disagreement, or disputes.

*Unmet Needs.* A code was devised for responses in which the target of tension had more to do with the mother's than with the daughter's behavior in the context of the relationship. This code was used if mothers and daughters explicitly stated that tension rose from the mother's inability to meet the daughter's needs.

*Praise.* Finally, a code was included for references to positive aspects of the past relationship. Although the open-ended questions specifically asked about sources of difficulty in the most conflicted period, mothers and daughters often spontaneously mentioned something positive about the other person or the relationship in the past.

## RESULTS

Mothers and daughters initially rated the level of conflict for each time period on a scale of 1 to 7. Table 2 contains means and standard deviations of mothers' and daughters' ratings of level of conflict for each of the five time periods, paired t-tests comparing their ratings at each period, and correlation matrices comparing their ratings of different time periods. Daughters tended to rate a higher degree of conflict for each of the five time periods, but the only significant intergenerational difference in

TABLE 1  
Codes and Examples of Sources of Difficulties

Code	Example	Kappa
Daily matters	Mother	.96
	Daughter	
Independence	Mother	.93
	Daughter	
Opposite sex	Mother	.96
	Daughter	
Needs met	Mother	.75
	Daughter	
Arguments	Mother	.93
	Daughter	
Positive material	Mother	.87
	Daughter	

**TABLE 2**  
**Mothers' and Daughters' Mean Ratings of Degree of Conflict at Each Time Period**

	Mother (1=very little, 7=a great deal)	Daughter (1=very little, 7=a great deal)	Paired t-tests		
<u>Daughter's Age</u>					
5 to 12	2.02 (s.d.=1.18)	2.35 (s.d.=1.66)	ns		
13 to 17	3.34 (s.d.=1.84)	4.06 (s.d.=2.10)	2.08*		
18 to 24	2.98 (s.d.=1.59)	3.33 s.d.=1.65	ns		
25 to Present	2.15 (s.d.=1.61)	2.56 (s.d.=1.41)	ns		
Present	1.64 (s.d.=1.64)	2.21 (s.d.=1.66)	ns		
<u>Correlations between Past Ratings for Mothers</u>					
	5 to 12	13 to 17	18 to 24	25 on	Present
5 to 12	1.00	.44**	-.01	.05	-.10
13 to 17	.44**	1.00	.36*	.11	.22
18 to 24	-.01	.37*	1.00	.29*	.22
25 on	.05	.11	.29*	1.00	.42**
Present	-.10	.22	.22	.42**	1.00
<u>Correlations between Past Ratings for Daughters</u>					
	5 to 12	13 to 17	18 to 24	25 on	Present
5 to 12	1.00	.58**	.35*	.15	.08
13 to 17	.58**	1.00	.56**	.03	.07
18 to 24	.36*	.56**	1.00	.08	.11
25 on	.15	.04	.08	1.00	.41**
Present	.08	.07	.11	.41**	1.00

Notes: \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

ratings involved mothers' and daughters' ratings of the amount of conflict in their relationship between ages 13 and 17,  $t(46)=2.08$ ,  $p \leq .05$ , with daughters reporting a greater degree of conflict at that time than did mothers.

### *Comparisons of Ratings at Different Periods*

Participants seemed to draw a distinction between the pre-adult and adult periods in their ratings of conflict. Mothers and daughters rated levels of conflict in the years after age 24 similarly, but there were not strong correlations between ratings of level of conflict in the years before age 24 and after. Present conflict ratings correlated significantly only with ratings of conflict from ages 25 on.

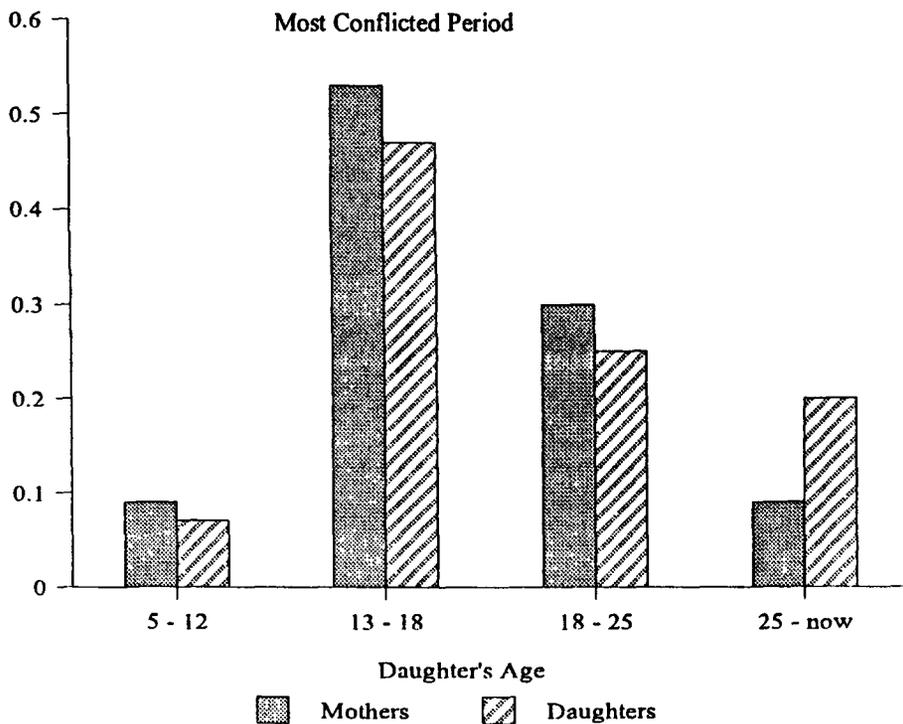
Analyses were also conducted to examine whether those mothers and daughters who considered their relationships more conflict ridden at one time period consistently fell in the upper half of the sample for conflict ratings across time periods. A median split was performed for ratings of each time period: ages 5 to 12; 13 to 17; 18 to 24; and 24 and older, dividing mothers and daughters into the upper or low half of ratings at each time period. The median ratings for each period were different, and thus the split took place at a different point for each period. For example, for daughters, ratings of over four fell in the upper half for the teen years, whereas for mothers, ratings of two or more constituted the upper half of the sample for ratings of conflict in childhood. Using a dummy variable in which upper half of the sample=1 and lower half=0, patterns of distribution were examined across time periods.

Point biserial  $r$ 's were calculated to look at patterns of similarity in median splits across time periods. Similar to the findings of continuous ratings, there seemed to be a split between the childhood and adult years. Daughters who fell in the upper half of ratings in the childhood years also were likely to fall in the upper half for the teen,  $r=.49$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . For daughters, falling in the upper half in the teen years increased the likelihood of falling in the upper half in the young adult years,  $r=.33$ ,  $p \leq .05$ . For mothers, falling in the upper half of the sample ratings of conflict for the teen and the childhood years were associated,  $r=.47$ ,  $p \leq .01$ , and being in the upper half of ratings of conflict from ages 18 to 24 and ages 25 to present were associated,  $r=.37$ ,  $p \leq .05$ . Other correlations were not significant.

### *Dyadic Comparisons*

Mothers' and daughters' individual ratings of past conflict were compared to the other person's ratings of past conflict. Daughters who rated their present relationships as more conflicted tended to have mothers who rated the mother/daughter relationship as more conflicted in the past. Daughters' ratings of present conflict correlated with: mothers' ratings of conflict in childhood  $r=.36$ ,  $p \leq .05$ , mothers' ratings of conflict in adolescence,  $r=.33$ ,  $p \leq .05$ , and mothers' ratings of conflict from ages 24 to present,  $r=.38$ ,  $p \leq .01$ .

**FIGURE 1**  
**Proportions of Mothers and Daughters Selecting each Time Period**  
**as the Most Conflicted**



### THE MOST CONFLICTED PERIOD

Figure 1 includes the proportions of mothers and daughters who rated each time as the most conflicted in their relationship. The open-ended follow-up questions and ratings of behavior were obtained only for this most-conflicted period. The modal period for highest conflict fell in the teenage years for mothers and daughters alike.

Agreement within dyads for mothers' and daughters' selection of the most conflicted period was examined. An index was calculated in which selection of the same period as most conflicted was coded as 1 and selection of different periods was coded as 0. Forty-eight percent of mothers and daughters selected the same time period as most conflicted. Chi square analysis revealed that the distribution of agreement varied by the time period daughters' had selected as most conflicted,  $X^2=8.12$ ,  $n=48$ ,  $p<.05$ ; there was disproportionate agreement when mothers and daughters selected the teen years as most conflicted. Where there was disagreement, mothers tended to select the early time periods, whereas daughters selected the later periods.

### SOURCES OF PAST PROBLEMS

The distribution of sources of tension at different time periods was examined next. Table 3 contains the proportion of mothers and daughters whose responses to the

**TABLE 3**  
**Proportions of Mothers and Daughters whose Reports of Past Tension Fell under each Content Code**

Content Code

	Mother (n = 48)	Daughter (n = 48)
Daily matters	.52	.45
Independence	.23	.42
Sexuality	.35	.28
Didn't Meet Daughter's Needs	.25	.26
Arguments	.44	.49
Praise	.21	.07

open-ended question about the sources of difficulty fell under each content code. Mothers and daughters tended to consider daily matters and general disputes and arguments as the primary sources of difficulties in their past relationships; approximately half of all responses fit each of these categories. In addition, nearly a third of respondents described situations in which the daughters' emerging sexuality was a cause of past conflict. Finally, approximately a quarter of all responses pertained to issues involving the mothers meeting the daughters' needs. McNemar's test, a statistic used to examine differences in the off-diagonals of 2X2 paired tables were calculated. McNemar's test did not reveal significant differences in the proportions of mothers and daughters whose responses fell under each content code. Daughters tended to be more likely to describe situations involving their growing needs for independence, McNemar's exact  $p=.0678$ .

***Context Codes by Time Period***

Each mother and daughter described sources of tension in their relationship for only the most conflict-ridden period. The distribution of content codes was examined as a function of the time period mothers and daughters were discussing. A series of chi-squares were calculated separately for mothers and daughters examining the presence or absence of a given content code by each of the four time periods. For all chi-square analyses, degrees of freedom were 3, and  $n=48$ .

As with the distribution of conflict ratings, there appeared to be differences in the pre-adult and adult years with regard to the sources of tensions described. Daughters were more likely to claim that open disputes were a source of difficulty if they spoke about the teenage years,  $X^2=7.26$ ,  $p\leq.05$ . They were more likely to describe daily behavioral problems as a source of difficulty if they considered the childhood or teen years as the principal period of difficulty,  $X^2=13.73$ ,  $p\leq.005$ . Daughters only discussed

**TABLE 4**  
**Mothers' and Daughters' Ratings of Their Use of Conflict Behaviors in the Past**

Type of Behavior	Mother (n = 48)	Daughter (n = 48)	Paired t-tests
Pretended Nothing was Wrong (1=almost never, 5=almost always)	2.78 (s.d.=1.28)	3.62 (s.d.=1.28)	-3.47***
Raised Your Voice or Yelled (1=almost never, 5=almost always)	3.00 (s.d.=1.23)	3.22 (s.d.=1.33)	ns
Told her What Was Wrong (1=almost never, 5=almost always)	3.22 (s.d.=1.38)	2.64 (s.d.=1.26)	2.11*

Notes: \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

situations involving their sexuality if they had selected the teenage or early adult years as periods of greatest conflict,  $X^2=10.09$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

Mothers were also more likely to describe situations involving arguments and fights if they had selected the teenage years as most troublesome,  $X^2=13.48$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Like daughters, mothers described daily matters as problems predominantly in childhood or adolescence,  $X^2=15.17$ ,  $p \leq .005$ . Mothers who considered their daughters' sexuality as a source of tension tended to consider it a problem in later years than did their daughters. Mothers who discussed sexuality focused on conflict in the years from 18 to 24 and to some extent from age 24 to present,  $X^2=11.38$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

#### ***Agreement on Time Period and Sources of Difficulty***

It is possible that mothers and daughters who remember the same time period as most conflicted do so because the source of problems at that period was particularly memorable. The pattern of associations between mothers and daughters selecting the same time period as problematic and the sources of difficulties described were examined using point biserial correlations. Dummy variables were created for selection of the same time period (1=selected the same time period, 0=did not select the same time period) and describing tensions that were coded under each content code (1=fit code, 0=did not). These correlations were not significant for daughters' descriptions of sources of tension. Mothers who chose the same time period as their daughters tended to describe situations in which they had argued,  $r=.45$ ,  $p \leq .01$ , or where the daughter's independence was a matter of concern,  $r=.50$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Mothers who praised the past relationship were less likely to have named the same time period their daughters did as most problematic,  $r=-.33$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

## REPORTS OF PAST BEHAVIORS

Table 4 contains means and standard deviations for mothers' and daughters' ratings of the behaviors used to resolve difficulties in the period they considered most conflicted. Paired t-tests were conducted to examine intergenerational differences in reports of past behavior. Daughters were significantly more likely to report using avoidant approaches to resolve difficulties,  $t(47)=-3.47$ ,  $p\leq.001$ , and mothers were more likely to say they had told their daughters what was wrong,  $t(46)=2.11$ ,  $p\leq.05$ . These findings are in keeping with other research from this study concerning reports of present conflict behaviors (see Fingerman, 1995). There were no significant differences in reports of yelling; daughters and mothers claimed to have done so some of the time on average in the past.

### *Behaviors by Past Time Period and Sources of Tension*

Mothers' and daughters' reported use of different behaviors was examined as a function of the time period that they had claimed was most conflicted. The sample size precluded use of MANOVA. One way ANOVA's were calculated with the ratings of behaviors as the dependent variables and the time period considered most conflicted as the grouping variable. Daughters' reports of their behaviors in the past did not vary as a function of the time period discussed. Mothers' reports of pretending nothing was wrong varied as a function of the time period they had discussed  $F(3, 44)=4.43$ ,  $p\leq.01$ . Tukey's test revealed that mothers who claimed the child and teen years were most stressful were less likely to claim they had pretended nothing was wrong, particularly in comparison to mothers who discussed problems in the early adult years. In addition, mothers' reported use of yelling or raising their voices varied by time period discussed,  $F(3, 44)=7.74$ ,  $p\leq.001$ . The pattern of variation was linear, Tukey's test indicated that mothers who discussed later time periods (early adulthood and adulthood) reported less yelling and confrontation than did mothers who discussed the child or teen years.

In addition, behaviors were examined as a function of the content of the conflict situations. As with the time periods, one Way ANOVA's were calculated with ratings of behaviors as the dependent variables, and content of conflict as the grouping variables (1=described situation involving that content code, 2=did not describe situation involving that content code). In essence, t-tests were conducted. Mothers who described daily matters as a source of tension rated their use of avoidance lower  $F(1, 45)=8.62$ ,  $p\leq.01$ . By contrast, mothers who described situations involving their daughters' sexuality rated their use of avoidance higher  $F(1, 45)=5.81$ ,  $p\leq.05$ . Daughters' ratings of behaviors did not vary by the content of the situations described.

## INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONSHIP WELL-BEING

Table 5 contains means and paired t-tests comparing mothers' and daughters' scores on the Bengtson Relationship and the CES-D subscales. Although mothers and daugh-

**TABLE 5**  
**Relationship and Individual Well-being Indices for Mothers and Daughters**

	Mothers	Daughters	Paired t-tests
<b>Positive Relationship Affect</b>			
Bengtson Positive Affect Index (possible scores=5 to 25)	21.58 (s.d.=3.24)	20.52 (s.d.=3.14)	2.63*
<b>CES-D Depression Scales</b>			
Depressed Mood Subscale (possible scores=1 to 4)	1.39 (s.d.=0.49)	1.31 (s.d.=0.38)	-0.89
Positive Affect Subscale (possible scores 1 to 4)	3.40 (s.d.=.80)	3.60 (s.d.=0.61)	1.30

Note: \* $p \leq .05$ .

ters alike rated their relationship highly, there were inter-generational differences in ratings of the relationship, with mothers expressing more positive regard for the relationship than daughters. There were no significant generational differences on the CES-D subscales. Participants tended to score low on the depressed mood subscale and high on the positive affect subscale, indicating general psychological well-being.

To see if some women were more positive in their ratings in general and others were more negative, correlations were calculated separately for mothers and daughters between the CES-D individual well-being and Bengtson relationship indices. For mothers, there were significant correlations between the CES-D positive mood scale and the Bengtson scale for regard for the relationship,  $r=.40$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Daughters' CES-D scores were not significantly related to their regard for the relationship.

In general, there were few significant correlations between mothers' and daughters' reports of past conflict in their relationship and present relationship or individual well-being. Significant associations are discussed below.

### *Time Period Ratings and Outcomes*

Ratings of past conflict did not appear to relate to present sentiment or to individual mood. As with other ratings in this study, only ratings of conflict in the adult years related to present relationship quality. Mothers' and daughters' ratings of level of conflict in more recent years, ages 25 to present were related to their ratings of the present quality of the relationship,  $r=-.39$ ,  $p \leq .05$ , for mothers and  $r=-.41$ ,  $p \leq .01$  for daughters. In addition, daughters who reported more conflict in recent past years also scored higher on the CES-D depression subscale,  $r=.40$ .

**TABLE 6**  
**Relationship and Individual Well-being Regressed on Conflict Behaviors and Time Period Selected by Daughters**

	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t	p
<u>Predicting Bengtson Positive Affect Index</u>				
Constant	24.67	1.43	17.17	.001
Time Period	-0.81	0.76	-1.06	ns
Yelled/Raised Voice	-1.31	0.37	-3.53	.001
F(2,42)=6.73, p<.005, R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)=.21				
<u>Predicting CES-D Negative Mood</u>				
Constant	0.63	0.21	2.95	.005
Time Period	0.20	0.10	1.98	.05
Pretend Nothing Wrong	0.13	0.04	3.23	.005
F(2,43)=6.29, p<.005, R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)=.19				
<u>Predicting CES-D Positive Mood</u>				
Constant	4.38	0.36	12.08	.001
Time Period	-0.16	0.17	-0.89	ns
Pretend Nothing Wrong	-0.19	0.07	-2.81	.01
F(2,43)=4.03, p<.05, R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)=.12				

Mothers' and daughters' selection of the same time period as most conflicted was not related to the outcome variables in the present study.

### ***Content Codes and Outcomes***

Daughters' coded responses did not predict quality of relationship nor individual well-being. Mothers' descriptions of situations involving daily matters predicted outcomes. Mothers who claimed that some sort of daily matter was an area of concern scored higher on the Bengtson Positive Affect Index,  $r=.36$ ,  $p\leq .05$ , and on the positive mood subscale of the CES-D,  $r=.31$ ,  $p\leq .05$ .

### ***Reported Behavior and Outcomes***

Since the hypotheses for behaviors were dependent on time period, a series of regressions were calculated in which the outcome variables were regressed on behavior and time period rated as most conflicted, separately for mothers and daughters. Time period was an ordinal, not an continuous variable, and thus a dummy variable was created to represent time period selected in the regression equations. Given the consistent patterns in other findings in the study, dummy codes were established by dividing the childhood and teen years into one group and the adult years into a second group (0=childhood and adolescence, 1=adult years). (The pattern of results was the same when time period in its original 5-point scale was entered as though it were a continuous variable.)

Table 6 contains results from significant regressions for daughters. For daughters, the regression for yelling or raising their voices significantly predicted relationship quality,  $F(2, 42)=6.73$ ,  $p \leq .005$ , with the destructive behaviors as a significant predictor,  $Beta=-1.31$ . Daughters' reports that they pretended nothing was wrong predicted their scores on the CES-D,  $F(2,43)=6.49$ ,  $p \leq .005$  for negative mood subscale. Pretending nothing was wrong predicted higher scores on the negative scale,  $Beta=3.23$ , as did selecting the adult years as more conflict ridden,  $Beta=0.13$ . Daughters' reports of pretending nothing was wrong also predicted their ratings on the positive mood subscale,  $F(2,43)=4.03$ ,  $p \leq .05$ . Pretending nothing is wrong negatively predicted positive mood subscale scores,  $Beta=-0.19$ . The regressions were not significant for mothers.

## **DISCUSSION**

When asked to rate and describe past difficulties and behaviors, older mothers and their adult daughters described a wide range of conflicted periods, sources of problems, and behaviors used to deal with difficulties. Although the majority of mothers and daughters saw the teen years as most conflicted, mothers and daughters varied considerably in their ratings of where and when conflict occurred in their past relationship. The findings from the present study suggest that mothers' retrospective ratings of past levels of conflict, sources of conflict, and behaviors are only moderately related to present aspects of the relationship and individual well-being. Daughters' memories of the relationship are moderately related to present feelings about the relationship and individual well-being. In this addition, the findings suggest that mothers' and daughters' perceptions of past conflict may reflect the vantage they each have of their relationship.

Mothers and daughters first rated levels of tension at each time period independently. Mothers and daughters frequently agreed that the teen years were most problematic. It was originally hypothesized that daughters would consistently report more past conflict across each time period. In the present study, daughters tended to rate more conflict than mothers did at all time periods, but only the difference in ratings at the teen period was significant. In general, there appears to be agreement that conflict peaks in the teen and early adult years, with decreasing conflict as mothers and daughters grow older.

Yet, a more interesting pattern of associations appears to underlie mothers' and daughters' conceptions of patterns of conflict when associations between ratings at different periods were considered. Mothers and daughters seemed to view conflict in the child and adolescent years as related. Apparently, difficult mother/daughter relationships in childhood appear to turn into difficult relationships in the teen years. A split occurs when considering ratings of the adult years, particularly those years after age 25. Whether actual ratings were considered or ratings relative to the sample (falling in the upper or lower half of ratings), ratings in the childhood and teen years were associated and ratings in the adult years were associated, but the two periods were not related.

Several hypotheses can be generated from these findings that warrant further investigation. It is possible that mothers and daughters who have close relationships in the childhood and teen years incur difficulties when the daughter tries to separate in the adult years. This model suggests that problems in the early years stem from the daughter's greater individuation and inoculate against problems around growing independence in later years. Alternately, mothers and daughters who have more conflict-ridden relationships early on learn to negotiate difficulties so that, by the adult years, their experience of their relationship is more problem-free. Of course, longitudinal data are needed to substantiate either of these premises.

### *The Most Conflict-Ridden Period*

The period rated as most conflict-ridden was examined next. The majority of instances where mothers and daughters agreed on the most problematic period was when both rated the teen period as most problematic. The disproportionate agreement in selecting the teen years may reflect an actual elevation of conflict at this period or a cultural norm for considering this period the most conflicted. These findings may also reflect a limitation pertaining to the distribution of periods rated as most conflict ridden. The mode for the distribution of time periods rated as most conflicted fell in the teen years for mothers and daughters alike. Thus, it is also the period in which correspondence between mothers and daughters is most likely to be found by chance.

The findings of the present study suggest that there may be intergenerational differences in salience of conflict or beliefs about the most conflicted period outside of the teen years. Although the findings were not significant, mothers who did not rate the teen years as most problematic had a tendency to rate the childhood years as more problematic, but daughters were slightly more skewed towards the adult years. This difference in ratings may reflect older mothers' and daughters' positions in their relationship. The difficulties associated with child rearing may be more salient to mothers. Difficulties in more recent years may be more memorable to daughters. In addition, reported problems and patterns of behavior follow a similar pattern. Issues and behaviors associated with the earlier years appeared to be more salient to mothers, and issues and behaviors associated with the later years appeared to be more salient to daughters.

### ***Sources of Difficulties***

The majority of responses seemed to fall under a larger theme of the daughters' continuing developmental needs for independence. Disputes over daily matters, independence, and sexuality may all represent tension between mothers and daughters which stems from the daughters' separation from her mother and establishment of a distinct identity. The male pattern for establishing independence from parents may include parameters confined primarily to adolescence (Bettleheim, 1965). For daughters, the underlying struggles for independence from mothers may change over time, from practicing the piano at age six to maintaining a clean house at age thirty-six, but the general theme of tension over separation remains. Sexuality is also a part of a daughter's growing independence, more so than for males. The themes and needs for independence appear to be less discreet and less confined to a single time period for daughters than the patterns which are usually described for males. Issues of dependence and independence in the mother/daughter relationship have received increasing attention in the gerontological literature in recent years (e.g., Fingerman, 1996; Walker, 1994). Yet, clearly there is a need for additional attention to this issue.

There were differences in the time periods at which mothers and daughters were most likely to remember different sources of tension. Mothers and daughters generally agreed on the periods at which open disagreements and obedience were matters of concern. Mothers and daughters were more likely to describe daily matters as sources of difficulty if they considered the childhood or adolescent years most problematic.

Although mothers and daughters alike were more likely to consider sexuality an issue in later years, there were generational differences in when they saw this problem arising. Daughters considered sexuality a source of difficulty in the teen and early adult years, but mothers considered it a source of difficulty only in the adult years. This difference may represent generational differences in perceptions of daughters' sexuality, with daughters perceiving themselves as sexual at a younger age than mothers do. If the differences in memory are related to actual differences in perceptions of daughters' sexuality, such discrepancies in perceptions may account for some of the retrospective reports of tension over this issue. Daughters may fail to perceive their sexuality as an issue related to their relationships with their mothers in adulthood, when mothers still struggle to accept their daughters' sexuality. Reports of difficulties over sexuality in the present study may also reflect cohort differences; the daughters came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, in a climate of very different sexual mores than the one in which their mothers grew up. However, a variety of issues might have been remembered as sources of tension between these cohorts, including political and social value changes. Future research might examine the degree to which current cohorts of young women report tension with their mothers over boyfriends, lovers, and their own sexuality to help determine whether the retrospective reports in the present study reflect salient cohort differences in the past or issues which continue to pervade mother/daughter relationships as daughters reach young adulthood.

With some exceptions, describing different issues as sources of past tension does not appear to be strongly related to present relationship quality or individual well-being in

a sample of healthy older mothers and daughters. Mothers who described daily matters as areas of tension did tend to score higher on a measure of relationship quality and positive mood (although these outcome indices were correlated for mothers). Mothers who remember these issues as sources of past tension may also remember their own role as “mother” more clearly and may derive esteem and pleasure from these memories. Memories of disputes over homework, clean rooms, and eating vegetables are clearly grounded in a situation where the daughter is still a “daughter” and the mother is in charge. The time period in which this situation is remembered does not appear to be as important as the memory of such a situation itself.

### *Retrospective Reports of Behaviors*

Mothers' and daughters' ratings of behaviors in the past were related to the sources of tension and time periods described. The ratings of behaviors at different time periods suggest a pattern of memories of decreasing communication with increasing age. Reported use of yelling and raising one's voice was higher for conflict in the early years. Mothers and daughters were also more likely to describe arguments and fights as a source of tension if they discussed the teen years. Mothers and daughters who selected the adult years as more problematic were more likely to rate their use of avoidant behaviors higher than participants who considered earlier years to be most conflicted.

Retrospective accounts of difficulties may be shaped by memories of past behavior, as well as by the source of tension that is remembered. For example, mothers in the present study reported pretending nothing is wrong less and yelling more when daughters were children and adolescents. In addition, mothers claimed to rarely use avoidance when the source of tension involved daily matters, but to be more avoidant around issues pertaining to the daughter's sexuality. Tension may be more salient and memorable to mothers in the early years because they remember themselves as engaged in “mothering.” They remember the direct confrontation.

Daughters were more likely to report that they had pretended nothing was wrong if they considered more recent years to be most conflict ridden. Intergenerational differences in discrepancies in memories of conflict may be related to differences in reported behaviors, particularly if these reports of behaviors are accurate. As was reported elsewhere using data from the same study, if daughters said that they engaged in avoidant behaviors when they were upset with their mothers, mothers were likely to be unaware that their daughters were upset (Fingerman, 1995). Thus, mothers may see more tension in the distant past because their daughters withdraw or avoid telling them when they are upset as they grow older, but did not do so as much when they were younger.

Daughters' memories of avoidance may or may not reflect actual behaviors. Whether or not they actually used these behaviors more in the past or not, daughters who rated their use of avoidance behaviors higher may feel that they could not communicate with their mothers in the past. Daughters who reported that they engaged in avoidant behaviors also reported greater psychological distress in the present. At the same time,

daughters who claimed they yelled at their mothers in the past also felt worse about their relationships in the present. If daughters' memories are accurate, there may be a trade off in use of behaviors—yelling and cajoling may harm the relationship, but pretending nothing is wrong may be worse for the individual. Alternately, given the retrospective nature of the study, daughters who remember their use of yelling or their use of pretending nothing is wrong may remember these behaviors for a reason. Their current feelings for the relationship or psychological distress may have less to do with their actual behavior than the salience of that behavior in their memories. Daughters who remember yelling at their mothers may remember behaviors related to their current feelings about the relationship, accounting for the association with lower rating of the relationship.

### *Limitations of the Present Study*

The present study is limited by a number of factors. Detailed memories were obtained for only one time period, constraining the comparisons that could be made about retrospective accounts of different periods. Moreover, longitudinal data is not available to allow comparisons of retrospective reports of past situations with reports obtained at those periods. Future research might involve longitudinal investigations of tension over time.

The study is further limited by the select nature of the sample. The present study involved primarily Caucasian, well-educated women. Memories of difficulties in the present study were related to American cultural norms pertaining to socialization of child, including an overarching theme of individuation and decreasing direct communication between mothers and daughters. Although mothers and daughters from other cultures might also frame their memories of past difficulties in their relationships in terms of the goals of socialization as well, the specific themes of those memories may be different. Mothers and daughters from another culture may remember difficulties pertaining to socialization outcomes reflecting their own cultural norms.

In addition, these mothers and daughters were highly educated and shared a privileged, middle to upper-income status. A variety of other patterns might emerge in mother/daughter relationships where daughters have received more education than their mothers (e.g., Sutor, 1987). Some daughters' memories of their childhood relationships with mothers might be expected to reflect her support for this achievement in the early years, whereas other daughters might remember the mother's resentment of being out-paced. Daughters of mothers who immigrated to a new country might also describe the discrepancies in their backgrounds more vividly in the childhood years.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study involved a systematic examination of mothers' and daughters' retrospective accounts of past difficulties in their relationship. Therapeutic techniques with clinical populations often emphasize the role of remembered past conflict between parents and offspring as important for present relationships and for individual

well-being. Research on adult attachment also has utilized memories of past experiences. The findings from the present study do not support a clear link between memories of past conflict and present relationship quality and individual well-being in a non-clinical sample. Rather, aging mothers' and adult daughters' memories of past difficulties appear to be related to the nature of the mother/daughter relationship and the roles each occupies in that relationship.

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### NOTES

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