

# Tight lips?: Aging mothers' and adult daughters' responses to interpersonal tensions in their relationships

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## Abstract

Mothers and daughters maintain strong positive relationships despite interpersonal tensions. This study examined the ways in which older mothers and their adult daughters handle problems in their relationships. Forty-eight dyads of healthy, aging mothers (mean age, 76 years) and their adult daughters (mean age, 44 years) participated. Rusbult's (1980) model of relationship investment was used as a framework for exploring how mothers and daughters might react when upset with the other party. Self-reports and observed behaviors across individual and joint interviews were examined. The mothers and daughters seemed to rely on constructive approaches to deal with problems in their relationship. Mothers tended to rely on loyalty behaviors more than their daughters did, but findings pertaining to such responses are complex. Reactions to problems in this relationship did not appear to be related to levels of investment, regard for the relationship, or frequency of tensions. The implications of this study for understanding the strength of mothers' and daughters' ties are discussed.

Connections between parents and offspring continue to be important to both parties in later life. Positive features of these intergenerational relationships have been

widely investigated, but negative features of these ties have only recently received attention. Early studies addressing negative aspects of parent/child relationships in old age have focused on degree of conflict (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Huck, 1994), perceptions of conflict behaviors (Fingerman, 1995), and sources of difficulties (Fingerman, 1996a; Fischer, 1986; Hagestad, 1984; Lehr, 1984; Morgan, 1989; Talbott, 1990). These studies have found that aging parents and middle-aged offspring describe negative feelings, but that they rarely report having overt confrontations. On the other hand, parents and adolescent children report frequent conflict (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). It is unclear whether such findings represent actual age-related differences in intergenerational conflict, or merely a gap in our understanding of parent/child relationships in later life. In particular, there has been little research addressing the ways in which

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The research in this article was part of a doctoral dissertation chaired by Eric Bermann and Joseph Veroff at the University of Michigan. The study was partially supported by the following awards: University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School Dissertation Award; American Psychological Association Dissertation Grant; Society for the Study of Social Issues Grants-in-Aid Award; and a grant from Sigma Xi. Linda Acitelli provided suggestions for data analysis and interpretation. I am grateful to Danielle Horvath for help with data management. Susan Sprecher and Rosemary Blieszner independently led me to Caryl Rusbult's work as a theoretical premise for this article. Lilah Koski provided comments on an early draft of this manuscript, and Ann Crouter provided essential feedback on more final drafts.

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middle-aged offspring and aging parents manage interpersonal tensions. The present study examines aging mothers' and their middle-aged daughters' reactions to problems in their relationships.

### **The Importance of Mother/Daughter Ties in Later Life**

Many factors distinguish the mother/daughter relationship from other intergenerational relationships in adulthood. A significant body of research indicates that mothers and daughters maintain more enduring and more intimate bonds than do fathers or sons (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Boyd, 1989; Henwood, 1993; Rossi, 1993; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Troll, 1987; Troll & Fingerman, 1996; Walker, 1994). Moreover, as mothers and daughters grow older, the ties between them serve a unique role in binding kin relationships across generations (Hagestad, 1981, 1984; Nydegger, 1983; Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991; Troll & Smith, 1976). Indeed, the ways in which mothers and daughters deal with problems in their own relationships may have an impact on extended family functioning as a whole.

Mother/daughter relationships in later life are also defined by social structural factors that shape women's lives. There are 1.5 women for every 1 man over the age of 70 in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). As a result, older women are less likely to remarry after they are widowed and are more likely to turn to daughters for help previously provided by a spouse (Allen & Walker, 1992; Brody, 1985). Middle-aged women who live near their mothers are also likely to take on caregiving burdens as their mothers' health declines (Brody, 1985; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987). Throughout their lives, daughters turn to their mothers for support as well, particularly in times of crisis (Barnett, Kibria, Baruch, & Pleck, 1991).

Despite the positive benefits mothers and daughters derive from their ties, they also experience more negative emotions in their relationships than do men in their intergenerational relationships (Boyd, 1989; Cohler, 1983, 1988; Lehr, 1984; Troll, 1985;

Troll & Fingerman, 1996). Such tensions between mothers and daughters may stem from the intensity of their bonds. Older mothers and middle-aged daughters alike report resenting many of the demands of the relationship (Cohler, 1983, 1988; Fingerman, 1996a). In addition, prior research suggests that when geographic proximity permits, most mothers and daughters see one another on a frequent basis (Aldous, 1987; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Shanas, 1979; Thompson & Walker, 1984; Walker, 1994; Walker & Thompson, 1983). Frequency of contact has been associated with reports of increased conflict across relationships (Akiyama & Antonucci, 1995). Thus, the strength of mother/daughter ties may allow for both greater negative and greater positive experiences (Troll & Fingerman, 1996).

In summary, mother/daughter relationships provide a forum for examining management of problems in the context of enduring and resource-rich intergenerational ties.

### **Aging Mothers' and Adult Daughters' Responses to Interpersonal Tensions**

To date, there is neither a clear definition of the negative aspects of relationships nor a clear theoretical model in the gerontological literature addressing how older adults might be expected to behave when upset with another party. Rook (1990, 1992) has argued that the downside of relationships involving older adults should be construed broadly, to include negative feelings and situations, with or without accompanying confrontation, or even mutual recognition that a problem exists. Elsewhere, I have used the term "interpersonal tensions" to encompass this variety of situations (Fingerman, 1995, 1996a). This term also includes a wide array of negative emotions, and does not focus solely on anger. Studies including older adults must examine an array of negative emotions because older adults report more mixed emotions than do younger adults (Lambouvie-Vief, DeVoe, & Bulka, 1989; Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992).

A framework for predicting response patterns to such tensions requires further in-

vestigation. In their research addressing difficulties in friendships in later life, Blieszner and Adams (1995) suggested that Rusbult (1980) and Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn's (1982) theory of relationship investment might be used as an initial model for understanding when and why older adults dissolve problematic friendships. This model was used in the present study to examine mothers' and daughters' responses to tensions in later life.

Rusbult's model was initially developed to explain behaviors in romantic relationships. The model addresses the reasons why individuals feel committed to specific relationships. In particular, Rusbult and her colleagues have proposed that individuals who are invested in, and satisfied with, a romantic relationship are more likely to be committed to maintaining that relationship. The generalizability of Rusbult's model to other relationships has not been fully explored, yet the theory contains several features relevant to understanding how middle-aged daughters and older mothers might approach their relationship. Current gerontological research shows that levels of investment in central relationships increased across adulthood (e.g., Carstensen, 1993, 1995). In general, mothers and daughters report high levels of satisfaction with their relationships as well (e.g., Barnett et al., 1991; Walker & Thompson, 1983).

Rusbult and her colleagues have applied their theory of investment to investigate individuals' behaviors when annoyed with their romantic partner (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). Their work suggests that a person who has a greater investment in a relationship will respond to a partner's irritating behaviors in a way that strengthens or maintains the relationship, rather than weakens it. Indeed, Rusbult and her colleagues (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult et al., 1982) developed a four-part taxonomy for classifying responses people use when confronted with a partner's disagreeable behaviors: voice, loyalty, neglect, and exit. Voice involves actively communicating in a way intended to improve the relationship. Loyalty pertains to waiting

things out optimistically and hoping things will improve. Neglect includes ignoring the partner, spending less time together, treating the partner badly, or otherwise engaging in behaviors that might harm the relationship without actually disbanding it. Finally, exit involves actively leaving the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1982).

The taxonomy of behaviors can be viewed along two dimensions: constructive/destructive and active/passive. Voice and loyalty are considered constructive behaviors because they enhance the relationship, whereas exit and neglect are considered destructive behaviors based on their deleterious impact on the relationship. Voice and exit are considered active responses, whereas neglect and loyalty are considered passive (Rusbult et al., 1982). These classifications parallel other work on interpersonal problems differentiating constructive and destructive approaches (Acitelli, 1988; Canary & Cupach, 1988; Gottman, 1979; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Straus, 1979) and delineating active versus passive approaches (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cupach, 1994; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Metts & Cupach, 1990; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Silars & Scott, 1983; Wodak & Schulz, 1986).

Some limitations exist in using the taxonomy developed by Rusbult and her colleagues with regard to older parents and their offspring. Empirical studies of parent/child relationships do not find evidence that aging mothers and middle-aged daughters sever ties when upset with the other party (Allen & Walker, 1992; Roberts et al., 1991; Welsh & Stewart, 1995). Thus, investigations of "exit" behaviors may be less relevant in this relationship. In addition, Rusbult and colleagues have applied their taxonomy in terms of the impact the response has on the relationship, rather than features of the behavior itself. For example, destructive criticism is classified as a "neglectful" response. Although this behavior is overtly active, it passively contributes to problems in the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1982). This approach may introduce confusion because classification of behaviors is based on outcome, rather than the manifest behavior itself. For the sake of consistency

with the existent taxonomy, however, criticism is included under "neglect" in this study. "Exit" behaviors are not addressed.

### *Predictions of mothers' and daughters' behaviors*

Several aspects of aging mother/daughter relationships suggest that women will be more likely to use constructive than destructive responses to tensions. Three factors appear to increase an individual's likelihood of responding constructively: (1) having a greater investment in a relationship, (2) perceiving the relationship in positive terms, and (3) having few alternatives to one's partner (Metts & Cupach, 1990; Rusbult et al., 1986). Older mothers and daughters tend to be satisfied with, and heavily invested in, their intergenerational relationships (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990). By the time a mother is in her 70s, neither mother nor daughter may feel that she has many realistic alternatives to the other party. Daughters cannot replace the long history they have with their mothers by affiliating with another older woman. Mothers' and daughters' shared investment in their larger extended family cannot be easily filled by a woman who is not a part of that kin network. In fact, few middle-aged daughters report having anyone who is more like a mother to them than their own biological or adopted mother (Webster & Herzog, 1995).

The investment model is slightly more complicated with regard to mothers' relationships to their daughters. Mothers may have more than one daughter, and the number of children an older mother has does appear to influence her investment in any one child (Fingerman, 1996a). Yet, older women who require care generally rely on one daughter who lives nearby, with little assistance from that daughter's siblings (Brody, Hoffman, & Kleban, 1989). Thus, although older mothers may have many children, they are likely to feel that their daughters who reside in close proximity are irreplaceable.

In addition, the fact that mothers and daughters are both women suggests that they will be more likely to respond with con-

structive than destructive approaches. Rusbult and her colleagues (1991) report that individuals who are higher in femininity, or who are female, are more likely to accommodate when a partner acts disagreeably.

The long-lasting intensity of mother/daughter ties also suggests that difficulties are handled in a way that strengthens rather than weakens relationships. Studies of romantic relationships have found that constructive behaviors are used more than destructive behaviors in stronger relationships (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Metts & Cupach, 1990). Of course, it is conceivable that mothers and daughters might feel free to express disapproval in destructive ways, given their certainty that the other party is unlikely to withdraw from the relationship. The first hypothesis rests on the assumption that this final premise is incorrect. Nonetheless, the possibility that mothers and daughters engage in nonconstructive behaviors was also considered.

*H1: Mothers and daughters were expected to use constructive responses to tensions more than destructive responses.*

The second hypothesis revolves around active versus passive means of resolving problems. Prior research suggests that within the constructive category, aging mothers and daughters will tend toward loyalty rather than voice responses. By the time offspring reach midlife, patterns of overt conflict are expected to give way to greater acceptance in the parent/child relationship (Blenkner, 1963; Bromberg, 1987; Fingerman, 1996b). Moreover, prior research suggests that aging parents and offspring manage some potential problems through avoidance rather than confrontation. For example, in a study of three-generation families in Chicago, Hagestad (1982) reported that grown offspring and their parents appeared to handle potential tensions in their relationships by dancing around difficult issues. She coined the term "demilitarized zone" to describe this process in which generations treat controversial topics as off-limits or taboo. Such behavior may serve as a

means of indicating loyalty to the other party.

By contrast, some studies suggest that individuals express their concerns more actively in stronger relationships (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). For example, Metts and Cupach (1990) found that college students who responded with voice behaviors in a romantic relationship were more likely to view the other party as changeable and to report higher-quality relationships. However, it is not clear that such research applies to mothers and daughters in later life. Aside from distinctions between romantic and nonromantic relationships, findings from college-based samples may not generalize to older age groups. In long-lasting relationships, individuals may be attuned to the other party's habits, and direct communication may be less essential when problems arise (Cupach & Metts, 1994). The desire to change the other party also appears to be less evident in some later-life relationships (Fingerman, 1996a). Although active problem-solving is associated with stronger relationships in some contexts, there has not been enough research with older populations to know if this is true in their relationships. Rather, existing research suggests that loyalty is a more likely response in long-lasting relationships such as those found between mothers and daughters.

*H2: Among constructive responses to tensions, mothers and daughters were expected to report using passive approaches more than active approaches.*

The first two hypotheses involve understanding relationship functioning, but they do not explicitly address dyadic processes. Parent/child relationships provide a unique forum for examining within-dyad similarities and differences in responses to tensions. Although mothers and daughters were generally expected to engage in the behaviors described above, within-relationship differences in their behaviors were also anticipated. Parent/child relationships involve individuals who differ in age, developmental task, and cohort. In childhood, daughters' choice of conflict tactics may closely reflect

the strategies their mothers utilize to resolve differences (Boyd, 1989; Cappell & Heiner, 1990; Dumas, Margolin, & John, 1994; Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Over time, the convergence between mothers' and daughters' behaviors in resolving interpersonal problems may be influenced by a variety of factors, including the daughters' exposure to education, spouses, and even the popular media.

The marital literature suggests that the way individuals deal with interpersonal tensions may also vary as a function of the roles they occupy in a relationship (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Acitelli et al., 1993; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Mothers and daughters bring different vantages to their relationship based on differences in the parental and filial roles. Consistent findings indicate that parents perceive greater compatibility in parent/child relationships than do offspring, and that such perceptions may be due to their greater investment in their offspring (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 1995; Sussman, 1985). According to Rusbult et al. (1991) those individuals with the greatest investment in the relationship are most likely to accommodate when confronted with disagreeable aspects of a significant other. Thus, mothers were expected to be more likely to try to accommodate when upset with their daughters.

Differences in behaviors might also reflect mothers' and daughters' maturation levels. Elsewhere, using data from the same larger study, I found that these mothers and daughters sometimes described sources of tensions stemming from "developmental schisms" in their relationships (Fingerman, 1996a). A developmental schism is a situation where the developmental tasks that two individuals face differ. Such schisms appear to underlie problems between parents and offspring throughout life. Intergenerational differences in behaviors may also stem from such schisms. Adults of different ages appear to use different behaviors to deal with interpersonal problems. Older adults are less likely to engage in overt communication of difficulties than are younger or middle-aged adults (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1993; Fiefel &

Strack, 1989; Minick & Gueldner, 1995; Quayhagen & Quayhagen, 1982). In an experimental context, older adults were more passive than younger adults in dealing with highly emotional interpersonal problems (Blanchard-Fields, 1986; Blanchard-Fields, Jahnke, & Camp, 1995). Thus, older mothers might be expected to respond more passively than their middle-aged daughters in the face of interpersonal tensions.

*H3: Mothers were expected to respond more constructively, and with greater loyalty, to interpersonal tensions than were daughters.*

### Description of the Present Study

The women who participated in the present study were healthy older mothers (age 70+ years) and their adult daughters. The daughters resided within an hour's drive of their mothers. The parties claimed to maintain frequent contact, and they generally described their relationships as good. This sample included only well-educated women of predominantly European descent. The sample permits examination of behaviors in a relatively homogeneous group, an important step in delineating patterns of association between variables of interest (Labouvie-Vief et al., 1989). However, such homogeneity precludes generalization to the wider range of mothers and daughters in the general population.

In their review of the literature addressing aging parents and offspring, Mancini and Blieszner (1989) suggested that parent/child conflict in later life could best be understood through in-depth studies utilizing multiple measures. The present study involved self-report and observation measures. Prior studies have relied on unitary or dual items to measure the entire construct of tension between parents and offspring (e.g., Whitbeck et al., 1994; Webster & Herzog, 1995). Thus, inclusion of self-report items specifically addressing parents' and offsprings' behaviors in response to problems adds to existing knowledge. Behaviors in the interview context were used as proxies for communication difficulties. Such be-

havior in an experimental context may not be representative of behaviors used elsewhere, but in-lab behaviors have been used in prior research to assess negative emotional experiences in older populations (Barefoot, Beckham, Haney, Siegler, & Lipkus, 1993; Levenson, Carstensen, Friesen, & Ekman, 1991). Despite limitations in the assessments and sample used, it was hoped that findings from this exploratory study would suggest avenues for future research with different samples.

### Methods

#### Participants

These data are from a larger study of aging mothers and adult daughters. The sample ( $N = 96$ ) consisted of 48 mothers over the age of 70 (mean age, 76.01;  $SD$ , 5.22 years) and their adult daughters (mean age, 44.02;  $SD$ , 7.03 years). Forty-six of the mother/daughter pairs were Caucasian; two pairs were African-American. Participants tended to be highly educated; 73% of mothers and 94% of daughters reported having at least some college education. Mothers and daughters resided in separate households within an hour's drive of the study site. Nearly all women reported speaking at least once a week and visiting in person at least twice a month. All of the women were healthy at the time of the study according to their own and the other party's reports. Mothers were recruited through senior citizen groups and word of mouth. (For a more complete description of the sample and recruitment process, see Fingerma, 1995.)

#### Procedure

Mothers and daughters were interviewed individually, given questionnaires to complete on their own, and interviewed together by the same interviewer within a 2-week period. Interviewers were young women in their mid-20s with at least a B.A. degree and 2 years of psychological research experience. All interviews took place in the women's homes. Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours each, and respondents reported that

the questionnaires required an additional hour or so. A desire to use multiple measures limited the number of items used for each type of measure, and some sacrifice had to be made in the thoroughness with which each type of indicator was used.

*Self-ratings of behavior.* Using 5-point Likert scales (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always), mothers and daughters were asked how often they generally (1) tell the other what is wrong and what she needs to do to make it better (voice); (2) express their feelings in a way that could hurt the other person (neglect); (3) avoid talking about what's wrong (avoidance/loyalty) in situations where they are irritated, hurt, or annoyed by the other. Given the nature of their relationship, it is difficult to assess loyalty between mothers and daughters directly in old age. A self-report item tapping a passive/tolerant dimension of behavior was used in the present study. As was discussed previously, behaviors related to the exit construct were not included (e.g., "I tried to end my relationship with her").

These self-report items were obtained twice, once at the start of the individual interview (Self-report 1) and then again, at the conclusion of the joint interview (Self-report 2). Thus, these indices constituted the initial and final items in the study battery. In the joint interview, the women were given a clipboard and were seated across the room from one another so that they could provide these ratings in confidence. The correlations between these two assessments were not as high as might be expected across a 2-week period. For daughters, these correlations were (1)  $r(47) = .61$  for voice; (2)  $r(47) = .58$  for neglect; and (3)  $r(47) = .52$  for loyalty. These correlations were generally lower for mothers: (1)  $r(47) = .28$  for voice; (2)  $r(47) = .67$  for neglect; and (3)  $r(47) = .20$  for loyalty. These findings suggest that participants were influenced by their participation in the study. Changes in ratings most probably reflect increased comfort with the interviewer, the context of the two interviews (the first being an individual interview, and the second being a joint interview), or other influences of participation rather than actual

changes in patterns of behavior over the 2-week period.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with other studies that have relied on single assessments of parent/child problems (e.g., Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1996), and to allow the least influence from other indicators in the battery, only the first self-ratings from the individual interview were used in the present study. (The pattern of findings was the same using either indicator, but was more conservative using the first.) Findings from both the first and second self-ratings are indicated in Table 1.

*Observed indicators of behavior.* During their individual interviews, mothers and daughters independently described the last time they were "irritated, hurt, or annoyed" with the other party. Then, in the joint interview, mothers and daughters did the same thing again, together. Variables were coded by two independent raters from audiotapes of mothers' and daughters' discussions. Cohen's kappas were calculated for each item on 24 randomly selected dyads to determine interrater agreement. Observed behaviors were grouped as follows. Voice behaviors included instigating the discussion ( $kappa = .87$ ), bringing up the topic or narrating what happened in the problematic situation ( $kappa = .91$ ), and asking questions of the other party to facilitate an understanding of the problem ( $kappa = .83$ ). Under the loyalty construct, behavioral manifestations included explicitly denying that problems occur, coded as 1 = stated disclaimer; 2 = did not ( $kappa = .87$ ).

For example, one daughter claimed, "Oh, we almost never have problems in our relationship" prior to helping her mother select their last tension incident. The use of

1. As is described elsewhere (Fingerman, 1995), mothers and daughters were asked to rate their own and the other party's behaviors during their last tense incident during the joint interview. Theorists have argued that ratings of behaviors in a specific incident appear to differ from ratings of behaviors in general (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study, the final self-ratings of behavior in general may have been influenced not only by participation in the study on the whole, but more specifically by ratings of behaviors in the specific incident obtained during that same interview.

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of self-reported behaviors

	Mothers	Daughters
Self-report 1 (1 = never; 5 = almost always)		
Voice	2.58 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.38)	3.50 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.01)
Loyalty	2.98 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.30)	3.02 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.28)
Destructive	1.81 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.02)	2.29 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.01)
Self-report 2 (1 = never; 5 = almost always)		
Voice	2.81 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.09)	3.38 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.07)
Loyalty	2.70 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.21)	2.87 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.07)
Destructive	1.70 ( <i>SD</i> = 0.86)	2.04 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.02)

disclaimers was included under loyalty because such behavior appeared to be a means of avoiding discussions of negative aspects of the relationship. In addition, for the sake of comparison, such behavior was also coded from the original individual interviews, using 1 = open and direct response; 2 = explicitly stated a disclaimer; 3 = did not give a response ( $kappa = .87$ ). A post hoc code was included under the loyalty construct. Some mothers and daughters spoke to the interviewer rather than the other party, in a manner that suggested that they were trying to avoid discussion of unpleasant topics in the other person's presence ( $kappa = .85$ ). Finally, disagreeing with the other person in a contradictory manner or rejecting something she said was the closest proxy for neglect behaviors ( $kappa = .72$ ). These behaviors did not include helpful comments intended to resolve the problem. No exit type behaviors were evident in either interview context.<sup>2</sup>

*Correspondence between individual and joint responses.* Mothers and daughters who openly discuss feelings with the other might be more likely to bring up the same issues in the joint interview that they had raised in private during the individual interview. Correspondence of response was coded: 1 = situations described matched; 2 = situations described did not match ( $kappa = .97$ ). Mothers and daughters were instructed not to discuss the interviews with one another, and their discussions in the joint interviews suggested that they did not.

*Investment and regard for the relationship.* A measure of investment in the relationship was included in the individual interview. During this interview, participants were asked to indicate how important the other party is in their lives. Participants rated the importance of their mother or daughter relative to other people as: 1 = most important; 2 = among the top 3; 3 = among the

2. A story completion task was also included in the original battery in which participants had to finish a story involving an older mother and a grown daughter who were experiencing difficulties. Data from this task are not reported here in detail because over a quarter of the mothers failed to complete all of the vignettes involved in the task. Daughters who completed the vignettes were more likely to have the characters engage in active ap-

proaches to deal with the problem (including exit behaviors) than was evident in their self-reports or their observed behaviors. Mothers who completed the task portrayed the characters as relying on active and inactive behaviors in equal proportions. These findings are in keeping with other research using vignettes to examine age differences in responses to interpersonal problems (Blanchard-Fields, Jahnke, & Camp, 1995).

top 6; or 4 = among the top 12 most important. None of the women in this study considered their mother or daughter to fall outside the top 12 important people in their lives.

The Bengtson Positive Affect Index (PAI; Bengtson & Schrader, 1982) was included in the questionnaire to assess positive regard for the relationship. This index consists of two subscales of five items pertaining to understanding, trust, fairness, respect, and affect. Participants rate their own feelings for the other person on the first subscale, and they rate their perceptions of the other's feelings toward themselves on the second subscale. The PAI is one of the most widely used instruments in research on intergenerational relationships. In its standard use, the two subscales are summed for a total score (Mangen, 1995; Roberts et al., 1991). Coefficient alphas for the PAI were .89 for mothers, and .85 for daughters in the present study.

*Frequency of tensions.* Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which tense situations arise in their relationships, using a 4-point scale (1 = 2–3 times a month; 4 = less than once a year). This item was then reverse-scored.

## Results

Table 1 contains means and standard deviations for the self-report measures. Table 2 contains proportions of the categorical behavioral indicators falling under each code.

*Behaviors mothers and daughters use most often*

H1: *Mothers and daughters were expected to use constructive behaviors (voice and loyalty) more than destructive (neglect) behaviors.*

H2: *Among constructive responses to tensions, mothers and daughters were expected to report using passive approaches more than active approaches.*

Analyses for the first two hypotheses are presented together because, in some in-

stances, one analysis was used to test both hypotheses. Although the initial two hypotheses do not specify intergenerational differences, analyses were conducted separately for mothers and daughters because the distribution of responses appeared to vary for the two groups. Findings are presented for self-report data and then for observation data.

*Self-report measures.* To limit the number of analyses pertaining to the self-report measures, only two paired *t*-test comparisons were conducted; this was done in such a manner that all possible differences were encompassed. For daughters, these comparisons involved comparing ratings of (1) destructive and loyalty behaviors and (2) loyalty and voice behaviors. If significant differences were found in both comparisons, ratings of voice behaviors would also differ significantly from ratings of destructive behaviors. Daughters' ratings of destructive behaviors were significantly lower than their ratings of loyalty behaviors,  $t(47) = 2.83, r = .21, p < .01$ , and thus they were significantly lower than their ratings of voice behaviors. No significant differences existed in their ratings of voice and loyalty behaviors.

For mothers, serial paired *t*-tests were calculated comparing ratings of (1) destructive and voice behaviors, and (2) voice and loyalty behaviors, because mothers rated their use of loyalty higher than their use of voice behaviors. Mothers' ratings of destructive behaviors differed significantly from their ratings of voice behaviors,  $t(47) = 3.52, r = .23, p < .001$ , and thus they differed significantly from their ratings of loyalty. No significant differences occurred in mothers' ratings of voice and loyalty behaviors. In summary, the first hypothesis, but not the second, was supported by findings from the self-report measures.

*Coded behaviors in the interview context.*

Given the categorical nature of the observation codes, McNemar's test, a nonparametric measure used to examine 2- $\times$ -2 tables with paired data, was conducted to examine within-subject differences in the

use of different types of behaviors. With regard to the first hypothesis, the McNemar tests were calculated comparing within-individual use of neglect behaviors (rejecting something the other party said in a contradictory manner) to within-individual use of constructive behaviors. For example, a daughter's rejecting something the mother said was compared with her initiating the conversation or narrating the situation. For all analyses  $N = 48$ , effect sizes were calculated by using the equivalent  $t$  value for the degrees of freedom ( $N - 2 = 46$ ) and the  $p$  values. These  $t$  values were treated as  $F$  values and entered into an equation for Epsilon-effect sizes using between- and within-subject degrees of freedom (Welkowitz, Ewen, & Cohen, 1991).

Analyses showed that mothers were less likely to disagree with their daughters than to engage in voice behaviors such as initiating conversation, McNemar's  $p < .02$ , epsilon = .20; introducing a topic for discussion, McNemar's  $p = .0002$ , epsilon = .27; asking their daughter questions, McNemar's  $p < .0001$ , epsilon  $\geq .28^*$ ; or loyalty behaviors such as disclaiming, McNemar's  $p < .0001$ , epsilon  $\geq .28^*$ ; and speaking to the interviewer, McNemar's  $p = .0008$ , epsilon = .25. Similar analyses showed that daughters were less likely to reject something their mother said than to engage in voice behaviors such as initiating conversation, McNemar's  $p < .02$ , epsilon = .21; introducing a topic for discussion, McNemar's  $p = .004$ , epsilon = .23; asking their mother questions (McNemar's  $p < .07$ , epsilon = .18, a trend only); or loyalty behaviors such as disclaiming, McNemar's  $p < .0001$ , epsilon  $\geq .28^*$ ; and speaking to the interviewer, McNemar's  $p < .002$ , epsilon = .25.

With regard to the second hypothesis, the proportions of mothers and daughters using loyalty and voice behaviors did not differ across most observed behaviors. In one exception, a chi-square test was calculated examining the proportions of mothers who engaged in a disclaimer to the propor-

tion of mothers who did not. Mothers were more likely to state a disclaimer than to engage in conversation without one,  $X^2 = 4.41$  ( $df = 1, N = 48$ ),  $\phi = .30, p < .05$ . In summary, the first hypothesis, but not the second, was supported by the observed behaviors.

*Comparisons across interviews.* Post hoc analyses were conducted to examine patterns of disclaiming across the two interviews. These analyses address the second hypothesis more than the first by examining directness of response, and mothers' and daughters' loyalty behaviors. The findings suggest that mothers and daughters rely on a mixture of loyalty and voice. Each participant did discuss some sort of problem with her mother or daughter during the individual or joint interview, but there was considerable variation in mothers' and daughters' degree of openness. Behaviors varied as a function of the interview context.

In the individual interviews, eight mothers were unable to come up with a situation where they had felt bothered, and many mothers disclaimed, stating something positive about the relationship prior to revealing what they saw as problems (see Fingerman, 1996a, for a discussion). Yet all mothers engaged in conversation with their daughters when asked to come up with their last tense situation during the joint interviews. On the other hand, all but four daughters responded directly to questions about tension in the individual interviews. Daughters' behaviors changed in the joint interviews. Daughters were more likely to disclaim when interviewed in their mother's presence than when interviewed alone, McNemar's  $p = .002$ , epsilon = .24.

Hypothesis 1 cannot be directly tested using the correspondence of mothers' and daughters' descriptions of their last tense situation across the individual and joint interviews. The correspondence between responses may serve as an indicator of the general active versus passive dimension examined in the second hypothesis, however. Mothers and daughters who are more open about their negative feelings may be more likely to describe the same problematic

\* The  $t$  tables available do not indicate  $t$  values for  $p < .0001$ , thus the  $r$  values derived are the highest possible estimates that can be calculated.

**Table 2.** Proportions of mothers' and daughters' behavior falling under observation codes

	Mothers	Daughters
<i>Individual interview initial response</i>		
Direct response	.44	.92
Disclaimed	.38	.08
No response	.17	.00
<i>Joint interview initial response</i>		
Direct response	.44	.68
Disclaimed	.54	.32
No response	.00	.00
<i>Joint interview other behaviors</i>		
Initiated joint interview discussion	.49	.51
Asked questions of other	.44	.43
Narrated story of what happened	.32	.58
Spoke to interviewer	.66	.62
Disagreed with comment made by other	.25	.17
<i>Correspondence between incidents</i>		
Joint response corresponds to individual one	.17	.29

situations across interviews. One-third of all dyads of mothers and daughters described the same situation independently during the individual interviews. (It should be kept in mind that eight mothers did not provide initial responses for comparison). However, only 11% of dyads gave responses in the joint interview that corresponded to both the mother's and the daughter's responses from the individual interviews. Moreover, an additional 6% of dyads described situations that corresponded to the mothers' initial response only, and an additional 19% of dyads gave responses that corresponded to the daughters' initial response only. The remaining 63% of dyads described situations during the joint interview that did not correspond to either party's initial response. A chi-square analysis of the distribution of correspondence was calculated using four categories that corresponded to mother's individual response only; daughter's individual response only; both responses; neither response ( $X^2 = 37.13$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $N = 48$ ,  $\phi = .87$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). This analysis was then calculated in a more conservative manner, excluding those mothers who had not supplied a response in the individual interviews and their daughters ( $X^2 = 18.68$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $n = 40$ ,  $\phi = .62$ ,  $p < .0005$ ). In summary, mothers and daughters were

more likely to discuss a new issue than to bring up an issue they had previously discussed in the individual interview. This pattern does not seem to reflect the presence of any new sources of irritation incurred between the two interviews.

#### *Frequency of tensions and behaviors*

Finally, zero-order correlations were calculated between mothers' and daughters' reports of the frequency with which they experience tensions, and between the indicators assessing mothers' and daughters' responses to such tensions. Few significant correlations were found. Daughters' self-ratings of voice and neglect were correlated with the frequency with which they claimed to experience tensions,  $r(48) = -.38$ ,  $p < .01$  for voice and  $r(48) = .44$ ,  $p < .001$  for neglect. Mothers' use of active behaviors in the joint interview was correlated with their reports of frequencies of tensions. Mothers who claimed to experience more frequent tensions also were more likely to reject things their daughter said  $r(48) = .39$ ,  $p < .05$  and were more likely to initiate the discussion of the problematic incident  $r(47) = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ . Given the paucity of findings, ratings of frequency of tensions were not examined further.

### *Intergenerational differences*

H3: *Mothers were expected to respond more constructively, and with greater loyalty, to interpersonal tensions than were daughters.*

*Intergenerational differences in self-ratings.* Daughters claimed to use both forms of direct behaviors, voice and destructive, more than mothers did,  $t(47) = 4.41, r = .36, p < .001$  and  $t(47) = 2.48, r = .15, p < .05$ , respectively. However, no significant differences existed in their ratings of use of loyalty.

*Intergenerational differences in observed behaviors.* Chi-square tests were used to examine distributions where only one party could engage in a given behavior—for example, starting the conversation. McNemar's tests were used where both parties might engage in a given behavior: for instance, asking the other party questions = 1; not asking the other party questions = 0.

In support of the third hypothesis, mothers were more likely to state a disclaimer than were daughters during the joint interview, McNemar's  $p < .04$ , epsilon = .19. Mothers and daughters did not appear to differ with regard to most voice behaviors, though daughters were more likely to describe the situation once the topic had been selected ( $X^2 = 12.84, df = 1, N = 48, \phi = .52, p < .005$ ). There were no significant differences in destructive behaviors, such as disagreeing with something the other party said. In fact, once a given mother or daughter disagreed with something the other party had said, that individual was likely to disagree as well, point biserial  $r(45) = .70, p < .001$ , providing evidence for a dyadic process rather than intergenerational differences in responses.

*Levels of investment.* Intergenerational differences in behavior were expected to reflect differences in mothers' and daughters' investment and regard for the relationship. The cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for any conclusions pertaining to causality, but analyses were conducted for exploratory purposes.

Intergenerational differences existed in ratings of investment and regard for the relationship, but mothers and daughters alike rated the other party as important and rated their relationship as important. A paired  $t$ -test revealed differences in mothers' and daughters' ratings on the PAI,  $t(47) = 2.63, r = .45, p < .05$ , with mothers rating regard for the relationship higher ( $M = 21.5, SD = 2.84$ , with a scale of 5 to 25), but daughters still generally rating their relationships positively ( $M = 20.52, SD = 2.82$ ). Mothers tended to be more likely to name the daughter as being the most important person or among the three most important people in their lives; 75% of mothers indicated the daughter fell among the three most important, compared to 58% of daughters who cited their mother. Again, however, mothers and daughters alike appeared to be highly invested in their relationship; a total of 90% of mothers and daughters ranked the other person as being among the six most important people in their lives.

Initial analyses focused on bivariate associations between responses to interpersonal tension and ratings of investment and the Bengtson PAI. Correlations were calculated between the self-report and observation indicators with the investment and relationship-quality indicators. There were few significant correlations, and the pattern did not appear systematic.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study have implications for understanding how mothers and daughters maintain such strong ties across the life span. Mothers and daughters in this study were able to discuss problems in their relationships, yet they favored cooperation and open communication when doing so. These results contradict notions in popular psychology that daughters silently fume and wither in the face of disagreement with their mothers (Friday, 1977; Lerner, 1985). At the same time, the complexity of behaviors and limitations of this exploratory study should be noted.

*Hypothesis 1: Use of constructive behaviors over destructive behaviors*

A consistent pattern was evident across assessments with regard to the first hypothesis. Mothers and daughters did appear to favor voice and loyalty behaviors more than behaviors that could harm their relationship. They claimed to discuss troublesome issues or to avoid such issues more than they reported responding in a way that might hurt the other party. Observed behaviors in the joint interviews and across the two interviews also revealed patterns of cooperation between mothers and daughters. Mothers and daughters rarely disagreed with a comment made by the other. Rather, they sought to engage the other party in discussion, and they tried to avoid tense issues by talking to the interviewer.

That such a long-lasting relationship is characterized by positive efforts to deal with difficulties makes intuitive sense. However, the empirical basis for this association was weak; few studies had previously explored the ways individuals manage interpersonal tensions in later life. Much prior research had focused on difficulties in romantic relationships, particularly among younger adults. Behaviors in these relationships do not necessarily generalize to other types of interpersonal ties or to other age groups. Findings from the present study suggest that older mothers and daughters do favor constructive means of dealing with problems in their relationship.

*Hypothesis 2: Use of passive behaviors over active behaviors*

The results pertaining to the second hypothesis are more complex. Many of the findings appear to contradict rather than to support the premise that mothers and daughters engage in passive rather than active behaviors. For example, there were no significant differences in participants' self-ratings of voice and loyalty behaviors. In the joint interview, mothers and daughters actively engaged in discussion of their last problematic situation rather than sitting passively.

Some support for the second hypothesis is evident from observed behaviors in the interviews. For example, many mothers and daughters disclaimed or referred to positive aspects of their relationship when asked to describe troublesome issues. In a more perplexing observation, nearly two-thirds of mothers or daughters turned to the interviewer with distracting questions or comments during the joint interviews. Such behavior may reflect a bias introduced by conducting research in the women's homes with an investigator present. However, the women did not add in such distracters during the individual interviews. Moreover, the family-systems literature suggests that presence of an additional person or stimuli serves as a proxy for evoking the ways in which family members generally interact (see Reiss, 1981, for a discussion). Some clinicians and sociologists have argued that efforts to include an outside party in discussion of conflicts indicates a poor-quality relationship (Bowen, 1960; Scheff, 1995). In the present study, efforts to include the interviewer appeared to be in the service of diffusing tension through distraction. This finding needs to be investigated in a more systematic manner to draw conclusions about its meaning.

Other support for the second hypothesis emerges from changes in behaviors across the two interviews. The lack of correspondence between responses provided in initial and joint interviews suggests that mothers and daughters loyally avoid bringing up topics that might hurt the other party. This behavior would be in keeping with Hagstad's (1982) "demilitarized zone." Mothers and daughters did not initiate their joint discussions with what might have been an obvious question, "What did you say in the last interview?" nor did they volunteer to provide this information in this setting.

*Hypothesis 3: Intergenerational differences: Mothers were expected to respond more constructively and with greater loyalty than daughters*

The third hypothesis was only partially supported by the findings of this study. Daugh-

ters did not respond with more destructive behaviors than their mothers did, but they did appear to be more open in their discussions of tensions during the interviews. Although the behaviors observed here do not fit the initial hypothesis, they do appear to reflect differences in mothers' and daughters' roles in the relationship.

Examination of the qualitative data across the two interviews reveals that mothers' behaviors appear almost stereotypically "motherly." The eight mothers who were unable to come up with a time when they were upset with their daughters during the individual interviews joined in the discussions during the joint interviews. Such mothers refrained from discussing their daughters' faults when asked to do so alone with a stranger; thus, they may have been acting as "good mothers" who brag about their children to outsiders. Then, after rapport was established with the interviewer, and the daughter was actually present, these mothers seemed to shift modes. They joined in the discussion with comments such as, "Well, you know, dear, there was the time you . . .," taking advantage of the opportunity to proffer advice to their daughters. This pattern would be in keeping with findings from the same study pertaining to mothers' and daughters' perceptions of the other party's behavior (Fingerman, 1995).

The daughters' greater openness may also be related to their roles in the relationship. Researchers have argued that throughout life parents perceive greater compatibility with offspring than offspring do (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 1995). Daughters' more direct behaviors may be related to their perceptions of greater conflict. Changes in behaviors across interviews also suggest complexities pertaining to middle-aged daughters' sense of their mothers' needs. Although all daughters were able to describe instances where they had been annoyed with their mothers when asked to do so alone, many daughters first disclaimed their ability to do so when asked to discuss problems in their mothers' presence. Such a pattern would be in keeping with Blenkner's (1963) "filial

maturity," the idea that as individuals mature, they are able to see their parents' vulnerabilities as well as their faults. In this case, they loyally try to protect them.

The intergenerational differences in responses may also be related to cohort differences. The daughters in this study came of age during the late 1960s and 1970s, a period when an emphasis was placed on freer expression of feelings. Yet younger daughters also appear to be more open than their middle-aged mothers, suggesting that role and development may contribute to such responses (Hurley & Fingerman, 1996).

### **Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present study involved multiple assessments, but was not designed as a methodological study. Nonetheless, the findings of the study provide a strong case for future research using multiple measures and for wide-scale validation of such measures. Researchers interested in interpersonal tensions note that many standard scales fail to capture more experiential aspects of interpersonal strain (Morgan & Rook, 1996). Changes in participants' behaviors across the two interviews not only provided information about possible dynamics in this relationship, but also suggest a need for other studies of parent/child relationships to include greater consideration of the context in which participants respond.

There were several limitations in the observation data obtained here. Social desirability biases may have influenced mothers' and daughters' responses in the interviews; unfortunately, these were not assessed. Conversely, daughters' willingness to speak openly in the first interview and mothers' willingness to discuss tense issues in the second interview indicate that social-desirability issues did not constrain their behaviors throughout the study. In addition, it is possible that something about the interviewer's presence evoked different behaviors in the two interviews. Future research might rely on computer simulations or videotapes to assess mothers' and daughters' responses to problems in the absence of an interviewer.

The sample utilized also clearly limits the generalizability of this study. The relationships assessed here did not include the full spectrum of health and educational levels of older women. These women were all fit, active, and generally advantaged relative to the larger population. Daughters' active responses to problems might be less evident when mothers are less healthy and more frail. Research with a wider range of gender, age, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups is needed to understand more fully patterns of communication between older mothers and daughters.

### **Investment in the Relationship and Development of a Theory of Behavioral Responses**

The theoretical heuristic underlying this study (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1982) assumes that levels of investment and satisfaction with the relationship underlie responses to a partner's disagreeable behaviors. In this study, neither degree of investment in the relationship nor regard for the relationship was related to behavioral patterns. Rusbult's theory was initially developed to differentiate those romantic relationships that would disintegrate over time from those that would not (Rusbult, 1980). Given the disproportionate evidence that most mothers and daughters maintain strong ties into old age (e.g., Rossi, 1993; Troll, 1985), it is not surprising that mothers and daughters in the present study were highly invested in their relationships. The truncated ranges of investment and regard for the relationship may account for the inability to discern behaviors based on these indicators. Indices with greater differentiation of positive anchors (e.g., 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = good; 4 = very good; 5 = excellent; 6 = superior; 7 = outstanding) seem to reveal greater variation in ratings than do the more traditional anchors in the Bengtson PAI scale (Fingerman, in press). Perhaps with a larger sample and such a scale, levels of investment and relationship satisfaction will differentiate those mothers who disclaim from those who do not, those

daughters who reject things their mothers say from those who do not, and so forth.

More importantly, a theory addressing the specific constraints of relationships other than marital couples must be developed to explain responses to tensions. In addition to investment in a specific relationship, a stronger value for interdependency in general may help explain parties' responses. The patterns found here may stem not only from investment in the mother/daughter relationship, but from women's tendency to value interdependence over individuation (Boyd, 1989; Chodorow, 1978; Henwood, 1993). An extensive literature on "face" suggests that individuals are willing to protect another party in situations where relationships are highly esteemed (Brown & Levenson, 1987; Cupach & Metts, 1994). Thus, the general finding that loyalty serves to strengthen relationships might be even more evident in cultural settings where relationships are valued over individual autonomy. Such contexts include Asian cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), North American Eskimos (Briggs, 1970), and the !Kung of southern Africa (Shostak, 1983). Studies of different cultural and ethnic samples may allow further examination of value for interdependency and response patterns when individuals are irritated with others.

The findings of the present study lend insight into interdependency and the aging process. The older mothers and daughters in the present study do profess a strong value for their relationship. Their responses to interpersonal tensions suggest a desire to shape the relationship context in which emotions are experienced, coupled with tolerance and acceptance of the need to regulate one's own emotions as well. Future research might examine this issue in other relationships, with men, or with different age ranges of mothers and daughters.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the findings from this study suggest that mothers and daughters use active and passive means of handling problems in their relationships. Some evidence

suggests that daughters use more active behaviors than do their mothers, but they also appear to be protective of their mothers' feelings in old age. For mothers, the later life pattern appears very different from the child-rearing years when parents seek actively to shape their children's behaviors.

These older mothers appear to be willing to accept their middle-aged daughters. Additional cross-sectional and longitudinal work is needed to explore further when and why women's intergenerational relationships change.

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