

# Relationships Between Parents-In-Law and Children-In-Law of Differing Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds: An Initial Qualitative Exploration

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**Abstract:** *In-law relationships have drawn recent interest from family scholars. Historical trends demonstrate a significant rise in newlyweds marrying someone of a different race or ethnicity. Given this growing population of inter-racial marriage, the need to know more about these couples and their families is paramount. This article describes four themes that emerged from qualitative interviews with nine parents-in-law discussing their relationships with their child-in-law who is of a different race. The overarching themes identified for in-laws included: being initially hesitant based on race and/or culture; managing barriers pertaining to communication, language, and/or culture; differences that were enriching to the in-law relationship; and bonding related to shared minority status. Based on these findings, social workers may assume a supportive role for members of interracial families as they navigate not only social barriers but also their in-law relationships.*

**Keywords:** *Couples, interracial, interethnic, in-laws, qualitative*

More than 2 million couples marry each year in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015), giving rise to multiple in-law relationships. These in-law relationships are drawing increasing attention from family researchers (Rittenour, 2012), as well as social workers (Greif et al., 2019; Greif & Wooley, 2018). The relationships that are formed when a person of a different race or ethnicity marries into the family have been virtually unexplored (Fingerman et al., 2012). In 2015, 1 in 6 persons who got married chose a spouse of a different race or ethnicity, a significant increase over the 1967 rate of 1 in 33 (Livingston, 2017). With this growing population of inter-marriages, the need to know more about these couples and their families is paramount. Marriage profoundly changes the families of origin of each partner with the addition of a new individual in the familial dynamic. With this expansion, in-law relationships are formed, which can include parents, adult children, siblings, and other relations. In-law relationships, regardless of the racial and ethnic match, can be difficult (Morr Serewicz, 2008). A myriad of factors affects both how well families adapt to having a new person in their midst as well as the adjustment process for that new individual. As we live in a society where racism exists (e.g., Skinner & Hudac, 2017) and where people may be especially wary of “others” during a pandemic, it is easy to see how interracial relationships between generations, specifically parents-in-law and children-in-law, could be a challenge for some family members.

## Literature Review

As there is little known about in-law relationships in interracial marriages, we first review the literature on interracial marriage and then the literature on in-law relationships.

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We then offer intergenerational ambivalence as a lens for understanding these relationships.

### **Interracial Marriage**

The United States Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) ruled that state laws banning interracial marriage were unconstitutional. This pivotal verdict continued an emerging trend towards a dramatic increase in the number of interracial couples marrying, as well as a shift in both public perception and popular opinion regarding interracial marriage. Garcia et al. (2015), using data from the General Social Survey, examined public attitudes related to laws regarding interracial marriage in the U.S. between 1972 and 2002 and reached three conclusions that bear on the topic we are investigating. First, social acceptance of interracial marriage has increased dramatically. Second, older people of all races, and this is relevant when looking at parents-in-law, are generally less accepting of interracial marriage. Third, Whites are less accepting of interracial marriage than people of other races.

Despite growing acceptance, historical societal factors (such as discrimination, anti-miscegenation laws, and cultural taboos) have negatively affected couples in interracial marriages (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006). Even since the passage of *Loving v. Virginia*, couples may feel a toll (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Killian, 2003; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Skinner & Hudac, 2017). Bratter and Eschbach (2006) used five years of pooled data from the National Health Interview Survey to compare the likelihood of experiencing psychological distress among interracial married/cohabiting adults. Being in an interracial couple was linked to higher rates of distress as compared to same-race couples. Those with an interracial partner who reported higher distress included Native American men, Hispanic men, White women, women married to non-White spouses, and African American or Native American husbands or wives. Skinner and Hudac (2017) found that White and Black interracial couples experience more reactions of affective and implicit bias compared to White and Black same-race couples.

Coping and adaptive strategies can help to combat the stress faced by interracial couple. Killian (2003) interviewed 12 interracial couples to learn about the strategies they used to combat racism both in society and in personal relationships. Six strategies arose: (a) fighting fire with fire (e.g., scowling back at people who made racist remarks); (b) making a special effort (e.g., dressing nicely when going out); (c) dissociating from one another (e.g., not sitting together on public transportation); (d) not discussing public reactions (e.g., not sharing any racism that was experienced that day); (e) restricting itineraries (e.g., avoiding travel to the Deep South); and (f) deprioritizing racial and ethnic differences (e.g., considering themselves like other couples; Killian, 2003, p. 8). Among the 76 African American and White interracial couples that Leslie and Letiecq (2004) surveyed, having pride in one's race and being accepting of other races were the most significant predictors of marital quality among the African American partners. Further, the more the African American partners had a strong Black identity, the less ambivalent they felt about the marriage. For White partners, viewing White culture as superior to Black culture was associated with less marital satisfaction.

The research also looks at familial influences on the interracial couple. Using data from three separate General Social Surveys completed in 2000, 2010, and 2012, Djamba and Kimuna (2014) examined the attitudes of both Black and White Americans regarding how they felt about relatives marrying outside of their race. The authors found that more than half of Black Americans and one-quarter of White Americans favored a close relative marrying either a White or Black person, respectively. Bell and Hastings (2015) interviewed 38 individuals who were partnered in Black and White interracial relationships to explore the couples' experiences, particularly pertaining to parental approval or disapproval. They found that while all the interracial couples endured societal disapproval, most felt parental support helped to mitigate the negative impact of societal disapproval.

One of the few surveys of parents' attitudes about having a child-in-law of a different race came from survey data from the Baylor Religion Study conducted by Perry and Whitehead (2015). The authors found that Whites who identified as Christian nationalists had a significantly greater degree of discomfort with a daughter marrying any racial minority, most notably an African American.

Systemic racism, and the recent increase of discord throughout our country, have the potential to significantly impact interracial couples and should not be overlooked. Further, intergenerational differences concerning views on race relations have shown the younger generation to be more open to such relationships so that parents-in-law may have more difficulty accepting an interracial marriage in their family than their child and child-in-law (Frey, 2016). At the same time, the literature suggests that couples in interracial marriages are impacted by other factors that lead to increased personal and relationship-related stress. While many have developed coping strategies, individuals with spouses of a different race or ethnicity may face societal opprobrium as well as rejection from other family members.

### **In-law Research**

The research literature on in-laws provides another context for considering the lived experience of interracial couples. As the in-law relationship is considered an involuntary one (Morr Serewicz, 2008), a parent approving of her or his child's selection of a spouse could go a long way toward enhancing the intergenerational ties. Apostolou and colleagues (2014) conducted three studies in Cyprus in which participants were asked to hypothesize about mate selection both for themselves as well as for their son or daughter. In each study, participants believed it would be more important for their child than for themselves to marry someone with a similar family orientation and a similar religion and ethnicity. One reason the match was believed to be less important for the parents than for their children was that the parents valued long-term mating strategies for their children more than for themselves.

A number of researchers (e.g., Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Merrill, 2007; Turner et al., 2006) have looked at a mother-in-law's relationship with her daughter-in-law, while few have studied the relationship with the son-in-law. None has focused on interracial or inter-ethnic relationships. Turner et al. (2006) conducted focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 19 mothers-in-law, 16 of whom were White and three of whom were Hispanic. In these intraracial relationships, many said that they were struggling to let go of

their son without losing a connection to him and that they struggled with their relationship with their daughter-in-law even though it had begun positively. Others had very positive relationships with their daughter-in-law and felt included in the lives of their son and daughter-in-law.

Merrill (2007) interviewed 14 White mothers-in-law and 53 daughters-in-law. Mothers-in-law tended to give more positive descriptions of the in-law relationship than did their daughters-in-law. Merrill, consistent with Turner et al. (2006), also noted that mothers-in-law worried about losing contact with their son and so were less likely to express that there was conflict with their daughter-in-law. The reluctance of mothers-in-law to express conflict with their daughters-in-law was also reported in Marotz-Baden and Cowan's (1987) study in Montana. For their sample (no race was given), 44 mothers-in-law and 55 daughters-in-law working together on family-owned farms completed questionnaires. When conflict arose, it usually revolved around differences in values and opinions as well as a lack of communication.

Less is known about relationships with sons-in-law. A sense of inclusion was an important variable in positive relationships. Mikucki-Enyart (2011) used an on-line survey and reached 104 parents-in-law, close to 90% of whom were mothers-in-law and were White. A slight majority chose to describe their relationship with their son-in-law. In examining their communication patterns, Mikucki-Enyart concluded positive relationships existed when parents-in-law felt that their child-in-law was a genuine member of the family, as measured by comfort in disclosures to that child-in-law.

Greif and Woolley (2018) explored, through qualitative interviews and questionnaires, the relationships of 35 fathers-in-law with their sons-in-law. Fathers-in-law who had positive relationships with their sons-in-law were married; close with other children-in-law; did not need physical assistance; were highly inclusive by nature; thought of their son-in-law as a son or as a friend; described their son-in-law as having a strong relationship with their daughter; and had grandchildren.

### **Intergenerational Ambivalence**

The relationships that parents-in-law form with their children and children-in-law can be understood through a lens of intergenerational ambivalence. Ambivalence in family relations refers to feelings that may exist toward a family member that are both positive and negative (Willson et al., 2003). Connidis and McMullin (2002) offer that, "...familial ties can involve more or less ambivalence at different points in the life course" (p. 564). Such feelings between parents and their adult children arise when attempts to negotiate how to make relationships work and resolve any contradictions are thwarted. Turner et al. (2006) write that ambivalence between generations is common, for example, as a young person strives to establish independence from their family of origin, an identity of their own, and also an intimate relationship with their spouse. The young person's parents may have mixed feelings about these attempts while, at the same time, their parents-in-law are trying to redefine their relationship with their own child and their new child-in-law. This dynamic may precipitate lack of clarity in the interactions between the generations.

Ambivalence, as was noted, was also a variable in Leslie and Letiecq's (2004) research on Black-White couples.

The present qualitative study was intended to describe the experiences of parents-in-law whose child married someone of a different race and/or ethnic background. Given how little is known about the growing population of parents-in-law of children in interracial marriages (Livingston, 2017), the goal was to help social workers better understand potential issues that these couples and families may present with when seeking services.

## Methods

The interviews for this preliminary study were gathered as part of a larger mixed-methods study of sons-in-law, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, and daughters-in-law and their relations with their same gender in-law (Greif & Woolley, 2021). One arm of the study, using qualitative methods, had Master of Social Work students in an advanced research class in 2018 and 2019 survey and interview fathers-in-law about their son-in-law and mothers-in-law about their daughter-in-law. Following HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) training, as required by the University's Institutional Review Board, the students were trained in administering a consent form, a survey, and in conducting a qualitative interview. Using convenience sampling, students could interview people they knew and people they recruited using social media platforms (e.g., Facebook). They were required to interview a mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, and son-in-law. The participants could not be related to the student or to each other. In total, 68 parents-in-law participated and 68 children-in-law. Here we report on the results of the interviews with the parents-in-law.

Demographic questions on the survey asked about the participant's race and the daughter- or son-in-law's race, and, if not the same, the race of the child-in-law. No survey questions specifically asked about ethnicity; individuals who responded with Hispanic/Latino to the race question were considered from an ethnic perspective, as per the U.S. Census Bureau definition (2018). We were interested in learning whether having a child in an interracial marriage affected the relationship with that child-in-law. Interview questions included: "How important is your relationship with your daughter-/son-in-law?"; "Describe in broad terms what the relationship is like with each of your in-laws?"; "Describe a difficult event or interaction with your child-in-law"; and "Describe a positive event or interaction with your son- or daughter-in-law." When appropriate based on the survey response, participants were also asked in the interview, "You shared on the survey that there are differences in race with your child-in-law. How do you see the impact of those differences in your relationship with your child-in-law?"

The authors separately read interviews with nine participants who had identified on the survey, and confirmed during the interview, that they and their child-in-law were a different race. In this multiple case analysis (Padgett, 2017), the authors identified initial themes that emerged from the relationships described by study participants. They were sensitized to the topic of interracial relationships through reviewing the literature, a process recommended by Padgett (2017), and to the topic of in-law relationships through their on-

going research with this population. Following Bradley et al.'s (2007) approach to coding thematically where each author separately read all the interviews and identified themes that arose, the authors met to resolve differences in what they had individually coded as themes. The authors then agreed on common themes and returned to the narratives to re-identify themes. They then grouped the respondents within each theme and checked with each other to resolve differences.

## Results

### Description of the Sample

Nine participants of the larger pool indicated on the survey, and confirmed during the interview, that they and their child-in-law were a different race; 59 parents-in-law did not indicate this and so did not meet criteria for participation. This study sample ( $n=9$ ) consists of four males and five females with an average age of 67 years ( $SD = 9$ ; range = 56–83). The average age of the parent-in-law's child was 40 years ( $SD = 8$ ; range = 30–51). Four of the participants identified as White, two as Black/African American, two as South Asian, and one as both Hispanic/Latino and White. The average age of the child-in-law was 41 years ( $SD = 11$ ; range = 27–60). Four of the parents-in-law have grandchildren from this couple's marriage. The average amount of time since the child-in-law married into the family was 8 years ( $SD = 7$ ; range = 1–21). Respondents had an average number of 18 years of education (2 years beyond a Bachelor's degree with a range from 16 to 20 years ( $SD = 2$ ). In terms of household income, one respondent (11%) indicated having a lower-middle income, 3 (33%) endorsed middle, and 5 (56%) endorsed upper-middle.

### Themes from the Interviews

The nine participants described experiences with their children-in-law that fit into four distinct thematic categories; one participant's experience aligned with two of the overarching themes identified. The overarching themes identified included: initial hesitation based on race and/or culture ( $n=4$ ); existing barriers pertaining to communication, language, and/or cultural barriers ( $n=1$ ); existing differences enriching the in-law relationship ( $n=4$ ); and connection related to both the father-in-law and son-in-law being minorities ( $n=1$ ). The following paragraphs further elucidate each of these four unique dynamics by painting a picture of the individual participants and providing pertinent quotations.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Information*

ID	Age	Gender	Race <sup>a</sup>	Child Age	Child-in-law Age	Child-in-law Race <sup>a</sup>	Time in Family <sup>b</sup> (years)	Theme(s)
F	60	Female	White	44	35	Asian	5	I
G	66	Female	White	39	33	Asian	12	I
H	66	Male	White	37	38	Black/African American	13	I
T	83	Male	South Asian	51	52	White	2	II
N	64	Male	White	31	36	Hispanic/Latino	3	I, III
C	56	Female	Black/African American	30	27	Filipino	1	III
D	76	Female	South Asian	47	52	White	21	III
E	58	Female	Black/African American	31	35	White	7	III
R	71	Male	Hispanic/Latino & White	46	60	Native American	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	IV

<sup>a</sup>Racial categories were self-reported by the participant and are categorized in this table based on the U.S. Census Bureau's proposed Race/Ethnicity question for the 2020 Census, which asks about Hispanic/Latino origins in a separate question from race (Wang, 2018). The U.S. Office of Management and Budget classifies individuals who identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish as "...a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (U.S. Census, 2018, para. 1). For the purpose of this table, we include Hispanic/Latino as a racial category.

<sup>b</sup>This survey question was phrased as follows: "How long ago did this [son-in-law or daughter-in-law] marry into your family?"

<sup>c</sup>Information was not collected on this question for this respondent

### ***Theme 1: Initial Hesitation Based on Race/Culture***

The first theme to emerge from these nine interviews can best be described as relationships between a parent-in-law and child-in-law that are marked by initial hesitation based on race (and even racism) and/or cultural differences. Of the four cases that fit into this theme, the parents-in-law describe several different outcomes of their relationships with their children-in-law, which include: still struggling; continuing to have pluses and minuses; and having overcome differences/racism.

Ms. F is a 60-year-old White woman, and the CEO of a computer company. Her 35-year-old mixed-race Asian daughter-in-law married into the family 5 years ago. Ms. F describes a relationship with her daughter-in-law in which she “walks on eggshells” to avoid conflict. She also openly acknowledges the struggle between them and the lack of respect that she has for her daughter-in-law.

*I look at her marriage to my son as almost like a gold-digger type thing. She is a perennial student. God only knows when she will graduate. Thank God they don't have kids. She doesn't work. I value hard work and she has been in school ever since I've known her, which has been almost 12 years. She is 35 and has never finished anything. Never graduated. She goes from one thing to the next. Now she wants to be a nurse. I just don't have a lot of respect for people who don't work when they are capable of working.*

While the lack of respect may be, in part, an issue of personality or personal values, the cultural differences at play between Ms. F and her daughter-in-law are stark, and suggest that Ms. F's initial perceptions of these differences may have stuck in her mind and tainted the dynamic between the two women. Ms. F describes her daughter-in-law's mother, in what could be seen as a racially insensitive term, as a “mail-order bride.”

*She was brought over from Indonesia to marry this guy. She brought three kids over. She married the guy and that's whom P refers to as her dad. They got married and then divorced. She is supposed to be getting married again. I don't know how many marriages this is for her.*

Another study participant, Ms. G, is a 66-year-old White woman, and works in support services at a law firm. She readily acknowledges that racial differences between her 33-year-old adopted Korean daughter-in-law and herself initially presented a challenge. Distinct from Ms. F, whose issues between her and her daughter-in-law stayed the same over time, Ms. G's dynamic with her daughter-in-law has unfolded with both pluses and minuses.

*I think she's wonderful and hardworking and she annoys the hell out of me sometimes. I've been so furious at her that I can't see straight, you know. It just really is the full spectrum.*

Having welcomed her daughter-in-law into their family 12 years ago, Ms. G discusses the racial and religious differences between the two families.

*My son is biracial; his father is African American. My son's wife is Korean; her parents are White. So, here's a good example of their religious differences; I put him in a church choir. He was in that choir for eight years because I thought it was good for him. The other private school boys were in it, and it gave him something constructive to do after school. I liked the structure. My daughter-in-law's parents assumed that there was some religious component that wasn't there ... when they got married. My daughter-in-law could've just kept her mouth shut, but she didn't. She said, 'We can't get married in a chapel or church because he [interviewee's son] isn't baptized.' Her mother's reaction was, 'Don't be ridiculous, of course he's been baptized.' So, there was a big 'oh God, now what?' I said to my son, 'Whatever you want to do: if you want to elope, if you want to get baptized... I don't care.' He said, 'I'll do whatever my fiancée wants me to do.' They compromised. It was fine, but her parents were horrified.*

Ms. G articulated the aftermath of this cultural /religious dissonance. "So, I've been ousted as a total heathen with them." Further along in the interview, Ms. G described how the racial differences between her and her daughter-in-law have played out.

*One day we were somewhere with my son, daughter-in-law, her parents, me, and my son's best friend, who is White. My daughter-in-law turned to me, laughed, and said, 'Look at us and our Caucasian entourage, which I thought ... was hilarious. Also, they've had some weird stuff. For example, they moved into a development and they went to a homeowners' meeting and they got kind of a weird reception, but it doesn't seem to bother them, and people get over it.'*

Two other cases grouped in this theme of initial hesitation based on racial and cultural differences take a turn from the first two described above, in which Ms. F continued to struggle and Ms. G described the in-law dynamic as the "full spectrum". Both Mr. N and Mr. H detail a process of confronting initial hesitation based on bias or overt racism, respectively, as it pertained to their sons-in-law, and eventually overcoming this bias, even undergoing personal growth.

Mr. N, a White 64-year-old retired man appears here because of what he articulated about the initial hesitation based on bias that he had in relation to his son-in-law from Guatemala and the process that he went through to overcome this. Mr. N shared that he had to "readjust his thinking" in the process of coming to terms with the fact that his daughter was in love with his future son-in-law, despite the apparent racial, cultural, and financial differences at play.

*I think we just realized that L and V really loved each other and that was the most important, and the fact that she was making an informed choice to pursue the relationship with V. In the end, we realize that we can either be happy with the decision and be happy with them, or we can do things that will ultimately alienate us from our child, and we don't want that either. We realized this is her decision, that she loved V, and that prompted us to look for the good things in V and accept him as our son-in-law.*

Despite his initial hesitation about the racial and cultural differences, Mr. N articulated his eventual desire for a close relationship with his son-in-law.

*I really don't have any negative feelings toward V. I think that I would like to be able to spend more time and get to know him better. He's quite private. There would be more opportunity for self-revealing that would lead to a deeper friendship if we lived closer.*

Arguably the most profound shift in relationship dynamics among these study participants comes from Mr. H, a retired, 66-year-old White, Jewish man. Mr. H shared his journey from what initially was overt racism toward his African American son-in-law to having overcome those feelings, leading to growing personally and, now, enjoying a fulfilling and open relationship with his son-in-law. Mr. H reported his initial perception once he found out that his daughter was going to marry an African American.

*I did not know him well at all. I don't know how long it took before I even met him. When they got engaged, my wife and I were on vacation, and I got a call that morning from my daughter that he had proposed to her. I didn't know what to do at that point.... [I wondered] whether I should kill myself now or later.*

Mr. H shed insight into the initial shift of perspective that he underwent from racism to how he feels today about his son-in-law.

*It started to shift as I got to know him. Once they got engaged, they were married within a year, so I started to see him a little more. It wasn't like it is now, because I think it was still a guarded kind of relationship. It definitely took me time to change my views and my opinion of him. I had only had a negative opinion of him because he was Black. I hate to say that but I didn't know anything else about him.*

Mr. H articulated some of the events that occurred, both leading up to the marriage and afterward, that illustrate his process of accepting his son-in-law.

*He's got a very good job. When they first decided to get married, when he first proposed, and I found out... he didn't ask for my permission because he was afraid I was going to say no... but once they decided to get married, he ended up converting to Judaism, which I thought was really something. I never expected it. I never brought it up. It was something he did on his own, and I think that made me really believe he's the perfect one. He's Black, okay... it's something I have to overlook and live in the 21st century.*

Mr. H expounds on his current degree of closeness with his son-in-law, and the openness between them about their differences.

*We're very close now. When he first became my son-in-law, we weren't. He was always afraid of me, which I later found out. We do a lot of family things together, and he's at my house, whether it's for dinner or whatever the occasion, so we talk about a lot of different subjects, and about him being Black and me being White. We talk a lot about racial issues, how I grew up and what I faced, and what he goes through being a Black person. Our relationship is very strong and we're very*

*open to one another. I'm not afraid to say how I feel, and we can discuss it. I definitely understand where he's coming from.*

Mr. H reflected back over the personal shift that he went through in accepting his son-in-law, a challenging situation that turned into a positive one: "I look at what it is and I think that I've changed for the better in that I'm much more open-minded today than I was years ago."

In these four cases, it was common for parents-in-law to experience some initial hesitation in relation to a child-in-law based on racial and/or cultural differences. These parents-in-law spanned a wide spectrum in terms of where they ended up regarding their current dynamic with their child-in-law. Ms. F is still struggling; Ms. G acknowledged that pluses and minuses remain; and Mr. N and Mr. H largely overcame their biased and racist viewpoints.

### ***Theme II: Cultural Barriers***

The theme of communication, language, and/or cultural barriers emerged in the relationships between parents-in-law and their children-in-law. One of the participants' experiences was best categorized under this thematic umbrella.

Mr. T is an 83-year-old man from India, retired, with a PhD in Economics, whose 52-year-old White son-in-law married into his family two years ago. Mr. T painted a rich picture of cultural distinctions that exist between his own culture of origin and his son-in-law's culture of origin in the United States. This dynamic was highlighted when Mr. T was asked about differences between his and his son-in-law's parenting philosophies.

*In our culture, a child depends on the parent until he's grown up and gets a job. Lives in the same house. So, I think if there are parental differences, it's because of culture. In this country, they send the child out after high school, to live on their own and earn money. Not true in our case. If a child is less than 21, they are welcome to stay at home, we don't kick them out.*

As the interview progressed, Mr. T shared how his own cultural assimilation over time in the United States shifted his views and expectations of interracial marriage.

*I don't see these differences anymore. Partly because we have been here almost 60 years, we are conscious of American culture a little bit. We are not new here. We are part of the culture. I believe we are less Indian now than we are American. Otherwise, we would not have allowed this intercultural marriage. Not that we would not have allowed, but she's 21, or whatever, she can do whatever she wants, but the whole idea is we agreed to it.*

Mr. T shared his thought process pertaining to acceptance of his daughter's marriage to a White man from the U.S., further illuminating the culture barriers surrounding traditional marriage in India that he has overcome.

*If we had moved at a later stage, she might have been married to an Indian anyway. Of course, India is not just one country, there are different religions and castes,*

*parts, and each state has its own language and culture. Therefore, she might have been married outside our community, outside our tribe. So maybe she would have been married to a quote un-quote foreigner for us, but it would not have been an American.*

While there were clearly cultural differences between Mr. T and his son-in-law, these differences are no longer barriers, perhaps due to Mr. T's length of time in the United States, and the two enjoy a close relationship.

### ***Theme III: Differences Enrich***

Four participants described the dynamics with their child-in-law as one in which the differences between them enriched the relationship.

Mr. N's (already described in the "Initial Hesitation Based on Race/Culture" theme above) story is one example of differences enriching a relationship. Mr. N's 36-year-old son-in-law, from Guatemala, met his daughter in an English as a Second Language class she was teaching, and married into the family three years ago. Mr. N explained the differences between his daughter and son-in-law:

*When L was in college, I imagined she would find a boyfriend there and marry someone who was from a similar socioeconomic background. It is natural for parents to think that ... I had to readjust my thinking when we realized that this was serious and that they were going to get married. L is obviously more educated than V, but V has lots of intuitive knowledge. I think that they're well suited for each other because of that. He is equally intelligent to L but just hasn't had the opportunities to get an education like she has.*

Mr. N explained how the differences between his son-in-law and himself have impacted their relationship, ultimately strengthening it.

*I think that they enrich our relationship in a lot of ways. For example, having gone to Guatemala and seen his parents and the culture, we have grown to appreciate the richness that a cross-cultural son-in-law brings to our family. V's brother and sister and uncle live in Baltimore, so we've had a chance to meet his extended family and celebrate Christmas with them in some uniquely Guatemalan ways. We have accepted V as part of the family and appreciate the cultural enrichment having him as part of the family brings.*

Another participant, whose racial and cultural differences with her daughter-in-law have enriched their relationship, is Ms. C, a 56-year-old African American woman who works as a registered nurse. Ms. C describes a "very close" relationship with her 27-year-old Filipino daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law met her son, a military service member, when she was the server administrator for an online video game that her son also played. Ms. C spoke to the cultural differences between her son and daughter-in-law.

*She is from the Philippines. She was raised Christian, so there is no religious difference there. They're both really into computers and computer games.*

*Culturally, Filipino women are very dedicated, very hardworking, and very loyal. So, truthfully, with his career, that's the perfect kind of woman he needs.*

Ms. C also elaborated on the cultural adjustment that her daughter-in-law experienced moving from the Philippines to the United States.

*It has been a culture shock for her because she has not started looking for jobs outside the home. She just got all her paperwork allowing her to work officially outside the home. She was initially in culture shock because when she was in the Philippines, she was used to working 10-hour days and making this crazy little amount of money. Here they are starting at, like, \$10 an hour.*

As she articulated the importance of the compatibility between her son and daughter-in-law, as well as the close dynamic that has developed between her daughter-in-law and herself, it can be concluded that Ms. C has always looked beyond racial and cultural differences.

*I feel like she truly was a great match for my son. They have such similar interests. They're very even-tempered people. I really believe they were meant for one another. We literally talk about everything. There is no subject that she doesn't broach with me. She told me about growing up, her relationship with her parents, the difference between them, and the health issues that she's had. She hasn't been secretive about anything.*

A third participant, Ms. D, is a 76-year-old self-described homemaker, originally from India, who discussed her relationship with her 52-year-old White daughter-in-law who married into the family 21 years ago. Ms. D suggested that, although she and her daughter-in-law are from different generations and cultures, they have found a way in which these dissimilarities enrich their relationship. Ms. D spoke to the initial political differences between the two women and the evolution that occurred.

*One of the best experiences I've had with my daughter-in-law is talking politics. When they got married, she was a southern Baptist and a staunch Republican. Now she's more a Democrat than me. She volunteers, so when Obama won, she and I had the best moment, and were on a high. One of the things that we have in common is we're both Democrats. She is very appreciative that she was a Republican and I helped her get better informed.*

Ms. D also spoke directly regarding the racial, ethnic, and religious differences between the two women.

*Even though she's Southern Baptist, she's Christian, and she believes in Jesus as the Son of God, she's Vedantic in many ways. So, religion has never been a problem with us. They've gone to India and she's been very open to everyone there. All our relatives love her. She gives them something that is very genuine. She's very forthright as we discovered.*

A final example of a relationship between a parent-in-law and child-in-law in which the racial and cultural differences enriched the dynamic comes from a 58-year-old African American K-12 female substitute teacher, Ms. E, who was previously married to a man,

but is now married to a woman. Ms. E describes the relationship with her 35-year-old White daughter-in-law who has been married to her daughter for seven years. Ms. E set the stage for the interviewer by explaining her thoughts regarding the background of this relationship.

*First of all, I did not know that she was bringing a woman home, but that's okay. When I dropped her off at college, I never knew that she would find someone of the same sex. I really didn't imagine that for her. When she was twelve, she told me that she loved me, and that she didn't care that I liked women. She said that it was okay but she was not going to be like that. And then I drop her off at college, and three years later she comes home with a woman. It was just... it was nice. It was relatable to me because, you know, I am married to a woman.*

Ms. E expressed having a relationship with her daughter-in-law in which “we respect each other's difference,” in this way portraying both the initial hesitation that she felt and subsequent openness with which she has addressed both her daughter's lesbian relationship as well as the racial differences.

*Because she was Caucasian, I know there is a difference in the way they grew up. I did have some apprehensions about the fact that she married out of her race. Don't get me wrong; I don't see anything wrong with that. It was just different. I had always seen her with young Black males at the school when she went to the prom...well I think that was just a front...it was a good front, because it fooled me. I didn't have any preconceived ideas about what I thought my in-law relationship would be. I just took it at face value and dealt with it that way.*

Ms. E shared more about how and why the racial differences, and same-sex marriage, at play between her daughter and daughter-in-law have caused her concern and worry.

*The fact that she's Caucasian and my daughter is African-American, when I first thought about it, I was like 'oh, okay.' I recognize a difference and I hope and pray that they can come together. However, when you come from different backgrounds, sometimes it's hard to maintain. In my generation growing up, I saw interracial couples being treated really badly. But they never told me anything that they had experienced about that. Because they have a double whammy—they are gay and they are interracial. So, if you look at it from the right-wing perspective, I just pray that they don't have to deal with the interracial relationship type situations that went on in my era.*

The above cases illustrate relationships between a parent-in-law and child-in-law in which the racial differences served to enrich the relationship. In summary, these dynamics are as follows: (1) Mr. N, who regards the racial and ethnic differences as ultimately strengthening; (2) Ms. C, who acknowledges the existence of stark cultural differences, but emphasizes the importance of the compatibility between her son and daughter-in-law; (3) Ms. D for whom cultural and generational differences between her daughter-in-law and herself augment the relationship; and (4) Ms. E, who describes a relationship in which respecting differences is the key ingredient for a wholesome and satisfying in-law relationship.

***Theme IV: Both Minorities***

All eight of the nine cases described up to this point have involved either the parent-in-law or the child-in-law being a racial and/or cultural minority, but not both of them. The dynamic changes with the final theme in which both the parent-in-law and child-in-law are minorities. Mr. R is a 71-year-old retired executive coach who identifies as half-Cuban and half-White. His 60-year-old Native American son-in-law is married to his 46-year-old daughter.

Mr. R opened the interview by speaking to his concerns surrounding the age difference between his daughter and son-in-law.

*At first, I had concerns. I was worried about my daughter in their relationship. She is younger, so there's that age difference, and I worried about her being able to pursue her interests and live her life. She'd never been married, and my son-in-law is older, so I wasn't sure how it was going to work. I worried that he would not give her the space she needed. She always lived by herself and didn't have kids so she always made her own decisions. It's hard to change that and your ways when you're married and live together.*

Mr. R described his son-in-law, and his racial/ethnic background, as follows:

*My son-in-law is of Cherokee descent; he's very proud of being Cherokee. You can't miss him; he's a 'big person.' He is a good man, but I mean he really is a big guy, very, very tall.*

Mr. R also described how the cultural differences in his relationship with his son-in-law influenced their relationship.

*If anything, I can relate to him in the aspect of being "other." I am half-Cuban, half-White, and I've lived here almost all my life, but I feel Cuban, and we both share that, the being connected to our heritage.*

Further along in the interview, Mr. R shared how the bonding process that the two men went through related in part to their similar ages and in part to a shared interest.

*I see him as a friend, almost. We're not that far away in age, so we can really talk and be around each other. Not that long ago we had a really nice time, nothing special or planned; we were just spending time and having drinks. We ended up drinking a whole bottle of whiskey while talking. Just two guys sitting, drinking, and talking about life. It wasn't forced or weird and after that I really felt closer, like we had begun a friendship.*

Toward the end of the interview, Mr. R described his current sense of connection with his son-in-law.

*I feel close to him. We take cruises and vacations together. I care about him and there is this mutual sense of respect. He is a caring man and those are really big characteristics.*

Mr. R described a rich and unique dynamic between his son-in-law and himself, in which the shared experience of both men being racial and cultural minorities brought them closer.

The above four themes provide a glimpse into the experiences of nine parents-in-law who are of different racial or ethnic backgrounds than their children-in-law. The following discussion section ties our findings to relevant literature, after which we address limitations and implications for social work practice.

## Discussion

Consistent with research suggesting that, from the perspective of parents-in-law, in-law relationships between the two generations are frequently viewed as positive (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2012; Merrill, 2007), most relationships in this study sample evolved over time, ending up in a positive place.

Nonetheless, struggles do exist in in-law relationships even when race and culture are not different, and such struggles often center around communication (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Mikucki-Enyart, 2011). Taking the concept of struggle deeper, Connidis and McMullen (2002) discuss ambivalence arising in relation to structural contradictions manifest in interactions, such as family ties. The present study offers further support for these findings. In this study sample, struggles emerged related to culture and language, and Mr. A's relationship with his child-in-law from a different cultural background is an example of a relationship that began with pre-existing ambivalence, even though the ambivalence resolved over time.

The experience of diversity within a family is a complex phenomenon. While we live in a racist society, the addition of a family member is enriching for many families (Greif & Woolley, 2018), and many individuals in society value seeing their son or daughter happily married. The current study suggests that this potential contradiction is one that can raise ambivalent feelings in a parent. Parents may also value diversity, and even have a history of welcoming people of diverse races into their family, yet still wonder about how bi-racial grandchildren might fare. We hypothesize that people who marry someone from a different race or culture may have been raised in a family where acceptance of others was a byword, as we heard from Ms. D and Ms. E. While such openness to others could be handed down inter-generationally as a value (e.g., Bowen, 1985), it may be experienced differently when individuals are asked to accept someone racially different from themselves into their family.

Bell and Hastings (2015), reporting on parental disapproval, found that openness to others is a positive trait for parents-in-law. However, sometimes acceptance never becomes part of an interracial in-law relationship. Not accepting a daughter- or son-in-law may be due to a number of factors, which could include a parent-in-law feeling excluded by the couple (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011) or being unclear to what extent they are accepted, leading to ambivalence. The present research extends findings on acceptance by indicating that even when race is immediately identified as a barrier, and in some cases never overcome, families may forge ahead with their relationships. For example, race, as Mr. H admitted,

was the crux of his initial hesitation, although he was able to overcome it with both time and by getting to know his son-in-law better.

Still, differences can be difficult to surmount and, even if the parents-in-law come to accept someone of a different race or culture, others in their family or social network may never come around and can make family gatherings uncomfortable. Greif et al. (2019), in their study of gay and lesbian couples, found that in-law relationships were often hampered by the extended network, even when the mother- or father-in-law was accepting of the couple. The case of Ms. E, in this study, an African-American mother-in-law whose daughter married a white woman, also emphasizes this finding.

Killian (2003) described how couples have to navigate talking about race, sometimes avoiding it. Mr. R's situation in this study paints an opposing picture. Both he and his son-in-law consider themselves as an "other" within the majority society which helped to reinforce their relationship. His account underpins the part that race plays for both generations as they negotiate around their relationship and the broader society, and we see openness around race as a reason and catalyst for bonding.

Other researchers (e.g., Greif & Woolley, 2018) have found that fathers-in-law are closer with sons-in-law when there are grandchildren. That may be truer for same race marriages. In this study, the presence of grandchildren did not seem to impact relationships, perhaps because the legacy of carrying on family traditions is less clearly delineated when a grandchild is bi-racial or multi-ethnic.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Social workers may receive a referral for, or be working with, families where an interracial marriage is planned or has already occurred. Given that interracial couples experience more marital stress than same-race couples (Brown et al., 2019), social workers may have to provide additional support to the interracial couple as they navigate both society and, as our research indicates, potential family opprobrium.

To engage in these conversations, social workers must be aware of their own biases and beliefs. Sue et al. (2016) advise, "The cultural perspectives of clients may often clash with the well-intentioned social worker, who must develop culturally appropriate intervention strategies in working with clients and client systems" (p. 22). Cultural competence is an on-going process, Sue et al. (2016) state, and involves understanding oneself and being, "... vigilant to prevent emotional reactions that may lead to a negation of other group values and lifestyles" (p. 39). Working with parents-in-law around inter-generational issues, social workers will recognize that, as Marotz-Baden and Cowan (1987) and Mikucki-Enyart (2011) suggest, while talking about race and ethnicity openly is not often easy, willingness on the part of parents-in-law to communicate in general and to discuss issues directly with their children-in-law can foster better relations. Social workers can help lay the groundwork for encouraging open communication by raising the importance of the concept during sessions with clients.

Social workers should also be attuned to the role that microaggressions may play in the relationship. According to Sue et al. (2019), microaggressions can vary on a continuum from the overt, intentional and explicit, to the unintentional and implicit. Parents-in-law, in an attempt to become closer to their child-in-law and solidify their relationship with their child, may not be aware of their own communications and behaviors which may be a reiteration of what their child-in-law is experiencing in broader society. For parents-in-law who are struggling in their relationship with a son- or daughter-in-law who is different from them, one approach is to educate them about the negative societal narratives around people of color—such as, Asians or Blacks, among others (Robinson-Wood et al., 2018)—to which they might be susceptible. Furthermore, encouraging more inter-generational communication geared towards learning about each others' family experiences and cultures of origin may also promote greater understanding and acceptance.

Finally, accepting that relationships can be ambivalent both with one's child and one's child-in-law can help normalize what a parent is feeling (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Turner et al., 2006). Such an awareness can also lead to discussions about how the parent-in-law, and potential grandparent of a multi-racial child, can become an ally in combatting racism by speaking out against it (Sue et al., 2019).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the use of a sample gathered at one point in time. Family relationships can be highly dynamic (Connidis & McMullin, 2002), and an interview at another time could have produced different results. In addition, the participants usually knew the student interviewers and, because people are often uncomfortable admitting to feelings that might depict them as racist, this might have led to more contextually desirable responses. Therefore, the nature of an in-law struggle may have been consciously or unconsciously denied.

Another limitation is that only one question was specifically used during the interviews to ask about the interracial nature of the marriage and the parent-in-law's relationship with the child-in-law. Additional questions would have allowed obtaining information about other family reactions to the interracial couple and the context in which the couple lives. Certain regions of the country, and even neighborhoods, may be more friendly to interracial couples, which could result in less stress on them (Killian, 2003). Also, the educational level of the respondents was higher than the national average (Census, 2020, Table 3), which brings into question the generalizability of our findings. A final limitation was that multiple interviewers conducted the interviews. Despite training, questions may have been asked by different interviewers in different ways.

### **Conclusion**

Four overarching themes were identified in this preliminary exploration of interracial and cross-cultural in-law relationships. Future research on in-law relationships could benefit from longitudinal studies (Morr Serewicz, 2008). Changes in the social environment can affect how families are seen by society as well as by other family

members, so studying interracial and cross-cultural families across time might help identify just how families are affected.

While it might seem ideal, and enriching, for parents-in-law to positively embrace the addition of a family member from a different background, this does not always occur. In fact, as evidenced by the current debates around immigration policies in the United States, potential struggles emerging from a world health crisis where Chinese have been viewed by some as blameworthy, and the 2020 racial protests views of race and race relations are continuing to undergo dynamic shifts. Social workers working with interracial couples and their families must be knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, this ever-changing cultural environment and the fact that the environments may change dramatically from one geographic community to the next.

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