



An exploration of ego-defense mechanisms in mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship

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Abstract

Usually a mother-in-law – daughter-in-law relationship is not found to be a smooth one. Some psychological issues disconnect them. Lack of harmony in this relationship leads to increased stress in familial interactions. The present study is an attempt to explore various ego-defense mechanisms adopted by mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in their interaction during conflicting situations. The sample consisted of two subgroups namely daughters-in-law (n=33) and mothers-in-law (n=45). Purposive sampling was done from various districts of Kerala, India. Semi-structured interview schedule and personal information schedule were used for data collection. For analyzing the data, thematic analysis was adopted. The results revealed various kinds of ego-defense mechanisms adopted by them in terms of its frequency and contextual peculiarity.

Key words:- daughter-in-law, ego-defense mechanisms, mother-in-law, psycho analysis, psychosomatic disorders.

Introduction

In Indian culture, mostly marriage is an event between families, and a lady who is getting married stays along with her husband's family for a long time, till she starts an independent living with her husband and children, either in a separate house or in the in-law's place. They are usually not allowed to stay separately, easily, though nowadays due to girls' education and female employment the young couple have to shift away from their own houses. If so the bride groom of a family suffer from a lot of adjustment problems from his parental side. For women, family relationships are tied to their sense of well-being and quality of life (Turner, Young, & Black, 2006). Married women are expected to create bonds and maintain the ties and traditions of both sides of the family (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001, as cited

in Turner, Young, & Black, 2006).

The mother-in-law – daughter-in-law relationship is one of the most complex relationships. A son's marriage creates perhaps the most ambivalent and yet one of the most critical relationships, that of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Fischer, 1983, 1986, as cited in Turner, Young, & Black, 2006). In some cases, even though the wife loves and shows respect to the mother-in-law, many a time, some unknowing psychological issues disconnect them. As a result of these psychological issues and conflicts, anxiety arises for both of them.

The concept of anxiety is prominent in the psychoanalytic view point. All conflicts are accompanied by anxiety. Anxiety is the anticipation of danger to be experienced in the future. It can even occur in the absence of any objective external threat. The threat that causes anxiety can be unconscious, and the person may not be aware of the source (Carson & Butcher, 1992).

Freud distinguished among three types of anxiety, or "psychic pain", that people can suffer, such as (a) reality anxiety, arising from dangers or threats in the external world, (b) neurotic anxiety, caused by the id's impulses threatening to break through ego controls into behavior that will be punished in some way, and (c) moral anxiety, arising from a real or contemplated action that is in conflict with an individual's superego and thus arouses feelings of guilt (Carson & Butcher, 1992).

Anxiety is a signal to take action. When faced with anxiety, the ego automatically attempts to reduce it; at the same time it should reduce the potential danger. Often, the ego cope with anxiety through rational measures. If these do not suffice, the ego resorts to irrational protective measures that are referred to as *ego defense mechanism* (Comer, 2004). Different defense mechanisms discharge or soothe anxiety, but they do so by helping an individual push of painful ideas out of consciousness rather than by dealing directly with a problem. For the individual, this results in a distorted view of reality.

Three matters are usually recognized concerning the defenses in general. First, they are used to avoid or reduce negative emotional states such as conflicts, frustration, anxiety, stress, and the like. Second, most defense mechanisms involve a distortion of reality. Third, persons are not consciously aware of their use of most defense mechanisms. If they were aware of their distortions, the distortions would not be effective for reducing the negative emotional states (Carson & Butcher, 1992).

Mother-in-law - daughter-in-law relationship is viewed as complex in myths, legends, stories, literature and movies; and considered to be filled with conflict. Other than the warmth, love, caring and concern between an elder, experienced wise person and a youngster, usually hatred, hostility, anger, and ego clashes are reported in the relation. Mother-in-law - daughter-in-law relationship can never be equated to the

relation between mother and daughter. Establishing a positive in-law bond is essential for personal and relational development.

An attempt is made through the study to explore the patterns of ego defense mechanisms evolved between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, during their inter relationships and styles of conflict.

Objectives

1. To analyze the pattern of defense mechanisms used by mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law during their interaction and conflicting situations.
2. To analyze the kinds of anxiety experienced by both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

Method Sample

The sample for the present study was drawn purposefully from various districts of Kerala. First subsample included 45 mothers-in-law of age ranging from 40 – 60 years and second subsample included 33 daughters-in-law of age ranging from 17 – 45 years. Care was taken to exclude participants with history of any mental illness.

Measures:

In-depth interview: The investigator approached each participant personally and the purpose was disclosed. Data collection was conducted in individual settings but in the respondents' house in most of the cases. As there were two subsamples, both of them were met separately and individually. Rapport was established with each participant after revealing the purpose of the study. After attaining informed consent, the two subsample (mother-in-law & daughter-in-law group) were studied with slightly different questions. Date, time and place were fixed as per the convenience of the participants. Initial items were used to study the background of the person such as demographic details, financial background, presence of father-in-law, number of offspring, number of members in the family and the like, whereas final questions were directly targeting on the inter personal conflict, communication, coping styles adopted in different time (soon after marriage, later on, sustainable style adopted and the like). For recording of the responses, key note method was used with the consent of the interviewee. Important aspects of their answers were noted down. The interviews were closed thankfully and professional support or referral service were offered whenever necessary, when the participants expressed a need to solve their adjustment issues, such as daily life affected due to conflicts or psycho somatic issues.

In the semi-structured interview schedule, items related to their inter relationships and conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were framed in advance, which were descriptive in nature. They were assessed by two experts in

Psychology to fix validity. Repetition of items were used at times to assure confirmation of data.

Results and Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the ego-defense mechanisms used by mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law during their interaction and conflicts. In the present study, 78 cases were studied by analyzing the verbal communication between in-laws, especially mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The sample included two subsamples, namely daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. The data were collected through interview method by fixing appointments. The communication between subsamples, their interactions, contexts and cause of conflicts were recorded through key note method and content analyzed. Thematic analysis was adopted for analyzing the data.

While analyzing the anxiety experienced by daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law participants, it can be seen that they experience all the three types of anxiety, as per the level of conflict. In a smooth relation, usually there is no chance for extreme anxiety, but difficulties in adjustment will cause the development of anxiety. When conflicts develop into a forefront fight or direct physical/verbal attack, mother-in-law usually perceived daughter-in-law as a real threat for their existence and vice-versa. This can be rated as a *realistic anxiety*. But in many of the cases studied, where mother-in-law was educated, young (in middle age) and called herself as 'modern and cultured', this direct attack was not possible even when she felt that daughter-in-law was keeping/taking away the lovable object of hers (son). This blocking of expression was mainly due to moral reasons which may cause for moral anxiety. Here expressions were done whenever possible only in disguised manner. Though the level of *neurotic anxiety* was not specifically studied in the present study, internalisation of anxiety was evident more in the mother-in-law, during the initial years after marriage whereas also reported in the daughter-in-law, as years passed. Psychosomatic symptoms such as pain disorders, tension headache, nausea, frequent breathlessness and so forth were some of the usual difficulties reported.

The neurotic anxiety could be seen more among the mothers-in-law through the dialogues such as "I lost my son", "my son for me as if he had dead", "I'm the animal about to sacrifice", and the like. Self talk or direct comments of mother-in-law, as if it has too many meaning or aim. For example, "I'm ready to go to the old age home", "she has bent my son's points of view", "both kinship and marriage relationship are different", and so forth. Almost all of them expressed the symptoms of psychosomatic disorders. Only those daughters-in-law who didn't have a smooth relation with the husband reported to have symptoms of psychosomatic disorders. In many cases pretention of illness was also used by both daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, to attract attention of husband/ son. This was reported by both participants, by

citing evidences. As Song and Zhang (2012) reported, the husband plays an important role in his wife and mother's relational well-being.

Both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law experienced anxiety in the sharing of a man's love. Mother-in-law expressed it through the words such as, "he had been brought up by me for the last 35 years". Daughter-in-law's comments back included, "I could understand your son within 35 days", "Why don't you brought up other sons?", "Why don't you die?" and so forth.

Same issues were viewed by both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law differently. But they never attempted for a conflict resolution. Both of them used a lose-lose conflict strategy approach and they couldn't collaborate; especially soon after marriage. The level and intensity of anxiety/stress felt in these kinds of relations couldn't be assessed just through the method adopted for the study.

Types of defense mechanism used by mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law

Throughout the analysis, the investigator could find out various types of defense mechanisms that were expressed both by mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Some of them were more found common among mothers-in-law such as *repression*, *reaction formation* and *isolation*. The mechanism of *suppression*, *denial* and *withdrawal* were found common among daughters-in-law. Both of them have used the same type of defense mechanisms in some occasions such as *regression*, *splitting*, *projection*, *displacement* and *emotional insulation*. In projection itself, *complementary projection* were more among mother-in-law. *Displacement* was used during fight situations by in-laws including sister-in-law. *Emotional insulation* was expressed by daughter-in-law in the beginning but by mother-in-law after a duration only, where it was evident especially after child birth in the family. *Acting out* was found among both, where the verbal attack was more among mother-in-law and physical aggression was more among daughters-in-law. Though not physically attacking someone, they had expressed it physically through acts such as biting teeth, punching, holding fist, throwing vessels away and so forth. The technique of *sublimation* was rare in the sampling. Both daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law have used crying as a defense mechanism of regression. Both of them accused each other as an act of pretending just to get the emotional support of the son/husband.

15 mothers-in-law have reported that there was no satisfactory sexual relationship between their son and daughter-in-law. It may be a guess work or information gathered through communication with the son, whereas their respective daughters-in-law have reported that a usual relationship existed between them. This can also be because sons might have told to the mother in a wrong way about their relationship just for consoling them or derive sympathy. When it happened to be a guess work of the mother-in-law, we can see that the satisfactory sexual relationship of the son is not easily accepted by the mothers. They try to seek evidences to prove that there does not exist a proper sexual relationship between their son and daughter-

in-law. It can be a kind of *distortion of reality*, or a kind of ego defense mechanism of the mother-in-law, to sooth oneself.

In four instances, the desire had expressed by the mothers-in-law to see the genital area of the daughters-in-law, later extreme love was experienced between them. Here, intrusion into the privacy of the daughters-in-law were found. Among this, one instance can be related to *reaction formation*. The mother-in-law was crying and hugging the daughter-in-law when she came to know that the daughter-in-law could not have sexual relation with her son due to infection in genital area, may be as a part of her initial encounter in sexual relationship. She expressed too much love and care towards the daughter-in-law, when the son went back to work abroad, after a short duration of leave without accompanying his wife. The same participant had reported a reverse of reaction form when her husband returned back and she got pregnant. Reaction formation could be readily read out in the following situation also. The mother-in-law participant empowered the daughter-in-law and gave formal assertiveness training after getting divorce from her own son. After that she arranged a second marriage for the daughter-in-law (in this case, earlier, the son was forced to divorce her by the parents). As a defense mechanism, *reaction formation* was more reported among young mothers-in-law. Especially it was found among educated in-laws and also in the beginning of the relation. Extreme love was expressed in these cases towards daughter-in-law.

Another mother-in-law participant engaged in the activities of painting, sewing, gardening and so forth when she had conflicts with daughter-in-law. It can be a kind of *compliance*, a defense mechanism.

It was found that the daughters-in-law were slowly acquiring the capacity to produce more verbal responses and fighting verbally later. Here they reported that their emotionality was being decreased gradually or they could adopt an ego-defense mechanism of *insulation* or *denial*. In the heightened emotional state, the daughters-in-law were unable to respond verbally.

Eight daughters-in-law have reported that their mothers-in-law had foul smell and they tried to avoid physical nearness and touching with them. While the mothers-in-law came near to them, most of them reported that they tried to stop their breathing in. They never liked to be touched by the mother-in-law and wanted to run away while hugging. But never they were able to make explanations regarding it. In an analysis of the interaction, in terms of the ego defense mechanisms, this can be considered as a kind of *repression*. Dislike toward the mother-in-law was repressed. Likewise the hatred of smell of mother-in-law might have pushed to unconscious, so couldn't explain easily by the daughter-in-law. Visual and auditory expressions of dislike towards the mother-in-law was direct by the daughters-in-law which may be because of less repression. But *suppression* was found in most of the other unliking events or the use of other forms of ego-defense mechanisms. This can also indicate

that repression occurs in brain areas where it doesn't have any capacity for verbal production or unconscious will never be in the left frontal lobe.

Both daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law have reported to be using 'cry' as a defense mechanism of regression. Both of them accused each other as an act of pretending just to get the emotional support of the son/husband whereas repression is like an unconscious defense. Thus they avoid anxiety by the *distortion of reality*. But these processes could be read out by others easily, as noted by children in terms of smell.

Daughters-in-law were found to be very reluctant to share their dress with their daughters (sister-in-law), as per the opinion of mother-in-law participants, against their will. One daughter-in-law expressed her reluctance to share clothes by tearing the new saree which could impress her sister-in-law. Here also, the daughters-in-law were unable to explain the reason for it. This inability for verbal expression can be due to repression or due to role of unconscious in the behavior. The touch was also unexplainable like smell. It may be due to the fact that they didn't like the bodily contact with sister-in-law/mother-in-law just as with their garments.

The daughter-in-law used to talk with her own mother and her husband by closing the door, to keep more privacy. The mother-in-law didn't like this. In the case of three participants, the mother-in-law tried to interfere with couple relation, when they deal with very private matters such as decision of next child and purchase of undergarments or even a sanitary napkin. They did not allow the son to purchase such things, as it is shameful. This is an example of an unconscious *denial* only.

Psychosomatic disorders from the part of mothers-in-law were reported almost in all cases whereas in the present study three cases were reported in daughters-in-law participants. The mothers-in-law themselves reported that their physical illness was caused as a consequence of the worries they had been facing. The presence of such disorders indicate that the mothers-in-law suffer too much emotionally due to the conflicts with in-laws. Some of the mothers-in-law have used it as a sharp weapon against daughter-in-law for attaining support of the son. It can be observed from the comments of son itself as, "my mother will live only for a short period, if she lives along with my wife". In one case, the son was trying to console the mother by saying that "all these are experiments by God". These information were collected both from mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Various types of psychosomatic disorders experienced by both of them were also found out. When the stress/tension cannot be expressed in a healthy manner, slowly, it affects the body as well as physical health too. Asthma, ulcer, hypertension, diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, and so forth were reported frequently in the cases studies. This can also be due to the age and other psychosocial factors of the subsample. Tension head ache and back pain were reported among young daughter-

in-law participants. The findings can be supported with the works of Berkowitz and Perkins (1985) and Humaida (2012).

Major Findings of the study

Repression, reaction formation and isolation were found more common among mothers-in-law whereas the mechanism of *suppression, denial and withdrawal* were found common among daughters-in-law. Both of them have used the same type of defense mechanisms in some occasions such as *regression, splitting, projection, displacement* and *emotional insulation*. Mother-in-law participants had reported psychosomatic disorders such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, ulcer and so forth, whereas daughters-in-law had disorders like tension headache, migraine, backpain, asthma, cervical spondilitis and so forth. Both blamed that other was pretending sick to attract the attention of the boy (son/husband).

Summary and Conclusion

In Eastern culture, marriage happens not only between two individuals but also as a tie of relation between two families. So the persons who are entered into marriage, not only have to adjust between themselves and own family members, but also with the in-law's family members, in terms of their new roles and positions. The new adjustment with the in-law family members are always expected to extend from the bride's side, which can be contribution of gender discrimination. This always creates an extra duty for the girl, where even the own family members may compel her to suffer and sustain in the new family.

In the present study an attempt was made to explore the ego defense mechanisms evolved between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, during their inter relationships and styles of conflict. Mothers-in-law took a dominating role in the relation, where they tried to control the mobility and decision making capacity of the daughters-in-law. The situation may change according to the care and love expressed by son toward the wife as well as age, education and culture of the mother-in-law. Usually mothers-in-law found to be liked to take decision which should be executed by the daughter-in-law. Similarly the financial management was done by mothers-in-law but when that was handed over to daughter-in-law, the mothers-in-law reported to be highly depressed and couple relation was reported as good. Mother-in-law participants had reported psychosomatic disorders such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, ulcer and the like, whereas daughters-in-law had disorders such as tension headache, migraine, back pain, asthma, cervical spondilitis and so forth. Both blamed that other was pretending sick to attract the attention of the boy (son/husband). Mothers-in-law also complained that daughters-in-law as having mental disorders. Mothers-in-law attributed externally for the shortcomings of the son whereas attributed internally for the shortcomings of daughters-in-law.

The present study had limitations of culture, religion, age, socio-economic background, living style and their influence on the family relations. The study can be further conducted extensively, with in-depth analysis focusing more on individual cases. The peculiar observation done in terms of touch and olfactory responses, the level of ego defense mechanisms were indicating signs of unconscious or lack of vocabulary. This can be explored in further research.

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