

Factors That Determine the Nature of Relationship between Mothers and Their Daughters In-Law: A Content Analysis of the ‘Mother In-Law’ Tv Drama Series

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Abstract

The relationship between mothers and their daughters-in-law remains of a strained nature despite the negative impacts it has on communication routines of families. While existing studies focus more on the dyadic relationships, there is a need to determine why this relationship has to be strained. This study therefore examined factors that determine the nature of the relationship between a mother and her daughter’s in-law as portrayed in family drama. Critical content analysis was used to analyze eight episodes of the ‘Mother-in-Law’ TV drama series aired on citizen TV. The episodes were sampled purposively basing on their composition of mother and daughter in-law scenes. Two coders conducted partial transcription of the episodes by playing back, recording and writing the content of the episodes. The summarized transcripts were then analyzed for content. Scott’s pi inter coder reliability value of 0.82 revealed that there was high agreement among the two coders on transcription. Content analysis revealed that independence, family identity, supportive communication, sense of belonging, accommodation, and cultural orientation are critical factors in the relationship between a mother and her daughters-in-law. Provision of an environment that can support these factors could therefore go a long way to improving the strained relations and hence communication routines of families.

Key Words: Nature of relationship, communication routines, supportive communication accommodation, cultural orientation

Introduction

Communication within families remains central to enhanced intra and inter relationships among family members. Indeed, the relational well-being of families has been postulated as an important factor when considering economic, physical and mental health across families (Hao, 1996). Besides, it is a well documented fact that the well being of the family affects the readiness and success of children in school as well as the engagement of youth in positive and productive roles. The need for cohesion in families is further strengthened by interaction between parents and children among others.

Interaction in the mother in-law / daughter in-law context is however noted to be a source of great difficulty in many marriages (Jean, Turner, Young & Black, 2006). Evidence exists showing strained relationships between mother's in-law and their daughter's in-law. Drama has been used to present a venomous power struggle between the family triad that includes the mother, son and daughter in-law (Miller, 2002; Tennessee, 2004). A study by Rawlins (1992) reveals that daughters in-law perceive greater interpersonal distance and have more negative attitude towards mothers in-law. This is further supported by Apter (2009) who contends that two-thirds of married British women complain of long-term unhappiness and stress due to friction with their mothers in-law.

The mother in-law / daughter in-law relationships in the African context take on a more significant dimension. This is so considering that domestic circles in the African context are closely knit and so these two categories of women interact quite often. The significance of interaction between mother's in-law and daughter's in-law in the African context is best explained by Rittenour and Soliz (2009) in arguing that the mother-in-law / daughter in-law relationship is fundamental to the success of marriages in the African context. Other authors share similar sentiments noting that the relationship between mothers in-law and daughters in-law is essential in kin keeping and is also critical in the cross generational family. Moreover, it gains more importance as people continue living (Santos & Levitt, 2007; Turner, Young & Black, 2006).

Literature presents several reasons that could be responsible for the strained relationship between mother's in-law and daughter's in-law. According to Jackson and Berg-Cross (1988), pursuance of different goals and values is responsible for the frequent conflicts between the two women. The media is also believed to contribute significantly in escalating perceived friction between the two groups of women. Cultural activities often aired on electronic media are inundated with depictions of problematic in-law relationships particularly those involving mothers in-law. Situational comedies and other television shows are also over amplifying these problematic relationships. This tends to cultivate a mainstream view of how mothers-in-law are cruel, dominant and intrusive.

The negative images about mothers-in-law have permeated the Kenyan society. Several local TV programmes have zeroed on themes centred on mother in-law / daughter in-law conflicts. The *'Mother in-Law'* programme has been airing on citizen TV since the year 2006. This weekly drama series is demarcated into episodes that focus on unique familial

communication issues surrounding Charity, the mother in-law. The programme uses episodes in order to attract attention of the diverse audience that has diverse needs. Besides, viewers have remained loyal to the programme owing to current familial tensions it addresses.

Despite the array of studies focusing on strained relationships between mother's in-law and daughters in-law, together with the many drama shows that gravitate around mother in-law/daughter in-law tensions, gaps still exist concerning key factors that are causative to these tensions. It remains unclear how daughters in-law are expected to behave when interacting with mothers in-law given that different people have varied likes and dislikes. The purpose of this study was therefore to analyze content of the *'Mother in-Law'* TV programme critically with a view to finding factors that determine the nature of relationships between mother's in-law and daughter's in-law.

Background Information

In general feminism asserts that sex is fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization which to date has subordinated women to men. Thus, feminism is centrally concerned with sex, an organizing principle of social life and one that is thoroughly circulated with power relations. Feminists have argued that the subordination of women occurs across the all range of social institutions and practices that is subjection of women is understood to be a structural condition (Raney and Bryant, 2002).

Television drama series have a long running series which have potentially unlimited time period to tell their stories and have no sense of closure to be found in the feature film. Most of the Television drama series establish a sense of geographical space that the audience can identify with and to which the characters return again and again. Thus the mother in-law programme utilizes the Kenya society and provides charity as a mother in-law who asserts authority and wants all other actors in the society to live an ideal life suitable to the extended African family life (Kukubo, 2009).

Television drama series utilizes the conventions of both realism and melodrama. Indeed they can be differentiated from each other in terms of the balance they struck between these conventions (Burton, 2000) Realism refers to a set of conventions by which drama appears to be a representation of the real world with motivated characters recognizable locations and believable social problems. In contrast, the melodrama is constituted through a heightened sense of dramatic with a focus on emotions and lives torments. Here the characters have insufficient motivation from realist point of view (Rubin, 2002). Reinforced by the same elevated acting style, dramatic music and lingering close-up shots the story line contain a variety of twists and tones that will stretch the credibility of realist narrative.

In studying media enjoyment and communication in television drama series, scholars have assumed a measurable, internally valid relationship between program content and viewer

response (Freadman 2001). How we respond to messages from the media television drama series depends precisely on the extent to which they fit with, or possibly contradict, other messages, other viewpoints that we have come across in other areas of our extended family lives (Gordon ,1993).

The television drama series which concentrate with the themes of interpersonal relationships such as marriages, divorces, break ups, new alliances, arguments, acts of revenge and acts of caring lie at the core of the TV programmes. They provide the narrative dynamic and emotional interest. Given the stress in television drama series on the personal sphere it is understandable that the family forms the mythic centre of the television drama series. It is mythic because the families are the major theme and most of the characters take family roles as the case in the mother in-law programme aired by Citizen TV (Kukubo, 2009). The imaginary ideal of the family is constantly shattered by the arguments, affairs, type of food cooked, and the mode of dress as of the actors in the mother in-law programme. This features named above are the makers of the mother in-law programme. However it is important to recognize that the perception the viewers get from the programme might be different from the intention of the actors (Kukubo 2009).

The TV programmes in Kenya have undergone tremendous improvement in the last few years as a result of competition of the media houses. The programmes commonly known by most viewers include: “Mother in-law”, “Tahidi’ high, “Inspecta Mwala”, “Vioja Mahakamani” among others. Events of everyday life are told in entertaining way using artful storytelling, suspense and video images that resonate with the common life and living. “Mother in-law” hence is such series that makes potential mothers and daughters in-law get glued to the screens with intentions to identify with the programme as a familial culture that can bring change when certain factors are considered.

Methodology

The study employed the method of content analysis inter-twined with thematic analysis. Content of eight episodes were analysed and recurrent themes in communicative interrelationships noted. Two coders were used to conduct partial transcription of the episodes by playing back, recording and writing the key content reflecting the nature of relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters in-law. The summarized transcripts were then analysed for recurrent themes in the content. Scotts’ pi intercoder reliability value of 0.82 confirmed that there was high agreement among the two coders on transcriptions made.

Character presentation

The characters were categorized according to their relationship with Charity Mwamba (unit of analysis). Consequently, the characters were categorized as the husband, son, daughter-in-law, other in-law, grandchild, or other relation. One character “Mwamba” was coded as Charity’s husband. Coder 1 recorded 19 incidences in which Mwamba appeared while coder 2 recorded 18 incidences. Two characters “Charlie” and “Robert” were identified as Charity’s

sons. Both the coders recorded 15 incidences in which the sons appeared. Two characters Celina and Lisa featured as Charity's daughter's in-law. Both coders recorded a total of 16 incidences each in which these daughters in-law appeared. One character "Betty" was identified as the daughter to Charity and appeared once according to the coders. Four grandchildren "Angie", "Mike", "Olive" and "Tina" were also identified. The two coders each reported a total of 13 incidences involving the grandchildren. Two characters "Joyce" and "Mama Alison" also featured as other in-laws to Charity. Coder 1 recorded a total of 7 incidences involving other in-laws while coder 2 recorded 6 incidences involving other in-law. The last category of characters "Alpha", "Inspector Wasike", "Maria", "Mustafa", "Ninja", "Ras", and "Wanande" were identified as other relations to Charity. Coder 1 recorded 19 incidences in which other relations appeared while coder 2 recorded a total of 15 incidences.

Results

Synopsis of the analyzed episodes

The following is a brief account of the eight episodes analyzed in the study:

Season 15, Episode 1 and 2

Lisa is planning Robert's (her husband) birthday party. She sends her step daughters (Angie and Olive) to place an order for a cake for the occasion from Nelly's place. While walking to the place, they are kidnapped by Onyi, Champez and an unnamed driver. The kidnapping is witnessed by Ninja (the watchman), who informs Charity's family. This sends Charity's family (Charity, Mwamba, Charlie and Robert) into confusion. This provides the context in which Charity launches an emotional attack on Lisa and Celina, accusing them of having engineered the kidnap. The men in the family (Mwamba, Charlie and Robert) are more cool-headed, informing the police and looking for ransom money. Meanwhile, Joyce (Charlie's former girlfriend and mother to Olive) exhibits false outrage, joining Charity in pillorying Lisa and Celina as the "evil witches", responsible for kidnapping her daughter. Mwamba pays the ransom, leading to the release of Angie and Olive. The second episode ends with the revelation that Joyce and Olive, arranged for the kidnapping of the latter, so that they could get part of the ransom money.

Season 15, Episode 3 and 4

Charity is locked up in a police cell for 18 hours for having a knife in her handbag. When she returns home, she's pissed that no one cared. She packs her items and leaves the house for an undisclosed place. Meanwhile, Alpha comes to Charity's house to thank Mike (who has attempted to commit suicide), for saving his life by donating O - negative blood to him. A flirtatious relationship develops between Angie and Alpha.

Season 15, Episode 5

It has been two days since Charity disappeared and Robert, Charlie and Mwamba are getting frantic, with no information about her. They search in hospitals and mortuaries for her. Maria, the house help, overhears a conversation between Lisa and Celina and discovers that it is

Lisa who put the knife in Charity's handbag, leading to her arrest. Meanwhile, the relationship between Alpha and Angie continues to blossom.

Season 15, Episode 6

The search for Charity continues, with Charlie coming across as the most affected by her disappearance, compared to Mwamba and Robert. Maria takes advantage of Lisa and Celina's secret, making them massage, fan and wash clothes for her, in order for Maria to keep the secret. Towards the end the episode, Charity reappears with the chief from her hideout, which turned out to be a women organisation camp. She had hoped that her disappearance, could make her family miss her and become close to her but it is apparent that the opposite effect is achieved.

Season 15, Episode 7

Angie and Alpha come back home after spending a night at the latter's home without telling anybody. Robert is forced to call Alpha's mother. Meantime, Charity attempts to make peace with Mwamba after her disappearance. When Alpha's mother arrives at Charity's home, she turns out to be the long lost daughter of Charity and Mwamba called Betty. The scene ends with the happy reunion of the Mwamba's family.

Season 16, Episode 1

Mwamba wants Charlie and Robert to move out of the family house but Charity is opposed, accusing Mwamba of greed. Lisa meets Jacob, her former classmate, in a restaurant to discuss the possibility of him selling a house to Lisa. Unfortunately, Lisa had not told Robert of her plans since she wanted to present the house as a birthday gift to Robert. Robert spies Lisa and Jacob in intimate conversation at the restaurant and thinks Lisa is cheating on him. When Lisa returns home, she finds a furious Robert. It is only Mwamba's intervention that helps to cool down Robert.

Factors That Determine the Nature of Relationship between Mothers-In-Law and Daughters In-Law

Independence in Family Set Up

Independence in family set up emerged from content analysis as a key factor determining the nature of relationship between mothers and their daughter's in-law. A transcription of episode 1 of 12th August 2012 shown in Table 1 depicted Charity (mother in-law) and Mwamba (Charity's husband) exchanging bitter words on whether or not the two sons Charlie and Robert should live the parental house. This Scenario was also reflected in the transcription of episode 2 of 19th August 2012 which depicts Robert and his wife Lisa arguing about vacating the parental home. Lisa was of the view that it was time they needed to vacate the parental Mwamba's house, but Robert was adamant.

Table 1.

Episode	Date	Excerpts
1	12th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mwamba was of the view that Charlie and Robert should be left to be on their own. • Mwamba argued that Charity was like a butterfly that thought that hanging on young ones was a means of protection only to realize later that the young ones could not fly.
2	19th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lisa reminded Robert the need to move out from the parental house. • Robert argued that there was no need for that now.
2	19th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charlie remarked to Robert that he was tired of being in the parental house and vowed to finish his house and move into it.

The implication of these results is that desire for independence has potential to determine the nature of the relationship between a mother and her daughter in-law. This finding is consistent with other findings that tend to show that daughters in-law often seek independence for autonomous family units (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011). This further reflects an argument hitherto held by Coterrill (1994), that daughters in-law sought independence from mothers in-law who were seen to meddle in their affairs. Similar sentiments are made by Petromo (2002) when observing that daughters in-law usually hope to manage privacy boundaries by attempting to regulate the dissemination of private information.

Familial identity

Analysis of transcriptions of episodes 2 (19th August 2012), 3 (26th August 2012), 4 (2nd September 2012), 7 (23rd, September 2012) and 8 (30th Sept, 2012) extracted familial identity as a key theme that cuts across the nature of relationship between mothers and daughters in-law. Excerpts presented in Table 2 reveal scenes loaded with family identification messages. From Charlie apologizing to his father Mwamba for deserting the parental home, to Mwamba negotiating with kidnappers in relation to the kidnapping of his daughter Angie and Charlie's daughter Olive, the message remains the same and reverberates around familial identity.

Table 2: Transcription results depicting need for family identity

Episode	Date	Excerpts
2	19 th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apology from Charlie to Mwamba for leaving family home• Charlie makes an attempt to unite Selina and Olive
3	26 th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mwamba takes control of negotiation with kidnappers of Angie and Olive.
4	2 nd September 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mwamba pursues the kidnapped girls and brings the two of them home portraying an intrinsic sense of family identification.
7	23 rd September 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mwamba goes to the mortuary in search of his wife Charity feared dead.• Alison's mother takes over Charity's role to make the family comfortable.

The essence of these findings is that the urge for family identity has an influence on the nature of relationships within families and this includes the relationship between mothers and their daughters-in-law. Indeed newly married women would greatly wish to be identified as part of the nuclear family. This therefore reflects an urge for acceptable and accommodative behaviour within the in-law dyad. These findings are consistent with findings by others (Merill, 2007, Mikucki- Enyart 2012). According to Merrill (2007), daughter's in-law cultivates ideas of positive in-law identity from a variety of sources but more importantly from the way parent's in-law relate with them. Mikucki-Enyart (2012) concurs by arguing that daughters in-law, especially those in early marriage years aim to establish an identity as suitable spouses and extended family members. Besides, Merill (2007) adds that children in-law aim to establish an identity as a married couple and family, and therefore expect support from parents in-law especially mothers to develop the marital dyad.

Supportive Communication

Supportive communication stands out as another key theme being communicated by the drama series. Most of the episodes analyzed show scenes portraying unhappiness and misunderstandings that require supportive communication. This implies that communication would encourage dialogue among members of the family. Lack of supportive communication is therefore a key factor in relationships between mothers and their daughter's in-law. Transcriptions of content of some scenes clearly show what would have been simple issues degenerating into complex matters that are not easy to resolve. The focus of these small misunderstandings are usually extended family relationships gravitating around the mother in-law and her two daughters in-law as reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Transcription results depicting urge for supportive communication

Episode	Date	Excerpts
2 scene 1	19th August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arguments ensue between Mwamba and Charity over whether Charlie and Robert should vacate the parental house.
Scene 3		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mwamba in anger intonates that for the 40 years he has been married to Charity he has only known stress.• Charity's body language and gestures hurt Mwamba more.
Episode 3		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charity refuses a gift from Celina (Charlie's wife)• Charity accuses Celina and Lisa for planning Angie's and Olive's kidnapping on the premise that they hate Olive

The excerpts depicts a lack of communication leading to unwarranted exchanges that aggravate hatred between Charity (mother in-law) and Celina (daughter in-law) on the one hand and between Charity and Lisa (daughter in-law) on the other. Indeed, supportive communication has been found to be an essential component within the formation and development of interpersonal relationship (Burlson, Albrecht & Sarason, 1994). These findings are further supported by Sprecher and Hendrick (2014) in asserting that supportive communication is related to perceptions of relational quality.

The importance of supportive communication in determining the nature of relationships between mothers and their daughter's in-law is further manifested by Soliz and Harwood (2006) when noting that supportive communication represents specific accommodative behaviours, and is consequently relevant when assessing the degree to which family members feel connected to each other in the family unit.

Sense of Belonging

Another key theme emerging from analysis of content of most of the episodes is sense to belonging portrayed by most characters. The Mwamba family was portrayed as not being cohesive with some members not allowed the space and freedom to explore activities they wanted to. Transcription of episode 2 of 19th August 2012 revealed that Lisa (Robert's wife) yearned for a sense of belonging through sentiments that pointed to her desire to vacate the parental house and move into their own. In the same episode, Celina (Charlie's wife) depicts a desire to belong by giving Charity a present which Charity however declines. The sense of belonging is also depicted in episode 7 of 23rd September 2012, when Alison's mother takes on Charity's role at a time it was feared that the latter had died.

The sense of belonging depicted in the episodes analyzed for content are in support of findings by Merrill (2007) which indicate that daughters in-law have positive relationships with

their mothers in-law and feel an obligation to help them maintain relationships with their husbands and grandchildren. The findings further support others suggesting that maintaining positive in-law relationships can significantly lead to a reduced risk of divorce and increased marital success.

Accommodation

Accommodation emerges as yet another key theme being communicated in the drama series and which potentially determines the nature of relationship between mother's in-law and daughter's in-law. Accommodation reflects being accepted into the Mwamba family set up by allowing extended and nuclear family members to share living facilities under the same roof. The episodes analyzed depict Mwamba as being accommodative of his daughters-in-law. Mwamba clearly takes into account his daughters in-law's feelings,, thoughts, needs and preferences when making decisions. On the contrary, most scenes show Charity as being non-accommodative of her daughter's in-law.

Cultural Orientation

The final factor that is manifested from the study in relation to determination of the nature of relationship between mothers and their daughter's in-law is cultural orientation. Several Scenes depicted an orientation towards traditional stereotypes and expectations of the roles wives should play. In Episode 2 Scene 2 (19th Aug.2012), Charity is seen quarreling with Lisa simply because Lisa is using Mustafa to cook instead of cooking herself. Meanwhile, Episode 3 (26th Aug.) scene1 shows Charity taking on Celina on her mode of dressing. In so doing, Charity is exerting pressure on Celina to pursue the traditional stereotypic way of thinking. In Episode 5 scene 3 of 9th Sept. 2012, Charity storms a party being thrown by Tina to her teenage friends, and orders everyone out. While this seems to infuriate Tina, it emerges that Charity is just leaning towards her traditional orientation which defines how children should grow up.

The findings regarding the cultural orientation factor are consistent with several other studies. According to Christensen and Johnson (1971), the new wife is often compared to the mother-in-law in terms of how she fulfills traditional roles of a wife, such as cooking, housekeeping, taking care of the husband and so on. Finger man (2001) on the other hand points out that sometimes, the misunderstanding between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is as a result of traditional expectations.

Conclusion

With respect to the characters relationships, the '*Mother-in-Law*' in the TV drama series was found to exhibit negative behaviour and negative personality traits towards her daughters-in-law whereas she displayed positive behaviours towards her sons. The plot and findings of this TV drama series are found to be consistent with most world-wide TV dramas, which tend to feature an intransigent mother in-law and an extremely docile daughter in-law. It is however important to observe that there are key factors around which the nature of relationship between

mothers and their daughter's in-law is founded. Supportive communication, the need to belong, desire for accommodation, need to be independent, family identity, and cultural orientation play a significant role in the direction the relationship between the two women progresses. More often than not, one party gets aggrieved when these key factors are not on offer.

Recommendations for practice

In view of the above findings, it is clear that relationships between mothers and their daughter's in-law could be made better if efforts are taken by members of the nuclear family to strengthen the in-law triad. It is necessary to allow married children to have independence to exist as a married unit without often meddling in their affairs. Parents and more so mothers should bring on board daughters in-law by identifying their membership in the family. Besides, these daughters ought to be accommodated seamlessly into the new family. Moreover, there is need for supportive communication between members of the family and the daughter's in-law, a feat that would see them enjoy being part of that family. There is however need for newly married wives to appreciate that mothers in-law lean on traditional cultural practices that they too should learn to accommodate.

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