

Mother-in-Law Involvement and Nuclear Family Unity among Families in Tseikuru Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya: A Qualitative Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100801058>

Received: 05 September 2026; Accepted: 10 September 2026; Published: 24 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Mother-in-law involvement can significantly shape relationships, belonging, and cohesion within nuclear families, particularly in contexts where traditional expectations of intergenerational authority intersect with the growing desire of couples for autonomy. Aim: This study explored how the influence of mothers-in-law relates to nuclear family unity in Tseikuru Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. Methods: The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design guided by Communication Accommodation Theory. Ten participants, comprising five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law, were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using manual qualitative coding and inductive thematic analysis. Results: Four interrelated themes emerged: cultural expectations and the negotiation of family belonging; relational tension, discomfort and emotional distance; intrusion, boundary violations and threats to nuclear family autonomy; and family division, withdrawal and erosion of family unity. Participants described how conflicting cultural expectations, criticism, unwanted advice, limited openness, perceived intrusion, and weakly negotiated family boundaries could contribute to emotional distance and reduced family cohesion. However, supportive and respectful involvement was perceived as potentially strengthening intergenerational relationships. Conclusion: Mother-in-law influence relates to nuclear family unity through communication, boundary negotiation, belonging, and the quality of intergenerational relationships. Involvement that respects nuclear family autonomy and promotes mutual accommodation may strengthen cohesion.

Keywords: mother-in-law influence; nuclear family unity; family cohesion; daughters-in-law; intergenerational relationships; Communication Accommodation Theory; qualitative study; Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage represents not only the union of two individuals but also the establishment of relationships between their respective families of origin. Within many societies, particularly those where extended-family relationships remain socially and culturally significant, the formation of a nuclear family does not necessarily sever ties with parents and other relatives. Instead, newly married couples continue to negotiate relationships with members of their families of origin, including mothers-in-law, whose involvement may shape the functioning and unity of the newly established household. The relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is therefore an important but often complex dimension of family life. Although such relationships may provide emotional, social and practical support, excessive involvement, conflicting expectations and unclear family boundaries may create tension within the nuclear family.

A substantial body of anthropological and family research has documented intergenerational power struggles between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. In South India, for example, intergenerational relationships

have been characterized by negotiations over authority and changing positions within the household (Allendorf, 2017). Research has particularly drawn attention to the authority exercised by mothers-in-law and the challenges daughters-in-law may experience as they establish their position within a new family. Such relationships have frequently been associated with strained interactions and have even been characterized as inherently conflictual (Shih & Pyke, 2010). Differences in values, expectations and perceptions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law may further contribute to tension within the relationship (Amevenku & Boaheng, 2020). Similarly, tension and limited openness have historically been identified as features of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships (Chen, 1999; Shih & Pyke, 2010; Turner et al., 2006).

The potential influence of a mother-in-law on family unity is particularly evident where she assumes an influential role within the household. Al-Islaah (2011), for instance, observed that mothers-in-law may exercise authority through their involvement in social activities, household resources and expectations concerning acceptable behaviour. Such involvement can position the mother-in-law as an important source of advice and support within the family. Importantly, however, mother-in-law involvement should not be understood exclusively as disruptive. Al-Islaah (2011) also emphasized the positive role a mother-in-law may play by providing guidance, physical and emotional support, security and encouragement during periods of need. Thus, the influence of a mother-in-law may take both supportive and disruptive forms, depending on the nature, extent and perception of her involvement.

The quality of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is consequently important to the development of cohesion within the broader family system. Soliz and Rittenour (2012) noted that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law face various challenges in developing cohesive relationships. Much of the existing research has concentrated on this dyadic relationship, reflecting a longstanding perception that it is particularly problematic (Fischer, 1993; Marote-Baden & Wowan, 1987; Verasanso, 1999). Nevertheless, this assumption is not universally supported. Some research has demonstrated high levels of support and satisfaction between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, suggesting that positive and mutually supportive relationships are possible (Wallin, 1954; Hung, 2005; Kurkek, 1999). This contrast suggests that the consequences of mother-in-law involvement may depend less on involvement itself and more on how that involvement is experienced, negotiated and incorporated into the life of the nuclear family.

Family identity provides another useful perspective for understanding these relationships. When members of families formed through marriage develop a sense of shared family identity, relationships may be characterized by comfort, caring, support, openness and positive social interaction (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Conversely, conflict and unmet expectations may produce negative relational experiences. Achieving such a shared identity can nevertheless be difficult because in-law relationships are not based on biological ties or long-established familiarity and are therefore largely involuntary (Baxter, Braithwaite & Nicholson, 1999). The process through which mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law negotiate their roles may consequently have implications beyond their immediate relationship, potentially affecting the cohesion and stability of the nuclear family.

Communication and relational behaviour also appear to influence whether these relationships become supportive or conflictual. Accommodative behaviours such as affection, supportive communication and positive self-disclosure have been associated with positive outcomes in in-law relationships (Floyd, 2003; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Serewicz, Hosmer, Ballard & Griffin, 2008). In contrast, non-accommodative behaviours, including topic avoidance and negative relational orientations, have been associated with less favourable outcomes (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011; Serewicz & Canary, 2008). These findings suggest that the manner in which family members communicate and interpret one another's behaviour may determine whether mother-in-law involvement contributes to connectedness or becomes a source of relational strain.

Family boundaries are particularly important in this regard. Boundaries distinguish the responsibilities, identities and relational spaces of different members of a family (Nichos, 2014). Within a nuclear family, clear and balanced boundaries allow spouses to develop their own identity and establish patterns of functioning without inappropriate interference from extended family members. When an extended-family member assumes responsibilities that belong to the nuclear family, boundary violations and enmeshment may occur (Garoll et al., 2004). Conversely, appropriately maintained boundaries can strengthen family functioning and

autonomy (Becvar & Becvar, 1995). Research indicates that daughters-in-law may particularly value independence as they establish their own autonomous family unit (Coterill, 1994; Merrill, 2007; Mikucki-Enyart, 2011). Unannounced visits and attempts by mothers-in-law to take over activities within the marital home have, for example, been reported as behaviours that daughters-in-law may perceive as violations of family boundaries (Engard & Rittenour, 2007; Coterill, 1994).

These concerns are also relevant within the Kenyan context, where extended-family relationships continue to form an important part of social and family life. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship has attracted considerable public attention in Kenya, including through television programmes portraying tensions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and their wider implications for families and society (Nguku, 2008; Citizen Television-Kenya). Kebaya (2017) further associated recurring conflicts within these relationships with serious family outcomes, including domestic violence, separation and divorce. Although popular representations cannot substitute for empirical research, they demonstrate the social visibility of tensions surrounding in-law relationships and the need to understand how such relationships are experienced within Kenyan families.

The existing literature, however, has predominantly examined communication between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the quality of their interpersonal relationship, or the broader triadic relationship involving the mother-in-law, son and daughter-in-law. Comparatively less attention has been directed toward understanding how mother-in-law involvement is experienced in relation to the **unity of the nuclear family itself**, particularly within rural Kenyan communities. This represents an important gap because the consequences of mother-in-law involvement may extend beyond the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship to influence marital cohesion, family harmony, emotional connectedness and the autonomy of the nuclear household.

This gap is particularly significant in rural settings such as Tseikuru Sub-County in Kitui County, Kenya, where family relationships are embedded within broader community and kinship structures. Understanding mother-in-law influence in such a setting requires attention not only to whether mothers-in-law are involved but also to how their involvement is perceived, negotiated and experienced by members of nuclear families. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because it allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words and provides insight into the meanings they attach to support, interference, conflict, boundaries and family unity. The present paper therefore focuses specifically on the influence of mother-in-law involvement on the unity of nuclear families in Tseikuru Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. Drawing exclusively on the qualitative component of the study, the paper explores how participants experienced and understood mother-in-law involvement and the ways in which such involvement was perceived to strengthen or undermine unity within the nuclear family. By centering participants' experiences, the study contributes contextualized evidence to the broader literature on in-law relationships and family functioning and addresses an underexplored dimension of mother-in-law influence within a rural Kenyan context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communication Accommodation Theory

This study is anchored in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Giles (1973), which explains how individuals adjust their communication and interaction patterns to create, maintain, or increase social distance in relationships (Giles, 1973; Giles, Taylor & Bourhis, 1973). CAT is particularly relevant to mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships because the manner in which the two parties communicate may shape the quality of their relationship and, consequently, the unity of the nuclear family. Accommodation may involve supportive communication, affection, positive self-disclosure and other behaviours that reduce social distance and promote a sense of shared family identity (Harwood, Raman & Hewstone, 2006; Rittenour, 2012; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). In contrast, non-accommodative behaviours may increase relational distance and undermine shared family identity. Rittenour and Soliz (2009) found that supportive and respectful behaviours by mothers-in-law were valued by daughters-in-law, while interference and other inappropriate behaviours were negatively associated with shared family identity. CAT therefore provides a

useful lens for understanding how everyday interactions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law may either foster acceptance, support and cohesion or generate tension and distance within the nuclear family.

The theory further distinguishes forms of accommodation, including convergence, divergence, maintenance, over-accommodation and under-accommodation, which help explain how relational behaviours may influence family unity (Giles, 1973; Soliz & Giles, 2014). Convergence involves adjusting one's communication or behaviour to reduce social distance, whereas divergence involves maintaining or increasing social distance. Of particular relevance to this study is over-accommodation, which occurs when an individual adjusts beyond what the other person desires or considers appropriate (Soliz & Giles, 2014). In mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, such behaviour may include assuming roles within the nuclear household, offering unwanted advice, or becoming excessively involved in family affairs (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Such involvement may be perceived as crossing family boundaries and may consequently generate conflict rather than cohesion. Conversely, appropriate accommodation through respect, emotional support and supportive communication may promote acceptance and shared family identity. CAT therefore provides a framework for interpreting participants' qualitative accounts of how mother-in-law interactions were experienced and how these interactions were perceived to either strengthen or undermine unity within the nuclear family.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions of mother-in-law influence on the unity of the nuclear family. A phenomenological approach is appropriate when the purpose of inquiry is to understand how individuals experience and interpret a particular social phenomenon from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). In the present study, the phenomenon of interest was the influence of mother-in-law involvement on nuclear family unity, with particular attention to experiences of support, tension, conflict, relational distance, family cohesion and boundary concerns. The qualitative component was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences that could not be adequately captured through numerical measures alone.

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Tseikuru Sub-County of Kitui County, Kenya, a rural setting in the northern part of Kitui County. Participants were drawn from selected churches within the sub-county and comprised mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law who had direct experience of the relationship under investigation. Tseikuru was selected as the study setting because it provided an appropriate rural context for examining family relationships and because the researcher had prior familiarity with the area. The study included 10 participants who met the predetermined eligibility criteria. Participants had attained at least primary school education, enabling them to participate meaningfully in the interview process. The sample was considered appropriate for a phenomenological inquiry, where emphasis is placed on obtaining rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences rather than statistical representation of a wider population (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018; Padgett, 2008).

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling approach that enables researchers to deliberately select individuals who possess experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Cozby & Bates, 2015; Padgett, 2018). This approach was considered appropriate because the study required participants who had direct experience of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships and could provide detailed accounts of how such relationships affected nuclear family unity. The researcher identified participants who met the inclusion criteria and invited them to participate voluntarily. The use of purposive sampling ensured that the interviews generated information directly relevant to the research focus rather than relying on participants with limited knowledge or experience of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a self-developed, in-depth semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were informed by the literature reviewed for the study and were designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail. For purposes of the present paper, analysis was restricted to interview material addressing the influence of mothers-in-law on nuclear family unity. Interviews were conducted primarily through face-to-face interactions, with a small number conducted by telephone where necessary. Face-to-face interviewing provided an opportunity for the researcher to establish rapport and conduct interviews in a conducive environment, thereby encouraging participants to provide open and detailed accounts of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher explained the purpose of the study before each interview, obtained participants' consent, and addressed any questions or concerns they raised. The interview protocol consisted of introductory instructions, central questions, probing questions, follow-up questions and a closing statement (Creswell, 2014; Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2014). Probing and follow-up questions enabled the researcher to explore participants' experiences more deeply and clarify issues arising during the interviews. Interviews continued until the researcher reached data saturation, understood as the point at which further interviews were no longer generating substantially new information relevant to the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014).

Pre-testing of the Interview Guide

The interview guide was pre-tested approximately three weeks before the main data collection. The pre-test involved five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law who met the relevant eligibility characteristics. The purpose of the pre-test was to familiarize the researcher with the interview process, assess the clarity and appropriateness of the questions, identify ambiguities and refine the interviewing approach. The exercise also enabled the researcher to identify weaknesses in the interview procedure and make appropriate modifications before the main study.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted through a systematic manual coding process. Qualitative analysis involves moving inductively from individual accounts toward broader patterns and themes through interpretation of the meanings contained in the data (Creswell, 2008). Following Saldaña (2016), analysis commenced alongside data collection and involved successive stages of coding and interpretation. The researcher first reviewed the interview responses to become familiar with the data and identify meaningful segments relevant to mother-in-law influence and family unity. First-cycle coding was then undertaken to assign descriptive codes to significant statements and experiences. This was followed by second-cycle coding, through which related codes were compared, combined and organized into broader patterns. Preliminary themes and categories were subsequently developed from recurring patterns in participants' accounts (Saldaña, 2016). Manual coding was used throughout the process (Saldaña, 2015). The analysis for this paper deliberately focused on themes concerning nuclear family unity, including participants' experiences of cohesion, conflict, support, interference, relational tension and the negotiation of family boundaries. Material primarily concerning decision-making or child nurturing was excluded from the analysis reported in this article.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles relating to informed consent, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were observed throughout the study. The researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from International Leadership University and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Before participation, individuals were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and provided informed consent. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that the information they provided would be treated confidentially. To protect anonymity, participants were not required to provide their names on the research materials. The information collected was used solely for research purposes and was handled in a manner intended to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

The study included 10 participants, comprising five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law from Tseikuru Sub-County. The participants' ages, educational backgrounds, occupations and years in marriage were considered important contextual characteristics because the experiences of mother-in-law influence may differ according to generation, life experience, social circumstances and length of marital experience. In particular, the age difference between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law provided perspectives from the two generations directly involved in the relationship under investigation. Similarly, duration of marriage was relevant because participants with different lengths of marital experience could provide varied accounts of how mother-in-law relationships develop and influence family unity over time. Educational and occupational backgrounds were also considered useful in understanding the social contexts within which participants experienced and interpreted family relationships.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in the qualitative study

Characteristic	Mothers-in-law (n=5)	Daughters-in-law (n=5)	Total (N=10)
Age (years)	49, 52, 52, 57, 60	25, 29, 30, 33, 35	25–60
Education	Primary: 2 Secondary: 1 College: 2	Primary: 3 Secondary: 2	Primary: 5 Secondary: 3 College: 2
Occupation	Housewife: 3 Business: 1 Private employment: 1	Housewife: 2 Business: 1 Private employment: 2	Housewife: 5 Business: 2 Private employment: 3
Years in marriage	6–10: 1 11–15: 1 16–20: 1 ≥21: 2	<1: 1 1–5: 2 6–10: 2	<1: 1 1–5: 2 6–10: 3 11–15: 1 16–20: 1 ≥21: 2

The participant characteristics provided important contextual variation for interpreting the qualitative accounts presented in this paper. The mothers-in-law represented longer marital histories, with two having been married for 21 years or more, whereas the daughters-in-law included participants in relatively recent marriages as well as marriages of up to 10 years. This variation enabled the study to capture experiences of mother-in-law involvement from both sides of the intergenerational relationship and across different stages of family formation. Rather than being used for statistical comparison, these characteristics served to situate participants' narratives and support a richer interpretation of how mother-in-law involvement was experienced in relation to nuclear family unity.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the qualitative interviews generated four interrelated themes concerning the influence of mothers-in-law on nuclear family unity: (1) cultural expectations and the negotiation of family belonging; (2) relational tension, discomfort and emotional distance; (3) intrusion, boundary violations and threats to nuclear family autonomy; and (4) family division, withdrawal and erosion of family unity. The themes illustrate how mother-in-law influence was experienced within the broader family system and how participants understood its consequences for relationships, belonging and cohesion within the nuclear family.

Theme 1: Cultural Expectations and the Negotiation of Family Belonging

Participants described Tseikuru's cultural expectations as an important context shaping mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. According to the accounts, parents were traditionally accorded considerable authority, and children were expected to respect and follow parental instructions. Within this cultural arrangement, mothers-in-law were perceived as having a recognized role in guiding and monitoring daughters-in-law. Some mothers-in-law regarded obedience and submission as important characteristics of a good daughter-in-law and considered changing attitudes among younger women a challenge to established family norms.

One mother-in-law expressed concern about changing generational attitudes:

“It is quite unfortunate that the present generation of daughters-in-law do not understand our culture. If they knew they would surrender fully to mothers-in-law to make them good wives.”

The interviews also revealed differences between the expectations of mothers-in-law and those of daughters-in-law concerning the boundaries of the newly established family. Four daughters-in-law expressed disagreement with the expectation of submitting to their mothers-in-law, emphasizing their desire to establish and develop their own nuclear families. One daughter-in-law, however, expressed willingness to submit to the mother-in-law. These accounts suggest that cultural expectations were not experienced uniformly and that tensions could arise when traditional expectations of obedience encountered daughters-in-law's expectations of autonomy.

The issue of belonging was also evident in participants' accounts. Some daughters-in-law described themselves as outsiders within their husbands' families. One participant stated:

“Being the only stranger in the family, members of the family find it difficult to associate with me. They suspect me of imaginable things.”

The perception of being a stranger appeared to affect participants' ability to develop a sense of belonging within the wider family. Suspicion and limited acceptance could therefore extend the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tension beyond the two individuals and affect relationships with other members of the family.

Theme 2: Relational Tension, Discomfort and Emotional Distance

A second theme concerned the relational difficulties experienced between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Participants described feelings of discomfort, limited openness and dissatisfaction in their interactions. Mothers-in-law attributed some of the difficulties to what they perceived as pride, lack of care, limited companionship and secrecy among daughters-in-law. One mother-in-law stated simply:

“My daughter-in-law is full of pride and I don't like it.”

Another described feeling neglected:

“My daughter-in-law does not cook for me, she does not fetch firewood for me and does not take care of me.”

Mothers-in-law also perceived limited communication as a source of relational difficulty. One participant explained:

“My daughter-in-law does not talk to me, she does not open up to me so I find it hard to communicate with her on some things.”

From the daughters-in-law's perspective, however, discomfort was associated with experiences of embarrassment, unwanted advice, gossip, criticism and perceived disrespect. Public criticism was particularly significant. One daughter-in-law reported:

“My mother-in-law challenges me in public and causes a lot of embarrassment. This makes me uncomfortable with her and I never go to public events with her.”

Another participant described the experience of receiving advice that she considered unnecessary:

“She gives me advice, some of which I do not need or want.”

Participants further described situations in which daughters-in-law felt that their privacy was not respected. Some reported that mothers-in-law sought information concerning their marriages and family affairs, including matters they considered private. Such experiences contributed to emotional distance and reduced willingness to interact openly.

Criticism and negative characterization also contributed to relational strain. Some daughters-in-law reported that mothers-in-law repeatedly focused on their weaknesses and attributed family problems to them. One participant stated:

“Mother-in-law usually says that I am the cause of all the problems my husband and family go through.”

Another explained:

“Because I am not highly educated I am blamed a lot.”

The accounts therefore revealed a reciprocal pattern in which mothers-in-law perceived daughters-in-law as disrespectful, distant or insufficiently caring, while daughters-in-law experienced mothers-in-law as intrusive, critical or demeaning. These differing perceptions appeared to reinforce relational distance rather than promote a shared sense of family belonging.

Theme 3: Intrusion, Boundary Violations and Threats to Nuclear Family Autonomy

Participants' accounts further indicated that mother-in-law influence became particularly problematic when it extended into the private space and functioning of the nuclear family. Daughters-in-law described concerns about mothers-in-law becoming involved in matters they regarded as belonging primarily to the marital household. Privacy was therefore an important aspect of the participants' experiences.

The accounts suggested that persistent involvement could make daughters-in-law feel that their nuclear families lacked sufficient independence. Participants described situations involving intrusion into family affairs, unwanted advice, criticism and attempts to influence the functioning of the household. These experiences were associated with feelings of oppression and insecurity.

One daughter-in-law expressed a particularly strong concern about the future of her marriage:

“The influence of my mother-in-law has made me think that she will bring another wife for my husband and leave me in the cold with my children.”

The statement illustrates how mother-in-law influence could be experienced not merely as an interpersonal disagreement but as a threat to the stability and security of the nuclear family. Participants also described uncertainty concerning the position of the daughter-in-law within the family when expectations from the mother-in-law conflicted with those of the marital household.

The interviews further suggested that excessive mother-in-law involvement could interfere with the couple's ability to establish their own relational space. Participants described reduced privacy, diminished freedom and difficulty managing family affairs independently. The issue was therefore not simply whether mothers-in-law were involved, but whether their involvement was perceived as crossing the boundaries of the nuclear family.

Theme 4: Family Division, Withdrawal and Erosion of Nuclear Family Unity

The final and most direct theme concerned the perceived consequences of mother-in-law influence for nuclear family unity. Participants described situations in which mother-in-law involvement contributed to divisions among family members. Some members were perceived to support the mother-in-law, while others supported the daughter-in-law. Such divided allegiances created tension and weakened relationships within the wider family.

Participants also associated mother-in-law influence with a breakdown in family joy and social interaction. Incessant disagreements, intrusion into private family affairs and strained relationships were described as contributing to reduced interaction among family members. In some cases, families reportedly chose to live independently to avoid recurrent disagreements and conflict. The withdrawal extended to family gatherings and social occasions. Some daughters-in-law reportedly avoided family meetings and social events because they felt unwelcome or were treated as outsiders. Consequently, opportunities for interaction between the daughter-in-law and other family members became reduced. Participants also described diminished freedom of interaction, with some family members choosing distance rather than continued engagement.

These experiences were accompanied by emotional consequences. Daughters-in-law described anger, loneliness, discouragement, anxiety, stress, embarrassment and feelings of being unwanted. Loneliness was particularly associated with being treated as a stranger or outsider within the family. The emotional experiences were therefore closely connected to the participants' perceptions of belonging and acceptance. The accounts also revealed that prolonged relational tension could affect perceptions of the marriage itself. Some daughters-in-law expressed regret concerning their marriages and described feeling discouraged by continued interference and conflict. Taken together, the participants' accounts indicate that mother-in-law influence was perceived to affect nuclear family unity through multiple interconnected pathways: relational tension, reduced privacy, contested boundaries, divided family loyalties, social withdrawal and diminished feelings of belonging.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that mother-in-law involvement was experienced in both relational and structural terms. At the relational level, participants described discomfort, criticism, limited openness and strained interactions. At the family level, these experiences were associated with division, withdrawal, reduced interaction and weakened cohesion. The findings also indicate that the influence of mothers-in-law cannot be understood solely as negative, since cultural expectations positioned their involvement as a legitimate form of guidance and family participation. Rather, the participants' accounts suggest that the extent and manner of involvement, and how that involvement was perceived by members of the nuclear family, were central to whether it contributed to connection or disunity.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicated that, within the experiences described by the participants, the influence of mothers-in-law on nuclear family unity was shaped by the interaction between cultural expectations, communication patterns, interpersonal relationships, family boundaries and perceptions of belonging. Rather than being uniformly positive or negative, mother-in-law involvement was described as having different implications depending on how such involvement was communicated, interpreted and accommodated by members of the family. This interpretation is consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which proposes that individuals adjust their communication and interaction in ways that may reduce or increase social distance (Giles, 1973). In the present study, participants described convergence and supportive interaction as contributing to stronger family relationships, whereas criticism, non-accommodation and perceived intrusion were associated with greater relational distance and reduced cohesion. These findings should be understood as reflecting the experiences and perceptions reported by the participants rather than as evidence that these patterns apply uniformly across Kenyan families.

The first theme, concerning cultural expectations and the negotiation of family belonging, highlighted the importance of cultural norms in shaping the intergenerational relationships described by participants. Participants' accounts suggested that mothers-in-law could understand obedience and submission from

daughters-in-law as culturally appropriate expressions of respect, whereas some daughters-in-law interpreted similar expectations as inconsistent with their desire to establish an autonomous nuclear family. This finding is consistent with Allendorf (2017), who found that mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships may involve intergenerational struggles over authority as family roles and expectations change. Similarly, Shih and Pyke (2010) observed that differences in authority and expectations can make the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship particularly vulnerable to conflict. From a CAT perspective, the divergent expectations described by participants may be interpreted as differences in interactional norms, whereby the two generations maintain different understandings of appropriate roles rather than adapting sufficiently to one another. Consequently, cultural expectations that were intended to maintain family order could, when experienced as incompatible or contested, contribute to perceived social distance.

The findings also indicated that perceptions of belonging were important to the participants' understanding of family unity. Some daughters-in-law described experiencing themselves as strangers within their husbands' families, suggesting that acceptance into the wider family was not necessarily experienced as automatic. This finding is relevant to Soliz and Harwood's (2006) conceptualization of shared family identity, which includes comfort, support, caring, openness and meaningful interaction among family members. When a daughter-in-law experiences exclusion or perceives herself as being treated as an outsider, the development of a shared family identity may become more difficult. Baxter, Braithwaite and Nicholson (1999) similarly noted that in-law relationships present particular challenges because they are not voluntarily established in the same way as many other interpersonal relationships. Thus, participants' accounts suggested that the transition from being an outsider to becoming a recognized member of the family may require relational accommodation from both generations.

The second theme, relational tension, discomfort and emotional distance, further illustrated how participants perceived communication as contributing to either stronger or weaker family cohesion. Mothers-in-law described daughters-in-law as proud, distant, secretive or insufficiently caring, while daughters-in-law described experiences of criticism, unwanted advice, embarrassment and limited privacy. These reciprocal perceptions are consistent with Shih and Pyke's (2010) observation that mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships can become strained when expectations concerning authority and appropriate behaviour differ. They also correspond with Rittenour and Soliz (2009), who found that supportive communication, respect and emotional support are associated with stronger shared family identity, whereas interference and other non-accommodative behaviours are negatively associated with that identity. Within the present study, participants' accounts suggested that relational distance could be reinforced through reciprocal interpretations of behaviour: one party perceived the other's actions negatively, responded through criticism, defensiveness or withdrawal, and the resulting interaction appeared to further reduce openness and trust. Because these interpretations were derived from participants' accounts, however, they represent perceived interactional processes rather than independently verified sequences of behaviour.

The third theme demonstrated that the meaning attached to mother-in-law involvement was particularly important when such involvement intersected with nuclear family boundaries. Participants described excessive or unwanted involvement as limiting privacy, independence and the couple's ability to establish their own relational space. This finding is consistent with literature indicating that daughters-in-law may value independence and the establishment of an autonomous family unit (Coterill, 1994; Merrill, 2007). Engard and Rittenour (2007) similarly identified unannounced or unwanted involvement as a source of difficulty in in-law relationships. Becvar and Becvar (1995) emphasized the importance of appropriate family boundaries for maintaining autonomy and functional relationships. The present findings provide contextual insight into these observations by showing how some participants perceived boundary concerns as extending beyond the immediate mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship and affecting their sense of security and the perceived stability of the nuclear family. The findings do not establish that boundary-related involvement directly causes family instability; rather, they indicate that participants associated perceived boundary violations with tension within the nuclear family.

Finally, the fourth theme showed how participants connected mother-in-law-related tensions with their perceptions of nuclear family unity. Participants described divided loyalties, withdrawal from family

gatherings, reduced interaction and, in some accounts, physical separation as ways of managing continuing tension. These experiences are consistent with Soliz and Harwood's (2006) argument that shared family identity is strengthened through support, openness, interaction and positive relational experiences, while conflict and unmet expectations may undermine family connection. Rittenour and Soliz (2009) similarly demonstrated that communication characterized by support and respect is associated with stronger shared family identity. From a CAT perspective, repeated non-accommodation may be interpreted as increasing social distance, potentially making withdrawal appear preferable to continued interaction. In the present study, participants' accounts suggested that reduced communication and shared activities were accompanied by weaker perceptions of family cohesion. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, the findings cannot establish whether withdrawal subsequently caused further deterioration in family relationships or whether existing tensions led participants to withdraw.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that mothers-in-law are inherently detrimental to nuclear family unity. Al-Islaah (2011) identified mothers-in-law as potential sources of guidance, emotional support, security and encouragement. The issue emerging from the participants' accounts was therefore not involvement itself, but the quality, extent and perceived legitimacy of that involvement. Supportive and respectful interactions were described in ways that could facilitate belonging and cohesion, whereas criticism, perceived control, unwanted involvement and failure to recognize emerging nuclear family boundaries were associated with greater relational distance. Overall, the findings suggest that, among the participants in this study, nuclear family unity was perceived as more sustainable when intergenerational relationships were characterized by mutual respect, appropriate boundaries, supportive communication and accommodation of changing family roles.

These findings should also be interpreted in light of the study's methodological scope. The study involved ten participants drawn from a specific setting, comprising five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law. Consequently, the findings provide contextual and experiential insight rather than statistically generalizable evidence about mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships across Kenya. In addition, the exclusive reliance on interviews means that the findings reflect what participants were willing and able to report about their experiences. Their accounts may therefore have been influenced by recall, emotions, personal interpretations or a desire to present themselves or other family members in a particular way. The cross-sectional design also provided insight into participants' experiences at a particular point in time and did not permit examination of how these relationships changed, improved or deteriorated over the course of marriage. Future research could therefore examine these relationships across multiple settings and with more diverse participants, while longitudinal or multi-method approaches could provide further insight into how intergenerational relationships and family boundaries develop over time.

CONCLUSION

In relation to the study objective of assessing how the influence of mothers-in-law relates to the unity of nuclear families in Tseikuru Sub-County, the findings indicated that participants' experiences of mother-in-law involvement were closely intertwined with perceptions of family cohesion, belonging and relational stability. Participants described cultural expectations and differences in perceptions of appropriate family roles as sources of tension between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, particularly where expectations of obedience were perceived to conflict with the nuclear family's desire for autonomy. Relational difficulties, including criticism, limited openness, unwanted advice and perceived intrusion, were also described as contributing to emotional distance, while perceived boundary violations, divided family loyalties and withdrawal from family interactions were associated in participants' accounts with weaker perceptions of nuclear family unity. At the same time, the findings indicated that mother-in-law involvement was not experienced as inherently disruptive, as some forms of supportive, respectful and appropriately bounded involvement were perceived as facilitating family relationships and a sense of belonging. Overall, the findings suggest that, among the participants in this study, the relationship between mother-in-law involvement and nuclear family unity was understood through the quality of intergenerational communication, the negotiation of family boundaries, and the extent to which family members experienced acceptance, respect and a shared sense of belonging. These findings provide contextual insight into the experiences of mothers-in-law and

daughters-in-law in Tseikuru Sub-County and should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable to all nuclear families in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest the need for deliberate efforts to strengthen intergenerational relationships while respecting the autonomy of the nuclear family. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law could benefit from structured family dialogue and guidance that promotes respectful communication, mutual understanding, clearly negotiated boundaries and accommodation of changing family roles. Community and faith-based family programmes in Tseikuru and similar rural settings could incorporate intergenerational relationship education to help families manage differences in cultural expectations without undermining family belonging. Particular emphasis should be placed on communication approaches that reduce criticism, unwanted interference and social distancing while encouraging supportive involvement, respect and openness. Such interventions should not seek to eliminate the role of mothers-in-law but rather promote forms of involvement that support, rather than undermine, nuclear family cohesion.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative sample comprised only 10 participants, consisting of five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law from Tseikuru Sub-County; therefore, the findings are context-specific and should not be generalized statistically to all families in Kenya. Second, the study relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by personal perceptions, emotional experiences or social desirability. Third, the study was conducted within a single geographical and cultural setting, limiting the extent to which the experiences can be assumed to reflect those of families in other Kenyan communities with different cultural practices. Finally, because the study captured participants' experiences at one point in time, it could not establish how mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships and perceptions of family unity may change over time. Future studies could therefore use longitudinal or comparative qualitative designs involving multiple communities and a wider range of family members.

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