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Abstract

This qualitative study explores mother–adult daughter relationships through in-depth, individual interviews with 24 adult daughters and their mothers ($N = 48$). Using a life-course perspective, the authors examined the kinds of themes that emerged in each woman’s narrative and within each mother–daughter pair. Given the periods of adulthood under study, the authors expected and found themes reflecting complexity and ambivalence within the relationships. Themes related to intimacy and positive relationship qualities included generational continuity, closeness, emotional support, and family norms/values. Themes indicating autonomy and relationship difficulties—generational change, conflict, secrets, and maternal pressures—were also identified. Generational differences, as well as within-dyad divergence, were found most often in narratives about autonomy and relationship difficulties. The majority of mothers and daughters reevaluated their past relationship in light of their present ties. The place of narratives about adult family relationships in understanding the life course is emphasized.

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Of all familial relationships, the mother–daughter one is most likely to remain important for both parties, even when major life changes occur, such as the daughter’s marriage or mother’s illness. Increasing life expectancy has extended the duration of the mother–daughter relationship (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), during which the longest period is when both mothers and daughters are adults. Thus, multiple theoretical perspectives—feminist (Chase & Rogers, 2001; Flax, 1978), psychoanalytic (Chodorow, 1989), life course (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), and family systems (Charles, Frank, Jacobson, & Grossman, 2001)—recognize the mother–daughter bond as lifelong, intimate, and developmentally important. Moreover, the importance of the mother–daughter relationship has been well documented across cultures (O’Reilly & Abbey, 2000).

However, from a life-course perspective (Elder, 1998), the mother–daughter relationship during adulthood remains poorly understood. Each woman brings to the relationship’s early history and the anticipation of a future in which the mother may become frail and receive care from her daughter (Donorfrio, & Kellett, 2006). Generational, role, chronological age, and historical differences may influence each woman’s perception of the relationship. To better understand the significance of the adulthood period of the mother–daughter relationship, this study uses a narrative approach to examine perceptions of both women about their relationship. We posed three research questions in this qualitative study:

Research Question 1: What are the themes that characterize the narratives of adult daughters and their mothers?

Research Question 2: How do perceptions of earlier periods in the relationship relate to those of the present relationship?

Research Question 3: When individual perceptions of the relationship are examined, what are the areas of agreement and divergence between generations (i.e., mothers as a group; daughters as a group) as well as within dyads?

Within a life-course perspective, we expected complexity and ambivalence as well as intimacy to characterize the perceptions of mothers and daughters; divergence of themes between generations, both across and within dyads

because mothers and daughters experience different perspectives because of chronological age and generational position; retrospective recollections of childhood interpreted and integrated into narratives of the current relationship; and areas of agreement, because mothers and daughters who maintain a relationship in adulthood are likely to share individual perspectives and be invested in common ground.

The Importance of Mother–Daughter Relationships in Adulthood

Despite the importance and duration of the mother–daughter bond, existing research on midlife mothers and their adult daughters remains relatively limited compared with earlier and later periods of the life course (Shrier, Tompsett, & Shrier, 2004). Child development scholars understandably have focused on maternal parenting of children and adolescents and the complementary processes of the daughter's development (Boyd, 1989; Chodorow, 1974; Thompson & Walker, 1984). Gerontologists largely have focused on aspects of caregiving and dependence as mothers age (e.g., Allen & Walker, 1992; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengston, 2002; Walker & Pratt, 1991).

However, the period during which daughters are young adults and mothers are middle-aged recently has emerged as an important area of study (Hay, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2007; Miller-Day, 2004). Demographic and historical changes are one factor. Adult development is characterized more by individual variability and diversity of roles and self-definition than normative biological, cognitive, and social changes (Baltes, 1987). In the United States and other developed countries, that diversity has become even more marked than in earlier historical periods. For example, median ages of marriage and first childbirth have risen exponentially since 1970 along with dramatic rises in the rates of higher education and in career and job changes (Downs, 2003). As a result, Arnett (2000) argues that *emerging adulthood* is now a distinct period of the life course, one in which adults in their 20s “often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews” (p. 469). Midlife women also experience diverse trajectories of employment, marriage (and remarriage), single status, and parenthood.

Such diverse life-course pathways have numerous implications for the mother–adult daughter bond. First, their relationship ties also are likely to be diverse. For example, Fischer (1986) finds that a daughter's marriage and motherhood increased her desire for closeness and continuity with her own mother but also changed her status from adult–child to adult–adult and from role-complement to role-colleague (as mother–mother). Fingerman (2000)

concludes that as daughters move through young adulthood, their dependency needs generally diminish and, in complementary fashion, the primacy of their mothers' nurturing role may lessen. The mother–daughter relationship transforms from a dyadic interest in the daughter's individual psychological development to a shared investment in a larger network of relationships.

In addition, as a result of the expansion of the early adulthood period, the parental and child roles are likely to remain salient. For example, residential instability characterizes emerging adulthood, with 40% of adults in their 20s moving out of their childhood home, moving back in with their parents, and then moving out again (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). In general, parents provide their adult children with more psychological and material support than the reverse (McGarry & Schoeni, 1997). Such patterns challenge the social definition of parenting as a linear process of high engagement, “launching,” and disengagement (Martin & Colbert, 1997).

Finally, the nonnormative variability of life-course trajectories coupled with the relationship norms that sometimes guide the parent–adult child bond are likely to affect how parents and their adult children understand one another, communicate with each other, and negotiate their relationship. In the absence of norms, each generation may find it difficult to accurately gauge the self- and relationship perceptions of the other and even of themselves as daughters or mothers. This may be one reason why the parent–adult child relationship has been described as one of intergenerational ambivalence (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), worry (Hay et al., 2007), and complexity (Sprenkle, 2005), as well as intimacy and affection. Furthermore, when norms exist, they often are contradictory. Numerous scholars have commented on the tension between autonomy and closeness (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Fingerman, 2000; O'Conner, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996; Thompson & Walker, 1984). For example, adult daughters in their 20s and their middle-aged mothers report poorer attachment quality in the relationship when either has greater dependence on the other (Thompson & Walker, 1984), whereas physical proximity to parents is associated with poorer quality relationships among children in their 20s (O'Conner et al., 1996).

We considered mothers' and daughters' reflections as two cohorts and as members of a dyad. Occupying different family roles and generations, mothers and daughters may bring different perceptions to their relationship by virtue of their role status. Meanwhile, from a family systems perspective (Sprenkle, 2005), each mother–daughter dyad is a dynamic, mutually influencing, interactional system in which each individual's creation of a relationship narrative (Bujold, 2004) is invariably shared.

Mother–Adult Daughter Relationships in Life-Course Perspective

Research suggests that as children mature to adulthood and their mothers become older, their relationship becomes the object of reflection and meaning making for both mothers and daughters (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Henwood, 1997). Consistent with Lewis's (1997) view that constructions of the past, rather than the past itself, influence the future, mothers and their developing daughters may draw implications for their present relationship from their assessments about the past and the present. Thus, we argue that exploring how mothers and their adult daughters evaluate and reframe their childhood experiences is the best way to understand how their relationship in adulthood is linked to earlier periods of their life courses.

In doing so, we use a narrative approach that reflects a social constructivist perspective (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2003; Raskin & Bridges, 2004) and emphasizes the importance of meaning making as each individual develops an understanding of herself in relation to the other. When individuals describe and evaluate an important relationship, this "accounting" of the relationship (Burnett, McGhee, & Clarke, 1987) imparts meanings to the events, actions, and emotions of their past history, their present interactions, and their anticipated future together. Following Miller (1992), Polkinghorne (1988), and Gergen and Gergen (1987), we define narrative as a meaning structure or "story" that organizes events and actions. Relationship narratives, therefore, describe an individual's story about herself and the other, especially in relation to the other. Similar to the construct of an internal working model within attachment theory (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999), the relationship narrative is a subjective, individual psychological construct. Of course, as each member of a relationship communicate, she invariably communicates aspects of the other's narrative, thereby influencing the other as she expresses, changes, and dynamically constructs her understanding of the relationship (Pennington, 2004). In this sense, relationship narratives may be viewed as "co-constructed." Like Duck (1995), however, we view relationship narratives as an independent, cognitive construct for each individual, which may have not only shared common elements with the narrative of the other but also may have unshared, even opposing, elements. Thus, we chose to assess how adult daughters and their mothers independently recount narratives of their relationship with one another and looked for common and divergent themes. We posed three major research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the dominant themes characterizing their relationship from each perspective?

Research Question 2: How do perceptions of earlier periods in the relationship relate to those of the present relationship?

Research Question 3: What are the areas of similarity and divergence between mothers and their adult daughters as two generational cohorts and within the dyad?

Method

Participants

Mothers and their adult daughters were recruited using a purposive, snowball sampling method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We posted flyers in the community (e.g., libraries, grocery stores, Laundromats, hair salons) and on campus, and we used word-of-mouth to recruit participants who were in nonestranged mother-and-daughter dyads and whose ages corresponded to the midlife period when mothers are still independent and daughters are in early adulthood or later. The final sample included 48 mothers and daughters (24 pairs). We judged that sample size as adequate when we achieved saturation of themes (Gilgun, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Each mother and daughter independently completed a demographic questionnaire before participating in an interview. In addition to background information, questions asked about the geographic distance between mother and daughter, frequency of visitation, frequency of contact via telephone, and frequency of e-mail contact. All but two of the participants were interviewed in person, whereas two of the mothers were interviewed via telephone after we received the signed consent and the demographic questionnaires.

The mothers' mean age was 53.38 years (range = 46-61 years), whereas the daughters' mean age was 25.57 (range = 21-38 years). The majority of the daughters were less than 30 years and thus in the period of young adulthood. To better understand the relationships under study, we recruited participants who varied in a limited number of ways—geographical region, mothers' and daughters' employment status, and daughters' marital status—but shared similar ethnicity, education, and social class background.

Specifically, participants were recruited from a Midwestern state ($n = 28$) and an eastern state ($n = 20$). Fifty-four percent of the mothers were employed full-time and 33% were not employed, whereas 56% of the daughters were employed part-time and 27% were not employed. Ninety-six percent of the

mothers and 39% of the daughters were married, whereas 13% ($n = 3$) of the daughters were mothers themselves.

For ethnicity, 91% of the daughters and all but one mother identified themselves as European American. For religious affiliation, 71% of the mothers identified themselves as Christian and 29% as Jewish, whereas 65% of daughters identified themselves as Christian and 35% as Jewish. Most mothers (75%) and daughters (74%) reported being somewhat or very religious.

For mothers' highest level of education, 4% reported less than high school, 4% completed high school, 17% reported some college, 17% earned bachelor's degrees, 17% reported some graduate work, and 41% earned graduate degrees. For daughters' highest level of education, 9% completed high school, 17% reported some college, 30% earned bachelor's degrees, 22% reported some graduate work, and 22% earned graduate degrees. Forty-eight percent of the daughters were full-time students, whereas 43% were not students and 9% were in school part-time. However, 17% of the mothers were full-time students.

The mean number of years since the daughter had lived at home with her mother (as reported by the daughter) was 5.05 (range = 1-18 years). Daughters' reported geographic distance from the mother ranged from less than 20 miles ($n = 5$ [21%]; including one daughter who lived with her mother) to more than 300 miles ($n = 11$; 46% of sample). All mother–daughter dyads were in regular contact, although the frequency of face-to-face contact ranged from visiting each other several times a week to 1 to 4 times a year.

Mothers and daughters had different perceptions of the frequency of their contact. Compared with their daughters, mothers generally reported a higher frequency of contact via telephone and e-mail, with 29% ($n = 7$) reporting speaking by phone several times a week and 17% ($n = 4$) sending e-mail daily. However, mothers reported less frequent face-to-face contact, with 38% ($n = 9$) reporting a visit with their daughters 1 to 4 times a year.

Interview Protocol

Previous studies (e.g., Fingerman, 2000; Fischer, 1986; Thompson & Walker, 1984) examining mother–adult daughter relationships focused on either the history or the current status of the relationship. This study examines both. Specifically, we asked mothers and daughters to describe their relationship from its beginning (i.e., from early childhood or birth of the daughter to the present) and then to describe their current relationship. Also, we asked each woman to describe changes in the relationship over the years, identify issues

related to those changes, and evaluate influences on the relationship, including ties with others (e.g., other family members, boyfriends), religion, and work history.

The interview questions were based on a review of major themes in the research literature as well as pilot interviews with eight women: four mothers and their adult daughters. Based on the pilot data, the protocol was further revised for clarity, completeness, and relevance. The final protocol contained 15 open-ended questions (see Appendix A).

Procedures

Mothers and daughters were individually and independently interviewed by 7 interviewers (2 professors and 5 graduate students, all with previous interviewing experience). The interviews lasted from 1 to 2.5 hours and were audio recorded and then transcribed. The pilot interviews suggested that rapport between the interviewer and interviewee was enhanced when they were similar in generation and role. Thus, the professors conducted interviews with mothers, whereas the graduate students interviewed the daughters. In addition, the interviewers were at the same life stage as their interviewees (i.e., the graduate students were adult daughters and the professors were mothers of an adult daughter).

Analyses

We used analytic induction (Patton, 2002) and constant comparative techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze interview transcripts and patterns in the data, using a three-step coding process involving open, axial, and selective coding. Specifically, we brainstormed themes we saw (open coding), clustered similar themes together (axial coding), and debated and rearranged themes as we made connections among them, resulting in overarching narratives that describe various categories in the data (selective coding). Below, the coding process is described in greater detail.

Open coding names pieces of information collected in the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We read through transcripts line by line and created codes, themes, and categories of data, continuing the process until we reached saturation in the themes. Generally, mothers and daughters described both positive and negative aspects of their relationships, and during open coding, we started the process of naming these positive and negative reflections.

Axial coding puts the pieces of data back together in a new way that reflects comparisons and connections of themes. Using the constant comparative method, we created categories that reflect connections in the data (Banks, Louie, & Einerson, 2000), including conflict, distance, external influence, mother as positive role model, and emotional support.

In the selective coding process, we created overarching narratives that describe aspects of the open and axial codes. In this stage of analysis, codes were grouped into themes (Gilgun, 1992), including generational continuity and generational change, closeness, secrets, family norms/values, relationship barriers, emerging independence, agents of change, and reconstructing the past. See Appendix B for the selective codes and definitions.

Four individuals (three authors and one undergraduate student studying child development) were involved in the coding process. The first author trained the others in coding techniques. We then worked through an example code by code, discussing questions and providing rationale for each code. Once trained, we coded at least one transcript a week together to ensure that the coding remained consistent. In instances in which we coded the same data differently, we went back to the participants' transcripts and reviewed their statements in their original contexts. We then discussed the discrepancies and worked to clarify the definitions of the themes. This process continued throughout the study until all transcripts were analyzed.

Assessing coder percentage of agreement is a commonly used method of evaluating coding reliability and can help determine if revisions to the coding schema are needed (Guest & MacQueen, 2007). Two authors recoded 50% of the transcripts using the determined themes and categories. The percentage of agreement for the selective coding was 82%. Based on this exercise, we determined that some of the code definitions needed further clarification. We then discussed ways in which to redefine the coding scheme and recoded a random selection of 43 quotes from the transcripts that represented axial and selective codes. The percentage of agreement for the axial coding ranged from 70% to 100%. For the selective coding, we demonstrated 80% to 100% agreement. Furthermore, using peer examination (Merriam, 1988), we asked a colleague not involved in the project to code a random set of the axial and selective codes to help enhance the reliability of the team's coding. We provided the external coder definitions of the codes and 32 randomly selected excerpts taken directly from the transcripts. The external coder agreed with our coding on 30 of the 32 axial codes (93.8%) and 31 of the 32 selective codes (96.9%).

Frequencies of Themes

In addition to the qualitative coding, we report frequencies of axial and selective codes for mothers and for daughters as cohorts (see Table 1). We do this not as part of a quantitative analysis but to provide a broader context for the individual relationship narratives we quote as illustrations, as well as to describe possible generational differences. In addition, presenting frequencies has been cited as a means of reducing investigator bias in qualitative studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Congruence within Mother–Daughter Dyads

Table 1 also reports the agreement on axial codes *within* mother–daughter dyads. Specifically, we computed the number of dyads who agreed on a particular axial code (i.e., the members of a dyad mentioned an open code that reflected the particular axial code). If both members did not mention a particular code, their perspectives were not considered congruent for the purposes of this study because we were interested in the presence, not the absence, of the axial codes.

Results

We applied the selective codes emerging from our analysis to address the three research questions. First, we describe the dominant themes within the mother and daughter narratives of their relationship (Research Question 1). To assess whether mothers and daughters evaluated their past relationship in light of their present one (Research Question 2), we looked for themes indicating such perceptions. For all themes, we address Research Question 3 (similarity and divergence in themes) by noting the percentage of mothers and daughters who mention the theme and the percentage of dyads showing congruence for that theme. These results are summarized in Table 1. As expected, congruence did not always occur between the mothers' and daughters' perspectives.

Generational Continuity and Generational Change

Mothers and daughters noted similarities and/or differences across generations. This selective code reflects self-identification as a member of a particular generation in historical (e.g., “The Greatest Generation”) or familial terms (e.g., the grandparent generation in the family), as well as awareness of the mother–daughter relationship in intergenerational terms.

Table 1. Congruence Within Mother–Daughter Pairs

Theme	Frequency of Responses		
	Mothers	Daughters	Congruence ^a
Generational Continuity vs. Change	23	17	17 (70.8%)
Generational continuity	22	15	15 (62.5%)
Generational change	13	12	9 (37.5%)
Closeness	24	24	24 (100%)
Proximity seeking	7	9	5 (20.8%)
Mother as understanding	6	9	4 (16.7%)
Emotional closeness despite distance	9	10	6 (25.0%)
Closeness	20	17	14 (58.3%)
Emotional support	21	21	18 (75.0%)
Positive reflection of the past	22	23	22 (91.7%)
Overall positive view of relationship	18	19	13 (54.2%)
Secrets	12	18	10 (41.7%)
Family norms and values	23	23	22 (91.7%)
Mother as positive role model	15	19	11 (45.8%)
Mother as negative role model	9	12	7 (29.2%)
Expectations/pressure	21	22	20 (83.3%)
Relationship barriers	24	22	22 (91.7%)
Conflict	17	17	14 (58.3%)
Distance	7	8	4 (16.7%)
Mother as unable to relate/judgmental	6	14	4 (16.7%)
Negative reflection of the past	17	18	15 (62.5%)
Emerging independence	19	16	13 (54.2%)
Autonomy/independence	13	11	7 (29.2%)
Push/pull	10	11	7 (29.2%)
Role ambiguity	8	4	2 (8.3%)
Agents of change	23	23	22 (91.7%)
Positive external influence	19	21	17 (70.8%)
Negative external influence	16	19	13 (54.2%)
Change in relationship/new dimension	17	21	15 (62.5%)
Reconstructing the past	14	14	9 (37.5%)

a. Both the mother and the daughter in a pair mentioned the theme or category.

In an example of generational continuity and generational change, the mother in one dyad asserted,

When I was real young, I would do my own rebellious thing with my mother, which was probably more prominent for those of us who grew up in the sixties than it was in some other generations . . . but I would say that I wasn't going to be like her [her own mother] and I considered her to be old fashioned.

Her daughter not only described her maternal grandmother in quite different terms but also derived meaning from the historical context of World War II and its aftermath:

I have a really close relationship with my grandmother. She's really amazing and I think her model has driven my mother in the way she has been as a woman. My grandmother was very ahead of her times in terms of . . . feminist proactivity and she's very determined like I have described my mother.

All but one mother reflected on issues of generational continuity and change, with most mothers mentioning only continuity. Daughters were less likely to address this issue. Furthermore, more dyadic congruence about continuity occurred across the generations than about change.

Closeness

All the mothers and daughters described instances of closeness with one another. They often stated how one would influence the other. Issues of emotional support occurred in almost all narratives, with only three mothers and three daughters failing to mention it. However, mothers and daughters tended to describe emotional support and influence as largely unidirectional, with mothers continuing to provide support and guidance to their adult daughters. For example, one mother stated, "She needs a lot of support to remind her that she's a good person. I've had lots of good conversations with her on the phone; we've had tears over some of her frustrations." Similarly, her daughter said, "My first year of college was very difficult, and I was very dependent on her. I called her almost every day crying, and I was a mess for a while, and she could help me."

As this example illustrates, some dyads described closeness during specific developmental periods whereas others described it more broadly. For example, one mother stated, "We have a close bond, and she's always shared a lot of

her feelings and emotions with me . . . in our family we tend to let things hang out about how we feel [about each other]." Similarly, her daughter stated, "The bottom line is that I would always go to talk to her about whatever it was that was bothering me. We've had a close relationship."

Secrets

Defined as events or feelings the individual chose not to disclose to the other, secrets emerged as a theme for half of the mothers and 75% of the daughters. The following example illustrates how one daughter feels more comfortable talking about certain topics with her friends than with her mother: "I think like in personal relationships, I talk more openly with my friends. Basic things I would tell her and ask her some questions; more personal things I would talk with my friends." Her mother also described certain off-limit topics: "I do confide in her, but there are two things I don't talk to her about."

In other instances, although mothers felt that their daughters could talk with them openly about everything, their daughters stated that there are things their mothers will "never know" about them. For example, one daughter described a "secret": "I think my mother knew me, but in some ways she didn't. Like when I was in high school, I actually did have hormones . . . my mother always thought I was kind of a prude." Her mother, however, made no mention of the daughter withholding any information from her. In fact, she asserted, "She knew that no matter what she said to me it would be held in the strictest of confidence and that she could say anything [to me]." As this example illustrates, most dyads were divergent in their perceptions of the role of secrets in their relationship.

Family Norms/Values

This selective code includes instances of the mother or the daughter describing the mother as a positive or a negative role model. (Interestingly, no participant described the daughter in these terms.) In every instance in which mothers discussed a negative role model, they did so about their own mother. In addition, two women also referred to themselves as negative role models for their daughters. Most mothers and daughters mentioned expectations and pressure as exerted by mothers on daughters. This transmission of expectations is evident in the following quote from a mother:

She's not the type to cling. . . . Usually I feel that I pressure her into calling me and to coming to town and to spending [time]. I do throw myself at her and that's not good.

Her daughter also expressed concern about how the relationship was not meeting her mother's expectations:

Now I think it's [relationship] probably the best that it's ever been, but to me, it's still dysfunctional. I don't think we communicate really well; we understand each other. Our relationship has improved, but I see other mothers and daughters, they are so close, we don't have that relationship. Even my mom said she wishes we were closer.

The theme of family values derived from earlier generations and influencing the mother is reflected in the daughter's comment:

I think she expected me to be closer to her like she was to her mom. . . . I think she probably thought that I would get married at a young age and then start a family and I would sort of do what she did.

Relationship Barriers

Despite emphasizing relationship closeness, emotional support, and generational continuity, mothers and daughters both recognized difficulties in their relationship, and most cited and agreed on instances of conflict. Similarly, both acknowledged past problems when daughters were growing up, particularly during the adolescent years when conflicts erupted around curfew, daughters' clothing, and their choice of friends. When daughters perceived a relationship barrier, they often viewed the mother as too judgmental. Mothers, however, did not perceive themselves as judgmental; hence, dyad congruence on this code was low. For example, this daughter reflects on her mother's disapproval of her boyfriend:

I guess there was a big issue that my boyfriend at the time wasn't Jewish. . . . Whenever she could, she would convey the message that she didn't approve. . . . So I think after a while, I just learned how to deal with it.

Her mother differed, stating, "I guess I always considered myself pretty easy-going about everything," and seemed to think she was reserving judgment of her daughter's relationship:

Parents can't always tell kids. Sometimes you feel if you say something, it could have the opposite effect. She's not in a serious relationship now,

but if something happened and she married this person that we expressed major reservations with, that can damage the next 10, 20 years. So it's tough.

Emerging Independence

This theme reflects the growing independence of the daughter from the mother and the family of origin. Specific axial codes within this theme—autonomy/independence, pull/push, and role ambiguity—reveal that the separation and individuation of the daughter from the mother are sometimes viewed with ambivalence by the daughter. For example, when discussing the daughter moving out of the family home, one mother expressed,

She's become much more independent. Being as she's the baby, it probably has been a little harder for me to let go. . . . I want them to go because I want them to be independent but, at the same time, to know they're always welcome.

Although the mother viewed this situation as a challenge, the daughter cited feelings of excitement because she will be on her own but also guilt that she will live so far away from her mother:

When I first moved away, it was really hard. I didn't realize how much I'd miss my family. I was just like, freedom! I could tell it was REALLY hard on my mom. And I'd feel really bad because I was like, I, if I wouldn't have gone so far away.

Interestingly, discussion of emerging independence was confined to the daughter's launching and independence from her family of origin. None of the mothers or daughters mentioned the emerging independence of the mother from the day-to-day responsibilities of raising children. Nearly half the dyads were divergent with respect to this theme.

Agents of Change

This theme focuses on individuals, events, and circumstances that are positive or negative agents of possible change in the mother–daughter relationship (e.g., father, grandmother, other family member, illness, death, religion, work).

The theme also reflects the recognition that each dyad partner is now an adult; hence, the mother–daughter relationship is an adult–adult bond, with

the physical, cognitive, and power asymmetries characteristic of adult–child relationships absent or diminished. The daughter is perceived as an autonomous individual making decisions about life choices. In the study, this recognition often was accompanied by acknowledging changes in the relationship over time.

For example, one mother perceived a more egalitarian relationship with her daughter in adulthood compared with her dominance in childhood:

Just as she has matured I would say our relationship has matured. We're more friends now instead of the authority-child and instead of telling her you've got to clean up.

Her daughter also reflected on a change in the relationship after she took on a parental role through her employment experience:

I turned 21 and that really changed the relationship with my mom because I was an au pair. It was the first time I really had a glimpse of what it took to be a mom. And I realized how much she sacrificed to be there with me and not be working.

Although many mothers and daughters discussed how their relationship has matured and how they were becoming more like friends, others described external factors that impeded the mother–daughter relationship and caused regression. For example, this mother describes her surprise at her daughter's reaction to a seemingly benign event:

The most recent, and most ridiculous issue, is that we have a young girl staying with us who is a border. . . . My oldest just went crazy—I was giving away her bedroom, her *childhood*. At first I thought she was just teasing me, but she sobbed, and it wasn't what I was expecting.

Her daughter reflected how salient the event was for her:

This kid was in my bedroom. That was very stressful . . . she's *not* my mother's child. I felt my mother dragged her feet with it more than I would have. When I go home, I don't want to share my mother's time with some other kid. My mother was more like: "let's give her a little leeway." So the situation sort of escalated.

Reconstructing the Past

This theme refers to explicit reevaluation of past relationship events—particularly during the daughter’s childhood—in light of the current adult–adult relationship. Fourteen mothers and 14 daughters engaged in such reconstruction of the past during their interviews, but low congruence occurred within the 24 dyads. For example, most of the mothers in the sample had worked part-time or full-time when their daughters were growing up, and the fit between employment and parenting was important for mothers as they reflected on the history of their relationship with their adult daughters. For some mothers, their views on the effect of their working during their daughter’s early years changed in light of the present. For example, one mother recollected,

I got a late start in life and thought I really needed to put in a lot more effort so I neglected the kids. . . . Looking back I have some regrets but the other benefit has been I grew so much through going to school that I am a better person than I ever would have been if I hadn’t chose to do that. I think the benefits have outweighed what they have lost.

Similarly, her daughter describes her new perspectives on her mother’s work history:

When we were little, she was home. . . . Then she went to school. . . . School affected us, and now that I look at it, it was for the better. It was very difficult, but we got through it. I’m proud of Mom. . . . Yeah, we had times where we wished she was home, but by that time we were teenagers, I don’t think we really cared.

This example illustrates congruence. Mother and daughter agreed that maternal employment positively affected the daughter.

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study focused on individual mother and adult daughter narratives about their relationship. Examining the relationship narratives of two adults with a lifelong, intimate relationship sheds light on the current quality of that relationship as well as on the ways in which the pair

reexamines, reevaluates, and consequently understands their shared past. Whereas many studies (e.g., Fingerman, 2000; Walker & Pratt, 1991) focus on one aspect of the mother–daughter relationship (e.g., conflict, contact, support), a major strength of this study is that it gives a broader perspective of the overarching themes in mothers' and daughters' perspectives on the relationship *as a whole*. A social constructivist framework using narrative allows us to note that the same theme may be verbalized quite differently by mothers and daughters.

In general, the mothers and daughters in this study described a close relationship that still reflects the asymmetries of parent and child, although the daughters average more than 25 years of age and more than 40% are married. Both generations and dyads were unanimous in viewing their bond as a close one. Mothers especially were aware of generational continuity; they reflected on their own childhood relationship with their mothers and they see their own daughters as becoming the young adults (in some cases, young mothers) they remember they once were. This is consistent with many other studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that document the persistent intimacy of the mother–daughter bond through the life span (e.g., Henwood, 1997; O'Reilly & Abbey, 2000; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Furthermore, our results suggest many levels of identification—mothers identifying with their own mothers, their adult daughters, and with their younger adult selves. Our results also suggest that daughters identify with their mothers—a notion found in psychoanalytic interpretations of narratives of mother–daughter relationships (e.g., Charles et al., 2001). Such findings are congruent with the life-course principle of linked lives (Elder, 1998), in which the developmental trajectories of each family member influence the other.

A more detailed look at this closeness, however, reveals that it is often based on relatively unidirectional influence, modeling, and support. Most women in both generations and dyads framed emotional support in terms of mothers' continuing support of their daughters. They failed to recognize and, in some cases, they explicitly rejected the idea that the adult daughter could provide emotional support to the mother. When each woman was asked how she influenced the other, both mothers and daughters readily and extensively described past and ongoing maternal influence, but many mothers and daughters were stymied when asked how the daughter might influence the mother. Some replied that they could think of nothing, whereas others mentioned apparently superficial forms of influence, such as conveying the latest fashions. The same pattern occurred in descriptions of the importance of family norms and values and perceptions of the other as a positive or negative role model. Mothers and daughters conceptualized value transmission as flowing

primarily from earlier to later generations. Mothers were considered role models (positive or negative) for their daughters, but daughters generally were not viewed as role models in important ways for their mothers. Finally, the theme of expectations/pressure referred exclusively to mothers' expectation about the daughter rather than the reverse. Thus, overall, both generations continued to see the mother–daughter bond in adulthood as one in which the mother continues to mother and the daughter continues to be the dependent daughter.

These results suggest that themes of caregiving and dependence, salient during daughters' childhood and mothers' old age (Walker & Pratt, 1991), do not disappear during the adult years. At least for this study's sample, there is continuing emphasis that emotional support, guidance, and influence flow from mother to daughter. Similarly, Fingerman (2000) found that mothers and daughters focus on daughters' well-being when daughters are young adults and only gradually shift to recognizing mutual needs and development. Our results also echo themes in Miller's (1992) interviews with adult women (aged 21–68 years), which revealed daughters' ongoing struggles, dating from adolescence, to forge a personal identity and differentiate from their mothers while continuing to need comfort and nurturance. Our findings, although consistent with Arnett's (2000) description of *emerging adulthood*, go further in showing how this life-course period influences perceptions of the mother–daughter relationship from both participants' perspectives.

From a life span perspective, the relationship period under study can be seen as a “bridge period” when mothers and their young adult daughters are just beginning to shift from the asymmetries of nurturing mother–dependent daughter to a more reciprocal relationship. Mothers especially appear more aware of generational continuity and change issues when their daughters are young adults and when they reflect on their relationship with their own mothers (who are likely to be elderly or recently deceased) and when they see their daughters as single adults, married women, and mothers of young children. In this way, the life span period appears to be one in which women's intergenerational history (grandmother–mother–daughter–daughter's children) is a powerful narrative thread.

Further evidence of a bridge period comes from countervailing themes about the mothering mother and the dependent daughter. Such themes reflect the daughter's growing independence, autonomy, and differentiation, a process that sometimes involves conflict and ambivalence. First, mothers were more likely to identify generational continuity than daughters. Second, daughters more often than mothers mentioned aspects of their lives they would keep from the other (“secrets”). Third, all mothers and all but two daughters recognized barriers or difficulties. Daughters sometimes accused their mothers

of being too judgmental, perhaps a reflection of the daughters' perceptions of maternal pressures on them. As Morgan and Hummert (2000) found, direct control strategies are viewed more negatively when directed toward young adult daughters than toward older women.

A marked divergence in perceptions of maternal pressure emerged as well; only four dyads were congruent in the theme "mother as unable to relate/judgmental." Overall, although both mothers and daughters recognized the dual forces of dependence and independence playing out in their current relationship, daughters were more likely to identify conflict in that process.

Intergenerational ambivalence between adult generations is well documented (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Pillemer & Suito, 2002; Spitze & Gallant, 2004; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Our findings of perceived closeness and support along with conflict and pressures of expectations (expressed by daughters) confirm ambivalent perceptions in the mother–daughter relationship and further describe the dimensions of such ambivalence.

Charles et al. (2001) and Flax (1978) argue that the twin themes of nurturance and autonomy fluctuate in dynamic tension throughout the mother–daughter relationship. In this study, sample characteristics alone would suggest themes of independence and autonomy. All but one daughter was living independently, and most were largely or totally economically self-sufficient. Education levels of both generations were high, and more than 40% lived more than 300 miles apart from one another. However, the findings also are consistent with a view of emerging adulthood as part of a historically extended launching period in which adult children remain emotionally (and often materially) dependent on their parents (Arnett, 2000). At least for middle-class mother–daughter pairs, persistent intimacy and mutual dependence may characterize the relationship throughout adulthood. The mother supporting her daughter may be an enduring feature of their adult relationship, shifting only when the mother becomes unable to function independently and her health declines. Zarit and Eggebeen (2002) contend that throughout the adulthood of both generations, parents give more help and support to their adult children than the children do to them, reversing only when the last grandchild is 19 years old.

In addition to persistent intimacy, unidirectional mothering, and conflict, there is evidence that the participants often reevaluate their past in light of the present. This reevaluation occurs among more than half the mothers and daughters, although dyads were not congruent, meaning they do not mention the same examples of reevaluation. In other studies, narratives emphasize how past experiences influence the current mother–daughter relationship. In fact, Miller (1992) notes that her guiding question—"How do you experience

your relationship with your mother/daughter?”—transformed during the course of her research into—“How have past experiences influenced your current relationship?” Such reexamination and reevaluation of the past relationship are consistent with the social constructivist perspective and support the view that childhood experiences continue to influence adult relationships. However, it is always conditioned or shaped by the individual’s current interpretation of those earlier experiences. The dynamic nature of mother–daughter relationships throughout adulthood ensures that both generations periodically may come to see earlier issues in a new light, such as the mother’s employment when the daughter was young.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Given the small sample size and the relative homogeneity of the sample, particularly with regard to socioeconomic status and cultural diversity, results should be interpreted with caution. Single mothers, mothers and daughters in poverty, and ethnic minority pairs were underrepresented in this sample. Moreover, all but one of the mother–daughter pairs were biologically related (i.e., one was adopted at birth).

Nevertheless, this exploratory study using narrative as its data poses questions to be incorporated into larger, more representative samples. Evidence suggests that stressful life circumstances, including those that occur during adulthood, influence the mother–daughter bond (e.g., Sterk, Elifson, & Theall, 2000; Wadsworth, Raviv, Compas, & Connor-Smith, 2005). In addition, other family ties (e.g., father of daughter, mother’s parents, daughter’s siblings) also affect the mother–daughter tie and, in turn, are affected by them. Although we asked mothers and daughters about other relationships that influenced their ties, further studies should focus on the entire kin and friendship networks of a mother–daughter dyad.

Because our study required both mothers and daughters to participate for us to examine individual reflections within dyadic pairs, our selection criteria eliminated estranged pairs. Therefore, there was a selection bias toward more positive mother–daughter relationships. Future research is needed on mother–daughter relationships in crisis. Additionally, longitudinal data would illuminate changes in mother–daughter understandings of their relationship after important life transitions, such as the daughter becoming a mother, the mother becoming postmenopausal, the mother retiring from work, or a divorce for either the mother or the daughter.

Although addressed in a limited way in this study, the issue of agreement or congruence of narratives within relationships is an important one. We defined

“agreement” as instances in which a mother and daughter each mentioned (in any way) the same code. A more detailed assessment of agreement might be restricted to dyads that describe a particular theme in a similar way and reach similar conclusions about an aspect of their relationship. Future studies could examine whether mothers and daughters describe themes that reflect a vacillation in mother–daughter relationships. For example, do the same mothers and daughters who describe generational continuity also describe generational change? Are there descriptions of distance in addition to closeness within the same narratives? Do mothers and daughters describe the same sources of stress? Such themes represent the dynamic nature of adult mother–daughter relationships and the complexity of such ties.

To place the mother–adult daughter relationship within the life course of each individual and her relationship, future research might ask how the themes we uncovered would change or remain the same when the mother becomes elderly and the daughter middle-aged. A strong emotional attachment between mothers and their adult daughters could lead to greater support by the daughter to the elderly dependent mother (Silverstein, Bengston, & Lawton, 1997). At the same time, older adults often express ambivalence as recipients of help from their adult children (Spitze & Gallant, 2004). It would be interesting to explore if ambivalence expressed by young adult daughters is related to later ambivalence expressed by their aging mothers.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the existing literature by sensitizing researchers to themes and issues that may be changing given the length of time spent in this life-course phase and the ways in which that change may or may not correspond to developmental expectations based on linear models. The results confirm the utility of studying individual narratives of the same relationship to explore similar themes as they appear from each perspective. Our findings also show that when daughters are young adults and their mothers are middle-aged, the past—the daughter’s childhood and the mother’s earlier child-rearing—is revisited and reassessed by both generations. In this sense, our findings are consistent with Lewis’s (1997) contention that childhood affects adulthood primarily through the prism of adult reconstructions and integrations of the past. Moreover, the mother–daughter relationship during these years remains an important, intimate bond. It continues to reflect the daughter’s separation, autonomy, and independence against the backdrop of continuing closeness to and emotional support from mothers.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol (Daughter)*

1. How would you describe yourself at this point in your life?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your mother:
(a) during your early childhood, (b) from elementary school to high school, (c) through high school, (d) after high school, and (e) now?
3. How do you think your mother's work life has affected your relationship with her?
4. If you needed any kind of emotional support, would you turn to your mother? Why or why not? Can you tell me more about that?
5. As a daughter, how do you think your relationship with your mother has changed? In what ways? Were any ages or times particularly important? What issues seemed most related to those changes?
6. If you have children of your own now, how do you think being a mother yourself has affected your relationship with your mother? How has your relationship with your mother affected your experience as a mother?
7. What expectations do you think your mother had for you growing up? How do you feel you have met, or not met, those expectations? What expectations does she have for you now? (What events did she expect to happen, and when?)
8. How much time do you spend together now? What kinds of things do you do? What do you talk about?
9. What was the most enjoyable, positive experience of the last year in your relationship with your mother? Would you describe your relationship with your mother as generally positive? Tell me more about that.
10. What was the most stressful experience of the last year, in your relationship with your mother? Is this an ongoing part of your relationship? If so, how long has this existed?
11. What aspects of your life are important in affecting your relationship with your mother? (How do other relationships, religion, etc. affect your relationship?)
12. How would you say you have influenced your mother?
13. How would you say your mother has influenced you?

14. If your grandmother is still living or if you knew her as a child, how would you say she has affected your relationship with your mother?
15. Is there anything else you would like to say about your relationship with your mother?

*Parallel questions were asked of mothers.

Appendix B

Definitions of Themes

Generational Continuity and Generational Change

Generational continuity: Mother or daughter describes behavior reflecting continuity across generations or recognizing similarities across generations.

Generational change: Mother or daughter describes behavior reflecting discontinuity or change across generations or recognizing differences across generations.

Closeness

Proximity seeking (physical closeness): Mother or daughter describes attempting to be physically close to the other (e.g., moving to be closer to one another).

Mother as understanding: Mother or daughter describes the mother as being accepting or understanding of the daughter.

Emotional closeness despite (physical) distance: Mother or daughter describes emotional presence or closeness of the other, even though she may not be physically close or available.

Closeness: Mother or daughter describes feeling a bond or special closeness with the other.

Emotional support: Mother or daughter describes relying on the other for emotional support.

Positive reflection of the past: Mother or daughter recalls past events in a positive way; perception that the relationship was favorable (i.e., mother was available).

Overall positive view of relationship: Mother or daughter describing the relationship as having ups and downs but as generally good.

Secrets

Mother or daughter describes withholding information from the other or keeping secrets from the other person.

Family Norms/Values

Mother as positive role model: Mother or daughter describes self or mother as a good example or role model to the daughter; mother or daughter describes the daughter as admiring the mother, wanting to emulate mother; makes mother feel like good model to daughter.

Mother as negative role model: Conscious, deliberate generational change; mother or daughter describes wanting to be different than her mother, not wanting to repeat certain behaviors.

Expectations/pressure: Mother or daughter describes perceptions of pressure or describing expectations for the daughter.

Relationship Barriers

Conflict: Mother or daughter describes disagreements, tension, and/or stress in the relationship.

Distance: Mother or daughter describes feeling emotionally distant from the other.

Mother unable to relate/mother judgmental: Mother or daughter describes the mother as not being understanding or accepting of the daughter.

Negative reflection of the past: Mother or daughter reconstructs past events negatively.

Emerging Independence

Autonomy/independence from mother: Mother or daughter describes the daughter's attempts to be independent.

Push/pull between interdependence and independence: Mother or daughter describes the desire to maintain physical and emotional closeness interchanged with the desire to obtain individuality or independence from the other.

Role ambiguity: Mother or daughter expresses uncertainty or describes being unsure about her role in relation to the other (i.e., when to intervene, when to stay out of it).

Agents of Change

Positive external influence: Mother or daughter describes an outside factor (e.g., father, grandmother, other family member, illness, death, religion, or work) that positively affects the mother–daughter relationship.

Negative external influence: Mother or daughter describes an outside factor (e.g., father, grandmother, other family member, illness, death, religion, or work) that negatively affects the mother–daughter relationship.

Change in relationship/new dimension: Mother or daughter describes a perception of a new aspect of the mother–daughter relationship; noting a new level or phase (e.g., friendship).

Reconstructing the Past

Mother or daughter describes new perspective on past events; viewing events from the past in a different way (positive or neutral).

Authors' Note

Kathryn E. Bojczyk is now a senior study director at Westat in Rockville, MD. Tara J. Lehan is now a postdoctoral fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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