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Social Support Among Women in Families: A Descriptive Study of Support in Intergenerational Relationships

Gina L. Bauswell
Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in Speech Communication at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG WOMEN IN FAMILIES

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF SUPPORT IN INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

BY

GINA L. BAUSWELL

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2000

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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12/19/00
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The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without my family members, those who participated by providing memories and love in the form of answers in the questionnaires, and also those who gave insight at various family gatherings. This goes to the men and women that make up the outstanding members of the entire family. The support that they give me is, without question, one of the most important factors pushing me to be the best person I can possibly be.
Finally, the driving force behind the accomplishment of this thesis is my mother and father. They are my inspiration and my best friends. I can only hope that when it is time for me to start my own family, I will be able to supply the enriching environment that has been my existence. Thank you for giving me life, and teaching me that the most incredible gift to be given is love. This thesis is dedicated to the both of you.
Abstract

This study examines the effects of social support in intergenerational relationships among women in families. The research examines ethnography as a study, some of the benefits of research done in intergenerational communication, changes in this communication over the time span of the intergenerational relationships, the transmission of this communication, social support, the positive effects of the phenomenon of this type of communication for all those participating in this dynamic process, and the heuristic value of this research. The participants were forty women in my extended family, and this study is based upon their answers to a questionnaire and focus group session. The findings create a descriptive analysis that provides (1) a definition of what consists of “our family”; (2) definitions of the woman’s role; (3) the rules and expectations of that role; (4) stories that explain our family; and (5) stories that define women’s relationships with one another.
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As I skipped into my grandmother's kitchen, my anticipation grew with each leap I took. Being the adventurous five-year old granddaughter, I had been waiting for my favorite meal to be prepared ever since Saturday morning cartoons, when my grandmother first informed me of the lunch she had planned. "What is that wonderful smell?" asked my great grandma Ruby. "It's a pot roast, mom," replied my grandma Sophie. "I wuv pot woast gwamma!" I exclaim. "Of course you do honey; we all do," stated my mother.

I am a firm believer that I have benefited in many ways from having four generations of women in my family. Not only have I been the storage site for many mouth-watering home cooked meals, but I have also received morals, values, and ideas about my culture from three amazing women. I can remember sitting around a room with my great grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother, talking about family members and priceless experiences dealing with humor, sadness, romance, health issues, and downright delicious recipes for different journeys through life, not to mention food! The transmission of my ideas about decision-making and values were communicated through observation of behavior, storytelling, and conversations held at family gatherings. I had the esteemed pleasure of being a participant in intergenerational communication among the women in my family. It is an honor to be able to tell our story through the method of ethnography.
In this study I will examine ethnography as a method of study, some of the research done relating to intergenerational communication, changes in this communication over the time span of the intergenerational relationships, the transmission of communication, social support, the positive effects of this type of communication for all those partaking in this dynamic process, and the heuristic value of this research.

**Ethnography as a Study**

I can remember keeping a journal for the majority of my life. I never imagined that my thoughts could be valued and appreciated as “rich data.” Then I discovered the methodology of ethnography, and my reality became a never-ending universe for research and discovery. Ethnographic methodology is an appropriate method for studying culture (Rosen, 1991). It is a “narrative practice”, qualitative in nature, that captures the experience of the research, along with the results (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). This approach to research collects events and traces the contributory development of a single subject (Aunger, 1995).

There have been some misconceptions about the validity of ethnography in the academic society. Some scholars have questioned the value and use of this type of research. According to ethnographers, it should have value and worth if you read the story and are moved and informed. However, this is not always the case in the eyes of quantitatively driven scholars. This makes the road traveled by the ethnographer a sometimes, treacherous road to follow (Goodall, 1989).
According to Kleinman (1999), the ethnographer engages him or herself in activities of the culture that they are researching. This can be a dangerous risk, but also a most rewarding experience. The ethnographer has a great responsibility in that they control their interaction and the outcome of their involvement. “Ethnographers must wander through a multicultural wilderness, learning to see the world through the eyes of people from all walks of life” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 146). When beginning the adventure, ethnographers must be able to investigate a particular culture and analyze the data that is found. After the analysis, they must write about what they have observed and recorded in an eloquent and convincing approach. The ethnographer will run into many unforeseen paths along the roads of this journey. The true ethnographer will not only pursue the guided paths, they will also seek to find the significance of the detours (Fetterman, 1998).

What does the ethnographer seek to find? According to Goodall (1989), the ethnographer is constantly searching for truth and beauty in the way their data is communicated to the reader. “Together, and in balance, they represent the best of what representation is about, which is the depiction of realities that draws us into (rather than away from) the experiencing of life (p. 139).” Bochner & Ellis (1999), also support this rationale for the study of ethnography. They hypothesize that our academic community can progress into one that is accepting of all forms of analysis, where the boundaries separating the multiple genres of art will dissolve. Through the many attacks on raw emotions and becoming overly personal, as to ignore the brute facts, ethnography as a study depicts a natural human experience that invites people from outside the academic world in a non-threatening manner. This can only be a positive thing. We, as
ethnographers, can only hope for an in-between territory where writing from the "head and the heart go hand in hand (p. 499)."

Exploring the Research in Intergenerational Communication

The benefits of intergenerational communication are evident through the importance of this communication to all people in all generations of the family. It affects every member in each generation equally and uniquely. I will focus on women. According to Williams et al., (1997):

In spite of a recent surge of research interest in communication and aging, there has been little work in the field of communication concerned with matters of the life span, particularly aging and intergenerational communication. In fact, the field of social gerontology has only recently begun to recognize the important role of communication in the health and well being of older adults (p. 372).

Edwards and Giles (1998) stated:

Since the mid-1980's, there has been a growing interest in research and theory across disciplines in a wide variety of aspects of communication and aging. This research reflects a general interest in older people as our population ages but, more importantly, it acknowledges the social and psychological importance of communication to, from, and about older people (p. 4).
Not only is the research relevant to an elderly generation, but also to middle age and adolescent generations. A study was conducted exploring women's perceptions of their family relationships. “The women had varying degrees of involvement with their children and grandchildren, and these relationships contributed to their sense of self and family,” (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 1999, p. 75). In a study completed by Ng, Liu, Weatherall, and Loong (1997), the generation gap in families between the elderly, middle-aged, and adolescent generations was examined in conversational dyads. It was found that even though a gap exists, it does not necessarily mean that the communication is unsatisfactory for the participants. “The values of a family are especially important during the transitional period of adolescence, as individuals gradually relinquish dependency upon parents and assume increasing responsibility and autonomy,” (Overbey & Pollina, 1996, p. 609). The encouragement and support provided by parents through communication is essential to the development of autonomy of the aging adolescent. Research done by Silverstein and Bengston (1997) suggests that with the aging of the child, there will be a shift in parent-child relations. They found that daughters are more likely to be close with and are less likely to have enforced relationships with their mothers. This supports the desire to partake in the relationship with the female familial partner from one generation to another. Seiffge-Krenke (1999) proposes that “daughters individuate while staying connected, and that families with daughters encourage
independence, yet stay committed to their offspring,” (p. 330). This is why I chose to limit my scope to the female members of my family.

**Changing Communication in Relationships Over Time**

Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, and Beatty (1999) reveal that intergenerational relationships continually change over the family life cycle. Their research demonstrates that as the parent-adolescent relationships change, perceptions and therefore communication styles and patterns, will change as well. However, in a study conducted by Bohannon and Blanton (1999) researching the attitudes of mothers and their daughters, it was shown that mothers are primary sources of socialization for their daughters, and as their attitudes changed over time, the changes seemed to be consistent for both the mothers and daughters. Thus, as generations mature, their communications and attitudes change with them.

Rathunde (1997) demonstrates the importance of contributing optimal communication strategies in dyads with intergenerational family members. An understanding of optimal communication provides enjoyment of communication for future interactions. Optimal communication strategies can help lead to successful communication in intergenerational communication. “Successful communication is vital for successful aging: whether it involves communicating with one’s peers, one’s caregivers, or one’s care-receivers,” (Gould & Shaleen, 1999, p. 397). Bhushan and Shirali’s (1992) study supports that the theory that parents’ openness in communication will aid in effective intergenerational
communication, emphasizing the significance of family relationships in the development process of identity achievement.

Mills (1999) examines the transition of grandchildren from adolescence to adulthood and their views of family solidarity. Mills (1999) defines family solidarity as “intergenerational association, perceptions of closeness, and similarity of ideals, values, and opinions” (p. 232). As transitions occur, there is an increase in family solidarity. Also relating to developing identities of aging parent-child relationships, Theriault (1997) concludes that “competent adolescents can successfully separate from their parents while still maintaining some attachment bonds with them.”

The identities of generations change over time as parents and children mature. As women age, not only do their identity levels change, but also their position as a care-giver. In a study presented by Scott (1998), as women matured to late old age, they received substantially more help with daily activities from their adult children.

Throughout the care-giving and care-taking experience in female intergenerational communication, the changes in identity roles provide many positive and negative gains. Sheehan and Donorfio (1999) propose:

Positive gains include caregiving satisfaction, rewards, uplifts, increased sense of mastery, a sense of purpose or meaning, enjoyment of the relationship, or improved quality of the relationship. Given the complexity and multidimensionality of human development and family
relations, caregiving can cause tensions within or across these domains. Resolution of these tensions can result in personal satisfaction and growth, while unresolved conflicts can result in stress, burden, psychological distress, and/or other stress-related outcome (p. 163).

The patterns of communication that are conveyed over time have effects on identity roles and relational roles, affecting all interactions that are distributed and perceived by the women in the family. These transactions are transmitted in many different ways.

**Transmission of Communication**

It is crucial to examine some of the ways in which communication of intergenerational women is transmitted. Manheimer (1997) studies the importance of generations working together for mutual benefit. Through this communication, each generation can learn about the other’s culture by observing and interacting with the other. By sharing ideas and views about the world, intergenerational communication can positively flourish.

Many stereotypes exist between generations about one another; however, children do want to know about stories from their parents’ or grandparents’ pasts. Arliss (1993) states that, “once children and grandparents can actually talk to one another, grandparents provide symbols of the child’s lineage as he or she searches for information about the self” (p. 161). This research also suggests that children benefit from listening to stories told by grandparents, and can add to
their ability to tell personal narratives. Intergenerational storytelling also teaches adolescents and young adults about the aging process, importance of health issues, and death. This storytelling will prepare them to deal with such issues outside of the intergenerational communication environment. A study conducted by Schely-Newman (1999) also supports Arliss’ theory of defining meaning in narratives told by mothers. During these observed interactions, the transmission of the narrative from mother to daughter shapes gender relations, social boundaries, and ideas and values about self for both mother and daughter.

Social Support and Positive Effects of Intergenerational Communication

I have discussed the need for intergenerational research among different generations, changes in the communication over the time span of the relationships, and some of the ways communication is transmitted, but perhaps the most important aspect of the research findings is the effect that this communication has on the well being of the women in each generation.

The social support that we provide our families has great impact on our lives. My family has been a strong source of social support for me, and research shows that social support has beneficial effects upon our mental and physical overall health and well being (Furukawa & Sarason, 1998). These supportive interactions and the presence of these supportive relationships in our lives has also shown to affect performance in outside relationships, such as in the work environment and in social groups (Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason, 1992).
I have found, from my own personal experience, and in the literature I reviewed, that positive behavior in accordance with healthy lifestyles and overall happiness among women of all generations in families is transmitted through intergenerational transactions. Levitt, Guacci, and Weber (1992) did a study with participants of three generations of women in families dealing with positive effects of communication. The study found that the quality of the relationships was associated with the contentment of each individual generation. In relation to grandchildren-grandparent communication, a study was made by Langer (1990) supporting that adult-grandchildren provide significant emotional support for their grandparents. Supportive communication affected the quality of the relationships among the women. “Whether positive or negative, there can be little doubt that what occurs in early family communication molds children’s communication patterns,” (Booth- Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998, p. 297).

Fergusson, Li, and Taylor (1998) contend that grandmothers also offer comfort for families with young children, in terms of taking care of the youth.

Parents and grandparents also have a strong influence in the socialization of adolescents, thereby affecting the decision-making process in the matter of healthy lifestyle choices, particularly safe sex, alcohol, and tobacco use. A study done by Miller, Norton, Fan, and Christopherson (1998) supports this theory in their findings while adding that the quality of interaction among parent-child communication has a major impact on decision making with regard to sexual values. General findings conclude that the mother is the primary socializing
influence on adolescent daughters' decision-making processes on these issues. Communication will occur more frequently if adolescents and parents perceive the conversations as comfortable and easy (Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand & Ham, 1998). In the context of sexual permissiveness, this reasoning leads to the general expectation that a parent’s influence on his or her teenager’s sexual attitudes is especially pronounced when parent-child communication is good (Taris, Semin & Bok, 1998). Several researchers have reported a positive association between communication about sex and safer sexual behaviors among adolescents (Whitaker, Miller, May, & Levin, 1999).

Although talking about sex is an important behavior predictor, the process is not an easy one. The intimate discussions about a teenager or young adult’s personal issues and opinions, especially pertaining to sexual relationships may be particularly difficult to communicate to older generations in the family. Even though the topics of personal issues can be uncomfortable to discuss in intergenerational communication, the way in which the parents address them can influence the behavior of adolescents. When parents openly and honestly invite the asking of questions and discussion with their adolescent children, this is likely to reduce discomfort among all participants in the conversation. It will also increase the chances that the adolescent will make healthier choices relating to sexual behavior (1999). The openness of communication in parent-child interactions also influences the consumption of alcohol among adolescents and college-aged children. “Even college students living at school are influenced by
their parents, and, in fact, may experience an increase in their family communication openness as they enter their college years," (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger 1998, p. 298). Many women begin smoking cigarettes at an early age, and it is feasible that parent-adolescent discussions of tobacco use can be smooth and open among all participants (Ary, James, & Biglan, 1999).

Along with promoting healthy lifestyle choices, intergenerational communication among women in families provides an overall positive psychological state and happiness and contentment of self. In personality psychology, research has shown that a person's personality can be influenced by a number of factors, such as social environment, genetic background, and individual experiences (Huang, 1999). Positive communication in families or home environment has been shown to improve self-esteem issues, attitudes on perceptions of self, and behavior towards others. These communication patterns have also been shown to contribute to personality characteristics of individuals interacting in such environments, such as taking leadership roles, maintaining true friendships, and partaking of more open conversations, thereby enhancing self and psychological state (1999). Other research that supports this theory is that of Miller, Kramer, Warner, Wickramaratne, and Weissman (1997). They conclude that the bonding that takes place during parent-child communication plays a significant role in the development of the adult psychopathology of the maturing child.
Heuristic Value of Intergenerational Communication

In the literature reviewed in this paper, I have discussed many important issues pertaining to the study of intergenerational communication and the effects that it has on individuals and society. However, more research is essential on this dynamic process.

More emphasis is necessary on relational and identity issues dealing with social networks of older people (Williams & Coupland 1998). The social encounters across generations of women in families are a vital aspect of socialization for each generation of women, and the effects of this interaction create meaning and self-identity. The research presented thus far, displays the value of this communication, and the need for further study.

Conclusion

I believe that intergenerational communication has played a substantial role in the development of my sense of self. The articles that I reviewed and observations made in my own environment have led me to believe that this phenomenon is important to understand. Whether laughing about past experiences around a picnic table with my mother and grandmothers, or sharing a serious moment about our lives, the ongoing intergenerational communication in my family has affected my morals, values, and sense of self in my environment. The research I have found supports my beliefs about the benefits of such
communication, and as I continue to grow and learn from daily experience of life, it is important that this line of research flourishes and grows as well.

Research Questions

After examining benefits of intergenerational communication research in the field of communication, changes in this communication, the transmission of this process, the positive effects of social support, and the heuristic value of such research, I decided to investigate what effects these intergenerational relationships had among the women in my family. This research is guided by the following questions posed to female members of my family:

RQ 1: What are the boundaries for what counts as “our family?”

RQ 2: What is the role of the woman in our family?

RQ 3: What are the rules and expectations of that role?

RQ 4: What stories capture the essence of our family?

RQ 5: What stories capture the relationships among women in our family?
Methodology

This part of the thesis describes the way in which the study was conducted. It includes the data collection procedures and the data analysis. I have collected family stories, which give details that lead into the answers to my research questions. These accounts characterize the identities of the members of my family. They are treated as texts for interpretation (Trujillo, 1998). While not all the surveys are “reported” in the thesis, information received from all respondents was incorporated into the collective voice of our family, expressed through individual quotations and in my autoethnography.

Many scholars have discussed the importance of family stories. According to Langellier and Peterson (1993), family storytelling is “a discursive practice that produces familial culture” (p. 50). In a synopsis of communication in families, Yerby et al (1995) suggest that family stories teach moral lessons, define identities of family members, connect generations of family members, and explain the family itself. “Most families develop a corpus of stories that define their history, depict what makes them unique ‘as a family,’ establish the values and principle to which they are devoted, and characterize the identities of each family member” (p. 206).

Along with the value of family stories, I have enveloped my own stories and memories in this analysis, and therefore, shaped my interpretations of the family stories and accounts. This is what gives this story and autoethnographic quality as well (Trujillo, 1998). “Our understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experience, and this experience involves our own personalities and histories as well as our field research” (Jackson, 1989, p. 17). This approach allowed me to not only examine how my
interpretations of the family stories were shaped by my own recollections of them, but also how they were reshaped by others recollections of them. This has given me the chance to reinterpret the identities of women in my family, resulting in another outlook of my family as a whole that I have never seen before.

Data Collection Procedures

Subjects. The subjects were women in my extended family, on both my mother's and father's sides. Their ages range from fifteen to ninety-four years old, and their locations were scattered throughout the United States. They take on various roles in each of their families, but to me they consist of my mother, grandmothers, great grandmother, aunts, great aunts, and first and second cousins. Forty participants were sent one cover letter and questionnaire each.

Procedure. The method used was a questionnaire. Since the questionnaire was sent to people I love, I issued each participant a cover letter explaining my reasoning for the study, and wishes of good cheer. This can be found in Appendix A. The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions that reflected my research questions. It required that my family members narrate a specific memory that symbolized what our family means to them, and what the role of the women entails in our family. This questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

On November 23, 2000, Thanksgiving Day, I utilized the cherished time spent together with my family by executing a focus group. This consisted of four women: my mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and cousin. I tried to minimize my interaction
with them and carefully observe as they discussed “old times” around the kitchen table just after Thanksgiving dinner.

In addition to the focus group and questionnaires, I was sent supplementary information from my great aunt, and received phone calls about the questionnaire from various family members, men and women. I kept field notes recording their ideas and insight in relating to our family as a collective.

Data Analysis

After receiving twenty-three of the forty questionnaires back from my family, I highlighted the common themes found for each question asked, while also acknowledging the different themes as well. These themes were checked by three other coders for intercoder reliability. I sketched notes after the conversation took place during the focus group, so as not to create uncomfortable tension during the conversation because of my note taking. When receiving phone calls and outside information from my family members, I would take notes while talking to them, or directly afterwards. After receiving the multiple narratives and answers to these research questions, I encapsulated my memories and experience of the culture of my family, along with those who participated, to create an autoethnography informed by the information provided by my family about the experience of social support in intergenerational relationships of women in my family. I hope you can not only relate, but also enjoy our story.
“The Holiday”

I gazed out the picture window at the glistening snowfall that twinkled and glittered on the ground having just arrived the night before. It appeared soft and crisp and barely covered the bushes that enclosed our front porch. A few flakes fell from the hazy purple sky, almost as if they were performing a dance to the audience of trees that surrounded them. The wood crackled in the fireplace providing the warmth that only a fireplace can on a cold winter evening as the sun was creeping its way under the horizon. I tugged at the bottom of my fuzzy wool sweater, as I always do, curled up on the corner of my favorite seat in the house, the couch. Nat King Cole sang the sweet sounds of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” and my anticipation grew with each passing tick of the clock. The smell of freshly prepared cookies and pies filled the living room as I awaited the arrival of my beloved family members.

“Who consists of our family?”

As the footprints in the snow made their way up to our front door, more and more guests poured in, hanging their coats in the closet and on the rack, dropping off boxes and bags of neatly wrapped presents as they gave hugs and kisses to all who greeted them. “Hey there’s” and “Merry Christmas’s” were exchanged as the sun fell below our viewing and the festivities had only just begun.

People were traveling from all directions of the country, California, Georgia, and Washington to name some of the furthest, but most were venturing in the cold winter chill from the Midwest section of the country. My mother was preparing quite a feast for
many of our family members, an exceptional number of people this particular year, and I watched her in awe.

I have the esteemed pleasure of getting to experience both my mother and father’s sides on most holidays, and this one may have been one of the largest attendance ratings in years. The definition of family has many connotative meanings in our society. The “nuclear family” has come to mean many different things to many different people. Immediate versus extended in relation to family, has criss-crossed its way through the boundaries of the “standard family,” as if there were such a thing. The rarity of our family is that we have come to call certain members “aunts”, “cousins”, and “grandmothers”, when they are not blood relatives to us. However, they have taken on these roles in various aspects. For example; my father’s brother’s wife, (my aunt) has a sister that I consider to be my aunt. Her daughters are my cousins, and her husband is my uncle. My aunt’s mother, who passed away this fall, is and will always live in my heart as my grandmother. This experience has also happened to my cousins, my father’s brother’s children. They consider my mother’s brother to be their uncle and his son to be their cousin. My cousin Erin made this statement:

“Not many people can say that their dad’s sister-in-law’s brother attended their mother’s mother’s funeral.”

Not to mention the fact that friends are always welcome to attend family gatherings. Often times, friends are considered members of the family, based on the time that they spend around a certain member or the family as a whole. They have been included in the
presentation of gifts, food preparation, and all other activities that take place at family functions. According to my cousin Nancy,

"Even our dogs seem like family."

These findings indicate that there are very loose boundaries when it comes to our family. We have taken on these roles for each other in an effort to create a loving environment that is very rare and phenomenal in our culture.

"What is the role of the woman in our family?"

Compliments on the tree and the décor of our house were given to my mother as she worked away in the kitchen. Her apron accented the labor she has done with its gravy stains covering the delicate hand-sewn red and green Christmas floral pattern that lay underneath. Her smile shined through her tired condition from all the preparation that went into this special day. The meticulous placement of relish trays and punch bowls that went unnoticed made the tables look like they were straight from Martha Stewart's book cover. She planned games for after dinner activities and made sure that everyone had enough to eat and drink, and was thoroughly enjoying themselves. I followed to help her in the back room, and I saw her take a deep exhale of relief from the depths of her lungs, thinking no one was watching her. I was. My cousin Erin sparked conversations with long lost family members whom she had not seen in awhile about their newest projects or hobbies. The sweet sound of my Grandma Littleton's voice hummed in the background as she exclaimed, "My how you've grown," to my cousin Justin, who grows a foot every year. My father and Uncle Jim laughed out loud as my Uncle Marty told his famous jokes. My Aunt Exie thanked my mother for hosting this year's Christmas
celebrations, since the two of them often take turns, and my mother replied ever so humbly, “Everything is just as it should be.”

All of the women in my family take on various roles, depending upon who is around them at the time. This is probably true for most people, and it is an obvious distinction. If I am around my mother, I am a daughter. If I am seeking the wisdom of one of my grandmothers, I am a granddaughter. If I am talking with my cousin, I am a cousin and a friend. This is true for all of the other women in my family, and possibly yours. However, I discovered through my research that some roles are changing as time passes. Some members are experiencing the “flip-flop” role of “care-seeker to caretaker.” This is a typical change as shown in my literature review, and it is taking place among women in my family. Some women who have been in attendance for the family gatherings are now becoming the hosts. My cousin Erin stated,

“In the beginning there was no real rule or expectation of what my role would be in the family. I was just Erin, going through the motions, reacting to whatever would come my way. However, as I have grown older, figuring out who I am and how I can contribute to the family, patterns have developed and thus rules and expectations have been formed. I now take a more active role within the family, and I think others have come to expect that...I have this need to keep our family together.”

I too, have come to feel this way about my family. I know that when I have a
family of my own, I want to take on all of these activities and responsibilities in keeping
the family as close as the women in my family thus far have kept ours.

“What are the rules and expectations of this role?”

“Something smells good,” exclaimed my Uncle Jim as he followed the mouth-watering scent of the freshly baked spread that was drenched in the holiday spirit, and not to mention butter! Individual conversations filled the room, while Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra medleys hummed in the background. “Thank you’s” were given to my mother by some guests for their invitation to this get-together. As I watched the conversations waltz throughout the aroma-filled rooms, I smiled and realized that I was one of the most fortunate people on the earth. I felt tremendous guilt to be so lucky, and to have all these wonderful people around me, and not be able to thank each and every one of them for the spiritual gifts that they give me. I truly believe that when you have a moment as I did, you have found real happiness.

My memories of family gatherings always contain my mother, my aunts, or my grandmothers preparing large home-cooked meals in honor of whatever occasion was being celebrated. Food preparation has always been an expectation of most of the women in my family. According to my Aunt Donna,

“I cook for whoever shows up!”

My Aunt Exie has always prepared large meals for us when she is hosting the gathering. My grandmothers and great aunts have also always been fabulous cooks, not only at
times when we are all together, but also for little visits, such as dropping in to say “Hi,” which also required meal preparation.

How do I know what my rules and expectations are? Currently, I am expected to be in attendance at family gatherings, and to try and keep in touch with as many members as I can in between these occasions. Email and telephone are great ways to keep in touch with my family members, and it has only been as I have gotten to be of an age where I truly appreciate the love and support I receive from them, that I have met these expectations with gladness in my heart. However, I know that my responsibilities grow with each passing year. When I was a child, I would run and play with my cousins while meals were being prepared and decorations were being hung. We would perform little plays and skits for the older generations of members, and we would wake up to presents that magically appeared under the tree. I now have a much deeper respect for all of the preparations and details that go into these congregations, and I know that this role will be passed down to me someday. My cousin Erin defines this experience as “modeling.” She writes,

“I see what my mom and other women in my family do to continue the bond among our family, and I realize someone needs to make an effort in order to continue this when they are not able to. This is important enough for me to play this part.”

There was a constant theme found in my research with my family about social support and its rules and expectations. I have already stated that attendance is an expectation, however this attendance policy is not only in effect at happy family
gatherings, but also at times of crisis. We depend on one another. There were many examples in the answers to the questionnaires about being there for one another in times of need. For example, funerals bring great attendance because of the desire to help one another through a loss of a loved one. There have been accidents, surgeries, scraped knees, and just about anything you can think of that brings our family together from great distances.

My mother’s side of the family has a “smidgen of sarcasm” among women and men. Most of my aunts and uncles have great sarcastic remarks for just about any topic you would like to discuss. Therefore, laughter has always been an unspoken expectation on this side of the family. It is almost as if someone is “just waiting” to get a punch line in. These jokes are always in good fun...well, almost always! For example, my Aunt Lorinda writes,

“Being the youngest sibling, I feel obligated to be the sarcastic smart-ass. There are not a lot of rules and expectations. Just try not to embarrass yourself or anybody else too badly.”

When asked what the rules and expectations of her role in the family, my cousin Lisa replied,

“Rules? There are no rules, with family they are all allowed to intrude on you at any time, aren’t they? That’s what they’ve always told me, anyway.

Expectations...well, expect the unexpected.”

“What stories capture the essence of our family?”
The air that escaped through the occasionally opened doorway smelled of potpourri and a dinner that had been devoured by nearly thirty hungry bellies. The relaxation period hit just after the last drop of chocolate cream pie left the last plate. Most of us gathered around the couch and chairs in the living room, while other congregated around the kitchen table. There were talks of old memories fluttering around future plans, and politics and college study filtered in and out. My Aunt Exie was giving her famous shoulder massages to those who were seated, and my Uncle Jim got an action shot with his camera at every opportune moment. Outside the picture window, the moon shimmereed off the newly fallen snow, and the footprints that once stood individually, now crunched in a slushy puddle, in alliance with one another. It was clear that a family dwelled within the walls of our home.

There have been many instances that come to mind when I think of the essence of my family. We have shared laughter through tears, and tears from laughter! Many of the responses to the questionnaires I received mentioned events such as camping trips and vacations taken, family reunions, or just special moments spent together that represent the closeness that is evident. One of my cousins asked her parents to be present in the delivery room for the birth of her baby. This is, of course, a beautiful example of the intimacy shared between parent and child. Along a more humorous token, remembering a certain camping trip in the Pecos Wilderness, my Aunt Lorinda stated,

"We have fun even when we are miserable."
Other instances of fun-filled memories include my Aunt Lillian telling the story of how she gave her sister Sophie (my grandmother) the underwear she had on so that Sophie could have a clean pair to go to the doctor’s office. Lillian writes,

“You can’t get much closer than that!”

This is truly the “art of giving” at its finest! Along the lines of giving, my Aunt Velma remembered the time that the entire family pitched in their savings so that their brother Myles’s family could come home for the holidays. When my great grandmother Ruby celebrated her 90th birthday party three years ago, many of the family indicated that celebration to be possibly the biggest tribute of all. Over one hundred family members traveled from all over the country, and even internationally to pay tribute to her “unconditional love” that she has provided to her family for, now, 93 years. My Aunt Exie writes,

“We’ve taken vacations together, spent weekends and almost every holiday together for the last 35-40 years, and we all still like each other.”

This says a lot about the tightness of a family bond. Finally, in the brilliant words of my grandma Ruby,

“Love is the basic ingredient to holding a family together.”

These examples are the true essence of our family.

“What stories capture the relationships among women in our family?”

“Susan, can I help you do anything,” asked my grandmother Sophie consistently?

“No Mom, you can’t,” persisted my mother. “Wuhl, dammit,” yelled my grandmother with a smirk on her face.” I laughed as I watched my mom push everyone out of the way
so that the dishes could be getting done as they were used, and each tray and bowl could be re-filled as they became the slightest bit empty. I have known that this is the way my mother operates from the time I was very young. She likes things done her way, as do most women on both sides of my family.

According to my cousin Lisa, I come from a long line of,

“strong, motivated, independent, self-reliant, outspoken (at times), humorous, respected and talented women.”

This is a constant motivation for me in my daily life, and reflects the “modeling” aspect of my generation in the family as I mentioned earlier. My grandmothers have raised amazing children under amazing circumstances that I cannot even imagine. Their wisdom goes beyond my wildest illusion. Then, in turn, their children have raised more amazing people, and so on. As our family grows, it is apparent that we have all been given a part of these “hard-working” genes, if you will. Many of those surveyed on my mother’s side of the family attributed this gift to my great grandmother Ruby. My cousin Lisa writes,

“My grandmother is a role model for all generations of women. She worked outside the home and managed to run a household with no help from a man. Her children are all educated, productive, accomplished, and responsible adults who in turn raised the next generation to be the same and so on. She has never said a negative thing about anyone in her life. She never complains about her health or her lot in life. She makes the best of every situation and expects no less from her family. She once told me when I had my first child... ‘Never ask your child or
anyone for that matter, to do anything for you that you are capable of doing
yourself.’ She is an incredible woman who loves her entire family deeply. She is
definitely the nucleus of our family.”

In the focus group session that took place on Thanksgiving, there were memories shared
about my cousin Erika and I driving around in my car when I first got my drivers license.
I was so excited to be with her, and she with me. Since I have not seen her in a couple of
years, Thanksgiving was very important to me, and to her. These precious recollections
elucidate the bond that we share. This close relationship is shared between my cousin
Erin and I as well. When I am around her, we have shared intimate details of our lives
and had many fun times that have formed a friendship that cannot be replaced. Erika
described how living far from family and the absence of just “being around” for the
social support that is given through visits and conversations has affected her. She has
missed us, just as we have missed her. Similar sentiments were expressed by other
family members surveyed who also live far from our family. There is definitely a want
and need by these family members to be around family more than they can due to the
distance factor.

The women in my family are always offering this social support system that links
one generation to the next. My grandmother Littleton writes,

“My daughter-in-laws are very loveable to me. I hear other ladies say that they
never see their daughters, and I just don’t understand it...My step-daughters are
the same way, very loving towards me.”
My grandmother Sophie remembers that my mother wrote to her a letter right after I was born that looked just like the one that she wrote her mother after my mother was born. She also talks about the fact that both her mother and daughter (my mother) have hearing losses, which makes for some very interesting stories!

In times of crisis all members of my family drop whatever is pressing in their daily lives to be there for one another. My Aunt Cindy discussed about the many times when her sister (my Aunt Exie) traveled to be with her when she was in need. My mother (Susan) writes,

"My mother relies on me for emotional support."

In turn, my mother must have a lot of emotional support to give, because I also rely on her for this type of support. There are many examples of these support systems, not only among women, but also among all members of this family.

"Goodnight…"

As the night grew into the late hours of that Christmas Eve, some had gone to bed earlier than others. My mother did the dishes as I cleared the table, and my father emptied coolers and threw away cups, cans, and bottles. Some of my cousins were watching television, and others were finishing their games at the table. My aunts and uncles wrapped last minute gifts in the back room so that they could go under the tree before the night’s end. My eyes grew weepy, and we all laid our heads to rest. As I tried to shut my eyes to sleep, all I could concentrate on was the wonderful smell that was coming from the kitchen. I crept my way down the hallway past the doors where my family slept in beds, (if they were the extremely lucky ones), air mattresses next to the
beds, (if they were the lucky ones), and sleeping bags on the floor, (if they were the not-so-lucky ones or children who prefer that spot). As I made my way into the sweet-smelling room, I saw a creature that was as beautiful in her night robe than she was in her best-dressed outfit. It was my mother, and she was preparing the turkey for Christmas Day. She smiled at me, and said, “Hi baby.” I walked to her and gave her a hug. Just then I walked into the living room, sat on the corner of the couch, tugged at the bottom of the sweatshirt that I wore to bed, and gazed out the picture window. It was quite dark, and I could see from the streetlights that preparations of holiday gatherings were taking place all down the block. Christmas tree lights were still shining bright, and cars lined up down the block. The snowflakes still fell, creating a fresh new foundation over the top of the mush that had been conceived before, just waiting to be walked upon by the footprints of those to come. Thank you for taking this journey with me inside the realms of my family and our holiday festivity. Now that you are here, would you like to stay for dinner?
To the Lovely Ladies in My Family,

Greetings everyone! I hope this letter finds you healthy and happy! I am currently working on my Master’s Thesis, a descriptive study on the influence of social support in intergenerational relationships among women in families. I have sent a questionnaire that I would love for you to fill out dealing with your role in our family. I sent them to most of the women in my extended family, in an effort to try and understand the various viewpoints of each of us on the topic of this family. Please answer these questions as though I know nothing about our family.

I would like to thank you so much for your participation in this questionnaire. I am very excited to examine your answers to these questions, in order to fully explore and describe the neat little facets and complexities of our family. I hope to be able to capture our family in such a way so that all who will read my description will be able to share and relate to our laughter and tears. All those who participated will receive a copy of the results! I expect the outcome to be one that will be beneficial to all of us, and hopefully a lot of fun to read and discuss! Please answer the following questions in the spaces provided, however, if there is not enough room, please feel free to use the back of the page. Thanks again for your cooperation, and I can’t wait to see all of you again!

Love,

Gina Bauswell
Appendix B

Name:

1. Please define the boundaries for what counts as "your family" (who is in, who is out). How is membership in the family determined?

2. How would you describe your role in your family?

3. What are the rules and expectations of your role in your family? How do you know?

4. Describe an incident, or tell a story, that captures the essence of the nature of your family. Why did you select this example?

5. Describe an incident, or tell a story, that describes what relationships among women are like in your family. Why did you select this example?
References


