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Conflict Handling in Ghanaian In-law Relationships: Implications for Face Concerns

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ABSTRACT

We interviewed 34 married individuals between the ages of 32 and 69 in Southern Ghana regarding conflict handling strategies they adopt in their in-law relationships. We conceptualized the strategies around face concerns. Findings from inductive thematic analysis support participant use of five main conflict handling strategies: *human/divine third-party engagements, obsequious behavior, apologizing, ignoring, and confronting*. These strategies map onto considerations for other-face concerns as well as mutual face concerns. Findings offer insights about conflict, face concerns, and in-law relationships within a previously understudied cultural context.

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For most West African people, family relationships are embedded in extended familial ties (Heaton & Darkwah, 2011; Salter & Adams, 2012). Even after marriage, Ghanaian children are encouraged to maintain a close relationship with their parents. Parents who do not get involved in their adult children's life are often perceived as irresponsible or not supportive of the marriage (Gyekye, 1998). Individuality is also discouraged in Ghanaian marriages (Takyi & Gyimah, 2007). Therefore, many in-laws in Ghana play an active role in their children's marriages. Increased contact with in-laws creates the opportunity for more marital or in-law conflict episodes to occur (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Fowler & Rittenour, 2017).

Conflict occurs in interpersonal relationships when one or more of the interdependent parties experience negative emotional reactions in response to perceived disagreements in goals, interests, or interference toward the attainment of each other's goals (Barki & Hartwick, 2001; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Less research explores how conflict episodes are handled in Ghanaian in-law relationships. This study investigates conflict handling strategies within the context of in-law relationships in Ghana. Conflict handling refers to how people behave and/or communicate in conflict situations (Gunkel, Schlaegel, & Taras, 2016; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

In-law communication practices are complex (Allendorf, 2015; Rittenour, 2012). One reason for the complexity is due to the triadic pattern of communication that is inherent in most in-law relationships. The triad consists of the child, the child-in-law, and the parent-in-law. Members of the triad must make strategic choices in their communication in order to minimize costs and maximize benefits for the triad. Communication with in-laws can be delicate for a new relational partner to navigate because of the uncertainty and newness of the relationship and the conscious effort of the partner to try and attain in-group family status (Rittenour & Kellas, 2015; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009).

Cultural scripts govern communication with elders in Ghana. Particularly, in Ghana, elders are afforded an elevated status requiring respectful interactions from others. As such, individuals make an extra effort to avoid offending an elderly member of the society (Van der Geest, 2004). These cultural norms impact how marital partners should communicate with their Ghanaian in-law parents.

Most communication research, and research in the family communication area, is largely conducted from a western world perspective among educated, rich, and democratic individuals (WEIRD; see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). These studies lack diversity and can privilege mostly student populations (Affi & Cornejo, 2020; Soliz & Phillips, 2018). Additionally, the in-law communication literature has largely focused on how in-laws can improve communication and in turn their relationship. While research supports that in-law relationships can affect marital quality (e.g. Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001), less research explores communication and the conflicts encountered within in-law relationships. Most of the research related to communication within in-law relationships has been conducted among collectivistic (mainly Asian) samples (e.g. Genç & Baptist, 2018; Shih, 2017; Song & Zhang, 2012; Wu et al., 2010). The current study explores how children-in-law handle conflicts they encounter in their in-law relationships in Ghana, which is largely a collectivistic culture in West Africa. We conceptualize our study around face concerns because of the cultural scripts governing communication with elders in Ghana.

Conflict face-negotiation theory

Face is the social image an individual prefers to present and maintain in relational communication (Goffman, 1955; Ting-Toomey, 1988). In relational communication, when face is threatened, an individual engages in strategies to save face. These strategies are known as facework (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Facework is not equivalent to conflict handling strategies. However, since conflict is a face-threatening situation, facework may influence strategies individuals select to handle conflict situations (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000). Individuals are more likely to select strategies that fit their cultural values (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001). In Ghanaian culture, there are expressions that prescribe the use of face-honoring and face-saving strategies. For example, among the Akan, honoring someone is equivalent to “raising someone’s face” and disgracing or bringing shame is to “cast one’s face down” (Agyekum, 2019, p. 78).

Initial typologies of handling conflict are based around two prominent dimensions or considerations when approaching conflict episodes: concern for self and concern for other (Rahim, 1983). The concept of a concern for mutual face in face-negotiation theory blends these two ideas when considering how to handle conflict episodes (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Oetzel et al., 2000). Flowing from these three ways of considering face concerns is use of one of three tactics to handle conflict episodes, the use of dominating facework, avoiding facework, and integrating facework. Dominating facework entails a high concern for self-face and a low concern for other-face in face-threatening situations. Individuals engage in behaviors that assert the self by using aggression, defending their face, and expressing emotion. The use of this strategy is prevalent in cultures that are considered individualistic, where a concern for self and independence are encouraged (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Avoiding facework entails engaging in conflict handling strategies that have high concern for other-face and low concern for self-face. Individuals who use the avoiding facework approach give in, pretend, or engage third-party help when engaging in conflict situations. The integrating facework behaviors emphasize a mutual concern for both self and other-face. Individuals who use this strategy often apologize, engage in private discussion, remain calm, problem-solve, or demonstrate respect for the offender. Avoiding and integrating facework strategies are often employed in cultures that are considered collectivistic (Oetzel et al., 2008, 2000; Ting-Toomey et al., 2001).

Individuals can experience positive or negative emotions when engaging in face saving strategies that are congruent or incongruent with their self-construal (Zhang, Ting-Toomey, & Oetzel, 2014). An individual may choose to adopt a variety of conflict handling strategies depending on the type of relational conflict, as well as the cultural prescriptions. In-law relationships in Ghana may support the use of certain facework regarding in-law conflicts. Hence, this study examined the following research question:

RQ: What conflict management strategies do children-in-law adopt in response to conflict with their Ghanaian parents-in-law?

After identification of the conflict management strategies used by children-in-law in Ghanaian in-law relationships, we explore in our discussion section how the diverse conflict management strategies map onto existing facework typologies.

Method

Participants and setting

We recruited a total of 37 participants to participate in the study. The study initially included 20 females and 17 males. One participant was excluded because she discussed experiences from the position of a mother-in-law and the focus of our study was on children-in-law. All the remaining 36 participants shared experiences about managing conflict in the in-law relationship as children-in-law. Two participants were further excluded from the current analysis. One participant was excluded because he had lost his in-laws and could not respond to our questions. The other was excluded because he had no problems with his in-laws. Hence, the data presented in this study are based on the responses of 34 participants. Our final sample included 18 females and 16 males. The average participant was 47.26 years (Range: 32 to 69 years old; $SD = 9.79$). On averages, participants had been married 20.13 years to their partner (Range: 2 to 40 years; $SD = 10.96$).

The sample size for this study was not predetermined. Rather, we conducted interviews and engaged in data analysis simultaneously. We stopped recruiting participants when new interviews and ongoing data analysis did not reveal any new information and/or codes. We considered the point of information redundancy as data saturation and the absence of new codes as inductive thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Additionally, a sample size of 34 participants is consistent with the recommended range – of 20–30 participants – for interview studies (Creswell, 2013; Warren, 2002).

We selected participants from the Greater Accra and Eastern regions of Ghana. In the Greater Accra Region, we selected participants from La and Burma Camp in the La Dade-Kotopon Municipality (LADMA), an urban community in the capital of Ghana. Most of the residents engage in informal services and petty trading (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014a). In the Eastern Region, we recruited participants from Aburi, a peri-urban community in the Akuapim South District. Almost half of the adult population in this region is married, and most of the population there engage in agricultural services or service and sales work (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014b). Most of our participants were self-employed in informal services and sales (i.e. traders, food vendors, water vendors, dressmakers, hairdressers, and auto mechanics).

Procedures

This study was part of a larger research project which explored forgiveness in Ghanaian marriage contexts. IRB clearance was issued by the University of Ghana. Three individuals conducted the participant interviews.

Interviewers independently visited homes and retail shops to identify and recruit prospective participants. Interviewers approached prospective participants at bus stations, homes, and market centers. Interviews were conducted on the spot. For those contacted at public places, interviewers made sure the interview location was relatively quiet and allowed privacy. Interviewers followed a convenience sample method in reaching other participants at their homes. Interviewers went from house-to-house and discussed the purpose of their visit with prospective participants.

In Ghana, it is an acceptable practice to visit people in their homes without prior appointment or notification. Interviewers adhered to acceptable customary practice of exchanging greetings with the prospective participants. They subsequently introduced themselves as researchers interested in

interviewing married individuals, who were 18 years old or older, about offenses in in-law relationships. Interested married individuals who met the study criteria provided verbal consent. After obtaining permission to record the interviews digitally, interviewers conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant.

Interviews were conducted in English ($n = 3$), Ga ($n = 8$), or Akan ($n = 23$) based on the participant's preference. Ga and Akan are local Ghanaian languages. Ga is the predominant local language spoken in LADMA and most people in Aburi are fluent Akan speakers. English is the official language of business in Ghana and is also the main language of instruction in institutions of learning. Interview duration ranged between seven and 16 minutes. We asked participants to describe conflicts that occurred in in-law relationships.

Within the context of the conflicts described, we asked participants to describe how these conflicts could be handled. Sample questions we asked participants relevant to this study were: "How do you handle conflict(s) with your in-laws?," "What do you do to solve the [conflict] situation?," and "In the case where the in-law wrongs you, what can you do for peace to prevail between you two?" We used follow-up questions and requested that participants elaborate on their responses, as necessary.

Data analysis

Interviews conducted in English were transcribed verbatim. Akan and Ga interviews were translated and transcribed simultaneously by native speakers, respectively. Data were analyzed inductively following the strategy recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). It involved: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) gathering initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming of themes; and (6) producing results. The first author read each transcript and familiarized herself with the data. She created an excel document and pasted each participant's response (s). Next, she identified initial codes for each statement (see Table 1).

Next, the coder grouped similar and recurrent codes under themes. For example, codes about *pleading for forgiveness* and *acceptance of wrong* were categorized under *apologizing*. Codes about *requesting a spouse to intervene* and *talking to a family elder* were grouped under *third-party*.

The fourth step involved reviewing themes. The first two authors met multiple times to discuss and revise the themes. Through the review process, the team agreed to combine some themes with others. For instance, the team agreed to categorize codes on *praying to God* and *getting a spouse to mediate a conflict* under the same theme. Conceptually, God and human mediators are third-party to the conflict between the child- and parent-in-law. Also, the team discussed appropriate theme labels. One example is deciding whether *avoiding*, *pretending*, or *ignoring* was the most appropriate label for a set of codes. The team

Table 1. Sample of initial codes.

Transcript	Initial codes
"What you should say is oh in-law please forgive me for what has happened, it will not happen again"	Take responsibility for what has happened Apology Request for forgiveness Promise of good behavior
"I will call my wife; you see what your mother did I don't like"	Complain to wife Wife expected to intervene
"You have to be humble to accept what you have done wrong"	Humbly accept wrongdoing Child-in-law takes the blame
"... if she [mother-in-law] wrongs you, [you] can't quarrel with her [mother-in-law] ... so you can go and plead with her"	Child-in-law takes the blame even when not at fault Plead for forgiveness
"If you tell your husband he won't listen because he only listens to what her mother is saying. So how are you going to solve it? You will just keep quiet because you cannot solve it. So, you will just be quiet."	Husband's intervention considered; but not pursued. Endure/bear with unsolvable conflicts Keep silent/quiet

looked the words up in the dictionary and deliberated further to arrive at a consensus. After the team finished the coding process, the third author independently reviewed the themes and offered suggestions for revision where necessary. For example, the coding team suggested *placate* as a label, but the third author observed that the label did not fit the codes in that category. Through further discussions and upon consulting the dictionary, the authors agreed on a more fitting label. The review processes used in the analysis are consistent with what has been termed consensual validation (Eisner, 1991) where the researcher tries to seek the opinion of others. The processes served as a form of peer review to ensure that the findings reflect the data (Creswell, 2013).

At the fifth stage of the thematic analysis, the authors used the codes under each theme to come up with a definition. For example, *third-party engagement* describes a strategy where children-in-law ask a spouse, a relative, or the Divine to mediate the conflict in the in-law relationship. Definitions for the other themes are presented in the results section. Stage six involved the production of the findings.

Results

Our research question asks what are the conflict management strategies that children-in-law adopt in response to conflict with their Ghanaian parents-in-law. To answer this question, we identified five main conflict strategies – *third-party engagements*, *obsequious behavior*, *apologizing*, *ignoring*, and *confronting*. The strategies are not mutually exclusive. For instance, sometimes an apology is conveyed via a third-party. Similarly, indirect confrontation can be used via third-party. The following paragraphs shed more light on these complexities. We also discuss how each strategy maps onto face-saving strategies.

Third-party engagements

Third-party mediation as a conflict management strategy occurs when an offended child-in-law requests a spouse, family elder, or the Divine to intervene in a conflict episode. We observed two qualitatively distinct forms of third-party engagements: human and Divine.

Human third-party engagements

Children-in-law in the study sometimes enlist the assistance of a spouse or a family elder to help handle the conflict between the child- and parent-in-law. This strategy prevents the child-in-law from engaging in direct dialogue with the parent-in-law about the conflictual issue. A 42-year-old woman, married for 12 years, states:

I spoke to him [husband] about it and told him that his mother is like my mother and I wouldn't expect her to be cooking and being in the kitchen so she should be seated somewhere so that I will rather serve her . . . he spoke to her that she should rather reserve herself.

In this situation the child-in-law expressed discomfort about her mother-in-law's use of her kitchen, which she considered her own personal space. In order to handle this conflict, she asked her husband to intervene. Another participant, a 56-year-old who has been married for 37 years, suggests: "Include the [family] elders . . . tell them that you didn't do that [offense], but my in-law has taken offense so you plead with her; whatever it is she should forgive you. That's it." In most traditional Ghanaian settings, conflicts that develop within marriage are sometimes taken to an elder in the extended family, a queen mother, or a chief (Brukum, 1998; Obeng & Stoeltje, 2002). An elder may choose to speak privately with either party or convene a meeting between all individuals. Depending on the gravity of the case, an elder may also invite additional elders to serve as a jury (for a review see Nwoye, 2000).

The use of human intermediaries suggests that children-in-law often care about the face concerns of their parents-in-law (Obeng, 1999). Children-in-law show deference to their parents-in-law when they use human third-party mediators. A child-in-law protects the face of his/her parent-in-law by refraining from directly engaging with him/her about the conflicting issue. This strategy preserves and

protects the face of the parent-in-law. Rather than bringing shame or disgrace (i.e. casting down the face) of the parent-in-law, the child-in-law demonstrates mindfulness of the face of his or her in-law by using this conflict management strategy.

Divine third-party engagements

Use of the divine third-party conflict management engagement strategy involves prayer and inviting God to intercede on behalf of the child-in-law. Unlike the human third-party intermediaries, who may be physically present during conflict mediation session, God may not be physically present. Notwithstanding, children-in-law believe that God plays an active role in the mediation process. A 66-year-old woman who had been married for 40 years suggests, “You have to pray.” Another participant, a 45-year-old woman married for 20 years, reiterates, “With patience and God, through prayer, you have to constantly pray and cry unto God so that He will give you what you deserve to solve the problem.” In both cases, the offended child-in-law notes praying themselves about the conflict issue at hand. A variation in this approach is suggested by a 63-year-old man who had been married for 30 years, “... if you and your spouse are Christians, you should just pray about [the issue].” In this instance, the participant notes the usefulness of both the offended child-in-law and the partner praying about the matter together. The use of spiritual interventions is common among Ghanaians, who believe in the role of religion in everyday life (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). Most Ghanaians report being religious (Pew, 2015). Significant social events, such as weddings, are often enacted within religious contexts (Heaton, James, & Ohene-Sakyi, 2009).

When children-in-law ask God to intercede on their behalf they avoid the risk of losing face that may occur when using a human third-party conflict management engagement strategy, which could involve use of face-threatening acts, like giving in to the demands of an in-law about how a marital conflict episode should be resolved. In these situations, children-in-law respond to the conflict by relying on a higher power to intercede in the conflict situation. Selection of this strategy by children-in-law reflects the use of a tactic that avoids the parent-in-law loss of face by engaging the conflict only through what might occur by God’s own intervention in the situation.

Obsequious behavior

The second main theme from our analysis is use of a conflict management strategy that privileges *obsequious behavior*. In this approach, children-in-law are extra cautious when discussing conflict episodes and accord their parents-in-law the highest level of courtesies. The children-in-law privilege are also especially attentive in trying to fulfill an idealized role as a child-in-law by making sure they do not offend their parents-in-law. Some children-in-law of the study are cautiously attentive to their parents-in-law in order to make up after a conflict episode has ended. A 51-year-old woman, who had been married for 10 years, reflects this strategy in stating:

... when the woman [i.e., my mother-in-law] didn’t like [her son’s] decision [to marry me], my husband told his mum he couldn’t figure out any sense in what her case is ... it was my husband’s father who gave his blessings for the union ... Because of what I saw, I am very careful. I know how painful and hard bringing forth a child feels like so I always tell my husband to do his due diligence to his mum as expected. Every month if it is plantain or money, I encourage him to let his mum have her share. I have been making sure that, as a daughter-in-law, my responsibilities to her are met.

In this situation, the mother-in-law clearly disapproves of her son’s marriage. Knowing there is potential conflict in the in-law relationship because of this disapproval, the child-in-law adopts an obsequious tactic in order to ensure that she does not offend her mother-in-law. A 42-year-old woman who has been married for 15 years narrates use of obsequious attentiveness when interacting with her in-laws:

Interviewee: Someone [in-laws] may pretend to have forgiven you. Someone will not forgive you. As soon as you leave, she still holds on to the grudge.

Interviewer: So in that case do you still plead?

Interviewee: You plead with her. You can buy some things for her once in a while. You observe her behavior toward you. You keep observing her.

Similarly, a 36-year-old woman who has been married for 10 years describes use of an obsequious tactic in describing how she handles conflicts with her in-laws:

Interviewer: So please in such circumstances what do you do to resolve the conflict?

Interviewee: . . . for me as an in-law when you come we all live in peace. Oh, even when I cook, I can ask my in-law what [she wants] to eat . . . when my in-law comes, I will make sure whatever my in-law wants I will do it for her. I will wake up to cook her food, even if it's her water I will [serve] her."

In the first example, the child-in-law suggests that pleading with an in-law might only lead to pseudo-forgiveness. In this case, use of an obsequious tactic is essential. In the second situation, the expression "even if it's her water" reflects a common practice in Ghana. Typically, children prepare hot water or make provision for water in the absence of running water for an elder to take a bath. Further, the act of asking an in-law for her food preference is considered as an honor in this context. More so, the word translated as "serve" means to accord someone with the highest level of courtesies and hospitality. Therefore, this child-in-law indicates a willingness to extend courtesies to the in-law despite any perceived conflict she may perceive.

Children-in-law save their own face when they engage in these normative roles and also uphold the face of their parents-in-law by performing any possible task a parent-in-law may desire. Use of this conflict management strategy communicates respect in a practical way that can be attested to not only by parents-in-law, but by others as well. In these situations, parents-in-law often accept reconciliatory attempts by children-in-law because continuing to engage in conflict about not approving of a marriage only threatens the in-law's own face.

Apologizing

Apologizing as a conflict management strategy includes the child-in-law accepting blame, expressing forgiveness, and promising good behavior going forward. Some children-in-law select conflict management tactics that involve a mutual concern for self and other face by apologizing when a conflict event occurs, regardless of who was at fault. One 46-year-old man who has been married for 6 years submits that, "Apologizing to your in-laws isn't any big deal. Maybe your in-laws are saying this is what you are doing . . . you just have to say 'oh, in-law please I am sorry, it will not happen again.'" Another participant, a 36-year-old woman who has been married for 10 years, states: "You have to be humble to accept what you have done wrong . . ."

Children-in-law protect the face of their parents-in-law by accepting blame and rendering an apology. However, children-in-law also appear to save their own face by assuming the role of a humble child-in-law through their apology. An examination of the apology strategy also shows how children-in-law typically offer apologies. In the examples above, participants' responses suggest that apologies are often offered in a polite manner showing that the child-in-law cares about the face of the parent-in-law.

Ignoring

The next strategy reflective of our participants' experiences is the *ignoring* conflict management strategy. Children-in-law use this strategy to minimize the significance of the conflict, to tolerate it,

or to prevent it from escalating. In the event of a conflict episode, some children-in-law decide that it is best to pretend the conflict never happened. By doing this, they avoid addressing the issue at hand. When selecting this conflict management strategy some participants assess the impact of the offense and in situations where the offense is perceived as non-threatening, they abandon any attempt to confront the issue. A 45-year-old man who has been married for 20 years shares that, “In some instances when such things [conflicts] happen, if you realize that it doesn’t really bother you, you just have to manage it like that and live with your wife.” Another participant, a 36-year-old woman who has been married for 10 years, pretends that the matter is not offensive by reframing the source of the conflict: “Even if the man’s mother is hurting you, don’t react. If she insults you, take it as if it’s your mother insulting you. You just ignore it.” When employing this strategy, insults are not perceived as offensive statements from outsiders that warrant a response. Rather, they are perceived as coming from a mother who is scolding her child. In the Ghanaian context, children do not usually defend themselves when being scolded by their parents because talking back to a parent while being scolded is regarded as disrespectful.

Also, some children-in-law do not simply ignore conflict episodes, but rather they endure the conflict situation. The example below illustrates this conflict management strategy:

Because you don’t want to get problems in your marriage you just shut up. You keep quiet and listen to her [mother-in-law] and you will be suffering . . . with your in-law, there is nothing really you can tell them because if you talk to them and it does not go down well with them that will result in a problem. (32-year-old woman, married for two years)

Addressing a conflict episode can threaten the parent-in-law’s face as well as the marriage. This has the potential to worsen or prolong a conflict episode. Therefore, children-in-law appear to weigh the benefits of saving their own face as opposed to saving their in-law’s face. In instances where saving in-law’s face is more beneficial to marital stability and familial harmony, children-in-law choose to ignore a conflict episode and endure the situation.

Confronting

The final conflict management strategy participants note using is confrontation. *Confronting* conflict episodes includes directly engaging with in-laws about whatever the conflict episode is at hand. The strategy sometimes involves an aggressive presentation of wrongdoing or a careful but direct dialogue about the conflict episode.

Aggressive confrontation

When aggressive confrontation occurs, participants aim to let the in-laws know that they are in the wrong. A 69-year-old male who has been married for 30 years narrates that, “If the woman [mother-in-law] dares to talk about it [the conflict], the man usually shouts “shut up” or other words just to caution the mother on poking her nose into his marital affairs.” Another participant (a 49-year-old woman who has been married for 30 years) shares that:

I told my husband to join us because I want to ask his mother some questions in his presence. I asked my mother-in-law that when did I ever call her a witch . . . ? She said she has never said anything like that . . . my mother-in-law was speechless for some time and denied . . . in fact, I wasn’t happy about that so my husband told me not to talk about it anymore because he knows I’ll never say such a thing.

In the situation described above, the mother-in-law alleged that her daughter-in-law called her a witch. In most Ghanaian settings, belief and fear of witchcraft is common. Accusing someone of engaging in witchcraft is a stereotype often instigated against elderly women. Calling someone a witch implies that the person has uncanny powers that can be used to psychologically or physically harm others (Adinkrah, 2004). In the situation above, the third party (the husband) serves as a witness to use of the confrontation strategy. The husband does not try to mediate the conflict episode. The daughter-in-

law in this situation makes use of direct confrontation in order to save her own face and directly acknowledging the accusation as false being raised by her mother-in-law.

Careful confrontation

A few participants discuss carefully confronting conflict episodes. When participants select this strategy, they temper communication about the conflict episode with caution. A 42-year-old woman who has been married for 12 years narrates how she confronted her mother-in-law for offering her own breast to her baby in an attempt to calm the crying baby in her absence:

When I met her [mother-in-law] breastfeeding the baby and then I asked her why she was doing that . . . I told her that the baby has food there so next time when the baby is crying she shouldn't breastfeed the baby she should rather give the baby the baby's food because it isn't hygienic. But I didn't say it in an angry way, I said it jovially; in a jovial way.

Even though this participant confronted her mother-in-law as being displeased that she was breastfeeding her baby, she employed use of careful confrontation tactics shrouded in humor as a way to soften discussion of the issue. The daughter-in-law communicates her displeasure to her mother-in-law in a way where she provides careful consideration for her mother-in-law's face concerns.

Discussion

Our study examines conflict management strategies employed by sons- and daughters-in-law with parents-in-law among a sample of married individuals in Southern Ghana. We explore how the approaches to conflict management map onto facework concerns. Participants described five main conflict management strategies: *third-party engagements*; *obsequious behavior*; *apologizing*; *ignoring*; and *confronting*. *Third-party engagements* occurred most frequently as a conflict management approach employed by children-in-law. The strategy involves use of a spouse, family elders, or the Divine, to either broker peace or to be the bearer of any reprimands for the situation. When participants use the *ignoring* strategy they make a conscious choice either to minimize the importance of an ongoing conflict or endure the situation. The *third-party engagement*, *obsequious behavior*, and *ignoring* conflict management strategies mainly maximize benefits for parents-in-law. When children-in-law maximize benefits for their parents-in-law they save the face of their in-laws in conflict episodes and situations.

Children-in-law who apologize, accept the blame for conflict episodes regardless of who is actually at fault for the conflict. Use of the *apologizing* strategy saves mutual face while maintaining benefits for the family. Children-in-law who use the apologizing strategy engage in facework that saves the parent-in-law's face at all costs in opposition to their own face concerns wrapped up in winning an argument. The finding that few children-in-law use self-face conflict management tactics, such as confrontation, is consistent with previous research in other collective cultures (Shih, 2017; Song & Zhang, 2012; Wu et al., 2010).

We identify two strategies less prevalent in previous research: *Divine third-party engagement*; and *obsequious behavior*. Enlisting the help of God in difficult situations is a practice that is common among Ghanaians (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Osei-Tutu, Dzokoto, & Afram, 2019). Some individuals may be inclined to seek God to intervene in conflict episodes out of a belief that relaying problems to God will lead to conflict resolution. Such an approach to conflict management can be misconstrued as apathy or insensitivity. Parents-in-law might feel slighted when children-in-law appear unresponsive in the face of a conflict episode. However, it is possible that children-in-law may not want to address the conflict directly with their parents-in-law because they are trying to avoid negative consequences. Although *obsequious behavior* may appear to be aimed at preventing conflict, children-in-law describe using this conflict management strategy in a way that is consistent with Ghanaian remorse behavior, where conciliatory acts are complex and include implicit and explicit acts of apology (Obeng, 1999). In

this study, participants describe tactics that hint at a chance for reconciliation by performing vindicating acts that warrant forgiveness without explicitly apologizing or admitting wrongdoing.

Children-in-law who use the *ignoring* conflict management strategy engage in relational collaborations and concessions (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). This strategy affords them the opportunity to indirectly save their own face as a *good child/child-in-law*, and forgo the identity of a *disrespectful child/child-in-law*. This mechanism of face saving is different from an individualistic perspective where taking the blame threatens the ego and self-image and prevents closure to the conflict situation. Our results demonstrate that participants find it more important to protect the social identity of being a *good child* or *good daughter/son-in-law* than to protect their own individual identities.

Our participants may ultimately experience positive emotions when they take the blame and apologize for a conflict episode, even if it is not their fault. In collectivist cultures, when individuals engage in facework that saves the other's face and/or saves mutual face, positive emotions like compassion as opposed to anger are more likely to occur (Zhang et al., 2014). Our results support the assertion that conflict facework strategies are not universal. Rather, conceptualizations, meanings and experiences of conflict facework vary culturally and relationally (Oetzel et al., 2008)

Our findings support the prominent use of other and mutual facework in collectivist cultures to maintain relational harmony. However, our study's results do not support the use of other dominating or mutual strategies found in other scholarship, such as use of private discussion, remaining calm, or engaging in problem-solving (Oetzel et al., 2008, 2000; Ting-Toomey et al., 2001). Children-in-law of the study make use of third-parties, including God, to help resolve conflict episodes with in-laws. The power distance inherent in Ghanaian in-law relationships does not usually afford children-in-law the opportunity to collaborate with parents-in-law to resolve conflict episodes. Attempts to resolve conflict are mostly mediated by third-parties, preferably family elders, as use of family elders signifies respect to the offended and suggests genuine remorse (Obeng, 1999). When children-in-law ask a third-party to resolve conflict episodes without involving them, the approach may be conceptualized as an indirect form of problem-solving. Mediation by third-party is more likely to involve all parties by eliciting suggestions to solve the conflict situation (Nwoye, 2000). This suggests that conflict management strategies can be carried out in ways that serve multiple purposes, depending on the relational and cultural context. Other apology acts, like *obsequious behavior*, can be seen as a conflict face-negotiation strategy in place of using other strategies not observed in this study.

This study provides insight about communication in in-law relationships outside a western, educated, rich, and democratic contexts or environments (WEIRD). WEIRD contexts afford conceptions of self and identity which promote individuation and abstracted independence. This may explain the limited research about conflict management in western in-law relationships, where the ecology affords individuation and privacy in conjugal relationships (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Salter & Adams, 2012). The Ghanaian ecology does not usually afford individuation from families in marriage. Communication with parents-in-law therefore often include strategies that promote relational harmony, not only because the Ghanaian society is an interdependent society, but also because marital stability and satisfaction may depend on it.

This study includes several limitations to keep in mind. First, our sample from Southern Ghana does not accurately reflect the dynamics of all in-law relations in Ghana. Our sample does not reflect the experiences of people in rural Ghana who have more frequent contacts with their in-laws as compared to those in urban communities. Increasing urbanization has led to nuclearization of families in Ghana. Some of the strategies described by children-in-law in this study (i.e., ignoring conflict), may have negative implications for children-in-law. Embedded in the attempt to maintain relational harmony is the sense of helplessness in handling conflicts with people of a higher status. However, we did not probe for emotional consequences of using the observed conflict handling strategy described by participants. Future research should explore this since managing emotions and emotional regulation strategies have implications for the quality of in-law and marital relationships.

We observe that mothers-in-law are central to most of the contentions raised by our participants. Given that overall, mothers-in-law appear to engage more actively with their children's marriages than

fathers-in-law (Allendorf, 2015; Maundeni, 2002), it is reasonable to assume the mother-in-law relationship is more likely to be plagued by more conflict episodes than father-in-law relationships. We did not observe significant-gendered issues in the management of conflict in our study. This is rather unusual. Gender is an important issue in both facework and communication (Obeng & Stoeltje, 2002). Further research might explore how gender contributes to facework within Ghanaian contexts.

In conclusion, our study extends research on facework and communication in the children-in-law /parents-in-law relationships to a collectivistic, African context. Although most of the conflict management strategies we identify (i.e., *human third-party*, *ignoring*, and *apologizing*), are part of the extant literature, our study contributes two unique strategies – *divine third-party engagement* and *obsequious behavior* – that reflect elements of Ghanaian culture. The strategies employed by Ghanaian children-in-law map onto concerns about other- and mutual face nicely, which are consistent with expectations for communications within a collectivistic culture and context.

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