

FAMILY STRENGTHS FROM A FINNISH PERSPECTIVE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AN INTERVIEW

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The cultural, ethnic, and spiritual influences on family strengths, resilience, and environmental connections were explored by a thematic analysis of an interview with a 26-year-old expatriate Finnish woman living in Qatar. The interview focused on her experiences and perceptions of family life, and explored the ways in which her family dealt with challenges. The responses were classified into latent and emergent themes underpinned by the family strengths model, family resilience theory, and the ecological systems theory. Positive family strengths were identified by themes such as “Appreciation and affection; Commitment; Positive communication; Enjoyable times together; Spiritual well-being; Managing stress and crisis; Open emotional sharing, Collaborative problem solving; Family identity, Shared values, Celebrations, and Transitions”. Positive environmental connections were identified by themes such as “Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem”. The qualitative indicators of family strength, resilience, and connections identified in the Finnish family context confirmed and expanded existing theory on the characteristics found universally to describe strong functioning family units.

Keywords: family science, Finnish families, interview, international family studies, transnational families, expatriate families

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Social psychologists tend to be over-concerned with understanding the differences between groups of individuals classified by factors such as sex, race, socio-economic status, and traits (Koppelman, 2020). However, focusing on social heterogeneity is divisive and discriminates against social homogeneity (LaLonde et al., 2015). A less divisive perspective is that, like a functional family “We are all brothers and sisters. We all face the same problems and find the same satisfactions. We are united in one great band (Michener, 1991, p. 249). Accordingly, research on the functioning of families should ideally focus more on homogeneity rather than heterogeneity. Every family should be perceived as a cultural unit, and family unity must be recognized before it is possible to understand the interactions within and between the family members and their environment (Sparling, 2009). Nevertheless, most family scientists have paid more attention to family deficits than strengths, including the absence of one or both parents (Ganieva et al. 2022; Kempsen, 2021); the abuse and/or neglect of children, as well as attachment, conduct, emotional, eating, sleeping, somatic, psychotic, and other mental health disorders (Horwath, 2018). Some family science researchers, including the author, question the family deficit approach, and view the strength of families more positively.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study was underpinned by a well- established theoretical framework. The theories outlined in Tables 1 to 3 posited that the social development of families exhibits positive qualities. The family strengths model outlined in Table 1 explains how functional families are characterized by six interconnected themes rooted in positive connections (Defrain & Assay, 2007; 2014). Several theories with the multiple themes listed in Table 2 explain the processes that strengthen the resilience of families, where resilience is defined as the capacity to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges (Walsh, 2016). Ungar (2012; 2015) proposed an ecological interpretation of family resilience theory, positing that interactions between families and their external environments promoted resilience, by helping family members to cope adaptively after exposure to challenges.

The ecological systems theory outlined in Table 3 posits that the social development of families is explained by five concentric environmental

microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's focus subsequently shifted away from environmental influences to more complex interactions between family members and other persons, objects, and symbols in their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evan, 2000). Paat (2013) supported the Ecological Model by demonstrating that children's experiences in different ecological systems are shaped by cultural differences in a diversity of family settings. The Ecological Model has subsequently been validated as a theory that broadly explains the influence of the environment on the social development of individuals and reflects the dynamic nature of family relationships (Hayes & O'Toole, 2017).

The limitation of the three theories outlined above is that they identify the qualitative characteristics of families but they do not predict cause-and-effect relationships (Taq, 2011). Limited research has been conducted to examine the degree to which the social development of individuals is enhanced by strong family connections and/or positive ecological systems. Greeff (2000) conducted used quantitative data collected in a cross-sectional survey from 119 families and identified the eight variables listed in Table 3 as "characteristics of families that function well" (p. 948).

Strength-based family therapies are instrumental to empower family units to reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, particularly in the face of challenges (Fruhauf et al., 2019; Mulligan et al., 2022; Oliver, 2014; Navaro et al., 2022). The five themes outlined in Table 5 underly strength-based family therapies (Oliver, 2014). However, much is still to be learnt about how social workers and other health professionals can intervene to optimize the family strengths (Carr, 2018; Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Varghese et al., 2020).

The meta-analysis of quantitative data extracted from 33 studies conducted by Dunst et al. (2021) concluded that family strengths measured with the Family Functioning Scale were correlated with the well-being of parents and their children. The size of the effect was largest for family well-being, and smallest for child well-being. However, correlation does not imply causation (Pearl et al., 2016).

Table 1. Themes Underlying the Family Strengths Model
(Defrain & Assay, 2007; 2014)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Characteristics of members of strong families</i>
Appreciation and affection	They are not afraid to express their love for each other.
Commitment	They genuinely care for each other’s well-being.
Positive communication	They live in harmony and stay connected by talking with and listening to each other.
Enjoyable times together	They enjoy the time that they spend together
Spiritual well-being	They experience a feeling or force that helps them to transcend themselves and their daily stressors, and to focus on what is sacred to them.
Managing stress and crisis	They possess the ability to work together to manage daily stressors and to cope creatively and effectively with difficult life crises

Table 2. Themes Underlying Family Resilience Theory (Walsh, 2016)

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making meaning of adversity 2. Positive outlook 3. Transcendence and spirituality 4. Flexibility 5. Connectedness 6. Mobilization of social and economic resources 7. Clarity 8. Open emotional sharing 9. Collaborative problem solving

Table 3. Themes Underlying the Ecological Systems Theory
(Bronfenbrenner & Evan, 2000)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Microsystem	Groups that have direct contact with a child’s immediate environment (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, teachers)

Mesosystem	Relationships between the groups in the microsystem.
Exosystem	Groups that have an indirect relationship with a child (e.g., extended family, neighbors, employers)
Macrosystem	Cultural elements that influence a child's development (e.g., socio-economic status and ethnicity)
Chronosystem	Environmental changes that influence a family over time

Table 4. Variables Contributing Significantly to Family Functioning (Greeff, 2000)

1. Family satisfaction
2. Spouse's satisfaction with the sexual relationship
3. Satisfaction with general quality of life
4. Family strengths
5. Flexibility in the way free time is spent
6. Sound relationships with family and friends
7. Conflict management and resolution
8. Good communication

Table 5. Themes Underlying Strength-Based Family Therapies

1. All families have the capacity for continual growth and that their untapped abilities and resources can help resolve current problems.
2. Family members are the experts of their own lives, and have the best insights into what they need to become more functional.
3. Families achieve success by pursuing what is important to them.
4. When family members are encouraged to talk about their strengths and successes, it changes the way they see themselves and opens up new hope and possibilities.
5. Family members are part of a broader community which is rich in formal and informal resources.

Aims and Objectives

An original set of qualitative data was generated and analyzed to provide the empirical evidence to support the theoretical framework outlined by the themes listed in Tables 1 to 5. The objectives were to explore an interviewee's perceived associations between cultural, ethnic, and spiritual influences and family strengths. The in-depth semi-structured interview focused on a Finnish family member's perspective on her family's strengths and the ways in which these strengths assisted her family to deal with adversity and challenges.

Methods

The 31 open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed by the author to gain insights into the interviewee's perspectives on her family strengths, resilience, and connections. The responses were typed into a Word document on a laptop computer, and a template analysis was conducted. This method of thematic analysis was grounded in a predefined list of latent themes, underpinned by a theoretical framework (Brooks et al., 2015). The interview transcript was reviewed and relevant quotations were interpreted and fitted to the latent themes defined by the template. Emergent themes that did not directly fit the template, because they were not specifically defined by the authors of the theoretical framework, were also identified. The objective evidence to identify each theme is presented using the interviewee's verbatim responses preceded by "A:" and enclosed in inverted commas. The interviewer's questions (in italics) are preceded by "Q:". This transparent method of presenting the results of a qualitative analysis is preferred by the author because it provides unbiased objective evidence to identify themes, however, this approach may be criticized by some qualitative researchers who may prefer a more narrative or interpretative approach (Cordon and Sainsbury, 2006).

Participants: The semi-structured interview took place between the author and a 26-year-old Finnish expatriate female living in Doha, Qatar.

Results

The results of the template analysis are presented in three sections. The first section identifies the themes underpinned by the family strengths model defined in Table 1. The second section identifies the themes underpinned by family resilience theory defined in Table 2. The third section identifies the themes underpinned by the ecological systems theory defined in Table 3.

Family Strengths Model: “Appreciation and affection”

“Appreciation and affection” were indicated by the answers to three questions. Q: *How would you describe your family identity?* A: “I feel that my family is very warm and we care for each other”. Q: *How does your family show appreciation and affection?* A: “I think as a family we do quite a bit of stuff together”. Q: *What would you say binds your family together?* A: “The fact that we are a family. But it’s not like we feel like we have to spend time together. Yeah, I think we actually like being with each other. Yeah, especially my little brother, I think we get along so well”.

Family Strengths Model: “Commitment”

“Commitment” was evidenced by A: “We always help each other as well” in response to Q: *How does your family show appreciation and affection?* Commitment was also indicated by the A: *What things are most important to your family?* A: “...being together, keeping up the relations”.

Family Strengths Model: “Positive communication”

“Positive communication” was reflected by the answers to three questions. Q: *Think of a time when your family had a challenge. How would you describe the communication amongst family members at that time?* A: We started planning to go to Lapland, northern Finland...And we were looking for the cabins they had available, and gosh! Everybody wanted something different. This is so stupid to argue about a cabin we are going to stay, but it turned into a big argument and I think it was because everyone had different expectations for the vacation... But eventually, we found a solution. We took a big cabin what was three floors... And afterwards we were all laughing about how silly we were”. Q: *Think of a time when things are going well for your family. How would you describe the communication amongst family members during this time?* A: “Normal. I don’t think it’s anything special.... Even if I live far away, we are trying to keep in touch” Q: *What do you prefer in family communication?* A: “I prefer face to face over phone calls. But I try to see them as much as possible, because it’s not the same as talking over the phone”.

Family Strengths Model: “Enjoyable Times Together”

“Enjoyable times together” was reflected by the answers to two questions: Q: *Do you have a favorite memory about your family?* A: “We used to go

skiing to Lapland, in the North of Finland... We drove there by car, overnight it takes 12 hours... It is a very normal thing that a family has a summer home, a place where the family can go and relax, a way to escape the normal days and just have some time off... All the times when we gather up to have dinner together. Mother's Day, Father's Day, mom's birthday, Christmas, Easter, summer cabin. But Christmas especially. Every Christmas I go to our forest with my dad to find a Christmas tree". Q: *What activities does your family participate in to enjoy time together?* A: It depends if whole family or just part of us. But if whole family, if with mom, we usually gather around and eat either at mom's place if she's cooking or we go out. But with dad in addition to having dinners, he likes to organize lots of stuff, like the skiing trips".

Family Strengths Model "Spiritual well-being"

"Spiritual well-being" was reflected by Q: *What role has spirituality played in your family?* and A: "I'd say we are not spiritual, no, not at all. But my grandma was very religious, so we all had to go to Sunday school when we were kids"; as well as: Q: *Would you say spirituality is significant in your community?* A: The basic stuff, like babies being baptized, and people getting married in church yeah, but otherwise no, just the regular stuff"

Family Strengths Model: "Managing Stress and Crisis"

"Managing stress and crisis" was manifested by the response to Q: *Think of a time that your family had to deal with a challenge. What was the challenge?* A: "I can only think of the time when my parents divorced, because it is the most recent one. I don't think we had other challenges as a family because my parents didn't share the problems with the kids, so I didn't really see my parents fighting for example". In response to Q: *What does your family do to relieve stress?* the answer was A:

"I don't think we do that as a family. I think it is very individual".

Family Resilience Theory "Open emotional sharing"

"Open emotional sharing" was reflected by the answer to Q: *What strengths did your family use to deal with that challenge?* A: "I think one of the strengths was that my parents were quite open about it"; and Q: *How were they open?* A: "They told us about it quite openly. They told us that they were going to separate first. Well, they started first by telling us that they were thinking of it before they made any decisions".

Family Resilience Theory: Collaborative problem solving

“Collaborative problem solving” was manifested by the response to Q: *What is something that your family has learned together?* A: “When my parents divorced, we had to learn as kids, getting used to mom and dad are not together anymore, they are living at different addresses, family get togethers are different. With my dad it was more difficult because me and my little brother we moved to my mom’s place and my dad was basically all along with the cats. He had to learn to clean up and cook for himself”

Ecological Systems Theory: Microsystem

In response to Q: *What can you tell me about the community in which your family resides?* the interviewee referred to the groups that she had direct contact with in her immediate environment. as follows: A: “It looks different now than when I was a kid. We did a lot as a family, especially my grandma, dad’s mom when I was a kid. But, now it’s a little different. Because now I kind of see my family divided into two parts, and it’s like having two families, being at mom’s place or dad’s place”. Q: *Who else is concerned about what is happening in your family right now?* A: “Friends, but no one specifically. For example, if I go to my dad’s place and my neighbor’s see me, they might come say, oh hey how is your mom doing? because she doesn’t live there anymore”.

Ecological Systems Theory: Mesosystem

In response to Q: *What can you tell me about the community in which your family resides?* the interviewee talked about the relationships between the groups in her microsystem, indicated by A: “ I’m from the countryside, about 400 people, where everybody knows everybody and you always have to say hi to everybody. And our school, the whole school had grades 1st to 6th and only had 30 people. So, it was basically you had to be friends with everybody because the community was so small” further answer was A: “I think because of the place where we are from, because everybody knows each other, I think it was very easy to get help if you needed something. Like in all things. People are doing teamwork”.

Ecological Systems Theory: Exosystem

The interviewee talked about the groups with an indirect relationship with her family. In response to Q: *When having a family challenge, does your*

family look to anybody for support? the response was A: We usually deal with our stuff ourselves. I think individually we might talk to people, but we don't talk about it to other people or groups as a family. If I get in a fight with my brother for example, I might mention it to my friends but not as a family. The limited importance of an exosystem to her family was also manifested by Q: *How are you involved with your extended family, friends and community?* and A: "Not as a whole family. Me and my little brother, we share a lot of common friends so we quite often go to same parties. We did a rowing team thing, and that was a big thing. Like something to do together. But as a full family, I don't think we do that much stuff with other people."

Ecological Systems Theory: Macrosystem

The interviewee talked about the cultural elements that influenced her development. The response to Q: *What ways has living in your country influenced your family?* was A: Free education is one thing. I would think in the countries where families have to pay for university, I would imagine it being actually like hard that you have to think for so long into the future. And not only is it free, but being in Finland it is also good quality... I am sure that living in Finland has influenced my whole family to think ecologically and conserve the environment. And Finland is such big country. 70 percent of the country I think is covered by woods, so we also appreciate nature. Technology - because Finland is one of the most advanced countries when it comes to technology. I think Finland has the most mobile phones for people. We don't have landlines anymore. That must have influenced my family. Internet connections are so cheap .., Maybe the freedom. You can do basically anything you want.

The reply to Q: *Are there any aspects of your culture that have proven challenging for your family?* was A: "The high taxation... Like it's a little annoying that if you are living somewhere else most likely, you wouldn't have to pay that much taxes and you could actually spend the money on yourself. When you know that you're the one that is supporting people that doesn't have that much money, it's like, I think everybody is a little selfish, and I think that's the thing that makes the taxation a little annoying. My family has always appreciated that Finland has a safety net".

The response to Q: *Are there particular aspects of your culture that have provided strength for your family?* was |A: "I think in Qatar people take well-

being and the fact that they have a lot of money for granted. In Finland, we value working hard and if you have nothing and you make your life all by yourself, it is very appreciated in Finland and people look up to you. So, I think that is one of the things that has provided strength to my family because we have always been taught that even if we have social security, and the government will take care of you, we have the mindset that we should work hard for what we have, because everybody knows that the society will not work if people just take from the government because the money has to come from somewhere. And I would say the sauna in the summer and cabin culture, because um, because it is not about if you have money or not, it is a very normal thing that a family has a summer home, a place where the family can go and relax, a way to escape the normal days and just have some time off. And I think the fact that we go to sauna naked has made us more open, I don't know if that makes sense, but I think it does. And the fact that we consider nudity being a normal thing and that it has nothing to do with sexuality. Because in Qatar it feels so weird when they are trying to cover, especially woman, even if that is all normal here. I think it is so weird they are trying to separate woman and men all the time. Like different waiting areas for women and men. And in Finland you can go to sauna all naked, no matter if it is opposite sex or not”.

Ecological Systems Theory: Chronosystem

The interviewee talked about the changes that had previously influenced or may potentially influence her family over time. Her response to Q: *Was there a time in your family's life that was more stable than now? What did that look like?* was A: “It is different now that my parents are not together but I wouldn't call it unstable. It's different that we go to my mom's place and dad's place, but I wouldn't say it is unstable”. Her response to A: *What do you want your family to look like six months/one year/two years from now?* was “I like it the way it is now. I think if something is going to change is that it is just going to grow. Me getting married, my brother getting married, having kids at some point maybe, otherwise I'd like to see us staying close, doing things together” The response to Q: *What beliefs, customs, ideals, rituals, etc. from your family would you like to continue with your own future family (spouse/children)?* was A: “Gathering up for Christmas. Not just Christmas, but overall. I think as a family we are pretty close and do stuff together, so I would like to do that with my future family as well”. The response to Q: *In what ways has your family*

changed over time? was A: “Two major things. One is the divorce, so I kind of have two families, one mom, one dad. The second thing is that people get older. I live aboard, my brother has a family. We don’t do as much stuff as we did when we were kids because that’s just normal, we grow up and we have our own lives. And the family is getting bigger. My brother getting married and getting kids. And especially for my brother it is different, because now he has his wife’s family as well”.

Table 6 present the evidence based on verbatim quotations to identify five themes relating to family strengths that emerged from the qualitative analysis, specifically “Family identity, Shared values, Celebrations, Transitions, and Traditions. These emergent themes could not be fitted to the template derived from existing theory

Table 6. Emergent Themes

Family identity	<i>Q: How would you describe your family identity? A: “Appreciation for working hard. Not only working hard, but also financial stuff. I mean like for example, saving, investing, and budgeting and that sort of stuff. My dad always tried to teach us to handle money properly. And that is definitely different from other families I know because there are so many friends that I know that when it their payday they spend it all, or most, they don’t plan it, they do whatever they like and I’m not like that.</i>
Shared values	<i>Q: What things are most important to your family? A: I think one of the major cornerstones has always been work. My dad is an entrepreneur and he as always pushed us to work. And he has always tried to teach us the value of working”</i>
Celebrations	<i>Q: How does your family recognize achievements? A: “It depends how big it is. When we were kids, our friends tried to encourage us to get good grades. We would get a little money for good grades. When I graduated, we had a small party. I got this watch from my dad. He remembered my graduation. If it is small maybe we would call or send a text message to say congratulations but if it is bigger maybe we will get together and give small gifts for the one we are celebrating”.</i>

Transitions

Q: Describe a time when your family experienced a transition. What are some things that made the transition/change/move easier? A: Moving to Qatar for example. Before I came here, I think we spent a lot more time together. But it still wasn't easy. The only thing was that my parents divorced, but not as a whole family. When I moved away to study for example, I don't think that was something that impacted the whole family. Maybe it was a change for my parents' perspective, but I don't know about what would make the transition easier for them.

Traditions

Q: What traditions/rituals are important to your family? A: All the times when we gather up to have dinner together. Mother's Day, Father's Day, mom's birthday, Christmas, Easter, summer cabin. But Christmas especially. Every Christmas I go to our forest with my dad to find a Christmas tree, still now when I'm in my 20's I do that. My stepsister sometimes might join. Yeah, we don't buy our Christmas tree, we always go and find it ourselves.

Conclusions

Theoretical Implications

The author followed the modern trend of qualitative researchers by attempting to verify and expand existing theory in order explain a socio-psychological phenomenon using empirical data collected at an interview (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Grbich, 2019). Because the data were generalized to theory, and not to a specific population of families, the collection of information from a single interviewee was not necessarily a limitation. The data collected by the in-depth interview with a Finnish woman and subsequent thematic analysis of her experiences and perceptions identified universal themes that could be generalized to the family strengths model (Defrain & Assay, 2007; 2014); family resilience theory (Walsh, 2016); and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evan, 2000).

Positive strengths universal to all functional families regardless of culture, ethnic, or religious influences were identified by universal latent themes including "Appreciation and affection; Commitment; Positive communication; Enjoyable times together; Spiritual well-being; Managing stress and crisis " previously defined by Defrain & Assay (2014) as well as "Open emotional sharing " and Collaborative problem solving;" previously defined by Walsh (2016). Positive latent themes also identified the layered environmen-

tal connections within which a family lives and grows, including “Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem” previously defined by Bronfenbrenner & Evan (2000). These latent themes were complemented by emergent themes not directly defined by previous research, but were included because they identified family strengths such including “Family identity, Shared values, Celebrations” and “Transitions”.

The family strengths and environmental connections associated with family resilience identified within the Finnish family context not only helped to confirm and expand existing theory based on qualitative research. The themes extracted from the interview transcript were consistent with the quantitative variables that have been found to contribute significantly to positive family functioning, including “Family strengths, Flexibility in the way free time is spent, Sound relationships with family and friends, Conflict management and resolution, and Good communication” (Greeff, 2000).

Practical Implications

The themes identified in this study were consistent with the principles underlying strength-based family therapies, including the capacity of families for growth and solving problems, and being part of a broader community (Oliver, 2014). The practical implications are that helping families to reflect on their strengths is empowering, particularly in the face of challenges, and can help inform the development of family therapies at individual, policy, and practice levels. However, much is still to be learnt about how social workers and other health professionals can intervene to optimize the strengths, resilience, and environmental connections of families (Carr, 2018; Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Varghese et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

Some of the themes identified in this study may only have local implications in the Finnish family context, because the progressive social policies in Finland concerned with the macrosystem (e.g., taxation, education, environmental issues, technology, social freedoms, and work ethics) were perceived by the interviewee to contribute to her family strengths, challenges, and connections. More Finnish family members need to be interviewed before it is possible to achieve saturation, and determine if these latent themes are consistent with Finnish families at a societal level or if they apply to all families at a universal level.

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Appendix A

Family Strengths from a Finnish Perspective: A Thematic Analysis of an Interview

Sex: Female

Age: 26

Country of origin: Finland

Expatriate: Qatar

Questions

- 1 What can you share with me about your family?
- 2 Do you have a favorite memory about your family?
- 3 How would you describe your family identity?
- 4 Think of a time that your family had to deal with a challenge. What was the challenge?
- 5 What can you tell me about the community in which your family resides?
- 6 What type of resources has your family benefited from in your community?
- 7 Would you think it is a strength being from a small community?
- 8 What would you say binds your family together?
- 9 How does your family show appreciation and affection?
- 10 Describe a time that your family has shown commitment to each other.
- 11 Think of a time when your family had a challenge. How would you describe the communication amongst family members at that time?
- 12 Think of a time when things are going well for your family. How would you describe the communication amongst family members during this time?
- 13 What do you prefer in family communication?
- 14 What characteristics of communication are helpful/preferred?
- 15 What activities does your family participate in to enjoy time together?
- 16 What role has spirituality played in your family?
- 17 Would you say spirituality is significant in your community?

- 18 How does your family recognize achievements?
 - 19 What does your family do to relieve stress?
 - 20 In what ways has living in your country influenced your family?
 - 21 In what ways has your family changed over time?
 - 22 What things are most important to your family?
 - 23 What is something that your family has learned together?
Who else is concerned about what is happening in your family right now?
 - 24 Was there a time in your family's life that was more stable than now?
25 What did that look like?
What do you want your family to look like 6 months/one year/two years from now? What will help you get there?
 - 26 What traditions/rituals are important to your family?
How are you involved with your extended family, friends and community? For example, what kind of social activities is your family involved in with others?
 - 27 When having a family challenge, does your family look to anybody for support? Who are these people/groups?
Describe a time when your family experienced a transition. What are some things that made the transition/change/move easier?
 - 28 What beliefs, customs, ideals, rituals, etc. from your family would you like to continue with your own future family (spouse/children)?
 - 29
 - 30
 - 31
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