



**VARNA FREE UNIVERSITY
"CHERNORIZETS HRABAR"**

**FACULTY OF SOCIAL, BUSINESS AND COMPUTER SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

LILACH SCHWARTZ PELEG

**THE IMPACT OF NEW FAMILY MEMBERS ON
SIBLINGS RELATIONSHIPS – EXAMINING
DIFFERENTIATION, PARENTAL ATTITUDES
AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS.**

AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT

of a dissertation submitted for the award of the
educational and scientific degree "Doctor",
in the professional field 3.2 "Psychology",
Doctoral Program "General Psychology"

Scientific Supervisor:
Prof. Sevdzhihan Eyubova, PhD

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The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, references and appendices and comprises a total of 172 pages.

The dissertation includes 7 tables and 9 figures.

The bibliography contains 98 sources in English and Hebrew.

Six appendices containing research instruments and questionnaires are included at the end of the dissertation.

The dissertation was discussed and approved by the Departmental Council of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social, Business and Computer Sciences at Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar” and has been submitted for defense before the scientific jury.

The author of the dissertation, Lilach Schwartz Peleg, is a doctoral student in the independent study track at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social, Business and Computer Sciences, Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar.”

I. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DISSERTATION

1. Introduction

Sibling relationships represent one of the most enduring interpersonal bonds across the human lifespan. From childhood through adulthood, siblings play a significant role in emotional development, identity formation, and the acquisition of interpersonal competencies. Unlike many other family relationships, sibling ties typically persist throughout the life course and continue to evolve in response to developmental transitions and structural changes within the family.

Despite their importance, sibling relationships have historically received less scholarly attention than parent–child or marital relationships. Only in recent decades has family research begun to explore the complexity of adult sibling relationships and their contribution to psychological well-being and family functioning.

One of the major transitions affecting sibling dynamics occurs when a sibling forms a couple relationship and a new family member enters the family system through marriage. The inclusion of a brother-in-law or sister-in-law may reshape communication patterns, emotional alliances, and role expectations within the sibling subsystem. These changes can either strengthen family cohesion or create new tensions and conflicts.

Within this context, the present dissertation examines the ways in which the entry of new family members influences adult sibling relationships. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from family systems theory, attachment theory, and Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self, the study aims to deepen the understanding of the psychological and relational mechanisms shaping sibling dynamics during family expansion.

2. Topicality and Relevance of the Research

The relevance of the present research stems from the increasing recognition that sibling relationships constitute a central dimension of family functioning throughout adulthood. While traditional psychological research has primarily focused on vertical family relationships such as parent–child dynamics, contemporary studies highlight the importance of horizontal relationships among siblings.

Adult siblings often remain important sources of emotional support, shared identity, and long-term social connection. However, these relationships are not static and may

change significantly in response to life transitions such as marriage, parenthood, and the restructuring of family roles.

The integration of a sibling's spouse into the family system represents a particularly significant transition. The presence of an in-law may alter patterns of communication, redefine boundaries between family subsystems, and influence perceptions of loyalty and belonging within the family network. These processes may also reactivate earlier family dynamics related to parental influence, sibling rivalry, and conflict management patterns formed in childhood.

The relevance of this study lies in its attempt to examine this transition through three key psychological dimensions: differentiation of self within the family system, perceived parental attitudes and favoritism, and conflict resolution strategies between siblings. By integrating these perspectives, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of adult sibling relationships during periods of family expansion.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the research also has practical implications. The findings may inform the work of family therapists and counselors dealing with conflicts among adult siblings and broader relational tensions within extended families.

3. Object and Subject of the Research

The object of the research is adult sibling relationships within the context of the family system.

The subject of the research is the influence of the entry of new family members—specifically siblings-in-law introduced through marriage—on the quality and dynamics of relationships between adult siblings.

The study focuses particularly on the role of three factors that may shape these dynamics: parental attitudes and perceived parental favoritism, differentiation of self within the family system, and conflict resolution skills among siblings.

4. Research Problem

The research problem addressed in this dissertation concerns the limited empirical understanding of how adult sibling relationships change when a sibling marries and a new family member becomes integrated into the family system.

Although sibling relationships are typically long-term and emotionally significant, the introduction of an in-law may create new relational dynamics that influence emotional

closeness, communication patterns, and conflict management between siblings. Such transitions may involve shifts in loyalty, renegotiation of family roles, and changes in interpersonal boundaries.

From a scientific perspective, this issue reflects a gap in the literature on family psychology regarding the impact of family expansion on adult sibling relationships. From a practical perspective, unresolved tensions during this transition may contribute to long-term relational strain within the family.

The present study therefore seeks to explore how the entry of a sibling-in-law influences the quality of adult sibling relationships and which psychological and family factors shape this process.

5. Author's Argument

The dissertation is based on the assumption that the entry of a new family member through marriage constitutes a significant transition within the family life cycle that may reshape existing sibling relationships.

The central argument of the study is that the impact of this transition is not uniform but depends on several psychological and relational factors within the family system. In particular, levels of differentiation of self, patterns of parental attitudes and favoritism, and the conflict resolution skills of siblings are assumed to influence the way siblings adapt to the integration of a new family member.

These factors may either facilitate constructive adaptation and relational stability or contribute to increased tension and rivalry within the sibling subsystem.

6. Objective, Research Questions and Hypotheses

The main objective of the dissertation is to examine the impact of the entry of new family members through marriage on the quality and dynamics of adult sibling relationships.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How does the entry of a sibling-in-law influence the perceived quality of relationships between adult siblings?
- What role do parental attitudes and perceived parental favoritism play in shaping adult sibling relationships during family expansion?
- How are levels of differentiation of self associated with patterns of interaction and emotional closeness among siblings?

- How do conflict resolution skills influence the stability and functioning of sibling relationships following the integration of a new family member?

Based on these questions, the study formulates several hypotheses concerning the relationships between sibling relationship quality, differentiation of self, parental favoritism, and conflict resolution strategies.

7. Research Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The quantitative component is based on survey data collected from adult participants who have at least one sibling. The research instruments include standardized questionnaires measuring sibling relationship quality, differentiation of self, conflict resolution skills, and perceived parental favoritism, along with demographic variables. The qualitative component consists of semi-structured in-depth interviews with selected participants. These interviews explore participants' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding changes in sibling relationships following the entry of a sibling-in-law into the family system.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enables both statistical analysis of relationships between variables and deeper exploration of personal experiences and family dynamics, thereby enhancing the validity and interpretative depth of the research findings.

8. Limitations of the Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of the study.

First, the research sample consists primarily of participants from a specific cultural and social context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the study relies largely on self-reported data, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions, memory biases, or social desirability effects.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of the research design limits the ability to examine long-term developmental changes in sibling relationships over time.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the understanding of an underexplored aspect of family psychology and provides valuable insights into the dynamics of adult sibling relationships during periods of family transition.

II. SIZE AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation is structured into an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, references and appendices.

The introduction presents the research problem, the topicality and relevance of the study, the object and subject of the research, the research questions and hypotheses, as well as the methodological framework of the study.

Chapter One reviews the literature and theoretical framework related to the impact of new family members on adult sibling relationships and presents the scientific and practical significance, as well as the novelty and contribution of the study.

Chapter Two examines the key concepts and theoretical perspectives on sibling relationships, including attachment theory, social learning theory, structural family theory (Minuchin, 1974), and Bowen's concept of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978).

Chapter Three describes the research methodology, including the research design, instruments used in the study, procedures for data collection and ethical considerations, as well as the characteristics of the research sample.

Chapter Four presents the empirical findings of the study, including both quantitative and qualitative results, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature.

The dissertation concludes with a summary of the main findings, theoretical implications and recommendations for future research.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows:

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: The Impact of New Family Members on Adult Sibling Relationships

1.1 Personal and Professional Context of the Study

1.2 Scientific and Practical Significance

1.3 Contribution of the Research

1.4 Novelty and Originality of the Study

1.5 Aims and Objectives

1.6 Research Questions

CHAPTER 2. Key Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives on Sibling Relationships

2.1 Sibling Relationships: Definitions, Characteristics, and Dimensions

2.1.1 Quality of Sibling Relationships

2.1.2	Warmth and Closeness
2.1.3	Rivalry and Competitive Dynamics
2.1.4	Conflict and Resolution Strategies
2.2	Theoretical Perspectives Relevant to Sibling Relationships in the Context of Family Expansion
2.2.1	Attachment Theory
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2.2.3	Structural–Family Approach
2.3	Parental Approaches and Their Influence on Sibling Relationships
2.3.1	Control vs. Autonomy; Acceptance vs. Rejection
2.3.2	Parental Differentiation, Favoritism, and Intergenerational Transmission
2.3.3	Parenting, intergenerational transmission and differentiation of self, in Bowen's theory
2.4	Differentiation of Self – Concept, Theory, and Application to Sibling Dynamics
2.4.1	Differentiation: Definition
2.4.2	Bowen’s Theory
2.4.3	Differentiation of self and couple relationships
2.4.4	Impact of Differentiation on Sibling Relationships in the Context of a Couple Relationship
CHAPTER 3. Methodology for Examining the Impact of New Family Members on Adult Sibling Relationships	
3.1	Research Design and Conceptual Approach
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4.1	Quantitative Findings – Sibling Relationship Quality, Differentiation, and Conflict Resolution Skills
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III. DISSERTATION SUMMARY

Introduction

Sibling relationships constitute one of the most enduring interpersonal bonds in human life. Unlike many other social relationships, sibling ties are typically established early in childhood and may continue across the entire life span. These relationships develop within a shared family environment characterized by common experiences, emotional exchanges, and patterns of interaction that shape the personal and relational development of each family member.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, siblings often play central roles in socialization processes. They provide opportunities for emotional learning, cooperation, rivalry, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Through daily interaction, siblings influence each other's behavioral patterns, emotional responses, and perceptions of family relationships. As a result, sibling relationships frequently serve as an important context for the development of interpersonal competencies that later influence friendships, romantic partnerships, and other adult relationships.

Despite their significance, sibling relationships have historically received less scholarly attention than other family relationships, particularly in the context of adulthood. Much of the existing research has focused on early developmental stages, examining sibling rivalry, parental mediation of sibling conflicts, and the effects of birth order during childhood. Far fewer studies have explored how sibling relationships evolve during adulthood or how they respond to major family transitions.

Adulthood introduces a variety of life events that may significantly influence family dynamics. Individuals leave the parental household, establish independent identities, pursue careers, and form intimate partnerships. These developments alter family roles and create new relational structures within the family system. Consequently, sibling relationships may change in both form and function as individuals adjust to new responsibilities and priorities.

One particularly important transition within the family life cycle occurs when a sibling forms a long-term romantic partnership and introduces a spouse into the family system. The entry of a sibling-in-law represents the integration of a new individual into an

already established network of relationships. This process may alter patterns of communication, emotional closeness, and loyalty among family members.

In some families, the integration of a new family member may strengthen family cohesion by fostering new connections and shared experiences. In other families, however, the transition may create tensions or emotional distance as siblings renegotiate their roles and adjust to shifting family dynamics. The presence of a new spouse may influence how siblings interact with one another, how they allocate time and emotional energy, and how they interpret their place within the family structure.

Understanding these dynamics requires an approach that considers both individual psychological characteristics and broader family-system processes. The present dissertation therefore examines adult sibling relationships within the framework of family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) and related psychological perspectives. In particular, the study focuses on three central factors that may influence sibling relationships during family transitions: differentiation of self, perceived parental favoritism, and conflict resolution strategies.

Differentiation of self, as conceptualized by Bowen (1978), refers to an individual's ability to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining connected to significant others. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are generally better able to regulate emotional responses and maintain stable relationships even under conditions of stress or change. In the context of sibling relationships, differentiation may influence how individuals respond to the entry of a new family member and how they manage the emotional adjustments associated with this transition.

Another important factor examined in the study is perceived parental favoritism. Research suggests that siblings' perceptions of unequal parental treatment may have long-lasting effects on their relationships. Feelings that one sibling has been favored by parents can create tensions that persist into adulthood and may reemerge during significant family transitions such as marriage.

Conflict resolution strategies also play a central role in shaping the quality of sibling relationships. Constructive communication and effective conflict management may enable siblings to navigate family transitions more successfully, whereas avoidant or aggressive conflict styles may exacerbate tensions and contribute to relationship deterioration.

The present research integrates these theoretical perspectives in order to examine how sibling relationships evolve when new family members enter the family system. By combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes through which adult sibling relationships adapt to family expansion.

The following sections summarize the main components of the dissertation. Each chapter is presented with an overview of its content and the principal findings derived from the research. This summary aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the theoretical foundations, methodological design, empirical results, and conclusions of the dissertation.

Chapter 1 Summary

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: The Impact of New Family

Members on Adult Sibling Relationships

- 1.1 Personal and Professional Context of the Study
- 1.2 Scientific and Practical Significance
- 1.3 Contribution of the Research
- 1.4 Novelty and Originality of the Study
- 1.5 Aims and Objectives
- 1.6 Research Questions

The first chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical background of the research and situates the study within the broader field of family psychology and sibling relationship research. The chapter introduces the central themes that guide the dissertation and outlines the theoretical framework through which adult sibling relationships are examined.

Sibling relationships represent one of the most enduring interpersonal connections in human life. Unlike friendships or romantic relationships, siblings share a unique developmental history shaped by a common family environment. These relationships emerge early in childhood and often extend across the entire life span. Throughout childhood and adolescence, siblings engage in a wide range of interactions that include emotional support, cooperation, rivalry, negotiation, and conflict. Through these interactions, siblings contribute significantly to each other's social and emotional development.

Despite the importance of sibling relationships, much of the psychological literature has historically focused on parent–child relationships or romantic partnerships. As a result, sibling relationships—particularly those occurring in adulthood—have received relatively limited scholarly attention. In recent years, however, researchers have increasingly recognized that adult sibling relationships play an important role in emotional well-being, social support, and the continuity of family bonds across generations.

Adult sibling relationships differ in several important ways from those observed during childhood. As individuals move into adulthood, they often establish independent households, develop careers, and form intimate partnerships. These life transitions reshape family roles and influence patterns of interaction between siblings. The emotional closeness and frequency of communication between siblings may change as they assume new responsibilities and commitments.

One of the most significant transitions affecting sibling relationships occurs when a sibling forms a long-term romantic partnership and introduces a spouse into the family system. The entry of a sibling-in-law represents the integration of a new individual into an already established network of family relationships. This transition may alter existing patterns of communication, loyalty, and emotional closeness among siblings.

In some cases, the introduction of a new family member may strengthen sibling relationships by fostering greater family cohesion and shared social interactions. For example, spouses may encourage family gatherings or facilitate communication between siblings. In other situations, however, the presence of a new partner may lead to tension or emotional distance as siblings adjust to new family roles and renegotiate their place within the family structure.

Understanding these processes requires an examination of both individual psychological characteristics and broader family dynamics. The chapter therefore situates the research within the framework of family systems theory, which views the family as an interconnected system in which changes affecting one member influence the entire relational network. Within this perspective, the marriage of one sibling can be understood as a systemic event that may reshape the dynamics of relationships among all family members.

The chapter further emphasizes the scientific and practical significance of studying adult sibling relationships. Siblings often remain important sources of emotional support, companionship, and shared identity throughout adulthood. At the same time, sibling relationships may also involve unresolved tensions or patterns established during childhood. Examining how these relationships evolve during major family transitions contributes to a deeper understanding of family functioning and interpersonal development.

Another important component of the chapter concerns the originality and contribution of the research. The study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that combines several theoretical perspectives in order to analyze sibling relationships during periods of family expansion. In particular, the research draws on Bowen's theory of differentiation of self, research on parental favoritism, and studies of conflict resolution processes within family relationships.

Differentiation of self refers to an individual's capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining connected to significant others. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation are generally better able to regulate emotional reactions and manage interpersonal tensions. Within the context of sibling relationships, differentiation may influence how individuals respond to changes in family structure, including the entry of a new spouse into the family.

The chapter also highlights the role of perceived parental favoritism in shaping sibling dynamics. Research suggests that perceptions of unequal parental treatment may have long-lasting effects on sibling relationships. Feelings that one sibling has been favored by parents may contribute to rivalry, jealousy, or unresolved tensions that persist into adulthood.

In addition, the chapter considers the role of conflict resolution strategies in maintaining or undermining sibling relationships. Constructive communication and cooperative problem-solving may help siblings adapt more successfully to family transitions, whereas avoidant or confrontational conflict styles may intensify tensions and lead to deterioration in relationship quality.

Based on these theoretical considerations, the chapter presents the main objectives of the research. The central aim of the dissertation is to examine how the entry of a new family member through marriage influences adult sibling relationships. The research

also seeks to identify psychological and relational factors that may shape how siblings adapt to this transition.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses several research questions. These questions explore the ways in which sibling relationships change following the entry of a new family member, the role of differentiation of self in moderating these changes, and the influence of perceived parental favoritism and conflict resolution strategies on sibling relationship outcomes.

Through the development of this theoretical framework, the chapter establishes the conceptual foundation for the empirical investigation presented in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 1 Findings

The literature review indicates that adult sibling relationships are shaped by a complex interaction of developmental experiences, family dynamics, and individual psychological characteristics. Although sibling relationships remain significant throughout adulthood, they are sensitive to major life transitions such as marriage and the expansion of the family system.

The analysis of previous research highlights that the integration of new family members may influence patterns of communication, emotional closeness, and interaction between siblings. However, the role of siblings-in-law in shaping these dynamics has received relatively limited attention in empirical studies.

The theoretical perspectives presented in the chapter therefore underscore the importance of examining sibling relationships within the broader context of family systems and individual psychological processes. This conceptual framework provides the foundation for the empirical investigation conducted in the following chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 Summary

Key Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives on Sibling Relationships

2.1 Sibling Relationships: Definitions, Characteristics, and Dimensions

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives Relevant to Sibling Relationships in the Context of Family Expansion

2.3 Parental Approaches and Their Influence on Sibling Relationships

2.4 Differentiation of Self – Concept, Theory, and Application to Sibling Dynamics

The second chapter presents the key conceptual foundations and theoretical perspectives necessary for understanding sibling relationships within the broader context of family systems. While sibling relationships are among the most enduring interpersonal connections individuals experience, their complexity requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates psychological, developmental, and family-system perspectives.

The chapter begins by defining sibling relationships and examining their fundamental characteristics and dimensions. Sibling relationships are unique in that they combine elements of intimacy, shared experience, and long-term continuity. Unlike friendships or romantic relationships, sibling bonds are typically not chosen but emerge from family structure and shared developmental environments. As a result, these relationships often include a mixture of emotional closeness, cooperation, rivalry, competition, and conflict.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, siblings interact within a shared environment that provides opportunities for learning social roles, negotiating power dynamics, and developing interpersonal competencies. These interactions contribute significantly to the development of communication skills, emotional regulation, and conflict management abilities. Over time, the patterns established during childhood may continue to influence sibling relationships in adulthood.

The chapter therefore examines several central dimensions that characterize sibling relationships. These include warmth and emotional closeness, patterns of rivalry and competition, and strategies for managing interpersonal conflict. Emotional closeness often develops through shared experiences, mutual support, and a sense of familial belonging. At the same time, rivalry and competition may arise as siblings seek parental attention, recognition, and validation.

Conflict represents another common dimension of sibling relationships. While conflicts between siblings may create tension, they can also serve as opportunities for developing negotiation skills and learning constructive ways of resolving disagreements. The ways in which siblings manage conflict may therefore have long-term implications for the stability and quality of their relationships.

In addition to describing these relational dimensions, the chapter reviews several theoretical perspectives that provide a conceptual framework for understanding sibling relationships within the context of family expansion. One of the central perspectives discussed is attachment theory. According to this theory, early emotional bonds between children and their caregivers influence the development of later interpersonal relationships. Secure attachment patterns may foster trust, empathy, and emotional closeness between siblings, whereas insecure attachment patterns may contribute to rivalry, jealousy, or emotional distance.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is social learning theory. This approach emphasizes the role of observation and modeling in shaping behavior. Within the family context, siblings often observe and imitate each other's behaviors, communication styles, and conflict management strategies. As a result, sibling interactions may reinforce certain relational patterns that persist into adulthood.

The chapter also considers the structural family approach, which views the family as a system composed of interdependent subsystems. From this perspective, sibling relationships cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined within the broader structure of family relationships. Changes within one part of the family system—such as the formation of a marital relationship—may therefore influence the dynamics of sibling interactions.

Another important theme addressed in the chapter concerns parental approaches and their influence on sibling relationships. Parents play a central role in shaping the emotional climate of the family and in establishing patterns of interaction between siblings. Parental behaviors such as control, acceptance, support, or rejection may significantly affect how siblings perceive and relate to one another.

Research has shown that perceived parental favoritism may have particularly strong effects on sibling dynamics. When siblings believe that one child receives greater parental attention, approval, or resources, feelings of inequality may emerge. These perceptions can lead to rivalry, resentment, or competition that may persist into adulthood. Even subtle differences in parental treatment may influence siblings' interpretations of fairness and belonging within the family.

The chapter also explores the concept of intergenerational transmission of family patterns. Family interaction styles, emotional responses, and relational expectations

may be transmitted across generations, influencing how siblings relate to each other throughout the life course. These patterns may become especially visible during periods of family transition, when established roles and expectations are renegotiated.

A central theoretical framework examined in the chapter is Bowen's concept of differentiation of self. Differentiation refers to an individual's capacity to maintain a clear sense of personal identity while remaining emotionally connected to others. Individuals with high levels of differentiation are better able to regulate emotional responses, tolerate interpersonal tension, and maintain balanced relationships within the family system.

Within sibling relationships, differentiation may influence how individuals respond to changes in family structure. When a sibling forms a romantic partnership and introduces a new spouse into the family system, individuals with higher levels of differentiation may adapt more effectively to the transition. They are generally better able to balance emotional closeness with personal autonomy and to maintain stable relationships despite shifting family dynamics.

In contrast, individuals with lower levels of differentiation may experience greater emotional reactivity during family transitions. They may perceive the entry of a new family member as a threat to existing relationships or struggle to redefine their roles within the family system. These responses may lead to increased tension or conflict between siblings.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the chapter provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding sibling relationships in adulthood. The combination of relational dimensions, family-system theories, and individual psychological processes offers a multidimensional approach to analyzing how sibling relationships evolve when new members enter the family system.

Chapter 2 Findings

The theoretical analysis presented in this chapter highlights the complexity of sibling relationships and the multiple factors that influence their development and stability. Sibling relationships are shaped by emotional closeness, patterns of rivalry and competition, and strategies for managing interpersonal conflict.

The literature review also demonstrates that sibling relationships cannot be understood independently of broader family processes. Parental behavior, perceptions of fairness

and favoritism, and patterns of communication within the family system play significant roles in shaping sibling dynamics.

In addition, the concept of differentiation of self provides an important framework for understanding how individuals adapt to changes within the family structure. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation appear better able to maintain stable relationships during periods of family transition.

These theoretical insights establish the conceptual foundation for the empirical investigation presented in the following chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 3 Summary

Methodology for Examining the Impact of New Family Members on Adult

Sibling Relationships

3.1 Research Design and Conceptual Approach

3.2 Selection and Justification of Research Instruments

3.3 Data Collection Procedures and Ethical Considerations

3.4 Description of the Research Sample and Participant Characteristics

The third chapter presents the methodological framework of the study and outlines the research design, instruments, procedures, and characteristics of the research sample. The methodological structure of the study was developed in accordance with the research objectives and theoretical framework presented in the previous chapters, with the aim of providing a comprehensive empirical examination of adult sibling relationships in the context of family expansion.

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. The combination of these two approaches allows for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The quantitative component enables the systematic examination of relationships between key psychological variables associated with sibling relationships, while the qualitative component provides an in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences and interpretations of changes in family dynamics.

The conceptual approach underlying the research is grounded primarily in family systems theory, which conceptualizes the family as an interconnected relational system. According to this perspective, the behavior and experiences of individual family members cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined within the context of

the entire family structure. Changes affecting one member of the system—such as the formation of a marital relationship and the integration of a new family member—may influence patterns of interaction, emotional closeness, and relational roles among other family members.

Within this framework, the entry of a sibling's spouse into the family system is viewed as a significant developmental transition that may reshape existing sibling relationships. The study therefore examines how such transitions are associated with several psychological and relational variables, including differentiation of self, perceived parental favoritism, and conflict resolution strategies.

The quantitative part of the study employed the following research instruments:

1. Demographic Questionnaire
2. Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)
3. Parental Favoritism Questionnaire
4. Differentiation of Self Inventory
5. Level of Conflict Intelligence Self-Assessment (Velasco et al., 2019)

The qualitative part of the study employed a semi-structured in-depth interview guide developed for the current study.

In addition to the quantitative questionnaires, the research incorporates a qualitative component aimed at exploring participants' lived experiences of sibling relationships within the context of family transitions. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants in order to obtain deeper insight into the ways individuals interpret and experience changes in sibling relationships following the entry of new family members into the family system.

The qualitative approach allows participants to describe their personal perceptions, emotional responses, and relational experiences in their own words. Through these narratives, the study explores how siblings perceive the influence of marital relationships on family dynamics, how they interpret shifts in emotional closeness and communication patterns, and how they adapt to new relational roles within the family system.

Data collection procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic research purposes. Anonymity was preserved throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

The research sample consists of adult individuals who have siblings and whose family structures include the presence of new family members through marriage or long-term partnerships. The participants represent a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, allowing for the examination of sibling relationships across different family contexts.

Participants completed the quantitative questionnaires, which provided measurable data regarding the variables examined in the study. In addition, selected participants took part in semi-structured qualitative interviews designed to explore their personal experiences of sibling relationships in greater depth.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enables a comprehensive examination of adult sibling relationships and the factors that influence them during periods of family transition. By combining statistical analysis with qualitative exploration, the methodological design of the study provides both empirical rigor and contextual depth in understanding how sibling relationships evolve when new members enter the family system.

Chapter 3 Findings

The methodological design described in this chapter provided a structured and reliable framework for examining the research questions addressed in the dissertation. The mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of statistical analysis and qualitative exploration, thereby offering complementary perspectives on the dynamics of adult sibling relationships.

The quantitative component allowed for the systematic examination of relationships between key psychological variables related to sibling relationships, including differentiation of self, perceptions of parental favoritism, and conflict resolution

strategies. These variables provided measurable indicators for understanding the ways individuals experience and manage relational changes within the family system.

The qualitative component, based on semi-structured interviews, provided deeper insight into participants' subjective interpretations of family dynamics and the ways in which the entry of new family members influences sibling relationships. Participants' narratives revealed the complexity of emotional responses and relational adjustments that accompany family transitions.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative approaches created a comprehensive empirical basis for the presentation and interpretation of the research findings discussed in the following chapter of the dissertation.

Chapter 4 Summary

Findings and Discussion: Adult Sibling Relationships amid Family Expansion

- 4.1 Quantitative Findings – Sibling Relationship Quality, Differentiation, and Conflict Resolution Skills
- 4.2 Qualitative Findings
- 4.3 Discussion of Findings in the Context of Existing Literature
- 4.4 Summary of Key Conclusions

The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings of the study and integrates the results within the broader theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapters. The chapter combines quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative thematic analysis in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of adult sibling relationships in the context of family expansion.

4.1 Quantitative Findings – Sibling Relationship Quality, Differentiation, and Conflict Resolution Skills

The quantitative component of the study examined the relationships between several key variables associated with adult sibling relationships. These variables included the quality of sibling relationships, differentiation of self, perceived parental favoritism, and conflict resolution strategies.

The statistical analysis explored how these variables are associated with the ways individuals experience and manage sibling relationships following the entry of new family members into the family system. The results indicate that sibling relationship

quality is influenced by a combination of individual psychological characteristics and family dynamics.

Differentiation of self emerged as an important variable associated with patterns of interaction between siblings.

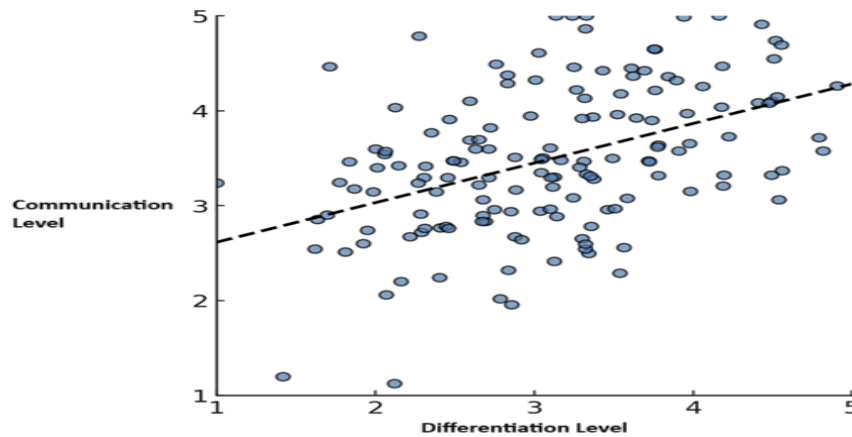


Figure 1: Correlation between level of differentiation and level of sibling communication (N = 150).

Individuals with higher levels of differentiation tend to demonstrate greater emotional regulation and interpersonal stability within family relationships. Such individuals appear better able to maintain emotional closeness with siblings while simultaneously adapting to structural changes within the family system, including the introduction of new family members through marriage.

Perceptions of parental favoritism also play a significant role in shaping sibling dynamics. The findings suggest that perceived inequalities in parental attitudes and treatment may contribute to tensions or rivalry between siblings. Even when these perceptions originate in earlier developmental stages, they may continue to influence sibling relationships in adulthood, particularly during periods of family transition.

Conflict resolution skills represent another important factor influencing sibling relationships. Individuals who employ constructive conflict management strategies are more likely to maintain stable and supportive sibling relationships despite the potential challenges introduced by changes in family structure. Conversely, less effective conflict management strategies may intensify relational tensions and contribute to decreased relationship satisfaction.

Taken together, the quantitative findings demonstrate that adult sibling relationships are shaped by a complex interaction between individual psychological characteristics and broader family dynamics.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative component of the study provided deeper insight into participants’ subjective experiences of sibling relationships in adulthood. Through semi-structured interviews, participants described how their relationships with siblings evolved over time and how these relationships were influenced by major family transitions.

To provide a concise overview of the qualitative findings, Table 1 presents the main themes that emerged from participants’ accounts.

Table 1: Key themes from the qualitative analysis and selected examples (summarized from participant accounts)

Main Theme	Description & Selected Examples
Change in sibling relationship patterns	A change in the frequency and nature of communication between siblings after the marriage. Many described a drop in the number of conversations and meet-ups (“we no longer talk every day...”), and sometimes a shift toward more “formal” communication. Some noted positive changes as well (e.g., growing closer through new family roles).
Jealousy and sense of loss	Mixed feelings about the sibling’s marriage: a sense of jealousy toward the new spouse and a feeling of “loss” of the exclusive closeness with the sibling. For example, a younger sister said: “I felt like I was a bit losing my brother to his wife.” These feelings are sometimes accompanied by guilt, but tend to moderate over time.
Role of the in-law in the dynamic	The impact of the new spouse on sibling relationships. In some cases the in-law acts as a “bridge” bringing siblings closer (encouraging communication and gatherings), and in other cases a “wall” distancing the married sibling from their family. This

Main Theme	Description & Selected Examples
	depends on the in-law's personality, openness to the family, and the patterns of communication within the new family.
Coping, adaptation, and growth	How siblings adjust to the new reality over time. Many learned to initiate contact more or set new boundaries with the married sibling. After an adjustment period, some siblings managed to renew their closeness in more mature ways, and even experienced personal growth (e.g., developing independence or alternative social circles).

Several themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. One recurring theme concerned the ways in which siblings renegotiate their relationships following the formation of romantic partnerships and the integration of spouses into the family system. Participants often described adjustments in patterns of communication, emotional closeness, and expectations regarding family roles.

Another important theme involved the balance between continuity and change in sibling relationships. While many participants reported that the emotional bond with siblings remained meaningful throughout adulthood, the nature of interaction between siblings often changed as individuals assumed new roles within their own nuclear families.

Participants also emphasized the influence of family history on present sibling relationships. Experiences from childhood, including patterns of parental attitudes and earlier sibling dynamics, were frequently described as continuing to shape perceptions and interactions in adulthood.

In addition, participants highlighted the role of emotional maturity and personal development in shaping sibling relationships. Individuals who reported greater emotional independence and self-awareness often described more flexible and adaptive approaches to family changes.

4.3 Discussion of Findings in the Context of Existing Literature

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allows for a more comprehensive understanding of adult sibling relationships within the context of family expansion. The results support the theoretical perspectives presented in the literature

review and highlight the importance of examining sibling relationships within a family systems framework.

Consistent with previous research, the findings indicate that sibling relationships in adulthood remain important sources of emotional connection and social support. At the same time, these relationships are sensitive to structural changes within the family system, including the formation of marital relationships and the introduction of new family members.

The findings regarding differentiation of self align with Bowen's theoretical perspective (Bowen, 1978), suggesting that individuals who demonstrate greater emotional autonomy are better equipped to maintain stable family relationships during periods of transition. Similarly, the influence of perceived parental favoritism supports previous studies indicating that early family experiences may continue to shape sibling dynamics throughout the life course.

The qualitative findings further emphasize the complexity of sibling relationships and highlight the importance of considering both emotional and structural factors in understanding how these relationships evolve over time.

4.4 Summary of Key Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that adult sibling relationships are dynamic and multifaceted. They are influenced by individual psychological characteristics, early family experiences, and ongoing changes in family structure.

The integration of new family members through marriage represents an important transition that may reshape patterns of interaction between siblings. However, the ways in which siblings respond to this transition depend on several factors, including levels of differentiation of self, perceptions of parental attitudes, and the ability to manage interpersonal conflict.

Overall, the results of the study contribute to a deeper understanding of sibling relationships in adulthood and highlight the importance of examining these relationships within the broader context of family systems and life-course transitions.

Conclusion

The present dissertation examined adult sibling relationships within the context of family expansion, focusing on the ways in which the entry of new family members through marriage influences relational dynamics between siblings. While sibling relationships constitute one of the longest-lasting interpersonal bonds across the human life span, their development and transformation during adulthood have received relatively limited scholarly attention. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural and psychological processes that shape sibling relationships during significant family transitions.

The findings of the research highlight the dynamic nature of sibling relationships in adulthood. Rather than remaining static or predetermined by childhood experiences alone, these relationships continue to evolve in response to changes in family structure, shifting relational roles, and the developmental trajectories of individual family members. The integration of new family members into the family system represents a particularly meaningful transition that may reshape patterns of communication, emotional closeness, and relational expectations among siblings.

The study demonstrates that the ways in which siblings adapt to these transitions are influenced by several interrelated psychological and relational factors. Differentiation of self emerges as a central concept in understanding individuals' capacity to maintain emotional connection while preserving personal autonomy within family relationships. Individuals who demonstrate higher levels of differentiation appear better able to navigate changes in family structure while sustaining stable and supportive relationships with siblings.

In addition, the findings emphasize the enduring influence of early family experiences, particularly perceptions of parental attitudes and favoritism, on adult sibling dynamics. Even when these perceptions originate during childhood, they may continue to shape relational interpretations and emotional responses in adulthood, especially during periods of family transition. The results therefore support theoretical perspectives that highlight the long-term impact of family-of-origin experiences on later interpersonal relationships.

Conflict resolution processes represent another important factor influencing the stability and quality of sibling relationships. Constructive communication patterns and adaptive approaches to managing disagreement appear to facilitate more resilient sibling bonds, even in the face of changing family circumstances. Conversely, less

effective conflict management strategies may intensify relational tensions and contribute to emotional distance between siblings.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, the research provides both empirical evidence and contextual insight into the ways adult sibling relationships evolve when families expand through marriage. The mixed-methods design enabled the examination of measurable relationships between psychological variables while also capturing participants' lived experiences and interpretations of family change.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of examining sibling relationships within the broader framework of family systems and life-course development. Adult sibling relationships remain significant sources of emotional support, identity, and continuity across the life span, yet they are also sensitive to structural transformations within the family system.

The dissertation therefore contributes to the growing body of research recognizing sibling relationships as a central domain of family life in adulthood. By highlighting the psychological and relational factors that influence sibling dynamics during family expansion, the study provides new perspectives for future research and offers insights that may inform both theoretical development and practical applications in the fields of family psychology and relationship counseling.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Scientific Contribution

1. The study reconceptualizes adult sibling relationships by identifying the entry of in-laws as a distinct transitional point within the family life cycle.
2. The study demonstrates that sibling relationships in adulthood are dynamic rather than static and continue to evolve as family structures expand through marriage and the integration of new family members.
3. The research advances systemic family theory by proposing an integrative framework that connects Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, perceived parental favoritism, and conflict resolution processes in explaining variations in the quality of adult sibling relationships.
4. By examining these factors together, the study offers a broader conceptual understanding of how psychological and relational variables interact during periods of family transition.
5. The study highlights a complex relational dynamic involving loyalty tensions between commitment to one's spouse and emotional ties to siblings, including an insider–outsider process in the integration of siblings-in-law into the family system.

Practical Contribution

1. The research provides a methodological framework for examining sibling relationships during periods of family transition through the integration of quantitative survey data and qualitative semi-structured interviews.
2. The study applies established research instruments measuring sibling relationship quality, differentiation of self, perceived parental favoritism, and conflict resolution skills, together with a qualitative interview protocol developed for the current study.
3. The findings may inform family therapy, psychological counseling, and relational consultation by improving understanding of communication, loyalty, and conflict within expanding family systems.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE PHD THESIS

1. Peleg, L. (2025). "Sibling Relationships – A Theoretical Framework and Their Impact on Individual Development." E-Journal VFU, Issue 23 (2025), pp. 63–70. <https://doi.org/10.53606/evfu.23.63-70>
2. Peleg, L. (2025). "Key Characteristics of Sibling Relationships and Their Impact on Individual Development." E-Journal VFU, Issue 23 (2025), pp. 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.53606/evfu.23.71-79>
3. Peleg, L. (2025). Parental favoritism, sibling conflict, and emotional distance: A quantitative examination of adult sibling relationships. In Proceedings of the XXIV International Scientific Conference "Applied Psychology and Social Practice" (pp. 253–257). Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar". ISSN 1314-8397.
https://www.vfu.bg/dokladi_ot_konferentsii/files/Psihology_2025_Final.pdf
4. Peleg, L. (2025). Through the eyes of the siblings: The impact of in-laws on adult sibling relationships – A qualitative inquiry. In Proceedings of the XXIV International Scientific Conference "Applied Psychology and Social Practice" (pp. 258–262). Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar". ISSN 1314-8397.
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