

## STATEMENT

By

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Regarding Rector's Order No. 338 of VFU – Varna, dated 27.03.2025, for inclusion in the scientific jury for the defense of Lilach Schwartz's dissertation for the award of the scientific degree "doctor" in the scientific specialty "Psychology", professional direction 3.2 "Psychology", doctoral program "General Psychology" on the topic: "Influence of new family members on the relations between siblings - a study of differentiation, parental attitudes and conflict resolution skills."

1. Relevance: Stating that the topic of family relations is relevant would not be entirely accurate. This is a topic that constantly excites a wide range of specialists and non-specialists, which what makes it so difficult to remain in the scientific field when writing about it. There are many reasons for this , ranging from the personal traumatism of those who write (and read) scientific publications on the topic to the very scarce literary base and serious scientific research on the general topic of the family and the relationships of the individual subgroups within it. This makes the issue of relevance undeniable but also raises many questions about the limits to which the “eye of the scientist” can penetrate the secrets of family systems. We must admit that the works of family psychotherapists who work with individual cases are more useful and informative than attempts to subject these intricately intertwined interconnections and interdependencies to cold scientific analysis. In this sense, any attempt in this direction is worthy of respect, and the present work is based on a purely clinical theory, possessing both advantages and disadvantages. In a certain sense, the study of relationships always contains an element of retrospectivity, making it difficult for the subjects themselves to differentiate the current relationship from the memory of it. Seeking impossible and not expected to seek “purity” of the experiment; one must always be careful about the accumulation of these complex internal relations of hidden or overt rivalry, which react to the appearance of new partners. Rivalry, of course, is fundamental to parental love and attention, with each child striving to be the only one and receive all the love and attention. The new partners of a brother or sister can either be perceived as a threat to the relationship between the siblings or bring to light forgotten problems and conflicts – in any case, the dynamic is present.

### 2. Characteristics of the dissertation work

The dissertation contains 195 pages, and includes 7 tables and 9 figures. The bibliography lists 98 sources in English and Hebrew.

At the beginning, a general overview of the problem of the studied relationships and their significance is presented, and an assumption is made about their possible change when new partners appear for the already adult brothers and sisters. The great complexity and difficulty of building an experimental design is evident. The study of change in a cross-sectional, one-time study places many limitations on the conclusions.

The important question is raised by studying the role of relationships between siblings in providing emotional support in the life of the adult, and hypotheses are expressed about the dynamics of these relationships when new partners appear. The theory of attachment is presented as a fundamental basis for the development of emotional regulation. At its core, the paper examines a problem posed by Bowen about the stress that the social and intimate life of siblings brings to the already established family system, thus the role of difference as a challenge to the illusion of “family harmony”.

The objectives and research questions are presented, making it clear that the study deals with both dyadic relationships and the more general concepts of family therapy. The main thesis and hypotheses on the problem of the influence of new family members on existing relationships between siblings are derived. Of course, the question here is whether the new members really change these relationships, or do they simply make visible and exacerbate existing ones.

The methodology uses both quantitative and qualitative data. The author seeks to present an integrative model connecting attachment theory, systemic theories and social learning theory. An integrative model that gives more freedom to interpretation, but also obliges to a comprehensiveness of the analysis of the problems posed, which is insufficiently represented. The desire to present a comprehensive theoretical framework should not be at the expense of deepening the analysis. The difficulty in presenting a stable theoretical framework is related, on the one hand, to the unclear status of the concept of family psychology, which is the subject of research by various branches of psychology - general, social, adult and child psychology, and clinical and psychotherapeutic psychology. On the other hand, Bowen's theory itself is based entirely on a clinical basis, the concepts he uses change over time and are often metaphorically-abstract, not strictly scientific. The dissertation is based on Murray Bowen's systemic family theory, which is essentially a psychotherapeutic theory, that is, in order to be used as the basis of a scientific work, efforts are needed to explain why this model was chosen and how it contributes to scientific research. Bowen's concept is presented as supporting individualism and differentiation of the Self; in essence, Bowen's ideas do not oppose autonomy and connectedness. His understanding of generational connectedness and transmission of relationship-building models is used, as well as the influence of the social life of family members as a factor that confronts the existing family system with the need to renew and part with its illusions.

Regarding the design of the study: the methodological structure of the study is developed in accordance with the research objectives and the theoretical basis. The goal is adequately formulated and is related to the topic and main direction of the dissertation work. The tasks are designed and tailored to support the implementation of the research goal. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, which is required by the research tasks set in this way. After defining the sibling relationship, the following aspects emerge as leading: emotional closeness, cooperation, rivalry, competition, and conflicts.

In the quantitative part of the study, several methodologies were used to examine the relationships between key psychological variables: the quality of sibling relationships, self-differentiation, perceived parental preference, and conflict resolution strategies.

In the qualitative part of the experimental study, an analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the subjects was conducted. A kind of content analysis was performed, and the key themes shared by the subjects were identified.

The presented data were processed with statistical methods adequate to the scaled values and distributions. Synthesized data from previous studies on the topic and a discussion in the context of the existing literature are presented.

The conclusions are a summary of the results, including the limiting factors that accompany any precise study. The conclusions and contributions are presented critically and adequately, with the focus not so much on proving something new in relation to already existing theories, but rather on detailing and deepening the dynamics in the relationships between siblings, taking into account the influence of parent-child relationships.

Recommendations for the dissertation research.

I have the following recommendations for the dissertation work: it is recommended to present a clearer argumentation in the author's position regarding the choice of a fundamentally clinical theory, using more metaphorical than scientific concepts. Understanding the regionality of the sample as a contribution to the study of the specific community and its national characteristics with its specific prevailing family systems, and not only as a limitation.

4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions.

Overall, the dissertation work provides grounds for formulating the following scientific and scientific-applied contributions:

1. The problems of relationships between siblings in and their dynamics during changes in the family system of the nuclear family are systematized. The need to pay attention to concepts that are insufficiently scientifically researched, despite their universal significance, is justified.
2. The various theoretical models are analyzed, seeking an integrative approach.
3. A study of the problem is made, along the vertical axis of deepening and detailing the brother-sister relationship, in the context of the family system and generational models.
4. A qualitative methodology for analysis is integrated, using a semi-structured interview, which also provides a field for future models for studying relationships and family systems.
5. The presented model of relationships has the quality that it describes them as a synthesis and not only of harmony, warmth, but also presents the positive function of differentiated rivalry, for the individuation and self-affirmation of the personality.

The abstract fully reflects the content of the dissertation work. The main parts of the dissertation work are presented in four publications in the form of articles and reports from national and international conferences.

## 5. Conclusion

The dissertation work of the doctoral student Lilach Schwartz represents an in-depth study of a universal in its significance, but difficult and insufficiently studied area of scientific psychological knowledge. Qualitative research methods enrich the models by which families and relationships can be studied. This work carries a message about the need to seek ways to study family relationships, thought of as a micro-image of what is happening in the community, the ways in which people connect, differentiate and conflict in their families, are a path by which methods for peaceful existence can be sought even between large communities.

This gives me reason to recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury, upon successful defense, to vote for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field Professional field 3.2 "Psychology".

Varna Prepared the opinion:

16.04. 2026 Assoc. Prof. Dr. Veronika Ivanova