**Siblings-in-law:** **The effect of new additions to the generic family on the quality of sibling relationships, in context of differentiation, parenting attitudes, and interpersonal communication**

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The effect of new additions to the generic family on the quality of sibling relationships, in context of differentiation, parenting attitudes, and interpersonal communication

The topic of sibling relationships and their influence has become more prominent over the last few years, especially within families. A survey of the professional literature shows that central psychoanalytical approaches, from Freud until the beginning of the 1980s, did not significantly deal with sibling relationships within the various theories of mental development. Freud, who lost his 8-month-old brother Julius when he was a year and a half old, described in his autobiographic writings how the loss of his brother influenced the animosity and closeness he felt toward a nephew who grew up with him as a brother, as well as his relationship with peers in his adult life (Altman, 2013). Psychoanalytical movements which arose after Freud had opposing and contradictory attitudes toward fraternity, among them Melanie Klein, Winnicott, and Kohut. In the 1980s, professionals started exploring the topic of sibling relationships, and in Israel, too, this topic gained momentum and served as a focus of discussion. Mitchell was the first and only professional, until now, who proposed a developmental theory of the psyche. She wrote of the vertical axis (parent-child) and horizontal axis (sibling relationships) as axes that intersect and are intertwined with each other, forming one’s mental identity and assisting in its consolidation (Altman, 2013).

Minuchin (1974), the inventor of the systemic approach to family therapy, also greatly contributed to our understanding of the importance of fraternal relationships in providing a safe ground for investigation and social experience. Through these relationships, one can safely investigate and conduct experiments within one’s peer group: acquiring friends, competing, losing, recognizing the other’s skills, negotiating, and more.

It is important for both therapists in the practical professional field and for parents in normative families, whose important and challenging goal is to create good and healthy fraternal relationships, to recognize the influence of sibling relationships during childhood. The current study aims to develop a unified understanding of two central terms: “Sibling relationships” and “positive relationships between siblings.” The first relates to both sexes (brothers and/or sisters), meaning people who are genetically related to one another, who have familial connections, and live within a given social and historical context. This is defined by Walecka in his study of the influence of sibling relationships on the quality of life over the lifespan (Walecka-Matgja, 2015). An additional definition can be found in the work of Gur (2007): “Sibling relationships are the sum of the interactions (physical, verbal, and non-verbal) of two or more who share knowledge, perceptions, values, beliefs, and emotions toward one another. Therefore, these relationships can continue to exist even when they are physically separated and lacking continual interaction.”

The unique characteristics of these relationships is first, that they are the longest relationships (even in cases of adopted or step-siblings), they are determined at birth, and cannot be acquired or dismissed. An additional characteristic is that sibling relationships during childhood are intimate and daily, as opposed to the period of adolescence which is usually spent further apart. A third important characteristic is that despite the gap in power relations and status (age, knowledge, intelligence, social skills, achievements, and more), the relationships are usually characterized by acceptance, thus leading to more equal relationships as peers (Gur, 2007).

The second term, “positive relationship between siblings” or “warmth,” achieved wide consensus among scholars. This describes the factors that determine the quality of the sibling relationship based on acceptance, knowledge about one another, similarity, admiration, understanding, and emotional and instrumental support of each other.

I wish to look at these terms in tandem, and examine what happens to the life of a generic adult family when “others” join them from the outside. What happens to the sibling relationships in their adult lives with the addition of siblings-in-law?

Parents who prioritize sibling relationships usually invest many resources in the early stages of family formation, including family outings, games, family entertainment, and family meals. Will this necessarily help the siblings’ relationships in their adult lives? A significant and lengthy portion of the family lifespan will include the addition of people from the outside, such as siblings-in-law. Did the siblings and their parents dedicate enough resources to prepare for what seems to be a natural stage in the family’s development? Were enough skills implemented to create a broad and firm basis for this developmental stage?

This study was born primarily from my being a mother whose main concern, like other parents across the world, is for my children to retain good relationships among themselves also in adulthood. My first exposure to the impact of outsiders joining the family was when my eldest, adolescent daughter was in a relationship with a partner, and for the first time there was a significant presence, both physical and emotional, of an “outsider.” This influenced the family dynamics, especially her relationship with her brother. It threw my thoughts toward important questions regarding my own core family – as a third of four daughters, I wished to understand how the addition of siblings-in-law to our family influenced our relationship as sisters. Did it?

One example that received wide coverage on the topic came from the British royal family, when Princess Diana’s death left her two sons, princes William and Harry, orphaned, touching many hearts. Their unique and complex upbringing as princes linked their destinies and realities in a way known only to the two of them. With maturity and the addition of their brides (Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle), much was written in the media about the conflicts between the sisters-in-law. These significantly contributed to the rift between, among others, the two brothers, disappointing people throughout the world and leading Prince Harry and Meghan Markle to leave the royal house and move to the United States. Jessica Bailey wrote in the online magazine “Grazia” about the book *Finding Freedom* (by the respectable royal authors Omid Scobie and Carolyn Durand), which details the relationship between Markle and Middleton. The book attempts to answer the question: “What was the relationship between Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle when they both lived under the same roof?” Their careful conclusion is that, curiously, Middleton did little to bridge the gap between Prince William and Prince Harry, and, as a result, the princes quarreled.

*The New Yorker* described the last appearance of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex as active members of the royal family in the 62nd annual United Kingdom ceremony which took place in Westminster Abbey, and noted the tension in the William-Harry-Meghan triangle (brothers and sister-in-law): “Television cameras which were placed within the Abbey documented the royal brothers sitting awkwardly in their seats while waiting for the Queen. According to reports, the previous close connection between Harry and William was put to the test by Harry’s choice of “a different path,” as he called it in an interview to Africa Trip. Camilla Tominey wrote a story in which she exposed that the Telegraph’s “expert lip-reader” investigated the royal interactions and reached the conclusion that Harry said to Meghan, “He really said, ‘Hello, Harry,’ and that is all.” It would require an expert mind-reader to distinguish whether the prince referred to Prince William or to Boris Johnson, who was on the receiving line, or to someone else entirely. After the ceremony there will be more body language to analyze, but instead of waiting for the royals to leave the Abbey, I crossed London in order to pay my respects to the first Duke of Sussex” (Mead, 2020).

Another family which gained international recognition are the Kardashians, who supplied many headlines, including ones describing the complex marital life of Kim Kardashian (the second daughter) and her (ex)partner and father of her four children, Kanye West, the American rapper. Their relationship caused upheaval and tension in the relationship between the sisters as documented in a series that follows their lives, and in both social media and newspapers (Desk, 2022). Kim Kardashian’s sister, Khloe, appeared in the Van Nuys airport wearing Yeezy sneakers, probably to show support for her problematic brother-in-law Kanye West, within the context of the ongoing rift between the rapper, Kim Kardashian, and Pete Davidson.

My personal dealings, as well as the world’s, with the quality of the relationship between adult siblings centering upon the addition of siblings-in-law to the family, made me determined to try to shed more light on this sensitive topic. This topic is important for the continuity of my dynasty, and for the continued optimal and quality of family life wherever it may be.

Relationships with siblings are the strongest and longest a person will have (Walecka-Matgja, 2015). The fraternal relationship serves as a primary laboratory for experiencing and trying out social skills such as sharing, initiating, competing, and other skills which will prepare them for peer attachments throughout their lives (Minuchin, 1974).

The importance of sibling relationships in general, and of sibling relationships in adulthood in particular, only recently reached the awareness of the research community; and even then, to a fairly limited extent. A longitudinal survey shows that since the days of Freud and his followers no significant place was allotted to sibling relationships and their influence and even less to those relationships during adulthood (Altman, 2013). Freud himself related to the influence of the relationship he shared with his nephew, who was raised as a brother to him, after the death of his infant brother. Melanie Klein mainly emphasized the mother-child relationship, and her contribution to sibling rivalry was indirect, as she distinguished between three terms: envy, jealousy, and greed. Winnicott emphasized the relationship with his parents as a central factor and sibling relationships as secondary (Altman, 2013). Lately, more has been written about sibling relationships in general, and on sibling relationships during adulthood in particular, but this too is limited.

Of the generic family lifespan, it is usually only the first two decades of a child’s life that is spent within the framework of the nuclear family, while the rest is spent independently, usually with a spouse, raising a family of his or her own. If so, why does the literature emphasize sibling relationships only during childhood? The lengthy period during which the individual marries does not get the attention and investigation it deserves. How does the addition of outsiders influence the siblings’ relationship? Can one prepare for this stage of life? I believe that it is critically important to raise an awareness of this topic, whose main goal is to contribute to the improvement of sibling relationships during adulthood despite the change in the family makeup following the addition of siblings-in-law.

Walecka-Matgja (2015) posited that there is not much literature on the topic due to the difficulty of generalizing about family life, given the differential influence of family size, order of birth, age differences, gender, personality characteristics, and more.

To shed light on this important research topic, which may affect families in general and sibling relationships in particular, I will focus on three contexts: parental approach, differentiation, and interpersonal communication (conflict management), and their effect on sibling relationships after siblings-in-law joined the family.

Parental approach: The educational approach of parents who stand at the head of the family will greatly influence both their children and the relationships between the siblings. In Walecka-Matgja’s (2015) study, the communication patterns established by the parents influenced the siblings’ relationship in adulthood. From a chronological point of view, one can discern a significant change in Western society from the 1960s until today. The concept of the indisputable authoritative adult was replaced with a permissible approach toward child-rearing. The professional literature mainly differentiates, within each parenting style, between two dimensions: acquiescence and demands. On the acquiescence dimension, they differentiate between effective acquiescence, which includes warmth and the expression of emotions, and cognitive acquiescence which relates to conversing with the child, encouraging him to express an opinion, and supplying intellectual stimuli. The demands dimension refers to strictness regarding discipline and performing tasks, and the willingness to present society’s demands to the child. These dimensions lead to three central parenting styles: The authoritarian parent, the permissive parent, and the authoritative parent. The authoritarian parent is characterized by high parental control and low parental support, where the parent attempts to mold and control the child’s behavior according to clear standards which he sets and expects the child to follow. The permissive parent is characterized by low parental control and high parental support of the child, one who relates to the child’s desires and actions and does not punish or require him to obey defined principles. The authoritative parent strives to combine high parental control with high parental support: He sets out clear rules for the child and enforces them, but also recognizes the child’s desires and opinions. This parent tries to direct the child’s activities while supplying rational explanations and the use of negotiation (Gur, 2007). Omer, a psychologist, believes that in the modern era the traditional authority has weakened. This traditional authority was based on an agreement, among the majority of elements in society and the community, that parents deserve obedience and respect by virtue of being parents. Aside from liminal revolutionaries, all believed that every expression of disobedience and rebellion should be condemned and quashed. The new approach to authority, which Omer developed, is based on the premise that the role of the person of authority (parent, teacher) is to maintain his authority while preserving the child’s honor, as well as protecting his or her developmental track and function intact. The new authority is not based on overpowering the child and achieving full control of their behavior, but on transmitting a clear message: “We respect your privacy and your choices, but since we love you, we cannot allow you to hurt yourself without doing anything about it” (Omer Haim, *New Authority: Family, School and Community*, 2007).

Other recent studies deal with additional parental approaches, such as gender equality. A group of English scholars who focused on the gender-equality parental approach found that equally distributing household chores between the parents (not necessarily gendered stances) was directly correlated with the quality of sibling relationships. It seems that marital satisfaction, related to the equal division of household chores, affected both the child-parent relationship and the relationships between the siblings. This study also found a correlation between a warm parental approach to children and a closer relationship between the siblings (Dawson et al., 2015). A different study examined the effect of a differential (unequal; discriminatory) parental approach on the inner concept of the individual, and found that parents who expressed more affection toward those individuals than toward their siblings led the less-preferred siblings to develop low self-esteem, negative thoughts about themselves and others, and feel less loved than their preferred siblings. The most prominent expression of children in a family whose parents’ hold a discriminatory approach will be sibling rivalry. This refers to the complex of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors which stem from the threat or loss of a loving relationship with a rival. For our purposes, in sibling relationships the loved one is the individual’s parent, and the rival is his sibling. This means that differential parenting will lead to heightened jealousy, which will lead to low self-esteem, and, in the future, affect the quality of marriage. This study adds and shows that when the person views himself as the beneficiary of more affection than his siblings, he may find it difficult to establish security and to be loved in a relationship as a young adult (Rauer & Volling, 2007).

The above survey shows that the scholarly literature bases the importance of the parental approach and its influence on the siblings’ relationships and on the individual, where the parental approach directly affects the siblings’ relationship. Given this great importance, in this study I will try to broaden the prism and examine the way in which the addition of newcomers to the family influences the siblings’ relationship within the context of the parental approach.

Interpersonal communication/conflict resolution: As noted above, the relationship between siblings is the longest-lasting and most influential relationship in a person’s life. The ability to resolve conflicts develops within this relationship, and interactions with one’s siblings serve as a microcosm of the social world outside. The skills required for conflict management are vital to the success of any relationship, such as marital life in the future (Shalach et al., 2013). Shalach also notes that the way to cope with conflicts between siblings can be constructive, but could also be destructive. He found a significant correlation between an individual’s conflict resolution style vis-à-vis his siblings, during their youth, and his style of conflict resolution in his adult life, vis-à-vis his partner. This testifies to the great importance of one’s conflict management style, beyond the frequency of conflicts between siblings in their youth.

My study will try to innovate, delve deeper, and examine, among others, whether the ability to optimally resolve conflicts will assist in maintaining a good relationship between siblings even after the addition of siblings-in-law, a stage that induces a change in the family dynamics and structure following the absorption of “outsiders” into the nuclear family.

Differentiation: This is a mental process that determines how we function toward ourselves and toward others within a significant relationship. It was Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist active during the 1970s and 1980s, who identified and defined this process and implemented it within an innovative model for family therapy. He was followed by psychologist Dr. David Schnarch who developed and applied the process, more specifically, to the field of intimacy and sexuality (Schnarch et al., 2012). Schnarch developed the “Crucible approach” which extends and more precisely defines the four elements which describe differentiation:

A stable sense of self-esteem: Our level of differentiation determines the extent to which we validate ourselves, preserving and sustaining our healthy sense of self-esteem. Within high levels of differentiation, our sense of self-esteem is not based or dependent upon what others think or feel about us, or how they act toward us.

The ability to self-soothe: Another element of differentiation is our ability to soothe ourselves – to manage our emotions in healthy and efficient ways when we are exposed to the emotions of others. High levels of differentiation lead to the ability to preserve inner stability and not respond in an extreme manner, or, conversely, to break off contact. We are capable of remaining close while others express their feelings toward us, and can be emotionally connected to a partner even when it is inconvenient for us or when we do not like what they are expressing toward us.

Growth and development: Raising our level of differentiation is a process of growth. Another aspect of differentiation is the willingness to bear discomfort in order to achieve growth. Personal growth and intimacy are often accompanied by conflict, anxieties, and unpleasant thoughts or feelings. Increasing our endurance for these types of discomfort increases our ability to grow and experience intimacy. Pushing ourselves to do things that we perceive as difficult (for example, being assertive which someone even though we anticipate conflict and opposition) can teach us new and growth-inducing skills.

Setting boundaries for the other and being true to myself: Our level of differentiation determines our ability to define and express our sense of identity (my perception of who I am, what I am thinking, what I feel, and what I want) and to be open and tolerant of others who define and express themselves toward us. The ability to be assertive and preserve healthy boundaries (the ability to set boundaries for others, and to say when something does not suit me) is part of the process of differentiation. Our level of differentiation determines the degree to which we are capable of preserving and protecting our inner integrity (our moral and ethical beliefs). Within low levels of differentiation, we will be more willing to give in and sacrifice our integrity and agree with issues that bother us, to avoid the anxiety which accompanies opposition and conflict. Within low levels of differentiation, we have a higher chance of being involved in actions that decrease anxiety short-term, such as lies, concealment, disloyalty, and various addictions (Schnarch et al., 2012).

Differentiation, on its own, has lately become an important tool within the therapeutic field in general, and within couple’s therapy in particular. Therefore, it is important to also examine the topic of differentiation within sibling relationships, and whether it is another essential element that can help preserve siblings’ relationships during their adult lives.

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