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SIBLINGHOOD-IN-LAW AS A DIMENSION OF SIBLINGHOOD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LATER LIFE

The article focuses on siblinghood-in-law – a dimension of siblinghood revealed in qualitative research on siblinghood at age 50 and over, based on individual interviews and focus groups, realised in the Czech Republic. It introduces the interconnectedness between siblinghood and siblinghood-in-law, and pays particular attention to old age. A sibling-in-law relationship is created in the context of a more complex relationality (where conjugal construction of reality plays an important role); in addition to the dyadic relationship of two siblings-in-law, or a triadic relationship mediated by the linchpin person, the sibling-in-law relation to his/her siblings-in-law (even as individuals) may be primarily defined as a sibling-in-law relationship to a sibling group (generating itself its own definition of reality), possibly even to a larger kin. Late-life situations create a context to possibly intensify relations between the “remaining” siblings and siblings-in-law. The article concludes with a typology of sibling-in-law relationship patterns.

Key words: sibling; sibling-in-law; qualitative analysis; old age

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Szwagrostwo jako wymiar relacji między rodzeństwem z perspektywy późniejszego wieku

Artykuł zajmuje się szwagrostwem – wymiarem rodzeństwa ujawnionym w jakościowych badaniach nad rodzeństwem w wieku 50 lat i późniejszym, opartych na indywidualnych wywiadach i grupach fokusowych, zrealizowanych w Czechach. Relacje szwagierskie wytwarzają się w kontekście bardziej złożonej relacyjności (gdzie ważną rolę odgrywa małżeńska konstrukcja rzeczywistości). Relacje szwagierskie, oprócz bezpośredniej dwójga szwagrostwa lub pośredniej przez osobę pokrewną, obejmują także relacje szwagrów/szwagierek do ogółu rodzeństwa, a być może nawet do szerszej pojętego pokrewieństwa. Sytuacje z późnego etapu życia – śmierć rodziców, partnerów i rodzeństwa, nieobecność dzieci w domu – tworzą kontekst, który może zintensyfikować relacje między „pozostałym” rodzeństwem a szwagrostwem. Na końcu przedstawiona jest typologia wzorów relacyjnych między szwagrami bądź z udziałem szwagrów.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzeństwo; szwagrostwo; analiza jakościowa; późny wiek

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Introduction

This article deals with the issue of siblinghood-in-law, in connection with the sibling bond. Almost everyone who has siblings has siblings-in-law, since having siblings-in-law is the result of a combination of siblinghood and partnership. In this text, a sibling-in-law means the sibling's life partner, the life partner's sibling or even the partner of a partner's sibling. „[T]he sibling-in-law relationship [...] is embedded within two other relationships that are extremely significant [...]: marriage and biological siblinghood“ (Floyd, Morr 2003: 249) But, from the sociological point of view, it is not necessary to dwell on the legal status – siblinghood-in-law may be a relationship resulting from marriage as well as cohabitation. Sociologically, a sibling-in-law is not necessarily “in-law”.

Partnership has received a lot of attention, unlike adult sibling relationship. (Crenner, Déchaux, Herpin 2000; Céroux, Vérité 2012) Relationships among siblings-in-law are downright understudied. (Yoshimura 2014; Prentice, Tyler 2016) The aim of this article is to contribute to the knowledge about siblinghood-in-law as a dimension of adult siblinghood. In accordance with qualitative research principles, I inductively trace regularities in sibling-in-law relationships and try to depict norms in the work governing them. I focus primarily on the form of the relationship (what shapes the very basis of sibling-in-law relationship and how); on the construction of reality in relationships (how the rules concerning siblinghood-in-law are “negotiated”, explicitly as well as implicitly, and how the key statuses, i.e. of sibling, life partner and sibling-in-law, are involved); and how siblinghood-in-law permeates sibling relationships.

This article is based on qualitative analysis of data collected in the Czech Republic among siblings aged 50+ through both individual in-depth and focus group interviews. The primary concern of this research is the siblinghood, while knowledge about siblinghood-in-law comes from secondary analysis of the data; the proceeding concerning siblinghood-in-law is rather explorative than systematic. The 50+ population is heterogeneous – it includes both professionally active and retired people, as well as people at different stages of their family career. My analysis is inductive, i.e. any differences between younger and older in terms of siblinghood and siblinghood-in-law must arise from the data. I don't presuppose them a priori.

I rely on the concept of family as an “intrinsically relational phenomenon” (Rossi, Carrà 2012), while taking into account that the reality of relationships is (also) socially constructed (Berger, Kellner 1964). There have not been many published sociological findings about sibling-in-law relationships in contemporary Western society (in general, not only in the Czech or European context); here I refer mainly to Anglo-Saxon findings (Yoshimura 2010; 2014; Prentice, Tyler 2016; Floyd, Morr 2003; O'Bryant 1988; Connidis 1992; Connidis 2010).

When presenting my research findings, I focus successively on introducing the sibling-in-laws' part on siblinghood making in general; on marital construction of reality concerning sibling and sibling-in-law relationships; on the form of the sibling-in-law relationship; and on the complexity of the sibling-in-law relationship in the context of sibling groups having more than two members. The article concludes by presenting a typology of relationship patterns involving siblings-in-law.

Concept and Method

The state of knowledge and theoretical framework

One of the main family characteristics nowadays is its "privatisation" (Durkheim in Singly 2007), i.e., among others, accent on the quality of interpersonal relationships and growing conjugal and individual autonomy (in comparison to the past obligations). In the same time, most people remain in (meaningful) contact with their relatives beyond the framework of their conjugal family and maintain active relationships with (some of) them. Adult siblings cannot simply be excluded from family relationship analysis; neither can their life partners.

Unlike other "in-law" relationships, the one among siblings-in-law is "peer-like" (Floyd, Morr 2003), as it is derived from siblinghood, which is usually peer-like as well. Sibling-in-law relationship does not seem to have a clear relational function (Yoshimura 2014) or clear normative anchoring. There are no clear roles involving in-laws. The individual is uncertain as how to express closeness to his/her in-laws. (Goetting 1990: 68) However, siblings-in-law often help each other like siblings would or help strengthen a sibling relationship (Yoshimura 2014). They might support each other under specific life circumstances, such as the death of a spouse. On the other hand, in-laws as "newcomers" often induce or reinforce family/sibling tensions. (Prentice in Yoshimura 2014) As Connidis found in her retrospective data analysis from a sibling dyad study in individuals aged from 25 to 89 years, forty percent of them said that their sibling ties were affected by their own marriage or a sibling's (Connidis 1992; 2010). In matters of greater emotional closeness, it is more likely the effect of the sibling's children's arrival than his/her marriage as such. (Connidis 1992: 976)

Theory views the sibling-in-law relationship in two ways. In accordance with the "triangular theory of in-law relationships", it is conceived as a triad relationship in which one person (one's sibling and husband/wife of the other) acts as a linchpin. This corresponds to the concept of in-law relationships as non-voluntary and triadic (Morr Serewicz, Canary 2008). This view,

however, results from studying in-law relationships in the case of parent-in-law – daughter/son-in-law. Yoshimura (2014) points out that there are significant age and power differences between parent-in-law and sibling-in-law relationships; thus, we cannot automatically presume that these relationships function similarly. The author mentions not only the possibility of a dyadic sibling-in-law relationship, without mediation by the linchpin, but also points to the possible influence of the people in the relationship's sex. The fact that the triangular theory does not explain everything within the framework of the sibling-in-law relationships is also evidenced by the findings by Floyd & Morr (2003) on some in-law relationships lasting even after a person's divorce with the other's sibling. US studies from the 1970s showed that in-law (including sibling-in-law) relationships reduce significantly after a divorce, even though a lot less drastically for women. Affection is reported as the main reason to stay in touch. (Serovich, Price, Chapman 1992)

Method and Participants

The data on siblings and siblings-in-law analysed in this article come from research into siblinghood in late adulthood – from the *Graying Siblinghood* research project. [anonymized]. The data collection, realised by the means of interviews (individual and in focus groups) in Czechia, proceeded from 2017 to 2019. Common ethical qualitative research principles have been respected. The conditions for participation were being at least 50 years of age and having at least one living sibling. The participants were recruited applying the snowball sampling technique complemented by sampling via institutions such as seniors' clubs or U3A. The participants of the individual interviews were asked if it was possible to contact their sibling/s too, and in the case of consent being given, the sibling/s was/were interviewed (separately) as well; these siblings might be younger than 50 (in the case the first interviewed – this one obligatory aged 50+ – had younger sibling/s). I am aware that the choice of the first interviewed in a sibling group might already influence the possibility of contacting his/her other siblings, their eventual consent, but also the sibling-identity of each of them in the interviewing process, and by that the content of the narrative. (cf. Buisson 2003)

The research is based on individual in-depth interviews, where participants were invited to talk about siblings and siblinghood, and in focus group interviews (organized around the topic of siblinghood in the context of widowhood, serious illness, childlessness and divorce; the criteria for participation in the FG were, besides being the age 50+ and having at least one sibling, personal experience of one of the mentioned life events/situations). There have been 89 individual interviews about the interviewee's proper siblinghood (plus two individual interviews with two interviewed women's husbands about their wives' sibling

relationships); there are 67 sibling groups, of which 54 are represented by only one of the siblings and 13 by two to four siblings. For seven sibling groups, the conversation was conducted with all living members. The participants listed in table 1 are only those who are directly quoted or mentioned as an example in this article; overall, the article is based on a detailed analysis of 91 individual interviews and three focus groups (with childless, divorced and ill). The average length of the individual interview was around two hours; the individual span was from about half an hour to four hours. Both the audio recordings and transcribed text were analyzed, together with data obtained by additional techniques such as adapted version of the Family Structure Questionnaire, Sibling Contact Questionnaire (Burbidge, Minnes 2014), and the Adult Sibling Familial Relationship Scale (Wałęcka-Matyja 2015).

Siblinghood-in-law was not targeted as a separate phenomenon; the matter was introduced by participants as part of the definition of siblinghood. In most interviews, siblings-in-law were mentioned in some way, predominantly explicitly. In some, they were not mentioned directly, but were included implicitly among “they”, meaning a sibling’s couple or his/her family.

Results

Couple’s privacy and sibling solidarity: request for mutual respect and autonomy

Expectations for sibling solidarity and the claim of the couple’s autonomy create a particularly important part of the context and conditions for siblinghood-in-law.

Part of the adult sibling’s role is to help the brother/sister in difficult situations. (Favart 2003; Petite 2005; Herpin, Déchaux 2004) According to É. Favart’s (2003) findings, it is more prescriptive than based on emotions. It should be added that “[t]here may be sacrifice on the part of the sibling’s spouse, offering support that provides the time and space for that support to happen” (Yoshimura 2014: 107). This is the case of Lauren’s husband: a long time ago, Lauren’s brother, Victor, then without a partner and injured after an accident, temporarily lived with his sister’s family in a small flat; Lauren and her husband provided him care. Judith’s youngest sister and her husband used to provide refuge to Judith and her young children when Judith’s husband got drunk and was aggressive, which could happen suddenly, often during the night. Such concessions on the part of the life partner do happen. They are mainly linked with the sibling’s particularly difficult, critical, or temporary situation, and/or with the absence, deficiency or indisposition of the sibling’s life partner.

This observation is in line with what we know (based both on our data and on literature) about more common solidarity: “a sister may be willing to ‘share’ her husband with her widowed sibling” (O’Bryant 1988: 180); a brother-in-law may provide for his wife’s sister living alone (Jonas 2006: 42).

In short, there is no need to point out the requirement of life partners’ privacy, autonomy and priority. But there is an obvious request for some autonomy in an adult sibling relationship, too. It can be manifested through a certain claim for privacy during sibling contact. Such an exclusive contact does not need to be frequent; moreover, many siblings have this possibility in everyday life. But the request becomes very explicit in cases where there is an obstacle, in cases of crisis (there are problems concerning the sibling group exclusively), or where sibling relationships are more important in the context of the individual’s relational network. A focus group debate for childless participants revealed a strong need for at least occasional (even once a few years) exclusive contact with the sibling (with no other persons); this is not possible for some of them, precisely because of their sibling-in-law’s influence. One of the participants regretted a certain weakening of her relationship with her brother after his marriage. She said: “*His wife has taken my brother for herself*”; however, in general, she did not evaluate her sister-in-law negatively. It is possible that childlessness strengthens identifying with the family of origin (despite having a life partner). This request also comes to the fore in critical moments of sibling relationship, especially if it is the sibling-in-law who is perceived as a strong factor in sibling dissension. After years of misunderstanding and avoiding contact from her (only) brother (due to their mother’s former action, but accentuated by her sister-in-law’s influence), Cristina expected, unsuccessfully, a face-to-face meeting with her brother in their native house to try and recover their relationship. It happens that the relationship between a sibling and his/her partner is so dominant over other relationships that the sibling relationship cannot be realized. Craig perceives his brother as „*heavily hen-pecked*”. Craig’s sister-in-law had dragged her husband from his crew of friends – since the very beginning of their partnership. She controls him directly, eavesdrops on his calls, comments on them and is almost always with him because they are both retired. Craig does not see a way to contact his brother.

The life partner’s death may restore a certain “entitlement” to closer sibling life, in particular when not just one of the siblings is concerned by the life partner loss. The “new” sibling life may be anchored in both sibling and partner/sibling-in-law identity. After their life partners disappear, some siblings move into one household. Ida (18 years older than her brother Simon) was already a widow when, unexpectedly, Simon lost his wife due to severe illness. He proposed then Ida move to his home. Ida puts her consent in the context of her relationship with her deceased sister-in-law:

we loved each other very much, and she always said: ‘You know, Ida, once you are not capable anymore, we would help you.’ And it turned out that she died at sixty-six [...], I had already been alone for two years, my husband died, and so Simon came to me and [proposed that I] move in with him so I won’t be alone and he won’t either.

Unclear expectations concerning adult siblinghood contribute to relational ambivalence (Sýkorová 2019); it seems to apply even more to siblinghood-in-law. The same sibling-in-law can once be appreciated, or otherwise presented rather negatively.

Perceiving a sibling-in-law as good or bad does not depend on the quality of the participant’s proper relationship with the sibling being the linchpin. Blanca and her sister Monica, each independently of the other, present the eldest brother’s wife very positively, while the wife of the younger brother appears as problematic. Both sisters talk about their good relationships with both brothers, admitting the (bad) influence of the sister-in-law on the younger brother. The evocated bad influence of a sibling-in-law on the sibling serves, in some cases, as a certain explanation, or even excuse of the sibling’s bad behaviour. In some cases, the sibling’s behaviour, initially presented as good, is being gradually revealed (in the interview process) as having already been somewhat problematic before the sibling met his/her life partner, possibly since childhood. This is similar to otherwise different stories of siblinghood recounted by Judith and Mila. Both women come from three-member sibling groups; for both of them the relationship with one sibling had no problems, in contrast to the relationship with the other sibling. The latter even broke contact for years (30 years in the case of Judith’s middle sister, 16 years in the case of Mila’s brother); the restoration of relationship in both cases occurred only after the death of the respective sibling-in-law.

Mila’s brother, apparently under his wife’s influence, deprived his sisters of an important part of their share in their inheritance; subsequently he began avoiding them both, the sisters had no news of him for years. Hereat, Mila first characterizes the relationship between the siblings as “*a beautiful relationship, really nice*”. She also recounts the initial attitude towards the sister-in-law as nice. Even if a significant proportion of her sister-in-law’s action cannot be questioned, the end of the interview reveals the brother’s unfairness towards his sisters, both in childhood and in the present (after his wife’s death), too. Mila forgave him; nevertheless, she has no trust in him. She is, however, glad for renewed contact – every Sunday all three siblings, sometimes with a cousin, go together downtown to Holy Mass and then sit in cafes. These regular meetings are totally absent from Mila’s talks with her husband. This fact merits attention, for marital partners’ conversation is an important means of social construction of reality. (Berger, Kellner 1964)

Marital construction of reality in sibling and sibling-in-law relationships

Under certain conditions, the image of the sibling, and by that the sibling relationship itself can be endangered by the process of conjugal conversation; to protect this relationship, the individual may try to escape talks about the sibling. A certain tacit consent exists among Mila and her husband on not talking about her brother. She prefers not to tell her husband about other contact with her brother, e.g. taking care of him; she invents another reason for being absent from home. It seems that Mila tries to keep her own definition of the relationship situation with her brother and to protect it from transforming when conversing with her husband. The question is how far it is possible. Silence on a subject does not actually mean it is *de facto* absent from the conversation. Ongoing conversation with a significant other “validates over and over again the fundamental definitions of reality once entered into, not, of course, so much by explicit articulation, but precisely by taking the definitions silently for granted and conversing about all conceivable matters on this taken-for-granted basis.” (Berger, Kellner 1964: 4) Mila knows that her husband doesn’t like his brother-in-law’s continuing unfairness towards his sisters, in principle.

Judith’s husband apparently had reservations about his wife’s family, amongst other things, because of his uncompromising political attitudes, and did not keep in touch with anyone from his wife’s family. Judith perceived her sister had re-interpreted past and existing relationships. “[...] the marriage partner becomes the other par excellence [...]. Indeed, all other significant relationships have to be almost automatically re-perceived and re-grouped [...].” (Berger, Kellner 1964: 11) Judith says: “*I always thought I had a good relationship with this middle-sister, and she later claimed to be terribly terrorized by me as a child.*” The middle-sister cut ties with all her family members, with the exception of her mother. She even didn’t tolerate her sisters’ presence during her visits in the parents’ home; she said explicitly there was nothing common to talk about. The “nomic rupture” (Berger, Kellner 1964) was indicative of a value rupture. Both sisters only reconciled not long before Judith’s sister’s (already widowed) death. Widowhood seems to have been a necessary condition to allow the renewing of sister relationships. Judith took her sister, seriously ill, from the hospice and cared for her until she died a few months later. Judith even turned her to the Christian faith (which implied sisters’ re-construction of reality). In spite of the above, however, it can be doubted that the middle-sister turning her back on the family was caused only by the brother-in-law. Judith, partly unawares, confirms the difference between the middle-sister and the others in terms of relational engagement in the family (it arises, for example, from the commentary on a photo of all three sisters as children with their mother).

In some cases, a fairly good relationship between siblings successively worsens under the influence of a sibling-in-law. If a sibling-in-law perceives his/her partner's sibling's action as meddling in his/her couple's affairs, then he/she can tend to hamper such siblings' relationships or cut them down. Frank cared for his brother (11 years younger) since the latter was 12 years old (their mother, widow for two years, moved away with a new partner and wanted to put the younger son in institutional care). At present, Frank is experiencing a barrier in contact with him.

Initially, my brother often phoned me [...] entrusted me with family problems, with how it was at home and at work [...]. And... thereon I received a letter, from my sister-in-law, [writing] she doesn't wish for me to visit them, that my brother has his family, [...] and doesn't need me to mentor him constantly, that the times I cared for him are gone [...] So I was forbidden to enter there. (Frank)

The sister-in-law's argument recalls the requirement of autonomy of one's own conjugal family in relation to his/her spouse's parents. Frank was not refused as a brother-in-law, but rather as a "mentor"; this is evidenced also by the fact that some contact, including visits, continued. As Frank thinks, the sister-in-law has fundamentally changed her husband's view of him. It was not without significance that she first tried to prevent conversation between the brothers. She effectively *redefined* the brothers' relationship: Frank's brother then blamed Frank for being selfish and thinking only of himself, for not having established a family.

On the other hand, sharing thoughts about sibling relationships with the life partner can help the individual to find and define such a relational position which makes it possible to protect his/her self-esteem, in case it is threatened by a sibling's action. Eric has long seen that the relationship investment towards his older brother is one-sided. He also feels the insincerity on the part of his brother and his family of origin in general. This led him to the decision not to participate in family meetings, a decision made before the celebration of his eldest brother's (now aged 69) fiftieth birthday.

The decision was up to me. I've evaluated it so, the conversation I've had with my wife on the subject. Many times, we went back to it, it took a long time before it stopped hurting, but I have to say that after the disillusionment was over and the relationship with the older brother ended, I was relieved. [*pause*] Because I have a family, my wife's family, that is said to be zany.

Construction of reality in Eric's marital relationship not only proceeds in exclusive marital conversation; its context is formed by the living relations of a complex sibling and sibling-in-law group.

Sibling-in-law relationship and the factor of sibling construction of reality

As for the type of sibling-in-law relationship, our data reveal both the dyadic one, i.e. a direct, unrelated relationship between persons who are mutually siblings-in-law (see Yoshimura 2014), and the triadic one, mediated by the linchpin – the person connecting the two individuals in the sibling-in-law relationship (see Morr Serewicz, Canary 2008). According to my findings, it does not seem that one type of relationship would exclude the other.

In some cases, relationships among siblings-in-law become an explicit and realised subject of their interaction. Emile returns to the message he has received from his brother-in-law: *“I was 13; my brother-in-law established such a responsible, adult relationship, [...] he told me siblinghood-in-law was far more important than marriage [he emphasizes the words ‘siblinghood-in-law’ and ‘marriage’], which could be divorced, but siblinghood-in-law, it lasts ages, forever.”* In the brother-in-law’s proposal, this relationship is self-contained, without the need to depend on the bond with the person who brought these two siblings-in-law together. It seems that this interaction (the core of which is the brother-in-law’s message containing evident exaggeration) creates a framework for a further relationship between Emile and his sister’s husband, facilitated by the age gap between the two protagonists, but also by the fact that they were of the same sex. Emile’s brother-in-law had the possibility to appeal to his bride’s brother as an adult man to a teenage man. The situation made it possible for the elder to give the younger a certain wisdom, but at the same time, the content of the message made their status equal for the future. The relationship of these two brothers-in-law has not been proved by a marriage breakdown. But among other cases there have also been those where a ‘divorce test’ occurred – and in which the sibling-in-law relationship endured. Eric justifies maintaining contact with his younger brother’s first spouse in these words: *“We didn’t do anything [i.e. wrong] to each other, we got on well, so there is no reason to cut it [the relationship] off.”* Eric does not maintain a relationship with this brother’s second wife, who even played a crucial role in breaking up the brothers’ relationship. In contrast, Regina continues the relationships with both her brother’s widow and his first wife, whom her brother divorced in the past. Kinship and relatedness are negotiated and negotiable: the practice “may privilege time and community over connections through blood” (Kramer 2011: 381), but also over connections through law. In the case of siblinghood-in-law, this relatedness does not necessarily occur in dyads or triads alone, as evidenced by larger sibling groups.

When talking about her first sister-in-law (the eldest brother’s wife), Blanca begins with the context of her whole sibling group: *“this one fitted in with us”*. When it comes to the more intimate plane of the relationship, she speaks only

for the sisters: *“she was like our second mom. [...] for all three of us, sisters. Our mother died early, and she was our second mom from then”*.

According to their Father’s wish to conserve the family surname in the family house, the younger of the brothers received the property. Blanca uses the plural (“we”) to express talking in the name of the others, and says that they “renounced” the house, that they “decided”. She does not present her sibling group as passively executing the father’s will, but as actors acting of their own will: *“And we renounced that all and we never quarreled because of that. Simply we decided so.”* The younger brother died recently, and his widow is selling the house. For siblings, it is a painful affair. But Blanca expresses understanding for her sister-in-law: *“I understand her, she is alone, the house is large [...] she says she’s unhappy there without Tony, without her husband, [...] that she’s selling it [...]”*. From *“I understand her”* Blanca moves on to *“we understand her”*, by which she is speaking in the name of the sibling group as a whole: *“not that we’d be angry with her, we understand her; but the subconscious is that Daddy wished it [different]”*. Using the plural, she unwittingly draws attention to how the question is a concern of the sibling group. According to Blanca, this sister-in-law did not even *“fit”* into the family before; she used to hinder her children’s contacts with her husband’s parents. From Monica’s narrative, it turns out that the problem was not so in the specific dyadic relationships of the sister-in-law with the individual siblings of her husband (*“I had a good relationship with my brother, with her, but ...”*), but in her overall attitude towards her husband’s family.

The sibling-in-law bond creates relationships that cannot be limited to dyadic (sibling-in-law – sibling-in-law) or triadic (sibling-in-law – linchpin person – sibling-in-law), in which just two, respectively three individuals participate. In particular larger sibling groups (consisting of more than two individuals) create by their proper relationality, a context for relationships with third persons. Among these persons, the brother/sister-in-law has a specific status: he/she is primarily bound with only one member of the sibling group, while he/she relates to the others both as individual persons and as members of the sibling group (to which his/her spouse is a member). In addition, he/she is often a member of another sibling group. A sibling-in-law relationship is created in the context of a more complex family and kin relationality, where both conjugal and sibling constructions of reality are interrelated.

Siblings-in-law involving relationship patterns

Nomic rupture accompanying the entry into marital life or cohabitation implies a certain nomic rupture in sibling relationships too. It’s the moment of reinterpreting the whole family of origin’s relationships as well, including one’s own identification with the family. But further life events are also susceptible

to inciting a sort of nomic rupture (typically a sibling's widowhood in a sibling relationship or a sibling's death in a sibling-in-law relationship).

The possibility of common construction of reality in which all the key positions (sibling, life partner, sibling-in-law), respectively the real people holding these positions, participate seems to be important. This common construction of reality generates the rules governing the action. Although I draw conclusions from one-time interviews only, it is quite clear that this is a constant living process. By inductively analysing the interviews, I identified the key sibling-in-law relationships' dimensions: configuration base; opportunities to meet or contact; composition and status of gathering/contact participants; place of reunion/gathering or means of communication; character and topic of conversation (and possibly another method of communication). On the basis of these dimensions, we can draw up four ideal types of patterns regulating the relationships somehow involving siblings-in-law. We can call them the "kin-based" sibling-in-law involving relationship; the "couple-based" sibling-in-law relationship; "late life blending" relationship; and "friend-like" sibling-in-law relationship.

"Kin-based" sibling-in-law involving relationship

For the "*kin-based*" *sibling-in-law involving relationship*, the sibling-in-law "marries into the family"; according to that he/she "fits in" to the family or not (see the cases of Blanca and Monica's two sisters-in-law described above). The siblings represent their family of origin; the family reunions are organized in a place representing the family/kin (typically the parental home or later in life, the home of the *kinkeeper*). In matters of kin affiliation, no norm obliges to prefer either the wife or the husband's line in Czech society. Certainly, matrilinearity is stronger in real contact practice, like patrilinearity is more common in matters of surname choice; this, however, is rather a negotiable rule than an obliging social norm. Even if a source of tensions in some cases, double kin affiliation is thus perfectly possible in many others. Asked about her relationship with her siblings, currently, in late life, Alice (having two living sisters) says: "*we hold together till now, [...] we count the sister-in-law [= widowed after the brother died] all the time in the family, and when there are family events we invite her to everything and talk together*". With reference to their younger age, she invokes gatherings in the siblings' parents' house: "*it used to be quite lively in our home, we also met with the brothers-in-law and the sister-in-law together with all the children there*". Later, they used to meet at a cottage owned by the Alice's and Libusha's sister-in-law's family, their brother's wife.

Everybody is included as a member of the family, no matter how deep his/her identification is. Active presence is welcome; but even a sibling-in-law's

(a sibling's partner) absence at a reunion is accepted if it does not mean avoiding or refusing the family. Yet, in the case of a strong "newcomer" de-identification (as in the case of one of Judith's brothers-in-law – see above), the sibling being the "linchpin" may be torn out of the family conceived this way (Judith's sister with her children, but without her husband, continued to see just her mother, avoiding contact with other members of the family).

The family meets on occasions such as birthday celebrations or holidays, but also for specially organized family reunions. During such reunions, conversation – "*talking together*" (Alice) – is very important, not necessarily deep: the "together" imports. Some personal implication is still important in the sense of at least minimum sharing, proving that the individual, the sibling-in-law, is not "haughty". This is the expression used by Rosemary to render her sister-in-law's approach:

she refused to talk about what they were doing [...]. She tried to be nice to the parents, but [...]. Because what do people talk about? About what they do, don't they! [...] And as she didn't want to talk about it, [...] Daddy had a lot of trouble with it [...], it was hard for him to talk to them [= *Rosemary's brother and his wife*], because he didn't know what to talk about, he was unhappy about it many times

Practical solidarity and reciprocal help is also common (e.g. help building or reconstructing the house, fruit processing, or mutually looking after grandchildren); it seems to be of particular importance for some men who expressed, in interviews, feeling less sense in "small talk" family conversation (in general, not only in the case of sibling-in-law relationships). As with other kin members, siblings-in-law also meet and contact each other not only on such occasions and not only all together. Especially in the case of those living nearby, their contacts can be frequent; obviously, conversation may concern different things and be more or less deep.

"Couple-based" sibling-in-law relationship

The next type accents siblinghood-in-law as an attribute of a couple's life. The individual is in a relationship with his/her sibling-in-law because he/she is in a relationship with his/her sibling. A sibling-in-law relationship is thus a relationship between couples of life partners. Belonging to a couple authorises the sibling-in-laws' interaction, aiming to support the couples' contact (and by that of the siblings), even despite lack of interest of one of the siblings concerned. This is the case of communication between Jane and her sister's husband; while her sister doesn't care for contact with Jane, the latter and her brother-in-law currently keep in touch via e-mails and phone, sharing news about their children and being initiators of at least courtesy calls for both sisters and their husbands, e.g. on Christmas.

Obviously, not all siblings-in-law have a partner (this is the case of one's life partner single siblings); this does not exclude them from the sibling-in-law relationship of this type. For there is, behind this relationship type, a strong sense of generational belonging: siblings-in-law are perceived as peers, even without being peers, in fact. Emile, already mentioned above, talks not only about his great relationship with his brother-in-law (Emile was a teenager when his sister got married), but also about an excellent lifelong relationship between both couples, since he later got married.

As the "kin-based" sibling-in-law involving relationship, the "couple-based" sibling-in-law relationship develops and is maintained thanks to gatherings which take place more or less regularly, e.g. on the occasion of birthday celebration. The siblings and siblings-in-law typically invite themselves reciprocally (with no household being given priority). Deep conversation is not required; still, conversation remains very important, enabling combining the conjugal, the sibling and the sibling-in-law identity. "Small talk" allows a feeling of good relationship to be kept: *"everybody has been somewhere; we'll say things like that... it's not for a long chat"* (Stanley). The couples' meetings can mix both "small talk", in some sense obligatory conversation, and appreciated fun chatting.

Leona's and her sister's husbands "each had different interests", but the couples met regularly, sang songs, and talked. "He and my husband just said what they had to; I have to admit that. My husband was just completely different, whereas my sister's husband knew how to fix many things. He was adroit, skillful, repair his car or make furniture for the cottage, it was amazing. Well, my husband was a journalist, so he had completely different interests." *According to Leona, her sister liked her [Leona's] husband very much: "But again, my sister really liked my husband [...] he was educated, intelligent, he was just, clever [laugh]. [...] so, we just got along, they [= her husband and her sister] got along very well too."* (Leona)

The tendency to one of the types can be clear (from a retrospective point of view) throughout the life course and family career. However, the inclination to one or another type can change in connection with the key events of this path. The siblings' parents' death may either direct to transfer "kinkeeping" to another person (typically one of the daughters or daughters-in-law), or shift the relationship towards the "couple-based" type. Wenceslas reports on his relationships with his wife's sisters and their husbands:

[with Lydia's younger sister and her husband] we talk about everything and keep in very good contact. You can't say that with her other sister. [...] her [first] husband, because we hated each other and somehow we said it to each other, so he didn't look for contact at all and she adjusted to him. [...] my wife hated him too [...]. She tried, of course, to help her, and if she could, she somehow helped

Wenceslas and his wife Lydia's contact with Lydia's younger sister and her husband are frequent and appreciated, interwoven with both ordinary and deeper conversation. In contrast, contacts with Lydia's older sister are "*very sporadic*"; they fail to meet even at Christmas, even after she remarried (and despite being "*totally fine*" with her second spouse). Christmas gatherings worked while Lydia's parents lived: "*I coped with it on a social level [...] that I was able to talk to my wife's sister, but not with her first husband at all!*" A certain slight tendency to the "kin-based" relationship type (anchored in Lydia's parents' "kinkeeping") enabled at least a basic ("*on a social level*") relationship between Wenceslas and his sister-in-law ("*I was able*"); after the death of his parents-in-law the stronger, "couple-based" side of the relationship came to the forefront, emphasizing the reasons for not maintaining the sibling-in-law relationship at the expense of the reason for maintaining it. Wenceslas, however, does not avoid all types of contact with his sister-in-law and her present husband; practical solidarity is possible (e.g. Wenceslas helped his sister-in-law's second husband build their house). As for Lydia, she maintains a relationship based on sincerity with both of her sisters.

"Late life blending" relationship

It is not possible to draw a clear line dividing late life sibling-in-law relationship patterns according to age as such. Nevertheless, some commonly (even if not exclusively) age-related conditions, such as widowhood combined with retirement, if shared by siblings and siblings-in-law (and maybe more precisely by sisters and sisters-in-law), create a specific context for a sibling-in-law relationship. This is the case of the relationship between Frederica, her sister Claudia and one of their sisters-in-law, three of them living close together and widows.

Then our brother died. [...] Then the other brother died. So just us have remained, we [= *the sisters*] and the sister-in-law, of that great [family]. And our Mother's brother lived next door. He was also our family. And so, as they gradually disappeared, those people were leaving, so in fact only three of us remain now. (Frederica)

Previously "kin-based" (as we can deduce, among others, from Frederica's comment about the "*three of us*" who "*have remained [...] of that great [family]*"), their relationship shifted to another type. Peers in family career and life course in general, despite real age differences, these three women share their day to day life in a close neighbourhood, meeting in one of their homes for common activities, like baking (making cookies for their children families, for neighbours and others); they also help each other without reciprocal meeting (one of them is better at sewing and when needed, she sews for the others; they babysit their grandchildren reciprocally). They are connected by permanent

communication as a trio; their current relationship is not mediated by a linchpin, but it is not only dyadic (although there is no doubt that there is a dyadic relationship between each of the sisters and their sister-in-law). Being sisters or sisters-in-law, members of a larger kin or peers (elder women) is blended.

In contrast, their “we/us” does not include the other sister-in-law, Frederica’s and Claudia’s older brother’s widow, although both sisters maintain contact and have good relationships with her; she lives in another town – the proximity of residence seems to still be more important for maintaining sibling-in-law contact than sibling contact. Claudia’s partner (whom Frederica calls “brother-in-law”), living nearby, is not included either. It may be because he, as a man, does not participate in their activities perceived as “feminine” ones; maybe because he does not share a household with his partner, Claudia, and their relationship is recent, fresh in comparison to the life-long relationship of the three women; he had not belonged to the “kin”, and thus could not “remain”.

“Friend-like” sibling-in-law relationship

Life circumstances can make siblings-in-law friends. Also the above described relationship types are compatible with reciprocal sympathy and joy of encounter; there is a type, however, resembling friendship more properly. Still, there is a reason to consider their relationship rather a type of sibling-in-law relationship, than simply friendship. Yet the interviewees themselves already evoke these relationships in the context of talking about siblinghood and siblinghood-in-law.

Simple will to meet is reason to do so. Meetings are arranged individually, according to willingness (not organized on the occasion of birthday or holiday celebrations), and can take place e.g. at one’s home or somewhere outside (e.g. in a café). Let’s recall Regina’s words about her contacts with her sister-in-law and her ex-sister-in-law: *“we meet, and I can say I have good relationship with both my sisters-in-law. When I need something or they do, they call: ‘We have not seen each other [for a long time], come for a gossip’, ‘let’s meet and have a coffee’, or ‘stop by for a visit’”*.

Unlike Regina, Charlotte sees her sister-in-law, her brother’s (Gregory) partner, regularly – every morning. Gregory and his partner come to Charlotte for coffee together; so it is not a meeting of siblings-in-law exclusively; moreover, Gregory’s partner is a widow of both siblings’ childhood friend (Charlotte says this friend had been “like a brother” to both of them). In this case, siblinghood, siblinghood-in-law, partnership and friendship come together, anchored both in the past and in the present.

Even if the frequency of contact between Regina and her sisters-in-law and between Charlotte, Gregory and his partner (i.e. Charlotte’s *de facto* sister-in-law) differ significantly, we can estimate the nature of their conversation.

Having coffee together is time *par excellence* for conversation; its daily practice with the same people is incompatible with just “small talk”; concrete common themes, both deeper and based on everyday life, necessarily come up. A similar idea applies to “gossip” after a longer break; pleasure of interacting hidden in the words “come for a gossip” reveals curiosity about the other.

In both presented cases, children are absent from talk – in the interview – about sibling-in-law contacts (which does not mean absence of talking about children as such). It is rather symptomatic to the fact that neither kin nor couple reference comes to the fore when presenting such a sibling-in-law relationship. Certain autonomy resulting from late life circumstances (e.g. being newly retired, already having adult children living apart; widowhood or old-age new partnership character) seem to present the opportunity to re-invest relationships with peers from the larger family (as siblings and siblings-in-law) accentuating the friend-like aspect.

Conclusion

This article focused on siblinghood-in-law as a dimension of siblinghood, as revealed in the course of qualitative research on siblinghood in late adulthood and old age, realised in Czechia. The interconnectedness between siblinghood and siblinghood-in-law in the process of family and kinship interaction were analysed, with particular attention to late life. We tried to depict regularities in sibling-in-law relationships and the main norms in work governing them. Even if the main interest was in the interviewees’ present sibling relationships, the interviews contain much retrospective data too: that is why my findings do not concern only the present, i.e. later life. Siblings-in-law are important in “siblinghood making”, not only at the very moment of marriage, but throughout life course, both on specific occasions or in specific circumstances (care for ageing parents, heritage division), as well as through sharing a more or less ordinary life.

In Czech society, the sibling role is played by 4/5 of people aged 50 – 70 (Vidovičová 2018); not only in the light of this fact, but also according to my qualitative findings, sibling-in-law status should definitely be considered as an important one held by Czech seniors. Unlike at the beginning of adult life, in old age most of the siblings-in-law (with exception of the siblings’ new partners) are no longer “newcomers” to the family (cf. Prentice in Yoshimura 2014). On the contrary: they are counted among those who “remain”, as other important family members disappear; late life condition tends to accentuate the “peer-like” character of the sibling-in-law relationship (cf. Floyd, Morr 2003). As Connidis did (1992), I observed the effect of widowhood or divorce

on sibling or sibling-in-law relationships: in many cases siblings-in-law help each other like siblings would, they can become closer or share everyday life. Similarly, sibling relationships formerly blocked by a sibling-in-law tend to recover after the sibling-in-law's death. These general observations are not accidental, but they seem to follow basic norms, as well as appropriate rules "negotiated" in the process of marital, sibling and sibling-in-law construction of reality.

As it is known from literature, in Western societies, the couple and the conjugal family are given autonomy and priority over the family of origin. Present analysis of Czech data shows that for an individual, his/her life partner's siblings are perceived as representatives of the partner's family of origin, even more after the parents' death. From the other side, a sibling's life partner is perceived as somebody who is welcome to the family, especially where mutual sympathy seems possible on both sides. But this person is sometimes presented as having limited his/her life partner's relationship with his/her family of origin, including his/her siblings. Moreover, late life situations (the death of parents, life partners and siblings, absence of children at home) create a context for possibly intensifying relationships between "remaining" siblings and siblings-in-law. In late life, as before, siblings-in-law participate in "siblinghood making", both via conjugal construction of reality and direct relationship. In many cases, a sibling-in-law can strengthen the sibling's relationship; siblings and life partners' relationships may also blend together and mutually support each other. There are, unfortunately, also cases of worsening, or even paralyzing sibling relationship through a sibling-in-law's action, especially in the case of an exaggerated accent on conjugal autonomy.

A sibling-in-law relationship is created in the context of a more complex relationality; in addition to the dyadic relationship of two siblings-in-law or a triadic relationship mediated by the linchpin person, the sibling-in-law relationship may be primarily defined as a sibling-in-law relationship to a sibling group (itself generating its own definition of reality) or its part, possibly even to a more complex form of kinship. The sibling construction of reality is an important part of the context of building and maintaining sibling-in-law relationships, which is particularly evident in more than two-member sibling groups.

My analysis has led to the construction of a model consisting of four ideal types of sibling-in-law relationships patterns. In the "kin-based" sibling-in-law involving relationship, the sibling-in-law is anchored in the rules of the kin to which he/she married. In the "couple-based" sibling-in-law relationship, siblings-in-law interact primarily as life partners of siblings. Late life circumstances create a condition for certain "late life blending" relationships for those who remain; we might guess the "kin-based" origin of this relationship pattern.

Finally, willingness to meet (or simply contact), as concrete individuals (being at the same time peers from the same larger family), together with an increase in personal autonomy (that certain phase of late life may bring), enhance the “friend-like” sibling-in-law relationship. Real sibling-in-law relationships can tend to one of the ideal types than to others, but hardly correspond to one of them uniquely. When some of the significant others disappear (due to death or divorce), and also when new ones eventually appear, this can add to relationship dynamics and make the sibling-in-law relationship pattern closer to another ideal type than before.

As to further (more targeted) research on siblinghood-in-law, the issues of number and sex of siblings seem to be especially worthy of deeper investigation. Siblinghood-in-law, as our findings suggest, is an important family tie for many adults and seniors, and (not only as such) merits sociologists’ attention.

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Attachment

Table 1. Individual interview participants mentioned and/ or quoted in the article

Name	Sex/ age/ marital status	Siblings
<i>Alice</i>	F/74/married	sister <i>Libusha</i> (82, widowed), sister (83, widowed), deceased brother (1 sister-in-law, widow after the brother)
<i>Libusha</i>	F/82/widowed	sister <i>Alice</i> (74, married), sister (83, widowed), deceased brother (1 sister-in-law, widow after the brother)
<i>Blanca</i>	F/66/married	brother (69, widowed), sister (61, married), sister <i>Monica</i> (60, married); deceased brother
<i>Monica</i>	F/60/married	brother (69, widowed), sister <i>Blanca</i> (66, married), sister (61, married); deceased brother
<i>Eric</i>	M/64/married to <i>Monica</i>	brother (69, married), brother (59, divorced and remarried)
<i>Craig</i>	M/71/divorced	brother (70, married)
<i>Cristina</i>	F/62/married	brother (60, married)
<i>Emile</i>	M/73/married	sister (79, recently widowed)
<i>Frank</i>	M/69/single	sister (67, married), brother (58, married)
<i>Frederica</i>	F/80/widow	sister <i>Claudia</i> (74, widowed, with a partner LAT); 2 deceased brothers (2 sisters-in-law, widowed after the brothers' death)
<i>Claudia</i>	F/74/divorced, LAT with a partner	sister <i>Frederica</i> (80, widowed); 2 deceased brothers (2 sisters-in-law, widowed after the brothers' death)
<i>Gregory</i>	M/69/widower, living with a partner	sister <i>Charlotte</i> (67, divorced)
<i>Charlotte</i>	F/67/divorced	brother <i>Gregory</i> (69, twice widowed, living with a partner since recently)
<i>Ida</i>	F/94/widow	sister (92, divorced), brother <i>Simon</i> (76, widowed); 2 brothers deceased as infants, before <i>Simon</i> was born
<i>Simon</i>	M/76/widower	sister <i>Ida</i> (94, widowed), sister (92, divorced); 2 brothers deceased as infants, before <i>Simon</i> was born
<i>Jane</i>	F/63/married	sister (68, married)
<i>Judith</i>	F/76/widow	sister (66); deceased sister
<i>Lauren</i>	F/74/married	brothers <i>Paul</i> (73, widowed and remarried) and <i>Victor</i> (69, divorced, now LAT with a partner)
<i>Paul</i>	M/73/married	sister <i>Lauren</i> (74, married), brother <i>Victor</i> (69, divorced, now LAT with a partner)
<i>Victor</i>	M/69/divorced, living with a partner	sister <i>Lauren</i> (74, married), brother <i>Paul</i> (73, widowed and remarried)
<i>Leona</i>	F/79/widow	sister (79, married)
<i>Mila</i>	F/72/married	brother (81, widowed), sister (79, widowed)

<i>Nina</i>	F/74/married	sister <i>Regina</i> (68, single); deceased brother (1 sister-in-law, widowed after the brother's death; 1 ex-sister-in-law, with whom the brother had divorced)
<i>Regina</i>	F/68/single	sister <i>Nina</i> (74, married); deceased brother (1 sister-in-law, widowed after the brother's death; 1 ex-sister-in-law, with whom the brother had divorced)
<i>Rosemary</i>	F/66/married	brother (62, married)
<i>Stanley</i>	M/67/married to <i>Stacey</i> (66)	brother (58, married), deceased sister; <i>Stacey's</i> siblings: sister (69, widowed), sister (63, married), sister (54, married)
<i>Lydia</i> & <i>Wenceslas</i> *	F/66/married to <i>Wenceslas</i> * interviewed about his wife's siblinghood	sister (63, married), sister (55, married), 1 sister (<i>Lydia's</i> twin) deceased at the age of 19