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Research Paper

Echoes of Neglect: Navigating Sibling Rivalry as the Unheard Child

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Abstract

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study delves into the personal experiences of children who feel unheard within the context of sibling rivalry. It focuses on how these children perceive their roles in the family, particularly in situations where they feel overshadowed or ignored in comparison to their siblings. The study involved semi-structured interviews with seven (7) children aged 18-37 years old, who shared their feelings and stories about sibling rivalry, especially when they felt excluded from family attention or support. The analysis revealed three (3) key themes: (1) Favoritism, which refers to the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another. (2) Detachment, described as an emotional withdrawal to avoid pain or rejection, often develops in childhood. (3) Self-Doubt, referred to as the feeling of questioning one's own worth and decisions, often caused by being ignored or dismissed by important people like parents. The study underscores the importance of fostering a more open, inclusive family environment where every child's voice is valued and heard, especially for those who may feel lost in the shadows of sibling dynamics. These findings highlight the emotional toll of sibling rivalry and suggest ways for families to better address the needs of all children, ensuring they feel seen and supported.

Keywords: *Unheard Child, Birth Order Theory, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Growing up with siblings involves a complex mix of friendship, rivalry, and competition, a dynamic deeply rooted in family life across cultures. As children share spaces, attention, and resources, tensions can naturally emerge, shaping their relationships with each other and with their parents. These tensions often manifest as sibling rivalry, a common yet complex aspect of family life that can influence emotional development, self-identity, and the overall family atmosphere. Despite growing scholarly attention on sibling rivalry, much of the existing research focuses on parents' or adults' interpretations, leaving children's voices largely unheard. Experts have long been interested in how these everyday struggles between siblings fit into the bigger picture of child development and family life. These conflicts are part of many families' everyday reality and can have a powerful impact on the children involved (EBSCO, n.d.) When left unchecked, they may lead to struggles with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and even feelings of isolation (Brighter Tomorrow Counseling, n.d.).

Building on this understanding, it is important to explore the broader effects of sibling rivalry on the family system as a whole. The broader effects of sibling rivalry, including how it shapes family dynamics beyond the sibling pair, offer crucial insight into the emotional environments children grow up in. Importantly, sibling rivalry doesn't just affect the children; it also shapes how parents perceive and interact with them. It influences parental expectations, parenting styles, and how love and attention are distributed within the household. While most brothers and sisters

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aren't battling over basic needs, emotionally, these conflicts serve a deeper purpose; they help children figure out who they are as individuals, a process known as "differentiation" (Prc-Admin-Live, 2023).

While sibling rivalry plays a key role in shaping family dynamics and identity formation, it is equally important to examine the emotional roots and long-term consequences that arise when these conflicts are left unaddressed. Sibling rivalry often stems from emotional triggers such as competition, jealousy, or perceived unfairness in the family dynamic. It can negatively impact sibling relationships and contribute to heightened anxiety and stress among children. These feelings are frequently exacerbated by external factors, including parental inattention, unclear family structure, or experiences of exclusion and rejection (Johnson, 2021) If these issues remain unresolved, they can extend beyond childhood, causing long-term emotional distress and frustration for both children and their parents, ultimately affecting the children's emotional health and social functioning (Sydney, 2022) Research has shown that the impact of sibling rivalry can be understood across three dimensions: (1) the individual impact, (2) the impact on sibling relationships, and (3) the broader external impact (Suci, 2023) Individually, children may show signs of regressive behavior. In terms of sibling dynamics, it can manifest as hostility, reluctance to offer help, and frequent complaints about one another. Beyond the home, these strained relationships can influence how children behave in school and social settings, potentially affecting friendships and peer interactions (Brighter Tomorrow Counseling, n.d.-b)

To gain deeper insight into these psychological and familial dynamics, this study draws on Alfred Adler's family constellation theory. According to Adler, sibling rivalry reflects the distinct roles and positions children occupy within the family system (Vertel, 2023), He emphasized that a child's sense of belonging, perceived importance, and strategies for gaining attention are shaped by their birth order and sibling dynamics. Rivalry, therefore, is not simply a series of conflicts but a reflection of deeper psychological patterns as children strive to define their place and identity within the family. However, current literature tends to center on adult interpretations, often overlooking the lived realities of children, especially those whose experiences remain marginalized or silenced.

While much has been written about sibling rivalry, most studies have predominantly reflected the perspectives of parents, caregivers, or professionals, leaving children's own voices largely overlooked in both research and intervention. Recognizing this gap, the present study seeks to center children's lived experiences and perspectives. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of these unheard children. It aims to amplify their voices, uncover how they perceive and navigate sibling rivalry, and offer insights that may inform more empathetic and effective support strategies. By centering the child's perspective, this research contributes to a more compassionate and balanced view of sibling dynamics, one that listens to children, values their stories, and brings their voices to the heart of the conversation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sibling Rivalry

Up to this point, the researcher believes that sibling rivalry and the sibling subsystem in general have been a neglected dimension in the sociology of the family. This is primarily because even basic introductory Sociology books have yet to dedicate an entire section, or at least a significant portion of content, to the subject. For example, Eshleman's (2019) introductory book on the sociological study of the family, specifically the sixth edition, contains only five interconnected paragraphs discussing two key aspects of sibling relations: sibling violence and sibling rivalry. This lack of attention to sibling dynamics is further confirmed in the "Birth Order and Sibling Relationships" subsection of the book, where Eshleman himself acknowledges that the role and

significance of siblings are often underrepresented in family textbooks. Similarly, Bloom and Build (2021) highlight how parental favoritism can fuel lifelong sibling rivalries, affecting emotional well-being and increasing the risk of depression and anxiety. Additionally, the family is the closest environment to each individual, especially for children.

The knowledge, understanding, and interactions they receive first come from this environment, with mothers playing a central role. A mother must serve as a role model, shaping norms, values, and beliefs (Gade, 2019). While the family environment is the most influential, the school and community environments also play important roles in a child's development. It is crucial to conceptually define terms like siblings, sibling abuse, and sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is defined as competition or occasional aggression among siblings, not intended to cause harm (Sanders, 2019). Since definitions of normal sibling rivalry vary greatly across cultures, values, and beliefs, it's important to distinguish between rivalry and abuse to minimize variations in definitions for this study. Additionally, it is essential to differentiate between the terms "between" and "among." "Between" refers to two people, while "among" refers to more than two people. For this study, the term "among" is used to discuss sibling abuse, acknowledging that a child may be abused by more than one sibling.

Young adults (18-35 years old) who perceive disfavoritism as "unfair" report higher depressive symptoms (Conteh, 2021), lower self-esteem, and conflicts in romantic and sibling relationships. Young adults were classified as having higher levels of depressive symptoms based on their ratings of how they felt in the last seven days. Reports of higher depression were associated with receiving less support from their siblings. In addition, the report of depression was greater for same-gender siblings if one sibling received less favorable treatment from their fathers rather than from their mothers. One assumption is that social comparison is more likely to occur in or among individuals with similarities (Jasen et al., 2022). However, Ponappo et al. (2018), as cited in Jasen et al. (2022) investigated relationships among parent-child triangulation (parent(s)' conflict), PDT, sibling warmth, and depression. They found that children in the middle of their parents' conflict perceive PDT more because of the displacement of parental anger on them; therefore, they experience lower levels of sibling warmth and experience more depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that the Parent-child dynamic can influence well-being and sibling relationships.

Parental Attention & Expectations

Adler's theory suggests that parental expectations and the way attention is distributed among children play a crucial role in shaping sibling relationships. Firstborns often feel responsible for setting an example and may experience pressure to meet high expectations. In contrast, middle children might feel overlooked, leading them to seek ways to stand out. Youngest children, on the other hand, may develop a sense of entitlement due to receiving special attention from parents. These differences in parental treatment can contribute to sibling rivalry as children compete for recognition and validation.

Family Dynamics and Rivalry Development

The structure and interactions within a family significantly influence how siblings relate to one another. The way parents respond to birth order can shape personality traits and sibling relationships. For instance, a firstborn may develop strong leadership skills due to their early responsibilities, but they might also experience frustration or conflict when younger siblings challenge their authority. Similarly, middle children may develop a competitive or rebellious nature in response to feeling overshadowed, while youngest children may adopt attention-seeking behaviors to assert their place in the family. Relatively, according to Adler, sibling rivalry arises from the need for attention, competition for resources, and the desire to establish worth within the

family unit (Causes, Effects and Solutions, n.d.) Each birth order position carries its own unique challenges, leading to different forms of rivalry (Sissons, 2024)

In this framework, Adler's Birth Order Theory explains how different positions in the family hierarchy (firstborn, middle child, youngest child, and only child) influence sibling rivalry. The firstborn child often experiences competition and rivalry when younger siblings challenge their position, due to high parental expectations. Middle children may feel neglected and often compete with both older and younger siblings for attention, leading to a sense of inferiority or rebellion. The youngest child might develop rivalry with older siblings and feel pressured to gain attention in unique ways. Only children do not have siblings, but may face challenges in their relationships with peers due to high parental expectations. This framework suggests that parental attention, parental expectations, and family dynamics (such as birth order) all mediate the development of sibling rivalry. Understanding these dynamics can help explain how rivalry develops and how it is influenced by the child's birth order position within the family.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) to explore the lived experiences of unheard children in the context of sibling rivalry. IPA involved conducting open-ended interviews and analyzing participants' responses to identify emergent themes, enabling the researcher to interpret how individuals made sense of their experiences within personal and social contexts (Smith & Nizza, 2021). This approach was selected for its depth and emphasis on individual meaning-making, incorporating both participant narratives and researcher interpretation. A purposeful homogeneous sampling technique was utilized to select participants from Tanauan Institute Inc. based on specific criteria aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring that the data gathered were rich, relevant, and directly applicable to the research questions.

In the collection of data, the researchers used a validated semi-structured interview guide, which was especially important for this kind of qualitative study. It allowed them to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses, leading to more genuine and meaningful conversations. The process began with reaching out to the school for permission, followed by a Facebook post inviting participants and clearly stating the qualifications. Before each interview, the researchers took time to explain the study and get informed consent. They then carefully transcribed the interviews for analysis. Throughout the interviews, a standard protocol was followed to ensure that all participants were treated equally and the process stayed consistent. Since the topics were sensitive, the researchers made sure the approach was trauma-informed, creating a space where participants could feel safe and respected. The final transcript was then printed and returned to the participants for member-checking to ensure the accuracy of the data gathered.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants of this study are young adults (aged 18-40) who feel unheard and have experienced sibling rivalry within their families, residing in Batangas, Philippines, during the school year 2024-2025. These individuals have lived emotional experiences rooted in their family dynamics, which they were willing to share and reveal. A total of seven (7) participants took part in the study. Ellis (2016), as cited by Akilith et al. (2025), stated that six (6) to 25 respondents are enough to acquire saturated data. As such, the researchers decided to use seven (7) respondents. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, the names of the Participants are kept confidential; hence, the names appearing in Table 1 are presented using their code names.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Participant	Age	Chronological Order Upon Birth
PAX 1	37	1st
PAX 2	22	2nd
PAX 3	27	4th
PAX 4	22	2nd
PAX 5	18	4th (youngest)
PAX 6	22	1st
PAX 7	22	3rd

The study explored the participants' personal experiences and analyzed comparable situations as part of its methodological approach. Consequently, the research was guided by the central question: What is the essence of the lived experience of unheard children as it pertains to sibling rivalry? The corollary question is answered in the discussion below: Corollary Question Number 1: How do unheard children describe their experience of sibling rivalry? Interview Question 1: How would you describe the relationship with your siblings?

When asked, both PAX 2 and PAX 7 shared experiences that reflect deep personal pain and family tension. PAX 2 spoke of strained relationships with siblings and a strong belief that their mother shows favoritism, an idea expressed with notable clarity and a quiet sense of gratitude for being heard during the interview. PAX 7 openly described feeling dismissed compared to a sibling, especially when asking for support, and the pain in their voice made it clear they were reliving difficult, unfair moments. These stories illustrate how feeling overlooked by parents can deeply affect a child's emotional well-being and shape how they relate to their siblings, leaving lasting impressions of being unheard and unseen within their own home. This was evident in their response when they stated:

> *"The three of us are not okay with each other. We just try to make things work…My mom, I feel as though she really sides with someone, she has her favorites...", PAX 2*

> *"I can feel that there is favoritism in our home. If I need something, I hear a lot of comments, but if it's my sibling, they're quiet...", PAX 7*

Favoritism among children is more common than many realize. Studies show that up to 40% of people felt lonely growing up in families where they sensed favoritism (Jordan, 2025). These feelings, often subtle but deeply felt, can shape how children see themselves and relate to their siblings, leaving emotional imprints that can last well into adulthood. Relatively, parental favoritism can fuel lifelong sibling rivalries (Bloom & Build, 2021). Through the lens of Adler's Birth Order Theory, these experiences make even more sense. A child's place in the family, whether they're the oldest, middle, or youngest, can influence how they interpret and respond to favoritism. The oldest might feel replaced when younger siblings arrive, the middle may feel invisible, and the youngest might feel overly sheltered or unfairly compared. When children feel consistently less valued, it can feed into feelings of inferiority, rivalry, or insecurity, struggles Adler believed were rooted in birth order and family roles. Favoritism doesn't just shape family relationships; it quietly molds the way children come to understand themselves and their place in the world. Interview Question 2: How does sibling rivalry affect the relationship of the family?

The responses from PAX 5 and PAX 6 reveal the deep emotional wounds that favoritism

can create within sibling relationships. PAX 5 expressed feelings of hurt and frustration, highlighting how perceived favoritism led to emotional distance and a sense of not being heard within the family. This emotional detachment was evident during the interview, as the participant reflected on the lasting conflict it caused. Similarly, PAX 6 shared how favoritism strained the family bond, fostering distance and misunderstanding among siblings. Signs of sadness were noticeable, underscoring the participant's frustration with the ongoing disconnection in their home life. Together, these accounts illustrate how favoritism not only favors one child over another but it fractures the fundamental relationships among siblings, leading to long-term emotional isolation and a breakdown of family unity. This was evident in their response when they stated:

> *"...really had a big impact on our family relationships. Sometimes, I feel like there's favoritism, and it seems like I'm the only one not being listened to, so I tend to distance myself from them.", PAX 5*

> *"...our bond was really affected. Especially when there's favoritism, because it feels like someone is being favored among us, which makes us grow distant from one another…",PAX 6*

Favoritism can quietly sow deep emotional wounds in a child's life, often leading to feelings of jealousy, resentment, and emotional distance from family members (Jordan, 2025b) It doesn't just create conflict between siblings; it can also chip away at a child's sense of self-worth, leaving them feeling overlooked and hurt. Through the lens of Adler's Birth Order Theory, these feelings often align with the unique struggles children face based on their birth position. A middle child, for instance, may feel invisible; a firstborn might feel replaced; and the youngest may feel either overly protected or unfairly judged. In the case of one participant, feeling unheard at home didn't just cause frustration; it pushed them to emotionally withdraw from their family. This highlights how favoritism isn't just about unequal treatment, but about the quiet pain of not feeling truly seen or valued. Interview Question 3: How does sibling rivalry affect your self-esteem or how you see yourself?

The narratives shared by PAX 5 and PAX 6 emphasize the deep impact of favoritism on a child's self-esteem and emotional well-being. PAX 5 described a persistent feeling of being wrong, which eroded their confidence and left them questioning their importance within the family. During the interview, nervousness and low confidence were evident, mirroring the participant's inner struggle with feeling unimportant and misunderstood. Similarly, PAX 6 spoke of not feeling "enough" in the eyes of their parents, especially when siblings were favored, leading to growing self-doubt and a noticeable decline in self-esteem. Sadness was apparent as the participant expressed a longing for recognition and validation that they felt was missing. These accounts highlight how favoritism can deeply damage a child's sense of self-worth, leaving them to battle feelings of inadequacy and emotional isolation long after the moments of favoritism have passed. This was evident in their response when they stated:

> *"...I always felt like I was wrong. That's why I started to lose confidence in myself. There were so many times when I felt like I wasn't important to my family.", PAX 5*

> *"Sometimes, it feels like I'm not enough in the eyes of my parents, especially when they side more with my siblings. When that happens, I start to lose my confidence and doubt myself, which causes my self-esteem to drop even more.", PAX 6*

Being treated as second-best can leave deep and lasting emotional effects. Research shows

that even from a young age, children are aware of unequal treatment, for example, when one sibling consistently receives more affection or attention from parents (Dennett, 2023) Similarly, children may perceive such differences as favoritism, even when the intention is to respond to their individual needs or personalities (Jennifer, 2023) Through the lens of Adler's Birth Order Theory, these perceptions can be especially impactful, as a child's place in the family shapes how they interpret and respond to such treatment. For instance, middle children may feel overlooked, while firstborns may struggle with the pressure to meet expectations when younger siblings are favored. In this study, participants expressed clear emotional responses to these experiences, often showing a deep sense of longing for the attention and fairness they felt were missing. Their reflections reveal not only resentment but also a quiet sadness for what they believed their relationships with their parents could have been.

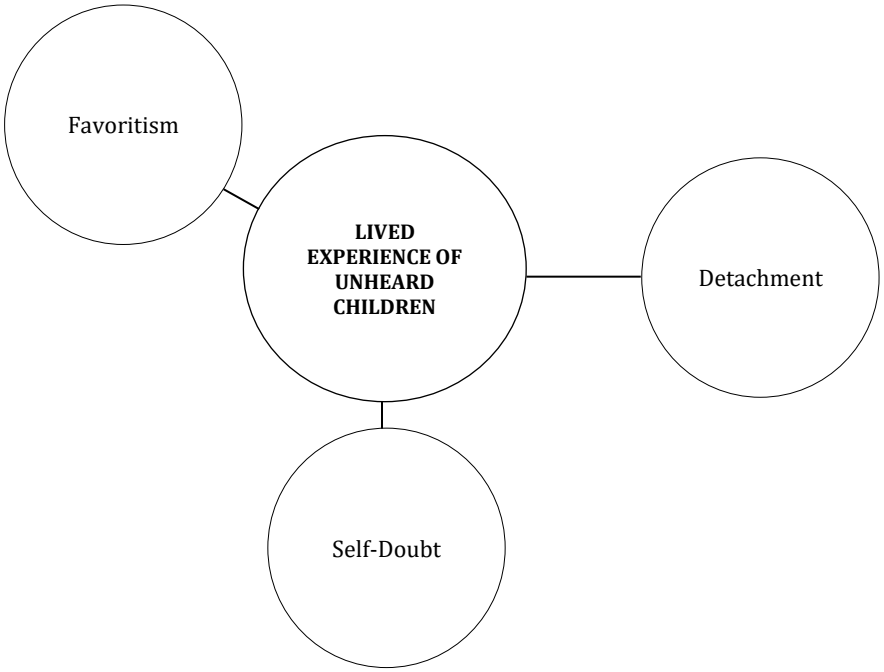


Figure 1. Themes of the Lived Experience of Unheard Children

Based on the responses of the unheard children, the researchers identified three emergent themes from the interview transcripts: (1) Favoritism, (2) Detachment, and (3) Self-Doubt, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Favoritism

The first interview question generated the first theme, Favoritism. It is described as the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another. When asked, PAX 3 acknowledged the inevitability of favoritism, suggesting that it exists in varying forms, whether directed toward the eldest, the middle child, or the youngest. It was evident in the response when PAX 3 stated:

> "*Of course, favoritism will always be there, toward the eldest, the middle child, and the youngest.*", PAX 3

With a similar question, PAX 4 expressed a more personal and emotional experience,

describing a sense of being unheard and invalidated. It was evident in the response when PAX 4 stated:

> "*I don't feel like what I say gets validated. When it's Liam, it's like they believe him, but when it's me, nothing, it's like there's favoritism between us.",* PAX 4

In Adler's Birth Order Theory, favoritism within families can significantly affect sibling dynamics and the psychological development of each child. Favored children, often the firstborn or those who receive more parental attention, may feel burdened by high expectations and develop traits such as perfectionism and anxiety (Greenlee, 2025). Meanwhile, unfavored children may experience feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem, particularly if they perceive themselves as overlooked or less valued (Your Child's Self-Esteem, for Parents, n.d.) These emotional imbalances can strain sibling relationships, leading to lasting disconnection and resentment. Such dynamics can foster feelings of loneliness and emotional distance, which may extend into adulthood.

Detachment

The second interview question generated the second theme, Detachment. It is described as an emotional withdrawal to avoid pain or rejection, often developed in childhood. When asked, PAX 5 shared that the rivalry among siblings has strained their familial bond, leading her to feel isolated and unheard. This sense of exclusion has prompted her to withdraw and distance herself from her family. It was evident in the response when PAX 5 stated:

> *"The rivalry between my siblings and me has really affected our family relationship. Sometimes, I feel like there's favoritism, and it's like I'm the only one not being heard, so I've started to distance myself from them.", PAX 5*

With a similar question, PAX 6 reflected on how rivalry, especially when coupled with favoritism, has weakened the connection among family members. She described a growing emotional distance, a lack of harmony at home, and a deepening misunderstanding between siblings. It was evident in the response when PAX 6 stated:

> *"When there's rivalry in the family, it really affects our bond. Especially when there's favoritism, because it feels like someone is being favored, and it makes us distant from each other. At home, we don't get along, and we don't understand each other.", PAX 6*

Sibling estrangement often stems from feeling less valued by parents, especially when one sibling receives more attention or care. This emotional hurt can cause the other to withdraw, not just out of resentment, but from feeling unseen (Rogers & Morgan, 2025). According to Adler's Birth Order Theory, such experiences can intensify the struggles tied to a child's position in the family; for example, middle children may feel overlooked, while eldest or youngest may struggle with pressure or comparison. These dynamics can deeply affect a child's sense of belonging and emotional safety within the family.

Self-Doubt

The third interview question generated the third theme, Self-Doubt. It is described as the feeling of questioning one's own worth and decisions, often caused by being ignored or dismissed by important people, like parents. When asked, PAX 4 recounted moments of emotional pain, expressing confusion and sadness over being mistreated despite her efforts to be kind and giving. Her words reveal a deep sense of hurt stemming from the lack of recognition and fairness within

the sibling dynamic. It was evident in the response when PAX 4 stated:

> *"I would always cry, wondering why she treats me that way when I haven't done anything wrong to her. I even give her what she wants, so of course, it really hurts me.", PAX 4*

When asked the same question, PAX 7 shared how parental favoritism has led her to feel unseen and undervalued, diminishing her sense of worth. She described how these feelings have fueled her insecurities, increased her self-doubt, and made her feel as though she isn't allowed to make mistakes. It was evident in the response when PAX 7 stated:

> *"When my parents favor them more, I feel like they don't see or value the things I do, which makes my insecurities grow. I feel like I don't have the right to make mistakes. My self-doubt increases, and I start to lose confidence in myself.", PAX 7*

Sibling favoritism can have a profound impact on children's emotional well-being and their relationships, often leading to feelings of resentment, jealousy, and inadequacy (EuroSchool, 2024) In the context of Adler's Birth Order Theory, this dynamic can shape the child's role and self-perception within the family. In this case, the child, feeling overlooked due to favoritism, experiences self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy. The participant's struggle to understand what they could do reflects the emotional strain often seen in birth order dynamics, where a perceived lack of value can hinder a child's sense of purpose and self-worth.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal the deep emotional effects of sibling rivalry, especially as influenced by the recurring themes of favoritism, detachment, and self-doubt. Many participants shared how parental favoritism, often directed toward the eldest or youngest siblings, left them feeling overlooked and emotionally unsupported. This unequal treatment led to feelings of resentment, competition, and the belief that their efforts were not recognized or valued. As a result, children developed insecurities and began to question their worth, leading to an internal struggle with self-doubt. Favoritism consistently surfaced in the responses, revealing how validation and recognition are often distributed unequally, intensifying the sense of exclusion. In parallel, self-doubt emerged as a powerful emotional response, stemming from repeated experiences of being dismissed or underappreciated.

Moreover, the emotional distance caused by constant comparison and perceived neglect often results in detachment, with some children withdrawing from family interactions to cope with their feelings of exclusion. Detachment was marked by emotional withdrawal and the weakening of familial bonds, as participants described a lack of open communication and growing disconnection among siblings. The lack of fair and inclusive parental guidance further intensifies the rivalry, making reconciliation more difficult. However, the study also highlights the importance of parental involvement in resolving these conflicts. Promoting fairness, validating each child's voice, and encouraging shared experiences can help siblings better understand one another and rebuild their bond. By recognizing and addressing the root causes of rivalry, particularly favoritism, families can foster a more supportive and emotionally balanced environment where all children feel equally valued and heard.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged in interpreting its findings. The research involved a small sample size of seven sibling groups, all residing in Batangas, Philippines. Although purposive homogeneous sampling was employed to ensure that participants

had direct and relevant experiences with sibling rivalry, the limited scope and geographic concentration restrict the generalizability of the results. The findings may not fully reflect the range of sibling dynamics experienced in other regions or cultural settings, where familial structures, socioeconomic factors, and social norms may vary significantly.

Furthermore, the study focused solely on the lived experiences of the "unheard" child, providing valuable insight into a perspective that is often overlooked. However, this narrow lens excluded the viewpoints of parents, favored siblings, and other family members, limiting the understanding of the broader family context. The findings are also not applicable to children without siblings, whose experiences may differ considerably. Future research is recommended to include a larger and more diverse sample, expand to other geographical locations, and incorporate multiple family perspectives for a more holistic understanding. In addition, while this study employed a qualitative approach to explore emotional depth and context, future research may benefit from incorporating quantitative methods. Quantitative studies could help measure the prevalence, patterns, and psychological effects of sibling rivalry across different populations, allowing for broader generalization and deeper analysis through statistical comparisons.

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