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Snippets and silences: ethics and reflexivity in narratives of sistering

MELANIE MAUTHNER

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This paper considers two aspects of feminist orthodoxy regarding ethics and reflexivity during data analysis in qualitative research. These methodological issues surfaced in an exploratory study of how discourses of sistering socially construct and produce feminine subjectivity. Research was carried out with 37 women aged between 6 and 50 from different class and ethnic backgrounds living in the UK. Auto/biographical work in sociology influenced the design of the qualitative methods and the use of a grounded theory and case study approach to the analysis of the interview narratives. The discussion of methodological dilemmas—how to analyse multiple perspectives of relationships with varying degrees of disclosure among participants—is located within both feminist standpoint and post-structuralist theory. A case is made for guaranteeing anonymity rather than confidentiality, and offering selective reciprocity rather than an equal exchange between researcher and participants. The challenge of working with feminist reflexivity is considered through the notion of bounded privacy and a silenced 'I'.

Introduction

Women's relationships with their biological sisters constitute a hidden aspect of female experience; and narratives and discourses of sistering constitute marginalized cultures. Yet this widespread, neglected and socially invisible personal tie plays a significant role in the social construction of feminine subjectivity (Mauthner, in press). The *Kindred Spirits* study (1993–1998) explored how sisters who have an active relationship (defined as contact) with each other understand its evolution during girlhood and womanhood (Mauthner 1998a). I collected sister narratives adopting an auto/biographical approach in order to investigate five research questions: the different types of sister ties and contact patterns that exist, the factors that affect these, differences and similarities with other female friendships, and changes in sister ties over time. Some of the main findings concerned the links between material aspects of feminine subjectivity and sistering. Subjectivity, including emotions and power relations, was explored empirically from a feminist standpoint and post-structuralist perspective to see how femininity is constructed through sistering (Alcoff 1988, Jones 1993, Lauretis 1984).

Melanie Mauthner: Culture, Communication and Societies, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

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This article argues that the empirical work undertaken in the *Kindred Spirits* study suggests that some feminist mantras about research methodology cannot hold all the time. It highlights methodological dilemmas of analysing and constructing narratives of intimate family life for the public domain. Dyadic and triadic sister ties are often sensitive relationships embedded in enmeshed lives. Inevitably, betrayal is perhaps intrinsic to research based on auto/biographical life histories: 'Doing this work, then, requires that we find a way to encompass contradictions and make our peace with them'. (Josselson 1996: xiii).

The main ethical difficulty concerned the multiple perspectives present in the data with two, three or four angles on relationships sometimes present. Producing public accounts of relationships from two or more narratives raised dilemmas about how to reconcile differences between these (Song 1998). There were differences to do with agreements and disagreements in narratives by related sisters. Other differences were the varying degrees of disclosure in the sisters' narratives: some women were more open and revealing than their sisters and I had to decide how much and which information to make public.

Two principles of feminist research influenced my attempts to address these dilemmas of interpretation and representation when I came to analyse the data in a similar way as they guided me during fieldwork (Mauthner 1998b). One principle concerned ethical precepts, regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Another concerned reflexivity, including the role of the researcher's 'I' and the need for a degree of reciprocity between researcher and participants. First I describe the theoretical framework of the study and the method of analysis adopted. These background details provide the context for the discussion of methodological issues that follows. They also make explicit the links between the theories that underpin the study, its design and implementation. In the final part of the paper I discuss the methodological dilemmas to do with principles of ethics and reflexivity.

Theoretical framework

Three bodies of work informed the theoretical framework: feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-structuralism, and auto/biographical work in sociology. I drew on each perspective in order to plan, conduct and conceptualize the study: all three influenced my methodology—my approach to and method of collecting and analysing the data—and my epistemological and ontological positions. The tensions that surfaced in my attempt to reconcile these three theories are explored elsewhere (see Mauthner 2000).

Feminist standpoint epistemology is defined as grounded in Marxist materialist concepts of class, power relations and economy (Smith 1987, Stanley and Wise 1990). The implication of this position is that knowledge can be produced out of women's material experience including their emotions (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994, Maynard 1994, Ramazanoglu and Holland 1997). One of its strengths is the argument that women's experiences offer a different and even better perspective of the world—

Smith's idea of 'situated knowledges' which are socially and historically located (Smith 1974 cited in Stanley and Wise 1993). Another, is its acceptance and recognition of other 'silenced' standpoints such as black feminist and lesbian epistemologies (Stanley and Wise 1990).

Thus documenting women's lived experience requires particular attention to methodological issues and the methods adopted. One aim is to produce knowledge from women's own perspectives while respecting their subjectivities. A parallel focus is the role of the researcher's own subjectivity in the production of knowledge, what is referred to as the need for reflexivity throughout the research process (Hughes 1998, May 1998). Participatory methods during fieldwork and data analysis are considered valuable tools (Rheinharz 1992). Smith (1987) highlights the involvement of research participants in actively constructing and interpreting the social processes and social relations that constitute their lives. In practice, such a participatory approach presents specific challenges during both fieldwork and data analysis and I return to my participants' active involvement later. Standpoint theory influenced my study in relation to ontology, epistemology and methodology. The concepts, which I draw on deriving from empirical research designed according to standpoint theory, are *power relations* and *negotiation*.

The second theory, which influenced my theoretical framework, is feminist post-structuralism.[1] Feminist theory has seized on many ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralism in order to expand knowledge about language, desire, sexuality and the body (Maynard 1995). Its main influence was in relation to three concepts—language, discourse and subjectivity—used in order to develop four discourses of sistering for analysing the data. Language in the study referred to the word as text or utterance, and thus verbal and textual narratives. By discourse, I mean structures of power and thought; and by subjectivity, 'ways in which a person gives meaning to themselves' (Davies and Banks 1992: 2).

Third, theories of auto/biography in sociology provided a methodology and method[2] with which to gather and interpret narratives of changing power relations and subjectivity in women's sister ties (Crapanzano 1984). This method connects the individual and the social, subjectivity and discourse: it incorporates and weaves together changes in individual subjectivity and in social structures. Until recently auto/biography[3] and biography were viewed as two separate activities, a division questioned by some sociologists who see the two as intermeshed (Stanley 1993).[4] I used the method to explore narratives of the construction of complex subjectivities, rather than to present a 'true' representation of lives (Stanley 1993). This enabled me, as others have,[5] to place subjectivity, emotions, memory and analysis of experience, and the link between individual experience and social, political and familial processes at the centre of personal accounts.[6]

These three theories provided a basis for the collection and interpretation of sister narratives. Feminist standpoint theory places women's gendered subjectivity and the sister tie at the heart of women's lives (Smith 1987). A feminist post-structuralist approach enabled specific moments in narratives to be captured—a shift or a turning-point—while

firmly locating these in the fluid and changing aspects of relationships (Vaughan 1987, Hey 1997, Alcoff 1988). Theories of auto/biography help researcher and participant to bring out the complex webs of relationships in which women's lives as sisters are enmeshed and the difficulties that ensue for both when attempting to both 'tell their stories' and interpret them (Hamson 1995). Together, the three theories, empirical studies on sisters, and the narratives of sistering, shaped the four discourses of sistering, which emerged from the data. These discourses are defined in the next section.

Method of data collection

I sampled across six decades, from the pre-teenage years to the fifties in order to capture a range of sistering experiences and narratives over the life-course. This varied sample was constituted in order to highlight moments of transition between girlhood and adulthood over decades from an auto/biographical perspective and was not designed to make comparisons across class and ethnicity. The sample was accessed principally through snowballing from my own professional and friendship networks. In retrospect, accessing women through my personal networks contributed to the methodological dilemmas I faced when analysing the data, especially the issues of preserving confidentiality and of how much to reveal about myself, the researcher's 'I', which I return to later.

I conducted 29 interviews, 6 individual, 16 separate and 7 paired (one of these was an interview with three teenage sisters), with 37 girls and women aged between 6 and 50 from different class and ethnic backgrounds in various urban locations in the UK. Individual interviews were those where the participant's sister did not wish or was unable to take part in the study; separate interviews were those where each member of a pair or set of sisters was interviewed separately. Participants' decisions to be interviewed alone or together reflected the type of tie between them, their age and stage of life and their geographic location. Most sisters in their teens and twenties preferred to be interviewed together (see Mauthner in press).

As well as the depth interview, I used two self-complete instruments adapted from social work techniques (Department of Health 1988) to collect the data: an Ecomap of kin and friendship networks and a Flowchart of life events and turning-points. The Ecomap involved drawing connecting lines between the respondent placed in a circle in the centre of the page and other key members in their social network. Different types of lines were drawn to indicate the various types of ties that exist between family, friends and colleagues, for example strong, weak or stressful. The Flowchart recorded turning-points in the sister relationship and reviewed life events in the general sense of the term (Riessman 1989). It required participants to recall and reflect on changes in their relationship over time to do with the birth of a sister, changing school, acquiring or losing girlfriends and boyfriends, leaving home and changing patterns of closeness/distance and dependence/independence.

Method of data analysis

Data analysis occurred in three simultaneous stages based on the inductive process of 'grounded theory' (Strauss 1987). My material included interview transcripts, Ecomaps and Flowcharts, fieldnotes, and a research diary. First, I explored the data using ideas embedded in the research questions and interview guide (derived from a review of relevant literature, friendship for instance). Second, and simultaneously, I identified themes emerging from the data: moments of change, life events, talk and silence. Third, I developed coding categories from the theoretical concepts (power relations, discourse, subjectivity) in interaction with my data such as 'changing relationships' and 'changing subjectivity'. I developed a coding grid based on 15 categories—for example emotions, contact, conflict, and heterosexuality—in the form of a table. I coded each interview and wrote these up as summaries and longer case studies.

My analysis of the data in interaction with my reading of the literature on kinship, friendship, gendered subjectivity and researching women's lives (Maynard and Purvis 1994) led me to formulate four discourses for interpreting the narratives: *best friendship*, *companionship*, the *positioned* and the *shifting positions* discourses. *Best friendship* was characterized by a high level of contact, talk, intimacy, reciprocity and emotional closeness. Whereas *best friendship* was a term used by many of the sisters, I coined the other three discourses. *Companionship* took two forms: distant companionship was associated with low levels of contact, talk, intimacy, reciprocity and emotional closeness; *close companionship* was a midway stage between *distant companionship* and *best friendship*.

The four discourses permeated each other and coexisted within one relationship as sisters moved from one discourse to the other at a single moment or over a period of time. The *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses conceptualized the changing power relations and changing subjectivities in relationships. The *positioned* discourse reproduces specific elements of mother-daughter relationships, especially mini-mothering, where sisters adopt 'big' and 'little' sister roles of carer and cared for, and where power relations tend to be hegemonic (Edelman 1984). Here women can position themselves and be positioned by their sister or other family members into carer or cared for sibling (see Mauthner in press). In the *shifting positions* discourse where role reversals occur, women alternately adopt dominant, dominated, or more equal positions of power. These two discourses could contradict and yet co-exist within the *best friendship* or *companionship* discourses. Thus, two companion or best friend sisters also experienced other dimensions of their relationship as positioned or as part of a role reversal, with shifting positions.

Before exploring ethical issues of how to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality in the sister narratives, I consider the significance of the interview context in relation to the type of narratives produced and my interpretation of these. Clearly, the joint, individual and separate inter-

views with sisters generated different potentials and constraints. While individual and separate interviews allowed for greater freedom in reflecting on experience, joint interviews enabled participants to negotiate perceptions and assumptions in the course of the interview.

I gave participants the choice about whether they wanted to be interviewed alone, or with one or more of their sisters. Participants' decisions reflected their age, stage of life, geographic location, willingness to participate in the study and the state of their current relationship. The varied interview contexts in which I met and listened to sister best friends preclude any simple direct connection between interview context and sistering discourses as the following examples illustrate.

Several pairs of sisters in their teens and twenties who emerged as best friends wished to be interviewed together although this was not always possible. Mildred (26) and Frieda (24), white and middle class, who also lived together, reflected openly in their joint narrative on changes that their relationship had gone through. Rae (30) and Bukhi (25), Asian and middle class, another pair of best friend sisters also opted for a joint interview. However, I spoke to them separately. At the convened time, Bukhi's work commitments prevented her from attending. Both were very disappointed yet realized during their separate interviews how a joint interview might have altered their narratives. They felt ambivalent about this: arranging the interview and the interview itself made them consider the issues of openness and confidentiality as they spoke. In another case, in spite of being best friends and living in the same city, though as different as 'chalk and cheese' in their political beliefs, marital statuses and lifestyles, while Leila (40), Asian and middle class was eager to take part, Annar (38) declined. Each of these *best friendship* narratives was produced in a different interview context: joint for Mildred and Frieda, separate for Rae and Bukhi, and a sole individual interview for Leila.

How far do the joint, separate and individual interview contexts reflect and reinforce the four discourses? To what extent did the participants' choice of interview context reflect the discourses or did the context generate a particular discourse? Obviously, the interview context influenced the women's narratives and the discourses were developed in relation to these narratives. However, the four discourses were not necessarily developed on the basis of the type of interview context. In analysing my data, I found greater complexity in the links between choice of interview context and discourses and also other factors: age, geographical location and stage of life of participants. Moreover, although the predominant discourse at the time of the interview influenced the choice of interview context by participants, it was not the only discourse produced. Madonna (31) and Roxanne's (39) relationship of *distant companionship* affected their decision to be interviewed separately in spite of the *best friendship* they had experienced in their teens, which both described at length. A defining characteristic of these sistering discourses is that they are not fixed and change over the course of the relationship. Both my own and the women's assessment of their relationship at the moment I spoke to them was necessarily in process of flux.

Ethical dilemmas and strategies: interpreting multiple perspectives of relationships

I applied tenets of a feminist methodology for carrying out this research: throughout the research process I addressed the issues of power relations, reflexivity, ethics, reciprocity/exchange and representation (Gill 1998, Stanley and Wise 1990). Elsewhere (Mauthner 1998b), I described the practical techniques addressing ethical concerns that I employed during fieldwork in order to respect and protect the participants' identities. When analysing the data, my main concern was how to safeguard their anonymity and the confidentiality of their accounts.

I analysed and wrote up the data in the form of case studies, a useful approach for understanding participants' own versions of their relationship. A strength of comparing narratives this way, of 'using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning' (Stake 1994: 241), was the resulting triangulation of data through checking the consistency of different data sources from the same method. However, the ethical costs of adopting a case study approach were many. Three ethical dilemmas surfaced: the varying degrees of disclosure in separate interviews, the challenge of analysing agreements and disagreements, and the issue of how to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

Degrees of disclosure

Interpreting different angles on the relationship was especially problematic in the 16 separate interviews with pairs of related sisters and with sets of three or four sisters. The main difficulty here was whether and how to use these different accounts in writing up the data—for example one-sided revelations of details by one woman who was more open than her sister. Some of these different disclosures touched on sensitive issues such as eating disorders, abortion, adoption, singledom, jealousy and envy.

My separate encounters with sisters who were *close companions*, such as Anne (38) and Flora (40), white and middle class, alerted me to the dilemma of presenting degrees of disclosure. Flora, at the end of a very frank interview, requested to see any parts of her transcript that I wanted to use in writing up the data. Flora consented to talk to me mainly because Anne had asked her to. I only used her words anonymously, without even referring to her pseudonym; I chose not to paraphrase her. While her transcript influenced the way I analysed the data, I made her invisible and respected her wishes. Some of her words could have been damaging to her relationship with Anne. This episode revealed undisclosed and one-sided feelings in the relationship, which only Flora expressed. It would have compromised the trust I had built up with her to have made these feelings public. Hey (1997, 2000) also held back data from her participants' diaries which were too personal to include in her book.

These varying degrees of disclosure, which reflected participants' different perspectives on their relationships, were magnified when several

sisters in a family took part. During separate interviews with close companions, Alice (36), Rosemary (30) and their older sister Eliza (38), African Caribbean and middle class, Alice and Rosemary talked more openly than Eliza. She remained the most circumspect and felt the most uncomfortable: 'I wouldn't say anything that I felt that might sort of betray them'. Rosemary and Alice freely shared personal details about feelings of jealousy, about which of their sisters was best at keeping secrets and who they turned to as 'first port of call' regarding work or sexual relationship issues. Their openness might have been linked to their position as 'little sisters' in relation to Eliza or to the particularities of their own situations, notably their different marital statuses. For Alice, single and living alone, her sisters formed a key part of her social network. Eliza, however, living with her partner and children, had friends outside the kin group. In short, variations in sisters' social statuses affected their relationships with each other: these differences were reflected in the degrees of disclosure about their relationships during the interviews.

The dilemma for me as researcher was how to respect their confidences while retaining valuable insights about their inter-twined lives for the process of interpretation of the data. Ethically, I decided as a general principle of data analysis not to represent any information that, for example Alice revealed about Rosemary, which Rosemary did not reveal to me. I privileged information received 'directly' and let lie 'indirect' information. For example, I decided not to use details about Rosemary's past which I only heard about from Alice.

I was just as anxious to keep confidences during the data analysis and writing up as I was during the interviews in the field. But I felt ambivalent about my ability to keep my promise of confidentiality and preserve the women's identity from other participants, in this case their sisters, once they had disclosed information in the semi-public space of the interview, which remained secret in their private lives. I realised that some women would inevitably recognize details of their own or their sisters' experiences after the writing up stage. I wanted to respect the confidentiality, in particular, of those who experienced tensions in their relationships and had opted to talk to me about these separately. As researcher, I did not want to become a mediator between family members in the way Hey (1997: 121) was for the schoolgirls she researched. She found that the girls 'frequently used my interest in understanding their friendship as an opportunity to speak to each other about difficulties which were previously unvoiced'.

Although I resisted the therapist role during fieldwork, in the sense that I refrained from giving feedback, my role in the separate interviews, was that of an indirect and silent mediator and closer to that of therapist than I wished (Birch and Miller 2000). Many interviews were emotionally charged and some women made explicit comparisons with therapy sessions. There are parallels between Lieblich's (1996) research on kibbutz life and mine: our research in both studies raised dilemmas for the researcher of collecting life histories from individuals in a closed community. Lieblich found herself placed in a similar role when relatives gave information to her, but not to one another:

> I seemed to open a Pandora's box: out came old wounds, long forgotten or hidden from the public eye. The emotional sessions gradually escalated, and people often cried or expressed anger. [...] Whereas my concern was for protecting every individual separately and each one vis-à-vis the community, the dyadic complications were hard to fathom. (Lieblich 1996: 177–182)

When the research findings were made public, some of the participants in Lieblich's study experienced emotional distress.

The tensions surrounding confidentiality in the research process raise questions to do with boundaries between: what is 'personal' and 'private' to a set of kin relationships, and what is appropriate to another 'outsider' relationship with a researcher in the semi-public interview context, and the public setting of this article (Mauthner 1998b). Inevitably, boundaries around disclosure shift between contexts when representing individuals' relationships in writing up the data. This dilemma of dealing with different degrees of disclosure is connected to the process faced by all researchers of telling their own story about the research and, in this case, of 'objectifying' participants with whom I formed a trusting relationship during fieldwork when subsequently making their lives 'public'.

Analysing agreements and disagreements

The other challenge that I faced when interpreting these multiple perspectives of relationships was the issue of truth claims about any single narrative. Comparing separate versions of similar events in sisters' personal lives and intimate networks touches on questions of truth and reality, validity and power. How does the researcher tell a story from multiple accounts? Hazel (34), white and working class, was acutely aware of this issue and raised it as we discussed the possibility of an interview with her older sister, Phoebe (35), which I carried out several months later:

> ...She'll probably tell you a completely different story but then...that's how it should be, she should tell you her side, her story. I mean, I've always said, there's three sides to every story, one person's side, the other person's side and somewhere in the middle, you get the truth, but it is in the middle, it's not there or there.

If 'there's three sides to every story', how should I analyse agreements and disagreements that emerge in linked narratives, especially when some were voiced while others were silenced either by participants, like Eliza for privacy, or by the researcher, for ethical reasons? These issues surfaced specifically among companionate rather than best friend sisters and when they had constructed their narratives separately rather than together. The best friend sisters, whether interviewed together or separately, produced similar versions of events and tended to feel the same way about changes in their relationship or their subjectivity: they could voice their agreements and disagreements openly.

Best friends Mildred (26) and Frieda (24) produced a joint account about how Mildred had changed after she had split up with her first boyfriend Luke, and then travelled abroad. In joint accounts of relationships produced by best friend sisters such as Mildred and Frieda, the presence of discrepancies or disagreements between them was consider-

ably diminished, or at least acknowledged explicitly in their interview. In their account of the changes that Mildred went through, Frieda was the main narrator. Mildred assented to and briefly corroborated her sister's analysis of her own changing subjectivity and of relevant factors: boyfriends, travel, starting work. The way that Frieda highlighted both positive and negative changes—Mildred's greater independence and increased anxiety, her former relaxed style compared to her new frantic mode, was significant. It displayed the breadth of Frieda's knowledge of her sister's life. In another joint interview, Zoë (17), Asian and working class, in a similarly open way recounted her anger at Sofia's (16) 'bunking' off from school and her fear that her younger sister's schooling and academic path would suffer from mistakes which she, Zoë, was only too familiar with.

The main difference between best and companionate sisters was that best friend sisters were able to disagree openly or to agree to disagree, in the semi-public space of the interview (and maybe privately) whereas companionate sisters refrained from this. Mildred and Frieda pondered over the effect of Luke on Mildred's life, each giving their own views and producing a joint narrative. Hilda (9) and Adrienne (12), white and middle class, presented themselves as having little in common and did not identify their tie as *best friendship*. However I did typify their relationship as *close companionship* with elements of *best friendship* owing to the intimacy displayed in the interview context, as they gleefully quibbled over the morality of the practice of 'dumping' girlfriends (Mauthner 1998b).

Best friends who spoke to me separately also perceived the evolution and current state of their tie in similar ways. Rae (30) and Bukhi (25) both commented on their inter-dependency in the joys of motherhood for Rae and the trials of heterosexuality for Bukhi as key aspects of their changing relationship. Each sister gave very similar accounts of Bukhi's involvement in Rae's labour and mothering of her new daughter and of Rae's support in Bukhi's painful break-up with her boyfriend. Hazel (34) and Phoebe (35), best friends and close companions each produced narratives that echoed the ups and downs of their changing subjectivities and changing relationship (see Mauthner in press).

Among companionate sisters, the contradictions remained silenced in the private world of their relationship, but could and did emerge in individual and separate interview narratives where they became visible to and interpreted by me, the researcher. Some disagreements were silenced though painfully palpable; for example in a group discussion among teenage sisters, the sensitive subject of boyfriends emerged and dramatically altered the dynamics of the interview: silence, embarrassment and teasing accusations took place. In another case, distant companions Madonna (31) and Roxanne (39), white and middle class, spoke to me separately. Both felt sad about the loss of their *best friendship*, the ensuing distance between them, and their inability to discuss these changes calmly. Interestingly, they agreed on the changes in their tie but not the reasons for these. Here agreement on some issues was voiced in the interviews and disagreement on others remained silenced in their relationship.

In a similar, but happier, case of white and middle class *distant companionship*, Beth (27) and Louise's (22) separate interview narratives revealed similar elements which they agreed on and generally accepted: the distance between them, their ambivalence about wanting and not wanting more closeness, the value of privacy. Their reflections and feelings emerged in the interview and yet remained implicit in their relationship. One aspect of their tie, 'doting', a mixture of respect, regard and dependence on Beth the eldest, and its connection to the *positioned* discourse or 'big/little' sister dynamic, illustrates the difference in emphasis they each accorded it. Louise appeared very aware of her little sister position in relation to Beth. She expressed ambivalence about its benefits and disadvantages around remaining positioned there or experimenting with the *shifting positions* discourse. Louise said: 'I suppose in some ways I'd like her not to be quite so important to me, in some ways... and yet, at the same time, I like having someone there that I can ask sort of things of, or I can look to [...]'. Beth, in comparison, seemed slightly naive about her position as the 'big sister' and its impact on Louise: 'I can't imagine her ever looking up to anybody in particular or you know, don't know. [...] She'd never dote after us [...][addressing her brother]'.

What are the ethical implications of analysing agreements and disagreements that are alternately voiced and silenced in multiple perspectives on relationships? Beth and Louise's narratives raise ethical issues to do with preserving the sisters' anonymity—from each other and the reader—in representing emotions and power relations in their relationship in a way which the narratives in joint interviews do not. How could I respect the privacy of emotional ties and hold on to valuable insights about power relations, for example, in the context of changing relationships and changing subjectivities? I turn to this question next as I consider the practical ethical strategies that I adopted. These enabled me to safeguard some elements of confidentiality and anonymity rather than others in the writing up process.

Strategies for disguising anonymity and preserving confidentiality

Talking to companionate sisters such as Beth and Louise, Roxanne and Madonna separately presented difficulties about respecting the anonymity of each narrative and interpreting multiple accounts of relationships. The issue of anonymity in representing emotions and power relations mirrors the intricacies of verbalizing these in sisters' lived relationships. The recurring dilemma concerned the question of loyalty to participants. What guidelines do feminist research principles offer for guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' narratives?

I was influenced by some guidelines which sisters themselves adopted in their own relationships. I respected confidentiality between related sisters by not disclosing any information from one woman to another (Mauthner 1998b). I tried to act as a blank slate and not reveal any prior information obtained in subsequent interviews. Several women described 'rules of disclosure' that operated in their relationships to do with

preserving or revealing secrets and confidences among sisters. Similarly, these rules applied during the research process. Rosemary (30) was explicit about not wanting Alice (36) knowing what she had divulged to me:

> *Rosemary*: What time are you seeing Alice?
> *MM*: I'm seeing her at 3.30 when she comes home from...
> *Rosemary*: That will be interesting, I'll ring her later [laughs]. Does she get to know any of what I've told you?
> *MM*: No, that's what I want to say because I've done this before although not usually on the same day.
> *Rosemary*: Because that could cause friction couldn't it? [laughs]

This dilemma is about preserving the women's identity from their sisters, when they have disclosed information in the interview, which remains secret in their private lives.[7] Representing the women's narratives required selectivity in order to respect their anonymity without losing any insights from the analysis. Data about Beth and Louise's relationship illustrated the impossible task of describing emotions and power relations while still preserving confidentiality between them. At the most, I could assure participants anonymity rather than confidentiality.

I adopted five strategies for disguising participants' identity. Occasionally, I quoted from the women not even using even their pseudonym. Second, I also changed certain socio-demographic details. A third strategy was to illustrate a theme where confidentiality among sisters was an issue—rifts and disjunctions, transitions, life and trigger events leading to disappointment or conflict—through specific, though unattributed examples.

A fourth strategy was to write up some case studies about women leaving out comments by their sisters—this produced a deliberately one-sided version, for example with a set of four sisters whom I interviewed separately. I presented material from Jeanne's (45) narrative as a case study about her ambivalence towards the *positioned* discourse that she felt locked into. I then explored the tie between her two sisters, Madonna (31) and Roxanne (39), independently of their bond with Jeanne. I did not draw directly on their sister Leonie's (48) narrative in these case studies though I illustrated my use of the auto/biographical method with her account of her teenage working class femininity. The fifth ethical strategy concerned my choice of transcript extracts. I selected statements where participants talked in the first person, 'I was . . .' in order to express negativity, regret or sadness rather than those in the third person about a sister, 'she's . . .'. All these strategies ensured a measure of anonymity.

These ethical dilemmas reflect the tension between 'hanging on to' real lives and experiences and constructing them as artifacts for public consumption. While the feminist researcher's task is to ensure that the public product remains as faithful to the participants' experiences as possible, inevitably the end result while 'providing theoretical accounts continuous with experience' (Stanley 1993: 201) reflects the researcher's interpretation and construction of the narratives. Other aspects of the research which made these dilemmas problematic relate to: the nature of the material itself, emotional and private on the one hand, and concerning

power relations between women as sisters on the other—a little discussed topic; a hidden and socially invisible relationship; a relationship replete with its own silenced and suppressed stories; and the personal echoes for me as sister myself.

Reflexivity: the researcher's 'I'

In addition to my ethical preoccupation with how to analyse in an ethical way the multiple perspectives of relationships, my second methodological concern was my own reflexivity. Reflexivity is a central tenet of a feminist methodology whereby the researcher documents the production of knowledge and locates herself in this process for '. . . the subjectivity of the researcher herself is part of research production' (Harrison and Lyon 1993: 105). Elsewhere, I examined dilemmas of reflexivity during fieldwork and recounted my attempts to locate myself as researcher (Mauthner 1998b). I veered from detachment to self-disclosure in the way that I engaged with the women; the research was also personal for me as a sister and I wanted to maintain the privacy of my own sister relationship (Song 1998, Hey 2000). A sense of detachment distanced me from the women, and self-disclosure, as prescribed in several feminist texts (Oakley 1981, Fontana and Frey 1994) made me feel vulnerable.

Towards the end of fieldwork I felt comfortable enough to reveal simultaneously the feminist aspect of the research topic and research process to the participants (Thorne 1980). I disclosed some personal information, and sought to address the draining emotional effect of the research on me. I ceased to alternate between distancing and self-disclosure during the interviews as I found a middle-ground position that took account of my own subjectivity. I gradually adopted a form of controlled self-disclosure: I only revealed selective information about myself if the participants asked questions and then kept my replies to a minimum (Edwards 1993, Sharpe 1994). I felt comfortable with this position as it allowed me to talk about myself as researcher and maintain my own privacy as sister.

In retrospect, it is perplexing that, as a feminist researcher, I did not reflect more in advance of the fieldwork about the amount of personal disclosure that I could tolerate. I struggled with this issue in each research encounter until I discovered a way through my dilemma. Eventually, I achieved a balance between revelations about my sister and researcher identities. Although this is a continuous challenge for all researchers investigating intimate topics, in the *Kindred Spirits* study, it was compounded by the personal method of recruitment that I employed. Indeed, the participants and I knew one or more of the gate-keepers who had brought us together. Contacting participants through snowballing added to the personal privacy dilemma as it might have ruptured my relationships with these intermediaries as well as the sister relationships.

Applying the principle of reflexivity during data analysis raised a dilemma related to those encountered during fieldwork to do with privacy and silence. These all involve the issue of documenting and making

visible steps and decisions taken during data analysis. This dilemma concerns the impact of personal experience during the research and the role of the researcher's 'I'. I want to make visible in a limited way the knowledge and experience which I as researcher and sister brought to the research (Strauss and Corbin 1990), what Miller (1995) calls the 'autobiography of the question', and Maynard (1994: 16) and Stanley (1987: 30)—the 'intellectual autobiography' of researchers. For these thinkers, 'intellectual autobiography' forms an integral part of the research and writing stages. Others call for the researcher to be reflexive during data analysis by: acknowledging the specific theoretical perspectives adopted; exposing emotions and personal influence; and claiming ownership of and power to mould the final research account (Ribbens 1989, Fontana and Frey 1994, Skeggs 1994).

My ambivalence about wanting to preserve my own privacy while asking others to make semi-public parts of their experience was a dilemma throughout the study. Placing myself in the research required me to consider the place of personal experience in the accounts of private *lived cultures* that we—the women and I—produced during the study. The knowledge produced resulted, implicitly and partially, from a joint activity between researcher and myself that occurred in the interviews.

In several interviews, I exchanged personal details about myself as sister—my relationship with my sister, reflections, and experiences—and acknowledged commonalties with the participants: this exchange contributed to my thinking throughout. This dialogue facilitated the interviewing process. In one interview, I exchanged places with a participant when she began to interview me and probed about the effect of the research on me. In another, the woman became concerned about my well-being and commented: 'You've looked quite stressed a couple of times [laughter] you've almost looked as if you've got stomach ache [laughter]!'

Clearly, my own sistering experiences coloured my interpretation of the data: they influenced the way that I listened to the narratives, the patterns that I noticed in the data, and the themes that I pursued. The fact that I shared aspects of the women's biographies meant that my own past and present affected the data analysis (Hey 2000). Hey suggests that elements of sameness and difference shared with participants lead to connection and recognition which play an important role in both rapport and data analysis even if these remain unconscious. Re-visiting the past, she says, is also a way of 'returning to a former self', of reliving these 'moments as embodied rather than as distant memories' of pleasure and pain. It is a way of understanding changes and experiences in our own life. It is also, I would add, a way of examining the minutiae of change which is probably more easily analysed with some detachment from live events.

My researcher's 'I' remained muted in the writing up of the data. This 'I' enabled me to maintain my own privacy as sister and provided a tool which allowed me to conduct the research. What were the analytic costs and effects of this bounded privacy during the interpretation of the data? What were the reverberations of this silenced 'I'? I leave these questions unanswered for now. These silences are among several absences in the final research products.

Selective reciprocity and exchange: a participatory methodology and authorial control

Feminists have argued about the importance of 'reflexivity' in order to document the subjective aspects of the research process, the decisions taken at each stage, and the omnipresent power relations influencing these. Describing in detail the process of reflexivity or being explicit about the 'I' illustrates the complexity of making decisions where power relations are involved. I consider next a second dilemma to do with reflexivity regarding interpretation and the production of knowledge. How did the principle of reciprocity or exchange (Ribbens 1989), an important one in feminist research practice to do with giving interviewees something back in return for their participation, influence the role of my researcher's 'I' in the way that collective knowledge was produced? How could I reconcile the tension between my participatory standpoint methodology during fieldwork, in contrast with my authorial control over the production of knowledge during data analysis? I resolved this tension only partially. I ended up offering the participants selective reciprocity rather than an equal exchange.

Who was the knowledge produced for? The ethical implications of representing and making this knowledge public were addressed in the previous section. A recurrent issue in feminist research concerns the process of knowledge production when interpreting women's lives. A corresponding dilemma is how to avoid setting up a power hierarchy between those whose experiences are being researched and those 'who know' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 1997). The research product emerges through a process of analysis that may not be visible at a purely 'experiential level' (Stanley and Wise 1990: 24). Using theory to make sense of experience, while necessary for producing sociology inevitably distances the participants from the research product. This distance stems in part from the power relations embedded in the research process itself (Wolf 1996).

In the *Kindred Spirits* study knowledge was created from the participants' lived experience and emotions, and from the narratives which they produced about these. Knowledge about the women's lives and relationships was created in a number of locations—by some of the women, prior to the interview. Hazel (34), Alice (36) and Carmen (47)—all unrelated—had reflected on their experiences before the interview and constructed their narratives practically single-handed. Alice described her feelings of guilt and the tugs and sense of duty bound up in the positioned discourse, after she, as the second in a family of five sisters, and the eldest Eliza (38) left home. She said: 'So Eliza and I were all sort of surrogate parents really and so when I left home and um Eliza had left home as well, I felt, you know, I felt a bit guilty, I suppose, sort of deserting my children [laughter] sort of thing!'

Some of the women's prior analysis of their own experience and production, as in Alice's case, of fluent narratives, had significant implications for conceptualising subjectivity as 'active and agentic' (Maynard 1995: 274). Collective knowledge was also created by some of

the women and myself jointly in the interview. In these cases, analysis occurred during the interviews, an illustration of how data collection and analysis overlap. Knowledge was further generated by myself as sister and researcher prior to and during the research process, what I refer to as the 'I' in the analysis.

The main dilemma was how to respect the women's privacy and my own, while retaining and making public insights from the data. I largely kept complete control of the process of analysis, which is the traditional research model, which to some extent goes against the feminist grain of involving participants according to the principle of 'reciprocity'. There was little exchange with participants during the data analysis stage, except for snippets of information and insights about our experiences shared in some interviews. Post-fieldwork however, the process of data analysis was an individual not a collective one.

Although some researchers return to participants with interview tapes, transcripts or written analysis attempting to break down researcher-subject hierarchies, I did not.[8] I decided, like Chase (1996) who researched work narratives of school heads, not to give the participants any editorial control over my interpretations. My relationship with the participants did not take the form of an 'exchange' (Berik 1996: 69), at the most we exchanged experiences and some knowledge of sistering. I also offered a research summary describing the main findings at the end of the study. Berik (1996) reflecting on her research as a feminist with women carpet weavers in rural Turkey does not consider the absence of an 'exchange' between participants and researcher—intervening in order to improve their working conditions, for example—as unethical.

As I exited the field, I tried to leave the relationships as intact as I had found them. The women expressed mixed feelings about their involvement, with some more positive and enthusiastic than others. Clearly, the effect of participation in the research on their sister relationships was difficult to ascertain and beyond the scope of the study. Out of respect and sensitivity for complex personal ties, my aim was to safeguard these and adopt a formal position of non-intervention (Berik 1996). Unlike other researchers (Cotterill 1992, Lieblich 1996, Hey 1997, Stacey 1988) I decided, after leaving the field, not to pursue further active contact with the participants apart from the few whom I met again in my social networks. On these occasions, I did not discuss the research with them in any detail. After I renewed contact with them and sent out the research summary I did not hear back from any of them.

Conclusion

This article extends aspects of the debate in feminist methodology about conducting ethical and reflexive research by highlighting a research context in which some aspects of feminist orthodoxy do not easily apply. The method of analysis based on grounded theory, case studies and auto/biography was outlined. It raised several ethical and methodological dilemmas encountered in researching sistering. These surfaced during data

analysis when interpreting narratives of changing relationships and changing subjectivities and representing these when working with feminist principles of ethics and reflexivity.

The repercussion of going public with material about dyadic and triadic ties is an on-going dilemma when representing sensitive family narratives. Part of the difficulty in the *Kindred Spirits* study stemmed from examining not only women's experiences of their relationships with their sisters but, in addition, exploring the webs of ties that women as sisters were involved in from their multiple perspectives. Analysing these narratives raised questions about how to address sisters' varying degrees of disclosure and their voiced and silenced agreements and disagreements in their separate and individual interviews. These dilemmas concerning confidentiality and anonymity were further complicated by my snowballing method of accessing participants, and my ambiguous role as both 'insider', as sister myself, and as researcher or 'outsider' in the case of women who revealed information to me previously undisclosed to their kin.

The partial resolution of these dilemmas at times necessitated adopting different strategies than those usually suggested as good feminist practice. I adopted three strategies in order to address these ethical and methodological issues. I preserved anonymity rather than confidentiality in written research products. I offered participants greater reciprocity in the production of knowledge during rather than after fieldwork. And I made visible in a limited way the influence of the researcher's 'I' in the process of interpretation. As a consequence, it is the intellectual rather than the emotional aspects of this knowledge production that are the most visible.

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Notes

1. Postmodern ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault and Derrida's post-structuralism have had a considerable impact on feminist theorising. I use the term post-structuralism rather than postmodernism, although the terms are often used interchangeably, in order to distinguish between the work of postmodern writers such as Lacan, Lyotard and Baudrillard and the post-structuralism of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault which has been far more influential on feminist theory (Maynard 1995).

2. This is a way of distinguishing between method, methodology, epistemology and ontology in the research process.
3. Whereas Crapanzano (1984) distinguishes between 'life histories', a response to a request from an outsider, and 'autobiographies', accounts originating with the narrator, Blair *et al.* (1995) distinguish between life-history, which is delivered orally, and auto/biography or the story of one's own life or a written account of someone else's.
4. One confusion about the term 'auto/biographical work' is whether it refers to either the researcher or the participant. As proponents of this approach stress, it refers to both and especially to the idea that both the autobiography and biography of each are entertwined and inseparable (Stanley 1992), hence the slash in the term.
5. Steedman (1989) and Walkerdine (1990) use auto/biography to explore subjectivity in a social context and critique merely chronological accounts.
6. See Evans (1993); Ribbens (1993); Steedman (1992); Kippax *et al.* (1990).
7. A linked dilemma was the presence in the study, through their sisters' narratives, of women who had declined to take part in the research. In the original study, I marked the names of these 'involuntary participants' in italics.
8. See Luff (1999); Hey (1997); Lieblich (1996); Skeggs (1994); Frazer (1988).

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