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Siblings, Stories and the Self: the sociological significance of young people's sibling relationships

Dr Katherine Davies

Abstract

This article explores the significance of intra-generational ties with siblings to sociological understandings of the formation of social identity and sense of self in young people's lives. Drawing on data from a qualitative study exploring young people's sense of who they are and who they have the potential to become in the future, it is demonstrated that young people's identities are often constructed in relation to how they are similar to or different from their sibling(s). Literature expounding the role of stories in the construction of the self is used to suggest that the comparing that is at the heart of the relational construction of sibling identities can occur through the telling and re-telling of family stories within the politics and power dynamics of existing relationships. The article concludes by suggesting that sibling relationships be conceptualised as part of a web of relationships in which young people are embedded.

Keywords

Sibling relationships-self-identity-family stories-relationality-narrative

Introduction

Sibling relationships, be they with full, half or step siblings, can be amongst our most long lasting social relationships (Allan, 1979) with the potential to influence and shape us throughout the life course. Furthermore, being a sibling means being one in a series with individuality often constructed in relation to the sibship (sibling group) as a whole (Edwards et al, 2006) through the comparing of siblings. This article demonstrates that sibling relationships can be a fundamental part of how our identities and sense of self are formed in relation to others. Although social theory has tended to focus inter-generationally on the role of others, particularly parents, in shaping who we are and who we can become in the future, it is the lateral nature of sibling relationships that renders them so important for shaping the self. This article indicates how the comparability of siblings emphasises similarities and differences between individuals in a sibship so that the self is constructed in relation to siblings. It is argued that the influence of siblings on young people's sense of self/identity spans beyond the immediate sibship through the telling and re-telling of stories within the dynamics of wider familial relationships. The article concludes by suggesting that the significance of sibling relationships be incorporated into sociological understandings of self/identity through a conceptualisation of individuals as embedded in webs of relationships with others.

The significance of being a brother or sister is reflected in cultural representations of siblingship where there is something of a fascination with the similarities and differences between siblings who are often depicted as opposites. Think for example of the fictional characters of Bart and Lisa in the popular cartoon series 'The Simpsons'ⁱ who are portrayed

as having oppositional personality traits, levels of intelligence and social skills. Focusing upon what is different about siblings encourages us to make comparisons between them and to conceptualise them in relation to one another. Furthermore, siblings are often heralded as a fitting test case for thinking through the formation of the self, with the identification of similarities and differences between siblings prompting debates about 'nature versus nurture'. The potential emotional effects of such comparisons is also the subject of much media intrigue and sibling relationships are often understood as being particularly imbued with rivalry or jealousy. This was evident in media coverage of the 2010 UK Labour Party leadership campaigns of brothers Ed and David Miliband which included headlines such as, 'A tale of brotherly love: when siblings fall out and try to make up (Bennett, 2010) and the listing of infamous fraternal rivals in the headline, 'Romulus and Remus, Prospero and Antonio, David and Ed' (Higgins, 2010).

Despite this public fascination, sociology as a discipline has tended to focus on the role of parents in shaping who we are through socialisation. This is not to suggest that siblings have been overlooked entirely and there is growing empirical interest in sibling relationships amongst some sociologists. However, there remains an emphasis upon the significance of intergenerational transmission in the formation of the self and resultantly the role of *intra*-generational transmission remains largely unaccounted for in sociological theory. Think for example of Mead's (1934) theory of the formation of the relational self and Bourdieu's (1990) thesis on the inculcation of habitus, both of which have influenced much sociological thinking today and imply that the traits, tendencies and characteristics that make up the self largely pass *downwards* in the family with parents seen as crucial in both accounts. Of course the significance of intergenerational relationships, particularly with parents, should not be understated and as Brannen et al argue, 'Children's lives are lived within the structural context of power in which adults regulate children's bodies and minds' (2000:178). However, it seems odd that siblings, who often share the same home and parents (and accordingly a very similar habitus or socialisation environment), have taken such a 'back seat' in sociological theory.ⁱⁱ Indeed, the study of sibling relationships has been largely dominated by psychology (Punch, 2008).

Using empirical data from a qualitative project exploring young people's understandings of who they are and who they think they can become in the future, this article addresses this oversight by demonstrating how being and having brothers or sisters can have a profound impact upon young people's sense of self and the formation of their social identities. The article addresses issues of both self (understood in terms of processes of self-identification – our own sense of who we are, formed in relation to others) and identity (understood as a form of categorization – how others see us) (Jenkins, 2008). Self-identification and categorization are fundamentally relational (May, 2013) and in order to theorise the role of siblings in these processes, the article draws upon recent advancements in thinking about kinship and relatedness which conceptualise individuals as embedded within webs of relationships spanning space and time. Bengtson et al suggest that familial relationships be conceptualised in terms of 'linked lives', emphasising 'the interconnectedness of lives, particularly as linked across the generations by bonds of kinship.' (2012:10) Building on this, Smart (2007) advocates the concept of embeddedness to help researchers conceptualise individual selves as formed through relationships with others - past and present, 'real' and imagined. Carsten's (2004) focus on 'relatedness' and Mason's (2004) emphasis on

'relationality' similarly conceptualise individual lives as inherently relational. Although not explicitly discussing siblings, this body of work moves beyond the parent-child dichotomy to emphasise the role of a whole host of others in shaping self-identification, often pointing to the telling of family stories and the sharing of memories in these processes (Thompson, 1993; Misztal, 2003; Smart, 2007).

Siblings in Sociology

Despite the lack of attention to lateral kin in sociological theories of self/identity, sibling relationships have received a passing mention in classic sociological studies such as Young and Willmott's (1957) ethnography of family and kinship and Jackson and Marsden's (1962) study of working class children's experiences of education. Finch and Mason's (1993) study of family negotiations also provides an insight into the complexities of sibling relationships. A number of researchers have more recently investigated everyday sibling interactions, applying a social constructionist approach. Punch for example demonstrates how children's sibling relationships are 'played out in the backstage conditions of shared knowledge, time and space' (2008:342) and argues that relationships with siblings are less defined by fixed, generational power differentials than those with parents (2005). In a further analysis of data from the same study, McIntosh and Punch also indicate how birth order and age hierarchies are 'subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated' (2009:63) within children's everyday sibling interactions. Brannen et al (2000) similarly point to the negotiated nature of sibling birth order and Mauthner (2005) highlights the dynamics of shifting subjectivities within sister relationships. Edwards et al's (2006) study of sibling relationships in middle childhood combines social constructionist and psychodynamic approaches, identifying the negotiated meanings and everyday ambivalences of being/having a sibling whilst also attending to social structures. This work was continued under the Timescapes programme of research (Edwards and Weller, 2011) where the evolution of gendered sibling relationships and the dynamics of sibling care and support were explored through time. In exploring exchanges of sibling support at school, work by Holland (2008), Hadfield et al (2006) and Gillies and Lucey (2006) also highlights the ambivalent nature of many sibling relationships, which can be highly conflictual whilst also characterised by emotional support. Here my focus is less on the everyday lived realities of interactions between siblings and more on how individual young people think about themselves in relation to their siblings. However, these detailed and insightful studies offer a powerful reminder that the narratives of self presented in this article are borne out of the particular everyday knowledge of one's siblings which comes from growing up in close proximity (McIntosh and Punch, 2009).

Work exploring the significance of similarities and differences between siblings provides valuable clues as to how siblings might influence processes of self-identification and categorization for individual young people. Edwards et al (2006) for example, point to the centrality of sameness and difference in the language of siblingship and the effect of this upon the ways young people construct their sense of self:

Sameness and difference, then, are two of the key intersubjective notions that children and young people use when describing and reflecting upon their own sense of self, notions that are closely tied up with feelings about individuality and being part of a group, belonging, connection and separation, dependence and independence. (2006: 38)

In her anthropological account of kinship in a Malay fishing community, Carsten (1997) similarly identifies the concepts of identity, similarity and difference as fundamental to sibling relationships as well as being representative of reproduction and, as such, kinship itself:

Siblingship is both about resemblance and identity and about difference. Simultaneously individual and multiple, it is the process by which things start the same, multiple entities in one body, but become different and separate: bodies within bodies. (1997:106)

Song (2010) also explores issues of sameness and difference, pointing to ways that 'mixed race' siblings can be constructed as ethnically different within family scripts due to identifying features such as friends, cultural taste and appearance. The importance of physical appearance to some families in Song's research introduces a sense of embodiment to understandings of sibling similarities and differences.

This attention to the impact of sibling similarities and differences upon processes of self-identification offers clues as to how being and having a sibling can influence the ways in which young people form ideas about who they are and who they might become as a person. It indicates how comparing is central to siblingship, with individuals conceptualised in relation to their sibling(s). In the remainder of this article I draw upon data from a qualitative study of young people's sense of how they are 'turning out' to demonstrate how identities can be constructed in relation to siblings within families. I suggest that these relational identities can be inculcated through the telling and re-telling of family stories within the politics and power dynamics of family relationships.

The study

This article is based upon a study investigating how young people make sense of the sort of person they are and can become in the future (in terms of their characteristics, appearance, talents, intelligence, humour and so on). The role of young people's relationships were key and the study paid particular attention to how school peers, friends and siblings influenced their ideas about themselves. Parents are of course hugely important to these processes and, although they were not researched as a particular facet of the study, they were obliquely present throughout the research and their role in the creation of sibling identities are discussed at points throughout this article.

The study comprised 26 qualitative interviews with 41 young people (17 boys, 24 girls) between the ages of 11 and 15 (including single interviews and interviews in pairs and groups of three) as well as 9 focus groups with 75 young people (31 girls, 41 boys) in the same age range. Participants were recruited in schools and youth clubs in the North West of England. All focus groups were conducted in secondary schools with interviews carried out in schools, youth clubs and homes between 2007 and 2008. The 26 qualitative interviews centred upon personal narratives and were used to explore young people's subjectivities and experiences. The 9 focus group discussions were designed to explore young people's opinions and theories about how identity can be constructed in a more abstract way.

Although there were some cases in the project when interviews were conducted with a young person's sibling or friend, or when parents contributed to discussions; the primary focus was on young people's own perspectives of how their relationships influenced how they were 'turning out' rather than on attempting to map these influences through a more networked

approach. However, those occasions when others participated in the research provided valuable insights into everyday interactions and this article draws upon one such interview interaction (involving the interviewer, young person and their mother) in discussing the role of wider family dynamics in the construction of sibling identities.

Young people were recruited from three schools (one in a deprived area of a North West city, one in an affluent locale but with a catchment area incorporating both affluent and deprived areas and one in a predominantly lower middle class suburban area) and three youth clubs (one based in an affluent rural area, one serving young people on a deprived housing estate and one in a city centre location attracting children from diverse social backgrounds). Thus the sample contains children from a range of class backgrounds. However, in many cases it has not been possible to make definitive comments about young people's social class because, although all participants were asked to provide details of their parents' occupation, many were not in possession of this information. The sample is also ethnically mixed, with focus groups containing 27 non-white participants and the interviews 9. It is likely that the effect of siblings upon young people's identities can vary according to ethnic and cultural background (see Mand, 2006 for a discussion of siblingship in South Asian families). However, due to the small number of participants in each ethnic group, it has not been possible to tease out such differences in this study. The sample includes young people with complex arrays of sibling relationships including full, step and half siblings, siblings who live in the same and different homes, those who can be said to have 'grown up' together and apart and other relatives and friends who are understood to be 'like' siblings in various ways. Attention is drawn to these intricacies where relevant throughout the following discussion but young people have not been categorised according to their position in the structure of the sibship due to the complexity and fluidity of these categories. The sample contains very few young people who do not have a sibling and a discussion of the experiences of being an 'only child' are beyond the scope of this article.

Talking to young people about their lives in this way generated data depicting aspects of self/identity which were significant to them. Rather than the lengthy reflections which can characterise qualitative data with adults, young people in the study often spoke in seemingly light-hearted ways about general aspects of their 'personality' and appearance. This article demonstrates how such discussions provide profound insights into what matters to young people when they are making sense of who they are. The data was analysed using both case study and thematic analysis. Case studies were used to understand processes and relationships and thematic analysis explored the spread of certain issues across the data set. The two sorts of analysis were used in conjunction, informing one another throughout the analytical process and this article draws upon both. Data identified through the thematic analysis of all interviews and focus groups is used to provide examples of the various ways in which young people spoke of their identities as constructed in relation to their sibling(s) before a case study is examined in depth to explore *how* these constructions were formed within a particular family. Although the narratives presented in this article are inherently gendered, the analysis identified no definitive differences in the ways boys and girls talked of the effect of their sibling relationships upon themselves beyond differences in the activities and forms of interactions in which brothers and sisters engage, which have been discussed elsewhere (Edwards et al, 2005).

The Relational Construction of Sibling Identity

Analysis of the data demonstrated that participants' ideas about who they are and who they can become in the future are often formed in relation to their sibling(s). This can occur through young people making comparisons between themselves and their brothers/sisters as well as through comparisons made by others. These comparisons are embedded in relationships that span beyond the sibship, with other people appearing central to the identification of similarities and differences and participants often reproducing existing family narratives in making their own comparisons.

Making comparisons: siblings and self-identification

When asked to describe themselves and their siblings (in terms of traits, tendencies, talents, appearance and so on), most participants recited numerous ways in which they were similar or different to their siblings in terms of 'personality', appearance and education. Many respondents compared themselves to their siblings without being prompted to do so but what is striking about those who were specifically asked to make comparisons is that most required little or no time to consider their response, suggesting an existing narrative surrounding sibling similarities and differences which participants were able to readily draw upon (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). Take the following examples:

Olivia: Well, the two twins, Matthew and Kevin, Matthew's like me, but Kevin is really like Jonathan. They, he goes off in strops, he had a really bad tantrum today.

Richard: I'm similar to my sister but not to my brother. My brother's more like hyperactive...

Reece: I think I'm the same, well my sister loves sport as well and I like sport and she's ...like pretty loud and confident and I'm loud and confident.

Personal characteristics such as 'moodiness', 'activeness', 'sportiness' or 'loudness' are significant aspects of how young people think about themselves and others and were key to how participants made sense of themselves in relation to their siblings. Differences were particularly salient to the construction of the self within a sibship and traits such as 'loudness' or 'sportiness' were often applied through mutually exclusive, oppositional labels. For example, young people commonly referred to a naughty or good 'one' in terms of sibling behaviour (particularly at school). As Nick states of his older sisters, 'Er Sara outside..., she was like the good one. Rebecca, she's the really naughty one. Rebecca got excluded about, I think it's 27 times.' It is significant that there is rarely a good two or three when it comes to describing sibling identities in common parlance. Take the following quote from Sadia:

Sadia: [discussing her eldest sister] She's really argumentative. She wouldn't like give in. Erm, she likes going out and just being by herself most of the time.

...

Interviewer: What about your other sister?

Sadia: Erm, she compromises us both. She does like, she mainly does all the work at home. She helps me out as well with my dad and everything else. She's like the good one.

...

Interviewer: So if she's the good one, what one are you would you say?

Sadia: Erm, I think I'm the naughty one...

(age 14)

The way Sadia describes one sister as 'compromising' the other less helpful and well behaved sisters is illuminating in that it suggests an understanding that, when taken together, the characteristics of the three sisters form a well balanced whole. Sadia is the 'naughty one' *because* her sisters are not and this identity is of course also constructed within the complex gendered dynamics of these relationships.

Thus it seems that in narrating themselves and their sibling(s) in terms of being the naughty, quiet, good or clever 'one', young people are constructing their own characteristics in relation to the sibship as a whole. These ways that young people narrated their own and their siblings' identities points to the centrality of sameness and difference in sibling relationships (as identified by Edwards et al, 2006) with individuality constructed in relation to the sibling group. As well as constructing these comparisons around aspects of 'character', it was also common for participants to narrate themselves in terms of how they are similar or different in appearance to their siblings.ⁱⁱⁱ This is reminiscent of Song's (2010) work, where the importance of similarities and differences in appearance amongst 'mixed race' siblings were fundamental to the construction of sense of self and of ethnic identity. For example, discussing her brother, Lois states that 'everyone says I look like him in the face, I've got his nose, I've got his eyes, I've got his lips' and Poppy sums up the differences between her and her sister by relating their appearance to that of their parents: 'I look like my dad, and my sister looks like my mum when my mum was little.' In the following example Georgia cites physical attractiveness and build as a way of differentiating herself from her half sister and of explaining their differing levels of social success at school:

Georgia: Erm, my brother's, like, sort of the good looking boy out of everybody else sort of thing, except he looks like my dad...Actually, he looks like me. My sister..., she's quite short and, erm, she's like pretty big, so she's a bit different to me cos of that sort of thing...so she's obviously a bit different to me at school.

(age 11)

Here Georgia is conceptualising the appearance of her siblings in relation to the sibship as a whole in a similar way to Sadia's description of being the 'naughty one' described earlier. The complexities of family resemblances and theories of who takes after who and how and why things get passed on in families are clearly woven into Georgia's narrative of the relational construction of her siblings' selves at school. She provides these categorisations with an explanatory history and indicates the entwining of physicality and character in the construction of sibling similarities and differences.

It was also common for educational achievement to be understood relationally, with younger siblings in the sample often measuring their own success, or lack thereof, in terms of their perceived similarities to and differences from older siblings who had gone through the education system before. Take the following example from Francesca, whose struggles to

adapt to secondary school are compounded by the fact that her older sister, Anna, had 'settled in' quicker:

Francesca: my mum ... doesn't really want me to move schools and ... she says that, 'This is how it was with Anna in Year 7' and, and, like, and 'when she first came to a new school', but the thing is, Anna, Anna settled in at, like, the end of Year 7 and I've still not, it's just like...
(age 12)

This emphasis on similarities and differences between siblings at school was often experienced as placing pressure on (mainly) younger siblings. As Ethan (12) states, 'both my brothers have been head boy, and they've got like the best marks in the year...so I'm pretty, like, got loads of pressure on me.' In the following focus group discussion, Tom describes the pressures and anxieties he experiences as a result of having a 'clever' older sister:

Tom: I think I'm never gonna be as clever as me sister but I don't want my mum and dad to like, you know, think I should erm...what's the word?

Sofia: You're not good enough?

Tom: Yeah think I'm not good enough and like try and make me as good as her when I know I can't so it's annoying really. It scares me when I see all the work she's doing, I think 'I've got to do that one day'. It's annoying.

(age: 13-14)

These anxieties and pressures are examples of how practices of comparing and the construction of the self in relation to one's sibling(s) can fuel the ambivalences and feelings of both closeness and distance that often characterise sibling relationships. Young people's progression through the life course is often tied to that of their sibling and the quotations above indicate how older siblings can act as benchmarks against which their younger brothers and sisters make sense of their own experiences and achievements. Despite McIntosh and Punch's (2009) finding that birth order is negotiated and contested within sibling interactions in the home, it appears that age hierarchies can be experienced as particularly static in terms of educational achievement where young people are categorised according to age and where the measurement of individual performance at particular ages invites comparison.

Although young people are often compared to a wide range of others, particularly their friends and peers, the relational nature of the comparing that occurs between siblings renders it unique. Indeed, although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article, the data indicates that participants often compared themselves to their friends. However, although significant, these comparisons were not perpetuated by others to the same degree as those with siblings which were deeply embedded in family politics. In the following section I examine the comparisons made by others in more detail.

Being compared: siblings and categorization

In addition to identifying similarities and differences themselves, participants also referred to the ways others commonly compared them to their siblings, categorizing them and constructing their identity in relation to their brothers/sisters. This was evident in the way Francesca's mum compared her to her sister Anna in the earlier quotation and in Tom's fears that he would 'never be as clever as me sister'. Participants were also compared to their

sibling(s) by teachers, a practice that was commonly perceived as irritating and, in some cases, unethical. Take the following examples:

Tom: Some of the teachers who've taught [sic] my sister throughout the whole years say 'why can't you just be like your sister?' Cos she never talks or whatever and I'm always talking and you just get annoyed and they try and make me the same as my sister.

Kyle: My brother's not that good at school so they [the teachers] thought that I wouldn't be that good either but I actually am.

Farhana: I think they [the teachers] tended like, 'Oh your older sister was like a lot chatty you know you seem quite quiet.'

It is the lateral nature of siblingship that invites such comparisons. McIntosh and Punch (2009) are critical of the use of the word 'lateral' to describe sibling relationships because it implies an equality which ignores power differentials between siblings. However, sibling relationships can be seen as lateral in the sense that siblings are often of the same generation and experience more readily comparable education systems, job markets and cultural signifiers than, say, children and their parents, thus tempting people to look across a generation and make comparisons. This comparing is encouraged by the fact that siblings often reach developmental and educational milestones in close succession and, for parents in particular, their other children are likely to be their main points of reference when thinking about how a particular child is 'turning out'. Furthermore, as Carsten identifies, full siblings are unique in that they 'start the same' before becoming 'different and separate' (1997:106). Thus, comparability is inherently part of siblingship since birth. This comparability was something that young people in the study were particularly reflexive about and all focus groups contained discussions of *how* this comparing can occur. Take the following discussion where participants debate the pattern of these comparing practices:

Interviewer: What are the advantages and disadvantages of being the youngest do you think?

Participant1: (inaudible) pressure to be like your older brother or sister.

Interviewer: Right. So this pressure ... is that worse if you've got an older brother or sister?

Participant1: Probably cos it's like you should be more like them.

Participant2: Yeah but not always cos the oldest is always compared to the parents.

Interviewer: Do you think?

Participant2: Yeah, because there's no-one else.

...

Participant1: Yeah, but the younger child can be compared with the older one. So it's a lot like closer.

...

Participant3: Sometimes the younger children are compared to the adults though aren't they?

Participant4: To the parents.

(age 14-15)

This quote conveys the idea that there are patterns (even rules) concerning who is compared to whom in families which relate to family structures (birth order and generational positionings), even if there is little agreement about what these patterns are. Indeed, most of the examples cited thus far have indicated the role of others in the construction of sibling relational identities, from the ways participants appeared to be reproducing well rehearsed

narratives when reciting the similarities and differences between themselves and their siblings to the specific references to teachers' and parents' habits of comparing siblings. The comparisons of others were generally readily adopted by young people and often seemed to form a taken for granted aspect of their kinship knowledge. This is epitomised in Lois's use of the phrase 'everyone says' when discussing her physical likeness to her brother in the aforementioned quotation.

This section of the article has demonstrated some of the ways in which young people construct their own sense of self and are categorized by others in relation to their siblings, as part of a larger whole. Furthermore, it appears that even those comparisons that are made by young people themselves are done so from within wider familial relationships, with the reproduction of rehearsed narratives common in the data. Thus young people's sibling relationships are firmly embedded within a wider network of relationships (Smart, 2007). But how are these narratives of similarity and difference perpetuated and how do they relate to wider familial power dynamics? In the following section I turn to work exploring the social significance of stories in order to start to theorise *how* these relational sibling identities can be constructed.

The Role of Stories in the Construction of Sibling Identities

We are, it seems, *homo narrans*: humankind the narrators and story tellers. Society itself may be seen as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work. (Plummer, 1995: 5, original emphasis)

According to Plummer, the telling of stories is central to social life and forms the basis of the social world around us. Indeed, a number of scholars have identified the key role that stories play in the construction of identity. Lawler (2008) and Gubrium and Holstein (2000) for example, point to the effect of stories on individuals, with both arguing that identity is created through narrative. The self, according to Gubrium and Holstein 'is not only something we are, but an object we *actively* construct and live by' (2000:10, original emphasis) through everyday 'narrative practice' (2000:104).

Important to understandings of stories are the ways they are produced collectively, and as such are subject to the politics and power dynamics of the interpersonal relationships within which they are created. Misztal for example, discusses how memory is constructed communally through the telling of stories in 'mnemonic communities' - 'groups that socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten' (2003:15) –and, as discussed, Song (2010) highlights the role of family scripts in the construction of 'mixed race' siblings' ethnic identities. Thompson (1993) also emphasises how individuals are actually telling 'family' stories in the narratives they (re)produce in qualitative interviews. These stories are passed on in families as a form of social transmission and are part of the context through which individuals make decisions about their future:

Family myths, models, and denials, transmitted within a family system provide for most people part of the context in which their crucial life choices must be made, propelling them into their own individual life paths. (Thompson, 1993:36)

Therefore, stories can be understood as part of how relationality (Mason, 2004) comes to affect individuals and the ways they act upon themselves.

I suggest that the construction, telling and re-telling of stories within families can be seen as a mechanism through which siblings' relational identities can be produced and reproduced. A sense of this was gained in the ways participants reproduced rehearsed narratives when narrating their similarities to and differences from their sibling(s).

Young people have considerable agency in this process and do not simply reproduce the stories of others. Indeed, the data contains examples of young people rejecting others' narratives of similarity and difference or constructing narratives based on their own opinions about their siblings' identities. However, these stories occurred less commonly than those where participants seemed to be reproducing narratives provided by others (usually parents). Take the following example where Britney is discussing her cousin Joseph (who she describes as being 'like' a brother). Although Britney is critical of her mum and uncle for comparing her to Joseph and attempts to reclaim the narrative by pointing to her own unique talents, she ultimately accepts their depiction of Joseph as more intelligent:

Britney: Like I get it a lot cos he's really smart and I'm not. I'm like more of the chatty person. He's the one that concentrates and gets down, buckles down. And like my mum and uncle Nigel and everyone's like, 'Why can't you be more like Joseph?' and it drives me insane. That really does get on my nerves cos I've had it said to me so much I'm like, 'Well I'm trying: Don't you, don't you listen to what I'm saying?' I'm good at art. He's not. We're different. (age 12)

Furthermore, in those interviews where a parent was present for the conversation it appeared that young people had less power to control the story that was told and were often interrupted or corrected by their parent when they strayed from existing family scripts. Aiden's attempts to describe his siblings are a good example of this. Not only do we see him incorporating his mother's descriptions into his narrative but we see her dictating the sorts of characteristics discussed:

Aiden: Er, Claire, she's, like, really into drawing. David, he's.
Mother: No, what's her personality, like though?
Aiden: Like, happy, as well as me.
Mother: She's very sensitive, isn't she?
Aiden: Like, sensitive as well. David is, like grumpy... Chelsea, erm, she's more like, getting into boyfriends, and stuff like that. And Amy.
Mother: You don't really know, do you? She hasn't lived at home for a while, has she?
Aiden: I don't really know.
(age 12)

Having a parent present during interviews created what Gubrium and Holstein (2008) would term a different 'narrative environment' and the stories generated by these interviews reflect this difference. The ways in which stories are constructed within the dynamics and politics of existing relationships came across clearly in those interviews conducted with a parent present. I now examine a particular interview where parent-child interactions occurred throughout to explore the dynamics of power in these 'narrative environments' in more

detail. By analysing one interview as a whole it is possible to illuminate *how* stories of sibling relational identity can be constructed within complex webs of relationships.

Politics and power in the communal construction of family stories: The case of Mason and his half-brother

The politics and power dynamics at the heart of stories about siblings' relational identities were particularly observable in an interview with Mason (age 13) where his mother, who sat in on most of the interview, interjected during a discussion about similarities and differences between Mason and his half brother. Mason's mother and father are divorced (Mason lives with his mother but sees his father regularly) and he has a half brother, Zack, whom his father had in another relationship. Zack is 1 year older than Mason and attends the same school although they have never lived together. The discussion between Mason, his mother and the interviewer offers insights into how and why a narrative about the differences between Mason and his half-brother might have been collectively constructed:

Mother: And they're [Mason and Zack] completely opposite. You both went to the same school and the teachers can't believe you're brothers.

...

Mason: [We're] really, like, different and they [school teachers] expect me to be like my brother. Like, good at art and not that good at maths and English. But it's the opposite for me; I'm not that good at art, but I'm good at maths and English.

...

Mother: He is [good at art]. But he thinks he's not better than Zack.

Mason: I'm not, I'm not that good though.

Mother: No, but you've done very good.

...

Mother: That's, sorry, that's the only feedback I got when I went to his parent's evening in March, no one could believe that he...they can't believe that Zack is his brother. That's all we got.

Interviewer: (To Mason): What do you think of that?

Mother: And the mannerisms. And I didn't understand at first, and I said, cos he's [Zack] lovely with me, but I'm very strict, well not strict, but I don't have children talking back. So he, when he comes, when he's been here he's lovely with me, but outside that door, he's completely...

In this example a multitude of voices (Mason's, his mother's and the boys' teachers) are contributing to the narrative of Mason and Zack as very different. Mason and his mother are in agreement that the brothers are different but, whereas Mason concentrates on academic differences, his mother focuses on differences in character, mannerisms and, ultimately, upbringing. It is also clear that it is the mother's voice which dominates and the interviewer's attempts to provide Mason with the opportunity to contribute his own take on his differences with Zack largely fail, with his mother jumping in to respond to questions on his behalf. The relative powerlessness of the young people in the story is notable and the dominant role of Mason's mother in the interview interaction provides a 'live' example of her power in shaping the story that is told.

It is likely that Mason's mother has strong motivations for wanting to construct the two brothers as different. First, she seems eager to boost Mason's confidence and ensure he sees himself as equal, if not superior, in intelligence and academic success to Zack (she rejects the

narrative of the brothers having different skills and insists that Mason is also good at art). Second, she is divorced from Mason's father and by constructing his son, Zack, as badly behaved and Mason as so different, she is able to draw attention to differences she perceives between her own and her ex-partner's parenting skills. As such, a narrative is produced constructing the brothers as opposites and creating relational memories about what the boys were like at school and growing up more generally. It is interesting how Mason's mother adds further weight to her claims by drawing upon what teachers have told her as a kind of 'expert' corroboration of the points she makes; narrative devices which strengthen her version of the story.

Although parents were only present in 3 interviews in the study, this example indicates *how* stories about sibling identities can come to be formed within families and the role of power and generation within this, illustrating how stories are embedded within existing relationships and relational histories. Mason and Zack's identities are sedimented into the history of Mason's parents' relationship with one another. Thus, sibling identities can be constructed not only in relation to other siblings in the family but also in relation to complex webs of relationships with and between others formed over time. In other words, young people's lives are fundamentally relational (Carsten, 2004), embedded (Smart, 2007) and linked (Bengtson et al, 2012).

Conclusion

This article has identified how the comparative nature of sibling relationships can render them fundamental to the formation of young people's sense of self/identity. It has been demonstrated that young people can make sense of who they are in relation to how they are similar or different to their siblings and that others often understand them in this way too. These comparisons are perpetuated through the telling and re-telling of stories within families. The nature of the comparisons presented here are bound to differ according to ethnicity, gender, age-gap, class, family form and so on. However, analysing the effects of various groups or configurations was not the primary aim of the project and further research is necessary to explore these complexities.

In emphasising the significance of lateral kin to sociological understandings of the self I do not wish to suggest that vertical relationships are without importance. Indeed, this article has demonstrated that parents in particular can play a key role in the construction of the family stories and memories that can create relational identities. It is also notable that parents seem to possess more power than children here (although this is not to deny that children are agentic social actors in these processes). However, the particular comparability of siblings means they influence identification and self-classification in ways that the existing sociological pre-occupation with intergenerational influence overlooks. I suggest that, in thinking through how processes of socialisation occur, sociologists must widen their gaze to look beyond the prominence of parents in accounts such as those proposed by Mead (1934) and Bourdieu (1990) and ensure that lateral relationships are accounted for.

Furthermore, the analysis of a particular case has indicated how stories about similarities and differences are produced within the dynamics of existing relationships which can span beyond

those of the young people in question in both time and space. This means that to fully appreciate the role of lateral kin in the formation of the self is not a question of simply looking horizontally as well as vertically; although this is important and the sociological 'blind spot' to this direction of transmission means we might have to make a conscious effort to 'look both ways' in our thinking. Rather, it is about conceptualising the self as formed through webs of connection over time. For example, the ways in which Mason's identity has come to be constructed in relation to that of his half brother is embedded within his parents' own relational history.

This is in line with recent advancements in the sociology and anthropology of personal relationships which have seen interest extend beyond a narrow focus on 'the family' (in sociology) and kinship structures (in anthropology) to develop new concepts for exploring the connections between people more profoundly. Concepts of embeddedness (Smart, 2007), relatedness (Carsten, 2004) and relationality (Mason, 2004) help us to understand the role of siblings as part of a web of relationships across time and space, relationships which are integral to the formation of self, identity and to personhood. By conceptualising individuals in this way it is possible to understand the relational formation of the self in a way which looks in all directions for sources of influence, so that hitherto overlooked relationships, such as those with siblings, can become part of mainstream sociological thinking about the social formation of self and identity.

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ⁱ The Simpsons is a long running US cartoon series created by Matt Groening for Fox and aired in over 60 countries. It features a fictional American family including a mother (Marge), father (Homer) and children (Bart, Lisa and Maggie).

ⁱⁱ An exception is Coleman's (1998) work on social capital where the presence of siblings are explicitly acknowledged. However, Coleman remains so fixated on the role of parents in the transmission of capital that, rather than conceptualised as active agents capable of effecting social influence, siblings are said to dilute parentally-provided capital. For critiques see Holland, 2008; Hadfield et al, 2006; Gillies and Lucey, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although not limited to full siblings in this study, these constructions were less common amongst step siblings with no shared genetic heritage.