

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MELANIE L. MAUTHNER, *Sistering: Power and Change in Female Relationships*. Houndmills, U.K. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2002. x + 228 p. Index.

Mauthner makes a useful contribution with *Sistering* by focussing on the sometimes positive, sometime problematic, experience of familial “sistering” and its impact on women’s lives. While the literature has examined how women see themselves as mothers, and the impact of mothers on the socialization of daughters, we know far less about how female siblings shape women’s gendered subjectivity; this book helps to fill this gap. This study is based on the qualitative analysis of interviews with twenty-seven middle-class and ten working-class women, who comprise nineteen sets of sisters with two to four sisters per family unit. In six of the families units, the author was able to interview all the sisters involved, while in the others at least one sister was absent from the interviews. Informants range in age from teenagers to women in their fifties. The book presents a series of case studies of these sets of sisters to illustrate how the experience of being sisters may vary between women, change over time with age and life events, and, most importantly, entail contradictions and tensions.

Mauthner shows us how sistering is socially constructed and is in no way fixed or static because of a particular biological tie. Based on the descriptions of her informants, Mauthner suggests there are four “discourses” of sistering which give shape to these women’s accounts. The first two—‘best friendship’ and ‘companionship’—describe the varying emotional quality of the relationship. Best friendship refers to a very intimate relationship between siblings and represents an ideal which may or may not be achieved. Companionship describes a less engaged relationship; the author further subdivides this category into close and distant companionship. While close companionship entails positive though less intense relations than best friendship, distant companionship seems to be quite a different thing; it is used to describe women who have very ambivalent, problematic or minimal involvements with their sisters and thus seem to be hardly companionable at all. Mauthner would have done better if she had used a different name to differentiate this discourse since an important part of her argument is that sistering may be a problematic and tension-filled; her choice of distant ‘companionship’ as a category name seems to minimize this.

Two additional discourses focus on the power dynamics within sistering; these include 'positioned' and 'shifting positions' themes. The former refers to sisters who relate through relatively fixed, family-defined roles, such as an elder sister who becomes a mother-substitute, exercising power over a younger sibling as well as taking on responsibility for her well-being and care. In contrast, the shifting positions discourse is engaged by sisters who have a more egalitarian relationship and negotiate the exercise of power in an on-going way, frequently exchanging roles of the cared for and the care-giver. The author aptly illustrates how some of the sisters have moved between these discourses over time, through either conscious efforts to reshape family dynamics or in reaction to events beyond their control. Mauthner also makes some astute observations about the way caregiving and power are intertwined in family relationships. She examines the similarities and differences in caregiving between friends versus family members, and shows how sisterly relations are shaped by gendered expectations of women as caregivers within families.

This book will be of interest to those doing research on family relationships, and on relations of power between women. In addition, Mauthner offers food for thought to those working on feminist theory and who use sisterhood as a political metaphor. The empirical accounts of familial sisters show that we should not overly mythologize this relationship as an entirely positive one; at the same time, women's conscious efforts to work through or accept differences between them may indeed create a relation that is highly supportive. Mauthner's contribution lies in showing how the relations between women are better captured by the notion of 'sistering'—a verb that evokes the on-going effort of creating kinship—rather than taken for granted as a fixed, naturalistic, or essentialistic relation which the noun 'sisterhood' too easily implies.

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