

## Book Reviews

### REVIEW ESSAY

*Sistering: power and change in female relationships*. Melanie L. Mauthner, 2005. London: PalgraveMacmillan; ISBN 1403941254, 228 pp., £15.99, paper.

Melanie Mauthner's book, now out in paperback, demonstrates the way that feminist, qualitative explorations of specific women's lives can illuminate, not just those lives in their relation to society, its institutions and social forces, but also, by implication, suggest other areas of (overdue) inquiry, and provide some of the tools for making sense of and learning from those other explorations: not just getting something onto the intellectual and political map, but providing a basis for changing the map itself.

With Dorothy Smith (1988: 222–23), Mauthner's declared aim is to produce 'a form of knowledge that remains accessible to those who have contributed to its production' (p. 183): Mauthner interviewed teenage sisters, and sisters in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties. She adheres to Strauss's (1987) reworking of grounded theory (as a process of generating theory through emerging categories from data), to acknowledge both *in vivo codes* which stem from the language of participants, and *sociologically constructed codes* brought to bear by the researcher herself. She cites the importance of the auto/biographical method for her exploration of 'the emotional and material production of subjectivity' (p. 193), which she says allows her through language to draw together the two discordant epistemologies of feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism. Mauthner maintains a double focus: both ontological (in terms of the centrality of narrative and discourse in constituting 'reality' through language), and epistemological (focusing on subjectivity within knowledge production).

This hybrid, process frame, and her emphasis on power and change, direct our attention to how sisters *do* these familial relations over time, which immediately draws the reader in as co-participant, just as it did the sisters themselves. The main body of the text draws extensively from transcripts of the sisters' narratives, both individually and in dialogue. Two appendices provide additional biographical information about the sisters,

and a detailed exposition of Mauthner's method and methodology. Readers are able to make their own way, in any order or pattern, through these three sections, which are both 'freestanding' and interconnected.

### SISTERING DISCOURSES AND FEMININITY

Mauthner's stated aim is 'to theorise agency empirically in the context of a female family tie' (p. 8). She is explicit about her concerns as a *feminist* sociologist:

The concept of changing subjectivity is key to the whole book . . . In focusing on subjectivity, I am particularly interested in emotions as sources of knowledge and in the links between emotions and language.

(p. 10)

Mauthner presents four sistering discourses, which emerged from the women's narratives: *best friendship*; *close companionship/distant companionship*; the *positioned* and *shifting positions discourses*. These are not fixed, static or discrete; for example, they can co-exist within a relationship at a single moment or over a period of time; one may permeate or replace another over time. She demonstrates how these sistering discourses provide 'ways of thinking and understanding the different forms that sister relationships can take' (p. 9).

For example, the *positioned discourse* reproduces specific elements of mother–daughter relationships, and Edelman's (1994) concept of *mini-mothering* is prominent here in 'big' and 'little' sister roles of carer and cared for. The figure of the mother, as a paradigm of care, intimacy, power, hovers over these life histories, even when the mother is not 'good enough'. In these circumstances, fear of the fragility of familial bonds can exert its conservative power, restricting a daughter's/sister's changing subjectivity: 'you think you can't have the row, you can't have the blazing argument, you mustn't say that to Mummy, she might get upset' (p. 103).

Mothers are seen to play an influential role in nurturing or discouraging closeness between sisters; as well as in terms of their presence/absence in daughters' lives; and consequent physical and/or emotional workloads (i.e. *roles*) picked up by daughters in the mother's 'absence'. Rejection, distance, manipulation contribute to daughters'/sisters' experience of the mother, sister and self, and all three in relationality. These scenarios, which produce the rebel, the dutiful daughter, Miss Goody Two Shoes, the prodigal daughter, sisters as rivals, etc., position daughters/sisters in ways which it can take many years to unravel (both in terms of understanding and *changing*), and the fact that Mauthner's sisters span several generations enables us to glimpse these processes within their narratives. The fact that the *positioned discourse* is inherently heterosexist is

clear but left implicit by Mauthner, rather than openly and directly harnessed to her analysis.

The ability, opportunity and desire to shift from the *positioned discourse* into the *shifting positions discourse*, where role reversals occur, and where women can adopt more equal positions of power, emerge as key (potential) features of sistering. This is, therefore, a book about gendered power relations; women's differential emotional and social creativity; and factors (external and internal) which contribute to these processes over time. Narratives relating crisis and change are structured around emotions and understanding them (pp. 148, 151). For some sisters, identity and experience were much discussed and processed within their relationships. For others, 'central aspects of their sistering remain unspoken' (p. 167). Mauthner (p. 14) cites Johnson's (1986) insight, that power 'privatises the *secrecies of the oppressed*' – in this case, women. And within the sisters' narratives, there are instances of breathtaking denial: for example, around disability (pp. 157–58) and sexuality (p. 77).

While it is *gendered* subjectivity and discourses of *femininity* which are foregrounded, the book provides insight and impetus beyond these. Caring and power relations in intimacy: issues of relationality, of powerfulness and powerlessness, whether power relations are fixed or open to negotiation, the impact of age and life stage, triggers for change – 'I couldn't actually be me' (p. 96) – these are significant in every life. This is one of the sisters, commenting on the role of talk and experience in developing new interpretations of experience (p. 107): 'We, I think, I think we've learnt to listen to each other, isn't it, that's the thing, isn't it, it's rather than talking, it's actually learning to listen to each other'. This is a book about inequality, and the challenge of equality in relationships. One of the sisters acknowledges: 'Because equality is difficult isn't it?' And: 'Most, I think, most relationships are, are premised on some sort of inequality' (p. 140).

### GENERATING CHANGE

Mauthner's research provides impetus for exploring 'other socially invisible bonds and support networks' (p. 173), both familial and extra-familial (for example, between brothers, brothers and sisters, lesbians, and gay men). Before the end of the book, as an erstwhile (?) 'big' sister, I was starting to think about that bond in terms of Mauthner's sistering discourses. And then there are my relationships with women . . .

I read this research account as a mother's daughter, a sister-free woman with one brother, and a second cousin I have always referred to as the nearest thing to a sister (though we live geographically at a distance and hardly meet); and years influenced by the idea of 'sisterhood', as an emotional and political 'dream' and a metaphor for feminists and for

women's friendships generally. In these scenarios, the comment, 'That's not very sisterly', amounts to equating 'sisterly' with 'feminist' *virtue*, and clearly draws on assumptions about both sistering and feminism. I found myself reaching for Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum's (1988) landmark book, *Bittersweet: Love, Envy and Competition in Women's Friendships*. I noted I first read this in 1989: time to reread it, 16 years later, in the light of this book on sistering.

As well as having relevance for various academic disciplines and professional practices, Melanie Mauthner's book has the potential to encourage readers to be more reflective and self-reflexive about their own sibling relationships, and even relationships generally; as well as honing critical awareness regarding societal and institutional pressures and their consequences. In exemplary feminist fashion, *Sistering* positions the reader across the complexity of the personal, professional and political, while implicitly challenging these as discrete and unconnected categories of experience or identity.

'Change in sistering occurs through women's experiences of power relations, their reflections and emotions about these and ability to name them' (p. 169). The feminist process Mauthner describes here (encompassing experience, critical thinking, emotions, new vocabularies for emergent consciousness, and feminist theory and dialogue) is a basic prerequisite for surviving and thriving despite those power relations: of moving from the *positioned* discourse to the *shifting positions* discourse, via auto/biographical process and feminist consciousness and theory. For women need to be *conscious* and *creative*, with stamina for the long haul. It is regrettable that lesbian experience of sistering does not form part of Mauthner's study: the evidence she presents of how heterosexual femininity functions within kin relationships, and influences power and change in those relationships, would surely have been enriched.

Towards the end of the book, she reflects: 'Can sisters be located in the *positioned* discourse and be best friends? Probably not' (p. 169). The *positioned discourse* was never about nurturing women's friendship or intimacy. Mauthner's verdict has much to tell us about the dilemma of women's relationships in western society, across all differences, and why adult-adult, peer processes must replace the parent-child scenarios which foster heterosexual femininity at the expense of women's subjectivity, if we are to be friends, never mind best friends.

## REFERENCES

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#### NAZISM AND COMMUNISM AND THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF THE POLISH POPE

*Memory and identity: personal reflections*. Pope John Paul II, 2005. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; ISBN 0297785075X, 198 pp., £12.99, cloth.

This book provides an extraordinary insight into the mind of one of the twentieth-century's most influential religious leaders. It is not a biography, but in reflecting on one of the most turbulent periods of history – the second half of the twentieth century – and John Paul's own beliefs and experiences, it nonetheless serves to paint a picture of the remarkable life of the Polish Pope.

The book is actually a collection of personal memoirs and reflections prompted by a series of interviews held at Castel Gandolfo in 1993. Josef Tischner and Krzysztof Michalski, two Polish philosophers who had co-founded the 'Institute for Human Sciences' in Vienna, conducted these interviews. They had requested that the Pontiff undertake a critical analysis of the two opposing dictatorships that marked twentieth-century Polish history, Nazism and Communism. The Pope had returned to the transcripts of the interviews almost 20 years later with the intention of broadening and updating the discussion and debate contained within the original text. There is a poignancy and timeliness of the publication of these memoirs coinciding, as they did, with the year in which John Paul died, 2005.

The style of the book is constructed as a conversation in order that the reader will not misconstrue it as an academic treatise but, rather, accept it as an informal dialogue. The obvious intention is that it should be accessible to a greater audience than those who would normally read the writings of the Pope. It must be said, however, that it only partially succeeds in this ambition since the work is sufficiently dense to provide an intellectual challenge beyond that of most informal dialogues and it does come across as a series of intensely philosophical monologues on specific topics. The prose is sometimes difficult to follow and one needs a certain knowledge of church and political history (not to mention Latin) to fully