Who is a Sister and a Brother?
Biological and Social Ties

Rosalind Edwards, Lucy Hadfield, Helen Lucey and Melanie Mauthner

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Introduction

This Working Paper considers the issue of who is a sister and a brother? At first sight this may seem like a question with a simple answer – siblings are related by biology, through their parents, or at least one parent. Indeed, this technical fact is often an assumption underpinning statistics that are collected on children and their families, and in research on children's sibling relationships. Drawing on empirical data collected from children and young people about their relationships with their sisters and brothers, however, we reveal that their own answers to this question are more complex. Their responses add another dimension to the question of who is a sister or brother: the ways in which sibling relationships are socially constructed. For children, sibling relationships are actively built in everyday interactions involving language and non-verbal communication – or indeed the lack of it – as part of lived experience. This then raises a qualitatively different sort of question: what is a sister or brother? It also brings into view the subjective ways in which having sisters and brothers contributes towards a sense of self; that is, who you are and your relationship to other people and the world.

We begin with an overview and assessment of different sorts of approaches to the question of who is a sibling that underpin much research on the topic, and the various links posed between biological and social bonds. The often simplistic associations involved in these approaches contrast to the more complex understandings of children and young people themselves. In the rest of the paper, we first describe the research projects from which we are drawing our data. We then move on to explore the children and young people's perspectives on who and what is a sibling. We provide in-depth examples of how biological and social constructions of who is a sibling are interwoven. We note how everyday living together, and conceptions of distinctions and elisions between siblings and friends, reveal issues of connection and separation in sibling relationships. We then address this 'what', or fabric, of sibling relationships further, using in-depth case studies of how children and young people's conceptions of themselves in relation to others and the wider social world are embodied in their relationships with their sisters and brothers. These accounts also highlight the way that the lived specificities of ethnicity, gender and social class are integral to these dynamics of connection and separation.

Who is a Sibling?

The increasing diversity of family structures occurring in most Western societies raises a number of issues for the technical fact of who is a sister or brother. Increasing rates of divorce and separation, repartnering and step-families (for example, for the UK see NFPI 2004, and for the USA see Census Bureau 2003), mean that children may now have full siblings (sharing both biological parents), half siblings (sharing one biological parent) and step siblings (who are not biologically related but who each have a biological parent in a partner relationship). The resultant sibling diversity is rarely captured in statistics collected on children and families, however. In this section we look at the facts as represented by statistics and typologies, and then consider three main approaches to their social and emotional implications, which stress in turn: social function, personality and psyche, and genetics and emotions.

Statistics and typologies

The demographic figures collected by official bodies, notably government, provide an administrative model of social order and social connections, drawing boundaries around who falls inside a particular category, such as sibling, and who does not. These categories are regarded as socially significant,

and such constructions then have important consequences for how the state of families is perceived in contemporary society. Statistics about the number of children living together in families are overwhelmingly collected from the point of view of the family as a household unit rather than from the point of view of the child, as Lala Carr Steelman and colleagues illustrate: '… imagine two families, one with one child and one with four children. If we use the family as the unit of analysis, the average family size is 2.5; however, if we use the child as the unit of analysis, one child is in a family of one and four children are in a family of four, resulting in an average of 3:4' (2002, f. 6). In 2001, in the UK, the average number of dependent children in a family was 1.8 (Office for National Statistics 2001). Just under 60 per cent of children lived in households containing more than one child and 20 per cent of these contained three or more children. This varied by ethnic group. For example, the majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children lived in households containing three or more children (50 per cent), most Indian and White children lived in two-child households (45 and 40 per cent respectively), while the majority of Black children (60 per cent) were evenly split between two-child and three or more-child households (Platt 2002, Figure 4.5).

Parental separation and repartnering can mean that children do not necessarily live in the same household as their full biological siblings, however, and children may have half or step siblings living in the same or another household. Children may also have siblings – whether full, half or step – who are no longer dependent, or are looked-after, and live outside their household/s. This adds a further caveat to the technical facts in addition to the one noted by Steelman and colleagues above. Taking children themselves as the unit of analysis and dispensing with boundaries of household, the average number of siblings per child may well be higher than the co-residence figures indicate. Yet, there are no figures available that allow us to estimate this.

Such technical facts, however, do not address the social question of whether or not the children involved consider all these different sorts of relationships to be siblings. The definition of who is a sibling may be constructed differently between ethnic and cultural groups and societies (Cicirelli 1994). For example, African-Caribbean and African people may view a range of biologically and non-biologically related family members as siblings (Chamberlain 1992; Graham 1999; Prevatt-Goldstein 1999), and research in the USA focuses on the longstanding practice of 'going for kin' amongst African-American communities wherein non-biologically related people refer to, and act towards, each other as brother, sister, mother, father and so on (Liebow 1969; Stack 1974). This raises the issue of the importance of culture, language, interpretation and subjectivity to constructing definitions, and social and emotional experiences, of who is a sibling, rather than a self-evident, biological or legal, state. Being a sibling is a socially constructed relationship, not just a technical fact.

Some researchers have developed technical typologies and terminologies of forms of sibling relationship (up to 26 categories in the case of Treffers and colleagues, 1999). These begin to move towards acknowledging siblings as a socially constructed relationship. Marian Elgar and Ann Head (1999), for example, relate their categories to family continuity or change. Their nine types of sibling cover full, half, step, adopted and foster siblings, and residential arrangements, and are based on some degree of one, some or all of: common genes; common history, family values and culture; and common legal status (see Table 1). Thus, their typology takes into account not only the biological tie (genes) but also social ties that are constructed in the everyday experience of living together or their absence (history, family values and culture). Marjut Kosonen (1999) distinguishes between 'core' and 'kin' siblings, contrasting sisters and brothers who have experienced co-residency with those who have never lived together but who may feel strong emotional ties. Salman Akhtar and Selma Kramer (1999) describe co-resident children who are not biologically related as 'social siblings'. For some writers, however, this description raises the problem of how long non-biologically related

children have to live together before they can be considered siblings (for example, Sanders, 2002, on step-siblings). Such questions, in turn, raise the bases of decisions for the construction of categorical boundaries, and who should make them. Focusing on administrative timeframes ignores the meaning of the relationship for the children involved.

Table 1: Elgar and Head's types of sibling relationships (1999, p.21)

	Common genes	Common history, family values, and culture	Common legal status
Full siblings brought up together	√	√	√
Full siblings brought up apart/separated during childhood	√	some	√
Full siblings, one placed away from another at birth	√	no	√ (unless adopted)
Half siblings, brought up together	some	√	no
Half siblings brought up apart/separated during childhood	some	some	no
Half siblings – brought up by one parent – never lived with half siblings	some	no	no
Adopted children	no	some	√
Step-siblings	no	some	no
Foster children (non-related children)	no	some	no

Social function

Much of the research on siblings is from a social functionalist perspective, which takes technical facts further to look at the configuration of sibling groups. The focus is on the number of siblings, their position in the age hierarchy, and the age gap between them. This type of work, which is extensive and overwhelmingly survey-based, highlights the functional outcomes of these technical sibling facts in terms of child development, behaviour, and educational attainment (see Steelman et al. 2002; Sulloway 20021, for overviews of studies of this type). James Coleman (1988), for example, argued that the greater the number of children they have, the less parents can invest time and attention in them, and the less their socialisation into acceptable social norms and their educational attainment.

While the definition of how many children constitutes a 'large' family would seem to be culturally specific, the number of children in a family has long been a preoccupation of national social policies in various ways. In the UK, it contains underlying fears of disproportionate parental fertility as symbolic of out of control sexuality and dysfunctional family life on the part of sections of the working class or immigrant and other marginalised groups. Such families are regarded as a threat to an orderly and controlled society (from the concerns of the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, to notions of a 'cycle of deprivation' and 'the underclass' in the late 20th century, and preoccupations with 'anti-social families' in the early 21st century). In this sense, the biological and the social are tied together at the level of the state of the nation and its subjectivity.

Personality and psyche

Psychological and psychoanalytic work has also been concerned with sibling configuration, linking technical facts and the subjective space that an individual occupies within their sibling and family group. Thus, firstborns are said to develop dominant, conscientious and conforming personalities,

and to feel resentment or ambivalence towards their younger siblings, while laterborn children are risk-taking and creative, and middle children act as peacekeepers (for example, James 2002; Mitchell 2000; Sulloway 1996, 2001). Research on twins has also examined the effects of technical, biological sameness and birth order on personality, addressing tensions between conceptions of self as part of unitary 'twiness' or as involving individual autonomy (Stewart 2000).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn (1982) argue that social changes such as smaller family size may be giving sibling bonds greater rather than lesser relevance, creating an even more intense and formative touchstone influence on personality as children grow up. They pose siblings bonds as especially providing the 'object constancy' against the vagaries of an uncertain world where there is what they call 'high access' between siblings (one sibling, living and playing together, narrow age difference, and so on) and parents are less available to their children (physically, for example in terms of paid employment, or emotionally). Bank and Kahn's stated focus is on full biological siblings, however. As noted earlier, this leaves aside the fact that children may have social ties to half and step sisters and brothers both within and outside their household that provide larger sibling groups. Juliet Mitchell (2003), also from a psychoanalytic perspective, contends that these forms of sibling relationship may be equally influential in terms of the sense of desire for connection, affinity and sameness of self and other, and desire for separation, autonomy and difference between self and other, that siblings can embody. Such connections and separations are said to create the dynamic structures of alliance/support and rivalry/conflict that found intimate relationships and wider understandings of social relations for people throughout their lives.

Genetics and emotions

In some perspectives on family life biological links are explicitly privileged in terms of underpinning emotional ties. Notions of shared biological parentage and common genes are promoted through the social concepts of lines of descent and principles of genealogy. Marilyn Strathern (1992) argues that genetic relations have come to stand as a symbol for the supposed naturalness of biological bonds. They offer an inner feeling of coherence and certainty in the context of family diversity and supposed fragmentation, where a general sense of uncertainty and risk pervades a society that increasingly appears to be moving away from the 'natural' and 'traditional'.

A sense of stability is offered by regarding genetic ties as primary. This is most evident in evolutionary psychology's (neo-Darwinist) emphasis on the essential basis of biology and emotion. Evolutionary psychology argues that, as part of the natural selection drive, the genetic link between parent and child leads parents to feel love and commitment towards their offspring. If biological links are absent, then parents/carers and children will not gain from an emotional investment in a relationship with each other, in terms of genetic prosperity (Daly and Wilson 1998). In turn, siblings compete with each other to maximise parental investment in the continuity of their genes. In this model, personality differences between siblings are explained as adaptations to capture parental involvement (Sulloway 1996). Although this is not explicitly stated, presumably half siblings are in competition for their one shared genetic parent's investment, while step siblings would each attach themselves to their particular biological parents and exhibit even more jealousy of their step siblings. This perspective interpets emotions and threats in a simplistic and reductionist fashion. It cannot offer explanations of how meanings are constructed in everyday life, or relate the interplay of love/care and hate/spite as core aspects of self and other in sibling bonds.

A social constructionist approach

The above perspectives on who is a sibling, configurations of siblings, and effects on subjectivity often pose a simplistic and universalist view of the links between biological and social ties. From a perspective that involves attention to dynamic interactions between social structures and subjectivity, it would seem likely that social and cultural context is important in how these ties are played out. Working class or minority ethnic sibling groups may be subject to different sorts of threats in an uncertain world than White middle class siblings, for example, and various gendered images will play their part too. Such processes also occur within overarching societal/cultural contexts that privilege and value particular forms of self in relation to other. In Western societies and bodies of expert knowledge, individuality and autonomy are generally regarded as preferable to collectivity and dependency, including their inculcation in children and young people (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Edwards 2002; Rose 1989; and see Stewart 2000 specifically in relation to twins). Within this orthodoxy, different ethnic and class subjectivities and practices of ties between self and others may therefore be marginalised and regarded as pathological, including relationships between siblings. These sorts of dynamics between social structures and subjectivity form key issues that we explore in subsequent sections.

The discussion so far has focused on the sometimes implicit, sometimes overt, links between biological and social ties with sisters and brothers raised in and by research addressing the technical fact of 'who' is a sibling. Another way to approach to the question of who is a sibling is to start from siblings' own understandings and experiences (Mauthner 2002; Mullender 1999). In the rest of this paper we consider who is a sibling from the perspectives of the children and young people taking part in our research. Their understandings weave together biological and social dimensions in complex ways, and lead us to address the somewhat different question of 'what' is a sister or brother? This highlights the relational aspects of being a sibling. Since the children and young people's accounts are so complex, we provide case studies of individuals in addition to overviews of recurring themes in the data from our studies, in order to do justice to the detail of their narratives. Initially though, we describe the research projects from which our data are drawn.

'Sibling' Studies: Research Focus and Methods

This paper draws on data from two qualitative research projects[1] that themselves can be considered 'siblings', both in terms of their related focus and their 'co-residence': they were conducted in tandem within the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group (www.lsbu.ac.uk/families). Both studies focused on 'sibling formations', a term that we use to draw attention to the complexity of the structural side of sibling relationships, particularly in 'non-traditional' family forms. We looked at the 'technical facts' of sibling relationships from children and young people's point of view, which could stretch across households rather than being confined within them. Both concentrated on everyday life with siblings, rather than children in families with problems who used particular services. In addition, the studies shared a similar 'child-focused' approach, in which children and young people

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[1] The 'Sibling relationships in middle childhood: children's views' project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. A full report of the project's findings will be published as 'Children's Understandings of Their Sibling Relationships' in May 2005 by the National Children's Bureau. The 'Sibling practices: children's understandings and experiences' project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group's core programme of work. A book bringing together further aspects of the two studies, 'Sisters and Brothers: Sibling Identity and Relationality' will be published by Routledge in 2006.

are treated as socially competent interpreters of, and informants on, their relationships with their sisters and brothers. In both, most of the interviewees chose their own pseudonyms.

The 'Sibling relationships in middle childhood: children's views' project considered the images and resources that underpin children's understandings of their sibling relationships, what they themselves consider to be strengths and limitations, and the ways that they deal with them. Fifty-eight children in 'middle childhood' (between 7 and 13 years), from 46 households, were interviewed for this study (in 10 households, more than one child was interviewed). The children were drawn from a nationally representative sample of parents of 8-12 year olds (although the sample for the study is not nationally representative in itself).

The 'Sibling practices: children's understandings and experiences' project addressed social capital through a focus on how siblings facilitate and constrain ties, norms, values and relationships for each other through caring practices. The sample was recruited through networking techniques. Sibling formations were accessed through formal and informal contacts, with as many siblings in the formation interviewed as possible (with formations ranging from two to seven siblings). Forty-four children and young people, aged between 5 and 21, were interviewed from 16 sibling formations.

Together, the samples from the two studies provide a broad range of social characteristics. The majority of the children and young people were part of mixed sibling formations (containing sisters and brothers), and about a quarter were sister-only and brother-only formations. About half the children and young people came from strands of the working class, with the other half coming from strands of the middle class (based on parental occupation). Across the two samples, the majority of the children and young people taking part were White, with a quarter of Asian, Black or mixed parentage. In terms of household structures, just over half the children and young people lived in nuclear families with both their biological parents, and about a quarter lived in step-families, while the remaining children and young people lived with their biological mother. Combined, the samples are fairly evenly split between those who had one or two siblings and those who had three or more (up to seven in the largest formation), which is greater than the national co-residential average noted earlier. Furthermore, just under half the children had siblings living outside their family household, fairly evenly divided between those who had dependent full, half or step-siblings living in another family household and those with older full, half or step siblings living independently. The majority had contact with these siblings. Geographically, the children and young people lived in a range of metropolitan, urban and rural areas across mainland Britain.

In both our sibling studies, we asked the children and young people to fill in a circle map as a way of identifying the people in their lives who they felt were close to them or important in some way. The circle map consists of a series of concentric rings, divided into three wedges respectively labelled 'My family', 'My friends' and 'Other people' (see www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/jrfsibresources.shtml and Figures 1, 2 and 3). A small circle in the centre of the map represents the child or young person being interviewed, while rings radiating outwards indicate different levels of emotional closeness. The children and young people were asked to write the names of people who were significant in their lives, or draw a picture of them, on coloured stickers and then to place the stickers in the rings. The nearer to themselves that they placed a sticker, the closer they felt that the named person was to them. The children and young people explained who the people on the stickers were and why they had placed them in a particular ring. This allowed us to look at their reasoning both in placing people in a particular wedge of the circle map and in which particular ring. This activity is a useful vehicle for exploring diverse aspects of sibling relationships, including who 'counts' as a sibling and what it means to be a sister or brother, and we draw on these maps in our discussion below. We also asked most of the children and young people more abstract questions about the necessity of shared

parentage and co-residency for sibling relationships, as well as questions about their everyday lives with their sisters and brothers.

The children and young people's accounts throw light on the interweaving of biological and social ties in considerations of who is a sibling, and the importance of a subjective sense of connection and quality of relationship in this.

Who is a Sister or Brother? Children's and Young People's Understandings of Biological and Social Ties

The children and young people had little difficulty in distinguishing between 'family' and 'friends' on the circle map. Many felt that children who were biologically related through their parents were siblings – although, as we will see, this was not the only definition they worked with. We did not stipulate that they should include all their siblings on the map. Indeed a minority did not place someone who was technically a sibling on their map or refer to them during their interview. In such cases, we would not have known the sibling existed if parents had not informed of this parents before or after the interview. This silence usually occurred when a child had a very distant relationship with a sister or brother because they had little contact with them, and because they had closer ties with the siblings who they did talk about. For example, Daniel (a White working class boy, age 9) started the interview by writing a list of his siblings and their ages. His mother, who was sitting in on the interview, reminded him about his 20 year old half brother, Harvey, who lived elsewhere but visited them:

> Daniel: Yeah, I'm 9. Sapphire is 8. Fay, she is 14 I think, yeah 14. Chantel, she is one.
> Interviewer: Is there anyone else?
> Daniel: No.
> Mother: Yes there is.
> Daniel: Who?
> Mum: Harvey.
> Daniel: Oh yeah, I forgot.

One child, Jacob (discussed in more detail later), felt so alienated from two of his co-resident siblings that he did not put them on his map, although he acknowledged them as siblings and discussed their shortcomings extensively in his interview.

In contrast, some placed a sister or brother they had never lived with on their circle maps. Orla (a White middle class girl, age 18) placed an older step sister who she had never met on her map, in addition to her two co-resident half sisters. Sam (a White middle class boy, age 11) put his only sibling – his 19 year old half sister – quite close to him on his circle map (see Figure 1). He had never lived with her, she lived some geographical distance away, and he remarked 'I hardly ever see her'. Nonetheless, Sam recalled that:

> Even though I can't remember it I have been told that I saw her lots and lots [when I was very young] … I don't see her much but I still have the same kind of relationship with my sister as [my friends who live with their sisters] do with theirs.

A few children were so emotionally identified with one of their siblings that they chose that sibling's actual name as a pseudonym for themselves, for us to use in writing up the research.

Figure 1: Sam's circle map
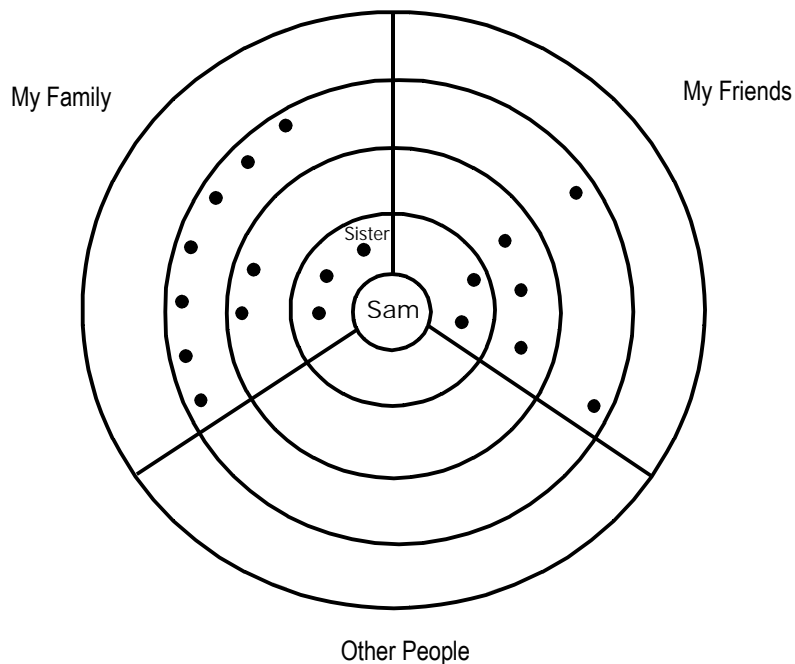
These sorts of exclusions and inclusions of siblings in their maps indicate that, for children and young people themselves, the answer to who is a sibling is as much rooted in social ties as it is in biological fact.

Who is a sibling as biological and social: case studies

Most of the children and young people we spoke to drew on both biological and social constructions of the nature of ties in discussing their sibling relationships, fusing them together or holding them side by side. A few, however, privileged either biological or social understandings. In this section we present three case studies to illustrate the range of interpretations, from privileging biological ties, through holding both biological and social understandings, to stressing social ties.

A primarily biological tie – Eddie and China:

Eddie and China, a White working class brother and sister, provide an interesting example of the minority who held a biological understanding of who is a sister or brother. Eddie was 10 and China was 8, and they lived together with their biological mother and China's biological father, who Eddie referred to as 'my father'. In response to the question 'Do you think that brothers and sisters need to have the same mum and dad?', Eddie firmly replied 'It matters because then it's a real family not a fake one'. He also drew a distinction between family and friends, saying 'Your brother and sister is closer to you than a friend … friends could never do as much as a member of your family could do'. Eddie's assertion of the emotional superiority of his relationship with China over that with his friends recurred throughout in his interview: 'We can play with each other, we can talk to each other about things … I know I can trust her'. It would seem that Eddie saw his own family as 'fake' rather than 'real', and social relationships as inferior to biologically grounded ones. This placing of his family, and his own membership of it, as 'fake' was hidden, however, because Eddie did not tell the interviewer that he had a biological father who lived elsewhere. In contrast, China drew attention to

the fact when she was asked whether or not siblings need to share the same parents: 'Yes, but Eddie's got a different father really, but this one is a step-father really'. She also marginalised Eddie as a sibling through his behaviour, discussing how he 'acts like he's a grown up … not like a sister or brother … and it's just like I'm on my own with Mum, Dad and the dog'. It may have been that – unlike other children and young people in similar situations who we spoke to – Eddie had to work hard to feel part of a collective family unit with his sister. He highlighted the emotional closeness of his relationship to her in contrast to that with friends, and silenced the distinction in parentage between them in order to present himself as a 'real' member of the family, rather than as marginalised through only partly shared biological links. Yet China's observation that Eddie may be a brother but doesn't act like one brings in an element of the social construction of sibling relationships. It adds another layer to Eddie's biological difference, involving the idea that who is a sibling is socially enacted.

As we noted, though, most children and young people moved further towards incorporating a social perspective on relationships with sisters and brothers alongside biological links.

Biological and social ties – Spike:

Spike was 17 years old, and his twin sister, Zara, also took part in the research. They were working class and of mixed parentage, living with their White mother and seeing their father, of Pakistani origin, regularly. Spike and Zara had a 13 year old half sister, Juliet, from another of their father's previous relationships. Juliet's mother had repartnered and Juliet had a 9 year old half-brother from this relationship, who had no biological relationship to the twins. Both Spike and Zara placed Juliet close to them on their circle maps, but only Spike's map (see Figure 2) included Juliet's half brother (identified as 'little bro').

Figure 2: Spike's circle map

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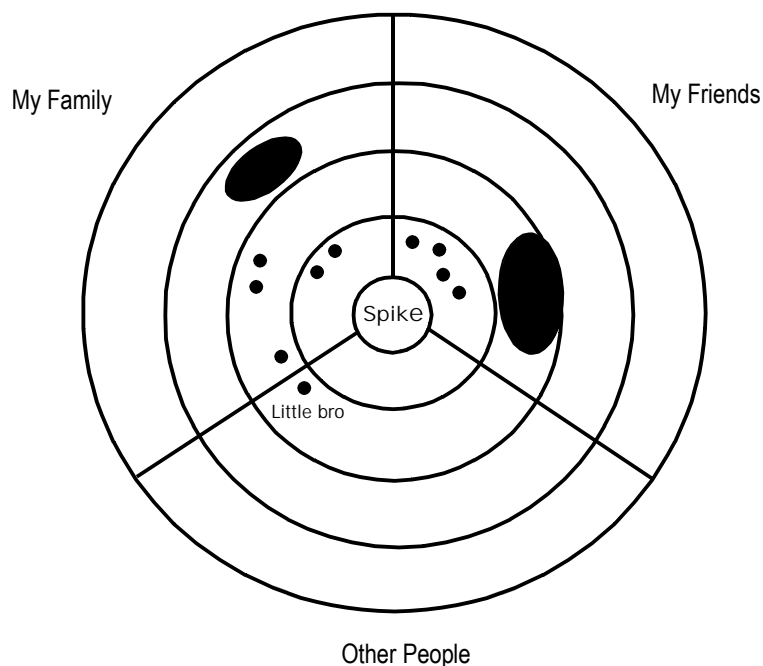
When asked whether 'blood is absolutely necessary to make somebody a brother or sister?', Spike responded:

> I don't call anyone else my brother or my sister. I call both my sisters my sisters and I don't call any of my friends brothers or whatever. Friends are friends, and sisters are sisters, and my girlfriend is my girlfriend. And my little sister is my half sister but I still call her my little sister. And – actually there is one example of that. My little sister has got a step-brother, no, half brother, and I just call him my little bro when I see him, because he's just with her sometimes. So when I see him I say 'what's up little bro?', or whatever. He treats me as his older brother, like we play pool and stuff, and he kind of looks up to me. So when I smoke he goes, 'oh, when I grow up I know another one of my family smokes', and stuff like that … [To him, I'm] an older brother who does all sorts of weird things, and the weird things are always seen as cool by little people.

Spike interrupted himself in his initial assertion that there are different categories into which people definitely fall, including one for 'blood' sibling relationships, when he recalled his 'older brother' relationship to Juliet's half brother, which fell outside of the biological boundary. For Spike, this sibling relationship was socially based, and seemed to fulfil emotional needs. His 'little bro' provided an important (masculine) family space for Spike to occupy; one in which he was looked up to and admired by another male. This subjective space was not readily available to Spike elsewhere. He acknowledged that he was getting himself into destructive situations involving drugs and physical violence, pulling away from Zara and hurting his girlfriend, rebelling at school and failing educationally. His father was particularly censorious. This was in stark contrast with his twin, Zara, who was achieving well in all she did, praised by her father, and full of ambition. Zara did not seem to feel the same subjective need to annex a 'little bro' to look up to her.

Given the two accounts described above, it may seem that children and young people who are not living in a straightforward nuclear family use biological assumptions about family ties to a greater or lesser extent as an element of emotional stability and certainty for underpinning relationships in complex family formations. As we have seen, however, social ties enter these biological constructions. Furthermore, children and young people in equally complex family circumstances held socially-based understandings of who is a sister or brother.

Primarily social ties – Melody:

Melody was a 15 year old working class White girl who lived with her 13 year old full sister, Chrissie, and their mother. They had an older, adult half brother and sister from another previous relationship of their father's, who in turn had children of their own. Melody's discussion of what makes someone a sister or brother included biology but privileged social relationships, involving a deep subjective knowledge of each other. She included some close friends who lived on the same housing estate as her in the category of sibling:

> Somebody that you are close to, somebody that you don't exactly get along with but you know well, like you've shared a lot of stuff with them. That doesn't necessarily have to be blood. I have people that I call my brother or my sister that live on this estate, because I'm close to them and I know them well … You don't need to live together, but you can spend time together at one point in your life. It's just somebody you share a lot with, I think. You don't have to necessarily spend time with them all the time, whatever. [You] share like memories, times together. And I think somebody that you can argue with as well. Because

you have to have somebody you can argue with and you know them well enough. If you can't argue with them then I don't think you know them. And then carry on being close to them.

In constructing her circle map, Melody placed some people who would not conventionally be defined as siblings in the 'My family' wedge of the map as close to her, in addition to Chrissie, her older half siblings and their children, and other family members (see Figure 3):

I'll put these people here because, although they are friends, they are more, I call them more family. Because Laurie is a boy who lives down there and I get on with him really well, and he's close to me like a brother. And like he'll look after me like he's my brother. We can still muck around and play fight, and it's just like having a brother around. Al's an ex-boyfriend. He used to live on the estate and we love each other basically, and are still close like that … We can understand each other. So I think he's close like family should be. I wouldn't put him as a friend.

Figure 3: Melody's circle map
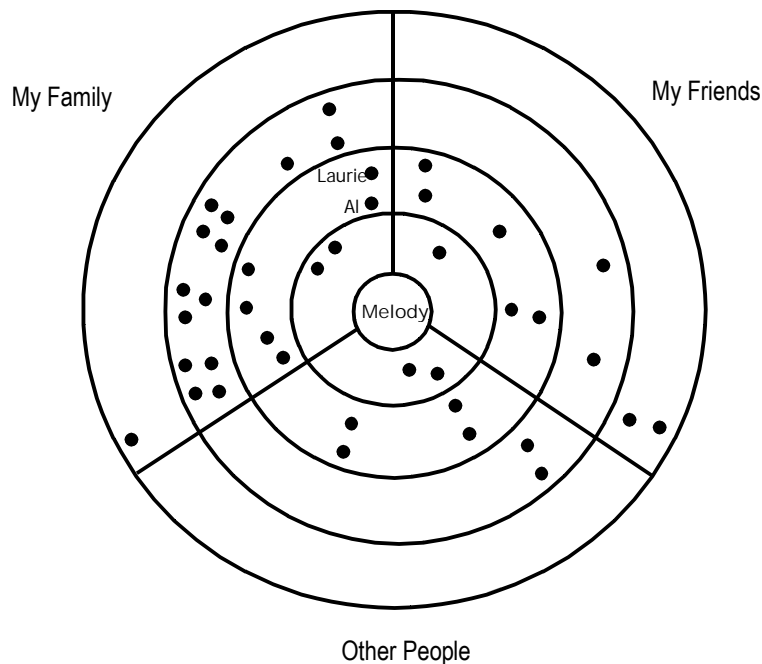
While few of the children and young people taking part in our studies went as far as Melody in including friends as sisters or brothers, most of them also drew on socially constructed notions of sibling relationships alongside technical fact – on the one hand, the not 'acting' like a sister or brother that China (above) referred to, and on the other, the deep inner knowledge and shared experiences connoting a sibling relationship that Melody espoused. These interpretations start to lead us beyond the 'who' of being a sibling to the socially and emotionally constructed question of 'what' is a sister or brother? It raises issues around everyday social practice, as well as similarities and distinctions between sibling and friendship relationships.

Being there and everyday living together

Recurring themes in the children and young people's accounts were that sisters and brothers were bound together because they 'really know' each other, and indeed sometimes could be 'best friends' (see Mauthner 2002 on this for sister relationships). Siblings provided the children with an sense of emotional security – a feeling that someone was 'always there' for them, which meant that they were not in danger of being an isolated, unconnected person:

> I'm never really alone. But one of my friends, she doesn't have a brother or sister or a – she doesn't have anybody at all, so she misses out … Because [my sister] kind of lives with me and she shares – cos she knows more about me so I'm kind of closer to her than I would be to [friends] … I went [on a school trip for half a week] and my sister, when I got back, my sister said – I said 'oh, did you miss me?', and she was like 'oh yeah, it's so boring without you, I mean there's nothing to do', and I felt like really happy and stuff. So I wasn't just ignored, I wasn't not bothered about.
> (Izzy, White middle-class, age 9, talking about her younger full sister)

> They're there when I need them … My sisters help cos when they're – when I've come home and I've had a bad day at school and that they cheer me up and they help with my homework … The best things about having sisters are they're there to help, they're around when you need them. They're there to have a good time with.
> (Ellie, White working-class, age 12, talking about her co-resident older full and half sisters and her two non-resident older half sisters)

This subjective sense of connection was regarded as best brought about through everyday living and growing up together:

> I don't really get to see Matthew and Louise that much. And I know Jasmine, I actually know Jasmine. And Matthew and Louise, I just don't know them that much, you know. I mean I know that [Jasmine's] pretty good and she'll never lie and that she'll never betray me … I don't know that much about Louise and Matthew. I mean I can't really trust them.
> (Laura, White middle class, age 10, talking about her non-resident half brother and sister – Matthew and Louise – and her co-resident full sister - Jasmine)

> You can like live apart but it ain't as good. Cos like, if you want to do stuff, right, and you really needed them, like if you wanted to like choose something, something really big, then you might need them. But then like if they lived in another country or like really far away, you wouldn't like be able to get something.
> (Ashley, White working class, age 9, talking about his older full brother)

Indeed, while the children and young people acknowledged that sisters and brothers did not need to live together in order to be siblings and that biological links would exist whatever, they regarded keeping in contact as important.

Distinctions between siblings and friends

Most of the children and young people asserted that friends could not cross the boundary to be siblings. Nonetheless, some did feel that friends could feel or act 'as if' they were a sister or brother

as a result of a combination of everyday contact and emotional closeness that mirrored the subjective construction of sibling relationships discussed above:

> [Friends] are not part of the family but they're mixed in. They're not in your family, but sometimes it can feel like they are. When we play games you think – like when you go to their house and they just follow you around and when they come here.
> (Fred, White working class, age 11)

> [Friends] kind of become, act like we're brother and sister, when we're best friends, and we don't really act like we don't live together … Actually, they're kind of the same, my sister and my friends, because sometimes we fall out and sometimes we won't talk to each other, but like we always make good friends again. But my sister might be, my sister might be a teeny bit stronger, closer to me.
> (Izzy, White middle class, age 9)

The use of the descriptors 'like a friend' to describe a sibling relationship, or 'like a sister or brother' to describe a friendship, shows the importance of language – or its silences – in expressing the social meaning of connections between people. The descriptive assignment of sister or brother, or friend, reveals how ideas about the quality of relationship between self and other underpin notions of who is a sibling, rather than technical fact alone (Mauthner 2002). For example, the quality of sibling relationships are part of collective language and understandings. The socialist and trade union practice of referring to co-members as 'brothers' and – more recently – 'sisters', and the feminist notion of women as 'sisters', signal a particular sort relationship – a political sense of the subjective quality of the bond between self in relation to the other.

Complex social constructions were evident in the children and young people's discussions of everyday life with their sisters and brothers, fleshing out the picture of the more pertinent question of 'what' is a sister or brother?, and bringing the importance of ethnic, gendered and classed cultural contexts to light. We examine these in the next section.

'What' is a Sister or Brother? Children and Young People's Understandings of Connection and Separation

Children and young people's understandings of who was a sister or brother, then, encompassed biological ties, yet built upon and extended these into social constructions of the subjective nature of sibling relationships. They are complex and variable, and involve a sense of self in relationship to others and the social world. In this section we look at this in detail, considering the children and young people's conceptions of themselves in relation to others as embodied in their relationships with their siblings. The social question of 'what' is a sister or brother raises relational issues. These concern whether a sibling is someone who is similar to oneself, in the form of connection and affinity, and/or is different, in the form of separation and difference.

As we noted earlier in this paper, social and cultural structures and divisions provide a context for a sense of self in relation to others, producing variable patterns of subjectivities and practices of ties between self and siblings. In the rest of this section, we explore several accounts of children and young people's understandings of feelings of connection and separation, and threats to these. They each provide an illustration of the range of permutations and interplays of connection and separation within the context of individual children and young people's relationships with their sisters and

brothers. They also highlight the ways that the lived specificities of ethnicity, gender and social class are integrally interwoven in these perspectives.

Shabnur – connection as closeness

Our first account illustrates close connection and its relationship to culture and gendered images within this. It concerns Shabnur, a 15 year old Asian girl who had three older and one younger sisters: Azra, age 24; Habiba, age 21; Sabina, age 20; and Misha, age 11. All except the oldest sister, who had married and moved away to reside with her husband's family, lived at home with their mother and father, who originated from Bangladesh. The family were practising Muslims, and occupied an ambiguous social class position, between working and middle class. They lived in rented accommodation in a desirable inner city neighbourhood.

Shabnur felt a strong connection with her sisters, and regarded them as 'there no matter what' and 'best friends'. Her account is peppered with their shared family life and domestic responsibilities, in which each contributed to the family unit according to need and ability:

> When Habiba had exams recently and I had to do quite a bit. And then when I'm doing stuff, like at the moment, Habiba will take over everything because she is free. So we don't tell each other what to do, we sort of know what we have to do … When we go to other people's families it is either like western families, Chinese families, whatever, families, like everyone will be like 'it's your turn to do the dishes'. But we never have fights because we will know what we'll do.

She preferred the company of her sisters and their 'togetherness' as a domestic group, and saw this preference as denoting a level of maturity:

> [We often] make the effort to go out and get a film so we can all sit down, just as sisters … I think I've grown out of the stage of going out with friends and having to go to the cinema, blah, blah, blah. So whatever time I do spend with my friends, it will be in school, and that will be enough for me because I've grown to a stage where friends really aren't that important anymore.

The sisters' relationships with each other and the outside world were constructed and enacted in the light of what they should and should not do as Asians and Muslims and, for Shabnur, her two oldest sisters embodied goodness in this respect:

> We have respect for [Azra] and in our eyes she's never done anything bad, and she's so pure and good inside that we all respect her so much … [Habiba], like when you've done something bad, she doesn't shout at you, but her expression makes you feel even more guilty. So that keeps me out of trouble … We are the type of girls that we've got so much respect for our parents that if somebody saw us outside [at 10 pm] they'd be pointing, and then everyone would spread it … Mum and dad have both worked very hard to keep our reputations good and clean. And at the end of the day it is for our benefit.

Just as her oldest sisters kept Shabnur on the straight and narrow, Shabnur was concerned about protecting her other sisters' reputations, should they stray under the bad influences of the wider

world. She kept a watchful eye on her younger sister, Misha, and worried about her older sister, Sabina:

> Because there are more people at home, mum and dad don't worry that much because we are here to look after [Misha] as well as them … And you can't blame us for not wanting her to go out and spend time because all these kids, the ones she hangs around with, they've got blue hair, they wear black lipstick, they've got their nails painted … [I'm also concerned about who Sabina is mixing with] because she might be influenced in doing stuff. And if somebody's in need of help, somebody might say 'help me out here', and it might cause her to get into trouble.

In may well be that Shabnur's fears about her own abilities to live up to the behaviour required of her as an Asian Muslim young woman, and the standards set by her two oldest sisters, became crystalised in her concerns for her other two sisters.

Shabnur's account demonstrates how a sense of self formed in sibling relationships is shaped by ethnicity and religion, and by gendered images within this. Rather than putting emotional connection and interdependence with her sisters aside as she grew older, striving for the western ideal of a sense of an autonomous self (symbolised by other ethnic families arguing over the washing up, and unsuitable friends with coloured hair and fingernails), Shabnur regarded this as a threat. She strove for similarity with her oldest two sisters and attempted to ensure that her other sisters did the same. She regarded independence and emotional separation from them (represented by having stronger relationships with friends and going out) as denoting immaturity and unsuitable behaviour for an Asian Muslim woman, and perhaps feared her own ability to live up to these particular culturally prescribed standards.

Cora – connection through negativity

A strong sense of connection to siblings is not always represented by a positive sense of affinity, however. Our next account illustrates a strong sense of connection in that self is bound up in and defined by differentiation, and its relationship to gender and age images. Cora was a 13 year old White working class girl who lived with her 16 year old brother, Gordon, and their mother and father in a small, rural village with few transport links.

Cora persistently raised Gordon's shortcomings in her account. These involved his everyday failure to act in the ways that an older male sibling of hers should do:

> He's just immature. He doesn't act like older … Sometimes he's nice to me, more times just an idiot … He can never say anything sensible … Cos he's always making stupid noises and it's so annoying … I wish he'd go out more and act more like a teenager. Cos like most folk go out and hang about. And then if he went and did that I think he'd grow up more. Cos I've sort of grown up more, faster than he is. He's always been with himself, a loner. I wish he'd just hang out with his friends cos maybe he'd start to grow up … He doesn't do anything basically. And he's just basically hanging around with people younger than him. Cos you know he never really asks if he can go up to [town] but I wish he would. Sad act.

In her negative portrayal of Gordon, Cora placed herself as more mature in her behaviour than her older brother. Her account was not one of an emotional separation from him; rather Cora had a lot of herself invested in her differentiation from Gordon. Cora needed this negative sibling relationship.

Indeed, she said that she missed Gordon when he went on a school trip to Belgium: 'just like no-one to argue with'.

Cora's remedy to bring about a more positive emotional connection with Gordon was for him to act in the ways that she would value in an older male sibling. Rather than closeness through an everyday doing more together, they would achieve affinity if Gordon embedded himself in relationships with groups of older boys. He needed to act like a teenage boy should do:

> I don't think we'd fight as much if he would go out more and then I went out a wee bit more, you know. Cos we'd like be able to say [to each other] 'what did you do tonight?'

Cora herself would go out more if she could, but as a 13 year old girl her mother did not allow her to travel into the local town on her own, which is where most of her large group of friends lived. This was in distinction to Gordon, who as a 16 year old boy could travel about on his own if only he would. Thus, in gregarious Cora's eyes, Gordon's spurning of a mobile social life was perverse.

Cora's account demonstrates a strong connection through negativity and differentiation. Her sense of self is crucially bound up with her older brother; she has a positive understanding of herself and her relationship to others and the wider world, as a mature girl, through contrast with Gordon's immature male behaviour. Cora's characterisation of Gordon as a 'loner' who is not part of a group (of local boys of his own age) also chimed with other White working class children and young people's accounts of a sense of self that is defined through being part of a collective group. This can be a sibling formation, or another group. Fitting in and being part of a group, however, is the important issue. Our next account illustrates this.

Dan – enforced separation

Siblings can provide children and young people with a feeling of being part of a collective unit; an individual who defined through being part of a group. This was especially important for the working class children and young people taking part in our studies. It can be disrupted, however, if other siblings in a formation act in ways that force separation. This was the case in Dan's account. He was an 11 year old White working class boy who lived with his 16 year old brother, 13 year old sister, baby brother, and mother and father, in a large village. He chose his own actual name as a pseudonym for his older brother, which is significant in the context of his account of their relationship (and is the reason why we do not [pseudo]name his brother here).

Being part of a group characterised Dan's account. He felt that a group of his friends acted 'as if' they were his siblings in backing him up and helping him deal with trouble with other children at school:

> [Friends are like siblings] because they're like close to you. And like I said, them lot [non-friends] will come after you and like get you and then go and tell your teacher, and then people won't come near to you. [Friends]'re close to you, they're helping you … If I got in a fight at school, they'd come up to them and hit them.

Within the family, he also posed household tasks as being carried out by whoever was there to do them as part of a collective effort, rather than being allocated, or weighed up and counted:

> [My brother and sister] do [the washing up] sometimes, but me and my mum and my dad do it most of the time. I don't mind [my siblings not doing it] cos there's three people that are

offering to do it. My mum and my dad and me … I do the gardening, my dad does the gardening, my mum does the gardening, my brothers and sister do the gardening. So it's all of us do the gardening really … We have two dogs and three cats, and loads of fish. All of us [look after them].

Dan characterised his older brother and sister as 'always out. Like my brother, last night he slept at my friend's house'. The reason that his older brother had stayed overnight at what Dan referred to as his own friend's house was that 'for ages' Dan's mother had been friends with the mother in a family that lived close by; his older brother had been friends with the older son in that family; and Dan himself had been 'best ever' friends with the younger son. Dan said that he was not concerned about his older siblings being out a lot: 'as long as they're getting on with their friends, I don't mind'. In the sense that his older brother and sister were fitting in with their friendship groups, they were okay in his eyes. Dan himself, however, was not so okay; a cloud had recently crossed his horizon and he did mind about it. His older brother was pulling away from Dan, separating himself and strengthening his ties with his friendship group:

> Say I was down there [at our friends' house] as well, my brother would just say 'can you go away Dan, cos I'm down here'. And it annoys me a little bit because I'm with my other friend and why can't he go away? I stay because he can't shoo me out of my friend's house because it's not his house … I can't go like [into town] like on my own, without my brothers and sister. But if my brother went then I could go, yeah. Sometimes I go, if he like goes. But sometimes he doesn't let me cos he wants to spend time with his friends … My brother's just not interested sometimes, he doesn't really care [about me]. He's at that age where he doesn't care. He hasn't always been like that … When he like took me fishing, he's not taking me fishing now. I don't know why. He says that I play up but I don't. I feel left out.

Dan was hurt by his older brother's rejection, but he felt comforted by his connection to his friends and other siblings – he could talk to his sister about his feelings of being 'left out', and he played with his baby brother. His choice of his own name as a pseudonym for his older brother represents an attempt at symbolically recreating a lost connection in this context.

Dan's account represents an enforced separation with his older brother. His understanding of himself as part of, and protected by, membership of a group, was being threatened. His brother was not only rejecting Dan, as part of this he was also cutting across Dan's relationship with his friend in the group setting of his friend's home. Thus Dan's sense of security in being part of a collectivity – a sibling formation and a group of friends – was under threat on both fronts. Dan found this recent double separation disturbing. For some children and young people, however, separation and independence from siblings was valued.

Jacob – separation through individualisation

Children and young people could view physical and emotional separation from their siblings as autonomy and independence, rather than isolation. Rather than having their individual self defined through membership of a sibling formation, they saw themselves as an individual who was also a sibling. Where it was evident, this position was largely represented among the middle class children and young people in our studies. For a minority of them, this independent, individualised sense of self was taken even further. They desired complete separation from their siblings. Rather than connection to sisters or brothers through negativity, such a position denoted connection itself as a threat to personhood. Our last in-depth account addresses this issue, intertwined with gender images. Jacob was a 8 year old White middle class boy who lived in a large city with Clara, his 7

year old sister; Rupert, his 6 year old brother; Tobin, his 1 year old brother; and their mother and father.

Jacob did not include two of his siblings, Clara and Rupert, on his circle map, saying 'they're really annoying'. He expressed a visceral hatred of them, especially Clara, who was 'a girl'. Their very existence blighted his life:

> They're really annoying and Clara, my sister, she always says to my mum – she cries for my stuff and then she always ends up with them. She like steals things, steals like one pound from me, pounds from me. And Rupert because I sleep with him and it can be really annoying. He keeps me awake all night. He has to have this light on and I just can't get to sleep … And they come up and destroy the thing that I've been playing with. Especially Rupert because it's his bedroom as well … Clara always does singing when I'm watching the telly.

Baby Tobin posed a contrast to them in not being 'annoying' because he was:

> … cute and soft. I really like him … [I] play with him when he's crying. I play with him when he's not crying. I play with him all the time.

As a pliable baby brother, with no enacted desires of his own that could cut across or clash with Jacob's, Tobin appeared not to pose a threat to Jacob's strongly asserted, but easily threatened, senses of independence, autonomy and masculinity.

Jacob's defence against these assaults were attempts to create spaces where he was physically separate from Clara and Rupert, symbolising an emotional separation from them. He sought to isolate himself at home, and could not bear the thought of these siblings attending the same school as him, invading his sense of a self that was separate from them there:

> I spend most of the time by myself … [To avoid sleeping in the same room as Rupert], I go downstairs into the spare room ... It doesn't really [help] because when I go down, Clara's in the spare room for no reason. I try to get there first and then, then I go downstairs and ask mummy if I can go in the spare room and she doesn't get to be in there … [When Clara sings] I go in the kitchen or bedroom and watch telly, but it's not very comfortable … [At school], I get to be by myself longer … [Clara and Rupert] are going to come to my school and I don't want them to. They're going to be really annoying … [When they come] I'm fast away from them. I'm like the second fastest [runner] in the class. Or I'll hide in the boys' toilets until they forget about it, get bored … [I won't mind if people at school find out that Clara is my sister] because I don't like her and Clara would know that they don't like her either.

Jacob believed that because he hated Clara, others at school would also do so. Her own assertions of personhood were posed as not only a threat to his own, but also intolerable to the wider world.

Jacob's desire for separation from his two unpliable siblings, especially his sister, was revealed in his remark about how he wished Clara was a boy: '[It would be] cool. She wouldn't be sleeping [in her bedroom], she would be sleeping [in mine] … We'd be like twins. We'd have mostly exactly the same things and stuff'. Although Jacob did have two brothers, one of whom he shared a bedroom with, he wanted connection to a brother who appeared to be a replica of himself (a twin with the

same possessions). This imagined self-connection seems to be less problematic than the reality of emotional connection with Clara herself.

Jacob's exclusion of two of his siblings from his circle map symbolised his desire for complete separation from them; he wished that they did not exist. He wanted to distance himself physically as well as emotionally, 'running away' and 'hiding' from them at school and at home. Other than his assertion that his sister was 'a girl', highlighting his masculinity, Jacob's account is characterised largely by a lack of differentiation from and contrast with his siblings. Such differentiation would at least demonstrate an investment in a form of connection, even if negative. Instead, Jacob's interview is redolent with a sense of threats to an autonomous self from his siblings that can only be repulsed by separation from their very existence and personhood. It would seem that Jacob's striving for a (White middle class and societally dominant) notion of autonomous, independent masculinity is a fraught and fragile process.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reviewed several approaches to the issue of who is a sibling. These perspectives underpin much of the research on sibling relationships, posing particular sorts of links between biological and social ties. We argued that these approaches either rely on technical fact alone, or assume that biological links are primary and that social ties arise from them. We further argued that such work did not address the potentially variable subjectivity practices of marginalised social groups of siblings, such as those from working class or minority ethnic backgrounds. In our own exploration of children and young people's relationships with their sisters and brothers, we took a social constructionist approach that considers the question from the point of view of children and young people themselves. This produced a far more complex consideration of the links between biological and social ties in sibling relationships. The children and young people's accounts demonstrate that the question of who is a sister or brother cannot be divorced from the far more fruitful question of what is a sibling? Their understandings encompassed constructions of social as well as biological ties in various ways, and drew attention to the subjective nature of sibling relationships. The quality of relationships with sisters and brothers was important to children and young people, entailing a sense of a self that is connected to and separate from others, collectively and individually.

Our engagement with children's and young people's own accounts in this paper also highlights the importance of the lived specificities of ethnicity, social class and gender, as well as age and birth order status, in how the questions of who and what is a sibling interact with a sense of self in relation to others and the wider world. Their understandings provide a challenge to dominant, and often simplistic, approaches to investigating sibling relationships. As researchers begin to take account of diversity in family structures and forms generally, we need to recognise that the structure of sibling relationships – what we have termed sibling formations – involves more than biological ties and co-residence. Importantly, too, we need to encompass the social implications of this, as children and young people actively construct complex subjective understandings of who and what is a sibling as part of their lived experience within a broader social context.

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