

# Narrating Sisters: Narrative Structure, 'Closeness' and the Prototypical 'Sister' in Women's Online Stories of Sisterhood

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## Abstract

*In interactional sociolinguistics (for example Tannen, 2007; Gordon, 2007a, 2007b) and narrative analysis, talk within and about the family have been identified as significant sites for creating individual and family identities. Schiffrin (1996), for instance, examines women's stories about their families and finds that speakers 'paint a self-portrait' of themselves as mothers through narrative negotiations of their family relationships. In this study, I investigate structural trajectories and salient themes in posts to an Internet message board devoted to 'stories about being a sister and having siblings'. The stories typically exhibit one of two structures: the short and elliptical core stories or the longer expository stories. These structures form a framework for 'how' participants talk about siblings, echoing Hamilton's (1998) finding that repetition in online discourse helps to shape social cohesion and local identities. Significantly, the theme of closeness emerges as a salient part of the group's discourse about their experiences as sisters. Participants negotiate the meaning of closeness and individually contribute to the emergence of a situated closeness-seeking sister prototype. Both the structural and thematic patterns potentially show evidence of more global discourses of sisterhood and desirable sibling relationships.*

## Introduction

Researchers on discourse analysis have frequently commented on the family as a site and topic within which speakers create, showcase, and negotiate personal and group identities. In this study, I consider structural and thematic patterns which indicate the presence of a co-constructed group prototype or identity in a women's online environment, 'Sisters Space', in which users are urged to 'share their experiences' of being sisters and having siblings. An analysis of the structures and themes of the stories submitted to the website reveals structural and thematic patterns. The posts are found to belong to two structural categories: the brief and evaluative 'core' stories of sisterhood, and the longer 'expository' stories which recount in greater detail the women's sibling relationships and how they have changed over time.

In addition, the stories illustrate different realisations of 'closeness' as

crucial elements in sister relationships. I argue that the structural similarities across the data, in addition to the presence of closeness as a salient feature throughout the sibling stories, suggest that participants co-construct a view of themselves as 'closeness-seeking' sisters. These results exemplify how speakers within this setting conceptualise and enact a prototype of 'sisterhood' through the use of particular narrative trajectories.

## **Background**

### **Interaction, Narrative and the Family**

Interactional sociolinguists have traditionally investigated language primarily in face-to-face domains such as groups of friends, families, colleagues, or people engaged in some form of service encounter. One site of discourse where identity is of particular salience is the personal and discursive space of the family. Research on family discourse shows that the talk performed by family members in interaction (Tannen, 2007; Gordon, 2007a), as well as in talk about family (Gordon, 2007b; Schiffrin, 1996), is instrumental in the construction of participant identities. In essence, each family member necessarily takes up positions in relation to others.

Gordon (2007a) illustrates how the family identity of 'Liberal, Al Gore supporters' is created in one family through (among other strategies) the repeated, and eventually ritualised, use of referring terms signalling proximity and understanding with then-presidential candidate Al Gore and distance from his opponent, George W. Bush. The playful nature of this habitual way of talking about political affiliation acts as a vehicle for creating and maintaining a sense of closeness within the family, as well as functioning as a socialisation mechanism for the family's children. Tannen (2007) illustrates the negotiation of identity, and the polysemy of power and solidarity in the family, by describing how a mother voices, or 'ventriloquises', the family dogs when making indirect commands for her son to pick up his toys. The 'ventriloquising' allows the mother to distance herself from the 'bad cop mom' she could be seen as, and allowing herself to remain - in the son's eyes - a 'good cop mom.'

These works make clear the complicated nature of talk within the family, and they also bring to the foreground the notion that connection between family members is a highly salient and desirable thing. Family members will strive to achieve it, whether through the solidification of a specific type of talk, as in Gordon's work, or through avoiding making a direct and blunt request, as shown by Tannen. This suggests a strong, perhaps inextricable, connection between the notions of 'closeness' and 'family'.

Research on personal narrative similarly points out family as a site of identity-making. In her studies of the performance of 'mother' identities in stories told about women's relationships with their families, Schiffrin (1996) calls narrative a 'self-portrait' whereby speakers create identities and cast themselves as independent women and mothers through linguistic choices in the stories they tell. Gordon (2007b), in her study of a woman's construction of a 'mother' identity, also makes the analogy of talk and storytelling as portrait: 'Janet constructs her identity or 'paints a portrait' of herself as a mother through performing social acts and taking up stances towards the topic of talk.' (2007b, p. 72)

These sociolinguistic investigations allow us to make observations about family discourse: a) that family is an institution fundamentally tied to personal identity, b) that such identities are necessarily plural due to the multitudes of different roles simultaneously assumed by speakers with regard to different family members, and c) that family member identities are continuously showcased and shaped within different contexts – whether watching TV with one's children, evaluating one's relationship with one's mother, or telling a story about one's daughter's childhood. In order to add to the sociolinguistic discussion of family identity, I have chosen to focus my investigation on a non-canonical narrative environment: an online message board which lacks many of the features of face-to-face talk. Through looking at this environment, I was able to analyse a comparatively large sample of narratives, which enabled me to identify patterns across texts as well as within them. In doing this, I am hoping to shed light on a family 'role' hitherto less studied by interactional sociolinguists and narrative analysts - that of a sister – by investigating how women typify and cast themselves as sisters for other women in an online testimonial environment which operates as a place promoting 'self-understanding' and 'sharing'.

### **Language and Identity in Computer-Mediated Communication**

Sociolinguists have recently paid increasing attention to talk that happens on the internet. Herring (2001) uses the overarching term computer-mediated discourse (CMD) to describe online talk, and identifies the particularities of talk in online environments. Speakers within CMD contexts use orthographic means to convey what in face-to-face discourse would be expressed through prosody, physical cues or other extra linguistic means.

The term 'virtual community', coined by Rheingold (1993), refers to the plethora of online spaces in which participants, though not physically co-present, engage in communication. To some extent, the virtual or online community is a notion analogous to a face-to-face situation in which communication between interlocutors arises. However, where face-to-face

communicative contexts may consist of groups of people as close as families or as incidental and ephemeral as fellow commuters on a train, online communities are more often made up of people sharing a motivation for engaging in a particular kind of discussion. Baym (1995; 1999) has extensively studied fan identity, in-group solidarity and the use of humour between members of an online group for fans of a US television soap opera. Postmes, Spears and Lea (2000) explored an online graduate statistics course as a site for students' group formation and the creation of in-group language practices. Gendered language practices have been studied within contexts such as recreational chat and topical discussion boards (for example Herring, 2003), and male-oriented discussion boards populated by stockholders in a company (Herrmann, 2007). These are of course merely a small selection of works on different types of online groups, but what they all have in common is that members are connected by a common interest, focusing the talk on a particular topic and allowing the speakers to co-construct local stances and identities.

Hamilton (1998) shows evidence of the creation of individual and group identity, through the use of orthographically represented reported speech, across texts within an online forum dealing with bone marrow transplant patients. Previously, reported speech (or as Tannen (2007 [1989]) terms it, constructed dialogue) was a discourse feature which had been studied within face-to-face contexts only. Hamilton's discourse analysis of the creation of the group's survivor identity indicates that the establishment of identities depends, to a large extent, on the presence of recurring elements, thematic and structural, across texts within a given communicative situation.

This finding echoes Tannen's (2007 [1989]) view of repetition in discourse as a device which anchors and lends solidity to talk between people, bringing them closer together and thus helping with the co-creation of a mutually understood identity. In an online sphere, as Hamilton's analysis shows, such repetition will be found across texts produced within the same speech situation, in this case, a website populated by speakers with a common interest. The recurring narrative trajectories and content of the posts in the environment under study support Hamilton's and Tannen's assertions about the instrumentality of situated intertextual patterns in the creation of local, group-specific roles and prototypes – in this case, the prototype of a sister and her sibling relationships.

## **Sisters Space and the Data**

The data for this study comprise 34 postings to Sisters Space, a subspace of host website 'The Place for Experience'<sup>1</sup>. The Place for

Experience is described by its designers as ‘the first social experience website where you can anonymously connect with people on topics that are real, that you care about, that matter’. This subtitle suggests that the site-makers’ intentions with the website are to create an environment encouraging reciprocity, solidarity and support for its members. The site is made up of an ever-growing number of ‘experience groups’ in which members post stories of experience on certain topics, ranging from ‘Battling depression’ to ‘being the spouse of a US Marine’.

The data was collected in October 2007 and at the time of collection comprised the full contents of the subspace Sisters Space, though it has subsequently been added to. An initial indicator of the communication profile of this space is the fact that, at the time of collection, the site had 147 members but only 34 postings to the board, most without comments from other members. This suggests that Sisters Space is primarily testimonial in nature, analogous more of a bulletin board rather than a real-time conversation.

The testimonial nature of the board is further underscored by the fact that no social or demographic characteristics of the members are readily available. Geographical location, ethnicity and age are not displayed. The gender of the members can only be inferred from the fact that the board is devoted to stories of ‘being a sister’. This kind of anonymity makes it necessary to closely examine the structure of the environment for clues as to how members relate to one another. One key to understanding this space is its web interface.

Herring (2004) summarises the criteria which groups must fulfil to some degree to be categorized as communities:

1. Active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
2. Shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
3. Solidarity, support, reciprocity
4. Criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
5. Self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
6. Emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

(Herring, 2004, p. 14)

Sisters Space cannot fulfil the membership or communication criteria for

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<sup>1</sup>In order to protect the identities of participants, the name of the website under study as well as all participant online screen names, have been substituted by pseudonyms. Within the sibling stories themselves, names, and references to geographic locations have also been changed.

community status due to the member statistics, and the layout of the interface itself. Judging by the member statistics above, it is possible that the site does have regularly visiting members. However, as evidenced by the absence of comments and the relatively small number of active participants, and the fact that one member rarely posts more than one entry, the members fail to create self-sustained participation. This may largely be due to the web interface layout and design. In particular, the order in which posts and potential comments are displayed, the ease of access to posts, and the trajectory of posts and comments, play a role in the unfolding of talk, or lack thereof. Figure 1 on the next page shows the order in which posts are displayed on the site.

Posts on Sisters Space are displayed in reverse-chronological order with a density of ten posts per page. The interface is designed so that a visitor cannot see the full accounts from the front page: only the first few clauses are visible, making it necessary to follow the hyperlink, shown as [read more], to see the post in its entirety on a different page. The lack of immediate access to posts on Sisters Space may deter viewers from commenting as it puts a burden on the viewer to seek out a link, wait for the page to load, and locate the commenting tool, before a comment may be made. Put simply, this design makes engaging in talk taxing for participants.

It is worth noting that each post on the main page is accompanied by a views counter, detailing how many times a particular post has been opened and viewed in full. This can be seen in Figure 1. Although posts are not immediately visible and rarely commented upon, the participants who do post are able to see that their stories have been read by others on the views counter. This appears to be the only indicator of any engagement with the stories by anybody other than their respective authors. The lack of interaction may prohibit members of this space from getting to know each other, as would be expected of a discussion board promoting sociability<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the participants should be unable to create group norms and values, identify inappropriate conduct and reprimand it, and practice ritual.

Nonetheless, as I argue, participants draw on the interactional resources available to them in order to shape the discourse into recognizable, and replicated, patterns. The participants post accounts which follow two primary structural patterns, and the discrete accounts emerge as a locally situated way of talking about siblings for the participants. Prior to moving on to the

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<sup>2</sup>It is certainly possible, and plausible, that the participants engage in private conversation outside of Sisters Space. A more longitudinal, ethnographic investigation of the interpersonal relationships of the participants falls outside the scope of this article, but is of course an interesting angle for future investigation of the development of this online environment.

analysis, I describe the storytelling 'prompt', which is designed to encourage participation. The prompt serves as a departure point for the intertextual creation of group discourse: it produces a positive environment emphasizing self-understanding and interpersonal connection which arguably encourages participants to create 'sameness' through their narrative trajectories and the focus on closeness.



Figure 1: Reverse-chronological, linear post display on Sisters Space

## The Storytelling Prompt

The stories of sister relationships are presented as responses to a prompt made by the site-designers, which can be likened to the method of eliciting narrative in sociolinguistic interviews, as described by Labov (1972). Coupland, Garrett and Williams (2005), in their study of youth narratives and language attitudes, provide an extensive storytelling prompt. The participants are provided with options of 'story types' (for example funny, embarrassing, or frightening) to lead them into a narrative (Coupland, Garrett and Williams, 2005, p. 73). In contrast, the leading prompt of The Place for Experience is vague:

No one understands you better than someone that has shared your experiences. The Place for Experience is a network of communities based on life experiences, such as surviving cancer or attending Stanford. Share your life experiences and the stories behind them, and we automatically find others who share experiences with you. The more you have in common, the stronger the potential connection - and the deeper the understanding.

**Figure 2 The storytelling prompt of The Place of Experience**

The participants are being prompted to perform an act ('share your life experiences and the stories behind them') in order to come into contact with others like them ('the more you have in common, the stronger the potential connection - and the deeper the understanding'). The sharing of stories is portrayed as beneficial to the participants, who will gain connection with and understanding from others by engaging in this activity. Arguably, the prompt forms a framework for the individual participant stories, a 'frame' which, as Tannen (1979) describes it, is a '[structure] of expectation based on past experience' (p. 179). The expectation at play is that the group discourse will make visible similarities between the participants.

## **Analysis**

### **Core Stories**

In this section, I describe the structural patterns in the type of story which I call the core story. The term 'core' signifies that the stories are brief and comprise information which is deemed central to the description of one's siblings. There are 18 core stories which make up 53%. There are three general trends in core stories. Firstly, the core stories are relatively short; generally not exceeding 6-8 clauses. Secondly, they include 'core' information about siblings, including: number, sex, age or age relative to the speaker herself. Occasionally, speakers mention their siblings' names. Finally, core stories all mention speakers' attitudes and stances towards their siblings. Significantly, speakers negotiate 'being close' to siblings.

Example 1, below, shows a core story in its entirety. The speaker provided this story as a reply to the Sisters Space prompt: share your experiences and stories of being a sister and having siblings.

#### **Example 1: Marlene80**

*I have 2 younger brothers.*

*One is 18 months younger and the other is 3 years*

*younger.*

*I love them both a lot.*

*I really miss my little brother cause he moved to Louisiana last summer.*

Marlene80's story exemplifies perfectly the structural trends in core stories. She begins by stating the number and sex of her siblings on lines 1-2 (2 younger brothers... 18 months younger... 3 years younger) which in a sense already fulfils the requirements of the prompt – she has shared her experience of siblinghood by confirming that she has siblings. Lines 3-4 show a trajectory of central information: I love them both a lot (line 3) shows an important stance towards the siblings, and contextualises the speaker and her siblings as a unit, suggesting the belief that 'love' is a central emotion to be conveyed in sibling stories. Marlene80 further illustrates her positive stance towards her brother (I really miss my little brother, line 4). The focus on Marlene80's stance and attitude towards her siblings makes the story more than just a list of demographic information. The same focus, on love and missing, illustrates the third trend of core stories: they include information about sibling qualities and the speakers' emotional stances towards siblings.

## **Siblings, Ages, Stances and Attitudes**

In the following examples I focus on showing the overarching presence of the three features typical of core stories. Examples 2 and 3 show two core stories and exemplify, specifically, the corresponding inclusion of demographic information about siblings and the similarities in the lengths of the stories.

### **Example 2: TearyEyes**

Siblings' relative ages

I am a big sister and a little sister.

Sibling sex

I have three sisters that are still living, two that are deceased and I have two brothers, both deceased.

ATTITUDES/STANCES

I MISS ALL OF THEM. THE THREE THAT ARE LIVING LIVE VERY FAR AWAY FROM ME, SO I DON'T GET TO SEE OR SPEAK TO THEM VERY OFTEN.

**Example 3: Michaeladancer24**

Sex + relative age                      *I have one brother a year older than me.*

ATTITUDES / STANCES                *WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CLOSE. MOM SAYS WHEN WE WERE GROWING UP HER FRIENDS WERE ALWAYS JEALOUS BECAUSE HER CHILDREN NEVER FOUGHT. IN HIGH SCHOOL WE DATED EACH OTHERS FRIENDS AND ALWAYS COVERED EACH OTHERS BACK.*

Both TearyEyes and Michaeladancer24 include similar information in their stories, echoing the same choices made by Marlene80 in example 1: they both say how many siblings they have and what their sex is (I have three sisters... and I have one brother), the place of the speaker or the siblings in the birth order (I am a big sister and a little sister and I have one brother a year older than me), and both display attitudes and stances towards the siblings, as well as their level of emotional involvement (I miss all of them... and We have always been close). The presence of this third category – stances, attitudes, or emotional involvement – throughout the data may signal that participants continuously draw on some understanding that ‘the bare minimum’ is not enough to tell an adequate sibling story. The structural similarities exemplified by the three core stories discussed in examples 1, 2, and 3 indicate a normative way of structuring short stories of sibling experiences. The drive to include certain kinds of information and experiences, particularly those of stances and attitudes, is further explored in the expository stories.

**Expository Stories**

In this section, I describe the structural properties of the second structural type of stories, which I call the expository stories. The expository structure appears in 47% of the full data. These display similar structural elements to the core stories including demographic information about siblings, relative age, and attitudes and stances of the speakers. The term ‘expository’ is used to indicate that these stories are longer and more story-like than the core stories – some include elements of William Labov's (1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) narrative structure in that they depict discrete events in the past. Furthermore, they expand on the attitudes and stances expressed briefly in the core stories. In the expository stories, stances and attitudes are shown in a trajectory – speakers explain what their relationship with their siblings was like when they were young, what it is like now, and how it

changed over time, following the format of sibling sex / number of siblings, stances, then, now and reaffirmation.

The stories begin with the same demographic information as did the core stories. Following this, participants state their stances towards their siblings, pertaining to emotional connection – love, closeness, and arguments fall under this category. As previously examined, these are all features of core stories as well as expository stories. Where the expository stories differ is in the exemplification of said stances and emotional connections. The exemplification follows a temporally ordered path: participants state, and sometimes describe in detail, what the sibling relationship was like when they were children, followed by a mention of what the relationship is like now - whether they are close or not, whether they argue more or less, and whether they see each other often. The final element of the expository story structure, and one which becomes crucial to the creation of a closeness-seeking identity, brings the story up to the present and reaffirms their position in the current relationship – whether they are happy with their relationship with their siblings, or if they wish things were different.

### **The Five Elements of Expository Stories**

Example 4 shows a story which includes all five structural elements. In the example, Ynnie tells of her relationship with her sister Katherine. Although they were ‘mortal enemies’ as kids, their relationship changed in their teens when they began to get along. As an adult, Ynnie does not see her sister very often, but expresses an assurance that she is always willing to help her sister when needed.

**Example 4: Ynnie**

SIBS	<i>My sister Katherine is four years younger than me. I'm the oldest kid in my family and my sister is the youngest...</i>
STANCES/THEN	<i>When we were growing up we were mortal enemies. We were mean and nasty to one another on a daily basis. She once got me grounded because she failed to tell my mother that I had called to ask for a ride home from an after school club meeting. I waited for my mom for 5 hours after school...There were so many other things... I even had to hide my toothbrush in my bedroom because I learned that she had been cleaning the toilet with my old one. Anyhow, in my later high school years we actually started to get along for some reason. Then when I was packing up to go off to college. I found a note from her in one of my bags. I still have the note... it was an apology from her for being such a tattle-tale pain in the *** to me all of those years. I think I cried for about an hour as I read it...</i>
NOW	<i>Now-a-days I don't see my sister as often as I'd like... mostly because we live on opposite corners of the state.</i>
REAFFIRMATION	<i>But, I think she knows how much I love her and every time I do get to see her/talk to her I let her know that if she ever needs me that I'll be there for her.</i>

The expository story as a structural type within the data is an expanded version of the core story, in which participants display significant information about siblings in a condensed and fragmented manner. While dealing with largely the same themes as a core story, it paints – to borrow the term from Schiffrin (1996) – a fuller portrait of the participants than do the core stories. Example 5 shows a very similar structure: Samira's relationship with her sisters, which used to be negative in her youth when she felt alienated from her twin sisters, has changed for the better as they have aged. She is now very involved in their lives and shows her involvement with – and closeness to – her sisters by stating her pride and feelings of being privileged to know

them.

### Example 5: Samira

SIBS

*I am a big sister to twins, two years younger than me.*

THEN

*We used to fight all the time, and I resented them for occupying my parents and leaving me to be the odd one out. All my friends only had to deal with one sibling- I had to deal with TWO. And they were ganging up on me!! Snooping in my room, making fun of me when I was beginning to grow up and they were too young to understand.*

NOW

*But now that we're older, the age difference doesn't matter so much. In fact, I don't even notice it. They are my best friends, and we look so alike that we're often mistaken for triplets. We socialise together, we share some of the same friends, and when I'm around them I feel like a better person.*

REAFFIRMATION

*I know how lucky I am to have two sisters I genuinely like so much, and I am fiercely proud of them and everything they've achieved, and everything they are working towards.*

Example 6 shows how a participant describes an enduringly negative sibling experience. FunnyGirl mentions that her sister has been resentful of her all their lives. They are distant from each other, and FunnyGirl has become alienated from her sister and their mother. FunnyGirl concludes that it is 'better' for her to stay out of her sister's and mother's arguments and she tries not to get involved – a display of conscious distance from her family members.

**Example 6: FunnyGirl**

SIBS	<i>My sister is 15 months younger than me.</i>
STANCES	<i>For reasons I can't fully explain, she has always had some element of jealousy and resentment towards me.</i>
THEN	<i>In our super 8 home movies from when we were very small, you can see her crying in any movie that was taken at one of my birthday parties. She begrudged me even getting birthday presents...</i>
NOW	<i>My sister is not a bad person, and can even be really sweet at times, but I think we got along best during a seven year stretch when my life really sucked.</i>
REAFFIRMATION	<i>When my mom and sister are getting along well, I am basically excluded, but should they have a fight, they call me to ***** about the other. I don't get too involved in any of their little dramas, it is best that way.</i>

Example 6 shows how a negative sibling experience story is constructed. It is evident that the story comprises the five structural categories: introduction of siblings, a statement of stance, a description of the relationship in the past and present, and a reaffirmation of the participant's own position.

The stories do not stop at bare-minimum information – the participating women continuously present personal information and instantiate their relationships with their siblings. The structural similarities in what participants choose to share about their siblings and their relationships within the 'positive, gainful self-understanding' environment of Sisters Space, appears to point towards the creation of a locally situated in-group standard of telling stories about being sisters and having siblings. The idea that a group norm is being created and enacted through these stories of sisterhood is further reinforced by the fact that all stories in the data have at least some elements of the two narrative structures described above. In fact, only two stories take a different reading of the sister stories prompt. These two not only discuss their siblings, but add, with a touch of humour, references to being a 'sista' as well as a 'sister'. Presumably, these women are referring to being women of colour.

## The Diversity of Closeness

The stories across the data reveal that closeness is depicted in diverse ways. Speakers continuously negotiate what closeness means and in which incarnations it is present in sibling relationships. The frequent occurrence of 'closeness-talk' in stories points towards its salience when talking about sibling relationships. In addition, the consensus of the importance of closeness contributes to the emergence of the group's closeness-seeking sister prototype discussed in the next section.

Closeness in the stories appears in a variety of statements which all display the presence or absence of the closeness being talked about. In attempting to disambiguate the notion of closeness and its incarnations in the data, I have identified seven categories in terms of which closeness is discussed by participants. These are:

1. Enduring closeness (present/absent)
2. Loving the sibling(s)
3. Missing the sibling(s)
4. Frequency of meetings and communication
5. Being happy with the state of the relationship
6. Being there
7. A connective element – physical resemblance, reciprocal wish for closeness

All of the above have the potential of conveying emotional closeness – simply stating that one is close to one's siblings creates a powerful mental image of love and caring. Still, it is difficult to pin down just what closeness is. A particularly salient trend is the dichotomous nature of the closeness elements – siblings are people who the women describe being either close to, or distant from.

<i>ELEMENT</i>	<i>PRESENCE</i>	<i>ABSENCE</i>
<i>Close/not close</i>	<i>We are very close and I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have her to confide in (nightingale1268)</i> <i>My sister and I have always been close (posterchild)</i>	<i>I used to want this super close relationship with my big sister but I've let that go too (mariah)</i> <i>my sister and I were never really close (browneyequeen)</i>
<i>Loving</i>	<i>I love them both a lot (marlene80)</i> <i>regardless of how it came to be I LOVE all my sisters!! (BeautyBecomesHer)</i>	
<i>Missing</i>	<i>I miss all of them (TearyEyes)</i> <i>I miss my brothers a lot (sizzles)</i>	
<i>See/speak to often</i>		<i>Now-a-days I don't see my sister as often as I'd like (Ynnie)</i> <i>do I ever see either of them, no I don't! (fruitfanatic)</i>
<i>Happy</i>	<i>They're the best brothers I could ever ask for (sizzles)</i> <i>my sisters are more free spirited, we all get along great! (splitpersonality)</i>	<i>I wish I was closer to her, its not like I never tried to be close to her, she kepted pushing me away. now its too late for me to makes things better between us (browneyequeen)</i>
<i>Being there</i>	<i>I let her know that if she ever needs me that I'll be there for her (Ynnie)</i> <i>But I know that there's always someone who cares about me (Lynney)</i>	<i>Brothers don't come to sisters for advice. Or at least neither of mine ever did. Then again, I never went to either of them for advice, either (Celia)</i>
<i>Connection</i>	<i>I have the best connection with my oldest sisters....we can like almost read each others minds at times.... (blackkitty)</i>	<i>I don't have any real attachments to them. They are ppl. they come and they go (Mariah)</i>

**Figure 3: Elements of closeness – presence and absence**

Descriptions of the presence of closeness in sibling relationships vary

from the basic statement of closeness and its importance in a stable sibling relationship, for example *We are very close and I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have her to confide in* (nightingale1268), to the less tangible evaluation of what it is that makes a speaker close to her sibling(s): *I have the best connection with my oldest sisters....we can like almost read each others minds at times....were all lucky to have one another...* (blackkitty). The expressions of the absence of closeness range from simple statements, for example *my sister and I were never really close* (browneyequeen), to expressions of defeat, illustrating that the speaker has attempted to achieve closeness, but given up: *its not like I never tried to be close to her, she kepted pushing me away. Now it's too late for me to makes things better between us* (browneyequeen).

It is evident that closeness can be addressed and portrayed through a variety of expressions. Speakers who are pleased with their sibling relationship state their closeness, love, and willingness to be there for their siblings. Those whose relationships are negative state distance from their siblings and the siblings' absence from their lives, both in terms of frequency of communication and unwillingness to 'be there when needed'. In sum, it is clear that closeness plays a significant role in the construction and portrayal of a sibling relationship. However, one question that remains to be asked is whether there exists a default position, a sibling relationship prototype which speakers are aware of and in relation to which they choose their own portrayals.

## Wanting the Default 'Good' Relationship

Speakers continuously signal that closeness in sibling relationships can be both present and absent. A look at the breakdown presence/absence displays in Figure 3 (above) shows that certain elements of closeness –loving and missing the siblings, and speaking to/seeing them often – are not equal in frequency.

The displays of loving and missing the siblings, and speaking to/seeing siblings show that the inclusion or omission of information can contribute to the creation of a 'closeness default' in sibling relationships as portrayed on Sisters Space. In the elements of 'loving the siblings' and 'missing the siblings', the women consistently include only varieties which show the presence of the elements. While speakers include information like *I love them both a lot* (marlene80) and *I miss all of them* (TearyEyes), the negative counterparts are absent. This trend indicates that loving and missing are both expressions of closeness which are favoured by participants over their negative counterparts. These become a default way of expressing a good

sibling relationship.

Interestingly, the assumption that siblings who are emotionally close also frequently see each other and speak to each other, is challenged by the fact that participants focus overwhelmingly on not seeing their siblings often. Below are three examples of the 'see/speak to often' element, which show that participants consistently absolve themselves of the blame for the lack of communication.

*I don't get to see my sister very much* (Charley) – the passive nature of 'get to' suggests that the lack of communication is not Charley's fault. She wants to see her sister, but circumstances do not allow it.

*Now-a-days I don't see my sister as often as I'd like* (Ynnie) – the adverb 'now-a-days' [sic] suggests that Ynnie used to see her sister more. 'As often as I'd like', too, implies that the frequency of communication has decreased over time and that Ynnie, who *seeks* emotional closeness by wanting to see her sister, is not pleased by this situation.

*Do I ever see either of them, no I don't!* (fruitfanatic) – rather than simply stating that she does not see her siblings often, fruitfanatic intensifies her statement by using an exclamative form, 'no, I don't!' This suggests disappointment – fruitfanatic would like to see her sisters but does not, and this is not her fault.

The prevalence of the absence of frequent communication, as shared by the speakers, paints a similar picture to the inclusion of positive elements of a relationship, such as loving and missing siblings. By stating that they do not see their siblings (although they used to/want to), participants create a default picture of a 'good' sibling relationship as inclusive of frequent communication. It may therefore be concluded that the default view of a close sibling relationship is as follows: *A good sibling relationship is one in which the siblings are close to each other, love and miss each other, and make an effort to see and speak to each other as often as possible.*

Through the different displays of closeness, participants negotiate the group's mutually understood definition of what closeness is. It follows from the definition of a close sibling relationship that participants should want to be close and seek closeness.

## **The Closeness-Seeking Sister Prototype**

In this section, I focus on the ways in which participants make clear that they do seek closeness, whether they are successful in achieving it or not. This analysis focuses on three portrayals: a) having sought closeness and

achieved it, b) having sought closeness and failed, and c) always having had closeness and being appreciative of its value.

Figure 4 exemplifies ways in which participants portray themselves as closeness-seeking sisters. The participants do not always use the word closeness to refer to the positive relationship they have attempted to achieve. The examples below illustrate how participants portray their seeking of closeness, the outcome thereof, and their evaluations of their efforts.

<b>SOUGHT CLOSENESS AND SUCCEEDED</b>	<b>SOUGHT CLOSENESS AND FAILED</b>	<b>CLOSENESS ALWAYS PRESENT, PARTICIPANT APPRECIATIVE</b>
<p><i>We are a lot closer now, thank goodness! We both grew up I guess and realized that it is o.k. for sisters to be friends. (biscuit78)</i></p> <p><i>But now that we're older, the age difference doesn't matter so much. ... We socialise together, we share some of the same friends, and when I'm around them I feel like a better person (Samira)</i></p>	<p><i>I used to want this super close relationship with my big sister but I've let that go too. I really don't like talking to her too much... I don't have any real attachments to them. They are ppl. they come and they go (mariah)</i></p>	<p><i>But, I think she knows how much I love her and every time I do get to see her/talk to her I let her know that if she ever needs me that I'll be there for her. (Ynnie)</i></p> <p><i>I know that there's always someone who cares about me, that has some wisdom of their own and is willing to help guide me through the turmoil we call life (Lynney)</i></p>

**Figure 4: Ways of self-identifying as closeness-seeking sister**

The closeness-seeking in these stories is shown through the portrayal of a relationship as either enduringly close or changing. In cases where closeness has been present for some time, participants show their appreciation of it and foreground their own insights about the value of the closeness. Ynnie, with her statement I let her know that if she ever needs me that I'll be there for her, shows that she is conscious of the need to maintain the emotional closeness, and not to take it for granted. She also enacts the importance of the 'being there when needed' element of sibling closeness. In doing so, Ynnie portrays herself as a conscientious, closeness-seeking, proactive sister. Lynney shows appreciation of her siblings' closeness-seeking by stating I know that there's always someone who cares about me. She, too, highlights the positivity of her sibling relationship experience by noting that it is characterised by emotional closeness – love and caring, in this instance - which she is eager to maintain.

The sisters who have 'sought closeness and succeeded' put the emphasis on the changing nature of their relationships over a period of time. Age and maturity are factors by which the women measure their relative success at achieving closeness: we both grew up I guess and realized that it is o.k. for sisters to be friends (biscuit78); but now that we're older, the age difference doesn't matter so much (Samira). Both biscuit78 and Samira indicate that they have matured, grown older, and gained insights which have allowed them to achieve elements of closeness: friendship and equality in spite of the age difference. This level of self-evaluation suggests that participants are keen to show that they consider themselves insightful into the workings of their sibling relationships, and to maintain this positive change.

Mariah makes it explicit that she previously sought closeness but failed to achieve it: I used to want this super close relationship with my big sister but I've let that go too. I really don't like talking to her too much... I don't have any real attachments to them. They are ppl. They come and they go (Mariah). Here, she shows the decline in her efforts to maintain a close relationship and frequent communication with her sister. If Mariah at one point wanted the relationship, her sister's lack of similar interest must have contributed to Mariah's defeat. Because she was not to blame for the failure of the relationship, there exists an element of closeness-seeking in her story.

In sum, the many expressions of closeness – from love and the positivity associated with frequent communication, to expressions of defeat and aborted efforts to achieve closeness – all contribute to the creation of a) a model of sisterhood and sibling relationships, and b) the common view of self and fellow participants as proactive, closeness-seeking sisters. It follows that the view of closeness as a positive factor in sibling relationships and the mutual understanding of participants as seeking to achieve that closeness are both part of the construction of a closeness-seeking sister prototype for members of Sisters Space.

## **Conclusion**

In this study of online family discourse, I analysed 34 postings to a women's online discussion group in which participants are urged to share experiences of sisterhood with likeminded others. In my analysis I have showed the existence of two trends in the women's stories: structural similarities in the ways participants choose to talk about their experiences of sisterhood and sibling relationships, and the negotiation of closeness as an important facet of sibling relationships. The structural patterns are reminiscent of William Labov's (1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) exploration of temporal structure in personal narrative – participants talk about the ways

in which their sibling relationships have changed over time, constantly evaluating their own positions within these. The clearly observable patterns suggest that participants choose similar ways of talking about their sibling experiences, by turns co-creating and reflecting discourses of sisterhood present within the Sisters Space environment.

Strikingly, the analysed sibling stories overwhelmingly appear to focus on themes of closeness among siblings, indicating that closeness is particularly salient to the description of sibling relationships. By extension, it may be argued that closeness is also seen by the participating women as being an intrinsic part of the sibling relationship itself. When prompted to describe their experiences of being a sister and having siblings, participants appear to default to one conceptualisation of an idealised sibling relationship: one which is characterised by emotional, and ideally also social and physical, closeness with their siblings. Evaluating these forms of closeness, the women appear to arrive at an understanding that having them, and wanting them, is desirable in a sibling relationship. Participants use this shared understanding to co-construct a sisterhood prototype which is continuously present in their stories, one of a closeness-seeking sister.

As suggested by Hamilton (1998) and Tannen (2007 [1989]) intertextual repetition is a very powerful force in the creation of in-group norms and identities. While the lack of actual communication between members of Sisters Space makes it difficult to talk about an identity being created, the repeated narrative structures and themes do tell us something about norm construction and prototypicality. Even if members know little about each other beyond the understanding that they are all women, and even if the narratives pattern the way they do due to a trend initiated by the first few posters, the uniformity of the narratives is consistent across the data. It is challenged only twice, through tongue-in-cheek references to an alternative reading of 'sister' as 'sista' or woman of colour, and even then in addition to two stories which by and large follow the discursive patterns of the other stories. The norm of the group, then, is solidified over time as the narrative patterns are replicated by more and more members, conforming to both the structural and thematic elements that constitute a Sisters Space story. The continuous replication of narrative style – choosing to foreground contrasts between childhood and adulthood, for example – and thematic elements such as closeness and its importance in a desirable sibling relationship, both work together to create – again borrowing Schiffrin's (1996) analogy – a portrait of what a Sisters Space sister is, a local prototype on which depictions of sisterhood and sibling relationships are scaffolded. This locally situated norm provides a foundation for further stories about being a sister.

To conclude, we may ask this: what is special about being a 'sister'? Necessarily, talk about what is essentially a gendered role is in some ways gendered talk. While this study focuses primarily on locally and immediately relevant views of what a sister is, we may also ask ourselves how this selfportrait of a sister reflects larger patterns and culturally recognisable prototypes of sisterhood. Just as Tannen's (2007) and Gordon's (2007a; 2007b) studies exemplify family discourse situations in which participants are cast in culturally recognisable roles of 'good cop mom' and 'Democratic Al Gore supporter', the closeness-seeking sister can be seen as a reflection of ideas about women's roles within the family unit. For example, the prototypical sister is portrayed as conscious of the importance of closeness, possessing an insight and selfreflection on her relationship with her siblings, and as a proactive party whose desire it is to achieve closeness and keep the family together. She is desiring of closeness and consciously works to achieve it, lamenting the absence of those circumstances which allow her to be close to her siblings – either their unwillingness, or geographical distance. Without delving into cultural depictions of women or the resulting expectations on women in society (as these fall outside the immediate scope of this study), we may tentatively conclude that the sister prototype constructed by members of Sisters Space reflects, in some ways, the idea of women's family-orientedness and consciousness of their role within the family configuration as central members and nurturers of relationships. In short, the closeness-seeking sister can be seen as a facet of the matriarch. Further research on women's family narrative – and comparisons with men's narratives of, for instance, their sibling relationships – would of course shed necessary light on the construction of gendered identities within the family.

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