A Lateral Exploration of Faith, Intimacy and Care among Adult Sisters

Abstract

Purpose. Sociologists of religion continue to prioritise parent–child socialisation in research on families and religion. In doing so, other kinds of family relationships that also influence faith practices can go unnoticed. I therefore propose a lateral reading of religion and intimate ties between siblings, specifically adult sisters. Research on this group is limited with much of sibling research focusing on younger cohorts. Explorations of faith and intimacy among sisters are also scant.

Methodology. Drawing on 23 biographical interviews with adult women who were based in the UK, identified as sisters, in a sister relationship and as a practicing Muslim or Christian, I examine intersections of faith and intimacy. I employ a feminist standpoint and lived religion approach along with conceptualisations of practices of intimacy from family sociologists to analyse adult sister experiences.

Findings. Overlapping themes of religion and intimacy between sisters are discussed which reveal faith as a source of intimate connection, sisters as everyday sources of support and care, religion as part of the everyday fabric of sister relations and that sisters' differing religious identities can offer a lens onto society's changing relationship to religion.

Originality. In offering a lateral vantage point, I foreground the co-constitutive shaping of faith and intimacy among adult sisters which contributes to sociological knowledge on families and religion. Consideration of religion and intimacy among adult sister relationships also raises important points for social policy on care especially in mid and late adulthood.

Introduction

Siblings and sisters more specifically are mainly absent from sociological studies of religion. This is because sociologists have prioritised the vertical transmission of religion. This is understood as parents socialising their children into religion through the modelling and passing on of faith practices, behaviours, and attitudes. Smith and Adamczyk (2020) revealed from a study of "230 interviews and three nationally representative surveys" that "the most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents" (pp.1-2). Another American study found that grandparents "influence grandchildren's religiosity independent of parents, suggesting that religious beliefs and practices formed within nuclear and extended families persist into adulthood" (Bengston *et al.,* 2009, p. 325; Bengston *et al.,* 2013). Elsewhere, both parents and grandparents affected religious identity formation, for instance among adolescent Pakistanis (Batool and Ghayas, 2021), children who were confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Tervo-Niemelä, 2021), and British children who inhabited a "humanist condition" (Strhan *et al.,* 2024, p. 1). Arweck and Nesbitt (2010) in their research on mixed-faith families in the UK found that parents with both strong and less strong religious affiliations want to pass on a religious tradition to their children so that they can have a choice of faith of which to belong (p. 84). Similarly, Cerchiaro (2020) reported that children of Christian-Muslim Italian couples have varied religious and spiritual trajectories suggesting a complexity of religious identity overtime.

Although parents are central to religious formation, this process is not linear, nor simply a vertical one. Other family relationships influence faith identities and practices and can go unnoticed such as the laterality of sibling ties (i.e., adopted, biological, half, step). Park and Ecklund (2007) noted that among second-generation Asian-Americans, "siblings were mentioned often enough that they stood out as a significant nonparental family influence in

respondents' religious socialization" (p. 103). Having interviewed an even number of female and male university students in their study, sisters and brothers were positive sources for religion and by which participants compared their own religiosity. Some participants discussed how their sisters' religiosity or lack thereof guided their own decisions and level of non/religious commitment. Among Turkish-Muslim families, cousins and siblings were "important religious socialization agents," especially in religious participation and learning (Özdikmenli-Demir and Şahin-Kütük, 2012). From interviews also with university students, 43 women and 28 men, some shared that if they were the eldest sibling they had a religious influence over their younger siblings, and some were more religiously influenced by an elder sister or brother of the same sex. Sisters in this research discussed how they were a significant religious influence on younger siblings with younger siblings concurring that their sisters influenced appropriately religious and respectable behaviour.

While religious socialisation is a key area of research in the study of adult sisters and brothers, others have pointed to the complexities of siblings' religious lives when power, love, sexual orientation and ethnicity intersect. Joseph (1994) who studied Arab families in Lebanon found that power, connectivity, and love are central to brother/sister relationships and the reproduction of Arab patriarchy of which religion is a part (p. 52). Sibling ties are not just romantic and safe, nor are they only experienced as hierarchies through honor/shame complexes. Both sisters and brothers in the family constellation can endorse socio-religious structures and power relations, affecting love, connection, and psychodynamic processes. Yip (2004) found similarly in his research on 22 male and 20 female non-heterosexual British Muslims that very few came out to their brothers and sisters because of fear of rejection and maintenance of family honour that was tied to religious beliefs and structures. Song's (2010) important research on 51 sibling pairs, 21 of which were sister pairs, revealed that mixed race, ethnic and religious identities within families based in Britain can create tension and cohesion

between siblings. Song highlights the case of one family in which Catholic (Portuguese) and Muslim (Pakistani) ethno-religious backgrounds co-existed but not without conflict. One of the sisters, Myriam "had become a devout Muslim while at university and had married an older Asian Muslim man" (p. 278). She chose to adhere to her Pakistani heritage while their older brother Richard "had converted to Catholicism and saw himself as mostly Portuguese" (p. 278). Myriam's commitment to Islam was viewed as "distancing" herself from her family while Richard's conversion to Catholicism as unproblematic (p. 278). Myriam's choice was considered "a (problematic) symbolic assertion of difference within mainstream British society" (p. 282). As such, a sociological reading of religion among siblings and moreover adult sister relationships can reveal barriers and shifts in sibling intimacies and societal attitudes towards religion. This small but growing body of research that highlights the intersection of religion with adult sibling ties evidences the impact of sisters and brothers on the shaping of religious selves and structures and vice versa. My study contributes to this research area, especially on how religion and intimacy are lived among adult sisters.

Sisters moreover are under-researched as a group on their own and as adults. Mauthner's (2005a, b) work is an exception. Her research investigated how sister relations can shape modes of feminine subjectivity and power such as "motherly sistering". She noted how sisterly ties can shift between closeness and distance and transform over time because of life transitions. Mauthner contends that sisters brought up in the same family are less remarked on than the mother-daughter dyad and often overlooked compared to feminist sisterhood. Here and elsewhere (2016, 2024), I build on Mauthner's work by examining how adult sisters experience religion and intimacy with each other. While adult sisters are largely invisible in sociological research on religion because of their ordinariness in everyday life, their relationships with each other endure and there is much to learn from them. In this article, I offer a lateral viewpoint, interrogating the co-constitutive shaping of faith and intimacy among

adult sisters and argue that sister-religious-ties should be considered for what they can contribute to sociological knowledge on religion and families and social policy on care.

Theoretical framework

A feminist standpoint and lived religion approach theoretically frame my study. Doing feminist research means my research is "grounded in experiences of gendered social life" that interact with other social structures such as religion, race and class that are imbued within relations of power and embedded in the everyday (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002, p. 5). A feminist standpoint assists in uncovering lived experiences, relationships, and practices of women and of sisters in the ordinariness of familial and social life. Compared to the public sphere where men's accounts of fraternities, brotherhoods and being a brother are more prominent, the private sphere where sororities, sisterhoods and being a sister are less remarked upon (Mauthner, 2005a). Some may argue however that this is changing due to the public visibility of women's sports, stories, leadership, and achievements. Nonetheless, "understanding women's lives from a committed feminist exploration of their experiences…produces more complete and less distorted knowledge … [and] can reveal the existence of forms of human relationships which may not be visible…" (Maynard, 1994, p. 19).

Lived religion as a theoretical paradigm offers a similar direction in that it contends that, "Religion is situated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world …religion is always religion-in-action, religion-in-relationships between people" (Orsi, 2003, p. 172). It is an approach in which researchers take their cue from the people themselves, paying attention to how they understand, describe, and utilise their religious signs and practices and the structures and conditions in which these emerge (Orsi 2003). In this sense it complements a feminist stance by taking note of religious beliefs and practices hidden from view but that are very much part of the fabric of everyday life. The

sharing and doing of intimacy are part of this too – daily practices of care and concern that are overlooked, taken-for-granted. For instance, a cup of tea made and put at the bedside of a loved one or the words, 'I'll pray for you' said from one sister to another towards the end of a phone call. Jamieson (2011) defines practices of intimacy as "practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other" (p. 151). Practice itself "emphasizes embodiment, habit, and daily activity" (Bender, 2012, p. 273) and is inherent to the living out or 'doing' of religion, intimacy, and family (Morgan, 1996, 2011) 'Sistering' is also a practice that encompasses the everyday endeavours, care and power relations of being a sister. "Sistering as a set of gendered social practices that maintain kin connections in and across diverse types of households is a central aspect of family life" (Mauthner, 2005a, p. 637). While being a sister is different to being a daughter or mother there can be overlap depending on relations of power and position in the family.

In examining Christian and Muslim women who identify as sisters, their religious practices and relationships with each other can go unnoticed because of being in the shadow of institutional, politicised, and violent depictions of religion in public life (Jeldtoft, 2011). For example, clerical childhood sexual abuse in the Anglican and Catholic Churches or political activism and terrorist attacks linked to Islam. The women in this study were removed from such instances but were aware of living with/in and encountering the public gaze when wearing the *hijab* (Author) and public discourses in relation to problematic histories and stances of the Church of England and Catholic Church related to colonialism and sexuality for instance. Thus, a feminist standpoint and lived religion approach links everyday social and religious life "with the larger structures of opportunity and constraint within which practices exist" (Ammerman, 2020, p. 9).

Methods

A feminist approach also frames my research methods in that the knowledge gathered and produced from this study 'has some grounding in women's *experiences*' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 16). As a feminist researcher, my position to the research is one of both familiarity and unfamiliarity. I am a sister myself brought up in a mixed-faith household, and thus my entrée into the topic shares some experience of sister dynamics of religion and intimacy with those of my participants. This does not preclude however the power relations embedded in the research but points to my awareness of how my "personal history is part of the process by which understanding and conclusions are reached" (Maynard, 1994, p. 16). This piece of feminist research took a qualitative approach to explore how religion, specifically Christianity and Islam, shapes practices of intimacy between sisters, and in turn how sister relationships affect religious commitments and identities.

A sample of 23 adult women who identified as sisters, having grown up with religion, and living in Britain were recruited through word-of-mouth snowball sampling and through known networks and informants. Twelve women identified as Christian and were mainly of the Anglican tradition with others stating they were from Catholic, Episcopalian, Pentecostal and United Reformed traditions. Except for one who identified as Afro-Caribbean, all identified as from a White ethnic background and middle class. Of the Christian sample, 10 women were married and 2 were single. Eleven women identified as Muslim and were ethnically diverse, self-identifying as African (1), Arab (2), Egyptian (1), Indian (1), Mixed Arab and African descent (1), Pakistani (3), Saudi Arabian (1), and Sudanese (1), and as middle class. Of the Muslim sample, 3 were married, 1 was partnered, 6 were single and 1 was divorced. All participants were part of the study because they voluntarily put themselves forward and were not recruited because of class status. The age range of participants was 25-75. For both groups, differences within denominations or among faith groups were not a focus but rather the intersection of sisterly and religious practices.

Adult sisters were chosen because "Adult sibling ties are among the least studied of kin relations" (Spitze and Trent, 2006, p. 977). My study aimed to address this gap, especially among sociologists of family and religion. Christianity was chosen because despite a decrease since the 2011 Census "'Christian' remains the most common response to the religion question" with 46.2% identifying as Christian in England and Wales (ONS, 2022, p. 3) and 32.4% with the Church of Scotland (Scotland's Census, 2025). Since 2011, "There were increases in the number of people who described themselves as 'Muslim'; 6.5% in 2021, up from 4.9% in 2011" (ONS, 2022, p. 3). There are several demographic details which make for an interesting sample of women and as such a limitation of the study is that a feminist-intersectional analysis of these different categories is not foregrounded here because of the focus on religion and intimacy.

I conducted biographical interviews. This method "denotes research which utilises individual stories or other personal documents to understand lives within a social, psychological and/or historical frame" (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 10). The interviews assisted in capturing lived aspects of religion as well as uncovering aspects of the women's lives as sisters that may go unobserved. Biographical interviews can help "to discern patterns but also distinctiveness in lives, the relationship between the particular and general, uniqueness and commonality" (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 2). The interviews were guided by questions that addressed areas of family history, growing up with their sisters, life transitions and religious trajectories and practices, and how religion could affect closeness and distance between sisters. For example, Tell me a little bit about the make-up of your family? What was it like being a sister in your family? How often are you in contact with your sisters? What role did religion play in your family growing up? How did having a faith in common affect being close with each other or not? How did being close (or not) affect matters of faith? Can you say a little bit about how your relationship may have changed over the years? In what ways has religion

impacted on the ways you care for each other or not? How have the different religious paths that each of you has taken (or not) affected your relationship with one another? Interviews with sets of sisters were not conducted because of ethical reasons related to disclosing of sensitive and private information in the presence of a family member and possible conflict and discomfort. The limitation of this is that it prevents observation of sisterly dynamics. Another limitation of the study is that it is not longitudinal research thereby preventing the study of how religion and intimacy between sisters changed and was impacted over time. Ethics approval was obtained from my University Department's Ethics Committee. After explanation of the study, participants gave their informed consent to be part of this study and publication of unidentifiable quotes. The women were each given a pseudonym.

I employed thematic analysis to analyse the data transcripts. I familiarised myself with the transcripts, noting interesting features of the data. I co-constructed layers of codes from descriptive to more analytical and then assembled potential themes. Refining the themes was an ongoing process to capture an overall narrative of the data. It was a process of "identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes')" which enabled me to organise the varying layers contained within the women's accounts (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297). The women's biographical accounts revealed the intersection of religion, lateral ties and intimacy. The themes that I discuss here draw from across the data set. Overlapping themes of religion and intimacy between sisters are discussed which reveal faith as a source of intimate connection, sisters as everyday sources of support, religion as part of the everyday fabric of sister relations and that sisters' differing religious identities can offer a window onto society's changing relationship to religion. Sister relationships also raise important considerations for social policy on care especially for those in mid and late adulthood.

Findings

Sisters as "spiritually" and intimately connected

As noted above, Orsi contends that religion is "religion-in-relationships between people" (2003, p. 172). Sue who was aged 47 identified as White British and was the eldest of three sisters. She brings Orsi's notion to life in her account of an event she attended with her middle sister Ruby. They were brought up the Anglican Church in which the enjoyment of music was part of their experience. One of Sue's daughters was part of a choir and when she and Ruby went to hear her sing, Sue stated:

> I know I can't look at [Ruby] and vice versa because we will just cry. We find it so moving, we often get moved and my father as well, very moved by the music and certain things that are happening. And I know that connection, whereas if I stood next to my sister-in-law, I wouldn't feel that same spiritual connection. So, it's very difficult to put it in words but there's that history that's very palpable.

The sacred as emotive is a form of intimacy shared between Sue and Ruby. Having a religious faith in common can affect a sense of heritage, memory and being able to experience faith uniquely with each other unlike other peers or family members. It is an intimacy that Sue and Ruby came to know because of the religious practices they were long engaged in including the hearing of religious music that moves the soul. It was a "spiritual connection" and form of closeness that has a template of its own that "reaches into adult life" (van Beekum, 2009, p. 131). Experiences of religion such as these evidenced the closeness between sisters as did experiences of faith amid illness. Khadija (age 39) of British Pakistani heritage reflected on her relationship with her sister Uma when Uma's daughter became ill:

…My older daughter had just turned one … I stayed with [my sister] in the hospital for one week … The whole experience, the sharing of that, the initial treatment when they started her [daughter] on chemo, being together in the hospital just me and my sister … So, I've got a very strong connection with her … my sister when her daughter got sick, I showed up there and she said, 'It's my faith, it's my belief that's keeping me strong' … and referring to her child, she said, 'She is a gift to me from my God and if he decides to take back that gift, I'm fine with that' … I realised that she's stronger than me in her faith and her belief as well. So, we talk about this personal stuff [faith] and with her and with my younger sister too.

The practice of being close was demonstrated between Khadija and Uma through this difficult time of illness and despair. In the everyday space of the hospital where families often dwell, they experienced the clinical process together, supporting each other. The "quality of 'closeness'" conveyed by Khadija, between her and Uma, included the "emotional and cognitive … [and] a feeling of mutual love, being 'of like mind'" because of being sisters and mothers (Jamieson, 2011, p. 151). Khadija also witnessed and took courage from their shared faith. Like intimacy, "lived religion is also *constituted by the practices* people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through often-mundane practices…" like talking about faith in a hospital room or listening to music together (McGuire, 2008, p. 98). While these micro-processes of faith and intimacy between sisters are often overlooked, they were meaningful and self-sustaining for my participants. Documenting these processes enable a shifting of the gaze from "rivalry to support" and "greater recognition of the social and emotional significance" of women's lateral ties during difficult life moments and different life stages (Mauthner, 2005a, p. 637).

"I care for my sisters because we're sisters."

Most participants explained that religious practices were part of being close even though religiosity and dynamics of closeness can shift over the life course. For some participants being close was prioritised even though they had grown up in the same religious household. Stephanie (age 47) who was White Scottish spoke of attending the Catholic Church with her twin. Today, she remains Catholic, but her sister does not. She stated that this did not affect their relationship, rather it was the bond of being twins that took precedence. Halima (age 51) of British Pakistani heritage stated similarly:

> I don't care for my sisters because Islam tells me to care for my sisters, I care for my sisters because we're sisters. We are of the same parents, we grew up together, we share a history together, we share blood together, we care about each other. Now our religion will tell us to love your siblings as well, but you can still love your siblings and not be a Muslim.

Research "that has examined the influence of the gender composition of the sibling dyad on relationship quality" has found that "across all stages of adulthood, sister–sister pairs have the closest relationships, spend the most time together, and provide support to each other more than any other gender constellation" (Gilligan *et al.*, 2020, p. 307). Thus, religion played only a small role in the love and closeness some participants felt for their sisters. Asma (age 29) who was of British Indian heritage explained the bond she had with her sister that continued to inform her adult life:

> I think she's one of the few people I trust in my life to kind of [tell me everything] so if I want some honest advice I go to her, like, 'Look, I think I'm making this life

decision, whatever it might be, what is some of your critical feedback on that.' And I think I'm the same for her where we can both be very honest with each other and be very authentic and real … me and my sister … we're very similar in our belief systems …. it's really good to have a sounding board.

Like Stephanie and Halima, religion was just one part of the closeness Asma and her sister shared. They supported each other in the assessing, pondering, and making of "life decisions." Similar in age, they navigated these with each other's encouragement. It is often the case that life moments and changes are understood as part of individual trajectories when actually they are experienced as part of a larger constellation of relations and networks. Mitchell (2003) states, that "the baby is born into a world of peers as well as of parents" (p. 3). A feminist perspective calls for these important relations to be made visible especially amidst neoliberal ideologies that prize individual responsibility and accomplishment. Studying adult sisters from a feminist perspective highlights forms of care and social support that happen collectively. It also sheds light and on how women practice 'sistering' among sisters versus brothers where gender and power relations are experienced differently (Mauthner 2005a). Sistering shown here brings into view dynamics of friendship and sisterly presence that can be silenced or missed when considering sociologies of vertical care in families.

Religion as part of the everyday

Religion moreover was often interwoven into the everyday that sisters experienced such as facing illness and death and the ups and downs of daily life. Patricia (aged 75) who was White British and the eldest of her sisters, took care of her sister when she became ill with cancer. Their closeness had been cemented by the fact that her sister's husband had died years earlier. Patricia said that her sister was no longer a believer of the Christian faith, but Patricia was and

was viewed as the "religious one." Approaching her death, her sister often questioned how Patricia could still believe and wished she had such a faith. Patricia responded that "she had enough faith for the both of them." She planned her sister's funeral, and her Christian identity and practice were from which her other sister "could draw familiarity, intimacy, structure, and history" (Author). These moments of conversation and revelation capture the intersection of care and faith which are part of the everyday micro-intimacies that happen between adult sisters. They also expose the "motherly sistering" (Mauthner, 2005b) that can happen when parents are no longer around, and the immediacy and reliance on of sisters is evermore present and needed to enact care and maintain kin relations. As such motherly sister ties can be sources of ambivalence and enjoyment and once established in the structure of the family not so easily relinquished along with perceptions of religiosity (Mauthner, 2005b).

Such everyday practices of religion and intimacy showed up for others. Rayyan (age 42) of British Arab African heritage and a Muslim stated, "When you have your sister, they know the situation like you … My sister if she's got something she will call up, '[Rayyan] can you pray for me.' We do that a lot." Sister relationships can be part of how one finds their way in the world through a process of differentiation and support and a way in which one remains tied to a world that sisters uniquely know together such as faith traditions and practices (van Beekum, 2009). Hannah (age 35) who was White British and grew up Anglican described her relationship with her sister as close. Having a faith in common contributed to their closeness as did weekly contact and making time to go on specific outings such as to an annual Christian conference. Hannah stated: "[Faith has] become part of who we are for both of us and so we don't have to have big separate spiritual conversations … it's just peppered in with normal conversations." These women's experiences highlight how religion and intimacy converge and are shaped by a range of activities, habits, and events and are present amid the momentous and ordinary. They also offer another site among a broad "range of sites where we can understand

the shaping of religious selves" and practices of intimacy, and how laterality assists making such selves and practices possible (Bender, 2012, p. 285).

Religion lived differently among sisters

Several women in the study described being brought up in the same faith tradition but as adults living this tradition differently from their sisters or leaving it altogether. Such shifts were due to life transitions like university, marriage, migrating for work and against the wider backdrop of social change like secularisation. Cheryl (age 61) who was White British said that growing up her and her sister went to the Methodist Church. Since university, her sister attended an evangelical church and Cheryl an Anglican one. Cheryl stated: "She sees herself or is able to be more of an evangelist than I see myself being … She's more fundamental than I am." Another participant, Lia (age 40) also White British stated that she and her sister attended the Church of England growing up. Lia described herself though as "much more conservative than her [sister] and for her [sister] it is more cultural … I've always been really involved in the church community, and I lead a bible study group, and she doesn't participate in those sorts of activities." Religion could be part of conversations and relating but also in the background depending on the level and kind of religious commitment. It could contribute to a range of experiences of closeness and distance among sisters (Author). Padma (age 27) who was of British Arab Muslim heritage was brought up in a strict religious household and described how her and her eldest sister's different approaches to her family's religion affected their relationship:

> I was more a rebel, and she followed the rules, and you know, in terms of Islam she was very strict with praying and fasting and hijab and getting married, like the arranged thing. But with me I have done everything the opposite in terms of religion ... I think if

it wasn't for religion she would still be in my life, and I would still be with my sister and would still have great, loving memories together every day.

Religion intersects with sister relations which can cause inclusions and exclusions, acceptances and refusals, and inner and outer conflict about whether to stay or leave one's faith tradition. Padma chose to leave, and it affected the closeness she shared with her sister. The everyday realities of sister relationships and religion's place within them can impact on felt intimacies and expose structural notions of belonging related to gender, femininity and religion (Author). Religion between sisters can be a source of connection but also a source of acrimony and disagreement. They can also act as a microcosm of wider society, reflecting an array of non/religious views and stances that mirror the socio-cultural context in which they live and society's changing relationship with religion. The women interviewed lived in the UK where secularisation and the pluralisation of religion in society have been observed over the last two census periods (ONS, 2022). These macro societal changes were moreover apparent among the women at a micro-level, living out different religious trajectories amid sisterly ties.

Sisters, care and social policy

For most of my participants, sisters were important figures in their life who had shaped their understandings of themselves. In mid-to-late adulthood, they continued to be a support and close in varied ways, including the sharing of religious heritage, beliefs, and practices. In this section, I address the implications that siblings and religion can have on care and social policy, and future areas of research.

As noted above, religion remained an active resource for several participants and was entwined with modes of care for their sisters. Tronto (2015) defines and explains care as "relational" and involving four aspects: "caring about" meaning to identify a need, "caring for"

meaning to take responsibility, "caregiving" meaning to meet the need for care and "care-receiving" meaning responses to care and understanding if the care given was successful (pp. 4-7). Because care is so ubiquitous and embedded in the everyday it can often be overlooked, taken-for-granted and un/evenly recognised and rewarded depending on time and context and how it is socially shaped and understood. Religions have long influenced attitudes, values and understandings of care, and participants were aware of how their religion affected the care given, received, and shown toward their siblings. Jodi aged 49 and White Scottish stated, "[Christianity] was a very strong influence and we'd all be there for [each other] now and that stems from our Christian upbringing." Faith was crucial to Patricia in caring for her dying sister and to Khadija and her sister while supporting an ill child. Religious beliefs and practices were embedded in participants' care for each other, and such care and connection between sisters and siblings more generally can contribute to wellbeing in mid and late adulthood (Dillon and Wink, 2003; Jensen *et al*., 2019).

The care-work that siblings and sisters do must be considered. As parents age and die, siblings can take on greater significance maintaining familial relations, shared histories, and forms of care. Adult children and siblings contribute enormously to care for ageing parents, and this can affect levels of closeness, obligation, support, and distress among sisters and brothers as a result (Bedford, 2005; Gilligan *et al*., 2020; Tonti, 1988). Lewis and Meredith (1988) reported that sisters were more active in caring for ageing parents and depending on if they were single, married with children, working fulltime and proximity to their parents it was mainly assumed they take up a caring role. A more recent study that used the data for 14 European countries from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe found that "daughters start to care more often when they have brothers instead of sisters" (Vergauwen and Mortelmans, 2021, p. 536). Buchanan (2021) also noted in her research that sisters play the major role in caring for ageing parents, highlighting how patterns of gendered intergenerational

care persist. Social work, social care, and healthcare systems should account for the constellation and power relations among adult siblings and their quality of closeness when planning day-to-day care needs (Gilligan *et al*., 2020). Faith traditions and communities should also be considered when assessing the health and wellbeing of adults in mid and later life as they can have significant effect on support, daily health and care routines, and end-of-life decisions (Gilligan *et al*., 2020; Author; Author).

Siblings and sisters however can often be thought of as peripheral to spouses, children, and parents. Yet, sisters and brothers typically have longer relationships with each other than with their parents. Gilligan and colleagues (2020) argue that more research needs to be done to understand sibling relationships across the life course and within the larger family context (pp. 312-313). Longitudinal research and research with multiple siblings from the same family could expand knowledge and understanding of the impact and importance of sibling ties across life trajectories (Gilligan *et al*., 2020). Notably, Gilligan and colleagues (2020) contend that "research should consider how diversity between and within families affects sibling relationships" (p. 313). They cite the important work done "among African American families, [noting that] spirituality and ethnic identity were linked to positive sibling relationships" (McHale *et al*., 2007 cited on p. 313). The significance of cultural and religious beliefs among siblings is understudied, for instance, in how they might assist in coping with migration, employment and class mobility, different forms of discrimination and how they are part of ageing and wellbeing and caring for siblings in later life (Gilligan *et al*., 2020). My study contributes to addressing a gap in this research area, especially on how religion and intimacy between adult sisters reveals the care they have for and give to each other, assisting them in confronting and coping with life's challenges.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed overlapping themes: the spiritual connection experienced between sisters, sisters as sources of support to one another, religion as part of the everyday fabric of sister relations and that sisters' differing religious identities can reflect society's changing relationship to religion. Sister relationships also raise important considerations for social policy on care. I conclude with a few overarching points related to the theoretical framing of this paper. First, in addition to parent-child religious socialisation, sisters keep alive faith traditions into adulthood. Sisters therefore matter to religious practices and identities. However, there are few studies that have focused on their importance to religiosity in families. There are even fewer that focus on the micro-level practices of religion that they share between each other such as in the everyday conversations and activities they do together. Applying a lived religion approach to this research thus reveals "religion at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world" (Orsi, 2003, p. 172).

Second, practices of intimacy between sisters matter. The quality of closeness participants experienced with their sisters meant being able to share religious lives and practices (or not) and tuning into the sacred together. The entwinement of faith and intimacy was also shown through the care they demonstrated toward one another such as showing up for each other during illness and difficult circumstances. This interdependence between sisters thus pushes against the individualism of society and exposes "the coexistence of intimacy" and "forms of collectivism" (Jamieson, 2011, 1.6). Of note however is "Practices of intimacy are not, in themselves, automatically democratising or dismantling of patriarchal arrangements" (Jamieson, 2011, 6.4). Participants negotiated horizontal and vertical power relations depending on how they were situated in their families and experienced gender inequality in their families which could intersect with religious beliefs and values (Author).

Third, a feminist standpoint that centres on women's sister experiences thus uncovers what can go unnoticed and unremarked upon. It is a perspective that pays attention to what is

taken for granted in families such as the structured social relations of sisters and the care they carry out that intersects with patriarchal religious traditions and gendered norms and expectations. A feminist standpoint focuses on personal and collective experience and notes how lived experience and social location produce different life trajectories, including religious ones, among sisters from the same family. Applied to the study of religion and intimacy between sisters, a feminist perspective also reveals webs of care between women who continue to show up for each other long past their formative years with their parents.

Fourth, as Voorpostel and Blieszner (2008) found, "relationship quality and contact frequency are more important for support among sisters than among brothers" (p. 164) which Gilligan and colleagues (2020) later concurred, noting that "sister–sister pairs provide support to each other more than any other gender constellation" (p. 307). This paper contributes to this research showing that sisters are significant to faith lives, care and wellbeing. Looking closely at lateral ties especially among sisters can be a catalyst for consideration of friends and other meaningful networks of which people are a part including faith communities. And while not a focus here, there is much to be learned from the larger configuration of sisterly and brotherly ties through marriage, partnership and chosen families and how these affect religious practices, trajectories and forms of sistering. Moreover, heeding the interconnection of religion and intimate sister ties during adulthood can generate lateral vantage points beyond the nuclear family that contribute to equitable social policies on care in mid and late adulthood.

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