

The Performance and Production of Bisexual Identity Work Online

by

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B.A., University of Waterloo, 2005

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Abstract

Employing institutional ethnography as an analytic frame, this study explicates the disjuncture felt by bisexual-identified individuals between their lived actualities and the textual realities stemming from the binary model of sexuality. This study also explores the role of online journal communities, including the capabilities and limits of this type of venue, as a *rolling text* that coordinates the narratives created there around bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Finally, this study critically examines the collaborative development of an experience-based discourse on bisexuality as produced by text-based identity work. Through the coordination of bisexual identity work taking place online, the venue facilitates the production of an alternative discourse that is differentiated from other sexuality discourses in its demonstration of fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to order. In its differences from, rather than its similarities to, governing sexuality discourses, this bisexual discourse-in-production creates the possibility for a radical reconceptualization of sexuality and sexual-identification.

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“I don’t know why, I don’t know why, I don’t know why it takes so long”
– The Weepies

For my Dad,
whose inner strength and perseverance inspired me to “keep swimming.”

For my Mom,
whose guts, grit and resilience have shown me how to dig deep and kick ass.

Chapter One: Introducing the Study

1.1 Statement of Objectives

When the Internet first came into popular use in 1995, the potential it held for challenging governing conceptions of identity seemed endless. While essentialist notions of identity were (and continue to be) prominent in Western discourse and culture, theorists influenced by postmodernist thinking recognized the up-and-coming cyber-realm as holding great potential for promoting more fluid and diverse notions of identity. More recently, cyberqueer theorists have begun to focus on the use of computer-mediated technologies by the sexually marginalized in order to foster community and share information through dynamic interaction and dialogue. Bisexuality, in particular, is a sexual identity that has battled issues of visibility as it has been largely ignored in queer¹ activist circles and the academic domain. This scant recognition has also translated into a lack of substantial social space in which to negotiate coherent identity narratives. Denied status as a legitimate sexual identity and lacking significant physical social space in which to connect, bisexual-identified individuals have migrated to the 'Net in order to develop communities, as well as to take on the creation and negotiation of bisexual identity narratives.

Hemmings (1997) and Woodland (2000) identify interactions within online and offline social spaces as having significant impact on each other. The interconnectedness of online and offline experiences goes two ways: individuals carry the effects of online interactions with them into offline contexts and carrying the effects of offline experiences

¹ Throughout this paper, the term “queer” with a small “q” will act as an informal representation of all non-heterosexual individuals, groups, and positions.

into their interactions within online social spaces (Campbell, 2004). According to Smith (1987; 2005), the everyday actions and speech of individuals are coordinated and structured by the ruling relations embedded within institutional texts, such as discourse and the media. If this is true, and this study operates on the premise that it is, the influence of institutional texts within offline spaces must be carried by participants into online spaces and, thus, shape the nature of the identity discussions being negotiated there. Consequently, it is vital to explore the role that these institutional texts play in the process of bisexual identity narrative construction online. Just as vital is to study the role that this online venue, itself, plays in mediating and coordinating the types of identity discussions taking place there. Since online diary community participants conduct the negotiation of these narratives through a venue, which is structured in particular ways, these negotiations, in turn, become similarly coded in the process. Limits or features of a specific type of venue affect not only the type of information that can be shared (e.g. mainly text), but also the different modes of and rules for interaction within that community (Slater, 2002; Donath, 1999; O'Brien, 2000; Hayles, 1999; Stone, 1991; Plant, 1997). Therefore, the venue itself acts as a textually mediated social organization that effectively coordinates and mediates the social relations within the online community, and the identity work that is taking place there. Moreover, the text-based interactions taking place in the online venue, as well as the experiences shared in the posting of entries and comments, become experience-based texts around bisexuality and bisexual-identification. While the binary discourse organizes understandings of sexuality in particular ways, the texts being created within the communities, in turn, create discursive frameworks for understanding bisexuality. Given this, these online textual

narratives contribute to the production of a discourse on bisexuality that organizes participants' understanding of sexuality in both radical and oppressive ways. Although the conceptualizations of bisexuality inherent to these texts are being developed online, they do not remain there. Noting again the interconnectedness of online and offline space, these frameworks are carried by participants into their lives offline. As a result, it is important to also consider the process, and content, of this bisexual discourse-in-production as it both enables and restricts understandings of sexuality and, in turn, social relations.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the identity narratives being negotiated within these online journal communities in order to explore the disjuncture experienced by community members between their lived actualities and the regulatory frame of a binary model of sexuality emphasized by mainstream culture and society. In addition, this study seeks to explicate the ways in which elements endemic to online diary communities, as online venues, may be said to coordinate discussions among and between participants and, thus, the narratives around bisexuality formed therein. Finally, this study examines the processes of a discourse-in-production, as the textual identity narratives published in these online spaces collectively begin developing into a dynamic, experience-based alternative discourse on bisexuality.

1.2 Institutional Ethnography: Sexuality, Discourse and Text

Keeping in mind institutional ethnography's theoretical underpinnings, the sexuality discourses that buttress the position of binary categorizations of sexuality in Western society and culture may be viewed as something that is not *forced upon* but

activated by individuals in their everyday work and practices. Activities like reading, writing and watching television are considered by institutional ethnographers to be participatory activations of the text-mediated discourses. These activations effectively fuel the relations of ruling and the primacy of textual realities and objectified discourses over experiential reality. As Smith (1987, p. 212) so clearly articulates: “the organization of power in texts and the ruling relations mediated by texts...[mould] the consciousness of who we are, of our social relations...creat[ing] a knowledge apt for ruling.” In the case of institutional ethnography (IE), the researcher’s interest in text involves explicating the ways in which it enters into and aids in the coordination of people’s day-to-day activities and the framing of their experiences (Smith, 2005).

Campbell and Gregor (2002, p. 23) clarify this further in pointing out that “people not only interact face-to-face, they also interact through texts.” Due to the popularity of computer-mediated communication, the computer has become central to our day-to-day lives and interactions and, thus, acts as a key interface for communication. As a result, the venues in which people interact, through their various features, formatting and coding, become the text through which participants in virtual communities and online users connect with one another. As such, it is imperative to consider not only the role of offline discourse, such as the sexuality discourse discussed above, in terms of its coordinative role in the experience of bisexuality and bisexual-identification, but also the meditative role that the online venue plays in facilitating and acting as the main text through which these dialogues are created and engaged in online.

Through their day-to-day work² and practices, individuals come to activate various ruling discourses which do not reflect their reality and, in fact, take precedence over other modes of knowing. Thus, although the experience of bi-identified individuals of sexuality and sexual-identification contradicts the textual reality of a dichotomous model of sexuality, many do not question the system in place but, instead, question the validity and legitimacy of their own experiences and feelings (Rust, 1992, p. 285). Moreover, those within queer and straight communities also enact this textual reality by engaging in biphobic behaviour based in this discursive understanding of sexuality. The binary model of sexuality discourse that the researchers and theorists above fault as contributing so heavily to biphobia, bi-invisibility and erasure is, according to an institutional ethnographic framework, seen as supplying the language and normative boundaries for sexuality and sexual practice. Thus, it effectively provides a frame for thinking about and understanding particular types of sexual behaviours and lifestyles. This could be considered a potent example of how the relations of ruling work in the arena of sexuality in Western culture. In fact, preliminary observation and analysis of the identity discussions taking place among the bi-identified participants in online diary communities seems to lend support to the ruling effect of the binary model of sexuality in terms of their experiences as bi-identified individuals.

While the identity work taking place online sometimes involves activations of ruling discourses, it chiefly entails the production of alternative narratives and representations of bisexuality through the expression and discussion of the actualities of

² The institutional ethnographic conception of work is broadly defined here to include “everything that people know how to do and that their daily lives require them to do” as it relates to institutional processes (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 72)

bisexual experience. Mediated through a text-based online venue, these textual narratives are collaboratively developed through the dynamic interchanges between participants in posted entries and comments. Unlike governing discourses that are developed from a ruling standpoint, these texts are produced in the lived experiences of bi-identified people and, as such, are based from the standpoint of the subjugated. Like ruling texts, however, the texts created within these communities act as a “bridge between the actual and discursive” in that they begin to coordinate the diversities of individual experiences, definitions, and understandings of bisexuality and bisexual-identification (Eastwood, 2006, p. 182). As such, it is important to consider the process through which the identity work online engenders a discourse around bisexuality, and critically examine the social frame of consciousness it develops for understanding bisexuality, specifically, and sexuality in general.

Bi-identified people, then, experience a disjuncture between their experiential reality as bi-identified individuals and a textual reality formed around sexuality that only recognizes exclusively hetero- or exclusively homo-sexuality. Institutional ethnography highlights the importance of attending to the actualities of people’s experience and, thus, begins its inquiry at the point of disjuncture between those lived actualities and the textual realities which muddy the validity and legitimacy of their experiences. Disjunctures, in the case of institutional ethnography, act as starting points of inquiry which “guide the researcher towards a discovery of relevant features of social organization that must be traced and understood to make sense of the setting” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 49). It makes sense, then, to employ institutional ethnography, an approach that begins its inquiry at the point of disjuncture, in order to explore the

experience of bi-identified individuals. Since the Internet has become a prime venue for bisexual identified individuals to create virtual communities in which to commune and engage in identity work through personal narrative and discussion, it is important to consider, as a starting point, not only the regulatory frames around sexuality that coordinate these discussions online, but the ways in which the online venue too may be said to act as a coordinating text in types of identity work being engaged in online. Moreover, using institutional ethnography as an analytic frame, critical examination of a discourse-in-production can be undertaken, including explication of how it coordinates a particular framework for understanding sexuality and sexual-identification.

1.3 Establishing the Problematic

Given the breadth of discussion above, the aim of this thesis project is three-fold: (1) to explicate the disjuncture felt by bisexual-identified individuals between their lived actualities and the regulatory frame of a normative culture that iterates a binary model of sexuality; (2) to explore the role of online diary communities, including the capabilities and limits of this type of venue, as a *rolling text* that coordinates the narratives created there around bisexuality and bisexual-identification (Walby, 2005, p. 200); (3) to critically examine the development of an experience-based discourse on bisexuality as produced by the text-based identity work taking place online. The narratives around bisexuality and bisexual- identification created in these online communities, both in posted entries and the posted comments to various entries, as well as the set-up of the venue itself, will act as the entry point for exploration of the regulatory frames of the

institutional order around sexuality discourses, the Internet, and the production of an alternative sexuality discourse.

1.4 Research Design

1.4.1 Key Concepts

The key concepts for this study are online journal communities, bisexual identity, identity discussions, identity work, and text-based discourse.

Online journal communities refer to online journal pages, organized around particular themes, to which entries can be posted by various users from their respective online journal accounts. Bisexual identity, for the purposes of this study, will be defined in terms of self-identification. I intentionally refrain from providing a prescriptive definition of bisexual identity as it would be counter-productive for me to do so, given that it would serve to include and/or exclude the dialogue of individuals who may or may not choose to self-identify in this way. In this study, the term “bi” will sometimes be used instead of ‘bisexual’ as it is a commonly understood short form of the word.

Since the production of identity discussions, and coordination of these discussions by the regulatory frames of governing texts, is the focus of this investigation, it may be more helpful to demarcate what is meant by the term identity discussion and/or identity work. Here, the term identity discussion will be refer to a textual monologue and/or dialogue relating to a set of characteristics or conditions that invoke reference to and/or clarification of the experiences of being bisexual-identified and/or of bisexuality in general. Correspondingly, identity work calls on the institutional ethnographic application of the term work outlined above. Therefore, the term identity work, in this study, will relate to the various activities and practices that online diary participants

engage in within the venue as related to discussion, narration or dialoguing with understandings, experiences and meanings associated with bisexuality and/or bisexual-identification. A more in-depth discussion on how identity can be understood as work will take place in Chapter Four.

Discourse is a concept that is uniquely applied in institutional ethnography. As Smith (1999, p. 158) describes it, discourse may best be understood as “skeins of social relations, mediated and organized textually, connecting and coordinating the activities of actual individuals.” While discourse may be said to coordinate, through the projection of an organizing framework on bodies of knowledge and the development of particular social frames of consciousness, individuals are also understood to be active agents in this process. Discourse, then, is not understood as a static organization of the social, but as part of a process whereby individuals activate texts that organize knowledge in particular ways in order to interpret, understand and make sense of the world as we engage in our day-to-day practices, processes and activities. In this way, the particularities of individual experience are organized “as and into discourse across local settings” (Smith, 1999, p. 155). This concept of discourse is central to this study and is, thus, a key orienting concept.³

1.4.2 Institutional Ethnography as an Analytic Frame

Institutional ethnography, instead of focusing primarily on the thoughts and behaviours of participants, uses an informant’s accounts, activities and understandings as a starting point for identifying and mapping discursively-organized and translocal

³ The terms “ruling discourse,” “governing discourse” and “institutional discourse” will be used interchangeably throughout the paper to describe discourses that are implicated in the relations of ruling and are dominant in Western society, both in terms of the ruling standpoint from which they are conceptually organized and written, but their means of dissemination through official, authoritative texts.

relations of ruling. As elucidated by McCoy (2006, p. 109), “the analytic goal [of IE] is to make visible the ways the institutional order creates the conditions of individual experience. What happens to people? What shapes or constrains the possibilities open to them, including the possibilities for knowing and telling their experience?” By employing institutional ethnography as an analytic frame, then, I am examining the ways that the binary model of sexuality, as a social organization of knowledge, not only shapes the experiences of bisexual-identified people and their relationships with others, but also the ways that elements of the discourse constrain the ways they are able to articulate those experiences. Moreover, I am considering the various ways in which the online venue also enables and constrains the articulation and expression of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Finally, using the definition of discourse central to institutional ethnography as an orienting concept, I am able to investigate how participants, through their dynamic contribution of textual narratives, collectively produce a discourse on bisexuality that, like ruling discourses, “has its own distinctive organization of authorities, means of dissemination, educational and knowledge-producing sites and production processes” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 34).

1.4.3 Data Collection

The narrative accounts created and negotiated by participants within these bisexual-themed online diary communities were the focus of data collection as they provide insight into the disjuncture between their lived realities and the ruling textual realities that typically supersede them. This *identity work* acts as crystallized social relations that provide evidence of the ways in which the governing discourse on sexuality, the rolling text of the online venue, and the identity narratives as a discourse-

in-production coordinate this particular aspect of sociality – understandings of sexuality and sexual-identity. While the aim of data collection within institutional ethnography is clear, the methods of inquiry for this approach remain flexible and open-ended.

Researchers are encouraged, simply, to employ whatever methods best investigate the ways in which a particular setting is organized and ruled (ibid; Smith, 2005; Grahame, 2004). As such, I decided to employ critical observation and exploratory analysis of the identity discussions taking place within online diary communities as well as the form of venue.

1.4.4 Field Sites

For this study, the sample consists of three different bisexual-themed online journal communities located on the LiveJournal.com host site. I have decided to focus on online journal communities, in particular, for several reasons. First, I have been actively involved in online journaling and online journal communities for the past six years. My personal experience with participating in this type of forum not only fuels my interest but familiarizes me with the technical and non-technical aspects of online journaling as well as giving me access to the field of study. Second, through my participation I have come to notice the increasing number of bisexual-themed communities. The expanse of bi-themed online journal communities, as well as the considerable number of members within these communities, speaks to the popularity of these sites among bi-identified individuals. Finally, preliminary observations of these communities have indicated that identity discussions commonly arise within these online venues.

The three bisexual-themed online journal sites have been selected using a criterion sampling technique. The criteria for inclusion in this study are as follows: (1)

that the online journal community is dedicated to discussion of bisexuality and/or bisexual issues as indicated by the community information page; (2) that the online journal community is intended for, but not exclusive to, self-identified bisexual users, as indicated by the community information page; and (3) that the online journal community has an active membership, as indicated by frequencies of postings (i.e. no longer than a week between posts). These criteria are necessary for ensuring that the sample is composed of active online journal communities, specific to bisexual-identified individuals, and that the focus of the content is geared toward group-identified issues concerning bisexuality, such as discrimination and/or experiences with biphobic stereotyping.

1.5 Methods of Inquiry

1.5.1 Critical Observation Online

As Mann and Stewart (2000, p. 84) point out, studies involving online communities have introduced new applications of the more traditional methods of observation. Observation in an online social space is somewhat unique in that much of what one observes – activities, interchanges, performances, social relations -- is textual. With the abundance of virtual communities and in-community discursive dialogues, online observation has become a popular means of understanding different social meanings as these social relations are crystallized through text (ibid). The use of critical observation in online space has been employed by many researchers (Stubbs, 1998, 1999; Pleace, Burrows, Loader, Muncer & Nettleton, 2000; Ward, 1999; Rodino, 1997;

Paccagnella, 1997; Kleinman, 2002; Kinnevy, 2002) to explore a variety of aspects of virtual interaction and community.

In this study, critical observation was employed as the central method of analysis, and was undertaken for a period of three months in three bisexual-themed online journal communities. Like critical thinking, critical observation involves active interpretation of activities taking place in order to skillfully recognize linkages, as well as to determine implications from what is being observed or expressed (Fisher & Scriven, 1997; Rappaport, 2000). It is both purposeful and reflective. Having been involved in online journaling for a number of years, I was quite familiar with this online venue as a social setting, as well as the features and format. In order to help focus my analysis, however, I used the problematic I had developed as a guide for the creation of an observation guide outlining the parameters of my data collection (see Appendix A). The main focus of my observation included: the content and processes involved in the creation of identity narratives, the use of the online space in these processes, and the nature of participant interaction.

In applying IE to an online setting, rather than using interview data or observation of work/activities in a physical environment, the textual narratives and identity discussions taking place in the entries and comment boxes of bisexual-themed online journal communities are understood to be informant accounts. These experiential accounts were central to my analysis as they provide rich data outlining the lived experience of bi-identified people and the actualities of bisexual identification. Observational analysis allowed me to gain insight into how the experiences and lifework of bi-identified people are coordinated by a range of different translocal organizations of

ruling, particularly the binary model of sexuality. Moreover, critical observation of the processes involved in developing these textual narratives in an online discursive venue provided clear insights into the coordinative functions of both the technical and social aspects of the online venue. Finally, by engaging in analysis through critical observation I was able to attend to the more dynamic aspects of the online space and, as such, was able to actively follow the process of discourse development through extended observation of the ongoing identity discussions and interactions taking place between community members.

Foster (1996, p. 58) also outlines many of the advantages that online observational work has over other methods of inquiry including: that social relations are directly recorded and retroactively accessible; that observers are able to “see the familiar as strange” in assessing the features of the online environment and/or the behaviours taking place there; that patterns in the environment are easily observed and analyzed over time; and, finally, that observation makes accessible populations of people, such as bisexual-identified individuals, who might otherwise be difficult to access as a group. This last point is especially relevant to the context of this study given the popularity of the Internet among bi-identified people for creating community, and the marked invisibility of the bisexual community which makes identification and access of this population difficult.

In an online space, interactions between participants and the technology, and between community members themselves, result in a complex tangle of social relations that organize and impact the activities, understandings, and processes taking place there. Like Ward (1999), I believe that extended periods of observation allow for special insight

into the nuances of cyberculture within those communities. Likewise, I believe critical observation significantly enhanced my understanding of the complex environment in which these discussions take place, and provided greater depth of insight into discourse as an active process.

1.5.2 Exploratory Analysis

In addition to critical observation, I employed an exploratory analysis of the identity-themed texts being developed in these communities. The purpose of this exploratory analysis was to gain further insight into the translocal organization evident in these experiential accounts through immersing myself in the data. DeVault and McCoy (2002, p. 755) liken this process to unraveling a ball of string, in that it is only as the researcher begins to unravel a particular aspect that they discover which direction their inquiry should go next.

Based on my observational work, I was able to identify and pull entries and comments from the communities that contained identity discussions. These experiential accounts of bisexuality and bisexual-identification were, then, analyzed further. The approach to this stage of analysis employed a similar analytic framework to the one utilized in the institutional ethnography undertaken by Butterwick and Dawson (2005), involving analysis of conversations regarding the conditions of labour in academic institutions. Like Butterwick and Dawson (*ibid*), analysis of the texts focused on, first, iteratively examining the narratives formed through the sharing of local experiences and identity discussions within these communities in order to identify governing texts that coordinate the lifework of bi-identified people. Second, analysis of these narrative accounts sought insight into ways that specific features and format of this online

discursive environment coordinate the creation and production of these experience-based narratives on bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Third, this analysis allowed me to begin to cognitively map out the process by which these identity discussions engender a discourse through the identification of developing definitions, norms, ideal models and a moral logic around bisexuality and bisexual-identification.

1.5.3 Accessing the Data

The data in this study has been accessed via the online journal host site, LiveJournal.com. On this host site is a directory containing links to the various theme-based online journal communities hosted there. By accessing the links to identified bisexuality-themed communities, appropriate field sites were selected according to the criteria stipulated above. Since these sites are publicly accessible and conveniently linked by a directory, gaining initial access to relevant sites was fairly straightforward.

The text contained within the entries as well as the entry comment boxes from each of the selected online journal communities constitute the primary data for this study. In this paper, excerpts from the data used to illustrate an argument are worded almost verbatim in order to preserve the essence and words of the community member as an informant. The only changes that have been made to these excerpts are the correction of minor spelling or grammatical errors required for the ideas to read coherently.

1.6 Analysis

Guided by implications in the data, as well as my personal experience as a bisexual-identified online journalist and my participation in these types of communities, I was able to begin to explicate the coordinative functions of specific ruling conceptual

structures and governing texts through identifying linkages between the actualities of experience and the governing discursive structures that are invoked through activations of the text in informants' day-to-day activities and practices. Throughout my analysis of the data, taken both from my observations and exploratory analysis, I was guided by the problematic I developed through careful preliminary work. This was to ensure that I remained true to the data, and to aid me in determining the elements of these accounts that advanced my understanding and explication of my problematic. Since analysis in institutional ethnography requires active interpretation of the data in order to map out conceptual links, it is important that this practice is disciplined through the identification of key orienting concepts, "the analytic framework of social organization of knowledge, and then by the materiality of the data" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 98).

While the initial stages of the exploratory analysis took place through iterative processes of reading the textual narratives, the next stage took place in the writing process. In institutional ethnography, the practice of writing about the insights you gain from immersing yourself in the data is central to analysis (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 93). Thus, using the insights I had gained, and keeping my problematic in mind, I was able to select excerpts from the data that provided illustrative entry points into this translocal organization. Following the guide to institutional ethnographic analysis developed by Campbell and Gregor (2002, p. 93), I then began to write up my data into "stories" that helped to explicate my problematic. Next, I would locate raw data that helped to illustrate this insight, and incorporated that data into the text in order to support the account I was developing. In IE, this process, whereby your insights are supported by your actual data, is meant to hold your writing to that which is evident in the

experiential accounts (ibid). As you write about each little insight-based story, you begin to develop a more comprehensive account of the various aspects of translocal organization that are coordinating this aspect of the social. Each piece brings you closer to understanding how the setting is organized and how this experience is being coordinated. As Campbell & Gregor (2002, p. 95) articulate:

As you work with your own data, you will continue to clarify your understanding, moving away from your beginning hunch towards an argument that becomes nuanced and useful. In this way, you will find that you are doing analysis. You are drawing on your data to make a point, as above, which is analytically 'interesting.' You move on from there to other features showing how the story develops and unfolds.

Given this, the process of analysis I used is very much exploratory in that I had to immerse myself in the data and slowly move through it in order to understand and unfold what it was telling me, and use this as the basis and direction of my ongoing inquiry. Once the initial analysis stage was complete, the data was then supplemented by the incorporation of relevant theory, as determined by elements of informants' accounts, in order to complement the entry-level data taken from informants' experiential accounts with this second-level data.

Through this process, I was able to begin to develop an account of how the lifework of bisexual-identified people is coordinated by binary discourse stemming from the binary model of sexuality, a socially organized form of knowledge concerning sexuality. In addition, I was able to develop an account of how the venue, as a direct discursive environment, coordinates the performance and production of bisexual identities and bisexual identity narratives. Finally, I was able to begin to map out the process through which these online identity narratives begin to form a bisexual discourse-in-production.

1.7 Contributions to Bodies of Literature

This study contributes to various existing bodies of literature. First, this study serves to remedy the absence of discussions around bisexuality within the academic domain by focusing on the use of online spaces by bisexual-identified subjects. Second, in exploring the identity work taking place within online journal communities, this study also contributes to the literature concerning the impact of cyber-technologies on the process of identity-formation. Finally, this study contributes to bodies of work on the social organization of knowledge in that it maps out the production of a discourse, and seeks to explicate the processes involved in generalizing, normalizing and conceptually framing individual lived experiences of bisexuality and bisexuality identification, which aid in the coordination of understandings of sexuality and sexual-identification. Undertaking this study not only reveals the institutional structures organizing this particular segment of the social, but will also provide invaluable insight into the ways in which *ruling relations*⁴ work to govern various other aspects of everyday life (Smith, 2005). As Smith (ibid, p. 181) puts it: “no study stands alone; each opens into the interconnections of the ruling relations regardless of the ethnographic level of its

⁴ The concept of *ruling relations*, of course, is meant to “direct attention to the distinctive translocal forms of social organization and social relations mediated by texts of all kinds (print, film, television, computer, and so on) that have emerged and become dominant in the last two hundred years” (Smith, 2005, p. 227). These include objectified forms of consciousness and organization that both create and rely on textually based realities that are outside of and discrete from personal experience and lived actualities (ibid). These textual realities are standardized across multiple settings (Smith, 1990a; Smith, 1987, p. 221; Smith, 1992; Smith, 2001). Through the creation of objectivity within knowledge claims, as it is buttressed by conventions of authority and facticity, this organization of ruling shields questions stemming from disjunctures between the actualities of experience and the textual realities purported in discourse, media and myriad other texts (Smith, 1990a, p. 96-97). It is this aspect of the practices of ruling that make the relations of ruling so elusive.

major focus...[and make it] possible to trace connections that might otherwise be inaccessible.”

Chapter Two: The Bisexual Dilemma

2.1 Introducing the Chapter

Bisexual-identified people may be more or less accepted, depending on a specific context, but much of their reception depends upon how others perceive them and bisexuality, factors over which bisexual-identified people do not always have control. Uniquely, the erasure of bisexuality occurs in both ostensibly straight and queer communities. In other contexts, erasure and exclusion of bisexuals occurs, depending on whether they are perceived as 'truly' gay, 'truly' straight, or in a 'safe' or 'dangerous' limbo between the two. (James, 1996, p. 221)

Sexuality, among other institutions in Western culture, is understood in the dualistic terms provided by a binary framework. While other models for conceptualizing sexuality have been introduced by sexologists and sexuality researchers over the years, such as the continuum-based model of sexuality introduced by Kinsey (1948; 1953) and the grid-based model of sexuality introduced by Klein (Klein & Wolf, 1985; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985), they have not managed to generate the same resonance or demonstrate the same level of resiliency as the binary model. As such, the binary understanding of sexuality has maintained its hold as the primary conceptual framework through which sexual identities and behaviours come to be interpreted and understood.

Alongside the perpetuation of the binary model, sexual identities that do not fit into this neat monosexist dyad have come to be identified and adopted by a number of individuals in Western society. Bisexuality, for instance, is a sexual identity that resides distinctly outside of the binary system of sexuality in that rather than defining one's sexual desire, behaviour or attraction in monolithic terms (i.e. consistently same-sex (homosexual) or consistently opposite-sex (heterosexual)), individuals experience varying levels of sexual attraction to and sexual interaction with members of either sex.

Unable to be accounted for using the monosexual logic of the binary model, bisexuality stands in opposition to the simplicity of this model and poses a challenge to the adequacy of this conceptualization for accurately modelling the complex realities of sexuality and sexual identification. As James (1996, p. 224) contends: “bisexuality can be viewed as a destabilizing third category, both within and outside the hetero/homosexual dichotomy.” Ironically, while bisexuality challenges a binary understanding of sexuality, the term ‘bisexual’ underscores the stronghold of the binary model of gender, a framework that is similarly limiting and exclusionary. While the binary system of gender mirrors and may be said to buttress the binary model of sexuality in Western society and culture, for clarity of focus the relationship between the binary system of gender and the binary system of sexuality will remain unexamined.

Using the narratives created within posted user entries and comments as entry points to this analysis and sources of illustration, in this chapter I will be detailing the dynamics and dimensions of the bisexual dilemma. In so doing, I will be explicating how the binary model of sexuality coordinates social relations in ways that are significant to bisexual-identification and the experiences of bisexual-identified people. As G. W. Smith (1998, p. 312) articulates: “the excerpts create windows within the text, bringing into view the social organization of my informants’ lives.” More specifically, I will outline the textual rule and coordinative function of the binary model through an examination of: the relative invisibility of bisexuality within the discursive realm and its effect on the process and experience of identifying as bisexual; the primacy of the binary model in modes of interpreting and understanding sexuality and sexual identification; the production and reproduction of negative representations of bisexuality within discursive

texts; and the establishment of relations of biphobia through local practices of the binary discourse.

2.2 The Process of Bisexual Identification and Inherent Disjuncture

While homosexuality generally has become more visible in mainstream media and popular discourse, bisexuality has remained largely unacknowledged (Ochs, 1996; Yoshino, 2000; Bradford, 2004). As one poster points out: “People are just starting to get used to homosexuals in regular sitcoms and tv shows....bisexuals are rarely discussed.” According to Yoshino (2000, p. 368-69), the discrepancy between the visibility of homosexuality versus the visibility of bisexuality is consistent across the board, from popular media and culture to academic articles and abstracts. In fact, he maintains that the invisibility of bisexuality within institutional and discursive texts is the result of an *epistemic contract of bisexual erasure* between straight-identified and gay-identified individuals and communities. This lack of visibility is significant to both the primacy and perpetuation of the binary model of sexuality. If bisexuality is made invisible through its absence in discursive texts, the challenge that it poses to the monosexual hegemony established through this binary model is diminished. Through the silencing of narratives of experience that could serve to challenge the naturalness of this mode of categorization, then, the sexual binary is effectively upheld and maintains its relevance in the current socio-cultural realm.

This invisibility also plays a significant role in coordinating the social, as it relates to sexuality and sexual identification. The absence of bisexuality in discursive texts, for instance, influences the process through which individuals who experience sexual

attraction to multiple sexes come to identify themselves sexually. While the heteronormativity present in the majority of texts produced within mainstream media and discourse effectively model heterosexual lifestyle and sexual identification, queer activist texts have leaked into the discursive realm and these texts allow, to a certain degree, for the modeling and normalization of gay and lesbian lifestyles and identification (Kinsman, 1995, p. 90-91; Rust, 1996, p. 72).⁵ The absence of bisexual representation works in exactly the opposite way – it promotes the hegemony of monosexuality and it creates the false textual reality that sexuality and sexual identity categories may only be understood within the context of a homo-/heterosexual dichotomy. As a result, the process of sexual identification for those whose sexual experience and attraction does not neatly fit within this framework is a difficult one. As one participant puts it: “No-one ever mentioned bisexuality. Homosexuality was mentioned in whispers, but at least it existed culturally. I didn't know it was possible to be bi, I thought you had to like one or the other, and knew I liked girls.” In fact, many participants shared stories that indicated that, while they were aware of their sexual attraction to both men and women, they were unaware that bisexuality, as a practice, as an identity, or even as word, existed. One person writes: “I felt the same way, yes. Mainly because I was experiencing attraction to both sexes when I didn't know a thing like bisexuality even existed. I thought I was ill or something, I thought no one would ever understand me.” In this way, it becomes evident how the primacy of a binary model of sexuality, as established and perpetuated through discursive texts, begins to coordinate the process of sexual identification.

⁵ Admittedly, many of these representations within mainstream media may be considered problematic and in need of a considerable reworking – including more fulsome and varied representation of the myriad queer lifestyles and experiences of sexual identification.

To begin, the epistemic absence of bisexuality within institutional texts creates a disjuncture between the lived realities of bi-identified individuals and a discursive framework that contradicts the possibility and legitimacy of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. This disjuncture has a significant influence on the process of sexual identification in that it inevitably leads to feelings of confusion and isolation (Paul, 1985; Ochs, 1996; Bradford, 2004). As one participant expresses:

being 'bi' feels (initially) like being CONFUSED all the time. At least when you ARE lesbian or gay...you KNOW what you are, who you are - where you belong. If you are a TRUE bisexual...it's not clear WHERE you belong."

Similarly, when responding to an entry surveying community members about different aspects of bisexuality, another participant shares the confusion involved with first coming to terms with his bisexuality. He writes: "Well I am [bisexual]. It took me a long time to realize that. I knew I wasn't gay but that also I wasn't straight either. It confused and screwed me up for a while...." Along with these feelings of confusion and isolation, the disjuncture caused by the invisibility of bisexuality ultimately makes it difficult for those identifying as bisexual to do so without strong feelings of self-doubt (Ochs, 1996; Bradford, 2004). One community participant, while lamenting the confusion associated with bisexual desire and identification, writes:

The only reason young men don't doubt their attraction to women is that they've been told all their lives that it will happen, and that it's appropriate. Maybe if those doors had been constantly open to us from the day we were first immersed in society, we'd be as sure as those guys are.

In order to overcome the disjuncture, community participants often shared personal stories of how they (at least initially) sought to resolve the resulting confusion and isolation by attempting to fit the actualities of their experience into the categorical schema created and coordinated by the binary system. One person, for example, recalls

the experience of trying to make sense of her dual sexual attractions and desires within the terms and logic of a system that only acknowledges monosexuality. She writes:

I grew up in relatively sheltered suburban town, and didn't even know bisexuality existed. I thought you were either gay or straight and that's it, so I spent my high school years telling myself 'Well, I must be straight since I like guys. The interest in girls... I guess I just have a healthy appreciation of what's attractive and what's not in my own gender.' After I got to college and began to understand that people didn't always fit into those two tidy little molds it suddenly all started to make a lot more sense.

These attempts to apply the logic of the binary model of sexuality to one's lived actualities underscores the power of discursive texts to coordinate aspects of the social, even aspects as personal as one's process of sexual identification. Rather than causing individuals to question the validity/suitability of a discursive framework that does not account for the actualities of their experience, individuals whose experiences are not reflected within institutional texts try to overcome the disjuncture by, instead, questioning themselves. By rendering bisexuality and bisexual identification invisible through its absence in the discursive realm, then, the ruling power of the binary model of sexuality is both exhibited and sustained.

Taken together, the absence and invisibility of bisexuality and bisexual representation in institutional discourse and texts both stems from and helps to reinforce the hegemony of monosexuality and the primacy of a binary model of sexuality. The impact of this reification is the creation of a disjuncture between the lived realities of bi-identified people and an institutional discourse that only recognizes monosexuality. As demonstrated above, this, in turn, coordinates very intimate aspects of the social -- the process and experience of identifying as bisexual, and the framing of one's experience of bisexuality and bisexual attraction. The desire for adequate representation in institutional

texts, and the possibilities for self-expression that come along with that through the creation of language and cultural codes, is expressed in a comment made by a community participant who writes:

I think that as the language becomes more and more common in our culture, we can put names to our experiences earlier and earlier. Which I think is a good thing. I often wonder how my life might have been different if I had 'let' myself be bi when I first started *really* questioning it around age 12.⁶

2.3 Evidence of Binary in How Sexual Identity is Interpreted and Characterized

The previous section began by mapping out some of the ways in which text-mediated discourses, which promote a binary model of sexuality, serve to coordinate the process and experience of identifying as bisexual. Since the function of this discursive framework as an organizing principle is dependent on its positioning within the socio-cultural realm, it is important to explore just how entrenched the binary model of sexuality is in modern Western society. The two aspects of bisexual experience that I will use to demonstrate the centrality of the binary model within our understandings and interpretations of sex and sexuality are: the experience of being “misread,” and pressure to ‘pick a side’. Both of these aspects of bisexual experience are manifestations of the binary that demonstrate the primacy of this system of knowledge and, thus, its coordinative power. They also demonstrate common ways that discursive texts are activated in day-to-day life as “people attend to, name, and interpret their own and others’ doings in relationship to them” (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 33).

Sexual identity, much like other aspects of one’s social identity, is usually inferred based upon a variety of social cues. In fact, in order to engage in meaningful interaction,

⁶ The use of asterisks in online spaces generally implies an emphasis on the words in between them, or to indicate an action that can not be seen or heard in a text-based venue.

individuals attempt to glean information based upon shared cultural codes to help orient the self, the other person, and the context of the interaction (O'Brien, 2000). Our means of deciphering aspects of social identity, then, are largely based upon the social and cultural scripts established in and disseminated through text-mediated discourses. As McCoy (1995, p. 183) puts it: "social relations rely on individual moments of interpretation, where texts are activated within discourse by competent users through the employment of known-in-common interpretive schemes." Sexual behaviour and sexual identity, then, become interpretable as such when users are able to activate institutional discourses, which organize consciousness around sexuality. Kissing or holding hands with someone, for instance, becomes interpretable as an indicator of someone's sexual identity with the activation of sexuality-based discursive texts. As Smith (2006, p. 82) points out: "People's doings are no longer just that but become interpretable as expressions or instances of a higher source of organization." A key way to discern an individual's sexuality in a society that organizes sexuality into a binary model of attraction, behaviour and desire, is to infer that person's sexuality based upon the perceived gender of their romantic partner(s).⁷ If you are holding hands with a same-sex partner, for instance, your sexuality is generally interpreted or 'read' as homosexual (gay or lesbian), and if you are holding hands with an opposite-sex partner your sexuality is generally read as heterosexual. The monosexual focus of the binary discourse means that the sexual behaviour of bi-identified people, in being interpreted through a binary lens, is often misread as an expression of either a homosexual identity (gay/lesbian) or a heterosexual identity. As one online participant puts it:

⁷ This is also an example of the intersection between gender- and sexuality-based binary systems of knowledge.

If you are gay - it's obvious - if you're lesbian - it's obvious - being seen being affectionate to the same sex in a romantic way is always a tell-tell sign. But when your bi - it just confuses people. Sometimes I'm with a girl - ohh she's lesbian - sometimes I'm with a guy - ohh she's straight. If I'm with a girl and a guy...ohh...she's confused.

Another person remarks:

With a lot of people, the backstory won't be visible or relevant. If you have a lovely girlfriend, they'll be aware of that, and likely assume you're a lesbian. Even if they're aware of the ex-boyfriend, they may figure that you hadn't come out yet.

These instances of being misread by others, an experience commonly posted within the entries and comments of these online communities, demonstrate the centrality of the binary model of sexuality as it is shown to be activated in the process of interpreting and understanding sexuality and sexual behaviour. These instances also help to demonstrate limitations of the binary model because, when it is activated and used as a means for interpreting sexual behaviour and identity, it leads to mis-interpretations that reveal the inadequacy of its monosexual logic.

While this perhaps innocuous way of discerning another person's sexuality helps to reveal activations of the binary discourse in day-to-day life, the entrenchment of this in Western society is evidenced further through an insistence on compliance with binary sexual identity categories. Many bisexual-identified people in the online communities, for instance, shared frustration with the insistence of others that they must identify as either gay/lesbian or straight, as determined by the gender of their current romantic partner. One person writes:

That's what I was trying to get at. I'm a monogamous bisexual, currently in a relationship with a woman. That doesn't mean I was "confused" before, and now classify as a lesbian. But a lot of people try to tell me just that. Even though I know I still could fall in love with a man anytime, and chances are I will.

Taking this one step further, others attempt to enforce the binary model through the intentional mis-identification of individuals known to identify as bisexual. As an example, one community participant shares the experience of being deliberately mis-identified by a previous lover, first as lesbian (during their relationship) and then as heterosexual: “When we broke up it only got worse. I started going on dates (mostly with men because for some reason it's easier for me to find men to go out with than women), and she started calling me straight. I was like, look... I fucked you for 2 years... what more do you need?!?” This type of insistence on applying a binary framework to the sexual behaviour and/or identification of others, instead of accepting the sexual identity that the individual has adopted (bisexual) or considering the actualities of their sexual experience, signals how entrenched this system of knowledge is in our society. Further, it evidences the ruling power of the binary discourse in coordinating this aspect of the social through a demonstration of some of the ways that people have come to activate and, ultimately, forcefully impose this discourse -- through an adamant re-framing of sexual identities and behaviours according to the parameters of the categorization scheme established by this binary system.

In addition to the intentional mis-identification of bi-identified people, activation and enforcement of the binary model is revealed in the pressure exerted on bi-identified individuals to ‘pick a side’. The identity work done online often includes discussion concerning the experience of being coerced by acquaintances, friends, lovers, and family, in both straight and queer communities, to decide to identify as either purely homo- or heterosexual. One poster, for instance, describes the experience of being pressured by the woman she was dating to also identify as lesbian. She writes: “I found myself in a

relationship with a woman who identified as a lesbian, and she had problems with the fact that I didn't. I'm not. She had a hard time reconciling herself to that idea, to that fact.”

Others commiserate with her, sharing very similar experiences. In a separate entry on the same issue, one person comments: “I get more of that pressure from my gay friends/acquaintances than from the straight ones. I've been told more than once to just 'fess up' to being gay since I'm engaged to another woman, or to 'get over needing to keep your options open'.” This type of pressure can have a significant impact on bisexual-identified people. For some, the inherent monosexism of the binary model, and resultant pressure to identify as either/or, causes further confusion about their sexual-identity. One person writes: “does anyone else feel pressured to ultimately choose to be either hetero or homosexual? i suppose i will be making that decision in a way...there's a boy i love and one day we want to get married. obviously i wouldn't cheat on him, be it with a guy or a girl, but will i still be bi?” For others, however, the pressure to define their experience according to the logic of a binary system of sexuality is refuted outright. As one person puts it: “just as eating a salad for lunch does not make me a vegetarian, being with a woman does not make me a lesbian and being with a man does not make me straight, I always was, am and will be a bisexual person.” Ultimately, this pressure to ‘pick a side’ – homosexuality or heterosexuality – not only demonstrates another way in which this discursive model organizes and coordinates the interpretation of the sexual identities, but how this discursive framework organizes social relations through the policing of the identification of others with sexualities that do not fit within the model. The logic of the binary model is, thusly, both activated and enforced in these instances

and, as such, evidences the primacy of the binary model of sexuality and its entrenchment in Western society.

In summary, instances of being misread by others serve to demonstrate the centrality of the binary model of sexuality as it is shown to be activated in the process of interpreting and understanding sexuality and sexual behaviour. The intentional misidentification of bi-identified people and/or the exertion of pressure to ‘pick a side’, demonstrates an enforcement of the binary model which, in turn, evidences how entrenched this system of knowledge has become in our culture and society and, thus, how it serves to coordinate social relations as an organizing principle. The recasting of bisexual identification and behaviour according to the terms, parameters and logic of the binary model, as was modeled in the above experiences, not only demonstrates the ruling power of the binary model but reinforces it.

2.4 Discounting Bisexuality

The continued ruling power of the binary system is also evidenced in the process through which bisexuality comes to be discounted and discarded by others. Earlier in the chapter, the experience of invisibility, resulting from significant gaps in representation and the relative absence of bisexuality within various institutional and discursive texts (from academic articles to popular media) was identified as consequence of the binary system. Just as important, however, is explicating the role of the binary in the representations of bisexuality that have become visible in the discursive realm. Using those identified within discussions by online community participants as a guide, I will explicate how the binary model coordinates the construction of these representations

(including quality and type) through the framing of bisexuality according to the organizational principles of the binary system. I will also demonstrate how these representations undermine the legitimacy of bisexuality and bisexual-identification, effectively mitigating the subversive potential of bisexuality, through outright dismissal of its legitimacy and/or through the creation of negative stereotypes. In demonstrating this process, I will simultaneously be illustrating how the trivialization and stigmatization of bisexual-identification that inevitably results from such negative characterizations ultimately functions both as an activation of discriminatory discourses, which coordinate a specific form of consciousness, and as a reinforcement of the ruling power of the binary system of sexuality.

To begin, discursive texts challenge the legitimacy of bisexual identification through assertions that bisexuality cannot and does not exist. Discussion around academic research studies disputing the possibility of bisexuality, for example, is common in these communities, with participants providing links to and debating the merits of the studies. An examination of one such entry, and the posted comments, helps illustrate this type of characterization within the academic realm as well as the community participants' response to it. In one post, for instance, a participant posts the link to a recently published academic study concerning bisexuality in women. The tagline they created for this link is: "A new study proves that bisexual women stay bisexual! It's not just a phase! Congratulations, bi girls, you've just been proved into existence!" Response to this study and its findings (in the comment box of this entry) is mostly sarcastic and mocking in tone. For example, one commenter asks whether or not bisexual guys are, then, "still mythical." As a reply, another participant says "yes" and

posts a link to a different study with findings concluding that male bisexuality does not exist. When the original commenter responds to this by sarcastically asking if this means he will now “have to choose” (note the framing of bisexuality in terms of the generally-accepted binary model), the participant writes “no, you just don’t exist.” While other male bisexual-identified participants lament the absence of consideration of male subjects in the original study, some female bisexual-identified participants express resentment over the basis of the study. One woman writes: “It’s nice to have some data (however weak) to back it up, but really, how frustrating that we’re still at the stage where this *needs* to be stated and studied. The very premise of the study is offensive-- what’s their alternative hypothesis? That all bisexuals are just kidding themselves?” Similarly, a woman demonstrates a rejection of the idea that something as personal as a sexual identity and sexual identification would need to be justified through scientific measures. She writes:

I don't need science to tell me that i exist. other people shouldn't need science to be able to respect bisexuality as an orientation, rather than insisting that we're just making it up for attention. there's a big difference between believing in a geocentric universe because you lack the technology to prove otherwise and assuming that anyone who has a "deviant" lifestyle is lying or mentally ill or just a general bad person until proven otherwise.

The findings of this study, which actually support the idea that bisexuality exists – at least in women -- stand in contrast to many other studies, such as the one hyperlinked in another participant’s posted comment, which continue to challenge the legitimacy of bisexuality as a persistent sexual identity. The discursive representation of bisexuality as illegitimate, created within these texts, comes to be activated by individuals as they engage, interpret and participate in day-to-day lifework. As Kinsman (1995, p. 80), explains, “ruling social frames of consciousness ...are actively organized within the

worlds of official discourse and ruling relations.” The binary model of sexuality, as a social frame of consciousness, is perpetuated through discursive texts which assert that bisexuality is not a legitimate sexual practice or identity. Through participation in the discourse, individuals who come to view bisexuality as illegitimate also perpetuate the binary model through the dismissal of bisexuality and bisexual-identification in others. Often raised as an issue in posted entries and comments on the community, the outright dismissal of bisexuality or bisexual-identification in this way is, for obvious reasons, a sensitive issue for many participants. One individual expresses their frustration by posting an entry that simply states: “I’M SICK OF HEARING THAT bisexuality ‘doesn’t exist’. Seriously, God = up for debate, Santa = up for debate, People’s genuine sexual attraction for either gender = NOT up for debate.” This sentiment is shared by another community participant who comments on this entry, stating: “I’m sick of hearing it too ... I get all sorts of mixed reactions to being bisexual, but it’s the ones that tell me that I can’t possibly be into both [men and women] that annoy me the most.” Another individual attempts to highlight the ridiculousness of positing that bisexuality does not exist, especially to a bisexual-identified person, through a humorous but poignant analogy. She writes: “Imagine someone walking up to you while you ate lunch and saying ‘You don’t really like that sandwich. You’re just confused about your taste buds.’ You’d look at them like they had three nipples.”

Another way that the legitimacy of bisexuality is called into question is through the creation of negative (mis)representations and stereotypes within discursive texts, often originating in the media and then incorporated into popular culture. The establishment of these stereotypes, once again, can be related back to the ruling power of

the binary system. For instance, while Paul (1984; 1985) and others (Bennett, 1992; Gibian, 1992; Israel & Mabr, 2004; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1992) recognize the seductive simplicity of a binary system of sexuality, they emphasize the ways in which this classification serves as a basis for biphobic discrimination. Paul (1985, p. 22-23) articulates this point in stating: “such a system...demands the grafting on of a host of assumptions to deal with the facts of bisexuality. Those who prefer the precision of such a model to the muddle of real life transfer blame from the theory to the person.” The result is the production of a wide range of stereotypes that call the legitimacy of bisexuality and bisexual-identification into question through trivialization and/or stigmatization. These stereotypes are produced and reproduced within discursive texts, most prominently the media. A community participant expresses frustration over the stereotyped representations of bisexuality present in the media:

When are people going to start recognizing bisexual like they do gay or straight as opposed to portraying the image that we are a) greedy b) Gay and in the closet or c) that we should sh*t or get off the can. Anyone who's seen the episode of sex and the city where Carrie dates the bi guy will understand what I'm saying. I love the show but must say I was upset that they had such a strong anti-bi storyline, where they called bisexuality a 'layover on the way to gaytown.' or that we are just 'double-dipping.'

Such negative characterizations of bisexuality present in the media are, then, further perpetuated as people activate these texts and participate in these discourses in their day-to-day lifework. By incorporating bisexuality into mainstream culture in this way, the binary system that coordinates the construction of such representations reinforces its ruling power.

Stereotypes encountered in media-based texts or in personal interactions are an issue often raised in these online communities. An examination of some of the stereotypes

identified and taken issue with by the online participants, as well as some of the negative representations identified in mass media texts, will help to illustrate the ways in which these narratives serve to promote and strengthen the entrenchment of a binary model of sexuality. The following list, posted by a participant summarizing typical stereotypes around bisexuality and/or bisexual-identified people, encompasses the range of stereotypes identified by participants within posted comments and entries:

- Bisexual people are just confused straight/queer people
- We are sluts who will sleep with anyone who is willing
- We are selfish
- We need to "pick a side"
- If I am in a relationship with a woman, I am no longer bisexual, I'm a lesbian! In the opposite situation, I've turned straight!
- We make gay people "look bad" or weaken "their" movement
- We are indecisive
- We are confused
- We are all 50/50 when it comes to our attractions

An examination of some of these common stereotypes can help to further explicate how the understanding of bisexuality as an illegitimate sexual identity is coordinated by, and ultimately serves to reify and reinforce, a binary model of sexuality.

First, let's start with the stereotype that bisexuality is just a state of confusion that ends once that person realizes they are either straight or queer. By conceptualizing bisexuality in this way, it can be understood as a temporal part of the process of 'coming out' rather than a valid sexual identity. As one community participant explains: "one of the hardest things about coming out as bi, is that there are always those who hope you'll 'turn out straight' or at least gay in the end." In a separate entry, one participant advises another participant on how to handle encounters with such stereotypes:

As to the ones that then say 'Oh well you just haven't had enough experience to realize your (straight/gay).' I raise an eyebrow and ask if they're offering,

then usually turn it around on them (you haven't had enough experience to realise your (whatever the opposite orientation is of theirs).

This conceptualization, located within the confines of a binary model that views homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive, is not surprising given the fact that “the only way that bisexuality can be rendered intelligible is through co-option into one or other of the two legitimate sexual categories such that bisexuals are “really gay,” or “really straight” (Germon, 2008, p. 244). This conceptualization is also perpetuated in the misrepresentation of bisexuality in the media. Barker et al (2008, p. 145) elucidate:

fictional characters tend to be presented as straight if in a relationship with someone of the “opposite sex,” and gay if in a relationship with someone of the “same sex.” If someone becomes attracted to a person of a different gender to the one he or she was before, that someone is portrayed as changing from straight to gay (or vice versa), for example as seen in the American TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where the character Willow makes such a transition and is subsequently labeled as a ‘lesbian.’

Similar in its focus on bisexuality as temporal, there is the stereotype that bisexuality is just an experimental phase that ends once you decide upon a romantic partner. One community participant who writes: “i have a few straight friends who seem to think i'm confused and will figure it out when i'm ready to settle down.” This characterization is demonstrated in the common idiom “Bi now, gay later” or “Bi now, straight later,” which highlights, in a slightly mocking tone, the strong emphasis on temporality as a way to separate bisexual behaviour, which can be fitted within the binary model as long as it is framed as experimentation, from bisexual identification, an illegitimate sexual identity. The perpetuation of this stereotype is also cited by community participants within the media around Tila Tequila, a MySpace celebrity who starred in her own reality-based bisexual dating show. With the show featuring bachelors and bachelorettes competing to

be Tila's one significant other, Tila was quoted in new media articles as teasingly asking: "Will I be straight or lesbian in the end?"

By conceptualizing bisexuality in this way, so that bisexuality is seen as phase or as part of the process of coming out, the challenge it poses to the logic of the binary system is sublimated in two distinct ways. First, framing bisexuality as "some form of phase, immaturity, or deviance rather than an identity where both/and scenarios can coexist" undermines the authenticity of bisexual-identification through a trivialization of the lived experience of bi-identified people (Barker, Bowles-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008, p. 149). Second, conceptualizing bisexuality as a transition into heterosexuality or homosexuality replicates the logic of the binary system; thus, the problem of bisexuality can be explained away in terms that reinforce and reproduce this model.

While the legitimacy of bisexuality is called into question by the misrepresentation of bisexuality as a transitional phase, this is also facilitated by the creation of biphobic stereotypes and discriminatory representations of bisexuality within media texts and popular culture (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003, p. 57). As Deschamps (2008, p. 131) argues, these misrepresentations, which sometimes seem more like targeted attacks, are the inevitable cost of bisexual visibility.⁸ As such, through the attachment of negative attributes and characteristics to bisexuality and bisexual-identified people, these misrepresentations serve to not only trivialize authentic experiences of bisexual-identification but effectively stigmatize bisexuality and bisexual-identification.

⁸ As Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan and Lin (2006, p. 803) elucidate, the visibility of one's non-normative sexual identity "is both necessary and also constitutive of a mark of difference that is a target for violence in its myriad incarnations."

As noted by Smith and Griffith (2005, p. 42), institutional discourse “interprets situations, defines objects, locates our own subjectivities in relation to them, and subordinates us to its moral logic.” In coordinating representations of bisexuality, the moral logic within sexuality discourses creates taboos that are, in turn, attributed with bisexuality. This attribution of different taboos to bisexuality and bisexual-identified people acts as the basis for discrimination and stigmatization. For example, while we live in a socio-culture where sex figures prominently in different forms of media but sexual behaviour remains chastened by moral coding, bisexuality is often equated with promiscuity. One person shares a personal encounter with this type of stereotyping in sharing: “I was lucky that my mom said from the time I was young, ‘If any of my girls ended up being lesbians I'd be OK with that.’ (Unfortunately, she also said, ‘But not bisexual -- those bisexuals will sleep with anyone!’).” Another person explains the framing of bisexual-identified people as promiscuous in this way: “to alot of straight people, becoming bi is just another way of saying ‘i'll fuck anybody!’” This association with promiscuity often results in a multitude of other biphobic characterizations that are equally stigmatizing, such as the idea that bisexual-identified people are responsible for the spreading of sexually-transmitted diseases, such as HIV or AIDS. One person shares an experience of facing this stereotype in their own family. They write: “My hyper-conservative parents claim bisexuality is ‘doubly disgusting’, because people like me can't even be honest and accept one identity; instead I have to ‘decieve’ everyone while I have fun at their expense and give everyone diseases.” This viewpoint is not, however, limited to encounters among the ‘hyper-conservative’ as many participants have shared experiences with this stereotype in the queer community. One person writes:

very often i'm made to feel like i'm dirty, or fake, or some sort of ho...or worse yet, a second class citizen in the rainbow nation. it's bad enough that straight people look at bisexuals with either disdain or confusion, but it's far more hurtful when it comes from another member of the gay community [...] you know i've heard all kinds of bullshit regarding bisexuals. some of the most outrageous have come from lesbians, stating that it's the bi women who bring disease into the community, going back and forth between men and women.

By tapping into established social fears, this conceptualization of bisexual-identified people as “dirty disease spreaders,” as one community member phrases it, creates stigma around bisexuality and bisexual-identification.

Along with promiscuity and disease, (mis)representations create an opposition between bisexuality and dominant socio-cultural values through the framing of bisexual-identified people as greedy or hedonistic. One community member shares: “i, like many of you, am frustrated by people telling me i don't exist or that i'm ‘greedy’. it's quite silly.” Another participant expresses how this stereotype influences their decision to openly identify as bisexual, especially to family. They write: “My family doesn't know about my sexuality, and I don't think I could ever tell them. They've said they think bisexual people are only after self-gratification and things like that... so, I could only imagine what they'd think of me then!”

The misrepresentations of bisexuality and bisexual-identified people located within media texts and popular culture have a significant impact on how bisexuality is perceived by others. By organizing biphobic stereotypes around sexual taboos, social fears, and the morality of social values they stigmatize bisexual practice, identification and bisexual-identified people. This is perhaps best demonstrated in an experience shared by one community participant, who writes: “I was hanging out with my family today. And the topic came up of someone who was bi and one of my cousins (a year

older than I am) replied with ‘eww bi? How gross can you get’ I sunk a little in my chair when I heard that.” Once again, these stereotypes are both produced and reproduced in discursive media-based texts, where the framing of bisexuality as “gross” or “dirty” is just as common on heteronormative shows as it is on shows like the *L Word*, a queer-oriented television show which claims to be attempting a fair and accurate representation of bisexuality.⁹ By attaching stigma to bisexual practice and identification, and relegating bisexuality to the peripheries, the binary model is able to resiliently maintain its ruling power. After all, “It can certainly be more comfortable for society to keep portraying bisexuality as deviant because when it ceases to be a bohemian or extreme way of living and becomes part of our lives and our societies we are called to reconsider the very notion of sexual orientation” (Barker, 2008, p. 11).

Across the board, the stereotypes identified above perform a couple of key functions. In focusing on the temporality of bisexuality or bisexual-identification, some of these stereotypes re-frame bisexuality so that it may be viewed as congruent with the binary system rather than recognized as a sexuality that is positioned outside and in opposition to it. If bisexuality is seen as a temporary state of confusion, delusion, or indecision that eventually leads to identification with either homosexuality or heterosexuality, it no longer presents the same threat to the logic of the binary system. Moreover, by positioning bisexuality as a liminal state within the process of sexual identification, the incorporation of bisexual status into the binary framework does not solicit an increased acceptance of bisexuality as an identity or practice, but actually

⁹ <http://bialogue.livejournal.com/19383.html> - “It is common on the show for the bi-identified character, Alice, to be teased for being a “dirty bisexual” or to be told that bisexuality is gross. This biphobic content reaches a pinnacle when Alice, herself, uses bisexuality as a punchline when she turns to her friend and says ‘Bisexuality is gross. I see it now’.”

results in further unease and suspicion. This is illustrated in a biphobic comment posted by a gay male on an LGBT website, as it was reproduced by a bi-community participant in the body of an entry, who asserted that bisexuality is not a legitimate sexuality: “i think that most ‘bisexuals’ fall into one or more of the following categories: gay and fooling themselves, gay and trying to hide it, [or] just confused and experimenting.”

While the original poster demonstrates how bisexuality can be characterized in a way that is congruent with the binary model, through an activation of these text-based stereotypes, this excerpt also demonstrates the inherent suspicion around bisexuality that inevitably results through the poster’s use of quotation marks around the word ‘bisexual’. The stereotypes identified above that are not temporally based also contribute to this process as the suspicion attached to bisexual-identification becomes coupled with either trivialization or stigma. These stereotypes present a textual reality that is ideal for reinforcing and reproducing the logic of the binary system. The subversive potential of bisexuality is diffused through partial incorporation into the binary system of thought, while persistent identification with bisexuality is discouraged through stigmatization facilitated by negative stereotypes and derogatory (mis)representation.

To conclude this section, the production and reproduction of discursive texts that call into question the legitimacy of bisexuality and bisexual-identification are coordinated by and supportive of the binary conceptualization of sexuality. With the binary model as the interpretive scheme through which bisexuality is framed, these representations of bisexuality result in the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes that help to explain away ‘bisexuality’ either through outright dismissal of bisexuality, through incorporation of transitional bisexual status within the binary framework, or through banishment of

bisexuality through stigmatization. By accounting for bisexuality in a way that does not disrupt the foundational aspects of the binary model, this system of knowledge is able to maintain its ruling power in spite of the various lived experiences and actualities that counter it. The means by which this is achieved, via the creation of biphobic stereotypes and misrepresentation, results in a “continuing and shifting disjuncture” experienced by bisexual-identified people (Kinsman, 1995, p. 81). Furthermore, the misrepresentations of bisexuality produced within these discursive texts, in providing a social frame of consciousness for understanding bisexuality, also coordinate social relations between bi-identified people and others. This will be explored in the next section.

2.5 Biphobia and Stigmatization

In coordinating social frames of consciousness around bisexuality, via representations of bisexuality within institutional texts, the binary model of sexuality also serves to coordinate relationships between bi-identified individuals and non-bisexual-identified others. As people participate in the binary discourse, employing it as an interpretive scheme for understanding and categorizing sexual identities and behaviours, they activate the standpoint of the binary system, including its inherent “canons of relevance and validity..., judgments and values” (Smith, 1999, p. 36). In so doing, the conceptualization of bisexuality as deviant or illegitimate, coordinated by the binary framework and produced within discursive texts, infiltrates the social realm and begins to inform the nature and terms of social interaction between bisexual-identified people and others. The marginalization, discrimination and exclusion of bisexual-identified individuals within both heterosexual and lesbian/gay communities functions as local

practice of the discourse (Israel & Mobr, 2004; Blasingame, 1992; Ochs, 1996; Ault, 1996; Paul, 1984; *ibid*, 1985). These local practices, although separated by instance, are interrelated through their coordination by the textually-mediated binary discourse.

Adapting the term “relations of homophobia” established by Smith, Mykhalovskiy and Weatherbee (2006), these practices may best be understood as relations of biphobia, whereby the suspicion and disgust developed in institutional discursive texts acts as an organizing factor in interpersonal relations both on a macro and micro scale. Udis-Kessler (1990, p. 54) helps to detail the character of biphobia in Western society:

Bisexuals thus become, in popular heterosexual discourse, the object of skepticism and suspicion, ambivalent and promiscuous opportunists who if openly adopting the label do so for unconvincing reasons of fad or avoidance of homosexual stigma. Comparably, within gay subcultures they are ‘tourists’, ‘fence-sitters’, traitors, cop-outs, closet cases ... who use and discard their same-sex lovers like so many Kleenex.

Within the bisexual-themed online journal communities, experiences with different local practices of the discourse, now understood as relations of biphobia, are commonly raised in participants’ entries and comments. Detailing some of these experiences will help to illustrate the dimensions and dynamics of these relations of biphobia in local settings, and their impact on the experience of bisexual-identification.

The marginalization of bisexuality and bisexual-identification is one element of the relations of biphobia that is mentioned in a variety of identity discussions. One consequence of this marginalization, for many online community members, is a strong sense of social and cultural isolation. One person, for example, articulates the experience of bisexual marginalization this way:

Sometimes I really hate being bisexual- because I don't *fit* anywhere. I'm too queer for the straights and too straight for the queers ... I'm supposed to relate to other heterosexual married women- when that's not actually how I

feel all the time. Lesbians (in general, as this is certainly not true in all cases), see me as a traitor, one who chose heterosexual privilege [over] the activist life and over identifying with my lesbian sisters. Perhaps they are right- but I don't feel privileged.

In response to this posted entry, another community participant commiserates: “I can totally relate, for when you are straight or gay, you actually belong to one of the groups; for some reason, when you are so much alike to both groups, you don't belong into any of them.” What is common among these narratives on the marginalization of bisexuality, as coordinated by the dominant binary structure, is a theme of “un/belonging” (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan & Lin, 2006, p. 805). While bisexuality has gained some visibility in institutional texts, as well as mainstream and queer culture, this has not translated into much more than superficial acceptance within straight or queer social circles. As a result, spaces of social belonging remain inaccessible, in many ways, for bisexual-identified people. Consequently, many participants characterize bisexuality as a minority identity within a minority group. Isolated from mainstream heterosexual communities due to their same-sex sexual involvement, community members generally express equal feelings of non-belonging within the LGBT community (despite the allusion to inclusiveness in the community's title name). One participant asserts: “The ‘B’ and the ‘T’ and the ‘Q’ parts of GLBTQ are often overlooked, and we're often seen as second-class citizens, within an already marginalized population.”

While marginalization is common in both queer and straight communities, local practices of the relations of biphobia in the LGBT communities seemed to be felt more acutely. This experience of being ‘overlooked’ or mistreated by individuals within the queer community, of which bisexuality is (at least in theory) a part, is often described by community participants in ways that denoted feelings of bitterness, betrayal and/or

resentment. One person remarks: “bigotry seems not to be just for ‘straight’ people. One might think that those subjected to bigotry would know better. One might in a disconcerting number of cases be wrong.” Another sarcastically bemoans the hegemonic rule of monosexuality within the LGBT community: “I just love how folks who were fighting the hetero hegemony 20 years ago are now trying to enforce their own.”

While the practices of biphobia described in users’ posted entries and comments sometimes focused on general feelings or experiences of marginalization and exclusion, other times users would detail particular experiences of discrimination and exclusion. One person, for example, shares the biphobia she encountered in a relationship with a romantic partner: “she was a lesbian, and I was bi, she constantly berated me for it. Most of the time she thought she was being funny... but I certainly didn't think so.” Similarly, one participant identifies how it feels to face biphobic discrimination when seeking out romantic partners in lesbian communities:

I hate it when lesbians ask me if Im Bi or a lesbian when i say I like girls, and when I say Im Bi, they dont want to be with me...like wtf? What is so wrong about the fact Iv been with a guy or that I also happen to like men? Its like they act like they are too good for me or something. It hurts tho too, it doesnt just make me angry. If a lesbian could please explain to me whats so horrible about being Bi, please do.

This experience of exclusion is repeated, yet again, in the narrative of another participant who details the experience of losing friends on the basis of her sexual identity:

I've had so many lesbian friends leave me when they've realized I was still attracted to men... as though I had changed, somehow betrayed them, or was just disgusting. I didn't do anything... I hadn't changed at all... they just couldn't accept me for who I am and had their own biases to deal with.

Present on both macro and micro levels, relations of biphobia extend from interactions between individuals and the general community to personal interactions with friends,

family, and romantic partners. Moreover, despite the context, the character of these relations remains fairly consistent – bi-identified people, as a consequence of biphobic stereotypes and negative (mis)representations that operate from the standpoint of the binary model, experience discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization upon the basis of their sexual identity.

Local practices contributing to the relations of biphobia can have significant impacts on the organization of bisexual-identified people's 'lifework' (Smith, Mykhalovskiy & Weatherbee, 2006, p. 178). As one example, relations of biphobia resulting in a marginalization of the bisexual lifestyle make it difficult for some bi-identified people to relate to and communicate their sexual experiences with non-bi-identified others. As one individual puts it: "I feel 'in between' all the time. It's hard to address boyfriend issues with lesbian friends or girlfriend issues with a crowd of straight girls." Moreover, relations of biphobia tend to isolate bi-identified individuals not only socially but culturally as well. One online participant, for instance, describes how marginalization of bisexuality within the LGBT community makes it difficult for bi-identified individuals to feel like a part of that community or to identify with LGBT culture. They write:

We come from a different cultural context than many of our gay friends. [...] a lot of gay people, when they come out, have a subculture of their own to which to turn. This is where they get their support, friendship, etc, and they emulate its modes. I, for years, stayed in the bi closet simply because I didn't like what I perceived as 'gay culture' and the local gay community was pretty antagonistic to bisexuals. I wouldn't even wear pride imagery. But that wasn't my culture...

Relations of biphobia can not only impact the organization of one's lifework, but the organization of their identity work as well. For example, experience with practices of

biphobia can lead to strong feelings of invalidation, shame, and fear within bi-identified individuals. This, in turn, can cause individuals to re-organize their sexual identity work so that their bisexual-identification is made less visible, and thus free from scrutiny. The tendency to avoid identifying as bisexual in attempt to avoid potential discrimination or bigotry is a direct response to relations of biphobia. In response to a posted entry that asked community participants whether or not they would ever lie if asked their sexuality identity, for instance, one person remarked: “Yes, usually if someone asks, they already know, but I still hate coming out to people that way because it feels like an accusation. ‘Are you bisexual?’ ‘Did you shoot someone and hide the body in the woods?’ urg.”

The connection between relations of biphobia and the closeting of one’s bisexual identification is made even more evident in another comment, where the user shares: “One of my friends (bisexual) had her gf (lesbian) tell her that bisexuality was unnatural and disgusting. What? My friend didn't even admit to her own gf that she was in fact bisexual and not lesbian as her gf assumed.” While the ability of bisexual-identified individuals to ‘pass’ as heterosexual (and thus access heterosexual privilege) is part of the reason some in the queer community hold contempt for bisexual-identified people, it is important to note that, just like visibility, this type of closeting of one’s sexual identity, within either straight or queer social contexts, comes at a cost. As one community member puts it:

If someone pulls the ‘straight privilege’ thing on you, don't get mad. It's common to hear that sort of thing, especially when you're bemoaning a lack of belongingness. Just be frank, honest, and heartfelt about it. Help the other person understand that there's a price for passing as straight-- living a lie. They might find it strange to discover how many bi people there are out there who feel uncomfortable being themselves.

By avoiding bi-identification in attempting to avoid ostracism, a loss of legitimacy in their peer circles, and/or feelings of shame associated with the negative stereotypes around bisexuality, Ault (1996, p. 456) points out that many bisexual-identified people inadvertently reify the absence and invisibility of bisexuality to heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities and culture. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Burleson (2005) considers invisibility the principal challenge currently facing the bisexual community despite so-called advancements made through the introduction of bisexual representation in some areas of the social.

In summary, analysis of the online bisexual identity narratives has revealed local practices that engage the binary discourse, resulting in relations of biphobia. This has helped to illustrate how the binary standpoint, through practices of marginalization, exclusion and discrimination, is taken up by individuals within and across local settings. Furthermore, these narratives also explicate the role of binary discourse, and discursive texts, in coordinating the experience of bisexual identification, in terms of how bi-identified people view their own sexuality and their understanding of how bisexuality is perceived within the broader social context. As such, relations of biphobia have been shown to have a significant impact on the lifework of bisexual-identified people.

2.6 Conclusion

The disjuncture felt by bi-identified individuals between their lived actualities and the textual realities established in institutional and discursive texts acts as an apt entry point for discovering how the binary model coordinates social relations. In examining the dynamics and dimensions of the bisexual dilemma, it is possible to explore the primacy

of the binary model in modern Western culture and to map out the various ways the binary system coordinates different aspects of sexual identification and sexual identity work. Although bisexual activists and theorists have identified the binary model of sexuality as central to bisexual invisibility, erasure and biphobic discrimination (Paul 1984; 1985; Bennett, 1992; Gibian, 1992; Israel & Moberg, 2004; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1992; 1996), the use of an institutional ethnographic approach allows for an explication of concrete ways that the binary system coordinates the lived experience of bisexuality and bisexual-identification through local practices by individuals as they activate and participate in the binary discourse.

Specifically, this chapter has demonstrated how the relative absence of bisexuality in the discursive realm both reflects and reinforces the standpoint of the binary model, which, in turn, coordinates the process of sexual-identification. The activation of the binary standpoint as an interpretive scheme is demonstrated in instances where sexual identities are inferred based on the gender of an individual's current romantic partner. The practice of forcefully applying the binary framework in cases where bi-identified individuals are pressured to 'pick a side', however, illustrates how entrenched this model is in our society. Discussion in this chapter has also shown how discursive representations of bisexuality that have begun to surface in academic research studies, media texts, and popular culture reflect a binary standpoint in that they are constructed according to the moral logic and conceptual framework of the binary system. The resulting conceptualizations of bisexuality as illegitimate, transitional, and/or deviant help to reinforce the legitimacy of the binary model while mitigating the disruptive potential of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. The consequence of these binary-

driven discursive (mis)representations of bisexuality was shown to have a significant impact on relationships between bi-identified individuals and others, resulting in relations of biphobia. These relations of biphobia, as constituted through local practices of the binary discourse, included the marginalization of, exclusion of, and discrimination against bi-identified people. The binary model of sexuality coordinates social relations in ways that have a significant impact on both the lifework and identity work of bisexual-identified people.

Given the feelings of social and cultural un/belonging outlined in this chapter, it is not surprising that bi-identified people would move to the Internet to participate in venues where you can be 'read' as bisexual, where narratives around bisexual-identification are welcomed, and where bi-identified people are able to interact with like-identified others through the creation and participation in a shared culture. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The Coordinative Function of Online Social Spaces

3.1 Introducing the Chapter

As outlined in the previous chapter, bisexuality has traditionally been denied status as a legitimate sexual identity, and bi-identified people have, in turn, experienced cultural invisibility and stigmatization from both lesbian/gay and heterosexual communities, and lacked significant social space in which to connect. Given this, it is not surprising that many bisexual-identified individuals have migrated to the 'Net not only to create communities, but also to negotiate bisexual identity narratives. According to Rust (2001, p. 34), "individuals who do not fit neatly into culturally produced heterosexual, lesbian and gay categories seek to claim the experiential space that can form the basis for bisexual identity." With this in mind, the Internet is emerging as an important venue in which bisexual subjects, in particular, may meet to commune as well as to narrate and authenticate what has traditionally been denied as a legitimate sexual identity.

The online venues in which the creation, expression and production of identities take place, however, are not neutral spaces. In fact, Hemmings (1997a) and Woodland (2000) both assert that the social spaces in which identity work takes place have a critical impact on both the expression and the production of that identity. The concept of identity work will be explained in further detail in the next chapter. Since online environments, including online journal communities, have quickly become social spaces that act as "contemporary site[s] of cultural transformation, identification and community participation" for many bi-identified individuals, it becomes important to consider the impact of these spaces on the identity discussions taking place there (Bryson, 2004, p.

239). Furthermore, while most academics tend to hold either a utopian or dystopian view of technology and its effects on politics and the social, Haraway (1991, p. 154) stresses the importance of analyzing technology from both points of view since each “reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point.” By being attentive to both the capabilities and limitations endemic to this type of online venue, a fuller picture of its coordinative function can be explicated.

In this chapter, the coordinative and mediatory role of the online journal community, as a direct discursive environment, will be considered in terms of the expression of bisexuality and the production of narratives concerning bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Specifically, this chapter outlines: the significance of the online venue as a space for bisexual identity discussions; the characteristics of the online journal communities in which these identity discussions are taking place; the conceptualization of online venues as “rolling texts;” and the explication of the ways in which the format, features and norms of these online venues coordinate identity work.

3.2 Significance of the Online Venue

Jonathon Alexander (2002b) is one theorist who feels that the Internet holds great potential for the promotion of stigmatized sexualities. While his work makes almost no mention of bisexuality in particular, he (*ibid*, p. 77) insists that the Internet is a unique tool for “dispens[ing] information and foster[ing] contacts about subjects, such as homosexuality, that continue to have little wide-spread currency or validation in public discourse.” Moreover, Hubbard (2001, p. 66-67) contends that the Internet is especially important for the articulation and performance of marginalized sexual identities since it

allows for the creation of communities that employ alternative social orders to that of mainstream society. Online communities are able to act as “contradictory sites of consciousness” for individuals who experience disjuncture between the textual realities of ruling relations and the local particularities of their lived experience (Smith, 1999, p. 93). Burleson (2005) seems to support this notion. He (ibid) asserts that many bisexual subjects are benefiting from an increase in access to relevant sources of information and community, due to their involvement as both hosts and consumers of Websites. It is important to consider which elements of these online spaces make them particularly appealing to bisexual-identified people as venues for the creation of bisexual communities, as well as the expression and production of bisexual identities. Why go online?

The Internet represents an important space for locating what is largely an invisible population. It is clear from the discussion in Chapter Two that bisexual-identified people face invisibility, marginalization and exclusion due to the coordinative effect of the binary model of sexuality. However, the invisibility of bisexuality in the discursive realm also extends into invisibility in the social realm. In fact, as noted earlier, Burleson (2005) asserts that invisibility is the principal challenge currently facing the bisexual community. On the one hand, this invisibility stems from the fact that bisexuals are more difficult to identify passively since you cannot infer bisexuality based on common social cues, such as the gender of their current romantic partner. One community participant describes: “Since most bi women ‘pass’ in the straight community, it can be tough to know who they are. I have one friend who is also openly bisexual, but I’m not sure where to meet others.” On the other hand, as Ault (1996) has pointed out, the invisibility of

bisexuality also stems from resistance by individuals to openly identify as bisexual in an attempt to avoid ostracism. As one participant puts it: “bisexuals are so few and far between that they may as well not exist (most of them keep their mouths shut if they are).”

This invisibility, coupled with the exclusion and marginalization within both queer and straight communities, creates a sense of ‘un/belonging’ that can propel bisexual-identified individuals to seek out communities in social spaces where bisexuality is not only accepted, but may also be freely articulated, discussed and performed. The ability to engage in discussion and articulation of bisexuality, after all, is fairly rare in most social contexts. As Evans (1993, p. 152) points out: “bisexuality has been predominantly treated as an individual condition, detached from any clearly identifiable subcultural setting.” For example, one participant, speaking of the bi-themed online journal community of which she is a member, writes: “I think that's what's good about this group lol, knowing [yo]u're not alone.” Hemmings (1997a, p. 147) maintains that even in social spaces where bisexuality is supposedly accepted, including the queer community, discussion concerning bisexuality and bisexual identity becomes subjugated by the more dominant (read: legitimate) sexualities.

It is not surprising, then, that bi-identified individuals seek out bisexual-themed communities. The fact that this search, for many people, takes place online eases the process of identifying and accessing communities developed around this invisible minority. Rather than having to seek out bi-specific communities in offline contexts, individuals can go online and, in a matter of minutes, seek out a number of bisexual communities with a membership of like-identified people and dedicated bi-themed

content. Given this, the Internet can be understood as an important venue for bisexual-identified individuals to locate community, establish a sense of belonging, engage culturally and identify social networks of like-identified others (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan & Lin, 2006, p. 805). In fact, participants in these bi-themed online journal communities often include remarks in posted entries and comments concerning the important role the venue plays in fulfilling desires for community, identity-related discussion and interaction, and social acceptance. Seeking community is commonly identified by community members in their introductory posts as their reason for joining the community. These posts often highlight the absence of bisexual-identified people in participants' offline social contexts, as well as problems with locating bisexual-specific communities. While one participant intimates: "i've never met someone who was openly bisexual," another participant writes: "I am a bi male trapped in the hetero world. I guess being married for 13 years will do that. I know a few gay people (male and female). I know a ton of hetero people, but I have only met two people who are bi." In a separate entry, one person expresses their excitement over locating a bisexual-themed community: "I'm happy that I joined this group. I'm starting to feel like, for the first time, that I belong somewhere. *sigh of happiness*."

While these narratives clearly express the desire of participants to find a community of bi-identified others, their willingness to provide new members with a sense of belonging is evidenced in the responses commonly received in the comment boxes of introductory posts. One community member responds to an introductory post by remarking: "Welcome to the community. I've found everyone here to be extremely helpful and supportive when I needed that. I hope you feel the same way." Another

person reassures the new community participant by saying: “you're in good hands sir.” The willingness to form friendships and provide a sense of community often extends beyond venue-based interactions as people invite others to contact them through other media, such as email, telephone or instant messaging [IM]. It is not unusual for people to respond to posts where people are seeking friendships or support by offering: “If you ever need to talk, feel free to IM me,” or “Nice to meet you. Feel free to drop me a line if you want to talk.”

The sense of belonging that participants often seem to be seeking also stems from a desire to be in a space where issues related to bisexuality can be discussed openly with like-identified others. Due to a common sexual identity, it is assumed that other community members may be able to better relate, understand and sympathize with issues being raised. This is evidenced in many entries; for example, one participant expresses: “there's hardly anyone I can truly relate to and I know that's why I try so hard to reach out to someone...anyone that may know where I'm coming from.” Another person writes: “i know that plenty of people are bi. and honestly, i'm ok with being who i am. nevertheless, it still helps to have someone i can talk to about it without any reservation or fear of misunderstanding.” Being among like-identified others creates the opportunity to develop and share information concerning what it means to be bisexual, and to explore the dimensions of different lived experiences of bisexuality and bisexuality identification. As Rubin (1999, p. 162) makes clear, a lot of information concerning “how to find, occupy, and live in the marginal sexual worlds” is generally suppressed. As a result, bisexual-themed communities serve as an important information resource for individuals seeking greater understanding about this sexual identity. One person, for example,

expresses their desire to better understand bisexuality through discussion with other bi-identified people: “I came by this community while looking for new friends and this seemed to be the best place as I can meet people who are also bi and who probably have more experience than me!” By drawing on the experience of others who are discussing and articulating experiences of bisexuality, while also actively engaging in the discussion through the posting of entries and comments, this participant is able to use this interactive venue as a resource for thinking through her/his own experiences of bisexual-identification.

The use of these communities as information resources is also highlighted by the number of what I will call “ask” posts in the communities. “Ask” posts are entries or comments in which individuals ask other community members to share similar experiences, opinions or advice on issues related to bisexuality and bisexual-identification. In one ask post, for example, a community member ends a personal essay on their thoughts concerning bisexuality:

...I would be interested in others' reactions, opinions and personal experiences in regards to the various issues addressed above. I suspect that others can relate to or have experience with some of these issues. Perhaps others can benefit from my sharing my experience. Perhaps I can learn from the experiences of others. I would like to discuss these things and wonder if perhaps others would as well.

Similarly, another person ends an entry concerning confusion they were experiencing around their bisexuality by asking: “Any ideas on anything i've written about here? anything would be helpful, I'm at a really confusing point.” These types of requests for opinions, experience and advice effectively highlight the absence of information on bisexuality in more mainstream media and discourses. They also demonstrate the unique

role that these online venues play in creating a source of information around bisexuality that is based on personal experiences of bi-identified individuals.

Bisexual-themed online communities are also significant in that, in providing an easily accessible and identifiable bisexual-dedicated space, they create a context in which bisexuality can be discussed, debated, expressed and performed freely. These communities, then, act as safe spaces where bisexuality is accepted as legitimate, where a participant's sexuality is automatically read as bisexual unless stated otherwise, and where discussion around bisexuality is not only brought to the forefront but is the exclusive topic of conversation. According to Woodland (2000), the ability to create such a safe space is necessary for the facilitation of discussions involving identity formation and/or redefinition. Similarly, Campbell (2004, p. 83-84) points out that "the primary feature making these locations feel safe [is] the presumption that everyone within the confines of the space claims a similar identity – creating an interior world of affirmation in the face of an external world of hostility." The safety created in these spaces is evidenced in community members' entries; for example, as one participant ends one of their entries: "I feel very comfortable knowing there are such outlets like this one where I can talk about such matters without fear of repercussions or hate." Another participant writes: "Personally, this has always been a comm[unity] where one can find safety and support when the world seems to be flooded with so much negativity Its refreshing." The centrality of dedication to bisexual content to the creation of a safe space where community members can freely discuss aspects of their sexual identity is further underscored by Wincapaw's (2000) findings on exclusionary practices within lesbian and bisexual women's email lists. She (2000, p. 54) found that bisexual women

were excluded from many of the lesbian mailing lists, and that those allowed to participate were subject to censure whenever they attempted to discuss their relationships with men. Wincapaw (ibid) aptly noted that asking women to refrain from sharing this aspect of their lived experiences effectively forced them to engage in self-censorship as a condition of participation. These types of discriminatory practices found in lesbian/gay/bi/trans/questioning (LGBTQ) communities highlight both the costs of participation for bisexual-identified people, and the unique opportunity for safety and the freedom of expression that a bi-dedicated space affords. As an earlier quote from one participant demonstrates: “It’s hard to address boyfriend issues with lesbian friends or girlfriend issues with a crowd of straight girls.”

Finally, the dedication to bisexual content within these online communities brings with it the assumption that participants are bisexual-identified. This is often a unique experience for participants in that, unlike in the physical realm, their identity, behaviour and experiences are primarily read as bisexual. While it has been made clear that bisexual-identified people are largely invisible both in the physical and discursive realms, the inability to be read as bisexual, as noted in Chapter One, is an issue that many bi-identified people resent. As one participant puts it: “I always feel weird having to announce I am bisexual and yet I want to be seen.” The importance of being able to perform a sexuality and have that sexuality recognized by others is reflected in Lloyd’s (1998, p. 132) critique of Butler’s work on identity, in which she states: “it is easy to neglect or to underestimate the importance of the space within which performance occurs: the others involved in or implicated by the production, and how they receive, interpret and respond to what they see.” It is important to recognize the opportunities that

the space created within the online venue affords bisexual-identified people to perform bisexuality and to have that performance read as bisexual by those around them. In this way, the Internet enables bi-identified individuals to encounter each other as bisexuals in a way they would rarely be able to attain in the physical world. Moreover, this type of dedicated content allows bisexual participants to perform their sexuality in a space where it is not only visible, but is validated by others.

In light of this discussion, it becomes clear that the Internet acts as an important medium and social venue for the location of community, the establishment of social networks, engagement with culture, and the performance and production of sexual identities. In the case of online journal communities, these online venues prove important social spaces for bi-identified people to interact with each other, engage in identity discussions, and articulate their experiences through textual narratives concerning bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Acting as the chief interface through which community members may engage in self-expression and interactions with others, the venue is central to the process and production of these identity-based texts and, thus, becomes implicated in these processes. It is important to consider the ways that key aspects of the online venue coordinate and mediate the identity discussions taking place there. The following section outlines some of the key features that are characteristic to online journal communities.

3.3 Characteristics of the Online Venue

What is perhaps most notable about online journals or blogs is the coalescence of public and private space (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan & Lin, 2006, p. 799). Like journals

or diaries, these spaces feature intimate narratives about the lived experiences of everyday people. Unlike journals or diaries, however, these intimate narratives are published to a publicly accessible space and, given this, are written with the expectation that this accessibility will allow for an audience not only to read but also to comment on them. In blurring the lines between public and private space in this way, Carroli (1997, p. 359) contends that blogs may be understood as liminal spaces “where articulations of ‘self’ and perceptions of ‘community’ collide.” Online journal communities are similar to individual journals or blogs in that participants are publishing intimate narratives to the online space with an expectation of audience interaction with the text (e.g. reading and/or responding to the posted entry). Online journals communities are differentiated from individual blogs, however, in that they are defined by a specific topic of discussion, they are able to grant membership to any number of people, and they allow for multiple authorship so that any member, not just the founder of the community, is able to contribute narrative through the posting of an entry.

In this study, the online journal communities in which these identity discussions are taking place are organized around discussion topics related to bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Brief descriptions of the following distinctive venue features of these communities will be presented in order to provide a better sense of the context in which this identity work is taking place. Some of the notable features include: entry/comment feature; community information page, which includes information about the purpose of the community, content and posting guidelines, number of community members, names/avatars of community moderators and community members, and links to topic-

related content elsewhere online; bisexual content-specific posting guidelines; moderators; and restricted authorship.

Dialogue and interaction between community participants in the venue is enabled through the posting of entries and/or comments. This set-up is typical of blogs since individuals posting entries are able to receive feedback on textual narratives that they post while individual readers are included in this process through the contribution of comments to the entries. Having a community based around blogging extends this entry/comment feature so that all community participants have the ability to introduce topics into the discussion either through the posting of an entry or the contribution of a comment on a posted entry. Entries are published to the community's main page in chronological order from when they were posted, with the fifteen most recent entries visible.

The dedication of this online space to discussion, expression and dialogue concerning bisexuality and bisexual-identification, discussed in the previous section, is sustained in a number of ways. In identifying the purpose of the community in the community information page, it is clear to community members that participation should be focused on topics related to bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Moreover, specific posting guidelines requiring bi-specific topics restrict content to narratives concerning bisexuality and bisexual-identification. These posting guidelines, in turn, are upheld by community moderators. If a post contains content that is not relevant to the community theme, moderators tend to either delete the post automatically (most common in cases of spamming) or post a comment to the offending entry reminding the author of the posting guidelines. In addition, it is not unusual for community members to uphold

these guidelines by posting critical comments on the entry reminding the post-er of the guidelines and/or questioning the appropriateness of the post. For example, one individual posted an entry outlining her experience of people assuming that it is because she is overweight that she has decided to identify as bisexual, so as to better her chances of getting a romantic partner. While some participants responded to her entry with sympathetic comments, others questioned the appropriateness of the entry given the posting guidelines. One person comments: “I have to say, my only real thoughts are that this is a post more about being overweight than it is about being bisexual.” Through citation of the posting guidelines in lieu of responding to the issue being raised, then, community members, like moderators, ensure that content remains dedicated to the identified theme of bisexuality and bisexual-identification.

By listing the number and names/avatars of community members on the community information page, a sense of bisexual community is automatically established. Rather than being an individual condition, the number of community participants speaks to the presence of bisexual-identified others. This sense of community is also supported through the links provided on the community information page to bisexual resources online, including books, support pages, activist groups, and other bisexual-themed communities. In providing promotion of and access to other bisexual resources, this venue grants visibility to different branches of bisexual community online, and acts as an important resource to bi-identified people seeking community, resources and information.

While the public accessibility of these narratives of experience around bisexuality and bisexual-identification is an important feature of these communities, rules around who can contribute through the posting of entries or comments are somewhat more

private. In the communities examined here, posting privileges were limited to community members only.¹⁰ By restricting authorship on the basis of a bisexual-identity or acceptance of bisexuality, a sense of safety can be cultivated within the online community as authorship remains restricted to community members interested in contributing to the production of narratives around bisexuality and bisexual-identification.

While the characteristics of these online communities cited above help to give a sense of the context in which these identity discussions are taking place, a more critical analysis is needed in order to explicate the coordinative role that these venues play in the production of online identity work. As Bryson et al. (2006, p. 792) point out: “there is...nothing straightforward about the relationship of subaltern sexual identifications and cyberculture.” As such, the following section will now explore the concept of ‘rolling text’ in order to help guide the critical analysis of these venues.

3.4 Online Venues as Rolling Texts

In previous sections, the potential of the Internet for granting access to space in which to promote stigmatized sexual identities and to encourage creative play with notions of sexual identity have been highlighted. The features and limits of the online venue, however, may be as restrictive as they are enabling. As Wakeford (2000, p. 412) so clearly states:

[C]yberspace has its own dominant history of how diverse sexual identities are expressed or silenced, yet this is rarely acknowledged. For

¹⁰ In order to gain membership in the community, one must submit a request to a moderator (usually a simple mouse click on a ‘request’ button on the community information page). Within a matter of hours or days the requester is included as a community member and gains access to posting privileges. While the criteria for approving membership are unclear, the three communities examined here have all outlined on their community information pages that bisexual-identified or bisexual-friendly individuals are welcome.

the most part those producing and consuming cyberqueer spaces are obliged to work within what is technically possible within computer systems, and the representations which they have the skills to construct in each forum.

Since online journal community participants negotiate these narratives through a venue that is structured in particular ways, these negotiations, in turn, become similarly coded in the process. Limits or features of a specific type of venue affect not only the type of information that can be shared (e.g. mainly text), but also the different modes of and rules for interaction within that community (Stutzman, 2008; Slater, 2002; Donath, 1999; O'Brien, 2000; Hayles, 1999; Stone, 1991; Plant, 1997). Therefore, the venue itself acts as a text through which social relations within the online community are mediated, and the identity work taking place there is coordinated.

Walby's (2005) concept of "rolling text" is of use here to facilitate understanding of the coordinative role of the venue in facilitating these identity discussions. He uses the term to explicate the role of closed-circuit television surveillance cameras in coordinating the social. The term "rolling text," for Walby, helps to capture the active role of CCTV video in the immediate or "real time" coordination of social relations. By conceptualizing this online venue as a *rolling text*, emphasis is placed on examining the ways in which the venue works to "mediate sociality and work processes within the [virtual] local setting directly in the moment" (Walby, *ibid*, p. 193). Given the dynamic nature of the discussions and simultaneous creation of identity narratives within these online venues, it makes sense to be attentive to the active role of this venue in coordinating and mediating the types of sociality and identity-work continually taking place there. As Bryson (2005, p. 85) argues, it is important to attend to the intersection between the "in-progress qualities" of the identity work taking place and the ongoing

meditative effects of the networked digital technologies that facilitate this work.

Moreover, in line with Hayles' (2002, p. 41-42) work on the meditative effects of technology, investigation into the work taking place in online spaces cannot be complete without attention to the specificities of the online environment, including its capabilities and functionalities.

Given this discussion, it becomes clear that investigation of this identity work must attend to the fact that “technologies of all kinds, as they expand, enhance, and transform human work activities, also coordinate them” (Smith, 2006, p. 65). In the next section, an explication will be provided of the various ways the online venue coordinates the identity work taking place in these communities. The impact of this coordination on the process and content of the resulting identity narratives will also be discussed.

3.5 Explicating the Coordination of Online Identity Discussions

Users of social web technologies are mandated to situate their activities in the midst of a cohort, where the technology mediates the mode, premise and content of [the] social. (Stutzman, 2008)

It is clear from discussions presented above that online journal communities, as online social spaces, have proven to be important venues for participation in bisexual community and for the expression of lived experiences of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. The technology that enables the creation of such social spaces, however, is not neutral.

As noted in the previous section, the venue acts as a rolling text through which community members can connect with one another, and through which all the narratives being produced about bisexuality and bisexual-identification are being filtered. The fact that these discussions are taking place online means that the interactions are coordinated,

to a certain extent, by the technical parameters of online space in general. Moreover, identity discussions are further coordinated by characteristics distinctive to the venue itself. Elements including technical features, set-up and coding of the venue mediate the ways in which content is produced and participation is organized. Finally, the fact that the online venue is not merely a venue but an online community means that these discussions are also coordinated and mediated in ways that relate back to the social, such as the establishment of particular norms and conventions.

It is not possible, due to the limited scale of this project, to explicate all of the ways that the technical and social characteristics of the online venue serve to coordinate and/or mediate the identity work taking place online. As such, this section will outline a few key ways that the online venue - as a direct discursive environment, a community complete with social norms, and a rolling text through which identity work is filtered - serves to coordinate both the modes of expressing and producing bisexual identities and the content of these discursive narratives.

The fact that the identity work is taking place in an online space has a clear impact on modes of expressing experiences of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Dependent on the technical capacities of the online space, users' interactions with one another and avenues for self-expression are defined by limits of the venue. The degree of bandwidth available, for instance, may affect users' ability to offer a more complex presentation of identity online, since it dictates one's ability to incorporate more multimedia approaches and applications. Both O'Brien (2000), and Plant (1991) attribute the persistent reliance on established categories of identification, such as those stemming from the binary system of sexuality, to the narrow bandwidth of the medium. As Stone (1991, p. 104)

explains, “the effect of narrowing the bandwidth is to engage more of the participants’ interpretive faculties ... [P]articipants draw on cultural codes to construct a scenario that compresses large amounts of information into a very small space.” The result is a dependency on more hyperbolic performances of identity that, while expressing some aspects of bisexuality and bisexual-identification, can risk the exclusion of other aspects of identity that are more subtle, nuanced and complex (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, Lin, 2006, p. 795).

As the virtual realm continues to expand and evolve, increases in bandwidth have, in fact, made it possible for users to take advantage of more multimedia applications, such as the inclusion of audio and/or video. Despite this increase, however, Susan Herring (2004) suggests computer mediated communication continues to be largely dominated by text. While this reliance on text may be said to narrow the range of self-expression available to participants, the textual character of the dialogues also coordinate the construction and content of identity narratives in enabling ways. First, it is clear from the identity discussions taking place within these communities that individuals are still struggling to name their experience(s) through established language categories and speech. This is not surprising given the absence of bisexual identity narratives in ruling discursive texts. Since the nature of the identity work being done within these communities takes place solely through textual exchange, however, this type of dialoguing may be seen as a way to “challenge the lack of vocabulary for, and encourage the linguistic visibility of, a bisexual identity” (Albright, 1996, as cited in Kaloski, 1997, p. 58). Textual interchange also creates a tangible dialogue that can be accessed at any point and by anyone. Since all of the entries, dating back to the first posted entry, are

archived, anyone is free at any time to create new discussion and/or add to discussions from days, months, and even years past. Boyd (2008, p. 126) explains: “unlike the ephemeral quality of speech in unmediated publics, networked communications are recorded for posterity. This enables asynchronous communication, but it also extends the period of existence of any speech act.” The accessibility and posterity of narratives published within the online environment coordinate the individual experiences being expressed and shared within this community in that they allow for the possibility of reading the collection of individual posts as an ongoing narrative. This aspect, in itself, is an important way that the venue facilitates the production of a collaboratively developed discourse. The relationship between the identity work online and the production of a discourse on bisexuality will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Limited access to online space can also coordinate the content of the narrative being developed in these communities. Just as narrow bandwidth limits the range of expressive resources available for articulating aspects of identity, limited access to these online spaces reduces the range of variance and diversity of experience that may be woven into these dynamic narratives. The fact that these identity discussions are taking place in an online venue limits the inclusion of experiences to those with Internet access, thus silencing the experiences and voices of some individuals, while privileging others. Despite the expansion and continuous increase of Internet use in different countries across the world, there are still significant enclaves of individuals, even in countries that are economically developed, that have limited access to the Internet (Scholz, 2008).

Participant access is also limited, to a certain extent, by their level of computer literacy. Weight (cited in Alexander, 2002a) contends that the ways in which online

identity narratives can be expressed and online representations of sexual identity may be promoted, are dependent both on the author's technological savvy and on the (limited) range of gay identity markers available online. Users who are less comfortable in the online environment and/or are less familiar with the different features and capabilities of an online venue may experience limitations in how they navigate the venue, and in turn, the ways in which they can narrate their experiences and engage in the dialogue. Access to online environments is also mediated by other bases of inequality and exclusion, such as cultural background, gender, race and language (Hartzog, 2008; Wincapaw, 2000, p. 54). As such, different groups of people face varying levels of limitation within these communities in terms of their access to: the narratives being developed, opportunities for participation, and opportunities to contribute to the bisexual-themed narratives being produced. Despite these current limitations in access to the online environments, as Scholz (2008) argues, it is important to note that "the age, gender, and language diversity online has changed for the better and the overwhelmingly high numbers of users speak for themselves" (Scholz & Hartzog, 2008). Keeping this in mind, while the location of these discussions in online space currently coordinates the identity discussions taking place there by limiting the narratives to only privileged groups of individual with ongoing Internet access and computer literacy, this type of exclusion is slowly diminishing.

Modes of expressing experiences of bisexuality and bisexual-identification, and the content of the narratives being produced and shared, are also coordinated by characteristics of the venue itself. The coordinative effect of the following key elements will be considered in the context of the identity discussions taking place online: addressivity, interactivity, and the entry/comment feature. The elements of addressivity

and interactivity, while endemic to digital networks of various kinds, play a key role in coordinating the formation and content of identity narratives in online journal communities, and as such, will be considered an aspect of the venue.

Addressivity, or awareness of audience, acts as a coordinative function in online journal communities in that individuals posting entries do so with the anticipation of a particular audience, whom they address either implicitly or explicitly in their posted entries. This, in turn, may impact the way they express or perform an identity.

According to Bryson et al. (2006, p. 802), the performance and production of identities in online spaces result in articulations of identity that are “complex, part self-absorbed narrative[s], part performative iteration[s] demanding witness and interpretation.” The element of addressivity, and the desire for witness and interpretation, are made clearly visible by the number of ‘ask’ posts, highlighted earlier in the chapter. While these types of entries evidence the explicit use of the element of addressivity in these venues in order to solicit responses, opinions, feedback, and or further information on an identified issue, the influence of addressivity on the identity discussions can also be more understated.

Implicit acknowledgement of audience, for instance, can also be identified in the narrative style used by participants in entries and comments to express aspects of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt where the participant’s conversational style suggests awareness of an audience of readers, even if further interaction is not overtly solicited:

I guess what it comes down to is...I'm afraid that no one will think I'm actually bi. Stupid, no? But I dated a guy, and then a girl, and then another guy for over three years, dated a girl briefly while still dating him ... and now I have crushes on two guys and a girl ... but...I'm getting really confused? I'm not sure what anyone can really say to this post. I know it's

not particularly well written, but I have the dumb right now, and I have it bad. So...yeah.

Anticipation of an audience may be said to influence what people decide to include and exclude in the content of their post, and the ways they come to express their identities and tell their stories. As Bryson (2004, p. 241) points out, individuals performing and producing their identity in public spaces rely on presentations and expressions of identity that are socially intelligible so that their performances are properly interpreted. It is the presence and/or anticipation of audience, then, that influences the way people express sexual identity, and thus the performance and production of that identity (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 799). Coupled with the limitations inherent to a text-based medium, discussed earlier, this element of addressivity can serve to limit the expression and production of more complex aspects of identity that may not be readily understood or accepted and thus lead to a more narrow construction.

The element of interactivity also plays a complex role in mediating and coordinating the performance and production of identity work in this online space. The narrative texts that are created in the posted entries and comments in these online communities are inherently interactive (see Appendix B for an example of interactivity taken from the data). These narratives are collaboratively developed in that individuals contribute to their production through the posting of entries and comments, and through passive participation as readers. They are also interactively structured through their reference to other comments and entries that have been posted, and through the posting of links to other communities, to research articles, and to other resources online. As such, the narratives around bisexuality developed and produced within these online journal communities are solid examples of what Hayles (2005, p. 105) terms work as

assemblage: “cluster(s) of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and otherwise intermediate one another.” The interactivity of the environment combined with multiple authorship, thus, results in the production of interrelated identity narratives that are coordinated by the layering of individual lived experiences, opinions and thoughts. The result of this process of ‘work as assemblage’ is the creation of narratives that, through their interactions and intermediations, become inextricably linked. It is this process of development, in addition to the posterity and accessibility of these narratives, that coordinates the reading of individual stories, experiences and ideas as part of a collaborative narrative.

The set-up of the venue and the interactive capabilities of the medium, as it enables a dynamic text, results in the production of an identity that is constantly in the process of development as community members engage with each other in the working out of what it means to be bisexual-identified. This dynamism, in turn, coordinates the production of the bisexual identity discussions and narratives in important ways. Chiefly, it weaves into the narrative around bisexuality an unavoidable fluidity, multiplicity and resistance to a coherent (read normalizing and static) discursive representation of bisexuality. As can be seen in the examples shown in Chapter Two, it is clear that people contribute varied and sometimes contradictory narratives on what it means to be bisexual-identified and how bisexuality is or can be performed. These variant narratives on bisexuality and bisexual-identification demonstrate the messy, complicated and dynamic experiences that exist within what is categorized as bisexual. Further, incorporating fluidity and multiplicity helps to call into question the normalizing and rigid qualities of binary categorization and the limits of labeling. This resistance to order is characteristic

of an online space where interaction with others and features of the venue (such as hyperlinks) enable the user to engage passively or actively in the direction/framing and production of the text (Alexander, 2002b; Tsang, 2000; Woodland, 2000). These narratives, then, reveal the mediatory effects of the venue on their content and form as characteristics of this online medium are reflected and incorporated into the narratives.

Finally, it is impossible to ignore the social aspects of this online community that serve to mediate and coordinate both the terms of participation and the content of the narratives. In particular, social norms around participation in these communities will be considered since, in coordinating modes of participation by community members they, in turn, also serve to coordinate the content of identity discussions in particular ways.

While the technical aspects of the online community allow for variant narratives through multiple authorship, social norms within the community can potentially limit the freedom of participants' to express heterogeneous experiences and understandings of what it means to be bisexual. Gurak (2000), for example, asserts that although group discussions technically provide the opportunity for the sharing of diverse perspectives and opinions, this diversity may not always be freely expressed. She (*ibid*, p. 259-60) asserts: "online communities...do not always cultivate an open atmosphere and instead may leave out those who are on the margins and do not assume or feel comfortable with the prevailing community ethos of this potential for interaction between community members." While compelling, her argument is not supported in my analyses of the three online communities of this study. As evidenced in the previous chapter, it is quite common to have a series of comments that contradict each other, such as during a discussion that took place within one entry's comment boxes where people debated

whether sexual identity should be equated to sexual behaviour. Furthermore, repercussions for the voicing of seemingly unpopular opinions on issues were not observed. One individual, for example, posted a comment to an entry indicating that he felt that to be true to one's bisexuality, bisexual-identified individuals should engage in polyamory. Although this comment sparked an identity discussion around the relationship between bisexuality and polyamory, this person was not openly reprimanded or criticized. In response to the comments, he writes: "Well I do apologize if I've offended anyone. I do appreciate everyone's input on these ramblings of mine. Thanks." Furthermore, the response by another community member typifies the willingness to allow for diversity in opinions in an open manner: "You haven't offended me. I disagree with you. It's different." Perhaps the reason behind these communities' openness to diverse opinions is related to Gurak's (1999) discussion on community ethos. Within each of the communities in this sample, there is no clear narrative indicating what it means to be bisexual and/or bisexual-identified. In resisting prescriptive narratives on the "Truth" around bisexuality and bisexual identification, norms are created within the venue that may be said to facilitate and encourage diversity of opinion in this identity work.

Social norms in online communities can also mediate the performance of sexual identities. Bryson et al. (2006, p. 794) assert that in online communities where membership is based on a shared identity, the performance of one's sexual identity is mediated by community norms and expectations around what may be defined as legitimate performances of that identity. Individuals identifying as bisexual, then, may be excluded from participation within the community if their performance does not fit the

prevailing community understanding of that sexuality. Observation of interactions within these online communities, however, has demonstrated that most participants are assumed to be bisexual if and when they are participating in the space, unless they specify otherwise. This seems to be based on an unstated community understanding that sexuality is something only an individual can identify for themselves. For example, one person writes: “However you identify now is who you are right now, and it's perfectly legitimate whether it remains that way for the rest of your life or fluctuates over time.” Moreover, when someone posted an entry concerning his friend’s sexual orientation, one person responded: “Let him decide how he wants to identify, and the rest of it is nobody's business.” As a result of this community norm around self-identification, narratives often seem to include diverse interpretations, expressions and experiences of bisexuality, rather than a narrow conception. As such, homogeneity of experience does not seem to be a requirement for inclusion and/or participation. Given this, the question of “not... ‘Are you lesbian?’ but ‘Are you lesbian enough?’ to participate” found within the communities studied by Bryson et al. (2006, p. 794) seem to be noticeably absent here. As one participant puts it: “Anyhow, acceptance is refreshing! So I'd love to hear from any and all of you. Even if our views differ... at least we stand firmly on common ground as **BI-SEXUAL.**”

In conclusion, the coordinative effects of the social and technical aspects of the online venue as a rolling text through which the identity discussions take place have been shown to have a significant impact on modes of expressing bisexuality and the content of the narratives being formed around those experiences. While the technology affords important opportunities for online identity discussions on bisexuality for community

members, it also limits, in many ways, who can engage in these dialogues, the ways that lived experiences may be expressed, and the content of the narratives being produced.

3.6 Contextualizing the Coordinative Effects of the Online Venue

As a rolling text, the venue organizes the social in real time through extralocal coordination of participants' actions, activities and interactions. While this form of mediation may be seen as common to governing texts, the coordinative effects of the online venue are divergent, in some ways, from those characteristic of relations of ruling.

Given the nuances of online space, it follows that this type of mediation would shape the interactions and activities taking place there in distinctive ways. The coordinative effects of this type of mediation become visible not only in the organization of the community, but in the experiential texts being developed there. The dedication of the space to bisexual content, and the creation of norms to enforce it, for instance, creates a space in which people can begin to talk from the particularities of their experience with bisexuality. The sharing of experience somewhat disrupts the relations of ruling, since people are speaking for themselves and using their experiences as a basis for challenging institutional discourses. Features of the online venue, such as interactivity, non-linearity and the entry/comment format, coordinate the production of identity narratives that, unlike those in ruling texts, are inherently dynamic, fluid and diverse. As a result of this mediation, then, new configurations in (and of) texts are being produced that resist the hegemonic tendencies of objectified knowledge. Moreover, the creation of such knowledge is enabled by the technical and social configurations of the online space that allow for multiple authorship. Users are able to contribute content and develop knowledge through the publication of diverse narratives outlining lived experiences.

Unlike in ruling texts, the voices of subjugated groups form the basis of this knowledge. The text is produced on a grassroots level by individual people, rather than by ruling social institutions.

There is no doubt that some of the coordinative effects of the venue, like that of ruling texts, reinforce relations of ruling in that they place notable parameters on modes of interaction and self-expression in the online space. What is remarkable about this form of mediation, however, is the ways in which these parameters lend themselves to the subversion of relations of ruling. Through its distinctive organization of the social in these spaces, this mediation facilitates the creation and dissemination of alternative, collaboratively-developed knowledges on sexuality. As such, this online space, while mediatory, acts as a contradictory site of consciousness where participants can begin to collectively reconfigure current formations of social consciousness around sexuality and sexual identification.

3.7 Conclusion

For bisexual-identified individuals who collectively make up an invisible minority that has limited social credibility and inadequate access to social safe spaces, the Internet has proven to be an important venue through which to interact and engage in identity discussions with like-identified others. In the case of our *techno-digested* society, the computer then becomes a key interface for communication. As a result, through their various features, formatting and coding, online venues become the text through which participants in virtual communities and online users connect with one another. As such, it is imperative to consider not only the role of offline discourse,

such as the sexuality discourse discussed in the previous chapter, but also the meditative role that the online venue plays in facilitating and acting as the main text through which these dialogues are created and engaged in.

In this chapter, the ways in which the Internet, as an online social space, proves to be significant to bisexual-identified individuals and the facilitation of bisexual identity discussions was outlined. To further understand the online space in which these identity discussions are taking place, some of the characteristic features of online journal communities were examined. The concept of rolling text was discussed, and was employed as a chief orienting concept for explicating the ways in which the features and formatting of the venue actively coordinate these discussions in 'real time'. Finally, the coordinative functions that both technical and social aspects of the media play in mediating the mode and content of identity discussion in these online environments were explicated.

In the next chapter, the concept of identity work will be used to examine how the identity discussions taking place in these online venues collectively form the basis for an alternative, experience-based sexuality discourse. Critical analysis of the content and form of these identity narratives will be undertaken in order to identify inherent reinforcements of, and disruptions to, current conceptualizations of sexuality, including the binary model of sexual categorization.

Chapter Four: Online Identity Work as Discourse-in-Production

4.1 Introducing the Chapter

Encompassing a wide range of local activities and practices, the understanding of identity as work seeks to capture the dynamic and active process of performing and producing identities. At the same time, it provides insight into the coordination of these local practices by the discursive, inter-textual binary framework. For the purposes of this study, the various practices of expressing, writing, discussing, and pondering sexual identities and sexual identification in the online venue will be included as part of the series of activities which make up the performance and, thus, the production of experience-based discourse on bisexual identities and identification. These practices, conceptualized as identity work, will help to explicate the coordinative role that the binary discourse plays in the performance and production of bisexual identities. Moreover, examination of this identity work will shed light on the unique process through which intimate dialogue and personal narratives developed in an online space becomes the basis for an experience-based bisexual discourse.

In this chapter, I will begin by outlining relevant theory related to both the performance and the production of identity and use this theory as a foundation for conceptualizing identity as work. Identity work, then, will be used as an orienting concept to attend to and explicate: how bisexuality is produced within the online communities through different identity work practices; how this experience-based discourse both challenges and reflects the binary standpoint; and the inherent possibilities and constraints within experience-based, collaboratively developed discourse. In identifying elements of the binary system of sexuality in the bisexual identity work taking

place online, I will be demonstrating the resilience of this discursive framework in current understandings of sexuality. By performing a critical examination of this discourse-in-production, I will also be considering the radical potential of this alternative, experience-based discourse for challenging and overcoming the limitations and constraints characteristic of dominant sexuality narratives and discourses.

4.2 Identity as Work

The concept of work is uniquely applied in Institutional Ethnography. It is chiefly employed as an orienting concept that lends itself to identifying key interfaces between the actual, embodied experiences and practices of individuals and the large-scale intertextual networks involved in institutional ruling. Work, then, may be understood as the series of activities and practices that individuals engage in day-to-day that, in turn, are shaped, coordinated and/or linked into institutional processes of ruling. Focusing on work in this way, institutional ethnographers are able to begin to map out how individuals participate in institutional relations, processes and discourses within the “spaces of everyday life (including the mental space of consciousness)” (McCoy, 2006, p. 111). In addition to locating the ways day-to-day practices link in to translocal institutional processes, the researcher is also attempting to elucidate the ways in which these high-level discourses and texts become implicated in local practices (Turner, 2006, p. 159). In the case of this study, the focus will be on examining sexual identity work taking place within the bisexual-themed online journal communities in order to locate the interface between the embodied experience of bisexual-identified individuals and the institutional organization of sexuality, specifically the ruling power of the binary model.

The conceptualization of identity (or identification) as work may, in some ways, seem to push the broad boundaries of institutional ethnography's use of the term 'work'. This conceptualization may seem less strange, however, if one comes to consider the complex of activities and practices involved in interpreting, performing, and producing one's (sexual) identity and the identities of others. As work, these local practices are, of course, linked in to translocal relations of ruling. After all, identity, rather than simply reflecting an internal essence, is an element of the self which is both socially and culturally informed. As Stein and Plummer (1994, p. 184-185) elucidate: "identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life, though mediated by texts ... sexuality, along with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and generation, is articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices." The mediation of these identity-based activities and practices through text is important to the understanding of identity as work. Identities may be understood, expressed, socialized, interpreted (through gestures, social cues, and behaviours), and dynamically constructed through practices. These practices are, in turn, coordinated by various discourses and conceptual frameworks.

Social institutions may be understood as coordinating identity performance in that institutionally generated concepts, norms and categories become central to the direction and intelligibility of these performances. As was discussed in the previous chapter, discourse provides textual resources that facilitate and coordinate the performance of particular sexual identities while also providing an interpretive framework for evaluating the performances of others. As such, and as Butler (1993, p. 2) makes clear, discourse can be understood as formative to and regulative of the processes of identification, identity performance, and identity. Consequently, those identifying with a subject

position outside of or contrary to regulating institutional discourses, such as bisexual-identified individuals, are subject to dismissal, exclusion, abjection, and disavowal (Butler, 1993, p. 3). As evidenced in Chapter Two, it is through the foreclosure on object identifications, and those who identify with them, that the primacy of the institutional regime, and its practices, are upheld.

Both Seidman (2006) and Butler (1999) contend that the particularities of identity performances are taught, and to a large degree governed, by a system of rewards and sanctions. As Seidman (2006, p. 12) states: “we come to know, almost without thinking, what gestures, styles of dress and grooming, and ways of walking and talking are considered ‘normal’.” While Seidman, expanding on the work of Butler (1999), is speaking specifically about gender, this thinking can be similarly applied to the performance of sexuality. Like gender, sexuality is also informed by a framework which encourages and discourages certain ways of acting and being as a means of regulation. The performance of sexuality, or a sexual identity, is chiefly accomplished through a concert of “words, acts, gestures, and articulated and enacted desires” (Butler, 1999, p. 136). Butler contends (1999, p. 141) that these various practices, taken together, are not expressive of a core, essential identity, but, instead, represent the constitution (or projection) of an identity through their performance. Given that work is understood as a series of activities centred around a specific task, one can begin to see the ways in which performance of identity can, in fact, be understood as work.

Butler’s (1993) work helps to illustrate how the various activities involved in the performance of identity are coordinated by high-order discourse. What it fails to capture, however, is the agency of individuals to produce and (re)work (rather than simply

perform) identities and subject positions based upon their lived experiences. As is evidenced by the identity work taking place within the online communities, the production of an identity is not, as Butler's (1993) argument would suggest, limited to institutional discourse and ruling textual representations of sexualities. In fact, individuals can work together to create alternative systems of meaning, which allow for the creation and performance of re-signified sexual identities. This form of agency is evidenced in Vance's (1984, p. 13) account of struggles within the lesbian community to create a culturally recognizable identity:

Because the printed word is often the enclave of dominant culture, used to enforce cultural invisibility, the voices of lower-status groups are relatively absent from dominant texts. But these groups have not been silent; they have created rival cultural and symbolic systems ... [which act as] important...sources of information, socialization, and transmission of knowledge.

Vance (*ibid*) focuses on the ways that creation of alternative systems of meaning has enabled the production and performance of lesbian identities that contrast with the limiting and distorted representations present in dominant cultural texts. This can likewise be aptly applied to the identity work of bi-identified individuals. In opposition to the systemic erasure of a sexuality that exists outside of binary conceptions of sexuality, bisexual individuals hold the agency to produce this non-normative identity by speaking it into existence through the creation of textual narratives (Bacon, 1998, p. 255). Rather than simply performing bisexuality, bi-identified participants, in the context of their discussions and in the posting of entries and comments, actually engage in the work of producing this sexual identity through the creation of experience-based accounts and narratives. In engaging in the explanation and discussion of the actualities of their experience, they are creating new systems of meaning and understanding that not only

facilitate, but also constitute the production of identity. In essence, “explaining identity means producing identity” (Gomel, 1999, p. 26).

Identity as work, then, can not only be understood in terms of the practices and processes of performing an identity, but the practices and processes through which an identity comes to be constructed. The narrative practices involved in community participation, including discussion, dialogue and expression of bisexuality and experiences of bisexual identification, are foundational to the creation of bisexual discourse and, in turn, the creation of bisexual subjectivities. In the case of these communities, then, examination of identity work is intended to capture the processes through which explaining identity, to others and to oneself, actually produces an identity. It seeks to uncover not just the performance of the bisexual identity as it is prescribed by the meager representation of bisexual subjectivities within discursive texts, but the production of a bisexual identity and the creation of a bisexual discourse through the collaboration of personal narratives and intimate dialogue.

In the next section, identity work undertaken within the communities will be examined in order to explore the nature and dimension of the discourse that develops as a result of participant dialogue and discussion centred around lived experiences with and personal accounts of bisexuality and bisexuality-identification.

4.3 Developing Discourse Through Online Identity Work

As mentioned in the previous section, the identity work taking place in bisexual-themed online journal communities, including text-based discussion, dialogue and expression of bisexuality and lived experiences of bisexual identification between participants, is foundational to the production of bisexual identity and bisexual discourse.

In this section I will first outline different forms of identity work taking place within the communities that contribute to the development of a bisexual discourse. These include: discourse through the sharing of a personal experience of bisexuality and/or bi-identification; discourse through account, which involves descriptive definitions of what it is to be bisexual or the parameters of bisexual identification; and, discourse through dialoguing with dominant representations of bisexuality. In examining the ways that these forms of identity work contribute to the formation of a bisexual discourse, we are able to “rediscover discourse as an actual happening, actually performed, local organization of consciousness” (Smith, 1999, p. 134). Examples of themes around bisexuality from within each category of identity work will be provided, in order to demonstrate: what the category of identity work looks like in practice; why this identity work should be considered discursive; and, what elements of the bisexual experience are being communicated and, thus, woven into this discourse-in-production.

Discourse Through Personal Experience

The first category of identity work includes narratives around bisexuality and bisexual-identification that are based upon lived experiences and framed as an individual point of view (rather than an assertion of fact). Some of the themes within these narratives include: different bases for bisexual identification, bases of sexual attraction to others as a bisexual-identified person, the nature of sexual attraction as bisexual-identified people, and personal understandings of how bisexuality can be defined. One person, for instance, explains how she came to identify as bisexual:

I just lived with it for a while to see where it would go and I know I'm not going to somehow morph into a lesbian now, so I'm happy with swinging both ways. ♥If only my sexual experimentation had been more tangible! I've never been kissed by either sex, so you could say my sexuality has

never been tested, but I've thought about it a lot so I know where my preference lies.

Another person explains her reasons for identifying as bisexual in this way:

I've always called myself bi, even if I'm not attracted to women at the moment, because I know my history and I know I have a tendency to be attracted to them as well as men. Bi is an easy label within which you can do your waxing and waning and changing.

While many of these narratives tend to focus on the particularities of the participant's own experiences of bisexuality or bisexual-identification, it is not unusual for other participants to identify with an experience or issue being shared. The salience of an issue raised in a posted entry within the bisexual-themed community is often reflected in the number and type of responses received in the entry's comment box. In fact, building on the original narrative formed within the posted entry, participants are able to extend the narrative by contrasting and comparing their own experiences with the issue being raised. As mentioned in the previous chapter, homogeneous and heterogeneous responses to a specific issue not only extend the narrative but allow the dimensions of that particular theme within bisexual-identification to be mapped textually. As such, it creates the basis for understanding, explaining and constructing an aspect of bisexuality. This type of experience-based, collaborative narrative is often found in identity discussions around the basis of sexual attraction and nature of sexual attraction. For instance, while a number of participants identify their sexual attraction as person-based rather than gender-based, other participants identify particular aspects of gender that differentiates the attraction they feel towards men from the attraction they feel towards women. One person describes her experience of bisexual attraction as person-based: "I am proud to be someone who, instead of looking at a gender, looks at a person. which is i

guess my view of my bisexuality... it's about the person more-so than the gender, it's about love and compassion more than oh it has to be a boy..." Similarly, someone else writes: "Your bit about being attracted to specific individuals rather than a gender makes perfect sense, at least to me. I'm relatively indifferent to gender, it's the person I get stuck on." Conversely, a participant in another entry outlines the details of her gender-based attraction in this way: "it's not so much that i don't care if a person is male or female. it's that there are things about women i find extremely sexy, yet different things i find just as hot about men. i view them separately, and don't feel more inclined towards one or the other."

While heterogeneity of experience helps to map out the dimensions of an issue, which gives breadth to this discourse-in-production, identification of continuities within and across individual experiences of bisexuality creates the basis for generalized understandings of what it means to be bisexual and what bisexuality and bisexual-identification looks like. This, in turn, can have a normalizing effect as parameters begin to be drawn around bisexual subjectivity that form the basis of a generalized and generalizing discourse. This phenomenon is seen more clearly in narratives themed around personal experiences involving the nature of bisexual attraction, which, to many participants, often involves unpredictable shifts in levels of attraction to same-sex and/or other-sex partners. One participant surveys community members on this issue in posting the following entry: "i've noticed something about myself and want to know if it's something a lot of bi people have or if i'm just weird. does anyone have 'lesbian days' and 'straight days'? to be more specific, does anyone have days where they feel attracted only to one sex?" This post received a large number of responses in which individuals

outlined the details of their variant attractions. One person writes: “it's more years and months for me than days... But generally speaking, yes!” Another person comments: “Definitely! It can even vary [whether attracted to men or women]] by the hour. But I also have phases of months at a time when I'm almost exclusively attracted to one or the other, and little transition periods in between. It can be kind of annoying!” The normalizing effect of these shared experiences can be seen when participants, recognizing this shared pattern, begin to make remarks like: “Yeah, I get those a lot too; maybe it's just a normal bisexual thing?” or “it's rather comforting in a way, to read these responses...”

This may also be seen in the narratives individuals provide on the theme of defining bisexuality. While the focus, in this category of identity work, tends to be on the author's basis for self-identification as bisexual, or simply their opinion on how it may be defined, the definitional aspects contribute to the discursive parameters around what may be defined as bisexual. One individual writes: “to me, a bisexual is someone who would be open to any special person who came along, whatever sex that person was. Attraction waxes and wanes -- labels to me have more to do with who you are romantically open to. So if you're always open to either sex, I would call you bisexual.” Another person shares her definition of bisexuality in stating: “I classify myself as bisexual because humans like to have labels for things, and since a guy and a girl had ... as good of a chance as each other of garnering my attraction I felt bisexual was the best label to use.” Although these definitions may seem prescriptive, they are personalized by the addition of qualifications such as “to me” or “I classify myself.” Other participants resist the temptation to impose parameters by focusing on the right to self-identify:

Everyone might have different conclusions on how to classify what sexual orientation a person is. But you yourself are the only person to know what you like and who you are. Only you can decide your sexual orientation. If you find both males and females attractive whether both the same or one more than the other, then you can possibly be bisexual.

This type of resistance to prescriptive definitions, and variance in narratives around a particular theme within bisexual-identification allow for the demonstration of dimension and difference that disrupt attempts to generalize experience. Despite this, however, the recognition of continuities of experiences, as well as participants' responses to identified similarities, begins to show how the particularities of individuals' experiences come to form the basis for generalized understandings of bisexuality and the production of a bisexual discourse.

Discourse Through Account

Similar to the sharing of personal experiences is the category of identity work I have identified as discourse through account. Unlike the previous category, however, the narratives on bisexuality are more generalizing since they are not qualified or framed as individual points of view. Rather than simply sharing their individual experience of bisexuality and bisexual-identification as a point of view, individuals attempt to provide authoritative, informative, descriptive, and definitional statements concerning bisexuality and bisexual experience. Examples of themes within this category of identity work are similar to those in the previous category, including: the basis of bisexual identification; the nature and dimensions of bisexual attraction; and, definitions of bisexuality and parameters of bisexual-identification. In terms of the basis for bisexual identification, for example, various identity discussions focus on the relationship between bisexual behaviour and bisexual identification. Many narratives in this vein focus on the idea that

bisexual-identification is not dependent on experience with (bi)sexual behaviour. One person, for example, writes: “Before I had my 1st gf, I got asked ‘How do you know you're bisexual if you've never been with another woman?’ I answered ‘How did you know you were heterosexual when YOU were a virgin?’ You just KNOW! Silly people!” Likewise, another person writes:

One does not have to have experience with the same gender to know they are bi or gay. Did you have to have sex with a man to know that yr straight? One intuitively knows what arouses themselves. Its an erroneous assumption that one knows they're straight but has to "find out" they're an alternative orientation.

Other narratives outline a range of things, beyond sexual behaviour, that contribute to one’s sexual identification. One person, for example, asserts: “A lot more makes up sexual orientation than who one sleeps with (try explaining that to society), such as attraction, gender identity, fantasies, fetishes, genetics, and life history.” Providing definitions of bisexuality and what qualifies as bisexual is a common identity discussion that provides an important component of bisexual discourse. While the details and focus of the definitions vary slightly from person to person, they all seek to describe what qualifies as bisexual. One person, clearly basing her definition on her own experience, writes:

Bisexual doesn't necessarily [mean] being attracted to both sexes equally, just that we're attracted to both sexes. I'm definitely bisexual, but I've mostly been with men because a) it's simpler to find them, and b) I value strength and masculinity, even in my women. Does this make me straight? No! 'Cause I love the pussy, to put it crudely. I go back and forth between the extremes, and often inhabit the grey area in between... It's totally fluid. Bisexual simply means liking, being attracted to both sexes, but not necessarily equally....It's totally ok to go back and forth a lot, and you never have to settle.

Another person defines bisexuality in more general terms:

Bisexuality covers a wide range of people and to be bisexual does not mean you have to be 50/50 attracted to guys and girls. The best way i've heard it put is that if you more than marginally get off to the thought/act of sex with girls as well as with guys then your probably bi. It doesn't really matter who you predominately form relationships with or if you flip flop from time to time.

Others define bisexuality much more crudely: “Here's how you know someone is bi. They fuck men *and* women.”

Further, in terms of the nature and dimensions of bisexual attraction, narratives outlining the ratio of attraction to same-sex and other-sex partners, as well as shifting levels of attraction, are common. However, what is most common and significant about these narratives is the tone of authority that is employed. While one person writes: “not all bisexuals will experience attraction equally to both genders. Some may prefer one gender a little bit more over the other but the attraction is still there,” another person states: “There's lots of bisexuals out there that are fickle (and I mean that in the best possible way) and whose desires for one sex or the other change on a regular basis. As bisexuals, it's pretty common for us to hear ‘Choose one, dammit!’ from various societal factions. Well, we don't. That's what makes us bi. :)”

The authoritative tone characteristic of these texts (and, notably, of high-order discourses) reflects attempts to formulate new norms, parameters and frames of reference around sexuality, in general, and bisexuality, in particular, that are more congruent with the lived experience of bi-identified individuals than those provided by the ruling binary system. The normalization of aspects of bisexual identification and experience, through the contribution of authoritative texts outlining what it means to be bisexual and what bisexuality looks like, can be a strong source of comfort and reassurance to some community members. One person, for instance, reassures another person about the

variability they are experiencing in their attractions by making the following generalized assertion:

Most of us find we go in phases throughout our lives. These include desires for one sex or the other (predominantly) for those of us who like both males and females. I am strongly hetero-biased in my relationships, but I often find myself going through periods where I really want to feel another man. All my bisexual friends (mostly female) have the same experiences. Nothing to worry about. Consider it a cyclical thing.

This more generalized understanding of bisexuality, and the authority with which it is spoken, is probably based, to a certain degree, on the author's own lived experience and their understanding of the actualities of other's lived experiences (as opposed to dominant discursive representations). Moreover, the definitions provided vary based on who is outlining them. Nonetheless, the collection of these narratives provides clear illustrations of how this type of identity work might contribute to a discourse around bisexuality, including inherent definitions, norms and parameters. Similar to the creation of cultural texts within lesbian communities cited earlier by Vance (1984, p. 13), the narratives in these bisexual communities are creating an alternative discourse around bisexuality through which bisexual identities are being produced and performed.

Discourse Through Dialoguing with Dominant Representations

Finally, the creation of a bisexual identity discourse is also formed on the basis of narratives that, in essence, dialogue with the stereotypes and negative representations of bisexuality found in dominant discursive texts. In these narratives, participants' experiences with bisexuality and bisexual-identification are juxtaposed against the (mis)representations found in dominant discourse around bisexuality in an attempt to reframe and renegotiate them. The significance of this process is captured by Stein and Plummer (1994, p. 184) in their assertion that "although sexuality is constructed through

various discourses, individuals are not simply passive recipients of these cultural constructions. They use them creatively, accepting parts of them, rejecting others, to actively construct their lives.” It is not surprising that in the construction of bisexual subjectivities people engage in a complicated narrative woven around the interplay between individual experience and “cultural master narratives” (Gomel, 2003, 63). In expressing their experience through a dialogue with stereotypes and misrepresentations in dominant discursive texts, they attempt to deconstruct these representations and replace them with the actualities of their experience. In this process, then, they are displacing elements of the dominant discourse through the creation of an experience-based, alternative discourse around bisexuality.

Some of the key stereotypes that are taken on in this process are: the conceptualization of bisexuality as a transitional identity, the characterization of bisexual people as promiscuous, the idea that sexuality is defined by the gender of your current sexual partner, and the assertion that bisexuality cannot exist. Some people take on the stereotypes by making light of them, such as this woman, who addresses the conceptualization of bisexuality as a transitional identity through sarcasm: “Oh, I’ve known several women for whom it was clearly a phase; the time between figuring themselves out, and death. But yeah, just a phase.” Others take on stereotypes by asserting the authority of their lived actualities, such as this woman who takes on the stereotype that equates bisexuality with promiscuity: “to me being bisexual just means that I can fall in love with both ... promiscuity is just a chosen lifestyle that does not define anyone's sexual orientation. I can be bisexual, and still be monogamous. The one does not exclude the other.” Another person asserts: “bisexual does not mean slutty or

unable to commit to someone - many people think that because someone is bi, they can never be in a committed relationship b/c they will always be wanting something else. that is absolutely not true.” In confronting another stereotype, one community member describes their response to a person who insists that she be honest about her sexuality by defining it based upon the gender of her current sexual partner. She writes: “I looked him in the eye [and] said ‘For me to say that I am straight now because I am with a man would be a lie - it would be denying my history with women. Do you think that's an honest thing for me to do?’” Finally, another person highlights the ridiculousness of the idea that bisexuality does not exist given the fact that she lives as a bisexual-identified person. She describes her response when confronted with this idea:

For me? I just tell 'em that 'bisexuality does not exist' is hard for me to grasp, because I've thoroughly enjoyed sex with women, and sex with men. If they continue, I offer to go into the details as to why I enjoy sex with both genders, how it's different, etc. Usually that kind of bluntness either illuminates them or gets them to shut up.

What is perhaps most powerful about these narratives, and the discourse it produces, is the primacy given to lived experiences and personal accounts over that of the high-order textual realities promoted in discourse. While there are both possibilities and constraints present in a uniquely developed experience-based discourse such as this, it is important to note the nature and effects of this unique development of a discourse from the ground up.

In examining various categories of identity work taking place within these online communities, it becomes clear how the collaborative contribution of narratives created through the posting of entries and comments is implicated in the production of a discourse around bisexuality. Like any discourse, this includes the tendency to establish particular definitions, norms and parameters around bisexuality and bisexual-

identification. The production of such a discourse may be important for bi-identified people since this type of “small but growing bisexual culture and social structure...create[s] new social and political landmarks with which individuals can anchor bisexual identities” (Rust, 1996, p. 70). Despite being based in the particularities of personal experience with bisexuality and bisexual-identification, this discourse, which is developed from the ground-up, is not produced in isolation. Instead, it too is both mediated and coordinated by other sexuality discourses, including the binary model of sexuality. The coordination of this experience-based discourse is both implicit and explicit in these identity discussions. The ways in which the binary is both invoked and disrupted in this unique discourse will now be explored.

4.4 Working Within and Beyond the Binary

Now that it is clear how the identity work undertaken as part of participation in bi-themed online communities results in the production of an experience-based discourse around bisexuality, it is important to consider the intertextual relationship between this discourse and dominant discourses around sexuality. In particular, the mediative role of the binary model of sexuality and the binary discourse, which has been shown to be central to understandings, interpretations and conceptualization of sexuality in Western culture, will be examined. Specifically, this section will include an explication of the ways the binary coordinates the identity work and, in turn, the production of this bisexual discourse. It will also examine the creation of a discourse that is based in a dialogue with institutional conceptualizations of bisexuality. In addition, this section will identify

and examine how this identity work and identity discourse subverts the logic and parameters of the binary model.

This discourse, while it is being created through the identity work involved in explaining and expressing the actualities of bisexual-identification, is not produced in isolation from dominant sexuality discourses. As is evidenced in the above section, the production of a bisexual discourse through identity work also involves dialogue with stereotypes around bisexuality found in institutional texts and framed from a binary standpoint. The production of bisexuality through refusals of the negative representations in governing texts may best be exemplified in the following excerpt from a post that was entitled “the bisexual manifesto”:

We are not necessarily equally attracted to men and women. And we are not necessarily attracted to all men and all women. We cannot be polarized. We cannot be summarized. We don't want to be judged. We would prefer not to judge others. [--]Our sexuality is not a lifestyle. It's an identity. It's not a choice. It's a natural assignment. But bisexual behavior and bisexual identity are not necessarily the same thing. And don't worry, this confuses us even more than it confuses you. [--] ... We are not taking the easy way out, we are not in denial, we are not maintaining a middle ground. We are not confused. We are not hormonal. We are not fence-sitters. We are not going through a phase. We are not embarrassed. We are not proud. We are not ashamed. While some of us may have bisexual experiences while we're 'in transition,' for many of us, bisexuality is the final destination.

While this aspect of identity work, as we will explore a bit later, is subversive in that it actively takes on the inadequacies and misrepresentations present in the binary model and binary-based texts, it creates a discourse that incorporates elements of the binary model, to which it is opposed. In so doing, rather than creating an extra-institutional discourse, it creates a discourse in which the binary standpoint is dialectically woven into the foundational elements of how bisexuality comes to be expressed and, as such, produced.

This element of incorporating and including the binary model, even dialectically, into the production of bisexuality and bisexual discourse may also be seen in the reliance on binary language within bisexual identity work. Participants, for instance, often utilize binary-based language in the articulation of bisexuality and bisexual-identification, including descriptions of sexual attraction or desire. The expression and experience of bisexual desire for individuals of same- or other-sex, then, is often described in monosexual terms. Same-sex attraction, for instance, is often labeled as gay and other-sex attraction is often described as straight, even though the presence of both attractions, however fluid or variable, would seemingly negate this approach. In an earlier cited post, an individual surveyed the community to see whether the variability she experiences in her attraction to others is common among other bisexuals. What is notable here is the phrasing she uses: “does anyone have 'lesbian days' and 'straight days'?” In response to this query, individuals posted the following comments:

“Omg yes! I thought I was the only one...xDDD Today's definitely a gay day for me”

“Lol, my bi friends and I joke about getting t-shirts that say ‘I'm feeling _____’ and then ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ or whatever on little pieces of velcro to stick to it.”

“I'm pretty 'lesbian' right now. Have been for a while.”

“sometimes I have very strong gay desires and then sometimes I have straight. Sometimes I have both at once and then it goes to one or the other...”

“I've definitely gone through phases when I feel more straight or more gay”

Moreover, some people employ this same binary-based language to describe experiences associated with bisexuality. One woman, for instance, attempts to explain her difficulty with navigating a monogamous relationship with a man, while experiencing other-sex

desires. She expresses it in this way: “I just feel like the part of me that likes women is missing out on an important experience even though the ‘straight’ part of me is totally happy and satisfied. Now that I am with him, I don’t even notice other guys but with women...I just wanna know if I’ll ever not feel torn.” While hesitancy around employing binary language may be inferred from the occasional use of quotation marks around the monosexual terminology, sometimes this resistance is brought to the fore in participants’ posted entries or comments. One person, for example, remarks: “I don’t understand the idea of defining bisexuality in terms of percentages of gay vs. straight. To me, it makes it seem like “bisexual” isn’t really a valid enough term.” With this in mind, one begins to wonder why individuals who identify with a sexuality that is inherently oppositional to the binary model, would employ language and terminology that is consistent with, and effectively reinforces, the logic of the binary model. In essence, this is due to the fact that expressions of bisexuality involved in identity work are being fitted to the text of the binary model of sexuality. As Rust (1996, p. 66) points out, this is inevitable, to a degree, since the expression and construction of a bisexual identity is taking place within the context of binarized thinking and, thus, the provision of language that is only meant to describe monosexual and dyadic sexualities and desires. As a result, it makes sense that individuals, lacking a language that speaks to their experience, speak that experience within terms that, while they are not of their own making or choosing, are culturally available (Bereket & Brayton, 2008, 32-33; Esterberg, 2006, p. 160). As Bereket and Brayton (2008, p. 32-33) put it:

in this linguistic world of binary divisions, bisexuals do not fit in, and they cannot honestly speak to their realities due to the predominance of binary encoded language. More specifically, the structuring of the social world such that sex and gender are interconnected, and the framing of sexuality as a

duality between heterosexuality and homosexuality, negate bisexual realities. To try and speak about a social world that rejects these artificial connections between sex and gender is near impossible. Binary opposition in language removes the opportunities for people to speak outside these organizing dichotomies.

It is now clear why participants would employ binary, monosexist language to describe their experiences of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. The result of this, however, is the mediation of these experiences through a binary framework, which not only skews the actualities of the experiences but mitigates the subversive potential of the discourse. By working within the binary in this way, the coordinative function of the binary standpoint becomes woven, to a certain degree, into the discourse around bisexuality that comes to be produced. The result is an alternative discourse that reinforces the homo-hetero dyadic relationship and the hegemony of monosexuality through the expression of bisexual desire in binary, monosexual terms.

Despite the coordinative role of the binary model of sexuality that has been explicated, the identity work and the narratives that create a discourse around sexuality also demonstrate subversion and disavowal of the binary model. For example, the identity work that involves dialoguing with stereotypes, as noted earlier, attempts to challenge the authenticity of stereotypes through the juxtaposition of these textual realities to the lived actualities of their experience. As such, this type of identity work weaves into the narratives (that collectively form the discourse) what Smith (2006) refers to as oppositional talk. She (*ibid*, p. 120) explains: “Oppositional or critical talk takes a stance that highlights the differences between the institutional discourse and the forms of knowing and being the speaker feels to be preferable.” So, although this discourse is produced, in part, through a dialogue with stereotypes and representations of bisexuality

that privilege a binary standpoint, they challenge this standpoint by giving primacy to their lived experiences as superior ways of knowing and being. This may be evidenced by an earlier example used in Chapter Two, where a community member posted the link to a study that concluded that bisexuality in women does exist. Instead of feeling justified by the findings of the study, many female community members rejected the necessity of a study that sought to prove what their lived actualities already told them was legitimate and real. Furthermore, participants supported the lived experiences of bi-identified male community members by mocking other studies that have ‘proven’ bisexuality in males does not exist. In challenging the binary framework through the privileging of their lived experiences, communities members are creating narratives that begin to reveal the inadequacy of the binary model and the false assumptions present in (mis)representations in official discourse and text.

As Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, and Lin (2006, p. 799) assert, experience-based accounts and expressions of identity often “entail a series of refusals of specific articulations of gender, racialization, sexual desire, age, and the like.” While the official representations may be said to shape the discourse, this practice demonstrates that individuals are not passive recipients of these constructions. Instead, through a combination of the privileging of alternative knowledges and accounts, and the creative acceptance and rejection of the constructions of bisexuality found in institutional discourses, individuals are actively involved in the discursive (re)construction of bisexuality (Stein & Plummer, 1994, p. 184-185). Moreover, while utilization of binary language reinforces the binary model through the reiteration of its inherent logic, the creative application of this discursive language to express and explain an identity that

lays outside of its parameters may also be seen as subversive. In explaining attempts to describe and discuss experience from a woman's standpoint using the language of patriarchal discourse, Smith (2005, p. 127) begins to articulate how pushing the boundaries of language can also be radical. She (2005, p. 127) writes:

Uttering our experiences was a struggle to force the lexical givens of discourse, made in masculinity, to speak what they were not prepared to do. But we could make them speak because the dialogue, as Bakhtin emphasizes, between intentions and the givens of discourse at any moment is indeed fluid. Words can be made to serve what they have not been established to do.

So, like the work of feminists against the patriarchal regime, bisexual-identified individuals collectively push language to speak their experience and, in so doing, are effectively moving the discourse, and discursive givens, in a new direction.

The narratives created through the identity work taking place in the online communities work together to create a discourse around bisexuality that is experience-based and collaboratively developed. While the resulting discourse around bisexuality is shaped, to a certain extent, by the binary framework through a dialectic relationship, the use of oppositional talk and the reworking of representations of bisexuality retain some potential for subverting the primacy of the binary model. Uniquely formed, the resulting discourse provides accounts of lived experiences that are messy, diverse and sometimes contrary. As such, it holds a lot of potential for disrupting dyadic, monolithic categorizations that underpin the dominance of the binary model of sexuality. As a discourse, however, there remain aspects of this alternative discourse that may be considered just as limiting and exclusionary as the binary model. In the next section, the possibilities and constraints present in this unique discourse will be explored.

4.5 Inherent Possibilities and Constraints

Examination of the identity work taking place within these bisexual-themed online journal communities has revealed the production of a discourse that is in opposition to, but still informed by, other sexuality discourse, including the binary framework. It is important now to consider how this discourse, formed through the ongoing, dynamic process of identity work taking place in these communities, may be said to contain possibilities for pushing sexuality discourses in new directions. At the same time, we must consider how this discourse-in-production also contains constraints that are characteristic of high-order discourses. As Griffith and Smith (2005, p. 42) point out: “discourse enables a language that is both enabling and restricting. It interprets situations, defines objects, locates our own subjectivities in relation to them, and subordinates us to its moral logic.” As we have seen in this and previous chapters, these elements of high order discourse coordinate the lifework and identity work of bisexual-identified people in a variety of negative ways. It is important to redirect the critiques of high order discourse to the discourse that is being uniquely produced and developed here -- through ongoing narrative and dialogue concerning the lived experiences and the actualities of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. First, in comparing this discourse to dominant discourses, this section will map out the ways that this discourse-in-production subverts the hegemonic logic and foundational framework of current ruling discourses around sexuality and representations of bisexuality. Second, this section includes a critical examination of this new discourse in order to outline the ways in which it may be said to replicate and reproduce similar practices of exclusion, restriction and erasure.

To begin, the most notable difference between the discourse that is being formed in these communities and that of ruling institutional discourses is the manner of production. While both discourses are text-based, this discourse-in-production is created through the expression of lived experience and local knowledges of bisexual-identified people rather than through the generalized, high order standpoint of ruling. The creation and expression of local knowledges, within the process of identity work, is the basis upon which it may be called an alternative discourse. What is particularly unique about this alternative discourse is that it is being created through a dynamic collaboration of narratives that focus on exploring, expressing and debating what it means to be bisexual and publicizing variant experiences of bisexual-identification. The cultural erasure of bisexuality through either direct dismissal or through delegitimizing practices is being replaced by a discourse around bisexuality that is based on self-constitution and analysis. What it means to be bisexual is being developed dialogically between bi-identified people and dominant representations of bisexuality, as well as through dialogues between bi-identified people in the online communities who claim varying and even sometimes contrary experiences with this sexuality. The result is the creation of a discourse that privileges the local practices of sexuality and lived actualities of their experiences. As one participant puts it: “I think the key to accepting our sexuality, is to know ourselves. You're absolutely right: you don't have to be anyone but yourself. And the only way for society to get to the point where they accept that is for people to be themselves proudly, without shame or apology.”

The subversive potential of an alternative discourse based on local accounts and lived actualities of sexuality and sexual-identification is that it holds the potential

to promote different formations of social consciousness. It is through a demonstration and promotion of “other types of knowing...[that] may counteract the hegemonic tendencies of objectified knowledge” (Collins, 1992, p. 77). According to Smith (1989), dominant texts and governing discourses speak only from the standpoint of the ruling. It is clear, then, that subversion of this type of dominance would decidedly include the creation of textually-mediated discourse that comes from the subjugated voices of those inside-outsiders of these relations. As Kelley and Mann (1997, p. 397) emphasize, it is one’s social location outside of the relations of ruling that allows an individual to identify, understand and speak to the inadequacies of a particular system of knowledge. In order to maintain a position that is outside of these relations of ruling, according to Smith (1989, p. 39), subversive texts would have to be formed through a “standpoint which is ...situated in the particularities of the local everyday and everynight worlds of our immediate experience.” Such texts, can, in turn, be used to challenge the textual realities borne of the organizationally produced objectified knowledges. The subversive potential of narrative accounts of bisexuality, then, lies primarily in its opposition to the binary model. From the peripheries, bisexuality acts as a spectre that brings to light the inadequacies of the binary model (Goldman, 1996, p. 177). Given this, by promoting local accounts of bisexuality which challenge the erasure and delegitimization of bisexual-identification, this discourse effectively serves to reinstate the subversive potential of bisexuality. No longer in the background, these accounts challenge the naturalization of the binary model and the hegemony of monosexuality since they bring to the

surface alternate representations of bisexuality and, in turn, conceptualizations of sexuality. As Rust (1996, p. 80) argues:

the challenge to monosexual identity is posed, not by bisexuality per se, but by the different understanding of sexual identity that an exploration of bisexual identities in a gendered world can facilitate ... bisexuality merely provides a convenient vehicle for identifying the weaknesses that are already inherent in the effort to create stable categories.

Given the primacy of the binary model of sexuality, and its erasure and dismissal of sexualities that do not fit within its monosexual framework, an experience-based collaboratively developed bisexual discourse presents radical evidence of life beyond the parameters of a binary system.

Further, the subversive potential of this type of alternative discourse also lies in its promotion of diversity and variation within sexual identity categories. In demonstrating the messy, contrary and complicated dynamics of experiences of sexuality and sexual-identification, these narratives challenge the neat, fixed, monolithic sexuality framework of the binary. In the last section, continuities in experience were noted as having a normalizing effect. Conversely, discontinuities in experience, narratives and opinions demonstrate that sexual identity categories, including the parameters and definitions, cannot be tied down to any one combination of attributes, characteristics and experiences. Instead, these categories are, as one participant phrases it, are “just words we use to label things...a quick reference guide, a communication short hand if you will.” As evidenced in the previous section, many discontinuities may be found among community participants. These include differences in bases of attraction, personal definitions of bisexuality, bases for identifying as bisexual, status of relationships as polyamorous or monogamous, and

so on. Differences in experiences and definition of bisexuality and bisexual-identification are so commonly known that attempts to nail down specific parameters or definitions of bisexuality are usually met with opposition, and instead a focus on diversity is given. Resistance to the rigidity of systems of categorization, such as those characteristic of the binary model, is demonstrated in the following excerpts from the community:

“Stating that other people are innately bisexual is as limiting and condescending as stating that bisexuals are actually straight and/or gay and denying it. Everyone should be allowed to self-define their sexuality.”

“One size does NOT fit all, not between two straight people or two bisexual people. Just think about it for a moment and it should be easy for you to find lots of straight people who are into things that you would NEVER want to do. The same is true for bisexual people, too.”

“neither labels nor stereotypes are really sufficient to describe people. Male/female, black/white, gay/straight/bi. Whatever categorization system you describe, there are people who don't fit into it.”

“it's far too easy to assume everyone is like us, and twist things about quite fiercely to make it so.”

This demonstration of diversity and resistance to rigid formulations and definitions of bisexuality is, through the identity work narratives, woven into this discourse. As a result, the rigid categorizations and parameters set out in high-order discourse is challenged both by the dynamic process through which this discourse is being developed, but also in its resistance to the creation of static definitions. As one poster puts it: “one reason that I like to see people be out and proud as bisexuals is that then our diversity becomes more obvious, and it helps fuzz boxes in people's brains.” This represents a radical departure from most ruling discourse which “makes no concessions to variation in

the practical and material contexts... or to the realities” of the diverse number of people and the equally varied details of their lived experiences (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 39).

Despite its subversive potential, however, this discourse-in-production does contain some of the normative elements of ruling discourses. The normalizing effect that continuities identified within and across experiences have on understandings of bisexuality, discussed in the last section, are a clear example of how constraints within the discourse begin to form. Like high-order discourse, this includes the setting up of parameters for normalcy and attempts to define a coherent and set definition and model of bisexuality, the creation of a framework for naming and interpreting behaviour of others, and the imposition of a set of values and moral logic (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Smith, 1999). The design of these normative parameters may best be seen through the policing of bisexual identities present in some of the identity work within the communities. The assumption of a shared set of values and morality may be seen, in particular, within identity discussions focusing on behaviours or individuals that may be said to give bisexuals a bad name, what I will refer to as “bad bisexuals” or ‘bad bis’. Parameters of normalcy and ideal models of bisexuality, on the other hand, may best be seen in discussions centred around individuals who pretend to be bisexual, what are sometimes called “poseur bis”.

Bad bis are generally those bisexual-identified individuals who are said to engage in behaviours that actualize taboo-based stereotypes around bisexuality, such as promiscuity or infidelity. For instance, one member posted an entry concerning jealousy issues that had arisen in her relationship since she and her partner decided to no longer be monogamous. In response to this, one person comments: “it's people like you and others

who exhibit shady behavior, that give bi-sexual and gay people such a seedy reputation!

If we set the example for upstanding bi-sexuals, maybe more people would accept it!”

While this response was chided by other community participants, it demonstrates the tendency to police bisexual behaviour on the basis of achieving legitimacy. Another person demonstrates this way of thinking in an entry where she tries to explain stereotypes as arising as a consequence of the behaviour of bad bis. She writes:

So, no we shouldn't tolerate stereotypes, or people saying that bisexuality isn't 'real'. But we also shouldn't ignore the behavior of bisexuals who promote heteronormative and biphobic assumptions, and whose lives make it harder for all LGBT folks to achieve real equality.

Poseur bisexuals are also identified in identity discussions with varying degrees of disdain and resentment, as they represent to many people an obstacle to the promotion of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. This can be seen in the following comment by a community participant: “I am also loathe to use the word ‘bi’ due to the amount of daft wee girls running about my home town screaming ‘look at meeeeeeeeeee, look at meeeee, i'm so alt, i'm biiiii! i'm special!!!’ just to cover up the fact they have no personality.”

Another person writes: “it really annoys me to see the ‘fakers’ out there.” The identification of fake bisexuals, however, is reliant on the idea of true bisexuality, which requires the designation of certain behaviours and characteristics as definitively bisexual. While the nature of the production of this discourse makes it difficult to arrive at a steady, rigid definition, as every new identity discussion has the potential to add a new or contrary opinion, it does evidence in the discourse a temptation to exclude those that are, as one participant puts it, “muddying the true bisexual identity.” According to some, this tendency to create normative parameters and/or exclusionary practices are common in communities organized around a marginalized identity. This is because the

development of the community is somewhat dependent on the idealization of homogeneity and a particular articulation in which to anchor their identity (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 795; Bryson, 2004, p. 247). In these online journal communities, however, this emphasis on setting up an ideal model of 'true' bisexuality is subverted by the coordinative effect of the venue. As noted in the previous chapter, a coherent model of bisexuality is difficult to achieve given the dynamism of the production and the multiplicity of accounts contributed by community members. Moreover, resistance to establishing ideal models is raised by some of the community members themselves. One person, for instance, attempts to defend those whose identification is deemed fake, based on trendiness and/or a need for male-attention: "It may be pretending just to be cool, or it may be someone's way of coping with questions about ones own sexuality." Another person shares: "I'm tired of seeing that stereotype applied to any 'straight' looking girl who says she's bi or bi-curious. Even if a girl did make out with girls in front of a boyfriend, perhaps that's the only way she feels comfortable admitting and exploring her sexuality. I don't get the hostility."

It is clear to see from the above discussion, then, how this unique discourse-in-production provides "space for the work of reforming while simultaneously maintaining ruling strategies" (Kinsman, 1995, p. 88). Similar to ruling discourses, this discourse-in-production replicates the constraints found in high order discourses by policing sexual identities and by creating norms around bisexuality through identification of continuities in experience and definition. However, due both to its unique process of development and the influence of the venue on the identity discussions that institute it, this discourse also represents a radical departure from traditional ruling discourses around sexuality.

This is evidenced in its resistance to rigid categories and definitions, and through its demonstration of diversity as it promotes discontinuities in experience and variance in opinion. Moreover, current forms of consciousness around sexuality are challenged by the creation of such a discourse, which promotes a sexuality that calls attention to the inadequacies of a binary model, and challenges binary-based representations of bisexuality through the promotion of lived experiences.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the concept of identity as work was used to orient the explication of the processes involved in expressing and producing bisexual identities. An exploration of the different types of identity work taking place within these communities provided insight into the process through which these narrative accounts become woven into a dynamic, experience-based discourse. While the identity work incorporates into the discourse elements of the binary system, through reliance on binary language and dialoguing with stereotypes, it also serves to challenge this system of knowledge through the privileging of lived experiences and the use of oppositional talk. Ultimately, the formation of this discourse does seem to showcase some elements that liken it to high-order discourses, such as tendencies to create normative parameters, ideal models, and exclusionary practices through the identification of continuities. At the same time, by presenting a challenge to the binary framework, this discourse-in-production also creates possibilities for reworking current ruling conceptualizations of sexuality.

Chapter Five: Concluding Thoughts

“words are eventually found to breathe a voice into what needs to be said, and the first signs of a debate can thus be heard ... The words become stories, people become storytellers, and identities get attached to the stories. This is a politics of stories, through which new...identities are created.”
(Plummer, 2003, p. 81)

“the ‘ambiguous position’ of bisexuals ‘can also lead to a deep appreciation of the differences among people – whether cultural, sexual, and gendered – since any attempt to construct a coherent identity in opposition to another would flounder on the multiplicity of, at times, conflicting identifications generated by the bisexual point of view” (Goldman, 1996b, p. 176)

5.1 Summary of Discussion

It is clear from analysis of the identity discussions taking place online that the experiences and lifework of bi-identified people are coordinated by the binary model of sexuality. The discourse of the binary, as mediated through high-order texts, organizes knowledge around sexuality and sexual-identification in ways that render bisexuality invisible. As such, knowledge concerning bisexuality as an identity, practice and lifestyle is suppressed in most dominant texts, resulting in much confusion and angst for those struggling to understand their bi-sexual attractions and practices through the governing binary framework. When representations of bisexuality do appear, they are framed through the ruling standpoint of the binary model. As a result, these representations often characterize bisexuality as an illegitimate, transitional, and/or deviant sexuality.

This particular social organization of knowledge, in turn, has specific impacts on the organization of social relations. The stigma that becomes attached to bisexuality and bisexual-identification, as attributed through (mis)representations in dominant texts, results in relations of biphobia. Relations of biphobia involve discrimination against and

exclusion of bisexual-identified people within social contexts. Consequently, bisexual-identified people often feel isolated socially, in both queer and straight social circles, and culturally, due to the invisibility and/or dismissal of bisexuality in the dominant discursive texts that inform our social-cultural understandings of sexuality.

These feelings of un/belonging, combined with the desire for community with like-identified people, have been cited as key reasons why bisexual-identified people have begun to create and participate in bisexual-themed online social spaces. These online communities, through their dedication to bi-themed content and (presumably) bi-identified membership, have become safe spaces for community members to freely engage in identity discussions and publish personal narratives on experiences with bisexuality and bisexual-identification. The practices involved in the performance and production of bisexual identities may best be understood as identity work.

Since participants can only participate in these identity discussions taking place online through the interface of the computer, the expression, performance and production of identities in these spaces is necessarily mediated by the rolling text of the venue. Through its features, formatting and coding, the online venue actively coordinates the identity work taking place there. In that it is a social space and not just a venue, however, the social norms and conventions established in the community also serve to coordinate how bisexuality and bisexual identities come to be performed and produced in the online space.

Through their text-based interactions and the contribution of bisexual-themed textual narratives, community members begin to develop knowledge based on the actualities and lived experiences of bisexuality and bisexual-identification. Moreover, the texts created

in the process of expressing and performing sexuality, through the sharing of stories and engagement in dialogues, form the foundation of an alternative discourse on bisexuality. Norms, definitions, and parameters of what qualifies as bisexual begin to be created through the identification of continuities and discontinuities across individual experiences of bisexuality. Aspects of the online venue in which these identity discussions are taking place, however, shape the development of this discourse in notable ways. It is important to consider how the coordinative functions of the venue shape the process, form and content of this bisexual discourse in ways that both enable and constrain the potential to provide a more radical understanding of sexuality and sexual identity categories.

5.2 The Radical Potential of Online Identity Work

It is the online community, as a direct discursive environment, that is central to the development of this experience-based discourse on bisexuality. Not only does it provide the social space necessary for the type of bisexual identity work taking place there, but the social and technical elements of the online community coordinate this work in distinctive ways that, in turn, condition the form and content of the discourse being developed. More specifically, elements endemic to this online space coordinate the development of this discourse in ways that enhance its radical bent and help to differentiate it from governing discourses on sexuality.

To begin, the dynamic nature of textual contribution (via the posting of entries or comments), for example, creates a discourse that is always in the process of being produced. As a result, in contrast to the staticity and fixedness of the binary model of sexuality, this discourse is both fluid and dynamic, becoming more nuanced with every narrative contribution. In addition, the freedom to voice varied perspectives, enabled, in

part, by the social norms of the online space, allows for the demonstration of diversity across the category of 'bisexual'. Unlike the essentialist, neatly defined categories of identity promoted in governing sexuality discourses, the ongoing contribution of diverse narratives of experience by bi-identified community members makes the creation of solid definitions through consensus or through identification of continuities almost impossible. This is particularly significant in that attempts to create and establish a "coherent" identity, through the generalization of individual experiences and the establishment of norms, definitions, and parameters around what it means to be bisexually-identified, become the basis for exclusion. As evidenced by the previously noted impact that activations of the binary discourse has had on the lifework of bisexual-identified people, those whose experiences and identities do not conform to the model are either marginalized or rendered invisible. Thus, this discourse, through its dynamic, messy, in-process form and development, departs from the formation of a rigid, monolithic textual reality concerning bisexuality. Instead of creating and producing an identity, it creates multiple bisexual identities that can exist in contrast to, but not necessarily in antagonism with, one other.

Further, it is important to see the possibilities inherent in the creation of a discourse around bisexuality that, rather than reflecting the standpoint of the ruling, speaks from the standpoint of the subjugated. As Plummer points out, the narratives and stories that new sexual communities form become the foundation upon which acceptance of the legitimacy of a sexual identity develops. These online bisexual-themed journal communities not only give voice to a group that has been silenced and the opportunity to commune, but it allows them to weave together narratives of bisexuality through the

voices of their own experiences. Following the work of Vance (1984, p. 13) cited earlier, bi-identified members of these online communities have begun to counter the invisibility and/or dismissal of bisexual identities and identification in governing texts by developing alternative cultural and symbolic systems of thought. It is these narratives that carve out a space for bisexuality.

It is also important to recognize the opportunity this publicly-accessible venue creates for the promotion of bisexuality as a liminal sexual identity that is inherently oppositional to the foundational bases of the binary framework. In speaking from the standpoint of the subjugated, these accounts facilitate small disruptions in governing systems of knowledge. They are effectively creating a new body of knowledge that acts as a challenge to the limited and exclusionary ruling vision of sexual identity and sexual practice. In demonstrating that sexuality must be understood as more than an either/or, the texts being created online have great subversive potential. As Goldman (1996, p. 177) articulates: “the concept of bisexuality could function to disrupt and further open a paradigm that depends on binary oppositions.”

Finally, through the coordination of bisexual identity work taking place online, the venue facilitates the production of an alternative discourse that is differentiated from other sexuality discourses in its demonstration of fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to order. While the creation of a bisexual discourse that is constructed through the narrative contributions of participants in an online community may seem an insignificant challenge to the hegemony of monosexuality and ruling systems of sexuality, this movement towards change could mark the beginnings of a revolution. As Green (2002, p. 542) puts it:

“ it will take more...to render the modern sexual regime and the hetero/homo binary inert. In the meantime, rather than circulating our fantasies of a sexual revolution, perhaps we are better off to look for subversion in its less overtly spectacular forms, in the subtle disruptions and local disjunctures that pervade social interaction”

It is in its differences from, rather than its similarities to, governing sexuality discourses, such as the binary model, that this bisexual discourse-in-production creates the possibility for a radical reconceptualization of sexuality and sexual-identification. Through the creation of an alternative system of knowledge, people are able to access new ways of thinking that draw attention to the limitations inherent in ruling systems of thought.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Observation Guide

FEATURES:

- Which features are standard across the sampled online journal community venues?
- Which features are unique to online journal community venues?
- Are any typical features absent from this particular online journal community venue?
- Are any features present that are unique to this particular online journal community venue?
- Which features are most often used?
- Which features are used the least?
- Do there seem to be any obvious constraints in dialogue/narratives around bisexuality due to the coding and/or presence of features?
- Do there seem to be any unique possibilities for dialogue/narratives around bisexuality due to the coding and/or presence of features?
- Do there seem to be any obvious constraints in dialogue/narratives around bisexuality due to coding and/or absence of features?
- Do there seem to be any unique possibilities for dialogue/narratives around bisexuality due to coding and/or absence of features?
- Is there any unintended/unique applications of features within this particular online journal community venue? (e.g. intended for one use, but used for a different one)

ENTRIES:

- How often do bisexual identity discussions/narratives arise in entries?
- What are the triggers to bisexual identity narratives/discussions stated in entries?
- What types of bisexual identity narratives/discussions are taking place in entries?
- How do identity narratives/discussions in entries differ from that in comment boxes?
- What are the similarities between identity narratives/discussions in entries and those in comment boxes?

COMMENTS:

- How often do bisexual identity discussions arise in comment boxes?
- What are the triggers to bisexual identity discussions taking place in comment boxes?
- What types of bisexual identity narratives/discussions are taking place in entries?

- How does entry content affect the triggering of identity discussions in comment boxes for entries?
- How do identity discussions in comment boxes differ from that in entries?


COMMUNITY MEMBERS:


- How many members are there?
- How many members post entries?
- How many members post comments?
- How often do members post entries?
- How often do members post comments?
- How often do strangers/non-members post entries?
- How often do strangers/non-members post comments?
- How important is membership to community participation? (e.g. what are the norms around strangers/non-members posting)

COMMUNITY NORMS FOR BEHAVIOUR:

- How are behaviour norms laid out in the community information page?
- How are behaviour norms laid out in dialogues taking place in entries?
- How are behaviour norms laid out in dialogues taking place in comment boxes?
- What role do moderators play in enforcing behaviour norms?
- What role do community members play in enforcing behaviour norms?
- What are the norms concerning the creation/discussion of bisexual identity narratives in the community?
- Do any particular narratives around bisexuality seem to be privileged in this community?
- Do any particular narratives around bisexuality seem to be discouraged or unaccepted in this community?
- How are differing views or disagreements on bisexuality or bisexual identification settled?
- How is the breaking of norms addressed by moderators?
- How is the breaking of norms addressed by community members?
- How might community norms (behavioural or otherwise) be said to constrain bisexual-identity narratives/discussions?
- How might community norms (behavioural or otherwise) be said to facilitate bisexual-identity narratives/discussions?


Appendix B: Example of Interactivity from Sample Data

 **me_but_not**

2008-01-11 03:41 pm UTC ([link](#)) 

Why does it matter to you that people think your bi? Is it some sort of badge of honor?

([Reply to this](#))([Thread](#))

 **malicious_pengy**

2008-01-11 03:56 pm UTC ([link](#)) 

I've gone through too much fucking pain and suffering with my parents and my homophobic high school friends to get to college and be thought straight.

([Reply to this](#))([Parent](#))

 **everyoneiknow**


2008-01-11 06:36 pm UTC ([link](#)) 

if you say youre bi, you are bi, and it shouldnt matter whether anyone else believes it or not.

and for the record, since being bi is kind of 'in' right now, when you get to college, most people you meet kind of assume every girl in college is bi or at least bi-curious, so i dont think that will be too much of an issue. . .

([Reply to this](#))([Thread](#))


 **malicious_pengy**

2008-01-11 07:14 pm UTC ([link](#)) 

For the record, I'm not sure what population group it's popular to be bi in. I always here it's popular, and yet...I don't know anyone outside of the actual queer community (which is mostly really dedicatedly queer people) who say they are bi. Most of my friends are either straight or lesbian. Three people in my entire life have ever, ever, ever guess I was anything but straight.

([Reply to this](#))([Parent](#))([Thread](#))

 **bandcqulsj**

2008-01-12 04:05 am UTC ([link](#)) 

I haven't seen where it's popular to be bi, either.

Bisexual people are still saddled with the stereotypes. :-)