Constructing identities in cyberspace: The case of eating disorders

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This paper consists of a discourse analysis of data collected from websites that have been created by and for people who wish to share experiences of eating disorders in a positive and supportive environment. These sites have earned the broad description 'pro-ana' (where 'ana' is short for 'anorexia'). Site users have come to see themselves as a broad on-line community of like-minded individuals, but within this community there are many subgroups, and the boundaries between these subgroups are fiercely contested. In addition, frequent attacks on such websites in the media (charged with 'promoting eating disorders'), and by occasional hostile site visitors, have often forced the community into a defensive mode. The result is a rich tapestry of identity work. The analysis examines several 'pro-ana' sites and explores the way in which the identity is used to police the boundaries of the community, and ultimately, what it means 'to be ana' rather than 'mia' (bulimic), 'a normal', 'a faker', or even 'a hater'.

In the 1990s, it was quite common for psychologists to refer to the Internet as an environment with unlimited potential for identity management. The literature abounded with terms like 'identity laboratory' (Wallace, 1999), the implication being that computer users could play any social role they liked and transform themselves into fantasy selves, free of all physical and natural constraints (Turkle, 1995). For a minority of Internet users, this may remain the case. Meanwhile, the Internet continues to surprise us by creating previously undreamt of opportunities for communication. One such opportunity has been the development of on-line communities that allow socially isolated or stigmatized individuals to share experiences in relative anonymity, in an apparent safe haven. Newsgroups – lists of individuals with a shared interest – were among the earliest on-line communities and have increasingly served as discursive spaces for marginalized or stigmatized social groups (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Most of the research on the evolution of on-line communities has tended to focus on well-defined communities such as those found in newsgroups and chat rooms, and has produced largely superficial content analyses, logging the incidence of single words

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(e.g. Rosen, Woelfel, Krikorian, & Barnett, 2003). The community described in this paper is a rather different phenomenon – a phenomenon that has constructed itself by gradually accumulating increasing numbers of websites and their members into a community of practice. This is a network of web users with a broadly similar, yet highly unconventional and controversial, shared outlook on the topic of eating disorders.

Pro-ana websites

The shifting mass of websites constructed by and for young people with an eating disorder, is now typically referred to as the 'pro-ana' community (Davies & Lipsey, 2003; Pollack, 2003). It has been estimated (Atkins, 2002) that there are now over 400 'pro-ana' sites ('ana' being the subcultural referent for 'anorexia'), though even rough estimates are unreliable since this is essentially a nomadic community that drifts through cyberspace as successive sites are shut down by hosts and then reopened at new locations.

Typically, pro-ana sites contain archived journals or diaries written by people with eating disorders (EDs), large amounts of information, 'tips' and advice, emotional support, photo galleries, usually of thin models but occasionally of users' own bodies, poetry and song lyrics reflecting the experience of anorexia and related conditions (significantly though, never obesity). Of most interest to researchers are the discussion forums that attract thousands of postings from young people on a huge variety of ED-related topics. Many of the 'threads' on these forums are strikingly innocuous, dealing with mundane adolescent concerns such as boys and school; others are perhaps more sinister in nature, offering guidance on how to 'purge', and conceal anorexia from suspicious siblings or parents.

Pro-ana sites have excited controversy for a number of reasons. First, their content – effectively a dialogue of resistance against medical and professional constructions of EDs – has alarmed parents and health professionals alike (see Paquette, 2002, the editorial of a psychiatric journal warning about the phenomenon). Even more equivocal responses (e.g. Pollack, 2003), while seeing them as potentially empowering for misrepresented young women, have urged caution that such websites may act as a trigger for vulnerable individuals. Many internet servers have now blocked access to the most notorious pro-ana sites, and other sites have been compelled to carry highly visible disclaimers (e.g. 'If you are not anorexic do not enter'). Such disclaimers act as insurance against irresponsibility while serving to protect the integrity of the community, an issue which has come to assume great importance among pro-ana site users, as will be discussed later in the paper.

It is an over-simplification to regard the pro-ana community as reflecting a universally coherent standpoint. Each site owner has her own perspective on what it means to be eating disordered, or anorexic; the term 'ana' itself has become the source of much dispute (and identity negotiation); even users themselves are unsure as to whether they are 'celebrating' their EDs, whether anorexia is a life-style choice, a medical condition, an illness, or a positive or a negative experience. In many respects, the community is defined in adversity: when a 'hater' breaks through on to a discussion forum and posts a savage attack on the pro-ana position, or when a site is shut down by gatekeepers, each perceived slight seems to strengthen the resistance of the users and to foster the sense of shared goals and beliefs.

In the remainder of this paper, I analyse data collected over several months from a variety of pro-ana sites (many now defunct) in order to examine the way the community works to construct identities around eating disorders, and how these identities are used

to protect the community from perceived outsiders. I believe that these data offer psychologists and other social scientists unique and privileged access to 'naturally occurring' discourse, and give us the opportunity to explore how identities are constructed through discourse, and how they are used to police group boundaries and also to reveal the meaning that EDs have for the members of this community.

Naturally occurring data and social identity

There has been an ongoing debate for some time in the field of discourse and conversation analysis about what constitutes 'naturally occurring' discourse, and indeed whether such a thing can ever be said to exist (Speer, 2002, and subsequent commentaries). Early conversation analysts created experimental situations in order to study the spontaneous production of language under controlled conditions (see Garfinkel, 1967), but by the end of the 1960s, most conversation studies were drawing on recordings of telephone calls to emergency services and other data collected in 'real-world' settings (Psathas, 1979; Schegloff, 1968). Ethical considerations have since made this type of data difficult to collect, and most modern-day conversation research uses either public domain material such as talk radio (e.g. Hutchby, 2001a) or television talk shows (e.g. Stokoe & Wallwork, 2003), or uses data collected first hand by researchers in interview or focus group settings (e.g. Frith, 1998).

While both types of data can effectively be studied using the same analytic techniques, there has been disagreement over the importance of the intrusion of the researcher in bringing about the data. Speer (2002) suggests that the 'natural/contrived' distinction is irrelevant if we make the context in which the data are produced a central feature of the work. However, in doing so, we may lose sight of the very question that interests us as researchers. As Silverman (2001, p. 159) has argued, if we can access real-world data, why bother with 'researcher-provoked' data?

Of course, most of the data that has been collected in the task of studying social identity has been purely 'researcher provoked', in controlled experiments where 'identity' is operationalized as the random membership of an artificial group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The experimental work has been valuable in terms of specifying the minimal conditions under which social identity can be made salient by individuals, but tells us relatively little about the way in which identities operate in everyday situations.

The same is true also of social psychological research on computer-mediated communication (CMC), which has been nested within the same (experimental) minimal group paradigm as off-line social identity research (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1999). Typically, standard experimental participants are asked to communicate on-line under conditions of anonymity (e.g. Sassenberg & Postmes, 2002). While such research has been valuable in demonstrating social influence in CMC, it has not really explored the issue of how on-line social identities emerge: as the researchers themselves argue, 'future research will need to take a closer look at the way in which social norms and social identities emerge in situ' (Postmes *et al.*, 1999, p. 183).

Eating disorders as contested illnesses

Because this paper is largely concerned with the construction of identity rather than the nature of EDs *per se*, I will not attempt to review a broad range of literature in this general field. Nevertheless, it is important in this case to consider the peculiarities of EDs that make them such a ripe topic for the kind of identity work being carried out on pro-ana websites.

It is possible to regard EDs as a set of 'contested illnesses' (Stainton Rogers, 2000) along with conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome. These latter conditions are problematic in medicine because professionals (though not patients) typically regard them as psychosomatic rather than organic. In the case of anorexia, the situation is reversed; medical professionals usually treat the physical manifestation of anorexia (i.e. a body weight below 85% the normal for age and height), but the cause and onset of the condition are invariably rooted in the psychology of the individual. This is profoundly shaped by social processes, notably consumerism, the mass media, and the changing status of women in Western society (Bordo, 1992; Malson, 1998; Orbach, 1993).

This brings into play a broad network of discourses around the practice of eating, touching on topics such as morality, blame, and responsibility. Historically, overeating has been cast as the sin of gluttony; therefore, obese individuals are stigmatized as lazy, undisciplined, greedy and lacking in self-respect (Lupton, 1996; Orbach, 1993). Undereating, conversely, is associated with self-discipline, asceticism, moral rectitude and principled rebellion (e.g. hunger strike action; Smith, 2002). With these conflicting discourses circulating in contemporary Western society, the social identity of the eating disordered individual is complicated. Malson (1998, p. 145) has described anorexia as 'a plural collectivity, signifying a multiplicity of shifting and often contradictory subjectivities'.

Consequently, pro-ana websites are far from consistent in their standpoint on who, or what, is to blame for an eating disorder. Some sites and users take an explicitly essentialist position, using terms like 'illness', 'disease' and 'sick' (the subtext being that they cannot help having anorexia, it is out of their control), while others are more cautious, celebrating anorexia as a 'choice' or even a 'life-style'. However, the distinction is not clear. The same users may draw on the same arguments at different times.

In the analysis that follows, I will examine two interesting phenomena that have implications for theories of social identity. Firstly, I will explain how these discourses are used to construct different identities for the users of pro-ana websites. Secondly, I will consider how additional identities are created for members of out-groups, in particular for site users who are seen as interlopers or enemies, and how these identities are mobilized to define and protect the community itself.

Method

Data collection

These data were downloaded from the internet in two phases during the spring and summer of 2003. Altogether, a total of 20 websites were used in the analysis – these were sites that I believed to be typical of pro-ana sites in terms of structure. I have deliberately withheld specific details of sites, such as names and addresses, partly in order to protect the anonymity of the sources[1] and also as a result of the widely reported practice of vulnerable individuals using details published in articles in order to obtain information to visit pro-ana sites. (An additional consideration is that the short-lived nature of such sites means that the interested reader may have nothing left to consult!).

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[1] *There is a powerful ethical argument against doing internet research of this type – see Eysenbach and Till (2001) – which rests on the notion that contributors to internet sites do not 'expect' to be participants in a research study. One could however extend this argument to preclude the use of any 'real world' or 'naturally occurring' data. Ultimately the ethical validity of any research needs to be weighed against its importance, and, as Pollack (2003, p. 250) argues, participation in pro-ana sites is 'literally a matter of life and death'.*

The data in each case were obtained by entering a 'discussion forum' or 'message board' on which material had been archived for several months. Some messages were single postings that had not been replied to, but the vast majority of postings form part of a 'thread' of messages where several posters have replied to an original message. As an example, on one site a thread of seven messages responded to an original posting entitled 'My ex boyfriend went away to college and slept with 12 girls'. Messages themselves vary enormously in length: some are brief comments, while others can be 200 words or more, developing quite complex narratives.

A selection of threads from the websites was saved in word file format in order to store and print for analytic purposes. Threads were chosen largely for their level of interest, in particular those containing exchanges that implied a degree of conflict or debate. The data are not in any particular way intended to be 'representative' of the overall material found on pro-ana sites (the majority of which, as suggested above, is largely routine teenage chat). In total, the dataset exceeded 150,000 words.

Analytic procedure

The data were analysed using a technique known as membership categorization analysis (MCA). This technique has been developed under the aegis of conversation analysis, as a means of exploring the ways in which speakers use category information and inferences to create a frame of reference to make meaning of the world (Stokoe, 2004). For instance, as Baker (2004) puts it, there is a huge difference between being asked to speak as 'a mother of three' and being asked to speak as 'a professor' in terms of the cultural expectancies that such categorization entails, and how the speaker is then responded to.

Baker (2004, p. 174) recommends three stages in conducting MCA. The first step is to identify the 'central categories' that underpin the talk (e.g. invocation of group membership). The second step is to identify attributions, both implicit and explicit, that are associated with these categories. The third is to explore the ways speakers use these attributions to imply how 'actors do, could or should behave'.

The analysis began by identifying category terms that were used to infer either in-group or out-group membership. Broadly speaking, these were used to assess whether or not a contributor belonged on the discussion forum. Extract 1 refers to a clear out-group – 'the haters' – that the user has been trying to avoid during her visits to pro-ana sites.

> (1) this isn't like the other sites i've been to at all! it was the haters i've been worried about!

Haters, it emerges, are individuals who post 'flame' messages that are abusive towards people with pro-ana views, or people with EDs generally. This, then, is a very simple invocation of out-group membership.

Extract 2 illustrates the type of disclaimer that 'newbies' – people who have not used the website before – feel inclined to provide as a way of claiming a right to contribute.

> (2) As a newbie I feel like I'm intruding to be responding to this type of thread – so I hope you all forgive me for adding my two pence worth.

The category 'newbie' implies a rather fragile level of in-group membership. It is in-group membership that has yet to be earned.

Finally, Extract 3 reveals the kind of categorization that emerges among members of the pro-ana community.

(3) I am not Ana. I am a relapsing Mia. . . I thought all eating disorders were welcome here. I feel bad now for posting here.

While 'ana' is code for anorexic, 'mia' is code for bulimic. Both identities fit within the broad in-group category of eating disordered (and specifically pro-ana) website users. However, it is clear even from this short extract that the membership of these categories is far from straightforward.

In the remainder of the analysis, I will concentrate on two specific sites of conflict – one between different in-groups within the pro-ana community (ana and mia, as in Extract 3) and the other between members of the community and perceived out-groups.

Analysis

The ana/mia debate

The first half of this analysis deals with the intrinsic right to earn the title of 'ana' that is hotly debated throughout the pro-ana community. In many respects, it is a debate that goes right to the heart of what it means to be 'pro-ana' and may indeed reveal important material for clinicians and other professionals to help understand the nature of eating disorders, and the resistance to treatment of many anorexic individuals.

A common theme running through many message board threads concerns the relative merits of ana and mia, a debate that spills into outright hostility in places. There is a general assumption that ana represents an ED ideal, creating disdain for 'fakers' and 'wannabes' (two clearly identified out-groups). As Burns (2004, p. 270) argues, this construct derives from the use of 'dualistic conceptual categories that characterize Western epistemology' – whereby anorexia is constructed as a display of personal discipline and ultimately a triumph of the will, and bulimia is seen as a failure or lack of these attributes. Bulimia involves sporadic and excess consumption, followed by the ritual 'purging' of undigested food – a seemingly messier business with undertones of ill-discipline, feeble surrender to hunger pangs, guilt, and moral laxity. All the things, indeed, that anorexics pride themselves on resisting.

Ana as a superior identity

It would seem likely, then, that 'anas' believe themselves to occupy a higher moral ground within this community. Such a belief is frequently reinforced on a casual basis – for example in Extract 4, mia is constructed as an easy option:

(4) I always found something pure about ana, but mia I think would be easier. . . but then again they both leave messy emotional scars. . .

Another popular construction, consistent with the findings of Burns (2004), is the belief that mias are 'failed' anas.

(5) When I was mia I intentionally switched to ana because mia is so disgusting. . .Just look at all the anas who have a slip and end up asking mias for advise (*sic*) on how to purge.

A further negative attribution is the belief that mia constitutes 'cheating', and is, furthermore, 'dirty', thus contrasted with the 'purity' that comes from ana, a key motif in anorexic discourse:

(6) I know a girl who's 'bulimerexic' or whatever, and she hates it. I'd always just been pure ana, and can't/won't throw up for the life of me. It's just so dirty and gross. . . I've always

thought being bulimic was sort of cheating, like a wanna be normal and anorexic at the same time. No offense to the mias out there in TF land, just my thoughts.

Extract 6 negotiates the ana/mia boundary explicitly, through constructing a dual identity ('bulimerexic'); if purity is a goal of anorexia, such an identity must be inauthentic. Despite these negative attributions towards mia, however, this contributor still feels obliged to issue a disclaimer at the end, 'no offence to the mias', to show a degree of respect towards mias as an in-group within the pro-ana community ('TF land' = a reference to a website solely populated by mias).

Staunch defence of the mia identity
While at one level 'mia' acts as a feared identity for anas, what about those who currently identify themselves as mia? Do they accept a subordinate position in the eating disordered hierarchy? The fact that they have established their own separate websites suggests that the mia identity is valued at some level.

Extract 7 is the first response to the accusation in Extract 6 that mia is 'cheating'.

> (7) Oh really? Cheating? Well have you ever considered starving yourself 'cheating'? Because you're not losing weight the healthy way, neither am I. It's not cheating it's a DISORDER!! Dirty. . .:roll:[2] At least I get to eat whatever I want. Perhaps you should type this stuff over in the Purgatoriam, see what happens. . .

This extract effectively turns the tables on the ana/mia debate by invoking 'the Purgatorium' – another site-specifically aimed at 'mias' – as a serious community with a different set of values and beliefs from the 'ana' in-group.

The contributor in Extract 7 defends the mia identity through recourse to an argument that is prevalent throughout the pro-ana community, that she is the victim of a 'disorder' (elsewhere, as in Extract 8, terms such as 'sickness' and 'illness' are preferred) which inoculates her from any moral judgment.

> (8) I'm just a sick, sick person, when you feel proud at puking your guts out after every meal.

While this rhetorical device might be used to defend either ana or mia positions, it seems to be more prevalent among bulimic contributors because of the moral laxity attributed to bingeing and purging behaviour.

An alternative counter-position is to argue that, contrary to the dominant attribution, it is indeed bulimia that requires 'willpower' and discipline:

> (9) I have tried to be bulimic but I think it's so hard! Throwing up takes forever (at least for me – I'm not very good at it), and it hurts and takes a lot of willpower. I have always found not eating a lot easier... but I have heard that bulimics are failed anorexics. I don't buy that.

This position is reinforced by contributions discussing the criteria for being 'a good bulimic', and the uncovering of fake bulimics.

> (10) sometimes i think this of myself and i feel bad because i think i'm a 'bad' bulimic. Like there are bulimics much better than me and i shouldnt call myself one because i dont purge as much as them or i'm not as skinny as them. It really makes me feel horrible sometimes and i wish i were a 'better' bulimic – does that make sense?

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[2] *The term 'roll' is used by some contributors to signal a derisive gesture; namely, the upward rolling of the eyeballs in disdain.*

> (11) Does anyone have a friend or know some one that is also mia? and monitor their eating habbits? and think to yourself. . .you are so NOT bulimic? Me and my best friend got really drunk and both confessed that we were mia, i always knew she had a problem with body image, but she is so not bulimic, or not like she says. . . i just hate it because she can eat heaps, not throw it up, keep her figure and say shes bulimic – whereas i eat nothing in front of anyone, throw up everything i eat, take laxative, diet pills etc, and remain around the same weights. I believe that shes bulimic but i somehow feel shes not doing it right

These extracts establish some criteria for earning the identity of 'mia', such as frequent purging and the use of artificial dieting aids. There is some dispute over whether body shape is a qualifying factor. In Extract 10, 'skinny' is cited as a means of identifying a 'good' bulimic, while in Extract 11 'keeping' ones figure is not in itself an admired achievement. It is the effort expended on losing weight that earns respect rather than the weight loss *per se*. 'Dieters' are greatly distrusted within the pro-ana community and have a clear out-group status.

Fluctuating identities

While, as we see above, a number of mias launch a spirited defence of their identity, there is perhaps a more general tendency to treat 'mia' as a temporary state, with 'ana' remaining the ideal self. There is a proliferation of marginal identities within the pro-ana community, most of them referring to clinical diagnoses such as ED-NOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified) that serve as 'half-way house' identities for individuals who don't feel confident of their status as 'true' anas, or even mias.

> (12) Hell I always consider myself a phony. I mean, I'm EDNOS' that means some fucked up eating disorder that's probably just 'disordered eating' and well I can't be bulimic because I don't purge, I'm not COE [compulsive overeating] because I don't eat that much any more, and I can't be anorexic because I go through a binge mebbe once a week. . . I feel phony as hell.

> (13) I feel like another yo-yo dieter who is too much of a failure to earn a concrete diagnosis. . .even last year when the doctor at the hospital was shoving a picture of karen carpenter at me and telling me i was going to die after he weighed me. . .i just couldn't believe that i was anorexic, because i wasn't 'sick' enough, i wasn't a 'real' anorexic.

> (14) I mean, it isn't anorexia, or 'real' bulimia, or all-the-way coe. So, the brain goes, you don't have the right to call yourself eating disordered. because I'm not.

Extracts 12–14 serve to demonstrate the importance of identity in the eating disordered experience. The central concern is the fear of appearing 'phony' or not 'real', suggesting that there is something intrinsically *authentic* about the nature of anorexia. It is a club with stringent entry criteria, which are not met by the contributors above, who (12) have lapses into the occasional binge, or (13 and 14) have failed to 'earn' membership through medical diagnosis.[3] EDNOS, while an official diagnosis, is seen as an underachievement. Membership of the eating disordered community as a whole is simply not enough.

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[3] *The pro-ana community places medical diagnosis in high esteem (ironic given its general disdain for the health profession) and occasional attempts at typology by users generally arouse enormous interest.*

Policing the community boundaries

While pro-ana website users strive for the 'right' to call themselves ana, there is nonetheless a shared recognition of themselves as a distinct community. In Extracts 12–14, the contributors sympathize with each other's dilemma; they negotiate identity on the same terms. Community has two levels – a macro-level in which all the pro-ana site users are broadly respected for the shared sense of having an eating disorder, and a micro-level, seen in Extracts 6 and 7, whereby individual websites cater for different subgroups within the pro-ana community.

Membership of the micro-community is negotiated on specific terms, within the ana/mia debate for example, while membership of the macro-community is much more vigorously contested, largely through the creation of clear out-groups. The biggest single out-group is referred to as 'normals' – essentially anyone without an eating disorder. This group is largely tolerated although there are occasional postings in which users despair at their slack morals (e.g. how 'comfortable' normals seem to be with their body fat). Within the broad out-group, though there are smaller groups that invoke hostility within the pro-ana community. The most openly hostile out-group is the 'haters' (see Extract 1), but equally vilified are 'fakers' or 'wannabes', who are seen as interlopers, bringing the community into disrepute. In this section of the analysis, I will examine what happens when either haters or wannabes are perceived to have invaded the discussion forum on a pro-ana site.

Dealing with haters

Flames are abusive messages that have long been identified in internet communication (Ó Dochartaigh, 2002). They appear in two guises on pro-ana message boards, first as 'warnings' from concerned individuals (often relatives of pro-ana site users), and second, as random attacks on users as 'sick' and 'sad'. Extract 15 is a typical example of the former category. (The whole message stretches to over 300 words).

> (15) . . .You have come to this site with a problem, the problem being that you can't face the truth. You hide from it. You have been teased, bullied or laughed at your whole life. You have a broken and sick family, dad is dead or hates you. Mom is alcoholic and abusive, or the other way around. . .Trust me, kill yourself now and the pain will be a lot shorter.

Despite the frequency of such attacks, flames are usually responded to in kind – they become an opportunity for a display of community solidarity. Extracts 16–19 all come from the thread that emerges in response to Extract 15 (16a and 16b are so labelled because they are adjacent).

> (16a) Translation:. . . Girls here made me feel inferior. Here I was, thinking I had found a place where I could sit and touch my semi that I get from being a board troll, and they basically told me to piss off. . . For some reason, this reminds me of every time a girl has told me, 'It's too small' and the next day I see her, my prize, with another guy.

> (16b) LOL. . .Kielle, you're insane!! He's gonna be mad when he reads it. If it's a 'he'.

> (17) . . . go back to looking for nude picture of Avril Lavigne.

> (18) get a freaking life, you dolt. you're the truly useless one, for who else would take the time to write such cynical, obtuse b.s.

> (19) back in your sad piece of sh*t life. Where you spend hours jerking off to computer porn while occasional coming to sights like this to feel all high and mighty. . . just maybe you'll

> look at your own pathetic life and realize hey im an as$ hole who gets of on preaching to other people about their problems instead of looking at my own. Seriously get a life.

It is clear from these messages that the author of the flame is not only an outsider by virtue of being non-eating disordered but also is quite likely to be *male*; indeed, only the contributor of Extract 16b raises any doubt on this issue. Scrutiny of the message from which Extract 15 is drawn failed to identify any specific clues to the author's gender identity. I am not primarily examining gender in this paper, although there is a clear assumption by pro-ana site users that, in the absence explicit evidence to the contrary, all users are female. It is interesting that such attributions should be made towards an abusive contributor, indicating the salience of gender as a feature of the community's collective identity. As Extract 20 demonstrates, the rare male users tend to be rather apologetic, as if they can only ever be honorary members.

> (20) I am more alone than most, because I am male. . .my question is, is it ok that I am here. . .Being here makes me feel like I am in the girls bathroom.

While the author of Extract 20 is warmly welcomed by the female site users, the assumption is made that the author of Extract 15 does not belong on the site, and that 'he' can only be there in a voyeuristic capacity, most likely for purposes of sexual gratification. The thread degenerates into a return of abuse drawing on typically crude associations between penis size, pornography and rejection, with frequent exhortations to 'get a life'. It is assumed (at least in Extract 16b) that the male in question is somehow unenlightened about his own failings: as with so many flames, the author never re-emerges to contest the debate, probably because an efficient gatekeeper has blocked access.

Extracts 21 and 22, taken from the same thread (as 15–19), are effectively table-turning responses.

> (21) Eating disorders are a form of sickness anyone who has an ED knows it and they don't have to hide from it.

> (22) start running a$$hole, cause in case you haven't noticed, you're in a PRO-ANA-SUICIDE-SOCIETY, which, in short, means we're f*cking crazy a$$ b*tches

These responses work by subverting the flamer's arguments – in Extract 21 we see a reprise of the 'sickness' defence (encountered earlier in Extracts 7 and 8), while Extract 22 takes a typically subcultural delight in exaggerating the accusations of mental abnormality. There is no need to mount a denial, but to enjoy the power of abandoning responsibility. Such messages are typically treated by other users as ironic and enjoyed for the discomfort they create in outsiders.

Dealing with wannabes

While haters present users with unpleasant challenges to the safe haven of the pro-ana community, it is perhaps the wannabes who pose the biggest threat to the community's identity and well-being. Wannabes are especially disliked because they potentially damage the credibility of the pro-ana standpoint. It is important for 'true anas' to maintain some semblance of elitism: as one of Burns' (2004, p. 277) participants puts it, 'You've actually gotta be . . . quite good at . . . controlling yourself to be anorexic. Most people can't manage it'.

Wannabes are frequently blamed for negative press coverage ('it's people like you who give us a bad name') although, to the lay observer, their views are not notably more disturbing than those frequently exchanged by regular site users. There is a substantial grey area in which wannabes are hard to distinguish from 'newbies' – by definition a wannabe is not a regular member of the community – but they are swiftly identified by regular users, and rounded on by the community as a whole.

Indeed, sensitivity towards 'wannabes' is such that seemingly sporadic messages are posted in order to ward them off, as in Extract 23, where the author is reacting to a perceived hurt from a fellow user:

(23) hey bunny, just to let you know, my post to the wannabes wasn't directed at anyone in particular. It was generally directed to all the wannabes that are lurking around.

At other times, users attempt to smoke out wannabes by issuing alerts:

(24) . . .there is deffy one person on this site, who you can just tell has NOT got an ED. I know, you cant tell over the web, but you can by her comments & her stupid posts on the subjects etc. A number of people on my msn who visit this site have also spoken about her on numours(sp) occasions, so I know for a fact, I am not the only one who has noticed this. . .

Such is the level of suspicion towards the presence of this unwelcome out-group, ambiguous first posts from 'newbies' can even spark disputes among regular users, as in the following thread. Extract 25a is a very typical example of a newbie post, followed by a quick flame from a sceptical regular, and then, in turn, by a supportive post from a sympathetic regular.

(25a) Hey Im new here, IM 16 and my stats r 5'8, female, from canada, and i'm ana with mia tendencies. my CW is like 195, and im trying to lose like 50lbs in 4 or 5 months or less, i just need some pionters, I cant do it myself, kinda hard I figure that i go on a long water fast and even very small amout of foods like every 2 weeks for 2 days, then water fast again! do u think thats ok? and if not plz give some pionters, PLZ PLZ PLZ, i already feel bad about my weight now

(25b) if you are truley anorexic you dont really need someone there telling u what to do or showing u pics and to be honest u probably wouldnt be 195 – try a proper diet site

(25c) [to previous author] That comment was kind of prejudice. How can you say that she is not anorexic hardly knowing anything about her... SOME OF US ARE still really heavy, it doesn't mean we don't have EDs. [postscript to original author]: PM me and add me to MSN. I can totally relate to what you're going through

Here, Extract 25b's response seems rather harsh considering that 25a has disclosed quite a lot of personal information (including, unusually, a gender term). However, her suspicion may well be founded on negative media portrayals of pro-ana sites as repositories for 'tips' and 'hints' for self-starvation and purging, and she has read 25a as a naïve request that plays into the hands of 'haters' and other disapproving authorities. Judged by the standards of regular pro-ana site users, then, 25a's form of address is inappropriate. Why does 25c come to her help? It seems that 25b's comment is treated as offensive and judgmental; by seizing on weight as a criterion for rejection, she has unwittingly helped draw the newbie into the fold.

Later in the thread (Extract 26a), another regular takes the newbie's side. By 26b, the newbie is already beginning to display communicative confidence ('everyone needs to

start somewhere, right?'), and by 26c has gained another 'ana buddie' who has (rather foolishly) posted her telephone number.

> (26a) Hey there, Just wanted to add, yes, it is possible to be ana and fat. I'm 5'11 and I used to weigh 116 pounds, I never ate anything, just water and tea, so, I guess THAT would qualify me as ana? This isn't meant to be in a snappy tone or anything, it's just real frustrating to be called a "wanna-be ana" that doesn't belong here, just based on your weight. (Which does NOT mean that I'm proud of being ana!)

> (26b) [original 'newbie' author]. . .it really is fustrating being called a wonnabe ana, I myself used to purge all the time when i felt down about myself. . .I used to weigh 150lbs, purging made me gain up to my current weight(195lbs), so now im trying to lose the weight by b'ing ana. And u sure r rite about hearing that ppl r "wonnab's". . .everyone needs to start somewhere right?

> (26c) hey i feel your pain it sux bein called a wannabe i know ive been called that plenty if u ever need anyone to talk to im always available whenever needed you can even call me [phone number] im nice:)

These last three exchanges all rally round the perceived slight that comes from being identified as a 'wannabe'. Eventually, it is the author of 25b who ends up being rounded on as inappropriate, for using weight as a (false) criterion for smoking out a fake ana.

Discussion

Why are 'wannabes' so quickly rejected by the pro-ana community? Why are anas and mias at loggerheads when essentially pro-ana sites are there for mutual support? It seems that the motive behind these debates is one of protection for an embattled community. Pro-ana sites have a lot to lose from the 'wrong' people snooping and reading their correspondence – which makes it surprising that so few of them choose to restrict access to their message boards. The community exists in a state of heightened awareness about the danger of interlopers and so any outsiders, even people with seemingly impeccable membership criteria, are treated with a certain amount of suspicion.

The proliferation of different identities constructed by the users of pro-ana sites stems from two powerful factors, both of which relate to the need for distinctiveness when the community is threatened from outside. First, out-groups need to be identified in relation to the nature of the threat they pose. Haters, while capable of inspiring a volley of random abuse, are essentially harmless because they are easily dealt with by site controllers (although they may of course report back to more harmful authorities if they dislike what they read).

Wannabes are perceived a greater threat because they blur the boundaries between 'ana' as state of purity and discipline and as helplessly biological/medical 'condition'. The dilemma at the centre of the anorexic experience concerns its state as 'contested illness', as physical manifestation of unknown psychological origins. Wannabes are treated as naïve interlopers orienting to it as a trendy life-style choice, as stereotypically portrayed in negative media accounts. As Malson (1998) has found, individuals with EDs try to distance themselves as far as possible from popular stereotypes of anorexia, since these are the constructions of *others*, while for them anorexia functions as a 'site in which subjectivity is constantly negotiated' (p. 143). In this context, 'wannabes' act as a convenient scapegoat for the enforced closure of pro-ana sites.

The second factor lies in the need for threatened in-group members to achieve a distinct identity, and inevitably, this draws on the discourses circulating around anorexia itself. If anorexia is about attempting the unachievable (forever chasing impossibly low weights, trying to live on air), then it is not surprising that anorexics set such high standards for admittance to their community. The pro-ana world then becomes a hierarchy of in-group (positive identities), with ana ('true' or 'pure' ana to be precise) at the top, mia just below, and marginal, vague identities such as ED-NOS at the margins. Ironically, for a community that actively resists social norms, medical diagnosis operates as a qualification – but this only serves to point up a critical ambivalence towards medicine in the pro-ana community, where site users debate endlessly whether ana is an 'illness' or a 'choice'. Diagnosis serves as nothing more than a mark of authenticity.

Pro-ana site material has been used in this project largely as a case study of how identity is used to accomplish certain tasks in the creation of an on-line community. The research has not been carried out with any particular social goal in mind. Whether pro-ana sites are bad – even deadly – or harmless is a separate issue. As with many internet phenomena, it is too early to speculate about the negative 'effects' of such material until we have data about the actual internet use of individuals with eating disorders.

It is also possible that non-synchronous message boards may not be the perfect data for studying the on-line construction of identities. IRC (internet relay chat, or 'chat rooms'), where communication unfolds synchronously in 'real time', are probably the closest on-line equivalent to 'naturally occurring' talk, and might be richer sites for identity work. However, the ethical matters mentioned earlier in relation to message boards become more problematic in accessing IRC data, where a researcher generally needs to register with a gatekeeper and then either 'lurk' or deceive other users by posing as a plausible member of the community. It must also be recognized, as Hutchby (2001b) and others have pointed out, that each new technological form makes a potentially new, and different, contribution to the communicative environment – on-line and off-line communication are by no means analogous.

Moreover, the pro-ana community is worth studying in its own right as a social (virtual) space that affords a style of interaction that would be highly unlikely in the off-line, or pre-internet, environment. To adopt something of a McLuhanist perspective (and perhaps a Gibsonian one), it could be argued that pro-ana message boards should be treated as a unique communicative environment with no off-line equivalent. Indeed, it may even be worth considering, from a social constructionist perspective, whether we can even say that *ana* is the same discursive object as *anorexia*. This may seem a trivial point but it has important implications for understanding the impact of pro-ana sites on their users (and for the EDs field in general).

There may be more general lessons to be learned through the study of on-line communities such as this one. Pro-ana sites are not alone in promoting unhealthy lifestyles or behaviour. Already there are numerous sites devoted to, among others, unsafe sex, smoking, and self harm. As we have seen with paedophilia, the internet offers a perfect sanctuary for people with interests that are unacceptable to the general public. By serving as a counter-culture to official discourse around health and illness, the web may serve to undermine the professionals so that more and more people find ways of opting out of conventional society (e.g. health care) if they can locate supportive communities on-line. Once again, whether this is a positive or negative consequence of the internet is a matter for debate.

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