
Categories, Gender and Online Community

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ABSTRACT This article presents a sketch for a theory of the rhetorics involved in categorisation and the creation of culture in online communities. Persuasion, or shaping perceptions of the world, is never incidental to social life, but living online necessarily involves persuasion as it is difficult to bring force to bear, although people can be temporarily excluded from different groups to different degrees, and the modality of persuasion may be influenced by the structures of communication in play. Communication almost always involves an attempted act of power aiming to produce a response in another. It is argued that linguistic categories, especially self-identity categories, are to some extent flexible, and that they exist in connection and contrast with other categories. The meaning of categories depends upon the ways they are framed (frames can also be categories), and framing and category content can be the subject of argument. Among the most important ways of framing online by Westerners are by space, public/private, authenticity, gender and community. The rest of the article explores the nature of online communication and power; how gender is used as a category; the kinds of effects that this categorisation has had; and how this category becomes salient within the framework of people making a 'community' on the Cybermind mailing list.

Introduction

The first part of this article gives a brief and schematic sketch of a theory of culture and rhetoric; the second part references this theory to elucidate some interactions on the Cybermind mailing list.[1]

Groups and Culture in General

Societies and cultures are not unities; they are hypothetical entities, which may have no definite boundaries. Boundaries are drawn for heuristic reasons, and may vary with who is drawing them. Groups which may be classified as different, or are self-classifying as different, might be seen as similar in comparison with, or in interaction with, other groups. As such, groups are the basis of the identity categories with which people may self-identify, be identified with by others, or identify others with. This implies that identity is not automatically a shared collection of meanings, but is differentiated and contested. Different people, or the same people in different situations, may interpret events in radically different socially positioned ways. Therefore, there is not 'one culture', but a whole series of idio-cultures produced by people in co-action, and the variant meanings may drive the interactions.

To quote Fredrik Barth:

Culture is distributed and major aspects of its structure inhere precisely in its patterns of distribution ... Actors are ... positioned, and the interpretations they make will reflect this positioning and the knowledge that they command. (1993, p. 176)

A theory of culture must explain what we do when we propose the existence of culture, as well as elucidate what we are describing. Culture is something constructed by the analyst in interaction with others, as an attempt to understand them. It is also what everyone has to do, to some extent all the time, especially when they move into a new situation in which conventions are not clear.

Cynically, it can be suggested that events which make sense are ignored; 'culture' occurs where we find our understanding or ability to act is inadequate.

As Michael Agar writes, culture is 'what happens to you when you encounter differences' (1994, p. 20).

What follows is a brief outline of an approach to culture which respects these issues and explores the relationship between groups, categories, and persuasion.

Categories

Linguistic categories both summarise and make knowledge. Putting something in a category not only implies a degree of understanding of it, but of the types of response and action possible with it. Perceiving a person as belonging to a category not only defines them as similar or different, but selects the similarity or difference as normative (Turner et al, 1987, p. 131).

John Taylor suggests that in the traditional Western view of categories, all members of a category are similar in the same way, so that: a) membership can always be given by necessary and sufficient conditions, or by definition; b) boundaries are clear so that things are either in or outside the category; and c) there are no degrees of membership (Taylor, 1989, pp. 23-24). These positions are all dubious.

In the 1920s the Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky categorised the development of categories in children in three different ways or stages, as follows:

- 'Congeries', where disparate objects or events are grouped together, and subjective bonds are important. This might include presence in the same visual field, contiguity, emotional response, etc. Here grouping is on a 'trial and error' basis (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 110-112).
- 'Complexes', where objects or events are linked by perceived bonds existing between them. These bonds need not be the same for each item in the complex; they can be connected in many different ways. For example, in chain categories each item is connected to a previous item but the links between items may change, and in radial categories each item is linked to a central item or items, also possibly by different links (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 112ff; compare Lakoff, 1987, pp. 91-95).
- 'Concepts', where the traits of linkage are consistent and systematic. Concepts are only built where there is a pressure towards system and the objects they include can be concretely manipulated.[2] In other words, the general Western notion of concepts only occurs on relatively rare occasions.

In general, congeries and complexes merge into each other, so I prefer to simplify by contrasting congeries with concepts, while admitting that these two stages also blend into each other. The distinction is one of use and continuum. It is important to note that although people can construct their own categories, Vygotsky's work implies that other people reinforce, guide or debate our categorisation.

Another consequence of this argument about categories is that category boundaries are not always distinct: they can blend into one another or overlap; they can fade out; they can be arranged in a mutually dependent system or be treated as isolated (Taylor, 1989). In which case, liminality cannot be a given (as implied by Mary Douglas or Victor Turner). For a group, or process, to be liminal it has to be made so, and this process needs to be investigated. We further need to ask why it is that certain ambiguities and boundary issues (which are not rare in any category) become emphasised and others do not. We can also ask what happens to categories when their use online may become separate from the manipulation of things, and moves into the attempted manipulation of people.

These theories show us that categories are not immutable, even if they are affected by the nature of the world. They are often subject to dispute. Similarity between category members can vary. Categories in most circumstances are variable, to a degree to be determined, depending on what people need to do with them. In few cases are all members of a category equally good members of that category, and this further enables flexibility and the use of rhetoric. Placing things in a category evokes the assumed knowledges associated with that category.

Prototypes

Eleanor Rosch was perhaps the first to point out that some category members are 'better' than others, and that category members are not all similar in the same way. For example, people in the US hold that a robin is a better example of 'a bird' than a duck or an ostrich. Likewise, a chair is a better example of furniture than a vase or a refrigerator (Taylor, 1989, pp. 43-44). These 'better' members may be similar to the central items of a radial congerie. Again, category members are not always linked by uniform definition and can have degrees of membership.

Some consequences of this are that anything which can be labelled as belonging to a category with prototypes can then appear to take on characteristics of that prototype (Taylor, 1989, p. 45). Prototypes are easy to remember, and memory tends to make situations more prototypic (p. 53). What constitutes a good prototype can also vary, depending on the comparison being made and the situation it is being made in.

I define category norms as the explicit or explicable properties which express prototypicality. These are vital in the moral theories seeming to cluster around much category membership. People who self-categorise as members of particular groups will tend to try and impose category agreement on each other as a condition of group membership, and this leads to a relation between power and communication. Prominent members of a group will frequently be seen to express category norms, even if they do not. To some extent status is a dynamic occurring between people approaching category prototypicality, while prominence in the group can modify the prototype.

Communication and Power

It is important not to confuse communication with what we call 'good communication' and dismiss bad communication as unessential noise. Most, if not all, communication is erroneous to a degree, and may not contribute to harmony. Communication is not a transfer of contents between people (involving 'flow' and 'absorption'), but a continual active process of mutual adjustment which depends upon the interpretation and framing of communicative events. Variation implies that communication involves checking the responses of others with our expectations. Having expectations and making interpretations is a necessary part of communication, but having congruence of mental states, or message contents, is not.

As communication is about shaping a predicted response, it involves power at its outset. Peckham defines the meaning of a communicative act as the response it engenders, with indeterminacy of behaviour being resolved by the multiplication of codes or the use of force (Peckham, 1979, pp. xv, xvii, 66-67). Peckham defines a culture as a conglomeration of rhetorics which maintains behaviour through constant reiteration (p. 169). In his theory culture is a strategy for postponing the use of what he calls the four sanctions: deprivation, separation, torture and death (pp. xviii, 172). Though one may hesitate to claim that culture is a concept rather than a congerie, this definition is a tool drawing attention to issues of rhetoric and power.

One way of succeeding in rhetoric is by framing the debate in favourable, widely reiterated and 'understood' terms. Another method is by defining category membership of the arguers. We shall first of all deal with framing.

Framing

As communication is not a transfer of contents, it is always ambiguous to a degree. Some of the ambiguity in communication is reduced by language being embedded within, and partially consisting of, a 'framing' of ritual, etiquette, gestures, artefacts, tasks, place, forms of speech, types of symbol, tones of speech, types of font, modes of deference and so on, which comment upon the situation, telling people about the message and reducing ambiguity of response. Framings tell people how things are likely to proceed and convey expectations about the other people involved, and their expectations of them. Framing displays, or reinforces, the situation of coaction and can make an utterance performative in Austin's (1962) sense.[3]

There is no necessity for communication or events to be framed similarly. Different framings can intersect. Framings are not necessarily stable; they may be challenged. Different groups in the society may use framings differently. Being able to successfully 'define' the framings in play allows

a person or group to define the debate, as they then influence the meanings and responses of those involved. In all cases, the identity category of self and other is a major framing.

Self-identity

Societies, through language and group divisions, offer a variety of ways of categorising self and other. These categories convey knowledge about category membership and hence the identity of self and others. Some of these categories are pre-given and some will develop. Self-categories are relational and self-identity arises in relationship with others, both as an act of categorisation and as a mode of framing which helps people interpret others. People categorise themselves, and are categorised by others, as belonging to particular groups, which are categorised in relationship to other groups.

A category of people often need only be named to have an effect; it need not have any other 'real' properties. For example, experiments show that people who were randomly allocated group membership without knowing the other members of the group were biased in favour of their group (Turner et al, 1987, pp. 27-28). Similarly, Biernat et al (1996) found that US college students would embrace positive stereotypes associated with their fraternity or sorority, as highly self-descriptive. They did not deny negative stereotypes as valid, but claimed they were general: everyone is really 'bad' in the way that *we* are supposed to be.

Those properties (conscious or unconscious) which announce, or are announced by, category membership, are also category norms, although only prototypic members need possess most of them. Cancian suggests that 'individuals conform to norms in order to validate an identity' (1975, p. 137). As category-norms gather around or create reciprocal identities, they may induce mutually rejecting, exaggerating, complementary or cooperative behaviour. However, these norms need not be underlying; they can be created in crisis or confrontation with difference. If category norms arise in, or are mobilised to deal with, particular types of situations, then an appearance of value hierarchy may be given by the recurrence of certain happenings and the rarity of others. This appearance may change completely with the introduction of new events or challenges to authority. Values formulated in times of lesser stress may have little impact on behaviour or values formulated in times of greater stress.

People can be forced to belong to a category by the actions and reactions of others. People may go along with such impositions, not only to avoid the sanctions of enforcement, but because otherwise communication and coaction is constantly disrupted by the 'incorrect' interpretations of others.

Rhetoric and Social Category

We have seen that people tend to think their category has certain virtues. Furthermore, persuasiveness of an argument increases if people are told it came from a group to whom they were similar, and diminishes if they are told the arguments came from a dissimilar group (Turner et al, 1987, p. 160; Haslam et al., 1996). Thus, discovering, inventing, implementing and persuading others of these category differences becomes a prime social dynamic.

People tend to be evaluated positively by fellow category members to the degree they are perceived as prototypic of the category to which they all belong (Turner et al, 1987, p. 57). Outgroup members are less attractive the more they can be perceived as prototypic of a negative outgroup (p. 60). The most prototypic ingroup member is the most persuasive (Turner et al, 1987, p. 155; van Knippenberg et al, 1994). The degree of persuasiveness of a statement is 'exactly equivalent' to the degree it is perceived to exemplify some ingroup norm or property (Turner et al, 1987, p. 154). Persuasion from a current opinion is also easier if the opinion is not relevant to self-identity as a member of other groups (Festinger, 1960, p. 294).

Hopkins & Reicher (1997) show how effective persuaders: a) define category boundaries so as to include as many of the audience as possible; b) try to make the audience and speaker part of a common category; c) construct the recommended actions or beliefs as congruent, or prototypic, with this category; and d) try to make opposing arguments represent an outgroup category.

Categorisation is most successful when it already corresponds to recognised social factions. Conflict framing can strengthen category norms, thus causing 'ambiguous' individuals to be expelled and helping to bring the group to a more extreme position.

Category and Rhetoric Online

About Cybermind

Cybermind is a mailing list founded by Alan Sondheim and Michael Current in mid-1994 to discuss the sociology, epistemology and psychology of cyberspace. It is a list which has included academics, but it is not an academic list. I have been with the group since the beginning of 1995 and members are aware of my fieldwork and of the papers and thesis I have written about them.[4] The members of this group have shown exceptional flexibility and cooperativeness; and their willingness to discuss almost anything makes the disruption of the list by ethnography almost impossible.

Cybermind has been through many vicissitudes, and at its peak had about 400 members and a volume of over 50 posts a day. If its population can be characterised briefly, it is as middle-class intellectuals from the English-speaking world, mainly the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Currently, it is going through a fallow period, with a small, relatively long-term active membership, a low intake of newcomers, and relatively low levels of mainly off-topic conversation, following a series of political arguments centred around the Bush administration's response to the 'war on terror', which seems to have led to a loss in population.

In the early days there were many offlist 'fleshmeets', as they were known, which were reported back to the list. These cumulated in the Cybermind conference in late 1996, in Perth, Western Australia. In its heyday the list can be seen as a continuation of the social pattern of forming voluntary and temporary interest groups common in the West, which add to the possibilities of survival for a middle class (particularly intellectuals or artists) increasingly displaced by a lowering of skilled employment opportunities, a decrease in the participation available in the state, increasing hierarchies, and increase in the relative power of the corporate sector.[5]

In its prime, the most frequently deployed self-category norms of the Cybermind 'community' could be listed as multi-gendered, leftist, concerned to make space for discussion, and so on. The presentation of this self-identity has a history and is by no means uniform. It was largely constellated in response to perceptions of difference and attack. This widespread self-identity category did not prevent the articulation of other political beliefs, and a few long-standing members were openly right-wing in orientation, although more representative of the libertarian than the conservative right.

Structures of Communication and Relations of Power

Relations of power are overtly affected by the way communication is structured and group categories can be applied, and this differs in different types of online group. Power relations may also be affected by the forces keeping a person employing the group, power relations offline (especially when people know each other), and the group's normal conventions about control (Marshall, 2000, Chapters 4 and 5; Marshall, 2004).

I will briefly summarise the forces affecting Cybermind. Although in theory the moderator can exert absolute power because all the mail goes through one set of software which the moderator can control, this is mitigated by the tendency of the list members to argue with moderator decisions, the relative weakness of the list as a self-category marker, and the ease of leaving or setting up alternative lists. The prime moderator during the period discussed here (1995-2-002) was Alan Sondheim, as Michael Current died in the first month of the list's life. Alan has usually shared moderator duties with another person; gender does not seem to have restricted this position. This is the only formal privilege which Alan can allocate, and as it involves much work it is not an unalloyed benefit and is hard to use to construct a power base, or form a special group which works together. On occasions, Alan has selected people to consult with on list crises; these groups seem to have existed only during those crises as a correspondence-sharing group, using the 'cc' function on email, and have had little long-term effect, or self-identity.

Furthermore, although people will request moderator assistance in disputes, onlist and offlist, it has proven difficult for the moderator to act as an arbitrator or to use his or her power without starting further disputes or provoking people to leave. The only real sanctions a moderator has are the ability to expel a member, and perhaps the ability to read a particular member's posts before forwarding them to the list. It is extremely hard for anyone else to act directly on another person, and the action has to be done by rhetoric. This rhetoric usually seems to involve framing the other's text, or framing the other directly by situating them in some kind of marked category which makes their actions comprehensible and reprehensible.

To some extent these structures of communication also seem to influence the kinds of space which are experienced online. The sensation of online space is by no means uniform, differing in mailing lists, MOOs (MUD Object Oriented) [6] and on the Web, as the structures of communication enable and restrict kinds of behaviour which can translate into 'spatiality'. Types of space can then frame arguments (Marshall, 2001). People are more likely to choose MOOs for subgroup or personally intimate interaction, as they have private 'rooms' which can take in a relatively controlled number of people, rather than using a list for such purposes. So, rather than discussing claims that online space resembles Deleuze and Guattari's 'smooth' (open or free) or 'striated' (structured) space (Bayne, 2004), it is probably better to investigate the particular spaces which are experienced, given the different structures of communication. Also, in a perfectly smooth space (such as a vacuum or a desert), it is extremely difficult to move in the way or direction you might wish to; thus the smooth space can be confining. Untrammelled freedom or diversity need not automatically appear through a communication structure.

Furthermore, because of the structures of communication it is relatively difficult for Internet groups to act as groups in relation to other groups, and as membership of many groups is common, the categories formed by group membership do not seem as strong as offline categories (such as political allegiance, nationality, gender and so on), and are frequently overpowered by these offline categories. Offline categories seem more effectively used for rhetorical purposes, as we shall see below.

Ambiguities of Presence

Living online is embedded in ambiguities.[7] Potential anonymity is a form of ambiguity, which both enables and restricts potential behaviour. It can enable some people who are shy or reticent (whether individually or through social compulsion) to present texts or images, but it can also deprive them of the reference to their daily living which might give their voice the authority of experience. A discussion of anything which disrupts conventional category identities can be extremely difficult in those circumstances, as other people can make exactly the same claims – 'How do you know I am not a dog?', to rephrase the old cartoon. People commonly attempt to uncover relevant offline categories to know how they should behave, or even how it is safe to behave. Online status and conventions can rarely be entirely insulated from the processes of offline status.

However, ambiguity is more fundamental than this; it may even involve a person's sense of their own presence. There is, for example, a suspension of closure in email communication, as email exchanges generally close in silence. There are not the grunts, acknowledgements, or exchange of farewells that people generally receive in offline communication. Much of the time a person will not know how they have been received, especially by a group, and in personal communication they may not even know if their email has arrived or been lost. Online presence only manifests itself when text is issued or when text is acknowledged, so a person cannot know if people they expect to be present, and give them support or response, are present or not. Whether you are being ignored, or not being responded to for another reason, is a constant question. A person who feels liberated to express opinions that they otherwise would conceal might find the uncertain patterns of response as difficult to deal with as overt attacks upon their person.

Ambiguity of presence tends to be the case, irrespective of whether the exchange is synchronous or asynchronous. In asynchronous communication with a group it is impossible to adjust the message according to the audience's response, and there is a high possibility that a topic you may have started will wander into unrelated areas, or for people's interpretation of what you

have written to vary considerably. In some cases, this variation may be deliberate, as when someone attempts to turn a thread about the competence of the President into a thread on the use of jelly in sex, but nevertheless it does mean that topics of interest or controversy can get buried under diverging threads. Even in synchronous communication, texts can intertwine so that it is difficult to tell who which part of the text is from, and how the text is put together. Furthermore, the perceived intertwining may differ at each station, making apparently dislocated or meaning-variant responses more frequent. Without normal cues it seems easy to read mail quickly in the context of a particular mood, or expectation, which frame it in unexpected ways. Again, meaning has a tendency to escape control, and presence can feel ambivalent. Similarly, because there are no visible markers of presence and status, and as there is usually a constant influx of new people, status may have to be constantly re-earned.

In a psychiatric context, Ruesch & Bateson have proposed that people can feel helpless or insecure if they do not receive acknowledgment of their messages, and claim that 'the individual feels paralysed if correction of erroneous interpretations is impossible' (1987, pp. 39-40). I have called this ambiguity of presence and reception 'asence' (it is neither 'presence' nor 'absence'), and suggest that asence is generally uncomfortable and that people work to reduce it. One way of reducing asence is to strive hard to frame one's comments (even though the frames may also escape); another is to try to guarantee a response by invoking or using flame, another is to try to regulate content by reference to the body, as in netsex [8], through trying to build intimacy, or by making contact with people offline (Marshall, 2003). Almost all these asence reduction methods are influenced by gender.

Issues of Framing

If we accept the problems of ambiguity in communication proposed earlier, then online it appears even harder to control the spread and diversity of interpretation. A person often cannot immediately perceive the response engendered, and cannot mould it by force or otherwise into a more expected format. Therefore framing becomes a marked activity, whether conscious or unconscious.

At present the kinds of framings employed seem marked categories largely imported from the external world. They include such devices as authenticity, use of public and private categories, locale, mood (or reference to bodily states, often generated by a reiteration of mooded texts), political viewpoint, gender, and use of the category of 'community'. In the space available, it is not possible to discuss all of these common frames.

Ambiguity of Gender and Gender as a Frame

Gender is an ambiguity which, while surrounded by assertions that it does not (or should not) matter online, is something people go to great lengths to discover, usually by applying conventional clichés. People may even drop contact with those whose offline gender remains uncertain, and they express great dislocation, and sometimes a sense of betrayal, when they discover that they have misread and mistaken the gender identity of someone who has become a friend. Whenever I say that I am writing about gender and the Internet, almost always someone will tell me such a story, as having happened to them or to a friend.

Gender marks one of the most common encounters with difference and it is not surprising that culture grows around it online and off. It is dubious whether hiding gender issues touches this culture in any deep sense. As Wallach Scott argues, feminism has a paradoxical relationship to gender categories:

To the extent that it acted for 'women' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse 'sexual difference' – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement. (1996, pp. 3-4)

On Cybermind, most people are identified by their name, and naming conventions, as male or female. Of those few who use ungendered pseudonyms, the majority are identified as male or female by use of a gendered name within their posts at some time in their life on the list. On the

whole amongst Cybermind members, gender is usually taken as clear. However, ambiguities can occur when people misread cues associated with gender. Thus, one male ('dobie') was commonly identified as female, probably because of his common use of emoticons, and written emotions, despite the fact that he made no effort to hide his offline gender. His professions of gender were ignored in the face of gender clichés.

Within my experience, rather than playing with multiplicity, people seem to seek out what we may call the authenticity of the other, often relying on conventions about the underlying nature of the body and emotions (Marshall, 2000, Chapter 7). Gender seemed to be a prime framing allowing the interpretation of authenticity and so could rarely be discarded, especially when discourse shifted into the private or intimate realm where authenticity becomes relational, and establishing that at least one of the dyad is a woman allows closeness to manifest more easily.

The common usage of gender to indicate authenticity is in tension with formal declarations that gender does not matter, also because of authenticity. When 'DaveS' (one of the few Cybermind members ever to openly admit membership of the military) expressed surprise that his fellow member 'Amethyst' was male, he stated that gender was fundamental to authenticity writing: 'Sex cannot be removed from the persona, it IS who we are! (changers and crossers be damned!)'. The response was almost uniformly hostile, and the criticisms were most often made in terms of authenticity and limitation. Amethyst himself explained the strength of the reaction as stemming from 'those who resist being limited and defined by gender based ideologies'. 'Daniel' added that:

the *performed* self of Cyberinteraction, although (constructed) by the user according to hir own desires of how they want to be perceived is still coded by us according to external cultural systems – now, while that affects how male/female/androgenous the cyberself is, the cyberself can be rewritten with the potential of total divorce from those relative issues of the *real* self – if the user has the ability to do that.

Gender categories can be attacked in the name of authenticity, at the same time as authenticity makes use of them.

Public and Private as a Gendered Frame

Discovering authenticity is marked by a series of conventions which are contradictory and paradoxical (Marshall, 2005) and which may undermine the search for truth or closeness. Nevertheless, people seem to wish to discover who the other person is, and what their 'real' gender is, and this increases the more that intimacy and privacy is invoked in the relationship. This demand for categorisation of another is frequently related to efforts to convey one's own 'correct' self-categorisation.

Role-playing seems much more acceptable as a public than as a private activity. Privacy can be a convention deployed to ascertain authenticity. Thus messages given offlist, or offline (in private), are more likely to be considered authentic than messages received onlist or online. As Kendall writes: '[People] privilege offline identity information over information received online ... This allows them to continue to understand identity in the essentialised terms of a persistent and consistent self, grounded in a particular physical body' (1998, p. 130).

This public/private division is often treated as an opposition or polarity but is actually ambiguous, with the apparently oppositionary categories shading into one another. This ambiguity is part of the dynamics of the division's deployment. However, it seems that the common category norms are that the public marks the domain of politics, social action, large groups and attack, and is predominantly 'masculine', while the private marks the domain of intimacy, 'domesticity', a dyad or small group, and protection, and is predominantly 'feminine'. [9]

To some extent these framings seem to define the prototypes of male and female. Given the apparent strengthening of frames and categories online, it is possible that the more the relationship moves into the private zone, the more important it is to find if the person is the 'correct' gender, and in Cybermind and more generally, this particularly means finding out that at least one of the dyad is female. This is why it seems to be so much more disturbing to discover that a person you had had close relations with, and thought was female, was 'in fact' male, than the other way around. It appears to transfer the private and intimate into the zone of public and attack.

This division also gives rise to questions about the way that mailing lists work. Most list life, indeed most online life, may not be public. Even a classroom-based online forum is not isolated from the politics and reprisals of the schoolyard or the college. Cybermind in particular was surrounded by what Alan Sondheim called list 'aura', a constant stream of hidden emails, telephone calls, visits and so on, between members. This presents a further problem for the researcher. In offline life it might be possible to observe that something is going on (people disappear into the bushes together or give each other 'meaningful' glances), but online this is not possible and we can only proceed by anecdote.[10] For example, one of my list friends demonstrated repeatedly that offlist interactions could give onlist interactions different meanings, by pointing out how some letters referred to offlist interactions in which she had participated and I had not. Newcomers may perceive this as a barrier. 'Dragon' wrote:

as a newbie I have to admit that I have found it hard to find a place to join a discussion here. I feel very outside the lot of you. Perhaps some of that can be attributed to all the offlist chatter (of which I am not a part at all).

However, there are always counterpositions. One new female list member wrote to me that 'in the six weeks or so that I've been on CM, I have probably posted more often to people I know only through CM *off-list*, than I have posted to the list itself'. The gender of the member may also be relevant to this, for interestingly, given the private/female association, all of my continuing, as opposed to intermittent, offlist contacts involved women. Alan similarly wrote that 'most of my correspondence off-list is with women, with "bursts" or "cycles" of correspondence with men'.

Associations of the offlist as intimate and female arose also when 'Rose' writes that 'women are perhaps *more* "mutually supportive" off-list than on? ("They aren't listening – now we can talk!")'. 'Morrigan' likewise wrote:

I've found, personally, that women become more open off list more easily. Women seem to make themselves more vulnerable to me a lot quicker than men do, but maybe that's because I am another woman, ie it has nothing to do with the originator but with the audience.

'Caitlin' wrote:

Usually, when I strike a chord, the mail I get backchannel is filled w/personal revelation and I haven't noticed any difference there. I haven't noticed men being somehow more careful w/me due to issues of sexual tension, either. Certainly that sort of tension exists, but I'll note that women are as likely to flirt w/me in email (and I w/them) as men are.

All these points suggest that investigations of online life cannot just focus on the public life of the group, which may be predominantly framed by males, but have to consider the web of private and intimate posts which give the group its 'depths' and some of the sense of the personal which seems to frame ideas of community.

Gender Categories Offline and On: in public

Gender categories and their norms are currently contested rather than entirely stable, which is not to deny the (often marked) relative differences in power ratios and life options between people in differing genders, but to suggest that these power differentials are still connected with prototypes organising the male domain as public and the female domain as intimate. Gender is a form of social organisation, an institution if you will, which manifests in what seem like individual, or personal, relationships and interactions, and operates through categorisation. It crosses over with many other social categories. The Internet will not in itself change these power differentials and organisations; it so far has not even changed the gender differentials in the time available to make use of it.

There is no necessary binary to the term of gender, but in practice it seems to be thought of as a binary. There was, for example, in 1995-96 a relatively large and visible lesbian population on Cybermind. However, it does not seem that they were treated as a special category by others, and although they interacted together offlist and sexually, the gossip which I heard does not suggest that the analysis needed extra terms or detail.[11] Similarly, in this period there was a least one 'male' member who was self-regarded as transgendered, but this was largely unknown to most of the male population and was never publicly proclaimed to the group. Again these events seem

examples of the female domain being categorised as more intimate and private. Neither were there many self-proclaimed gay males outside the first six months of list life. This does indicate something, perhaps, about fear of the public and fear of males specifically, or that Cybermind was never able to present itself as quite as accepting as some would have liked, which affected 'category deviant' men more than women.

In a group like Cybermind there seems relatively little opportunity to exploit gendered differences in labour, but there is the possibility of exploitation of gendered differences in personal relations via either emotional or sexual demands. There is some evidence of this, but it must be inferred from incidents; the official and enunciated Cybermind norm would be that women should be free from harassment. However, anecdotally, it does seem that some men had, amongst some women, a reputation for being emotionally needy, or for making passes which could be accepted or rejected with relative ease. Sometimes women acted as bridges between men. I know that one man inquired after my health and condition to a mutually known woman before asking me, while I assumed that a particular woman had smoothed things over between myself and another man. This may imply that in some circumstances online, an important part of females' role is engaging in some kind of emotional labour, just as they might offline (Erikson, 2005). It is possible the female-instigated production of one-line jokes, after the ructions of the period before the Iraq war, was an emotional labour of looking after the health of the list. Occasionally a particular woman, such as Rose, might become visible as particularly skilled in this form of labour and, as a prototype, become extremely high-status.

If, as has been asserted earlier, public space is associated with the male, then visibility of opinion and hence the definition of the world, or display of power, will be largely confined to men (or people who are by default considered to be men), and there is little doubt that in some cases these power differentials have been transported across to the Internet. Susan Herring has done the most persuasive work in this field. In her study of the discussion lists LINGUIST and Megabyte University, Herring found that women participated 'at a rate that is significantly lower than that corresponding to their numerical representation'. She also states that 'the messages contributed by women are shorter ... a very long message invariably indicates that the sender is male', and that 'messages posted by women consistently received fewer average responses than those posted by men [T]opics initiated by women are less often taken up as topics of discussion by the group as a whole' (Herring, 1996, p. 480). However, subsequent research has not everywhere confirmed these results, and results may be influenced by the structures of communication, by the salience of gender categories and by population distribution. There is, as far as I can see, no concerted and deliberate attempt by all males on Cybermind to monopolise onlist space. The statistical evidence shows women are among the most voluminous posters, that the response rates to males and females is similar, and the average length of posts is also similar (Marshall, 2000, Appendix I).[12]

This seems to have been the case from the beginning. Women have always been in the minority on Cybermind, yet have a significant visible presence. Over 300 people subscribed to the list during the first month, and at least 60 people posted. Women made up 25% of the active population and made 32% of the posts. Well over half of the total known posts were made by the twelve most prolific posters, or by less than one-eighth of the total active group. Six of these twelve most prolific posters were women. The active presence of women was clear at the time to some members; 'fido', one of the more prolific female posters, wrote:

One of the things I've found really refreshing about this list – and this will be the first and probably the last time I hitch my post to a fe/male observation where I equate such distinctions with something positive – is the number of female names attached to messages. I don't think I have ever been on a list with so many (presumed) female voices. (3 July 1994)

Although the disparity may not be present, it is still known of and might be brought up on Cybermind in arguments about gender.

Gender, Flame and Dispute

The category association in much research, and indeed on Cybermind itself, is that most aggressive, 'flaming' behaviour arises from males. However, women did participate in personal disputes. Almost immediately after one dispute in the first week of the list's life, in which almost

the participants were female, another woman proposed that women were much less prone to flame and was not challenged. This dispute, although overtly about proofreading posts and correct spelling, was also about whether swearing and flaming drove women away from lists. The expressed opinion of most of the women who participated in the dispute (who seem to have known each other from the FutureCulture list), and who remained on Cybermind, was that bad spelling and obscenities both coded for genuine (authentic) expression, which should not be trammelled by 'rules' (Marshall, 2004).

However, the organising category association between males and 'violence' seems to guide perception. This association is also embraced by some males, either critically or as a self-identifier. There also appears to be a reluctance to observe female 'violence', dispute or assertion, even when in a 'good cause'. For example, Hall's (1996) account of the SAPHO list implies people could be removed for not appearing female. This was not unreasonable as this list was meant to be only for women, and thus was a target for attack with, at that time, little security in guaranteeing the 'real' gender of participants. Some struggle occurred over whether the rather clichéd definitions of this 'appearance' were legitimate or not. Similarly, women on Cybermind seemed as determined to defend their list from attack as the men. Women also seemed to become involved in internal disputes as readily as men, even though men may have formed the majority of participants in most disputes. This may not be uncommon. Witmer & Katzman concluded their statistical research online by writing that 'The data do not support the ... hypothesis that men use more challenging language and flame more often than women' (1998, pp. 7, 9-10). However, subjectivity in ranking flames is marked. It is exceedingly difficult to define flame; it is a congerie, and the guiding principle might be that it is largely *other* people who flame – *we* just make robust or pointed comment.

It is also possible that the normal, relatively low levels of hostility and absence of list-wide flame wars, particularly in the first six months of fieldwork, were indeed part of the reason for the obvious presence and participation of women, particularly given the kind of verbal violence and invocation of sexual assault and harassment found more generally on the Internet.

An Attack and Its Aftermath

In this section we shall see how members of Cybermind subliminally engage in creating culture, attempting to control responses, and implementing an identity through opposition to already known identities of outsiders. In this sense 'culture' is not only a process but contingent, even though it is limited by wider categories and processes.

In mid-1995, the group was visited by its first overt 'troll', who was known as 'Gordon'.^[13] This was important for revealing, not only something about Cybermind's gender categories, but also the way that community categories could be applied. Gordon's initial posts included one on reputed bumper stickers about guns, such as 'Guns don't kill people, I do', and a defence of flaming, which told how he recently found himself:

in a flame war with a group of sanctimonious profeminist men. I began with, I thought, some rather gentle needling and their reaction was ferocious. Of course, certain groups would likely be touchier than others, but what really got them going was that my flames generally had a grain of critical truth in them.

Another member of the list later told me that these posts 'generally centered on varying aspects of how [the mailing list] profemen was populated by sensitive new age wimps'.

Both these initial posts would place Gordon in a very specific political and self-identity category (as imposed by others), and would be motivators of either welcome or hostility in most places on the Internet. Categories from the offline world take greater importance online in defining who people might be and these are strong framings.

Alan responded to Gordon as follows:

I think there are a number of problems with flames – first of all, it's not true that they don't happen in real life – they happen all the time in Brooklyn on the street. Second, they tend to take over a Usenet group when they happen. Third, they are a particularly male/aggressive way of arguing; they don't really determine the truth or falsity of anything. Fourth, on email lists, they can be really obstructive to whatever discussion is going on. And fifth, because they embody a

fairly aggressive style, they drive out other subscribers/readers who either don't want to or don't feel the ability to participate. I'd also add that they break down community as well.

This response is notable for its impersonality, it does not attack Gordon, but nevertheless situates flaming as male, as driving away other people, as taking over a list, and as destroying 'community'. Not only has Gordon provoked a response about gender, but gender (implicitly feminine) is being associated with community and protection.

Another response, from 'steven', is less focused on the gender aspects, but nevertheless is clear on the personal, (private) and safety aspects of community. Indicators of the feminine abound:

I would agree with what Alan said about flames. To me, cyberspace is NOT a 'place' where people lose themselves but rather where one can find and explore the most secret and tender tendrils of their person and others. To finally delurk, only to have some other unknown entity rip the viscera out of one's words and feelings can be devastating. I want everyone to be able to feel comfortable to reveal all the aspects of their beauty.

A third response, this time from 'Nan', also contrasted community with flame:

community can't exist without civility, and flames burn that out with aggressive posturing that intimidates, generating lots of heat but little light. And this list has for me a precious, almost miraculous feeling of community – a sense that I think springs from an unspoken commitment to civil discourse and respect for the wonderful diversity of its members.

These responses might shed a rather rosy light on the gentility of all Cybermind members to each other. After all, the spelling dispute mentioned above led to the anti-flaming person leaving the flame-ridden environment. It is easy to ignore the actual performance of a self-category group and concentrate on the norms. Others suggested that flaming could strengthen 'community', and some were more similar to Gordon politically than they were to the rest of the group, although they had no connection to him. If Gordon had spent some time building visibility and connections on the list, then his disruptive effect might have been considerably greater, as those who politically self-categorised in his direction would have more likely cooperated with him. As it was, Gordon was clearly a newcomer with no part in the list aura, marking himself as 'different' and disruptive. The category norms of the group were being explicated in response to difference, and the term 'community' was being used both to include group members and by implication to potentially exclude Gordon and his behaviour.

Gordon's own responses appeared to be preoccupied with both attacking and conflating 'sensitivity' and 'weakness' in males. His preoccupation with establishing, defending, or being prototypic of 'traditional' masculine categories could be said to be counterpositional to prototypes easily mobilisable on Cybermind.

Gordon repeatedly used the term 'weenie' (usually associated in the US with small penises) as a term of abuse; wrote that a group which was disrupted by flames was weak; implied that anyone with hurt feelings was a wimp; and wrote of the 'S[ensitive] N[ew] A[ge] G[uy] virus', which destroys the mind and sense of humour. He recommended reading Hemingway and Mailer as cures, neither of whom is particularly noted for their sense of humour, but rather for their 'masculinity'. He recurrently used phrases implying the naturalness of competitive or aggressive communication, such as 'If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen', and 'If you go to the park you have to poop with the big dogs'. He occasionally referred to women by masculine pronouns, as if the audience was naturally male. For him, the Internet was unrelievedly and unambiguously framed as male, public and open space, whereas members of Cybermind defined the space as private, resembling a living room or group meeting space.

Members of the group perceived this focus on masculinity as in keeping with the importance of categories of gender online, and in relation to offlist issues. Various list members wrote in response: '[this] strikes me as the white, male backlash-inspired flame war'; 'this is a part of being male, is it, the urge to be a nuisance to others, just to prove how big our pricks are or something???'; 'you seemed to assume that the group should operate according to stereotypically "masculine" testosterone-laced communication styles. Quite a few of us on this group are women, and our presence here does affect the communication style of the list'. Again, the feminine is associated with peaceful interaction. The group consciously fought against exclusionary gender regimes, even though this did not destroy gender-based regimes in practice.

Eventually Gordon was expelled from the list, although this provoked considerable criticism of Alan for expelling him. The dispute over the expulsion may have lasted longer than the dispute with Gordon, and shows some of the difficulties Alan had of activating patterns of obedience.

In online society (particularly on lists and newsgroups), a very few people can set the mood for the society and the way messages are framed. Gordon did not actually occupy very much list space; other conversations went on unheeding of him and unheeded by him. However, the emotional or reiterative uniformity of his posts seems to have given people the impression that he was dominating the list and that the list now had a certain kind of tone. This is a general phenomena and it does not take many people to assume that males are 'violent' or females are 'cooperative' to drive away those who disagree, and to produce societies which are essentially gendered in tone and eventually segregated. Sometimes it seems that the only way cooperation can exist is for it to ruthlessly expunge its attackers, which in itself can lead to fragmentation.

There have been several examples of breakaway or fragmentary lists on Cybermind. One arising soon after the events involving Gordon was a gender-based list called 'emma', which demonstrates that even though the public posting and presence of women did not decline, the list's aspirations towards being multi-gender could not always hold up. I first heard of 'emma' in January 1996, when it was mentioned in an offlist response to a survey. It was exceedingly difficult to get information about this group, and eventually (from three people) I received two different stories of its origin. Both stories agreed it was formed in September 1995. One story said it was formed by about 20 women and:

one biological male who has a female soul out of disgust at the dominantly male point-of-view [...] It sprang forth [...] following the weird summer on cm ... The original intent was to have a women's place, where friends whose voices we valued could come and speak freely without the competitive, judgmental, talking-down atmosphere some of us were feeling from particular men on the lists. (Not *all* of them, mind you).

The other, slightly less definite, story was that:

Emma was being formed in response to events on future culture [another mailing list with a high level of overlap with Cybermind], and that some women who were on cybermind only were invited to participate by women who were on both lists.

I only know the identities of eight members of 'emma', all members of Cybermind, of whom three were also members of FutureCulture, but this bias in favour of Cybermind members is probably linked to my sources. The list was private and by invitation only: 'We decided once the list was up and running well, we'd nominate people for membership and it would have to be unanimous'. The list was very active on opening but 'we had a major falling out in November over whether to open the list to men, and truth to tell, it has never recovered'. However another person, writing at about the same time, claimed that 'It seems to be picking up lately, mostly with posts from younger, grad student women – and the topics are exceedingly personal, and I treasure that'. Subsequent reports suggest that the list died soon after. These stories again suggest the connection between gender, privacy, intimacy and community, and the slight contradiction of the expectations of all-female harmony. The 'emma' list shows issues of power. Even in an 'equitable' list, facing men over the issues seemed impossible; the only possibility was to split. On the whole the clustering of the categories is similar to that provoked and embodied by Gordon.

The Category of 'Community'

'Community' is not a concept but a congerie, and cannot be defined. In a well-known article, George Hillery looked at 94 different definitions of community by sociologists, concluding the one thing they all had in common was that they dealt with people (1955, p. 119). Konig claims that 'one could easily append to [Hillery's] bibliography at least as many important sources again' (1968, p. 22). Given this variety, it is pointless to engage in the fruitless question of whether online groups are 'real' communities or not.[14] We can, however, ask what aspects of life are enabled or restricted in online groups, and observe how the term is deployed: to evoke and build connections; to give political legitimacy; to support the feeling of commonality or difference; or to delimit and support identity. On the whole it seemed clear that the idea of the list as community was one

which was positively received. Even within the first week of the list's operation, people were discussing whether Cybermind did or could constitute a 'community', and what that would mean for people.

We have already seen that the category of community was mobilised and associated with openness and relatively low aggression when the list was faced with the disruption produced by Gordon, even if this was not the case at other times. Specifically it seems a community in which people should not be excluded by gender, but it also seems based on the idea that men are potentially dangerous to community and women are safe and accepting of the intimacy necessary for community. As such, gender is important for the schemas which are in play.

At a more abstract level we can say that list members often distinguish what are called 'community posts' to the list by their irrelevance to the list topic and/or by their personal nature. For example, Alan can imply the difference in writing: 'This list has developed a sense of community, which is great, and a lot of good discussion, which is great'. The list tended to emphasise the 'personal' and 'private'. Descriptions of offline events, often featuring personal aspects of people's lives, were relayed to the list. For example, 'Caitlin' and 'Janet' both described their experiences in hospital and the support they received from online friends. Alan described and theorised about a meeting with a schoolfriend, possibly someone he once loved, which started a small thread, not only of sympathy but of people writing about their own ex-schoolfriends and experiences at school. Rose sketched her experiences in a street parade in her home town, and so on. However, such posts can easily drive away those looking for a topic-based list or those with little time, and thus diminish the list.

At one time a member proposed to set up a separate list for off-topic conversations and was greeted with opposition. For example, 'Tom' wrote:

Cybermind would no longer be Cybermind, and I for one feel that the sense of community would be lost. While I greatly enjoy the intellectual conversations here, is the personal snippets and 'off topic' stuff that makes this list *human*

'Vijay', in his only post for that month, claimed that he agreed with Tom: 'the personal, intimate nature of this list is stunning. Please dont tamper with it.' Much later, another list was set up specifically for on-topic discussions, as Alan was worried the volume of the off-topic discussion was driving people away. This new list was almost always dead, and had *less* on-topic discussion in terms of volume than its parent list. The dynamics may well be different for lists which arise from an existing offline group, but it is possible that this association of 'community' with intimacy may have been part of what made the list seem open to women. Even the most flame-prone males on the list never strenuously objected to its presence, even when political difference was invoked.

However, increased communication does not necessarily prevent wars (as has been occasionally argued on the list). Openness of communication can generate unexpected differences. Faced with a person writing that they occasionally found the US bent of the list difficult, another person asked 'why do you hate America?'. As this question contained an implicit requirement to either not answer it, give reassurance, or deny the 'dislike', it appeared that communication was not occurring, when communication (e.g. writing about what one did find difficult about the US) was making things worse. A previously nonexistent hostility was *created* through communication. Even people sympathetic to the original difficulty saw the responses as anti-American, and did not perceive the hostility of some of the US-based posters towards non-Americans. In this case it was lack of communication (i.e. becoming quiet) that restored a sense of 'community'. However, as the idea of asence implies, people on a list cannot be silent together; they cannot sit and share presencing. Something eventually has to be 'said', hence the role of jokes. This is an example of knowing when to keep silent but still demonstrate presence.

National identity categories and the difference involved may be reinforced by encountering others, rather than diminished, as is often argued. The offline identity category of the 'we' as American was stronger than the 'we' of Cybermind. The 'other' side was grouped as non-American, rather than as German, British, Canadian or Australian. This was particularly pronounced after the 'war on terror' began, after which many of the non-American members expressed difficulty with the Bush administration's actions and could easily be categorised as 'anti-American', even by those Americans who could have belonged to the 'we' who opposed the Bush administration's actions. In this latter case it was notable that although the dispute involved

persons of both genders, most of the one-liner and sexual innuendo posts were begun by, or continued by, women. Ideas of community were also occasionally introduced to make linkage, but ultimately failed.

Offline 'fleshmeets' have already been mentioned, but online meetings between two or more groups, in different parts of the world, also occurred, usually via MOOs. However, meetings as groups were relatively rare, possibly due to organisational difficulties, such as deciding on a time.[15] It was easier for people to meet online as pairs or by accident (people spending time and building characters on the same MOOs), and this happened with considerable frequency, leading to a large and shifting set of relationships, which often involved attempts at online pairing. This was the subject of much gossip, and possibly influenced the history of the list in more indirect ways. These relationships either became so strong that they no longer appeared on Cybermind, but went offlist entirely, undermining the list community, or else they fractured, not always amicably, and one party or both left the list, not wanting to be in the same space as the other.

Obviously the full complexities of this gossip will never be available to me, but for me this gossip nearly always came through women, as might be expected, given that it was conveyed in private communication. Communicating this kind of information in public on the list seemed frowned upon, and people not involved (usually women, again) would frequently complain about the violation of privacy. Listening to the gossip not only conveyed something about a network of women and cross-gender relationships, but also some kind of subversiveness, as the gossip frequently mocked, or showed the clay feet of, the higher-status and better-known members of the group (men as well as women). I am not sure, again, but it seems probable that this kind of mutual offlist meeting and discussion of the group is not as common as it was, and possibly accounts for Cybermind's present fallowness, although I would not want to imply that all online groups are like this. The importance of these relationships stemmed directly from people's way of making themselves into 'community', as well as the potential to act in this manner.

Conclusion

'Culture' seems to be created by a daily politics of categorisation of self and others, reaction to difference and the implementation of power relations in communication. It does depend on commonalities, but also upon differences and the contingencies of argument and mobilisation within the restraints of social living, and these may include things such as the structures of communication. As such, culture is never one thing; it is situated within a range of diversities and reactions to perceived difference. These differences are not a falling-away from the pure rules of one culture, but a vital part of what drives it. Any description of a culture will always be partial, just as any attempt to use the term 'culture' will result in a congerie not a concept; and this may be exactly what we need.

One way out of the impasse of unified ways of looking at culture is to look at the way categories and persuasions are deployed in action, in the various processes that people classify themselves and others in responses to particular situations, and to see communication in terms of interactions and responses rather than in terms of conveying content. I have attempted to apply these tools to life on an Internet mailing list, particularly looking at the way gender categories are deployed in the formation of self-categorisings around community, and the relation between public and private categories. Some of these categories seemed to be in conflict, and sometimes these conflicts were an important part of the way the categories could be deployed, and category norms and prototypes displayed and constructed.

It seems that gender does not necessarily influence the number of posts a person makes to Cybermind; however, gender is still important to the way the group functions and organises itself, even allowing for variety, which generates conflict and change. Gender does seem to be connected to intimacy and to the hidden network which formed around the list, giving it its sense of itself. Offlist correspondence and emotional labour involving women seems to be of great importance to the list 'community', making different experiences for males and females probable. However, even with this 'glue', differences evoked by categories of nationality and politics can overwhelm the deployment of community, probably because of the difficulty of self-categorising as a member of

Cybermind, and deploying that membership elsewhere with other such members. Offline social categories, and the identities formed within them, cannot be ignored when people use the Internet.

Notes

- [1] This article is a modified version of a presentation made at the CRESC (Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change) conference 'Culture and Social Change: disciplinary exchanges', held at Manchester University, UK, 11-13 July 2005.
- [2] This does not deny the possibility that the category may also express something about the world as it appears in those situations.
- [3] My use of the term 'frame' comes from Agar (1994, p. 130), although it is not unique to him. The idea goes back, at least, to Malinowski's 'context of the situation' (1949, p. 306ff.). The term has been changed into a verb, to imply that framing is not 'set', but active and even competitive. For a good short summary of many approaches, see MacLachlan & Reid (1994).
- [4] I run the currently functioning list website, which may be found at: <http://www.geocities.com/jpmarshall.geo/cybermind/index.html>. These pages include copies of the papers, the thesis and ongoing work.
- [5] Justification for this argument is given in my thesis (Marshall, 2000).
- [6] A MOO is one of the family of 'multi-roomed' online places for interaction. The earliest forms were called Multi-user-Dungeons, or MUDs, and in some stories reflect their origins in attempts to transfer Dungeons and Dragons types of role-playing games to online environments. Others claim that MUD stands for Multi-user-Domain. A MOO is a 'MUD Object Oriented' which refers to the user's ability to make their own objects.
- [7] I have attempted to summarise most of the ambiguities of online life and gender in a conference paper (Marshall, 2005). A more polished version will appear in a forthcoming book.
- [8] Flame is the name given to vituperative, and usually personal, responses to someone else's message. There is no set definition, as might be expected. Netsex is when people attempt to have sex via the net, usually by typing descriptions of sexual activity at each other, and collaborating in the unfolding story.
- [9] No claims whatsoever are being made about the universality of these categories, or that the category norms are accurate. Clearly 'the home' is not a safe or protected place for many women.
- [10] One female list member did conduct an offlist survey about people's offlist contacts, with the avowed intention of turning this information into an article. Frustratingly, this never happened and I believe the data were lost. My own attempts at such surveys failed. This may be a case in which the gender of the researcher was important in accessing the private, intimate side of the list.
- [11] Such lack of gossip to me, a male, hardly proves that lesbian behaviour online does not require further analysis or even different categories of analysis. I am simply claiming that it does not seem to affect the analysis of this particular group.
- [12] In a forthcoming article in a book I am editing, Alexanne Don will argue that although the statistical evidence of gender activity on Cybermind is as I suggest, the linguistic evidence still implies that dominance and deference operate in gendered ways.
- [13] 'Troll' is the common name given to a person who specifically attempts to embroil a group in argument, and thus to flood that group with reactions to them. It suggests a person who can tolerate only low degrees of absence. The responses they get definitely prove they exist.
- [14] Accusations of unreality have been surprisingly common in supposedly sympathetic accounts of online life. For example, Nunes writes 'Cyberspace ... like a Disneyland for Enlightenment conceptions of community ... [is] a simulacrum of community, deferring the moment of realisation that community no longer exists' (1997, p. 173).
- [15] It was, in practical terms, impossible to choose a time at which many people in the US, the UK and Australia could all be online together. Formal MOO meets tended to be between US and Australian members, or US and UK members.

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