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ON..... 18 May 2004.....

.....  
Sec. Research Graduate School Committee

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## ADDENDUM

p 66: Add at end of para 3:

### Boundary – The Historical Use of ‘Boundary’ in Community Studies

“There are social processes which maintain both the boundaries *and* the equilibrium of a system relative to other systems which constitute its environment. For the continued existence of systems, there must also be exchange across their boundaries with other systems” (Abercrombie et al, 1994:36).

The concept of ‘boundary’ is inherent in all conceptualisations of community. Community, from whichever theoretical perspective it is considered, relates to a discrete social system of people. Without a boundary to differentiate it, the community dissolves into the larger social scene. The identification and maintenance of a boundary is essential to the formation and sustainability of ‘community’. In Chapters One and Two, the historical development of the concept of both a real and a virtual community in sociological analysis was outlined. Whilst many theories of community are not overtly concerned with discussing ‘boundary maintenance’ with the same emphasis as Cohen, it is clear that ‘boundary’ is a defining feature of community.

Tönnies embeds a distinct boundary between society and community (Tönnies, 1887/1974). Where the boundary is manifested in day-to-day life will differ according to the society, but clearly there is an important delineation between community boundaries and the wider society. Similarly, Durkheim’s theoretical division between mechanical and organic solidarity suggests that the boundary which defines organic solidarity is manifested through the signifiers of a commonality of group identity, values, beliefs, norms and customs (Loomis & McKinney, 1957:13). Subsequent research in the sociology of community employed a rural/urban dichotomy, where the dimensions of the community under study were examined and defined (see Redfield, 1941., Lynd & Lynd, 1929., Oeser & Hammond, 1954 for example). It was only through the identification of the community’s boundary that the dimensions within are able to be explored.

Many of the early sociological studies of community delineated the boundaries of communities by geographic parameters. However, territory (and subsequent boundaries) may not necessarily be restricted to physical space. To summarise, Goffman (1971) differentiates between eight types of physical and psychological preserves (or territories) over which the individual has control. These preserves relate to personal body space, the physical space in which the individual is situated, the expectations and uses of physical space, the possessions or objects used by the individual, the information and knowledge about the individual and the conversational space being used by the individual to interact with other people. These preserves/territories are physical and psychological spaces, with boundaries defined by ‘markers’ (Goffman, 1971:41). These markers may be real or symbolic indicators of the boundaries of these territories and assist the individual and others to negotiate and/or violate the individual’s territories. Goffman emphasised that territory and boundaries may be physical or conceptual, and are equally as important for individuals as for wider social arrangements.

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Kantor and Lehr (1975) refined Goffman's notion of the territorial preserves of individuals and focused on the dimensions of territories in families. It is only through the interaction between family members and non-family members in the family territory that social relationships become meaningful. The dimensions of the family territory relating to physical and conceptual space, time and energy are meaningful only if they are delineated by a boundary encasing the family.

If a family system fails to develop a territory, it virtually ceases to exist, for it becomes indistinguishable from the larger space. It is in the working out of its bounding activities, and marking off how it is the same or different from those around, that a family operationally defines itself to the community (Kantor and Lehr, 1975: 68).

The concept of physical and conceptual boundaries has been explored in relation to individuals, families and communities. More recently, social network analysis (as outlined in Chapter One) has deconstructed the concept of a community boundary further. Social network analysis emphasises community as a process and provides a conceptual map of the diversity of relationships that exist within a community. The map attempts to explain community, not as a static entity occupying a defined locality, but as a network of social relationships that are constantly shifting and creating new boundaries of community. From this perspective, the boundary of the community is critical in defining the limits of the social network of relationships. The boundary represents at any single point in time the theoretical exhaustion of all ties/relationships within the community.

Symbolic interactionist perspectives on community define boundary in more abstract or intangible ways. Such perspectives, including Cohen's work, view the boundary of a community as defined and delineated by a set of symbols. Such symbols are the essential feature of a community, and are the ways in which the boundaries of the community are manifested and recognised by community members and outsiders. Cohen uses the concept of boundary as the central feature of community (Cohen, 1985). Cohen's work contributes to the broader research and theory development of boundary by severing boundary from that of physical space and reconceptualizing boundary as a symbolic construct.

For Cohen, the essential symbols of boundary are those that define the normative codes, values and beliefs enclosed within the community (Cohen, 1985: 19). He explores how these community symbols are juxtaposed with those symbols external to the community, thus creating a community boundary. How these symbols of values and beliefs are expressed will differ depending on the community members. For some communities, these symbols of boundary may be evident through the use of rituals, customs and traditions, membership hierarchies, codes of behaviour and rules of interaction, and dominant ideology. The symbols of the community boundary are arguably most evident when they are transgressed or violated by those external to the community. It is through challenges to the symbolic boundaries of a community that the community is able to reinforce the boundaries that differentiate its community from those external to it.

The essential features of community then are the set of symbols that define the boundary of the community from those communities and/or individuals external to it. Boundary is an essential feature of community; community simply cannot exist without a delineating boundary. This thesis will explore how an online group may define and demarcate itself as a distinct community through the use of the symbols of its boundary.

p 104 Add at end of para 1:

The following chapters will explore the ways in which the chronic pain group defines and demarcates itself as a distinct 'community' on Usenet through the use of specific symbols of its boundary. These symbols include: the development of customary norms for posting behaviour, membership hierarchies and associated rituals of inclusion, the development of a communal identity relating to experiences of chronic pain the group ideology and values relating to life and death, norms of advocacy and group interaction, and online group rituals. In order to understand further how these symbols of boundary act to define the community, Chapter Eight explores the ways in which these symbols are reinforced and fortified at times when those individuals or communities external to the community threaten the community members. It is only through conflict with those individuals or groups external to the community (non-members) that the group can maintain the symbolic boundaries that define it as a community.

p 223 Add at end of para 2:

In a social environment that is not linked to a physical place or location, theories of community that rely on geographic space may become redundant. Rather, theories that emphasise the symbolic dimensions of community may be more appropriate in studies of online social groups. This thesis has explored the symbolic construction of online community through exploring one of the most essential elements of community, namely, its boundary. For groups that exist solely in virtual space, the maintenance and reinforcement of its symbolic boundaries of community are the primary means by which the community is defined as a distinct and separate social unit. The lack of opportunity to reinforce the symbols of its community in the real world (because the group members do not actually know or see each other in traditional ways) means that the group must aggressively maintain its symbols of community boundary in online space. Conflict over symbolic community boundaries is an essential feature of online community development and sustainability. In the real world the boundary is an essential feature of any community in so far as a community cannot exist without a delineating boundary. In the online world, however, a symbolic boundary is a critical feature of community; a community simply cannot exist without the opportunities to delineate, maintain and reinforce its boundary against those who would seek to challenge it.

p. 248 2<sup>nd</sup> line insert: Goffman, E. (1971) *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York: Harper and Row.

p 250 11<sup>th</sup> line insert: Kantor, D. and Lehr, W. (1975) *Inside the Family: Towards a Theory of Family Process*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

# **The Symbolic Construction of Online Community**

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BA (Hons)**

**A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**December 2002**

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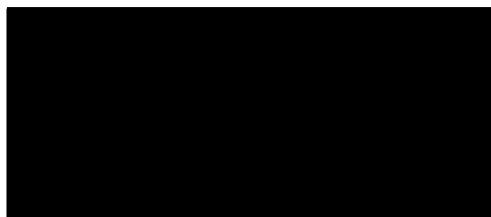
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide a sociological exploration of the concept of community in virtual spaces. In the past few decades the ubiquitous expansion of computer-mediated communication technologies has led to claims of the emergence of a new form of community, the online community. These online communities are seen to emerge when people communicate through a forum on the Internet over an extended period of time. Previous research has tended to assume the existence of online community rather than critically examine it. Researchers have consistently neglected to explore the concept of online communities using any traditionally accepted sociological framework of community. In response to this limitation, this thesis employs a symbolic interactionist perspective as a valuable and appropriate framework in which to explore and understand how an online group can constitute a community. A case study of a chronic pain support newsgroup on Usenet was examined using both qualitative and quantitative data. The ways in which the newsgroup constituted a community were examined through the exploration of issues of community identity construction, the development of normative regulations of behaviour, ritualistic episodes and the manner in which the group dealt with conflict. The research concluded that the group members utilised important symbols of community boundary to differentiate their newsgroup from others. The findings from this research have implications for the sociological understanding of community in real and virtual spaces. In particular, this thesis suggests that a symbolic interactionist framework is a viable means by which to empirically examine online community. Furthermore, these research findings indicate that issues of conflict and community boundary maintenance are of paramount concern for the development of an online community.

I declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirm that to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



Ronelle Hutchinson

19<sup>th</sup> December 2002

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

What is a community? This is one of the elementary questions asked throughout the history of sociology. In essence, this is the question that drives sociological research and theory. What is a society? What is a community? The distinction between these two sociological terms has caused much confusion and debate amongst social theorists. Despite a long history of research, a concise and comprehensive definition or, indeed, an adequate explanation of society, and more specifically of community, continues to evade social theorists and sociologists. The term 'community' is used in so many different ways, with a variety of different connotations and with such flexibility in meaning, that it is not surprising sociologists have found it difficult to cement one definition. This thesis will begin with a brief history of the sociology of community to illustrate the main ways in which 'community' has been theorised, conceptualised and researched over the past two centuries. More recently, the ubiquitous expansion of computer-mediated communication technologies, and in particular the use of the Internet, has provided new possibilities for people to interact, connect and communicate. With the increased use of this technology have come claims that the Internet provides an innovative platform for the creation of a new form of community, namely, the 'virtual community'.

## The Sociology of Community

“Trying to study community is like trying to scoop up jello with your fingers. You can get hold of some, but there’s always more slipping away from you” (Effrat, 1974:1). Community is an ambiguous, vague and evasive term in sociology. Any attempt to develop an all-inclusive definition has met with disagreement and conflict. “Definitions of ‘community’ are usually vague and of great variety and number” (Freilich, 1963:117). This difficulty in defining a community is demonstrated by Hillery’s pivotal study in the categorisation of different definitions of community. Hillery (1955) analysed 94 sociological definitions of community in an attempt to gauge the level of agreement or conformity about what community entails. Overall there was little consensus. The majority of definitions (70 out of the 94) included the following as important dimensions of community: area or territory, common ties and social interaction. Of all the 94 definitions of community analysed, only one notion was common to all – that a community involved people.

In fact the term ‘community’ has been so widely disputed that some sociologists have called for a boycott of the term altogether. Margaret Stacey proposed to discard the term ‘community’ from sociological analysis. She argued that the term itself is so ambiguous and ill-defined that it becomes non-operational and obsolete (Stacey, 1974:14). Community is an abstract concept, not a social institution to be studied. Attempts to create a definition of community that is both comprehensive and generalisable to diverse social arrangements has been largely unsuccessful.

It now appears that something of an impasse has been reached concerning the definition of community – some might even call it exhaustion. This must lead us to examine the theory of community from other points of view. (Bell & Newby, 1971:32)

It may be more fruitful to examine the various theoretical approaches to the study of community rather than attempt to formulate a concrete definition. Perhaps a more prudent question is: in what ways have sociologists explored or understood community?

The most significant conceptualisations of community stem from a variety of influential scholars who attempted to explain the social changes that occurred during the periods of industrialisation and modernity. These scholars developed a dichotomous relationship between society and community. Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) is widely recognised as the father of the sociological study of community. Tönnies was interested in the impact of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation on the manner in which people interact with one another. Tönnies (1887/1974) *Gemeinschaft & Gesellschaft* (or *Community and Association*) demonstrated two ideal types of social relations that govern human interaction.

*Gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society) were two opposing patterns of social relations that explained the changes that occurred after the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Tönnies proposed there had been a shift in the patterns of human relations from that of *gemeinschaft* (community), conceptualised by a former mode of living in a pre-industrial village, to that of *gesellschaft* (society) where rational and contractual social relations regulated behaviour.

Gemeinschaft (community) was characterised by intimate close contacts that embodied a set of voluntary, social and reciprocal relations that bound people together by an immutable 'we feeling' (Foster, 1997:25). These close bonds among people gave rise to common sentiments and loyalty to place or people (Wild, 1981:19). People were bound together by family, kinship, fellowship and customs into a community which formed the basis of a shared understanding and consensus about their social relations (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). It was this natural and instinctive form of living together that provided warm, affectionate and cooperative relationships amongst people. Each member had a clear understanding of his or her role in the community and was aware of the social status and roles of other community members. There was relatively little social or physical mobility in the population and the cultural environment was relatively homogeneous. People shared similar values, beliefs and customs. In this way gemeinschaft refers to social bonds that are characterised by cohesion, depth, continuity and accordance (Bell & Newby, 1971:24).

In contrast, gesellschaft (society) mirrors the zeitgeist of the modern era. It is a situation of individualism in which relations become mechanical, rationally determined, transitory and contractually oriented (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). People are relatively isolated and act in relation to their own self-interest and calculated responses to others. People act in order to maximise the benefit for themselves rather than for their communities. Relationships amongst members of a society are contractual, functional and often involve the exchange of goods, money, credit or obligation (Poplin, 1979:128). Society lacks cohesion and conflict occurs frequently (Bell & Newby, 1974:xi). In gesellschaft people are divided and the population is heterogeneous in

relation to cultural beliefs, values and actions. There is a constant state of tension in society.

Tönnies proposed that *gesellschaft* emerged as people began to take greater control over their individual lives. The loss of *gemeinschaft* was a necessary condition for the emergence of the self-conscious and self-directing individual that characterises the capitalist worker (Kirkpatrick, 1986:17). People were controlled and influenced primarily by their own and others' rational actions rather than by any ubiquitous value system of their community. The dichotomy was exposed: human association either occurs naturally in community or rationally in society (Wild, 1981:19). Tönnies did acknowledge that both *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* could be present in all various forms of human associations. Nevertheless, he and those who followed have glorified *gemeinschaft* and irreparably associated it with the European pre-industrial rural village (Bernard, 1973: 92). In essence, Tönnies proposed a dichotomy of social arrangements that could be used to explain the ways in which societies and communities were structured.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) also developed a dichotomy of social relationships that attempted to explain the change in social life between the pre- and post-industrial eras. Durkheim's (1893/1964) study of the division of labour proposed that there were two different types of social relationships that were distinctly related to different stages in the societal division of labour (in Bell & Newby, 1974:23). Durkheim contrasted mechanical solidarity with the organic solidarity evident in different types of social arrangements.

For Durkheim, the pre-industrial village represented the mechanical solidarity of society. There was a small population with a simple division of labour. Relationships were intimate and personal and were based on common group identity, values, beliefs, norms and customs. People were bound together because they shared a common culture. The community held a universal moral and legal code and transgressions were directed at punishing offenders in order to reinforce the dominant value system. The social group was uniform with sentiments and beliefs common to all (Loomis & McKinney, 1957: 13). Commonality was the basis for solidarity.

In contrast, the nature of contemporary life shaped by the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism represented what Durkheim termed organic social solidarity. Social cohesion is based on differences among people rather than commonality (Kenny, 1994:34). Society is held together not by a common culture, but rather it is bound by an interdependence of its parts. Society has a large population with great density and interdependence of social relationships among its members. The production of goods becomes highly specialised with different 'industries' devoted to the production of one type of product or service. This specialisation of labour encourages individualism and differentiation amongst people. Society becomes heterogenous and moral, ethical or cultural similarities dissipate. People act in accordance with mutually agreed contracts based on their social situations rather than on the basis of an accepted moral code. Law and the punishment of those committing offences is aimed at restitution for injuries perpetrated rather than to uphold some ever-present moral order (Wild, 1981: 19). Difference is the basis for solidarity.

The industrial revolution saw a shift from mechanical solidarity based on communal consensus, to organic solidarity founded on individualism and specialisation in the division of labour (Bender, 1978: 18). Durkheim did not lament the loss of an idealised traditional community; rather he posited an explanation for social change and for the transition from one type of social relation to another, from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. Durkheim argued that the division of labour creates solidarity in society because people become dependent upon one another for the production of different goods and services. This interdependence among social members and social institutions creates a web of solidarity that bonds the members of the society together. Durkheim's dichotomy of organic and mechanical solidarity provides a way to understand changes in social formations and organisation.

Subsequent research in the sociology of community field employed a rural/urban dichotomy to explain the construction of community. Redfield (1941) introduced the folk/urban dichotomy and proposed two types of communities that represented different stages in the process of urbanisation. Rural or folk society was the classic repository of community, with traditional, stable, family-oriented and moralistic social relationships. The more one moved towards the urban end of Redfield's continuum, the greater the loss of community (Cohen, 1985:27). Sociological studies of community in the first half of the twentieth century in America, Britain and Australia involved the examination of case studies in an attempt to explain the differences and transition between urban and rural social organisation. Such case studies were assumed to be complete, autonomous social systems and were seen to represent a microcosm of the wider society (Effrat, 1974:6). In America, the Chicago school was particularly focused on the investigation

of diverse communities in urban locales, whilst in Britain and Australia, sociologists generally focused on communities in rural locations.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century yielded the most influential work in the field of sociology of community based on the community/society distinction. In the American tradition, we saw the Lynds' contribution of *Middletown* in the 1920s. The husband and wife team, Robert and Helen Lynd, sought to describe the social organisation of the small American town in which they lived, in their work, *Middletown: A Study of American Culture* (1929/1956). They studied the social institutions in the community, not in isolation, but rather in terms of their interconnectedness and their interdependence. In contrast the Chicago School focused on the urban end of the dichotomy and its research was influenced by the ecological perspective<sup>1</sup>. In the 1920s and 1930s the Chicago School produced a number of famous and influential studies of urban locales, including Anderson's (1923/1975) *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless*. Urban phenomena and social arrangements were examined as indices of the types of 'communities' that developed in urbanised environments.

In Britain, the use of the rural/urban dichotomy continued to be dominant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The European studies tended to focus primarily on rural environments as the locale for community. For example, one of the most significant studies was undertaken by Arensberg and Kimball in *Family and Community in Ireland*

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<sup>1</sup> The primary goal of the ecological approach is to explain the spatial organisation and growth dynamics of urban communities (Poplin, 1979: 83). The ecological model of community equates communities of people with animal and plant communities. Social organisation may be considered in reference to biological organisations and biological terminology (Bell & Newby, 1974:xivii). The community is a self-sufficient entity that experiences cycles of change and evolution much the same as plant and animal environments (Stonall, 1983:76). Human ecologists tend to focus on macro phenomena in the community rather than on micro processes of interaction when examining how communities are constructed. Competition for resources is crucial to this paradigm. The community is located in a defined space and members therefore share a common locality and must compete for the resources located within that area.

(1940/1961). This study focused on the small scale subsistence farmers in County Clare, a scarcely populated rural area. Of particular interest were examples of the community activities, associations and events that brought the geographically dispersed community together. Other famous and influential work includes Ree's (1951) *Life in the Welsh Countryside* and Williams' (1956) *Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth*. These works demonstrate the emphasis placed on the theoretical divide of rural/urban environments in British sociology of community in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Australian sociologists also formulated their investigations into community through a rural/urban dichotomous perspective. The research by Oeser and Hammond, *Social Structure and Personality in a City* (1954) and Oeser and Emery's, *Social Structure and Personality in a Rural Community* (1954) were most notable. These were companion studies, one of a rural community and the other of a community in an urban environment. Even more recently, Australian sociologists continue to focus on rural towns as case studies to explore how communities organise social relations. Dempsey, in *Smalltown: A Study of Social Inequality, Cohesion and Belonging* (1990) explored the principal factors shaping social life and inequality in a small rural Australian town. He explored the ways in which gender, class, age and length of residence in the rural town shaped social life and structural inequalities. Dempsey argued that the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* may not be made clearly in this town. The same social relationship can be impersonal, calculative and contractual whilst, at other times, it can be caring, non-calculative and personal (Dempsey, 1990:313). Social relations can display a mixture of traits belonging to both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. The distinction between community and society may not be as sharp or as clearly defined as

was once believed. Dempsey's work demonstrates that the theoretical urban/rural dichotomy is still influential in directing community studies in sociology.

The distinction between society and community has become the building block for the sociological study of community. "These dichotomies in their various forms, often subsumed under the general rubric of the community-society continuum, became central to the study of community in urbanising societies" (Bender, 1978:18). The perception exists that community (whether it be *gemeinschaft*, mechanical solidarity or folk society) has declined, been eroded or even dissipated with the process of industrialisation. The reason we talk about community so incessantly is that we have lost community (Talbot, 1995:63). Pre-industrial social relations is where we 'find' community and the breakdown of this community is seen to epitomise the modern era. Community is lost.

Along with this nostalgic yearning for the 'good life' that vanished with the processes of industrialisation, such dichotomous approaches to the study of community necessarily emphasise both locality and structure. "... [F]or centuries the idea of community was tied to place" (Dunham, 1986:399). Community was necessarily and intimately related to the physical locality in which social relationships took place. Community was also tied to a structural definition of its properties. For example, community studies may have focused on families, schools, local councils, physical space, businesses or health care providers as evidence of community. A study of a community necessarily explored the social structures that existed within the bounded area of space. Each social structure was observable in social institutions and hence the exploration of community was pursued by empirical research.

Community studies appear to have dwindled in the 1960s and 1970s (Lyon, 1987: 16). More fashionable topics of investigation became a priority for sociologists. For those still working in the area, there was a strong shift towards non-territorial definitions of community and a movement towards theoretical approaches that emphasised social processes as essential elements of a community. This ideological shift has been attributed to the effect of new communication technologies, changing housing patterns, the quality of education and the suburbanisation of our living areas (Dunham, 1977: 259). We need a new conceptualisation of community, one which allowed us to penetrate beneath such simple categories as city, village, town and country to see a variety of social relations (Calhoun, 1980:107).

The community of propinquity, as described by the earlier dichotomous approaches, was challenged by the advent of social network analysis<sup>2</sup> and its application to the study of community. Social network analysis emphasises community as a process that is not essentially linked to any physical locality. Social network analysis provides a conceptual map of the diversity of relationships that exists within a social system. This approach reflects the disillusionment experienced with the inadequacies of the traditional models of community. Social network analysis focuses on the nature of alternative non-spatial forms of community and uses a methodological approach developed from social anthropology (Effrat, 1974:19). The model attempts to explain community, not as a static entity occupying a defined locality or neighbourhood, but as a network of social relations that are constantly shifting and creating new boundaries of community. People are not placed in a singular all encompassing community but rather

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Berkowitz (1988) for an extended history of social network analysis: its philosophical and intellectual foundations in European social science and mathematics; and its distinction from other structurally focused sociological theories.

belong to multiple and partial communities that do not command their full allegiance. These low-density, partial communities are in fact heterogeneous social networks of relationships that are not necessarily bound to any specific location. Social network analysis represents community as a web of ties or types of social relations that each individual member holds with other members. It is the study of the network of social relations in which the individual is embedded (Bender, 1978: 122). Social stratification then is understood by the nature and quality of the links among people in the network.

Social network analysis demonstrates a sensitivity to the context of the network and does not assume *a priori* that the network is a community (Bender, 1978: 125). Most studies of community attempt to 'write' communities in an isolated fashion rather than attempt to grapple with overlapping communities (Jones, 1995: 21). In contrast social network analysis can deal with overlapping communities as they are incorporated into the network where each association differs in the quality of relationship. The parameters of the network or community are not determined necessarily by the physical location of the networks actors. This "... model places the individual, rather than the place, at its center" (Chaskin, 1997:530). This approach leaves the researcher open to the discovery of communal ties that span several networks without restricting the interpretation by situating it in a prescriptive paradigm of community locality.

The 1980s and 1990s saw an upsurge in social network analysis as a means to describe and explain social systems, communities and societies. Despite the advantages of a non-territorial based model to examine community, social network analysis has been criticised as a merely descriptive methodology that only becomes useful, analytic and explanatory when it is related to other higher-level concepts (Wild, 1981: 38).

Whilst social network analysis has challenged our understandings of community based on propinquity, caution must be exercised so as not to assume that a community exists merely because a network does.

Whilst dichotomous approaches, in all their guises have been the driving force for understanding community construction in the discipline of sociology, they have been criticised for their inability to deal with a diversity of social relations. The traditional focus on social structure and locality in relation to community has also come under attack with the development of diverse frameworks which attempt to understand community as a process. However, there is still a disproportionate amount of attention given to the structural versus the experiential or phenomenological aspects of community. Relatively less popular approaches to the study of community such as symbolic interactionist theories that focus on the human experience of community will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three of this thesis. Such approaches provide a framework for this research into online community.

### **The Sociology of the Online Community**

The advent of Internet technologies has raised the question of whether or not 'community' can develop within a computer-mediated context. The idea that a community may exist without a defined 'place' of existence and with limited 'social structures' complicates and challenges our traditional understandings of community. How is it possible that people who only ever meet via a computer screen can constitute a community? How can a 'community' develop in an online forum if there are no structures and regulations of social organisation and interaction? With the absence of

place, can people develop the type of relationships that we have traditionally seen as *gemeinschaft*? How can a virtual community possibly be a real community?

Despite its common usage, the term 'virtual community' is ill-defined and often disputed. It is generally accepted that, in essence, a virtual community is a conglomeration of users who come together and interact via a computer-mediated forum. However, it is unclear whether or not users may complement this mediated interaction with face-to-face communication in real life. For example Virnoche and Marx define "... 'virtual communities' as those encompassing people whose connections to one another are based *solely* in virtual space or on computer-mediated communications" (1997:88 emphasis added). Despite this ambiguity in definition, it is clear that at least some social interaction must occur through a mediated context for it to be understood as an online community.

The foundational work in the area of online community was Howard Rheingold's 1993 essay, *A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community*, in which he discussed his personal experiences with an online community. He elaborated on the idea of a virtual community in his book length argument, *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Rheingold, 1993b), and discussed the maintenance of online communities in his later work (cf. Rheingold, 1998; Rheingold, 2000). Rheingold challenged the previously held notion that the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication were artificial, shallow, alienating and a mocking reproduction of face-to-face encounters. Rheingold outlined his personal experiences with the WELL (Whole Earth Lectronic Link), a San Francisco based conference website. In describing the forum itself and the experiences he shared with other

members, Rheingold concluded that genuine communities can develop over time amongst users of an electronic forum. His view is illustrated by his frequently quoted definition of a virtual community:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions, long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993b: 5)

Virtual communities happen over time when a group accumulates sufficient numbers of friendships, trials, losses, events and celebrations that bond any kind of community so that it develops in people's minds as a defined sense of place (Rheingold, 1993a: 64).

Rheingold did not claim any theoretical or methodological rigour for his study, rather he justified the existence of a virtual community by his personal experiences.

Rheingold proposed that the emergence of virtual communities occurred with the disintegration of traditional communities (1993a: 62). Other authors concur that these new forms of community have emerged to fill the gap in society left by diminishing real neighbourhoods (Turkle, 1996:50). Self-proclaiming visionaries proposed that this "utopian" cyberspace would be the avenue to reclaim the meaning and experience of community (Robins, 1992:136). They claimed that people were logging into their newly discovered cyber communities and gaining the support, social needs and relationships they were missing in the globalised and economically driven 'real world'.

Virtual communities, in short, have become a new governing myth. The opening of new communications paradigms coincides with a yawning and unfulfilled need for community, and

communications consumerism persuades us that this dream is available in an electronic affinity group. (Lockard, 1997: 229)

Much of the discussion of the emergence of virtual communities as a substitute for 'lost' real life communities relies on Ray Oldenburg's concept of a third place. Oldenburg (1989) discussed community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial world. In addition to the realm of work and the realm of the private home, Oldenburg described a third realm in our societies where communal events and occurrences thrived. These third places were the coffee shops, the pubs, the local candy store, the café and corner stores where neighbours came together in a shared public space to informally interact. It is within these places that community develops, occurs and is reproduced. Oldenburg lamented the loss of informal public life and these third places in contemporary society.

It has been suggested that the Internet provides a new and innovative 'third place' in which we may develop the communal relations lost in our societies. "Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall" (Rheingold, 1993b:26). This utopian idea that humans will somehow forge community using whatever means possible underlies much of the early rhetoric of the virtual community literature.

Another idea that featured strongly in the virtual community rhetoric was the 'imagined community' as outlined by Benedict Anderson (1983). Anderson proposed that all communities were 'imagined' by their constituents. Community then resides in the minds of the community members. Virtual community scholars have adopted this concept of imagined communities and applied it in their discussions of virtual communities. Whilst many writers allude to online communities as communities

'imagined' by their constituents, very little academic investigation has occurred that explores the use of this concept in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research. At most, virtual community researchers have explored online communities in relation to "the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1983:6).

Another popular phrase that pervades the literature about virtual community is 'community of interest'. Communities of interest are formed around a common interest or topic rather than a location. People choose to belong to a variety of communities of interest that may span several geographic communities. For example, we hear about the school community, the church community, the Poodle dog owners' community, the Lebanese community etc. These communities are not restricted to locality, but are based around a common interest or topic. Whether these interests are constructive or destructive, the social bonds of cooperation at the heart of these communities are what make them most valuable to those who belong (Whittle, 1997: 287).

It is claimed that groups who interact in cyberspace are communities of interest that form around a shared value or interest. Membership is fluid rather than fixed with members coming and going depending on their interest levels. The freedom to leave a virtual community when its values conflict with yours is important. It is a sense of control that may be lacking in real life communities (Whittle, 1997: 240). Virtual communities of interest offer more freedom of association than real life, geographically-bound communities. They offer unprecedented freedom to choose our associations and participate on our own terms (Whittle, 1997: 240).

Unfortunately the idea that virtual communities are communities of interest remains largely unexplored and it is certainly not approached in a critical fashion. Much of the rhetoric of the virtual community literature relies on the uncritical adoption of the concepts of the 'third place', 'imagined communities' and 'communities of interest'. Many computer-mediated communication researchers have embraced these concepts and enthusiastically heralded the Internet as a revolutionary opportunity for the development of community.

### **The Current Research**

The authenticity of 'virtual communities' as communities has been largely unchallenged or critically explored within a sociological framework. Initial writings were predominantly enthusiastic and proclaimed the existence of online groups as authentic, genuine, functioning communities (see, Rhinegold, 1993b; Turkle, 1995). However, scholars have begun to debate the legitimacy of labelling these online groups as communities. "Despite the wide spread use of the term virtual community, debate continues over whether communities can and do exist in cyberspace" (Roberts, et al. 1996a). In this debate about what constitutes community sociologists have been strangely absent (Morton, 2001:3). Sociologists have neglected to apply their sociological knowledge of community to online communities. To critically examine some of these new claims of online community, we need to explore our traditional explanations of community.

Before outlining the argument to be made in the following chapters, it is prudent to address the difference between an 'online' and a 'virtual' community in this thesis.

Whilst the debate about the authenticity of online communities is underway, it would seem important to begin any study of an online group with as few assumptions as possible about the nature of the group. By labelling an online group a 'virtual' community, we are assuming *a priori* that it can not be a real community. Watson explains the connotations for the use of the term 'virtual':

The term 'virtual' means something akin to 'unreal' and so the entailments of calling online communities 'virtual' include spreading and reinforcing a belief that what happens online is *like* a community, but isn't *really* a community. (1997:129 original emphasis)

This thesis addresses the complexities involved in exploring online groups in relation to sociological understandings of community. It would seem sensible not to embark on this research investigation by attaching a label to the group that is laden with connotations of its authenticity and legitimacy. For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'virtual community' will be avoided and the group under study will be described as an 'online community' if appropriate. The explicit aims of this research will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two after a more thorough examination of the ways in which researchers have theorised and understood online community. Suffice to say at this stage, this research aims to explore the symbolic construction of online community.

The following chapters of this thesis will present my research into how an online newsgroup can constitute a community. Chapter Two will present a review of the relevant literature of the ways that computer-mediated communication scholars have understood online communities. Researchers have examined online groups as communities in a number of different ways. Evidence of community has been claimed through the examination of social structures and hierarchy, the development of group

specific language and the development of normative standards of conduct in online groups. Another focus has been the subjective experiences of community that online group members experience. Social theorists have also applied traditional sociological models of community, such as social network analysis, to explore social organisation and relationships in cyberspace. Before I outline the theoretical framework for the current study, I will discuss some of the more sophisticated understandings of online communities that view them as complex social systems and attempt to situate them within a wider political, social, economic and technological context. A critique of the current literature will be presented before I outline the aims of my research.

Chapter Three offers an outline of the symbolic interactionist perspective in sociology and how it may be useful in the study of online communities. In particular Cohen's theory of the symbolic construction of community (1985) is discussed because it forms the theoretical basis for the current research. Cohen's theory emphasises the importance of symbols of community boundary to understand how the community is constructed.

Chapter Four explores the methodological and ethical decisions pertinent to my research. The epistemological framework of this study is discussed along with the benefits and disadvantages of conducting case study research. The rationale and justification for choosing a chronic pain newsgroup for the study will be presented. The processes involved in collecting, storing, analysing and presenting the data from the newsgroup will also be detailed.

Chapter Five introduces the online newsgroup that is the focus of this study. A statistical snapshot of their posting behaviour, gender breakdown, membership levels and social interaction is presented. In order to familiarise the reader with the key personalities in the group, brief character biographies are presented.

Chapter Six explores the repertoire of symbols the members of the chronic pain group employ to create their identity. The understanding of chronic pain and the associated social stigma are discussed in relation to their symbolism of communal identity. The normative beliefs, values and principles the group holds are explored, along with the manner in which this belief system mobilises action with respect to patient advocacy issues. A set of rituals and practices assist in demarcating those inside and those outside the newsgroup. Chapter Six explores how the newsgroup constitutes a community in relation to symbols of group identity.

Chapter Seven examines the symbolism of norms, standards and conventions that the group has developed. The expected format for posting messages and requesting support is outlined. Furthermore, the regulations regarding the provision of different types of support are discussed. Such norms and standards are symbols by which the group reinforces their identity. Chapter Seven explores how the newsgroup constitutes a community in relation to symbols of social control.

Chapter Eight presents episodes of conflict and explores the manner in which the newsgroup deals with breaches or challenges to its boundary. Conflict over membership, norms and standards of conduct and conflict caused by a malicious personality are discussed. The manner in which the group responds to conflict and, in

so doing, strengthens their symbolic boundary and assists in the demarcation of their group as a holistic, unique and distinctive newsgroup is presented. Chapter Eight explores how the newsgroup constitutes a community in relation to their boundary symbolism.

Chapter Nine concludes this thesis with a discussion of how the newsgroup is symbolically constructed as a community. An examination of the contributions and implications of my research findings for the fields of virtual community research and the sociology of community is also presented. The focus on the symbolic dimensions of community adds a distinctive and innovative approach to the study of an online community.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MAKING SENSE OF ONLINE COMMUNITY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Our understanding of community has been complicated by the ubiquitous expansion of Internet technologies and the possibility of an online community. At present there is an abundance of literature about online communities, however no coherent or extensive body of research exists. Numerous writers have explored the online community from diverse perspectives whilst utilising a plethora of methodologies. Despite the multitude of literature, anecdotal assertions about online communities far outweigh any rigorous accounts and seem to resemble "...the old genre of 'traveller's tales', accounts of adventurous trips from the civilised world to newly discovered, exotic realms" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999:170). It is surprising, given the emphasis sociologists have traditionally placed on community, that there has been a notable lack of sociological or anthropological contributions in the area (Morton, 2001: 3). However, the 1990s saw a growing body of qualitative research on the Internet, particularly in the field of online community (Lewis, 2001:234). This ethnographic and qualitative research began slowly, but there is now a mounting body of literature based on fieldwork conducted with online groups.

This chapter will explore the main explanations and justifications for the existence of online communities. Whilst it is difficult to synthesise a diverse body of literature that is interdisciplinary and varies in academic quality, the principal ways in

which online communities have been understood will be explored. A selection of relevant and significant research will be presented to illustrate the main approaches. These research summaries are used as examples and do not represent an exhaustive account of all work in each area. After the initial descriptive accounts of online groups, researchers began to explore how online groups construct community. Of particular interest were structural hierarchy or social stratification that develops in online groups, along with norms, standards and social conventions. Furthermore, the development of group specific language and jargon has been explored as a means by which online groups demonstrate 'community'. Online community has also been considered a subjective experience of group members. More recently sociological models such as social network analysis have been employed in order to assist in understanding online community. Finally, online community has been understood as consisting of a complex social system that must necessarily be understood within the wider social, political and economic structures of our technologically-saturated societies. To conclude this chapter, a critique of the current literature will be presented and the aims of my research will be discussed.

### **Early Descriptive Studies of Online Communities**

The 1990s saw the emergence of a number of seminal works in the field of online community. These early studies were primarily descriptive and outlined the social and technical elements pertinent to the study of online communities. A number of case studies were outlined in detail and provided the field with an evidential basis to begin exploring community.

One of these early descriptive studies was produced by the computer programmer, Pavel Curtis (1992). Curtis was the creator of one of the most famous and well-known MUDs (Multi-User Dimension) called LambdaMOO. His work provides an excellent description of the social and technical facets of the MUD, based on his observations whilst a member. In his paper he described at length the textual functions and commands members use to navigate the environment, including functions such as \* say \* command to communicate and the \* emote \* command to express non-verbal information. He outlined the means by which players express and develop their identities, the gender role playing games and the social hierarchy and power regulations that exist in that online space.

Whilst Curtis focused on the Internet forum of a MUD, others explored different communication platforms. Descriptive studies of groups that communicate via a chat medium have also been conducted. Cyberdewd (1997) provided a rich description of an Internet Relay Chat channel, AUSNET. The use of nicknames (nicks) was discussed in reference to the development of online identity. Rules and guidelines governing interaction in the chatroom were also explained, including the role of 'Chan Ops' (elders of the chatroom) and 'Bots' (software robots). The actual dialect used by the group was outlined including the abbreviations, alternative spelling and emoticons used to save bandwidth and time. The existence of private and public channels of chat allowed for more intimate conversation, including incidences of cybersex. Other anti-social behaviour that occurred in the chatroom, such as insults and flooding (repetitious announcements of insults which are now commonly referred to as spam), were also examined. Difficulties and challenges experienced by the users were discussed, particularly their annoyance at using a synchronous medium that experiences temporal

lag. This research provided a rich description of the social and technical aspects pertinent to the study of online communities.

Whilst many of these early studies remain purely descriptive, we do find some that move beyond mere description to understanding an online community. Of particular note is the work by Shelly Correll in her 1995 study entitled, *The Ethnography of an Electronic Bar: The Lesbian Café*. Correll set out to describe an electronic bar, the Lesbian Café, and “examine the ways in which community can be created and sustained through interactions restricted to computer screens” (Correll, 1995: 271). The cafe under study consisted of bulletin boards, electronic mail and a live chat arena where patrons interacted with one another. The appearance of the forum was described at length, including the symbolism of a ‘bar’ with customary pool table and fire place and the effect this virtual scene had on the interactions amongst members of the group. The main functions of the forum were: a place for lesbians to meet who were unable to interact in real life lesbian communities; an avenue to make friends; and a forum for flirting. These functions were illustrated by the rich description of textual interaction. The types of patrons who frequented the virtual bar were also presented and their characteristics described at length. Correll argued that the virtual scenery of the bar acted as a mechanism to develop a sense of common reality amongst the bar constituents and this helped to maintain a community. Thus, community is not necessarily tied to a physical place and can be manifested in social arenas where a common reality is created through verbal descriptions and social interactions. Whilst Correll attempted to cement her discussion of the group in the ethnographic tradition and in Goffman’s (1959) interactionist perspective, she did not extend her argument much beyond mere description. The focus of her work was the description of the virtual

group and she made a quick and relatively unexamined conjecture by assuming that the group constituted a community. She failed to critically analyse the underlying assumptions of community in virtual space.

These early descriptive studies of online communities set out to describe the technical and social elements significant to communal interaction in cyberspace. This initial work was interdisciplinary and spawned a variety of different approaches to describing online communities. Such rich, descriptive accounts provided the foundations of knowledge and documented evidence of online interaction that subsequent researchers have utilised to further examine online community. These early studies also suggested groups who use different Internet forums may interact differently depending on the forum they use. This has led later researchers to be cautious in generalising their findings from one online group interacting via a particular medium (such as chat) to other online groups communicating via another medium (such as a newsgroup). Whilst these initial descriptive studies form the foundation for the blossoming field of sociology of online community, they were somewhat limited in their approaches. The majority of these early studies assumed *a priori* that the groups under study were in fact communities. As Bell asks, "...why is it that commentators are so keen to see *communities* (rather than market segments or cultures of compatible consumption) in cyberspace?" (Bell, 2001:101 original emphasis). The existence of these groups as communities is rarely questioned, rather the descriptions of their social interactions and organisation are understood as obvious evidence of community. Community is assumed in these early studies rather than critically analysed.

## Norms, Standards and Conventions as Community Elements

The early forays to describe virtual groups gave rise to more substantial studies into the nuances of such interaction. Of particular focus was the development of norms, standards and conventions of behaviour which were interpreted as evidence of a community. If a group shares norms, values, beliefs and standards of conduct, then such sharing may become an index of 'community'.

Elizabeth Reid was one of the first scholars to explore the development of specific norms, standards and conventions in an online group. Her 1991 unpublished history honours thesis entitled, *Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat*, provides a largely descriptive account of Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Reid's primary argument is that online groups develop a system of 'shared significance' that constitutes the group as a community. Community is created in IRC through the development of a common culture. New methods of creating shared culture occur with the deconstruction of conventional rules which dictate appropriate relations and leave open the possibility of exploring new means of interaction. Social boundaries are deconstructed and become blurred when individuals are anonymous and experience a disinhibition of behaviour due to reduced social cues. Reid argued that this disinhibition may result in deep, emotional relationships between people in online communities. Such a bond allowed participants in IRC to develop a common culture or 'shared significance'. The norms, conventions and practices the group developed in order to accommodate the reduced social context of a text-only medium became markers of their shared culture. An understanding of this shared culture thus formed the basis of their membership and social standing in the community. The group developed

systems of punishment and enforcement to maintain the existing social order and reinforce its social structure. As Reid concludes:

This community is self-regulating, having systems of hierarchy and power that allow for punishment of transgressors of those systems of behaviour and meaning. (1991:70)

Whilst some researchers like Reid (1991) outline the manner in which online groups develop norms and standards of conduct that mark them as a community, others have explored the responses from online groups when those norms and standards are violated. Community is assumed by the communal response to violations of the group's normative rules and regulations. Communications expert, Margaret McLaughlin and her colleagues, Kerry Osborne and Nicole Ellison (1995), studied discourse processes and categorised the violations of the normative culture in newsgroups. McLaughlin and her colleagues are some of the few researchers who have turned their attention to an online community within the Internet communication medium of a newsgroup. In their study, the violations of normative codes of conduct in newsgroups fell into seven categories: incorrect or novice use; bandwidth wastage; violation of network conventions; violation of newsgroup specific conventions; ethical violations; inappropriate language; and errors. The group had a system of self-regulation whereby members corrected those who infringed the rules. As newsgroups develop around a particular interest topic, any attempt to alter the norms that maintain the discussion around that topic is viewed as a threat to the community (as it is constituted for the interests of the regular posters). Rules of conduct on Usenet need to be understood as a complex set of guidelines driven by economic, cultural, socio-psychological and discursive factors within and external to the network (McLaughlin et al. 1995: 107). Social control is enforced by a self-

regulatory system that acts to maintain the conventions developed in the particular virtual space. In summary, McLaughlin argued that the existence of commonly agreed protocols and standards, the advent of a distinctive language (such as jargon, symbols and abbreviated phrases) and the formation of strong social networks suggested that something akin to community had developed. These community standards, peculiarly applicable to the electronic environment, are aimed towards the preservation of the group (McLaughlin et al. 1997:147).

This exploration of group specific norms and standards began an era in the field of online community research that invited more sophisticated approaches to community than was previously seen in the purely descriptive studies. Again, much of the research into normative standards of conduct simply assumes that if the group shares norms, then they must be a community. Despite this lack of academic rigour, these studies do provide an interesting approach to the study of online community by exploring its culture rather than the structural or physical manifestations of community. Community lies in the symbolic culture of the group, the values and beliefs the group holds in common and the way these are manifested in a variety of normative rules and practices. By focusing on culture, there is little need to look for structural or physical manifestations of community that are unable to exist in a 'placeless' virtual world. This idea that community can manifest in the development of a shared symbolic culture will be explored in further detail in Chapter Three because it forms the basis for the theoretical framework of my research.

### Group Specific Language as Evidence for Community

Other researchers have explored group specific language, lingo, jargon and discourse in online groups as a primary justification for their existence as communities. The way language is used in social interaction and how 'lingo' develops is seen to illustrate a consensus within the group about their interaction. Such a consensus is seen to be a characteristic of community.

Eva-Lise Carlstrom was one of the first authors to explore how contextually specific language may be seen as indicative of community. Carlstrom (1992) focused on the famous MUD, LambdaMOO, as a new kind of sociolinguistic environment. Her research provided a detailed description of the programming commands used by members, the language games they played, the architecture of the MUD and the occurrence of netsex. She also briefly explored the differences in textual communication with real life face-to-face interaction, focusing on proxemics, silence and turn-taking in conversation. She argued that the members created their own reality through their use of language. Whilst contending that MUDs represent new forms of sociolinguistic environments, Carlstrom did not extend her discussion to any great depth. Her description of the MUD and the fact that interaction is, by the nature of the medium, textual, appears to be sufficient to justify her claim that it is a new sociolinguistic environment. Unfortunately Carlstrom raises an interesting issue, yet fails to critically analyse it. Despite this criticism, Carlstrom was writing at a time when any attempt to theoretically discuss online groups demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding compared with the purely descriptive studies being produced.

Folklore specialist, Lee Ellen Marvin, linked more intimately the relationship between language and community construction than did Carlstrom. Marvin (1997) examined four jargon terms specific to six text-based MUDs in an 18-month participant observation study. The regularly used jargon items of 'spoof', 'spam', 'lurk' and 'lag' were described and analysed. These items had specific meanings. 'Spoof' referred to any un-attributed or identified communication. 'Spam' referred to an excess of unwanted communication. 'Lurk' was a refusal to communicate and implied surreptitious observation, whilst 'lag' denoted an electronic delay in communication due to technical factors. Marvin argued that the aesthetics of expression in MUDs act as a resource for the construction of community. Technical jargon develops as a response to the limitations and demands placed on interaction by the MUD technologies. These jargon items act as governing rules of behaviour, markers of experience and membership, metaphors for poetic expression and are resources for play. So, like Reid (1991) who argued that a common culture arises from technical limitations, Marvin argued that common discourse develops from those same limitations.

Whilst providing an excellent descriptive account of the textual/conversational use of the jargon items and grounding her discussion in empirical evidence, Marvin neglects to offer her conclusions such rigorous consideration. It is possible that these jargon items are not specific to any one 'community', rather are developed across Internet forums to compensate for the lowered social context cues. If this is the case, then these jargon items are not indicative of 'community' per se, rather they illustrate a more broad Internet discourse. They are not specific to any one community, but rather to the Internet as a whole. Again we find the unexamined and assumed conclusion that context specific language is an index of community.

Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the use of language as an index of community in virtual environments is Lynn Cherny's (1999) *Conversation and Community*. Cherny classified online communities as speech communities. She argued that justification for the use of the term 'community' in the computer-mediated communication literature comes from two approaches: approaches that validate it in terms of the processes of discourse in computer-mediated communication forums and approaches that seek evidence of social structures (Cherny, 1999:22). In her study she provided a detailed and complete description of a MUD, including the historical background, membership, characters, social structures, gender relations and communicative actions. More specifically however, she focused on the context specific use of language that governed the social interaction in the MUD. Her analysis of this language use included both quantitative and qualitative analysis of a variety of data. Her research outlined how language was used to regulate turn-taking in conversation, the use of back-channel communication<sup>3</sup>, the use of emotes, the use of other textual substitutions for non-verbal information and gender differences in the use of language.

Cherny explicitly stated that she was not concerned with analysing her case study against definitions of community in order to determine whether it met sociological criteria for a 'real' community (Cherny, 1999: 258). Rather, she applied aspects of diverse definitions of community and research traditions to her case study in order to illustrate community crises and collective action. Cherny's work is a substantial advancement on most analyses of online communities because she situates her

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<sup>3</sup> Back-channel communication refers to the verbal and non-verbal cues that conversationalists communicate to one another to signify understanding and conversational cooperation (Cherny, 1999: 185). For example nods or interjections of 'ok' or 'right' comments would be seen to represent back-channel communication.

discussion within existing paradigms of the construction of community. Whilst attempting to make her analysis multi-faceted, other elements of the construction of community are overshadowed by her focus on the use of language as an index of community.

Given the nature of the Internet and the technological configurations of chat, newsgroups and MUDs, it is understandable and expected that online community researchers would focus on language as an index of community. Initially, research into the use of language by online group participants remained primarily descriptive however, the innovative study by Cherny (1999) represented a more sophisticated analysis. The ways in which language is used, manipulated and developed in response to the limitations and parameters set down by the technology has been explored. Online community then has been investigated, explained and understood as the development of contextually specific systems of language and discourse in online groups.

### **Social Structure and Stratification as Indices of Community**

In addition to normative behaviours and language as indices of community, some of the most prominent researchers have explored online community in relation to social stratification, hierarchy and structure. These studies see the structures of power, hierarchy and social control as providing a valuable insight into the communal characteristics of the group. The group is structured in a particular way and social control rests on the group's ability to identify outsiders and enforce the group's structure and norms.

Elizabeth Reid turned her attention to groups communicating within MUDs in 1994. Like in her 1991 thesis, she argued again that the limitations caused by reduced social context cues were alleviated by the measures that users devised to deal with these limitations. These measures became the markers of their common culture. The MUD group under study had devised systems of symbolic and textual significance that enabled them to achieve understanding (Reid, 1995:173). Reid's (1994) unpublished English masters thesis examined the forms of social structure and control in different social and adventure MUDs. Her main argument proposed that a member's place in the social hierarchy was based on his or her ability to manipulate the elements of the virtual environment. Technical elements of the medium have effects on social phenomena and lead to new modes of interaction and new cultural formations (Reid, 1995:166). Cohesion is created within the community because users are required to put in a degree of commitment and emotional investment into their play over an extended period of time (Reid, 1999:130). Reid noted the importance of the virtual scenery in the MUD, the self-presentation and player descriptions, the use of language, the development of MUD jargon and the ways these can help structure the group. These aspects of communication in MUDs enabled users to develop systems of symbolic and textual significance that helped achieve understanding despite the absence of conventional social context cues (Reid, 1999:173). Reid examined social sanctions and conventions as a means of creating a common culture (in Slevin, 2000: 101). Again Reid's focus on symbolic and shared culture provides an appropriate and useful approach to the study of online communities.

The way in which virtual groups are structured and maintain social control over their members has also been explored. How do groups maintain their social structure

and hierarchy in the midst of challenges to the existing social order? One of the most famous accounts of hierarchy and social control in the virtual community literature is journalist Julian Dibbell's account of the way in which MUD members formed a cohesive community. In his article, *A Rape in Cyberspace: or how an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards and a Cast of Dozens turned a Database into a Society* (1994) Dibbell described an incident of virtual violence that occurred within a MUD database. A character named Mr. Bungle utilised some clever programming to force one of the other characters in the MUD to sexually service him. In this text-only environment, the rape was described and the victim was unable to alter what was happening to her onscreen character. The evening after the assault, the group members began discussing the incident on the MUD's mailing list. From their discussions, it became clear that the rape, although it had occurred to a virtual body and in a virtual space, was perceived to have similar affects on the victim and other community members as if it had occurred in real life. This MUD community found itself in a position where they had to invent self-government in order to determine an appropriate means of punishment for Mr. Bungle. From this incident, the MUD members developed commands which dealt with antisocial players, including a 'boot' command to eject offensive users. Dibbell's *A Rape in Cyberspace* has become one of the key descriptive studies in the field of virtual community research, and more generally, in computer-mediated communication research. This work comprehensively described an instance of virtual conflict that reflected the machinery of hierarchy and the enforcement of social control conventions in a virtual space.

Whilst Dibbell's work has interesting ramifications for the management of identity and social control within the field of online community research, he neglected

to extend his argument beyond mere description. It appears that decision-making abilities and efforts at social control are sufficient for a 'community' to develop in an online forum. Once again, like the work by Curtis (1992), Cyberdewd (1997) and Marvin (1997) the definition of the group as a community is assumed without any rigorous analysis.

In summary, the issues of social hierarchy and social control have become pertinent focal points in the study of online communities. A few key researchers have examined these issues and described how social structures operate within a variety of different virtual environments. Like much of the literature in the field of virtual community research, there is no cohesive body of knowledge in this area and although some writers have attempted to situate their discussion within accepted academic paradigms, community is rarely explicitly explored. Rather, there is an unexamined assumption that such social structures of stratification and hierarchy are necessarily indices of community.

### **Community as a Subjective Experience**

Other researchers have departed from the tradition of exploring and understanding online community based upon social structures and hierarchy to explore community as a phenomenological experience. Of particular interest has been the concept of a 'sense of community' as evidence for the existence of a community. This perspective theorises that if members experience communal bonds and 'feel' like they belong to a community, then community must exist. "Critics of the concept of a digital community are simply those who haven't bothered to experience it at first hand" (Cyberdewd,

1997). Community is constituted by the phenomenological understanding of the group members. To date, most researchers who explore the subjective experience of online group members presume that the development of a system of shared understandings is sufficient evidence for the existence of community. "To us, the 'virtual community' is constructed (like any other 'community') through individual's (temporal and partial) engagement in the production and the consumption of a sense of sharedness and belonging" (Kelemen & Smith, 2001:372). If the group *feels* like a cohesive group and members *believe* themselves to belong to a community, then in fact they are a community.

Harriet Wilkins' *Computer Talk: Long-Distance Conversations by Computer* (1991) is a rare attempt to simultaneously explore two dimensions of community in online groups: the subjective experience of community and the use of group specific language as a signifier of community. Her examination of three months of postings from a bulletin board explored how language use may have contributed to the sense of community. Wilkins provided a lengthy descriptive account of the nuances of communication within the forum and focused specifically on turn-taking in conversation, the use of lexical repetition, synonyms, shared extra-situational knowledge, and levels of involvement in the conversation as pertinent to the creation of a sense of community. She explored in detail the linguistic and textual communication that occurred on the bulletin board and emphasised the nuances in language as an important mechanism in the creation of community. Despite this impressive analysis of language communication, Wilkins neglected to examine the concept of 'sense of community' itself. She did not explore the way in which participants experience a 'sense of community'; rather she inferred this based on evidence of a shared knowledge.

Wilkins argued that through interaction on the bulletin board the participants developed into an 'interpretive community'. They established new spheres of shared knowledge and developed normative standards for membership and group interaction (Wilkins, 1991: 73). Whilst attempting to situate her discussion within a theoretical paradigm of an 'interpretive community', Wilkins did not elaborate or provide background information for this framework. She labelled her group an 'interpretive community' without any explanation of just what that entailed.

Whilst Wilkins assumed that users experience a sense of community, other researchers have more directly explored the subjective experiences of online community members. The group of psychologists who have contributed the most influential work on 'sense of community' is the Australian team of Lynne Roberts, Leigh Smith and Clare Pollock (see Roberts et al. 1996a; 1996b; 1997a; 1997c). These researchers have examined the creation of the psychological construct of a 'sense of community' by interviewing users of both IRC and MUDs. Their initial work explored the construction of the subjective experience of community in users of a MUD system (see Roberts et al. 1996a). A sense of community was examined in reference to four aspects: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections. The results indicated that the majority of people interviewed in their study experienced a sense of community within a particular place in the MUD, within the MUD as a whole or across MUDs. The interaction within the MUD created a sense of community because members felt their needs were met by the community and they in turn believed they assisted to meet the needs of other community members.

This team's later work explored the creation of a sense of community in users of IRC and focused on the phenomenological perception of community by users (see Roberts et al. 1997a). They discovered that, whilst some users of IRC experienced no sense of community, the majority of those interviewed experienced feelings of community at least on some level. This sense of community was primarily felt at the channel level of discussion rather than on the network level. People felt a sense of community in the chat channel they frequented and attributed this to the supportive, sharing and respectful social interaction which occurred with other regulars of that chat channel. The researchers concluded that because the majority of people interviewed expressed a sense of community, then chat technologies were capable of constructing communities.

The cumulative work by Roberts and her colleagues stands out as an attempt to explore the phenomenological component of community rather than assume it through simply observing the behaviour of members. By interviewing group members and questioning them about their experiences and feelings of community, they attempted to measure or gauge a 'sense of community' from those who experienced it. Of particular note is their consistent use of existing paradigms to help understand online community. Their research incorporated traditional psychological understandings of 'sense of community' and attempted to apply these models to online group communication. This work demonstrates an encouraging move in the field of online community research that attempts to explore such groups with traditional or historical frameworks of understanding community.

Derek Foster is another researcher who explored the subjective experience of community and situated his discussion in traditional sociological understandings of community (1997). Foster's primarily theoretical discussion of online community is positioned in the Tönnies' traditional dichotomy of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Community in any situation, real life or online, is characterised by sufficient 'we' feelings in the members' subjective experiences. Foster says:

The spirit of community is essential to the vitality of virtual communities. That which holds a virtual community intact is the subjective criterion of togetherness, a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging. Virtual communities require much more than the mere act of connection itself. (1997: 29)

The quality of these connections or interactions among online group members must be examined to see whether they create the subjective experiences of community that characterise *gemeinschaft*. Foster argued that online communities are co-determined and constructed by the simultaneous forces of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in the real world and as such, are public/private locales that allow for the redefinition of both public identities and private identities (1997:35). It is clear that a phenomenological experience of community is essential for a community's existence, but this communal feeling does not necessarily develop in online groups in isolation from broader societal forces. Whilst Foster demonstrated a relatively rare attempt to discuss online community within the confines of existing sociological literature about community, his discussion is primarily theoretical and philosophical. Given that the field of online community research is in its infancy, it would be prudent to extend Foster's discussion of *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* in online communities by conducting empirical research to substantiate this argument.

The focus on the subjective experience of community in online community research has allowed for the human element of community to be brought into the debate. Such research has ensured that online community is discussed in relation to the experiences of group members. Such an emphasis is particularly important in the field of computer-mediated communication research because people interact primarily via computer networks. The very infrastructure that supports this mode of communication may be seen to isolate or reduce the appearance of 'people'. We are identifying the human element behind the computer connections and reminding ourselves that, despite the technological advancements that allow communication, it is people who are using it to communicate.

At this early stage in this field of research, the understanding of online community from the subjective experience of group members is complicated by the paucity of research and the conflicting ways in which researchers have understood such constructs as a 'sense of community'. Our understanding of the subjective experiences of online community will be further developed when research allows a comparative analysis across diverse research findings. Whilst a focus on the subjective experience of community has been fruitful, it remains clear that other structures of community must also be examined. The subjective experiences of group members may be just one element that contributes to the development of a community. Research needs to explore how structural aspects of community are 'experienced' by group members. For example, social hierarchy, social control, normative regulations and membership boundaries are other more 'structural' elements of online groups that may contribute to

the development of online community. These structural elements must also be explored in relation to their impact on the subjective experience of group members.

### **Community as a Social Network**

Whilst some researchers such as Roberts (and colleagues) and Foster have sought to inject traditional understandings of community into their analyses, other researchers who have previously researched 'real' life communities have now turned their attention to the online community. Barry Wellman and his colleagues are sociologists who have previously worked in the field of sociology of community and have begun to explore the online community using the same methods they have traditionally employed. They explore community in real life and in virtual space through the use of social network analysis (c.f. Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988; Wellman et al. 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). They conceptualise community as a complex network of social relations where such relations differ in their strength of association.

Wellman and Gulia, in their work, *Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone* (1999), called for the exploration and investigation of online communities as real communities characterised as complex social networks. They argued that online group interactions need to be examined in relation to whether these interactions are narrowly specialised or broadly supportive and whether they represent weak or strong ties within the social network. The authors proposed a series of research questions to be addressed in future research and began to explore online community in relation to these questions. Such questions focused on whether weak ties in a social network are useful in an online environment and whether reciprocity exists in online

relationships. Unfortunately, these researchers did not present their own research findings in order to further explore these issues. Instead, they discussed the application of social network analysis and demonstrated the manner in which this may occur by drawing on previous research findings from other computer-mediated communication researchers. Wellman and Gulia acknowledged this limitation of their work and explained that the paucity of systematic research into online communities has raised more questions than it begins to answer (1999:188).

Social network analysis provides a traditional sociological understanding of community which we can transpose on to an online group. Social network analysis removes the focus of community research from the physical locale of community because it theorises community as a network of social relationships that may or may not be confined by a physical boundary. Such a community becomes an attractive alternative when we begin to explore online groups that do not necessarily reside in a 'place' as we traditionally understand it. Whilst the application of social network analysis to our understanding of online community holds much promise, very few researchers have conducted any substantial work in the area and consequently, the application of the theory to online communities is scarce.

### **Community as a Complex Social System**

In addition to the work that has explored community by examining one feature such as social structure (Dibbell, 1994; Reid, 1994), normative standards (McLaughlin et al. 1995; Reid 1991) language (Carlstrom, 1992; Cherny, 1999; Marvin, 1997) or subjective experiences (Roberts et al. 1996a; Wilkins, 1991), other researchers have

explored online community as a more sophisticated complex social arrangement. Like social network analysis, such approaches to understanding community in cyberspace construct community as multifaceted and multidimensional. Research into online communities has begun to propose that communities are inherently related to a system of symbols external to the computer network. "We must begin from the real world, which is the world in which virtual communities are now being imagined. And we must recognise that difference, asymmetry and conflict are constitutive features of that world, not community" (Robins, 1992: 152). Scholars have expanded their research to ensure that a multitude of aspects relating to community in virtual spaces have been explored. Researchers are beginning to recognise that these online communities must also be understood as developing out of diverse systems of politics, ideologies and practices in the real world. The distinction between online communities and the 'real' offline world is increasingly being challenged by scholars who call for a more socially contextualised approach to Internet research (Lewis, 2001: 238). The distinction should not be made so clearly between online and everyday life (Argyle & Shields, 1996: 38).

One researcher who has attempted to understand online groups as multifaceted, complex communities is the cultural anthropologist, Jen Clodius. Clodius' paper, *Creating a Community of Interest: 'Self' and 'Other' on DragonMUD* (1997), investigated how users of a MUD created and defined themselves as a community within that environment. It was argued that despite not interacting face-to-face in a defined geographic locality the group nevertheless still constituted a 'community'. A variety of aspects were examined as indices of community. These aspects included the formation of individual and group identities and issues which related to the shared history and assumed common future of the group. The social and political hierarchies

that have developed within the mediated environment were also investigated, as were the systems of exchange of resources and information between group members. Relationships including kinships, factions and friendships were explored. Group membership was investigated by examining the creation of an 'other' in order to delineate group membership boundaries. Additional aspects explored in this research included the shared interests, shared values, and caring and nurturing interactions amongst members. The language employed by the group as well as the common moral code was also detailed. All these elements of the group's interaction were thought to cumulatively demonstrate the existence of the group as a distinctly defined community.

This research provides one of the few studies that takes a multifaceted approach to online community and examines a variety of social avenues to the creation of community. Despite the sophistication of viewing community as a multifaceted construct, Clodius presents little scholarly evidence for her examination. In fact, Clodius bases her argument that the group is in fact a community, albeit multifaceted, on the unsubstantiated definition in an unpublished paper by online community researcher, Roger Scime (1994). His definition simply lists shared interests, shared values, caring/nurturing, discourse and a moral voice as the definitive characteristics of community. Clodius deliberately emphasises her academic anthropological background in her paper. Given this, it is surprising to find that she does not situate her discussion of online community within a traditional academic framework or theory of community. Her research lacks an appreciation of the anthropological and sociological perspectives that construct community as a complex social system and how such perspectives may be employed to study an online community.

One such researcher who does not ignore the historical development of the sociology of community and attempts to incorporate this knowledge into his understanding of online communities is sociologist Kevin Thompson (2001). Thompson explored online community by using existing theoretical perspectives of community. He used various frameworks of community such as a 'form of expression', an 'expression of ideology' and a 'set of unifying symbols' to examine the White Nationalist (white supremacy) movement on the Internet. This multifaceted approach examined issues of sharing, mutual commitment amongst members, a sense of belonging and sharing of common interests as pertinent to the creation of associations that represent a community. In order to understand how the community was an expression of shared ideology, Thompson focused on how the group stigmatised certain groups in the world (in this case non-white people) and rationalised how the world operates in terms of conflict between distinctive racial groups. The use of symbols such as the burning cross, swastika, Celtic cross and confederate flag act as a set of unifying symbols by which the group created itself as a community. Thompson argued that online communities are no less valid than their real life counterparts. "...[T]he meanings, actions and relationships that characterise a community bear greater significance than the forums in which such meanings, actions and relationships are enacted" (Thompson, 2001: 47). In essence, the forum for communication (whether it be an online discussion board or a real life geographical location) is of lesser importance than the form the communication takes when determining if a group constitutes a community.

Thompson's work examined various aspects of the formation of community in online space, whilst situating his analysis in existing sociological paradigms of

community. He viewed the White Nationalist online community as a complex social group that incorporates various elements into its community construction. These included the diverse associations amongst group members, a defined system of ideology and discourse and a set of unifying symbols. Thompson not only appreciated the online group as a complex social system but appeared determined to understand how it constituted an online community in relation to traditional sociological perspectives on community.

We have seen an extension of this perspective where online communities are understood as complex social systems that must be studied in the wider social context in which they have developed. Some of these new studies situate the online community in the politics of the real world and examine the group as a socially constructed entity. Many previous studies of online communities do not develop a critical approach to the concept of 'community' and as such fail to grasp the broader implications of the internet for human association and conduct beyond that of a narrowly conceived online interaction (Slevin, 2000: 91). The previous research on virtual communities can be characterised by a dependence on the concept of community which imagines online interactions as somehow abstracted from the broader sets of social relations in the real world (Lewis, 2001: 234). Such studies examine Internet groups in isolation as a separate reality without recognising the possible overlap between people's everyday and virtual lives (Roberts, et al. 1996a). Such studies fail to incorporate the principle of contextualism in understanding online communities. "... [C]ontextualism emphasises the fact that human activity does not develop in a social vacuum, but is rigorously situated within a sociohistorical context of meanings and relationships" (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985:82).

One of the more comprehensive accounts that attempts to understand online community as a complex social system, contextualised in the social, historical and cultural context of the real world, is Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000). Hine provided an excellent example of the perspective that online groups, interactions and communities are constructed by, and intersect with, more popular cultural processes in real life. This work examined Internet groups who formed in response to the murder trial in the US of English nanny, Louise Woodward. Hine provided a comprehensive account of how events that occurred in real life influenced the events, information and interaction in online space. This is a pertinent example because in this trial the Internet became a primary vehicle for information to flow to the public from the judicial system.

Hine argued that ethnographers need to reconsider the notion of 'site' and work towards developing methodological approaches that acknowledge the intersection between online and offline 'sites' of communication. Her work represents an understanding of how online group interaction and events are embedded in real world processes and systems. However, despite her extensive theoretical discussion of the connectivity between the online and offline worlds she focused primarily on online culture (eg, the Louise Woodward case) and did not really explore the issues of connectivity that she had raised (Lewis, 2001:240). Despite this criticism, Hine's work demonstrated that online interaction and community is a complex social arrangement that necessarily needs to be understood in relation to the broader social and political context.

Miller and Slater's text, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000), offers a comprehensive account of the way in which the people of Trinidad have embraced new communications technologies for connection and community. The authors argued that online community research assumes that cyberspace (and thus online communities) is separate from the real physical world. Like Hine, Miller and Slater approached online community research with an emphasis on the "... need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces ..." (Miller & Slater, 2000:5). Their research examined a variety of aspects of the Trinidadian community online. These aspects included how existing real world practices, ideologies and social events are replicated and displayed on the Internet and how the Internet is used as a vehicle for representing Trinidadian national identity. The political economy of Trinidad, business and e-commerce relations on the Internet, as well as religion and Trinidadian family relationships were also investigated. The text provides an approach to the study of online groups that represents the online events as they are constructed by the dominant political, ideological and cultural regimes in the real world. Miller and Slater demonstrated that technology does not exist as separate to Trinidadian culture and identity, rather its meanings and effects are realised through specific social traditions, rituals and practices online.

Recent developments in the field view the online group as a complex social system that contains multiple elements that collectively define it as a community. Scholars have extended this view to suggest that the complexity is increased when we consider the real world social arrangements. In essence:

...we need to recognise that cyberspace, far from being detached and governed by completely different rules, exists in a

symbiotic relationship with the non-virtual world. Cyberspaces are situated and embodied spaces; they are simulations or extensions rather than substitutions. Cyberspaces and the rules of engagement within them do bear a remarkable resemblance to real-world spaces and protocols. (Kitchen, 1998:97)

Miller and Slaters work on the Trinidadian community raises an interesting point about the origin of an online community. Some researchers study online groups that already exist within the real world. For example Miller and Slater looked at the Trinidadian community and Thompson looked at white supremacists in the US. These are groups who all exist independent of the Internet. They are treated as online communities in so much as they have deliberately developed Internet sites or forums so that they will have a presence online. Alternatively, there are online communities that exist solely on the Internet and have no counterpart in the real world. For example Dibbles' MUD, Reid's IRC or MUD groups and Cherny's MUD linguistic community are all groups who only exist in cyberspace. It must be noted that not all online communities will have an observable presence in the real world but all online communities will be influenced by the wider political, economic and social realities of the world.

### **The Current Research**

The field of online community research is in its infancy. In the late 80s and early 90s richly descriptive accounts of 'virtual communities' emerged that detailed the interaction that occurred within online space. These early accounts ascribed the status of 'community' to virtual groups with very little, if any, critical discussion of community. Later researchers began to explore how community could be understood in relation to the norms, standards and conventions that develop within an online group. Others

investigated the development of group specific language, jargon and discourses as an index of community development. Alternatively, researchers considered the existence of social structures and hierarchical stratification within online groups to indicate their community status. Some researchers began to explore online community in relation to the subjective experiences of its members, whilst others attempted to understand online communities via social network analysis. More recently we have seen a movement towards understanding the online community as a complex social system that is multifaceted and influenced by the wider social context in which the technology has developed.

An uncritical assumption that online communities do in fact exist underpins much of the research and literature in this field. "Sociologists often define community as whatever they happen to be studying, instead of being open to whether or not what they are studying is, in fact, a community"(Stoneall, 1983:2). Very few writers question their assumptions that online groups on the Internet are in fact communities. What constitutes an online community remains unexplored territory (McLaughlin et al, 1995: 93). My research was inherently driven by the *question* of community, rather than the assumption of community. It was important to begin my investigation without a preconceived idea or assumption that the group under study was a 'community'. Consequently, my research aims to provide a critical analysis of online community.

The research to date has provided an evidential basis for understanding online community and has outlined in rich detail the interactions that occur in online space. However, much of the work is interdisciplinary, unscholarly and some authors neglect to draw on an existing body of knowledge. Our understanding of an online community

can be complimented by a more distinctly sociological approach to community. The study of community has a long history in sociology. It has a substantial body of philosophical, theoretical and experiential knowledge about a diversity of communities developed over two centuries of research and academic debate. For example, knowledge of group behaviour, social structures, culture, socialisation and conflict dynamics can be applied to any community for a micro level analysis of human behaviour. It would appear that such knowledge could, and arguably should, be applied to the study of this new form of community, the online community. Furthermore, the critical analyses and persistent questioning that characterises the sociological imagination encourages a comprehensive and rigorous approach to online group case studies. An investigation, which employs a historically established, distinctively sociological perspective, would contribute a unique perspective to the study of online community. Given this, the explicit aims of my research are:

- To provide a sociological examination of an online group.
- To present an in-depth case study of an online group.
- To explore the social interaction in this group from the perspective of symbolic interactionism.
- To determine if and how this group constitutes a community.

This thesis is an attempt to come to terms with some of the complexities involved in understanding online groups. A theoretical framework to study online groups is needed which allows for the multiple elements of community to be incorporated. Such a framework would allow for language, social hierarchy, norms and values, as well as the subjective experience of group members, to be incorporated into

an understanding of what constitutes an online community. Such a framework would also need to be sufficiently sophisticated to necessarily view an online group as a complex social system which takes into account the influences of real world factors. The following chapter outlines such a theoretical framework that addresses the issues for research in the field of online community. The symbolic interactionist perspective will be explored and Cohen's theory (1985) of the symbolic construction of community will be outlined. This theory is seen to be an appropriate framework in which to comprehensively and inclusively explore online groups as communities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING ONLINE COMMUNITY

This thesis does not aim to develop yet another definition of community that will inevitably evoke criticism because it is unable to account for all aspects of community. Hillery argues that in many cases definitions are not useful because they are premature particularly in regards to community (1982:13). In response, I will explore a framework that allows us to understand how community can be constructed in virtual spaces. The question asked is not, 'is the group a community'? Rather it is posed, 'how can the group be understood as a community'? In relation to the expressed aims of this research, an online group will be examined from a distinctly sociological perspective to see if and how it constitutes a community.

Jan Fernback (1999) argued for the exploration of the symbolic dimensions of online communities. She defined an online community as a set of "...social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g. a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest" (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). Whilst a few researchers have attempted to explore the symbolic or cultural aspects of online community (e.g. Foster, 1997; McLaughlin et al. 1995; Reid, 1991), few have substantiated their discussions in an academic or scholastic framework. This research attempts to address these inadequacies and explore a case study of an online group from the perspective of a symbolic interactionist approach. The history of symbolic interactionism will be considered along

with the diverse criticisms it has heralded from the wider sociological community. The manner in which symbolic interactionism has been applied to the study of community will be addressed. More specifically, a relatively little known theory of community espoused by Anthony Cohen in his book, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), will be explored as a demonstration of how online groups may be understood as a community.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and the Study of Community**

Despite the manner in which symbolic interactionism is discussed in the sociological literature, there is a myth that there is one monolithic theory. There is no single symbolic interactionist orthodoxy; instead, a variety of different theories and perspectives can be amalgamated under the same term. A multitude of symbolic interactionisms differ with respect to their perspectives on the social self, social interaction, societal structure, methodologies and possible areas of investigation. Symbolic interactionism has nonetheless been regarded holistically as both a general framework for the analysis of society and as a social psychological theory that primarily addresses issues of socialisation (Stryker, 1980:1).

The founding father of symbolic interactionism was Charles Mead (1863-1931). Mead built on the foundations of Weberian 'interpretive understanding' (1922/1978) and Cooley's looking glass mirror concept (1902/1964) when he outlined the ways in which individuals become social beings<sup>4</sup>. Mead's primary contributions to the field

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<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the history of symbolic interactionism and the main philosophical and intellectual influences on its development, including George Mead, Herbert Blummer, John Dewey, Charles Cooley, George Simmel, W.I. Thomas, William James and Irving Goffman, please see Meltzer et al. *Symbolic Interactionism: Genesis, Varieties and Criticisms* (1975).

were published posthumously in a collection of three volumes including, *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), *The Philosophy of the Act* (1938) and *The Philosophy of the Present* (1959). Mead proposed that society is an ongoing social process which is achieved through people's engagement in social acts and communication. Social action relies on our ability to imagine ourselves in other people's roles and to take on that role in a given situation. Society then is a social process whereby individuals exchange gestures and symbols of particular roles. "Symbols enable people to predict their own and others' behaviour and to anticipate the future course of interaction" (Stryker, 1980:37). When an event to which an arbitrary meaning has been assigned assumes that meaning for more than one person, then it becomes a symbol to be employed in the communicative process (Dance, 1967:300). Mead argued that the concept of 'self' emerges from this social interaction and exists in so far as the person is able to view him or herself reflexively. This self-reflexivity is made possible through a system of symbols which allows individuals to view themselves as others would.

Mead's work is central to all forms of symbolic interactionism. However, the term 'symbolic interactionism' was invented by Herbert Blumer (1937) and was applied to the history of the thought and ideas we now associate with it. At the core of the diverse symbolic interactionist theories are a set of principles which form the basis for all these perspectives. Blumer eloquently outlined the three principles that form the basis of the symbolic interactionist framework:

1. Human beings act towards things and each other on the basis of the meanings those things hold for them.
2. The meanings that such things hold are derived from and out of the social interaction that occurs amongst people.
3. These meanings are modified and reinforced through an interpretive process used by people with the things as they encounter things (other people and/or objects) during social action. (1969:2)

At the centre of any symbolic interactionism is the belief that sociology needs to make sense of the social world by concentrating on the symbolic nature of that world and the complex manner in which people navigate through their social environment. Symbolic interactionist theory explores social relations and the complexity of the relationship between the self and society as a process of symbolic communication between social contributors.

A variety of symbolic interactionist theories embraced the three primary principles but differed in the manner in which social interaction was approached, theorised and studied. Meltzer et al. (1975:54) considers modern symbolic interactionism to be divided into four schools of thought. Firstly, the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism viewed people as active agents who are engaged in their social environments. They advocate a distinctive and unique methodology for symbolic interactionist studies. Secondly, the Iowa School retained the more positivist foundations of sociology and believed that symbolic interaction needs to be studied objectively by measuring tangible and overt acts. Thirdly, the dramaturgical approach viewed people as somewhat manipulative. Their focus was on the everyday world in which people engage in impression management acts. The most famous modern symbolic interactionist sociologist, Irving Goffman, works within this school of thought. Finally, the ethnomethodological approach focused on the everyday and ordinary ways people construct their social worlds as meaningful. The indexical character of conversation illuminates the rules, methods and understandings that assist people in their communicative actions.

More modern symbolic interactionisms such as those espoused by Blumer (1962), Burke and Tully (1977), Goffman (1959), Kuhn (c.f. 1964; 1954), Kuhn & Addison Hickman (1956), McCall and Simmons (1978), Turner (cf. 1976) and Weinstein and Tanur (1976) offer different perspectives on the study of social interaction.

True, there is common acceptance of some very general principles; and, beyond this, there seems to be an emergent consensus on important matters of concept, theory and procedure. But there is difference and disagreement as well. There are differences in just how "determinative" social structure is seen, and in what ways, with respect to self and interactional processes. There are differences in just how social structure is conceptualised; differences in just what range of social and personal behaviour symbolic interactionism is taken to be responsible for and to; differences in analytic and theory-building strategies; and so on. (Stryker, 1980:135)

Symbolic interactionisms have been criticised on a number of grounds. The validity and appropriateness of these critiques depends on the particular style of symbolic interactionism to which they are addressed. Some of the major criticisms include: it is ahistorical and non-economic (Block, 1973; Ropers, 1973; Smith, 1973); it has a limited view of the importance of power (Kanter, 1972:88); it presents a quaint and unrealistic picture of social relations (Horowitz, 1971; Shashkolski, 1970); and it is biased within a certain philosophical and ideological perspective (Huber, 1973:275) that favours liberal democracy and the maintenance of the status quo (Stryker, 1980: 146). In terms of methodology, symbolic interactionism has also been criticised for its inability to provide precise concepts that are easily operational, measurable and scientific (Stryker, 1980:146).

The most pertinent criticism of symbolic interactionism for my research is the argument that it neglects an examination of larger social structures and ignores the macro-organisational features of society and their effects on behaviour (Stryker, 1980:146). It is claimed that a symbolic interactionist approach, which is necessarily preoccupied with exploring micro-scale social phenomena, can not adequately explain and appreciate broader social organisation and structures. The day-to-day, interpersonal social relations do little to assist in understanding the ways in which our society operates on a macro scale. Symbolic interactionisms do not allow for a macro analysis of social phenomena.

The assertion that symbolic interactionist theories can not account for societal structures is contentious. Alternative versions of the theory differ in their ability to account for the effects of larger social structures and processes. Stryker argues that many versions of the theory are in fact capable of incorporating such understandings into their analyses. "A most important lesson to be learned from the intellectual sources of symbolic interactionism is that a focus on the person without a correlative focus on social structure, or vice versa, is necessarily partial and incomplete" (Stryker, 1980:53). If we consider that social structures are merely "the enduring, orderly and patterned relationships between elements of a society" (Abercrombie et al. 1994:391) this is precisely what symbolic interactionist theories aim to explain. Not all social structures manifest as directly observable social institutions such as a school, the family or the government; rather many social structures are far more intangible and apparent only by the observation of human behaviour. Structures of power, hierarchy, conflict, culture or value systems are abstract conceptualisations at the very heart of symbolic interactionist

endeavours. To criticise symbolic interactionism because it is unable to account for social structures is to take a very narrow definition of what social structure may entail.

Whilst certain varieties of symbolic interactionism may be able to account for social structures and incorporate such concepts into their analyses, the fact remains that these theories do not have the capacity to explore macro or societal level social arrangements. What may seem to be a near fatal flaw of symbolic interactionism may be redundant, depending on the application and purposes to which the theory is applied. Not every sociological endeavour aims to explain social organisation on a grand scale. Many investigations, like my research, specifically aim to explore micro-level social relations in order to help us understand our everyday social world and apply our sociological imagination to what we see around us.

Despite the varied criticisms symbolic interactionism has evoked from the wider sociological community, many researchers have adopted this theoretical framework as appropriate and pertinent to examine the concept of community. From Weber's relatively unknown theory of community<sup>5</sup> to the research of present day scholars, sociologists have applied the principles of symbolic interactionism to the study of community. They focus on the micro level interactions amongst social members that symbolise their community. Members negotiate the meaning of their community and set in place various mechanisms of social control that govern future interactions. In this way meanings and definitions of community are constantly renegotiated and reinforced in social interaction. Hence, community is not necessarily an external object; rather it is symbolically constructed by members through their meaningful interaction with one

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive outline of Weber's theory of community, please see J. Winckelmann (1956) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (4<sup>th</sup> edition).

another. Rituals, events, language and social interaction amongst members create a communal bond and help distinguish the group as a social unit to outsiders (Stonall, 1983: 189). Community becomes a set of unifying symbols that act as a mechanism for amalgamating membership (Thompson, 2001:39). It is only by understanding how individuals experience their world that the researcher is able to form an appreciation of how community operates.

Whilst many scholars have employed a symbolic interactionist framework in their studies of community, for the purposes of this research thesis only one perspective will be explored in detail. Anthony Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985) provides an application of the symbolic interactionist approach to the study of community that easily lends itself to the exploration of an online group.

### **Cohen's Symbolic Construction of Community**

Anthony Cohen is a social anthropologist most famous for his ethnographic account of a Shetland fishing community, outlined in his work, *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island* (1987). He also developed a theory of the symbolic construction of community that was subsequently published in a book length volume of the same name. Cohen did not set out to concretely 'define' a community; rather he posited a framework in which community could be more appropriately explored in contemporary settings. He examined how group members symbolically constructed community as a collection of normative codes, values and rituals, that provided members with a sense of collective identity in opposition to those who are external to the community.

Cohen argued that traditional sociological understandings of community are preoccupied with defining and determining the manner in which social structures impact upon and influence social behaviour (Cohen, 1985:70). Some sociologists have concentrated on the structures and forms of social life which they can overtly and empirically observe, and which lend themselves to a positivist approach to community. The dominance of such structural determinist accounts in sociology was challenged by the advent of Weberian sociology and Meadian social psychological approaches. With increased industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation, the structural elements of community are becoming increasingly blurred and indistinct. Cohen's emphasis on symbolic meanings in the construction of community sidesteps some of the definitional problems posed by the search for a structural model of community (Hamilton, 1985:9). Such an approach challenges and redefines the manner in which we can explore community and, "[by] emphasising *meaning* rather than structure, Cohen rightly demonstrates that community is substance over form" (Fernback, 1999:210 original emphasis). Community then is not identified by its structural components, rather by the manner in which it is symbolised by its constituents.

Like other symbolic interactionist perspectives, at the core of Cohen's argument lies the notion of a symbol. Symbols are malleable concepts that are manipulated and redefined according to the needs of the members of the community. Symbols are abstract representations and those who employ them engage in a constant process of negotiating their meanings and applications to the social world. Communities then share a common set of symbols which members manipulate and employ in their interactions and also when in opposition to others. Community is a symbol that

simultaneously implies both similarity and difference. Community is an oppositional concept and only 'means' something when it is held in direct contrast to those outside the community. The community and its collective identity are embodied in its discriminatory boundary. The boundary of the community symbolises both the beginning and the end of the community.

The concept of a boundary as an identifying symbol of community is the crux of Cohen's argument and he outlines its significance when he says;

Community suggests that its putative members have something in common with each other which distinguishes them in a significant manner from the members of other groups. The term thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference; hence its relational character: it suggests the opposition of the community to others or to other social entities ... In a sense therefore, we might see the essential meaning of the community -- those propagated as a collective rhetoric, and those imputed to the collectivity by individuals through the medium of their idiosyncratic experience - as invested in its boundaries, those ideas which discriminate the community from other places and groups. It is precisely this sense that I suggested above that boundaries might be regarded as symbolic entities. Like other symbols, they can be thought of as common in form to their members, who can invest them with their own pertinent meanings. (1987:14)

The reality of community then depends upon the symbolic construction of its boundary which then acts to embrace and encapsulate all that is held within. "Like other symbols, the boundary does not entail given meanings. Rather, it provides people with forms which they may then invest with meaning" (Cohen, 1987:13). The essence of community lies in its boundary as well as in the distinction between the community and the outside world. Community members inject their meanings and values into the symbolic boundary and use it to reinforce their own communal identity.

Communal identity can only be achieved through its boundary and the development of a set of collectively defined symbols of community. It develops through interactions that occur at, and also transgress, the symbolic boundary of the group. Interactions with 'others' external to the community ensure that the boundary is symbolically reinforced. It is only through contact with those outside that the group is able to clearly delineate who belongs within and who resides outside the community. Community identity becomes a 'mask' displayed to the wider world. "This symbolically constituted collective self presents a fairly undifferentiated, 'typical' image to the outside world" (Cohen, 1987:19). Jenkins discusses the function of such a communal mask:

Community membership, for Cohen, depends upon the symbolic construction and signification of a mask of similarity which all can wear, an umbrella of solidarity under which all can shelter. The similarity of communal membership is thus imagined; insomuch as it is a potent symbolic presence in people's lives, however it is not imaginary. (1996:105)

Despite this emphasis on community identity, Cohen does not preclude the development of individual identity that may be incongruent with the overall collective one. To the outside world, the public 'mask' of the community displays solidarity, commonality and cohesion; but, within the confines of the community boundary, the private mask can be disputed and plagued by disparities amongst the constituents (Cohen, 1985: 14). The commonality of the community identity does not necessarily imply uniformity amongst the members. Cohen's theory allows for the formation of an individual identity for community members which may be incongruent with the

collective identity. For example, the symbols of community may not necessarily be understood in the same way by all group members. Cohen argues, "...whilst the *form* of symbols may be common to those who bear the same culture, the *meanings* of the symbols, their contents, may differ" (1987:13 original emphasis).

In essence, Cohen advocates the study of 'communities' in contemporary society through the use of a symbolic interactionist perspective that places emphasis on the symbolic nature of the community's boundary and the meanings that such a boundary has for the collective identity of the group. Cohen sums up his argument when he claims that "... it is clear that identity (however explicit), boundary (however evasive and nebulous) and authenticity (however contested and contestable) are matters in which people invest huge value" (Cohen, 2000:5).

Cohen's ideas have been criticised on a number of grounds. Most notably, his distinction between social structure and culture may be considered problematic (Jenkins, 1996:109). Whilst Cohen criticises traditional sociological dependence on the concept of structure to determine social behaviour, his definition of those structures remains unclear. It appears that 'structure' in the form of social institutions and tangible, physically manifested structures are not helpful when exploring community from this perspective. However, Cohen frequently discusses 'culture' to illustrate and augment his theory. Culture may be viewed as re-occurring patterns of human behaviour that regulate social behaviour. In this way culture is a social structure. When Cohen argues that social structures are no longer appropriate references from which to explore community he is speaking specifically about tangible institutional structures, rather than the myriad of patterned social relations that could be considered social structures.

## The Symbolic Construction of Online Community

Whilst Cohen's ideas appear to have been prominent and influential in the field of anthropology, it appears relatively few sociologists have appropriated his framework for the study of community. A few scholars have used it as a basis to explore diverse or divergent communities. For example, Setzer (1995) uses Cohen's theory as a framework when examining how different Jewish communities use symbols of resurrection and death to differentiate themselves from other communities. The scarcity of research utilising Cohen's theory may not necessarily indicate a reluctance by researchers to adopt it. As it is a relatively recent theory, perhaps sociologists have yet to decipher the means by which this theory can prove useful in their current endeavours. My research is one such attempt at an innovative and novel application of Cohen's theory.

Whilst Cohen's theory may have some limitations it does provide some insightful avenues along which to explore community in cyberspace. The emphasis on the symbolic forms of community does not preclude a community located in physical space, nor necessarily tie it to a physical location. Such an understanding of community offers the opportunity to explore online groups without making fundamental adjustments to Cohen's theory to account for the group's lack of physical location. Symbolic interactionism, and specifically Cohen's framework, offers the opportunity to explore an online group within a traditional sociological framework. Such a framework does not need to be altered, amended nor manipulated to allow for the fact that these groups exist via a mediated context in a virtual space.

This framework also provides an opportunity to explore the social structures that regulate the patterns of interaction in the group. Whilst online groups appear to have little physically overt manifestations of structure, they do have cultural and intangible structures that help regulate and organise the group's interaction. Cohen's theory offers an existing paradigm in which to explore 'symbolic' social structures such as norms, values, rituals and rules of behaviour.

The importance of a boundary in assisting the development of a community identity is an interesting concept to apply in a study of an online group. Many computer-mediated communication forums, such as newsgroups, produce online groups that have few identifying features to clearly differentiate each group from another. For example, most newsgroups on Usenet 'look' the same, operate in the same manner in regards to reading and posting and are only differentiated from each other by a few words in their names. In an environment where groups are not easily distinguishable, symbolic boundary maintenance may become quite pertinent.

Symbolic interactionist perspectives advocate the exploration of 'community' in relation to the means by which they are phenomenologically and symbolically understood by the constituents. Cohen's theory set out in his work, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985) offers a framework to further assist in understanding online community. Community is constructed as a set of symbols, in particular the community's boundary symbols, which are negotiated, manipulated, reinforced and adapted by community members in their interaction amongst themselves. Whilst no claim is made that Cohen's theory is the definitive framework in which to study online communities, it does offer the promise of a starting point in an analysis of the ways in

which online group members may construct community. In my research, Cohen's theory is viewed not as a prescriptive framework dictating how community must be understood; rather it offers some guiding principles and key concepts by which an analysis may be fruitful. The focus on the symbolic world, and in particular the construction of symbolic boundaries for the community, provides an attractive means by which to study groups in a context with limited physical structures. The following chapter of this thesis outlines the methodology of my research, which is a case study of an online group which has been explored, investigated, and analysed using the principles espoused in Cohen's theory.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Like so many areas in the field of computer-mediated communication, issues of research design and methodology in online community projects have rarely been addressed or scrutinised. "There is a paucity of academic writing addressing methodological issues in Internet research, perhaps attributable to the newness of the area" (Roberts, et al. 1997b). This oversight may well be due to the relatively recent development of the field of computer-mediated research but it may also be attributed to the nature of the medium itself. Computer-mediated communication is just as difficult to understand as face-to-face communication. It is easy to be fooled into believing that we have a better grip on computer-mediated communication as interactions are textual, fixed and available to us (Jones, 1999: 12). Perhaps researchers are granted security and reassurance by the fact that gathering data appears to be so easy, affordable and attainable in online research projects and consequently issues of methodology may not seem to be of paramount importance.

Of those researchers who are concerned with issues of methodology in online research, some claim that the use of the Internet as a site for social research and a method for data collection, drastically transforms our understandings of how existing research methodologies operate. For example, some claim that when the 'field' is text appearing on a computer screen and the social group observed involves people

dispersed throughout the world, the whole notion of 'fieldwork' is radically altered (Morton, 2001:5). Our understanding of the use, employment and outcomes of existing methodological tools may be called into question when those tools are engaged in an online research context.

At present, the field of Internet research methodology is characterised either by a lack of interest in the area or by the claims that the instruments, tools and design perspectives are fundamentally altered when taking our research online. We must critically examine the tools, methods and research choices we make in online research projects. "... [W]hilst the Internet and WWW does offer new and exciting prospects for sociological research, in many respects the methodological issues which it raises are by and large not new" (Coomber, 1997). Issue of data collection, collation and presentation are fundamental to any sociological research project whether that project exists in online or offline space. At present there is no standard technique for studying Internet related social phenomena, rather it is a case of plundering traditional research for emerging methodological ideas (Wakeford, 2000:31). Researchers conducting online research need to be aware of these methodological questions and scrutinise their research methodologies not only in reference to their appropriateness for their research topic, but also in reference to their suitability and viability in online environments. "...[U]ntil online methods are more mainstream, it is the individual researcher who must take responsibility for convincing others of the authenticity and credibility of the medium ..." (Mann & Stewart, 2000:51).

A discussion of the rationale and justification for any research design and methodology is intimately related to issues of ethical conduct. How we choose our

research participants and how we involve them in our research project is fundamentally determined by the code of ethics in which the profession of sociology must practice. In using the Internet for research these ethical issues become a paramount concern for researchers. Online sociologists are wrestling with customary ethical questions that do not appear to have obvious conclusions when placed in the context of online research. At this early stage, sociologists need to be guided by offline ethical regulations in their treatment of participants and their public conduct as academic researchers. We need to critically examine our existing ethical guidelines for appropriate application in an online environment<sup>6</sup>. The difficulties for researchers lies in adapting conventional ethical standards to a research environment that were neither predicted nor envisaged at the time such standards were developed. We may find that our ethical guidelines do not provide a seamless transition from traditional research to 'e-research'. Researchers must make their methodological decisions with an awareness of the debates currently taking place in Internet research ethics, and justify these decisions based on both their knowledge of research methodology and what is appropriate conduct for online researchers. The current research project (Application Number 2001/005) was reviewed and approved by the Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans at Monash University in December 2000.

The current research examines the symbolic construction of online community. A case study of a newsgroup for chronically ill people was used as the focal point for this research. Observations were made of the newsgroup's activities over a six-month period and all textual communication occurring in the newsgroup was collected for later

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on the application of existing ethical guidelines to online research projects, please see: Hutchinson, Ronelle (2001) 'Dangerous Liaisons? Ethical Considerations in Conducting Online Sociological Research' Refereed Proceedings of The Australian Sociological Association's Annual Conference, The University of Sydney, 13-15<sup>th</sup> December.

analysis. The following discussion will highlight the research design and methodological decisions pertinent to the current study. Issues relating to the overall research design, choice of the 'case study' as a viable method of investigation and the selection of a newsgroup forum as an appropriate site in which to conduct the research will be outlined. The rationale behind the choice of the particular newsgroup under investigation will be examined, in addition to a discussion of the public/private space considerations that underpinned that decision. Furthermore, issues concerning the choice of data collection tools and the use of software for data collection and analysis will be outlined. Ethical concerns over potential risks to the research participants and issues of informed consent will also be addressed. Finally, the theoretical foundations and process of analysis, coding and transformation of data for presentation will be discussed in detail. This chapter aims to explore and make transparent the research methods, design and analysis choices made in this project. Such transparency is seen as important to justify and validate online research methodologies. Welsh (2002) argues that it is unusual to find accounts of how researchers analyse their data. As Silverman states "... unless you can show your audience the procedures you used to ensure that your methods were reliable and your conclusions valid, there is little point in aiming to conclude a research dissertation" (Silverman, 2000: 188).

### **Epistemological Framework**

In considering the overall research aims and objectives, it was determined that a primarily qualitative research approach would be the most suitable paradigm for this project. Issues of community, community construction and experiences of community members have in the past tended to be examined from a qualitative perspective, most

commonly using an ethnographic approach. In particular, research employing symbolic interactionist approaches have been predominantly conducted from a qualitative perspective. Although often difficult to locate an adequate definition of qualitative research, the following discussion by Peter Spratt provides an overview of the pertinent characteristics of qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers are unlikely to see sociology as a collection of 'objective' facts. Their research involves attempts to understand the meanings that people bring to their environment, and is often descriptive. They see the distance between researcher and 'subject' as undermining good research (2000:223)

This emphasis on socially contextualised meanings is a crucial component of most qualitative research. "... [A] qualitative paradigm follows an interpretivist approach to knowledge production whereby reality is socially constructed within the discursive practices tied to specific cultural locations" (Bowker, 2001). The current research project sought to examine the concept of community and, in order to do so, needed to contextualise the group under study in the forum in which it had developed. The nature of the communication that occurs in mediated groups may be viewed as a hybrid of conversation and text, and can not be easily quantified whilst still retaining the characteristics most important to a study of community. Thus, a qualitative approach was most applicable for the current study.

### The Case Study Method

In order to examine how community is constructed in virtual spaces, a case study of one particular online group was considered to be the most viable and appropriate choice. The case study method examines one particular social system, event or action in the

natural environment in which it takes place and explores it in depth to develop a contextualised understanding of its operations. A "case study is the study of a social practice in the field of activity in which it takes place ..." (Jones, 1999:35). A case study is seen to have four characteristics: it is a bounded system; it is a case of something; an attempt is made to preserve the wholeness; and multiple sources of data and data collection occur (Punch, 1998:153). This triangulation of data collection assists in developing understandings that are context specific. "We can see a mixture of methods in numerous studies that seek to provide not only a contemporary account of social life via qualitative techniques, but also seek to understand those in terms of the history that informs the narratives of respondents" (May, 2001:172). The case study method is defined solely in terms of its concentration on the specific case in its social context. It can be as pre-structured or emergent as is appropriate for the purposes of the research (Robson, 1993:149). In essence, a case study is an exploration of one research site that attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of that site in reference to the historical and cultural context in which it occurs.

The use of case studies in social science research may occur in both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, however, more recently they have been associated with qualitative approaches. In the field of sociology of community, we often see the use of the case study method as a means of examining a 'community' in context and holistically. Many of the community studies that emerged from the earlier dichotomous approaches to community/society incorporated case studies in their fundamental designs. Case studies have had an ambiguous place in the social sciences and historically there has been a cautious attitude towards their use due to the criticism that their generalisation to other cases was limited (Punch, 1998:155). Despite this criticism,

the case study is a viable and appropriate research design for particular research topics, aims and goals. "Properly conducted case studies, especially in situations where our knowledge is shallow, fragmentary, incomplete or non-existent, have a valuable contribution to make ..." (Punch, 1998:155). Research, such as my study, which aims to investigate social phenomena through a computer-mediated context, is particularly well suited to the case study method. At present, online community research and computer-mediated communication research more broadly are in their infancy as research knowledge areas. Very little is known or understood about the social processes underpinning communal activity in online forums and, as a consequence, in-depth case studies are required and are an appropriate means by which to explore these issues further.

A distinction needs to be made here to distinguish this online case study method from the more popular and fashionable 'virtual ethnography'. Often the term 'ethnography' is used to describe research employing case studies. Virtual ethnographies, online ethnographies and computer-mediated ethnographies are all popular descriptions currently used to describe recent research into online groups and communities (cf. Correll, 1995; Hamman, 1996; Hine, 2000). Ethnography typically refers to naturalistic observations and holistic understandings of cultures and subcultures (Babbie, 1999:261). It is a research design that incorporates multiple forms of data, as well as several different methods to collect them, in an attempt to develop a holistic understanding of the group or social phenomena under study. Often ethnographies are primarily characterised by the lengthy immersion of the researcher into the field site.

The point is made here to distinctly delineate the current project as a 'case study' rather than an ethnography. Although the current study does attempt to create a contextualised, comprehensive, complete and holistic understanding of the virtual group under study, a number of differences are pertinent. The current research is unable to be described as an 'ethnography' due to the nature of the data collected and the means by which that data was gathered. Only one source of data was collected, namely, the digital postings from the newsgroup. There was no triangulation of data or data collection involved in the present study. No interviews were conducted and no other personal real life details about the newsgroup participants were collected. The data source was observed over a six month period with every public posting to the focus newsgroup downloaded and stored for later analysis. This form of observation was not the participant observation technique most commonly used in ethnographic research. It was decided that my active involvement in the groups interactions during the data collection period could have potentially negatively affected the groups dynamics and the nature of the data collected. Whilst issues of research design and methodology go unexamined in the field of computer-mediated communication research, we must be wary of adopting traditional research tools and employing them in an online context without consideration of the effect this will have on the data collected and the nature of that collection process. Until such time when a more coherent body of knowledge exists about the application of complex research tools, approaches and methodological paradigms and like Wittel (1999), I would hesitate to label research in purely virtual spaces 'ethnographies'.

## Procedure

### The Newsgroup Forum

In order to ascertain which Internet forum to draw the case study from, a variety of computer-mediated communication forums were evaluated. Synchronous mediums such as chat rooms and MUDs were explored as options, but it was determined that the most viable, uncontroversial and appropriate forum was a newsgroup. The "reasons for choosing a particular on-line group must be made explicit" (Schrum, 1995: 319). Therefore, a newsgroup was chosen primarily on the basis of an evaluation of the public/private space debate in the computer-mediated communication field, which will be discussed in detail later. The largest system of newsgroups is Usenet. Usenet is a system comprising of thousands of newsgroups, structured in a hierarchy around various interest topics. Gauntlett defines a newsgroup in Usenet as:

A public online space where messages are posted for public consumption and response. The most available distribution of newsgroups is Usenet, which contains thousands of newsgroups devoted to all kinds of (diverse and perverse) topics. Often referred to as the original public sphere of cyberspace, newsgroups are currently over-run by spam. (2000:224)

Newsgroups on Usenet are free services that can be accessed via an Internet browser. To subscribe to a newsgroup a user configures their Internet browser software to download the messages from the newsgroup. On an average day tens of thousands of different people contribute messages to the Usenet (Kollock & Smith, 1999:6). These newsgroups are hierarchically organised and each operates as an open forum for the discussion of a specific interest area (Baym, 1998: 39). The major categories of newsgroups in Usenet are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Usenet newsgroup categories**

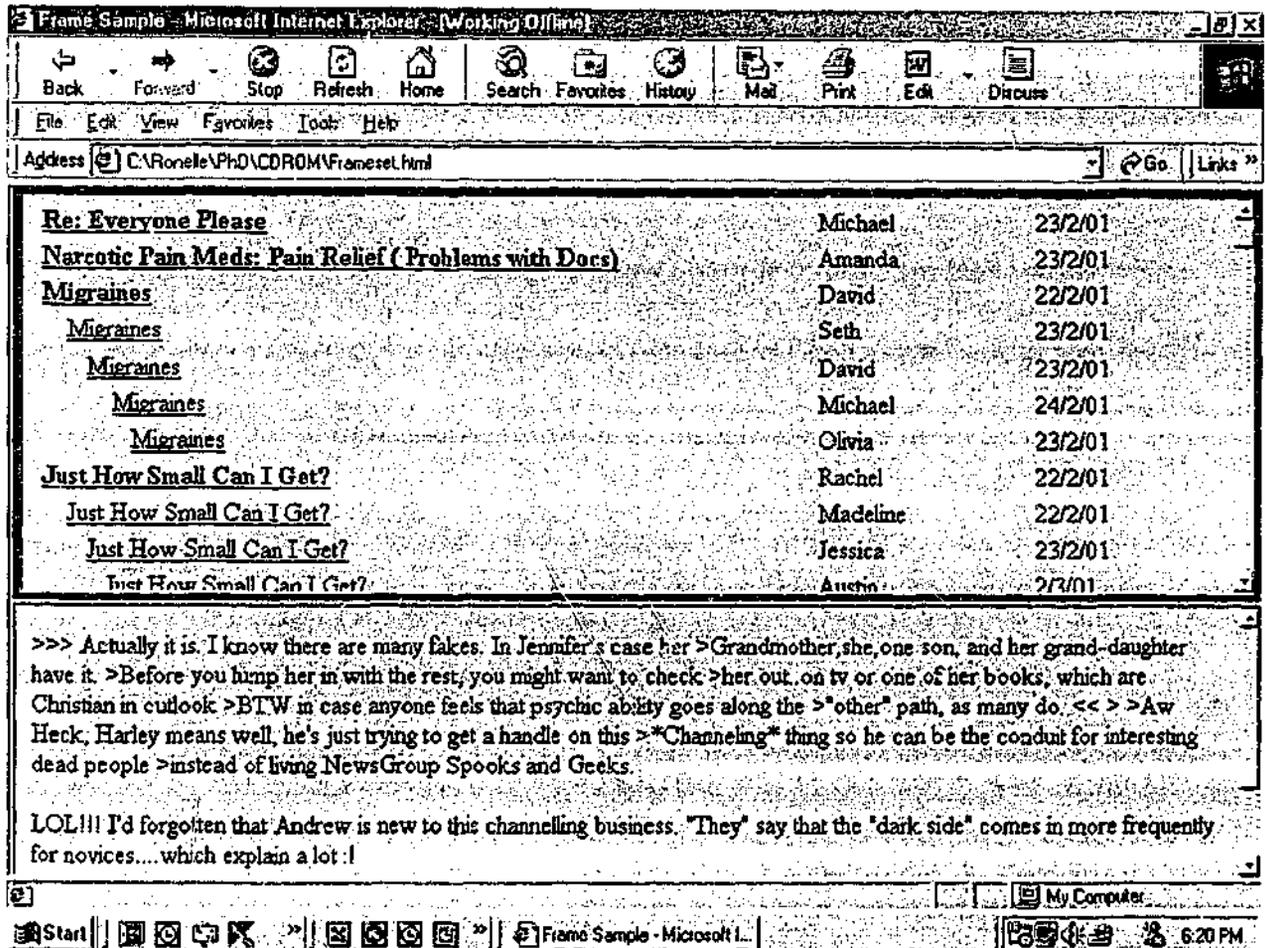
<b>Usenet Category</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Example</b>
Alt	A discussion of alternative topics	Alt.Games.video.Nintendo
Comp	Discussions of computer related topics	Comp.hardware.discdrives
News	Recreational pursuits/hobbies discussions	News.admin.censorship
Sci	Scientific discussions	Sci.techniques.testing
Soc	Discussions of cultural and social issues	Soc.culture.Australian
Talk	Opinion and view based discussions	Talk.politics.middle-eastern

The Usenet has no central authority, no single source of power that can enforce normative regulations and police behaviour. No one owns Usenet newsgroups but, despite this lack of authority, order and structure do exist in many newsgroups. Whatever order exists in the Usenet is seen to be the product of a delicate balance between individual freedom and collective good (Kollock & Smith, 1999: 6). All control, if any, is exercised at the site level in Usenet newsgroups (MacKinnon, 1995:113).

Whilst no one officially owns a newsgroup, the newsgroups are initially conceived to discuss a particular topic. Most newsgroups develop around a common area of interest and interaction within that newsgroup is expected to pertain to that topic area. Users of the newsgroups do not necessarily need to be present at the same time to interact in the forum. Users post messages via their email accounts to the newsgroup, which then displays their message publicly for all other users to see. The newsgroup helps structure the interactions between participants by organising every message into a branching tree structure that is displayed on their newsreader or Internet browser. Discussions are structured into threads of messages with an initial post leading into

follow-up postings from other users about the topic of the initial post. Figure 1 provides an example of the organisation and structure of a newsgroup, in this case, a replica of the focus newsgroup for this research.

Figure 1. Example of the organisation of the chronic pain newsgroup



Message headers convey information about the sender, the subject of the message and the time the message was sent. This information can be and is used by newsreaders to sort messages and by users to decide what to read and what to ignore (Baym, 1998: 45). Users can access every message in the thread of discussion by searching through the newsgroup, reading and responding at their leisure. Messages are stored at each site for a period left to the system administrators to decide, usually no longer than a couple of weeks. Until the old messages are removed, readers can check in

at their convenience and read or respond to the array of messages online (Baym, 1998: 43).

Some of the purported benefits of newsgroup communication include the ability to read and respond to the newsgroup at your leisure. This allows for more people to participate in the discussion. A group can interact without everyone gathering at a particular time. As a result, people on very different schedules or in distant time zones can still exchange messages and sustain discussions (Kollock & Smith, 1999:6). The asynchronous nature of newsgroups also allows people to contemplate and edit their messages before sending them to the public newsgroup. The asynchronicity of the newsgroup medium is an attractive form of communication for many.

Other benefits of computer-mediated communication that are applicable to this newsgroup medium include the possible liberation from the bonds of physical appearance and identity (Harasim, 1993:26) that are seen to occur in online contexts. The reduced social and physical contextual cues associated with online interaction are seen to provide people with the opportunity to interact with others without the restrictions and prejudices associated with the physical displays of socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. Identity becomes a flexible variable which computer-mediated communication users can 'play with' and manipulate at their discretion.

Despite the proposed benefits of computer-mediated communication and more specifically, newsgroup communication, there are a number of disadvantages. The anonymity provided by the medium that allows for identity manipulation may also contribute to an increase in disinhibited behaviour amongst users. Disinhibition occurs

online when social constraints break down and people engage in deviant or antisocial behaviour (Hiltz et al. 1989:220).

One basic assumption about computer-mediated communications is that they transmit less of the natural richness and interaction of interpersonal communication than face-to-face interaction. Therefore, users of CMC systems exhibit fewer of their natural communication behaviours. (Rice & Love, 1987:87)

Such unnatural or disinhibited behaviour is seen to be an underlying cause of the occurrence of flaming and spam in newsgroups. The occurrence of spam in newsgroups generally occurs only in un-moderated newsgroups, such as those on Usenet. A moderator acts in the role of a filter for the newsgroup, reading every message posted to the newsgroup, determining its appropriateness and releasing it to the public newsgroup. Postings that are offensive, off-topic or distasteful for that particular newsgroup will be vetted by the moderator. Moderated newsgroups tend to appear 'cleaner' and 'tidier' with most messages referring to the topic of the group and with very little 'noise' or unwanted messages. The moderator will also clean out redundant or old messages from the newsgroup on a regular basis, perhaps every two to three weeks (Denzin, 1999:109). Un-moderated newsgroups in contrast are vulnerable to an inundation of unwanted, off-topic and irrelevant postings. Often these are in the form of cross-posted messages that have little relation to the topic of the current newsgroup. Cross posting occurs when a message is sent to more than one newsgroup simultaneously and these newsgroups have no apparent relation to one another. Due to the un-moderated nature of Usenet, it has a reputation for being the 'wild west' of the Internet. For more serious discussion people tend to choose other asynchronous forums for their interaction (Wallace, 1999:6). In order to reduce the disruptions to discussions, netiquette generally shuns extensive cross posting or spamming to newsgroups.

A newsgroup on Usenet was a very attractive and appropriate site for data collection for my research. Such appeal stemmed from a consideration of the public/private space debate within the computer-mediated communication literature. In recent years there has been a debate raging amongst online researchers about the status of online space in terms of privacy. Is online space public or private space? To date, there is little consensus among researchers about what constitutes public or private space online (Roberts, et al. 1997b). Social scientists conducting online research have generally taken one of three approaches to this debate. Some argue that online content falls within public space because it is easily accessible by researchers. Sudweeks and Rafaeli (cited in Paccagnella, 1997) see such data as tantamount to a study of tombstones, graffiti or letters to the editor: Personal – Yes. Private – No. Others argue that online content exists in the private domain and requires consent from participants. Users perceive a level of privacy in their communication that does not exist (Frankel & Siang, 1999) and will accordingly engage in 'private' forms of interaction (Waskul & Douglass, 1996:132). Privacy is not an element intrinsically built into the context or technological medium; it is a phenomenological experience of the user. A third group of online researchers argue that there exists simultaneously both private and public spaces on the Internet. Classifications such as the public/private distinction is context specific. In online space the boundaries between what is private and public become perceptually and conceptually blurred. These contexts are both 'publicly private' and 'privately public' (Waskul & Douglass, 1996:131).

After considering these arguments, I believe most researchers would agree that unmoderated Usenet newsgroups exist in public space on the Internet. Newsgroups on

Usenet require no special facilities to access and there are no official rules of conduct besides those that may be developed by the users. There are no requirements to disclose personally identifiable information and these newsgroups do not require passwords for entry. A combination of these aspects suggests that, of the different Internet forums available, the newsgroups on Usenet exist in public space. Research in a public Internet space, where people may not display their real life details is considered to be less intrusive than research into a private space on the Internet. A newsgroup was thus chosen because it provides a fairly safe and uncontroversial public forum in which to conduct research at this stage in the field of online community research.

In addition, utilising a newsgroup for the current study provides an ability to collect a quality of data that is not possible with other Internet forums. As the newsgroup is asynchronous and every interaction that occurs within it is archived in the newsgroup itself, research into activities in the newsgroup can incorporate the entire field site as it occurs. There is no missing data and the researcher is not restricted by time in the field or the convenience of collection in selecting the data to include in their data set. Instead, an entire replication of the interaction in the newsgroup over the research period is possible. Such data collection takes the form of daily reading, monitoring and downloading new newsgroup postings. Data collection is facilitated by the ease of collecting data by downloading it to a newsgroup browser that has the capacity to store a vast number of newsgroup postings.

## The Chronic Pain Newsgroup

The focus newsgroup in this research is a discussion forum pertaining to the issue of chronic pain and illness. The chronic pain newsgroup exists in the Usenet environment and can be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection and newsreader. Due to the 'frontier' nature of Usenet, it is unknown how and when this particular newsgroup developed; however, there is some evidence to suggest that the newsgroup has been active for the six years prior to this study in 2001. Discussion in the newsgroup evolves around issues of support and assistance for those people who suffer, or who have family members who suffer, chronic pain or illness. Although the newsgroup is not identified as a support group by its name, it is clear that one of the intended topics of conversation in the group is social support in the management of and issues surrounding chronic pain and illness.

The Internet address and indeed official name of the focus newsgroup will not be disclosed in the course of this thesis. Despite being a publicly accessible forum, little is known about the effects of conducting online research on the groups under study. Some researchers have argued that intense focus on a particular online group during research can have detrimental effects by drawing unwanted attention to the group and may consequently place all the participants in that group at risk (Miskevitch, 1996:242). Prominent online researcher, Elizabeth Reid, admits that her research into an online support group for survivors of sexual abuse adversely affected the group she studied (Reid, 1996:169). The participants felt that the sense of privacy and safety they previously found in the group had been replaced by distrust and wariness. This was due to increased outsider scrutiny and membership growth after the publication of Reid's

research. Consequently, the name and site of the group will not be disclosed in this research, to protect the identity of the participants and shield the group from unwanted effects.

The focus newsgroup was chosen from the plethora of newsgroups possible on Usenet for a number of very specific reasons. Firstly, the newsgroup appeared to be entirely unmoderated. Like many Usenet newsgroups, there exists no gatekeeper or facilitator who monitors the interaction that occurs in the forum. This was considered to be very important because it was assumed that moderation could be seen to enforce certain rules of behaviour on the group. The development and display of self-governing regulation was one of the features of the newsgroup I wished to examine in the study. Moderation may provide an artificial version of how rules and regulation govern the group's interaction. Secondly, during the period of newsgroup selection, the focus newsgroup appeared to be an active and established newsgroup. cursory inspections revealed that there appeared to be a large number of postings by different people on a daily basis and posts referred to a shared knowledge of events, histories and members which I assumed represented the established, long term existence of the newsgroup. Finally, the newsgroup was chosen due to my individual interests. I have a keen and personal interest in issues of chronic pain and support for people with these disabilities. I felt my passionate interest in the newsgroup's topic was critical in ensuring my ongoing attention to the discussion on an academic, but also on a personal level for over six months of observation and subsequent data analysis.

## Data Collection

Once the chronic pain newsgroup was selected, a period of observational data collection commenced. Observation as a method of data collection has a long history in the social sciences. It is incorporated into a variety of theoretical frameworks and is often used in conjunction with other data collection techniques such as interviews and surveys.

Observation was used as the exclusive form of data collection in the current project and, more specifically, naturalistic observation techniques were employed.

In naturalistic observation, observers neither manipulate or stimulate the behaviour of those whom they are observing, in contrast to some other data gathering techniques. The situation being observed is not contrived for research purposes. (Punch, 1998: 185)

It was decided that 'naturalistic' unstructured observation was more appropriate than other forms of observation, in particular, participant observation. Some researchers claim that "... the idea of disengagement to produce 'untainted data' is something of a myth and is based upon a particular view of 'scientific procedure' ..." (May, 2001:170). Proponents of the participant observation method propose that participating in the field site provides a more comprehensive understanding of the social phenomena under study. Despite this, it was considered important for the current study to minimise the risk of interference by the researcher on the group's interaction. "... [F]rom the perspective of the social scientist, the more that one is able to disappear into the background of whatever group one is studying, the less the data is affected and possibly corrupted by one's presence" (Miskevitch, 1996:241). Given the exploratory nature of my study and the limited understanding of how community may be symbolised online,

it was considered important to reduce possible researcher effect to collect the most untainted and natural sample possible of the group's interactions. Thus, naturalistic, non-participatory observation was used to collect data in this research project.

Whilst this study involved examining a particular group's mediated interaction as a means to explore the construction of community in virtual space, there were in fact no research participants to speak of. The people involved in the chronic pain newsgroup were not approached to participate in the study for a number of reasons. As outlined previously, the study was an exploratory analysis which required the most 'natural' field site as was possible. It was important that I was unintrusive to minimise any researcher effect. The aims and overall goals of the project did not require the collection of further personal information from newsgroup members. In fact, real life identifying information was at no stage intentionally collected in this study.

Whilst recognising that newsgroup members in this study are not what we would normally describe as research participants, issues relating to their anonymity were paramount. At first glance the online environment provides its own solutions for researchers to protect the identities of participants. Users can shield their real life identities by developing digital identities. Users develop a 'nic' or nickname which they use to communicate online. This pseudonym provides the user with a digital persona to conduct their online communication. Users are aware that it is a public forum, accessible by anyone, and thus routinely safeguard their personal information. A researcher can not determine the authenticity of what appears to be a 'real name' in an online forum. The research data in these online spaces is already de-identified data with no direct and obvious link to the real life user.

There are, nevertheless, arguments that online pseudonymity is not sufficient to protect research participants from harm. Roberts et al. (1997b) advocate the use of pseudonyms for real and digital names. Users may have spent considerable time and energy building a social and technical reputation based on their digital personae and to identify them by their personae may be synonymous with naming them by their real names. In this case we are not dealing with de-identified data; rather we are dealing with personal information that identifies that person in online space. To acknowledge digital names in a research project could be considered synonymous with conducting research into the dynamics of an inner city gang and retaining the nicknames used by gang members. There is the danger that the publication of research may unduly affect the experience the user has of their online forum if their digital identity is not concealed. In the current study it was decided that, without knowing *a priori* the importance and level of identification that newsgroup members ascribed to their usernames, pseudonyms would be used to describe newsgroup members.

In the process of determining the appropriate research design and methodology for the current study, issues of consent were also raised. Issues of informed consent become extremely problematic when placed in an online research context.

Regardless of one's ethical stance, the reality of the multiple and simultaneous forms of on-line interaction often renders obtaining informed consent a practical impossibility. (Waskul & Douglass, 1996:136)

To gain informed consent from individual newsgroup members is impossible unless real life identifying details about them are sought. In this study such information was not

collected. Some online researchers argue that informed consent also needs to be obtained from the administrator of the potential research group. Schrum (1995) suggests that researchers need to approach the administrators of the site, provide them with detailed information regarding the proposed study and gain their informed consent from them to conduct research. This presumes that the administrator is actually in control of the group, that the administrator has been granted the authority to give consent for research on behalf of the group and that the group itself is a cohesive entity that may be spoken for. To gain consent from the technological administrator of the group assumes that the group's membership is fixed. This may not be the case with electronic groups. Membership is fluid, with users coming and going. The problem with distinguishing membership in an online group is difficult because membership may involve only those users who actively communicate in the group and/or those users who 'lurk' and consistently read the communication but rarely post. The 'community' may extend beyond those that are immediately co-present (Cavanagh, 1999). The informed consent of the administrators of the group may not necessarily mean the informed consent of every participant. Given the difficulties associated with gaining consent from research participants, it was decided that the goals of the current research project could be attained without engaging newsgroup members in research participation. The use of de-identified data in a public space ensured that informed consent from individuals or any group leader/administrator was not necessary.

After the issues of anonymity and consent were resolved, the data collection for this research project commenced. In order to observe and collect data from the newsgroup over an extended period of time, it was necessary to utilise specialised software. The newsgroup was downloaded to and read through a newsreader program,

Lurker 32 (1999). Lurker is a powerful newsgroup database allowing the user to display entire newsgroups in a single database. The program has extensive display and search options and has a storage capacity only limited by the size of the hard drive. The postings of the chronic pain newsgroup were downloaded daily to this newsreader program from the 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2001 until the 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2001. The use of this sophisticated software program allowed for data to be collected for a longitudinal case study without the technical limitations or hindrances that could occur with less powerful programs.

## **Data Analysis**

### The Grounded Theory Approach

My research and the analysis of the chronic pain newsgroup data was strongly influenced by the framework of grounded theory. Grounded theory is an approach to social research and particularly qualitative data analysis that begins with the observations from the field and then proposes patterns, themes or common categories which emerge from that data. The grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis was initiated, developed and refined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The analysis is not set up to confirm or negate specific hypotheses (Babbie, 1999:261) but rather grounded theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomena it represents. The theory is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:23). The aim of a grounded theory study is to build a theory that is faithful to the evidence, whilst

leaving the researcher open to the unexpected and willing to change the direction of the research if the data so directs them (Neuman, 1997:334).

The grounded theory approach necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the research data that is only gained through a close reading of the data. A crucial component of grounded theory is to develop a theoretical sensitivity to the data. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attributes of having insight, the ability to give meanings to the data, the capacity to understand and the ability to separate the important from that which isn't (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:42). Continuing analysis relies on the necessity of re-reading the data in complete transcripts (field notes) and in categorised chunks repeatedly in order to develop an analysis with some depth (Barry, 1998:2.3). A sophisticated theory of the data can only be achieved by grounding that theory in a contextualised understanding of the social phenomena at hand. In essence a grounded theory model of analysis involves an initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data and an attempt to saturate these categories with appropriate cases to demonstrate their relevance. These categories are then developed into a more general theoretical framework with relevance to other settings (Silverman, 2000:144).

Grounded theory has been criticised for its failure to acknowledge the implicit ideas, theories and assumptions the researcher brings to the research process. The fact that the grounded theory perspective advocates the development of theories which emerge only from the data and in isolation from existing theoretical concepts has given rise to a popular myth which depicts qualitative research as an 'inductive' endeavour (Kelle, 1997). Despite the fluid, flexible and versatile process of data analysis proposed in a grounded theory approach, analysis of the data *is* informed by prior knowledge in

the field of study. The background literature in grounded theory research does have a role even when building theory from data. It can be used to stimulate theoretical sensitivity by providing concepts and relationships that are then checked against the actual data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:50). However, in the nature of the grounded theory approach, it makes little sense to begin analysing the data by using established theories gleaned from the literature. The assignment of established theories to the data is likely to impede the development of new theoretical formulations, unless of course the purpose is to open these up and to find new meanings in them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:50).

Research by Bong (2002) provides an interesting and useful adoption of the principles of grounded theory that departs quite strongly from those espoused by Glaser and Strauss. In researching the impact of cultures and religions on women's human rights in Malaysia, Bong provides an innovative use of grounded theory. She acknowledges that she did not start her research with a 'blank slate'; rather, she presupposed an integral relationship amongst her theoretical categories prior to data collection. She comes to terms with "the extent to which ... [she is] implicitly, perhaps even surreptitiously testing theory or hypothesis as it conflicts with an exploratory research paradigm that ... [she has] espoused" (Bong, 2002). Her theoretical conclusions are inductively grounded in the data, but are guided by a provisional theory that provides a conceptual link amongst her theoretical propositions. This provisional theory has been derived from her reading of past research in her area of study. Similar to the research by Bong (2002), my research departs from a purist form of grounded theory to understand how community can be constructed in virtual spaces. Such an analysis is informed by traditional sociological understandings of community, in

particular symbolic interactionism and Cohen's theory of the symbolic construction of community (1985), but is open to examination of how these understandings may be altered, transformed or rejected when a group interacts in a mediated forum.

Another point of departure from a purist grounded theory approach lies in the coding analysis techniques prescribed by Glaser and Strauss. Grounded theorists are characterised by a concern to detail the analytical procedures applied to qualitative research. It has been argued that Glaser, Strauss and Corbin only provide a variety of useful heuristics, rules of thumb and methodological terminology rather than a precise set of methodological rules or algorithms (Kelle, 1997:3.4). Consequently, concepts and strategies for analysis such as open, axial and selective coding techniques were employed in my research to assist in the analysis of the chronic pain newsgroup data. Such concepts provided a framework for the analysis that was then manipulated or altered in response to the issues emerging from the data.

### Software Considerations

Due to the large amount of qualitative data collected in this study, it was necessary to utilise computer-assisted analysis to aid in organising, arranging and displaying the data. The term, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), refers to the range of software that supports a variety of analytic processes in qualitative work. QSR software programs are a series of qualitative data analysis software instruments that have enjoyed increasing popularity amongst researchers dealing with complex qualitative data sets. QSR programs were initially developed at Latrobe University in Australia during the 1980s. The developers formed a commercial

enterprise in 1994 and proceeded to release a variety of different analysis instruments. Nvivo, the particular analysis program used in this study, was launched in 1999 and provides a new and innovative approach to the analysis of complex qualitative data sets. The developers of the product emphasise the importance of such software in so much that "analysis of such data requires sensitivity to detail and context, as well as accurate access to information and ways to rigorously and carefully explore themes and discover ... patterns" (Nvivo, 2000, sec. help files). The software program helps to arrange the data by utilising a database system of documents and nodes (coding concepts). Sophisticated linking, coding and conceptual mapping are then undertaken to assist in the analysis of the data. Nvivo allows for 'theory' building which incorporates both the generation of and testing of those theories.

The purported benefits of using CAQDAS such as Nvivo are comprehensively outlined by Silverman (2000:155). Benefits include increased speed at handling large volumes of data and the freeing up of the researcher to explore diverse and numerous analytic questions. Other benefits include improvements in the analytic rigour that increases the validity and reliability of the conclusions, as well as facilitating team research endeavours with consistent coding procedures. Finally, CAQDAS is believed to assist researchers in sampling decisions based on representation or theory generation concerns.

The use of CAQDAS has been criticised on the grounds that the software may guide researchers in a particular direction or that it will distance the researcher from their data and encourage the quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Barry, 1998). It has also been argued that it is not realistic, or true to the purposes and underlying

epistemology of qualitative research to expect a social phenomenon to be broken up and quantified in any meaningful way by a tool based on a positivistic approach to the social world (Roberts & Wilson, 2002:22). Even with the immense scope these programs provide in terms of handling the large amount of data, they can still be restrictive. With a longitudinal project comprising of such a vast amount of textual data, as is often seen in computer-mediated communication studies, the software may not have the capacity to import all the collected data. The researcher must make prudent judgements as to the data most appropriate to analyse in the program.

Whilst some critics may argue against the use of such programs as Nvivo, “[c]omputer-assisted qualitative data analysis does not differ fundamentally, for the most part, from the non-mechanical qualitative analysis traditions from which it has developed” (Dohan & Sanchez-Jankowski, 1998:7). The researcher engages with the same process of analysis with computer assistance as they would do if analysing their data manually. Organisation, structuring, coding, linking and conceptual modelling are all required aspects both in computer-assisted and traditional forms of qualitative data analysis. The primary thrust of the application of computers to qualitative research has focused on the use of computers to assist with the collection, organisation, and analysis of field notes (Brent & Anderson, 1990:271). Rather than distancing the researcher from their data, the use of the computer reduces the distance between analyst and data by making the data less overwhelming and more approachable (Dohan & Sanchez-Jankowski, 1998:15). The researcher immerses his or herself in the data and develops a ‘closeness’ to the data that underlies the explanation of the complexities involved. However, in any qualitative analysis project, a critical view of the data is required which only comes from numerous cycles through small amounts of data, massive amounts of

thinking and a heavy dose of intuition. In these crucial aspects of analysis, a software program does not have a huge role to play (Agar, cited in Fisher, 1997:20).

### Coding Procedure

After the observation period in this research, the data was transformed into an appropriate format for analysis. Each thread of postings in the newsgroup was replicated into a rich text format document. Usernames, phone numbers or any other identifying information were appropriately anonymised or removed from each posting. Redundant information in each post (such as any reply message content) was removed in order to facilitate ease in reading the entire thread. In this way a single document represented a thread in the newsgroup and contained all the postings relating to that thread. Please refer to Appendix A for an example of a transformed newsgroup thread document. In such a way, the context for each message was retained. "In showing and telling we preserve the phenomenological intactness of the situation and continue with the ethnomethodological/conversation analytic project of presenting 'raw' data so that others may inspect the explicative work one has undertaken on that data" (Slack, 1998). In such a way, each data unit (newsgroup posting) could be presented and analysed whilst retaining the overall context in which it initially occurred. Each document then existed in an appropriate form to import into the Nvivo software program.

Whilst Nvivo helps arrange and organise the selected data from the focus newsgroup, a comprehensive and complex coding process was required to make sense of the content of the data. Content analysis is essentially a coding operation whereby the communication data is coded according to some conceptual framework (Babbie,

1999:290). Content analysis is a procedure for the systematic, objective and quantitative description of the manifest content of a text (Brent & Anderson, 1990:268). Qualitative content analysis starts with the idea of social context, and views the author as a self-conscious actor addressing an audience under particular circumstances. The task of the researcher is to conduct a 'reading' of the text in terms of its symbols and meanings. The researchers approach the text through an understanding of the context of its production (May, 2001:193).

In a distinct departure from a classical grounded theory approach, a number of speculative concepts were identified prior to the data analysis as possible concepts to focus on during the analysis stage of this investigation. From the literature pertaining to the sociology of community, and in particular Cohen's theory, it was decided that the following concepts would provide a useful starting point for analysis: conflict issues, membership issues, resource trade and allocation, subjective experiences and normative practices. The data was then explored in relation to these and new emerging concepts using Nvivo. "New categories emerge from field research as the research progresses. New codes are created, existing categories are merged, and some codes and concepts are dropped if they no longer seem productive" (Hall & Marshall, 1992:155). This reflexivity in the process of analysis allowed for unforeseen and unpredicted concepts to be explored.

The process of analysis in this research project can be seen to mimic Miles and Huberman's (1984) categorisation of first and second level coding in analysis. First level coding is concerned with attaching labels to groups of words. Second level or pattern coding groups the initial codes into smaller numbers of themes or pattern coding

groups (Miles & Huberman, cited in Robson, 1993:385). The chronic pain newsgroup data was initially coded at this 'first level' where appropriate segments of data were identified and coding labels were attached to them. These first level codes were fairly elementary and unsophisticated and described the social phenomena under investigation. For example, any incidence of conflict was labelled at this first level of analysis under the broad code of 'conflict'. During this process of first level coding a number of theoretical memos were developed to assist in directing the investigation into more fruitful areas of exploration. A memo is the theorising write up of ideas about codes and their relationships during coding (Glaser, 1978:81). Such memos assisted in the second level of conceptual coding.

This process of exploration of coding categories led to the development of provisional conclusions about the nature of community in this newsgroup. In order to verify and authenticate these conclusions, two processes were initiated. The first process of verification was to use the constant comparative method espoused by Glaser & Strauss (1967). In this way an attempt was made to find another case through which to check the provisional conclusions. It involved inspecting and comparing all the data fragments that arise in a single case. The data set was explored once again and events or incidences within the newsgroup that provided further evidence for these conclusions were identified. This process assisted in further refining the theoretical conclusions that had been drawn. The second process aimed at the verification of these tentative conclusions by a procedure of negative case analysis, which is a systemised version of analysis developed by Kidder (1981). This involves continuously revising and refining a theme until it accounts for all known cases without exception (Kidder, cited in Robson, 1993:380). The data was explored once again to determine if any incident or event

within the newsgroup would negate the conclusions drawn or cast doubt on the theoretical explanations of the social action. Such negative case analysis assisted in further developing the theoretical explanations as well as providing support and validity for such conclusions. By engaging in such an exhaustive analysis process, the plausibility and accuracy of the conclusions drawn in this study were further confirmed and validated.

### Presentation of Data

Prior to the presentation of the analysis of the chronic pain newsgroup data that will occupy the following chapters of this thesis, it is prudent to discuss decisions pertaining to the presentation of such data. In the tradition of qualitative research, it is of primary importance to ensure that our understandings of social phenomena are contextualised and grounded in the social environment in which they naturally occur. "It is important for qualitative researchers to keep interview data in the context in which it was gathered and to preserve the respondents' use of their own language to protect, as far as possible, the original meaning expressed through the data" (Roberts & Wilson, 2002). To give 'voice' to participants and to present their research contributions in their own narrative discourse was seen to be of primary importance for the current research project. Given the significance placed on such contextualisation, an attempt was made to situate the newsgroup messages in the context in which they naturally occurred.

An attempt was made to contextualise and retain the original meanings intended by the authors when presenting their posts. In response to concerns about the anonymity of the newsgroup participants, all potentially identifying material was removed or

altered from the postings to ensure that the newsgroup participants were not easily identifiable.

Like any other research scenario, all identifying characteristics of person and place should be removed from the research in the course of data collection. This most certainly includes not just names and demographic data, but statements that could potentially reveal the on-line location of the individual. (Waskal & Douglass, 1996 :135)

Information evident in the newsgroup messages that provided some indication of real life identities was either removed or altered in the presentation of such data. Despite the frequent use of pseudonyms or 'nics' on the newsgroup, even these names were given pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the people posting to the group. "Changing not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researcher for the social reality of cyberspace" (Paccagnella, 1997).

The formatting and presentation of the newsgroup messages reflects the importance placed on contextualising the data within the social environment within which it originally occurred. Each transcript is numbered for ease of identification. Each message or transcript is presented with its original 'header' defining the topic or the thread, as well as the original date posted, whilst the author is represented by the pseudonym assigned to them for this research. The significant content in each message is not isolated and presented in abstract but rather is presented within the entire message or message context in which it occurred. In such messages, some spelling and typing errors have been amended for clarity purposes but newsgroup specific jargon and lingo, emoticons and abbreviations used by the authors have been retained.

In addition to the vast array of qualitative material presented in the following chapters, a small amount of quantitative analysis is also presented where appropriate.

...[T]here is no reason why qualitative researchers should not, where appropriate, use quantitative measures. Simple counting techniques, theoretically derived and ideally based on members' own categories, can offer a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in intensive, qualitative research. (Silverman, 2000: 185)

The following chapter presents a 'snapshot' of the social environment of the chronic pain newsgroup and, in doing so, use was made of simple quantitative procedures to provide graphical representations of the activity occurring within the newsgroup.

### Summary

In order to explore how community is symbolically constructed in virtual space, a case study of an online newsgroup was conducted. Six months of observation culminated in the field site being recorded in its entirety. A process of data selection and content analysis followed which was influenced by the grounded theory method of analysis. During the course of the research design and process, a number of difficult issues were resolved. Issues pertaining to the use of the case study approach, the selection of an appropriate Internet forum and the choice of an appropriate group as a case study were raised. Further to this, the choice of data collection tools, participant concerns, use of software and the framework for analysis were all addressed and clarified. Finally the importance of contextualising the contributions made by the newsgroup participants in this research was discussed. Only through understanding the meanings the participants place on their actions in the social context in which they occur can we even begin to

understand the ways in which the group may symbolically construct itself as a community. The following chapters will explore the means by which such symbolic constructions may operate to develop and sustain community within the chronic pain newsgroup.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE VIRTUAL LANDSCAPE – A SNAPSHOT OF THE SOCIAL SCENE

Prior to exploring how this online chronic pain newsgroup may constitute a community, it is prudent to have an understanding of its organisation. In this chapter the purpose of the newsgroup will be presented, as well as the membership taxonomy the group has developed to identify different types of members. In order to understand the group in comparison with other Usenet newsgroups, statistical accounts of the posting behaviour over the six-month observation period will be presented. The gender composition of the newsgroup's membership will be discussed. The key personalities of the newsgroup will also be described to give readers some familiarity with their backgrounds and the roles they play in the group. This statistical and background information will help contextualise the arguments to be made in the following chapters; namely that this newsgroup constitutes a community through the symbolic construction and maintenance of its boundary.

#### Posting Behaviour

The focus newsgroup was developed around six years ago on Usenet (circa 1997). It is a fully functional newsgroup, identical in structure to other newsgroups on Usenet. The methods of reading and posting messages to the newsgroup conform to the standards and conventions of the wider Usenet environment. The group was originally developed

as a forum for the discussion of chronic pain issues but, over time, it has transformed from an information exchange forum to one primarily concerned with the provision of social support to chronic pain patients, friends and their families.

To demonstrate how typical or usual this newsgroup is in relation to other Usenet newsgroups, the posting statistics during the six month observation period will be presented. During the observation period a total of 15,031 messages were posted to the newsgroup. If we use Smith's (1999) classification, it would be considered a 'supergroup' in terms of posting traffic. A supergroup on Usenet contains more than 1000 posts during any ten-month period. This 'supergroup' certainly qualifies by receiving more than 2000 messages per month over the six month period studied. Once the messages were downloaded into the newsreader, they were categorised as either 'new' messages or 'response' messages. A 'new' message was a post that begins a new thread of conversation in the newsgroup. A 'response' message was any post made in reply to another post already on the newsgroup. Often a 'new' message referred to the content existing in another thread, but for ease of classification, it was considered a 'new' post on the newsgroup. Table 2 indicates the distribution of message categorisation over the six-month observation period. As mentioned previously, data collection began on 22<sup>nd</sup> February and was completed on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2001. As only messages from part of February and August were sampled, the number of messages for these two months is lower than for the other months.

**Table 2. Frequencies of new, response and total messages per month**

Month (2001)	Total New	Total Response	Total messages	New %	Response %	Total %
Feb (starting 22 <sup>nd</sup> )	29	222	251	11.55	88.45	100
March	322	2654	2976	10.82	89.18	100
April	338	2596	2934	11.52	88.48	100
May	281	2876	3157	8.90	91.10	100
June	264	2146	2410	10.95	89.05	100
July	353	2257	2610	13.60	86.48	100
Aug (ending 21 <sup>st</sup> )	92	605	697	13.20	86.80	100

Table 2 indicates a fairly even distribution over the six-month period in the ratio of messages that are categorised as response or new messages. There appears to be a slight increase in May in the percentage of messages classified as response messages and a decrease in the posting of new messages. This may be explained by the increased conflict within the group during this month. Such conflict ensured that fewer 'new' messages were posted because members were engaged in responding to the conflict occurring in existing threads. During this time the members were distracted from initiating new topics of conversation because they were occupied by the conflict.

Fullmer and Walls (1994) in their study of disability related newsgroups suggest that a high feedback/distribution ratio indicates a high level of interactivity in the newsgroup. The feedback/distribution ratio is the number of request messages (like the 'new' messages) to the number of response messages. Whilst they do not explain the rationale behind their conclusions, they argue that a high ratio indicates a high level of interactivity. If I take a similar approach it can be presumed that a high number of response messages per new posting indicates that the members of this newsgroup are engaging with new content, and carry on extended and lengthy conversations with each other in single threads. Over the six-month period, an average 88.82% of the total messages were response type messages, whilst only 11.18% of messages were new

messages. It is argued that this newsgroup is highly interactive with new messages creating extended threads of interaction and conversation amongst the readership population. This group is more interested in responding to each other's postings than posting new information. An average of 4.98 response messages were posted to any new message on the newsgroup over the six-month observation period. For comparison, in a study of support groups, Gallagher, Sproull and Kiesler (1998) found that in an online depression support group the mean number of reply messages per new message was 3.5. The chronic pain group therefore had a high response rate to each new message thread suggesting that it is a highly interactive and vibrant newsgroup.

It is clear from the analysis thus far that the chronic pain newsgroup is an active, interactive and dynamic newsgroup on Usenet. Such activity varies over time and may be explained by variations in the topics/content of the newsgroup discussion during the course of the observation period.

### **Gender Divisions**

It was considered pertinent to determine the gender distribution of the chronic pain newsgroup membership. Given the overrepresentation of men on the Internet (Pitkow & Kehoe, cited in Wellman & Gulia, 1999:185) it would be expected that the group would consist of a majority of male members. However, it is known that women are more likely to participate in face-to-face self-help groups and buy self-help books (see Grodin, 1991; Jones, 1990; Starker, 1986; Wood, 1988) and this may inflate the female representation in the chronic pain newsgroup. The usernames of members were divided into those that contained some reference to gender and those that did not. For the

purpose of categorisation, the username as well as the email address associated with it were examined. For example a username in the female category might be Rebecca@hotmail.com whilst usernames in the male category might appear as Fred@hotmail.com. An example of a username with ambiguous gender may be PainPatient@hotmail.com

During the six-month observation period a total of 925 different usernames posted to the newsgroup. Of these usernames, 192 (or 20.7%) appeared to be female. Usernames presenting in a male fashion accounted for 327 (or 35.4%) of the total usernames. The 406 remaining usernames (or 43.9%) were presented in such a way as to provide no indication of the gender of the poster. With the paucity of research into the gender representation of Usenet usernames, it is difficult to forge conclusions about the gender distribution in the chronic pain newsgroup. If we assume that there would be a large number of women attracted to self-help delivered via the Internet, we would have expected to see a larger percentage than 20.7% presenting as women. It is tentatively suggested that perhaps the membership of the newsgroup does in fact have a higher proportion of women but these women are for some reason deliberately choosing usernames that represent their gender as ambiguous. This would explain the high proportion (43.9%) of members with usernames with no distinct gender affiliation. As it stands, it would appear that the newsgroup is dominated by male posters and by people whose gender is ambiguous or unknown.

## Membership Levels

The newsgroup participants have developed their own typology to identify the different types of newsgroup members. This membership typology has been slightly altered here to include a membership level that is not overtly recognised or acknowledged by the group members but is influential in guiding their interaction. These levels of membership provide structure to the interaction and relate to a user's level of competency in conforming to the rules of the newsgroup and Usenet in general. Constituents of the group may be newbies, newbie-lurkers, lurkers, regulars or non-members of the group.

Newbies are people who post to the newsgroup for the first time. They may have lurked for a couple of weeks, but usually the newsgroup is a novelty to them and they have not participated before. Their experience of the newsgroup depends on the manner in which they introduce themselves and the responses of the other members. Newbie-lurkers in contrast are somewhat like newbies in that they are posting for the first time, or have not posted in a long time. They are identified as 'new' to the group. They depart from the general characteristics of newbies in as much as they are constant lurkers on the newsgroup who read, but rarely post. They have watched the newsgroup for a lengthy period of time and are aware of the nuances of posting, norms and regulations associated with group interaction. The category of newbie-lurkers is a level of membership not identified explicitly by the group but is included here to clarify the different types of 'new' people that can appear on the newsgroup. Lurkers in contrast are people who read the newsgroup but do not ever announce their presence through a public posting. They are participating members of the newsgroup and other members

are aware that they exist in large numbers but they do not have a public presence online. They may gain support from the information posted on the newsgroup or interact with other members via private email but they remain quiet in the public domain. Regulars on the other hand rarely remain quiet. They are the constant personalities who post frequently and at length on a variety of different topics. Regulars have a long history in the newsgroup and have often participated over a number of years. They are the enforcers of the group norms, values and standards of conduct. Regulars are not universally popular however, with some members being very unpopular within the wider newsgroup population. Rather than being a cohesive friendly group, dissention does occur amongst the regular group of contributors.

Finally, non-members are distinguished by the group in a number of ways that will be discussed in the following chapters. Suffice to say at this stage, the category of non-members contains people who the group decides are not chronic pain patients and have no legitimate reason for participating in the newsgroup. The mechanisms of such decisions will be explored in Chapter Six. These non-members may include trolls or advertisers who are labelled as spammers. The introduction of a non-member into the newsgroup almost always causes some form of conflict.

### **Key Personalities in the Newsgroup**

It is important to have an overview of the key personalities or characters in order to understand the social environment of the newsgroup. Group leaders emerge online just as they do in face-to-face groups (Fingeld, 2000:248). They provide structure for the group by addressing posts to specific members, providing support, using humour and

focusing on other people's problems (Salem et al. 1997:198). Whilst the following chapters will include comments from a wider variety of newsgroup participants, for brevity sake, only a selection of key characters will be presented here. Whilst many of the personalities outlined here may not appear regularly in the following chapters, they are the dominant characters in the newsgroup and influence the direction and nature of the interaction. Short biographies are presented below of the most influential members of the group, including information about a significant non-member, Fernando the Troll.

### Mark/Jude

Mark (aka Jude) is the most prolific poster to the newsgroup. During the six months of research, Mark posted a total of 1183 messages. Mark goes by two names on the newsgroup. Initially he was known to the group as 'Mark' but he changed his username to 'Jude' because his email account was being spammed. This new throwaway email account, entitled 'Jude', allows him to avoid much of the harassment and spam directed into the 'Mark' account. Mark posted 19.7% of his messages under the user name 'Mark' and 80.2% of his messages under the username, 'Jude', during the observation period. Interestingly, although Mark's presence in the newsgroup during the six months is ongoing and frequent he only initiated two threads of conversation during the observation period. Mark tends to respond to others, providing information and support and assisting them with their problems, whilst neglecting to discuss his own.

Mark suffers from progressive osteoarthritis and appears to be in his mid 50s. His pain is kept under control by daily Oxycontin medication from which he suffers excruciating constipation as a side-effect. Mark is American, has been online for over

10 years and currently participates in a number of other newsgroups. In considering his reputation and respect in the group, it is not surprising to find that in real life Mark is a vocational rehabilitation counsellor.

Mark is a very popular member of the newsgroup. He provides intelligent responses to problems and will seek out information to assist others. Mark responds and interacts with a wide variety of people on the newsgroup, from regulars to newcomers and trolls. His witty sense of humour, flirtatious nature and ongoing banter with other members provide light relief for the group. Mark occasionally enters into conflict situations but his response to such conflict is generally polite and unassuming. With those he considers to be non-members he tries a different strategy. He baits the resident troll, Fernando, at every opportunity and edits Fernando's posts so that they read as ludicrous and insensible. His baiting of the troll is understood by the rest of the group to be Mark's way of redirecting the troll's attention towards him to provide some respite for others from the troll's malicious attacks.

### Jessica

Jessica is a regular member of the group who posts frequently to a wide variety of people. During the observation period she posted a total of 528 messages. Of these messages, 17.5% initiated new threads of conversation, vastly more than any other regular. These new threads were usually updates on her medical progress, or information regarding the Oxycontin debate, which is an ongoing media campaign in the US to remove the pain-killing drug, Oxycontin, from the marketplace.

Jessica is in her late 20s and has suffered chronic pain for almost a decade. She has a myriad of medical problems including lupus, fibromyalgia, osteoporosis, back problems, diabetes and digestive diseases. She is having chemotherapy treatment and was on Oxycontin medication until her doctor changed her medications due to the 'Oxy' scare. Jessica lives with her very supportive husband and three cats but finds that the limitations and pressures of being chronically ill negatively affect her marriage. During the observation period, Jessica was invited by the Purdue Pharmaceutical Company, who manufacture Oxycontin, to be a patient advocate for them. She became involved in writing letters, providing education and being interviewed for media stories. During this time Jessica also lost her medical insurance for a month when she transferred to a new fund. She experienced ongoing problems with her new insurance company, which exacerbated her financial worries.

Jessica's contributions to the newsgroup are primarily supportive and informative in nature. She uses her background as a pharmacy technician to provide others with information about medications, medication schedules and possible side-effects. She responds to a vast array of people and appears to have a few close friendships with the other regulars. Whether she is responding to another person's problems or posting about her own, Jessica tends to write detailed and lengthy posts to the newsgroup. Despite being an active member of the group, Jessica very rarely engages in any conflict or debates but she will defend herself if she is attacked.

## Madison

Madison is a well-liked and respected member of the group. She posted a total of 558 messages during the observation period, with only 2.7% of those being messages to initiate new threads of conversation. It is clear that she spends a great deal of her time on the newsgroup responding to other people. Madison has suffered from Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD) along with pancreatitis and endometriosis for the past 10 years. She previously worked at a bank until her pain levels became too high. During the time of this research, she was attempting to get back into the workforce, but was finding the process quite difficult.

Madison has special friendships with other regulars, such as Samantha, Mark/Jude and Trevor, and is well liked and received by the majority of the group. During the observation period, she spent a couple of weeks in hospital and received many messages of support (delivered via Samantha) from her friends on the newsgroup. She does have ongoing differences of opinion with some of the other regulars but she is always polite and restrained in these discussions whilst defending herself and her friends. Madison's contributions to the newsgroup are predominantly supportive in nature. She offers suggestions to other people and characteristically draws on her knowledge from her own medical history as well as her research into her disease to assist others with their problems. Madison's contributions to the group are primarily affirmative.

## Trevor

Trevor is a constant presence on the newsgroup. During the observation period he posted a total number of 240 messages to the group, 24.5% of which were messages initiating new threads of conversations. Trevor's postings to the newsgroup are distinctive because he personalises his responses to individuals by addressing them by name. He has followed the newsgroup on and off for several years but rejoined the group on a permanent basis about a year prior to the data collection for this research.

Trevor is in his late 40s and is proudly Jewish American. He is disabled with a degenerative back condition and has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and temporal lobe epilepsy. Trevor lives with his supportive partner, Lena. His chronic pain is for the most part, not being appropriately managed and he suffers impotence and chronic constipation as side-effects from his opiate therapy. When he first came to the newsgroup he was suffering a deep depression with associated suicidal thoughts which appear to have subsided over the six month observation period. During this time Trevor initiated the search for a new pain specialist to help him with pain management. This unsuccessful and traumatic process was shared with the group on a frequent basis. Trevor's active contributions to the newsgroup are mainly made at night because he suffers from insomnia brought on by his medications and illnesses.

Trevor appears to be a very compassionate and expressive member of the newsgroup who steers away from conflict and spends his time writing encouraging messages to other members. He routinely thanks others for their concern and advice and volunteers to put 36 cents in his pishka (Jewish prayer vase) in prayer for others.

Trevor will also politely indicate to someone who is breaking the group's 'rules' what the appropriate conduct should be. He will also frequently welcome new members to the group using the conventional adages of welcome.

### Madeline

Over the six-month observation period Madeline was a very active contributor to the newsgroup, despite being ill and suffering through chemotherapy treatment. Madeline posted a total number of 648 messages, of which only 4.8% were messages to initiate new threads of conversation. The vast majority of her postings were sent in response to postings by other members. Madeline's contributions are distinctive in that she directs them to such a large variety of people in the newsgroup. Her postings are often humorous short notes commenting on events or issues under discussion.

Madeline is married, with dependent children and lives in Canada. She was diagnosed with lupus 10 years ago and suffers added complications from pancreatitis. She is college educated and spends some of her time doing web development work. Her computer skills have been useful for the group because she initiated and developed a chat room for members to use when they wanted to extend communication into a more synchronous medium. Madeline has been a regular contributor for over a year. She first found the newsgroup during a period of suicidal ideation and she proclaims that the group has helped her cope with her illnesses and associated pain. Whilst appearing to be universally admired she has particularly close relationships with Jessica, Samantha and Trevor in the newsgroup. These relationships have extended beyond the newsgroup interaction into private email and phone communication.

## Rachel

Rachel is a regular in the group and posted a total number of 352 messages to the group during the observation period. Of these, 5.6% initiated new threads of discussion. Many of these new messages were postings of information regarding the Oxycontin debate.

Rachel has endured chronic pain for over 20 years. She suffers from a muscle loss disease and the repercussions and side effects from her primary illness manifest themselves as stomach and digestive diseases, extreme weight loss and thyroid problems. Her activism in the Oxycontin debates stems from her own experience of using the medication daily for pain management and her fear that in America, where she lives, the drug may be taken off the market. Despite her illnesses, Rachel is a loving grandmother to her new granddaughter and, along with her husband, is actively involved in her Neighbourhood Watch program in her local community.

Rachel is the enforcer of the newsgroup's norms and standards. She will always comment on a conflict situation or correct someone if they are violating a norm of behaviour. Whilst she had only been a member of the newsgroup for a little over a year at the time of this research, she was fully informed about the nature of the medium, rules of conduct and culture of the newsgroup. She presents herself as the 'Internet Expert' on newsgroup technicalities such as spamming, use of headers, ISP addresses and occurrences of trolling.

Rachel responds to a wide variety of people on the newsgroup and appears to have close friendships with other regulars. Along with a fixation on newsgroup norms and their enforcement, Rachel's posts are characterised by her blunt, direct and honest opinions about the topic under discussion. Rachel has an ongoing conflict with some group members. She defends herself vehemently against any attacks on her credibility and authority and thus exists in an uneasy relationship with some members of the newsgroup.

### Samantha

Samantha is a constant presence on the newsgroup. During the observation period, she posted a total of 917 messages, of which 9% were 'new' messages initiating new conversations. Samantha is a dynamic member of the newsgroup and encourages new and diverse topics of conversation.

Samantha is in her mid 40s, single and has an adult son. She has suffered chronic pain of one type or another for the past 20 years. Currently she is diagnosed with fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, diabetes and, for her, the most debilitating of all, chronic migraines. Samantha has experienced the whole gamut of life problems associated with living in chronic pain. She has experienced poverty as well as a series of 'bad' doctors who did not provide her with adequate relief. She is now under the care of a good doctor and her pain levels are under control. Samantha works part time at her pain specialist clinic and has developed a vast array of procedural and factual information relating to the pain management sector of the medical industry. Samantha

has been a member of the newsgroup for a number of years and also frequents a variety of other newsgroups on Usenet.

Samantha almost always gets involved in any conflict situation. She constantly calls into question new people's credibility and will challenge new people to 'prove' their worth to the group. She attempts to discredit spammers or advertisers and continuously engages the resident troll in debate. Her postings to the troll are often violent, aggressive and spattered with vulgarities. Samantha also has frequent disputes with Jessica and Rachel. Whilst these disagreements are often quite heated, Samantha appears to hold few grudges and, when the dispute is resolved, continues to provide those people with support. One of the reasons Samantha experiences so much conflict within the newsgroup is her blunt and undiplomatic style of expression. Samantha does not shy away from saying the unpopular things that others may want to say but are not willing to.

Samantha extends her knowledge to help a wide variety of people, from newbies to regulars. She takes the time and writes quite lengthy and detailed messages to people. Samantha has an extensive knowledge of medications and provides others with valuable information. Her posts to the group are generally characterised as informative, encouraging and supportive. Samantha has a very close friendship with Madison. She defends Madison in any newsgroup conflict and communicates with her by telephone in addition to their newsgroup communication.

Samantha appears to be quite territorial and possessive about the newsgroup. She provides a running commentary on the issues impacting on the lives of chronic pain

patients. She is passionate about the Oxycontin debate despite the fact that she is not using it, and she encourages others to become politically active about this issue.

Samantha can always be relied upon to remind the group of their commonality, their common bond as pain patients and the shared experiences they all have. She consistently reminds the group of its basic beliefs and ideologies that they hold in relation to chronic pain and the wider world.

### Fernando

Fernando is the resident troll in the newsgroup. He is an insidious presence whose main contention is to cause trouble, conflict and harassment within the newsgroup. During the observation period Fernando posted a total of 446 times to the group. Of these postings, only 9% of them were postings to initiate new threads of conversations. Most of these new postings were his version of the newsgroup FAQ or unfulfilled promises to leave the newsgroup. A FAQ is an acronym for Frequently Asked Questions and in general Internet usage it denotes a document outlining the rules and regulations relating to a specific website. Fernando entered the newsgroup under the pretence of needing support for gout, but his motives were soon apparent. Fernando has an ongoing conflict with another newsgroup member that has transcended a variety of newsgroups on Usenet over a number of years. Whilst Fernando is a constant presence in the group, he is not welcomed as a member. Some members do seem to find his posts amusing, however the vast majority respond with hostility and aggression. Virtually nothing about Fernando's real life details is known because he provides such conflicting and nonsensical information about himself and every other issue he discusses, that the reader is unsure if anything he has said is true.

## Non-Newsgroup Interaction

It is important to note at this stage that these regular personalities do not restrict their communication with each other to the newsgroup medium. Whilst the majority of their interactions do occur on the newsgroup, many continue their friendships and discussions in the form of private email or via the phone. Occasionally this interaction extends outside a mediated technology where newsgroup members may meet face-to-face in the same geographic space. In addition to the newsgroup interaction, the group members have also developed a chat room that allows them to interact in synchronous format. Whilst it would appear that a few members have enjoyed chatting, others have expressed frustration with the technology. It is common for online relationships to move beyond the medium in which they were formed and move to at least one additional channel of communication such as the phone, postal mail or face-to-face communication (Baym, 1998: 58; Parks, 1996:92). Despite this, it would appear the newsgroup remains the primary form of communication for the group.

## Summary

This short descriptive account has indicated that the chronic pain group is an active, engaged and highly interactive newsgroup on Usenet. Because many members are reluctant to identify their gender through their usernames, no estimation of the gender distribution in the newsgroup can be made with confidence. However, it is clear that there exist a variety of important key players in the group. These people are from diverse backgrounds and their motives for participating in the newsgroup are varied. The following chapter examines the ways in which such diverse individuals have

developed a collective identity based on a system of symbols representing the experiences of chronic pain patients.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SYMBOLISING BOUNDARY -

#### CREATING AN IDENTITY WITHIN THE MARGIN

1. Re: A Poem I wrote..... Gisselle 7/3/01

---

There is a pain inside my body.  
It infiltrates my soul.  
It grabs onto my spirit  
And leaves me less than whole

It takes me for a ride  
Far above the earth.  
Can't eat, can't sleep, can't study  
It takes away my worth

I know someday I'll beat it  
And it will go away.  
But when I'm in its grasp  
It only wants to stay.

So what can I do this moment,  
To make you understand  
How much this pain is hurting me?  
"This isn't what I'd planned!"

Maybe I should scream or cry  
To make the others see  
How much this little monster  
Has taken a hold on me.

Instead I go about my life  
And pretend it's all OK  
But inside I am crying,  
"Please make it go away!"

When will my body listen  
And see I have these dreams??  
To give me pain that interferes  
Is only cruel it seems

So for today I'll smile  
It's hard to let you know  
The inner battle I'm fighting  
My laughter is just for show.

I know in my heart I'll beat it.  
I know that I am strong  
But when I'm in the midst of it,  
The end just seems so long.

So say a prayer that I'll come through,  
The pain will go away.  
That my inner strength will come along  
And guide me through each day.

I bet there are many of you out there that can relate to my feelings. I'd never wish chronic pain (let alone chronic pain which is not treated adequately) upon anyone BUT it is comforting knowing that there are others out there going through the same (if not worse problems).

Giss

The construction of a collective identity is crucial to the development of 'community'. Cohen argued that the boundary of a community is indeed most poignant because it demarcates the community from others and embraces the symbols of the group's identity. He says:

The quintessential referent of community is that its members make ... a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and, further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere. The reality of community in people's experiences thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols. (Cohen, 1985: 16)

A community identity then is a collection of symbols the group understands as meaningful and representative of their group. Such an identity is developed and reproduced in opposition to others outside the community. The symbolic boundary acts as a container, to hold within it the collection of symbols used to identify that community. Given the prolific number of newsgroups on Usenet, how is it that this group manages to distinguish itself from others? How do they define themselves as a community and how do they ensure other people recognise them as a cohesive community of pain patients? In essence, what symbols do they employ to signify the development of their collective identity? This chapter will outline the various strategies the group employs to define itself as a community, set their membership criteria and symbolise their boundary. The symbols of community are grounded in, and stem from, their real life experiences of chronic pain.

## The Chronic Pain Patient Identity

Given that the mediated environment allows for a high level of anonymity in communication, it has been argued that online identities exist in a postmodern condition that is characterised by the fragmentation and plasticity of identity construction (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). How then, in such an environment can this group of pain patients develop their individual online identities, as well as a collective identity for the group? The newsgroup participants develop, cement and express their individual identities and their identity as a group in relation to their common experience of chronic pain. Community identity is intimately related to their identity as chronic pain sufferers. Sharing a common life experience (pain) not only qualifies them for membership in the chronic pain patient group but in the newsgroup itself. The experience of chronic pain acts as a symbolic marker for inclusion within this group. The members are aware of this commonality and often express the virtues of interacting with others who share their experience. Dennis expresses this sentiment.

2 RE: Oh Shit! HTML in next post Dennis 27/4/01

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You see, everyone here has one thing in common... We hurt... Bad... In the middle of the night, when the pain comes, when no one is there, when you're all alone, when there is nothing but pain, when you don't know if you can survive another second... When time has stopped... We've all been there... Last night, tonight, whenever... We all have that in common... We all share that one thing... So what if we don't get along... So what if not everyone agrees on stuff... So what if so and so is a jerk... None of that matters when the pain comes... Not that background pain that's always there - you know what I'm talking about... When it comes none of that other stuff matters... And when it comes for you; any of you, I feel for ya... I wish I could help... I wish I could do anything... And when it comes for me.....

Not only do the members of the group share the affliction of relentless pain, but each member has experienced alterations to their way of life and a change in the very meaning of their existence. These changes are now incorporated into their own definition of self, and consequently the collective identity of the group. Such life experiences become symbolic of their common identity and help construct the group as a community. For example, Elizabeth laments the loss of her pain free life and describes how this has impacted upon her interaction with other people who are not sympathetic to her pain.

3 Kenneth - Big Head, Big Trouble Elizabeth 7/4/01

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We seem to all hold a part of our anger about the blows we receive daily inside of us. Then we all unload all that pent up helplessness in one of the flames. That, I am afraid, is part of the burden we all share! Each and everyone of us had a life! We were all blindsided by whatever it is that has put us in this hell hole! We can not scream and holler at our doctors, can we? They hold the keys to what little relief we get! We cannot stop the degradation we suffer at the hands of HMO's, WC, SS. all the places we find ourselves having to deal with daily! I know I was once a powerful woman. As many of you I had the respect of my peers, a place in society, a life filled with so many gratifying events. Now, we are reduced to begging!!!! We have to humble ourselves to comply with the endless minutiae of forms, repeating the same story over and over to people that have the compassion of a gnat! People that do not look you in the eye, people that use their small little piece of power to its fullest! We all have that built up anger!!!

It is thought that only other pain patients can truly understand the associated lifestyle changes that occur with chronic pain. Chronic pain sufferers are identified, both individually and as a collective, by their isolation. Their disabilities and associated pain may prevent them from contributing to social occasions, spending quality time

with family and friends and participating in wider community affairs. More importantly perhaps, chronic pain patients are so isolated from others in terms of their daily experiences that only other pain patients can understand and empathise. Chronic pain patients seek interaction with those whose understanding is based in a common experience. Trevor describes his dependence on computer interaction as a 'life line' to connect him with others.

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4 Appt. With new pain doc... Trevor 15/5/01

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The 'puter is a lifeline to the people who understand where I'm at, and what I'm feeling. Without other chronic pain sufferers to talk with (sometimes, even on the phone), I have no idea of what I would do to handle all of this. As has been discussed in the past, lovers, family, friends, & therapists are all a big help when they try to be supportive. But talking with people who actually talk the talk and walk the walk is far more supportive. Chronic pain sufferers are able to relate real-life suggestions that they have already used, or, are in the process of trying.

Whilst other members' dependence on the newsgroup may be less extreme than Trevor's, there appears to be something very comforting in sharing the common experience of pain for these people. Brad remarks that this common bond gives him strength to endure the pain.

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5 Back again, still in pain.... Brad 6/4/01

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Oh well I suppose if you all can live in pain then it gives me hope. The reason I have come back is that no one in my life really understands what living in pain is like. I guess I just read the posts here and sometimes I lie here and cry and think "yes that is how I feel too!".

The contact that is provided by the newsgroup interaction appears to have few rivals in the real world for this group of people. Their individual identities as pain patients are painfully reiterated on a daily basis of medications, hospital visits and immobility, but their identity as a group of chronic pain patients is made possible through interaction in the newsgroup. It is interesting to note that although these people suffer constant pain, they are determined to distinguish chronic from acute pain. The difference between chronic and acute pain is described as:

6 Get this....

Jessica

22/3/01

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Chronic pain is pain that will last longer than 3 months...this is the description I have seen used frequently. If a person has pain for less than that, than it's appropriate to treat with short acting meds...if the pain then lasts longer than that, then the longer acting meds can be used. Surgical pain is not considered chronic, it is considered acute.

The distinction is important because acute pain patients are treated differently from chronic pain patients. Chronic pain is not only a long-term affliction, it is an intensity of pain that necessitates the use of narcotics for relief. Consequently these pain patients experience a host of side effects that accompany such medications. This distinction between chronic and acute pain is important in helping the group define their collective identity. It provides parameters around what it means to be a chronic pain patient. Chronic pain becomes a symbol of community identity. We will see in the next section how this identification as a chronic pain patient is further complicated by the stigma associated with this condition, and the resulting difference in treatment these people receive from family, friends and the medical establishment.

## The Chronic Pain Stigma

The newsgroup members believe that chronic pain patients are held in contempt and are stigmatised by society. Some of this prejudice arises from the fact that chronic pain is often perceived as a character flaw. The inability to cope with, endure, or 'stick it out' with respect to pain is seen to be a weakness rather than a natural reaction to extreme intractable pain. After an extended period of time with an illness, the initial stages of care, concern and assistance from friends wears off, and those around the person 'forget' they are still suffering from the same condition and still require continued assistance. Those who have not experienced pain do not understand its nature and believe the person just can not cope. This common experience of prejudice is adopted by the members and becomes a symbol of their communal identity. Each member recognises that sympathy and assistance are easily forthcoming for an acute ailment, but wears thin when the ailment becomes chronic. Elizabeth discusses this response in others.

7 Dealing with pain

Elizabeth 11/3/01

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.....Well, there are people that think a little burn from a hot pan is MAJOR pain...so, you have to develop a very tough skin and learn to let it slide. Hardest thing in the world to learn! Sometimes even family will not understand! My family thinks that if I stopped taking all those drugs I would get better. They think I am lazy, looking for sympathy and have totally dismissed the fact that there have been years where I have been in hospital 14 times! So..... I learned to tune them out. Only thing to be done.

Perhaps more damaging than the perception of pain patients as weak-willed is the perception that chronic pain patients are drug seekers and drug addicts, who do not necessarily require opiate therapy, but use their prescribed medication to get high. The reliance on opiate therapy for pain maintenance is crucial for many chronic pain patients and they can become anxious and distressed with the idea of being without appropriate medication. They are seen then by society as 'drug seeking', dependent and addicted to their medications and so those around them treat them disapprovingly. In a discussion on this topic, Kaitlin queries why this stigmatisation exists.

8 Why are people who need pain.... Kaitlin 26/2/01

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I need your thoughts everyone. I want to know why are people who need pain medication held in such contempt as opposed to people with all other illnesses?

Why does everyone react so negatively to people with chronic-pain? Why are they treated so badly? I just do not understand. I have never seen anyone else treated as horribly as we are treated, always. Even people with AIDS, who used to be treated so horribly because they were gay and contracted AIDS, are no longer treated like dirt. Why treat us like dirt?

In response to this question, Samantha offers her thoughts on the perception that chronic pain is a character weakness.

9 Why are people who need pain.. Samantha 25/2/01

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Possibly because it's considered a character flaw to not be able to handle pain? (on Mark's remark, it's also considered a character flaw for a person to be obese, as if there aren't medical reasons for it to happen in many cases)

I know I've been told to "suck it up" more than once, even by doctors. Especially by doctors! Until they feel what unending, intense, mind-blowing intractable pain feels like, it's easy for them to sit in judgment.

I remember someone posting to the migraine ng a long time ago calling us a bunch of whiney pussies over a few headaches, because if a DOCTOR called us a drug seeker, the doctor had to be right. Months later, the person posted an apology after having undergone some particularly painful dental procedures, IIRC, and got treated like a druggie when THEY needed more meds than the doc gave them. Apparently in their mindset, no one who truly needed pain meds would be treated as a drug seeker and blown off by a medical professional. This person really thought they were IN CONTROL of their pain, so when they got a good dose of pain, they HAD to be believed. They weren't. They then realized that maybe things weren't as black and white as they'd originally believed.

This experience of negative treatment and stigma associated with chronic pain can be heightened for some types of chronic pain sufferers. It would seem young patients are more often accused of being drug addicts by the medical profession than their older counterparts. This treatment is not dependent upon their diagnosis, but rather determined by the type of medication they use. Nathaniel, a young twenty something chronic pain patient, describes his experience.

10 Re: Capsules vs. Tablets

Nathaniel

8/3/01

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I wonder if my age has anything to do with it? I'm in my mid-twenties and most people tell me I look like I'm about 21-22. It seems to me as if people don't realize that younger people can have chronic pain too. Just because I'm young doesn't mean I need to suffer either as far as pain medicines go. I had one pharmacist tell me that I was too young to be on any of these medicines ...

It is not uncommon for stigmatisation to become a significant symbol for community identity. Cohen discussed a similar phenomena that occurred with Focaltown Pentecostals. Members of that community proudly advertise and promote the very things that make them a stigmatised group. Cohen says:

In this respect, it 'advertises' the stigma with which its members feel themselves to be branded. Indeed, it wields the stigma almost as a challenge to others. It uses the stigma as a symbolic means of asserting and embellishing its own boundaries – indeed as a means of constructing an alternative community. (1985:62)

In a similar way, the members of the chronic pain newsgroup embrace the stigma of chronic pain and they incorporate it into the symbolic array that helps construct them as a definitive community.

### **Good and Bad Doctor Experiences**

The stereotypes associated with chronic pain impacts upon the type and quality of treatment pain patients receive from the medical profession. Unfortunately the majority of medical treatment experience stories relayed on the newsgroup are negative. This is to be expected given the group is a support group for chronic pain sufferers, and attracts people who may not have yet experienced successful treatment. Despite this, both positive and negative medical treatment experiences were recounted and can occur with a variety of doctors, pain specialists, surgeons, pharmacists, ER doctors or primary care physicians. The positive and negative experiences of medical treatment are adopted as symbols of community identity. The group defines doctors into two categories: good doctors and bad doctors.

There are a set of characteristics that define a 'good' doctor for the group. A good doctor is accessible and appointments can be made relatively quickly. The consultation with a good doctor can take some time, the doctor listens to what the patient has to say about his or her own illness and treatment, and the doctor is thorough with background investigations on their medical history. These doctors are compassionate. A good doctor is likely to appreciate the experience of being a chronic pain patient and will understand the scale of pain that patients use. This scale extends from 1 (not very much pain – virtually pain free) to 10 (the worst possible pain imaginable). Such doctors are also likely to sensitively inform their patients of the difference between addiction and dependence in relation to opiate medications. Good doctors are fully aware of the stigma associated with chronic pain and the use of opiate drug therapy and will act to minimise the distress and humiliation of their clients. Good doctors are skilled in the off-label use of medications and are willing to attempt alternative procedures to relieve pain. Moreover, they know how to properly titrate pain medications for individual patients, are aware of the uniqueness of each pain patient and will respond with appropriate medical treatment. Good doctors are thorough, give correct information, listen to the experiences of patients and are eager to learn from those experiences. Carter describes a positive experience with a 'good doctor'.

11 Pain Doctor Visit

Carter

4/5/01

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The doctor I saw today was terrific. His nurse spent a great deal of time with me filling out paperwork and asking questions about the nature of my pain. Then I saw the doctor and he spent about 45 minutes talking with me looking over my chart and discussing what I've tried and how it has worked and discussing the possible options. He didn't think nerve blocks would work

well (I'm kind of glad - I really hate needles). He said we could continue with the vicoprofen but he thought it would be better to use a longer acting narcotic since the pain was chronic in nature. He started me on Oxycontin with vicoprofen for breakthrough and I check in at the end of the month to see how its working. We talked about constipation and what to do, and I signed a narcotics contract. I know this is a medication that has helped so many of you and I feel confident it will work for me as well. I am so glad that I pushed forward. This is a good day - I may never have to deal with bent over double pain again! I have a great doctor in my corner who is willing to do what it takes to help me.

Likewise, Diamond expresses optimism that perhaps changes will occur in the way medical specialists treat pain patients.

12 Appt. With new pain doc... Diamond 17/5/01

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Interestingly, last week when I went to my PCP, the nurse asked me what my pain level was that day. I assumed she asked because I'm a chronic pain patient, but she told me that they ask everyone now. They even have a chart that shows a scale from 1-10 with frowny faces and descriptors like "the worst pain you've ever felt" etc. Apparently they are taking the new pain guidelines seriously. This office is quasi-related to the local teaching hospital (which in general is pretty bad!) and that may be one reason why they are doing it. My PCP, however, is very caring and would be asking me about the pain just like she always asks about the fatigue. (BTW she doesn't give me my pain meds -- she is glad that I have a pain doc to do that.)

Maybe, just maybe, this will happen in doctors' offices everywhere as people realize they have to take the guidelines seriously. I just wish everyone could have decent doctors.

In contrast to the 'good doctor', the group describes a set of characteristics that epitomise a 'bad doctor'. A bad doctor is fixed in his or her way of thinking about treatments for pain. They are unlikely to increase pain medication dosages or use break-

through pain medications for their patients. Their attitude is that patients must 'deal with it' when pain is excessive. Patients are treated as if they are their disease or illness, and as ill informed about their medical problems. Bad doctors are often sceptical or disbelieving about patient-reported symptoms or levels of pain. These doctors are often seen to be incompetent, unable to adequately treat pain, have a tendency to misdiagnose illnesses/diseases and will not accept or acknowledge their errors. Some bad doctors are seen as corrupted by insurance companies, or Work Cover, or whoever pays their bills. Patients do not feel they provide adequate service. Most of all, a bad doctor has little understanding or compassion for the pain and difficulties chronic pain patients suffer.

Trevor, in the course of trying to find a new pain specialist, recounts an episode with a new doctor who he describes as Dr Mengele, a reference to a Nazi medical doctor in the Second World War.

13 Appt. With new pain doc... Trevor 11/5/01

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Hi Everyone,

I had my appt. today with the new pain doc, Dr. Mengele. The first thing I was told right off the bat was that this clinic did NOT use break-thru pain meds, and the focus of treatment at this facility was NOT medication. I was then told it wasn't because of the addictive potential of break-thru pain meds, it was because break-thru meds might make people more tolerant of their daily meds.

When I asked what patients were supposed to do when the pain was greater than the daily med could handle, I was told the following: The 80MG of Methadone that I take daily should handle 80% of the pain. Although I might get physical therapy, patients have to learn to "deal" with the pain.

They do NOT do epidurals, patients just have to learn how to limit some activities, and deal with the remaining pain. When I asked what I should do on days when I am in pain, where I have needed break-thru meds in the past, I asked if I'm just supposed to lay in bed all day? The doctor did not have an answer, but told me that counselling is stressed in this program, and they do NOT see medication as an answer to the problem of dealing with pain.

When I told him my current pain doc had mentioned the morphine pump implant, he told me that my "mind" was not in the right place to have a morphine pump implanted.

At this point, I took off my hospital gown, put on my clothes, and left. I know that some folks might think that I was too hasty in my judgement call. My point of view is very simple: anytime a pain doc says the patient just has to learn to "deal" with the pain, and then says that a certain amount of daily pain med will have basically the same result for his patients (80MG always controls 80% of the pain? gee, I thought we were all individuals?), it's time for me to leave. The philosophy that this pain clinic uses seems negligent at its' best, and truly cruel at its' worst.

I'm really disappointed by what happened, and guess that i'll have to keep my current doc for now. I just didn't realize how truly shitty it is to have to search for a new pain doc. I will certainly have more respect for folks who have already gone thru this in the future, when they talk about switching docs.

Unfortunately Trevor's experience of a 'bad doctor' is not unique and many chronic pain patients face what they perceive to be entrenched stereotyping by the medical profession. The stigmatisation and criminalisation of pain patients is not restricted to medical doctors. Many people experience similar treatment by the pharmacies from where they obtain their opiate prescriptions. Whilst some members of the newsgroup acknowledge the high-quality and personal treatment they receive, many express dismay at a culture of stigma and suspicion cast upon people who present for opiate medication. They are treated like drug-addicts by pharmacy staff. Many are therefore required to have their prescription verified by their doctor over the phone

before the pharmacy will dispense the medication. Other pharmacies refuse to stock the medication, particularly the drug Oxycontin. This may be a consequence of the political environment surrounding the Oxycontin debate during the time this research was conducted. The group members believe that the worst pharmacies for this type of treatment are the national chain pharmacies. Angelina describes her frustrations in trying to fill her script for Oxycontin.

14 Re: Capsules vs. Tablet

Angelina

8/3/01

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Just wanted to make comment to let you know that I just had the same problem getting my oxycodone 5mg filled... the script was for 120 of oxycodone 5 mg and then another script for 100 of oxycontin 10 mg. I had to go to five different pharmacies that would actually fill the script all the places I went said that they were out or either didn't have enough pills to fill the full script and they could not fill only part of the script... yada yada yada.. finally i ended up breaking down and eventually going to the walmarts pharmacy and they had more than enough to fill the script.. i got dirty looks all over that pharmacy but oh well.. I got my meds. I just hate those "looks" people give you when they see that you are getting more than a "couple" of pills... and no matter what i should not have to explain to a pharmacy why i need pain meds.. they are all like " oh your too young to be in that amount of chronic pain ect." i can't stand that... GRRR oh well...

The negative image surrounding chronic pain patients is seen to influence the type of medical treatment patients receive. Interestingly, whilst discussing such medical treatments, members rarely discuss any particular medical procedure, but rather categorise their doctors as 'good' or 'bad' by focusing on the relationship with the doctor as a human being and specialist. Good doctors understand the human side of suffering and are sympathetic in their treatment. This is obviously an important factor for patients seeking a doctor. Bad doctors in contrast are perceived by the negative

stereotype of chronic pain patients. They think they are drug seekers or hypochondriacs and treat them accordingly. This negative perception of chronic pain patients and associated treatment from friends, family, the medical profession and the wider society is unfortunately, an all too common experience for each member of the group. By sharing episodes of discrimination with each other they solidify their common bond. Everybody in the group knows what it's like to be in pain.

The defining feature of membership in this group is the experience of chronic pain. The group's membership is defined by this commonality of pain and shared life experiences. The negative stereotyping and stigma associated with being a chronic pain patient and the consequences for good medical treatment and understanding from friends and families is an universal experience for every member of the group. These shared understandings and experiences are a potent force in defining the membership of the group and symbolises the boundary between the group and others. It creates a sense of belonging and solidarity whilst it simultaneously symbolises their difference from others. Such a common identity helps symbolically construct the newsgroup as a community.

### **Chronic Pain Ideology**

It is not only the symbols of their shared marginalisation as chronic pain sufferers that bonds the group, but also more positive symbols such as shared beliefs and values. In the history of the sociology of community, almost all approaches emphasise the significance of shared values and a belief system in a community. "It seems to me that some common core of values must exist before any community is

possible. (Dunham, 1986:402). So for our chronic pain newsgroup, what are these beliefs? What does this group value besides the desire to be pain free? How are these values symbolised to help construct the group as a community? There are two significant values which are commonly expressed in this group and act as markers for inclusion in the community.

The first value that unites the group members is the distinction between addiction and dependence upon pain relief medication. Chronic pain patients do not identify themselves as addicted, but rather dependent on their medication. This distinction is very important because it necessarily counteracts the existing negative stereotype of chronic pain patients. Pain patients argue that opiate medications reduce their pain to a manageable level to allow them a quality of life comparable with most others. The daily routine of medication guarantees that their bodies become dependent on the drugs to function and maintain equilibrium. In addition, chronic pain patients become psychologically and emotionally dependent on the drugs because withdrawal results in a level of pain incomprehensible to most people. Medications are not taken to get 'high' or to get a 'buzz', but rather to necessarily manage pain. They are not 'addicted' to the drugs in a common sense understanding, rather they are dependent on them for day-to-day living. Athena discusses the distinction between addiction and dependence.

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15	Have I po'd my doc?	Athena	23/4/01
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It you are using meds, for a legitimate purpose like we all are, there is no such thing as addiction. Addiction comes out of "recreational" (for lack of a better word) use of drugs. I too, am drug dependent. Biggest difference is we use ours for a reason - our pain. Yes, our bodies depend on narcotics but everyone needs to understand the difference

Chronic pain patients liken their dependence on opiates to that of diabetics who are dependent on insulin. This distinction between dependence and addiction is an important belief that acts as a symbol of community identity.

The other significant belief that acts as an ideological symbol for the group is that each individual experiences medical procedures and treatments differently. Individuals are as unique as their responses to medications, and therefore medical procedures or operations will necessarily vary. What is effective for one person will have horrible side-effects for another, and something that may have proven unhelpful for one will be the 'miracle' cure for another. Malcolm expresses this idea in relation to his own experience with the drug, Demerol.

16 Get this....

Malcolm

21/3/01

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By now we all know, don't we, that each of us reacts to medicines differently. I regularly have some pretty big doses of Demerol during the daytime and it irritates the hell out of me to have to sit in the ER for 20 minutes of observation because I've been going through it for so long that I know it is not going to cause a reaction and if I could spend that 20 minutes in bed it would be of tremendous help; OTOH if I take the same dose at night I definitely need help just getting into bed and will fall flat on my face if not cared for..... Different medications for different situations and different doses for different people..... Well y'all have your opinion; I have mine. Whatever it takes is what it takes and I just hope we can each eventually find out what it takes and that when we do it will be available.

The beliefs discussed here are widely shared within the chronic pain group and are rarely disputed or challenged. "By adapting to the ideology of the group, individuals develop a strong sense of commitment and belonging to the group" (Phillips, 1996). These beliefs and ideas are held in common by the group and contribute to both their individual identities and collective identity as chronic pain patients. These beliefs have become symbolic markers of inclusion within the group and help construct it as a community. Those who do not value these ideas are identified as external to the group's boundary.

### **Chronic Pain, Depression and Suicide**

Group members must also deal with depression and suicidal ideation that commonly result from their experience of chronic pain. These issues are a common experience of all members and act as a symbol of community identity and belonging. It is believed that every person with chronic intractable pain will have experienced at least some level of depression or considered suicide at some stage in his or her life. The group regularly discusses these issues openly and the relating of their stories or emotions demonstrates shared and common experiences.

Depression is viewed as a by-product of living with chronic pain. It is not viewed as pathology nor as a critical medical problem, but rather depression and the use of antidepressant medication is viewed as a necessary consequence of chronic pain. Elizabeth acknowledges that depression is a common experience and she is willing to take bets on its universality amongst group members!

We all know that depression is only a step away from all of us! Having to not only deal with the chronic pain, and sometimes living with a disease that is terminal we must constantly face a medical community that is dead set on not getting us "addicted" to opiates. All the while we know that having proper pain control means the difference of having a life or not having even a will to live!!!

I would wager that there is not one person on this ng that doesn't have to take some kind of med. for depression! It is a very sad commentary on the state of medical help in this country!

Depression is seen to be caused primarily by chronic pain and associated illnesses, but is also confounded by the dramatic lifestyle changes that accompany chronic pain. The physical inability to do things they previously loved to do can lead some members into depression. Feeling depressed, having really bad days and being emotionally exhausted is an accepted part of being a chronic pain sufferer and is treated by the group as 'natural'. Sometimes when members are feeling especially depressed they post and ask the group how others alleviate depression. The group will respond with a variety of activities, methods and tools that they themselves have found useful. The expression of these feelings of depression may act as a 'normalising' agent for the rest of the group. It signifies that depression is something suffered by everyone and is incorporated accordingly into the collective identity of the chronic pain group.

Whilst the newsgroup members struggle with the common experience of depression, a more serious issue is also a familiar concern for them – suicide. Suicidal ideation is considered to be a by-product of suffering chronic intractable pain. Thoughts

of suicide are believed to be experienced by all chronic pain sufferers at one stage or another during the course of their illnesses. Suicide is seen as a decision based on suffering, rather than depression. Suicide is not considered a pathological state, rather it is viewed as an understandable, rational decision made by a person who has exhausted all options of pain relief and decided death is preferable. Cassandra discusses her decision with the group. She believes other people share the same experience.

18 Suicide?

Kassandra

31/3/01

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I don't think my suicidal plans are a function of irrationality or psychopathology, but just a logical response to severe intractable pain. I saw my father, who was a quadriplegic, suffer 20 plus years with severe pain and I'm not going to put up with the same bullshit. If this pain doesn't go away soon I'm going to terminate my life. The reason I'm articulating these thoughts is because I think the people on this message board can relate to my frustration, desperation and depression.

In a series of postings on the issue of depression, Trevor discusses his suicide plans as a rational decision.

19 I'm tired

Trevor

3/3/01

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I am trying to keep busy, keep my thoughts off of suicide. I am the first to admit that the casual way I talk about this very serious subject may seem crazy to some. The answer is very simple: My decision to take my own life will be based on suffering, not depression. I will simply have grown tired of the way the medical profession treats those of us in chronic pain, people like me & you. Most of all, I have grown tired of the grinding, constant, back pain, knee pain, & hip pain. There are other occasional areas, based on usage, but these three are there every day, and truly diminish the quality of my life.

Suicidal ideation, though understandable, tends to only occur when pain levels are not being treated appropriately. If pain levels are manageable, then people do not generally entertain the idea of ending their own lives. During the time that Trevor was contemplating committing suicide, his partner, Lena, posted to the group to let them know he was suicidal and sought their advice. The group responded with urgent pleas for Lena to help Trevor get his pain under control. Abbey contributed the following suggestions to Lena:

20 Friends of Trevor

Abbey

12/3/01

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Dear Lena:

Thank you for taking the time to write us about Trevor. If it is possible can you contact Perdue Pharma and find out when the rep will be in your area so that the forms for Trevors medications can be filled out? You might also want to contact the patient representative at Barnes and explain the situation to him/her. Be sure to let them know that his \*pain doctor\* couldn't be bothered to fill out the form for him. I am sorry but this \*doctor\* has put Trevor in a horrible position to have to choose to suffer or hold on to the possibility of getting the medication he needs and deserves!

During the course of my research, Trevor did manage to receive appropriate medical attention. His pain levels were kept in control and with the help of his partner and his newsgroup friends, he fought the temptation to take his life. It appears Trevor may not be the only member who has overcome suicidal thoughts due to the support they received from the newsgroup. Brad shows appreciation for the support he has received.

You see I know this newsgroup has helped me. I was suicidally depressed and I came here in desperation and received a lot of support and advice and I can say I owe my life to this group. I have spoken to other people who also owe their lives to THIS NEWSGROUP.

Depressive and suicidal ideations are widespread experiences for chronic pain patients. Rather than viewing them as pathological states, they are considered a natural response to living in constant pain. All members of the group have experienced this to some degree and recognise the reasons behind these inclinations. The experience of depression and suicidal thoughts are adapted and transformed into symbols of community identity. The frank discussion and the beliefs surrounding their existence in chronic pain patients act as markers of membership within the newsgroup.

### **Chronic Pain and Patient Advocacy**

Another influential factor involved in symbolically constructing the newsgroup as a community is the importance placed upon issues of patient advocacy. As briefly mentioned earlier, one of the most significant issues facing chronic pain sufferers is the campaign to remove from the market one of the most widely prescribed and used opiate pain medications. Oxycontin is a long-acting pain medication specifically designed to be used in the treatment of chronic illness and was developed by the Purdue Pharma company. After a series of unrelated deaths associated with the abuse of this drug in early 2001, a media campaign was initiated to remove the drug from the market. The US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the political agenda of the American government's War on Drugs further fuelled this scare campaign. The media campaign

against Oxycontin sensationalised the stories of a few abusers, yet failed to mention its benefits when used appropriately by chronic pain sufferers. Ian outlined the situation with frustration:

22 Maurice: pain in the neck. Ian 28/5/01

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The #1 reason Oxycontin is being vilified is the never ending , money gobbling life destroying , War On Drugs . Oxycontin is time release oxycodone , which the drug abusers are crushing in order to defeat the time release matrix . This allows a dose similar to taking a handful of single dose medications at one time. In their ignorance , they are dying . It is a horrible mess that our Government has decided to interfere in . The abusers will move on to something new ( or old ) , while we lose a potent weapon in combating chronic pain .

As a consequence of the Oxycontin media campaign, some newsgroup members have had their Oxycontin scripts cancelled by their doctors who refuse to prescribe it whilst the debate continues. The group sees it as a reaction based on fear by doctors who might be accused by the DEA of prescribing it inappropriately. Diamond's doctor is one of those who decided to cease prescribing Oxycontin.

23 Look what's in my email Diamond 7/4/01

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And because of all this stupidity, my pain doc has almost stopped writing oxy and is putting people on methadone instead. It's not because he thinks it's a bad drug, it's because people are asking for something else because they are "scared." Makes me glad for my mscontin . . .

The impact of the negative publicity surrounding Oxycontin is not restricted to the medical profession. Some group members declare that their families and friends are

influenced by the media campaign and are taking it upon themselves to 'inform' them of the dangers of Oxycontin. As Abel indicates, some family members are asking about this 'hillbilly heroin'.

24    Damn Press and Oxycontin            Abel            17/7/01

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My mother-in-law called last night in a panic "I hope you're not taking Oxycontin, I just heard on the news that it kills people, blah blah blah".

I didn't catch the broadcast, but it sounded like the usual sensationalistic press bullshit - deadly drug, without any discussion of its benefits in a controlled situation. She only focused on the phrase "hillbilly heroin". Not her fault, she's just concerned, but still, this type of journalism does nothing for us.

The group responded in a number of ways to the Oxycontin media campaign and advocacy issues were of primary importance. Firstly, many members took it upon themselves to ensure that the group was appropriately informed about up-to-date information. The URLs to online articles about the Oxycontin 'problem' were frequently posted and updated on the newsgroup to ensure the members were knowledgeable about the issues. In response to some of these sensationalised or arguably factually incorrect accounts in the media, many group members wrote to the reporters involved to inform them of the true nature of the drug and its benefits when used according to its instructions. Other activities discussed on the newsgroup included writing to congress or local parliament members to gain their support to retain the drug on the market. An extended response by the Purdue Pharma Company, who manufactures the drug, provided practical and encouraging advice as to what to do to assist the campaign. Some of these suggestions included collecting patient testimonials

about the relief obtained from using the medication. Purdue invited Jessica to be a patient advocate on their behalf. Jessica bubbled with excitement at the prospect.

25 I am a patient advocate... Jessica 13/5/01

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After writing them several times about my opinion concerning this Oxycontin hysteria, they sent me papers to become a patient advocate. They want to use that letter I had sent as well as another letter I had written. I am so excited about this...about the fact that I might be helping other chronic pain patients and educating others about chronic pain.

The threat of Oxycontin being removed from the market is of particular concern to chronic pain patients because it represents a threat to recent advancements in the treatment of chronic pain. As Elizabeth suggests, the threat to pain management advancements can spur on activism.

26 Look what's in my email Elizabeth 18/3/01

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We are facing a war, in my opinion. We have just now been getting our foot in the door of adequate pain treatment! I cannot sit by and see the slow progress we have made over all these years that I have faced carrying this beast on my back without doing at least something! No matter how small!

Many patients responded and were forced into action through fear of having their Oxycontin medication removed. For some, Oxycontin is the last drug in a long list of drugs they have tried, and it is the only medication that can adequately address their pain issues. Even for those who are not taking Oxycontin, the threat represents the ability of the US government to remove from the market any drug they decide is dangerous. Their meds could be next!

The common concern over this issue acts as a symbol of community identity. The group can not accept a chronic pain patient who does not believe in the efficacy of Oxycontin and the unfair demonisation of it by the media. It forms the basis of another bond among group members. One pain patient posted to the newsgroup after having had a bad experience with Oxycontin. He was treated by the group as if he was misinformed and his experience was not valid. In response, Rachel clearly indicates that he does not belong to the group.

27    Damn Press and Oxycontin                      Rachel                      27/7/01

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There is nothing much worse than an uninformed supposed to be pain patient.

There is a difference between dependence and addiction. If you do not know what that difference is you need to look into it. That way maybe you could have an intelligent conversation with those of us who post and read here and who do understand.

This is far worse than the Press not understanding it. It is people like you who are doing so very much damage to pain patients. What you are saying makes no sense. It is as bad as when the Press uses Oxycontin in one sentence and then replaces it with oxycodone in the next. There is a difference between these two also. Please do try to learn what you are talking about. The nerve you have hit is the one that reacts to more misinformation and it coming from someone who is supposedly a pain patient. The way you switch back and forth between the words makes it hard for me to believe you are telling the truth. It makes me believe you are one of the people who are not real pain patients but one of the ones who is in on this witch hunt based on mis-information.

Despite the group's belief that all patients experience their illness and treatment differently, and their constant legitimisation of different experiences of pain and pain

treatment, this particular person's experience was not validated. The group can not afford to have people within its midst who think in the same way as those outside its boundary. This threat to the common good of all pain patients helps construct this group as a community. To present a unified identity they need to disregard the innumerable factors which would normally divide them "... in order to present themselves, by contrast with other communities, as having an essential likeness, for it is on this likeness that their solidarity is founded" (Cohen, 1985:114). Those who do not recognise the symbols of their community, in this case patient advocacy, need to be constituted as outside the boundary of this community. The threat to Oxycontin acts as a means to unify the group. Beliefs and actions supporting 'Oxy' symbolise legitimacy as members of the community. The 'mask' presented to the world, and the Usenet environment, is of a cohesive community dedicated to the ideal of patient advocacy.

Interestingly, the Oxycontin media debate becomes the site for what Cohen would term a 'symbolic reversal' of the norms for the group. Cohen argued that often groups will "... reverse or invert the norms of behaviour and values which 'normally' mark their own boundaries. In these rituals of reversal, people behave quite deliberately and collectively in ways which they supposedly abhor or which are usually proscribed" (Cohen, 1985:58). The 'Bubble Wrap' incident is a case in point where the group demonstrated a humorous reversal of their values and beliefs and pretended to be the drug addicts that they are often perceived to be. In this case, they pretend to be bubble wrap addicts who are unable to stop popping their bubble wrap. Bubble wrap is the bubble packaging material used for fragile items during moving. The packaging material can be 'popped' by bursting a bubble and allowing the air to escape from the

plastic. An excerpt from the bubble wrap incident demonstrates this inversion of the group's normal perspective on addiction.

28 I'm Confused Samantha 16/3/01

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Yeah, Madison, that's what you SAY....but truth be told, you've got a bigtime bubble wrap abuse problem, don't you? You sit there and pop that stuff all day, and rob 7-11's just to buy your next roll. Don't deny it! I can tell a bubble wrap abuser at 50 paces.

I know some recovered bubble wrap abusers. Need a sponsor?

29 I'm Confused Diamond 16/3/01

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Samantha, you are awfully knowledgeable -- sounds like been there, done that got the t-shirt to me. Are you yourself in recovery? Go ahead and admit it to the group - you'll feel SO much better in the end . . .

Diamond  
(not ashamed to admit my habit)

30 I'm Confused Samantha 16/3/01

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M-m-m-me? No! Never! I've never touched the stuff in my life! I don't even know what it looks or smells like! I'm shocked, Mary, that you could think such a thing of me. <pop> That sound was my DOG sneezing! <pop> So he's got a cold....that doesn't mean anything! <pop> A BAD cold! <pop>

I can quit any time I want to. <pop>

31 I'm Confused Diamond 18/3/01

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There is a 12-step program near you . . . I urge you to get help before it's too late!!! Before you know it, you'll be scoring bubble wrap on streetcorners, and from there it's just a matter of time, just a matter of time. . .

look people, this isn't funny. do have any idea of how many teen age children are dying because of bubble wrap?? 8 out of every 10 children between the ages of 3 and 18 will have tried bubble wrap at least once. Not only that but 3 out of 10 will have had a small burst of air shot up their nose during the playful episode causing a small euphoric sensual high, usually leading to addiction or worse...STOOGISM. If only we could get the plastic manufactures to stop producing plastic we could save the lives of thousands. Please folks before another teenager gets caught doing something with themselves in the dark after a bubble party, which will usually lead to either death or dysfunction, send out your support to stop evil plastic manufactures.

this message has been paid for by the council on self satisfaction, the anti-bubble coalition and the let's not be a stooge union. Please donate soon.

I rarely get involved in these things...but I feel sooo strongly about this! You are so right Diamond. It is worth the billions of dollars we are spending if it keeps even just - one- weak willed person from ruining their life, and that of their loved ones with <gasp> bubble wrap! How can people see it any other way? That is why our government is set up isn't it...to protect us...to make decisions for those too weak, too ignorant to make them for themselves? Any right minded person sees it this way...ultimately it protects the children. In a bubbleless world, the temptation won't even BE there.

As far as the "legitimate uses" who are we kidding, they're only for extreme cases..(packing valuable tiffany lamps etc) and other, less harmful means can be employed. The few should be happy to make this petty sacrifice for the good of the many. Personally, I think they're only using packaging as an excuse to get their hands on it anyway.

With the building of a few more jails, stiffer sentences, and wonderful rehab programs, combined with a strict No Tolerance policy this can be an ideal world for all of us.

Thank you, thank you, no...it was really nothing <blushing>

Cohen (1985) discussed symbolic reversals in reference to ongoing rituals or repeated ceremonies and the mechanisms by which they inverted the norms for the group. Whilst the bubble wrap incident is not an ongoing repeated ritual, it does demonstrate the same principle of reversal. The group understands its norms, standards and values so clearly that they are able to 'play' the 'other' in a collective comic event and pretend to be the very people who stigmatise and demonise them. The group begins the reversal by inverting the norm regarding the stigma of addiction and then moves on to mirror some of the arguments made against the drug Oxycontin in the media debate. Michelle's and Keeley's later posts mimic the rhetoric found in the Oxycontin debate. They play the 'other', a non chronic pain patient, but make the argument ludicrous by applying it to a bubble wrap addiction. We see an amusing reversal of the group's norms which at the same time maintains the symbolic identity of the group. To understand the symbolic reversal in the bubble wrap incident, one needs to understand the meanings of the set of symbols that denotes the group's identity. When such symbols are manipulated and reversed in such a comical fashion, the real meanings for the group members are in fact reinforced.

### **Chronic Pain Rituals**

In examining the ways in which the newsgroup is symbolically constructed as a community, "...it should not be surprising, ... to find ritual occupying a prominent place in the repertoire of symbolic devices through which community boundaries are affirmed and reinforced" (Cohen, 1985:50). Ritual helps members to anchor themselves in their symbolic community. It acts as a reference point for some of the

more pertinent community symbols and acts to reinforce community identity and boundary. Members understand, recognise, and take part in these rituals to express their communal identity and their individual roles within that community. A variety of rituals are evident within the chronic pain newsgroup. Each acts as a symbol of communal identity, delineates the boundary of the newsgroup and help construct the group as a community.

The 'magic bubble' is one of the most delightful rituals in which the newsgroup takes part. Magic bubbles are imaginary devices bestowed upon people by one of the regulars, Elizabeth. Magic bubbles have two purposes for the community. Firstly, they act as an imagery tool to help the receiver fight his or her pain. They are symbolic of a safe, comforting place to go and hide from the world when it is all a bit too much and it seems like the walls are closing in. Secondly, magic bubbles are a form of group welcome. Elizabeth is the self-proclaimed official welcoming committee for the newsgroup and her magic bubbles are a ritual for welcoming each new member. When a new member first posts to the newsgroup, they are always welcomed with a magic bubble by Elizabeth. Elizabeth describes the symbolism of her magic bubbles.

34 Trevor, what do you think Elizabeth 10/3/01

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My "MB" are just a welcoming tool, full of compassion, understanding, good thoughts and happy memories! A place to escape when things get way too heavy to handle! There you were, going along living your life, one day after the other and WAM! what the \*H\* happened? Where did this pain that won't go away come from and why me!

Magic bubbles are a ritual entrenched within the newsgroup. They act as a means of welcome and signify acceptance within the group. The ritualistic giving of a magic bubble appears to have been developed from stories told by two former members who no longer participate. Elizabeth narrates the history of how she came to be the bearer of magic bubbles and relates how a recipient showed her appreciation in a very special and generous way.

35    A Magic Bubble story...                      Elizabeth                      2/6/01

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One day a few years ago, there was a woman, in great distress, fighting just to find a reason to live. She was very sick, depressed and in terrible pain all the time! She thought "I need something new in my life", so, she bought a computer. Got a friend to help set it up, get her a ISP and then showed her how to use "Chat Rooms" and said, "It's easy, just click on what you want to see.", he then rode off into the sunset.

But then, one day, she clicked on Newsgroups on her Outlook Express. \*Lord\*, there were so many! But she typed Chronic pain, up came this newsgroup and she was a happy camper.

Well, sort of... Being so dumb she got herself into a ton of trouble on the group because she tried posting from Yahoo and her ISP, with different names. This was \*not\* taken well by the members of the group and they let her know it....fast!

Thank Heavens, there was a group of wonderful people that knew she was just dumb, not mean spirited, and one of them, Mandy, wrote a story. The story was about this poor woman sitting all alone in meadow, crying, and how a kindly crew of women heard her crying and came to her rescue. The women gave her a "Magic Bubble". It was full of love, understanding, comfort and a safe place to hide when things got bad again.

The only thing she was to do with her "Magic Bubble" was to use it wisely. So she began to welcome new members and used them to help people when things looked their darkest.

She did miss a few, here and there, because the group got bigger and bigger as others found the group and told their friends. The group changed into a \*real\* helping place! Yes, there were some people that thought she was dotty, and some really didn't like her or her "Magic Bubbles", but she kept on...

One day when she was in a place in her life that just kept getting worse. When things were so dark again she mentioned on the group how awful her mattress was and how old and lumpy it had become. How being in bed all the time because she had so many things going wrong with her body she couldn't get comfortable at all. It was so hard to have to be in that bed. A woman e-mailed her, "What kind of mattress would she like to have?" Then on e-mail, again, the woman said, "I'm serious! What kind of mattress would you like?" At first the woman in our story couldn't believe it. Someone who's real name she didn't even know, was going to see that she got a brand new, wonderful bed?

But it was true!!!! The woman said to our lady, "Once you sent me a "Magic Bubble" when I truly needed it! When \*I\* was at \*MY\* lowest. This is a thank you for all those "Magic Bubbles"! "

So today, the "Magic Bubble" lady is lying on top of a cloud...her painful bones eased and comforted. All her cynical ways of looking at the world are now in question! The moral of this tale which is all true, is that there are Angels around us! That there is good in this tiny corner of the usenet. That true help and understanding is here. That there truly is.....LOVE and KINDNESS in the world.

So we can all reach out to each other and understand each others pain and despair. That in this corner of the world REAL PEOPLE reach out to EACH OTHER, and comfort is to be found.....right here!

THE END

Magic bubbles are a ritualistic symbol incorporated into the group's identity. Such a ritual identifies a new member and signifies that his or her experiences of pain, stigmatisation, depression, suicide and beliefs about patient advocacy are all symbols of the community into which he or she is being welcomed. The ritual becomes an important signifier of membership and acts as a mechanism to differentiate this community from others.

Another important ritual that helps constitute the group as a community is the use of a pity pot/party by members who are feeling depressed and need to complain about their situation. The pity pot/party is not a negative or unwelcomed event in the newsgroup, rather it is a symbol that encapsulates a common experience for all members, namely, the need to complain about their lives. The imagery of the pity pot/party is twofold: it represents a pot that you sit on to take a break from your pain or it is a party that you throw for yourself when you are feeling depressed, lonely and afraid. Pity parties are not 'real' parties, rather, they consists of doing something nice for yourself. As Sarah explains:

36    Is there a pity-pot newsgroup?    Sarah    5/4/01

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OH MY GOD!! You deserve a major pity party. When I'm feeling really bad and depressed and angry, etc. etc., I give myself a major pity party. I turn on my fav music, gather some of my fav goodies to eat (may not be wise w/your diabetes) and go to town for a few hours--or until I drop in exhaustion.

A reference to a pity party is generally used as a bittersweet humour device by the group members. It is a joke because when you are feeling so terrible the last thing in the world you would want to do is have a party. It represents a wish for things to be different. The pity pot/party symbol is sometimes used as a heading to signify that the post is going to be about the hardships and problems the member is facing. By using it as a heading for the post, it allows those people who are not able to cope with reading about other people's problems to choose not to read that particular thread of messages. Jessica indicates in the header that she needs to grumble about her situation.

Things are just not going well here. Ben and I are fighting, and feel so responsible for our financial problems because I can't work and don't have SSDI/SSI yet. I feel like a failure, because I don't work and don't contribute to the house much. I don't feel loved at all. When I am crying in pain, he just sits there, and when I call his name, he says "Well, what do you want ME to do, I can't do anything"...just BE there for me! Come over, rub my back, sit with me...something...anything. But no. He doesn't even touch me anymore. Tells me that he doesn't need to tell me that he loves me or cares about me...that I should know. Not by his actions I don't. I feel so empty. so lost. I've put off posting here, because I am just so unhappy, and there are others with problems, and I don't want to be a bother.

The pity pot and the pity party symbolise a communal ritual for the group. The use of this ritual represents both membership within the newsgroup and also membership in the pain suffering community. To know and understand the symbolism of the pity pot/party, a member needs to have spent enough time monitoring the newsgroup to see the ways in which the device is applied. They must understand the nuances of how it is used and then be able to appropriately employ it. Whilst members tend to apologise for using the pity pot, it is an accepted ritual that is seen to be necessary for every pain sufferer at some stage. So whilst it represents a way for individual members to relieve their frustrations, it also acts as a symbol that becomes incorporated into the symbolic array that makes up the community identity.

The third ritual the group performs is the 'pishka'. This is the imaginary act of donating money in prayer for another person's suffering. Trevor initiated this ritual, which has extended to other members of the newsgroup. Putting money in the pishka serves as a ritual to show care for another member. Trevor describes the origin of the ritual.

While I was growing up, I was taught about the 18 cent representing the 18th letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Chai, which means life. Then, in the households I was familiar with (baba, grandma parents, orthodox friends, conservative friends, etc.) I saw people use multiples of 18 cents when the prayer was really important (someone very sick, dying, needing a miracle from God, etc.).

So, as an adult, I adopted 36 cents (18 times 2) as the amount would put in the pishka when a "special" miracle was being asked of God.

Odd how traditions come to be :-} & yes, I think the difference in spelling is just a Yiddish variation based on locale.

People put money in the pishka and express their concern for a fellow newsgroup member. It is a way of asking God to make it easier for that person. Since this ritual originated with Trevor he is the person who most often says he has contributed money. For example, he prays for Madeline's health.

You will be in my thoughts, I will be praying for you, and will put 36 cents in the pishka for you. I will ask God to help you find a miracle like I found at the age of 22. I believe that there is one out there waiting, you just haven't stumbled across the right doc yet.

Whilst the ritual of the pishka has its origins in the Jewish faith, other non-Jewish members of the newsgroup recognise the symbolism and extend it to their own

traditions. Abbey extends the ritual of the pishka to her own religion and prays for Trevor.

40 Friends of Trevor

Abbey

12/3/01

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.....I am sorry but this \*doctor\* has put Albert in a horrible position to have to choose to suffer or hold on to the possibility of getting the medication he needs and deserves! Please tell him that while I am not Jewish I put \$5.00 in the plate for him this morning so he is paid up for a while...tell him too that as bad as it is right now, that it will get better if he will only hang on.

Although the pishka is a religious ritual, the group does not see it as spam or off-topic content like they would for other religious expressions. This acceptance of an overtly religious practice within a group who routinely expresses its distaste for such ideas may be because of the intention and the way the ritual is performed. The religious ideas associated with this ritual are not forced upon other members, rather it is presented as a culturally specific expression of concern. The core of the ritual is not especially religious; it is the practice of support and caring. The ritual acts as a signifier of membership. To have someone pray for you demonstrates your membership and acceptance within the group. When this ritual is repeated frequently, it becomes a means by which the wider newsgroup can recognise its members and thus reinforce the boundary. Such a ritual is incorporated into the symbolic array that constructs the group as a community.

There are also a few unique expressions that act as symbolic rituals for the group. When signing off a post, it is common to wish the readers "a pain free day and

night". This saying demonstrates one's membership within the group and reinforces the common bond that all members share – pain. Whilst it is unknown whether the person will in fact have a pain free day and night, the care is expressed for the group as a whole. In addition, when a newbie posts their first message to the newsgroup, members respond by saying, "nice to meet you, sorry you had to find us". This indicates that the new person is welcome but the group is regretful that he or she suffers the kind of pain which causes he or she to seek out support. These unique expressions act as rituals for the group. It is not surprising that given the group interacts in a text-only environment, 'sayings' or 'expressions' that can easily be communicated in text occupy a prominent role in the symbolic repertoire.

These rituals and common expressions act as symbols of community identity. Rituals such as Trevor's pishka and Elizabeth's magic bubbles are a means to affirm inclusion and membership, reassert and further define what it means to be in the group and therefore reinforce the groups shared symbols. The development of a set of ritualistic actions specific to the needs of the newsgroup reinforces the boundary of the group. In an Usenet environment where at first glance, all groups appear the same, such distinctive rituals act as a means to differentiate between this group and others and therefore strengthen its boundary.

### Summary

We have seen a variety of mechanisms by which members of this newsgroup symbolically construct themselves as a community. Their membership is described in relation to symbols of common experiences, mutual chronic pain and the associated

lifestyle changes that eventuate. The commonality of experience is further solidified by being labelled as a marginalised and stigmatised group of people. Chronic pain makes them the target of negative stereotypes of drug seekers and addicts. These people share the frustrations in the difficulty of finding good and appropriate medical care whilst combating the stigma associated with their illnesses. When medical care is not available or adequate, some members experience depressive episodes and/or consider the possibility of suicide.

The group is further characterised by a governing ideology that informs their interaction. A belief in the distinction between addiction and dependence on narcotics, as well as valuing individual differences in treatment is crucial to the collective culture of the newsgroup. These beliefs are channelled into patient advocacy issues, in particular the ways in which the group members viewed the Oxycontin debate. The Oxycontin debate became a site for complicating the normal beliefs of the group in what can be seen as an elaborate symbolic reversal of group values. A set of rituals and customary acts in which the group members engage, such as magic bubbles and the pishka, further maintain the internal workings of this community. These rituals act as symbolic markers of inclusion within the community and reflect the dominant culture of the newsgroup.

All of these diverse elements, from their common experiences to their elaborate rituals, are incorporated into the symbolic repertoire of this community. These symbols cumulatively represent the heart of the community's identity. Whilst each symbol may not be a potent identifier of a community, collectively they construct a holistic and cohesive community of people. Such a strong identity is crucial in the Usenet

environment in order to differentiate this newsgroup from other Usenet newsgroups. Such symbols represent the community identity but also demarcate the boundary of such an identity. Whilst the identity of the community may be clear, in what ways are the symbols of community enforced or reiterated in day-to-day interaction amongst members? The following chapter will explore the development of group specific norms, standards of practice and social expectations that characterise interaction within the group and help construct the chronic pain newsgroup as a community.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SYMBOLISING BOUNDARY – NORMS, STANDARDS AND CONVENTIONS

The members of the chronic pain newsgroup construct themselves as a distinct and cohesive community by sanctioning specific criteria for membership. We have seen in the preceding chapter some of the symbols that are influential in the development of community identity. However, the symbols of community are not only expressed through the defining acts of membership but also through the normative rules and standards that develop within the group. Knowledge and acceptance of such standards signifies membership within the group and violations identify the violator as an outsider. Norms that develop in any group are directly related to the purpose of the group. In order to meet the needs and adhere to the purpose of the group, standards of behaviour and methods of sanctioning inappropriate behaviour develop (Baym, 1998: 61). Some of the norms and standards of behaviour that have developed within the chronic pain newsgroup relate to existing ubiquitous Usenet norms, however many have developed specifically for this newsgroup's purposes. Rules and regulations regarding posting behaviour and the provision of support have been developed by the group to guide the interactions to ensure support is the primary purpose of the group. Such norms and standards act as symbols of community and assist in differentiating the group from others on Usenet.

## Posting Norms and Standards – Presentation

41 Do I Smell a Rat? Jude 2/5/01

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Rule number one on usenet... there ain't no frickin' rules!  
Rule number two on usenet... refer to rule one.

Despite the claim by Mark/Jude that there are no rules on Usenet, a variety of norms and regulations have emerged about posting behaviour in the newsgroup. Some of these rules extend beyond the chronic pain group and cover interaction in all Usenet newsgroups. Such normative rules and regulations are termed 'netiquette' by the wider Internet population. Quite literally, netiquette means 'network etiquette' and is the Usenet analogue for the external world's system of mores, norms and tradition (MacKinnon, 1995:115). Although there exists no charter or central authority for Usenet, users have developed their own netiquette to guide behaviour.

An example of an ubiquitous Usenet norm implemented in the chronic pain newsgroup is the expectation that people will not post messages typed in CAPITALS. In general Usenet usage, typing in capital letters denotes shouting and thus should be used sparingly. Interestingly the chronic pain newsgroup has additional reasons for maintaining this regulation. This is apparent in Joanne's response to a poster who insisted on capitalising their text.

42 A general message about.. Joanne 30/4/01

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Far be it from me to tell you what to do - how about all of USENET? Your use of all caps is considered shouting and violates general USENET netiquette. AOL has been known to

cancel accounts for this type of behaviour. Didn't you read Fernando's warning? He believes there are those out there to "get" people? This is the kind of thing that gets reported (not by me, mind you). Not everyone simply kill files or ignores posts. It is true that in this group all caps can actually exacerbate the pain of a migraine, including the pain of a poor innocent lurker - or don't they count? I understand you want to alienate some people, but why alienate the others out there that may be inclined to offer you help and support? Use all caps if you want, just don't expect as much support as you might have received.

Quite clearly an existing Usenet norm for posting has been adopted by the chronic pain newsgroup. However the rationalisation for why the group practices the norm is not related to the wider Usenet explanation. Instead, their reasoning relates to the type of people who frequent the newsgroup and who may need to minimise migraine pain. We see a similar explanation for the group's insistence that members post in text only format to the newsgroup. That is, html postings are not tolerated in the newsgroup environment because the use of bright colours or animation may exacerbate the migraine pain in some of the readers. A newer member, Carley, posted using html and Ian quickly informed her of the rule.

43    Answered Prayer!

Ian

12/5/01

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Carley , if you can post in plain text in a newsgroup , it will help the folks who can have a migraine triggered by HTML. Again , write anytime , Ian

These examples illustrate the way in which the group has adapted structures from outside the newsgroup (in this case Usenet posting conventions) and affixed their own meanings and symbols to them. Cohen argued that "... communities might import structural forms across their boundaries, but, having done so, they often infuse them

with their own meanings and use them to serve their own symbolic purposes" (Cohen, 1985:37). In this case, the newsgroup adapts wider Usenet normative regulations to their own needs so they take on a more relevant significance as symbols of their community. The group stamps new meaning on to external structures, and in doing so constructs new symbols of community.

The chronic pain group specifically breaks with a Usenet netiquette convention in their posting behaviour in order to consider the real life limitations of some of its members. The issue of where to post a response is debated. In responding to a previous message by another person, a reply may be posted either at the start of the post (top-posting) or at the bottom of the post (bottom-posting). In general Usenet netiquette it is more acceptable to bottom-post because it indicates clearly to the reader what the reply was related to. Whilst some members of the group bottom-post, or interject their replies throughout the text of the previous post, the most common form of response is to top-post. Rachel answers a query about top/bottom posting and explains the reason for the rule.

44	Sorry and Goodbye	Rachel	27/7/01
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Yes this group did have a discussion about top posting. Due to vision problems and the pain issues that have to do with the use of things like hands and finger most of us here top post. It is also becoming the norm in many other groups.

Again we see a standard developed that incorporates and allows for the limitations and specific needs of this particular group of users. Whilst the group members seem to tolerate any type of posting arrangement, the preferred standard is to top-post to

alleviate stress on some members. Top-posting demonstrates to the group that a user understands this break in Usenet convention, respects the reasons why, and thus establishes his or her place within the group. Top-posting symbolises inclusion within the community boundary and helps construct the group as a community.

Furthermore, within the newsgroup it is a common courtesy to snip irrelevant sections of the post when reply posting. Editing posts in this way improves the 'readability' of the message to increase comprehension while reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings or conflict. Whilst this is a customary act, editing posts in such a way that the original authorship is ambiguous breaches both the group's and general Usenet norms. Excessive editing, particularly whilst in debate with other members of the newsgroup, will likely eventuate in accusations of sly manipulation of the text for a user's own benefit. Samantha objects to what she perceives as the intentional manipulation of her comments for spiteful purposes.

45 Do I Smell a Rat?

Samantha

2/5/01

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Then she's posted all this stuff, not as it stands, but full of comments and definitions she does not identify as her own, making at least some people think it was MY writing, not hers. My emails to her weren't nearly as long as they are posted here. She also has omitted some things. If she's going to post my emails, then they should be without anything interjected by her, making it seem like I wrote it or making it confusing at the very least. I find it interesting that she's chosen to make it seem I wrote things I didn't, and also cut out some of my words. Could there be a reason for that? Often, how something is interpreted can turn on the use of a single word. Anyone here disagree with that? Anyone here feel it's fair to post someone's email that has been edited by another?

The use of the term 'ping' is another posting norm that has developed both in general Usenet and also within the chronic pain newsgroup. The inclusion of the word 'ping' in a subject header is a common occurrence in the newsgroup. Darlene explains its use to Sarah.

46 What is Ping?

Darlene

26/3/01

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Hi Sarah,

It is a computer command that has moved into popular usage. <g> In the computer operating systems with which I am familiar, "The ping utility sends a packet to the specified host and waits for a reply." There is always a specific syntax involved.

So, PING Sarah = ATTENTION Sarah with the hope that you will reply.

The use of the term 'ping' helps organise interaction on the newsgroup and assists the members to filter messages that are not relevant to them. It also assists in gaining the attention of the person to whom the message is addressed. Knowledge and effective use of the term 'ping' is an expression and symbol of membership within the group.

Normative standards also develop in relation to the use of language on the newsgroup. This includes the implicit norm that people post in English to the newsgroup. Whilst this may be seen to be specific to this newsgroup, English is the dominant and default language on Usenet and in Internet communications in general. The group can recognise a posting from someone from a non-English speaking background by their use of language. Such postings are not a common occurrence. There is an undercurrent of Americanism in the newsgroup that most likely reflects the

domination of the Internet and Usenet by US members. In the six-months of observation, there appeared to be very few people who posted to the newsgroup who were identified as from a non-English speaking background. It appears that all of the regular contributors have English as their first language.

It is also understood that members will use audience appropriate language in their postings. Members are expected to consider the knowledge and background of other members when constructing their messages to the group. When asking for information or support it is expected that the request will be written in a non-aggressive and non-hostile manner. It may appear obvious to some that you can 'catch more flies with honey' but a number of posts are written in an aggressive manner. Such posts will invariably invoke conflict or be ignored by members and they will not elicit the information the poster wanted. Members are expected to consider the tone of their communication and also pitch their explanations to a non-medical audience when discussing technical information. In response to a pharmacist who continued to answer questions using very scientific and technical language, Trenton said the following:

47 Re: Welbutrin

Trenton

1/4/01

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Excuse me, I am sure you mean well, but we all can read from a pharmacology book if we want DETAILED explanations, ie mu receptors etc...

could you please keep your info more on the level of most of us...I personally am not impressed, as I know you are only typing what you read in a text....

spare us the lengthy explanations..

It is expected that members will write in layperson's terms and consider the intellectual and cultural context of the group members before responding. Whilst this normative rule applies to posting behaviour, it does not imply that the group members are ill informed or uneducated. In fact, most members routinely use very specific medical terminology when discussing their illnesses or treatment. Medical terminology only becomes jargon when it is incomprehensible and unusual for the group.

The group denotes and reinforces its symbolic boundary by the enforcement of rules concerning appropriate language and posting formats. Rules regarding cross-posting also act as symbols to further strengthen its boundary. Cross-posting occurs when a message is sent to more than one newsgroup simultaneously. Whilst cross-posting can be a time saving device for authors who wish to disseminate material to a variety of different forums, it is considered particularly inappropriate if those forums appear to have nothing to do with one another. For example, posting a message to both a chronic pain newsgroup and a British legal issues newsgroup will most likely breach the rules of both newsgroups and cause conflict. After an incident of ongoing cross-posting of a thread, Orlando responded in exasperation.

48    Maurice: pain in the neck.                      Orlando                      23/5/01

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Would you folks in the other newsgroups who are interested in this thread please quit cross-posting to our newsgroup? We haven't a clue as to what you are talking about, and it's so off-topic that it's of no interest to those of us in this newsgroup. Thank you.

The cross-posting rules serve as a mechanism for boundary maintenance for the group and helps constitute the group as a community. It acknowledges and symbolises

a space external to the newsgroup that is seen as distinctly different. It ensures that members who are participating in the group are aware of the distinction, and experience the group as a closed group rather than one where the boundaries are open and overlap with others. Cohen argued "... people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things, or merely of contradictions to their own culture" (1985:69).

Cross-posting places members of the chronic pain group on the boundary and provides them with a view of other newsgroups. Such an insight reinforces the symbols within their group and allows them to differentiate themselves from others. To allow frequent cross-posting would mean that the boundary of the newsgroup was permeable and flexible and may encourage 'outsiders' who may not suffer chronic pain. Whilst frequent cross-posting would dissolve the symbolic boundaries of the chronic pain group, occasional cross-posting offers them an opportunity to observe the 'other', and reinforce their own collective identity.

### **Posting Norms and Standards – Behaviour**

There are a set of standards by which the group regulates appropriate behaviour in regards to posting messages to the newsgroup. For example, the posting of private emails to the newsgroup is considered inappropriate. Trace expresses the reasons why private emails should not be posted without permission of the author.

49 Do I Smell a Rat?

Trace

3/5/01

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I hear what you're saying, and regardless of whatever has transpired, e-mails between individuals should never be posted on usenet. That is something that is supposed to remain between the sender and recipient, just as if you had sent it via

US mail. Whatever the sentiment, that's bad form. If I were you, I wouldn't even include my real e-mail addy in Usenet postings. Keep them separate, as your e-mail to your provider is semi-permanent. Usenet names are not.

The group also regulates what should be taken 'off' the newsgroup. Using private email in order to 'set someone straight', intimidate, or let them know the rules of the newsgroup is considered inappropriate. Any conflict or disagreement among members of the group should stay in the medium of the newsgroup. If a posting involves conflict that is excessive and off-topic for the group, then the members involved will be politely asked to take their conflict to private email. Newsgroup members do not always appreciate the subtleties involved in understanding which discussions should stay on the newsgroup and which should not. Samantha, a long time regular of the group, posted a somewhat vicious message to another member. She later acknowledged that she breached the group's rules.

50 Just me Jessica

Samantha

28/3/01

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I'd like to say, that after reading this post that I made an error in posting it to the ng. It should have gone to private email. I apologize to everyone involved, and I've written this without having received a single criticizing email (since I just posted it not long ago anyway--no one really had time to respond!)

I don't retract what I said, but I believe it should have been private, not public.

When conflict does occur on the group, and it inevitably does, there are certain rules of conduct that group members are expect to follow. The rule that people will not 'morph' in order to continue a conflict with another person is evident in the newsgroup



a great deal of contempt. Spammers are seen to prey on disabled and desperate people for their own benefits (financial or otherwise). Whilst many group members do use homeopathic remedies to complement traditional medical treatment, they object to being viewed as a marketing opportunity for the manufacturers of these products. The advertisement of products is sometimes acceptable to the group members but it depends on the type of product, the manner in which it is advertised and its credibility. Magical cures and 'snake oil salesmen' are not tolerated and are labelled spam.

The newsgroup members respond to spamming by explicitly identifying it as spam. They will often poke fun at the spammer and the product. This is clearly evident with the case of Joseph, an 'energy healer' who claims to be able to heal a variety of unrelated diseases and afflictions. He is discredited by the group and becomes the focus of jokes about his healing powers.

53 RE: Can anyone help - Andrew 5/3/01

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>What I will do is place an add in the local  
> paper stating chronic pain relief without  
> medications the same day or the  
> therapy is free.

I thought the "therapy" IS free?? Now it's free only when it doesn't heal the poor pecker ...er, "the one born every minute"?

Is this what you're saying? Wait, it's \*gotta\* be ... I lifted those words from your post that's included BELOW!!

\*Read\* it, Joey! ! I certainly hope you can assemble sentences better with your mouth, than you can using a keyboard.

Maybe it's me, but I don't believe I'd let someone who contradicts himself use me as a lab rat. Come to think of it,

\*nobody\* uses me as a lab rat! (except possibly myself during my last 2 years of High School.Fitting name ... heh).

See ya in the Tabloids, Joey!

--

Andrew

Occasionally a spam message produces some disagreement among the group members. A post from a new member who was a deep muscle therapist was debated as spam amongst the group. The muscle therapist offered detailed advice on therapy that aimed to help alleviate the problems of one of the members. The group was divided as to whether this constituted spam. Those who believed it was spam argued that she was advertising her web page and therefore her paid services. Those who defended her claimed she gave advice freely to assist someone and hence it could be characterised as supportive rather than as advertising spam. It would appear that what constitutes spam differs with individual group members and is related to their interpretation of the norms and values of the group. What is spam to one newsgroup could be welcomed information to another. In this case it is quite clear that those messages that make unbelievable and unsubstantiated claims to the effectiveness of their products are nothing more than the filling of a 'spam and troll sandwich'.

The development of a set of symbols relating to the norms and standards of conduct help construct the group as a community, reinforce this community identity and bolster the significance of its boundary. Conventions in the presentation of posting such as typing in lower case, top-posting, the use of the term 'ping', default English and not cross-posting act as symbols of this community. Similarly, rules that govern the conduct of members around issues such as the privacy of emails, morphing or spamming also act

to construct community and delineate it from others. Uniformity in posting behaviour also assists in the development of a cohesive 'mask' of community. The newsgroup appears to outsiders as a consistent, homogenous and cohesive community.

### **Conventions in the Request of Support**

In addition to the normative regulations that we have explored so far, the chronic pain group has developed standards of conduct in relation to requests for support.

Membership within the group is delineated by knowledge of the acceptable ways in which advice is requested and provided. Conversely, people who do not understand and adhere to these rules are identified by their postings as external to the group's boundary. The normative format for requesting support becomes a symbol of community identity.

The customary format for requesting assistance is quite distinct for this newsgroup. The poster begins with a detailed outline of their medical or personal history. This information is often quite explicit and helps the poster contextualise their current situation for the readers. The level of detail does vary, but many posts are quite lengthy accounts that span many years of their illness history. The poster will routinely outline in chronological order the experiences they have been through. This tends to include details about the onset of symptoms, doctors or specialists he or she may have seen, medical testing or procedures he or she has experienced, current diagnosis and an explanation of current medical treatment and medication regime. Sometimes the poster will detail the remedies he or she has found, but unfortunately this is not a common occurrence. The very nature of the newsgroup assumes that those who are not obtaining pain relief would seek out the group for support. The poster often includes the ways in

which his or her life has been altered due to the restrictions of their illnesses. This might be a description of activities that he or she is no longer capable of doing or the effect the illness has had on his or her marriage and friendships.

The language used in these requests for support is distinctly technical and often uses medical terminology. When using such medical terminology the poster rarely provides a definition of terms because they assume that the readers already understand what these terms mean because they have most likely encountered them in their own histories. For example, Mike assumes knowledge of certain terms such as 'prednisone', 'epidural steroid injections' and 'vioxx' yet he realises that the phrase 'Pericutaneous Laser Decompressive Diskolysis' may not be commonly understood.

54      Question on recovery from...      Mike      4/4/01

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Six days ago I had back surgery and I'm wondering if anyone can give me insight into my recovery challenges.

I've had three herniated disks, one of them causing immense chronic pain. I've tried physical therapy, prednisone, epidural steroid injections, celebrex and vioxx. Although some of these things reduced the pain a lot, the remaining pain was terrible and too much to endure. So, surgery.

I underwent Pericutaneous Laser Decompressive Diskolysis, a relatively new endoscopic procedure that uses a laser to vaporize the nucleus of herniated disks. As the disks heal, they shrink, relieving the pain. The incision is about as wide as a pencil and they just snaked the laser around and into position, with guidance from xrays and from me, the awake-but-drugged patient.

Anybody else out there been through this? How'd it work for you? What do you think?

In recounting their medical histories members will often explore the impact their pain has had on their lives. The group never considers personal problems as off-topic. Personal problems and worries are exacerbated for chronic pain patients because it is believed that their levels of pain affect their ability to cope with life's tribulations. Personal problems increase stress and stress increases pain. Understandably, some personal problems concern issues peripheral to their pain. For example, personal stories of financial hardship, legal problems, and battles with insurance agencies or government welfare bodies are commonly discussed. Lilly acknowledges the help she has received from the group in the past and she now seeks support with a personal legal problem.

55    Desperately need legal advice!    Lilly    30/3/01

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I don't know if we've got any lawyers in our group but I really need some California legal advice re: the difference between guardianship and custody of children. I'm a grandma raising my two grandchildren and now my ex-daughter-in-law wants the kids back by April 16th. I can't do that to my boys, tear them out of school right before the end of the year but I only have guardianship. I need to know if I have the right to deny their Mom custody until the start of the next school year at least. I wish I could deny it altogether but don't think I can. Any help out there? You guys have come through on all my medical questions but this custody thing might kill me sooner than my pain! Thanks for any help in advance.

The provision of detailed medical or personal information is a way to pre-empt the questions that routinely follow. These questions may be implied in the post but are more often explicitly asked of the group. Such questions are generally a specific request for information regarding a medical situation, procedure or use of medication. By explaining their medical and personal background prior to posing the question, the poster is providing the relevant context and information so other members have

sufficient information to tailor their responses to the particular problem. Often the poster is seeking answers to questions based on personal experiences, answers they can not get from their doctors but only from those who have 'lived' it. Desini's post illustrates the standard format for a post to the group.

56 Dealing with pain

Desini

11/3/01

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I've had a lot of pain issues that were relatively short lived - kidney stone, gall stones, plantar faciitis, calcific achilles tendonitis (both bilaterally and fortunately not at the same time, but the pain was to the point of almost not being able to walk), migraine/tension headaches and now my latest & biggest bugaboo is the chronic neck pain. I've got DJD in my c-spine with a disc protruding about 1-2mm between C5-6. Most of the times the pain level is fairly low and I can ignore it. At other times it's horrendous and difficult to deal with. My doc said that if conservative measures don't work, he'll refer me to the pain clinic.

I'm also dealing with T2 diabetes (under excellent control), hypertension and glaucoma (for which I've had filtration surgery in one eye and need to have it in the other eye). (The surgery post-op instructions were "if you have severe unrelenting pain, call the office". I did have quite a bit of pain after the anest. wore off, but I was having a hard time defining "severe unrelenting"!)

My questions for the group are:

1. What could I expect from the pain clinic? Will it actually help? I think he'll probably send me to the one at the University of Washington in Seattle as he's a UW physician and I hear they have a pretty good pain clinic.
2. How do you deal mentally with the pain day in and day out?
3. How do you deal with insufferable people that tell you to "get over it" or "deal with it"??? I realize it's hard for people who don't experience chronic pain to understand that I'm just not malingering and unless they \*see\* something wrong, they can't believe there is anything wrong. I even had someone who experiences pain herself say "we all have our crosses to bear."

Desini clearly understands that she needs to provide sufficient background information to her medical problems to ensure that her readers understand her questions. In adhering to the standard posting format, Desini simultaneously maximises her chances of eliciting suitable support from the group whilst she also demonstrates her understanding of the group norm. In doing so, she confirms her membership.

It is generally accepted by the group that newbies should lurk for a while on the newsgroup before they contribute. It is expected that they will lurk for a sufficient time to understand the nuances of interaction and recognise the standard format for posting requests for support. When they do begin their interaction they are expected to adhere to these norms. Rachel expresses the group's belief that newbies should lurk lest they reveal their ignorance of the posting norms.

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57    Blake: Upper Back Pain                      Rachel                      25/4/01

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Many newbies are met with disapproval of what they are doing if what they are doing is wrong. I never said that what you are claiming is claimed does not happen. It does and sometimes in fact I think most of the time rightly so. If you are going into someplace new then you really should check it out before you start doing things -- there is a culture in newsgroups just as there is every where we interact with other people. The culture varies from one place to another. What is acceptable in your neighbourhood bar is far different than what is acceptable in your neighbourhood school or church yet it may even include many of the same people. I would never walk into one of those things for the first time and insist it be done my way or grab the pulpit or microphone and bang my own drum about what I want everyone else to buy so I will get rich. Do you see what I mean?

Whilst newbies are expected to understand that they should lurk for a while to discover the posting norms, regular members of the group often bypass the posting

format norms. Often regular members will only provide the medical information of their current situation or will not provide any background information in prefacing a question. Jessica discusses her current insurance problem.

58    Gonna Lose my insurance :(            Jessica            3/3/01

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I am losing my insurance for a month or two, and I know my doc wont write extra on my Duragesic script to hold me over, or an extra Oxycontin script. F\*ck. I will get the insurance back, but I just have to get my doc to fill out this paper for my Medicaid, but I know there will be a lapse. What the HELL am I going to do???

Jessica assumed that the reading audience was already aware of her illness, medications and treatment and did not state them in this new request for support. She assumed that because she has been regularly contributing to the newsgroup, others would be able to comment appropriately for this new request without her background history.

These conventions in posting formats act as a mechanism of control and organisation for the group. Posters who adhere to these norms validate their membership by providing a recognisable framework in which others can respond. This feature of posting and asking for support symbolises membership within the group, it reinforces the core of the community identity and helps construct the group as a community.



Skip Baker's website is a mosaic of information about pain management in the US. He provides assistance in finding pain management specialists and alerts readers to 'bad' doctors. The website also includes practical items such as medical forms and template letters to write to the US congress about the Oxycontin debate. Skip Baker is the president of the American Society for Action on Pain, which appears to be an advocacy group for pain patients in the US. Despite being the first point of call for a newcomer to the group, Skip Baker's website is disturbingly full of propaganda material and conspiracy theories. Information is shaded with the view that the American government is conspiring and discriminating against pain patients by legislating in the War On Drugs. To anyone who is not a pain patient, Skip Baker's website would appear as ludicrous spam but, to this group of patients, the value lies in its practical support and information.

The provision of support in the newsgroup is often presented in the form of a question or series of questions. Questions such as "have you tried.....?" or "has your doctor considered.....?" suggests different alternatives for the person without appearing dogmatic or demanding. We see in the following excerpt how Madison employs this technique of questioning as a means to provide information to Carley.

60	Answered Prayer!	Madison	13/5/01
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Carley,

I too have RSD...have had it for 10 plus years in one upper extremity, and 9 plus in the other.

Have you tried all pain meds? There are so many out there, there might be one that works. Don't discount all of them.

Have they tried a TENS Unit on you? Physical Therapy?

Much of the advice given in the newsgroup, whether in the form of questions or not, is practical in nature. The group resigns itself to being unable to actually help someone reduce their pain immediately and so focuses on providing practical advice about what they can do to alleviate their problems. During a discussion of the prevailing pain patient stereotypes, Samantha shares a solution she has discovered.

61 Re: Capsules vs. Tablets. Samantha 8/3/01

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One thing that I know has made a difference is a paper my doc gave me to give to whatever pharmacy I chose. It's entitled "Medical Necessity for High Dose Opiate Therapy" and it outlines my medical conditions, and the justification for my meds. The pharmacy didn't know what to do with the paper, but I told them to take it anyway, and that way if anyone questioned their dispensing my meds, they'd have it on hand. It's signed by my doc. I also carry a copy in my purse, along with an ID card which has my picture on it and says I'm an intractable pain patient. It's a nice card too! Like the California Drivers Licenses.....with a hologram on it and everything. Classy!

This type of practical advice can only be given by someone who appreciates the problem, and often this can only be understood by another person who is suffering chronic pain. Unfortunately even practical advice may not assist in solving a problem and so members resort to providing affirming and encouraging comments. For example, when Andrew's dog was hit by a car and died, the group responded with appropriate condolences and talked about the love and special friendships you can have with a pet. Whilst practical advice would be unhelpful for Andrew, the group provided support through more personal and intimate postings. In another example of a problem where



personal experience, the poster legitimises his or her advice and becomes an authority. Messages posted to discussion lists or newsgroups gain their authority from personal experiences (Knapp, 1997: 183). It is unlikely that the authenticity of such advice would be challenged. Any challenge to advice based on personal experience is also a challenge of that individual's membership within the group. The crux of community identity is the common experience of chronic pain. Chronic pain is the basis for and a symbol of community and to question someone's experience of pain is tantamount to branding him or her an outsider.

When we consider the group's belief that each pain patient experiences his or her pain and treatment differently, it is interesting that the majority of information and advice given on the newsgroup is based on the personal experiences of its members. Somehow the group seems to merge these two ideas together and ignore the conflict between ideology and behaviour. Despite each individual experiencing their illness, pain and medical treatment in a different way, the members continue to express and suggest what worked for them. The group members appear to regard such advice as additional to advice from doctors or family members. The view is that all the information gleaned about the problem from a variety of different sources should be amalgamated and the best course of action determined from there.

The norms for provision of support in the newsgroup, the type of advice and the ways in which that advice is presented are intimately related to the stated purpose of the newsgroup. The provision of information and advice must be supportive and must correspond to the ideology of the group that was discussed in the preceding chapter. The unique nature of each individual's response to pain and the distinction between drug

addiction and drug dependence must be incorporated into the types of support that are provided. Advice or suggestions that appear to contradict these beliefs will have their legitimacy and authority challenged by the other newsgroup members. The ability to determine what is appropriate support and how to provide it, along with the actual desire to help other people, identify the person as a member of the group. Kollock (1999) explored the exchange of public goods on the Internet. He argued that motivations for contributing public goods may include an attachment or commitment one can have to the group. A group which includes people who are willing to contribute requires the basic features of ongoing interaction, identity persistence and knowledge based on previous interactions (Kollock, 1999:235). In addition to these features it is argued here that the primary motivation for contributing public goods, or providing support for others in the chronic pain newsgroup, is an understanding of the symbolic dimensions of that group. Ongoing interaction, a persistent communal identity and past history all contribute to help symbolically construct the newsgroup as a distinct community. Members who provide support in the appropriate manner symbolise and legitimise their membership within the community.

### Summary

We have seen how a variety of normative standards and procedures have developed within the newsgroup as mechanisms of social control. The use of technical devices, posting formats, appropriate requests for information and the provision of support symbolise the boundary within which members may interact. By providing a set of guidelines or rules of interaction the newsgroup delineates its boundary. Members can then recognise those who do not belong by transgressions of those guidelines. Such

norms and standards are utilised as symbols to guide interaction and reinforce community identity. How does the group respond when someone from the outside attempts to breach their boundary? The next chapter will explore the types of conflict that can occur within the newsgroup when its norms and standards are violated by an outside entity. The means by which the group controls such conflict, constructs the violator as foreign and augments their symbolic boundary will be explored.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PROTECTING BOUNDARY – CONFLICT AND CONTROL

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| PLEASE |  
| DO NOT |  
| FEED THE |  
TROLLS

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..|||..

In the preceding chapters I have explored the rules, rituals and values by which the chronic pain newsgroup symbolically constructs itself as a community. What happens when their community boundary is permeated or infringed upon by outsiders? How does the group manage and penalise violations of their norms, values and standards? This chapter explores the methods the group employs to resolve conflict and in so doing, constructs and reinforces community. Two different categories of conflict will be explored; conflict over membership issues and conflict over violations of specific norms. Despite categorising these as distinct types of conflict, we will see that often a conflict incident can span both categories. The emergence of a troll within the group's midst illustrates the ways in which an outsider can permeate the communal boundary, cause conflict in terms of membership, violate norms and standards, and challenge the group to invest in and reinforce its boundary.

## Conflict over Membership

When the boundary of the group is threatened, the members mobilise their resources and reinforce their symbols of membership and belonging. Awareness of your culture and community is heightened as you stand at its boundaries, encounter other cultures ways of doing things or contradictions to your own culture (Cohen, 1985:69). New people may challenge the symbolic boundary and threaten to change or subvert the elements within that boundary. Posts from new people that do not conform to the standard posting format for a 'newbie' are received with suspicion and mistrust by the newsgroup members. The suspicion is that a new person may not be a chronic pain patient and may enter the group for sinister or malicious purposes. The credibility of a poster is related to the perceived motives of that person. If a person appears to post to the group with an agenda other than that of care and support he or she will have his or her credibility, legitimacy and authority called into question. If the new person can not demonstrate legitimacy, the group will define and label him or her as an outsider.

In order to explore how the group deals with conflict over membership I will consider two examples of newbies who encountered conflict on first entering the newsgroup. Their attempts to infiltrate the boundary of the community were met with hostility and suspicion by the members. The confrontation with a newbie called Chris, demonstrates the way in which the newsgroup members respond to an outsider. Chris initially appeared on the newsgroup with a series of unusual postings pleading for assistance with head pain management.

NEED HELP NECK BACK OF HEAD PAIN!!!!!! ADVICE WELCOME

help anyone.. my i have some nasty pain in the back of my head its JUST IN THE BACK OF MY HEAD ON THE RIGHT SIDE MOSTLY,.. and usually it spreads to the entire back part of my head.. I DO GET HEADACHS WHEN I PUT MY CHIN DOWN AND WHEN I KEEP my chin "UP" when wearing a hard neckbrace THE PAIN GOES AWAY... MY DOCTOR CHIROPRACTOR, AND NUROOLOGIST DONT KNOW WHAT TO, someone asked if I have trouble breathing when my chin is down and in general.. and the answer is YES!!!!, i do the neck brace helps the pain but does not do away with it altogether, and I wear the hard plastic ones not the foam ones, they dont work as well... :( DO.. the exrays are clear and so are the mri's..... CAN ANYONE GIVE ME SOME ADVICE AS WHAT TO DO... I ALSO HAVE TROUBLE WITH LOUD MUSIC AND TV AND STRESS IN GENERAL WHEN MY CHIN HAS BEEN DOWN TO LONG sneezing also makes it worse.. although i dont know why.. i think MABY its beacuse the jerking of my head forward... im not sure. IM 21.. HELP ME SOMEONE.. PLEASE.. please send me some email with your advice.. I WOULD WELCOME ANY AND ALL HELP. THANK YOU FOR YOU TIME....

As discussed previously, the group has many norms regarding the acceptable format for posting requests for support. Whilst Chris's initial post does conform in many ways to the standard accepted format for posting (such as the detail of medical information and treatment), the obvious errors in formatting immediately raised the suspicion of other group members. Nevertheless many members of the newsgroup did post responses to Chris suggesting actions and treatments he could take to alleviate his symptoms. However, many also voiced their misgivings about his credibility as a pain patient.

I suspected something when I noticed it was the same annoying message alternating between CAPS and lowercase. Even newbie's don't even do this. As such, Chris wasted our time, and never made a point.

Wade and other suspicious members were proven right when Chris attacked the group by writing an offensive story about the group's dynamics. It is a fictitious story that outlined his view that the newsgroup primarily consisted of older members who maliciously attack new people. There is an inherent threat that the regulars may have 'picked' on the wrong person.

A little sheep named Chris.. by Chris :)

NOTE: IF YOU DONT LIKE CURSING DONT READ.

The pasture was really nice.. it was a pretty day.. the sun was out the birds were singing, a beautiful day to be alive. All the little sheep were grazing, the sheep that had been in the pasture a long time believed they owned it instead of the landowner and gave brazen orders to the other sheep that were either new or didn't do what the old sheep wanted. A few of the other sheep saw this and knew it was wrong, but didn't think they could resist the authority of the old sheep who would piss all over anyone that they didn't like. One day the sheep hear a cry for help, they all ran over to the ledge and saw little Chris hanging on to a twig about to fall in the sea. He was yelling his ass off begging for help.. the sheep didn't know what to, the old sheep decided that since they didn't know how to help him that he should just shut up and stop shouting, Chris kept begging for help and the old sheep told him to stop yelling that it was bothering them and to stop repeating himself.. that they had heard him the first time.. mean while, a sheep named Samantha was trying to reach him with his hoof.. but he couldn't reach Chris.. who was still begging for help.. finally the old sheep had enough.. and started to piss over the edge of the cliff laughing at how clever and smart they were.. little Chris just kept trying to get up off well.. after the old sheep went to go eat and shit, Chris

finally got up out off the ledge.. covered with sheep piss he went up to the flock, and told Samantha and the few other sheep that tried to help to take off, that he wanted to talk to the old sheep.. so Samantha and his friends took off.. Chris stood up and threw off his wool... HIS RED EYES GLEAMING, THE FUNKY JOKERS GRIN.. HE WAS GOING TO HUFF AND GOING TO PUFF AND FUCK UP SOME SHEEP!!! THE PASTURE WAS COVERED IN SHEEP SHIT.. THEY COULDN'T BELIEVE IT!!!! ANYWAY.. CHRIS FUCKIN ATE AND KILLED THE OLD SHEEP AND THEIR FAMILIES THEN TOOK A BIG HAIRY DUMP ON THEIR GRAVES. with a big burp he said 'peace out' and left the pasture to the good little sheep that weren't mean.

THE END

PS This bitch deserved the Nobel prize for literature!!!! :)

Moral: if your not helping shut the fuck up.

After a series of even more offensive postings, the group challenged Chris to prove that he needed support. He was forced to defend his rights to membership on the grounds of chronic pain or admit that he was a troll out to harass the group. His defence of his behaviour was not very convincing to the group.

66 Chris's Pain Help...

Chris

8/5/01

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CHRIS HERE.. OK MR. PROOFREAD... IF YOU HAD READ MY POSTS YOU WOULD KNOW THAT COMPUTERS HURT MY EYES.. NOW I TYPE PRETTY FAST... AND GIVEN MY 5 MINUTE WINDOW TO TYPE BEFORE I GET A HEADACHE... I TRY.. i just remembered your complaint about caps.. but im not retying everything i just typed, im sorry i don't proofread my stuff.. . but believe it or not im in real pain.. and iv seen a psychologist.. im not making this up.. and i used to be well educated.. until this cursed pain hit me..... im not fooled by your insult.... (some form of english) implying im not typing in english.. when one hurts one does what one can mannage.. im sorry if its not up to what you think is "right"... im sorry for the pissing contest but i diddent start it.. and if you dont like it well... sorry..

Chris's inability to prove his worth to the group and hence his right to belong ensured that he was defined as an 'outsider'. Whether he had pain or not is left unknown, but his failure to convince the group of his legitimacy along with his inability to recognise and adhere to the norms of posting ensured that he remained outside the symbolic boundary of the group and unable to access its support.

Another example of conflict in an attempt to invade the boundary of the newsgroup occurred with a newbie-lurker named, Athena. Athena posted to the newsgroup and immediately had a disagreement with a regular member, Samantha. The initial conflict escalated due to a misunderstanding about identity. Athena, a relatively new initiate to the world of the Internet and newsgroups, posted a message in response to this argument but did it from 'Stanley', her husband's email account. This confused the group as to the identity of the posters. Athena was accused of deliberately morphing to get around the email block Samantha had set up against her.

67 My Observation

Samantha 12/5/01

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For those not paying attention, "Stanley" also posted down at Trevor's "visit w/Dr. Mengele" post, but got sloppy and signed the post as "Athena." Gee, could it be Athena, morphing again to try to post in support of herself? Just a lurker making an observation, huh? It's probably closer to the truth that you are desperate to make yourself look good and draw support after you got caught red handed in morphing to avoid an email block AND posting doctored emails to the group to make yourself look better.

Athena, you aren't the first person to post in support of yourself, but you surely got lazy fast by posting under a phony name and then using the same name to post elsewhere and accidentally signed your own name.

I was totally right--you ARE a whack job.

Athena, posting under the username of 'Stanley', expressed her distress at the state of affairs and attempted to diffuse the situation by explaining her innocence and naivety at such a technical deviance as morphing.

68 My Observation

Stanley 11/5/01

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Hello group,

I have been lurking here for the past couple months. From my own observations I have a hard time understanding how some, apparent "oldtimers" can consider themselves supportive. They are very supportive for one another but it looks like every time someone new comes along, they have to jump through all the hoops and prove themselves worthy. Shouldn't the fact that they suffer from chronic pain be all that is needed to be part of the group?

Sure, some of you have obviously been on usenet for a long time and others are obvious newbies. They are making mistakes - and they are paying dearly for them. You all need to remember that you were newbies once, too.

I'm not going to pass judgement on all the little wars going on in this group. After all it would only be my opinion, and we all know about opinions. But I am going to express my observations. The fact that anyone in this so-called support group would privately email someone with anything other than support, shame on you.

Nobody becomes an expert, at anything, overnight. We all had to crawl before we could walk. So if I come "crawling" into this group does it mean I'm not welcome until I can "walk?"

A very important observation I've made in life (and I'm not a youngster) is this; The first person to jump up and defend themselves (sometimes at great length) is 99% of the time, the guilty party. After all, innocent people have no reason to defend themselves. In light of this observation, some of you sound very guilty of things you profess to never have done. Tell me, why would someone in pain, new to the group, come in with the intent of starting trouble? Think about this. It doesn't make any sense.

I have had to spend many years of my life justifying my pain to doctors, friends, and employers. I would hope that when I come into a support group it would be the one place I don't have to justify my pain. Anyone in pain should be accepted here because

of their pain. They should not be judged because of their opinions. After all, if we all shared the same opinions, we wouldn't have any need for this group.

In closing, you should all remember this. Those that come here and are obviously newbies, should be given time to learn. I seriously doubt that anyone new to usenet would even know how to do the things they are being accused of - like morphing. When I started out I had no idea what this even meant. I certainly wouldn't have known how to go about doing it. I doubt many of the newcomers would know either. My feeling is that those who are making these accusations are really the guilty parties. But because they've been around for awhile, and have made many friends, they get the benefit of the doubt. After all, if you had to make a decision on right and wrong between a friend and a stranger, who do you think you'd pick?

After a period of intense disagreement within the newsgroup, the members accepted Athena's version of events and her apologies for her error in posting from her husband's account. Sometimes when a new person attempts to infiltrate the symbolic boundary of the group, they are met with resistance and hostility by the wider membership. Athena's early posts and the confusion that ensued augmented the group's suspicion of her motives and intentions. Athena was eventually admitted to the group and accepted as a legitimate pain patient who was worthy of receiving support.

The presence of new people on the newsgroup can be a threatening event for the members. If these new people do not quickly grasp the norms and standards of conduct and claim membership as a chronic pain patient, their credibility may be called into question. Such conflict over membership will continue until such a time as the newbie is either labelled an outsider and barred from entry or convinces the group of their credibility and is welcomed into the newsgroup membership. The symbolic boundary is fortified in response to a new person but it is not impregnable. Once a newbie adopts the

symbols and culture of the group, their inclusion and immersion in the group is assured. The group is not a closed, rather it is guarded where entry is determined by a set of predefined symbolic criteria.

### **Conflict over Norms and Standards**

Conflict also occurs within the newsgroup when the norms and standards of behaviour are violated. The members rarely breach such conventions, and transgressions are predominantly caused by those from outside. "Legitimacy and authority arising from group identity are especially evident when someone posts a message that violates group norms or standards of discourse"(Gallegher et al. 1998:520). The group must demonstrate its homogeneity by identifying those who have breached its norms and standards. Community is reinforced when provided with an incidence that challenges that communality. A number of events can cause conflict over symbolic norms and standards.

Advertising or spamming the newsgroup is an example of a normative breach that causes conflict. The group responds to spam and mobilises its resources to protect its boundary from uninvited guests. For example, a person who claimed to be a former chronic pain patient posted to the newsgroup about her book detailing her fight against pain and her recovery from illness. Frannie's initial posting explains her story and advertises her new book.

Hi,

My name is Frannie Rose and I have just written a book chronicling my 14 year journey through chronic pelvic pain. This is the story of becoming bedridden, being misdiagnosed, not believed and sent through the medical maze of today's healthcare. It is an honest and uplifting story of laughter, challenges and heroes. Doctor by doctor I struggled through an outdated system that is no longer built to treat the sick and has clearly lost its heart. I took a comical and tearful journey through hospitals and doctors offices looking for answers only to find the right doctors and my own medical solutions to chronic pain. I hope that reading my book will make you laugh and cry with me and most of all it will show you that there are answers out there. Fixing Frannie is available on amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and booksamillion.com. Please feel free to write with feedback!  
Frannie Rose

The group members accepted Frannie's advertisement because it addresses issues pertinent to their own lives, but they did object to the style of her advertising. Frannie lost credibility by cross-posting to other newsgroups. Samantha attacked her credibility.

It looks like Frannie is one sick cookie! She's posted similar messages to alt.med.fibromyalgia.recovery, alt.support.lupus, sci.med.diseases.lyme and alt.med.cfs.

Sounds like she's just trying to cash in on others' misery by claiming she's had it herself. Is greed an illness?

Frannie attempted to convey the message that her motives were pure and her advertisement was aimed at assisting others in their fight against pain. However, she attempted to deceive the group about her financial motives and presented her

advertisement as a 'supportive' posting rather than a marketing campaign. Samantha attempted to discredit her and made it clear that she was not welcome in the group.

71      Fixing Frannie a journey.....      Samantha      12/4/01

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: I am Frannie and it is not my goal to make money off of you...nor : was I trying  
: to advertise in the typical sense.

In what sense were you trying to advertise then? Advertising is advertising is advertising, and I'm sure if your ISP saw the posts you put in all those ngs, they wouldn't stop to wonder what sense of advertising you were doing. It's not rocket science, Frannie. You advertised. At least don't insult our intelligence by telling us that's not exactly what you were doing. If you were trying to post information to help us, why leave out the information that would have been of any help to us? Why ask us to buy your book? (because you want to sell it, that's why!). Had you just been interested in helping us, you wouldn't have bothered with giving the name of the book and where to buy it. If your real goal was just to help people without trying to sell them something, you wouldn't have told us that we can buy the book on those web sites.

I resent having you advertise here. I resent even more having you try to convince us that's not what you were doing and covering your tracks with silly word games.

Frannie violated one of the group's norms and consequently her advertisement was denounced as spam by the group. The members' responses to her announcement and their rejection of her credibility reinforced the group's understanding of what is considered spam. It is made clear what is acceptable, normal practice within the confines of the group, and what form of behaviour originating from external sources conflicts with the group's values.

In the midst of these somewhat insignificant spam postings exists a more persistent advertiser, Joseph. As mentioned previously, Joseph consistently advertises his 'energy healing' expertise. Joseph claims that his powers have the ability to cure a vast array of afflictions from chronic pain to dyslexia. The group meets his extravagant claims with derision and taunts. Catherine's response to Joseph's claims exemplifies the group's reactions.

72 RE: Can anyone...

Catherine

4/3/01

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Joseph advertised:

>Energy healing does provide chronic pain sometimes after the  
>healing  
>sometimes there is a throbbing pain that last for 5 to 7 days for  
>some people  
>and then all the chronic pain is gone and doesn't come back.

Oh good grief.

> Just saying  
>this means nothing,

Exactly what I was thinking.

>What I will do is place an add in the local paper  
>stating chronic pain relief without medications the same day or  
>the therapy  
>is free.  
>

You mean the therapy *\*isn't\** free?  
How did I get the idea you were offering your special healing gifts to those in chronic pain from the goodness of your heart? Oh yes, silly me, it must have been the message you conveyed in your *\*previous\** posts.

Rather than recognise an unfriendly audience in this newsgroup, Joseph continues to engage the members in debate. By continuing to argue over a series of

posts, he ensures that the group finds him even more offensive. His behaviour and continuous breaking of the group's norms actually helps the group demarcate its boundary and identify him as an outsider. Joseph's insistent debate and defence of his healing powers frustrates the members. Normally spamming is a once only occurrence, but Joseph continues to plague the newsgroup. In addition to taunting and teasing him, some members decide to use more 'scientific' or 'valid' methods to discredit Joseph and, in doing so, demonstrate to the others that his messages are neither legitimate nor approved. Characteristically, Samantha takes it upon herself to attack Joseph and in her frustration discredits some of Josephs more exaggerated claims.

73      Re: Enough of this crap!                      Samantha      5/3/01

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> Wow... you really have lost touch with reality, haven't you?

Of course he has! He is totally oblivious to the fact that he's got no training and has offered nothing but a bit of voodoo that he's blown up in his mind (probably while in an unmedicated manic phase) to be the end-all of healing for desperate people. Every aspect of his posts demonstrate that he's completely out of touch with reality and probably won't come back to earth till the men in white coats come for him and inject him with a hefty dose of Haldol.

I've contacted an organization that was founded to deal with dyslexia, and they have informed me that there are no known "cures" for dyslexia whatsoever, nor is there anything that can provide "relief" for dyslexia either. The only treatments are to train those with dyslexia to process their information differently (this is a paraphrase, my own, but essentially, it means that Joseph is full of shit). Dyslexia has been shown to be genetic in nature. Joseph can no more cure a genetic problem like dyslexia than he can cure something like Sickle Cell Anemia!

We have seen the manner in which the newsgroup members respond to challenges to their normative rules and regulations in relation to advertising and

spamming. Conflict over such norm violations is essential to emphasise their communal rules and reinforce the symbolic boundary of their group. Whilst advertising and spamming are obvious violations of the norms, how does the group respond to attempts to modify rather than breach these normative regulations?

An attempt to change one of the newsgroup norms was made by a newbie called London. In her confusion and inability to clearly determine and remember each member's illness she made the following suggestion.

74      May I suggest?

London

i1/4/01

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I am new here. And it may just be me, but I am having a difficult time learning who is who and why you are here.

May I suggest that you put some kind of appropriate tag line under your sigs? It would probably help everyone!

Such as (that way we all kinda know what kind of pain you are suffering and why)

London

(post cancer, fms, dm w/nueropathy, Sjorgrens)

This seems to be a good suggestion for the newsgroup. It would reinforce each person's legitimacy in belonging to the group, and it would ensure that advice and support was tailored specifically to each individual's condition. Signatures, which identify illnesses, would also minimise any confusion that may be caused by regulars who neglect to post in the standard format and give sufficient information about their situations. What may seem a logical and appropriate change to a newsgroup norm, was met with hostility by the majority of the members and the idea was quickly discarded. Wade rejects the suggestion as diplomatically as he can:

I don't think it's a good idea to post our disease/illness/injury on our tagline for number of reasons. The first being, I don't think a lot of people want to be identified with their disease or illness. For example, I'll talk about my illness one on one with another person, usually through private e-mail, but I generally don't like disclosing it on this board in the public. I'm sure many others feel the same way. I'm sure I could come up with a number of good reasons, but I believe other people on this board have brought them up.

Anyway, regardless of what disease/illness/injury/ailment/etc we each have, the bottom line is the same -- we all suffer from pain ... usually long-term and chronic.

The norms, standards and rules of behaviour that have developed within the newsgroup prove to be very robust in thwarting attempts to change or alter them. The group has a vested interest in retaining and reinforcing its norms because they encourage solidarity and help construct community. "The awareness of behavioural norms and the frequency of conduct-policing by other members of Usenet discussion groups strongly implies the sense of community in which individual actions are always executed within the known constraints of a forum ..." (Watson, 1997:111). Breaches of the norms through advertising or modification chisel away at the very fabric of the culture. When the community has manifest goals, conflict will be greater when those goals are shared by all members (DuVal Smith, 1999:146). When these goals, norms or values are threatened, the group must mobilise its resources, police their norms and collectively brand transgressors to reinforce the symbolic boundary of their community.

## Conflict caused by the Resident Troll

Conflict can also develop from much more complex assaults on the group's boundary. The emergence of a troll transverses both membership and norm conflict categories and disrupts the dynamics of the group. The newsgroup hosts a resident Troll named Fernando. Fernando appears to have quite a history of trolling on Usenet and is recognised under a variety of different usernames, the most common being Xander. Fernando has a long standing antagonism with one of the regulars of the group, Kenneth, and this conflict appears to have been played out in a number of different Usenet groups over the past decade. Fernando's main objection is that he believes Kenneth sells bogus therapeutic 'gels'. Kenneth is accused, among other things, of being a slippery snake oil salesman of whom the rest of the Internet world must be wary. Whilst this may appear as an aggressive personality clash, the animosity has extended into an obsession for Fernando. Fernando has created an elaborate web page designed to discredit Kenneth and warn the Internet population about him. Fernando and Kenneth's attempts to insult and discredit one another result in long threads of hostile interaction on the newsgroup. The newsgroup becomes cluttered with these lengthy diatribes. Fernando claims that he came to the newsgroup legitimately because he wanted information about gout. He was surprised to find Kenneth and defends the accusation that he has cyberstalked Kenneth.

76      Re: Family Lessons                      Fernando      21/5/01

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I came in legitimately looking for someone with the Gout to email with. Bang. There is my old nemesis Kenneth in a flamewar with the moderator of the newsgroup impotence. I did not intend to get into it, but I did email the moderator with a few words about Kenneth. Mistakenly, the moderator replied to my email publicly in the newsgroup and Kenneth went ballistic. I

was in it, like it or not. It moved to another newsgroup. I tweaked back at Kenneth for a while, but when I found out that the flamewar issue was that Kenneth, the most repulsive vindictive braggart and pathological liar I have ever come across in this medium, was using the group to sell chemicals he was mixing to inject into one's penis, I took it more seriously.

[SIDE NOTE] A decade ago after dealing with Kenneth for a about a year, someone posted the words of Dylan's Sub Homesick Blues: "Johnnies in the kitchen mixing up the medicine, I'm on the pavement thinking bout the government." I replied, "Gosh, the last thing in the world anyone would want is Kenneth mixing up their medicine!" And believe it or not, it actually came to pass. Real scary. [END SIDE NOTE]

Because of some people crossposting (the only one I remember in both places was Jude) it moved me from here to there and then back to here after Kenneth destroyed the newsgroupimpotence and everyone went to the new Web site. So thats the logistics of it.

Back here I was mystified how anyone in their right mind would defend such a repellent braggart and liar as Kenneth. But they did. Kinda like a newsgroup full of Eva Brauns (he's nice to me so he's a good guy). But it was still just some tweaking around. Then I began to notice the Regulars attacking others who, if not innocent, were at least undeserving of the lynchmob mentality here. So I decided to stay and see if I could help right the wrong.....

So after many years in retirement I decided to see if I could still hold my own in one of these fights. I must admit though, its not all that hard when yer on the right side. Not only has it the moral satisfaction, but the advantage of being easier than defending wrongs.

Oh, and there is a bit of satisfaction entertaining that imaginary audience that doesn't exist here.

In a characteristically lengthy, confusing and complicated posting, Fernando claimed he entered the group to legitimately seek information about gout. This claim is met with suspicion and contempt, and is disregarded as a troll tactic to justify his presence in the newsgroup. The group considers his claim as bogus. They reject his grounds for

membership and, in doing so, ensure that the group is aware that Fernando exists outside the symbolic boundary.

77      Re: Family Lessons                      Samantha              8/6/01

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This guy isn't a chronic pain sufferer. He came here to continue his stalking of Kenneth, and I happen to believe his post about gout that he posted RIGHT before he started in with his regular tirades on Kenneth, was done conveniently so he could claim he came here for other purposes when he started in, just as he's done on several other ngs. How many other gout sufferers are here? It's an easily treatable problem, not a chronic pain issue. Why has it never been something he's really wanted to discuss or learn anything about here? Because it's his EXCUSE, not his reason for being here.

Fernando extends his grievances to the social structure of the group when he likens it to a Mafia style family. He objects to what he sees as a group of 'controlling' regulars who attempt to regulate and moderate the discussion on the newsgroup. He accuses them of being territorial, intolerant of new comers and using the guise of chronic pain support to command their own piece of Usenet. Fernando heralds himself as the saviour of Usenet and feels compelled to stay in the group to change the social dynamics from a mafia stronghold to an equality driven group. Fernando explains the Mafia reference:

78      Re: Family Lessons                      Fernando              12/6/01

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That was a previous reference of mine to the Mafia style family loyalties at play here, transcending morality, ethics, good and bad, right and wrong. But Kathy [can I call you that now that we are fellow family members?] when yer in it, its a whole different story! Feels good. Like I knew that it would now.

Fernando constructs his own version of a group FAQ to continue his tirade against the 'evil regulars' of the group. Fernando begins to post this FAQ at regular intervals to warn any newcomers of the 'true' state of affairs in the newsgroup and the power relations that govern interaction. His lengthy FAQ is repeated here: it details the grievances and warnings he feels compelled to send to the newsgroup readership.

79

Chronic Pain FAQ

Fernando

14/5/01

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### CHRONIC-PAIN FAQ - MUST READ

A safe place to find much of the information you may be looking for is Skip Baker's website:  
<http://www.widomaker.com/~skipb/panic.html>

What is so very important here relates to the nature of this newsgroup, where giving out medical and personal information is often a requirement to receive help, especially in looking for regional pain doctors.

Please. Find another way of doing this without giving strangers on Usenet your name, address or medical history. Be very careful in this, in fact if you are using your real name, change it (or get a hotmail account) before proceeding further into this newsgroup.

There is a small group of people here who consider themselves Regulars and Family. Because they have been here for a while, they mistakenly believe this is their Newsgroup, they are in charge, and they will decide who is welcome and who is not, who gets hugs and who gets the rod. This of course is not unique to this Newsgroup, Control Freaks abound on USENET and are usually nothing more than the impetus for flame wars.

These people have been here long enough to no longer be much in need of support information regarding pain issues. They are now here mostly to support each other in their individual war games. And support each other they will, no matter how low a Regular may go.

The reason for this FAQ is a warning which concerns mainly two users in this Newsgroup.

First is Kenneth, who is so unlikable, such an obnoxious braggart and liar that it is often impossible for people of normal sensibilities to refrain from taking a whack at him. And if one does, they become his enemy. And there is probably no one on the net with a more vindictive nature to have as an enemy. He has absolutely no respect for anyone's privacy, and will not only mess with others as far as he can go within this medium, but he will take it to your front door if he can. He is not well. Be careful.

The other danger is a woman here named Rachel, who threatens other users with investigations and calling law enforcement on them. She too is not well. I have a few of her words here. If anyone should claim these quotes were taken out of context, just try to imagine what other context they could possibly be in.

"Rachel" wrote:

>Anyone who would say "got enough for everybody" is talking  
>about  
>serious drug abuse. Yes, I would tell the detectives I know about  
>someone who would say such a thing.

"Rachel" wrote:

> I would know anyone saying such a thing was a drug abuser.  
> I have no "friends" like that and I do not want any. And I would  
> call  
> in law enforcement if I believed such a comment had any  
> possibility of  
> reflecting what was really going on. That is not a joke -- it is not  
> funny. It is talking about drug abuse.

Of course there are many reading this who are friends with these people and will defend them no matter what they do. These Regulars will only blame the messenger. It's the nature of the beast. Of course their response to this will be a litany of personal attacks, IT'S WHAT THEY DO HERE.

At any given moment they are ganging up on someone or other; attacking them, calling them filthy names, harassing them in email or complaining to others ISPs to get them yanked. I only ask that you look around here before giving out too much information, then make your own decision.

But be warned.

By giving them too much information (even your real name) they can use it to get between you and your doctor, send the police to your door, contact your employer, your insurance company, complain to your ISP, and feed your information to anyone who

wants it. ONLY BECAUSE YOU SAID SOMETHING THEY DONT LIKE HEARING IN A NEWSGROUP FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!

This is not a game of trolling and flames as they pretend, rather, it is the very sad truth concerning these people. Its a very serious business that can adversely affect your life in a very serious way.

The primary Regulars to be most wary of:

Kenneth  
Rachel  
Samantha  
Jude  
Mark  
Andrew  
Madison  
Alexandria  
Diamond  
Justin

The impetus of this FAQ is not only as a warning, but hopefully to redirect the seething hatred these people have for me, to prove me wrong by cleaning up their obnoxious act.

In response to this attack on the group, some members suggested a counter FAQ to offset any damage that may be done by this troll FAQ. The group was concerned that Fernando's FAQ would scare off newbies who were in need of support. There was a lengthy debate about the nature of the group's FAQ and whether one could be created that reflected the views of the entire newsgroup membership. A counter FAQ was eventually developed, not as an official outline of rules and regulations, but rather as a guide to newcomers about the culture and expectations of the newsgroup. Alexandria begins to post this counter FAQ in response to Fernando's repeated postings.

## CHRONIC-PAIN FAQ - MUST READ

If someone who doesn't even participate in a constructive manner in this newsgroup can write one of these, I can too! So here goes...

There is helpful information at Skip Baker's website:  
<http://www.widomaker.com/~skipb/panic.html>

This is a newsgroup. It is not moderated - no one individual or group of people is in control.

There are some people who are considered 'regulars', because they have been active here for a while. That's all. There's no conspiracy amongst them to control who contributes and how, which would be pretty hard anyway, considering that they don't actually all agree with each other about everything...

It's up to you whether you give out any personal information. Some people here remain completely anonymous, some people are open about who they are any where they're from. Your choice.

If you want medical advice/suggestions, it's pretty hard to do so without giving at least some details about your medical condition. But you're certainly free to 'lurk' and read other people's posts, which may be helpful to you.

As with any newsgroup, it's completely up to you what threads you read, what threads you ignore, and what threads you respond to.

As with any newsgroup (and with life), if you are rude you will probably find people responding in kind.

As with any newsgroup, often discussions go 'off topic'.

As with any newsgroup, often arguments and 'flame wars' erupt.

Sometimes people will disagree with what you say. This doesn't mean they dislike you, they just disagree with what you are saying, or perhaps how you are saying it. People who can't distinguish between these often end up attacking the person instead of dealing with what they've said.

Some people actually think that if people disagree with them or what they are doing, this means there is a vendetta against them, whereby all those who disagree with them are actually part of

some conspiracy! Never mind, it takes all types, and you'll find them all on the Internet.

It is possible to find some wonderful support, advice, friendship and a sense of community here. Many have found their participation in this newsgroup to be a life-changing experience when they find that there are people going through what they are going through, and are offered suggestions for how to deal with their condition that may not have considered before.

The reason for this FAQ is to not only act as a guide, but to also show by example that just because something has 'FAQ - MUST READ' attached to it, all it is an opinion from someone, is in no way 'official', and has no more significance than any other post in this newsgroup.

Fernando is constructed by the group as an outsider who is not welcome. He does not conform to the requirements of membership and he does not provide any type of support to others. Not only does Fernando not belong to the group, but he contravenes every rule and normative standard the group holds. He cross-posts, attacks other people, does not provide support and derides the fundamental beliefs and philosophies about chronic pain that the group hold. Mark/Jude, in an uncharacteristically frustrated posting, reiterates that Fernando does not belong.

81 Chronic Pain FAQ

Jude

10/5/01

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He hasn't provided one bit of information to anyone with a question about chronic pain and he hasn't sent one single message of support to anyone suffering in chronic pain... yet he cavalierly passes judgment on those people who give their time and energy to help others. And after not once participating in the stated purpose of this group, he presents a FAQ that he alone writes as if he believes he is in control and has been crowned the high queen of this newsgroup. He carries on a rant about stuff that happened between him and other people some 20 years ago before he was even on the Internet as if it happened just yesterday and he has delusions of grandeur that only he knows the truth and can save the world from itself. He is the true definition of a net loon. Please place as much yellow tape and orange, cones as you

have to warn others about him. He isn't here because he cares about people... he's only here to damage this group and its members. He's a troll.

Whilst some members of the newsgroup occasionally find Fernando's tirades amusing, he is generally met with hostility and aggression. Some members believe that he is psychiatrically ill and suggest he seeks treatment. They can not believe that a sane and logical person would deliberately attack a group of disabled and chronically ill people. So, what methods does the group use to rid themselves of the persistent, insidious presence of a troll?

The most popular method to counteract the threat to the group posed by Fernando is the use of the killfile option. In order to 'killfile' someone from the group, a member sets their software browser to remove all messages from that particular person. This enables him or her to view the newsgroup without reading or even seeing messages from the person they objected to. Whilst an effective method, it is not fool proof and people will still see messages from the killfiled person when others respond to him or her. Many members of the newsgroup have killfiled Fernando and Jaren believes it will be the most obvious and effective solution to the Troll conflict.

82	A Threat?	Jaren	18/4/01
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May I suggest the obvious solution to Fernando, and all others whom you have deemed a 'troll'? Killfile them. Do not quote them in posts to reply to them, in deference to other people who have already killfiled them.

I began lurking in this group about two weeks ago, and almost turned around and left. More than 50% of the posts were flames and troll-bait. But, with the active use of the killfile feature (only 3 members so far) I have eliminated most of the trolls and flames.

Whilst some members removed Fernando through a killfile action, others chose a less permanent or direct option. When killfiling someone, you will not read another post by that person again, so you will be spared the conflict, but you will also miss out on supportive and important information that person may say. Whilst it seems unlikely that Fernando would contribute to the group in such a positive way, some members advocate merely ignoring and not responding to him.

83      Anyone up for a public vote?      Spencer      12/6/01

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I find it amazing that, especially with the old timers, it is still believed that trolls can be \*driven off\*. Every time the troll gets a \*reply\* or sees his name in the subject line, his little tiny dickie gets semi-wooden. It takes all of about 30 seconds to figure out if someone is a troll. One of the ways is when somebody materializes and starts attacking a long time member of the ng. That's eggsactly what happened with the latest shit for brains. This notion of feigning fairness is just more insanity..... Unfortunately, what it wants is all attention...negative or otherwise. Why should these sick individuals be given extra, special attention? The best and only way to disappear them, short of a suitable application of a high explosive, is to simply treat them as if they don't exist. In fact they don't exist...other than in the virtual world. \*NO REPLIES\* and I mean \*NO REPLIES\* and then it disappears back into the virtual world of non existence. That, my friends is how it works. It is therefore my request, that henceforth, it gets no replies...about anything...at anytime...ever again...in this group. If somebody feels so inclined to continue contact with it, they are of course free to do so in email. We thank you for your support.

Other members refuse to ignore the troll and use humour and taunts to frustrate him and make him leave. The group uses sarcastic humour to poke fun at the troll. Of particular focus is Fernando's 'Mafia Family' scenario, which is taken up by some members of the group as an avenue to taunt him. Marissa heckles the troll by mimicking his Mafia agenda.

Been wanting to ask the other half of my family; Hey Guido, Lueegie, I gots dis landlord causing me some greif. Do yous guys think yous could fit him wid a pair of cement shoes? Be sures to give da guy my regards, jus before yous take him for a swim. An I got dis old man of mine causing me some grief. Nuttin drastic, but could yous guys maybe just break those knee caps and once again sends my regards to him right before yous make him crawl home? Thanks to the Gambinos.

Mark/Jude also uses humour to tease the troll and draw its attention away from other members of the group who may become upset by it. Mark/Jude posts 'forged' posts by Fernando to the group. These posts appear to have been written by Fernando but have been edited in such a way that they read as ludicrous and humorous.

Fernando wrote:

>I squeal like a pig when I stick things in my butt.  
>  
>+  
>I think that I want to shove stuff up my butt

Interestingly, Mark/Jude is breaking the newsgroup's rule to not manipulate or creatively edit other people's posts. However, it appears to be an incident of acceptable rule breaking because it is humorous and directed at someone who is an outsider. Whilst killfiling and teasing the troll are tactics the group uses to rid themselves of the troll, Fernando himself offers the solution to their problems. He declares:

And I will try to explain this again for you. If you don't like seeing me here, then do not reply to me or get on the lapdog circuit replying about me. Just ignore me. It works. I made the first move here by taking the names out of the FAQ (thank Brad) and will continue to shorten it and make it less hyperbolic until there is no need for it any longer. It is doing the right thing, rather than having always to defend those doing the wrong thing, because you know them.

You don't need a counter FAQ war here, all a very few of you have to do is stop ganging up and treating people like poop, and the rest of you stop supporting them when they do. But to some, that is not even an option, keep it going and going and going and refuse to change the worst part of this ng.

Fernando continues to violate the norms and standards and so he is not considered a member of the group. His presence is an attack on the symbolic boundary and threatens to dissolve the solidarity that holds the group together. The most vitriolic exchanges between Fernando and the other group members occurred during the month of May. We saw earlier that this month had the highest percentage of response messages posted and the lowest percentage of 'new' messages on the newsgroup. The group was occupied with responding to the conflict with Fernando rather than discussing new topics. Some members began to leave due to the increased stress caused by this flaming and conflict. The 'nastiness' in the group was seen to overwhelm any support that was given. Migel says goodbye:

I've seen what this article talks about time & time again, a newbie will come in, ask questions & get their ass reamed.....How sad. All they are looking for is help. I've been lurking for awhile since getting my ass reamed.....I'm done. I wish you all the best and pray for your appropriate pain relief, which we all deserve.

The existence of a troll in the newsgroup can deter new members as well as cause existing members to leave. "... [I]n a group that has become sensitised to trolling- where the rate of deception is high- many honestly naïve questions may be quickly rejected as trollings" (Donath, 1999:45). The troll and the conflict in the newsgroup may intimidate new people and they may choose not to participate.

Despite the intense conflict that is created with the presence of the resident troll, such conflict may be seen to be beneficial for the group and helps the group construct itself as a community. Such conflict clearly differentiates who is a member and who is an outsider. The troll is constructed as a foreigner, an alien in their midst, who has been barred entry into the group. His attempts to gain membership are met with derision and hostility and he is depicted as outside the symbolic boundary that encloses the 'true' members of the community. Interestingly, it is this very group dynamic that Fernando objects to. In some ways we can see his 'Mafia Family' concept being played out within the newsgroup. There are a group of regulars who constitute the 'true' members of the group and who determine the worth and validity of those who attempt to transverse the boundary. The very social dynamics of Fernando's 'Mafia Family' concept help coordinate the interaction in the newsgroup and assist in monitoring the symbolic boundary of the group. The presence of a troll provides an opportunity for the group to overtly restate their rules and standards of conduct to ensure that such conventions are understood and adhered to by the group. When Fernando constantly violates the norms and rules of the newsgroup, his transgressions are highlighted and, in doing so, acceptable behaviour is clarified and reinforced.

## Summary

We have seen a variety of types of conflict develop within the newsgroup that challenge the existing symbolic boundary of the community. Conflict, whether it be in relation to membership of a new person, a violation of an existing norm or standard or by the presence of a troll, acts to create solidarity amongst the members. Conflict binds the group together by defining its symbolic boundary and allows the community to reassert, reaffirm and reiterate its standards and values. It is only in opposition to others that the group identifies itself and becomes a meaningful community. Conflict provides an opportunity to experience this opposition and allow the group to engage in the symbolic construction of an online community.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

The Internet has heralded new possibilities in communications and with it arrived the promise of an alternative form of community, namely, the online community. This research aimed to provide a sociological examination of an online group by presenting a case study of one particular newsgroup using the symbolic interactionist framework. Over a six-month observational period, a chronic pain newsgroup was observed and then analysed in terms of the way it was symbolically constructed as a community. The conclusions drawn from my research have broader implications and significance both for the field of virtual community and the sociology of community field. My research findings make a substantial contribution to our developing understanding of community within real and virtual spaces.

The chronic pain newsgroup provides an example of an Internet group that symbolically constitutes a community. A variety of symbols are employed to create and represent communal identity. The collective experiences of chronic pain, the recognised stigmatisation of chronic pain patients, good and bad encounters with the medical profession and shared experiences of depression or suicide, all act as markers of a common identity. Furthermore, the group shares an ideological basis (particularly in relation to patient advocacy issues) which influences their interaction both within and outside the newsgroup community. These symbols form the core of the chronic pain community identity. Such identity does not stem solely from online interactions, rather

it is grounded in the real, lived experiences of each member. Each member brings to the community their suffering of chronic pain, their socio-cultural experiences and ultimately their physicality. Rather than representing 'disembodied' Internet users, these newsgroup members bring their physicality to the core of their community by ensuring that physical pain is a common identifying feature. Symbols of community identity are entrenched and develop from their real world experiences.

Furthermore, a sophisticated system of norms and values that act as symbols to maintain and reinforce community identity and boundary has developed over time. Stringent guidelines dictating appropriate formats for postings have evolved, as have normative behavioural regulations. The community expects requests for support to be delivered according to a defined and acceptable format. Moreover, such regulations dictate the manner in which community members provide support to others. These norms, standards and regulations reinforce the symbolic identity of the community. In this way others perceive the group as a cohesive whole and its rules strengthen and bolster the community boundary.

We have also observed how the newsgroup community mobilises into action when outsiders threaten its symbolic boundary. Conflict can and does occur for a number of reasons: the introduction of a 'new' member, violations of normative standards of conduct or with the intrusion of an insidious presence such as a troll. The manner in which the community responds to such conflict reinforces the collective identity of the group and strengthens the symbolic boundary. The community has a vested interest in ensuring that those 'outside' the community are quickly identified and

barred entry. Conflict then becomes crucial in assisting the community to identify, strengthen and reinforce its symbolic boundary.

The results of my research contribute to and have significant implications for the field of online community research. Primarily, my research adds a distinctly sociological imagination to the study of online community. We saw earlier that there was a paucity of research that has addressed or understood online community from a sociological perspective. When I began this research in 1998 there was a striking absence of sociological contributions in the field of online community. Since then, as would be expected in this technological era, sociological research into this area has increased; however, it seems many sociologists are still somewhat reluctant to enter this debate. Thus, any distinctive sociological study of online communities at this stage, is a welcomed addition to our increasing understanding of how 'community' may exist and operate in virtual spaces.

By providing a distinctly sociological analysis, my research contributes a critical, analytical and unassuming perspective that has been largely lacking from the field. The use of symbolic interactionism allows for a study to take place using a traditional and acceptable sociological theory of community. The methodology and data analysis techniques have proven valid, reliable and credible, however their application to this new form of community is novel. Whilst the case study approach, grounded theory analysis, and even a symbolic interactionist framework all have their limitations and criticisms, it is argued that the use of such existing techniques and perspectives help reduce criticisms of this study. Researchers of computer-mediated communication need not invent new ways of studying Internet phenomena: there already exists a large

repertoire of tested and accepted sociological theories and methods ready to be applied and adapted to research in online environments. The use of such tools situates the research in an accepted scholarly and academic discipline.

The symbolic interactionist perspective also allows for a multifaceted and contextualised approach to online community. The emphasis placed upon the symbolic realm does not restrict the factors that can be explored in a community study. For example, norms and standards, rituals, membership, language, conflict and exchange of resources may all be considered by examining the symbols which represent them. Such an approach is inclusive and does not dictate *a priori* which factors indicate community. Any number of elements may be explored but their existence is not necessarily evidence of community; rather the symbolism the group employs to represent such elements becomes the necessary criteria for community. In this research, such symbolism was intimately related to the experiences of chronic pain patients in the real world.

This emphasis upon symbolism does not preclude the study of social structures within an online community. Whilst the community has limited physical structures to differentiate themselves from other online newsgroups, they do have social structures that govern their interaction. The chronic pain newsgroup possesses structures of social stratification that identify the various categories of members. The community also has a distinctive value and belief system which influences interaction. Other structures, such as normative regulations, help govern the interaction occurring within the community. Symbolic interactionist perspectives do not ignore social structures and in fact as my research suggests, structure is an important element to online community dynamics.

One of the more significant contributions to the field of online community that my research makes is the emphasis placed on examining boundary issues for online groups. Previous research in the field has rarely acknowledged just how significant the boundary of an online community may be for its identity development. Cohen's theory allows a focus on the community boundary that suggests it is an important feature for online community development. My research has found that for this chronic pain group, its symbolic community identity is distinctly related to the community boundary. The symbolic array assists to distinguish it from other groups on Usenet. In a standardised and undifferentiating environment such as Usenet, where little more than a name appears to distinguish groups from one another, the boundary becomes an important symbolic feature for a community.

Consequently, conflicts between the community and outsiders are not disturbing or destructive events; rather they play a crucial role in developing and distinguishing community identity. Without these conflicts, the community is denied the opportunity to view the 'other', and be exposed to foreign ways of doing things. This juxtaposition of members alongside others provides the community with the incentive to distinguish itself as an exclusive community. It generates the need to bolster their symbolic boundary and resolutely construct a cohesive community. The Internet has been perceived by many as a hostile place, with frequent incidences of flaming or other antisocial behaviour. Such inherent conflict is generally viewed as a negative consequence of the anonymity of the medium (Wallace, 1999:125). This research demonstrates that rather than being viewed as a harmful event, such conflict plays an essential role in allowing online communities to emerge. Without conflict, communities

are not forced to construct a symbolic boundary that encapsulate their community identity.

However, a question remains regarding the complexity of symbols required to define an online community. I argue that the symbolic dimension of community is primarily significant in constructing an online community, but it is unclear just how sophisticated such a system needs to be. Evidently, the chronic pain newsgroup contains a multitude of diverse symbols which help to construct it as a cohesive community. It would be difficult to argue that they are insufficiently sophisticated to constitute community. Further case studies of other Internet groups and their systems of symbolism may assist in determining the necessary quality of such communal symbols.

Whilst my research has provided an innovative framework in which to study online community, it would be further complemented by in depth comparisons with other online groups. It would be prudent to conduct case studies of groups communicating in other Internet mediums, such as chat groups or MUDs to determine if the same framework proves fruitful in alternative environments. Do other online groups develop similar systems of symbolism to construct themselves as a community? Further studies may determine if other groups place similar emphasis on symbols of boundary construction and maintenance with the same potency as the chronic pain newsgroup does.

Furthermore, my research intersects with both virtual community research as well as the field of sociology of community. As such, my research has significant implications for our sociological understanding of community. Firstly, it suggests an invigoration

and injection of contemporary excitement into the sociology of community field. It appears research into community waned in the second half of the last century. Sociologists became distracted by more fashionable or modern topics of investigation and as such, the sociology of community declined as a dynamic and vibrant field of research. The notion of community no longer seemed to feed the imagination of sociologists. The emergence of the online community may offer an avenue through which to resurrect the sociology of community to the forefront of the sociological imagination. My research suggests that traditional models or theories are not redundant but may prove useful when applied to contemporary social issues. The Internet is a realm where sociologists may apply their existing understandings of social phenomena, and add to our understanding of the social uses of technology. It is important to note that it was never my intention to generate a new theory of community with this research; rather the intention was to offer an example of the way in which an established theory might be applied in an innovative and novel way. It seemed sufficiently ambitious to take an existing theory and offer a new application of it. Such an application demonstrates the value of long-established sociological theories with respect to contemporary inquiries.

It is argued that the idea of community necessarily attached to a geographic place has become redundant. My research offers an alternative way in which to understand community as distinct from locality. If community can develop through a system of symbols, such as is argued can occur in Internet newsgroups, then traditional understandings of community must be reconsidered. Locality may be an element of real world communities, but the existence of online communities suggests that it is no longer

at the core of our understanding of community. I argue that what is at the core for all communities, whether in real or online space, is a system of communal symbols.

Furthermore, when considering structures of community, our theories need not necessarily focus on tangible, overtly manifest structures such as the family, government or education. More abstract social structures such as norms, values, social stratification and cultural ritual may be deemed just as significant for community development. Symbolic interactionist perspectives offer an existing framework to account for such social structures without enforcing a definition of structure that ties it to physical geography. If community can develop via a mediated forum with few overt structures, then we need to reconsider theories of community that emphasise physical structures as the primary definition of community development.

In conclusion, when discussing my research into online groups, I am often asked "Are they real communities?" People appear to want a straightforward answer, "Yes they are communities [or] no they are not". After such a longitudinal and intense study of one online community, it seems the answer is much more complex. From a sociological perspective, online groups become communities when they have developed a shared system of symbols. Such a system must contain sufficiently complex symbols of community that act to construct group identity, direct interaction and delineate the boundary of that community. So, can online communities be real communities? The answer in a word, is yes.

## APPENDIX A

### EXAMPLE OF A NEWSGROUP THREAD DOCUMENT

**AX Thread RE: Anyone had a Anterior Diskectomy on L-5?**

**RE: Anyone had a Anterior Diskectomy on L-5? From Hope**

**24/2/01**

I had an anterior fusion - L4-L5, L5-S1. They took bone from my hip, which hurt like hell. Depends on how much they cut, but if you've never had abdominal surgery, it ought not to be too bad. Amazing what they can do now. Although you'd only be in the hosp for a couple of days, it will take longer than that to heal. Isn't too bad, though.  
Hope.

**RE: Anyone had a Anterior Diskectomy on L-5? From Tanner**

**24/2/01**

I am left with an abdominal incision hernia....I had both approaches for hardware implants....I wish I never had it done...

**RE: Anyone had a Anterior Diskectomy on L-5? From Spencer**

**24/2/01**

It is common these days to use bone from a bone bank. I did, avoided that procedure on the advice that it was painful and takes a long time to heal. That damn bone is mine now.

Spencer

**RE: Anyone had a Anterior Diskectomy on L-5? From Tanner**

**25/2/01**

they used bone from both hips and donor bone for "plugs" when they removed damaged stuff. They drilled holes from the front and installed wedges of donor bone along with graph bone then turned me over and installed the 7 pounds of hooks, pelicles and rods along with some more bone mush from my pelvis...9-1/2 hours later I was a new man....

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS:**

### **COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TERMINOLOGY**

**AOL** – Denotes America Online, which is a large Internet Service Provider.

**Asynchronous Communication** - Any form of communication where the people need not be attending to the communication simultaneously.

**Bandwidth** - Refers to the information carrying capacity of the channel. A narrow bandwidth denotes slow or limited information flow.

**Bots** - Software robots that monitor communication within a chatroom.

**Bulletin Boards (BBS)** - An online forum where users can post messages and reply to previous messages by others.

**Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)** – The range of software that supports the variety of analytic processes in qualitative research.

**ChanOps** - The name given to 'elders' of a chatroom to denote their authority.

**Chat** - An Internet facility that allows one's typed sentences to appear instantly in another person's computer screen. It can be used for group or private synchronous communication.

**Chat Channel** – A particular ‘room’ within a chat forum.

**Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)** – A generic term referring to the different ways people can communicate with one another across a computer network.

**Cross-posting** – The sending of a message to more than one newsgroup at a time.

**Cybersex** - Refers to sexual activity that occurs between two or more people within a computer-mediated environment.

**Cyberspace** - Originally coined by William Gibson (1984) in his science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, this term commonly refers to the theoretical space where all computer networks converge.

**Disinhibition of Behaviour** - The belief that the lowered social context cues in CMC forums cause users to experience a devaluation of normative rules of conduct and escalate their behaviour in responses to events.

**Electronic Mail (E-Mail)** - Asynchronous communication that allows a textual message to be sent to a specified computer address of another person.

**Emoticon** - A symbol developed from the keyboard characters to represent an emotion. For example : ) to represent happiness.

**Flame** – An aggressive, abusive or hostile message.

**Flame war** – An extended and lengthy exchange of aggressive and abusive messages in a CMC forum.

**Flooding** – Repetitious announcements of insults which are now commonly referred to as spam.

**Frequently Asked Question (FAQ)** – This is generally a web page that lists the most often asked questions regarding a site or forum. The answers to such questions are provided.

**Header** – Information at the beginning of a newsgroup posting that details the title of the post, the author and date and time it was sent.

**HTML** – Hypertext Markup Language is the programming language in which web pages are written.

**In Real Life** – Commonly abbreviated to IRL and refers to offline environments and events.

**Internet** - An international network of computers that are linked together and allow the transmission of information across the network.

**Internet Relay Chat (IRC)** - An online chat system that allows for synchronous communication. Discussions among two or more users are held in real time via a computer interface.

**Internet Service Provider (ISP)** - The company through which users have an Internet account and can dial in to access the Internet.

**Killfile** - A facility in newsgroup reading software that allow the user to remove from their files any messages sent by a specified other party.

**Lurk** - To monitor public interaction online but not contribute to that interaction.

**Lurker** - The name given to someone who reads posts in a public newsgroup or chatroom but who does not contribute to the interaction.

**Mailing lists** - A list which people can subscribe to and then receive email from other subscribers.

**Moderated** - Refers to a type of CMC forum whereby all messages or communication is vetted by one person, a moderator, before being revealed to the other users.

**MOO Multi User Domain** - A form of MUD that allows users to manipulate the textual environment.

**Morphing** – To change your email address to circumvent an email block someone has in place.

**MUD - Multi User Dimensions** – An online facility that allow synchronous communication between users. Often in the form of a game, users play a self-determined character from which they can explore the textual environment and interact with other users.

**Netiquette** – Rules of etiquette that govern behaviour in CMC forums.

**Newbie** – The name given to a new person joining a CMC forum.

**Newsgroup** - A text-based asynchronous communication forum organised around interest topics. Users can 'post' messages to the newsgroup and 'read' messages from other people.

**Newsgroup Hierarchy** – The hierarchical system of organising Usenet newsgroups according to the topic of interest.

**Nic (nickname)** – The name or pseudonym CMC users create to use in their online communication. It is sometimes referred to as a username.

**Online** – Denotes being connected to the Internet.

**Outlook Express** – An email software program.

**Posts** – Messages sent to a newsgroup.

**Posters** – People who send messages to newsgroups.

**Signature File** – A note that is automatically added to the end of a message that a user sends. Usually it contains further information or contact details of the person.

**Spam** - Unwanted and inappropriate messages sent to a CMC forum.

**Synchronous Communication** - Any communication in which the people need to be attending to the communication simultaneously.

**Temporal Lag** – The electronic delay in information flow across the computer network.

**Thread** – Refers to a set of messages on a newsgroup that relate to the same topic.

**Troll** – A malicious user of a CMC forum whose intention is to cause disruption to the interaction.

**Unmoderated-** Refers to a type of CMC forum whereby messages or communication is not vetted or monitored by any person or moderator.

**URL (Uniform Resource Locator)** – The address of a web page on the Internet. It is usually prefaced by http://www

**Usenet** - The organization of thousands of public newsgroups.

**Username** – The name or pseudonym CMC users create to use in their online communication. It is sometimes referred to as a Nic.

**Virtual Community** – The popular term used to describe a ‘community’ that has formed via a CMC forum.

**Web Browser** – Software that allows you to view and interact with others on the Internet.

**Web Page/Site** - A HTML file (or set of files) that can be displayed in a web browser.

**World Wide Web (WWW)** – A global network of computers that allows individuals to create their own web pages.

**Yahoo** – A search engine on the Internet.

**GLOSSARY OF TERMS:**  
**MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY**

**Acute Pain** – Pain that lasts for less than three months and is usually attributed to a single accident, operation or affliction.

**Bipolar Disorder** – A form of depression with manic mood swings.

**Chronic Pain** - Pain that is ongoing and sustained for over three months.

**Diabetes** - A chronic condition associated with abnormally high levels of sugar in the blood and an inability for the pancreas to produce sufficient insulin to moderate sugar levels.

**Duragesic** – Pain medication used for severe chronic pain.

**Dyslexia** – A reading difficulty not related to intelligence, level or training or motivation.

**Endometriosis** - A disease in females where cells from the uterus grow outside the uterus.

**Epidural** – An injection of medicine into the spine usually done to reduce sensation.

**Epidural Steroid Injections** – Injections of a steroid drug into the spine.

**Fibromyalgia** – Chronic condition with unknown cause characterised by pain, stiffness and tenderness of the muscles, tendons and joints.

**Gout** – This condition is characterised by abnormally elevated levels of uric acid in the blood causing painful joint inflammation.

**Insulin** – A hormone released by the pancreas to normalise blood sugar levels.

**Lupus** – A chronic inflammatory disease caused by an autoimmune disease.

**Medicaid** – The US state programs of public assistance for health care.

**Methadone** – A drug used for pain relief and drug withdrawal.

**Morphine Pump** – An automated pump that is surgically implanted to control the delivery of the pain reliever drug morphine into the blood stream.

**Osteoarthritis** – A type of arthritis caused by the breakdown and eventual loss of the cartilage of the joints.

**Off-Label Use** – The prescription of approved medications for other than their intended purpose.

**Opiate Therapy** – The use of opiate medications to treat pain.

**Oxycodone** – A narcotic pain reliever.

**Oxycontin** - A brand of pain relief medication use for the treatment of moderate to severe pain.

**Pancreatitis** – A rare disease where the pancreas becomes inflamed and damaged.

**Prednisone** – An anti-inflammatory medication.

**Primary Care Physician (PCP)** – Refers to the primary doctor that a patient has for every day treatment of their illness or disease.

**Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy Syndrome (RSDS)** – A poorly understood disease characterised by burning pain, tenderness, swelling of the extremities, changes in body temperature and discoloration or shiny skin.

**Sickle Cell Anemia** – A disease characterised by a low level of red blood cells.

**Temporal Lobe Epilepsy** – A form of epilepsy in the temporal lobe of the brain characterised by sudden, brief changes in the electrical workings of that part of the brain.

**Vicoprofen** – A form of pain relief medication commonly used for break through pain in chronic pain sufferers.

**Vioxx** – An anti-inflammatory medication.

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