

Fluidity and relating: Accounting for relating practices and sexual identity in a bisexuality discussion group

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigates the social process of accounting in a bisexuality discussion group meeting, paying special attention to how dominant ideological forces of heterosexism and monosexism enable and constrain various assumptions about bisexuality and how bisexual relaters account for the legitimacy of bisexuality and/or disguise their sexuality in their everyday interactions. After briefly reviewing relevant literature about accounting practices, ideology, and issues of social identity, I discuss the methodological approach for this project, present a domain and thematic analysis of one discussion in the group meeting, and conclude with implications of this study to research in relating and accounting practices across various social communities.

Introduction

“But uh, she said, ‘Labels, schmabels, make me an offer.’” The speaker of this utterance is referring to a statement made by popular folk singer Ani DiFranco -- often thought to be bisexual by many of her fans -- when she was asked in an interview how she would characterize her sexual identity. In this statement, DiFranco seems to downplay the importance of how someone labels their sexual identity, preferring to focus on the attractiveness of the “offer” that is made. This brief anecdote highlights a number of issues regarding (bisexual) identity and relating practices such as: the fluid nature of identity, the labels used to talk about one’s identity when accounting for their sexual identities within social communities, and how these accounts may be simultaneously enabled and constrained by various ideologies.

This exploratory study investigates the social process of accounting in a bisexuality discussion group meeting, paying special attention to how dominant ideological forces of heterosexism and monosexism enable and constrain various assumptions about bisexuality and how bisexual relaters account for the legitimacy of bisexuality in their everyday interactions to those inside and outside of the discussion group. After briefly reviewing relevant literature about accounting practices, ideology, and issues of social identity, I will discuss the methodological approach for this project, present a thematic analysis of the discourse in a discussion group meeting, and conclude with implications of this study to research in relating and accounting practices across various social communities.

Review of Literature

In reviewing the following literature, I want to make the following arguments: 1) bisexual identities are considered fluid by some bisexual relaters; 2) identity is not (solely) the property of an individual, but identity is spoken into being; 3) relaters are held morally accountable to others in their social communities; 4) ideology privileges some accounts over others; 5) heterosexism and monosexism are ideologies that often collaborate to deny the existence of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity; 6) the nature of all categories (i.e., not just bisexual) obscure the subtleties of an identity; 7) relaters draw on different resources to perform their identity in various social communities.

The term “bisexual” often carries with it many assumptions about the nature of bisexual relating practices and sexual identity in mainstream discourse in the United States. Some activist groups seek to legitimate the existence of bisexuality as an identity, specifically highlighting its fluid nature. For example, the mission statement for the U. S. national bisexual magazine, Anything That Moves, reads,

Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we have “two” sides or that we MUST be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don’t assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility, or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity, or unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits

that cross ALL sexual orientations. Nothing should be assumed about anyone's sexuality – including your own. (back of front cover)

Confronting these assumptions that are made about bisexuality seems to be an issue common to many bisexual relaters (Garber, 1995). Often times, then, bisexual relaters are put in the position to account for their relating practices and identity to people who may deny or doubt the existence of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. This accounting process, however, may be fraught with tension for bisexual relaters. Namaste (1996), writing on issues of bisexual and queer theory, argues that “bisexual identity is undermined in the very instance it is uttered” (p. 17). This tension speaks to the experience that some bisexual relaters confront when trying to account for fluid, processual relating practices and identity by invoking static labels and category systems.

John Shotter (1992, p. 19) argues that “our experience and understanding of our *reality*, the form of our social *relationships*, and our *selves* are all constituted for us very largely in the ways of talking that we must *use*, if we are to be accounted by the others around us as competent adults, in accounting for it [our reality] (and for ourselves) in our society” (emphasis in original). There is a dual meaning to the word “account” in Shotter’s framework. Shotter first uses account as a verb that refers to the process of how we account for, or report on/justify, ourselves to others in our social communities to be counted as worthy of membership in that community. Second, Shotter refers to “accounting,” or justification, as enacted narratively in discourse among members of a community. In this second sense, an account (as a noun) is a narration that provides a particular explanation for one’s actions. Both senses, however, refer to a need to be morally accountable to other people.

If relaters account for their relating practices and identities by drawing on symbolic resources a social community provides, as Shotter’s argument runs, it follows that the accounts relaters make are enabled and constrained by the social communities within which the relaters are embedded. For example, in my master’s thesis project (Carl, 1997), one bisexual participant explained how she performed differently when she was talking with her lesbian friends (for example, the participant could “scope” other women but was constrained from “scoping” for men) versus when she was hanging with her heterosexual friends (for example, she could “scope” for guys, but was constrained in saying that she thought a woman was attractive).

One significant force that enables and constrains these relating practices is ideology. A view of ideology and power relations is noticeably absent from much research and theorizing in interpersonal communication and personal relationship research (West, 1995). West defines ideology as a “complex and dynamic concept” defined “as the interwoven and inseparable nexus of (a) the production of knowledge, (b) relations of power, and (c) institutional practices” (p. 132). That is, some systems of meanings and social practices are privileged over alternative systems and practices, permitting particular ways of relating as legitimate, and disallowing others.

Werking (1997) explains how a heterosexist ideology permeates the research practices and epistemologies of interpersonal communication and relationship researchers, shaping assumptions about social life and legitimate avenues of inquiry. Similarly, the topics of discussions, forms and contents of accounts, and social practices are enabled and constrained, privileged and precluded in everyday interactions. This is especially true for bisexual relaters as two powerful forces are at play: heterosexist and monosexist ideologies. That is bisexual relaters may be discriminated against from heterosexual communities for engaging in “illegitimate” same-sex relating practices -- part of a heterosexist ideology -- and from homosexual communities for being “confused,” “not picking a team,” wanting the best of “both worlds,” “traitors to the cause,” etc. -- part of a monosexist ideology (Armstrong, 1995).

Further, bisexuality is not seen as an authentic or legitimate sexual identity (Garber, 1995), as the assumptions above concerning bisexuality illustrate. Garber documents the use of sexual identity labels, especially in terms of their political implications. She writes that

bisexuality unsettles certainties: straight, gay, lesbian. It has affinities with all of these, and is delimited by none. It is, then, an identity that is also *not* an identity, a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defeats categorization. (Garber, 1995, p. 70)

In their study of social identities in talk, Antaki et al. (1996) argue that pre-given category labels may obscure the subtlety of a speaker’s identity. They contend that one’s social identity can be fruitfully understood as a resource that one draws upon in a conversational setting for various effects. Rather than conceptualizing identity as a feature of the objective world, or as a matter of perception and cognition, Antaki et al. focus on identity as a matter of situated description and states that an identity is “flexible and contextually contingent” but constrained by the symbolic resources available in a social community (p. 474).

The notion that relaters draw on resources to perform or enact their identity is an approach consistent with the Straussian concepts of bricolage and bricoleur (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Conville, 1997; Carl, 1997). In French vernacular, a bricoleur is a practical person or group of people who performs odd-jobs and do-it-yourself projects. For these projects, the bricoleur takes whatever materials she or he can find that are lying around to fashion a particular project. Bricolage is the process of assembling these concrete bits and pieces into a form or structure. Understood in relation to Shotter, the

form or structure being created must be morally accountable to others in a social community. Relevant to the current discussion, relaters draw on resources in their environment to fashion their identities and relationships. Further, relaters utilize various linguistic resources to account for their relating practices to other members of their social community.

Research Questions

Thus, the research questions for this exploratory study are:

- How do bisexual individuals talk about their relationships and/or sexual identity when questioned by outsiders to their relationship?
- How is the accounting process enabled and constrained by dominant ideological forces? What assumptions and inquiries about bisexuality arise within the context of these ideological forces?
- What do bisexual individuals say to one another about these inquiries?
- What language resources do the participants and the questioners employ in these instances?

Methodology

Identifying myself as a graduate student who is interested in how bisexual individuals talk about their relationships and sexual identity, I made arrangements with the facilitator of a bisexuality discussion group to conduct a group interview during their regularly scheduled group meeting. This research site and method of data collection is particularly valuable for at least two reasons.

First, a social community implies the notion of accountability; that is, members of a community are accountable to other members and draw on linguistic resources the community provides for accounting practices. At least one participant felt that this bisexuality discussion group was a primary site in the bisexual community: "I feel like this is the only bi community in [name of town] is this bi group." Thus, a group interview during the meeting allows for the participants to share stories of their everyday accounting practices and to play off one another's stories. Further, during the group interview/discussion, group members can question each other, providing opportunities for accounting to one another and myself as a researcher.

A second value of this research site and methodology is that the participants are accustomed to getting together for their bi-monthly meetings and to discussing issues of bisexuality and relationships in this group context. Thus, a group discussion is an activity that is not out of the ordinary for them, providing a more "naturalistic" setting than other methodological approaches might offer.

After transcribing the group interview and asking the participants to read it and make any appropriate changes for accuracy and confidentiality purposes, I analyzed the discourse of our group interview, giving particular attention to issues of ideology and how conversational accounts are simultaneously enabled and constrained. I drew on Spradley's (1979) domain and thematic analysis which focuses on the symbolic systems of meanings that people use to interpret their worlds and to generate social practices. A domain is any "symbolic category that includes other categories" with each member of a domain sharing at least one feature of meaning with the other members (p. 100). Based on analysis of the group discussion, I noted 37 domains. Some examples of these domains include "issues that bisexual relaters faced," "labels for sexual identity," and "crazy ideas people have about bisexuality." Spradley emphasizes themes, or the relationships among the domains, rather than each domain in isolation. He defines a theme as any "cognitive principle, tacit or explicit, recurrent in a number of domains and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning" (p. 186). I identified five cultural themes that were relevant to the research questions of this project which will be discussed in the next section. Before that, however, I would like to briefly provide a context for the group discussion.

This particular bisexuality discussion group is open to the community and has been ongoing for a number of years, with new members and facilitators coming in and out. The group meets twice a month and the number of participants fluctuate, often in the range of seven to ten for each meeting. For this discussion, there are four participants present, with another coming in towards the end of the discussion, and myself. For purposes of anonymity, I will not go into detail about the background of the participants and will use pseudonyms throughout this paper. The participants are Michelle (M), a white female and the group facilitator, a little over thirty years young; Matthew (Ma), a white male around 40; Ying (Y), a male of Asian descent and in his twenties; Ira (I), a white male in his late twenties; and myself, Walter (W), a white male in his twenties.

The meeting before the discussion I asked Michelle, the group facilitator, to explain that I would like to come in to a group meeting to learn more about how bisexual individuals talk about their sexual identity and relationships. At this time, she distributed consent forms for the members to sign and bring to the next meeting if they wanted to participate. On the night of the discussion, I brought pizza and drinks to the meeting as this is a common practice for the group and it was a way to express my appreciation for allowing me to participate in the group discussion. The discussion was audio-tape recorded, and the members were aware that they could ask to turn off the tape at any time and that they would have the opportunity to read and edit the transcript for confidentiality purposes.

After an opening round of "check-ins" for each participant and myself, I asked my first of two questions:

W: Do you find yourself, when, situations about like sexuality or relationships are being talked about and you're present, in the conversation, but you, um, what do you do if someone questions you, or, or do

you not speak about relationships at all? Or do you speak about them in particular ways? Do you disguise certain words, or make strategic choices about how you talk about things?

The second question I asked was:

W: Who is it that you find, that you talk to about your sexuality and your relationships? (2.0) Or, or, when would it come up maybe? Is it mainly here in this group?

The discussion went from here, starting out with responses to my questions, going off into different directions, and then eventually returning to the questions, as Ira and Matthew discuss here:

I: Um, (3.0) uh, (3.0) uh, and I, I enjoyed doing this tonight. And (.5), uh (.5). I think, I think that uh, (4.0) that it made the discussion a little less connected. (1.5) I think we normally go (1.0), more, from one thing to the next to the next, and then get, sort of get, further away from where we started, but we keep coming back, we have a question that we start out with that we keep coming back to. So, instead of one thing building on the next (.5), uh, we, sort of, you know, maybe wander away for a while and then come back, I don't know, it just thought that was...

Ma: Yeah, we have a center.

And Michelle characterized the group meeting in her "check out" this way:

M: My name's Michelle, uh huh huh ha ha. It was a pretty good meeting, we got into some discussions tonight. Um, (coughs) (.5) not any real deep issues, sometimes we just need to talk about how we define ourselves, and who define ourselves to, and that was good...

After the discussion ended (lasting for approximately 1.5 hours), we chatted informally for a few minutes and agreed that I would stay in contact with the group about my project and would send them copies of the transcript as soon as possible so they could edit it for accuracy and confidentiality purposes. With a context of the discussion established, I will move to an analysis of primary themes relevant to the goals of this study.

Analysis of themes

Based on the research questions for this study, I identified five themes and, following Spradley (1979), I have depicted these themes as brief assertions. These five themes are:

- The existence of bisexuality and bisexual relationships is often denied or doubted by others with whom the group members interact;
- Group members engaged in discursive practices to legitimate the existence of bisexuality as a real, important, and meaningful way to experience one's sexual identity;

- Group members also engaged in discursive practices where they disguise their bisexual identity;
- Positing the existence of bisexuality occurs through a process of accounting for definitions of a bisexual identity within and among multiple communities, and the bisexuality discussion group meeting is one site to negotiate the meanings and definitions for what bisexuality is and is not;
- The use of identity categories and labels is a problematic issue in bisexual communities.

I have placed these five themes in a sequential order to provide my own account of the group discussion. The excerpts that I chose to illustrate these themes do not necessarily occur according to the chronological order of the group discussion and some comments are edited for space considerations. I chose this sequential order, however, to construct an argument about issues the group members faced in their everyday accounting practices and the type of discourse that takes place in the group meeting concerning issues of sexual identity and relating practices. To illustrate these themes, I will provide excerpts from the group discussion, interspersed with commentary about the excerpts. Much of the commentary will be to highlight two arguments concerning the process of accounting. First, the social practices of accounting are simultaneously enabled and constrained by powerful ideologies, in this case, heterosexism and monosexism (Arnold, 1995; West, 1995). And second, the accounting practices that (de)legitimate bisexuality are rhetorical in nature. That is, when constructing accounts through discourse, the group members used language based upon the audience, occasion, purpose, and relations of power for their accounting (Antaki, 1987).

Before the excerpts and analysis, a brief note about the transcription conventions needs to be addressed. A number in the parentheses represents the number of seconds for a pause. Laughter is indicated, for example, by the following: “Um huh huh hah ha ha.” An audible breathing out or exhale is represented by “HHH,” while an inhalation is signified by “hhh.” And, I have decided to leave in the “uh”s, “um”s and other “dysfluencies” as these can be meaningful features of conversation.

The first theme I will discuss concerns a common issue that all of the group members experienced at least one time in their life. The following excerpts that all deal with the issue of doubt or denial about the existence or legitimacy of a bisexual identity.

Theme 1: The existence of bisexuality and bisexual relationships is often denied or doubted by others with whom the group members interact

W: Do you find yourself, when, situations about like sexuality or relationships are being talked about and you're present, in the conversation, but you, um, what do you do if someone questions you, or, or do you not speak about relationships at all? Or do you speak about them in particular ways? Do you disguise certain words, or make strategic choices about how you talk about things?

Ma: What I find is that uh, I'm never, almost never asked point-blank. (1.5) They assume that I'm gay. A lot of people, I don't know, I don't know, maybe I look gay ha ha ha.

M: Um huh huh hah ha ha.

Ma: I don't think so. I've never thought so myself. But, uh, uh, uh, quite often, more often than not, they hint around uh, that I'm gay. And I tell 'em, "I'm bi." (1.0) OK. And that's usually the end of the subject right there. Uh, it is, you know, like I said before. Things come out later. Either, OK, either, the most common things are, uh, the [unintelligible] showing me they that doubt it, or else the inordinate number of conversations on AIDS that come up. But um, no, I haven't, I haven't, for a long, long time been asked point-blank, "What's your sexual preference?" Or are, "or are you gay?" (1.5) They just start implying to me that I'm gay and then I have to tell them I'm bi.

(5.5)

M: I've had people assume I'm lesbian, because I'm over 30 and not married and never been married. That's, that's starting, well, since about age 30 or 32, people started going, "Oh, not married, never been married." You know, um huh ha huh ha...

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I: ...But I've been, I've had my, I've had not *my* bisexuality, but bisexuality in gender, in gender?, in general, uh, uh, (1.5) denied on national radio. I called in, did you ever hear the radio "The Connection"? It's on from ten 'til eleven on the public radio, the AM, the news station here?

M: Um hmm.

I: It's uh, it's uh, a call in show and during last June, wasn't it, I think I told you guys about it when I called in. I think it was around, it must have, I think it was around pride week, around, I think it was sometime during that time, they were having a whole week of shows, and they had a couple of, uh, gay literature, gay and lesbian literature experts on there from big universities in the Boston area. ...Um, but I called in and I just asked them about, I just made the point that Lani Ka'ahumanu [a prominent political activist figure in the bisexual community] made in her speech when she was here about, (1.5) about how, when the gay, the gay and lesbian community are claiming all these people as, uh, as gay and lesbian people from history, when, you know, it's sort of, it's a label that exis-, and it exists in modern society, it doesn't, it isn't necessarily a thing that existed in those times...Anyway, Lani Ka'ahumanu says that...their work, or their lives, were informed by the fact that uh, by the fact that they were attracted to both sexes, or at least that they had important relationships in their lives with both sexes, because you can't really ask them. I mean, you don't what their, what, what their sexual preference would be, but just that uh (2.0), but when you're discussing these things, you don't have to assume just because someone wasn't purely heterosexual that somebody's [unintelligible]. And I called in and I said that. And, and one of the experts just basically said that bisexuality isn't uh, isn't an important way of looking at literature, but uh,...

M: Dang! Um huh huh ha ha ha huh ha.

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M: ...And then there's like another guy who's on the exec board who *knows* I'm bi, and he knows my partner is bi, and we went to something just like a month ago and he ran into us there. Something like, it wasn't [name of building] and it wasn't [name of building], but it's one of those little things over there.

And he comes in and he goes, “Oh, you can’t go anywhere and you run into lesbians.” He knows damn well we’re both bi, and he’s known it for quite some time. Uh ha. I go to my partner, “What is this? He knows we’re bi.” Uh huh. So, I keep running into that sort of thing, where the gay community is like in denial that I’m *bi*. It’s not like I’ve hidden it, although, HHH you know, granted, I didn’t come out right away to everyone, but (1.5), I’ve come out to quite a few people now. ...And other people shouldn’t be making assumptions...

Y: Right.

M: ...and you shouldn’t be saying, “Oh, you’re in a relationship with a woman and that means you’re lesbian” you know. People make those assumptions a lot. They see you’re in a heterosexual relationship, therefore you’re heterosexual. They see...

Y: Yeah.

M: ...they see you in a homosexual relationship, therefore they say you’re a homosexual.

Y: Um hmm.

M: They define you by your relationship. (.5) Like I hope I’m a lot more fluid than that. (.5) Uh huh ha ha huh ha

W: Is there such thing as a bisexual relationship then?

M: I’m in a relationship right now with another bisexual woman (1.5),

W: So...

M: Um, yeah.

W: Does that make it to you a bisexual relationship, then or?

M: Yeah. Ha ha ha ha. (.5) Yeah. (.5) We, we talk about bi issues and (.5) we both consider ourselves bi, we love going to [watch Star] Trek with all the gay men. It’s a hoot. (.5) Uh huh huh ha ha huh. (.5) So, yeah, I’m in a bi relationship, I think. But, people looking in from the outside...

W: Um hmm.

M: ...view it as a lesbian relationship. Therefore, I’m a lesbian, you know. People say.

Whether it is on a national radio show discussing gay and lesbian literature or in everyday social interactions, every group member had encountered an experience where their bisexuality was either doubted or denied as a legitimate sexual identity. Often times, this doubt or denial results from assumptions that other people make about bisexuality. These assumptions are powerfully organized by an ideology of heterosexism, or in some cases, monosexism. As an ideology, heterosexism is a system of meanings that support existing power structures that privilege male–female sexual and romantic relationships and discourages these same types of relating practices among same-sex individuals. Distinct from heterosexism, monosexism recognizes heterosexual and homosexual relating practices, but delegitimizes the existence of

bisexual relationships. These excerpts illustrate sites where heterosexist and monosexist belief systems interact with one another, generating assumptions that deny bisexuality; assumptions concerning Matthew's knowledge about AIDS, or that he is a homosexual such that he must "correct" others to indicate that he is bi. Or, with assumptions about Michelle and her non-married status which means she must be a lesbian, even though she identifies herself as "bi." Later in the discussion, Michelle makes this comment which serves as a useful analogy to understand how these two ideologies can intersect with one another:

M: I was ambidextrous 'til like five years old, they told me "No, you have to choose one hand and you have to choose the right hand."

If we understand being ambidextrous as a metaphor for bisexuality, Michelle was told that she had to choose one hand (monosexist ideology at work), and that she had to choose the "right" hand (heterosexist ideology that privileges the right hand as being the "right" hand to use).

The group members engage in their everyday relating practices which are permeated by these two ideological systems. At times, they correct the assumptions that are sustained by heterosexist and monosexist ideologies, striving to legitimate their sexual identity, and at other times, as an excerpt in Theme 3 demonstrates, Michelle engages in practices to disguise her sexual identity.

Theme 2: Group members engaged in discursive practices to legitimate the existence of bisexuality as a real, important, and meaningful way to experience one's sexual identity

W: Who is it that you find, that you talk to about your sexuality and your relationships? (2.0) Or, or, when would it come up maybe? Is it mainly here in this group?

I: Well, here, but, but I'm pretty open about it wherever I am. I mean, where I worked at this little school over here, uh, this little [kind of] school, down by [unintelligible], and uh, and uh, it's a little community, and everybody knows I'm bi there. I, I haven't *come out* this year, but I just assume, especially the students, I'm sure they all tell each other, because, it's probably to them, just a complete, for some of them, it's a little bit like unusual, you know.

M: Uh huh huh ha.

I: Um, and uh, but uh, and I, and I get the opportunity to come out when I'm coming here, and they ask me where I'm going and I say "I'm going to my bisexual discussion group." Uh, I've only once, I decided one year, on, on, before actually, a few days before National Coming Out Day, I announced that I was bisexual, and that National Coming Out Day was coming up, and we sort of talked about National Coming Out Day [mumbles something unintelligible]. But I usually never even know when National Coming Out Day is, so, I can't get around to doing that on an annual basis. But,

M: Hm hm hm hm huh ha hm.

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I: Well, my, my, my life, when talking about hanging out in groups, in, my life is certainly unusual, since I hang out with high school students most of the time [Ira teaches at a residential high school]. And uh, I certainly find myself (.5), sort of correcting their assumptions from time to time. Not necessarily, but, if I hear them just making some sort-, assumptions about someone's sexuality I always point that out. I try and notice it and point it out. And uh, in, uh, you know, it's just my place in the community to do that.

M: Hm hm..

I: Uh, uh, (4.5), uh, but, yeah, I don't, certainly just my position, I don't, I don't get very personal with them, because it's unprofessional, you know. But, um, I'll sit there quietly when they're talking around with each other, when they say something that I, I'll sort of raise my eyebrows and I'll say, [unintelligible], (2.0) I don't remember exactly, it was something like, one of the girls was saying that they were all gonna boycott the boys and run away and hide or something. It was all joking, but I said, well, you know, probably not all the boys are heterosexual. (.5) And you're not going to be able to do anything, well, you know, it was just joking, but it was a little assumption that all the boys were heterosexual, and I just pointed out-. It's that kind of thing, I do that all the time.

W: ...When you said it's your place in the community, do you mean, the high school community?

I: Yeah, it's just a little school, which means the staff all live on campus.

W: Right, oh, uh huh.

I: Yeah, um, and uh, and (.5), I, I certainly, there are other people a lot less out (1.0), who are non-heterosexual people on the staff. (.5) And, when you're asking me "my place in the community," I certainly, when I got the job there, I said to myself, "I have *got to be out* because I'm working in a high school and I think it's really important for kids to have out, non-heterosexual people, working with them." So they see it's something they could do if they want to.

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M: ...I have (yawn) had difficulty with the gay community here. Which, at first, I was afraid to come out at like, GLBTU [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans-gendered Union, a University-affiliated organization]. And somebody even like (1.5), well it was the summer I came to coming out group and then it was like the first time I was at a GLBTU meeting, and they didn't have a student that was treasurer so I ended up being treasurer temporarily, like for a month, until they gotta student back, you know, from like July to August. (1.0) And so I was like for an interim, for one month I was on the exec board. Another exec board member, and he comes to me, we're in the office, we were trying to clean out the office and stuff, and he's like, "Well, what is the national lesbian magazine, and what is la-la-la, lesbian-this, lesbian-that?" And by the end of the day I got sick of it and I told him huh ha ha, I kinda told him off. Look, you're a GLBTU officer. This is GLBTU, you have no business (1.0) assuming everybody is G or L, and that's what you're doing here. Uh huh

Ma: Um hmm.

M: "I didn't come out to you, I didn't tell you what I was, but" ha ha huh, "I happen to be *bi*" ha ha huh huh ha, "and the national *bi* magazine is Anything That Moves. I don't know what the national lesbian magazine is," you know.

Enmeshed within heterosexual, gay, and lesbian communities who may or may not consider bisexuality a legitimate sexual identity, bisexual relaters are put in the position to account for their sexuality and ensure that their identity is represented as legitimate. In the first excerpt, Ira takes the opportunity to legitimate his identity to his students when he tells them he is coming to the bisexual discussion group meeting. Another way that some of the group members have done this is to correct assumptions that people make about bisexuality. The second excerpt shows Ira instructing his students' assumptions that everyone is heterosexual. Ira also shows that being "out" as a non-heterosexual person is a way to legitimate sexual identities other than heterosexual, so that the students can see that there are options for their sexuality that are not exclusive to heterosexuality.

In the third excerpt, Michelle tells a story of having her bisexuality ignored as a result of an assumption made by the executive board member. In this case, Michelle legitimated her bisexual identity by explicitly pointing out to the executive board member that he was making a faulty assumption. This story also illustrates well that bisexual identity is not just denied from members of the heterosexual community, but also from members of the gay and lesbian communities as well (see Armstrong, 1995; Carl, 1997; Garber, 1995, for a more in-depth discussion of this point).

Theme 3: Group members also engaged in discursive practices where they disguise their bisexual identity

Rather than legitimating one's bisexual identity in an affirmative way, there are times when some members disguise or engage in deception about their sexual identity, as this next excerpt featuring Michelle illustrates.

M: ...Um, (2.5), what else. Oh, lately (.5), well actually last spring one time, either not out at work I have done that, where I've disguised gender, or actually once last spring when I was dating one woman, I basically told one of my co-workers that I was dating a guy from [location], when it actually was a woman, and (1.5) actually twice now at [name of place] with another student, because I'm not out there, and I'm not out at the College of [name]. Just kind of, if she was like smart she would figure it out because I never used a gender term, "Oh I'm dating someone now who works at "[name]," and then another time I used the word "significant other" and I never like identified the gender of the person, so, actually, I've done that a couple times. (2.0). I really like the word "significant other."

In this excerpt above, Michelle disguises her sexual identity to certain people outside of the group rather than affirming and legitimating it. Scott (1990) argues that members of non-dominant groups may engage in strategic actions of disguise, deceit, or ambiguity to get by in their everyday lives. This example illustrates the rhetorical nature of account-making. Because Michelle was not "out" but needed to make an account (occasion) to her co-workers (audience), she disguised the fact that she was dating a woman to maintain the guise that her relating practices did not deviate from the norms of heterosexual relationships (purpose) established by a heterosexual ideology (enmeshed within relations of power). Further, she used an ambiguous label, "significant other" as a resource in making her account to disguise her sexual identity.

When the group members engage in practices of accounting that (de)legitimate their sexual identity in these excerpts, they are positing a definition for what it means to be bisexual. For example, as the group members state, one way of affirming the existence of bisexuality is to highlight and correct assumptions of others, and this practice implies that there is a(re) “correct” definition(s) or set of understandings about bisexuality that are acceptable and appropriate. These definitions that are considered acceptable and appropriate are negotiated within and across social communities, and this group discussion is one place where this negotiation takes place.

Theme 4: Positing the existence of bisexuality occurs through a process of accounting within and among multiple communities, and the bisexuality discussion group meeting is one site to negotiate the meanings and definitions for what bisexuality is and is not

The following excerpts show that bisexual individuals must continually negotiate multiple communities: heterosexual, homosexual, and their own bisexual communities. These first two excerpts speak to the tensions that some of the group members experience about segmenting their lives among multiple communities.

M: I’ll have to disagree with that, because you can’t cut your life into segments.

I: Yeah.

M: And that’s one of the reasons that we don’t have bi communities [unintelligible], or we don’t have much bi community. I feel like this is the only bi community in [name of city] is this bi group.

I: Uh huh.

M: Because when people get partnered then they end up in the community of wherever their partner is. Either the heterosexual community or the gay community.

Ma: Um hmm.

M: You know? It’s harder to get bi community. But um, I just can’t believe that. That you should segment your life off...

[I or Ma]: No.

M: ... chop it up into pieces.

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Ma: One thing, one thing which can happen to a person is that, he, he, he gets started in one of the two communities, and there’s a whole *tenacity* about it. Uh, you actually get kind of isolated from the other one, or you certainly can. Um, I, I’m actually, here over the past few months, I’ve actually ordered myself. OK, if I want to get back in the gay world, how am I going to reacclimate? Uh, huh, I just, I, I, uh, like here in the past month in particular, I’ve almost been worried, you know, geez, it’s kinda like the gay community in [location] now is like 50 miles away. Uh, so, I, uh, um (.5), I, I, I don’t know how to um (.5), um, adequately live in both at the same time. In fact, while you were talking, I, I, what I was thinking was, OK, at one time years and years ago, uh (1.5), to me, I defined bisexuality as almost like a 50/50 sorta thing. And uh, I read something that GLBTU had, uh, which was probably

the best single phrase that I had ever read on bisexuality. It just means that, that, that something other than the sex of the person, uh, is what determines whether or not you're attracted to them. And uh (.5), that's basically, that is what, the definition I've been usi-, working with since, or, regarding to be the case since. Um (.5), but I, I don't know how to, OK, the matter of this woman being 95% gay and 5% heterosexual [referring to another group member's definition for bisexuality]...

M: Um hmm huh hum hum.

Ma: It's kinda, kinda like saying, I listen to classical musical, or I listen to country music. Well what do they play where you work?

W: Uh huh huh.

Ma: Uh huh huh. You know, you can be not a country fan, and you can listen to country music eight hours a day. And you're going crazy, *but*, you know, uh (.5), you know, it will just depend on tenuating [sic] circumstances. You know, uh, whether or not, whether I'll be involved with men or women.

In this last excerpt Matthew talks about a shift in understanding that he had about what bisexuality meant. Rather than it being a "50/50 thing," segmenting homosexual and heterosexual parts and accepting this bipolar framework, his current definition is that the sex of the person is not the primary factor in determining whether or not he is attracted to that person. This also speaks to the situatedness, or fluidity, of Matthew's attractions, dependent upon extenuating circumstances, which is illustrated in the country/classical music example. That is, based on the context of his everyday interactions, Matthew could be "involved with men or women," flowing with the contingencies (what is enabled and constrained) of a particular situation. Michelle also highlighted a similar facet of fluidity ("They define you by your relationship. (.5) Like I hope I'm a lot more fluid than that."; see page 9) where she states part of her fluid identity is not basing relating practices on the sex of the partner nor making the sex of the partner the criteria for defining the type of relationship in which one is involved.

In the following excerpts, similar ideas about definitions and meanings for bisexuality are taken up again in conversation and the different definitions are more explicitly discussed. The group members account for their own definitions of bisexuality and ask for accounts from other group members about their own meanings for their sexual identity. Through this process of accounting, the group members negotiate their own definitions for what it means to be bisexual and why they choose to use this term to identify themselves.

In this next extended excerpt, Ying talks about bisexuality as composed of two parts, a homosexual and a heterosexual part, and each part fluctuates in terms of which one is dominant or secondary. Ying feels pressure from peers to ignore the homosexual part from his friends. He then states he feels like he needs to pick one or the other, which Michelle then challenges him on, subsequently stating her own meanings for bisexuality.

Y: Uh huh. But, I, I, I knew uh, I'm bisexual, that, uh, after I went to university counselling, and after I went to GLBTU because I know uh, there are other gay men there, who are totally, er, I don't know if totally, er, almost, not interested in woman, so, um, and, and I now am. I, I know I'm interested in

woman, but uh, but it's more interest in men. So, and, and that can be fluctuating. So, that's why I define myself bi.

Y: ...And actually two years ago I went back to [name of country where he is from] and then was the first time, I went to uh, the gay community. It was uh, a gay cafe. And the owner, uh, is lesbian, and, and, and I told her that uh, I'm bi. I was surprised. She said, "There's no bi." You know...

M: Umm?

Y: You know, either you are gay, or, er, or, you are straight. And she said uh, she's uh, 95% homosexual and 5% heterosexual, so, she defined herself, uh, you know lesbian. I said, "Oh, OK, you are 95 to 5, why can't somebody be 90 to 10, or 80 to 20, or you know..."

Y: ...And I also think you want to define yourself gay or bi, that's up to yourself. I mean, you just cannot compare to other people's situations. Because if somebody tell you uh, that it's 95 percent gay, 5 percent heter-, straight, I mean, it's just hard to, it's just hard to define what is 95 percent and 5 percent, you know, I mean. Uh, and so um, (.5) for me, I mean, sometimes I mean I could be 95 percent gay, and you know, 5 percent straight. But, I, at another time, I can be 95 percent straight, 5 percent gay, so, so I think, that um, but I mean, when I was 95 percent gay I forgot, you know I, I, I, had, I was 95 percent straight before. You know, when I was 95 percent straight...

Y: Uh, OK, um, when people know that I am bisexual, especially my society, um, being gay is tough. So I mean, um, initially most of my friends would, you know, tell me just to ignore the homosexual part. Act on the um, uh, heterosexual part. For me it was just hard, because, I mean, um, um, it can, you know (1.5), the ratio of homosexuality and heterosexuality can, they can fluctuate (1.0) from time to time. So, but, well maybe, um, but, I mean, maybe I would choose heterose-, you know, opposite sex partner eventually, but I don't know. Uh, I just need to figure out which, you know, which sex I really wanted.

(1.0)

M: Do you think you need to do that? (1.0). Can't you just like find someone, like them, and fall in love with them, and whatever sex they are, they are?

Y: Um, well, I think, I think, it also, you know, uh (1.5), I think for me I'm bisexual, but I have more homosexual part. But, I mean, it can fluctuate, so um, my first priority is to seek for same sex relationship. But I mean, it's probably not easy in my culture, so I'm, and, and also, I don't know, uh, if that's fantasy, because I never experience any relationship before. Either, you know, heterosexual or homosexual. Um (1.0), so (.5), I, I really don't know is it uh (1.0), just a fantasy, or you know, (4.5), I mean, because for me, I, I am, visually, I feel men is more attractive, but, but, but I, but I, I, also feel, I mean, in sex, I need to get uh, I think, uh, I don't know how to, even, you know, have sex with men. I don't know if I can have sex with men, you know. But, I, I feel I, I need to, uh, in order to get orgasm, you know, that would be with a wo-, woman. So, I mean it's just hard for me to know that.

(5.0)

M: See for me, it's not like I predetermine. I use the word bisexual because that's what everybody understands. But I really kinda, for me, biphilic, is more what term that really relates what I feel or who I think I am. Biphilic fits it better, but when you say that no one understands what that means. Um, so I use the word bisexual usually, just 'cause people understand what that means even though they get all kinds a crazy ideas. You don't know if they're thinking, "No, you're polyamorous" or "you won't be able to settle down with one sex," or "one sex won't satisfy you," or you know, a lot of people have a

lot of predeterminations about what they think about that, but. It's easier just to say I'm bisexual. When I say I'm biphilic what that means is that I can love either sex. It could be a man or it could be a woman, and it's more about the relationship than it is about the sex. It's like I fall in love with this person, they are, whatever sex they happen to be, it's like I fall in love with them. (1.5) It, and a lot of times, it's usu-, it's more of a, a mind thing, it's like a mind touch. It's like we just relate so well. (1.5) And, if the relationship is good then the sex is good. (2.0) It really doesn't matter what sex they are. That's like a secondary thing. (1.5) It's just whatever sex they happen to be. (1.0) That's why biphilic fits it better, but nobody knows what that means and you have to go into a long explanation.

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This excerpt further illustrates the rhetorical, context-specific nature of accounting, when Michelle talks about why she uses the label “bisexual” in her everyday interactions. In crafting her accounts, Michelle draws on what she perceives to be the knowledge of the person she is addressing to determine whether or not she can use the label “biphilic,” a label she considers more accurate to fit who she is, or the more commonly (mis)understood label, “bisexual.” In this case, for convenience purposes -- so she doesn't “have to go into a long explanation” -- she uses the term bisexual. Again, we can see ideology at work here that enables and constrains Michelle's account. In an earlier exchange in the conversation, Michelle and Matthew talk about how some people doubt the existence of bisexuality and just “lump” it together with homosexuality, not treating bisexuality as its own legitimate sexuality, nor understanding the various nuances among biphilic, bisexuality, and other sexual identity labels. Thus, Michelle is enabled to use the term “bisexual” as it has more cultural currency, but the term “biphilic,” a more nuanced term that shifts the attention from sex to love, is, at least perceived by Michelle, not as well known by persons to whom she is making her account.

In the next excerpt, there is another term that has contested currency in bisexual communities, the notion of a bisexual worldview. Earlier in the conversation, Michelle states that the explanation of a bisexual worldview helped her to make sense of her situation growing up, as seen in this exchange with Matthew below.

M: I just realized that my bisexuality after I was [unintelligible] feel like (1.5) it influences how I look at the whole world. (2.0). You know, when I figured out I was bi I was like, “Oh, that's why I think like that.”

Ma: Um.

M: Versus how my other friends think.

Ma: Um hmm.

M: It's like obvious now. I couldn't figure out why I thought differently than they thought. Uh huh huh ha.

Ma: Um hmm. Yeah, I, personally I'm kinda surprised that I'm not ambidextrous.

I, W: Um huh huh ha.

Ma: Because, because I always try to uh, uh look at both perspectives, or uh, have dual appreciation in everything. Academia was very hard for me because I wanted to take everything. I wanted to take every major and whatnot. Um (1.0), uh, but yeah, I notice some people are quite content, um, uh, with um (1.5), very limited appreciation. I just, I don't know, I just don't, I don't do that...

M: I was ambidextrous 'til like five years old, they told me "No, you have to choose one hand and you have to choose the right hand."

Here, both Michelle and Matthew state that their sexual orientation permeates and influences other aspects of their life. For them, "bisexuality as a worldview" has explanatory power, but Ira is not as convinced as illustrated in this next segment.

M: Uh ha hah ha ha huh. 'Cause then he turns around and calls me a lesbian. When he identifies as bi, quote unquote, and he knows I identify as bi, why wouldn't he come up and say, "You can't go anywhere you run into bisexuals." Why would you say "Can't go anywhere but you run into lesbians." Um huh huh ha ha.

I: Well, you know, I was thinking about...

M: I mean, the worldview doesn't fit.

I: But that's the thing, the, the, worldview thing. Like the, the (.5) gestalt [sic] of whatever group you're talking about. It, it just breaks down (.5) whenever you examine it too closely. 'Cause there's always, that's sort of, in a way, that's sort of a bi issue, because, we're, bis are (.5) the gray between the two poles. You know, you know, the, uh, but, everywhere, (2.0) uh, in the whole-, and the same thing with um, (1.0) with literature, analyzing literature on the basis of (.5) uh, what group the author belongs to (.5), uh, it's just, it's always so much more complex than that. And uh, and, (.5) um, and uh, I don't know what a bi worldview is.

Not being completely convinced about the meaning for, or existence of, a bi worldview, Ira offers a definition for bisexuality as a "gray between the two poles." Later in the discussion, however, Ira acknowledges that he is more taken with Matthew's definition of bisexuality that he previously offered:

I: Well I just don't know about that. I mean, uh, uh, I don't know if I completely understand. I just don't, it's, it's (.5), I'm, I'm, I'm more into what you said earlier that someone, that someone said to you earlier, that, um (.5), that sex is not a determining factor as to whether or not I find someone attractive.

What can be seen in these excerpts, then, is the negotiation of multiple definitions of bisexuality -- that it is a "50/50 thing" that fluctuates, the "gray between two poles," "a worldview," "biphilic" rather than "bisexual," and one most of the members agreed to, "something other than the sex of the person, uh, is what determines whether or not you're attracted to them" -- in implicit and often explicit terms, for different rhetorical contingencies. The meanings, definitions, labels, and identity categories have diverse currencies among different social communities, and these terms are used as resources to make sense of one's own sexuality and to construct accounts within the discussion group and to people outside of the bisexual community. The next theme illustrates the problematic nature of identity categories and labels in the bisexual community.

Theme 5: The use of identity categories and labels is a problematic issue in bisexual communities

Ma: I think this, the matter of categories, we've talked about this, well, I've been in three different bisexual discussion groups, since I concluded I was that I was bi in '83 (.5), and um, no, actually it was '84, but, um, uh (.5), we, we've talked, in the particular group, we've talked a lot about categories, and, it seems that this is what is inevitable for a bisexual.

I: ...I just think that everything, that uh (.5), that, that you just have to be *really* careful with categories. And, and just, the more (.5) you, you have to use them as tools, to get along in the world, but, it's really important to be aware of their limitations. (.5) Uh, and, and, uh, and to, watch out for when (.5) uh, the wrong one is, like, instead of, (1.0) the people determining what (.5) the generality, the, the people in a group creating the generality, the generality starts to create the people. (.5) And (.5), uh, and so, uh, (1.5) you know, people say things like (.5) in the personal ads, looking for straight-looking and straight-acting. Well, isn't there a whole community of so-called straight-looking and straight-acting gay men? And if that's true then doesn't that mean that, that's really not straight-looking and straight-acting, but a different way of acting gay?

M: Um huh ha.

I: Like, um, (.5) I, you, it just doesn't (.5), it, it really, what's really true is that everyone has their own gestalt. And whatever they uh (.5), uh (.5), produce and whatever lifestyle they live, it's their own. And it doesn't always, and it, and it, never fits perfectly into anything. (.5) Uh, uh, that is generalizable, you know.

(2.0)

M: That's true. There are categories and we put people into boxes. I've hated being put in a *box* since I was like *five* years old. And I wish people would quit trying to put me *in a box*. Um, but I do feel like I have a bi worldview, but, I don't feel like, not like I can speak for all bisexuals. Because there are a lot of *different* bisexual...

I: Uh huh.

M: ...worldviews. Ah huh ha huh huh huh.

Ira makes an insightful comment about the dialectical nature of language and language users and the constitutive nature of communication. That is, the language people use to identify themselves works to create the person or group of people according to the language or category used. Further, labels and category systems do not just represent existing sexual identities, a view of communication as mediation of psychological identity processes, but also play an active, constructive force, constituting one's identity in the language use (Shotter, 1995; Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997).

In the next excerpt for this theme, Ira talks about his use of bisexuality as a label, along with his views on gender and sexual preference, and expands on the problematic issues surrounding the use of this label.

I: Well, um, Matthew and Michelle have heard me especially talk about this many times, but they don't really, but, bisexual is just a convenient label, and not really a particularly accurate one, for me.

Um, um, I don't really believe in gender or sexual preference, the way it's usually thought about. I just think that everyone has a different one, of both gender and sexual preference. And uh, you know, there's just a small fraction of, most people are attracted to a small fraction of the human race, not, not, all women or all men. But I just, it just depends on how much time we have, how much, I, whether I explain what I mean by bisexual or (1.5), and, I know a lot of people who aren't interested in the label, you know, like Ani DiFranco [a popular "folk" singer who is surrounded by controversy concerning her sexual identity]. In her interview in Ms. magazine, she's, you know, basically considered bisexual by most of her, by most of her fans, but um, you know, you know Ani DiFranco (to W)?

W: Um hmm.

I: But uh, she said, "Labels, schmabels, make me an offer."

M, W: Um huh huh huh ha huh ha.

I: Like, she just, I've never heard her say that she's a bisexual. I never heard, I've read, I read every time, I'm a *big fan*, so every time I see any interview or anything, she never says it, so, but uh, and uh, but I think that it's pretty clear from her music that she's uh, attracted to both men and women. But, (1.5), but uh, as far as talking about, I mean, (3.0), it just depends on how curious they are. I'm, I'm pretty content to have them not, um, um, not get everything perfectly right when I say bisexual, and they think what they think. And I, they don't necessarily think exactly what I'm thinking.

W: Um hmm.

M: Um hmm huh huh ha.

I: Um, most of the time. 'Cause it's, and the reason that I, and I just sort of chose bisexual because it was the best out of the choices. It wasn't so, uh, uh, obscure as to have people have no idea what I meant when I talk about my sexual preferences. So, (1.5) uh, but I'm, I do this bisexual chat room¹ on, on IRC, and uh, we have pretty occasionally have discussions on there on what it means to be, uh... You know, you might want to go there some time.

W: Um hmm.

I: They won't kick you out if you're not bi.

W: Ha ha ha

M: Hm hm hm huh huh huh hum

Like Michelle stated earlier, Ira also chooses to use the label bisexual out of convenience, so that others will have some idea of what he means when talking about his sexual preference. Both are speaking to a problematic tension of representing their sexual identity accurately -- that is, according to how they experience their sexuality --

¹ Chat rooms on the internet and through commercial providers like America Online represent another public site where meanings for bisexuality are negotiated and a site of bisexual community. The discussion of this is beyond the scope of this project, but interested readers can refer to Lea & Spears (1995) and Turkle (1995) for more information about on-line, virtual communities.

and using labels that have cultural currency to engage in public interactions. The use of a particular label also has political implications, as Ira talks about below in the short excerpt.

I: Anytime that you're choosing an identity for anything other than, a sexual preference identity, for anything other than (2.0)

M: Personal?

I: Yeah, sort of, amorous (.5) issues, then uh, it's political. That's what it is.

(Cough)

I: But even when it's amorous it's political. I mean, er, er, er, political is everything. (.5) That's what (1.5) early seven-, early 70s feminism taught us. Everything's political. But um, (2.0) uh, I don't know if I have anything else to say.

And one of these political implications concerns the existence of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity, which returns us to the first and second themes. Using the term bisexual, even though it may not be particularly accurate, is one way of positing the existence of bisexuality, especially in the face of heterosexual and monosexist ideologies that doubt or outright deny the existence of bisexuality.

To summarize this analysis, these five themes illustrate:

(1) common issues faced by the members of the discussion group (doubt or denial of bisexual identity, the extent to which sexual identity can be distinguished from other aspects of identity, whether or not to use a particular label, accept the baggage of the label, or to create a different, self-defined set of criteria for inclusion in the labelled category),

(2) how they engaged in discursive practices to (de)legitimate their bisexual identity and that these practices were rhetorical in nature,

(3) that this (de)legitimation is practiced within and across multiple social communities, with the discussion group being one primary site where definitions and meanings for bisexuality get negotiated, and

(4) that the use of bisexuality as a label and category system is a problematic issue because of the tension between representing one's fluid sexuality accurately and gaining public legitimacy enmeshed within a culture dominated by heterosexist and monosexist ideologies.

In the next section, I will discuss the implications of these themes to broader discussions of sexual identity across social communities, specifically how heterosexual identities are fluid and are enacted in rhetorically contingent situations.

Implications for future research

Ira makes this astute recommendation towards the end of the group discussion:

I: Yeah. (10.0) Also, another thing I was thinking about was the, um (.5), the questions which you only asked like two questions, but uh (1.0), uh, I was, and I couldn't really remember how you worded them or anything, but, uh (.5), sometimes (.5), um, it's always good when you *ask* questions like that, to ask them about heterosexuality and homosexuality (.5) too, just ask them in your head. Or how does the question *sound* (.5) when you ask it about, (.5) heterosexuality especially. Uh, who do you talk to about being heterosexual. 'Cause I think that was a hard question for me to answer because it's just, I mean, I'm pretty out, but I just talk about it when I talk about it, you know, you know, it's not, it's not a big secret, it isn't (3.0) uh (1.0), it isn't like I, I find a place to talk about, except here. (4.0) I guess I'm all done.

One implication of this research is that the concept of identity is itself fluid, and bisexuality as an identity has some special features of that greater fluidity. Identity may then be understood not as located solely within the individual as a static, stable phenomena across time and space, but as a discursive resource drawn on for various rhetorical contingencies, enmeshed within relations of power and ideologies that position subjects to (not) act in certain ways.

For example, as Ira suggests, future research could turn the questions I asked about bisexuality and accounting to heterosexual relations. How do heterosexuals account for their sexual identity? Who does one talk with about being heterosexual? With heterosexual being the dominant, privileged sexual identity in mainstream U.S. culture, most times accounts as justifications are not necessary because heterosexuality is presumed normative, the standard (Antaki, 1987). But what about those places where one's heterosexuality may be perceived as something "other," specifically as homosexual. Michelle makes this point in this brief excerpt:

M: Girls are *allowed* to have close, interpersonal relationship, as long as it doesn't become sexual. Eh heh, then the labels come. (2.5) Versus guys (1.5), it's kinda just the opposite. They can be jerk-off buddies as long as they're not huggy and, as long as they're not like, eh heh heh, too tight. Eh heh heh heh huh. (2.0) And not have it be labelled necessarily.

What are the cultural spaces and sites where practices that might be considered "homosexual" are acceptable as "heterosexual" within a dominant heterosexist ideology. How do certain practices come to be named as "heterosexual" and "homosexual"? How are the situations Michelle raises, and other similar situations, reported on and justified in accounting practices? Interrogating heterosexuality in these ways could be a worthwhile extension of this research project.

Related to the above discussion, a second implication of this project is contextualizing accounting practices in discursive fields of power and ideology (Foucault, 1972; West, 1995). The dominant view of power in personal relationship research seems to stem from interdependence and social exchange theories where power is situated within the individual, focusing on issues of dependency and resource exchange between dyadic participants. This view of power elides an understanding of how ideologies permeate relationships, enabling and constraining particular relational

practices, and how assumptions about sexual identity come to bear on accounting processes where relaters (de)legitimate their sexual identities within and across multiple social communities.

Returning to the quotation now by Namaste (1996) from the introduction to this paper, it may be clearer why “bisexual identity is undermined in the very instance it is uttered” (p. 17). This quotation seems to speak to tensions that exist as bisexual relaters are enmeshed within relations of power and ideology and must make accounts that legitimate fluid, processual relating practices and identity by invoking static labels and incomplete category systems. These tensions are significant sites for empirical study and may exist across all social communities where issues of legitimation, representation, and static and fluid forces of identity are at play.

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