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THE ONLINE DISINHIBITION EFFECT

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Clinicians and researchers have observed how people may behave online in ways that appear quite uninhibited as compared with their usual offline behavior (Suler, 2003). So pervasive is the phenomenon that a term has surfaced for it: "the online disinhibition effect." Sometimes people reveal suppressed emotions, fears, and wishes; they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, or go out of their way to help others. We may call this "benign disinhibition." On the other hand, people may be rude, critical, angry, hateful, and threatening, or they visit places of perversion, crime, and violence – territory they would never explore in the "real" world. We may call this "toxic disinhibition."

As in all conceptual dichotomies, the distinction between benign and toxic disinhibition can be complex or ambiguous. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, we may define benign disinhibition as a process of working through – an attempt to better understand and develop oneself, to resolve interpersonal and intrapsychic problems or explore new dimensions to one's identity. By contrast, toxic disinhibition is simply a blind catharsis, a fruitless repetition compulsion or acting out of pathological needs without any beneficial psychology change.

Whether online disinhibition is benign, toxic, or a compromise formation of the two, several factors account for this loosening of the repressive barriers against underlying fantasies, needs, and affect. For some people, one or two of these factors produces the effect, but in most cases these factors interact, resulting in a more complex and amplified form of disinhibition.

Dissociative Anonymity

Whilst online one's identity can be partially or completely hidden. Usernames and e-mail addresses may be visible, but this information may not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is fabricated. For the most part, others only know what a person tells them. This anonymity is one of the

principle factors that creates the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to detach their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing or acting out. They don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online or offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self, a dissociated self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant acts, the person can evade responsibility, almost as if superego restrictions have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those online behaviors "aren't me at all."

Invisibility

In many online environments people cannot see each other. Others may not even be aware of one's presence at all. This invisibility gives people the courage to go places and act in ways that they otherwise would not. Although this power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity – because anonymity is the concealment of identity – there are some important differences. In the text communication of e-mail, chat, instant messaging, and blogs, people may know a great deal about each other's identities and lives. However, they still cannot see or hear each other.

Even with everyone's identity known, physical invisibility may create the disinhibition effect. People do not have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message, or about how others look or sound in response. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle or obvious signs of disapproval, hostility, and indifference inhibit what people are willing to express. Traditionally, the psychoanalyst sits behind the patient in order remain a physically ambiguous figure, revealing no body language or facial expression, so that patients have a free range to explore whatever they need to discuss without feeling inhibited by the analyst's reactions. In day-to-day encounters, people tend to avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. Avoiding eye contact and face-to-face visibility disinhibits people. Online text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

Asynchronicity

In many online environments, communication is asynchronous. People do not interact with each other in the same moments of time. They may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply. Not having to cope with someone's immediate reaction tends to disinhibit people. In a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others, moment-by-moment responses between people powerfully shapes the ongoing flow of self-disclosure, usually in the direction of conforming to social norms. In e-mail, message boards, and blogs, where there are delays in that feedback, free association sets

in and bypasses defenses. A person's stream of thought progresses more quickly towards deeper expressions of benign or toxic disinhibition. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as "running away" after posting a message that feels overly personal, emotional, or hostile. A person feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind quickly. In some cases, as Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, aptly describes it, the person may be participating in an "emotional hit and run" (personal communication, 2003).

Solipsistic Introjection

Communication via text without face-to-face cues can alter self-boundaries. People may sense that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person's psychological presence has been internalized or introjected into one's psyche. One may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in one's mind, often unconsciously, a voice is assigned to that person. One also may assign a visual image to how the person might look.

   The online companion then becomes a character within one's intrapsychic world, a character shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text communication, but also by one's transference expectations, wishes, and needs. As the introjected character becomes more elaborate and subjectively "real," a person may start to experience the typed-text conversation as taking place inside one's mind and intrapsychic world – not unlike authors typing out a play or novel.

   During everyday living, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or honestly confronting a friend. Within the safety of the intrapsychic world, people feel free to say and do things they would not in reality. Online text communication can evolve into an introjected psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves these fantasy role plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition.

   In cyberspace, when reading another's message, one might also "hear" the companion's voice as one's own voice. In this projecting of voice, and along with it, elements of one's self, into the other person's text, the conversation may be experienced unconsciously as talking to or with oneself, which encourages disinhibition. Talking with oneself feels safer than talking with others. It encourages a confrontation of oneself and an unlocking of the unconscious.

Dissociative Imagination

Combining the opportunity to easily dissociate from what happens online with the intrapsychic process of creating internalized characters, a somewhat

different process emerges to magnify disinhibition. Consciously or unconsciously, people may feel that the imaginary characters they "created" in cyberspace exist in a different space, that one's online representation along with the representation of others occupy a derealized transitional world, separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. They split or dissociate online fiction from offline fact. Emily Finch, an author and criminal lawyer studying identity theft in cyberspace, suggested that some people see their online life as a kind of game with rules and norms that do not apply to everyday living (personal communication, 2002). Once they get up from the keyboard and return to their daily routine, they believe they leave behind that game and their persona within it. They relinquish their responsible for what happens in a make-believe play world that has nothing to do with reality. This dissociative imagination surfaces clearly in online fantasy games when a user consciously creates an imaginary character, but it also can infiltrate other online activities. People with a predisposed difficulty in distinguishing personal fantasy from social reality may confuse their online games with their other online relationships.

Although anonymity amplifies the effect of dissociative imagination, dissociative imagination and dissociative anonymity usually differ in the complexity of the dissociated sector of the self. Under the influence of anonymity, the person may attempt an invisible non-identity, resulting in a reduced or compacted expression of self. In dissociative imagination, the expressed but split-off self may evolve into a complex structure.

Attenuated Status and Authority

Whilst online a person's position in the face-to-face world may be unknown to others or may bear less impact. Authority figures express status in their dress, body language, and the embellishments of their setting. The absence of those cues in the text environments of cyberspace reduces the impact of their authority. When people online know about an authority figure's offline status, that knowledge still may have less sway on that figure's perceived influence. In many environments of cyberspace, everyone has an equal opportunity to voice him or herself, regardless of offline status, wealth, race, and gender. Although one's identity in the outside world ultimately may shape power in cyberspace, what mostly determines the influence on others is one's skill in communicating (especially writing skills), persistence, the quality of one's ideas, and technical knowledge.

Because of fear of disapproval or punishment, people are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. However, whilst online, in what feels more like a peer relationship with the appearances of authority minimized, people are much more willing to speak out or act out. The traditional culture of the internet also maintains that everyone is an equal, that the purpose of the net is to share ideas and resources among peers. As cyber-

space expands into new environments, many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent-minded explorers and pioneers, even as rebels. This atmosphere contributes to disinhibition and the minimizing of authority.

Individual Differences

Individual differences play an important role in determining when and how people become disinhibited. For example, the intensity of underlying drives affect one's susceptibility. Personality types vary greatly in the strength of reality testing, defense mechanisms, and tendencies towards inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional; compulsive personalities show more restraint; schizotypal individuals are more prone to fantasy. One's developmental level in object relations will determine the susceptibility to the experience of merging with the online other. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's baseline (offline) behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes (Suler, 1999). Future research can focus on what people, under what circumstances, are more predisposed to the various elements of online disinhibition.

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