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The Online Disinhibition Effect

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ABSTRACT

While online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person. This article explores six factors that interact with each other in creating this online disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Personality variables also will influence the extent of this disinhibition. Rather than thinking of disinhibition as the revealing of an underlying “true self,” we can conceptualize it as a shift to a constellation within self-structure, involving clusters of affect and cognition that differ from the in-person constellation.

INTRODUCTION

EVERYDAY USERS on the Internet—as well as clinicians and researchers¹⁻⁷—have noted how people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. So pervasive is the phenomenon that a term has surfaced for it: *the online disinhibition effect*.

This disinhibition can work in two seemingly opposing directions. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. They show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, sometimes going out of their way to help others. We may call this *benign disinhibition*.

However, the disinhibition is not always so salutary. We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence—territory they would

never explore in the real world. We may call this *toxic disinhibition*.

Some types of benign disinhibition indicate an attempt to better understand and develop oneself, to resolve interpersonal and intrapsychic problems or explore new emotional and experiential dimensions to one’s identity.⁸ We could even consider it a process of “working through” as conceptualized in psychodynamic theory, or “self-actualization” as proposed in humanistic perspectives. By contrast, toxic disinhibition may simply be a blind catharsis, a fruitless repetition compulsion, and an acting out of unsavory needs without any personal growth at all.^{9,10}

As in all conceptual dichotomies, the distinction between benign and toxic disinhibition will be complex or ambiguous in some cases. For example, hostile words in a chat encounter could be a therapeutic breakthrough for some people. In an increasingly intimate e-mail relationship, people may quickly reveal personal information, then later regret their self-disclosures—feeling exposed,

vulnerable, or shameful. An excessively rapid, even false intimacy may develop, which later destroys the relationship when one or both people feel overwhelmed, anxious, or disappointed. Also, in the very wide variety of online subcultures, what is considered asocial behavior in one group may be very *à propos* in another. Cultural relativity as well as the complexities of psychological dynamics will blur any simple contrasts between disinhibition that is positive or negative.

Whether benign, toxic, or a mixture of both, what causes this online disinhibition? What elements of cyberspace lead to this weakening of the psychological barriers that block hidden feelings and needs?

At least six factors are involved. For some people, one or two of them produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases, however, these factors intersect and interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

DISSOCIATIVE ANONYMITY

As people move around the Internet, others they encounter can't easily determine who they are. Usernames and e-mail addresses may be visible, but this information may not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is contrived and the e-mail address derives from a large Internet service provider. Technologically savvy, motivated users may be able to detect a computer's IP address, but for the most part others only know what a person tells them. If so desired, people can hide some or all of their identity. They also can alter their identities. As the word "anonymous" indicates, people can have no name or at least not their real name.

This anonymity is one of the principle factors that creates the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes 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, especially those that are text-driven, people cannot see each other. When people visit web sites, message boards, and even some chat rooms, other people may not even know they are present at all—with the possible exception of web masters and other users who have access to software tools that can detect traffic through the environment, assuming they have the inclination to keep an eye on an individual person, who is one of maybe hundreds or thousands of users.

This invisibility gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't. 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, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. People don't have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message. They don't have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express. According to traditional psychoanalytic theory, the analyst sits behind the patient in order to remain a physically ambiguous figure, revealing no body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants without feeling inhibited by how the analyst is physically reacting. In everyday relationships, people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. Avoiding eye contact and face-to-face visibility inhibits people. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

ASYNCHRONICITY

In e-mail and message boards, communication is asynchronous. People don't interact with each other in real time. Others may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply. Not having to cope

with someone's immediate reaction disinhibits people. In real life, the analogy might be speaking to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when one is willing and able to hear the response.

In a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others, moment-by-moment responses from others powerfully shapes the ongoing flow of self-disclosure and behavioral expression, usually in the direction of conforming to social norms. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of benign and toxic disinhibition that avert social norms. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as "running away" after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind. In some cases, as Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, aptly describes it, the person may be participating in an "emotional hit and run" (K. Munro, unpublished observations, 2003).

SOLIPSISTIC INTROJECTION

Absent face-to-face cues combined with text communication can alter self-boundaries. People may feel 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 and influence have been assimilated or introjected into one's psyche.

Of course, one may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in one's mind a voice is assigned to that person. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, a person may even assign a visual image to what he or she thinks the person looks and behaves like. 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 internal representational system based on personal expectations, wishes, and needs. Transference reactions encourage the shaping of this perceived introjected character when similarities exist between the online companion and significant others in one's life, and when one fills in ambiguities in the personality of the online companion with images of past relationships, or from novels and film. As the introjected character becomes more elaborate and subjectively "real," a person may start to expe-

rience the typed-text conversation as taking place inside one's mind, within the imagination, within one's intrapsychic world—not unlike authors typing out a play or novel.

Even when online relationships are not involved, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination throughout the day. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or honestly confronting a friend about what they feel. In their imagination, where it's safe, people feel free to say and do things they would not in reality. At that moment, reality is one's imagination. 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. Cyberspace may become a stage, and we are merely players.

When reading another's message, one might also "hear" the online companion's voice using one's own voice. People may subvocalize as they read, thereby projecting the sound of their voice into the other person's text. This conversation may be experienced unconsciously as talking to/with oneself, which encourages disinhibition because talking with oneself feels safer than talking with others. For some people, talking with oneself may feel like confronting oneself, which may unleash many powerful psychological issues.

DISSOCIATIVE IMAGINATION

If we combine the opportunity to easily escape or dissociate from what happens online with the psychological process of creating imaginary characters, we get a somewhat different force that magnifies disinhibition. Consciously or unconsciously, people may feel that the imaginary characters they "created" exist in a different space, that one's online persona along with the online others live in an make-believe dimension, 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 who studies identity theft in cyberspace, has suggested that some people see their online life as a kind of game with rules and norms that don't apply to everyday living (E. Finch, unpublished observations, 2002). Once they turn off the computer and return to their daily routine, they believe they can leave behind that game and their game-identity. They relinquish their responsible for what happens in a make-believe play world that has nothing to do with reality.

The effect of this dissociative imagination surfaces clearly in fantasy game environments in which a user consciously creates an imaginary character, but it also can influence many dimensions of online living. For people with a predisposed difficulty in distinguishing personal fantasy from social reality, the distinction between online fantasy environments and online social environments may be blurred. In our modern media-driven lifestyles, the power of computer and video game imagination can infiltrate reality testing.

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 reducing, simplifying, or compartmentalizing of self-expression. In dissociative imagination, the expressed but split-off self may evolve greatly in complexity.

MINIMIZATION OF STATUS AND AUTHORITY

While online a person's status in the face-to-face world may not be known to others and may not have as much impact. Authority figures express their status and power in their dress, body language, and in the trappings of their environmental settings. The absence of those cues in the text environments of cyberspace reduces the impact of their authority.

Even if people do know something about an authority figure's offline status and power, that elevated position may have less of an effect on the person's online presence and influence. In many environments on the Internet, everyone has an equal opportunity to voice him or herself. Everyone—regardless of status, wealth, race, or gender—starts off on a level playing field. 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 (including writing skills), persistence, the quality of one's ideas, and technical know-how.

People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels more like a peer relationship—with the appearances of authority minimized—people are much more willing to speak out and misbehave.

The traditional Internet philosophy holds that everyone is an equal, that the purpose of the net is to share ideas and resources among peers. The net itself is designed with no centralized control, and as it grows, with seemingly no end to its potential for creating new environments, many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent-minded explorers and pioneers. This atmosphere and this philosophy contribute to the minimizing of authority.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND PREDISPOSITIONS

The online disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how much people self-disclose or act out in cyberspace. Individual differences play an important role. For example, the intensity of a person's underlying feelings, needs, and drive level affect susceptibility to disinhibition. Personality styles also vary greatly in the strength of defense mechanisms and tendencies towards inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional, whereas compulsive people are more restrained. 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. Future research can focus on which people, under what circumstances, are more predisposed to the various elements of online disinhibition.

SHIFTS AMONG INTRAPSYCHIC CONSTELLATIONS

We may be tempted to conclude that the disinhibition effect releases deeper aspects of intrapsychic structure, that it unlocks the true needs, emotions, and self attributes that dwell beneath surface personality presentations. A man with repressed anger unleashes his hostility online, thereby showing others how he really feels. A shy woman openly expresses her hidden affection for her cyberspace companion. The fact that some people report being more like their "true self" while online reinforces this conceptual temptation. Inspired by Freud's archeological model of the mind, these ideas rest on the assumption that personality structure is constructed in layers, that a core, true self exists beneath various layers of defenses and the more superficial roles of everyday social interactions.

However, personal and cultural values determine what are considered the “true” aspects of one’s personality. People more readily accept as true those traits that are regarded as positive and productive. However, self-centered sexual and aggressive tendencies, as Freud noted, also are basic components of personality dynamics, as are the array of psychological defenses designed to control them. Similarly, the seeming superficial social roles of everyday living are necessary for functioning, thereby serving a fundamental purpose in the psychology of the individual. They are stable, valuable aspects of identity.

The concept of disinhibition can lead us astray, into thinking that what is disinhibited is a more “true” aspect of identity than the processes of inhibiting and disinhibiting. But who or what is it that does the inhibiting and disinhibiting? It is a part or process within personality dynamics no less real or important than other parts or processes. This is why many psychoanalytic clinicians believe that working with defenses and resistance—the inhibitors of the personality structure—is so crucial to the success of the therapy. Even when therapy reduces the intensity of these defenses, remnants of them remain within the personality structure, serving an important regulatory function and sometimes evolving into productive aspects of one’s personality independent of the affect or conflict originally defended against.

The self does not exist separate from the environment in which that self is expressed. If someone contains his aggression in face-to-face living, but expresses that aggression online, both behaviors reflect aspects of self: the self that acts non-aggressively under certain conditions, the self that acts aggressively under other conditions. When a person is shy in person while outgoing online, neither self-presentation is more true. They are two dimensions of that person, each revealed within a different situational context. Sometimes, as Jung noted, these different sides of the person operate in a dynamic polarity relative to each other. They are two sides of the same personality dimension.

Instead of regarding the internal psychological world as constructed in layers and juxtaposed with an external environment, we can conceptualize it, following traditional associationist theory, as an intrapsychic field containing clusters or constellations of emotion, memory, and thinking that are interconnected with certain environments. Some constellations overlap, others are more dissociated from each other, with environmental variables influencing those levels of integration and dissocia-

tion. Personality dynamics involve the complex interactions among these facets of self and environmental contexts.

The disinhibition effect can then be understood as the person shifting, while online, to an intrapsychic constellation that may be, in varying degrees, dissociated from the in-person constellation, with inhibiting guilt, anxiety, and related affects as features of the in-person self but not as part of that online self. This constellations model—which is consistent with current clinical theories regarding dissociation and information processing—helps explain the disinhibition effect as well as other online phenomena, like identity experimentation, role playing, multitasking, and other more subtle shifts in personality expression as someone moves from one online environment to another. In fact, a single disinhibited “online self” probably does not exist at all, but rather a collection of slightly different constellations of affect, memory, and thought that surface in and interact with different types of online environments.

Different modalities of online communication (e.g., e-mail, chat, video) and different environments (e.g., social, vocational, fantasy) may facilitate diverse expressions of self. Each setting allows us to see a different perspective on identity. Neither one is necessarily more true than another. Based on a multidimensional analysis of the various psychological features of online settings, a comprehensive theory on the psychotherapeutics of cyberspace can explore how computer-mediated environments can be designed to express, develop, and if necessary, restrain different constellations of self-structure.^{11,12}

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