The Online Disinhibition Effect

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About a week ago, I was copied on an email that went out to all of the parents of players in my son's little league. The tone was hostile, the language was crude, and the topic seemed way too benign to merit the jabs at various people and aspects of the program that were under discussion. More than anything, the note just did not "fit" with the calm and gentle person I know "in real life." Wow, she's having a bad day, I thought, how could she seem so different?

In New York, a successful and beloved minister was arrested for attempting to meet a 13 year-old girl in person after a series of exchanges online. "Please understand," he said, "For me, this was just a fantasy. I never intended for this to be real." What could he have meant by that? Could that possibly be true?

Psychologist John Suler, Ph.D. is among the researchers who are attempting to answer these questions by studying a new dimension of human psychology, "Cyberpsychology." Cyberpsychology deals with all the dimensions of psychological experience that are affected by emerging technology. Among the phenomenona under study is the "Online Disinhibition Effect." That is, how interactions in cyberspace work to lower inhibitions and produce results that may or may not "fit" with the self we present in person. It turns out that a combination of factors, when working in concert, can serve to shift dramatically one's experience and presentation of self.

Dissociative Anonymity—*You don't know me.* The anonymous part is the feeling that since other people don't know who you are, you can say or do anything you want and it can't affect your "real life." Some people even feel like what they do is not them at all, and that's the dissociative part of it. Between the two aspects, many people do not feel that they have to take responsibility for their actions while "online."

Invisibility—*You can't see me.* In many environments, you can be there, observe, read, browse, and feel like no one can see you at all. Webmasters often monitor the traffic, but the general user would not be able to detect your presence. Invisibility adds to the disinhibition not just because you don't have to worry about how you look, but also because you don't have to worry about how other people are looking: bored, frowning, shaking their heads… it is all concealed.

Asynchronicity—*See you later.* Through email and message boards, communication is asynchronous. It is not in real time, so knowing you will not immediately have to deal with someone's reaction can lead to disinhibition. If you are feeling strongly, you can also "put it out there" and then walk away before you get response. One psychologist aptly termed this method "an emotional hit and run."

Solipsistic introjection—*It's all in my head.* When we read something in our own heads, we do so in our own voices. This is especially true when we don't know what the other person sounds like. We may also assign a look to a person we don't know, often borrowing from someone we do know or have known. As communication goes on, the character can be developed more fully and we may lose sight of what we've imagined versus what we

actually know. The voice in our head is comfortable and a good place to fantasize, test ideas, and take risks we wouldn't with other people. When in chat rooms or while instant messaging, people may forget it's not just a conversation with themselves.

Dissociative imagination—_It's just a game._ People sometimes feel that the imaginary characters they created actually exist in a different space… a dream world that is separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. Most people believe that they can keep the dream world and the real world completely separate.

Minimizing authority—_We are equals._ While online, a person's status is not known to others. You may be a very important person in your real life or you may be ordinary. Online, no one knows the difference. The Internet is an equal opportunity environment—status, wealth, race, and gender don't make a difference. The most important variables that determine your ability to influence others are the quality of your ideas and your capacity to communicate those ideas.

Taken together, these variables can create a space where inhibitions are lowered and personality aspects rarely seen in person may emerge and flourish. Cyberpsychology may be in its infancy, but useful information about the human experience is already developing. As our involvement with technology grows, so, too, does our need to understand how these technologies affect who we are.