

Virtual Culture: The Psychology of Cyberspace

There are obvious benefits and adverse consequences to technological advances, especially the continuous evolution of internet social worlds. How does progression in the world of technology influence how we achieve the goals of higher education? Understanding the individual and collective human experience is pertinent to achieving the overall purpose of higher education. The expansion of technology used as a medium for human interaction adds a new dimension to human experience. This is a new perspective that is important to psychological fields of study. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of human behavior, disciplines in the realm of psychology must also consider cyberpsychology as an additional variable.

Cyberpsychology examines the role of new technologies and their influence on human behavior; it literally means the psychology of cyberspace. Taking this variable into consideration, a new basis for understanding human behavior is incorporated into the study of psychology. The primary goal of psychology directly correlates to that of higher education as a whole. Reflection and critical evaluation of technological interactions between humans from a psychological perspective are now considered just as important as intellectual questioning of truth, justice and equality. The effectiveness of higher education relies on understanding cultural and individual diversity; virtual culture is an additional component necessary in that understanding. Cyberpsychology will ultimately change the study of human behaviors, a change that will affect how we pursue the goals of higher education.

The ultimate purpose of higher education comprises a deeper, integrated understanding of the individual in the community at large. The goals of higher education are reflected in Eckerd College's mission statement. By intellectually challenging questions that provide the foundation

for personal development, those of purpose, meaning and value, a student can acquire broad knowledge of the human experience. This is an experience riveted with complexity and diversity among individuals. Respecting and understanding the diversity will foster cross-cultural community and life-long learning. Understanding the individual and collective human experience is cultivated by the atmosphere of higher education. Studying the individual and collective human experience is refined in respective disciplines such as sociology, human development, and psychology.

The goal of these disciplines is to enhance humanity through constructing an account of human behaviors. Comprehensive understanding of human behaviors and individual differences will provide an accurate account for study and research. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the psychological perspective; although, I do believe all disciplines can benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of human behaviors.

There are four main goals of psychology as a science: description, prediction, explanation, and ultimately influencing behavior (Jackson, 2009, p. 14). Psychologists use observational techniques to describe behavior which allows us to learn about the nature of human interactions. Psychologists can predict future behavior or which events will occur indicated through correlated variables. Providing an explanation for why and when behavior occurs, gives researchers the ability to facilitate certain behavior through manipulation of the variables. The results of the research will be used to solve practical problems involving behavior and psychology. Taking these four conditions into consideration, the psychological influence of technology elicits another available resource for understanding human behavior. Students and teachers alike must be well versed in the influences of technology in order to fully understand this facet of human psychology.

I believe there are two approaches to studying psychology: the individual approach and the generalized population approach; both of these are intricately connected and important to understanding human interactions. Individual differences create the groundwork for which we build group dynamics. It is necessary to appreciate the diversity within both and the factors that influence their interactions. Much of psychology is dedicated to the study of group dynamics; after all it is easier to produce statistically significant results when research is based in a larger population. The four goals mentioned above detail statistical psychology. They can still be applied to individual psychology, but it is much more difficult to conduct research on a single individual and still gather data applicable to the entire population. Nevertheless, the individual approach to understanding human psychology permits deeper insight into human interactions. Personality psychologists study individual differences in people. Instead of generalizing how humans behave, character traits, adaptations and entire life story contributes to the explanation of individual behavior and how that individual interacts in a population (McAdams, 2009, p. 3-8).

Both approaches are taken into consideration when studying the interaction between humans and technology. There are individual differences in the psychological effects of technology that can be attributed to particular character traits and adaptations. Technology also influences the behavior of society as a whole. The study of cyberpsychology aims to understand the virtual culture from the individual and group perspective (Dewsnip, 2010). Just as any other psychological stimuli, technology will have a wide range of behavioral responses that can be attributed to an even more diverse range of individual variables. The topic of cyberpsychology adds a new dynamic to the study of psychology but is nonetheless multifaceted and complicated.

Much research has already been dedicated to understanding the possible psychological influences of technology, namely social networking. Gaining knowledge and experience in

virtual environments and critically evaluating their social influence from the psychological perspective is a primary goal of cyberpsychology. It is important to understand the details of some of the psychological influences in order to understand the necessity of this study in our perpetually evolving technological world. For the sake of cohesiveness, focus will remain on the social and psychological impact of the internet specifically its influence on communication and interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, and identity management. Since these are factors that greatly influence the personal development of students, higher education, particularly in the psychology disciplines are becoming increasingly concerned with the possible adverse effects elicited by technology.

These issues have become a more relevant area of research as the rapid increase in technological communication hits new heights but it has been on the research radar for many years. Some of the first controlled experiments using modern computer communication were conducted in 1984, a time when the popular opinion was focused on the benefits of increased communication capabilities. The findings of the research showed that computer mediated communication leads to uninhibited verbal behavior suggesting that people are more easily able to ignore acceptable social norms. These results were compared to face-to-face groups which showed more pleasant verbal behavior (less swearing, insults, and hostile comments). Their explanation for the results is that computer mediated communication involves a process of depersonalization and distraction from one's receiving audience (Kiesler et al., 1984).

Questions still remain regarding how online communication affects social development specifically in adolescents' relationships. It is difficult to identify how technology has altered relationships because studies would be needed from before technological influence and it is simply too late to do such studies. From a historical perspective, social patterns can provide

insight to this change. It has been determined that a lower proportion of communication is in the form of face to face interactions compared with electronic communication. The theory is that the depersonalization of this form of communication leads to less personal and mature relationship formation (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Creating these social relationships is a cornerstone to the adolescent experience and aids in developing their sense of identity. If there are adverse effects on the formation of intimate relationships then identity formation will also undergo changes.

A core adolescent developmental task is identity development, as described by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. Initially, it was believed that using the internet to explore identities would aid the formation of a mature identity through experimenting with a variety of character traits and personalities. But now, it is understood that this type of identity play often inhibits the formation of a coherent identity. Also, since adolescent identity is largely formed through personal interactions with family, friends and romantic partners, identity play online can serve as a distraction (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Research conducted in 1998 at Carnegie Mellon University indicates that increased internet use is correlated with a decrease in social activity, more specifically by replacing higher quality relationships with those of poorer quality (Kraut et al., 1998). With this disconnection to high quality relationships within friends and family, there is a threat of greater levels of dissociation causing more difficulty in real life identity formation. Arguably, those that have achieved a higher level of self-awareness are at less risk than those who have not yet established their identity. Reflecting on the importance of individual differences in psychology, people also vary in degrees to which they are consciously aware of their identity in virtual culture (Suler(2), 2002). The increase in age at which teenagers reach intellectual and behavioral maturity is positively correlated with the

increase in technological means of communication (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). In other words, we are fostering generational immaturity and supplementing the disorder with further means of disconnection to “real life”. This should greatly concern the arenas of higher education. In order to adequately motivate the personal development of students, the students must be at the proper maturity level to receive the benefits of their education.

The adverse effects of identity play can be diminished through upholding the principle of integration. Psychology greatly stresses the importance of integration through understanding all the elements of an individual’s life. Piecing these elements together in a cohesive fashion allows for balance and a deeper understanding of all the parts that comprise the whole of an individual identity (Suler (2), 2002). In this sense, through integrating one’s virtual life with one’s off-line identity, development can be enhanced. By adding this facet of individual psychology, one can extend personal insight through understanding their cyberpsychology. Interconnectedness in life enhances understanding and psychological health. The adverse effects of the rising use of virtual worlds are determined by the level of division and fragmentation that occurs within each individual (Suler (1), 2002). The amount an individual is submerged into virtual reality has been linked with psychological well-being; although, research is not conclusive regarding causation.

It is often recognized that preexisting psychological health status is accentuated through technological media such as social networks. For example, people higher on the extraversion scale tend to have wider social network which is negatively correlated with depression and loneliness. Those with traits associated with extraversion spend much less time on average in virtual world (Kraunt et al., 1998). The traits associated with introversion and neuroticism are already predisposed to depression and loneliness, mental health issues that are accentuated

through increased computer time. These are variables that, of course, fluctuate within individual character traits.

Kraut and colleagues conducted extensive research on the impact the internet has on social involvement and psychological well-being. Although they did not claim that their results were causal, they showed a distinct negative trend. Greater usage of the internet led to a decrease in the participants' involvement in social groups which was accompanied by increases in loneliness. Large declines in social contact and family involvement has previously been determined to negatively influence psychological well-being. The findings of this research support the notion that the increased involvement in our technological world could be correlated to the increase in diagnosis of mental health issues, especially those in adolescents. Kraut's findings further support Subrahmanyam and Greenfield's argument that increased use of technology can hinder personal identity development.

Fully understanding multi-faceted mental health issues is a continuous task tackled by psychologists. The use of technology has become an increasingly important factor in understanding the progression and development of mental health issues. Not only should cyberpsychology be included into the regular required course abnormal psychology, for those pursuing a psychology degree, but it should also be an individual entity. Social psychological issues raised by technological change have reached a point that must be addressed by the psychological community in higher education environments. An effective higher education system must not only understand the technological influences on identity formation but also teach it to rising higher education professionals. Those pursuing careers in psychology must understand the breadth of the human experience. The progression of online social networks is

adding new levels to the human experience. To better prepare students for the future of psychology, higher education must address these issues.

Some universities and colleges have incorporated a course that focuses on the psychological influences of cyberspace, called cyberpsychology. Glasgow Caledonian University in London has such a course. The topics of interest include: phenomenology of the internet, social psychology of the internet, online group behaviors, social networking and self-presentation, identity and computer mediated communication (Dewsnip, 2010). The goal of the program is for students to develop a critical understanding of the issues involved with advances in virtual environments. The course emphasizes the importance of critically evaluating these virtual environments from a psychological perspective. Likewise, Webster University in Vienna has recently added cyberpsychology, offered by their psychology department in the spring of 2011. The course is accessible to students of all majors. Birgit Stetina, the professor teaching the new course, says, "Reflection of habits is a part of general education...therefore all students can profit from a deeper understanding regarding our daily interaction in Cyberspace".

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design & Technology in Ireland is yet another higher education establishment that has recognized the importance of including a course on cyberpsychology. This course considers the impacts of technological forms of communication as well as the motivations behind human behavior in online settings. These topics are important for any level of education but most importantly in the psychology disciplines. In order to fully understand human experience, the psychology student must keep up with the demands of society. Further psychological issues may certainly arise from the increased use of computers as a form of communication; we should prepare for the implications of future research through incorporating the study of cyberpsychology. I believe the addition of this course at Eckerd

College will enhance the intellectual competitiveness and appeal. It could be yet another aspect of Eckerd's culture that distinguishes it from other higher education institutions.

Understanding students is a priority of higher education, reaching them on a personal level promotes intellectual, psychological, and worldly maturity. Bearing in mind the vast differences in personalities, the goal of personal development is quite the undertaking. It is necessary to consider as many contributing variables as possible; the role of technology in psychological maturity inevitably is a major player in the development of students.

The effectiveness of the psychology discipline in preparing students would also increase by including this additional perspective. Psychology students pursuing a professional career must be adequately prepared for the future of psychological issues. It is necessary to provide the most comprehensive view of human psychology, which is significantly influenced by technology. The study of cyberpsychology offers additional areas of research. Student led research would have readily accessible resources and participants. Overall, the inclusion of cyberpsychology upholds the goals designated by higher education, namely smaller private institutions that stress the importance of student leaders and their intimate involvement in all aspects of campus and academic life in order to promote professional and personal growth.

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