

Theories of Self: Ourselves and Our Relationships Online

By Barbara A. Sasso

According to recent psychological studies, relationships on the Internet are not all bad news. For most people, the Internet is a place where it is easier to express one's true self, and while we do try to show ourselves in our best light, most of us don't idealize our persona online to something that is out of reality. In our Internet relationships, however, we do tend to open up more and be more expressive and intimate in our conveyance of the dark and bright sides of our feelings, something that often doesn't happen in real-life meetings.

In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle explains that the anonymity of the Internet allows for people to experiment with who they are, expressing various personas, even different genders, to express facets of themselves without sanctions.

The idea that we all normally possess multiple selves isn't new. Theories of self takes us back to Aristotle, into the beginnings of philosophy. In the 6th century BC, Lao Tzu said, "Knowing others is wisdom. Knowing thyself is enlightenment." We begin as babies, flailing arms and legs to understand our own bodies, and feeling disassociation if we lose a limb or face [other emotional traumas](#). This is the beginning of understanding *what* we are. We eventually see our image in a mirror, and start to understand *who* we are.

Carl Jung, a prominent psychologist from the 1950's, distinguished between a public *self* and an inner *self*. He felt that one's real individuality resided in the unconscious self, as opposed to the conscious ego. In the 1980's, another psychologist, E.T. Higgins, distinguished between the *ideal*, the *ought* and the *actual* self. Sherry Turkle's vision of the Internet as a kind of social laboratory, describes self as an exploration of the current, inner self – neither a potential nor an ideal, but what the psychologist Carl Rogers (1951) called a *true self*.

Rogers distinguished between the inner self, (true self) and the public mask (actual self). He observed that many patients in therapy struggle with the feelings that they don't know themselves. One may claim to have lost his real self, or doesn't know who the real self is. Recall that we see this in Romeo: "Tut, I have lost myself. I am not here / This is not Romeo. He's some other where" (*Romeo*, 1.1.205-206). In therapy, according to Rogers, one works towards the discovery of the true self and the ability to express that personality with close friends. Rogers viewed the true self as not just in the unconscious mind, but acknowledged psychologically, although not fully expressed in casual social life the way the *actual self* is.

On the Internet, because you feel free to be whoever you want, you are more apt to disclose more of your inner self to someone you don't know well. When someone responds positively, your self-concept is validated, and this creates empathic bonds between you and your Internet friend that can be very strong. The more self-disclosure, the closer you feel to someone, and the Internet is a place where often relationships get very intense, very quickly. The basic need to have others see us as we would like to be seen is psychologically, a very strong force. Often this view of our inner self is *not* validated by those close to us in our real lives; for a variety of reasons, often we feel inhibited to expose our inner selves to those close to us.

In this way, the Internet can be seen as a positive force in the development of self and development of strong relationships. As reported in a study done by John Bargh at New York University ("Can You See the Real Me?" 2002) this proved to be the case. Participants were much less willing to disclose their true selves to people in face-to-face meetings as compared to meeting on the Internet. In face to face meetings, most people will wear only their public masks.

What the experiment also showed, however, was that when forming an attachment to someone online, we have a strong tendency to project onto that person our own idealized and desired attributes. That is, we impose onto our Internet friend qualities that we like, and want him or her to have. This almost never happens in face-to-face relationships, where the physical presence of the other person provides a barrier to this kind of

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fantasy. Aspects of the real person's appearance and other qualities of his or her persona inhibit most of us from reformatting someone to our own liking.

So while you might like someone more at first over the Internet, and indeed, create a strong bond quickly as your inner self is validated, you also tend *not* to see the other person's true character. You also don't protect yourself with your public mask as well.

The combination of these two factors and the influence of the Internet on relationships that are created there cannot be taken lightly. When a feeling of closeness and intimacy builds furiously, one should always be wary. Validation of self can be an incredibly seductive force, and when you in fact, don't really know the other person, it can be dangerous as well.

Questions:

When you present yourself on the Internet (texts, emails, Facebook) what kind of a person are you? Who are you? Is this how you would want those who love you to see you? Do you take time to express your true self to others in your real world? Do you express your bad qualities online as well as good ones? Are there qualities that you don't acknowledge? Have you had a misconception of someone on the Internet that was then revealed in the real world?

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