# CHAPTER 5:  THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PSEUDOPERSONALITY



Figure 5.1:  The pseudopersonality at work  (Tapscott 1998).

## 5.1  Introduction

This chapter will deal with the various issues around the development of the pseudopersonality.  The aim will be to compare how a pseudopersonality develops and manifests in the off-line and on-line world.  After a description of the history and manifestation of the pseudopersonality in the off-line, face-to-face world, a description will be provided of virtual interaction characteristics that promote pseudopersonality development in cyberspace.  The developmental process itself will be explained in more detail by applying theoretical assumptions from the well known Johari window as well as the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers.  The chapter will be concluded with a discussion around the relationship between the real world and cyberspace with the pseudopersonality as vehicle to commute between the two.

## 5.2  The pseudopersonality in the off-line world

Various psychologists and theorist from as early as the 1800s described and paid attention the theme of a plural self.  Frederik van Eeden published a pamphlet with the title 'Our Dual Self' in 1888.  He was followed by Max Dessoir who published a book in 1889 under the title "The Double Self'.  A prominent figure in French psychiatry Pierre Janet focused on the pathological conditions exhibited by hysterical patients and documented one patient for leading a triple existence.  His work is considered by many others as the front runner to 'The Three Faces of Eve' which only appeared a century later.  Henri Bergson also made a distinction between a public and an inner existence or a social and an individual existence (Van den Berg, 1974: 25).  This phenomenon was labelled in different ways for example: Freud described the ego, Id and superego.   Jung used the word archetypes. Lewin talked about subregions of the personality.   Goffmann referred to multiple selfing and Shapiro talked about subselves.  More detail will be provided in the next section on the following psychologists contributions to the theme namely:

- William James
- George Herbert Mead
- Harry Stack Sullivan
- The Humanistic movement in Psychology
- Middlebrook.

### 5.2.1   William James

In contrast to the abnormal manifestations of multiple personalities William James already paid attention to the theme in 1891 when he mentioned a pure self, the spiritual self, the material self and the social self:

- "The spiritual self is the personal, inalienable, inner self strictly our own.  It is the centre of consciousness, that part of us which makes us say 'I'.  It is the unique unparalleled self, which, as a condition to our existence, accompanies us until we die"  (Van den Berg 1974: 1).
- The material self contains everything about us of a substantial nature namely the body, clothing as well as money.

- The social self imply that we are not singular, exclusive, independent individuals, but that we belong together, we are not solitary, but solidary creatures.  "This belonging to a society is our nature to such an extent that there is no completely solitary individual.  A person growing up without any human contact loses all human qualities, he does not even learn how to laugh and is practically and animal in everyway.  We are formed, moulded, by being together; it provides us with a self, a social self.  *It does so to such an extent that being with one person or with another results in having different personalities.  A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him.  Every person has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares*" (Van den Berg 1974:  3).

He continues by providing reasons for this divided existence by stating that the mind has the ability to reflect on everything.  This implies an ability to make divisions and the creation of contrasts.  This function is much needed in the communities people live in.  "These communities consist of separated groups, groups with few connection between them, so few connections that the individual does not have anything but isolated selves to refer to" (Van den Berg 1974:  94).

### 5.2.2   George Herbert Mead

George Herbert Mead complimented the views of William James in 1934 when he addressed the 'multiple personality' in his book Mind, Self and Society.  He also referred to a divided existence whereby "we divide ourselves in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (Van den Berg 1974: 170).  According to Mead people live a multiple existence divided into many parts and it is a normal state of affairs as long as society as a whole remains a unity.  "For within the community as a whole … there is a unified self …"  (Van den Berg 1974:  170).

### 5.2.3   Harry Stack Sullivan

Harry Stack Sullivan's views in 1940 on man's plural existence focused on various kinds of experiences namely the:

- *Prototaxic experience:*
  A general all-inclusive experience for example the experience of a city with all its sights, sounds, traffic, people and activities.

- *Syntaxic experience:*

  Here the focus is placed on the words that people use to communicate with.  Every interaction people have with one another is a syntaxic experience in that understanding and progress is based on shared meaning, for example consensus based on interaction.

- *Parataxic experience:*

  This experience compliments James's 'social self' whereby when "A is talking to his friend B he is into quite the same person as he is when he is talking to his other friend C"  (Van den Berg 1974: 180).

### 5.2.4   The Humanistic movement in psychology

The earlier mentioned descriptions of the personality in terms of its multiplicity, preceded the Humanistic movement in psychology which first arose as a protest against the image of a human being offered by behaviouristic and psychoanalytic psychologies, that attempted to explain human conduct solely on the basis of a biological or mechanistic model.  Humanistic thinkers argued that the study of human beings begin with the human experience and proposed a psychology of growth rather than control.  They started using concepts like self-realisation, self actualisation and a psychology of 'being'.  Within this paradigm, personality is seen as a construct that changes continuously throughout an individual's life.  As the individual gets older and gain more life experience his or her personality grows and changes since it is influenced by human experience (Wertz 1993: 11).

### 5.2.5   Middlebrook

As early as 1974, Middlebrook was quoted on describing the "individual not as a single self, but many selves, which change somewhat as the individual shifts from situation to situation and person to person"  (Rowan 1990: 7).  This phenomenon was defined in various ways for example:  subselves, subidentities, alter personalities or subpersonalities.  For the purpose of this study the following working definition of subpersonality is applicable.  "A subpersonality is a semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person" (Rowan 1990: 8).

Subpersonalities originate from the different roles that people have in the off-line, face-to-face world such as father, husband, brother and worker.  The person can experience an inner conflict between two or more subpersonalities for example the strain of being a good worker and mother simultaneously, since each personality has its own responsibilities, demands and expectations that differ from each other.  During times when an important decision has to be taken the 'I' is caught up in the middle surrounded by many selves that compete with each other.  One of the easiest things for the human mind is to store information in compartments.  A healthy personality implies a fluid open relationship between these compartments that are integrated into one holistic whole i.e. personality.  As for diverse subpersonalities, it can become difficult to integrate them with each other.  This process is called the continuum of dissociation.  In cases where subpersonalities become almost 'strangers' to each other and completely dissociated with each other, abnormal behaviour and personality disorders can develop.  In the case of personality disorders the barriers between the multiple personalities are more rigid or inflexible than in the case of normal subpersonalities.  This term should not be confused with multiple personalities that entail a much higher degree of dissociation and abnormal behaviour.  In contrast subpersonalities are part of an integrated personality and self-concept and are used when individuals experience different situations and people.  During off-line, face-to-face interaction the individual can project different subpersonalities depending on the specific circumstances and/or people he or she encounters  (Rowan  1993:78).  Later on in the chapter the Johari window will be used to explain the process whereby the individual can hide and reveal characteristics during his or her interaction with others.

All these variations are integrated in the real personality that can be defined as the "combination of those relatively enduring characteristics of an individual which are expressed consistently across situations and over time" (Baron & Byrne 1991:  522).  In summary personality has been described in terms of its multiplicity by various authors throughout the centuries.  In the off-line world the real personality can be described as the keeper or integrated host of our many selves (Van den Berg 1974).  This phenomenon of multiplicity is also visible in on-line world and in cyberspace it manifests itself as a pseudopersonality.

## 5.3  On-line pseudopersonalities

When this phenomenon manifests in the on-line world the subpersonality is replaced with the pseudopersonality since the 'real me' behind the computer remains anonymous and invisible to others.  The word 'pseudo' comes from the Latin word for "false".  The anonymity of cyberspace makes it possible

for individuals to create cyberspace personalities or pseudopersonalities. For the purpose of this study the **pseudopersonality** is defined as a "temporary construction of the self without revealing the 'real me' during on-line interaction (Wood & Smith 2001: 58). The Internet chat-room can be described as a social laboratory because it provides freedom to the individual to subscribe to different roles that are not always possible in his or her everyday life and to try out various possible selves in a safe and risk free environment. In cyberspace the written word and information are more important than physical appearances and therefore the possibility exists to create multiple identities. During chat-room interaction the individual has the freedom to develop a pseudopersonality whereby he or she can adopt any age, gender, name etcetera. With this pseudopersonality the individual has the advantage of interacting with everybody without showing the 'real me'. It provides the individual with more power over the hidden and unknown elements of the personality. It is important to remember that as in the case of off-line subpersonalities the on-line pseudopersonality also remains a semi-permanent region of the personality capable of acting as a person in the unique context of cyberspace.

## 5.4 Virtual interaction characteristics that promote pseudopersonality development

Humans live in a world where sight is one of the most important senses used to evaluate the world as well as the people in it. Almost everybody has been exposed to Hollywood and the famous notion of acting out different roles and playing different lives also influence virtual interaction. Although transvestites can be perceived as negative in the physical life, on-line gender swapping is common. The virtual environment also allows space for those that are different from mainstream cultures, for those people with weird and sometimes wonderful ideas to meet people 'like me', thus combating loneliness. The discussion starts with the well-known saying: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'…

### 5.4.1 Invisible appearances can be deceiving (WYSIWIS - What you see is what I say)

The 'WYSIWIS' principle was first quoted by Gackenbach in 1998. Considerable research within the paradigm of social psychology shows the effect physical appearance has on impression management as well as determining whether a relationship will start between two people. During face-to-face

interactions people infer qualities for their identities based on physical characteristics such as gender, race and clothing.  During on-line interactions, physical appearances are invisible and cannot be assessed, at least not initially, therefore friendships are built on different grounds such as similarity, values and interests.  In the computer-mediated world the self becomes fluid and multiple, made and transformed by language and people are recognised through their textual behaviour by means of:

- Their signatures
- Their pseudonyms [According to Wallace (1999) 45% of pseudonyms are related to the individuals themselves in some way]
- How they conduct themselves in chat-rooms
- The type of contributions to the conversations
- Their unique use of language (Wood & Smith 2001).

Since chat-room interaction is limited to written communication, people use words to create pseudopersonalities around the idealised version of the self, for example those attributes the individual would like to possess during on-line interactions.  For example the reflection projected back is then one with good looks, irrespective of actually being overweight or an extrovert, but the real person behind the computer screen is actually the shy girl without the courage to talk to other girls on a playground.

"We see ourselves differently when we catch our image in the mirror of the machine" (Turkle 1995:  20). In first-time encounters an individual will be liked better if the encounter takes place in an Internet chat-room rather than if the two strangers meet face-to-face.  People who first met via the Internet and then talked face-to-face to each other, liked one another more than those who met each other face-to-face in both encounters.  Even those that were under the impression that they had met two different people, one via the Internet and another via face-to-face interaction, significantly liked the person they talked to via the Internet better (McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000)  One can argue that if physical appearance does not interfere with the initial impression formed, then once the Internet partners meet in person and physical appearance does come into play, it may carry less weight, as in the case of face-to-face encounters.

In cyberspace the physical body becomes a distant role player when the pseudopersonality is formed. Sometimes the individual has a body, at other times the personality is disembodied.  The context and given situation dictates the personality traits, thus the self is defined by the social environment giving the individual the opportunity to give birth to multiple selves dependant on situational characteristics.

**5.4.2**   **All the world's a stage – Virtual role play**

In the off-line world most people live in a situation of ambiguity, where their beliefs and behaviour are partly controlled by the groups that they belong to.  They do not act the same way at home with the family as they do at work or when with friends and therefore different roles are played out in different situations.  The famous words of Shakespeare come to mind:  'All the world's a stage…'  Eric Erikson referred to a specific development phase in his theory called the 'psychosocial moratorium' wherein adolescents focus on identity development.  Usually it is a time of intense interaction with other people, a time of experimentation in order to facilitate the development of the core self.  Erikson described this as a stage that has to be completed before the adolescent can move on to becoming an adult (Louw 1990). In many cases people move on and become older even if some issues in certain development stages are still unresolved.  Turkle (1995) argues that in cyberspace the individual, irrespective of age, is given the opportunity to experiment to develop a core self.  In cyberspace people will rather control the multiple roles they play than suffer from the burden of having to negotiate them. With this unique opportunity of role play individuals learn more about themselves.  At the same time the anthropological experience of 'dépaysement', for example  the experience of seeing the familiar through unfamiliar eyes, comes into play where the individual learns more about other gender groups, races or classes by acting out different roles (Wood & Smith 2001).

Frau-Meigs (2000: 230) describes the digital identity as a 'licence to grow'.  Wallace (1999) elaborates on the idea of growth and expands on Erikson's 'psychosocial moratorium' by stating that it is not confined to adolescence;  instead it is a process of life.  She discusses the MAMA-process (Moratorium – Achievement – Moratorium – Achievement).  The moratorium phase is a phase of self doubt about who people are and they experience this every time they experiment with different roles on the Internet. In contrast to off-line living, cyberspace creates an environment wherein people can explore unknown parts of the self by creating and experimenting with on-line pseudopersonalities that they never got around 'being' in real life.  Although cyberspace is synonymous to a theatre, a realm where one is invited to perform a variety of roles, the key is to reach the achievement phase.  As in the off-line world care must be taken not to develop dissociated multiple personalities that can result in abnormal behaviour and personality disorders.  During the achievement phase all newly acquired knowledge of the self are integrated into one intact, responsible personality able to effectively adapt to different situations throughout life (Smith & Kollock 2001).

The Internet makes it much easier for an individual to establish new relationships and express these important aspects of identity without the risk of upsetting the balance of the off-line relationships.  It is difficult for a person to effect changes in his or her self-concept when the surrounding social environment remain static.   In face-to-face interaction, features of one's physical appearance are strongly associated with social categories, roles and stereotypes.  When individuals interact in chat-rooms they acquire new peer groups that has no ties with off-line social groups.  The members of this new Internet peer group have no prior conceptions or expectations about the kinds of identities or roles to which this person should adhere to.  Starting out with a blank slate, the individual is then free to construct him- or herself in any number of different ways.

A social psychologist Mead contends that one discovers oneself by reflection from the people around one  (Cathcart & Samovar 1975).  With the freedom of identity construction, it might be that the individual has a need to be accepted and will turn into the person he or she thinks will get the kind of attention that is needed.  From a different point of view, the pseudopersonality works to the advantage of the hearing-impaired individual, whereby it provides him/her with more freedom to take on different roles and interact with people from different spheres of life, not readily available during face-to-face interactions.   Unfortunately the darker side of crime is becoming more evident in cyberspace.   For example, the pedophile can use gender swapping to present himself as a nice young girl looking for friends, but with darker motives in mind only open to him in the off-line world.

### 5.4.3   'MORFing' – Gender swapping

Gender as demographic variable is one of the primary means by which people classify themselves.  In most cultures the self is treated as being located in one body with a male/female dichotomy.  As stated earlier, during chat-room interaction the person can have a body and can be disembodied at times.  Although the embodiment is unknown in cyberspace, Smith and Kollock (2001) stated that people will anticipate a body talking back to them that is either male or female.  Wallace (1999) described the same process but linked this spontaneous gender-evaluation to priming.  The term priming implies that certain social categories are more accessible than others and people tend to use the one closest to the surface to form impressions about newcomers for example 'newbies' in a chat-room.  The male/female label is one of the primary categories by which newcomers will be evaluated.  This is evident early in chat-room conversations when the question is asked:  'M or F?' (Male of Female), which is conveniently given the term 'MORFing'.   According to Smith and Kollock (2001) there are three levels of classification during the early phases of chat-room discussions, for example:

- Level 1:    Gender and age
- Level 2:    Location
- Level 3:    Race.

The 'MORFing' phase provides no assurance that the individual will portray his or her real gender. On the cyberspace stage role play is rife and gender swapping does take place, as is evident in the next example:

"I have always used my first name as my login id, and I don't want to change now, but if I had to do it over again, I would probably use my last name. I have discovered the disadvantages as being identified as a woman by my login id"  (Winter & Huff 1996: 52).

Smith and Kollock (2001) also found that women tend to choose gender-neutral pseudonyms to avoid on-line harassment.  Males tend to choose female personalities because it is perceived that females get more attention, receive more help as well as offers of sexual advances, especially if they are 'newbies'.

Interestingly enough, Wood and Smith (2001) found that those individuals that swap genders on-line tend to portray rigid stereotypical roles and are caught in the act more than often.  This process was described as 'hypergendering' by Smith and Kollock in 2001.  When then are personalities that people create not foolproof?  Erving Goffman, developer of the Impression Management theory stated that some impressions and expressions are 'given', for example those deliberate actions aimed at creating a specific impression.  Then there are the impressions and expressions 'given off', for example those impressions that are more subtle and harder to control.  The latter becomes evident in the specific writing styles and language the person use.

Generally men and women have different communication styles.  Men are more competitive and women tend to seek consensus and are mutually more supportive (Smith & Kollock 2001).  According to Wallace (1999) women tend to:

- Use more verbal fillers that are relatively meaningless
- Use more intensifiers during on-line conversations
- Ask more questions
- Use more justifiers
- Emphasise relational aspects rather than having a task-orientated approach.

Women with more power adopt 'male-like' speech patterns.  Although women can be subtler on-line, men communicate in a very direct fashion using explicit threats at times.  In chat-rooms where males and females are present, women can start to control groups.  Wallace (1999) identified specific tactics that males use to react to the controlling party.  Men will avoid these postings or divert the attention away from the posting often by focussing on a tangential or incidental piece of the posting.   These general differences between males and females provide proof that is needed to determine a person's real gender-orientation during on-line interaction.   Individuals participating in gender-only groups, exercise gender-authenticity tests and look out for those impressions that are given off during on-line interactions  (Smith & Kollock 2001).

### 5.4.4   Reading race on-line

According to Goffman, race is also a sign 'given off' and during on-line interactions race can be determined by focusing on ethnicity.  Ethnicity is based on cultural markers of membership to a specific group for example language or religion.    South African blacks tend to quite often use the words 'sisters', 'bro' and 'comrades'.  The racial identity can also become known to the audience by means of descriptions of the person's heritage, hometown or parents (Smith & Kollock 2001).   Although the pseudopersonality is almost a given, at least initially during on-line communication, the 'real-me' do leave "fingerprints" behind that can be identified at a later stage.

### 5.4.5   Marginalised social identities

Although many chat-rooms focus on specialised topics and interests, other chat-rooms are not concerned with mainstream and non-stigmatised issues.  The existence of these chat-rooms plays a very important role in the lives of those individuals who possess concealable stigmatised identities.  It can be very difficult to find other similar identities in real life because of the potentially embarrassing nature of the identity and fear of the possible consequences of disclosure.  Anonymous on-line chatting provides the protective cloak needed for these individuals to admit to having marginalised or non-mainstream proclivities that must be kept a secret in real life.   During on-line conversations an individual is feeling less isolated and gain much needed emotional support.  A person who took part in a series of in-depth interviews stated:

"It seems to be easier to recognise who is similar to you and whom you'll like on the net.  Maybe this is because chat-rooms and newsgroups are more personalised and so you come into the room knowing you have something in common" (McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000: 74).

Active participation in chat-rooms that were concerned with marginalized aspects of identity, caused the individual to eventually bring the concealed identities into the open, telling family and friends about it for the first time (McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000).  For people who felt that their identity was stigmatised in real life, the Internet provided a safe environment by which they could find 'people-like-me' who helped them build significant relationships with others (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainaple & Fox 2002).

### 5.4.6   Loneliness and self-disclosure

Another aspect that is interrelated with the levels of self-disclosure is the feeling of loneliness.  For the purpose of this chapter, loneliness is defined as a "self-perceived state that a person's network of relationships is either smaller or less satisfying than desired" (Leung 2002: 242).  The cognitive layer imbedded in this concept refers to the individual's conclusion that he or she has fewer or less initial social relationships than desired.  The other side of the coin refers to the subjective experience of uneasy, uncomfortable feelings, distress and perceptions of deficiencies in one's social relations.

Sermat and Smyth in Leung (2002: 241) attributed loneliness to a "lack of opportunity to talk about personally important, private matters with someone else".  Lonely individuals many times are unwilling to enter into interpersonal situations that involve risk of being rejected, embarrassed or disappointment.  During chat-room interactions those risks are few because of the faceless encounters, as is evident from the following verbatim response.  "I know that I sometimes use the net to combat loneliness and isolation, but I am usually content to read messages, it makes me feel involved, and in fact through the notices, I get involved with things that otherwise would have passed me by.  It's like radio, only interactive"  (Winter & Huff 1996: 30).

Leung (2002) tested the relationship between chat-room use specifically on the ICQ.com website and loneliness.  Three types of loneliness were identified:

- *Chronic loneliness:*     It evolves from social deficits continuing over a period of years and can no longer be attributed to the situation or environment.  These individuals tend to devalue social activities.
- *Situational loneliness:*     This results in the termination of a relationship.  These individuals tend to adjust to the environment by, for example, attending social group activities.
- *Transient loneliness*:     This term refers to the short duration of loneliness that most people experience periodically, as a result of brief periods of minor social deficiency.

With a correlation analysis Leung (2002) indicated that the frequency of chat-room use was not significantly correlated to chronic loneliness.  [Frequency was measured in days per week ($r = -0.09$)].  Chronically lonely individuals reported less active use of the Internet than situational-lonely and non-lonely individuals.  This ties up with the assumption that chronically lonely people tend to devalue any form of social activity and their interpersonal communication is characterised by withdrawal and passivity.  Those that do use a faceless environment as safety net for interaction have more reason to develop a pseudopersonality.  As mentioned earlier, loneliness is related to valence, accuracy and amount of self-disclosure.  This provides a reason why lonely individuals would be keener to be less honest about revealing the 'real-me' during on-line conversations.

## 5.5  The process of pseudopersonality development

According to Wood and Smith (2001) the 'mediated self' constructs a sense of 'who I am' through interaction with others by means of the Internet chat-room.  This process of mediation can be seen as a point on a continuum.  As illustrated in the next figure, during off-line socialisation processes the individual either remains anonymous or reveals his or her identity by engaging in face-to-face interaction.  During on-line socialisation the individual has the freedom to move between these two extremes.  The real me remains anonymous and the pseudopersonality is based on those aspects that the individual chooses to reveal to others.  For example it is impossible to hide one's weight or skin colour during face-to-face interactions but in cyberspace chances are good that nobody will ever know someone else's weight or skin colour.

40

**Pseudonymity**

**Anonymity**                                                **Identity**
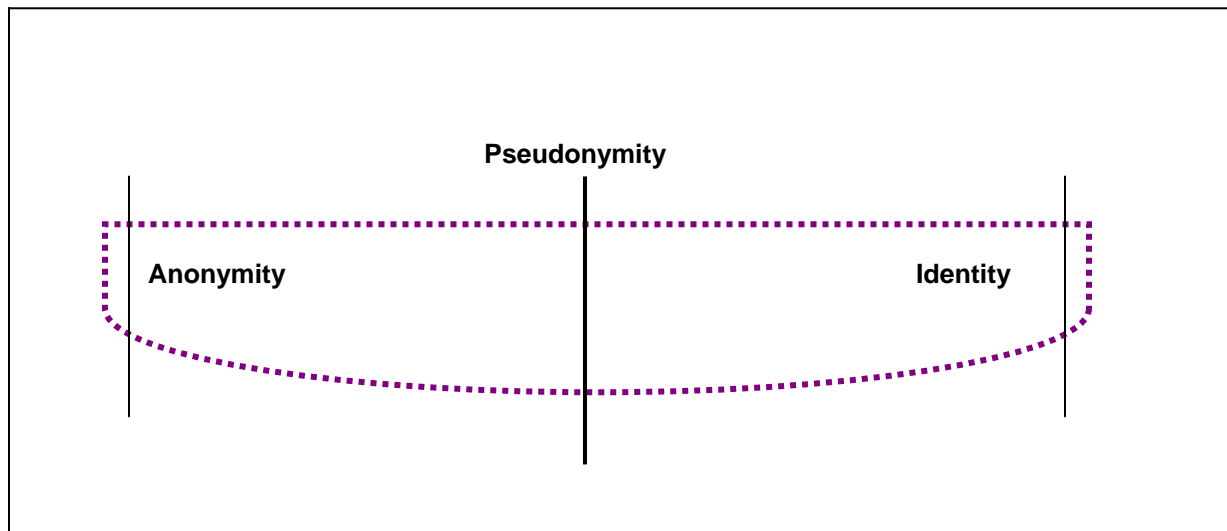
Figure 5.2:      Continuum of anonymity

Personal accountability in the off-line world is based on physical appearances, for example, a witness will testify in a murder trial that the killer has been seen a crime scene.  In contrast to this in cyberspace these degrees of anonymity have implications for personal accountability and debates around on-line identity usually centers around three issues:

- *The informative aspects of identity*:
  By providing personal credentials with a statement, it carries more weight thus making it more credible. On the other hand, the marginalised social identity needs anonymity to provide the much needed protection.
- *Group pressure*:
  If other group members can identify a person, he or she might only say the minimum thus conforming to group views, versus the freedom anonymity provides when expressing unpopular views, irrespective of what other group members think.
- *Law enforcement*:
  Anonymous postings can not be held accountable in court.

Irrespective of the views against and for anonymity, it remains one of the major attractions of cyberspace.  'On the net nobody knows you're a dog'.

## *5.6  Theoretical descriptions of the development process*

Next the aim will be to explain the process of pseudopersonality development by applying two theories:

- The Johari window
- The person-centred approach by Carl Rogers.

### 5.6.1   The 'Johari window' in the virtual world

The development of the pseudopersonality can be explained by using the Johari-window concept formulated in 1955 by Luft and Ingham  (Catcart & Samovar: 1975).  In broad terms the Johari window illustrates relationships in terms of awareness of information to the self and other individuals.

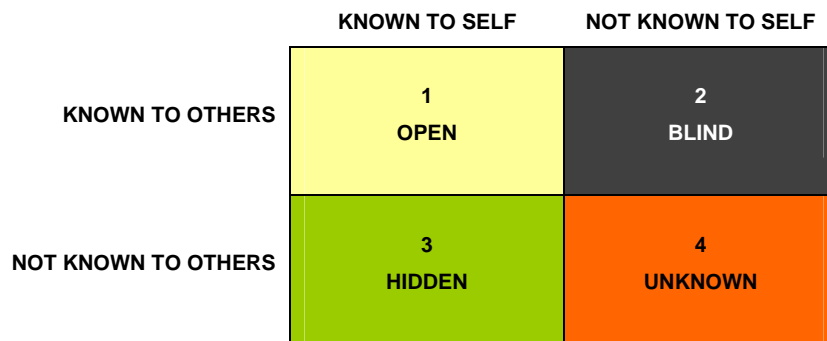|  | KNOWN TO SELF | NOT KNOWN TO SELF |
|---|---|---|
| **KNOWN TO OTHERS** | 1<br>OPEN | 2<br>BLIND |
| **NOT KNOWN TO OTHERS** | 3<br>HIDDEN | 4<br>UNKNOWN |

Figure 5.3:      The Johari window in the off-line world

- *Quadrant 1:*   The area of free activity, or open area, refers to behaviour and motivation known to self and known to others.
- *Quadrant 2:*   The blind area is where others can see things in a person of which he or she is unaware.
- *Quadrant 3*:   The avoided or hidden area represents things people know about themselves, but do not reveal to others.
- *Quadrant 4:*   The area of unknown activity, where neither the individual nor others are aware of certain behaviour or motives.

During face-to-face conversations in a newly formed group Q1 is very limited, with not much free and spontaneous interaction.  As a group grows and matures, Q1 expands in size and this usually means

that people are free to be themselves and to perceive others as they really are.  Imbedded in this process is the assumption of power and control over different parties in a group.  The individual has control over Q3 and does not expose behaviour or motives he or she does not want to.  In Q2 other individuals are aware of certain aspects that an individual might not be aware of, giving others more control over the process.  With this 'give and take' feedback process, the group grows and the open area in Q1 increases.

Within the virtual environment the individual has the power to manipulate information and create a pseudopersonalities with new characteristics.  This higher degree of personal control, linked to anonymity, contributes to individuals taking greater risks during on-line communication on the Internet.  The amount of social anxiety that is part and parcel of meeting somebody face-to-face for the first time is less during on-line meetings.  "On the Internet you can't smell my breath, catch the tremor in my voice or realize that I'm watching the rest of the party over my shoulder"  (Guiseppe & Galimberti 2001: 42).  One of the first things one usually asks when meeting someone for the first time, is his or her name.  In the virtual world the individual can be anybody and everybody except him- or herself.  The real ID book name Albertus, Jacobus, Stephanus Smit, can be changed to 'Hunk' or 'Sexy Al' for that matter.  The individual continues to have more control over Q3 (hidden area) and the principal of 'WYSIWIS' (What you see is what I say) is at play.  In Q2 (the blind area) the individual might not be aware of specific impressions that are given off which nevertheless are visible to others.  This area decreases since there is no guarantee that true information about the self is provided.

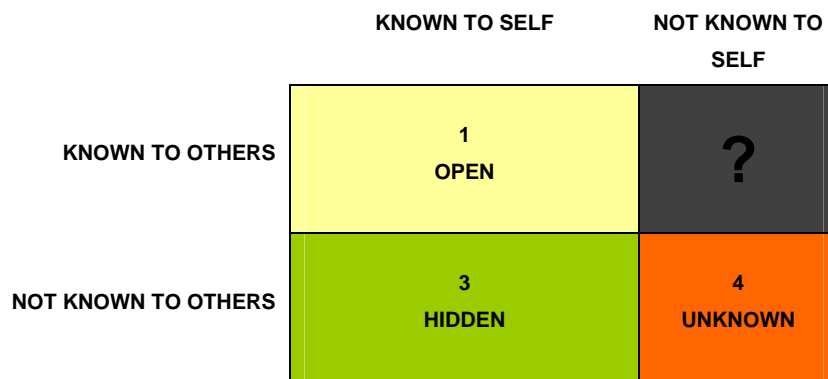|  | KNOWN TO SELF | NOT KNOWN TO SELF |
|---|---|---|
| KNOWN TO OTHERS | 1<br>OPEN | ? |
| NOT KNOWN TO OTHERS | 3<br>HIDDEN | 4<br>UNKNOWN |

Figure 5.4:      Changes to the Johari window in the virtual world

When constructs from the Johari window are used, the interaction process in the virtual world can be described as follows:

As indicated in the next figure there is one aspect that changes in the virtual world, compared to the off-line world, namely the amount of personal control an individual has during online interaction processes. The cyberspace environment is described as a "hybrid, allowing for different degrees of anonymity" thus making personality construction not a stable but a dynamic phenomenon and social construction (Talamo & Ligorio 2002: 110). On the left-hand side of the figure before the individual connects to the chat-room, he or she has the power to provide details of the true or real personality. The choice of what potential self to show is driven by strategic moves that participants can make within that situation. Choices are influenced by the individual's perception of how that social situation is characterised and what features will be more relevant and effective. Many times the individual chooses to provide more attractive information, for example adopt another age group, refer to good looks, or resort to gender-swapping.
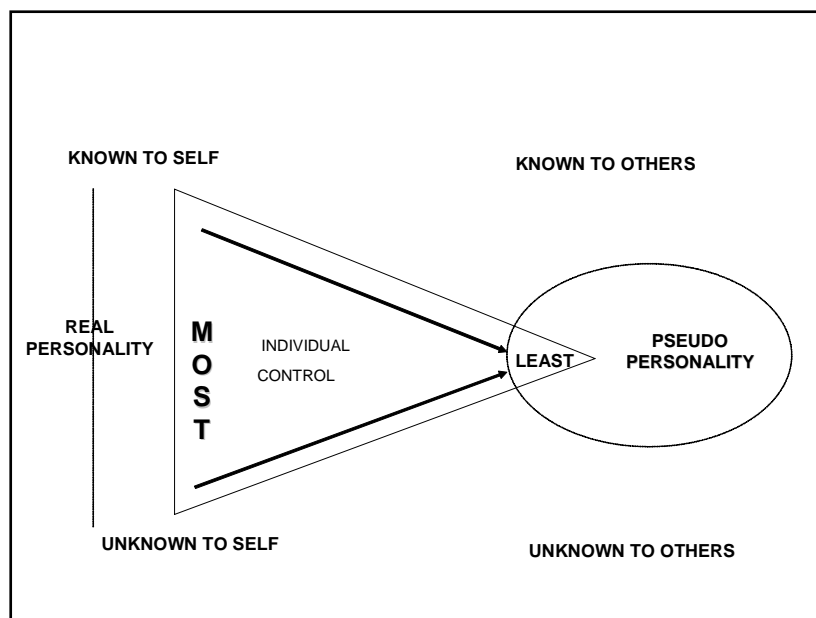


KNOWN TO SELF          KNOWN TO OTHERS

REAL PERSONALITY     M O S T     INDIVIDUAL CONTROL     LEAST     PSEUDO PERSONALITY

UNKNOWN TO SELF          UNKNOWN TO OTHERS

Figure 5.5:     The 'virtual' Johari window

The amount of personal control diminishes once the individual partakes in a chat-room. Pseudopersonality construction is co-dependant on social interaction. The individual has no guarantee that the 'new' personality will elicit the kind of response he or she wants. Furthermore he or she also has no control over other people's reactions to a pseudopersonality. This co-constructed context then guides and models further choices of pseudopersonality development, thus giving relevance to specific characteristic of each personality according to the specific type of chat-room, community and its development process (Talamo & Ligorio 2002). Since all participants share vulnerability during

interaction because no outcome can be predicted, people tend to trade control by gradually revealing more true information about the self and by covering wider areas of each other's lives (McKenna, Katelyn and Bargh 2000).  As is evident from the previous sections, pseudopersonality development is part and parcel of communication in the virtual world.  With no hindering physical boundaries inhibiting contact, communication is used as a technique with the ultimate goal of self-actualisation in the physical world.

### 5.6.2   Pseudopersonality development via the Person-centred approach

"If I keep from meddling with people they take care of themselves. If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves.  If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves. If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves"  (Rogers 1961:  178).

According to Rogers (1961) man is the architect of himself, emphasising the value of personal power during on-line relationships.   People have the resources for self-understanding, for altering self-concepts and attitudes by means of self-directed behaviour, but this can only be achieved in a climate that facilitates unconditional acceptance.   Imbedded in this quote, lies Carl Rogers' approach to address loneliness by truly listening to the meaning a person gives to life.  In many cases people live in private dungeons and do not have the luxury of expressing their own private inner world in face-to-face relationships.   The act of listening implies creative, active, sensitive and non-judgemental listeners which are all adjectives used to describe fellow chat-room participants.

The foundations of the Person-centered approach lie in two related tendencies:

- Actualising tendency
- Formative tendency.

"The good life … is the process of movement in a direction which the human organism selects when it is inwardly free to move in any direction" (Rogers 1961: 187).  The theory is based on basic trust in common good, a trust in organisms' movement toward constructive fulfilment of inherent possibilities for example, the actualising tendency.  This actualising tendency implies an integrated whole, for example an integration of different selves into one holistic whole.  This whole is very important since humans have a tendency to express themselves in the widest range of behaviours in response to a wide variety of personal needs.  People build on a self by cycling through many selves (Turkle 1995).  As stated

earlier, especially in the case of marginalized personalities all these needs cannot be addressed in the everyday life.  This motivates the need for a temporary resort to a pseudopersonality in a different space.  Under the protective cloak of anonymity, the chat-room participant can express the way he or she truly feels and thinks.   "The assurance of anonymity gives one far greater play in identity construction than is conceivable in face-to-face encounters" (McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000:  67). The optimal base for formative communication is congruency, for example, when the following three levels match:

- An individual's experience of a moment
- His or her awareness of an experience
- His or her communication of an experience.

These types of situations are growth-enhancing where an individual can feel free to develop a unique self. Modern day chat-rooms are perceived as being non-judgmental space, a space where one can discover unknown elements of the self, a safe space where a person can come into touch with a wider range of experiences.

Moving on to the formative tendency, Rogers (1961) described the need for positive regard from others that in turn influence the need for positive self-regard.  This implied that the formative tendency is not possible in isolation but can only be achieved in the presence of others or a broader social network making the personality a fluid construct that changes and are influenced by human experience.  To elaborate on this train of thought, there are two main motivators behind the tendency to interact with others on the Internet, for example self-related motives and social-related motives.  During Internet interactions with the focus on self-related needs, an individual will strive to find a social framework in which he or she can express his or her personality if it cannot be expressed in the immediate real-life environment.  To achieve personal satisfaction, a person has to be able to express his or her real self in social interaction and receive social recognition for it.  Different 'self-pictures' are tested in cyberspace where the individual interacts with the world.  By experiencing others' on-line reactions, an individual sees him- or herself through the eyes of other Internet users.  An obese person has the choice of creating:

- Pseudopersonality A:  a good-looking, well-built body builder in order to produce the picture of the ideal self to ensure positive feedback and regard from others.

<p align="center">or</p>

- Pseudopersonality B:  chooses to hide his obesity (according to Johari-window principals) thus creating a pseudopersonality by only focussing on the emotional and cognitive side and downplaying physical appearance completely.

<p align="right">46</p>

Scientists know that in a virtual environment, the individual experiences acceptance irrespective of real physical appearances, but the choice still remains which pseudopersonality to choose in order to integrate all the aspects of the self into one integrated whole.  "The Web is a safe place to try out different roles, voices and identities.  It's sort of like training wheels for the self you want to bring out in real life" (Guiseppe & Galimberti  2001: 1).

If a gentleman only seeks positive regard from females, he will most likely choose pseudopersonality A, although it is a false representation of himself, that will only make the process of actualisation more difficult.  His actualisation tendency will be enhanced if he chooses personality A as an idealised self.  If he would like to address his obesity, he could portray the persona of the body builder and experience the positive feedback on-line which can give him the motivation to revert to an off-line healthy lifestyle off-line.   Another option is to focus on other positive aspects of the personality and construct pseudopersonality B.   This will also enhance the actualisation process, since the safer Internet environment can foster more confidence in people during their off-line encounters as a male respondent puts it:

"I used to be a complete disaster when it came to talking with women.  In fact, I was so nervous about it that I would go to great lengths to avoid having to meet or talk with them, especially if I found them pretty or intelligent.  On the Internet I discovered that talking with women was much easier and not only that, many of them seemed to really like me, found me humorous, and sought me out to talk to.  I have become so much more confident with women and not just on-line"  (McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000: 76).

The principal of 'liberty with responsibility' can be used to summarise Carl Roger's viewpoints, when applied to on-line pseudopersonality development.  Although cyberspace is synonymous to a theatre the key is to reach a platform whereby newly acquired knowledge is integrated into one integrated, intact, responsible self.

## 5.7  The missing link – The journey from the 'cyber-me' towards the 'real-me'

"There is a possibility that the rewarding experiences with an on-line pseudopersonality may become decompartmentalised:  generalised to the off-line or real world, causing, in the worst case, delusions and unrealistic behaviour"(McKenna, Katelyn & Bargh 2000: 69).  The researchers assessed the

degree of ability to express the real self in a social environment with laboratory experiments. Two hypotheses led the investigation, for example:

- Introverts or neurotic people with difficulties in social interactions will locate the 'real-me' through the Internet
- Extroverts or non-neurotic people will locate the 'real-me' through traditional social interaction.

A sample of 42 hi-tech workers aged 20-32 years who were chat-room visitors completed questionnaires. The questionnaire comprised of four questions:

- Do you think you reveal more about yourself to people you know from the Internet than to real-life (non-Net) friends? (Yes/No)
- Are there things your Internet friends know about you that you cannot share with real-life (non-Net) friends?    (Yes/No)
- On as scale from 1-7 respondents had to rate the extent to which they expressed different facets of the self on the Internet compared to what they do in real life.
- Using the same scale they had to indicate the extent to which family and friends would be surprised were they to read personal Internet e-mail and newsgroup postings.

These four items were standardised to z scores and then to t scores. (Reliability for the 'real-me' questionnaire was calculated as 0.79 by means of Cronbach's coefficient.) Based on the average a 'real-me" index was formed; thus the higher the score the 'real-me' is more firmly placed on the Internet. Although the results were based on a small non-representative sample of chat-room participants, it was found that:

- Extroversion was negatively related to the 'real-me', for example extroverts tend to locate the real me through face-to-face interaction
- Neuroticism was positively related to the 'real-me', thus implying introverts tend to locate their real-me through Internet interaction.

## 5.8  Concluding summary

In summary, characteristics of the Internet for example anonymity and individual control of revealing information prove to be 'green lights' that attract those individuals who find it difficult to express the

'real-me' in face-to-face encounters.  It also shows the importance of a link between on- and off-line living.  Cyberspace should not be seen as an alternative space, something distanced from the physical world.  Cyberspace is an extension of one's physical world, a world mediated by means of one's computer, an electronic reflection of the world people currently inhabit.  It will always mirror people's real selves, their real lives.  Pseudopersonalities are temporary vehicles constructed by people for the journey of actualisation.  Going back to the question that was asked in chapter 2:  Is it mankind that is making technology (tools) or is mankind now being made by technology?  The results of this study will compliment this theoretical discussion by illustrating how mankind is being made by Internet technology.  Web spaces play an important role to facilitate personality growth towards maturity.

# CHAPTER 6:  COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC) – A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE



**Figure 6.1:  "We live in each other's brains as voices, images, words on screens"**

**(Rheingold in Turkle  1995: 235).**

## 6.1  Introduction

Computer-mediated-communication or CMC is defined as human behaviour maintained or altered by exchanging information through machines (Wood & Smith 2001).  This definition forms part of the concept of a mediated society where people are separated through different forms of technology ranging from paper in the more simple form to a cellular phone or in the present study case chat-rooms. In ancient civilisations Plato is quoted for having said that the true self could not be defined by text.  He believed in immediate communication where messages are transmitted more or less directly without the aid of exterior technology.  Today humankind is surrounded by devices designed to describe, influence and to some extent alter mediated communication routes.  This in turn implies a 'mediated self' where people construct a sense of who they are through interaction with others by means of various media forms.  The discussion will focus on different cognitive processes and theoretical perspectives of computer-mediated communication and the value of each within the broad framework of the modern cyberspace culture.

## *6.2  Cognitive processes in cyberspace*

The following cognitive processes are used during communication in cyberspace:

- Activation of stereotypes
- Prototype effects and;
- Priming of social categories resulting in the process of
- Snowballing.

### 6.2.1   Activation of stereotypes

The use of stereotypes need no introduction since it is part of daily life.  Although all participants for example Chief Executive Officers and students are equal in status when participating in chat-rooms, stereotypical roles and characteristics can be assigned to individuals based on limited amount of information available.  It has been reported that women tend to receive more sexual advances on-line than their male counterparts and it can be based on the stereotypical role of women to be 'sexual objects' (Gackenbach 1998).

### 6.2.2   Prototype effects

Membership of different groups is co-determined by how good the individual is perceived as an example of a group.  Judgments are then based on how well the individual fits into a specific group (Guiseppe & Galimberti 2001).  Should an unmarried male take part in computer-mediated communication, he can be categorised by means of a prototype effect.  Other group members would perceive him as either a 'bachelor' or maybe a 'homosexual' since he would easily fit into one or both categories, despite being a heterosexual student looking to meet interesting people on-line.

### 6.2.3   Priming of social categories

At any given moment some categories of information are more readily available than others.  Using the path of the least resistance, these categories are more likely to be used to form impressions about others (Guiseppe & Galimberti 2001). For example participants in women-only chat-rooms can be wrongly perceived as 'feminists' or 'lesbians' since there are no other sources of information available on other participants.

### 6.2.4   Snowballing

When stereotypes are formed or priming takes place during the initial phases of computer-mediated communication, Gilbert in Guiseppe and Galimberti (2001) stated that the communication process gathers momentum and it becomes more difficult to change these initial perceptions over time.  This can lead to mistakes since assumptions are made based on a specific trait ignoring individual behaviour that reveals more about the true person behind the computer screen.  If the emphasis is placed on the pseudopersonality, some attributes will be seen as more fitting than others.  This becomes the norm for example **all** women need help on the Internet especially when they are considered as 'newbies'.  This process of wrong perceptions or conclusions becoming the norm dictating future interaction during computer-mediated communication is known as 'snowballing'.

During on-line interaction it can also happen that people create opportunities for others to respond in a particular manner for example men tend to ignore women when the women are perceived as being strong willed and forward (Refer to chapter 5, paragraph 5.4.3).  This in turn provokes aggression from the women participants fuelling the perception of 'aggressive women', that is by the process of snowballing.  It is important to note that during the process of snowballing the perceiver is unaware that he or she is producing the behaviour of the target person.  It is likely that he or she would have behaved differently if the target person were not present.  One possible explanation for this type of behaviour is that during computer-mediated communication people spent more time on monitoring their own behaviour, impressions and responses to others than focussing on the result of, or effect their own behaviour has on other participants.

In summary these cognitive processes that were described are rife especially during the onset of computer-mediated communication.  It is evident that computer-mediated communication has changed from being a pure cognitive artefact to a social artefact, one that exceeds geographical boundaries.  Since chat-room participants are bound to the written inputs from others during computer-mediated communication, it is much easier to make mistakes, to draw wrong conclusions about other participants, especially in the early stages of communication.  It is important to get to know the individual, as is the case during face-to-face interaction, before any conclusions are drawn about who the person really is.  The Web is not an alternative world, but an electronic reflection of the world that people currently inhabit.  It is therefore important to provide individuals with an opportunity to reflect themselves back to others instead of painting a picture on their behalf.

## *6.3 Theoretical descriptions of the CMC process*

Against the backdrop of the mediated society and cyberspace culture, different theoretical models have been developed to describe the role and influence media has on a communication process.  Face-to-face communication is seen as the benchmark to evaluate the input of the different media forms during the process.  The following theoretical models will be discussed:

- Model of Media Richness
- Model of Social Presence
- Theory of Social Context Cues
- Model of Social Identity De-individuation (SIDE).

### 6.3.1   Model of Media Richness

Media forms differ in their ability to reduce ambiguity during communication processes.  Rich forms of media facilitate feedback and communication and is based on multiple cues with unique, individually tailored and highly specified messages implying a non-ambiguous and interactive communication process (Guiseppi & Galimberti 2001; Gackenbach 1998).  Face-to-face communication is the richest form of communication placing computer-mediated communication lower in ranking because of limitations such as:

- The absence of meta-communicative features like facial expressions
- The absence of collaborative commitment and co-formulation of messages
- The asymmetrical imbalance of the sender-receiver relationship
- The longer waiting period for interaction to take place (Guiseppi & Galimberti 2001).

### 6.3.2   Model of Social Presence

Wood and Smith (2001) conceptualised social presence as the degree to which individuals perceive one another as real people and any resulting interaction between two people as a relationship.  The importance of the connection is based on the amount of non-verbal information available to the receiver

through any channel. The higher the number of communication channels that are available the greater the social presence an individual has. During face-to-face interactions the optimum number of channels is available. During computer-mediated communication, only text is available implying the lowest social presence of all. According to this theory computer-mediated communication is very task orientated and impersonal that leads to more negative perceptions about participants (Gackenbach 1998). This implies that computer-mediated communication is limited in a sense that non-verbal contact is impossible and that sharing of emotions is only possible to a certain extent.

### 6.3.3   Theory of Social Context Cues

Here the focus is placed on information or social cues that are provided during computer-mediated communication. People tailor communication to the setting around them. Gackenbach (1998) defined social context cues as indicators of appropriate behaviour within a specific situation. During computer-mediated communication a limited amount of social cues are available to the participants. During these situations people tend to become more self-orientated and less concerned about feelings and opinions of other participants, a motivation for development of de-individuation. As in face-to-face encounters, people will always be motivated to develop social relationships in any communication context, including computer-mediated communication. They form impressions of each other based on available information in a social situation, which can be very limited especially in the initial stages. The absence of on-line social cues, especially during initial contact phases, create ample opportunities for cognitive mistakes such as stereotyping and snowballing to occur. During computer-mediated communication, as in other social situations, it is important that participants are sensitive to the differences between a *face-to-face* social situation and an *electronic* social situation.

### 6.3.4   Model of Social Identity De-individuation (SIDE)

During an Internet conversation in a chat-room one usually operate by means of pseudonyms. Even when a participant decides to use his or her real name, there is still an amount of anonymity involved especially when he or she interacts with individuals from other cities across continents. De-individuation can be described as a cognitive state produced by visual anonymity and physical isolation (Guiseppe & Galimberti  2001). Winter and Huff (1996) stated that the lack of social cues (for example dress codes in face-to-face interactions) during on-line conversations create an environment where people feel less inhibited and more prone to hostility and aggression. Gackenbach (1998) agrees with the definition that on-line behaviour is less inhibited than comparative behaviour in off-line encounters.

Another explanation for de-individuation is the two-component model of self-awareness summarised by Gackenbach in 1998.  In this model the focus is placed on:

- *Public self-awareness*    -    An individual is aware of a possibility of being evaluated.
- *Private self-awareness*    -    An individual is aware of his or her inner motives and personal evaluations.

During computer-mediated communication, private self-awareness is more dominant since individuals tend to be more concerned about their own presentation to others in a group.  Greater self-disclosure is associated with private self-awareness and the individual becomes less concerned about external evaluation that is public self-awareness.  This compliments the discussion about personal power that is more dominant in a 'virtual Johari-window' (Refer to chapter 5, paragraph 5.6.1).

According to McKenna, Katelyn and Bargh (2000) de-individuation can:

- Result in a weakened ability to regulate one's own behaviour
- Reduce one's ability to engage in rational long-term planning
- Increase one's tendency to react to immediate cues and emotional states
- Result in an individual that is less likely to care what others think of his or her behaviour.

Guiseppe and Galimberti (2001) elaborated on this list by stating that de-individuation implies greater group cohesion and group identity that dominates individuality of participants.  Due to the anonymity of postings, social identities rather than personal identities, are activated during on-line group discussions (Gackenbach 1998).  Behaviour is regulated by means of the norms and values in a chat-room and those social context cues that are available at a given time.  This enhances group conformity, polarisation of ideas and arguments, downplaying individuality.  As a practical example, a person may anonymously participate in a chat-room debating a certain issue.  If another individual sends a posting that this person disagrees with or finds emotionally upsetting he or she may experience de-individuation, react ferociously and respond in the heat of the moment by attacking the other person in a highly volatile and aggressive manner.  These reactions are known as 'flames' or 'flame wars' and can erupt between faceless, anonymous, de-individuated participants.  "Flaming is behaviour found in electronic communication that produces tension and may generate disparity between individuals. Flaming is hectoring or haranguing another person electronically, in response to an electronic message"  (Winter & Huff 1996: 31).  Where the individual is unaware of a snowballing process, Gackenbach (1998) reminds researchers that de-individuation is a deliberate action on the part of a participant.

## *6.4  Assessment of CMC theoretical models*

The value of any theory is determined by its practical applicability in the 'lived' world.  Since on-line snowballing based on stereotypes, prototypes and priming occur specific actions are taken to prevent it from happening as far as possible.  "The main purpose of the Internet is to allow people from around the world to communicate and exchange information.  It draws it strengths from the diversity of the users because there is no one group or person in charge.  Just like the physical world, the Internet cannot rely on laws to keep order.  There must be some level of ethics that people operate under in both these worlds"  (Thomas, Forcht & Count 1998: 74).  By setting norms for behaviour, specific actions are encouraged.  Wells and Meche (1999) described this process on the Internet as 'netiquette'.  As within any social process rules are needed to govern behaviour encouraging mutual respect between participants.  Many chat-rooms also have moderators evaluating postings in order to limit flame wars.  Moderators can intervene by means of 'toading' certain individuals.  Participants that disrupt groups can be 'toaded' for example given a special character such as a frog only visible to other participants as an identification tool, thus making the culprit visible to other chat-room participants (Wallace 1999).  The SIDE model provides valuable insight into the reasons for flaming.  This motivates Internet site-owners to introduce chat-rooms with clauses like:  "Please respect the rights and dignity of others using this forum – racism, hate speak and other fascist expressions will not be tolerated" *(http://mweb.co.za/airyou…/forums* 11 Mar. 2004).

Every coin has two sides and although de-individuation can result in flaming, the process has positive results as well.  Internet communication allows individuals to take greater risks in making disclosures to their Internet friends.  Although the assurance of a faceless encounter provides and individual far greater play in identity construction than in face-to-face encounters Gackenbach (1998) warns against excessive self-disclosure on the Internet.  Under the protective cloak of anonymity users can express the way they truly feel and think, giving the reason for the success of on-line self help groups  (Winter & Huff 1996).

In the three models, namely the model of media richness, the model of social presence and the theory of social context cues, computer-mediated communication is described, as a process in which non-verbal cues and emotional communication are limited or absent, making it a poor communication medium with little social presence and limited social context cues.  Computer-mediated communication

can never replace face-to-face interaction but research findings in chapter 8 will show how often emotions and other non-verbal cues are used creatively in chat-rooms.  Emoticons are symbols or abbreviations that describe emotions bringing back feeling to on-line conversations.  Some individuals describe emotions attached to the messages in detail and others use emoticons such as 'Lol' meaning 'laugh out load'.   Virtual reality is a potentially rich medium that opens up new pathways for representing emotion.  Colours, three dimensions of sculpture, music or interesting abbreviations are being used in dynamic ways to express individual feelings and thoughts.

## 6.5  Concluding summary

The question can be asked whether modern computer-mediated communication is socially more desirable than traditional face-to-face encounters?  It depends on the individual motives of participants.  For a shy individual, computer-mediated communication might be beneficial since he or she is able to be very selective with presenting the self to others.  But then again, reduced social cues can lead to an idealised perception of an individual, and when an actual face-to-face meeting does take place, one can be disillusioned since the computer-mediated communication impression was overly positive.  During computer-mediated communication the levels for self-disclosure are higher, making electronic self-help groups very effective, since anonymity motivates an individual to remove those strategic, carefully constructed self-presentations and reveal more about a real me.

Is computer-mediated communication a replacement of traditional face-to-face encounters?  Computer-mediated communication s merely an extension of our face-to-face world and can be seen as a social network.  In the off-line world, tarred roads connect people and enable them to maintain geographically dispersed networks.  In the borderless world of cyberspace chat-rooms connect people although they will never meet face-to-face.  On a highway care must be taken not to exceed speeding limits.  The same principle applies to on-line interaction where people must be aware of de-individuation and its effects for example flaming.  Participants must not be hasty in drawing conclusions that might be wrong and sticking by it for example snowballing throughout an on-line conversation.  People prefer a communication medium that is most suitable in a given context which is not always the richest medium for example in formal working relationships, e-mails are appropriate and should one wish to experiment with multiple pseudopersonalities, the use of different chat-rooms are more appropriate.

# CHAPTER 7: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CYBERSPACE CULTURE - A CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



Figure 7.1:     Symbols of cyberspace culture

## 7.1    Introduction

In the previous chapter the computer-mediated communication process on the microlevel has been described in detail.  This chapter will be structured in two distinct sections to provide a theoretical discussion of the next two levels of the Internet experience:

- Firstly the discussion will focus on the second stage of cyberspace culture development.  On the mesolevel of an Internet experience the focus is placed on group dynamics as well as community development in cyberspace compared to the same phenomenon in the off-line world.  In order to make a theoretical comparison between on-line and off-line groups and communities, research and theoretical explanations within the broad field of Social Psychology will be applied.

- The main focus of this chapter will be on the second section looking at the macrolevel of the Internet experience.  The Symbolic Action Theory will be used as basis to explain in detail the development of the cyberspace culture from a cultural-psychological perspective.

- The chapter will be concluded with a psychological description of different values important in the off-line world.  Later on the research results will aim to identify and compare the values that forms part of the cyberspace culture.

## *7.2    Group dynamics in cyberspace*

Sceptics have always debated whether cohesive groups could really emerge from computer-mediated communication due to the lack of usual social cues that are present in face-to-face groups.  Contrary to this viewpoint, there is evidence for a very strong sense of 'groupness' that emerges regularly on the Internet in the form of thousands of on-line chat-rooms operating on a global basis, 24 hours of the day.  Before the discussion begins the term 'group' should be defined.  A **group** "is a collection of two or more people who are interacting with and influencing one another" (Wallace 1999: 57).  Furthermore a group is also defined as "one kind of social network, one that is *tightly bounded* (delimited by strict measures of inclusion or exclusion of members), *densely knit* (with connections maintained between most pairs in the group), and *multiplex* (with ties based on many different kinds of exchanges) (Gackenbach 1998: 215).

### 7.2.1    Group conformity

When individuals influence each other during interaction, the word conformity is often used as a first phase of group development.  Successful off-line groups need a certain amount of predictability and one way of achieving this is to improve individuals' willingness to share, think alike and agree with a group's way of thinking.  In off-line groups, for example sport teams, individual players must conform to a unique dress code during matches.  In cyberspace these physical features that contribute to people's tendency to conform in a group setting are absent since groups members are not physical visible to one another.

Furthermore, members of on-line groups conform by means of their communication styles and patterns that are different from their off-line communication styles and patterns.  Traditional grammar rules do not apply to computer-mediated communication, misspellings, punctuation errors and ungrammatical sentences are perfectly acceptable, and preferred during on-line communication.  In off-line groups real names will be provided by group members but in cyberspace, use of pseudonyms is the norm.  In the face-to-face world group members will have a fair amount of personal information on each other such as gender, age, personal contact details and physical addresses.  In cyberspace it is accepted that no such personal information is provided especially in the case of children.

New entrants to off-line groups for example first timers in an elegant five star restaurant will often watch how regular visitors behave in order to learn acceptable patterns of behaviour in order to conform to a group. These visual cues are not available to newcomers in a chat-room or on-line group making access let alone conforming very difficult. In order to compensate for this Wells and Mesche (1999) used the term 'netiquette' to describe the on-line guides available to 'newbies' or newcomers prior to entering and interacting in chat-rooms. The Internet 'netiquette' consists of various dimensions namely:

- Country-specific 'slanguage'
- Grammar rules
- Emoticons.

As one enters a chat-room (on-line group) netiquette will provide general rules about on-line behaviour, guiding newcomers thus making it easier to join and ultimately conform to on-line group behaviour.

The main motivation for conformity in any group whether it is in the on-line or off-line world, is to protect a group from destabilisation. In the face-to-face world, should an individual fail to conform to the rules of a group there are various mechanisms in place to redirect behaviour or in extreme cases to punish unacceptable behaviour. Personal accountability in the off-line world is based on physical appearances, for example a witness will testify in a murder trial that the killer has been seen on the crime scene. In contrasting cyberspace, pseudopersonalities failing to conform to the rules of a chat-room have to be dealt with in different ways. On-line group moderators can stop postings from a particular offender and ban him or her from a site. A more potent threat to on-line group members failing to conform is the process of 'toading'. 'Toading' refers to on-line group moderator's power to alter an individual's personality and appearance to a negative character for example a frog. This is only visible to other group members thus labeling the individual as a non-conforming culprit (Wallace 1999: 65).

### 7.2.2 Group polarisation

Group polarisation is often a result of group conformity where an individual is dominated by the majority vote or view that result in extremist and fascists groups. The off-line world can share many such examples of which the segregated political past of South Africa is just one. In an off-line group the group polarisation process can be described as follows: initially an individual holds a relatively moderate view about an issue, but after talking to others about it he or she may move away from the

middle ground towards one of the fringes or extreme points on the continuum.  Psychologists David Mayers and George Bishop showed how this 'move towards the fringes' occurs when like-minded people get together to discuss racial attitudes (Wallace 1999: 71).  As in the off-line world group polarisation is also applicable to on-line group behaviour since on-line groups mainly develop because of shared views, interests and hobbies.  An individual opinion can easily get lost during on-line communication especially since group members are not physically visible to each other.  In many cases group members will just ignore postings of individuals who disagree with a group's point of view (Kiesler 1997: 181).  In summary group polarisation do occur in off- and on-line groups, especially if there is a strong sense of group identity that promotes group conformity and cohesiveness.

## 7.3  *Virtual communities*

Despite the active participation in on-line groups that has been discussed in the previous section is it possible to talk about the existence of virtual communities?  In order to answer this question, communities as they are known in the face-to-face world should be described in order to ascertain whether virtual communities really exist.

### 7.3.1  Communities in the off-line, face-to-face world

What makes a group of people develop into a community?  Central to off-line community development is a sense of belonging.  Individuals in an elevator rarely feel as if they belong to a group in the same way that they belong to a religious group or political party.  Well known in social psychological circles are the terms 'Gemeinshaft' and 'Gesellschaft'.  Back in 1957 the German social psychologist Ferdinand Tönnies already called this sense of belonging or sense of we-ness 'Gemeinshaft' compared to a detached gathering of people he called 'Gesellschaft' (Wood & Smith 2001: 114).   The feeling of belonging to a fellowship reflects the bonds experienced in a state of 'Gemeinshaft'.  Besides this sense of belonging, communities in the face-to-face world share common beliefs, attitudes and behaviour on a daily basis and tend to live in close-knit communities situated in a central geographical location in close proximity of each other (Smith & Kollock 2001).  Traditional communities were often bound together by economic considerations or a need for mutual protection.   Imbedded in this description are the assumptions that communities are geographically bound to specific locations and community members must experience face-to-face interaction on a regular basis.

**7.3.2   Virtual communities in cyberspace**

"Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough with significant human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold in Wood & Smith 2001: 110).  Communities in the off-line and on-line world provide individuals with a sense of belonging or 'Gemeinshaft'.  Imbedded in this definition the major difference between the virtual and face-to-face communities is the assumption that virtual communities are based on ongoing communication and not geographical boundaries or face-to-face interaction.  Virtual communities thus allow people to transcend geographic boundaries and unite with others who share common interests by means of computer networks.  Complimentary to the above, Wood and Smith formulated another definition of the virtual community stating that it is "a shared understanding of inter-relatedness among participants in computer-mediated environment" (2001:  117)

Virtual communities distinguish themselves from on-line groups when they feature the following four characteristics (Jones in Wood & Smith 2001:  115):

- *A minimum level of interactivity:*  Instead of face-to-face interactions there must be a flow of messages or postings between the participants.

- *A minimum level of sustained membership:*     Once-off or sporadic on-line interaction does not constitute a virtual community.  A virtual community only exists if there is an *ongoing, continuous* flow of messages through time between participants.  With time strong bonds and relationships develop between group members that are based on shared ideas, perceptions and world views.

- *A variety of communicators:*     On-line community members establish and maintain their relationships and community ties by interacting by means of different communication mediums.  In most cases chat-room discussions are complimented by personal e-mails, webcam communication and sharing of personal web pages with each other.

- *Common public space:*   In the borderless world of cyberspace no physical addresses or meeting places are available to community members to meet at or live in.  However cyberspace does provide common public spaces in the form of chat-rooms where members of a virtual community can meet on a regular basis, irrespective of their off-line physical geographical locations.

In summary on-line computer-mediated communication between individuals do have potential to develop into close-knit virtual communities with unique features that are different to those from traditional off-line communities.  These virtual communities are prerequisites for the development of the cyberspace culture on a macrolevel that in turn connects different virtual communities on a global basis.

## *7.4    Development of cyberspace culture*

Within the broad paradigm of Cultural Psychology this section will describe the Internet experience on the macrolevel.  Specific principles from the Symbolic Action Theory formulated by Boesch in 1991 will be applied to describe the developmental process of cyberspace culture.

### 7.4.1    Defining culture

Complimentary to the definitions provided in chapter one as well as the Humanistic way of thinking where human experience influence personality, Boesch defined culture as "the stable psychological, material and institutional results of the process of interaction between individuals and groups, and their natural material and social surroundings (1991:  9).  He elaborated further by arguing that "culture is a creation of human beings, a result of choices made over generations, but also a result of continuous interactions between individuals, groups and their environment"  (Boesch 1991: 367).

### 7.4.2    Experiencing culture

In the off-line world foreign cultures are experienced by means of language while a culture-specific language is also the carrier of non-verbal cues.  As is the case in the off-line world, cyberspace culture is also experienced via unique language use in chat-room discussions that were referred to as 'slanguage'.        When       the       ICQ.com       website       is       visited,       one       can       visit       the http://www.slanguage.com/southafrica.html for country-specific on-line dictionaries.  Therefore, in any culture the individual can label his or her experience with a word thereby applying a *denotative* classification to an experience thus focusing on the 'surface traits' of culture.

However these denotations are also associated with a personal experience, personal or cultural beliefs and evaluations private to an individual.  Complimentary to the Humanistic definition of personality as

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an ever-changing construct influenced by human experience (discussed in chapter 5), culture also influence the process of personality development. "Learning an alien culture confronts barriers deeply founded in our own self, relating to processes of self-definition" (Boesch 1991: 27). These *connotations* are difficult to communicate and are described as the 'depth traits' of a culture (Boesch 1991: 23). A connotational understanding of culture is important for establishing personal relationships and a sense of belonging between individuals. In summary the experience of the cyberspace culture starts with denotation where the newcomer must learn the language first. Over time and with continued interaction and participation in virtual communities the individual gets to know the depth traits or connotative meaning of culture. It ties in with the main theme of this study: "By understanding the patterns of Internet behaviour and the exchange of information through the eyes of chat-room participants, conclusions can be drawn about norms and values of the cyberspace culture" (Refer to chapter 3).

### 7.4.3   Cyberspace culture's starting point:  Action

Humans are in constant interaction with an environment whether it is a physical environment or cyberspace. "It is action which relates the individual to his or her environment, action which leads him/her to assimilate his or her world, to identify with it, submit to it, dissociate from it or rebel against it. In the course of these various forms of interaction, the individual's reality will be influenced or even transformed, and the self will be structured. These processes are interrelated in complex ways, but the basic concept that symbolise them is action" (Boesch 1991: 364). The Symbolic Action Theory compliments Carl Rogers' views on personal growth and creativity when the assumption is made that an individual tends to maintain and enlarge his or her action potential by transcending existing structures, testing frontiers and trying to cross them. Although each individual interaction process with an environment is unique they overlap, hence the formation of groups and communities. On the macrolevel this assumption implies that culture is also a field of action. Culture combines these overlapping fields of action in a collective space of action that consist of the combination of individual action spaces.

### 7.4.4   Culture defines possibilities and conditions for action

Since culture develops and changes as a result of individual actions and interactions, the opposite is also true; culture also influences behaviour. In this perspective **cyberspace culture** are "a set of

beliefs or standards, shared by a group of people, which helps the individual decide what is, what can be, how to feel, what to do and how to go about doing it *when using the Internet*" (Johnston & Johal 1999: 183).  Culture does not prescribe action but allows the individual some freedom of choice. Boesch described it as 'conditions for action' or 'zones of tolerance'.  As long as behaviour falls within these zones it may appear to be daring or unusual but it will not yet be considered deviant (Boesch 1991: 36).  Culture needs individualisation, originality and inventions in order to creatively adapt to change as much as it needs collective conformism to ensure long term longevity.

### 7.4.5   The meaning and symbolism of action

In previous paragraphs the cyberspace culture was defined in terms of it 'depth traits' or connotative meaning of actions that are based on personal experiences.  It is in this realm that actions begin to symbolise a deeper meaning or understanding of experience.  Any action, for example the choice of a pseudonym can be interpreted in relation to its symbolic meaning shared by members of the same cultural group.  Boesch (1991: 73) distinguished between five different forms of symbolism namely:

a.      Situational symbolism
b.      Functional symbolism
c.      Analogical symbolism
d.      Ideational symbolism
e.      Otherness symbolism.

*a.      Situational symbolism:*
Actions and their results are connected to an external situation or place.  In off-line cultures this usually relates to a geographical physical place, for example the African continent on which various African cultural groups reside.  As illustrated in the next figure, the physical qualities of a landscape such as warm climate, high temperatures and scenic landscapes are used as symbols when describing the African people living in these areas.



Figure 7.2:      The Zulu Kingdom in South Africa

In cyberspace culture, web spaces are designed to act as cultural mediators.  As illustrated in the next figure, visual artists of cyberspace create virtual spaces wherein physical bodies can interact without meeting each other personally.



Figure 7.3:      The on-line chat-room ICQ.com

*b.      Functional symbolism:*

Actions and their outcomes are connected to a functional outcome.  'Functional' has two meanings:  on the one hand it refers to processes within the organism for example breathing, feeling or thought.  On the other hand it refers of the instrumental use of an object for example a hammer is for nailing and a pen is for writing.  One example is a knife when interpreted in a Western culture in terms of its functional symbolism will refer to cutting, but in the Asian culture its functional symbolism will also refer to bad luck representing the break-up of interpersonal relationships.  In cyberspace culture a computer is not merely an information processor but, based on its functional symbolism, it is seen as a connection to the global village.

*c.      Analogical symbolism:*

Since culture combines overlapping fields of action in a collective space, actions are related to each other by analogy for example in off-line Western cultures use of guns may remind people of the World Wars and the killing of innocent civilians.    In the cyberspace culture pseudopersonalities are constructed based on experiences in the face-to-face world.  According to Wallace (1999) 45% of pseudonyms are related to the individuals themselves and personal experiences in the off-line world (Refer to chapter 5).

*d.      Ideational symbolism:*

Actions can remind people of similar actions and it can also be connected to general ideas.  In the Christian culture reference to human pottery can symbolise the general idea of God's relationship with the human race, since the Bible describes God's creation of man with statements like God that has molded man from clay.  Within the cyberspace culture the Internet symbolises the general idea of freedom of choice since it is not governed or regulated by any governing body.

*e.        Otherness symbolism:*

According to Boesch there is no reality without its alternatives.  In off-line language terms it is described as anonyms.  In the off-line world the Nazi regime in Germany symbolised a powerful empire but also the inability of one cultural group to respect cultural differences.  In cyberspace people specifically create on-line pseudopersonalities that are different from their off-line personalities, symbolising a person they are **not** in real life.

## 7.5    The psychology behind values

### 7.5.1   The definition of values

Taking the reader back to the definition of value systems provided in chapter 1 and without repeating all of the information, values can be described as "desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives"  (Seligman, Olson & Zanna 1996: 2).  The cultural group's value system acts as a peer group against which the individual compares his or her own value systems and it will guide individual behaviour in everyday situations when in contact with others.  Individuals therefore reorder their own value systems continuously according to the situations they found themselves in.  For example if a woman is confronted with the choice of having an abortion or not values related to the individual will be more important than conforming to traditional belief systems.  The opposite is true when one has to vote for a specific political party where the group value system is more important than the individual value system.

### 7.5.2   Motivational values

The authors elaborated on their discussion by providing ten motivational type values that govern off-line behaviour. The following table provides a list of the value types, each defined in terms of its central goal and followed, in parentheses, the specific single values the primarily represent it.

Table 7.1:    Definitions of motivational types of values in terms of their goals and the single values
that represent them (Seligman, Olson & Zanna 1996: 3)

| VALUES | DEFINITIONS |
|---|---|
| Power | Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources (Social power, Authority, Wealth). |
| Achievement | Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards (Successful, Capable, Ambitious, Influential). |
| Hedonism | Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself (Pleasure, Enjoying life). |
| Stimulation | Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life (Daring, A varied life, An exciting life). |
| Self-direction | Independent thought and action-choosing, creating, exploring.  (Creativity, Freedom, Independent, Curious, Choosing own goals). |
| Universalism | Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature (Broadminded, Wisdom, Social justice, Equality, A world at Peace, A world of beauty, Unity with nature, Protecting the environment). |
| Benevolence | Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact (Helpful, Honest, Forgiving, Loyal, Responsible). |
| Tradition | Respect, commitment and acceptable of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self.  (Humble, Accepting my portion in life, devout, Respect for tradition, Moderate). |
| Conformity | Restraint of action, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms (Politeness, Obedient, Self-discipline, Honouring parents and elders). |
| Security | Safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships, and of self.  (Family security, National security, Social order, Clean reciprocation of favours). |

In addition to this theory they described the relationships between these values by grouping them in terms of specific dimensions.  The next figure illustrates the conflict that develops between actions that are taken in pursuit of a specific set of values that are different from each other.  The motivational goals of the value types in **opposing** positions in the circle can not easily be pursued at the same time for example to seek personal success for oneself is likely to obstruct actions aimed at enhancing the welfare of others.  The dimension of 'openness to change' reflects an emphasis on individual thought and actions.  This is the direct opposite of the dimension of 'conservation' with a restriction of the individual actions in order to conform to traditional thoughts and practises.  The dimension of 'self-transcendence' where others are accepted as equals and there is a concern for others is in conflict with the dimension of 'self-enhancement' where individual success and dominance over others are important.
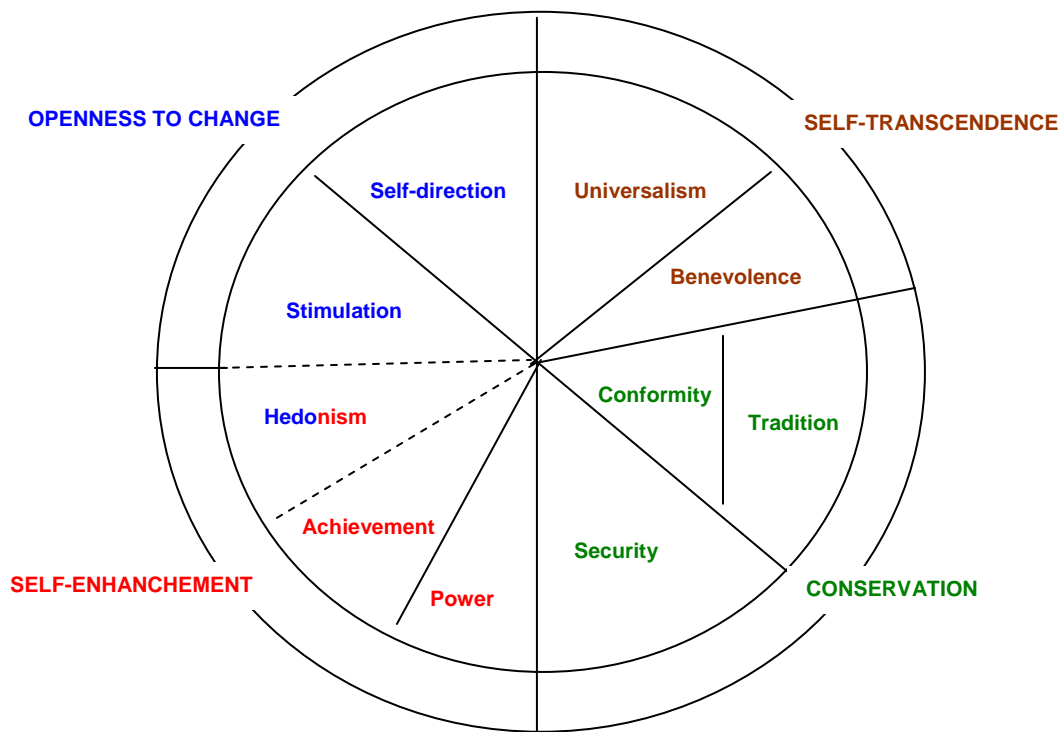
Figure 7.4:     The prototypical structure of value systems (Seligman, Olson & Zanna 1996: 5).

During their research the authors also found that the strongest predictor of failures in interpersonal cooperation can be attributed to the power values since it emphasises the competitive advantage to be gained even at the expense of others in the group.  Achievement as value promotes self-interest and also predicts failures in interpersonal cooperation.  The strongest predictor of successful interpersonal cooperation was the value of benevolence followed by universalism and conformity since the group and what is important to the group is put before individual needs and wants.  Conservation (coupled with the three values of conformity, tradition and security) correlated negatively with a readiness for out-group contact since any feedback from outside the group is perceived as a threat to the traditional belief systems and therefore the security, cohesiveness and thus longevity of the group.  In contrast the dimension of openness to change (including the values of self direction, stimulation and hedonism) correlated positively with readiness for out group contact since it provides exposure to new and different ways of life and opportunities to learn and explore them.  The same positive correlation was shown between the dimension of self-transcendence (including values of benevolence and universalism) and a readiness for out group contact since individuals although different from each others are seen as equals and not rivals.

### 7.5.3   Social values

Since the first set of values focused on motivational aspects it is also important to look at social values and how it influences behaviour.  According to the Social Adaptation Theory values develop from different life experiences.  People in the off-line world people adapt to different life roles in part through value development and value fulfillment.  Value development summarises previous experiences and provides a strategy for dealing with new situations and therefore new choices.  For example a person who value fun and enjoyment will use the Internet for games and social interaction but a person who value a sense of accomplishment will use the Internet for work related activities for example e-mail communication with colleagues.  Within this theoretical framework the following list of values (LOV) has been formulated.

Table 7.2:      The list of values according to the Social Adaptation Theory (Seligman, Olson & Zanna 1996: 138).

| VALUES | DEFINITIONS |
|---|---|
| Sense of belonging | To be accepted and needed by family, friends and the community |
| Excitement | To experience stimulation and thrills |
| Warm relationships with others | To have close companionships and intimate friendships |
| Self-fulfilment | To find peace of mind and to make the best use of your talents |
| Fun and enjoyment in life | To lead a pleasurable, happy life |
| Security | To be safe and protected from misfortune and attack |
| Self respect | To be proud of yourself and confident with who you are |
| As sense of accomplishment | To succeed at what you want to do |

These social values compliment the motivational values discussed in the previous section for example self respect and self-fulfillment compliment the dimension of self-enhancement with a focus on the individual achievements and successes.  Security is seen as a motivational as well as a social value and is important for people who lack economic, physical and psychological security.  A sense of belonging and the value of having warm relationships with others fit in with the dimension of self-

transcendence where it is important to be seen as an equal within a group thus being well respected within the group.  Excitement, fun and enjoyment fit with the motivational value of hedonism that fuels both dimensions of openness to change as well as self-enhancement.  These values are important in day-to-day off-line situations.  The next step will be to ascertain which of these values are important in day-to-day on-line situations within the cyberspace culture.

## *7.6    Concluding summary*

From a social psychological theoretical point of view this chapter aimed to compare on-line and off-line groups and communities with each other.  The researcher aimed to provide a cultural psychological description of the development process of culture in the off-line and on-line world.  Theoretical assumptions of the Symbolic Action Theory where used during the process.  Various values were described from a psychological perspective and in the following chapters the researcher will aim to test the applicability of these theories within the South African Internet context whilst addressing the main theme and research objectives of the study.