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Group Therapy through an Internet Chat Room: Implications for Virtual Politics

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Abstract. This article continues a series on research presented at the 1999 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. The article provides empirical data that have implications for the psychology of a virtual politics that is increasingly common in a globalized world.

One might posit that virtual politics has a very long history. This statement is founded on the assumption that virtual denotes anything short of face-to-face communication and instrumental action among participants who can perceive displays of concurrent verbal and nonverbal stimuli amongst themselves while sharing similar spatio-temporal coordinates. (Participants are those who are the source of communication and instrumental action, not merely functionaries, representatives, and underlings.) The statement also is founded on the assumption that politics denotes communication and instrumental action in a world wherein there is more need than resources to meet need. The long history of virtual politics would then include the gamut of covert and clandestine activities, the passing of notes and issuing of demarches, the sending of emissaries, the pursuits of diplomats, the use of audio and audiovisual hotlines, and the engaging in planning and analysis through imagination and fantasy.

Thus, it should not be surprising that much contemporary concern about the psychology of virtual politics is reactive to new technological aids--e.g., electronic mail and Internet postings, not the phenomenon itself. The concern bears on questioning the authenticity, spontaneity, immediacy, directness, and social psychological import of communication and instrumental action stemming from such aids. Social psychological import may be the most important for it comprises variation in--among other variables--impulsivity, aggression, cooperation, competitiveness, and various shifts in decision making that contribute to the essence of politics.

In this context of virtual politics, group therapy research by Barak and Wander-Schwartz at the University of Haifa is so intriguing. (This is even more the case when one realizes that group therapy can be conceptualized as essentially political--identifying and modifying conceptions of power relations and methods of satisfying needs amongst the concurrent strivings of other people.) They compared the psychological changes stemming from being a member in one of three groups--no-treatment control, standard group therapy, and group therapy via an Internet-based chat room. The researchers found little change for the control group and small, but statistically insignificant, positive changes for the two therapy groups in self-image, social relations, and well-being with some advantage for the Internet group. Also, the researchers found several similar group processes between the two group therapy groups--viz., perceptions of group cohesiveness, personal exposure, expression of feelings, independence, and order and organization. However, the researchers found that the Internet group reported higher levels of aggression and action orientation than the standard therapy group.

Granted the preliminary nature of these findings and the need to closely analyze the operational definitions of the above psychological constructs, one might conclude that there is at least the possibility that politics mediated via virtual communication and action may yield different consequences than the so-called "real thing." Because consequences of politics can comprise matters of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, pain or pleasure, and, ultimately, life and death for many people, one must--at best--

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ambivalently opt for the current promise of virtual methodologies as even incrementally superior to a long history of virtual communication and instrumental action. (See Barak, A., & Wander-Schwartz, M. (August, 1999). Empirical evaluation of brief group therapy through and Internet chat room. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA; Blanchard, A. (1998). Virtual communities and social capital. Social Science Computer Review, 16, 293-307; Frigione, F. (1996). Helios e l'Oscuro: Uno sguardo sulla "realta virtuale" della psiche. (Helios and the Obscure: A look at the "virtual reality" of the psyche.) Giornale Storico di Psicologia Dinamica, 20, 101-106; Plus ca change, plus la meme chose: Online communication a still offline. (April 23, 1999). IBPP, 6(16); The political psychology of virtual reality: Scandinavian trail blazing. (July 18, 1997). IBPP, 2(12).) (Keywords: Group Therapy, Internet, Virtual Politics.)

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