

Chapter 13

Virtual Reality and Identity Crisis: Implications for Individuals and Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Identity has become one of the single most important issues for human development and adjustment in today's turbulent times. Virtual world is changing the interface of identification and communication. Virtual reality has recently emerged as an effective tool to extend a healing space for an alternative identity. The focus of this chapter is on the challenges faced by the young generation, which is struggling to understand its "identity." The exploration of identity in such virtual environments may be a search for a 'unitary' construct about the self (Erikson, 1968). In this paper, the concept of "identity" and "identity crisis" and the potential challenges identified in the real and virtual world are discussed at length. In today's world people are pulled in different directions, thanks to the different kinds of societal demands from family, friends and society. It becomes difficult to find a uniqueness of one's self and yet able to fulfill the norms and parameters set up by the society. Respect for diversity of self would go a long way in allowing people to be "uniquely themselves" while belonging to a community. Healthy "crisis" or exploration can afford people the opportunity to knowledgeably investigate choices in which there is positive meaning with regard to where they have come from, where they presently exist, and where they envision their future to be (International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 2008). An attempt to explore the identity management and identity statuses has also been made to understand "real" and "virtual reality." Identity crisis and psychosocial moratorium's linkage (Erikson, 1963) to virtual reality have also been touched upon. An understanding of organizational identity with the individual identity.

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INTRODUCTION

“An identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or as a member of a social group that define who one is.” (Burke and Tully, 1977)

In the present era, questions regarding one self are constantly being asked and challenged. Issues of personal identity affect how we relate to others. However, identity in the online world is still poorly understood – both by the general public and scholars. As the internet becomes a central part of everyday life, these questions continue to rise in importance (Berman, Joshua and Bruckman (2001). In the present era questions regarding one self are constantly being asked and challenged. By reflexively adjusting one’s perception of self in reaction to society, people construct their individual identity (Boyd, 2001). The constant adjustment of one’s SELF, with the expectations of others and the societal norms plays an important role in building up an identity of oneself. The thought of gaining strength and support from one’s own identity is very crucial, for gaining inner strength. As Erikson argues, the construction of a single, unitary identity is achieved throughout the lifetime as individuals explore and then consolidate changes in how they define themselves (Grotevant 1998, quoted by Calvert 2002: 58). According to Calvert (2002), identity is often characterized in terms of one’s interpersonal characteristics, such as self-definition or personality traits, the roles and relationships one takes on in various interactions, and one’s personal values or moral beliefs. In psychology, identity is understood as a continual experience of the individual self; of that person’s uniqueness and authenticity, as well as the identification with life roles and the experience of belonging to bigger or smaller social groups (Vybiral et al, 2004).

Identity plays an inherent role in defining our social interactions. In face-to-face communication, many physical cues exist with which we convey our identity and our intentions. These physical

cues take a different form in a virtual world. And hence it is important to understand the purpose and meaning of the term “virtual identity” so as to understand the gradual merging of the physical identity into virtual identity. In the words of Vybiral and his associates, (2004), “In the environment of the Internet, the individual is not present as a physical subject, but only as a “virtual representation”. Thus on the internet, we do not influence our own selves, but our virtual representations. A virtual representation does not have an identity in the psychological sense. It is a “cluster” of digital data, a set of data that is ordered in some way. This virtual representation often includes digitally recorded and stored information about “who we are” a name or nickname, history, and status within the given virtual society. Just as in real life there is a physical record of identity in the form of an identity card, birth certificate, passport, etc., there is a record of “identity” (this time in a non-psychological sense) or identification in the virtual environment. One such record is an e-mail address, which is recorded and stored. In a way, the e-mail address represents our identity in the Internet environment. It becomes our virtual representation. We then project part of our real ideas and feelings – parts of our many-sided “I” – into our virtual representation”.

It is crucial to understand the role and interaction of identity in a virtual reality (VR). VR was originally conceived as a digitally created space that humans could access by donning sophisticated computer equipment (Lanier, 1992; Rheingold, 1991; Sutherland, 1968). Futurists heralded VR as an imminent transition in the ways humans would experience media, communicate with one another, and even perform mundane tasks. In the early nineties, pioneering scientists began considering new ways through which this groundbreaking technology could be used to study social interaction and other psychological phenomena (Bente, 1989; Biocca 1992a, b; Loomis, 1992). In subsequent years, “VR has continued to capture the imagination of scientists, philosophers, and artists for its

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