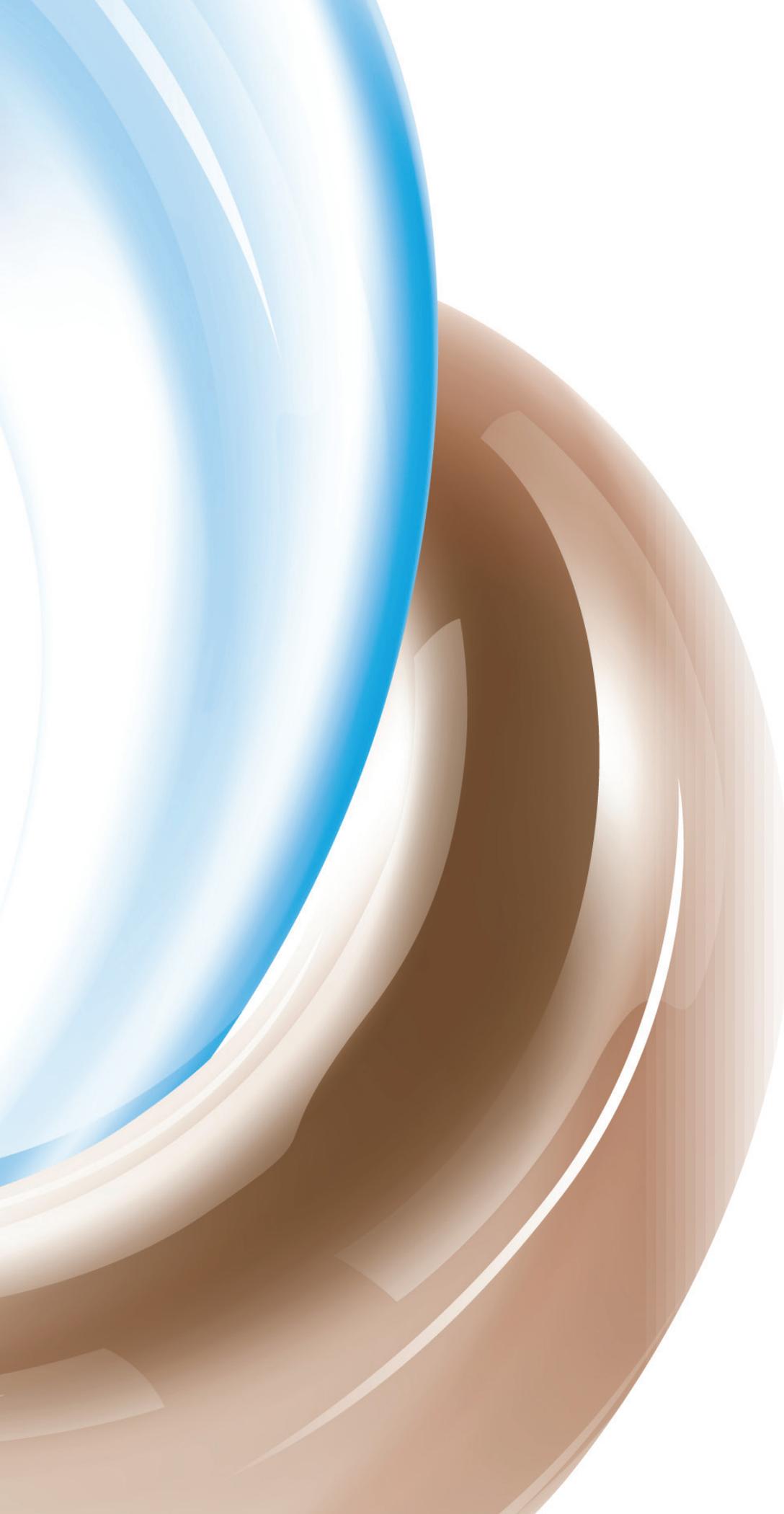


By Shawn Ware-Avant

ENGAGING Gamers

The Evolution of
Social Development
in Gen X, Y and Z

An abstract graphic on the left side of the page consists of several overlapping, curved, semi-transparent shapes. The top-left shape is a vibrant blue, while the others are in various shades of brown and tan, creating a sense of depth and movement. The shapes appear to be part of a larger, circular or spherical structure that is partially cut away, revealing the interior layers.

As clinicians,
we are trained
to assess for
pathology
in the clients
we see. In
essence
this means
determining
what mental
health
disturbance is
contributing
to a person's
inability to
function and
integrate in an
appropriate
social manner.

We endeavor to help our clients to develop coping skills so they may function socially in a way that allows them to acquire and maintain meaningful relationships. This sometimes requires a creative approach to exploring the client's pathology and developing strategies that address their mental health needs in a holistic way. This is especially true when the presenting issue is around Internet use, online social networking and/or gaming. We are experiencing an evolution of interpersonal relations and as helping professionals we must look closer at how technology is impacting psychosocial development.

Generations X, Y, and Z (the "Net Generations") include people who were born between approximately 1961 and 2010 and are comprised of the current and upcoming workforces and their preteen children. This group has always had knowledge of and access to computerized technology and its use for communication. As a result, it has become increasingly interwoven into their experience of daily life and productivity. Most public schools and the majority of colleges and universities teach and assign work that requires the use of computers and networks. Distance teaching via the Internet and conferencing technologies allow children and adults to learn from others all over the world. The majority of individuals who have matured during the last 4 decades have used digital/electronic technology and gaming for entertainment. During this time, computerized communication and social networking have increased at an accelerated rate. The most significant shifts have occurred in the last 10-15 years with the release of innovative networking and digital communications programs and devices that are being used and integrated as quickly as within a few weeks.

A New Perspective on Social Development Theory

Eric Erikson (1902-1994) was a developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst who believed that an

identity crisis is one of the most important conflicts people face in development. He said that "an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself." (Erikson 1970). A review of Erickson's theory reminds us that the psychosocial stages of development are marked by a series of eight conflicts a human being goes through from birth to death. Erikson believed that beginning in infancy, successful resolution at each stage results in a favorable outcome. For example, the first conflict, Stage 1: Trust vs. Mistrust, is successfully resolved if the infant learns and understands that caretakers are reliable. These conflicts are initiated by important events in our lives, and relationships provide experiences that teach each the individual the extremes of the challenges in that life stage. When both extremes are understood and mutually accepted as required and useful, the ideal virtue then surfaces in the individual.

In 2007, I learned about a virtual world where people developed businesses, owned virtual homes and participated in a virtual economy where real world money could be converted into virtual currency, invested and converted back for withdrawal. As a Generation Xer who had been exposed to video games since the age of 10, I became intrigued and decided to log on to see for myself. During the time that followed, I discovered many opportunities to explore interests, learn about other cultures and test my own beliefs about "self" and others in a way that might have been impossible to discover otherwise. My clinical work with children and adolescents struggling with balancing their digital relationships with face-to-face ones were excellent stepping stones to realizing that their parents, (and my peers), were also struggling with similar difficulties they hid in fear of judgment.

Prior to the Internet, we all defined ourselves based upon the community surrounding us and from that framework began to build an identity. Currently, we have access to people and cultures all over the world and our social framework is so expansive that people

Erickson's Psychosocial Stages and Virtual Self Development

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STAGE	CONFLICT	IMPORTANT EVENT	FAVORABLE OUTCOME
Trust v. Mistrust	Gaining trust in self and environment v. feeling mistrust and wariness of others	"Who are you and are you going to try to hack my computer?"	Ability to create a trusted social group (guild, friend's list, network)
Autonomy v. Shame/Doubt	Achieving a sense of autonomy v. shame and doubt over one's ability to be independent	"What a stupid rule, I want to try it this way!"	Being able to question rules and limits in a way that does not hurt others.
Initiative v. Guilt	Learning how to take initiative comfortably v. feeling guilty over motivations and needs	"I feel like I shouldn't be doing this, but I like it so I'm going to continue."	Challenging previously ingrained values in unconventional ways and identifying things useful to personal development
Industry v. Inferiority	Forming a sense of one's own identity vs. role confusion and self questioning	"I enjoy having knowledge of how all this works and helping people to figure it out."	Sense of comfort in virtual identity and able to develop since of personal morality
Intimacy v. Isolation	Achieving intimacy and connection with others v. feeling isolated and fearful of rejection	"I enjoy spending time with my online friends and the times we all get together for meetings and fun."	Creating relationships that extend beyond the virtual world – real world meetings/ties (Mastery II)
Generativity v. Stagnation	Leaving a Legacy/Giving back v. feeling stagnant and unfulfilled	"I have done so much online and been successful. I've always wanted to do __. I want to try it in the real world."	Creating a means to evolve the means and process of social connectedness Testing of virtual skills in real world projects to achieve goals/dreams
Ego Integrity V. Despair	Achieving ego integrity and relative peace with one's life v. a sense of despair and wastedness	"I have found success in following my dream of being __, the sky is the limit!"	Integration of Virtual and Tangible selves with less interest in virtual presence. Movement toward producing similar success in RW to that of Virtual World (Mastery III)

may find they relate to many different ways of "being." It's no wonder that some people have a difficult time "committing" to one sense of identity.

Upon examination of the process of balancing digital and face-to-face relationships in myself and my clients, I discovered that analogous to Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages, a similar process of conflict and struggle happens in the social development of those engaged in digital social communities. These experiences facilitated an increased awareness of the

presentation of clinical issues related to what I now call the digital psychosocial developmental process. I theorize an evolutionary shift in psychosocial development for myself, my peers and their children, who use online social networks (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) and/or Multilevel Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games [MMORPGs] (i.e., Second Life, World of Warcraft) as an important part of their social lives.

Additionally, I propose that when the clinician is aware of how the process of resolution and integration is

translated in digital connectedness, the individual progresses much more rapidly than when asked to terminate their online experiences altogether. For example, Trust vs. Mistrust (Stage 1), might involve the experience of entering a new online social network or gaming platform for the first time and the conflicts involved in learning to navigate it with the assistance of more experienced users. If the individual is able to engage others and rely on their guidance, he/she becomes more confident in their experience with the medium and is able to form a sense of competence and safety in those interactions. The individual might then feel ready to gain a sense of mastery similar to their mentors. They may then begin to overcome their sense of doubt around awkward attempts to use the social platform and become more skilled and fluid (Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt). Research which empirically validates assumptions around the impact of digital and online communication on social development at all eight stages, and the efficacy of adapted treatment models, is underway.

Treatment Considerations

As with any human activity, in excess, online social networking and gaming can become disruptive to an individual's offline functioning. With the increase in relationships that are created and/or maintained exclusively online, some clinicians find it difficult to plan treatment because clients are resistant to eliminating this means of social connectedness altogether. Many who seek help to overcome difficulties report that clinicians don't seem to understand their experiences and don't view their online relationships and gaming as "real" (Anthony 2001). However, it is clear that the paradigm for social development and connectedness is changing. As the way people access each other and information continues to evolve, so too will the way we provide services as clinical professionals.

There is a camp of professionals that have labeled "excessive" use of the computers and the Internet as an "addiction" and have attempted to apply similar

diagnostic criteria to that of gamblers. A subjective label of "excessive", relative to online social networking and gaming, requires close examination. Texting and e-mail communication is deeply embedded in our social culture personally and professionally and could easily be placed under the same label. Time invested in work activities and watching television and movies could also meet the same definition. What is truly being evaluated is how the activity interferes with healthy social interaction. Examination using this lens, might shape a more accurate definition for "excessive Internet/gaming use" or "addiction", as the time being invested in these digital interactions is, in fact, social. More useful criteria for evaluating the health of an individual's psychosocial development would be to consider if their use of digital technology has a severely negative impact on the creation and maintenance of face-to-face personal, familial and professional relationships. For example, an individual who uses the Internet "excessively" for pornography would not be considered under this definition, because the interactions are not designed to engender ongoing social connectedness. The drive is primarily to satisfy sexual urges. This alternative perspective conceptualizes computer and online usage as a symbol of evolutionary progression and views gaming and online social networking as part of that process. As such, focus of clinical intervention is placed on guiding the individual toward balance and assisting them in acquiring a better understanding of psychosocial processes and where they may be stuck.

Assisting Clients in Integrating Virtual and Real World Personas

Facilitating the integration of an individual's digital/virtual self with their tangible lives and relationships is the central focus of treatment. Initial sessions are used to assess client concerns and the nature of dysfunctional behavior. If the client presents issues they believe stem from online use, consider they may

be experiencing conflict with social relationships and evaluate what stage of psychosocial development they may be struggling to resolve. Often clients also present with clinically significant anxiety and depression and may have a more favorable view of their online relationships than their tangible ones. Referral for a medication evaluation to assist with those symptoms might be useful to allow the client to develop healthy coping skills if their online use is indicative of escapism.

The treatment process involves helping the client to define and assess relationship problems online and offline; the clinician challenging avoidant behavior patterns; and assisting the client in goal-setting and encouraging their follow through. Bringing online relationships into safe and healthy offline social interactions might also be indicated. Solution-Focused and Cognitive treatment models seem to work well in teaching the client to challenge distortions; develop realistic expectations of themselves and others; and gain mastery over goal-setting and achievement. Individuals will also need to learn how to set appropriate boundaries around their online relationships and understand the benefits of compartmentalization.

Conclusion

Clinicians who consider how our daily experiences are impacted by the growth of technology in our society, are ahead of the curve. The mobility of the Internet made possible by 3G, 4G and wireless technologies has contributed to a significant shift in the way people are connecting to each other. Text messaging, social networking and online gaming have become embedded in our world's social fabric. Analysts have predicted that by 2020, virtual worlds will be as widespread as the World Wide Web is now.

Exploring how we are evolving socially is imperative as we move into a time when online relationships and communication have become as important as face-to-

face interactions. Incorporating a revised treatment approach that includes an understanding of the impact of technology on psychosocial development will allow clinical professionals to more effectively support the "Net Generations" in bring balance to their lives.

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Erik Erikson first published his eight stage theory of human development in his 1950 book Childhood and Society. The chapter featuring the model was titled 'The Eight Ages of Man'. He expanded and refined his theory in later books and revisions, notably: Identity and the Life Cycle (1959); Insight and Responsibility (1964); The Life Cycle Completed: A Review (1982, revised 1996 by Joan Erikson); and Vital Involvement in Old Age (1989).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawn Ware-Avant has provided mental health services to children, adolescents and adults for over a decade. She is skilled using both face-to-face and distance (online, e-mail and avatar) treatment methods and specializes in Online/Cyber Relationships and personal development (social, emotional, spiritual). Shawn also has a passion for treating attachment and regulation challenges (RAD, Autism, Sensory Integration Dysfunction) and enjoys assisting parents of children with disabilities (especially Autism). She is happily married, for 16 years, with 3 children, including a set of twins and a son on the autism spectrum. She works and resides in Hampton Roads, Virginia.

