IDENTITY

Members Only

 Skeptics of the Internet worry that without face-to-face contact, people will bond better with their computers than with other humans. But research shows that the virtual world may give isolated individuals the chance to connect with other people for the first time.

Newsgroups are on-line areas where participants sound off on topics via e-mail postings. In three studies, Katelyn McKenna, Ph.D., and John Bargh, Ph.D., of New York University’s psychology department, observed three types of newsgroup users: people with mainstream interests (i.e. cooking); those with visible qualities considered culturally inferior (like excess weight); and individuals with hidden, socially stigmatized identities, like homosexuals and fans of sexual bondage or spanking.

The researchers noticed that people in the last category deemed involvement in newsgroups more important to their lives than other Internet denizens. That’s because people with unconventional identities can’t easily find others like them, McKenna explains. They tend to keep their proclivities hidden and miss out on social interaction as a result. Active newsgroup users also felt less estranged from society than “lurkers” who read message postings but didn’t join the discussion. Getting recognition from others in the group—acceptance hard to find in visible society—gives them the courage to display their true selves, says McKenna. And 37% of newsgroup users with closeted sexual identities tracked in the study were ultimately inspired to reveal their secret to loved ones. Ironically, write McKenna and Bargh, participants were motivated to integrate their Internet life into their real life.—C.T.

PETS

Talk to the Animals

Have we become too devoted to our pets? A slew of new books on pet psychology indicates that we may be turning man’s best friend into man’s favorite therapy patient. Manuals like Birds on the Couch (Crown) and Memoirs of a Pet Therapist (Fawcett) suggest that with love and patience, owners can lift Sparky’s depression or boost Tiger’s self-esteem.

One reason that these how-to guides have become so popular is that there is less of a stigma attached to therapy; it’s become a lens through which we view our world. We have always attributed human emotions and personality quirks to our pets. In a world where time is short and social interaction is on the decline, we want more than ever to connect with our dogs and cats, because they are increasingly important to us as a source of support and friendship. Herbert Nieberg, Ph.D., director of behavioral medicine at New York’s Fourwinds Hospital, says that the science of animal behavior is finally allowing us to do just that. “Pets have their neuroses,” he says. “We’re just finding better ways of controlling their behavior.” Witness, for example, the recent FDA approval of two drugs to treat mental disorders in dogs. The better we can understand our pets, the more likely our relationships with these faithful creatures will weather human breakups and disappointments.—C.C.

A Reason To Smile

Ever notice that beautiful people with ugly personalities seem to become less and less attractive with time? According to Leslie Zebrowitz, Ph.D., of Brandeis University, that’s because they do. When Zebrowitz compared personality tests taken by men and women over time with ratings of their attractiveness by objective observers, she discovered that men judged physically appealing in their youth were most likely to be sociable, agreeable adults. No surprise there. But women who had been gregarious as teens were deemed better-looking in their fifties than their aloof, unfriendly peers, regardless of their original physical appeal. These findings are intriguing, says Zebrowitz, because they run contrary to the popular notion that physical beauty has greater social consequences for women than for men. Says Zebrowitz: “It seems that the way a man looks influences the kind of personality he develops, but the kind of person a woman influences the kind of appearance she develops.”—J.H.