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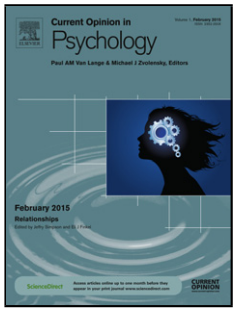

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Intrapersonal, interpersonal and social outcomes of the social sharing of emotion

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Abstract

Emotional experiences trigger the social sharing of emotion. This disclosure of emotional facts and feelings to the social surrounding was generally considered as a simple process of emotional release. The empirical data reviewed in this article invalidates this simplistic view. They show that the social sharing of emotions is a complex process that results not only in intrapersonal effects for the source person, but also in important interpersonal and social outcomes. The intrapersonal effects of the social sharing of emotions are varied, they do not necessarily go together, and they respond to specific conditions. At the interpersonal level, both the sharing of positive and negative emotional episodes affects relationships with the audience. Finally, the research highlights broader social effects relating to social structure, social norms, group action, beliefs, collective resilience and intergroup relations.

Keywords: social sharing of emotions, emotional disclosure, self-disclosure, emotion regulation, interpersonal emotion regulation, capitalization, co-rumination

Intrapersonal, interpersonal and social outcomes of the social sharing of emotion

After experiencing an emotion, people talk about it and tell others what happened [1]. Listeners experience emotion in their turn and then tell others what they heard [e.g., 2]. This process was labelled "social sharing of emotion" [for review, 3*], a form of self-disclosure focused on emotional experiences--also termed "emotional disclosure". Positive and negative emotions are shared similarly and more intense emotions elicit more abundant sharing [for review, 3*]. Experiments confirmed that situations that heighten emotional arousal boost social transmission regardless of their valence [4*]. When asked why they shared an emotion, respondents report four types of motives: intrapersonal (rehearsing/venting), socio-cognitive (receiving clarification/meaning; advice/solutions), socio-affective (getting empathy/support/comfort), and prosocial (informing/warning). Interestingly, informing others was observed to engage brain regions associated with motivation and reward [5], suggesting the intrinsic value of sharing information.

This review addresses studies examining outcomes of social sharing interactions focused upon emotional episodes. Written emotional disclosure [e.g., 6] will not be covered as such non interactive, private, expressive situations probably implement processes that are very different from those of interactive oral sharing. Though scarce, studies comparing them revealed written emotional disclosure to generate a much higher proportion of emotion words than oral conditions [7]. Whereas orally, participants focused on their audience with a concern to report facts and convince listerners, private written disclosure appeared to stimulate self-confrontation. Yet, nowadays, people abundantly communicate on social networking sites

using written modes that are oriented at others so that oral sharing and written disclosure are less distinct than they were in the past.

Sharing emotions online

The use of social network sites and the increasing amount of time spent by individuals interacting online raises a series of questions about the nature of computer-mediated communication and its specificities in comparison to face-to-face communication. A comprehensive review shows that, despite the use of specific visual and written cues [8], emotional communication online and offline is surprisingly similar [9**]. As is the case for offline emotional disclosure, online disclosure elicits emotional responses [10] and emotional support [11], reinforces involvement in online social behaviors [12] and is followed by emotional propagation [4*]. This last aspect is particularly studied in connection with the concept of arousal. Arousal boosts online sharing of information [13] and emotionally arousing stories (especially anger and anxiety-related, which are predominant in "fake news") tend to attract audience selection and exposure [14]. Interestingly, the network structure and type of media platform play important roles in social sharing. Emotional disclosure is associated with both the density and size of users' personal networks [14]. Further, the type of platform used varies with the emotional event to be shared [15]. Online sharing has clear applications in the study of many social phenomena, including the processes of mourning and reaction to traumatic events [16] An interesting avenue for future research is to examine its function in the creation of shared memories and representations. In addition, the models, methods and measurement tools of online social sharing still need further development and refining.

Intrapersonal outcomes of sharing an emotion

Simply telling

Contrary to common beliefs, simply telling an emotion generally elicits emotional reactivation rather than discharge [3*]. Regardless of the medium used, people experienced increased positive affect after sharing positive events, and increased negative affect after sharing negative events [15]. Thus, sharing a positive experience was found a source of enhancement of positive affect, a process called "capitalization" [17-19**].

Positive emotional episodes were conceived as opportunities on which to “capitalize", by letting others know about the event and thus getting another opportunity to enhance one’s positive affect [17]. Distinct and independent from social support, capitalization is an iterative process associated with an enhancement of positive affect far beyond the benefits of the positive events themselves [18-19**]. Its regular practice is positively correlated (among others) with subjective well-being, life satisfaction and self-esteem [19**]. Its consequences also extend to the relationship and its quality (e.g., intimacy, daily marital satisfaction, longevity) [18]. Importantly, the listener's response--and particularly its perception--plays a decisive role in the intra and interpersonal benefits of sharing. An active and constructive response, motivated by the reinforcement of positive feelings and reflecting the needs of the capitalizer for understanding, validation and attention [18], prolongs positive emotions [20*], reinforces the sense of acceptance and relational links that, as a result, predict future interactions and contributes to the intrapersonal benefits of both actors [19**]. Nevertheless, individual and contextual differences greatly influence the modalities and outcome of capitalization [19**, 21-22*]. There are also limits to capitalization. For instance, although it

may be much enjoyable to go through experiences that are superior to those of one's peers, the latter may then react negatively to the sharing of your superior experience, leaving you ultimately feeling bad [23].

By contrast, simply sharing a negative experience usually leads to poor outcomes. Thus, compared to participants who chose not to, those who chose to express their reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on that day reported worse emotional and health outcomes over the next two years and the longer their initial expressed reaction was, the worse these outcomes were [24]. Likewise, participants at risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who disclosed to those with similar risk developed greater levels of PTSD [25]. And delivering a Victim Impact Statement in court failed to contribute to the recovery of victims of violent crimes [26].

Beyond the effects of reactivation, the way people talk about a distressing experience can in itself sustain its impact. Modally, sharing develops in the immediate aftermath of an emotion and then gradually fades away [3*]. Perpetuation denotes non-resolution. In a longitudinal follow-up of women who conveyed such a distressing episode at t1, more than half of them reported still sharing this episode both at t2 (3 months later) and t3 (6 months later) [27]. Two explanations could account for this persisting impact of the episode: either how emotions were shared, or features of the episodes. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) testing clearly favored the first explanation (Figure 1), suggesting that the episode remained unresolved due to co-rumination, a particularly deleterious form of emotion sharing.

Model 1 viewed protracted social sharing as analogous to dysfunctional rumination: sharing reactivates the emotion and thus the need to share further.

This leads us to expect that sharing at t1 predicts sharing at t2, which in turn predicts sharing at t3, and that the strength of these relationships increases as time passes. The Model was well supported as the link t1 – t2 amounts .34 and t2 – t3 reaches .61. According to Model 2, the source of the protracted social sharing lies not in the sharing mode but in a particularly problematic emotional episode—it hardly lends itself to recovery. This implies that at each assessment time, the level of recovery (i.e., the difference between the initial emotional intensity and the current one) reactivates the need to talk and thus predicts sharing at subsequent measurement. This Model was only weakly supported for t1- t2 (-.10) and was not supported for t2 - t3 (.01).

Co-rumination, a deleterious form of sharing emotions

Resting on both constructs of self-disclosure and rumination, co-rumination consists of interactions extensively focusing on problems and negative feelings [28]. Studies highlighted the positive and negative consequences arising from these forms of interactions as well as the preponderance of the process in girls' relationships [28]. On the one hand, co-rumination has been repeatedly associated with positive friendship quality [e.g., 28-29] and high reported social support [30], thus fitting the interpersonal consequences of the sharing of emotions. On the other hand, co-rumination has also been found associated with depressive symptoms [e.g., 28, 30-32]. As partners are particularly supportive and engaged within these interactions [e.g., 29], it can be assumed that co-rumination involves the benefits (e.g., social integration) [33*] and the inconveniences (e.g., no recovery effects) [27] of socio-affective support. In addition, the ruminative aspect of the process may exacerbate the negative emotions due to lack of cognitive support from the co-ruminative partner. In line with these postulates, co-brooding

and co-reflection--two facets of co-rumination--correlated respectively with more and less depression symptoms among girls [31]. Similarly, compared to co-distracting and co-problem solving, co-ruminating has been demonstrated as the least effective strategy for regulating negative affect [34**] and the most related to depressive symptoms [32].

Conditions for positive outcomes of the social sharing of emotions

Expressive suppression does not open better perspectives than merely telling a negative emotion. Individuals who suppress their emotions experience more intrapersonal and interpersonal costs and the reverse was found among expressive individuals [35]. This raises the question of the conditions under which one would benefit from sharing emotions? This is a complex issue because benefits are varied and do not necessarily go together. For instance, participants who simply shared with a listening research assistant evidenced no emotional reduction, but reported important other benefits (clarification, support, validation…) [36]. Similarly, participants with unresolved stressful experiences who shared it did not manifest symptom reduction but evidenced posttraumatic growth [37].

Cognitive theories of emotion firmly established that emotions result not from the eliciting event per se, but rather from its cognitive appraisal. Therefore, changing the emotional impact of a past experience requires adopting a different perspective on this event [3*]. For instance, adopting a self-distancing perspective reduced the subjective emotional reactivity to negative memories [e.g., 38]. Compared to those who analyzed their trauma-related feelings from an immersed perspective (first-person), veterans who adopted a distanced (third-person) perspective evidenced a lower physiologic reactivity, though there was no effect for self-reported emotional reactivity [39]. Simple re-exposure to an emotional experience (thinking)

produces the worst effects: narration was more effective at down-regulating negative emotions than thinking, but less than distraction [40]. In line with the perspective-change view, narration was most effective when using past tenses and including positive emotions [41]. However, perspective-change is not the only cognitive process to be considered in this context. Livet [42] stressed the role of revising beliefs, expectations and worldviews. Learning was also recently examined: Narratives of anger-causing events was observed to promote learning about these events among young people and a steeper reduction in anger was found associated with greater self-reported learning [43].

Sharing emotions can lead to multiple benefits depending upon the listeners' response. Listeners' attentiveness, agreement, scaffolding and expertise play a considerable role in influencing storytelling and in affecting speakers' selves [44*]. Laboratory experiments demonstrated that whereas empathic responses from listeners entailed greater proximity to the listener and an impression of feeling better, a reduction of emotional impact occurred exclusively when listeners stimulated participants' cognitive work (reframing) [33*]. Several studies confirmed such findings [16, 45-49]. Can listeners tell what support sharers need? Manipulating this variable led to a negative response: listeners consistently perceived the sharer to predominantly want socio-affective (empathic) support [50**]. This explains why many social sharing instances revolve around socio-affective support, leading to subjectively experienced benefits, but not to genuine recovery [50**].

In sum, the relation between social sharing and emotional processing is fairly complex [51*]. To better grasp this complexity, studies should take into consideration major variables such as the type of shared emotion, listener response, timing of effects, and type of outcome [52]. Also, the difficult task of examining social sharing content [53-55] offers an important source of clarification. Finally, individual differences variables have to be considered [e.g., 56-57].

Interpersonal outcomes of sharing an emotion

Listeners of social sharing are primarily close persons (family, spouse, best friends) [3*]. Why do people listen to their loved ones' emotional narratives? Social integration motives stood out from studies. A semantic categorization of reported motives evidenced the predominant desire to provide the narrator with proof of social links and support [58]. Similarly, the need to belong--and not the listener's concurrent mood or feelings of self-worth--was found associated with a greater desire to listen to emotional--but not simply descriptive--disclosure [59*]. The specific interpersonal dynamic that develops in the social sharing of emotion [3, 60] lends itself particularly well to the strengthening of relational links: when sharing an emotional experience, person A arouses interest and emotions in B; their reciprocal stimulation of emotion sets both partners on the same wavelength; as recipient of B's attention, interest, empathy, and support, A experiences enhanced liking for B. Sharing emotions is thus effective in strengthening social ties [see Box 2; 33*].

Why is this closeness effect obtained from sharing emotions? Narrators bring listeners to share their emotional state, thus inducing a "communion", or temporary feeling of being on the same wavelength—or in synchrony [61-62]. A similar process develops in collective gatherings: by stimulating each other's emotions, participants foster a sense of emotional unity and social integration [63]. Then, would a bridging effect develop in people simply exposed to the same emotion-eliciting condition? This was tested exposing participants to an emotion-inducing film either together with other group members (i.e., common screen) or individually in a group setting (i.e., on an individual laptop using earphones in front of other group

members, not knowing which film they viewed) [64*]. The former felt higher closeness and integration. Thus, simply co-experiencing an emotion indeed fosters cohesion.

Since long, nonemotional self-disclosure was also shown to enhance mutual liking [65] as the equivalence of disclosing general information and disclosing specific autobiographic memories with regard to closeness was empirically established [66*]. However, when closeness was induced in unacquainted pairs through shared humor, they were more likely to discuss specific autobiographical memories than were unacquainted control pairs [66*]. Therefore, closeness might signal common ground, a safety condition granting understanding, confidentiality and nonjudgment. A bidirectional process may thus be at play in the interpersonal dynamics of the social sharing of emotions, sharing emotions favoring closeness and closeness favoring sharing emotions.

Who is most likely to receive liking? Narrators or listeners? Listeners reported more liking for narrators than narrators did for listeners. Yet, once there was an opportunity to reciprocate self-disclosure (e.g., by switching narrator and listener roles in a second round of self-disclosure), not only did these differences disappear but also liking further increased [67]. For narrators, interpersonal outcomes clearly depend upon how listeners respond: socio-affective reponses (empathy, social support, validation) reduced narrators' feelings of loneliness whereas cognitive responses (stimulating reappraisal, reframing) enhanced them [33*]. Similarly, the linguistic analysis of the tweets from over 8000 Twitter users revealed that using reassurance or comfort strategies was associated with greater popularity (followers gained), while the reverse occurred for "cognitive" strategies [68]. Being "on the same wavelength" thus seems critical for enhancing social ties in sharing situations. An analysis of on-line support interactions evidenced emotional-support attempts as more effective when

there was synchrony in the language used and semantic content of support providers and recipients [69]. Also, fluent conversations were found associated with feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and social validation [70].

Is empathic accuracy (understanding another person's thoughts and feelings) enough to facilitate responsive behavior in a social sharing situation? Rather, empathic concern (benevolent motivation) was found to play a preponderant role. When listeners' empathic concern was high, empathic accuracy facilitated responsiveness and boosted their ability to effectively respond to their partner's needs; but when empathic concern was low, empathic accuracy was unhelpful (and possibly harmful) for responsiveness [71].

In short, emotional experiences literally catalyse interpersonal relationships in a concatenation of need to belong, empathic concern, shared emotions, common ground and socio-affective responding. After emotion, social integration seems to be of primary importance for both sender and target. The evolutionary significance of this effect deserves serious examination.

Social outcomes of sharing an emotion

The social outcomes of sharing emotions are much broader than simply affecting interpersonal relationships. For instance, when people witness behaviors that deviate from social norms, they tend to share the emotions they felt during this event and to gossip about it. This was found associated with increased norm clarification and enhanced social cohesion [72*]. In social talks, narrators and their audience often realize that they experience the same emotional response toward a target. When this is the case, a narrator-audience coalition

develops which configures their relationship with the target and coordinates their target-directed action [73]. Thus, sharing an emotion in social talk has powerful consequences for social structure and group action. Emotion sharing was evidenced as mediator in this complex process [73]. People were more willing to exchange emotionally-loaded social anecdotes with a good friend, but they also communicated them with strangers or with unspecified audience, thus showing that such information disseminates throughout society [74**]. Thus, social beliefs of a society are likely to be shaped by the more emotionally arousing social experiences of its members.

Collective traumas elicit intense sharing of emotions among members of concerned communities. Is this simple emotional venting? In longitudinal data on Spanish participants' emotional reponses to March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, higher sharing initially predicted higher social integration and post-traumatic growth at follow-up [75]. The negative emotional response manifested in French Tweets exchanged after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris was followed by a marked long-term increase in the use of lexical indicators of solidarity [76]. Expressions of social processes, prosocial behavior and positive affect were higher in the months after the attacks for the individuals who participated to a higher degree in the collective sharing of emotion. Thus, the collective sharing of emotions after a disaster reveals the social resilience of a community.

Effects of sharing emotions are not limited to the intragroup level. They extend to intergroup effects as well. Thus, within-group sharing of emotions was found to play a role for intergroup relations. Compared to control who held a group irrelevant discussion, group members who shared an unfair group-relevant event developed negative emotions toward the outgroup, group-based appraisals of injustice and a greater group-based identity [77]. The

observed effects were comparable in size to those observed when social identity had been made salient explicitly beforehand. Effects of social sharing upon intergroup relationships in the opposite direction were also recorded. Self-disclosure that crosses group boundaries generates empathy and is thus associated with more positive explicit outgroup attitudes [78]. The more participants had experienced reciprocal self-disclosure with outgroup members, the more they empathized with the outgroup and, in turn, the more positive their explicit outgroup attitude was.

Conclusion

It has long been ignored that emotional experiences are systematically put into the social field. The social sharing of emotions pervades everyone's daily life. It also fills the professional life of psychologists. Studies reviewed here suggest that it is time to move beyond the narrow vision of social sharing of emotions as a simple process of emotion regulation. The fact that every emotion leads the individual to turn to others and talk about it indicates that emotional experience raises both a relational question and a question of meaning (see Figure 2). Future studies will need to examine human adaptation in light of this perspective.

The left side represents the relational component: the emotion generates a dynamic of refreshing and strengthening social ties. In case of negative emotion, this process responds to the subject's need for contact and ensures the social support that fosters coping and progress. The right side consists of the cognitive part: the emotion is seen as a puzzle calling for production of meaning and reconstruction of a shared reality. Both

sides contribute to the social synchronization implemented each time the individual (or group) goes through an experience with transformative power.

Conflicts of interest

We declare having no conflict of interest

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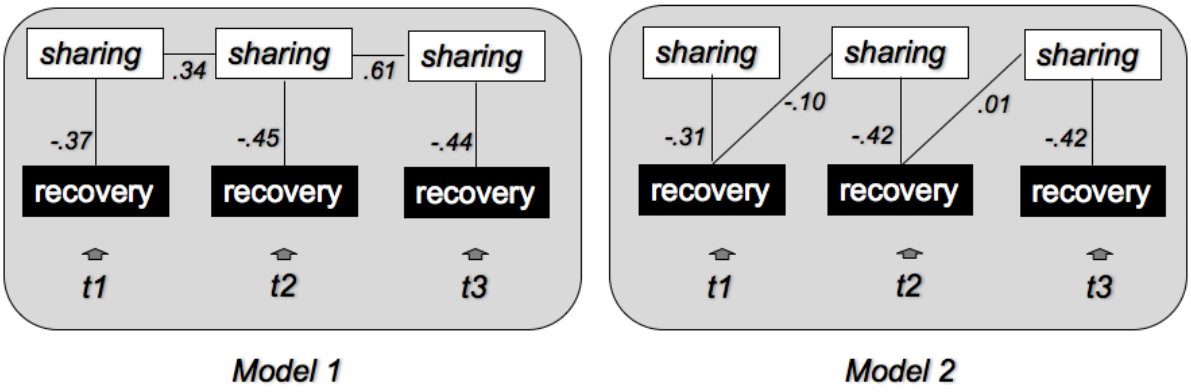

Figure 1. SEM test of two explanatory models of protracted social sharing of emotion in the longitudinal follow-up of female respondents [27].

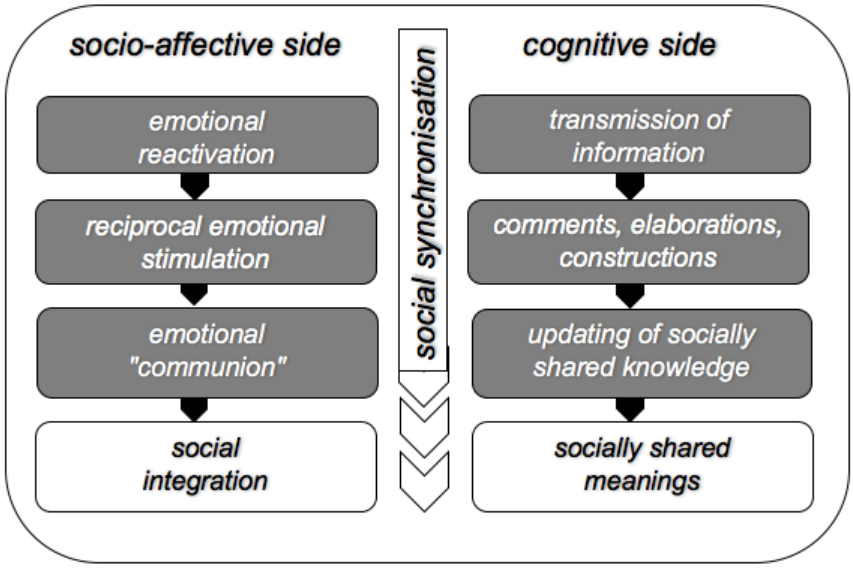

Figure 2. The social sharing of emotions as a two-sided process.