

# Chapter 4

## The Social Sharing of Emotion in Interpersonal and in Collective Situations

Bernard Rimé

### 4.1 Introduction

Affective life consists of a variety of manifestations among which one can distinguish temporary variations in mood states, feelings or emotions on the one hand, and more permanent features of the individual such as temperamental traits on the other hand. Emotions can rightly be seen as the highlights of our affective life. They encompass five major characteristics. First, they mark a break in the course of our existence because of the sudden upsurge of a new element. Second, they encompass subjective experiences of a high intensity and with a definite shape such as anger, fear, sadness, or shame for instance. They are thus distinct from less intense affective experiences that only vary on an axis extending diffusely from positive to negative affects. Third, emotions manifest themselves both quickly and shortly, although as we will see, they generally entail significant extensions thereafter. Fourth, emotions have an episodic structure, with a beginning, an apex, and a denouement. As such, they are particularly suited to narration. Fifth, emotions consist of multimodal events that affect all aspects of the person, with changes at the neurological and physiological level, as well as at the cognitive, the behavioral and the subjective or phenomenal level. These complex manifestations take place in moments where the relationship of the individual to the environment changes abruptly. Emotions thus represent powerful bio-psychological signals that inform individuals of important changes occurring in their situation. They motivate people to adapt quickly. Through the action tendencies they include, they additionally formulate all at once proposals for responses to these changes.

In this chapter, we will review evidence that emotions are also almost inextricably linked to a process of social communication. When people go through an emotional

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B. Rimé (✉)  
University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium  
e-mail: [Bernard.Rime@uclouvain.be](mailto:Bernard.Rime@uclouvain.be)

experience, they immediately feel the need to talk with members of their entourage, and they actually do so in almost all cases. This is what we call “the social sharing of emotion”. This process has only been studied systematically since two decades (Rimé et al. 1991a). It is of considerable importance for social life. It means in effect that the significant changes in the lives of individuals are systematically talked about and shared with the social network. Social communication thus gathers traces of almost all significant changes in the life of individuals. As long as these traces were exchanged via oral communication, they were fleeting and it was difficult to gauge the actual impact that shared experiences had for social life. Now that a considerable proportion of social communication is taking place in cyberspace, it leaves tangible marks. A large field of investigation has thus now been opened to the study of emotions, their impact, their social sharing and the consequences of that share to interpersonal relationships and to social cognitions.

The present chapter will give an overview of past work in the study of the social sharing of emotion. It is hoped that this overview could point to research avenues opened to future investigation in cyberspace. We will first examine basic observations about the social sharing of personal emotional experiences in interpersonal situations. We will then focus on the spread of emotional information that develops from such sharing situations. Third, we will discuss aspects of the social sharing of emotion that takes place during events affecting individuals collectively. In a final section, we will consider the collective sharing of emotions in collective emotional gatherings.

## 4.2 Social Sharing of Emotions: Basic Findings

Emotional episodes are subject to conversations in about 90 % of the cases and this is manifested most often repetitively—usually several times, with different people for a same emotional episode (for reviews Rimé 2009; Rimé et al. 1998, 1992). The more intense the emotion is, the higher the propensity to talk about it. The social sharing process is observed whatever the type of emotion involved (joy, fear, anger, sadness. . .) and whatever the valence of the experience (positive affect or negative affect). Only situations in which the person has felt shame and guilt elicit a restraint on the tendency to talk about it (Finkenauer and Rimé 1998). Manifestations of social sharing have also a strong cultural generality. They were observed at similar rates in Europe, Asia, and North America<sup>1</sup> (Singh-Manoux and Finkenauer 2001; Yogo and Onoe 1998<sup>2</sup>). From these observations, it can be concluded that the

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<sup>1</sup>Mesquita, B.: Cultural variations in emotion: a comparative study of Dutch, Surinamese and Turkish people in the Netherlands, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1993)

<sup>2</sup>Rimé, B., Yogo, M., Pennebaker, J.W.: [Social sharing of emotion across cultures]. Unpublished Raw Data (1996b)

process of talking about emotional experiences is a very general manifestation in such a way that it could be considered as an integral part of an emotional experience. Emotional sharing is started very early after the emotional event. A very reliable observation is that people first share their emotion on the day it happened in 60 % of the cases. In case of episodes of high emotional impact, the social sharing process, or at least the need to share the episode, may extend over weeks or even months, and sometimes over the entire life.

As the memory of the emotional episode fades away, sharing manifestations decline and the impact of the emotional experience is reduced and progressively becomes negligible. To illustrate, 1 week after a major academic exam, 100 % of students had talked about it within the 48 h preceding the survey. Two weeks after the exam, a rate of 94 % was still observed, whereas 3 weeks after the exam, the rate had fallen to 50 % (Rimé et al. 1998). The slope of the decline depends on the initial intensity of the experience. The higher the intensity of the initial emotion was, the lesser the steepness of the sharing extinction slope. Thus, compared with the university exam, the loss of a loved one obviously involves an emotion of a much higher intensity. Ten days after the death of a loved one, 97 % of respondents had shared their emotional experience in the 48 h preceding the survey. Four weeks after the death, the rate was still 86 %, and 12 weeks after the event, it still amounted to 79 %.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.3 Targets of Social Sharing

Who are the targets people select for sharing their emotions? Interesting trends about sharing addressees emerged from the comparison of age groups (Rimé et al. 1991a,b, 1992, 1996). Children aged between 6 and 8 who had been exposed to an emotion-eliciting narrative later manifested virtually no sharing toward peers of their classroom. Yet most of them shared the episode with their father and mother when back home. Other family members rarely were social sharing targets in this age group. Preadolescents (aged 8–12) were surveyed after a night game at a summer camp that, according to children's ratings, had induced a moderate intensity emotional state in them. They went back home on the day that followed the game. Three days later, parents' ratings showed that the night game had been shared by 97 % of the children. Parents clearly emerged as the privileged sharing partners—mother in 93 % and father in 89 %. Siblings served as recipients in 48 % of the cases, best friends in 33 %, peers in 37 % (peers generally were children who took part to the same summer camp), and grandparents in only 5 %. Among adolescents (aged 12–18), family members—predominantly parents—were by far the most often mentioned sharing target both among boys and girls. Friends collected about one-

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<sup>3</sup>Zech, E.: La gestion du deuil et la gestion des émotions [Coping with grief and coping with emotions]. Unpublished Master Thesis, University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium (1994)

third of emotional sharing. Boyfriends and girlfriends were rarely mentioned, either because there was no, or because in this age group they were not yet eligible as sharing partners. But, as age cohorts got older, friends, including girl/boy friends and female best friends became increasingly important. Other people were rarely mentioned as sharing partners. Nonmembers of the immediate social network were simply absent from these communications. Among young adults (aged 18–33), the role of family members was considerably reduced, especially among males. In contrast, for both genders, spouses/partners emerged as major actors on the social sharing stage, whereas friends kept the same importance as in adolescents' data. The role of family members decreased again in middle-aged adults (aged 40–60), perhaps in part because parents are no longer available. Additionally, a considerable drop in the importance of friends occurred for male adults, but not for females. In this age group, spouses/partners predominated markedly as sharing targets. In men in particular, the spouse/partner was an exclusive target for more than three-quarters of respondents. Data collected on elderly people (aged 65–95) simply replicated this pattern.

To conclude, the social sharing of emotion is essentially addressed to members of one's close social network. From adulthood on, spouses and partners constitute the main sharing targets (over 75 %), followed by members of one's family (over 30 %) and friends (about 20 %). As previously mentioned, other categories of people, such as strangers or professionals, were rarely mentioned (less than in 5 % of the cases). These conclusions are somewhat qualified by observations regarding emotional episodes occurring in a professional context or in the framework of a specific emotional conditions such as illness. Soldiers in military operations, or hospital nurses working in emergency units overwhelmingly adopted their professional colleagues as the first sharing partners when they faced an emotional experience in their work. Cancer patients mentioned other cancer patients, their physician and psychologists as their most important sharing targets.

#### **4.4 Emotional Reactivation and Motives to Share Emotions**

That people systematically share a positive emotional experience comes as no surprise. But when it comes to negative experience, the propensity to talk about it as soon as it happened and to then share repetitively what happened with various members of one's network looks more puzzling. Our studies have addressed this puzzle in various ways. In a study conducted two decades ago (Rimé et al. 1991a), participants were instructed to recall and then to give a detailed description of an emotional episode of their recent past life. The episode had to be either one of joy, anger, fear or sadness, according to randomly distributed instructions. After the description, participants had to report what they felt during this task. Whatever the type of emotion they had described was, participants overwhelmingly reported vivid mental images of the recalled event together with related feelings and bodily sensations. This simply confirmed the known fact that accessing the memory of

an emotional episode has the effect of reactivating the various components (i.e., physiological, sensory, experiential) of the emotion involved. Not surprisingly, participants who had to report an experience of joy rated their task as having been more pleasant than those who had to report an emotion of sadness, of fear, or of anger. More surprising was the fact that reporting fear, sadness or anger was rarely rated as unpleasant. Notwithstanding the reactivation of vivid images, feelings, and bodily sensations of a negative emotional experience, sharing such an experience was far from having elicited the aversion one would have expected. Even more striking was the fact that when participants were asked whether they would be willing to undertake the sharing of another emotional memory of the same type as the first one, virtually all of them (96 %) answered positively in all four emotional conditions. These data revealed the paradoxical character of the social sharing of emotion. Although sharing reactivates the various components of the emotion, it does seem to be a situation in which people engage much willingly, whatever the valence of the shared emotion.

Delfosse et al. (2004) investigated the reasons given by respondents for sharing their emotional experiences in current life. Here also, according to a random distribution, participants remembered an emotional event from their recent past having involved joy, anger, fear or sadness, and that they had shared with others. They were then asked about their motives for sharing the episode. The data collected in this study showed that the motives markedly differed depending on the valence of the event.

According to respondents' data, positive emotional memories were socially shared primarily in order to (1) recall the episode, (2) elicit the attention of the target person and to inform the latter of what happened. These findings are consistent with observations according to which talking about a past positive emotional experience elicits pleasurable emotional feelings both in the sender and in the receiver. In this regard, Langston (1994) introduced the concept of capitalization. Positive emotional episodes represent opportunities on which to seize or "capitalize". Whenever the memory of such an episode is reactivated, immediate benefits are taken under the form of a temporary boost of positive affect. Seeking social contacts and letting others know about the event largely contributes to capitalizing on positive emotional experiences. Communicating positive events to others was indeed associated with an enhancement of positive affect far beyond the benefits due to the valence of the positive events themselves (for review see Gable and Reis 2010). Gable et al. (2004) observed that close relationships in which one's partner typically responds enthusiastically to capitalization were associated with higher relationship well-being (e.g., intimacy, daily marital satisfaction). Thus, sharing positive emotions not only boosts individuals' positive affect, it also enhances their social bonds.

As regarded negative emotional memories, Delfosse et al. (2004) found them associated with four major motives: (1) venting the emotion, (2) receiving understanding from the target for what happens, (3) enhancing social bonds and (4) receiving social support. "Venting the emotion" is a stereotypical response that really pops out in the population when the question of emotional expression comes to the floor. Common sense indeed quite willingly explains the propensity for social

sharing of emotions by “liberatory” hypothesized effects of emotional expression. Thus, recommendations such as “talk about your emotional experience” or “get it off your chest” are adopted without hesitation by laypersons in Western countries as well as in Asia.<sup>4</sup> Psychological practitioners willingly subscribe to this thesis as well. To illustrate, after traumatic events, the so-called “psychological debriefing” techniques are much popular intervention methods in which victims are encouraged to express extensively the emotions they went through during the drama. Doing so is expected to ensure victims liberating effects and to prevent the development of psychological symptoms such as posttraumatic disorders. However, the meta-analysis of evaluation studies revealed that debriefings are not successful in reducing post-traumatic stress disorder and that in some cases, results are even going in the opposite direction (Arendt and Elklit 2001; Deahl 2000; Foa and Meadows 1997; Raphael and Wilson 2000; Rose and Bisson 1998; Rose et al. 2003; van Emmerik et al. 2002). These data therefore pleaded against the “discharge” hypothesis. Research on the effects of the social sharing of current life emotional episodes repetitively resulted in similar findings (Nils and Rimé 2012; for reviews Rimé 2009; Rimé et al. 1998). Contrary to the widespread expectations of common sense, simple sharing of emotion does not cause a reduction of the emotional and cognitive impact of memories of the shared emotional episode.

After the excluding the venting or discharge motive, we are left with three other motives alleged by respondents for sharing their negative emotional experiences: (1) receiving understanding from the target for what happens, (2) enhancing social bonds and (3) receiving social support. All three are social motives: addressees are expected to provide the sharing person with meaning, with social integration and with support. As will be seen in the section to follow, these observations fit nicely those collected in the investigation of the interpersonal dynamics that develop in the course of social sharing interactions.

## 4.5 The Interpersonal Dynamics of the Social Sharing of Emotion

A very special dynamic develops in person-to-person interaction focused on the social sharing of emotion by someone to a listening person.<sup>5</sup> First, listeners are found to exhibit a considerable interest for the narration of the emotional episode, whatever the valence of the episode—positive or negative. Actually, curiosity for emotionally negative scenes and information is quite common. When driving by a

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<sup>4</sup>Zech, E.: The effects of the communication of emotional experiences. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium (2000)

<sup>5</sup>Christophe, V.: Le partage social des émotions du point de vue de l’auditeur [Social sharing of emotion on the side of the target]. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Université de Lille III, France (1997)

traffic accident, drivers slow down to watch. Pedestrians change their course to look at a building in flames. People are attracted by emotional stories in the media as well as in movies, novels, plays, drama, opera, songs, images, etc. Admittedly, a fascination for negative emotional materials literally permeates everyday life. This fascination is playing a critical role in the development and maintenance of the social sharing of emotion. By manifesting their interest to the sender, social sharing listeners stimulate the narrative process and become thus increasingly exposed to an emotional content. This, in turn, stimulates their own emotions. The more emotionally loaded the story, the higher the emotional arousal of listeners.

A second characteristic response of social sharing listeners takes the form of empathy. By manifesting emotions echoing those expressed by the sender, listeners contribute to the development of a climate of emotional communion or emotional fusion in the interaction. Such a climate stimulates a prosocial orientation among listeners: the more they are emotionally moved by the narration, the more they express warmth, support, understanding and validation to the sharing person.

A final manifestation resulting from the interpersonal sharing of emotion involves mutual attraction. When the sharing partners have preexisting ties, as is most often the case, one speaks of an enhancement of their mutual attraction. The social sharing of emotion modally ends up with an increase of positive affect on both sides and therefore leads to closer links between the interaction partners. A similar phenomenon was very consistently found in the study of situations of confidence and self-disclosure (for review Collins and Miller 1994). Those who are the receivers of more intimate confidences develop a higher level of affection for the one who engage in these confidences. And likewise, those who engage in intimate confidences enhance their affection for those who listen.

Observing the behavioral responses of social sharing listeners revealed additional traits of the latter. Christophe and Rimé (1997) observed that when intense emotions are shared, listeners reduce their use of verbal mediators in their responses. They engage less in verbal expression. As a substitute, they display nonverbal comforting behaviors, such as reducing the physical distance of the interaction, or even hugging, kissing, or touching the narrator. This suggests that sharing an intense emotional experience ends up decreasing the psychological distance between two persons, thus contributing to the maintenance and even to the improvement of their ties. Of course, the process has limits. As soon as the shared episode involves elements likely to represent a threat for the listener, the latter is likely to deny listening and to manifest avoidance. This is frequently observed when a person is experiencing serious health problems for instance. The threat that such a condition represents to those who are exposed to it leads to a reduction of their willingness to listen to the ill person (Cantisano et al. 2012; Herbertte and Rimé 2004).

## 4.6 The Propagation of the Social Sharing of Emotion

If listening to an emotional story evokes emotion in the listener and if the emotion leads to social sharing of emotion, then we must expect that the listener shares in turn this story with others in a “secondary social sharing” (Christophe and Rimé 1997). Several studies confirmed that listeners indeed practice a secondary social sharing in about two-thirds of cases. The transmission of what they heard to members of their own social network is initiated in a majority of cases on the day listeners heard it. They usually share the story “three to four times” with “three to four people.” As for the primary sharing, the frequency of secondary social sharing increases linearly with the intensity of the emotion felt when listening. Research conducted on large samples of people using diary research techniques by Curci and Bellelli (2004) fully confirmed the reality of secondary social sharing. In one of their studies, volunteer students completed a diary for 15 days in which they had to report daily an episode shared with them by someone who had experienced it. The collected data comprised 875 episodes (302 positives and 573 negatives). On the day they were heard, 54 % of these episodes were secondarily shared, with no difference as a function of valence—a result that virtually matches those collected for primary sharing (i.e., 60 % on average, see above). In addition, 55 % of events that were not shared on the day they were heard were shared on a later day. In this manner, 75 % of all episodes collected in this study were shared. This closely replicated previous findings by Christophe and Rimé (1997). According to the study, the rate of secondary social sharing recorded ranged from 66 % for the lowest estimate to 86 % for the highest estimate. This is a phenomenon of considerable importance for social life.

Do receivers of a secondary social sharing talk in their turn to third parties?<sup>6</sup> examined this question by asking respondents to search in their memories a situation where they had been the target of a secondary social sharing. They then rated how often they had shared thereafter what they heard. The findings showed that this occurred in 64 % of cases—several times in 31 % of cases, and only once in 33 % of cases. The tertiary sharing was initiated on the same day as the secondary sharing took place in 31 % of cases.

In sum, according to data from the study of primary social sharing, a person faced with an emotional experience of some intensity then talk about it with four or five persons. Each of the latter is likely to undertake a secondary social sharing with three or four people. These new targets will be talk in their turn to one, two or three other persons. If five people were exposed to the shared information in the first round, there will be approximately 18 in the second round and 30 in the third one. This means that 50–60 people will be informed of the event that has affected a single member of their community. The person at the source of the sharing process

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<sup>6</sup>Christophe, V.: Le partage social des émotions du point de vue de l’auditeur [Social sharing of emotion on the side of the target]. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Université de Lille III, France (1997)



is necessarily having close ties to those who disseminate information. Each relay has at least an indirect link with this person. Since the greater part of social sharing takes place on one same day, it can be speculated that the broadcast grows in a few hours.

The reality of this propagation process has been confirmed in a field study in which Harber and Cohen (2005) monitored the communications of 33 university students that their instructor had taken to visit a hospital mortuary. The intensity of the emotional reactions experienced by the students during the visit could predict not only the number of people that each student has shared the visit with others (primary division), but also the number people to whom receptors then told the story of the visit (secondary shares) and the number of people that the new receptors had then addressed in turn (tertiary sharing). In this manner, the study demonstrated that within a few days, nearly 900 people had heard of this event. Research on rumors and on urban legends has provided results that are very consistent with those of the study of social sharing of emotions (Heath et al. 2001). These studies showed that the circulation of stories is based on an emotional selection rather than on an informational selection. People are all the more willing to share the stories that evoke more emotion. In addition, the more stories are emotional, the wider their dissemination is. The speed of propagation of this type of information being a function of its emotional impact, a particularly fast social spread is to be expected in case of events with a high emotional impact. In addition, it can be expected that when the impact is very high, information by word of mouth will be relayed by mass media. This then enters the register of collective emotional episodes, which is the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

## 4.7 Social Sharing of Collective Emotional Events

The social impact of emotional events is particularly spectacular in the case of a collective emotional episode. This is what happens when a community is directly affected by an event such as a victory or defeat (in sports, in politics, etc.), a loss, a disaster or a common threat. Under such conditions, the direct experience of individuals is generally taken into relay by mass media. In case of media exposure, the number of individuals and communities who are concerned about the event can be extended considerably. Thus, the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010 or Japan in 2011 first affected large communities directly. But the media coverage generated empathy across the entire planet. Similarly, the death of Princess Diana or of singer John Lennon affected individuals far beyond the communities directly affected due to the combined effect of the media coverage of the event and the prestige these personalities had in the world. In all cases that meet these examples, abundant collective sharing of emotion develops. It has spectacular features.

In case of individual emotional experiences, a single source disseminates information in direction of the periphery of the social network. However, the spread quickly reaches extinction, because empathy and emotion subside as one moves away from the initial source. The more the person to whom something happened is distant and unknown, the more a highly intense emotional story is needed to hold the interest of conversations. Instead, a collective emotional event will spark as many sources of social sharing of emotion as there are members in the social group concerned. In this manner, the social sharing of emotions can be expected to spread in all directions (Rimé 2007). In addition, as every moment of social sharing reactivates again in both the sender and the listener the emotion elicited by the event, the need for sharing is continuously reset for each of them.

Because of its repetitive aspect, the social sharing of a collective emotion contributes to the consolidation of the memory of the emotional episode, leading to a vivid memory of those events that caught people by surprise. Finkenauer and Rimé (1998) investigated the memory of the unexpected death of Belgium's king Baudouin in 1993 in a large sample of Belgian citizens. The data revealed that the news of the king's death had been widely socially shared. By talking about the event, people gradually constructed a social narrative and a collective memory of the emotional event. At the same time, they consolidated their own memory of the personal circumstances in which the event took place, an effect known as "flashbulb memory" (Conway 1995; Luminet and Curci 2009). The more an event is socially shared, the more it will be fixed in people's minds. Social sharing may in this way help to counteract some natural inclination people may have. Naturally, people should be driven to "forget" undesirable events. Thus, someone who just heard a bad news often inclines initially to deny what happened. The repetitive social sharing of the bad news contributes to realism.

As they elicit a spread of the social sharing in every direction, collective emotional events can cause chain reaction effects that are reminiscent of what occurs in a nuclear reactor. The emotional turmoil that ensues leads to a climate of mutual empathy and of collective emotional fusion. Whatever the emotional valence of a collective event, it is generally that start of a state of "honeymoon" in communities. People experience feelings such as "we feel the same, we are one, we are united." Pennebaker (1993) proposed a model of collective emotional responses to collective emotional events. The model first considers an initial period, or period of emergency, that takes place immediately after the event. It lasts about a month and is marked by intense emotional reactions of all members of the community. These reactions are accompanied by abundant mental rumination at the individual level. At the social level, intensive forms of communication develop (social sharing, media coverage), together with establishment of spontaneous connections and with numerous manifestations of generosity and of solidarity. We meet here the "honeymoon" situation that was mentioned above. Then, the model distinguishes a second phase, the so-called plateau, which also extends over approximately 1 month and represents an intermediate period. At this stage, the social sharing of emotion and the media coverage of the event disappear but mental rumination endures. Finally, 2 months after the starting point, a final period occurs. Social events of

the “honeymoon” (spontaneous links and solidarity) decline, mental rumination disappears, and social life returns to normal.

A community cannot remain almost exclusively focused on the shared emotional episode and keep neglecting the routine economic and survival activities. Some natural slowing process is needed to avoid this pitfall. In a nuclear reactor, the fission is slowed down by the introduction of cadmium bars in the system. In an emotionally aroused community, the major cause of return to normal life lies in the saturation that gradually settles. Pennebaker (1993) reported a very illustrative example of this process while studying communications in an American community that had been struck by an earthquake. During the first days, manifestations of social sharing of emotion between the victims were plentiful. After a while, however, some of the victims showed a reversal of attitude and expressed it in a spectacular way. They would start wearing T-shirts that read, “Please do not share with me your experience of the earthquake.” In fact, everyone was still so willing to tell things from one’s own point of view, but had no more desire to listen to the experience of others. In the early days, the interest of each other for the stories of neighbors was considerable. But the repetition inherent in the collective situation had gradually eroded the interest.

The model of psychosocial reactions to a collective emotional event as proposed by Pennebaker (1993) was tested after the terrorist attacks in Madrid in March 2004 (Páez et al. 2007; Rimé et al. 2010). At that time, the popular emotion was considerable throughout Spain. Repetitive mass demonstrations were held with the purpose to condemn terrorism. A large sample of people who participated to varying degrees in these events was contacted three times: 1 week, 3 weeks and then 2 months after the event. These people were subjected to various measures, including their sense of belonging to the group, their position in relation to collective beliefs, as well as their personal well being and confidence in life. The data confirmed the model predictions regarding the emergence, plateau, and the extinction of psychosocial events. In addition, in accordance with the principle that sharing emotion causes the reactivation of the shared emotion, it was found that the reactivation of negative emotions generated by the dramatic events was even greater among respondents who had invested themselves heavily in the protests. But the data also highlighted important positive social effects resulting from the collective sharing process. On the one hand, the more people were involved in the protest demonstrations, the stronger was their sense of belonging to the group and the level of their cultural beliefs as assessed 8 weeks after the events. In addition, the importance of their participation in the collective social sharing was associated with feelings of well being and with positive feelings vis-à-vis their future life. These observations are particularly consistent with the theoretical model that will be examined in the next section.

## 4.8 The Collective Sharing of Emotions in Social Gatherings

The social sharing of emotions can take another type of collective form that is particularly common in social life. Members of a group or of a society gather deliberately in situations in which they experience emotions together. Such emotional gatherings can take many forms. The spectrum is wide, since it comprises at a time political rallies or protest demonstrations, funeral ceremonies, wedding celebrations, court sessions, music concerts, theater, sport events or religious rituals, and so forth. A century ago, in his classic book titled “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life”, Emile Durkheim (1912) proposed an analysis of collective emotional gatherings primarily intended to account for religious rituals and ceremonies. Yet, his model is very likely valid for any type of situation in which people experience emotions in a crowd. Durkheim viewed such gatherings as a particularly effective way to periodically renew the membership of individuals to the group and reinvigorate in them the shared beliefs that underlie the life of any group. According to his analysis, in collective emotional gatherings, people generally gather in the presence of symbols that represent their membership group and evoking the beliefs shared by members. All the participants share a common concern and they focus their attention on a common object. The collective event then goes on involving abundant collective action and movements, with shared expressive gestures, dances, words, shouting or singing. These actions contribute to generate emotional states and an atmosphere of fervor. The shared focus and concern, the shared actions and movements, and the physical closeness of the participants contribute to favor emotional contagion. The elicited emotions echo and reinforce each other so that a climate of collective emotional fusion follows: individual feelings give way to shared feelings. For Durkheim, this generalized empathy is the action lever of collective rituals. It causes participants to experience a state of emotional fusion or communion: “we act the same way, we feel the same things, we are one”. The feeling of belonging is thus revived and social cohesion follows in the group. Shared beliefs, diluted daily by the individual life, return to the forefront of the consciousness of each. They can then return to their individual occupations, inhabited again for a while by the strength of the group and shared beliefs. A strengthened faith in the existence enables them to cope with everyday life with a sense of meaning.

It can be stressed that the interpersonal process of sharing emotions, the social sharing of a collective event and the collective expression of emotions in emotional gatherings overlap almost completely with regard to their underlying social dynamic. The underlying social dynamic is actually one and the same, that of emotional fusion. In all three cases, participants reciprocally stimulate their emotions. Such a dynamic leads to a sense of unity and has consequences in terms of social relationships, social trust, individual well-being and confidence in the future. The essential difference between interpersonal and collective social sharing lies in the way emotions propagate. In person-to-person situations, the propagation develops in successive stages and the emotion vanishes from the one stage to the

next one. By contrast, in the collective case, the emotional wave is instantaneous because it affects all members of a group at the same time.

Durkheim's model could be tested in the context of the "Gacaca" courts introduced all over Rwanda after the genocide that occurred in this country in 1994. These courts were inspired from the "Commissions for the Truth and Reconciliation" instituted for instance in South Africa after apartheid. The purpose of such procedures is to bring together victims and perpetrators in the presence of the members of the community. It is hoped that victims will find the opportunity to express their suffering and perpetrators will recognize their faults and will publicly express their repentances. In such collective situations, collective emotional expressions often reach paroxysmal dimension. Participants have very hard times in the situation, they leave it upset and sometimes retraumatized, but at the same time, they often feel a great personal and social benefit from their participation.

In two different studies (Kyangara et al. 2007; Rimé et al. 2011), victims of the Rwandan genocide and those detained for their involvement in the genocide have completed questionnaires before and after their participation in the Gacaca court of the community they belong. In one of these studies, their responses could be compared to those of control groups composed of victims and prisoners who completed the questionnaires at the same time but belonged to communities where the Gacaca courts had not yet taken place. As was predicted by the model put forward by Durkheim, the data collected showed that participation in Gacaca courts had intensified the emotions of most of the participants in both groups. However, also in line with the model of Durkheim, indicators of social integration included in the questionnaires showed significant positive effects. Thus, after participation, there has been an increase in the level of positive stereotypes of the group of victims vis-à-vis the genocidal, and vice versa. Moreover, we know that in intergroup conflicts, opponents are typically perceived as forming a more homogeneous group than it actually is: "they are all alike". The results of both studies showed that the monolithic perception was significantly reduced in both groups of respondents after their participation in the Gacaca courts. Finally, in full agreement with the logic of Durkheim that emotions and emotional fusion is the lever action of collective rituals, data analysis evidenced the role played by the emotional arousal of the participants as a partial mediator of the effects of social integration just described.

## 4.9 Conclusions

The study of the social sharing of emotion reveals that emotion is hardly ever experienced in social isolation. Rather, an emotional experience triggers and consistently feeds up important social process. Every individual communicates his emotional experiences to others. Those who heard about these experiences shall in their turn inform people around them of what they heard. In this way, they propagate all at once the emotional information, the emotional impact of this information and the need to share the information. Particularly intensive exchanges are occurring

between members of social groups when they cross a common emotional event. In this case, everyone is both a source and a target of emotional information and emotion reactivation. Finally, members of social groups gather regularly to experience emotions together or recall together common past emotional episodes. In such collective gatherings, the shared focus and concern, the shared actions and movements, and the physical closeness of the participants contribute to favor fast and powerful emotional contagion.

Why is emotion so closely associated with social orientation and social interactions? We have mentioned that common sense would favor an intra-individual explanation based upon the stereotype according to which expressing an emotion will end up “discharging” the associated emotional load. We saw that existing empirical data from the study of “psychological debriefings” after traumatic situations pleaded against the “discharge” hypothesis. Our own work on the effects of emotional sharing resulted in similar conclusions: contrary to the expectations of common sense, simple sharing of emotion does not cause a reduction of the emotional and cognitive impact of memories of the shared emotional episode. Thus, at odd with a very popular belief, emotional discharge is certainly not the primary function of the social sharing of emotion.

Rather, in this chapter, we have seen that the social sharing of emotion gives precedence to two well-documented processes. On the one hand, it rouses a specific socio-emotional process that (1) promotes emotional union between the sharing partners, (2) stimulates prosocial behaviors among targets, and (3) favors the social reintegration of individuals who lived a singular experience. On the other hand, the social sharing of emotion sparks a process of diffusion that allows the transmission of the individual experience to members of the social network. Those who receive this information are informed of what happened to one of them and how this one faced the situation. They will react to this information, spread it in turn, discuss it with others, and interpret it. Together, members of the social network will reflect upon the experience and they will derive lessons from it for the future of each of them. Through such a process, every significant experience of every single individual can enter the pool of shared knowledge, can impact on shared models of the world, shared worldviews and shared beliefs, and thus can engender changes into the systems of representations (concepts, beliefs, values, etc.) shared by the social milieu. In this sense, the social sharing of emotion is a tool for cultural transformation.

These findings allow us to get to the heart of what constitutes an emotional experience. An emotion necessarily reveals a mismatch between the events and the person’s expectations, goals, models, values, and so forth. It should be reminded that the anticipation systems of individuals possess largely originate in socially shared knowledge, or cultural knowledge. An emotion thus signals a gap occurring between the current individual experience and the socially shared knowledge. From this perspective, it is less surprising that in emotional circumstances, individuals are quick to turn to the social network they are members of. And it is less surprising that this social network cares much about what happened to their individual

members. The process of social sharing of emotion provides two functions that are essential with respect to survival: social integration of individuals and fine-grained adjustment of common knowledge on what can happen and how to face it. The model of collective emotional gatherings proposed by Emile Durkheim said nothing else. Their double function is to ensure social integration and to consolidate common belief systems.

In sum, emotional episodes have the effect of reviving a sense of unity among individuals and in social groups and this has important consequences for social cohesion, for social trust, for individual well-being and for confidence in the future.

#### **4.10 Perspectives: The Social Sharing of Emotions in Cyberspace**

The studies on which this chapter is based were conducted with respondents in small numbers and with methods limited to conventional data collection—most of the time using questionnaire techniques. This research has been able to highlight phenomena that were previously unknown and to open a number of promising avenues of investigation. However, it must be acknowledged that it is only in its infancy. From this point of view, the prospects offered by the study of emotions in cyberspace are simply gigantic. The study of online communications can spark a revolution in the field of investigation described in these pages. It will allow observing emotions, their expression and their social sharing in real time with massive data on communications flows, on the dynamics of exchanges, and on lexical indicators of underlying emotional, cognitive and social processes.

Events eliciting emotions of every possible types and of every level of intensity occur at every time in every parts of the world—would it be a bad act of purchase, the vision of a moving movie, attending a wedding or a funeral, or the sudden exposure to an earthquake. The study of online communications triggered by such events can offer an exceptionally fine-grained and reliable source of documentation on how people react to these events, how they talk about them, with whom, how many times, and for how long. Assessing reaction time, velocity of traffic, reaction time of target persons, duration of interactions, velocity of information propagation, extent of propagation wave, speed of extinction, indicators of reactivation or of remembrance and the like will provide a real time analysis of the dynamics of the social sharing of emotions. Such variables will be examined in function of the type of emotions involved, of the characteristics of the event, of its geographical location, of its socio-cultural context, of how distant witnesses are, of their socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics, and so forth.

Cyberspace data can powerfully feed the research about the management of emotion-eliciting experiences. Large scale data will help understanding how individuals and communities react to events, which are the factors that contribute to stress and trauma, and which are the ones promoting resilience and recovery. Such

data will also document the impact the emotion communication dynamics has upon interpersonal relationships and social links, upon group integration and cohesion, and upon group members' assertiveness and confidence. Critical issues in the study of emotions are likely to receive responses from data with a magnitude never achieved before.

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