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The Social Sharing of Emotion: Interpersonal and Collective Dimensions

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Summary

In this paper, we stressed the fact that emotion elicits a process that has much in common with the attachment process. People affected by an emotional experience are in search of meaning and understanding. They want to be with their intimates and want them to know what happened. Intimates in turn display responses that vary according to the emotional intensity of the shared episode. If the episode was mild, they will talk, asking questions, expressing opinions, and generating meanings. If the episode was severe, much less talk will be involved and non verbal behaviors will be displayed under the form of touching, of body contact, and of other attachment-like manifestations. Thus, the range of responses that will be found in the sharing situation extends from words and meanings to body contact and attachment. Both the cognitive needs and the affective needs aroused by the emotional situation are thus likely to be met in the sharing process. In final considerations, we argued that these needs result from the challenge inflicted to people's symbolic universe by the emotional episode.

The Social Sharing of Emotion: Interpersonal and Collective Dimensions

When people experience an emotion, they very generally--in 80 to 95%--talk about it recurrently in the following days and weeks (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991; Rimé, Noël, & Philippot, 1991; for a review, see Rimé, Philippot, Mesquita, & Boca, 1992). The studies revealed that this propensity is not dependent upon people's level of education. It is equally shown whether the persons hold a university degree, or whether their education was limited to elementary school. It is also observed with approximately equal importance in countries as diverse as Asian, North American and European ones. It does not seem that the type of primary emotion felt in the episode is a critical factor with regard to the need to talk about it. Episodes which involved fear, or anger, or sadness, are reported to others as often as episodes which involved happiness, or love. However, emotional episodes involving shame and guilt tend to be verbalized at a somewhat lesser degree.

From these observations, it can be concluded that the process of talking after emotional experiences has a very high generality. It is started in a majority of cases very early after the emotion--usually on the day it happened. It most often extends over the following days and weeks--or even months when the episode involved a high intensity of emotion. It is typically a repetitive phenomenon, as emotions are in their majority shared often or very often, and with a variety of target persons.

An important feature of this process of talking about an emotion of one's past personal experience is the fact that it elicits the reactivation of the shared emotion. Thus, mental images are re-experienced, body sensations are felt, and subjective feelings are aroused. In the case of negative emotion, the emotional reactivation usually leaves the sharing person in a state of upset. It is very puzzling that despite these negative consequences, people are in general quite eager to talk about their emotional experiences.

What we just described has been called the “social sharing of emotion” (Rimé, 1989; Rimé et al., 1991). The social sharing of emotion entails a description of the emotional event by the person who experienced it to some addressee, in a socially shared language. In its full form, the social sharing of emotion occurs in discourse when individuals communicate openly with one or more others about the circumstances of the emotion-eliciting event, and about their own feelings and emotional reactions. In attenuated forms, the social sharing of emotion consists of latent or indirect communications. In this latter case, the addressee is present only at a symbolic level, as is the case when one writes letters or diaries, or even when one performs some artistic production in the form of poems, music, or paintings.

The question arises of why people feel the need to share their emotional experiences. Very likely, the underlying motives are complex. In various studies, we observed that one of the most reliable predictors of the extent to which people feel the need to talk about a given episode was the intensity of the cognitive needs aroused by the emotional episode. The more an emotional experience elicited a need to “put things in order with regard to what happened”, to try to “find meaning in what happened”, and or to try “to understand what happened”, the more it will be shared afterwards (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, Philippot, 1998). Thus emotional episodes end up on some unfinished cognitive business, and this cognitive business could play some role in the motivation to talk about the emotion and to share it with other. Findings in support of this interpretation were issued from our investigations of emotional episodes that people did not share—secret emotions. We found that the memory of unshared episodes elicited feelings of unfinished cognitive business more than was the case for the memory of shared episodes (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). This was observed despite the fact that the two type of episodes were comparable for intensity of the elicited emotion.

Sharing targets and attachment figures

Who are the addressees in the process of sharing an emotion? An interesting trend emerges from studies considering the variety of age groups. Rimé, Dozier, Vandenplas, and Declercq (1996) individually exposed children aged 6 or 8 to an emotion-eliciting narrative and monitored thereafter the occurrence of sharing behaviors in each child in the next hours. Virtually no sharing toward peers of the same age and same classroom was observed. However, most children shared the emotional episode with their father and mother when they went back at their home in the evening. Sharing with other family members was exceptional. It thus seems that among children at this young age, attachment figures alone are taken as social sharing targets. In the next age group—8 to 12—some evolution was manifested in this regard. Children in this age range participating to a summer camp were followed up for their social sharing of emotion after an emotion-eliciting night game. Attachment figures obviously still played the major role in the social sharing of emotion at this age, as 93% of the children shared this experience with their mother and 89% with their father when back at home. However, the range of targets was now extended to siblings as well, and, to some extent, to peers. About half of the children talked to their siblings, and about one-third of them also shared their experience with some other child who attended the summer camp.

This question of the type of partner chosen for the social sharing process was further investigated in older age groups: adolescents (aged 12 to 17), young adults (aged 18-33), mature adults (aged 40-60) (Rimé, Mesquita, et al. 1991; Rimé, Noël, et al., 1991; Rimé, et al., 1992). It was observed that for people of all ages, targets of social sharing were confined to the circle of intimates (i.e., parents, brothers, sisters, friends, or spouse/partner). People who do not belong to this circle were only very rarely mentioned as having played the role of social sharing partners. In particular, professionals (e.g., priests, physicians, teachers,

psychologists), unfamiliar, or unknown persons are not likely to be selected for this role. However, among the eligible intimates, the chosen partner evolved as a function of gender and age. In particular, among adults, it was observed that the older they grew, the more they inclined to elect their spouse or companion as their privileged partner for the social sharing of their emotions. This trend was particularly marked among males.

Altogether, the data strongly suggest that important aspects of this social sharing behavior elicited by emotion relate to the attachment process. As was shown by the classic work conducted on primates by Harlow (1959) and as was abundantly documented about human beings by Bowlby (1969, 1973), exposure to an emotional situation elicits attachment behavior in the youngster at early age. The research briefly reviewed here above revealed that when children have reached the elementary school age, their attachment figures—father and mother—become their natural target for sharing an emotional experience. Later in age, the circle of sharing targets extends to other intimates--siblings, best friends, spouse or companion--who very likely are substitutes to the early attachment figures. With older age, spouse or companions who are obvious substitutes to attachment figures are most often attributed the role of exclusive sharing targets. Thus, the link observed at very young age between the experience of an emotion and the search for an attachment figure seems to be perpetuated across life up to old ages through the process of socially sharing one's emotional experiences.

How do target respond to the social sharing of emotion?

In studies conducted by Christophe & Rimé (1997) the response of recipients of the social sharing of an emotion were investigated. The data showed that hearing another's emotional story is itself the source of an emotion. Recipients indeed generally reported having felt intense emotions while listening to the narrative of the emotional episode. There was a clear positive linear relation between the emotional intensity of the heard episode and the

intensity of the emotion reported by the recipient. However, a common feature of emotional episodes across the range of intensities was that they all were rated by recipients at nearly maximal intensity for the emotion of interest they elicited. This led to conclude that people are generally much available and very opened to listen to the narratives of emotional episodes that occurred to others. Stated simply, we are eager to listen to such narratives.

Further examination of the profile of basic emotions reported by recipients of the social sharing of an emotion revealed that the more intense the emotional episodes they heard was, the more they experienced negative emotions such as fear, sadness, or disgust. Thus, one should expect that when the shared episode is emotionally intense, the listener's openness and availability to emotional narratives would be counter-acted by the strong negative feelings elicited, so that an approach-avoidance conflict is likely to be experienced. And when the shared episode is markedly intense, the balance is likely to shift on the avoidance side, so that the risk arises that listening would be denied. Consistent with this, surveying a community recently struck by an earthquake, Pennebaker and Harber (1993) noted that when people are exposed to someone's misfortune, their social responses often consist of either minimizing the problem, or of moderating the degree of disclosure, or even of discouraging any open emotional expression. To illustrate, these authors mentioned their observation that a few days after the earthquake had occurred, T-shirts appeared reading "Thank you for not sharing your earthquake experience".

Yet, such responses were in no manner found in our investigations of social sharing targets. What we observed was that when the intensity of the emotion heard was higher, listeners decreased their amount of minimizing responses and of verbal manifestations. As if to compensate, they also evidenced much more nonverbal comforting behaviors such as touching, body contact, taking into the arms, or kissing, than was the case when listening to low or moderate intensity episodes.

The targets' higher frequency of body contact and touching when exposed to the sharing of a high intensity emotion supports our view that the process of socially sharing emotions relates to attachment. Contrasting with the observations made by Pennebaker and Harber (1993) when surveying a community struck by an earthquake, the social responses recorded in our investigation of the social sharing process seemed characterized by tolerance, availability, and appropriate tuning of behaviors. Where does the difference lie? Our speculation is that the two observational sets differ in the type of social link involved in the observations. In the earthquake situation, people were exposed to members of their community in the broad sense of the term, which means non intimates, whereas listeners elected for the social sharing of an emotion are overwhelmingly selected among intimates. If our interpretation that intimates are attachment figures--or at least substitutes to the early attachment figures--is correct, then it should follow that such targets are unconditionally committed to listen to a victim's emotional expression, and to offer this person attention, affection and support.

Sharing emotions and strengthening social bonds

An interesting interpersonal dynamic is much likely to develop in a social sharing situation. When Person A experienced an emotion, the observations reviewed above lead to predict a chain of events as follows. Person A would feel the need to share the emotion and would share it effectively with a person B, presumably selected among intimates. In line with our data, Person B when listening would experience emotions. In particular, Person B would experience of a high level of interest for the emotional narrative. As an intimate of Person A, Person B's interest would not be counterbalanced by negative emotional feelings even if the emotional episode shared is intense. If this is the case, Person B would develop body contact or touching toward Person A. In line Bem' (1972) self-perception theory, such behaviors would activate empathic feelings in Person B, together with a willingness to help and to

support Person A. The latter thus successively receives from Person B manifestations of attention, interest, empathy, support and help which, altogether should end up in an enhancement of liking of Person A for Person B.

In sum, according to the dynamic just sketched, the social sharing of emotion has the potential of bringing the sender and the receiver closer to one another. At the closing of a sharing round, the two persons involved have a high likelihood to love one another more. As the described dynamics generally develops between people who already are intimates, the social sharing of emotion thus appears as a process instrumental in maintaining, refreshing and strengthening important social bonds. The practical significance of such a process is considerable. Roughly speaking, it means that each time a person is faced with an emotion eliciting situation, his or her closest social ties can be expected to be drawn tighter in the next minutes or hours. Enhanced social integration thus appears as a very likely consequence of the physiological and psychological turmoil resulting from an emotional situation. The benefits of the social sharing process on the side of the sender are thus obvious. But what are the benefits on the side of the listener?

Propagation of emotional information

If listening to emotion narratives induces emotion in the listener, then an interesting implication follows. In line with the general prediction that emotion elicits social sharing, a person exposed to the sharing of an emotion would then be expected to later share the listened narrative with a third person. In other words, a process of "secondary social sharing" should develop. This prediction is opposed to common sense in two ways. First, an emotional experience is often implicitly considered as a personal matter presupposing confidentiality. Second, sharing usually occurs with close confidants who, given the intimate nature of the relationship, are not expected to disclose what they heard. Nevertheless, the rationale

followed above leads one to predict the contrary. Once an emotion is shared, secrecy would rather be the exception.

Christophe and Rimé (1997) asked students to recall an episode in which someone had shared an emotional experience with them. They then reported whether they later told others about what they had heard. Findings clearly confirmed the prediction that shared emotional episodes are not kept confidential. Although listeners were intimates of the sharing person in 85% of the cases, 66% acknowledged having talked about the shared episode to one or more persons. Despite the common sense view of emotion as a personal and intimate matter, secondary social sharing occurred twice or more in 53% of all cases. The extent of secondary social sharing and the number of persons with whom it occurred varied as a function of the emotional intensity felt by the listener in the initial sharing situation. A second study further examined the relation between the intensity of the shared emotion and secondary social sharing. Participants were asked to recall a situation in which someone had shared with them an experience resembling those in one out of three lists of emotional events gathering respectively events of low, moderate and high emotional intensity. Again, they then were asked whether they later told others about what they had heard. Observed rates of secondary social sharing were again high and amounted to 78% of the cases across conditions. Frequency of secondary sharing and number of persons with whom secondary sharing occurred varied significantly with conditions of emotional intensity of the shared episode. Those who listened to a highly emotional sharing manifested secondary sharing more often than those who had listened to either a moderate or a low intensity sharing.

It should thus be concluded that once an emotion is shared, there is a high probability that the target would share this emotion with other persons, thus opening to a secondary social sharing process. Now, this suggests the possibility that this process would extend further. Indeed, a target of the secondary social sharing may also experience some emotion when

listening, which would also elicit in this person the need to further share the episode heard, in a "tertiary social sharing". That this actually occurs was clearly evidenced by Christophe (1997). Emotions heard in a secondary sharing are in fact again shared with one or several persons in most cases.

Altogether, these data reveal that emotional episodes propagate very easily across social networks. It can be calculated that when some intense emotional experience affects a given individual in a community, 50 to 60 members of this community would be informed of this event within the next hours by virtue of the propagation process. From intimates to intimates, and despite any recommendation not to repeat the information, most people in the community will know what happened to one of them. Such a process of propagation of emotional information has important potential implications in many respects. In particular, it means that emotion elicits intragroup communication. It means that members of a community keep track of the emotional experiences that affect the life of their peers. It also means that in a group, the shared social knowledge about emotional events and emotional reactions is continuously updated as a function of new individual experiences. As emotion generally occur when events are unexpected, unpredicted, or do not fit with expectations, and as such events generally require rapid, appropriate responding, the process by which information about emotional situations and responses spread in a social group may be seen as a particularly efficient prevention tool.

Emotion and sharing: The intrapersonal benefits

In the previous sections, we have briefly reviewed some aspects of the research we conducted around the general notion of the social sharing of emotion. In this review, we deliberately accented various interpersonal benefits which result from sharing emotions . This is not usual. Most of the time, when people's disclosure of what happened to them in an emotional episode comes to the floor, the first consideration which comes to mind in our

Western culture regards the intrapersonal aspects of the question. We immediately concentrate on the assumption that this process serves some "cathartic function". We presume that the person who experienced an emotion made use of talking as a discharge process which should eliminate the load of the emotional experience. We thus predominantly see talking about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process.

Such a view is not only much widespread among "psy" professionals, it is also commonly endorsed in the general population. In an inquiry conducted in Belgium on a very broad sample of adult respondents, Zech (2000) investigated people's beliefs about the social sharing of emotion and its consequences. She found that more than 80% of these respondents endorsed the view that talking about an emotion helps to recover from this emotion.

Yet, in the last 10 years, members of our team conducted a large number of investigations—both in naturalistic conditions and a laboratory environment--aimed at assessing in how far the social sharing of emotion actually had an impact on people's degree of recovery from the shared episode. We have been accumulating negative evidences (for a review and discussion, see Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001; Rimé & al., 1998; Zech, 2000). Our data virtually never confirmed that just talking about an emotional experience would change in a significant manner the emotionality that is attached to the memory of this experience. The abundance of our null findings finally led us to accept that despite stereotypes, socially sharing an emotion does not bring emotional relief as such. I now dare say that socially sharing an emotion cannot change the emotional memory. And after all, it does make sense with regard to adaptation. An emotional memory carries important information with respect to future situations. If we had the potential to easily alter the emotion-arousing capacities of such memories, such an equipment would deprive us from vital fruits of experience. Pathein mathein said the ancient Greek saying: Experiencing emotion is learning.

Yet, the negative findings regarding the recovery effects of talking about emotional experiences need to be considered together with two observations. First, there is the overabundant evidence that people who experienced an emotion want to talk about it and want to socially share this experience despite the emotional reactivation that is aroused in the process (Rimé & al, 1992; 1998). Second, in the course of our studies about the recovery effects, we very consistently observed that after having shared an emotion, our participants reported positive feelings and subjective benefits (Zech, 2000). Why do people want to share their emotions? Why do they have positive feelings after having shared their emotions? To be able to answer these questions, we need to reconsider what is exactly going on in an emotional experience.

Emotion and meanings: The cognitive dimension

We know that emotion arises from rapid and automatic meaning analyses of supervening events (e.g. Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1984). For example, if meanings such as "danger", "no control", "no escape" occur to me in a situation I am faced to, a variety of emergency reactions will develop in my body, and I will experience fear. There is however a second wave of meanings in emotion that we are generally unaware of. Situation-specific meanings such as "danger", "no control", "no escape" spread to broader meanings such as "the world is unsafe", "I am vulnerable and helpless", "life is unfair". Meanings of this kind affect how I view the world and on how I view myself. In other words, they pervade my symbolic universe.

What do we mean by subjective universe? In current life, I am living and acting under a subjective canopy of apparent order and meaning—a symbolic universe (e. g. Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Thanks to it, I can face the world and manage it relatively peacefully. Thanks to it, I can act as if it was just normal that I stand here on this planet, somewhere in between the Milky Way and Eternity. Emotional events often have to power to undermine this

delicate architecture. They challenge the canopy. Traumatic situations have been shown to be particularly deleterious in this regard (Epstein, 1987; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Parkes, 1972).

But any emotion has an impact on this symbolic architecture because emotion precisely develops at its fissures--or where things go unpredicted, unexpected, out-of-control, etc. By making fissures apparent, emotion makes us feel the weakness of the construction.

There lies probably the source of the need for cognitive clarification, for understanding, for finding meaning, abundantly reported by people who just went through some important emotional episode. Such a need generally matches the need for sharing the emotion. In our research, we first observed this match when comparing emotional memories that were shared and emotional memories that for some reason were kept secret (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). In this comparison, non-shared memories were found associated with (1) greater search for meaning, (2) greater efforts at understanding what had happened, and (3) greater attempts at "putting order in what happened". Items of this kind were later included in several studies in which the memory of an emotional experience was investigated among respondents (Rimé & al., 1998). In each of these studies, respondents' ratings of such items were found markedly and positively correlated with their rating of the need they still felt to share the investigated memory. This "need for completion" or "search for meaning" appears in the present state of the research as the best predictor of social sharing.

Emotion and sharing: The interpersonal dimension

But why do people also feel the need to be with others after an emotion? It should be stressed that the symbolic universe is everything but a solitary construction. No one could make sense of the world alone. Sociologists showed that we enter a culturally shaped subjective universe early in life (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The attachment process is the basic tool through which the construction is installed in the young human being. All along the development process, in everyday interactions, parents transmit their child the view of the

world that is shared in their culture. Later on, the construction is kept alive, strong and valid by the social consensus in which we take part minute after minute throughout our life as members of our community. Consequently, a crack in this symbolic universe does not only open in our meanings the breach that will elicit cognitive needs. It also has the effect to make us feel insecure and lonely, eliciting a very strong urge to re-immersing ourselves in the social consensus.

There probably lie the reasons why after an emotion, we feel the need to be with our intimates and to share the emotion with them. Our intimates are those who keep the attachment process alive for us, providing us with social support and security. They are those who share the social consensus with us, providing us with a coherent subjective universe. Being with these people and sharing the emotional experience with them will probably not have the effect of altering the memory of the emotion and of bringing us emotional relief. However, being with them and sharing the emotion with them can result in enhancing our experience of social support and in consolidating our symbolic universe. In other words, they will help us to make future life possible and meaningful in spite of what happened to us.

Emotion and the propagation of sharing: The collective dimension

We have described earlier in this chapter the propagation process that tends to develop in a community once an emotional experience affected a particular member of this community. We are now in a position to discuss the question of why such a collective process develops so easily when the experience at its start is strictly an individual one. Again, this point to the fact that what is challenged by the emotional episode is not unique to the individual who faced this episode. The symbolic universe is a collective construction and not an individual one. Therefore the impact of the emotional episode is not proper to the person who faced the emotional event. It has cognitive consequences for the entire community. It regards all those who share the same set of beliefs, of expectations and of world views. All of

them are threatened by what actually threatened only one. There lies the reason why each member of a community who hears about an individual emotional experience feels personally concerned with it. For each member, the mere fact that this episode happened implies that something in the community's meaning system is to be fixed.

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