The Age of Sharing

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5
Sharing Our Feelings

The concept of 'sharing' implies positive interpersonal relations. The way we create and sustain interpersonal relations nowadays is through talk. Sharing emotions, or conveying an inner state of ours to others, is crucial to what it means to be a proper, functioning member of society. Sharing, as a particular type of talk, can thus be conceived of as the constitutive activity of therapy culture (Füredi, 2004).

In this chapter, I explore the connection between digital culture and the therapeutic discourse. Perhaps in this chapter, more than any other, the reader will query my linking sharing as the dominant form of communication in therapy culture and sharing as the constitutive activity of social media (John, 2013a, and see Chapter 3). Are they really related? Does the fact that the word 'sharing' is prominent in both spheres really mean anything? And even if it does, so what? The objective of this chapter is to show that the therapeutic discourse (where 'sharing' is how we talk) and SNSs (where 'sharing' is how we participate) are related, and that the word 'sharing' helps us understand how. We have already seen, for instance, how SNSs make explicit use of therapeutic meanings of 'sharing' when they say things like 'Share with the people you care about'. However, the connection is deeper and touches on that which is considered private or public. Wuthnow (1994) has posited that '[s]upport groups are characterized by making private stories into public communicative

acts' (p. 186). The ease with which we could replace 'support groups' with 'social media' suggests the commonality that this chapter seeks to explore. We shall be talking, then, about the collapse of boundaries on the one hand and the rise of emotional communication on the other. This is not to say that all communication on SNSs is of a therapeutic ilk, but it is to say that the most basic assumptions about personhood that we find in our therapeutic culture are also at play in that sphere, and that the notion of sharing links the two.

Social network sites are places where, *inter alia*, people express emotions. I take this to be an entirely uncontroversial statement. There are entire industries that strive to extract knowledge from the many expressions of emotion people make online (sentiment analysis, for instance), and academics too have been fascinated by a range of aspects of emotional communication online (see Benski and Fisher, 2013, for an excellent collection). The emotional impact of surfing has long been of interest too, from Kraut et al.'s (1998) findings (later moderated in Kraut et al., 2001) that correlated depression with internet use, to more recent research that suggests that Facebook use is correlated with social capital (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007) and that emotional disclosure on Facebook can improve psychological well-being (see, for instance, Reinecke and Trepte, 2014).

For our purposes, however, we do not need to know much about who expresses emotions online, how, when and with what consequences. Of greater interest here is the notion that SNSs have an interest in their users expressing emotions on their platforms. As we saw in Chapter 3, 'sharing' is a mainstay of how SNSs market themselves. 'Sharing' incorporates the entire gamut of social media practices, and, through taglines such as 'Share your world' and 'Share your life', it is pretty clear that SNSs would like us to share everything. (Of course, as already discussed, sharing on SNSs is monetized and emotions are commodified; I shall come back to this aspect of sharing later on.)

Sometimes, SNSs appeal to us to participate by making explicit the association between sharing and emotions. Sharing on social media, they intimate, is good for us individually, and good for our interpersonal relationships. For instance, a post on Facebook's blog claimed that 'Facebook

aims to reduce that very isolation Putnam [in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000)] laments by facilitating sharing with the people we care the most about', and unambiguously asserts that 'The more people use Facebook, the better they feel' (Burke, 2010). Recall from Chapter 3 the ad I mentioned for Yahoo!'s Pulse network (also from 2010), which encouraged us to 'Share what's important to you with the people you care about'.

My general point, and the theme of this chapter, is that SNSs are part of today's 'therapy culture' (Füredi, 2004); they partake in the therapeutic discourse (Illouz, 2007, 2008). I am not talking here about websites, forums and online support groups that are explicitly dedicated to their members' psychological welfare, but rather about the assumptions regarding the self and the self's relations with others that underlie social media.

To illustrate briefly what I mean, before engaging with the concepts of therapy culture and the therapeutic discourse more intensively, consider a video produced by Facebook and published on Facebook's own Facebook page on 12 February 2015 (two days before Valentine's Day).[1] The text that accompanies the video reads 'Love is for sharing'. One meaning of this is that if you have love, you should share it around; in this sense, 'Love is for sharing' is a play on the more familiar phrase 'Share the love'. But of course what Facebook intends here is that we should share our love by communicating about it on Facebook, and this works as a tagline because 'sharing' is the word we use to refer both to the communication of emotions and to the act of posting to SNSs. In this short clip (1:06 minutes), we see a number of characters talking about love, directly or indirectly, and reading out status updates (including saying the words 'heart emoji'). Finally, the message of the clip is that if you love someone, tell them (on Facebook). The central example in the clip is of a mother's love for her young adult daughter and the daughter's love for her mother, though other instances of love appear, including (hetero- and homosexual) romantic love. However, relations between the self and other are not the only focus of the clip, as one of the talking heads declaims the famous Oscar Wilde quotation, 'To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.' In other words, we should have

high levels of self-esteem (a particularly important concept in what Moskowitz (2001) calls the 'therapeutic gospel'). In this clip, then, we are told that we should communicate our emotions to significant others, and that our own self and happiness should be at the forefront of our concerns.

These are two important features of what it means to live in a therapy culture. We shall now turn to the first of these, namely, the injunction to share our emotions.

Sharing and the Therapeutic Discourse

As a first step, let us observe the word 'sharing' in its sense of talking about emotions. In her analysis of the culture of therapy and self-help, sociologist of emotions Eva Illouz (2008) does not analyse the word 'sharing' per se, but the examples she cites show how it is used. Thus, she quotes a source as explaining, 'Sex is a very intimate encounter, one that involves sharing feelings' (p. 127). Illouz herself says that 'the therapeutic ideal increases the injunction to share all needs and feelings' (p. 227). In another important book about the rise of the therapeutic discourse, Deborah Lupton lays out a cultural requirement of our intimate ties: 'Individuals in close relationships are expected to achieve and maintain intimacy by sharing their emotions with each other, even if these are negative' (Lupton, 1998: 96). Bellah et al., in their classic, *Habits of the Heart*, also use the word 'sharing' to describe the idea of love in a therapeutic culture: 'Thus sharing of feelings between similar, authentic, expressive selves [...] becomes the basis for the therapeutic idea of love' (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton, 1985: 100).

As competent social actors, we know that this is an important meaning of 'sharing', and we most likely adhere to the injunction to share in this sense in our own relationships. But, as Chapter 2 showed, there is a history here. In the introduction to *Therapy Culture*, Frank Füredi points to the emergence of a therapeutic system by showing how terms such as 'stress', 'trauma' and 'self-esteem' have become far more prevalent in the press (Füredi, 2004: 3–7). Similarly, put the term 'share your feelings with' into Google's Ngram interface,[2] and you

are presented with a cultural shift (see Figure 5.1). During the second half of the 1960s, the term takes off. This sits well with what we know about the 1960s and 1970s – the counterculture, the rise of therapy and support groups, consciousness raising of various kinds, and the growing popularity of TV talk shows. The countercultural radicals of the 1960s 'wanted to organize all human relationships along therapeutic lines' (Moskowitz, 2001: 179) and 'liberate the self' (p. 217). In the 1970s, self-expression was seen by many Americans as the key to liberation, with 'candor, intimacy, and self-awareness' especially lionized (p. 219). According to this generation, 'Salvation', argues Moskowitz, 'lay in openness and communication' (p. 219). In Moskowitz's historical account of therapy culture, the 1970s saw an unprecedented focus on self-expression and feelings. 'Never before had such an emphasis been placed on intimacy, trust, and self-awareness' (p. 243). If 'sharing' conjures up rainbows, this is when that link was made.

This is an important part of what Paddy Scannell has termed the 'communicative turn' of the postwar western world (Scannell, 2009). It represents the consolidation of a self that is constructed through talking or writing about itself, be that in therapy, support groups, on television talk shows or in everyday interactions with significant others and even colleagues. It is a self that is (relatively) free from social shackles, at least formally so (parents were not choosing their children's marriage partners in 1960s America, for instance). This self, then, is free to engage in 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1992) that are based on the verbalization of feelings; or, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim put it, 'What used to be a team sharing the work [i.e., pre-modern agricultural families] has turned into a couple sharing emotions' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 48).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, like Habermas (1989) and Giddens (1992), trace this shift back to the beginning of modernity, but it would seem that the turn of the twentieth century was a key period in the internalization of the value of talk (see T. J. J. Lears, 1983; Moskowitz, 2001). In particular, I want to shine a spotlight on a group of religious Americans whose spiritual practices revolved around 'sharing', namely, the Oxford Group, which, given its status as the

Figure 5.1 Google Ngram, 'share your feelings with', 1800–2000

progenitor of Alcoholics Anonymous, is surprisingly unfamiliar to scholars of communication and therapeutic culture. As we shall see, the Oxford Group's use of the word 'sharing' was taken up by Alcoholics Anonymous and is now used extremely widely. In the first social scientific treatment of the Oxford Group, Allan Eister wrote:

> New religious movements are a source of perennial interest to the social scientist. They are the stuff out of which new institutions are sometimes formed. Often they open up fresh cleavages in society (or uncover latent ones); and not infrequently they have added important new values and patterns to the culture. At the same time these new movements bear the marks of the social order out of which they spring and are themselves products of significant social trends operative in society. (Eister, 1950: ix)

There is no doubt that the Oxford Group gave birth to new institutions (Alcoholics Anonymous), and I hope to show that it 'added important new values and patterns' to western culture – at the very least, the appellation of a certain type of talk, 'sharing'. I shall also attempt to place the Oxford Group in some kind of context, though with the advantage over Eister of an extra half-century of hindsight.

Sharing and the Oxford Group

The Oxford Group was founded in 1922 by Frank Buchman. It was a Christian group that, according to Dick B., a historian of Alcoholics Anonymous, aspired 'to get back to the beliefs and methods of the Apostles' (B., 1997: 52). The Oxford Group (no relation to the university) was the forerunner of the Moral Rearmament movement that was popular in the US in the lead-up to and during the Second World War. More significantly for our concerns here, it was also the progenitor of Alcoholics Anonymous, and thus in a way the forefather of today's wealth of support groups. This is important because, as Dick B. wrote, 'If there was one Oxford Group practice that had more influence on *today's* A.A. meetings and message-carrying ideas than any other, it was the

practice of *sharing*' (p. 64; emphasis in original). The place of the Oxford Group in the history of AA is also emphasized by Bill Pittman in his history of the organization, where he writes, 'There is little doubt about the Oxford Group's contributions in influencing the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous' (Pittman, 1988: 174). To support this, he cites AA co-founder Bill Wilson's own history, in which he writes, 'The early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Group' (W., 1979: 39; cited in Pittman, 1988: 175).

As mentioned, a central practice of the Oxford Group was sharing. In a pamphlet, *What is the Oxford Group?*, penned by the anonymous 'Layman with a Notebook', we read that 'The Sharing of our sins and temptations with another Christian life given to God' is the first of the Group's four spiritual activities which, it is claimed, will help people live according to the principles of 'Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love' (The Layman with a Notebook, 1933: 8). 'Sharing of sins as practised by the Oxford Group', according to the Layman, 'is sharing in the ordinary sense of the word; in plain language it is telling, or talking over, our sins with another whose life has already been surrendered to God.' As we saw in Chapter 2, 'sharing' already meant telling by the 1920s – this is the 'ordinary sense of the word'. But the practice it referred to was new, and the spread of the practice, along with the word, gave the word a new set of meanings.

While sharing in the Oxford Group also included listening to another's confession, the dominant sense was that of confessing. Unlike the Catholic confessional, however, sharing in the Oxford Group was a public act carried out in a secular setting (someone's living room, for instance) in front of a group of laymen (as opposed to privately, in a confession box, to a priest or even more privately to God). For the first time, then, 'sharing' meant the public profession of a fault of self (sin) for the sake of redemption. Indeed, the very origins of the movement, according to its founder, Frank Buchman, had their foundation in a religious experience he had where he felt that his heart obtained release from bitterness through the act of telling other people how he had maltreated them

(B., 1997). Talking openly and honestly to others, we might say, increased Buchman's subjective well-being.

What is the Oxford Group? (The Layman with a Notebook, 1933) and *For Sinners Only* (Russell, 1932) are both very useful texts from which we can extract a great deal of the values of the group, and in particular the implicit theory of communication and well-being that underpinned its emphasis on sharing. For this reason, I shall linger on them and present a number of extracts which, I believe, demonstrate the group's psychological bent (despite its strident opposition to psychotherapy) and show how its concept of sharing was a profoundly therapeutic one.

Given its stress on interpersonal relations, the Oxford Group was careful not to undercut or devalue the individual's unmediated relationship with God, but it is still hard not to read it as a modern organization with secular undertones. As the Layman wrote, it is enough that we acknowledge 'a need for change in our lives' in order to get help from the 'life changers' of the Oxford Group (p. 5); here, I would argue that the very ability to think in terms of instigating a 'change in our lives' is post-traditional. In this same pamphlet we also read what would appear to be a criticism of positive thinking, part of the group's broader rejection of psychology, at the same time as it irrefutably adopts a psychological model of the self and interiority. Regarding our sins, the Layman writes that, 'We cannot get rid of them by deciding to think no more about them' (p. 21). Rather, they must be 'cut out by a decided surgical spiritual operation', otherwise 'we become warped in outlook not only towards others but towards ourselves' (p. 21). Later, in the chapter titled 'Sharing', he talks about the value in 'getting things off our chest' (p. 28). Sharing (within the context of the group) is described as better than psychotherapy (with which it is clearly in competition):

> A father who Shares with his son the knowledge that he, too, went through the phase that his son now finds so torturous to his physical and spiritual outlook: an elder brother Sharing with a younger, a friend with a friend, can lay simply and easily those ghosts which the psychoanalyst can only eradicate by prolonged effort. (1933: 31)

But why not confess to God? What are the properties of sharing with other people that ensure redemption? First, notes the Layman, people can of course 'go straight to God' and 'God will forgive them' (p. 32). However,

> if they wish for a sure and certain knowledge that their past sins – and all of them – are to be wiped out, once and for all these sins must be *brought into the open* and honestly faced. *To put them into words*, before Christ with another Christian, as a witness, is the only healthy way of making sure that the spiritual system is virtually cleansed. (Ibid.: 32; emphasis added)

The italicized phrases here are crucial. Work on the self cannot be conducted internally. Our sins (the modern reader might substitute 'faults', 'neuroses', etc.) can only be redeemed (resolved, cured, worked through and so on) by being made public or, at the very least, by being brought outside of us, exteriorized, so that they can be observed by another. This interpretation is supported by an extract from *For Sinners Only*, in which Russell (1932) discusses the place of God in sharing. Ideally, he says, confessions 'should be made direct to God'. However, 'there are very many who need the help of Sharing with another [...]. For them Sharing is a practical necessity. Only so do they grasp the *reality* of their confession' (pp. 16–17; emphasis added). This notion is reinforced by a quotation from a conversation between Russell and Canon Prof. Grensted, a scholar and psychologist:

> 'Sharing is a positive good,' emphasised the Professor. 'It is the real answer to so many problems. For *it is almost impossible for a person to see his real problems straight unless he has an outside view on them*, and he can only get that by Sharing.' (Russell 1932: 238; emphasis added)

Eister (1950), the social scientist, presents a lengthy excerpt from Philip M. Brown (1937), an academic and Oxford Group member, on the subject of sharing and people's relationship with God:

> I have found that to deal drastically with sins it is necessary to share them completely with someone in whom we have

> confidence. *Few persons are honest and definite with God*. There is an inevitable tendency to be vague when we confess our sins alone. We do not name them in ugly detail. We do not lay them out as it were on a table and *look at them objectively*. [...] We cannot possibly see our sins in their true light [...] until we 'share' deeply with another human being (Brown, 1937: 33–4; cited in Eister, 1950: 18–19; emphasis added).

Once again we are presented with the idea that truth is ensured not by talking to God, but by placing ourselves under the scrutiny of another person. This presages the logic both of talks shows and reality TV, which also have a deeply therapeutic bent, and of social media.

Truth is attained via the gaze, and putting our 'sins' into words both objectifies and reifies them, making them real. This enables others to gaze upon our sins and confessions (or upon us) and thus redeem us, or give us value. This is what Illouz is referring to when describing a much more recent technique for partners to let off steam: 'This technique', she writes, 'instructs that we contain negative emotions and make them into emotions external to the self, to be watched from the outside, so to speak' (Illouz, 2007: 35). We shall come back to the idea that truth is attained through surveillance when we touch upon the place of reality TV in contemporary therapeutic performances of the self. For now, we note that sharing for the Oxford Group entails lowering the boundaries around the self and, as cited above in the context of support groups, 'making private stories into public communicative acts' (Wuthnow, 1994: 186).

Another aspect of sharing, as emphasized by Russell and others in the Group, was that of fellowship. Sharing, said Russell (1932), was 'the only way to true fellowship' (p. 17). Moreover, the founding story of how sharing was developed in the Oxford Group was one of the formation of fellowship: Buchman and some other men were travelling across China by train, preaching. Living in close quarters, tensions sometimes rose, which were resolved by sharing annoyances 'with the person concerned rather than with another'. The men 'share[d] our own faults' which enabled them to 'cement the team into the ideal fellowship' (p. 196).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, sharing is also held to be the bedrock of marriage. In another contemporary text about the Oxford Group, Victor Kitchen (1934) says that it is the 'sharing of one's sins' that turns 'an ordinary marriage' into 'holy wedlock' (p. 61). Russell (1932) tells of the tribulations of a married couple for whom sharing resolved a profound conflict. The wife had trained as a lawyer before marrying and having twelve children; now, however, she was unhappy. After a long conversation with an Oxford Group leader, she realized that 'she must just share the whole story with her husband'. The husband was deeply shocked to hear of his wife's unhappiness. However, 'It ended in both offering their lives to God, and they are rebuilding their home on understanding lines of simply Sharing. The wife has become a lawyer, and is practicing law with the whole-hearted assistance of her husband' (pp. 232–3). Russell then cites a man who explains his view of marriage:

> This team-work for Christ demands an open transparency between husband and wife, with no hidden reservations about each other. Most people are lone wolves by nature, and they need a regular time of Sharing each day, when all the silly little irritations, the jealousies, the suspicions which skim the cream from matrimony can be laughed away. (1932: 234)

Most of us today would consider this sound advice, and indeed very similar modes of talk are reported fifty years later by interviewees in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985), pointing to a continuity both in terms of language and cultural values. Many couples, we learn in *Habits of the Heart*, 'speak of sharing – thoughts, feelings, tasks, values, or life goals – as the greatest virtue in a relationship'. An interviewee talks about how she fell in love with her husband – '"I think it was the sharing, the real sharing of feelings'" – and the authors conclude that in American culture, the 'natural sharing of one's real self is, then, the essence of love', no less (p. 91). Observing patterns of communication among couples at around the same time as Bellah et al. were writing, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick noted that 'In the latter part of the 20th century, the sharing of personal feelings and information has become the hallmark of a close relationship' (Fitzpatrick, 1987: 131).

Notably, sharing in the Oxford Group was criticized in ways that resonate with contemporary critiques of the therapeutic ethos and sharing as its primary form of communication. In a book based on fifty-five case studies of current and former Oxford Group members, Walter Clark (1951) lays out some of the frequently expressed criticisms of the Group. One of these is that 'it is blind to social evil, and by its complacency is helping to perpetuate the shortcomings of the present social order' (p. 233). Likewise, in Eister's early sociological account, the Group was described as focusing on 'the moral shortcomings of individuals with little or no attention focused upon the institutional mechanisms and processes operative in the social order' (Eister, 1950: 184). This reads very much like a prefiguration of later critiques of the therapeutic ethos, such as those of Rieff (1966) and Lasch (1978), who bemoan the decline of the social at the expense of the individual.

Relatedly, Clark's interviewees who viewed the Oxford Group in a negative light saw the Oxford Group experience as overly emotional and not sufficiently intellectual (Clark, 1951). An interviewee whom Clark categorized as 'partly positive' nonetheless criticized the Group's 'over-emphasis of the emotional side of religion, in the unrestrained public confession of sins' (p. 167), and even in the chapter comprised of positive experiences with the Group one interviewee referred to 'its too great dependence on emotion' (p. 178).

There are even indications that 'sharing' was a manipulative tool. Clark (1951), for instance, writes that a 'member of the Group found a premium coming due on his insurance policy, his only monetary asset. He was "guided" [in Quiet Time, by God] to share his financial worries with another wealthier member, with the result that the premiums for the next five years were paid for him' (p. 30).

While I would not posit that today's social media sense of sharing is the same as the Oxford Group's, I link the two through the model of an individual self who conveys his or her authentic being through words that are placed in the public domain. What I show is that the kind of communication that SNSs encourage us to engage in has cultural roots in the kind of communication that the Oxford Group called 'sharing', which in turn draws on an understanding of the self that was emerging in the early twentieth century.

'Sharing' as Talking about Emotions

It is not easy – perhaps it is impossible – to definitively establish that our current understanding of 'sharing' as talking about our emotions is based in the Oxford Group, though this suggestion would seem to be supported by the corpus analysis presented in Chapter 2, as well as by a lack of references in texts about the Oxford Group to other people meaning something similar by 'sharing'.[3] It is far easier to establish that sharing is a form of communication that is central to how we live today, and especially to our interpersonal relationships. I shall attempt to do this by drawing on three key texts: Katriel and Philipsen's (1981) article about communication as a type of talk; Carbaugh's (1988) book about the talk show *Donahue*; and Cameron's (2000) critical appraisal of communication.

What we today call 'sharing' used to be called 'communication', as distinct from 'mere talk' (Katriel and Philipsen, 1981). For Katriel and Philipsen, ' "communication" refers to that speech which manifests self-disclosure, positive regard for the unique selves of the participants, and openness to emergent, negotiated definitions of self and other' (p. 315). Katriel and Philipsen distinguish communication from 'mere talk' by characterizing the former as close (as opposed to distant), supportive (as opposed to neutral) and flexible (as opposed to rigid). Katriel and Philipsen state that closeness between interlocutors is manifested 'To the degree that each interlocutor makes public what was previously private information about his or her unique self image' (p. 308). Second, 'communication' is 'speech in which unconditional positive regard finds its natural home' (p. 308). This does not mean that we approve of everything our interlocutor has done, but that we 'approve the other *qua* unique and precious individual' (p. 308). There is something fundamentally non-judgemental at play in this type of speech. Third, 'communication' is characterized by flexibility; it is 'the speech of emergent realities, of negotiated selves and the negotiated relationship' (p. 308). Today, I would maintain, these features apply to 'sharing', which has largely supplanted 'communicating' as the type of

speech we are engaged in when talking about our emotions and selves. The similarities with the Oxford Group's 'sharing' are also fairly plain to see.

In characterizing 'communication', Katriel and Philipsen refer to the television talk show *Donahue*, which is also the subject of Donal Carbaugh's book *Talking American*, which contains the only – to the best of my knowledge – treatment of sharing as a category of speech (Carbaugh, 1988; see esp. Chapter 8). Like Katriel and Philipsen before him, Carbaugh also stresses closeness and support as constitutive of this cultural category of speaking. Sharing, says Carbaugh, is 'making resources of self available to others in a tone that could support and benefit them.' It is 'making something that is one's own, for example, one's "psychological state," available to others' (p. 144).[4] Sharing, he says, 'is not only an expression of one's inner experiences and feelings, but is also speech with a relational embrace' (p. 145). Referring to men in a support group, Carbaugh says that 'sharing' is a type of talk through which 'The men gain support from one another'. They are sharing when 'they speak in a cooperative way about their common problems' (p. 147). Thus, argues Carbaugh, 'the primary purpose of sharing is expressive and affiliative' (p. 148), echoing the closeness and support of 'communication' in Katriel and Philipsen. Katriel and Philipsen's 'flexibility' is also present in that the talk show is held to be emotionally transformative, for both the guests and the audience.

In another echo of Katriel and Philipsen, and to recall once again the cartoon of the man 'sharing' beer with a child, Carbaugh notes that 'Socially discreditable behavior is overlooked and ignored when speech is labeled sharing' (p. 148). Here Carbaugh adds another aspect to this discussion: the fact that the way the speech is labelled impacts on how we view it. Calling talk 'sharing' is to use the word as an 'illocutionary force indicating device' (Searle, 1969), or as a 'metalinguistic performative' (J. Thomas, 1995). In other words, if we talk about a type of talk as 'sharing', we are creating an expectation for personal, emotional and intimate talk; if someone tells us they have something they want to share with us, we will expect to be told something of personal import, and not that the toothpaste has run out.

Building on Katriel and Philipsen and Carbaugh's analyses, Deborah Cameron adds the notion of 'therapeutic discourse'. Here, the key idea is that talking is *the* way to solve personal and interpersonal problems. Cameron herself does not call this talk 'sharing' directly; rather, she encloses the word in quote marks, presumably because she adopts an explicitly critical standpoint towards this type of talk (Predelli, 2003), and, as we know by now, if we call something 'sharing' we are saying it is good. However, it is clear that she is talking about the same kind of talk that so interested Katriel and Philipsen and Carbaugh before her. Cameron notes that one of the rules of the therapeutic way of talking is that one talk 'as an autonomous individual subject whose experiences and feelings are unique' (Cameron, 2000: 156; this is what American preschoolers learn through participation in the 'sharing circles' mentioned in the Introduction). Moreover, therapeutic talk is talk that can help one change for the better, recalling Katriel and Philipsen's concept of 'personal growth' (Cameron, 2000: 158), and similarly to the Oxford Group's hopes for people who shared their sins. Moreover, knowing how to talk this way is crucial for the ability to maintain intimate interpersonal relationships. Referring back to Carbaugh, Cameron also discusses the expectation that one will not be judged by what one says when therapy-talking.

Before examining how this therapeutic sense of sharing is played out in online environments, let us briefly review the common threads that connect sharing in the Oxford Group with sharing as talking about feelings today, so that they may inform our discussion of online sharing-as-telling.

First, sharing is authentic and reveals one's innermost self by conveying emotional rather than intellectual content – relatedly, therapists are more interested in how we feel than in what we think. Through sharing in the Oxford Group, we are told, 'People come to know one another as they really are' (Clark, 1951: 35). Members of the Oxford Group were meant 'to share our real selves, *sins*, and all, with each other' (Kitchen, 1934: 96; emphasis in original). In a Goffmanesque description of a meeting at Oxford University, Group member and author A. J. Russell wrote: 'Young men were revealing their real selves, [...] were showing a masked world how to be honest by removing their own masks' (Russell, 1932: 68).

This feeling of absolute honesty was also described by Philip M. Brown:

> This is the heart of sharing: one human soul going out to another in all humility, generous understanding, and confident faith, so completely and fearlessly that for once in his life a man can know the immense relief of being absolutely honest without reservation or concealment. (Brown, 1937; cited in Eister, 1950: 19)

Relatedly, sharing in the Oxford Group was very individualistic, and 'had almost exclusively as [its] focus the individual and some inwardly felt shortcoming' (Eister, 1950: 171–2).

Second, such sharing contributes to strong interpersonal ties, which in terms of the Oxford Group is called 'fellowship'. Indeed, the very circumstances in which the practice of sharing was developed involved close interpersonal relations. As mentioned, the story goes that Buchman and some companions were travelling in close proximity through China, and that being open and honest about how they felt towards each another not only prevented the group of missionaries from splitting up, but actually brought them closer together. Oxford Group member Victor Kitchen testified to the sense of friendship that sharing created between him and others on a retreat by noting that 'after but three days of sharing and fellowship in Christ I grew to know and love each one of the forty [people on the retreat] as I had not known or loved my own chosen clubmates during an intimacy of years' (Kitchen, 1934: 78). According to Clark, this fellowship comes about precisely because 'People come to know one another as they really are' (Clark, 1951: 35). Sharing is a profoundly honest type of communication.

Third, when listening to someone sharing, one remains non-judgemental. In the Oxford Group one would share in order to gain redemption and whoever was listening helped in that, simply by listening and accepting, or perhaps even by identifying with the sins being confessed and adding their confession too. As the Layman (1933) put it, at Oxford Group house-parties discussion took place 'directly and constructively without partisanship' (p. 11). Similarly, Russell (1932) explained that 'Changed men might go wrong in trying to change others by argument, but they were on safe

ground in *recounting their own experiences* as the Apostles recounted theirs' (p. 22; emphasis added). This sense of a lack of judgementalism, or a feeling that sharing is a type of talk that does not invite argument or contention, is concisely conveyed by the response in Alcoholics Anonymous after a group member has finished talking, namely, 'Thank you for sharing.' Carbaugh (1988) deals with the potential pitfalls of this non-judgementalism when discussing the racism expressed by a guest on *Donahue*. Donahue says of her, 'At least she is being honest. [...] She is sharing her feelings' (p. 148), as if this can compensate for the utterance of a racist remark. Deborah Cameron (2000) confronts this sense of a lack of moral grounding more explicitly. In discussing the type of speech on shows such as *Donahue*, she says that it is talk that is 'governed by a norm of "righteous tolerance" according to which everyone has a right to their opinion, but it is not legitimate to impose your opinions on others or to judge them' (p. 153). Sharing, then, is expressing one's personal truth in a way that cannot be argued with.

Fourth, there is a distinct sense that when Oxford Group sharing is described, the text could be referring to therapy as we know it today. For instance, A. J. Russell relates a conversation he had with another Group member over dinner: '"What is the Group teaching about smokes and drinks?" I asked. "What do you think?" That is the characteristic Group answer. [...] Throw a question at the Group and it comes back to you' (1932: 65–6). I have already mentioned the value noted by the Layman (1933) in 'getting things off our chest' (p. 28). He also says that talking about our sins 'brings them into the open light', meaning that 'they are no longer bogies but hard facts to be faced squarely' (p. 29), and stresses that sharing is not about 'Placing the blame on others and making excuses for our weaknesses' (p. 33). Moreover, the excerpts about marital harmony, and the story of Buchman and his companions learning to get along during their journey in China, sound as if they were lifted from present-day manuals for how to successfully maintain relationships. Members of the Oxford Group themselves were not unaware of this. Philip M. Brown, for instance, said quite unequivocally that 'The method of sharing or of "confession" is good psychology' (Brown, 1937; cited by Eister, 1950: 19).

Finally, and by way of extending the previous point, we can see similar views about the price of not sharing in both Oxford Group texts and contemporary common sense, and specifically the notion that a failure to share has profound negative psychic consequences. Russell (1932) again:

> What mattered far more was the danger of not Sharing. The life shut in on itself fell into disaster. The danger of Sharing could never be so great as the danger of bottling up. This led to all kinds of tragedies – including suicide and murder. (p. 238)

Jumping forward forty-five years, Susan Sontag (1978) described the power of such reasoning in folk attitudes towards cancer: 'many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger. [...] cancer is now imagined to be the wages of repression' (p. 21); it is viewed as a disease of the 'failure of expressiveness' (p. 48) and related to 'emotional withdrawal' (p. 55). While views such as these are probably far less prevalent than they were in the 1970s, I would wager that there is not a reader of these lines who would not encourage a friend who was feeling down, or who had gone through a difficult experience, to talk about it, perfectly convinced that things will only get worse if they do not.[5]

Mediated Displays of Authenticity

The point of devoting this much time and space to the communicative aspect of sharing – sharing as talking, specifically about our inner selves as part of intimate relations – is twofold. First, it enables us to see the history of the concept in this particular context, a history that has not yet been told. Second, it highlights that talk is always tied to a cultural context, and that cultural contexts always have a political economy.

In her book *In Therapy We Trust*, Eva Moskowitz (2001) notes that the advice column in *Good Housekeeping* in the

1890s was slow to take off because what she calls the 'therapeutic gospel' had not yet been widely accepted. People feared self-revelation and did not want to expose themselves. She also discusses the psychologization of poverty and the new theory of welfare in the 1920s and 1930s that were behind reforms to mental hospitals in the US. However, a new treatment, 'quaintly called "talk"' (p. 43), took time to be adopted, as not all patients were 'accustomed to the idea, readily accepted today, that they should disclose intimate personal facts to perfect strangers' (p. 43). This idea – that talking about yourself provided access to your core being and could improve your well-being – took hold of the general public at a time when authenticity itself was being questioned and hence reconstructed.

This is the thrust of T. J. Jackson Lears' (1983) seminal work on the therapeutic roots of consumer culture, which he locates in the years 1880–1930 – the decades leading up to the flourishing of the Oxford Group. I shall not here be able to do justice to Lears' analysis, but rather point to some key points. To start, urbanization and secularization, argues Lears, contributed to a disturbance in people's sense of the real. As life became more comfortable (through technological advances such as canned food, central heating and plumbing), it came to feel 'thinner'. At the same time, the city produced a sense of anonymity – this has been broadly documented by early sociologists – which saw personality trump character, according to Lears. Similarly, the relatively new social requirement that people tune and adapt their behaviour to the unfamiliar others surrounding them produced an empty sense of self; all that was left was impression management. Meanwhile, processes of secularization saw 'ethical convictions [grow] more supple', while 'experience lost gravity' (p. 10). Significantly for the later success of the Oxford Group, even liberal Protestant leaders were urging that people must look inward and spoke of the sanctity of human potential. In short, writes Lears, the emergent therapeutic ethos was related to 'personal quests for selfhood in an ambiguous moral universe' (p. 29). The decentring of the self produced a drive to resolidify it. Lears takes these to be the cultural conditions that made possible a consumer culture that appealed to new conceptions of the self.

Of particular interest here, though, are the new 'longings for reintegrated selfhood' (Lears, 1983: 17) and the 'quest for self-realization' (p. 29), and in particular the way these longings have provided the basis for critical analyses of reality TV, which, in its therapeutic moment, has significant commonalities with social media and SNSs. Although much has been said about the instantiation of the therapeutic ethos in talk shows (Carbaugh, 1988; Illouz, 2003; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, are just three prominent examples), I wish to proceed directly to reality TV, for which '[t]he question of emotion-based authenticity is crucial' (Aslama and Pantti, 2006: 177).

Bridget Griffen-Foley (2004) has pointed to 'considerable historical resonances' (p. 544) between reality TV and earlier forms of audience participation (advice columns in *Good Housekeeping* have already been mentioned in this regard). Similarly, as Beverley Skeggs has noted, ' "Reality" television is located within the longer process of modernity whereby personhood is opened out through the display of intimacy' (2009: 73). Her use of quote marks around the word 'reality' reflects the question that everyone – viewers and researchers alike – asks themselves about reality TV: how 'real' is it? Everyone knows there is contrivance (indeed, Rose and Wood, 2005, report that its 'contrived authenticity' (p. 294) is precisely one of reality TV's most attractive characteristics), which raises the question, what do reality TV shows stake their claim to reality on?

For Andrejevic (2004), it is the constant surveillance of reality TV participants (especially in shows such as *Big Brother*) that guarantees their authenticity. No one, when subjected to that much surveillance, could keep up a facade, we think, and so the surveillance itself promises truth, reality and authenticity. The expression of emotion, especially negative emotion, preferably accompanied by tears, is another guarantor of authenticity. Accordingly, for Aslama and Pantti (2006), 'the confessional monologue is one of the genre's main features' (p. 168), and has become 'the stage for emotional expression and self-disclosure' (p. 172). This is very much the premise of a study of reality TV shows about tattooists and their clients (Woodstock, 2014). Central to Woodstock's analysis of shows such as *Miami Ink* are the stories that tattooees tell about their tattoos and why they

wanted that particular image. When telling those stories, writes Woodstock, they are narrating themselves 'verbally in a therapeutic language that focuses on individual suffering and healing' (p. 782). Moreover, precisely because of the centrality of the display of emotions to reality TV, participation in a reality TV show can be an experience that contributes to one's self-understanding. As Andrejevic says, in reality TV, '[V]oluntary submission to comprehensive surveillance becomes a therapeutic experience' (Andrejevic, 2004: 86).

I think it is fairly uncontroversial to state that, whatever else it may be, our participation in the platforms of social media is also an example of our '[v]oluntary submission to comprehensive surveillance'. Given this, a number of scholars have explored the similarities between reality TV and social media, both of which are examples of what Jon Dovey (2000) has called 'first person media'. Stefanone, Lackaff and Rosen (2010), for instance, posit that 'SNSs provide a unique platform for the reproduction of behavior observed in and modeled by [reality TV] programing' (p. 513). They see reality TV, in which 'actors regularly engage in "confessions" where they ritualistically disclose their private thoughts and feelings to the broadcast audience' as similar to online communication platforms, which have 'likewise enabled a growing number of Internet users to publish their thoughts, photos, and videos on the Web' (p. 509). Similarly, Rachel Dubrofsky (2011) draws on her own previous work on reality TV (Dubrofsky, 2007) in suggesting that surveillance is the key common ground between reality TV and Facebook, both of which, she argues, 'are forms of media that gained immense popularity in the last decade, creating spaces where subjects are constructed through the mediation of technology that does the work of surveillance' (p. 113). Showing how productive a focus on disconnectivity can be, Laura Portwood-Stacer (2013) reports people accounting for their refusal to use Facebook by reference to reality TV: she cites a website in which a university professor equates sites such as Facebook with reality TV; and she talks of an interviewee of hers who implicitly related his not using Facebook to his not being 'a reality TV person' (p. 1050).

In addition to this, we might observe that both reality TV and social media focus on the ordinary, the everyday and the

mundane (interestingly, Paddy Scannell (2009) has described television in the 1950s as the 'medium of everyday life itself' (p. 208)): online this is reflected in the quantity of phatic communication (Miller, 2008). More generally, they are both demotic and feature ordinary people (see Turner, 2010, whose book includes chapters on both reality TV and SNSs).

Conclusion

'Sharing' today is so powerful a concept because it encapsulates the therapeutic ethos *and* the centrality of social media in our everyday lives. But more than that, the word 'sharing' directs us to the role of social media in the presentations of authenticity that precisely help to define the self in the therapeutic era. The fact that social media firms make use of 'sharing' as a marketing tool does not mean that what we do online is not really sharing, but rather unsubtly shows us that our interpersonal relations – including our romantic ones (Illouz, 1997) – do not exist outside of a political economy. If ours is the age of sharing, it is because in 'sharing' converge, on the one hand, the authentic expression of self both as a means of intimate relationship construction and maintenance and as a means of self-understanding, and, on the other, the mode of our participation in social media.

This implies that while calling our participation in social media 'sharing' certainly serves companies such as Facebook and Instagram, their use of the term is not (only) a crass marketing ploy aimed at playing on our heartstrings. In this chapter I have drawn a line from the period in time when 'sharing' came to mean 'communicating' – almost a hundred years ago – through to our presentations of self on social media today. This is not with the intention of then saying that what we do online is 'really' sharing. It is, though, to point to the important cultural similarities between 'sharing' in the Oxford Group and updating a status, similarities that are rooted in therapy culture. Samuel Mateus's (2010) use of the Lacanian concept of 'extimacy' is useful here. The idea is that the subject 'only reaches his inner self by making it public and sharing it. It is extimacy's condition that enables

the very possibility of individuality' (Mateus, 2010: 69). You become who you are by presenting – sharing – your self to (or with) others.

Alison Hearn's (2010) discussion of 'public intimacy' also reminds us that this sharing is highly commodified and shows how authentic expression is turned into money, unlike in the Oxford Group. But my point is that the 'original' version of sharing as a type of public intimacy – taking the Oxford Group as an exemplar of this – was also performed in a context that, if not itself commodified, was part of a society that was becoming ever more commodified. For scholars such as Andrejevic (2004) and Lears (1983), this is crucial for understanding the emergence of the practice of sharing-as-telling in the first place.

In addition to pointing out the structural affiliation between sharing in the Oxford Group – representing here the therapeutic ethos – and sharing on social media (authentic speech about the self with the aim of strengthening or healing the self and sustaining relationships with others, for instance), I shall return to the observation, mentioned at the chapter's start, that sharing in therapy culture, as well as in the sharing economy, is about making public what is private. We can see this quite neatly by looking at criticisms of practices of sharing-as-telling from different times. For instance, the guests on *Oprah* and heavy users of Twitter have all been accused of over-sharing and of polluting the public sphere with either inanities or downright inappropriate content (for a discussion of this criticism regarding the use of Twitter, see Arceneaux and Weiss, 2010; for a treatment of such criticism regarding Oprah Winfrey, see Illouz, 2003, especially Chapter 8). In both instances, the essence of the critique is that the boundary between the private and the public has not been maintained, and that information that should properly be kept private is actually being made public. We can even see a similar critique directed at the Oxford Group: recall its critic who panned the Group for its 'over-emphasis of the emotional side of religion, in the unrestrained public confession of sins' (Clark, 1951: 167). In therapy culture, sharing – whether online or off – expands the public at the expense of the private.

Moreover, this is a process that has come to be increasingly mediated by for-profit institutions – TV production

companies, the social media industry – which is a recurrent theme throughout this book. Lears (1983) helps us understand the cultural and economic context of 'sharing' in the Oxford Group, but although the Oxford Group obviously had an interest in attracting members, this interest was not financial. Today, sharing on Airbnb, Facebook or *Oprah* contributes to the wealth of private corporations. Tracing the therapeutic sense of 'sharing' – from the Oxford Group, through AA, reality TV and up to social media – shows once more that the most pressing matter is not whether it is 'really' sharing, but rather to highlight the shifts in the socio-economic context of this sharing, and the increase in power of commercial organizations in mediating it.

present meanings of 'sharing' are temporally and culturally specific.

18 See also: <http://www.shareable.net/blog/Is-Social-Media-Catalyzing-Offline-Sharing-Economy>.

19 This does not commit me to an essential core meaning of 'sharing'. To accept that there might be 'sharewashing' is only to acknowledge that certain social actors have correctly identified a consensual-enough sense of sharing and that they, at this point in time, are seeking to affiliate themselves with the positive values associated today with 'sharing'.

20 A similar kind of account of disharmony and selfishness is offered in Edward Banfield's account of the 'amoral familism' of the Montegranesi in Italy (Banfield, 1958). I am grateful to Elihu Katz for putting me on to this book.

21 By way of analogy, consider Illouz's (1997) demonstration that our contemporary conception of romantic utopias emerged in relation to the market and processes of commodification and are profoundly embedded in them.

Chapter 5 Sharing Our Feelings

1 See <https://www.facebook.com/facebook> and scroll down…

2 Available at: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.

3 I read nine texts about the Oxford Group to see how they discuss sharing (Cantril, 1941; Clark, 1951; Day, 1923; Eister, 1950; Kitchen, 1934; Leon, 1939; Russell, 1932; The Layman with a Notebook, 1933; Van Dusen, 1934).

4 Note that although Carbaugh is here discussing a type of communication, he nonetheless employs the sharing-as-distribution metaphor.

5 I would tentatively also link these views about the dangers of not sharing to the perception that there is something pathological about Facebook refuseniks, as described by Laura Portwood-Stacer (2013).

Chapter 6 Sharing Files

1 Following the closure in January 2012 of Megaupload, a massive repository for downloadable files, global internet