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## SHORT RESEARCH NOTE

# Motives for the Acceptance of the Social Sharing of Positive and Negative Emotions and Perceived Motives of the Narrator for Sharing the Emotional Episode

Gérald Delelis and Véronique Christophe

This study aimed to highlight the individual's motives for accepting the social sharing of emotions of a person as well as the motives perceived by the individual for the other's sharing. The 81 participants first retrieved an actual situation from their memory in which they had listened to a person who had experienced a negative or positive emotional episode and, secondly, they freely described these motives. A semantic categorization showed that the motives for accepting a person's social sharing are mainly the desire to provide the narrator with proof of social links and support; the perceived motives for the other's social sharing are mainly a supposed need to vent and to strengthen social links. The discussion makes suggestions for future studies in the field of emotion communication.

**Keywords:** Social sharing; Emotions; Motives

The vast majority of emotional episodes, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, lead to social approaches and emotion communication. People's strong inclination to talk about their emotional experiences, a phenomenon called the Social Sharing of Emotion (SSE; Rimé, 1989), has been well documented. Generally, people seem to believe that speaking about their emotional experiences is useful and beneficial overall (Zech & Rimé, 2005). Accordingly, they share their emotions but for different motives, which cover specific regulation needs (Duprez et al. 2015; Rimé 2007).

In particular, Rimé (2007) proposed a detailed summary of these alleged motives for the SSE: *rehearsing* (re-experiencing and remembering the emotion elicited by an event), *venting* (expressing, searching for relief), *social support* (obtaining support and help, being listened to), *emotional support* (being comforted), *legitimization* (receiving approval), *cognitive clarification* (finding explanations), *socio-cognitive clarification* (obtaining advice and solutions), *bonding* (strengthening social links, finding proof of cohesiveness), *arousing empathy* (moving other people), *gaining attention* (distinguishing oneself, eliciting interest), *enter-taining* (fluidizing social relationships), *informing or warn-ing* (protecting others, bringing others one's experience).

According to Duprez et al. (2015), positive events are most frequently shared for purposes of rehearsing the emotion, arousing empathy/attention, and informing/warning others, while negative events are shared for purposes of

venting and searching for social support and cognitive/socio-cognitive clarifications (see also Brans et al. 2013).

While there is an extensive literature on the motives for the SSE (e.g. Christophe et al. 2008; Delfosse et al. 2004; Duprez et al. 2015; Wetzter, Zeelenberg, & Pieters 2007), little is known about the motives for listening to other people's emotional experiences.

In fact, the SSE is possible thanks to the availability of communication targets – the listeners – who thus spend a great deal of time and energy both being in the presence of the concerned individual and listening to his/her narrative. This point is important because the psychosocial, psychological, and emotional consequences of the SSE differ according to the verbal and behavioral responses of the listener (Christophe & Di Giacomo, 2003). From a theoretical as well as a practical point of view, it is thus worth highlighting the motives that govern an individual's choice to accept another person's social affiliation whose purpose is the SSE. These behaviors are often costly and, a priori, without immediate benefits for the listener. So, why do people agree to spend time being exposed to the narratives of the emotional experiences of others?

This study aims to explore both the motives of individuals in agreeing to be the targets of SSE and the motives that these individuals perceive for the SSE of others who have experienced a negative or positive emotional episode.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were contacted individually on the campus, in libraries and in the cafeteria of a university in Northern France. Of those solicited (almost 150), 81 – 13 men and

68 women (aged from 18 to 35 years,  $M = 21$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ) – volunteered to take part in this study and completed the questionnaire, which was provided in such a way that the collected data were exploitable (i.e. questionnaires of participants who were capable of answering our request – see below – and questionnaires that were fully completed).

### **Procedure and measurements**

The study was described as investigating why people search for the presence of others after emotional events. The participants were invited to retrieve from their memories a recent situation in which someone had sought their presence following an emotional (positive or negative) event that (s)he had experienced (random assignment). Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. After they had agreed to participate in the study and signed a consent form, the participants were instructed to find a calm, isolated place to complete the questionnaire. Next, they were asked to read the instructions carefully and provide a short written description of the emotional episode they had listened to. This is a classic procedure in SSE studies and helps people to reactivate both thoughts and feelings (Rimé 2007; Rimé, Noël, & Philippot 1991). It was chosen in spite of its often-mentioned limitations and precisely because it focuses on people's representations, on the way they think after what happened and why they behaved as they did.

The respondents rated the valence of these shared episodes on 7-point scales (from 1: *not positive/negative at all* to 7: *very positive/negative*). Next, they rated their perception of the intensity of the emotion elicited by the episode (from 0: *not upset at all* to 7: *extremely upset*). Subsequently, they freely mentioned (thought-listing technique): First, up to 10 reasons explaining why they had accepted the social sharing and, second, up to 10 reasons that they supposed the narrator had had in searching for their presence. The questionnaire ended with socio-demographic items (age, gender, and level of education).

## **Results**

### **Manipulation check**

Compared to the mean value of the scale, the targeted negative events were rated as negative ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $t = 10.16$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 2.4$  and the positive ones as positive ( $M = 6.73$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ),  $t = 33.25$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 7.15$ . The emotional intensity of these episodes was also sufficiently high to enable the events to be considered truly positive or negative, that is,  $M = 5.86$  ( $SD = 1.27$ ) for negative episodes,  $t = 8.80$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 2.07$ , and  $M = 5.91$  ( $SD = 0.88$ ) for positive episodes,  $t = 14.32$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 3.07$ . The participants' gender did not influence any of these results.

### **Motives for accepting another's social sharing**

The participants initially provided a total of 234 motives for accepting someone's social sharing in the negative episode condition and 217 motives in the positive episode condition. Independent judges – two naive undergraduate students – performed a semantic categorization of these motives using Rimé's (2007) categories (Table 1). They reviewed the definition of each category, read and categorized the alleged motives, and then shared their

analyses and considered the gaps between them ( $K = .75$  for negative emotions,  $K = .70$  for positive ones.). The motives that were too specifically related to a situation or a relationship or that were off-topic were eliminated (i.e. 11.97%). Thus, 206 motives provided by 36 participants for negative episodes and 191 motives provided by 45 participants for positive episodes were considered for analyses.

The mean number of motives differed according to the emotion targeted:  $M = 5.92$  ( $SD = 2.47$ ) for negative episodes,  $M = 4.31$  ( $SD = 2.90$ ) for positive episodes,  $F(1,79) = 7.45$ ,  $p = .0078$ ,  $d = 0.60$ . The women generally provided two motives more than the men (5.31 vs. 3.31),  $F(1,79) = 6.27$ ,  $p = .0144$ ,  $d = 0.40$ .

For positive events, the categories *bonding* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  of at least 10.07,  $p < .01$ ), *empathy* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  of at least 10.27,  $p < .01$ ), and *information* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  of at least 8.45,  $p < .01$ ) showed the most and the strongest differences in usage compared with the other categories (the use of these motives did not differ). Next came *social support* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  ranged from 2.49 to 18.87), *venting* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  ranged from 0.36 to 24.55), and *legitimization* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  ranged from 0.36 to 19.72). The participants' gender did not influence these results.

For negative events, compared to the other categories, the most widely mentioned categories were *bonding* (all  $\text{Chi}^2$  at least 14.88, except for the comparison with *emotional support*,  $\text{Chi}^2 = 7.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and *social support* (all  $\text{Chi}^2$  at least 14.23). The use of these two motives did not differ ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 1.08$ ,  $p = .299$ ) and the participants' gender did not influence this result ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 0.48$  and 1.36, respectively).

Few differences appeared between the positive and negative episodes. Not surprisingly, *social support* and *emotional support* were mentioned more for negative than for positive episodes. *Legitimization*, *information*, and *empathy* were mentioned more for positive than for negative episodes.

### **Perceived motives of the narrator for sharing the episode**

As previously, a semantic categorization of these motives was carried out by the judges on the basis of Rimé's (2007) categories (Table 1). They eliminated 13.23 per cent (negative episodes) and 23.11 per cent (positive episodes) of the answers using the same criteria as for the motives for accepting another's SSE. Cohen's  $K$  were .89 (negative episodes) and .77 (positive episodes).

Thus, the participants provided 174 exploitable motives that they thought the narrator of the episode had had in mind when searching for the participant's presence in the negative episode condition, and they provided 151 exploitable motives in the positive episode condition.

The mean number of motives differed according to the episode targeted:  $M = 5.30$  ( $SD = 2.48$ ) for negative episodes versus  $M = 3.41$  ( $SD = 2.47$ ) for positive ones,  $F(1,79) = 11.04$ ,  $p = .0014$ ,  $d = 0.764$ . No differences appeared between women ( $M = 4.45$ ) and men ( $M = 3.08$ ),  $F(1,79) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .0859$ ,  $d = 0.55$ .

Generally, the mention of these categories of motives was similar for positive and negative episodes. *Venting* and *bonding* were commonly mentioned for both.

	Motives for SSE acceptance			Motives perceived for the other's SSE				
	Total	Positive episodes <sup>a</sup>	Negative episodes <sup>b</sup>	Chi <sup>2</sup>	Total	Positive episodes <sup>a</sup>	Negative episodes <sup>b</sup>	Chi <sup>2</sup>
Bonding	92 (23.17%)	47 (24.61%)	45 (21.84%)	0.42	76 (23.38%)	41 (27.15%)	35 (20.11%)	2.23
Legitimizing	16 (4.03%)	15 (7.85%)	1 (0.49%)	54.25****	10 (3.08%)	7 (4.64%)	3 (1.72%)	2.30
Empathy	49 (12.34%)	32 (16.75%)	17 (8.25%)	6.62*	14 (4.31%)	11 (7.28%)	3 (1.72%)	6.06*
Social support	77 (19.40%)	23 (12.04%)	54 (26.21%)	12.73***	21 (6.46%)	3 (1.99%)	18 (10.34%)	9.34**
Emotional support	26 (6.55%)	2 (1.05%)	24 (11.65%)	18.09****	37 (11.38%)	5 (3.31%)	32 (18.39%)	18.22****
Entertaining	11 (2.77%)	4 (2.09%)	7 (3.40%)	0.61	8 (2.46%)	3 (1.99%)	5 (2.87%)	0.26
Being informed	50 (12.59%)	34 (17.80%)	16 (7.77%)	9.20**	17 (5.23%)	15 (9.93%)	2 (1.15%)	12.58***
Venting	26 (6.55%)	12 (6.28%)	14 (6.80%)	0.04	92 (28.31%)	49 (32.45%)	43 (24.71%)	2.38
Cognitive clarification	15 (3.78%)	5 (2.621%)	10 (4.85%)	1.36	11 (3.38%)	0 (0%)	11 (6.32%)	9.88**
Socio-cognitive clarification	22 (5.54%)	9 (4.71%)	13 (6.31%)	0.48	29 (8.92%)	8 (5.30%)	21 (12.07%)	4.56*
Attention	13 (3.27%)	8 (4.19%)	5 (2.43%)	0.97	6 (1.85%)	5 (3.31%)	1 (0.57%)	3.34
Rehearsing	-	-	-	-	4 (1.23%)	4 (2.65%)	0 (0%)	4.67*
Total	397 (100%)	191 (100%)	206 (100%)		325 (100%)	151 (100%)	174 (100%)	

**Table 1:** Use (number, percentage) of the categories – motives for Social Sharing of Emotions (SSE) acceptance and motives that are perceived for the other's SSE – and comparisons between positive and negative episodes.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ ; <sup>a</sup> $n = 45$ , <sup>b</sup> $n = 36$ .

For positive episodes, the categories whose mention differed most frequently from that of the others were *venting* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  of at least 22.92,  $p < .0001$ ) and *bonding* ( $\text{Chi}^2$  of at least 14.82,  $p < .0001$ ) – whose use did not differ ( $\text{Chi}^2 = 1.013$ ). The same result was found for negative episodes (for *venting*,  $\text{Chi}^2$  ranged from 9.27 to 49.06 and for *bonding*, from 4.17 to 38.91).

### Comparison of the motives for SSE acceptance and the perceived motives of the narrator for sharing the episode

The motives for SSE acceptance and the motives perceived for the other's SSE were checked per participant and coded '1' (present) each time they appeared at least once. The results of the ANOVA, using these two sets of motives as repeated measures, are shown in **Table 2**.

Regardless of the valence of the episode, the participants thus mentioned *empathy*, *social support*, and *information* more as motives for accepting the SSE than as motives they perceived for the other's SSE. The same result appeared for *bonding* in the negative episode condition and *cognitive clarification* in the positive episode condition. *Venting*, again for both valences, was mentioned more as a perceived motive for another's SSE than as a motive for SSE acceptance.

### Discussion

This study was dedicated to (1) the reasons why people listen to someone else's emotional disclosure after positive or negative emotional events and (2) their perception of this person's motives in disclosing this to her or him. In addition, these sets of motives were compared.

Why do people think they listen to a person who has experienced an emotional episode? The answer is mainly to offer proof of a social relationship and to provide

support and understanding. These findings are consistent with those of Hackenbracht and Gasper (2013), which showed an association between an increased desire to listen to friends disclose emotional information and increased belonging needs. They are also consistent with other results found for the SSE (Christophe et al. 2008; Duprez et al. 2015).

Other motives also appeared depending on the valence of the episode. Positive episodes led the participants to accept the SSE in order to find out what had occurred during the event (*information*), to participate in the experience of this emotion (*empathy*), and to strengthen or exhibit cohesiveness by actively contributing to the memorization of the episode (*social support* and *legitimization*). Negative episodes led them to accept the SSE in order to help and comfort the narrator (cf. Christophe et al. 2008). For both types of episode, this responds quite well to the motives alleged for the initiation of the SSE (Duprez et al. 2015).

Compared with the motives that were mentioned to explain why one agrees to listen to someone's emotional disclosure, the motives that were generally perceived for the other person's sharing were mainly *venting* and *bonding* and, more specifically, *empathy* and *information* for the positive episodes and *emotional/social support* and *socio-cognitive clarification* for the negative ones. Thus, participants thought that the narrators wanted – or needed – to express their emotions, to avoid loneliness, and to receive help and comfort. This is consistent with the findings of Zech and Rimé (2005), which showed that individuals have a strong belief in both the necessity and the positive effects of venting. It is also consistent with findings related to the role of the auditor's warmth in a helpful and satisfactory SSE (Christophe & Di Giacomo 2003). Thus, individuals basically think that they listen, or should

	Negative episodes		$F(1,34)$	Positive episodes		$F(1,44)$
	Acceptance motives	Perceived motives		Acceptance motives	Perceived motives	
Bonding		>	4.39* $\eta^2_p = .11$			3.44 $\eta^2_p = .07$
Legitimizing			2.06 $\eta^2_p = .06$			2.67 $\eta^2_p = .06$
Empathy		>	7.61** $\eta^2_p = .15$	>		17.49*** $\eta^2_p = .28$
Social support		>	14.15** $\eta^2_p = .29$	>		16.00*** $\eta^2_p = .27$
Emotional support			<1			<1
Entertaining			<1			<1
Information		>	15.78*** $\eta^2_p = .32$	>		13.04*** $\eta^2_p = .23$
Venting		<	8.74** $\eta^2_p = .20$	<		25.88*** $\eta^2_p = .37$
Cognitive clarification			<1	>		4.30* $\eta^2_p = .09$
Socio-cognitive clarification			1.15 $\eta^2_p = .03$			0
Attention			1.84 $\eta^2_p = .05$			2.34 $\eta^2_p = .05$

**Table 2:** Comparisons between motives for SSE acceptance and motives that are perceived for the other's SSE.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

listen, to someone's disclosure to provide her/him with an opportunity to talk and to express their emotions to a sympathetic ear. In turn, they listen to this disclosure to be informed of what has happened, to exhibit empathy and signs of preserved bonds, as well as to offer some kind of emotional or concrete help or improvement if they can.

These discrepancies are intriguing. Generally, they may be of no importance because, for instance, listening to someone in order to be informed and to preserve social bonds (voluntarily or due to social constraints) clearly leads the listener to be attentive to the other's emotional disclosure. Sometimes, however, when people need precise feedback and reactions from their listener, these differences could significantly alter the sharing process and make it ineffective (see Christophe & Di Giacomo 2003). Future studies must clarify this point.

Other interesting questions arise. Despite the fact that the SSE does not help emotional recovery (Zech & Rimé 2005), are the best listeners those who are most able to offer a way of venting and who do this in a socially satisfactory way? Sharing an emotion may be helpful for individuals, but is this thanks to a mediating role of the reinforcement or reassurance associated with the social links that the narrator and listener share? How can one improve the listener's perception of the narrator's needs and lead them to meet these needs precisely?

A relevant design for future studies could be the joint evaluation of the motives for the SSE of a person, for the listening to this disclosure by an individual, and the motives that are perceived by the latter for this person's SSE, on the one hand, and the satisfaction of the partners during this SSE, on the other hand. In a dynamic way, it would be relevant to evaluate the relationships between the social distances, gestures, and behaviors during the narrative at the same time as the satisfaction of the partners and the narrator's emotional recovery.

Two limitations of this study were that the participants were essentially women (more than 83%) and that they were rather young (21 years old). It could be very interesting to extend its results in future studies using a larger population to enable the exploration of both gender differences and a possible age effect on the motives for accepting another's social sharing. Indeed, age and personal experience probably change the reasons why one agrees to listen to the emotional narratives of others.

Finally, even though this study only used self-reports and the majority of the participants were young women, it is the first to date to show which motives govern the listening to someone's disclosure and, in this way, it provides another step toward the knowledge about the way social interactions operate during or following emotional events. Indeed, we now know why people initiate an SSE (Rimé 2007, 2009), why they initiate a secondary SSE (Christophe et al. 2008), why they accept the SSE of another person and the motives they perceive for this sharing. Promising pathways for future studies have been opened up.

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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