Sharing

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Sharing is a particularly versatile and widespread human practice that features in all domains of life, including religion and politics, family life, and economics. It has a long ethnographic record but it is only recently that it has reached centre stage in social theory and in public awareness. However, not everything that is called 'sharing' qualifies as such in a comparative and more technical sense. This entry seeks to distinguish sharing from other transfers, such as alms- and gift-giving, resource pooling, and redistribution. Sharing is here defined as 'allowing others to access what is valued', an activity that is not necessarily initiated or desired by the person who gives. Sharing can help humans solve problems of resource distribution, but it may also generate problems that require culturally specific answers: What can or should be shared, with whom and under which conditions? What are the social prerequisites and the social implications of sharing? This entry presents some comparative cases of sharing found across the world and looks at how sharing is also a means to level differences and to prevent the accumulation of wealth and power. It equally considers the current inflational use of the label 'sharing' and on-going attempts to establish alternative forms of economic transfers in the so-called 'sharing economy'.

Introduction: the currency of sharing

Not everything that is called 'sharing' actually constitutes sharing in practice. When you use a 'car-sharing' system, for example, you may in fact be renting a car part-time, as this involves a straightforward rental contract with a company in return for a monthly fee or charges incurred per kilometre driven. This may therefore be a market transaction, akin to buying and selling. The company may want to call it 'sharing', as the term has positive connotations in the urban West where it is associated with saving resources and with giving you a sense of being engaged in a morally right activity. However, this may just be part of marketing discourse in what is otherwise a competitive commercial set-up. At the same time, you may have given your colleague or neighbour a lift in that rented car. Was that sharing, even though you may not have thought or talked about it that way? Or was it rather like a gift, if the other person now feels obliged to give you some sort of return at a later stage? And although you have not met the previous person renting this car, driving a car from a 'car-share company' may not feel like having a car exclusively to yourself, since you have sat in the same seat, touched the same steering wheel, and breathed more or less the same air as other users. So, was that part of it sharing, or was it something more like 'pooling', i.e. using a common property or infrastructure?

Questions such as these illustrate that anthropological analyses of sharing need to go beyond what people may call 'sharing' to distinguish different modes of transfers according to the difference they make with

regard to the social relationships involved. This is what this entry on sharing focuses on: How can we distinguish sharing from similar but different transfers on the basis of their capacity to change our social relations? And how constitutive are these modes of transfer for our sociality? Many definitions of sharing tend to focus on the objects that are being transferred, so that sharing is seen above all as a means of distribution. This entry, by contrast, focuses on the social implications of sharing by defining sharing technically as practices of 'extending the circle of people who have access to what is valued' (see Widlok 2017: xvii). The three elements of this definition will be discussed in turn, firstly the question of 'what is valued', secondly the interplay of 'gaining access', 'demanding access', and 'granting access' that constitute sharing as access, and thirdly the question of how exactly and how far the circle can be extended, especially in the growing platform economics.

Given the ubiquity of sharing today, it may be somewhat surprising that it has only recently gained prominence in social theory. This is largely because many other approaches have subsumed sharing under various other labels: Influential has been Marshall Sahlins' formulation that sharing is a form of 'reciprocity' (1988), hence closely related to gift-giving, and fusing sharing with other forms of redistribution (Polanyi 1944) or pooling (Price 1975). Later definitions, by contrast, highlighted that sharing was often 'uni-directional' (Hunt 2000) and that it did not have the contest-like quality of gift-giving, which also goes with careful account-keeping that is considered offensive in most sharing contexts (Graeber 2011: 99). While gift-giving can be explained as a strategy for creating dependency, obligation, and status accumulation for the giver, the same explanation does not hold for sharing practices. This intrigued evolutionary scholars who sought to explain sharing with reference to its evolutionary utility even though it seemed to benefit the survival of others rather than of oneself. Evolutionary approaches focus on the function of sharing to create a social resource buffer for lean times, as a risk-reducing strategy (Ichikawa 2005), and on its 'costly signalling' function, i.e. signalling to potential partners that we share and therefore care for others.

The growing interest in sharing today is at least partly due to the fact that it is considered a very promising candidate when exploring alternatives to the dominant modes of commercial, extractive, and exploitative economising. This makes sharing an anthropological concern not only for its role in human evolutionary past (see Kelly [2013] for this issue, which is beyond this entry) but also in terms of the transformation of the current and future political and economic order. The currency of sharing, as we shall see, lies not only in its redistributive capacity but also in its social challenges. Anthropologists are adamant in pointing out that much of what today is called 'sharing' in the more appropriately named 'crowd-based' or 'platform-based' economy may not be sharing at all. However, even the misnomers have helped to put sharing, as a practice, back on the research agenda. It took considerable time to understand the change brought about by the rise of capitalism and the extension of markets and commodity logics to all spheres of life in the 'great transformation' (Polanyi 1944). Today the claim that after the collapse of communism 'there is no

alternative' to the capitalist market economy has sparked a new interest in exploring the full repertoire of transfer modes that humans have at their disposal.

Sharing and value

The main anthropological problem with sharing is not that it is a rare or somehow 'exotic' practice that we are unfamiliar with. Rather, it is ubiquitous and everyone has experienced it. In that, it is different from other human practices that work for some groups but are strange for others. For instance, think of living with several partners, marrying your cousin, moving around nomadically, organising social order without a centralised government, making a living outside capitalist production, and so forth. In these cases, anthropology has had the function of making the seemingly strange familiar, for a long time with a European bias defining what needed 'de-exoticising'. But not everything cultural is peculiar in this way, and sharing is a case in point. Here, the role of anthropology is to make the mundane intriguing to us so that we can take a fresh comparative look at what seems familiar and unproblematic. With regard to sharing, this means to make sure that we do not mistake the rather peculiar notion of sharing, that we may hold as a result of our own cultural upbringing, with sharing as it emerges across a diversity of human contexts. A common bias that arises from living a particular way of life that we label 'modern' is to think of sharing as something that is only done with a few very close relatives, an altruistic exception in an otherwise selfish existence. Moreover, the dominant evaluation of sharing is in many ways disparate: On the one hand, there is a romantic yearning towards sharing as something that should be done, but often is not (or no longer). Alternatively, sharing is despised as something bad or backward that needs to be overcome. In Australia, for example, the government has tried for a long time to organise welfare payments to indigenous Australians in a way that they prevent recipients from sharing 'too much'. Demand sharing in particular has been targeted as a root problem by state administrators intervening in Aboriginal communities (Altman 2011: 196).

Groups that practice frequent and wide-ranging sharing are subject to this bifurcated preconception, being romanticised and discriminated against. I have encountered this frequently in field research with present-day hunter-gatherers under processes of change (see Widlok 1999, 2020). Nearby farm owners, government officials, and agro-pastoralist neighbours in many of these instances feel that hunter-gatherers have to abandon sharing in order to more effectively accumulate property and adopt a market- and investment-oriented way of economising. Sharing is considered an obstacle in that process. For instance, farm workers in Namibia who used to be hunter-gatherers and who tend to be lumped together under the ethnic label San, have been encouraged by colonial bosses to save up some of their salaries so that they could buy individual property items such as bicycles, cars, or houses (Widlok 1999: 123). The social pressures of sharing their income widely, in this view, prevents the 'uplifting' of San to mainstream culture. This has many parallels in the ways in which the landed gentry in Europe looked down on proletarians who

lived in permeable domestic units, spending and sharing space and income rather than accumulating and insulating within families. It also has parallels with the concerns of middle-class parents who see the youth as 'oversharing' in the social media, by which they mean 'disclosing too much of oneself in public' (see Widlok 2017: 165).

In my field research I often encountered doctors and development workers who kept cautioning the San and other hunter-gatherers not to share their tobacco pipes, drinking vessels, and sexual partners since this increases the danger of contracting contagious diseases. In the Covid-19 pandemic, again the dangers of sharing are being invoked, not limited to sharing (bodily) fluids but more generally to sharing the same space, even breathing the same air. The dominant view amongst those who have become unfamiliar with sharing is to delimit it rigidly. By contrast, among skilled and frequent practitioners, sharing tends to operate without rigid adherence to abstract principles of altruism, alms giving, or narrow kin support. It is often more open than that, and can be broadened but also at times narrowed. This raises questions, such as: Under which conditions may it be considered desirable to share? What are the limits and affordances of sharing? And how are these limits and opportunities culturally constructed and socially enforced?

Comparative studies across a variety of societies show that sharing regularly goes beyond individual households, and that repeated food crises lead humans to share more frequently but not automatically more widely (see Ember et al. 2018). When trying to answer the above questions properly, we therefore need to turn to individual cases studies. These are often taken from the ethnography of current and former hunter-gatherers around the world. This is not because the phenomena observed were limited to these societies but rather because theoretically interesting features were observed in these contexts that question recurring cultural preconceptions. For instance, the prevalent romantic but misleading idea that sharing is either a result of pure altruism or pure necessity has been put into question by observations made in Aboriginal Australia. The biased view includes the assumption that if you have at times too much of a certain item, you share it in order not to waste it. However, there is a different lesson that Fred Myers (1988) was taught by a Australian Aboriginal Pintupi man called Jimmy, which is mirrored in many ethnographic contexts: Sharing is not simply the consequence of economic needs and the ecological distribution of resources but rather it is instrumental in producing the underlying social conditions in the first place. It typically does not target what people are happy to give away anyway, but rather what they value and would like to keep. Jimmy asked Fred for cigarettes to be shared even though he did have some himself – which he, in the end, gave to Fred when he found out the anthropologist had given all of his cigarettes away already.

He also taught Fred to make sure to hide some of his resources so that he can dodge the constant demands and requests to share. In Aboriginal Australia, as in many contexts among (former) hunter-gatherers, sharing and demands do not contradict one another. Moreover, demands can take the form of accepted and conventionalised prompts that initiate sharing, but they can also take the problematic form of constant

nagging and out-of-proportion asking and pretending to be in need ('humbugging' in Aboriginal English). Myers concluded that sharing was often initiated not by those who had something or had too much of something, but rather by those who were asking, an activity that Nicolas Peterson called 'demand sharing' (Peterson 1993, see also Altman 2011). In these contexts people are granted the right to ask for things, and they find it morally difficult to reject a demand if one was seen to be able to satisfy it. This suggests that the practices of sharing were not simply a mode of resource allocation but all about dealing with social relationships in a particular way. While this is true for transfers between humans more generally, sharing seems to be characterised by a particular tension between autonomy and dependency (Myers 1988) in contrast to varying evaluations of dependency in societies dominated by market and gift-exchange (see Martin 2021).

Myers' ethnography also debunked the assumption that sharing was an automatism that followed out of collective ownership or out of a lack of property rights in things. By contrast, the items that Pintupi foragers brought back to camp, such as gathered fruits or small game animals and whatever else their 'country' (the land they belong to) was providing, were quite clearly subject to very specific property rights. These rights were partly obtained through labour, when collecting for example, or through kinship and a sense of belonging to a particular country. And there was no automatism that translated these rights into transfers, but rather they were subject to protracted negotiations. Allocations and (re-)distributions of foraged foods, household and ritual items constantly changed. In most societies in which a lot of sharing is being practiced, people do have a choice either to include others in the sharing or to hide items from them. At the same time, they feel that what they part with is not 'extra' (like second-hand clothing that well-to-do urbanites in the Global North readily give away) but something that they readily and happily could use themselves. They may therefore only let go of it begrudgingly. The social rules of what constitutes forms of 'co-ownership' do vary culturally and so do the actual strategies of asking, taking, and 'allowing to take'. The occurrence of sharing behaviour cannot be sufficiently explained by the economic and ecological pressures of a resource situation, even though these play a role. The same is true for absence of sharing: Sharing may break down under conditions of extreme shortage and it may thrive when things are abundant, but there is a lot of leeway in between, with culturally specific forms emerging in different contexts. On the one hand, sharing is an adaptive problem-solver for uneven resource distribution, but on the other hand it also involves problems since both nagging requests and inacceptable responses can become divisive. At the same time, the tolerance for open demands but also for attempts to hide and keep have been noted by ethnographers working in societies with a high incidence of sharing.

In other words, if sharing is neither an inevitable product of constant shortage, nor of boundless affluence, it depends critically on dealing successfully with an abundance of requests, on a sense of what constitutes a good response to requests and on what is appropriate access to items of value. It is in this context that being economically in need (or being in the position to provide) becomes relevant for judging which

requests are appropriate. Sharing not only redistributes resources but it also recalibrates the social problems of navigating through multiple expectations, entitlements, relationships, and demands. Comparatively speaking sharing depends on what is of value to humans, as humans share more than they need to - and less than they are being asked for.

Sharing and access: gained, granted and demanded

If it is not scarcity or abundance by itself that explains sharing, what are the conditions that enable and encourage, or disable and discourage, sharing? The subject matter of what is being shared is an important factor. Some things are easier and more readily shared than others, and some things lend themselves to be used for other forms of transfer such as gift-exchange or buying and selling. Amongst hunter-gatherers, 'country food' items are more readily shared than purchased items, and small items collected while foraging are more readily kept for individual consumption than larger 'bulky' items such as big hunted animals, elephants, or whales, for instance (Widlok 2017: 92-8, see also Ready & Power 2018: 76). The latter may invite more specific forms of distributions because they typically involve more of a collaborative effort or investment and more elaborate infrastructure such as boats or traps that need to be maintained.

Many more things can be shared in an economic system than what those who are living in a market economy may think. Researchers working with the Aché people of South America noted that they received more than 80 per cent of all their goods through sharing transfers (Kaplan & Hill 1985). Food collected was more readily shared when out collecting than food bought back to the mission settlement, but it seems that the permeability of domains is again subject to social negotiation as items can move from the domain of buying to that of sharing and vice versa. Even in a capitalist market economy there are many transfers which are not buying and selling. About 60 per cent of the population in post-industrial societies make a living not by buying and selling their labour but rather through 'other' transfers (see Ferguson [2015: 20] and Widlok [2017: xiii]). These transfers include state-orchestrated payments of social security, the individual support of dependent family members, and other forms of 'giving' like inheritance or neighbourhood assistance, for example.

What is important to keep in mind for those living in a highly materialist society, however, is that sharing is not only and not always primarily about objects that change hands, but at least as much about those involved in the giving and receiving. It is as much about 'sharing in' the social relations of givers and receivers as about 'sharing out', i.e. the transfer of objects. Among prime objects that can be shared are also immaterial things such as time and visits, knowledge and skills, and experiences more generally. However, what is subject to sharing and what is not cannot always be predicted. Mbendjele central African foragers are happy to share most personal items but they sell songs and rituals (Lewis 2015). San share knowledge about the whereabouts of game animals and not only the meat of hunted animals (Biesele & Barclay 2001). And hobbyists and professionals in industrialised societies may be happy to share their

informal insider-knowledge (see Lave & Wenger 1991) without sharing their salaries. In fact, it seems that much sharing takes place under the radar of economic thinking because it often takes immaterial forms and it involves many unmarked and mundane social interactions.

One of the common motivations of sharing is that it prevents accumulation, including the accumulation of power and the creation of dependencies. East African hunter-gatherers such as the Hadza of Tanzania are well-known for their sharing of meat. But even though their situation is one of relative equality, tendencies towards accumulation exist for them as well: Initiated Hadza men are reported to try to reserve some meat for themselves (see Woodburn 1998). Although they do not always succeed in it and although the quantity of meat may actually be limited, this shows a general problem that sharing responds to, namely the potential of turning the allocation of items into a tool for power play and privilege. In some cases, for instance the present-day mixed economy of Canadian Inuit, sharing is tacitly transformed into public and marked acts of generous gift-giving that invokes obligations and supports inequality (see Ready & Power 2018).

James Woodburn, who provided the Hadza ethnography mentioned, insists that sharing has to be distinguished from other forms of transfer, such as gift-giving, because of its social implications: While gift-giving can serve as a tool for gaining status (as a generous and affluent person) and for creating dependencies and obligations, sharing works in the opposite direction. Gift-giving allows people to accumulate status and to create followers through giving and this holds for reciprocal gift-giving with obligatory counter-gifts as well as for gifts that are not returned (Yan 2020). It is well understood as a system for creating mutual obligations, even dependencies, and for marking relationships between giver and receiver as special, also among hunter-gatherers. San foragers of southern Africa are known for cultivating friendships over time and distance through their *hxaro* exchange systems (Wiessner 1982) and the literature on *potlatch* in North America and on *kula* gift giving in Oceania and elsewhere is enormous (see Yan 2020, Widlok 2017). This literature has played such a major role in anthropology's drive towards pointing at alternatives to the dominant market economy that accounts of sharing were initially often subsumed under forms of 'reciprocal gift exchange' (see Mauss 2004). However, sharing as a social practice runs counter to many features of gift-giving, such as public display, strategic dependency, status accumulation, and the creation of obligations, in so that it is now considered a social institution in its own right (Woodburn 1998; Widlok 2017).

It is therefore important to point out that not all reports about giving are instances of sharing – nor are they all about gifts. Gifts are predicated on the obligations of giving, receiving, and returning (Mauss 2004). Sharing, by contrast, can be unidirectional (Hunt 2000). Even if it is mutual, it does not create the same obligations to accept and the same calculated and anticipated returns. Rather, it can effectively decouple giving from receiving; it is not framed as 'I give so that you will give in return'. This is typically achieved by simply allowing others to take, by not preventing them from taking an object or a share. It is

granting a share without necessarily handing over things. This underlines the rightfulness of the share and understates the fact that it was provided by a 'richer' party towards a 'poorer' party. Leaving things for others to take decouples receiving from returning. It highlights the entitlement of the recipient to what is given rather than the entitlement of the giver on what is to be expected as a return. The mutuality we find in sharing is a far cry from the calculated reciprocity that characterises other transfers, including many forms of gift-giving. Although things often flow both ways in sharing, these flows can be very uneven, they can be delayed and diffused in many ways, and they do not allow for the conversion into accumulated political capital that serves to steer obligations. Hunter-gatherer ethnography does report on various ways of dividing an animal and to allocate specific pieces of meat to specific kinsmen. But this should always be read in the context of two important conditions: firstly, the processual nature of 'waves of sharing' and secondly, the levelling power of sharing to undermine lasting obligations.

'Waves' and 'rounds' of sharing have been observed in many cases (see Ichikawa 2005: 155). Frequently, a hunter is not the person allocating hunted meat and allocation rules may apply in a first wave of sharing that may privilege some (close kin or in-laws of the hunter, for instance). However, this does not prevent meat from being divided further and indiscriminately in subsequent waves. As a result, the resource may ultimately get distributed widely, not only to immediate or specific kin but frequently to anyone who happens to be present. 'Sharing as levelling' not only refers to the fact that sharing broadens the circle of people who have access to a good, but also that efforts are typically made to disconnect the act of giving from that of taking. This is most readily achieved by using intermediaries: Children are often sent to carry food from one house to another (Widlok 2017: 7). Others are frequently allowed to take rather than making them wait until they are being given. Thus there are moral rules but also simple practical features that prevent individuals from using sharing as a tool for converting what is given into specific obligations and as a means for 'investment' aimed at receiving specific returns. This is very different from prototypical gift-exchange systems (both in pre-colonial Oceania and in bourgeois birthday gift-giving) which is not incompatible with a careful record being kept of what is given, what is received, and what is returned as a gift. Sharing, by contrast, helps to diffuse the attempts to turn, for instance, hunting luck into a tool for dominating others and is therefore an important levelling mechanism to make societies more egalitarian. The combined effect of the waves of sharing and of levelling is that sharing basically continues until there is no more ground for making demands (e.g. when the animal is consumed) while gift-giving continues *because* it creates the ground of making more gifts in the future.

Drawing a sharp distinction, we could say that the obligation to give, receive, and return gifts is replaced by the opportunity to ask, to respond, and to renounce (Widlok 2017: 79). The opportunity to ask is enabled not only by accepted ways of requests and demands but also by a permeable ordering of space that allows potential recipients to make themselves present to those who have something to share (see Widlok 2021). The opportunity to respond shows in the debates that people have about what is a rightful share or what

might be an outrageous demand. And finally, the opportunity to renounce allows people to let go of things that they cannot keep for themselves forever anyway. But this sharp analytic distinction does not preclude that, in practice, people shift and combine different modes of transferring all the time.

Sharing and expansion in online and offline communities

Ethnographers have observed many instances in which people tried to hide and insert into commercial transfers what was expected to be shared with others (see Widlok 2017: 94). 'Borrowed' clothes or other personal items often ended up being shared, in that they were never returned even though the givers were for a long time hoping to receive them back. In some contexts reported from Oceania, what missionaries considered 'stealing' was called 'borrowing' by local boarding school students and could at the same time be categorised as 'sharing' by the anthropologist (Strathern 2011). The rules for dividing 'bulky' resources such as whales and other big animals that are being distributed among Inuit and other Nordic hunters are another case in point where sharing and other modes of transfer come together. Having contributed to a collective effort such as a whale hunt gives individuals rights in certain parts of the animals. In Alaska, the captain, the harpooner, and the owner of the harpoon all get specific shares, but for the rest of the crew shares are equal independently of whether they participated for a few days or for the whole season - and about a third of the whale are 'designated as the community share' at feasts where everyone receives something (Bodenhorn 2005: 84). For smaller animals such as seals, there are elaborate gift-exchange partnerships that people cultivate and which should not be mistaken for sharing (as pointed out above, see Widlok [2017: 53-5]). Inuit examples of sharing from the literature have been important also in other respects. Inuit researchers were the first ones to point out that sharing often does not always 'even out'. In other words, there may be net receivers and net providers in sharing systems (Pryor & Graburn 1980). Calculated 'reciprocity', giving so that one can calculate on a more or less equal return, is not what is motivating these transfers, since they occur without calculation and without things balancing out. Instead, a sense of 'mutuality' is indeed involved in that there is a strong expectation that everyone would need to share if they find themselves in the position to do so despite the common experience that some find themselves in that position more regularly than others. In terms of net results and in terms of motivation, strict reciprocity thus seems unnecessary for a sharing system to work, but a degree of mutuality is. This is particularly clear with regard to immaterial sharing, for instance, sharing time or a place to live and work, which requires mutual engagement, attentiveness, and recognition of equal entitlements as social persons despite inequalities. This mutuality that is built into sharing should not be confused with a logic of 'do-ut-des' (I give so that I receive). It is not a balancing 'tit-for-tat' expectation with balance-keeping (I give as much as I have received). Consequently, Inuit researchers have pointed out the importance of 'non-material' forms of sharing, above all sharing time with one another through visiting (Pryor & Graburn 1980). This is echoed by research elsewhere, for instance the importance of sharing a place to sleep in Aboriginal Australia (Musharbash 2008).

It is tempting to continue along these immaterial lines and also include forms of sharing that take place on digital platforms (see below). However, even in digital environments, established and distinctive modes of transfer can be observed. Thus, many transfers among software developers are akin to gift-giving (see Zeitlyn 2003), providing the accumulation of status. The developers of 'shareware' software such as Ubuntu also face a situation in which there is a threat of code being appropriated and abused for corporate 'hoarding' and accumulation by some while it is defended as freely accessible by others (see Widlok 2017: 159). At the same time, the sharing of content on many internet platforms is accompanied by the accumulation of marketable data by a third party that operates in the background. It seems, therefore, that the interplay of different modes of transfer is as much a bone of contention on large digital platforms as it is in small hunter-gatherer groups. The question that remains is whether sharing as 'enlarging the circle of those who access what is valued' is compromised by the size of the group within the circle.

Local Exchange and Trading Systems (LETS), in which participants offer one another goods or services without the exchange of money (Hart 2000), are sometimes considered examples of sharing. That is because these modes of transfers provide members access to goods without participating in the general market or the money economy. Members can sign up to a platform or a noticeboard where they can trade in their particular skills or assets for what they need (e.g, a particular tool or someone to cut the lawn, take the dog out etc.). An internal currency often helps to store in a 'time bank' what can then be used in the form of vouchers to receive support from other members (see Widlok 2017: 145). LETS do not constitute sharing in a narrow sense because they are more like barter systems, as detailed records are being kept, often based on alternative currencies or vouchers. It has also been repeatedly reported that these systems only work up to a specific size that guarantees mutual trust (Widlok 2019a: 32). In any case a set membership tends to be a prerequisite for them, ideally supported by local, personal knowledge of each other that prevents free-riding. The primary goal of LETS is often not to extend the circle of participants but, to the contrary, to make sure that it does not extend beyond control and beyond the circle of trusted members. Correspondingly, these systems only provide small niches within the larger market economy. Recently, neighbourhood platforms have emerged which seek to carry the LETS system into the digital domain (Widlok 2019a). This has happened to sharing, too. What is new here is that online platforms are not only the tool for exchanges or transfers in the non-digital world but constitute an arena of sharing in itself, with individuals sharing knowledge in 'how-to' videos, as well as sharing ideas and swapping or copying music, pictures, and other forms of digitised messages. This has created the impression that sharing practices have received a boost beyond previous limits, to the extent that parts of the digital economy are sometimes called 'the sharing economy'. However, it is important to be precise here, as the English term 'sharing' glosses over important differences.

Some acts of digital communication effectively concentrate attention instead of distributing anything or granting access to what is valued. In fact, sharing content via social media may be more like a demand on

others to share attention, time, or support. It can also serve to accumulate followers and 'hoard' support. Just like spam messages, it is part of the often unsolicited and unwanted giving of what is not a value, but rather a burden. Thus, free software, sometimes known as 'shareware', frequently turns out to be malicious in that its recipients find it difficult to detect on or de-install from their computers. Moreover, social media publishing often confers value and status to the giver rather than being realised by the receiver who is literally degraded to being a 'follower' and not someone with a rightful share in a resource. Digital publishing and distribution can therefore be very unlike sharing, and more like gift-giving, initiated by the giver as an attempt to oblige the recipient to receive and return (see Zeitlyn 2003). Its precedent in the analogue world may be where surplus goods are put on the street for anyone to pick up – in many cases, things not particularly valued or wanted by others. The social implications of such acts of 'getting rid of things' are primarily the status creation for morally self-righteous providers who expect the supposedly needy to owe them gratitude (Widlok 2017: 147-51).

The English term 'sharing' has undergone a very peculiar development in recent years which confuses these modes of transfer, at least in part purposefully. English language corpora show that the notion of sharing has been widened to include many more objects in recent decades (John 2017: 26). Google analytics shows an increased pairing of 'sharing' with 'caring', and the sense of 'sharing your feelings with' others, which were not much used before but became widespread through the internet and social media (John 2017: 103). Communication scholars like Nicolas John conclude from this that the usage of 'sharing' has changed from a distributive sense to a communicative one. Here 'being on a digital platform together' is enough to constitute 'sharing', exemplified by the notorious 'share' button in several online social networks. By contrast, many anthropologists working in social environments in which distributive sharing is very strong noted that there was not one single term that would correspond to the English notion of 'sharing'. Instead, people would speak about 'helping out', 'supplying', or 'lending' (see Widlok 2017: 19-20). Clearly, to talk about sharing and to practice it are two different things. But the problem we are facing is that talking about sharing is to some extent implicated in sharing practices. For instance, regular complaints about people no longer sharing can be part of a strategy of eliciting a share. In the Arctic case study mentioned above (Pryor & Graburn 1980), it emerged that those who talked most about the importance of sharing were not necessarily those who did the most of it and *vice versa*. Studying sharing may thus imply establishing technical terms that distinguish it from buying and selling and from gift-giving, rather than simply adopting the labels used by the agents themselves.

We are therefore well-advised not to be too 'logocentric', too hung up on labels, but rather to put the *practices* of sharing and its social implications at the centre of our attention. This includes paying attention to the language strategies that form a part of these practices. People may disagree on what to call a transfer, but their actions usually speak louder than their words. Moreover, given the moral connotations of various labels, they may be part of strategies to re-classify transfers. In the above mentioned cases from

the Pacific, locals spoke of 'lending' what missionaries classified as 'stealing' (Strathern 2011). Similarly, when 'car sharing' first entered the market for short-term rentals, there were initially reservations to actually use the term 'sharing' as it was feared to carry negative connotations (John 2017: 7). Since then, many enterprises in the platform-based economy have employed the misnomer 'sharing economy' because of the positive sentiments that it has accumulated. The 'disruptive' economic strategies of UBER, AirBnB, Mechanical Turk, and so forth are primarily commercial and are not examples of sharing in a more technical sense. They make profit by opening up domains of life to market transactions that were previously not: for instance, giving others a lift as in hitchhiking or helping others out with odd jobs. The qualification 'primarily' is necessary here, because the combination and articulation between economic interests, moral aspirations, and change is an on-going dynamic (see Widlok 2019b). It is tempting to label everything 'sharing' or 'gift-giving' that does not look like a typical market exchange. But especially in complex transfers involving givers, takers, providers, revenue-recipients, and onlookers, several modes of transfer may be involved. What is central from an anthropological perspective is that different modes of transfer are interwoven with one another. Sharing may be a particularly old human practice. As a cultural practice, it has not disappeared when markets were introduced but it also does not automatically re-emerge when markets are shaken, disrupted, or expanded onto digital platforms. For sharing to be successfully (re-)instated or combined with other modes of transfer in the future, a number of preconditions will have to be in place.

Conclusion: the future of sharing

Sharing food or pressing a share button on a digital platform are not the same thing, as the latter too often amplifies 'leader-follower' and 'influencer-influenced' constellations and ultimately aims at generating profit. Actual sharing practices, by contrast, presuppose and reproduce positions of mutuality. So-called 'peer-to-peer transactions' on the internet may provide a degree of mutuality as well, but they often remain compromised, not least because platform providers accumulate information and keep knowledge about algorithms that structure digital interaction to themselves. There is typically no mutuality between platform users and those who hoard status or money as part of online publishing. Permeable public space is another prerequisite for sharing, again often compromised by gated communities and by 'hoarding', in the double sense of the word as accumulating and as concealing behind a fence (see Widlok 2021). Taxation may thus be a form of sharing when allowing poorer citizens access to collective wealth, but it also runs the danger of the third, redistributing party abusing access to the pooled resources. With respect to sharing, public control of state power may thus be comparable to public access to algorithms in the platform economy.

Some features of the digital environment may open up new space for sharing. After all, sharing has become cheaper, as creating digital copies and providing wider access to digital resources often comes at relatively

little additional cost in comparison to creating and sharing material items. It is therefore not surprising that many digital platforms that are vast and allow 'peer to peer' exchange set high hopes in developing sharing both online and offline. However, not every initiative that uses the label 'sharing' manages to bring about actual social benefits, and several come with social and individual costs. So, the future will tell whether or not the expansion of the digital world will enable transactions that reduce strategic status aggrandising, foster personal autonomy, limit centralised resource control, and value renunciation rather than an economic ideology of endless growth. Such actual forms of sharing would limit boundless accumulation and could allow us to deal productively with inevitable asymmetries. Since sharing allows potential recipients to initiate transfers through requests and to avoid obligations to be used in power plays, it broadens access to material and immaterial items of value. As such, it has the potential to foster sociality between people - and maybe to improve on it, too.

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