

The social sharing of emotion theory



Proposes sharing ones emotional experiences with others is a natural and advantageous way of recovering from emotional events (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot & Boca, 1991). However, there has been mixed support for this theory. Using the starter references below, review the evidence and critically evaluate this claim, considering possible intermediary factors.

A common belief among lay people and indeed some researchers (e. g; Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot & Boca, 1991 and Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) is that expressing ones emotions is beneficial in recovering from an emotional experience. Perceived benefits include improved coping, decreased stress and the promotion of physical and psychological health (Zech, 1999). After an emotional event, it is often expected of us to share our emotions, and when we do not it is considered maladaptive (Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2000). This common belief however may not be supported by the findings of empirical research. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to critically evaluate the social sharing of emotion through examination of the findings of current literature.

The “ social sharing of emotion” theory (Rimé et al, 1991, p 436) proposes sharing ones emotions is a natural and advantageous way of recovering from emotional events. The authors argue that after an emotional event, individuals purposively seek interpersonal contact to discuss the event and their emotional response to it. This outcome is viewed as an adaptive behavioural process whereby individuals use language (through cognitive articulation) to express, clarify, label and organise their emotions in a logical manner (Rimé et al, 1991).

One aspect of Rimé et al's (1991) study attempted to answer a fundamental question: do people share their emotions? In line with lay peoples belief Rimé et al (1991) found, by way of questionnaires and interviews, that individuals do engage in the social sharing of emotion in an attempt to reduce their state of cognitive dissonance. However, their research did not support the hypothesis that the social sharing of emotion aided the recovery process after the event.

Freud (1957) along with other researches of his time (e. g., Bowlby, 1980; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1996) maintained emotionally confronting and articulating an emotional event (repetition?) was necessary for individuals to resolve their grief. The fundamental underpinnings of modern counselling and therapy sessions assign a central role to Freud's (1957) theory and is still practised today (Stoebe et al, 2002). Later studies by Pennebaker and his colleagues (e. g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) supported this view and through their studies demonstrated that the act of physically writing about an (unspecified) emotional event facilitated long term health improvements (e. g. improved immune function). Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) study asked 46 participants to write about either a traumatic emotional event or a trivial matter over four consecutive days. Visits to a health centre were used as measurements of health over the proceeding six months. Results showed a decrease in visits to the health centre for those participants who wrote about their emotions relating to the traumatic event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Another claim in relation to social sharing of emotion has been made by Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan and Ramos (2004) who suggest that the social sharing of emotions has the potential to facilitate desensitisation to stimuli related to an acute traumatic event; i. e. watching a re-enacted rape scene, thus enhancing psychological and physiological adjustment.

Consistent with the theory of cognitive restructuring the authors argue that talking with others may give individuals the opportunity to see a new outlook on traumatic events (Lepore et al, 2004 p 357).

With this in mind then, it could be expected that disclosing emotions would be especially beneficial for the bereaved. However, in contrast with Rimé et al's (1991) theory and inconsistent with Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) study, it was shown by Range, Kovac, and Marion (2000) that writing about an emotional event, specifically bereavement, did not assist emotional recovery. Although the symptoms of bereavement; depression, anxiety and grief, did subside over time, the results from the sixty four participants found no significant correlation between writing tasks and positive health effects; neither physical nor psychological.

Furthermore, Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, and van den Bout's (2002) research found that disclosure of emotions, by means of Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) writing task, did not facilitate adjustment after bereavement. They support their argument with empirical data which found that sharing ones thoughts and feelings with others after the loss of a loved one did not reduce depressive symptoms or influence levels of distress (Stroebe et al, 2002). Moreover, the writing task did not appear to assist the bereaved adjust to the loss of their loved one. This report had a sample size of 128

considerably larger than Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) study. It was also longitudinal, eliminating the need for retrospective self reports of health, additionally objective measures as well as self report measures of health were used thus making this a more refined study (Stroebe et al, 2002). Stroebe et al's (2002) results replicated earlier results by Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) which found no association between sharing emotions and improved health.

Although the studies of Pennebaker and his colleagues (e. g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) were able to produce results in support of the proposal that articulating emotions is advantageous to emotional recovery, nevertheless, significant methodological issues should be raised. In the first instance, their studies did not address a specific event (e. g. bereavement) and did not measure the emotional recovery from that event. Rather they asked participants to write about as many past emotional events as they could (Zech & Rimé, 2005). This methodology has potential weaknesses including memory issue by testing retrospectively, where as Stroebe et al's (2002) study tested prospectively, and impression management. Similarly, Lepore et al's (2004) study was designed to elicit an emotional response from viewing a film (a manufactured laboratory condition as apposed to a real life event). Whether this is an accurate reflection of an emotional response to a real life event is questionable, as individuals sharing emotions regarding an emotional event personal to them could differ (Zech & Rimé, 2005). Consequently, a major limitation in their study was the fact that it was a contrived experiment and not real life situations.

Most intriguingly, studies by Arendt and Elklit (2001), Rose and Bisson (1998) Van Emmerik, Kamphuis, Hulsbosch, and Emmelkamp (2002) have demonstrated that psychological debriefing techniques, whereby individuals are encouraged to share their emotions in a group setting immediately after a potentially traumatic event, have not had the intended effects of reducing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Astoundingly, their research showed the opposite, suggesting that the technique of debriefing immediately after an event had detrimental recovery effects on individuals (cited in Zech & Rimé, 2005). This suggestion is supported by empirical evidence from Rime´ et al. (1998) and Zech, (1999 & 2000) again these studies were real life events.

It is important to note however, that other factors may be mediating the relationship between the sharing of emotions and recovery from emotional events and it is possible these may also explain the inconsistencies of the results from the reviewed literature. Firstly, it has been argued that personal beliefs about the sharing of emotions could be a confounding factor influencing reported results (Zech & Rimé, 2005). Secondly, Stroebe et al (2002) suggest the nature of the traumatic event itself could be another potential moderating factor. The authors suggest sudden losses of a loved one are more traumatic than expected losses following a long illness (Stroebe et al, 2002). Additionally, Lepore et al (2004) suggest personality could be a moderator to emotional expression and subsequent emotional recovery.

In sum, although the social sharing of emotion may seem to be a natural response to emotional events, the literature reviewed has not adequately supported that it is an advantageous way of recovering from an emotional

event. It is surprising that the literature studied has not drawn a consensus. Variations in the aforementioned studies could be due to methodological inconsistencies and possible intermediary factors which have yet to be studied. So why then do individuals share their emotions? It is the westernised view of the perceived benefits that in doing so will provide individuals enhanced emotional recovery (Zech & Rimé, 2005). But although the process of social sharing can be considered helpful, it has not yet been shown to accelerate the recovery process (Stroebe et al., 2002). Given the inconsistencies in the findings of the literature reviewed this paper can not unequivocally support the theory of the social sharing of emotion. Although it does show some intuitive findings (i. e. people tend to share emotions) the relationship between the sharing of emotions and recovery from emotional events is evidently complex. This paper has illustrated the need for further and more sophisticated research between the relationship and the possible discovery of intermediary factors affecting that relationship. For example it could be beneficial for future research to examine specific real life events in connection with personal beliefs about sharing and or personality traits. One thing that was conclusive and remained consistent though all the literature reviewed was that people consistently share their emotions after an event, regardless of their culture, age or sex.