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Sharing

Allowing others to take what is valued

Thomas WIDLÖK, *University of Cologne*

Sharing adds a paradox to the question of transfer and value: Why do people share what they value even though they cannot count on a return? This contribution breaks with the conventional assumption that practices of sharing are simple prestiges of more complex reciprocal gift-exchange or commodity transactions. Instead I consider sharing to be a complex social phenomenon that makes rather specific requirements in regard to bodily copresence, relatedness, and interaction. Based on ethnographic field research I also suggest that forms of “demand sharing” should not be considered to be aberrations since they conform particularly well to the values enshrined in sharing.

Keywords: sharing, demands, reciprocity, mutuality, situations, copresence

Why do people share what they value—even though they cannot count on a return?

When ethnographic accounts of sharing enter wider social science discussions, a twofold strategy for solving this apparent paradox emerges. Both strands of this strategy attempt to escape the paradox by incorporating the phenomenon of sharing into the dominant theory of value derived from monetized markets and reciprocal exchanges. Sharing is either redefined as a covert form of market behavior or as ultimately governed by extended forms of reciprocity.

The first part of the strategy suggests that it is rational for a hunter of a large animal to let others take a share. It assumes that limits of storing large amounts of meat (and of consuming it all by oneself) convince the hunter that he might as well give the meat away. This is put into direct parallel with what lions do when they allow others to eat the carrion once he (or she) is finished (see Ridley 1997: 111). In other words, this way of sharing no longer poses a problem to the market-derived theory of value because what is shared is basically of little value for the giver at that particular point, plus we are given an evolutionary argument on how sharing evolved, since humans are said to have copied it from lions. Now, there is in fact some evidence that humans did scare off lions in order to get to the carcass of large animals, but apparently before the lion had enough of its kill and before its

value was approaching nil—so that in a way we could say that the hunters were teaching the lion a lesson of human values rather than the other way round. Either way, the more relevant counterevidence in this context is that the bulk of reported sharing does not involve extraordinary quantities of meat but instead the ordinary shared consumption of gathered food and other everyday items. Moreover, foragers occasionally do store food and they still value and eat meat and other food after others consider it to be well beyond its shelf life. All of these ethnographic observations seriously weaken the proposed explanation that things get shared because they are basically no longer of value to whoever possesses them but are considered surplus that would be wasted unless given away. By contrast, people apparently do share what they value and what is of value.

The complementary strategy to explain sharing practices on the background of current commercial exchange is to show that sharing is really nothing but a conversion of one currency into another (Ridley 1997), one that even produces “interest” and “profits” in the form of prestige, insurance (reduced risk, obligation by others in tough times), favors with the local women and other things that suggest that the hunter aims for a “a good deal” just as “any broker on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange” (Ridley 1997: 116). Again, ethnography suggests that “not-in-kind exchange” occurs but that it does not account for all situations of sharing (cf. Marlowe 2004: 74). In fact, the perspective of the successful male hunter converting meat into services is not the most typical of all sharing contexts. As I point out in more detail below there are practices that systematically downplay the role of the provider in sharing. Even more damaging to this theory of sharing as converted value is the fact that typically, and prototypically, there are cases that cannot be stretched to fit the logic of exchange, be it geared toward reciprocity or profit. When a child receives from its parents or when the hunters see an animal as offering itself (Duerr 2010: 85–88) or as the environment “giving” it to them (Bird-David 1990), we have to go as far as to assume a notion of “cosmic” returns that delay reciprocity many generations down the line (or down the species ladder for that matter) for it to still be called reciprocal exchange. Otherwise the notion of reciprocity loses mutuality as its defining property, since—as Alfred Gell (1999: 88) has pointed out—a balance of comparable mutual sacrifices is built into the notion of reciprocity.

The challenge of sharing, therefore, continues to be that people do share what they value, they share without receiving or even expecting returns, and they even—at times—value sharing itself. More specifically, they primarily value the sharing action by others while they themselves may avoid sharing by hiding things or at least by trying not to share at all times and under all circumstances. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the motivation to give from the occurrence of transferred food (or other items) since the two do not necessarily match (Marlowe 2004: 73). There is sharing without the motive to give—and, conversely, the motive to give exists without it being sharing, most prominently in gift-giving. This makes a simplistic explanation of why people share even less convincing when conceived of as reciprocal exchange and it makes sharing an even greater challenge to an emerging anthropological theory of value. In this contribution I want to show why social science approaches have tried so hard to treat sharing as a form of reciprocity (and thereby tried to render it unproblematic for a universalizing theory of value), why this attempt has failed, and what an ethnographically informed account

of sharing contributes to an emerging theory of value that goes beyond assumptions based on market exchange, barter, and gift-exchange.

Since we are most accustomed to settings in which forms of competitive market exchange, reciprocal gift-exchange, and sharing coexist, it is tempting to explain all of these transactions in terms of the most dominant form(s) of transaction. This is what Graeber's critique of economic theories of money (and of value) tries to show: in academic and popularized economics the rules of market exchange are projected onto other forms of transfer (see Graeber 2001, 2011). The initial relativist anthropological response has been to show that each form of transfer is governed by its own morality and its own set of values not reducible to the others. Notions of reciprocity and gift-giving have been the champions in the attempt to provide a (mirror) image of forms of transfer and value generation that are to be distinguished from commodity exchange. However, people do not live in enclosed worlds consisting of a single mode of transfer and an associated single regime of values. And in those situations in which one mode is more dominant than others, it need not be that of exchange (of either commodities or gifts). For even in the heart of Melanesia, with its elaborate gift exchange systems, there are situations such as those of the Umeda where exchange plays no significant part and where instead forms of sharing or service provisioning (see Gell 1999: 85) form the base of sociality. Therefore, the development of a more general theory of value that would account for the various forms of transfer and the moralities associated with them is still on the agenda—a theory that will necessarily have to connect the establishment of value with established values in social practice (see Otto and Willerslev in part one of this special issue and Lambek in part two of this special issue). Bringing in action and agency is key in this attempt because up to now the comparative study of values has been seriously inhibited due to the failure “to relate it properly to action” (Graeber 2001:4). As one further step toward such a goal, the remainder of this contribution highlights the actions that constitute and enable sharing and that can add to an emerging theory of value by taking the insights on sharing into account.

Why sharing is not reciprocity—but why many want it to be

The language of market exchange is so pervasive today that it is not only the major source for concepts of value but also the backdrop against which those cases are discussed that do not easily fit the marketplace perspective. The laws of rational choice theory that are derived from market exchange and taught in introductory “Economics 101” courses continue to be criticized by anthropologists for not doing justice to the activities that are found in the broader human spectrum of “economic” pursuits (see Graeber 2011: 90). Consequently, “Anthropology 101” courses have highlighted an alternative set of laws around reciprocity and gift exchange (see Eriksen 2010). It appears that the more widespread the market rhetoric of self-interested calculation became, the more insistently anthropologists emphasized the morality of fair reciprocal exchange in the ethnographic record and in their policy recommendations for the current global situation (think of “fair trade”). While the two tropes of marketization and reciprocity seem to be mutually reinforcing, it is important to point out that there is more to the anthropology of value than reciprocal exchange alone. A considerable part of this “more” is discussed under the notion of “sharing.”

Over the last two decades considerable effort has been spent to establish that sharing is not adequately covered under a notion of reciprocity but that it is a form of transfer *sui generis* and “an important transactional mode in its own right” (Gell 1999: 77). While this discussion was first carried out above all in the specialized field of hunter-gatherer studies (Woodburn 1998; Hunt 2000; cf. Wenzel et al. 2000) it has also involved other societies (see Gell 1999) and it is currently being picked up in more general accounts (Graeber 2011; Ferguson 2011; cf. Widlok and Tadesse 2005). Sharing as a practice continues to be prevalent also among former hunter-gatherers who pursue other subsistence modes in what Alan Barnard has labeled the “foraging mode of thought” (Barnard 2004). Sharing is therefore not limited to a specific mode of subsistence. Rather, it is connected to particular forms of conceptualizing property and of organizing social life that we find in some hunter-gatherer societies (or former hunter-gatherer societies) but also more widely as aspects of other societies, typically those with brideservice (rather than bridewealth) and more generally with a “service economy” (Gell 1999: 88) rather than a gift economy or commodity economy. In a more recent twist of the debate, Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Rane Willerslev (2007) have argued that a focus on the “visible economy” (of what is observably transferred among human agents) may provide a wrong image of sharing (and selling, exchange, theft, etcetera) as completely separate types that could be correlated with types of societies.¹ They argue, on the basis of Siberian ethnography, that not only do various forms of transfer coexist but moreover that in the conceptualization of the agents themselves notions such as sharing can get stretched to their limits so that they touch upon apparent opposites such as theft or reciprocal exchange. In some cases, we are here dealing with the influential dominant logic of commercial indebtedness modifying other forms of transfer to the extent that they then appear to be inversions of commercial exchange, or its constitutive necessary opposite. In other cases what is labeled sharing may be framed and transformed by a form of distribution or of gift-giving, which then changes the values of the apparent

1. The main argument of Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev (2007; see also Strathern 2011) is a critique of established anthropological notions of what constitutes “a concept.” There is no room here to engage with their epistemological argument. Suffice to say that I think there is plenty of evidence that concepts are constantly shifting not least because they rely on language in dialogue that recontextualizes them all the time (see Wierzbicka 2010 who provides evidence for some key scientific concepts such as “experience,” “evidence,” “sense,” or “empirical”). Our concepts on transfers are no exception in this. What is worthwhile adding is that not only do concepts get stretched and occasionally collapse into their opposite even within a cultural tradition (e.g., when talking of “negative growth” etcetera) but in practice, too, they shade into one another (when “buying” a bankrupt company or desolate building for a “symbolical” single dollar). This in itself does not imply that we may only accept fuzzy concepts to describe fuzzy phenomena. There can be a value in analytically separating what forms a continuum, especially in contrast to local concepts that bundle up actions and motives in a culturally specific way. Ultimately, I see researchers and the agents involved in the transfers discussed here as following the same process. When construing concepts and when dealing with forms of transfer we are moving laterally from case to case, situation to situation, sharpening our expectations for the future as we go on. And in both cases this is not a journey undertaken on our own but necessarily in communication with others and with the communicative settings that influence the outcome of this process.

“sharing”—just like a minus can change the values of relations when preceding a bracket. This is, for instance, the case when what is sometimes called “sharing” is in fact overseen and controlled by wealthy sponsors (or in other contexts influential elders) in a way that effectively redefines it into forced pooling with subsequent redistribution (see Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 533). Similarly, in other settings (also within Melanesia) gift-giving may exist prior to reciprocal exchange and in a dynamic tension with it (Rio 2007). In other words, not only are we dealing with complex articulations of modes of transfer but also there is always the potential for negation and for a reversible movement. It is therefore important not only to explain the origins of sharing (or any other mode of transfer) but also its transformation and its demise. I recognize these complications but I maintain that not all practices are equally *coimplicated* with one another all the time, which makes inversion and the limits of negotiation empirical questions. I think that there are patterns that emerge and it is one of my main concerns to investigate the social actions that are being employed in particular settings to move either into a transactional mode such as sharing or out of it. After all, what distinguishes the various forms of transactions are not their specific formal character but the situation or social context that allows them to emerge—and that allows us to recognize their specific characteristics in the first place (see Gell 1999: 80). Identifying which aspects of social interaction and of morality go together with certain forms of transfer (and in which situations) remains an important anthropological task to which I want to turn now.

The tendency to consider all nonmarket exchanges as manifestations of “reciprocity” was formalized and popularized in Marshall Sahlins’s model of modes of exchange (cf. Sahlins 1988). As I have already pointed out (and others before me, see Gell 1999; Hunt 2000) it is misleading to cover all these transactions under the notion of “reciprocity.” However, the main reason why this model continues to be popular, especially outside economic anthropology, is that it proposes a forceful correlation between modes of economic transaction (“negative,” “balanced,” and “generalized” reciprocity) and modes of social organization (house, lineage, village, tribal, intertribal). Sahlins’s well known diagram (Sahlins 1988: 199) even suggested that the modes of transaction could be mapped onto the living arrangements of transfer partners in a single two-dimensional graph of concentric circles with *house* and *generalized reciprocity* at its center, *negative reciprocity* at the outside and *balanced reciprocity* in between. As with all simple models, this represents some features of reality better than others. The model rings true only insofar as it suggests that very close and very distant relationships are not necessarily those of balanced reciprocal transfers, in actual fact, but also in terms of the moral expectations involved. The happiness of the commodity trader distant from his customer is to have received a more valued item for a less valued one (Gell 1999: 85). Similarly, the pride of those in close “popular” neighborhood environments is that they do not need (nor expect) a “thank you” for acknowledging the value of the service they provide (Graeber 2011: 123-4). The model has been very productive in the discussions that it has provoked over time but almost from the start two fundamental critiques have been raised against it. First, it is overstretching of the notion of *reciprocity* to cover transactions that are clearly not reciprocal at all (“generalized reciprocity” for sharing and “negative reciprocity” for stealing). As Hunt (2000) has suggested, the more neutral term *transfer* is much

better suited as a cover term since it avoids this conceptual fusion. Second, empirically the claim that generalized reciprocity always implies close kinship relations did not stand up to the fact that sharing has been observed to be at times indiscriminate in regard to specific kin relations, since it may include everyone present, even “distant” visitors or anthropologists who are not treated as close kin in other contexts. Both, the conceptual and the empirical critique have led James Woodburn (1998) to underline that “sharing is not a form of reciprocity.” According to Woodburn, sharing is characterized precisely by contexts in which transfer is not based on specific kin obligations and in which it is not creating specific long-term commitments. However, merely distinguishing sharing from reciprocity in terms of one-way versus two-way transfers is also not sufficient. Elsewhere, I have pointed out difficulties of this distinction because it easily breaks down if we shift the relevant timeframe and if we take into account the multiplicity of perspectives (Widlök 2004). What agents (or observers for that matter) expect to be a two-way exchange may turn out to be a one-way transfer (and vice versa). What is considered a transfer from one perspective may be considered an exchange from the perspective of another participant (“paying tribute” is a case in point, see Widlok 1999a: 30–32).² Moreover, there are constant attempts to make one form of transfer appear to look like a different one, to stretch a concept to its acceptable limits, as Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev (2007) have pointed out. *Pace* Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev I do not think that our analysis should necessarily emulate this practice but rather to provide sharp and useful conceptual tools for describing and distinguishing these practices.

So, what are the defining characteristics of sharing settings beyond the fact that it is labeled *sharing* (or an equivalent term) in a particular local context and beyond essentialist features such as it being *one-way* or *generalized*? Elsewhere (Widlök 2004) I have suggested that what characterizes a sharing context comparatively is that it extends the circle of people who can enjoy the good implicated in a resource, for instance accessing a certain resource such as water. In other words, sharing food or drink is an action done *for its own sake*, putting the good of nourishment in the place of any specific goals that may be derivative of the transfer of food items, for instance the attempt to create obligations for the future. In this understanding, sharing is not a manifestation of an altruistic move, putting the goals of others above one's own goals, but rather one of renouncing derivative goals altogether in the face of intrinsic goods—its intrinsic value if you will. In gift-giving contexts, by contrast, goals of various kinds (whether held jointly by the exchange partners or not, whether altruistic or egoistic) override the intrinsic good of whatever it is that is being provided. I concede that this invites more questions about what actions allow such a sharing context to arise in the first place, a point that I shall address below. In a nutshell, what I suggest is that sharing among humans is best understood as the result of complex forms of interactions. Insofar as human agency is by definition one that allows itself to be directed toward certain goals, and moreover toward a choice of goals, the creation of situations for the

2. Valerio Valeri (1994) has made a similar point in regard to the Huaulu where the transfer of women is considered *buying* by the wife-takers but not *selling* by the wife-givers. It depends on the various actions involved in the process as to whether a transfer tends toward a gift/prestation or toward a purchase (see Valeri 1994: 5).

renunciation of goals is in fact a complex cultural achievement, one may even say one of the earliest cultural inventions of humankind—and it is certainly not to be confused with exchange or with reciprocity, which, of course, rely on their own social and cultural preconditions.

The anthropological debate that surrounds the social evolution of transaction modes is still largely unresolved. Contrary to a prevailing popular image there seems to be dwindling support for the primacy of reciprocity in the evolution of transaction modes. Knut Rio (2007) suggests that giving may precede exchange while Gell suggests that in many Melanesian settings, commodity exchange is “primordial” (1999: 97) since it provides the necessary input for gift-exchange, which in turn “mimic[s] the processes of commodity exchange” (1999: 77) and that sharing preceded gift-exchange (1999: 85) as a baseline. In fact, this is also reflected in Sahlins’s model, which places sharing at the zero-point—literally—in his above-mentioned graph that summarizes “the sociology of primitive exchange” (Sahlins 1988: 199), but figuratively this is also true for many other contributions in this debate. The practices that we now cover under the technical term of sharing as a specific mode of transfer were originally discussed under the notion of “primitive communism” (for a summary see Barnard 1983; Lee 1988) and presumed to be the earliest phase of human development. Sharing practices were either considered to be *basic* either in chronological terms or in logical terms as the essence of a “baseline communism” that continues to be “the foundation of all human sociability” including present-day market society (Graeber 2011: 96–98). Either way, sharing is considered to be the baseline, the default, the natural state of affairs. While there is some truth in this in terms of social evolution, the portrayal of sharing as a baseline is problematic insofar as it begs the question of how sharing came into being and what its constituent actions are then and today, especially since sharing continues in many settings and it gets reinvented under certain conditions. Moreover, it leads us away from investigating sharing in its own right by concentrating on the cultural inventions that apparently followed later on in the emancipation or destruction of this early stage of sharing, which makes it harder to see moves into and out of this mode of transaction. Incidentally, the evaluation of this move away from sharing is secondary here. Whether thinkers regretted the departure from the original state of affairs (as Rousseau did) or whether they saw it as a necessary first step toward a more industrious and complex human society (as Marx and Engels did), their work does not really help us to understand how sharing emerges and is maintained. In order to advance this line of thought we need a better understanding of sharing as a complex phenomenon. As a complex phenomenon in itself, sharing builds on other practices that are combined and brought to bear in a particular social environment. In what follows I sketch one particular ethnic environment in which sharing thrives in the present. I concede that sharing is multifaceted and that it may build on more or other practices than those that I describe. My main point here is that—even if sharing is logically and chronologically prior to other forms of economic relations—the practice of sharing itself builds on more basic modules of (inter)action. This may also help us to understand why in many contexts sharing has given way to other forms of transfer since this development can be described in terms of changes to the social environment that undermine the cultural forms of interactions on which sharing relies.

Why sharing is best conceived of as a complex phenomenon

Numerous ethnographies provide the factual background for my claim that sharing is best understood to be a complex phenomenon. Lorna Marshall (1976, 1998), for instance, has documented the various waves of sharing that take place among the !Kung. In the case of hunted meat, the sharing begins early on with mutual swapping or “borrowing” of arrows for the hunt, which makes the arrow makers participate in the hunts (and hunting success) of fellow hunters who carry and use arrows of several coresident men. It furthermore involves primary sharing at the killing site, secondary sharing upon returning from the site of the kill to the camp, and tertiary sharing after food has been prepared. Another dimension of complexity of sharing has been highlighted by Richard Lee (1979, 2003) in regard to the gossip that surrounds sharing, again long before there is anything to share, then while the sharing is taking place and long after the event. Sharing is demanded and commented upon, people claim that it does not take place frequently enough and when it takes place the provider or the share is ridiculed in a way that is generally explained in terms of a leveling device to underwrite equality. Hence the acts of sharing and the comments about sharing are far from being in unison and language adds a separate dimension of complexity to the sharing phenomenon, it is not merely a mirror of action (see Aikhenvald in part two of this special issue). Acts and the way they are presented and commented upon not only differ, they may also be purposefully in contrast with one another because comments on sharing are at the same time also themselves acts that may be intended to prompt acts of sharing or to prevent their political exploitation. Thus, there is a *horizontal* complexity in terms of a time scale of primary and secondary sharing and so on. Then there is also a *vertical* complexity depending on the degree of meta-comments that are involved. Moreover, we may add a third axis to this complexity, namely a *lateral* complexity in that previous experiences and actions constitute certain reliable expectations while still leaving a considerable amount of uncertainty as to whether and how sharing takes place. Independent of the horizontal timeline and the vertical gradient between explicitness and implicitness, sharing is complex because its outcome is in many ways open while being influenced through past experiences. As the following examples from my field research with *Akhoe Hai//om in northern Namibia testify (for details see Widlok 1999a) the complexity of sharing is to a large extent due to the fact that the taker rather than the provider typically initiates it.³

3. Remarks by one of the anonymous reviewers suggest that in the context of sharing we may be well advised not to use the same terms (giver, receiver, exchange) that are used in the analysis of gift-exchange so as to avoid confusion. I have tried to use an alternative set of terms (provider, taker, swapping) but I also underwrite other comments made by a reviewer, namely that a distinctive conceptual terminology should not suggest that there are no conversions and inversions of these practices and that they often condition one another as imagined or real opposites. I want to take the opportunity to thank all three anonymous reviewers and Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev as editors of this special issue for their comments and for including this contribution on sharing, which in many ways goes against the grain of many ideas developed in the debates about gift-exchange.

Case 1

Lukab is visiting from another place. He just takes the cup of coffee that Teseb (his son-in-law) has put in front of him without asking. There are no objections. Then Kurukhoes comes and takes away Lukab's hat, who in turn takes Teseb's hat. Again no objections are raised. (The hat is returned a day later.) Just a day earlier I/naib (a relative of Teseb with the same surname) tried to do the same, trying to pinch a sip of coffee from Teseb's cup. He was told to stop it and they tried to make him set down the cup but only managed after he had taken his sip.

Case 2

!Gamekhas is cooking maize meal, which was received from relatives who work on a farm. When the food is being prepared, a number of neighbors come and talk about the farm and the visit. Then, when the food is ready, a number of plates are filled and the people living at this hearth start to eat. //Ahes, who is visiting with some other women and children, starts making remarks that indicate how hungry she is and that she will just go home to her fire and "stay like that." She repeats this in a number of ways. Eventually she goes away. A little later Khau/nais comes and loudly demands, "Give me food!" She is not prevented from taking some from the plate.

Case 3

Madab has sent three onions to Davib. When the onions are handed over to Davib, I/naib, who is also present, grabs one and starts to walk off to his fireplace. Davib complains and says I/naib should return the onion but I/naib insists that he needs it to prepare sauce to go with his food. He walks off and Davib gives up.

These three events from my notes indicate that sharing is not an automatism but it is the product of complex interaction. I tried to establish in each of these situations what the decisive factors were that led to a successful transfer in one instance (Case 3), partially successful in another (Case 1), or that prevented such a transfer in yet another instance (Case 2). When looking over the cases it emerges that instead of a hard and fast list of factors from which we could predict the occurrence of sharing, the cases only provide some necessary cultural conditions under which sharing takes place. There was not one *decisive* factor (or several factors) sufficient to predict sharing. A still common stereotype about Paleolithic hunter-gatherers (see Schurz 2008: 30) holds that foragers needed to be able to predict where a particular food source was to be found but that it was only after the *causes* of plant growth were well known to them that they could "advance" beyond foraging toward agriculture. Inverting this stereotype we could argue that it is more accurate that to predict where a share is to be found is not possible but that the situative "causes" that can lead to sharing are indeed well known to participants—and correspondingly are also frequently reported in the ethnography. These cultural conditions, a set of actions and situations that are conducive to sharing may be summarized under three headings: the modes of relatedness, the modes of conversation, and the modes of bodily presence involved.

Relatedness: The kin relationship between people present plays a role in sharing events. It is not the case that certain kinship terms inevitably involve a particular

form of transfer (or vice versa) but rather that both are relevant for the establishment of what the status of mutual involvement for the persons concerned is. In this process the categorization of a particular person with a particular kinship term often follows the interaction rather than the other way around. The attribution of kin terms is universalist in these societies, that is, it extends to all humans. However, since there are always multiple ways of calculating kin relations in such small-scale societies, the participants may try to draw the other person near or keep a distance by using specific kin terms (see Widlok 1999a). And they do so on the basis of their experience with fellow humans, above all with regard to sharing. Being in a particular kinship relationship is no guarantee for sharing to take place and conversely sharing is not restricted to certain categories of kin. However, the two do not occur independently; the occurrence of sharing and the categorization of kin are mutually informative. Agents do not deduct behavior from kin terms, nor do they construct kin terms solely on the basis of sharing behavior. Rather, both kinship links and the occurrence of past sharing provide the necessary ground for sharing to take place and they provide background knowledge for agents to know whether sharing is likely to take place or not.

Conversation: At the time when I collected the instances of sharing reported on above, I did not have an audio or video recorder in place. But even without such a record it became clear that the mode of the conversation played a key role in these events. Direct demands occurred but also continual muttering at the side. There is a lot of parallel talking in *Akhoe Hai//om speech events, which implies that diverse and even contrastive statements can be made and juxtaposed without there being a linear *argument* of talk and countertalk. Many utterances do not get a response, many questions do not get answered, many statements are apparently ignored as if they had not been heard. Conversely, even harsh statements can be made without necessarily provoking a direct harsh response. Conversation is as varied as the use of kin terms but it sets the scene for sharing to take place. Sharing may therefore be provoked by indirect or direct demands (“Give me!” “*Au te re*”). In other words, sharing is not prevented through the use of direct demands (as in some Western notions of nonsolicited “free” giving). Additionally, there are numerous indirect ways to initiate sharing, namely by expressing a need, one’s *nonhaving*. *Akhoe Hai//om may say: “I have no water!” or, “There is a lack of water.” “Are we without water?” “Imagine that there was something to drink . . .” (see Widlok 1997). Again, there is no single utterance that guarantees sharing but the conversational strategies provide the background against which providers and takers find sharing to be an acceptable strategy or even a mode of transfer that they cannot avoid without risking confrontation or open conflict.

Presence: Strictly speaking, we may consider the modes of kin talk to be a subcategory of modes of conversation, which in turn may be considered a subcategory of bodily presence. The mode of personal presence is therefore a critical factor, a prompt for sharing. Frequently, third parties, for instance children, act as intermediaries, which works well when they are sent with food to deliver to others but less well when they are sent to demand food. This means that sharing can take place without *giving* in the sense of directly handing over. However, by not being on the scene yourself your chances of receiving a share decrease dramatically. Con-

versely, to be physically present in itself establishes a potential claim and to provide a share is an acknowledgement of the presence of the other as a person. However, presence needs to be recognized by those who are, for example, sitting at a hearth preparing or having food. Visitors to a hearth may only be greeted and addressed a fairly long time after they have sat down quietly somewhere, or in extreme cases they may not be spoken to at all (see Widlok 1999b). Thus, physical presence is regulated not only by those who move to a place but also by those who are already present. Copresence is an intercorporeal act in the true sense of the word in that it depends on the bodily movements of everyone on the scene. It matters how (and how long) someone decides to get closer and it matters how (and how long) those at the receiving end decide to acknowledge the presence of the other person. In all three modes of (inter)action that I have just described sharing requires particular actions by both provider and taker, accepting certain kin relations, responding to speech acts, and recognizing physical presence.

The dynamics of sharing

As mentioned above, part of the complexity of sharing is the fact that it tends to be initiated by the receiver (the taker) and that it does not depend on a charitable attitude of the giver (who is more of a provider) nor does it exclude sentiments of possessiveness among providers who may want to hide what they have so that they do not need to share. I do not, therefore, consider *demand sharing* to be a separate or even an unusual type of sharing but rather its prototype. The notion of demand sharing had a critical importance when it was first formulated (Peterson 1993). Among other things, it was used to cleanse the concept of sharing from the Western bias of charity. Many acts of sharing took place, and continue to take place, because they are initiated by the taker and social strategies are in place that decouple giving from receiving. Sharing may therefore take place without the provider enacting and expressing charity. Often it takes place in a way that downgrades the act of giving (see for instance Lee 2003) as part of leveling any potential attempts of the giver to take political advantage from his or her economically advantaged position. Demand sharing not only inverts the sequence of action but also the tone of the transaction that is known as “charitable giving.” It would therefore be wrong to consider demand sharing as a different *type* of transfer than sharing since in a certain sense there is no sharing without a demand. The demand need not be uttered, and it need not be the demand of a specific interlocutor since it is a demand for provisioning that emerges as a consequence of moral role relationships (Gell 1999: 87) or as incurred by a particular situation of copresence, as I would prefer to call it. We need to recognize that one’s mere bodily presence, underlined by addressing the other person in particular ways, is always a demand for being acknowledged as a partner, a personal being with legitimate needs. An appropriate definition of demand sharing is therefore much broader than the use of explicit demands such as “Give me . . .” leading to the appropriation of what one may think one is entitled to. The explicitness of the demand may differ and it may be entirely implicit very much like a “silent demand” (cf. Løgstrup 1997). Humans are sufficiently able to put themselves into the situation of others to be able to know what the intrinsic goods of shared objects are for fellow humans without any demand being uttered.

The underlying (implicit or explicit) demands that trigger sharing rely on cultural practices that are recognized as appropriate actions that make a difference, and are recognized by providers and takers but also by the bystanders for whom each act of sharing adds to the shared system of value. I have labeled the cultural practices on which sharing is based the modes of relatedness, the modes of talking, and the modes of corporeal presence as outlined above. The shared common ground that is necessary for sharing to be instituted as a habitual practice is therefore considerable. Only where this common ground exists can a transfer regularly take the shape of sharing. This underpins my general contention that sharing is an important cultural innovation and not an empty default or neutral baseline. It is as much culturally instituted as other forms of transfer, be it gift-exchange, trading, bartering, or commercial transactions.

Consequently, I also suggest that the move away from sharing is not that of a void that gets filled with cultural activities but rather as a consequence of the shared common ground that crumbles away or changes. We have enough ethnography to show that sharing breaks down when the shared common ground disappears, in terms of modes of relatedness, of talk, and of corporeal presence. The exact point when the critical threshold for breakdown has been reached is difficult to establish since it is the changing combination of factors that appears to be critical. When social agents reduce the multiplicity of potential kinship links to a fixed set of membership roles in social groups, when they abandon certain ways of conversation (for instance, that of talking parallel to one another) in favor of disciplined rhetoric, and when they start living in secluded homes and hearth places that make copresence less likely and more cumbersome to achieve (see Widlok 1999b), then the institutionalized practice of sharing loses the basis of shared practices upon which it is built. If this general pattern is valid we can easily imagine historical and evolutionary scenarios whereby the diminishment of sharing is neither a purposeful abandonment nor one that becomes inevitable and irreversible as other forms of transfer became more dominant. Rather, we can easily imagine scenarios where the abandonment of sharing was an unintended consequence of changes at the level of social practices (of kin relations, of linguistic pragmatics, and of corporeal movements) that underlie sharing and make it possible.

In concluding this section we may say that the difference between the various modes of transaction cannot be accounted for in regard to a single dimension of closeness or distance from house to intertribal “sectors” (Sahlins 1988: 199) however tempting such a reduction may be. The modes of transfer are not mechanically related to particular social features (such as close kinship) but they seem to be valued for the distinctive forms of satisfaction that they provide. After all, constitutive to each mode is a whole repertoire of actions that can change the quality of a transfer toward different ends: the pursuit of the gratification to have exchanged the lower valued against the higher valued (as in commodity exchange) or the gratification of achieving ulterior goals and particular values (as in reciprocal exchange) or, indeed, the gratification that an intrinsic good or value has been realized (as in sharing).

How sharing adds to an emerging theory of value

As has been pointed out by several contributions to this special issue, part of the difficulty of developing an anthropological theory of value is the ambiguity of the term *value* itself. David Graeber (2001: 1–2) points out that value can be construed in three different ways: (1) as what makes a meaningful difference; (2) as what can be measured by the willingness to give something up for something else; and (3) as what is desirable and good.

It is easy to see how market exchange is privileging the second of these modes and then pushes us to read it backward into giving and sharing as earlier and underdeveloped or nascent forms of value creation following the calculation of value in a market-type situation. What earns a high price in commercial exchange (2) is considered the reason why that particular item becomes desirable or more desirable than others (3) and it creates the most pervasive distinctions not only between objects but also between people (1). Graeber (2011) has summoned comprehensive ethnographic evidence to show why this backward and outward projection of value creation of market relations is misleading but he has also suggested that an emerging anthropological theory of value faces the challenge to deal with all three aspects of value (see Graeber 2001).

Let us consider the three dimensions of the notion of value in regard to the ethnography of sharing and let us begin with the first dimension, value as difference, which is the main sense of value now employed in the natural sciences and to which anthropology, in my view, should also relate. After all, there have been attempts to treat transactions as *values* in exactly this sense, for instance in network analysis. In his network analysis of the southern African *hxaro* exchange system Thomas Schweizer (1997) has calculated the values of density and distributedness that the exchange network has as a consequence of all exchanges added together as values of components within a system of transactions. In a similar fashion, outcome-based studies working under the evolutionary or related natural science paradigms investigate sharing or gift-giving in terms of the way in which they alter the values of available nutrition, of demographic effects, or of life expectancy, always in terms of individual transactions that make a difference as constituent elements of summative outcomes and consequences.

Within anthropology this focus on value as meaningful difference is a minority position while probably being the mainstream position outside the humanities. Against this position the theory of reciprocal gift exchange has critically argued that such a treatment of transacting subjects as objects in a mathematical function does not do justice to the phenomena at hand because it deterministically considers value production in terms of its outcomes of long-term adaptation and its properties as a closed system that leaves little or no room for human agency. By contrast, exchange theorists insist value does not only, and not even primarily or primordially, correspond to differences between measured objects and outcomes. Rather, it creates differences between the subjects involved in transactions that potentially alter these relationships. In Chris Gregory's terms, in gift exchange the value of objects is kept constant while the evaluation of giver and receiver is what is altered in the exchange (cf. Gregory 1982). In ceremonial exchange and exchange systems this feature is exploited by the participants who engage in giving as a difference maker and as a tool for manipulating hierarchy. This can also be shown with regard to the !Kung *hxaro* exchange, which is a celebrated case in point within

hunter-gatherer studies. It allows !Kung embedded in a universalist kinship network to add difference by creating *specific* exchange obligations with *specific* members of their kin network. I suggest that *hxaro* has been a “celebrated” case exactly because it constitutes that part of hunter-gatherer ethnography that can be readily incorporated into a theory of value based on reciprocal exchange. However, the way it has been dealt with in anthropology is completely out of proportion because we need to acknowledge that it is restricted to very few southern African forager groups, and even among the !Kung it accounts for very few of the transfers that people engage with—the substantial “rest” is sharing (cf. Schweizer 1997; Wiessner 1998). What practices of sharing add to the difference-making aspect of value is that it systematically decouples the various sorts of differences that are at stake. What I mean by that is that yes, it makes a difference to receive a shared item (instead of not receiving it) but sharing as a practice is set up as a transfer that decouples this difference from the difference between giver and receiver. Various pragmatic measures already mentioned (e.g., sending a child with a share, depreciating the share given, demanding rather than offering, initiative at the side of the receiver and not the giver) ensure that the transferred objects can make a difference to the individual while making as little difference as possible to the relationship between giver and receiver. In sharing it is not supposed to make a difference that you got this item from me rather than from someone else or directly from the environment. As I have tried to show above, this is by no means a trivial cultural achievement since it is a specific way of creating and determining value. The observed transfers between *haves* and *have-nots* are unlike processes of, say, osmosis or diffusion that may be observed outside the human lifeworld; they therefore require an *extended* theory of value that also relates to the other meanings of value mentioned above.

Consequently, discussions in this special issue have focused on the other two notions of value (2 and 3 in Graeber’s list above) and the relation between them, for short the relation between (calculated, economic) *value* and (moral, sociological) *values* (see Graeber 2001: 1; and Otto and Willerslev, introductions to these two issues). The greatest challenge that sharing provides in regard to this discussion, I propose, is that it inverts the mainstream assumption that moral values are plural while economic value follows a singular standard.

In economist thinking about transactions, value is considered to be variable to the extent that value is relative to the trade partners’ willingness to give up a thing for another. Preferences may vary but the deliberation and negotiation between them constitutes a single process. The process itself is usually envisaged as a unified process of producing a value, more specifically *the* value of something at a certain point in time. However, as we have seen in the ethnography, sharing can in fact be read as evidence that the frame of establishing the standard of value can be moved through changes in mode of transfer and thereby create plurality beyond diverse individual preferences. Sharing does not presuppose an explicit *willingness to give* for value to emerge. Rather we may say that sharing creates value in terms of the unwillingness to insist on particular possession rights in the face of social pressure that is based on kin ties, talk, and bodily presence. Given this social pressure, potential providers at a certain point are unwilling to hang on to things or to measure their relative value against returns. They are willing to give up a thing not for another thing but for remaining on good terms with the others and for being in

agreement with the accepted social terms of behavior. When “sharing out” (giving away) they are also “sharing in” (expanding group boundaries). They are more willing to give up objects than to give up community with those who share. In sum, sharing qualifies the notion of *willingness* and shifts the frame of how value is constituted in the first place—beyond what a value theory based solely on measuring market exchange would suggest. This is not a simple case of converting the material value of items into the value of intangible “things,” such as community. Rather, the way of framing alters the ways in which value is created and not just the value of particular items that are involved.

For instance, Frank Marlowe (2004: 86) notes what differentiates *theft* (or “tolerated theft”) from (tolerated) *scrounging* is the social context or situation in which these practices take place. Both imply that the giver does not explicitly want to part with what she or he has got. They differ in that theft only takes place in relations with another group (or another species) where outright dominance is the decisive and sufficient factor whereas tolerated scrounging requires practical circumstances that come in as extra necessary conditions. Tolerated scrounging takes place within the group where social pressure can be created through making claims on a share and through feelings of entitlement (2004: 76).⁴ What I have just labeled “extra” necessary conditions are, of course, only extra from the perspective of altruistic notions of sharing that dominate Western discourse. As I have pointed out, making demands is not at all an extra but a normal condition of sharing in many forager contexts and beyond.⁵ Conversely, providing an equal share may be considered normal when sharing is framed in larger processes of distribution, but not necessarily in the everyday practice of foragers.

Outside observers have tended to conceptualize sharing as the allocation of an equal piece for everyone and they typically had to learn their lesson when they attempted to achieve that goal by distributing resources. My own fieldwork experience is no exception here. When completing our first long period of field research, my wife and I decided to slaughter a goat, to buy a sack of potatoes, and to invite everyone in our Hai//om settlement to come with a bowl to get “their share.” People were generally happy with the event but they did see problems in our approach to sharing, which was really distribution. To begin with, not everyone had a bowl and the bowls available differed considerably in size and were used by hearth groups of variable composition. The fact that everyone in the end did get included was not due to our skill of distribution but rather due to the institution-

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4. Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev (2007) provide parallel cases where it is the manipulation of these extra necessary conditions that lead to sharing breaking down into obligations of gift-giving in interethnic relations between foragers and traders (2007: 533), into theft in interspecies relations between foragers and predatory animals (2007: 534), or into demands for reciprocity in relations between humans and spirits (2007:535).
 5. It is tempting to see Marlowe’s rendering of sharing as “tolerated scrounging” in similar ways as Marilyn Strathern (2011) has discussed the emergence of “borrowing” as a mediating concept at schools in the Pacific where teachers and students with different backgrounds seek to find common ground for conceptualizing transfers that under the particular conditions at hand fit neither of the idealized forms of transfer that they bring to the situation.

alized complex sharing practices that were in place. It may help to think of this routine sharing practice as a system of communicating tubes (a metaphor used by Nurit Bird-David) that connect the sites where resources become available. As it was our aim to give the same amount into similar kind of bowls, we envisaged apportioning what was to be distributed into standardized and separate household units. However, there are considerable forces within a hunter-gatherer group that resist such standardization and although autonomy is highly valued it does not create impermeable units. In other words, our hosts were very tolerant in regard to the constitution of a hearth group that gathers around one bowl. People come when they are hungry and they leave when they are full. Children in particular may move freely between parental and grandparental homes. Partners separate and rejoin—even being on your own is also acceptable. Shares are usually not kept for those who are not present or earmarked for categories of people unless they engage in conversation and copresence. Through sharing people get a chance to connect to a system of links that act like communicating tubes. The different bowls (which signify diverse and fluid hearth groups) were effectively connected as if there were communicating tubes between them. As we put resources into one bowl, the level of provision rose across the whole system. Wherever and whenever something is added to this system the level of contents rises to roughly the same level irrespective of the size or shape of the bowls and irrespective of their place within the system. The flows eventually reach everyone—without the need for a single regulating body that would distribute fixed amounts, without a standardization of hearth or group sizes, and without constraining the fluid boundaries of entities within the system. Sharing in communicating tubes works irrespective of whether we assume affluence or scarcity, it is not dependent on either of these two conditions—but as I have outlined in this contribution it depends on a number of other conditions that ensure that the communication channels are not blocked but are maintained and kept open. Thus, the process of creating economic value is much less unified to the extent that it may be more appropriate to speak of *values*, or value framings, in the plural because it is not only the diverse preferences of the agents that constitute values but more fundamentally there are differences in the mode of transaction that frame a particular situation.

Thus, through its particular framing of transfers, sharing may be said to *pluralize* (economic) value creation. Moreover, sharing may also be said to *singularize* the (moral) values involved, and this is where an emerging theory of value may stand to gain most from an inclusion of sharing. In a market-based theory of value we commonly seek to establish what the goals and intentions are that make humans do certain things as they transfer certain objects or move to certain resources, for instance. We commonly do this in terms of ascribing ranked goals and choices between alternative goals to individual agents. Environmental factors are taken into account as limitations for achieving these goals—for instance, natural scarcity that prevents us from realizing all goals that we may have. Especially in anthropology we cherish the idea that the plurality of values is a *natural* thing in the sense that it is widely taken for granted in materialist (social) science that the values of people, and their consciousness, are a result of their economic practices and therefore by definition plural (see Otto and Willerslev's introduction to part one of this special issue). Sharing, by contrast, seriously undermines this default assumption of plurality. When sharing relates to intrinsic goods and demands that

intrinsically and unavoidably occur when humans face one another (see Løgstrup 1997), it posits “a world where it is necessary to aid and to give” as Emmanuel Levinas (1969: 216) has put it. Sharing cultivates a moral realism that constitutes a respected minority position in philosophy but goes against the grain of mainstream anthropology. Alfred Gell, who has worked in a society dominated by sharing, considers the emergence of exchange as an “*escape route* from a social order in which objects are transferred, and services performed, out of moral obligation, substituting for it one in which transfers and services can be conceptualized in terms of the schema of the mutually advantageous exchange of sacrifices” (Gell 1999: 88, my emphasis). This perception of breaking away from the established order of things, or even negating it, has a parallel also in the activities of hunter-gatherers who engage in gift-exchange such as *hxaro* to explore new routes of transfer.⁶

Sharing invokes natural (i.e., intrinsic) limits to value plurality in a way that is challenging to social sciences that are adverse to given (in the sense of universal) environmental or indeed metaphysical foundations and limitations. If we take seriously the notion of sharing as realizing an intrinsic good through renouncing specific goals we are led to look out for affordances intrinsic to the environment in which humans live. The human environment affords certain goods that are shared goods in the sense that they are recognized as being desirable. We do not need to assume that there is necessarily universal agreement about what these goods are (although it seems very likely that there is considerable overlap crossculturally) but only that there is universal agreement in regard to the distinction between specific goals held by particular humans in particular situations and the shared goods afforded by the environment that humans share. In other words, what sharing adds to our theory of value is that it reminds us that desirability is not merely a function of social relations (what others want tends to become desirable to me, too) but also a function of inherent affordances of objects in the human environment that lend themselves to become desirable (what lends itself to human life becomes desirable) and of my ability to recognize this for myself and for fellow human beings.

Conclusion

I began this contribution with a critique of those interpretations of sharing that subsume sharing under other forms of transfer, transposing ideas of value derived from commercial market exchanges onto practices of sharing. I have then outlined a notion of sharing that is neither derived from commercial exchange nor from gift-giving or other forms of reciprocity. At the same time I have argued that sharing does not form a neutral baseline or zero-point but that it is itself a complex phenomenon that is based on a combination of constituent practices to do with communication, relatedness, and bodily presence. I have outlined this in regard to the ethnography of southern African foragers but with the understanding that we are not dealing with a form of transfer that operates in isolation of other forms or

6. It also has parallels in the complaints of those who live in a “tight” gift-giving regime and are tired of it (see Rio 2007: 452) and also of those who live in an increasingly all-encompassing accountancy system (including present-day academics, see Otto and Willerslev’s introduction to this special issue). It seems that we are dealing with a more general phenomenon of exploring new opportunities out of existing regimes of transfer.

that was socially overdetermined in such a way that it was static and unchanging. Consequently, I argue that the demise or breakdown of sharing has to be explained in regard to the changes that affect its constituent practices. Finally, I have outlined what the ethnography of sharing has to add to an anthropological theory of value. According to this brief exploration, value is to be measured not only by the willingness to give up something *for something else* but also the preparedness to suspend measuring objects against one another in that situation and by the unwillingness to hang on to something *in a particular situation*. In regard to the notion of value as a difference maker, sharing suggests that what makes a difference to a person gaining access is not necessarily translated into a difference between giver and receiver if certain social strategies are in place that decouple the two processes of difference making. The perspective on value in terms of a desirable good, finally, is considerably broadened when sharing is included because it complements the measurement of desire in terms of competing goals with desirability that is based in what the environment affords to humans.

Sharing does involve objects that are valued and desired but in contradistinction to gift-exchange it cannot be fully explained by a rule of reciprocity and in contradistinction to market exchange it cannot be fully explained in terms of values established through measuring objects against one another. Since demand sharing is its typical form, sharing is also inadequately described in terms of Western values of altruistic sharing. In fact, sharing events without demands are rather peculiar as they mark and underline the relation between giver and receiver and are therefore more appropriately considered as verging on gift-giving. Sharing does not necessarily entail that everyone gets the same; rather the value of equal allocation is more typically associated with situations of distribution. We may consider sharing to be tolerated scrounging but for the scrounging to be tolerated it has to build on a number of recognized modes of action and interaction. There are numerous pragmatic factors to do with the mode of relatedness, the modes of talking, and the bodily presence that influence when and what someone might receive as a share—or whether someone is allowed to take a share. It is therefore misleading to consider sharing to be any more a natural system than any other mode of transfer. It presupposes a cultural system similar to that of a system of communicating tubes wherein the flow in these communicating tubes is not automatic since the tubes need to be kept clear of obstacles and have to be actively constructed and maintained as the connections that make up the system. Both the construction of the system and its maintenance are complex cultural processes that allow us to speak of sharing as a cultural invention and innovation. The specificity of sharing is not that it distributes resources and transfers them from one to the other—sharing out—after all; this is also achieved through other forms of transfer. Its specificity is rather that it also constitutes sharing in, granting access to the flows of objects, their intrinsic goods, and their intrinsic value.

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Partager. Accorder aux autres de prendre ce qui a de la valeur

Résumé : Le partage ajoute un paradoxe à la question du transfert et de la valeur : pourquoi les gens partagent ce à quoi ils accordent de la valeur alors qu'ils ne peuvent pas compter sur un retour ? Cet article rompt avec l'hypothèse classique selon laquelle les pratiques de partage sont de simples stades initiaux de formes plus complexes d'échange de dons réciproques ou de transactions marchandes. J'envisage au contraire le partage comme un phénomène social complexe qui implique des exigences assez spécifiques en matière de coprésence corporelle, de rapprochement et d'interaction. Sur la base de recherches ethnographiques de terrain je suggère également que les formes d'« exigence de partage » ne doivent pas être considérées comme des aberrations car elles sont particulièrement conformes aux valeurs inscrites dans le partage.

Thomas WIDLÖK is Professor for Kulturwissenschaften at the University of Cologne. After receiving his PhD in anthropology from the London School of Economics he has taught at the Universities of London, Heidelberg, Durham, and Nijmegen. He has carried out long-term ethnographic field research in southern Africa and Australia and has been engaged in a number of comparative interdisciplinary research projects. His publications include an ethnographic monograph on the Hai//om of Namibia (*Living on Mangetti*, OUP 1999) as well as articles and edited volumes on the anthropology of religion and the economy, cognition, and language. Most recent contributions include "Virtue" in the *Companion to moral anthropology* (edited by Didier Fassin) and "What is the value of rituals?" in a volume entitled *Body, performance, agency, and experience* (edited by A. Chaniotis).

*Institut für Afrikanistik
Universität zu Köln
Albertus-Magnus-Platz
50923 Köln
Germany
thomas.widlok@uni-koeln.de*