

## Chapter 7

General Discussion



When people are in emotional distress, they often turn to others for support, a phenomenon termed social sharing (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1991). Interestingly, while people generally perceive this to be beneficial, it often does not lead to actual long-term recovery, that is, a reduction in the experienced emotional intensity when confronted again with the situation (Zech & Rimé, 2005). The aim of the present dissertation was to shed light on this puzzling paradox. In doing so, we relied on the assumption that the effectiveness of social sharing depends on the type of support that the listener provides, using a key distinction between socio-affective and cognitive support proposed by Rimé (2009). Socio-affective support concerns comfort, care and validation, and has been shown to lead to short-term benefits such as temporary relief and feelings of closeness (Cutrona et al., 2007; Morelli et al., 2015; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009). Cognitive support, on the other hand, is directed at providing a different perspective, for example by putting the situation in a more global perspective, or trying to see the silver lining (i.e., reappraisal). Theory and research suggest that cognitive support should facilitate more long-term recovery: By changing the way the sharer thinks about the situation, the emotion being elicited also changes (Batenburg & Das, 2014; Brans, Van Mechelen, Rimé, & Verduyn, 2013; Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan, & Ramos, 2004; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009).

Using a wide variety of methods, we examined different aspects of the social sharing process in order to illuminate different ways through which social sharing may function as an effective or ineffective means of emotion regulation. We investigated the overarching hypothesis that sharing might typically revolve around socio-affective support provision, which would explain why sharing is often perceived as beneficial (given its short-term comforting effects), despite the absence of more long-term emotional recovery (cf. Rimé 2009). To this end, we first examined what kind of support sharers seek when sharing their emotions with others (Chapter 2). Second, we examined whether sharers can effectively communicate their support needs to others, such that listeners come to understand what they seek (Chapter 3). Third, we studied whether and how listeners tune their support provision to sharers' needs and feelings (Chapter 4), as well as the demands of the specific context at hand (Chapter 5). Finally, we examined whether virtual humans may provide an alternative for the effective provision of cognitive support (Chapter 6).

Below, I will provide an integrative discussion of the key findings, laying out the main conclusions, and addressing the relation of our findings to the prior literature, as well as the questions that our findings raise. This discussion is organized in terms of four overarching themes, namely the predominant role of socio-affective support (Chapter 2, 3 and 4), the role of context in shaping support provision (Chapter 5), the boundary conditions for effective cognitive support

(Chapter 6), and, moving beyond our research, the role of the relational context. I end by reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the present dissertation, touching on several outstanding issues that may be addressed in future research, and complete the discussion with several concluding thoughts.

## **Social Sharing: A Preponderance of Socio-Affective Support**

### **Theoretical Background and Summary of Our Findings**

In order to investigate the general hypothesis that sharing typically revolves around socio-affective support provision, in Chapter 2, we first examined whether sharers indeed have a preference for socio-affective as compared to cognitive support. Furthermore, we tested whether sharers' support evaluations vary depending on the specific emotion that is shared. To this end, we first established in two pilot studies (one pilot study and a replication thereof) that these two types of support could be reliably distinguished. Furthermore, these studies showed that only socio-affective support fostered feelings of interpersonal closeness. Then, we took an experimental approach to test participants' evaluations of socio-affective and cognitive support directly. Participants imagined being in a situation evoking sadness, anger, worry, regret or general negative affect, after which they evaluated different forms of socio-affective and cognitive support. The results showed that participants generally felt that receiving any type of response that included socio-affective support would be more favorable than receiving purely cognitive support. This preference for socio-affective support was mainly driven by anger and sadness: Those who imagined feeling worried or regretful were more open to cognitive support. These different support preferences might be explained by different appraisals inherent to the different emotions (e.g., see Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990). For example, it is possible that sadness and anger, characterized by high certainty of the situation or the sharer's interpretation thereof, call for greater acceptance or validation of the emotional experience as compared to regret and worry, which may invite an appraisal of the situation that is less negative than the sharer's. Overall, these findings are in line with our general hypothesis that sharers typically seek socio-affective support when sharing their emotions with others.

In Chapter 3, we examined whether sharers are able to effectively communicate their support needs to others. First, we examined whether sharers' support goals impact the way they express their emotions to others (Study 3.1). To this end, we manipulated participants' support goals and let them share an emotionally upsetting event on camera. We found that socio-affective support goals led participants to express their emotions more explicitly (e.g., "I felt so angry!"), whereas cognitive support goals resulted in a greater reference to appraisals of the

situation (e.g., “I found it very unfair”), as well as more frequent explicit requests to hear the listener’s view (e.g., “How would you feel about this?”). Next, we followed up on these findings, and tested whether these differential ways of sharing emotions are also interpreted by naïve listeners as conveying different support needs (Study 3.2 and 3.3). Participants read stories emphasizing either emotions, appraisals, explicit requests for the listener’s view, or mere facts. Across all conditions, participants ascribed the sharer a very high degree of emotional distress, and the degree of emotional distress ascribed predicted a higher perceived need for socio-affective than cognitive support. Together, these three studies showed that while sharers expressed themselves differently depending on the type of support they were seeking, listeners appeared not to pick up on these different cues. Instead, regardless of how sharers told their story, listeners *always* inferred that sharers sought socio-affective support to a much larger extent than cognitive support. As such, these findings suggest that any way of social sharing might still result in fulfillment of sharers’ socio-affective support needs, and that such support does not require effective communication, as hypothesized.

However, the experimental rigor implemented in Chapter 3 also came with an important limitation: Sharers may have communicated their support needs in additional ways that we did not assess in Study 3.1, and thus did not manipulate in Study 3.2 and 3.3. This may have led to an underestimation of sharers’ capability of effectively communicating their (cognitive) support needs. Therefore, in Chapter 4, we took another approach: We examined the social sharing process more closely by having participants engage in a relatively natural social sharing interaction. Previously unacquainted participants were randomly assigned to the role of sharer (who was asked to discuss an upsetting situation) or listener (who was instructed to respond naturally). Afterwards, both sharer and listener separately watched the interaction on video in 20-second fragments. For each fragment, sharers rated their experienced emotional intensity and socio-affective and cognitive support needs, while listeners rated their perception of the sharer’s emotional intensity and their own support provision. We found that sharers’ experienced emotional intensity shaped their support needs, which in turn shaped listeners’ support provision. Moreover, the more accurately listeners judged sharers’ emotional intensity, the more they fulfilled sharers’ socio-affective (but not cognitive) support needs. These findings thus suggest that sharers are capable of communicating their needs and feelings such that they at least to a degree shape the support they obtain. While Chapter 3 suggested that sharers may not effectively communicate their needs through the use of emotion words and appraisals, this study thus suggests that sharers use more subtle behavioral cues. Indeed, in behavioral coding, an important distinction is made between the physically observable properties of people’s emotional behaviors – such as

appraisals and emotion words – and the *meaning* of specific behaviors within their context, which needs to be decoded by the perceiver (see Coan & Gottman, 2007). It is thus possible that throughout the interaction, listeners may have decoded these implicit meanings that were lost in Chapter 3 as a result of our experimental approach. For example, listeners may have relied on the combination of sharers' disclosure in the context of their non-verbal behavior, or on the way in which sharers responded to the listener's support attempts. Perhaps then, just like recognizing others' emotions, inferring others' support needs is a social act that cannot be done without taking the social context into account (Fischer, Pauw, & Manstead, forthcoming).

In conclusion, these chapters show that sharers have a strong preference for receiving socio-affective support (Chapter 2 and 3) – a form of support that alleviates momentary distress but does not necessarily facilitate long-term recovery (Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009). Furthermore, listeners seem to assume that sharers are mostly in need of socio-affective support (Chapter 3), an inference that is strengthened if they perceive the sharer to be highly distressed (Chapter 3 and 4). Finally, we found that people express their emotions differently depending on the support that they desire (Chapter 3), which in turn may constitute a way to elicit the support that they desire. Indeed, Chapter 4 demonstrated that listeners pick up on sharers' fluctuating support needs, suggesting that sharers may effectively communicate their support needs – although future research is needed to learn *how* exactly sharers may do so. Together, these findings suggest that sharers' typically strong desire for socio-affective support may translate into listeners mostly providing socio-affective support. This preponderance of socio-affective support provision helps explain why sharers perceive social sharing as beneficial even though it typically does not engender emotional recovery (Zech & Rimé, 2005).

### **Implications and Future Directions**

These findings have implications for social sharing as a means of (interpersonal) emotion regulation. The rewarding nature of socio-affective support may explain why sharers keep engaging in social sharing: It makes sharers feel relieved, understood and validated, and more connected to others (e.g., Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009; Zech & Rimé, 2005). However, as was discussed in the General Introduction of this thesis, when sharers keep talking about their negative emotional experience without attempting to take a different perspective on the situation, social sharing may turn into co-rumination. Co-rumination involves frequently dwelling on problems or an upsetting situation together, by speculating about (potential) problems and continuously focusing on the negative feelings they elicit (Rose, 2002). When this co-rumination does not

involve any reflection that is conducive to reappraisal, it is associated with higher levels of depression and inadequate emotional adjustment (Horn & Maercker, 2016; Rose et al., 2007, 2014; Starr, 2015; Stone et al., 2011). This may be because as long as the sharing process does not change the emotions the situation elicits, one will keep feeling the need to share – a common consequence of experiencing emotions (Curci & Rimé, 2012). Consequently, given that the provision of socio-affective support is generally experienced as rewarding, while at the same time not reducing the emotional experience (Zech & Rimé, 2005), it may fuel a perpetual cycle, in which the prolongation of sharing may both reflect and predict poor emotional recovery (see Curci & Rimé, 2012).

While these findings thus speak to the general ineffectiveness of social sharing due to the focus on socio-affective support provision, there are other ways in which socio-affective support may contribute to emotional wellbeing, albeit indirectly. First, socio-affective support may buffer the ‘subtle’ impact of an emotional event – that is, the more general distress that it brings about. While socio-affective support may not directly facilitate reappraisal, it may temporarily decrease the general experience of distress by fostering feelings of relief and interpersonal closeness (see Chapter 2), which may be a prerequisite to engage in more cognitively and emotionally taxing forms of coping. When emotional distress is too high, sharers are unlikely to be receptive to cognitive support (Rimé, 2009). Indirect evidence comes from research on intrapersonal emotion regulation, showing that people are less inclined to engage in reappraisal when emotional intensity is high (rather than low; Kalokerinos, Résibois, Verduyn, & Kuppens, 2017; Sheppes et al., 2014; Sheppes et al., 2011). Furthermore, listeners report to provide less reappraisal and more non-verbal (and thus socio-affective) comforting behaviors in response to shared situations that are characterized by higher emotional intensity (Christophe & Rimé, 1997). In line with these findings, Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated that high levels of perceived distress were associated with listeners’ perceptions of elevated socio-affective support needs, as well as an increase in socio-affective support provision, and a decrease in cognitive support provision. These findings suggest that listeners may have implicit or explicit theories regarding the role of emotional intensity in appropriate support provision. Socio-affective support may buffer emotional distress and thereby pave the way for cognitive support, a hypothesis that remains to be empirically tested.

Second, and relatedly, by validating the way the other feels, listeners may signal to sharers that it is accepted and appropriate to feel the way they feel (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011), which may dampen potentially negative meta-emotions, such as feeling bad about being sad. Prior research has shown that when people think others expect them not to feel negative emotions, they in fact come to experience more negative affect, reduced wellbeing and enhanced feelings of loneliness –

effects that are caused by negative self-evaluation due to feeling negative emotions (Bastian et al., 2015, 2012; Dejonckheere, Bastian, Fried, Murphy, & Kuppens, 2017). By legitimizing sharers' negative emotions through socio-affective support provision, listeners may buffer this negative self-evaluation, cultivating acceptance of their emotions (Sarason et al., 1990). Both the instructed use of acceptance in the lab and the habitual use of acceptance in daily life have been shown to relate to reduced negative affect and greater psychological wellbeing (Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006; Kohl, Rief, & Glombiewski, 2012; Shallcross, Troy, Boland, & Mauss, 2010; Troy, Shallcross, Brunner, Friedman, & Jones, 2018; Wolgast, Lundh, & Viborg, 2011). Furthermore, acceptance-based interventions, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and dialectical behavior therapy, have similarly been shown to effectively treat impairments in emotion regulation (e.g., anxiety and depression), thereby speaking to its potential for improving psychological health (for a review of meta-analyses, see Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). By buffering negative self-evaluation, socio-affective support may thus be one way to foster sharers' acceptance, and thereby emotional recovery.

Third, the provision of socio-affective support may foster interpersonal intimacy and trust, as it creates an environment in which the discussion of feelings is safe and sharers feel understood (e.g., Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011). Sharers' emotional expressions may elicit feelings of liking and provoke reciprocal self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2002; Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013; Vittengl & Holt, 2000), a process that may serve to establish a shared reality – that is, a perceived commonality of inner thoughts, beliefs or concerns (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). Socio-affective support might fuel this process: By communicating validation, it verifies the sharer's world view, and may thereby contribute to perceived understanding and potentially shared feelings, which in turn increases feelings of closeness (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2011; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013). Furthermore, perceived understanding fosters perceived partner responsiveness, that is, the confidence that the other will understand and be responsive to one's needs. Partner responsiveness lies at the core of promoting wellbeing in all types of relationships (for overviews, see Reis & Gable, 2015; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017). Our finding that socio-affective support provision predicted perceived understanding and closeness (Chapter 2) further supports this notion, and rhymes with earlier findings on the positive effects of socio-affective support on interpersonal closeness (Cutrona et al., 2007; Morelli et al., 2015; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009), as well as the positive association between co-rumination and friendship quality (Rose et al., 2007, 2014; Rose, Smith, Glick, & Rebecca, 2016).

Recently, these processes have even been extended to the collective level: Social sharing in collective situations has similarly been linked to positive outcomes such as increased social integration – though not with actual emotional recovery, thereby mirroring the effects of dyadic social sharing (Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Rimé et al., 2011). Thus, coming back to the paradox described earlier, one key reason why social sharing is perceived as beneficial and so widely engaged in thus seems to be its socio-relational function. To the extent that listeners respond supportively – which our findings suggest is highly normative – social sharing fosters interpersonal relationships (see also Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008).

## **The Role of Context in Shaping Support Provision**

### **Theoretical Background**

An implication of the discussion above is that the effectiveness of social sharing thus depends on the relevant goal: Sharing may be ineffective as a means of down-regulating one's negative emotions, but effective in fostering intimacy. This conclusion is in line with a recent upsurge in theory and research suggesting that emotion regulation strategies are not inherently adaptive or maladaptive, but that their effectiveness depends on the context, given that situational demands vary (see Aldao & Tull, 2015; Fischer & Manstead, 2016). For example, while the ability as well as the tendency to reappraise negative situations have been found to relate to higher psychological well-being in uncontrollable situations, they have been associated with lower well-being in situations that are relatively controllable, presumably because they are associated with reduced motivation to take action that may resolve the situation (Haines et al., 2016; Troy et al., 2013). These findings show that reappraisal is in fact not always beneficial and may even cause harm, depending on the context in which it is used (Ford & Troy, 2019) – a conclusion that holds for other intrapersonal emotion regulation strategies as well (Aldao & Tull, 2015). Consequently, scholars have pointed to the importance of a coping system that can be flexibly attuned to the situational demands of an ever-changing environment (for a review, see Aldao, Sheppes, & Gross, 2015). Indeed, psychological or regulatory flexibility has been shown to be a fundamental aspect of health, positively relating to healthy adjustment to stressful events and negatively relating to various forms of psychopathology (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014; Haines et al., 2016; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). In fact, teaching psychological flexibility is a key component of many current psychological treatments, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), acceptance-based behavioral therapy (Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008), dialectical behavior therapy

(Linehan, 1993), and emotion regulation therapy (Mennin & Fresco, 2010) – highlighting the importance of adjusting one’s regulatory strategies to contextual demands.

This has implications for adequate support provision, because just like when regulating one’s own emotions, not every way of regulating others’ emotions may work equally well for everyone, across every situation (see also Dixon-Gordon, Bernecker, & Christensen, 2015). It has been argued that effective support should match the psychological needs that arise from the specific stressful life event (Cutrona, 1990b), and to the extent that listeners provide support that matches the sharer’s needs, a wide range of positive outcomes is predicted to occur (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). For example, matching support is judged to be more supportive and satisfying (Burlinson, 2003; Cutrona, 1990a; Horowitz et al., 2001), and may result in enhanced coping (Merluzzi, Philip, Yang, & Heitzmann, 2016; Reynolds & Perrin, 2004), more positive evaluations of the support provider (Bechtoldt, Beersma, & van Kleef, 2019; Cutrona et al., 2007; Marigold et al., 2014), and greater relationship well-being, as judged both by the sharer and the listener (Feeney & Collins, 2003; Marigold et al., 2014; Reis & Gable, 2015). Importantly, when provided support does not match the sharer’s goals, sharers may not accept listeners’ attempts to regulate their emotions (see Marigold et al., 2014).

However, relatively little empirical work has examined how people choose to regulate others’ emotions (Reeck et al., 2016), and how the context plays a role in this process (Dixon-Gordon, Bernecker, et al., 2015; though for exceptions, see for example Hasan-Aslih et al., 2018; Netzer, van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015; Niven, Henkel, & Hanratty, 2019). This is surprising in light of the ample evidence that people are context-sensitive in the strategies they choose to employ to regulate their own emotions (Bonanno & Burton, 2013), and specifically, that they regulate their emotions in ways that are functional to achieving their goals (Eldesouky & English, 2018; English et al., 2017). These goals may be hedonic (i.e., to feel better), but also instrumental (i.e., to achieve a specific goal; Kalokerinos, Tamir, & Kuppens, 2017; Mauss & Tamir, 2014; Tamir, 2009; Tamir & Millgram, 2017). For example, research has shown that people are aware that various emotion regulation strategies may differentially realize immediate versus future changes in emotions, and that these beliefs may guide their emotion regulation preferences (Ortner, Chadwick, & Wilson, 2018). Similarly, when regulating *others’* emotions, people may determine – on behalf of the sharer – how the sharer’s emotions should be optimally regulated in relation to the situational demands (see Niven, 2016). For example, Niven (2016) theorized that when regulation is driven by extrinsic motivations (i.e., instilled by external circumstances, such as the motivation to ensure smooth running of social situations), listeners will primarily attempt to regulate the sharer’s expressions, whereas regulation driven by

intrinsic motivations (e.g., the compassionate desire to make the sharer feel better) may translate into attempts to regulate the sharer's emotional *experience*. Yet, so far, it has not been empirically tested whether and how listeners may attempt to do so.

### **Summary of Our Findings**

In Chapter 5, we investigated whether and how listeners adapt their support provision to the regulatory demand of the sharer's situation. We confronted listeners with a sharer who was crying, and manipulated the extent to which the sharer's situation called for immediate down-regulation of their negative emotions (high regulatory demand). In addition to an overall predominance of socio-affective support provision, we found that under high (as compared to low) regulatory demand, listeners provided less socio-affective support, and tried to distract the crying person from the emotional situation or guide them towards suppressing their emotions. Cognitive support provision, however, was unaffected by regulatory demand. When the context required more immediate down-regulation, participants thus employed more regulation strategies aimed at disengaging from the emotional experience. While at best only effective in the short term (Gross, 2002; Kross & Ayduk, 2008; Sheppes & Meiran, 2008; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), these regulatory strategies may be functional to achieving situational goals that are impeded by the experience or expression of negative emotions (e.g., making a good impression at a job interview). In a similar vein, providing less socio-affective support should reduce the chances of getting wrapped up in co-rumination, which is particularly useful in situations that do not allow for dwelling on the emotional experience and situation. These findings thus suggest that listeners may be (implicitly) aware of the potential costs and benefits associated with different regulation strategies, and may adjust their support accordingly.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Together, Chapter 4 and 5 point to the potential for regulatory flexibility when regulating others' emotions. Bonanno and Burton (2013) have described three key elements characterizing regulatory flexibility: sensitivity to context, availability of a diverse repertoire of regulatory strategies and responsiveness to feedback. In Chapter 5, we tapped into the first two aspects, applying these to the context of interpersonal emotion regulation, by showing that people were capable of employing a relatively wide variety of support types that were contingent upon varying contextual demands. Furthermore, our findings from Chapter 4 speak to the third element of regulatory flexibility, responsiveness to feedback, which concerns the ability to monitor the effectiveness of one's regulatory attempts over

time and to adjust one's regulatory behavior if necessary. When regulating *others'* emotions, responsiveness to the efficacy of one's regulatory strategies seems equally crucial for effective support provision. We found that listeners were moderately able to adjust their support to sharers' fluctuating needs, thereby hinting at interpersonal regulatory flexibility.

One almost unexamined direction for future research concerns the question of how listeners may be able to correctly gauge sharers' support needs. Given that sharers' needs are presumably partly shaped by situational demands, listeners may infer their needs on the basis of the situation (cf. Chapter 5). For example, certain emotional contexts may lend themselves better to certain types of regulatory strategies – a principle termed environmental affordance (Suri et al., 2018; Suri, Whittaker, & Gross, 2014). Indirectly supporting this possibility, we found that sharers' support needs varied as a function of discrete emotion (Chapter 2, 4) – although it should be noted that we did not replicate this effect across all of our studies (Chapter 6). It is possible that these differential support needs primarily hold when the situation concerns a very specific emotion (such as in the vignettes adopted in Chapter 2), whereas they may be less pronounced in the typically mixed emotional experiences that people have in daily life. Furthermore, it is possible that listeners infer sharers' more dispositional support needs on the basis of their (joint) history, as will be elaborated upon below when discussing the relational context.

Yet, the findings of Chapter 4 speak to listeners' capability to infer strangers' fluctuating needs throughout a single sharing interaction based on a fixed emotional context, thereby speaking to the important role of sharers' communication. Indeed, when sharers do not obtain the support they desire, they may strategically change their emotional expressions in an attempt to obtain the support that they seek. For example, one study showed that when women perceive their partner to reappraise the situation as less worrisome, they more often up-regulate their expression of worry in an attempt to alert their partner to the seriousness of the problem (Parkinson, Simons, & Niven, 2016). These communicative attempts may take different forms: People may verbally or non-verbally seek support in direct ways, such as by sharing the problem or crying, or in indirect ways, such as by complaining or sighing. It has been argued that the more explicitly sharers communicate their support needs, the easier it is for others to respond appropriately (see Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Our findings suggest that sharers communicate their emotions differently depending on the support that they desire, though these cues may not be picked up by the listener (Chapter 3). As discussed in Chapter 4, is it possible that listeners to a large degree project their own support needs onto the sharer. Future research is thus warranted to uncover the ways in which sharers can effectively communicate diverse support

needs. Our findings tentatively suggest that this may occur primarily through non-verbal behaviors, as well as the ways in which sharers respond when not succeeding in getting the support that they desire.

## **Boundary Conditions for Effective Cognitive Support Provision**

### **Theoretical Background and Summary of Our Findings**

One potential reason why cognitive support may typically not be as well received as socio-affective support concerns its potentially invalidating nature. When listeners encourage or provide reappraisal of the event, sharers may not feel understood, and experience this as undermining their view of the world (see Marigold et al., 2014). Consequently, when sharers are not receptive, cognitive support will likely not be effective, given that sharers will tend to disengage more from the supportive interaction (Marigold et al., 2014). Therefore, in Chapter 6, we examined one potential alternative route through which effective support may be provided, namely by sharing with a virtual human. Prior research has shown that people may be especially motivated to share their emotions with virtual humans because of the anonymity they create, while nevertheless being capable of fostering rapport (Birnbaum et al., 2016b; Liu & Sundar, 2018; Lucas et al., 2014, 2017). As such, they establish a safe and non-threatening environment in which people feel comfortable disclosing their thoughts and feelings regarding personally upsetting events. Earlier work has shown that people highly appreciate emotional support (as compared to non-emotional support) when sharing with virtual humans (Birnbaum et al., 2016b, 2016a; Hoffman, Birnbaum, Vanunu, Sass, & Reis, 2014; Liu & Sundar, 2018). Yet, no studies have examined people's receptivity to cognitive support when provided by virtual humans. We reasoned that people may have different expectations when sharing with virtual humans, as compared to humans, since they do not ascribe them the mental capacity to experience empathy and expect them to be worse at emotional tasks (Gray et al., 2007; Waytz & Norton, 2014). Consequently, sharers might perceive cognitive support provided by a virtual human as less judgmental (cf. Pickard, Roster, & Chen, 2016), thereby potentially making them more inclined to accept their encouragement to reappraise the situation.

To test whether sharers have a preference for socio-affective support – as when sharing with other humans – or are relatively receptive to cognitive support from virtual humans, participants shared two personal emotional experiences with a virtual human, who provided either socio-affective or cognitive support. Interestingly, participants experienced cognitive support as equally empathetic as socio-affective support. Furthermore, the provision of cognitive support was experienced as equally helpful in coping with the emotional experience as

compared to socio-affective support. Cognitive and socio-affective support also led to a similar level of experienced interpersonal closeness and desire to interact with the virtual human again, and was similarly effective in (temporarily) reducing experienced emotional intensity regarding the upsetting event. Exploratory analyses revealed that the more socio-affective and cognitive support participants experienced to have received, the more helpful they experienced the conversations to have been, and the closer they felt to the virtual human. It should be noted, though, that these findings concern self-reported benefits. Future research would need to examine whether sharers indeed are more acceptant throughout the supportive interaction and truly endorse the reappraisals brought about by the conversation. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that sharers may be receptive to cognitive support when provided by virtual humans – a form of support that may be crucial to emotional recovery (Butler et al., 2006; Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan, & Ramos, 2004; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009) – thereby extending the literature on virtual humans' potential for providing adaptive support.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The observation that the provision of cognitive support did not come at the cost of perceiving the virtual human as insensitive is very promising given the importance of feeling understood for people to experience others as responsive to their needs (Reis et al., 2017). Feeling understood may facilitate the receptivity to cognitive support in several ways. First, it may foster a safe environment in which sharers are willing to openly disclose their emotions unhampered by interpersonal anxiety, which is argued to be a prerequisite for effective self-reflection and regulation (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Greenberg, 2004). Second, it may increase sharers' willingness to listen to the support provider. Indeed, people prefer to interact with more empathic virtual humans and are more motivated to have them by their side in difficult times (Birnbbaum et al., 2016b; Liu & Sundar, 2018). Likewise, feeling understood by one's therapist has been shown to be key to the effectiveness of therapy, correlating with treatment compliance and satisfaction with therapy (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Greenberg, Elliott, Watson, & Bohart, 2001; Pocock, 1997). Third, as discussed earlier, perceived understanding may foster acknowledgement and acceptance of one's emotions, which may facilitate effective reappraisal by promoting cognitive flexibility and the ability to disengage from one's thoughts and feelings (Kivity, Tamir, & Huppert, 2016; Shallcross, Troy, & Mauss, 2015). This principle is also reflected in several therapeutic approaches, such as emotion-focused therapy and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, that rest on the notion that before one can cognitively process an emotion, one will first need to acknowledge and accept

one's emotional experience (Greenberg, 2004; Hayes, Villatte, Levin, & Hildebrandt, 2011; Whelton, 2004). Thus, our findings complement earlier work suggesting that the effectiveness of cognitive support may be bolstered when it is provided in a context that communicates perceived understanding (see also Chapter 2).

Another factor that may influence the effectiveness of cognitive support provision concerns the way in which reappraisal is brought about. Listeners may offer cognitive support in two different ways: They can provide the sharer with a different perspective on the situation ('passive reappraisal' for the sharer), or, throughout the conversation, they can – like cognitive therapists – encourage the sharer to reappraise the situation themselves ('active reappraisal' by the sharer). Following cognitive behavioral therapy principles, it could be predicted that stimulating active reappraisal is more effective than passive reappraisal. Active reappraisal involves generating the reappraisal oneself, which has been shown to be a highly effective emotion regulation strategy (Butler et al., 2006; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), and should make sharers feel less threatened in their view on the situation (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Feng & MacGeorge, 2006, 2010). Based on the theory of psychological reactance, it could be predicted that when reappraising the emotion-eliciting event oneself, the sharer will endorse the reappraisal more strongly as compared to when it is provided by the listener, in which case it may elicit reactance (Miron & Brehm, 2006). Whether active reappraisals are indeed more effective for long-term emotional recovery than passive reappraisals, and how listeners may best achieve this, remain empirical questions for future research. Based on the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (e.g., see Beck & Weishaar, 2008), one fruitful approach may involve probing sharers to pinpoint their feelings, appraisals, behaviors and their consequences. By asking questions, the listener may then encourage the sharer to derive alternative, more adaptive appraisals that give rise to more positive feelings and behaviors.

Finally, the effectiveness of cognitive support provision may depend on the timing. As mentioned earlier, Rimé (2009) has theorized that when the emotion-eliciting event is recent, emotional distress is presumably relatively high. Consequently, initial socio-affective support provision may be warranted in order to buffer the immediate emotional distress, after which sharers may be more open (i.e., have more cognitive resources available and be more motivated) to engage in more elaborate cognitive processing. Rimé proposed that cognitive support might thus be more desired and effective under relatively low emotional intensity. This reasoning is indirectly supported by theory and research on intrapersonal emotion regulation (e.g., see Sheppes & Gross, 2011) showing that when emotional intensity is high, people prefer regulation strategies focused on disengaging from

the emotionally upsetting situation, such as suppression or distraction, which have the potential to bring about immediate relief (Dixon-Gordon, Aldao, & De Los Reyes, 2015; Sheppes et al., 2014; Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, & Gross, 2011). Yet when emotional intensity is low, people are more inclined to engage in reappraisal (Kalokerinos, Résibois, Verduyn, & Kuppens, 2017; Sheppes et al., 2014; Sheppes et al., 2011). Extending these findings to interpersonal emotion regulation, Chapter 3 showed that listeners partially based their judgments of the support that sharers needed on the level of distress that they perceived: The more upset the sharer seemed to them, the more socio-affective support they thought the sharer needed. Further corroborating these findings, Chapter 4 demonstrated that listeners increased their socio-affective support provision, and decreased their cognitive support provision, in response to higher emotional intensity experienced by the sharer. These findings thus support Rimé's (2009) timing hypothesis and show that emotional intensity not only influences the strategies that people choose to regulate their own emotions (Sheppes et al., 2014), but also how they seek to regulate others' emotions. Future research is required to establish whether support that is contingent upon timing and emotional intensity is in fact also more effective in bringing about emotional recovery and relational benefits.

### **Beyond the Role of The Sharer: The Relational Context**

The present dissertation has mostly focused on the role of the sharer in seeking and potentially eliciting support from the listener. However, social sharing is a dyadic process, and the listener thus also has a strong impact on, and is impacted by, the sharing process. Below, I will describe how listeners may have different motivations when attempting to regulate the sharer's emotions, and how these motivations may be shaped by the emotional impact the sharing process has on them. Furthermore, I will describe the impact that support provision in turn may have on the listener, as well as how these processes may vary depending on the relational context (e.g., relationship type and closeness).

First, listening to sharers' emotional disclosure may induce emotions in the listener, for example as a result of coming to experience the same emotion (i.e., emotional contagion), or by experiencing distress over the other's distress (Parkinson & Simons, 2012; Rimé, 2009). Particularly those who tend to experience distress when witnessing negative emotional experiences of others (i.e., high trait personal distress) have been shown to experience frequent recurring thoughts about the sharer (Stocks, López-Pérez, & Oceja, 2017). The fact that being exposed to sharers' emotional disclosure may in itself be an emotionally-inducing event is also evidenced by the observation of secondary sharing – that is, listeners' need to share the sharer's story with others (Christophe & Rimé, 1997). One reason why

listeners may feel elevated distress is because they may feel pressured to provide effective support and fix the problem (Jones, 2011; Perrine, 1993). Indeed, personal distress in response to others' emotional disclosure has been shown to be enhanced to the extent that listeners feel a high degree of responsibility for the other and when sharers do not show emotional improvement (Lewis & Manusov, 2009; Perrine, 1993). Furthermore, whereas problem solving has been found to give listeners the feeling that they really tried to help, providing emotional support (i.e., validating the other's feelings) was actually associated with greater experienced personal distress as compared to providing advice or attempting to solve the problem (Lewis & Manusov, 2009; Perrine, 1993).

This emotional impact on the listener may in turn shape their motivation and ability to provide adequate support (Sarason et al., 1990). High personal distress in the listener may induce more egoistic motives for reducing the sharer's distress (Batson et al., 1987). Egoistic motives have been found to be associated with ineffective forms of support, in contrast to altruistic motivations, which are associated with more responsive caring (Feeney & Collins, 2001, 2003). This may be because listeners who have egocentric motivations primarily respond in ways that help them obtain their own goals (e.g., minimize the other's problem in order to alleviate their own distress, or to be able to get back to work) rather than in ways driven by the desire to be responsive to the sharer's needs. In support of this idea, higher dispositional personal distress has been found to be associated with increased provision of unhelpful support (e.g., criticizing, inattention, disengagement, unhelpful advice), and decreased emotional and instrumental support (Devoldre et al., 2010). Remarkably, in one study, male partners who experienced high situational personal distress (but not empathic concern) in response to their partner's distress provided more instrumental support – a finding that may reflect egoistic attempts to solve the problem (Verhofstadt et al., 2016). Similarly, negative attributions regarding the partner or low relationship commitment may also reduce the motivation or ability to provide adequate support (Bodenmann, Randall, & Falconier, 2017). For example, when sharers are chronically expressing negative affect, partners have been shown to discount sharers' need for support and feel more entitled to disengage, leading to less responsive support provision (Forest et al., 2014). Thus, personal distress may instill egoistic motivations that may lead listeners to help the sharer in order to help themselves.

However, the degree of personal distress that listeners experience in response to sharers' disclosure and its consequences for their support provision may depend on the type of relationship. Particularly in close relationships, the emotional impact may be high. Close relationships are characterized by cognitive and emotional interdependence, causing the partner's distress to become one's

own distress (also termed “we-stress”; Bodenmann, 2005; Reis, 2014). This enhances the chances of ‘common dyadic coping’, in which partners make the situation a shared problem by focusing on how the situation may impact both partners and engaging in joint coping efforts (Bodenmann, 2005). Interestingly, a longitudinal study among 548 couples dealing with breast cancer showed that the more the women reported the couple to engage in common dyadic coping, the higher relationship quality and the fewer depressive symptoms both partners experienced (Rottman et al., 2015). ‘Supportive dyadic coping’ (i.e., the provision of socio-affective, cognitive or instrumental support), on the other hand, did not predict these relational and emotional outcomes. This finding reflects the interdependent nature of couples: If the listener does not experience a certain level of distress in response to the sharer’s problem, this may signal a lack of commitment. Importantly, then, dyadic coping is not purely altruistic: Ensuring the other’s wellbeing ultimately also ensures relationship functioning, satisfaction and wellbeing by fostering reciprocal trust, mutual closeness and intimacy (Bodenmann, 2005; Cutrona & Gardner, 2006; see also Cialdini et al., 1997).

The way in which these sharing dynamics unfold is shaped by the relational context. Both sharing partners come with their own ‘baggage’: They have their own support preferences and trait-like expectations of the other’s responsiveness, which are shaped by early attachment processes, as well as their relationship history (Butner, Diamond, & Hicks, 2007; Sarason et al., 1990; Schoebi, 2008). The closer people are, the more accumulated knowledge they have regarding each other’s regulatory preferences, goals, and past experiences, and thus the better they are able to recognize each other’s emotions and support needs (Ickes & Hodges, 2013; López-Pérez et al., 2017; Wilhelm & Perrez, 2004; Zhang & Parmley, 2011). For example, people may know from prior experience that every time they tried to offer a more positive perspective on the situation, it backfired, leaving their friend or partner only more sad or frustrated. These prior experiences may shape subsequent support behaviors (e.g., see Feeney, Cassidy, Lemay, & Ramos-Marcuse, 2009). As a result, sharing partners may create an idiosyncratic dynamic, in which their behavior is driven by the history (expectations based on prior behavior) and outlook of the relationship (e.g., relationship goals). Furthermore, the way listeners provide support may not only be informed by what the listener thinks the *sharer* desires, but also by what *they* think the sharer needs – the two may not always be aligned. For example, a series of studies conducted by Marigold and colleagues (Marigold et al., 2014) revealed that despite being aware that their low self-esteem friends would not be receptive of cognitive support, listeners nevertheless provided it, presumably because they felt it would be functional. Sadly, however, providing well-intended support that sharers were not willing to receive was detrimental for both members of the dyad. Thus, the

type of relationship and its history may shape the type of support that listeners provide, as well as its relational and emotional consequences.

Yet despite the potential emotional and demanding impact of social sharing, support provision may also yield several beneficial consequences for the listener. First, providing support may make listeners feel good about themselves: They may feel useful and perceive themselves as good relationship partners (cf. Cialdini et al., 1987; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984). Indeed, trying to make others feel better has been found to make people feel better themselves as well (Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Headley, 2012). Furthermore, by helping others regulate their emotions, listeners may practice regulatory skills (e.g. reappraisal), which in turn may improve regulation of their own emotions (Doré, Morris, Burr, Picard, & Ochsner, 2017). Finally, as discussed, adequate support provision promotes relational benefits, thereby also fostering the listener's own wellbeing (see Bodenmann et al., 2017; Niven et al., 2012).

Thus, as hopefully has become apparent throughout this discussion, instances of emotional experience and regulation in dyadic relationships are best understood as dynamically changing bidirectional processes (Butler, 2011, 2015; Jones, 2011; Schoebi & Randall, 2015). As our research has shown, the sharer's emotions shape the listener's emotions and regulatory efforts, which in turn impact the sharer, and on it goes. For example, experimental studies on how one partner's emotional expressions are linked to the other's motivation to down-regulate it (Marigold et al., 2014; Parkinson et al., 2016) highlight how emotional experience and regulation feed back into one another. Sharing one's emotions with others enables others to better understand one's emotions and needs, and to respond responsively (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011). Responsiveness, in turn, fosters personal and relational wellbeing (Reis & Gable, 2015). As such, research on social sharing nicely illustrates how emotions as well as attempts to regulate one's own and others' emotions emerge from social interactions, but in turn also shape these interactions and relationships (Mesquita & Boiger, 2014).

### **Strengths, Limitations and (More) Future Directions**

The present research advances our theoretical understanding of social sharing. The research is characterized by several strengths: First, while extant research has investigated the prevalence and effectiveness of social sharing in general, very few studies have looked into the *process* of sharing itself. This thesis contributes to the literature by providing insight into (1) the type of support that sharers usually seek, (2) the type of support that listeners typically provide, revealing how listeners attune their support to sharers' level of distress, support needs and situational demands and (3) sharers' active role in eliciting the support that they

desire. As such, I believe that the current set of studies form an important first step into better understanding when and why sharing may be (in)effective in regulating one's emotions.

Second, by breaking down the complex sharing process into separate parts, we adopted well-controlled experimental approaches that allowed us to structurally examine causal processes. For example, we assessed sharers' support needs (Chapter 2), how these needs shaped their sharing behavior (Chapter 3), and how this sharing behavior in turn impacted inferred support needs by the listener (Chapter 3). Third, we employed a multi-method approach, using innovative paradigms to investigate support seeking and support provision. To illustrate, in examining sharers' support preferences and evaluations, participants thought back at previous social sharing interactions (i.e., self-report, Chapter 2), imagined obtaining specific forms of support (i.e., vignettes, Chapter 2), engaged in an unstructured natural sharing interaction with an unacquainted other (Chapter 4), and received support from a virtual human via a wizard-of-oz paradigm (Chapter 6). Furthermore, in assessing sharers' and listeners' behaviors, we used self-report, such as autobiographical recall and real-time video-mediated recall, as well as behavioral measures, such as emotional expressions and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies, which were derived from text analysis of transcribed verbal behaviors.

Finally, in light of Aldao's (2013, page 5) call to researchers to use "emotion-eliciting stimuli (...) that produce more complex emotional and motivational states that are ideographically relevant and can therefore enhance the external and ecological validity of the experimental approach", the majority of our studies included the use of autobiographical recall of self-relevant past emotional experiences that still upset participants when thinking back at the event.

Despite the strengths of our research, several limitations and outstanding issues are worth mentioning that future research may address. First, while our general experimental approach ensured high experimental control, at times, this may have come at the expense of ecological validity. One concern is that we instructed participants to share an emotional situation that was still upsetting to them, which may differ from natural, 'acute' sharing in which people are intrinsically motivated to share spontaneously in response to an emotionally upsetting event. For example, our approach likely restricted the range of emotional intensity experienced in our participants. Because their emotional experience did not naturally unfold during our studies, we were unable to study the effect of time – both regarding sharers' potentially fluctuating support needs, and of listeners' support provision. Moreover, participants presumably shared situations that they have shared before and have already processed to varying degrees, which may also have impacted their support needs as well as responses to obtained support.

Another consideration is that, in several of our studies, participants shared with unacquainted others, which has implications for their support needs, support expectations, support seeking behaviors, and support evaluations. While participants shared with a stranger (Chapter 4) and virtual human (Chapter 6), it should be noted that when assessing support needs, several of our studies did rely on recalling or imagining sharing with a close other (see Chapter 2, 3 and 5). When sharing in daily life, people mostly share with those close to them (Rimé, 2009), and they may strategically (albeit largely unconsciously) seek out those conversation partners whom they think will be able to fulfill their specific support need (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, based on the nature and history of the relationship, sharers may have different needs and expectations, and the fulfillment of these expectations may be more important in shaping their impact and sharers' response than the mere support itself (Sarason et al., 1990). For example, one study showed that when relationship partners provided more emotional support than usual, this hardly resulted in affective changes in the sharer, whereas providing less support than usual was consistently associated with worsened mood and relationship processes (Bar-Kalifa & Rafaeli, 2015). Likewise, unsupportive spousal behaviors have been found to be associated with increased distress only to the extent that sharers were unsatisfied with their relationship partner (Frazier et al 2003) – thus speaking to the importance of the relational context that may shape the impact of support provision.

Consequently, an interesting question concerns the extent to which our findings may generalize to sharing with close others. In general, given the tenacity of sharers' desire for socio-affective support observed throughout our studies, it seems plausible that people always have a high need to be validated in order to feel understood (cf. Reis et al., 2017). In addition, I would predict that the closer the relationship, the stronger this need for socio-affective support, as it may fulfill the need for a shared reality that may be even stronger among close others (see Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). The question is whether listeners would show a similar inclination towards socio-affective support provision (over cognitive support provision) across different types of relationships. On the one hand, it could be argued that close others would provide more socio-affective support than strangers, given that the primary aim within a close relationship is to maintain or promote intimacy (see Bodenmann et al., 2017). On the other hand, assuming that in close relationships, a relatively high and steady degree of closeness should already be established, the relational functionality of socio-affective support provision may be less pronounced, providing a safer environment in which to provide cognitive support. Somewhat in line with this possibility, it has been shown that listeners are more inclined to provide unsolicited advice to those close to them, and sharers in turn are also more accepting of such advice when it comes

from close others (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006, 2010; Feng & Magen, 2016; but see also Marigold et al., 2014). Furthermore, close others may have greater background knowledge about both the sharer (e.g., typical emotional and appraisal patterns, coping styles) and the event, thereby making it relatively easier to provide adequate cognitive support.

Another limitation is that our studies relied on self-report to assess support needs. Importantly, however, I do not mean to imply that social sharing is always driven by explicit motives. For example, it has been shown that non-conscious goals may shape the way people want to feel, and that these goals may also impact regulatory behaviors (Koole, Webb, & Sheeran, 2015; Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007; Tamir, Ford, & Ryan, 2013). Similarly, with regards to interpersonal emotion regulation, sharers may have implicit goals regarding how they want to feel, or how they would like others to respond, which may drive the way they seek support. For example, the fact that people seek out others depending on their desired response (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2015), and are more inclined to share with those whom they predict to be responsive to their needs (Clark & Finkel, 2005; Clark et al., 2001; Von Culin et al., 2017), speaks to sharers' potentially strategic support seeking behavior, of which they may not always be aware. Through repeated experience, sharers may have implicitly learned that certain people are more likely than others to fulfill specific support needs, or they may have created habitual ways of expressing their emotions that have proven to be effective in eliciting the desired response (cf. Koole et al., 2015). A challenge for future research is to examine whether and how implicit support goals shape supportive interactions. One potential way to manipulate implicit goals could be to vary contextual features, such as the sharing partner or the type of problem (e.g., see Bechtoldt, Beersma, & Van Kleef, 2018). Alternatively, by violating sharers' support expectations (e.g., by having close others respond in an unusual way), sharers may become more aware of their implicit needs through actively having to seek out their desired response.

Moreover, I would like to emphasize that despite mostly limiting ourselves to (verbal) socio-affective and cognitive support, this is not to say that we consider these the only meaningful forms of support. Conceptualizing social sharing as a means of emotion-focused coping – that is, as an emotion regulation strategy directed towards reducing the emotional response to a stressor – led to the exclusion of strategies aimed towards removing the stressor (i.e., problem-focused coping; e.g., see Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), such as advice or instrumental (i.e., practical) support. In Chapter 5, we did broaden the scope of support provision by also examining regulation strategies that are focused on disengaging from the emotional event, such as distracting the sharer, encouraging suppression, or offering social companionship (i.e., spending any form of leisure time together).

Nevertheless, our studies do not speak to the extent to which sharers may seek or appreciate other forms of support than socio-affective and cognitive support, nor how they may go about obtaining these forms of support. For example, it is possible that when seeking distraction or suppression, people actually may be less inclined to engage in social sharing (Trees, 2005).

Lastly, it remains an open question whether and how sharers may effectively communicate their support needs through non-verbal channels, such as facial expressions, eye gaze, bodily movements, or tone of voice. Non-verbal communication may be particularly ambiguous – even more so to the extent that sharers feel ambivalent about seeking support – leaving a lot of room for misinterpretation (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). For example, it has been shown that people are worse than computers in identifying non-verbal markers of distress (e.g., Lucas, Gratch, Scherer, Boberg, & Stratou, 2015), and may rely on non-verbal behaviors to infer support needs that in fact do not vary as a function of those needs (Trees, 2005). Relatedly, it would be interesting to examine the relative role of non-verbal and verbal support provision in fostering emotional and relational benefits. Especially socio-affective support may be communicated non-verbally, for example by listening, nodding, vocal warmth or physical touch (Jones, 2011). Yet other conversational aspects may also have profound consequences: For example, greater conversational flow (e.g., short response latencies and smooth turn taking) is associated with greater feelings of connectedness, perceived understanding and social validation, thereby being conducive to establishing a shared reality that people may seek when engaging in social sharing (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2011, 2013, 2017).

### Concluding Thoughts

The present dissertation aimed to shed light on the paradoxical finding that whereas so many of us believe that sharing our emotional experiences with others will make us feel better, research suggests it often actually does not bring about emotional recovery. By experimentally examining different parts of the sharing process, we have illuminated some of the ways through which social sharing may function as an effective or ineffective means of emotion regulation. First, our research shows that one reason why social sharing is often ineffective in promoting emotional recovery is because the sharing process may mostly revolve around socio-affective support – a type of support that alleviates momentary distress and fosters interpersonal closeness, but does not facilitate long-term recovery (e.g., Nils & Rimé, 2012; Rimé, 2009). We found that sharers are strongly motivated to receive socio-affective support, a support preference that listeners also assume and are inclined to try to fulfill. Furthermore, our findings speak to a

potential role for sharers in eliciting the support that they desire. While we found that sharers express their emotions differently depending on the support that they seek, it remains unclear how exactly they may effectively communicate their support needs. Conveying the level of distress seemed to be an effective cue for eliciting socio-affective support provision, but future research is warranted to better understand how sharers may effectively communicate their cognitive support needs. Together, these studies reveal a preponderance of socio-affective support provision, explaining why sharers may typically perceive sharing as beneficial even though it does not engender emotional recovery.

Furthermore, we demonstrated that despite sharers' typical preference for socio-affective support, sharers can be receptive to cognitive support when provided by a virtual human. While we do not envision virtual humans as a replacement for humans, these findings do speak to virtual humans' potential for providing effective support and thereby point to a fruitful area for future research. Finally, we provided a first step in showing that listeners may be aware that sharers' goals might depend on the situation, and attune their support accordingly, regulating sharers' emotions in ways that may be adaptive given the specific situation. These findings highlight that to understand when and why sharing is effective, it is crucial to define the *goal* for which sharing may be instrumental. At the outset of this dissertation, we have conceptualized social sharing as a dyadic means of emotion regulation, defining effectiveness in terms of the ability to down-regulate the emotional experience elicited by a specific event. However, our research suggests that sharers may have a different predominant goal when sharing – that is, to feel understood and connected with others – and that social sharing *is* typically effective in fulfilling this socio-relational function. Perhaps, then, a problem shared is a problem halved after all.