

# Mutuality: Critique and substitute for Belk's "sharing"

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## Abstract

The recently introduced construct of consumer sharing is represented as a nonreciprocal, pro-social distribution of resources given without expectation of reciprocity (Belk, 2010, 'Sharing', *Journal of Consumer Research* 36: 715–34). The approach adopted rests on shaky ontological and epistemological grounds and reproduces an array of problematic modernist dichotomies (e.g., agency/structure, nurturing family/instrumental public, gift/market, and altruism/self-interest) that significantly constrain the analytical enterprise. This work redresses some of the conceptual problems in the current formulation. The critique highlights a focus on resource distribution based on a more holistic, socially grounded perspective on circulation. We offer the alternative concept of mutuality or generalized exchange and the metaphor of inclusion rather than exchange as central to this perspective. We argue this may provide a more sound basis for understanding alternative modes of circulation.

## Keywords

Anti-utilitarian theory, consumer behavior, generalized exchange, gift giving, mutuality, resource circulation, sharing

## How do consumption resources circulate?

Researchers may agree that the project of developing a social science of consumer behavior will benefit from a more comprehensive framework for understanding how consumption resources circulate. Recent research on service-dominant logic (Arnould, 2008; Arnould et al., 2006; Vargo and Akaka, 2012; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and peer-to-peer sharing networks (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; *The Economist*, 2013; Giesler, 2006; Geron, 2013; Lamberton

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and Rose, 2012; Owyang, 2013; Plouffe, 2008) constitutes nudges in this direction. The goal of introducing the “sharing” construct into consumer research (Belk, 2010) is precisely to open a new front in the theory of resource circulation by describing a neglected mode of resource circulation. This article (Belk, 2010) raises the general question of how sharing may be usefully understood and suggests why this construct, as well as its antecedents and outcomes, is of interest to marketing and consumer researchers. The article may well respond to a pervasive fear evident in critical scholarship and lay discourse alike that market logic pervades and colonizes every social relationship. We may welcome alternatives to the way metaphors that pervade marketing thought (O’Malley and Tynan, 1999). Despite its popularity in the business press (The Economist, 2013; Geron, 2013), however, the sharing concept suffers from a number of ontological and epistemological flaws that considerably hamper its theoretical value.

Here, we offer a critique from an anti-utilitarian perspective and suggest an alternative that is more in keeping with traditional theory on the gift and resource circulation as well as a cultural orientation to consumer behavior (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Askegaard and Linnet, 2013). Anti-utilitarianism is the critique of economism in social sciences including marketing and instrumental rationalism in moral and political philosophy. That is, anti-utilitarianism contests the typical reduction of human behavior to a matter of the working out of individual self-interest and adherence to market logics (Caillé, 2000; Godbout and Caillé, 1992; Godelier, 1972). Anti-utilitarianism is also consistent with social science associated with practice and actor network theories that prioritize networks and behaviors over human agency (Badje, 2013; Loyal and Barnes, 2001; M.A.U.S.S., 1996; Schau et al., 2009).

We also sketch an alternative concept that we argue is more useful, if more limited in scope, for example, “mutuality,” or if scholars prefer, the classic term “generalized exchange” (Ekeh, 1974; Willer et al., 2012). This mutuality is action with a normative overlay. It is action that signals a relationship of shared sociality. It is the enactment of the norm of giving, of failing to keep, or perhaps even of generosity. It is an act that entails belief in the reciprocal tie that is manifest in future acts of giving by the receiving party; thus it is not altruistic but socially “interested.” A potential confusion lies in the fact that one may give with the intent of receiving directly as in a balanced gift exchange, but in mutuality or generalized reciprocity, one may also give without the intent of receiving directly. But the implications of the action are determined by possibilities set out by the social structure in which the participants are embedded.

The organization of the essay is as follows. First, we offer a critique of the definition of sharing. Then, we turn to a critique of the anti-analytic empiricism employed in the article. We next turn to the egocentric focus of the original conceptualization, which is inconsistent with a cultural approach to consumer culture and with contemporary social theory. The viability of the sharing construct depends upon a critique of Maussian social theory, so we next reject that critique. Since the sharing concept turns upon a stereotypical portrayal of the family, the next section of the article deconstructs this image. Then, the article turns to the political dimension of the sharing concept. Finally, we conclude with a treatment of mutuality to solidify and tie together the various themes that arise in the critique, clarifying the alternative construct through explanation and example. We also present aspects of mutuality throughout our critique of the sharing concept in order to highlight the strengths of the former over the latter.

## Definitional issues

In the first pages, the sharing article offers at least two distinct conceptualizations of sharing, both of which are problematic (Belk, 2010: 715–20). First, it argues that sharing is a construct distinct from other forms of exchange because unlike those other forms, it does not involve a transfer of ownership; instead, as with members of a brand community, the author claims sharing implies joint possession (2010: 715, 727). However, the author also equates this with “a sense of collaborative ownership” (2010: 727). Joint possession, the article argues, is particularly the case in familial sharing. This is a problematic notion in its own right, and a point upon which we will elaborate later.

We maintain that this criterion of joint possession is not adequate to distinguish sharing from other forms of exchange, whether it be via contract or gift. Indeed, the argument is sometimes forced to resort to special pleading to reinforce the distinction as when referring to wearing of siblings clothing as “a borderline case of sharing” (Belk, 2010: 717). But the discussion jumbles joint ownership (a contractual arrangement) with other concepts, mostly household pooling, which as other scholars have shown involves extra-commercial gifting and redistribution (Bradford, 2009; Wilk, 1989). Moreover, the discussion confuses *emic* and *etic* perspectives. From an *emic* perspective, that is, the point of view of cultural insiders (Harris, 1976), many probably would agree with the argument that home mortgages even under the rubric of cohousing are “shared.” In the United States, the law often treats them as “common property” in a divorce proceeding; ironically, just that proceeding in which the fiction of sharing is shredded and the fundamental ambiguity of the thing is foregrounded. But from an *etic* perspective, that is, from an analytic point of view, this particular form of sharing manifests as a legal contract conveying ownership. Property and commercial exchange have not been removed from the equation at all. Similarly, one can give or convey 50% ownership in such things by way of a gift, but if accompanied with contractual agreements, this will also result in joint ownership and possession although its gifted origin may be foregrounded. One may “share” inalienable household wealth but possession and sales rights, if any, become ambiguous and often contested (Curasi et al., 2004; Epp and Price, 2008). Thus, even within the household, which the article (Belk, 2010) suggests is the core site of sharing object experiences and their properties are fluid. More generally, the characteristic ambiguity of human–object relationships in space and time (Kopytoff, 1986; Slater, 2014) renders them a poor ontological anchor for defining a mode of resource circulation.

The importance of clearly distinguishing shared use from shared ownership is rendered clear for consumer research, in any case, by recent articles arguing that in fact, some corporately mediated sharing such as car sharing is essentially a contractual arrangement that differs from conventional car rental services primarily in adding additional place and possession utilities to the standard model of sequentially shared use and in reducing the risks of shared access (Lamberton and Rose, 2012). Not surprisingly, absent key elements of the gift (personalization, narrative, and ritual) that induce emotional engagement, and which are evident in much household pooling, participants treat both the cars and other participants with the relative indifference of commodities (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012).

Also in the article (Belk, 2010: 717), it appears as if the real distinguishing characteristic of sharing is the fact that it is nonreciprocal—again unlike commodity exchange and gift giving, at least according to the eccentric manner in which gift giving is defined in the article (2010: 718). However, the article is inconsistent in this regard since at a later point in the manuscript in referring to the “nearly infinite shared content” on the Internet, the author remarks that “some of us may want to offer our own contributions to unseen others who share our interests” (2010: 727). This

reinserts a gift giving logic through the back door of the so-called “sharing in” construct (2010: 725), a logic of noninstrumental connectedness other scholars have shown is alive and well on the Internet (Giesler, 2006; Plouffe, 2008; Willer et al., 2012).

Moreover, this allegedly nonreciprocal aspect of the sharing concept may distinguish it from commodity exchange but only from representations of the gift in consumer research that imply that all gifts impose a dyadic form of reciprocity (Areni et al., 1998; Sherry, 1983; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). However, the dyadic model in consumer research misrepresents the construct of the gift in classic sociological thought—that is, in the tradition of anti-utilitarian social science from whence it derives (Liebersohn, 2010; Mauss, 1990 [1924–1925]), and in other recent consumer research (Giesler, 2006; Weinberger and Wallendorf, 2012). Theorizing in the latter tradition emphasizes that gift exchange constitutes a total social fact in which, theoretically speaking, understanding the obligation to give is equally important as the obligations to receive and reciprocate (M.A.U.S.S., 1996).

At the same time, it would seem this definitional criterion—nonreciprocity—assimilates sharing to the *perfect* gift (Caillé, 1994; Derrida, 1992), as delineated in Belk and Coon (1993). But this kind of absolute gift is a chimera (Derrida, 1992), as Mauss himself argued in his foundational treatise on the gift (1990 [1924–1925]). The perfect gift is a prominent element of the conflicted emic ideology of the gift peculiar to North America, which is tied to an underlying ideological conflict between altruism and self-interest (Carrier, 1991). But the perfect “altruistic” gift exists only in fiction, as in the O. Henry story the sharing article cites (Belk, 1989, 2010: 718). The perfect nonreciprocated gift is not properly speaking a social scientific construct as most scholars recognize. Thus, following Mauss, Mary Douglas (1990, ix) says,

There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient.

As Douglas implies, the gift, whether in the form of linguistic courtesies, marriage partners in a system of cross-cousin marriage, or old-fashioned Christmas cards, is fundamentally an invitation to sociality in a system of reciprocities rather than *warre* (i.e., segregation, suspicion, and conflict), a point Marshall Sahlins (1972) cogently argued. Indeed, as Caillé (2000) points out, all gifts are interested rather than disinterested but their interest is social not utilitarian. This is to say that they are not self-interested as the sharing article maintains to the contrary (Belk, 2010: 719, 720).

Moreover, commingling the first and second definitional elements, that is, joint ownership and nonreciprocity, obscures understanding of inalienable wealth (Bradford, 2009; Curasi et al., 2004; Weiner, 1992). These are things (hybrid object/narratives) imbued with the history and “spirit” of previous curators that produce rank and distinction for current caretakers (McCracken, 1988) but also must be given down through generations rather than across generations to other kin. In this case, the reciprocal tie embedded in the shared objects is multi-generational. Moreover, individual curatorship obscures joint possession, intergroup distinction, and in-group sociality that are wedded in the thing (Bradford, 2009; Curasi et al., 2004; Weiner, 1992). Under the logic of sharing (Belk, 2010), inalienable wealth would simply be considered a transfer of ownership. But in transfers of inalienable wealth, honor, sociality, and reciprocal obligation are driving forces, and it is expected this wealth will move on.

By the end of the first, definitional part (Belk, 2010: 715–720), the sharing article evokes gift giving, sharing, and commodity exchange as ideal types, digresses into tangential debates about

money, debt and usury, the contractual basis of marital services, commercial care giving as well as a defense of the conception of the agapic gift, without, for all of that, really providing a clear prototypical exemplification of sharing that was the stated aim of this part of the article. Instead, the article asserts that a range of disparate things at rather different scales of observation, and by dint of isolating them from the social processes of which they are crystallizations, are the same (i.e., exemplars of sharing). Thus to take just two examples of many, in an Asian context the individual's alleged sharing of a large bottle of beer (Belk, 2010: 715) is disembedded from the social rounds of gifted pours in a system of rank and hierarchy that actually constitutes Japanese male drinking behavior (Partanen, 2006). The individual sibling's momentary sharing of clothes is disembedded from the social rounds of clothing that passes between siblings and, often enough, siblings' children.

The conceptualization of sharing offered to consumer research (Belk, 2010) suffers from a Platonic idealism; it critiques straw man examples of perfect, albeit idealistic and mythical, gifts. In addition to the perfect dyadic gift, the article invokes a similar idealized version of charitable donation as an example of sharing but charitable giving is clearly a complex phenomenon composed of a number of quite distinct practices (Bajde, 2013). As briefly described in the article, "charity (closer to sharing) if it is given to someone with less wealth or power than the giver" (Belk, 2010: 718) is surely well explained as a kind of gifting in the Maussian perspective (Caillé, 2000; Godbout and Caille, 1992). That is, in fact, much charitable donation and certainly organized philanthropy can be analyzed like the classic potlatch through which the destruction or loss of one party's financial wealth, its consumption in giving, is transmuted into honor, dignity, respectability, and status (i.e., social and cultural capital) accruing to the giving party from relevant others. Thus, Bill Gates' contribution to Michael Bloomberg's gun control political action committee diminishes Bloomberg's status claims while burnishing Gates' even if it ever so slightly diminishes Gates' monetary wealth. Bajde (2013) has recently reminded us charitable gifting is productively thought of as a circuit of giving with social effects, if subjectively driven by a moral imaginary "society," "the poor," or "Africa" (Lakoff, 1995) and not as a one-way dyadic transfer. It is designed to ensure a certain system of social reproduction (Bajde, 2013; Godelier, 1999; Mauss, 1990 [1923–1924]; Silber, 2009: 178). This is a critical difference in understanding as it undermines the conceptual distinction underlying the sharing construct (Belk, 2010). Bajde (2013) suggests instead that even the proffered examples can be better understood from the perspective of the rich tradition of anti-utilitarian social science. In fact, the disparate examples critiqued above—beer, clothing, and charity—lead us to the next major point, which is that the empirics employed in the sharing article (Belk, 2010) to underpin its theoretical positioning suffers considerable shortcomings. We next turn to this issue.

## **The anti-analytic empiricism**

Beyond the construct issues underlying the sharing conceptualization, we also flag an empirical problem—namely, that the approach to empirical evidence in the sharing article (Belk, 2010) is reminiscent of the 19th-century comparative method employed in the work of Sir James Frazier (1950 [1890]) or more recently Joseph Campbell (1949), in their universalizing theories of the sacred and the hero, respectively, or in the medieval philology of the same period (Jussen, 2009). This kind of empiricism seeks truth claims by piling up multiple, disparate, and cherry-picked examples divorced from historical and cultural context that the researcher tries to systematize through metaphor, in this case sharing, and the rhetorical device of concatenation. It is in short an

exercise in uncontrolled comparison. This is problematic due to the lack of independent, articulated principles of family resemblance. In modern anthropology, this approach to comparative theorizing was discredited via the fieldwork revolution. The latter promoted contextually rooted ethnography and empathetic cultural interpretation over concatenation of decontextualized empirical instances, as the more appropriate foundation for establishing comparative knowledge about sociocultural phenomena (Eriksen and Nielsen, 2001; Stocking, 1992).

More generally, it is important to underscore that as social science constructs, things like gift giving, market exchange, and sharing are not observable empirical phenomena. Instead, they are analytic concepts that we employ for certain social scientific ends. But lay people also employ these concepts in different ways for their own parochial purposes. Lay people may well speak of sharing, gifts, commodities, charity, and the like, and thus, the business press has taken to trumpeting the “sharing economy” lately (The Economist, 2013; Giron, 2013). But lay or emic uses should not be confused with social scientific uses. Discussions of hybrid forms show that we lay analytic constructs over messier empirical realities. Thus, Rosenbaum et al. (2007) and Price and Arnould (1999) discern elements of the gift in ostensibly utilitarian market exchanges. Price et al. (2000) and Bradford (2009) detect calculative tactics coloring professed legacy gifts. Marcoux (2009) demonstrates some consumers seek relief from the burden of obligation in reciprocal gifts in the alleged transactional (a)morality of market exchange (although, of course, eminent scholarship has also shown that market exchanges are socially embedded and shot through with moral qualities; Granovetter, 1985; Parry and Bloch, 1989; Polanyi, 2001). The key point is that to be useful, analytic categories in social science should be carefully distinguished and the tendency to allow emic understandings to muddy the analytic uses, on the one hand, and the risk of reification in (proto) typological analyses, on the other, should be avoided. We fear that as proposed, the sharing construct falls prey to both problems. Further, we argue that analytic concepts such as gift giving, charitable giving, barter, market exchange, and other categories are hybrid blends between yet more abstract but pervasive cultural orientations or societal myths. These two higher order orientations can be termed possessive individualism, as Giesler (2008) suggests, on the one hand, and social utilitarianism, on the other hand (see also Ekeh, 1974 and Lakoff, 1995 for an alternative metaphorical imaginary). However, we substitute the term mutuality (cf. Ekeh’s collectivism, 1974) for Giesler’s social utilitarianism in order to avoid confusion with utilitarian philosophy as conventionally understood. These two orientations constitute two oppositional ideals of resource distribution in Western thought and, as such, they structure not only consumers’ narrative representations but also our own analytic language about resource distribution.

Every culturally informed, economic concept draws from this dialectic and their descriptions (Gouldner, 1960). In light of this ideological continuum, gift giving, market exchange, and the proposed sharing construct exhibit aspects of mutuality and possessive individualism. This continuum can then be positioned against another axis, social scale of perceived distance (Sahlins, 1972). Analytic descriptors of resource circulation can then be described as gift giving, market exchange, potlatch, redistribution (Leach, 1965), sharing of public goods, charitable giving, inalienable wealth and so forth as a blend of the two axes, scale, and mutuality–possessive individualism. This is apparent in many domains. At a middling scale of social distance, scientific collaboration among colleagues as a model mentioned in the sharing article (Belk, 2010: 729) displays elements of gifting, actions undertaken in the belief that they will be (indirectly) reciprocated. Examples include communicating specialized knowledge and expertise to junior colleagues, commenting on one another’s work, inviting others as guest speakers, mentoring, offering glowing letters of promotion, writing gushing book jacket recommendations and so on. But often

these are offered not in the expectation of balanced reciprocity but as in the logic of generalized exchange or mutuality, these favors will move on, growing the community as a whole. But scientific collaboration also displays, with some semantic irony, possessive individualist aspects, such as order of authorship concerns, relative contribution issues, plagiarism charges, consumption of ostentatious data sets, comparative journal rankings, and so forth. This blending of mutuality and possessive individualism is surely to do with the social scale at issue as scientific collaboration engages with mentoring and apprenticeship roles and the transmission of expertise within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)

What should be apparent here is that the two binaries are never separated. This post-structuralist analytic framing provides an explanation for why analytic boundaries between, for example, sharing and gift giving, as distinguished in the sharing article (Belk, 2010), are difficult to determine empirically; the phenomena as described are already apprehended through these master narrative categories. This in turn explains why the article must resort to concatenation and the prototypical empiricism mentioned earlier. But the more fundamental failure, and thus the more substantive critique of the sharing concept as put forth, is the failure to recognize that gift giving, sharing, and market exchange are *not* empirical phenomena but conceptual frames; hence, they cannot be defined through the piling up of empirical instances as comparative ethnologists and philologists used to do (Campbell, 1949; Frazier, 1950 [1890]; Jussen, 2009). This leads to unhelpful reification.

The sharing article (Belk, 2010) draws from the sharing/owning language protocol by adopting an essentialist worldview that enables the treatment of metaphor and anecdote as quasi-empirical evidence of this or that form of resource circulation rather than as various instantiations of ideological blending. In doing so, the conceptualization also reinforces and reproduces narratives that sustain a lay ideology of both the gift (as tit for tat exchanges between individuals) and sharing—the kind of belief that drives participants in burning man festivals, file sharing, or raves (Giesler, 2006; Goulding et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2002)—rather than shedding substantive analytic light on what constitutes sharing as a relevant construct for theorizing resource circulation. It is worth underscoring that this error was not made by Mauss, whose aims in his writing on the gift were explicitly political (i.e., the search for an anti-utilitarian basis of the social contract) nor by the authors writing in the Movement of Anti-Utilitarian Social Science (M.A.U.S.S.) circle of scholarship who wish to destabilize the ideological hold of utilitarianism on social science (Fournier, 2006; Liebersohn, 2010), but again as exemplified in the egocentric focus in the sharing model. Given the influential nature of both the sharing model and the “extended self” foundation on which it is built (Belk, 1988), a treatment of the theoretical shortcomings of the egocentric conceptualization underpinning both is warranted. It is to this issue that we turn next.

## The egocentric focus

The conceptualization of sharing offered to consumer research (Belk, 2010) adopts an egocentric approach to understanding social phenomena, an approach rooted in the same instrumental and social psychological worldview (e.g., Tian and Belk, 2005) that undergirds many variants of consumer psychology, economic analysis, and much social exchange theory (Ekeh, 1974), despite the cultural trappings it sometimes adopts. In the sharing article, the extended self is the privileged starting point for the ostensible cultural analysis of resource circulation. The concept is mentioned 31 times and is in the heading of one of the main subsections of the article. Thus, the conception of sharing is built on the much-cited extended-self model (Belk, 1988, 2010, 2013).

By enshrining the self as the irreducible starting point of analysis, this model recapitulates the structure-agency problem that bedeviled social science until the advent of practice theoretical and actor network approaches. Foundationally, ego-centered models of social action fail to recognize that individuals exert agentic power only within terms accorded to them by social and cultural institutions (Loyal and Barnes, 2001). Instead consistent with neoliberal and especially North American ideology that developed with industrial capitalism (Carrier, 1990), the egocentric approach insists that the self is an autonomous agent. Despite a nod to the post-dualistic position that the “existence of a core self is a belief rather than a fact” (Belk, 2013: 490), the sharing article reifies an irreducible self in discussing the ways in which such a self is enhanced and developed through technological means. Thus, in the sharing article, the sociality of the gift construct, the Maussian points that persons are party to the circulation of goods only as socially constituted moral subjects (Carrier, 1991) is cast aside in favor of an extending self.

In our view, gift giving and other forms of circulation cannot be properly conceptualized from the individual, ego-centered point of view. This is clear since collective appropriation as a culturally instantiated mode of circulation clearly precedes the individual. This is easy to see in inalienable common property such as the hunting rights enjoyed by the foraging populations to which the sharing article refers (Belk, 2010: 722–723) but also in examples detailed by common property researchers (McKean, 1992; Netting, 1981; Overing, 1989). This can also be seen in the shared health and social welfare benefits enjoyed in most developed countries, where again, our constitution as social, not biopsychological, beings brings about our access to resources in circulation (Loyal and Barnes, 2001; Swidler, 1986). The concept of mutuality avoids the egocentric trap by acknowledging the inherent sociality of what is called the self. Based in a rich tradition of anthropological and sociological theorizing, mutuality points to the role of socially embedded others in the constitution of the self. By recognizing the other in a given social interaction without expectations of direct reciprocity or exchange, an actor acknowledges his/her own embeddedness in a social fabric. This conceptualization tips its hat to the aphorism that there is no “I” without the “we” (Etzioni, 1987).

The prior social construction of acting subjects is equally constitutive at the micro scale as at the macro scale. Take for instance the smoothie example from the sharing article (Belk, 2010: 726). Here, an informant recalls an instance in her preteen years where she says she “learned to share” *due to social pressure* in the context of sharing smoothies with her friends. But the informant in the smoothie example clearly already is socialized to recognize peer pressures and already knows what is entailed in the emic notion of sharing. That the circumstances normatively require her to behave in terms of a preexisting model of sharing as practice only emphasizes our point that her behavior was a performance of gifting. In short, we are on safe ground in arguing that modern social theory (outside of economic psychology and microeconomics) would discount the explanatory potential of grasping modes of circulation—whether gift giving, commodity exchange, or sharing—as the aggregate behavior of individual transactors. This is because the warrant to give and to receive is already given in their constitution as mutually recognized social actors, for example, “my friends” in the Smoothie example.

Giesler’s (2006) discussion of gift giving as a social system rather than as a dyadic process, Bajde’s (2013) discussion of charitable giving, and Weinberger and Wallendorf’s (2012) explication of a redistributive potlatch show quite clearly what Mauss understood in foregrounding the gift as a total *social* fact. In other terms, through socialization processes actors develop routines in which generalized exchange or mutuality is foregrounded in certain circumstances, tit-for-tat gift exchange or market exchange in others, and this is what makes possible the behavior of individual smoothie sharers.



One can look in other contemporary cultural contexts to see challenges to the sharing individual as presented in the sharing (Belk, 2010) conceptualization. In India, ideas about spiritual flows between members of different castes (Parry, 1989); in China, ideas about *enqing* and “face” (Joy, 2001); and in the circum-Mediterranean, concepts of family honor (Carboni, 2008; Claverie, 1979) that effect resource circulation, all destabilize the Anglo-American preoccupation with the self as the irreducible core of resource circulation that underpins theorizing in the sharing article (Belk, 2010).

This egocentric focus leads to a substantial bias in the discussion of sharing hinted at in our evocation of the national regimes of public health and social security, namely, that the institutional systems in which sharing and the redistribution of resources are embedded are of critical importance to understanding these processes. A diverse literature (Godelier, 1999; Leach, 1965; Memel-Fotê, 1993; Polanyi, 2001; Polanyi et al., 1957) links resource redistribution and complex sociopolitical systems outside of market mechanisms. As we now know, economic exchanges between persons evolved out of institutional systems of redistribution rather than the other way around (Graeber, 2001, 2011). Just as Mauss (1990 [1924–1925]) and Malinowski (2013 [1922]) demonstrated the priority of institutions in the constitution of individuals and their gift exchange networks, Graeber (2011) compellingly demonstrates that archaic states created markets, providing evidence for the historical priority of institutions over individuals in the development of market modes of resource circulation. Moreover, as mentioned above, recent consumer research on brand communities and other commercial collectivities illustrates the simultaneous emergence of community, social status distinctions, and the circulation of collective resources (Hartman, et al. 2015; Kozinets, 2002; Leigh et al., 2006; McAlexander and Schouten, 1998; Schau et al., 2009). Indeed as Willer et al. (2011) point out, scholars, participants in brand communities, corporate work teams (Alter, 2009), auctions (Heath, 2013; Smith, 1993), and even random strangers through charitable giving, often act in a spirit of mutuality due to their embeddedness in a mutual social fabric. Thus in light of scholarship ranging from gift-based economies, to ancient states and contemporary consumption collectivities, a case could be made for a fundamental link between the development of mutuality and *extra*-familial social organization (Ekeh, 1974). This in contrast to prioritizing the individual and the nuclear family as the locus of sharing and caring, a point we will address below. This is a significant theoretical departure from the doubtful claim that adult extra-familial sharing is rare (Belk, 2010: 727).

## The critique of Maussian social theory

Much of what is discussed in the sharing article (Belk, 2010) can, as we have begun to show, be accommodated in the anti-utilitarian concept of the gift including much of that which occurs within families, in communities, and in charitable giving. Our contention is that recent literature on the gift reveals the robustness of the Maussian paradigm (Alter, 2009; Caillé, 2000; Godbout and Caille, 1992; Godelier, 1999; Leach and Leach, 1983; M.A.U.S.S., 1996) in contrast to the critique thereof in the justification for the sharing concept (Belk, 2010).

We suggest that the dismissal of the explanatory power of the sociological theory of the gift stems from the resolutely ego-centered view of exchange, the instrumental orientation to gift giving, and a temporal bias toward the present. In other words, the dismissal is built on a modernist, neoliberal episteme (Bonsu, 2011; Ekeh, 1974; Wrenn, 2012). Mauss recalled the sociocentric view of the gift to social theory from the obscurity to which the European utilitarian moral philosophy of the 18th and 19th century had consigned it (Liebersohn, 2010). He insists upon the coeval analytic power of the normative obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate, and

incorporates intergenerational time, which in turn leads to a more generous view of the explanatory power of this model.

In light of this perspective, it seems that the more general problem (Bajde, 2013), due to overindebtedness to utilitarian moral philosophy is that the sharing article overemphasizes two moments in the gift—that of receiving and of the obligation to return—over the other obligation (i.e., to give) that make up the sociological concept of the gift (e.g., Areni et al., 1998; Belk and Coon, 1993; Sherry, 1983; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011; cf. M.A.U.S.S., 1996). Underscoring the first two obligations shifts the focus of the entire project from a sociocentric view of the gift to an ego-centered one, as a one-off transaction between individuals or to the self (Mick and DeMoss, 1990). Unfortunately, this framing also accentuates the individual possession discourse, the obligatory receipt aspect of the gift. There is no reason to accept this axiomatic point of departure as utilitarian social theory does. But imagine a social theory based on the alternative axiom that the obligation to give is also a fundamental propensity as Maussian theory does rather than merely to receive and reciprocate (see also Bourdieu, 2000, 191ff.).

We insist on Mauss' point that the gift is a total social fact and not a transaction between individual social actors (Alter, 2009; Caillé, 2000; Giesler, 2006; Godbout and Caille, 1992; Weinberger and Wallendorf, 2012). This point is seemingly ignored in the statement that in Mauss' view "contemporary gift-giving is a very practical form of exchange; we give in order to get and because we are caught up in a system of mutual obligations" (Belk, 2010: 720). In fact this is not Mauss' view, nor is it the view of contemporary scholars in the anti-utilitarian tradition, for whom gifts always incorporate a third, social term—a group of some sort. That is, even now we give, receive, and reciprocate constantly to constitute and reproduce some social group. Thus, in times past dueling Kwakiutl chiefs engaged in potlatch as representatives of their clans; *kula* partners exchanged *kula* valuables as orchestrators of the inter- and intra-island exchange of mundane goods among kinsfolk (Leach and Leach, 1983; Malinowski, 2013 [1922]; Mauss, 1990 [1924–1925]; Weiner, 1992). But the gift as mechanism of solidarity and social reproduction is no relic as discussions of the collective dimension of gift giving both in mid-century (Caplow, 1982, 1984) and contemporary North American consumer contexts underscore (Cheal, 1996; McGrath and Englis, 1996). Within the improbable context of modern corporations, Alter's (2009) masterful and deeply researched study shows how the continuous giving of favors, honors, information, support, exceptions, and so on not only structures interaction from shop floor to executive suite but is the absolute requirement of corporate continuity. Others show how generalized exchange in Freecycle and Craigslist both constitutes the community as a third social term and stimulates positive group sentiment that motivates further giving (Willer et al., 2011). Hence, the distinction of gifts from sharing is marred by the utilitarian, transactional focus that the sharing article adopts rather than a sociological level of analysis as is called for in gift theory.

There also is a key construct that the sharing article misrepresents that leads to confusion in the argument. Consider the discussion of generalized reciprocity (Belk, 2010: 9) or following original usage what should be called generalized exchange (Ekeh, 1974; Willer et al., 2011). In this logic, there is no expectation of immediate return or return in kind, or even return between the original parties to the transfer of value, but two other expectations; that the recipient of a gift offered (a thing, a courtesy, or a favor) would act similarly were circumstances reversed (Graeber, 2011) and that this gift moves on, a point stressed at book length by Hyde (1983). Thus, the stranger who gives us 50 pence at the cash wrap when we are short of local currency, or who points out a place on a bench in a crowded waiting room, or who holds the door for us as we enter the restaurant behind her, is engaged in acts of generalized exchange. Similarly, as Bajde (2013) argues, charitable

giving rationalized as “giving back” to society also illustrates this recognition of three-way mutuality (one is given to and one passes on the gift) even if such gifts, like potlatch and kula, are driven by a sense of prior obligation and may produce or reinforce hierarchy. It is a fundamental act of social recognition, of inclusion in the moral community, embodied as the gift. The provision of generalized exchange is both a condition for and token of social intimacy, for the whole point of the multiplication of “diffuse obligations” is to avoid the social finality implied by closing the books, to paraphrase Sahlins (1972). Diffuse obligation personalizes relations just as close-ended transactions depersonalize and alienate persons (Sahlins, 1972: 194, 208). By failing to recognize this sociality implied by mutuality, the sharing article (Belk, 2010) builds itself upon a flawed understanding of macro social forces in resource circulation.

In generalized exchange, the expectation that the recipient party will return in some capacity the benefits that accrue to a second party as a benefit of the original transfer is often present. On this, interested scholars should consult Levi-Strauss’ (1966 [1950]) and Sahlins’ (1976) comments on the original Maori text that informed Mauss’ theory of the gift. Thus, for example, we may expect our graduate students (the second party) to engage in scholarly largesse toward the next generation of junior scholars (the third party) as they join the ranks of the tenured (the first party), while we in the professoriate do not necessarily expect them to compensate us equally for the mentoring we provide. But through such acts we (the first party) may accrue honor and even a portion of secular immortality (see Close et al., 2011 for empirical evidence) in much the way that the Maori priests eventually derive some benefit from the fructifying *hau* of the forest. The structure and outcome of successful curatorial consumption of inherited objects are similar (Curasi et al., 2004). Here again, mutuality is present. Because it is a normative expectation of how actors in a given situation ought to behave, it guides future interactions and develops broadening networks. This is a crucial point in explicating an analytically sound theory of resource circulation.

## Portrayal of the family

Forceful criticism of the representation of family in the sharing article (Belk, 2010) is the next point to which we turn. Critique is warranted on several points. One is the universalizing of the nuclear family as a foundational site of sharing. Second is unwarranted privileging of sharing over other kinds of resource circulation within family and family networks. Third is the reification of the nuclear family in North America. While the critique of the conceptualization of the family applies to some consumer research more generally (cf. Epp and Price, 2008), our aim and focus are narrower.

First, arguing that the nuclear family is a privileged site for generating a prototype of sharing as the sharing article does when it states that “Most people of the world . . . share their homes,” (Belk, 2010: 715) is a false start. Cross-culturally, kinship is all about “intensive interpersonal relationships of commitment and diffuse enduring solidarity demonstrated through recurrent acts of reciprocal sharing [meaning generalized exchange] and nurturance and symbolized by a variety of culture-specific media” (Marshall, 1977: 657). But the precise contours of this solidarity and generalized exchange are marvelously variable (Sahlins, 2012).

Kinship scholarship is instructive for dismissing the view of the family as composed of reified selves in privileged, autonomous acts of sharing. Based on data from a variety of cultures in a variety of time periods, Sahlins concludes that kin are “people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence” (2012: 2). Sahlins describes these kin relations as being constituted by a “mutuality of being.” Thus, the characterization of the self and the family as the former extending itself into and

through the latter is a category error, and it is a fundamental misrepresentation of both selfhood and kinship.

Kinship scholars also show nuclear families and coresidence are not broadly definitional of close kin. Instead close kin and close kin resource circulation are expressed through varying symbols and behaviors that are mutually defining. Here we may use comparison to critique the universalizing claims in the sharing article. Americans place emphasis on the symbolism of shared biogenetic substance that derives from sexual intercourse (Schneider, 1968). In Hausa-speaking Niger, reciprocal contributions to bride wealth and seasonal Islamic festal meals defined close kin (Arnould, 1984). Balinese kinship emphasizes the symbolism surrounding shared offering at a temple (Geertz and Geertz, 1975). Navajo let helping define kinship, “where this kind of solidarity exists, kinship exists; where it does not exist, there is no kinship” (Witherspoon, 1975: 22). Trukese kinship consists in part of shared land and similar productive resources (Marshall, 1977: 656). Among Maori, the circulation of *taonga* (woven feather cloaks) produced by women symbolized biological reproduction *and* the shared hau among close kin (Weiner, 1992). Among Inuit in Nunavut, reciprocal flows of foraged food resources within agnatically extended families (*ilagiit*) organized through the senior household both defines and symbolizes inclusion. Inclusion in circuits of generalized exchange of forest resources defines close kin-based community amongst Amazonian Cubeo and Piaroa people (Overing, 1989). What is general among close kin is a norm of generalized exchange (Sahlins, 2012), but coresidence and nuclear families are not prototypical of these culturally specific notions of closeness and systems of resource circulation.

Other evidence argues against the usefulness of the Platonic idealism found in the representation of family sharing (Belk, 2010). Consider the widespread peasant household treatment of children as units of labor (Durrenberger, 1984), the notoriously poor South Asian family treatment of daughters and daughters-in-law, European families’ exclusionary practices of primo- or ultimogeniture (Claverie, 1981), or the authoritarian Confucian family, all are unlikely models of generalized familial sharing. Finally, and not unimportantly, families are also sites of violence. Should we think of inherited patterns of domestic violence as a form sharing?

One other reason to doubt the claim that the maternal nurturing within the nuclear family is prototypical of sharing is bio-anthropological. A truism about parents being primary socialization agents, presumably through the nurturing process the sharing article extols, turns out to be doubtful. For example, Harris (1998) reports that 90% of the nongenetic influence on children’s cultural repertoires comes from their peers and extra-familial models. In this regard, research also shows children strongly inclined to mimic the cultural repertoire of domain competent peers (Brody and Stoneman, 1985). Similarly, further work shows that children at age 7–8 prefer resource allocations that *remove* advantageous or disadvantageous inequality among members of an in-group (Fehr et al., 2008). Thus, the scientific gloss on Western children’s concern for “fairness” suggests we consider that the human propensity toward mutuality may be found in peer sociality rather than in the mother–child bond that the theory of sharing mythologizes (Belk, 2010).

Second, the pooling and redistribution that take place within close kin are necessarily a part of a system of resource circulation and are neither one-off acts of altruism or formless sharing, as shown in studies of family mealtime (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Joy, 2001; Wilk, 1989, 2010). Scholars (Clark, 1989; Netting et al, 1984; Wilk, 1989) show that the resource pooling and redistribution are nothing like the cauldron of communal sharing, especially maternal nurturance, extolled in statements like children “need not seek permission to enter their family home, use the telephone, sit on the sofa, take a bath, or turn on the lights,” (Belk, 2010: 715). Consider once again that marriage is a state-written contract between persons, often

stipulated by and containing additional contracts, such as prenuptial agreements, signed contracts of driving privileges for teen drivers, and even chore contracts complete with remuneration. Bradford (2009, n.d) shows how within family resource circulation is freighted with a host of normative obligations. Commuri and Gentry (2005) draw attention to elaborate systems of balanced exchange in households where female spouses out-earn their mates. Literature on the transmission of farmland in the United States and other countries illustrates the commingling of gifting and market logics (Taylor and Norris, 2000).

Our critique is, of course, not to endorse Becker's (1981) extreme claim that families are little more than knots of individual self-interest or possessive individualism in Giesler's (2008) terms. North American household pooling and redistribution systems are clearly also co-constituted by inter-household token gift giving (Caplow, 1982, 1984; Cheal, 1996) and household-community gifting (Deb et al., 2010). Euro-American wedding celebrations also ritually dramatize this. Consider the way in which the new family is materially constituted through gifts of a significant share of household effects necessary to operate the new familial unit (McGrath and Englis, 1996). Notice too that this system of reciprocities is supposed to be perpetuated by the new family through a host of reciprocal activities subsequent to the marriage, ranging from immediate token gifts such as thank you cards to more elaborate ritual exchanges associated with other marriages, family birthdays, harvest meals (e.g., Thanksgiving, Ei el Fitr, Succoth), elder care, and, the ultimate reciprocal gift as far as ascending generations are concerned, grandchildren. From this perspective so-called household sharing is a moment in a cycle of reciprocities by which households are constituted and reproduced (Cappellini and Parsons, 2011). All these considerations clearly suggest that the North American family does not provide a prototype of sharing; instead, one can clearly see multiple logics of circulation at play here.

Third, and orthogonal to the point above, the portrayal of the nuclear family as the privileged site of sharing risks reinforcing anachronistic, ethnocentric, and patriarchal views of the Anglo-American family. While it may be true that nuclear families are uniquely well adapted to capitalist industrialism (Therborn, 2004), as other scholars have shown, the idea of the nuclear family as *the* norm of private life even in North America is a myth (Carlson, 1988; Cinotto, 2006; Coontz, 1992; Dressler et al., 1985). The sharing concept seems to contribute uncritically to the mythic ubiquity of the nuclear family in North American contexts when it says, "Because family is held [one may well ask, by whom?] to be the most immediate layer of extended self after the individual (Belk, 1988), it is also where the greatest amount of sharing takes place" (Belk, 2010: 724). Of note, this is a quantitative claim that is not supported by quantitative or qualitative data.

The portrayal of the nuclear family as privileged site of sharing perpetuates a patriarchal myth (Haraway, 1991). It is easy to discern that the sharing theory elides women's labor, especially with quotes such as, "Being at home implies certain taken-for-granted sharing privileges. As noted earlier, those who feel at home do not need ask permission or be invited to use family resources . . ." (Belk, 2010: 724; citing Belk, 2007). From the perspective that the article promotes, these resources seem to magically appear and their use is similarly unproblematic; the question of who provides, who prepares, who feels "at home," who cleans up, who disposes, and whose time is at issue in making these resources available is nowhere to be seen (Arnould and Price, 2006; Cappellini and Parsons 2011). The issue of whether there are gendered differences in this expectation (and execution) of access rights is problematic. As Epp and Price (2008) and Miller (1998) point out, it is labor within households that provides an important part of the identity work households perform and not some mythic generalized sharing. This is crucial, since eliding the issue of labor also obfuscates the sacrificial quality of domestic labor, this labor being absolutely

foundational to the Anglo-American household (Cappellini and Parsons 2011; Miller (1998). And of course, sacrifice is understood as the foundational gesture of generalized exchange between humans and the sacred in classical social theory (Hubert and Mauss, 1964 [1898]).

### **The knowledge/power dimension**

As the last part of our commentary on the idealized nurturing family put forth by the sharing project begins to suggest, a considerable political element bears examination. All knowledge claims are political. We don't need Foucault (1984) to know this. Throughout the article thus far, we have several times made mention of the analytic shortfalls of theorizing about a self divorced from sociality (except, admittedly, insofar as sociality is an appendage to be grafted to the self in question). In a discussion of the political ramifications of the sharing conceptualization, it bears touching upon an issue as considerable as the presentation of the self in the project as a whole.

In essence, if one may forgive the term, the self as presented in the sharing article (Belk, 2010) is atomized, separate, reified, autonomous, and unique. This concept is decidedly Western in orientation, based in part on the Judeo-Christian myth of the fall (Geertz and Geertz, 1975; Sahlin, 1996) and bears with it the considerable political baggage. Specifically, a self that is presented as inherently separate from the sociality in which it is embedded is foundational to bourgeois neo-liberal political philosophy. This conception has consequences. First, the egocentric model denies the validity of the worldview of cultures that do not share it; hence the tendency of the article to rely on the temporal present and the West in its ethnologic empirics. Second, such a denial further reinforces the perceived duality between the West and the other, carrying with it the dichotomies that drove Derrida to deconstructive denunciations.

Third, this presentation fails to adequately represent the self in terms which accord with any conception offered outside of microeconomics or economic psychology (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Badje (2013) is instructive on this issue. Whereas the self as presented in the sharing article is a reified autonomous reality, Badje (2013) suggests that any such ontological entity is more productively viewed as the product of heterogeneous relationship networks. More problematically, this individualistic focus makes it impossible for consumer research to move to the macro, social level necessary for theorizing resource circulation, in the same way that we know that markets cannot be theorized into existence through the actions of individuals (Graeber, 2001, 2011; Polanyi, 2001). Systems theories cannot be built on foundations of unabashed individualism (Badje, 2013), and some would even argue that they are fundamentally antithetical to one another (Mayhew, 1980), making the movement from a fascination with the self to an explanation of network and institution impossible. If one is to draw on and claim to develop theories born in anti-utilitarian social science, doing so on the bedrock of neoliberal, utilitarian, Western ideology is a considerable challenge.

### **Mutuality: Sketch of an alternative “inclusive” metaphor**

We agree emphatically that developing stronger theories of resource circulation based on alternative metaphors is desirable (Belk, 2010). At this point, we consider our alternative construct of mutuality, after a suggestion from Graeber (2001, 2011), in greater detail. We propose mutuality as a proper sociological object and alternative to sharing. Mutuality can also be understood as generalized exchange (Ekeh, 1974; Willer et al., 2011). It is action that entails the assumption that another party would act toward the first party in a similar, *mutual*, fashion if circumstances were

reversed, as guaranteed by their mutual inscription in a common social frame, as kin, coworker, or colleague, for example, and vice versa, which is to say that such behavior constructs that sociality. It is an act that entails belief in the reciprocal tie that is manifest in future acts of giving by the receiving party, and thus it is not altruistic. A point of confusion lies in the fact that one may give with the intent of receiving as in a balanced exchange, but also without the intent of receiving directly as in mutuality. Mutuality is an action overlaid with a normative sociality. It is an action that presupposes the inclusivity of a shared social fabric amongst the actors. Thus, it is the first moment of the Maussian gift (not the reciprocal gift of most consumer research), mutuality is an action that bears with it the presupposition of sociality. Thus, the guiding metaphor here should be inclusion, not exchange. Mutuality is an act of inclusion. It is the mechanism by which strangers and enemies are transformed into pacific acquaintances and potential allies in the absence of contract or state intervention (Mauss, 1990 [1923–1924]). It is also the supple, reciprocal element, the give, and take that renders formal precepts and external force unnecessary in the successful management of common property resources (Netting, 1981; Ostrom, 1990; Overing, 1989), that is, jointly “owned” resources without unilaterally tradeable shares (McKean, 1992: 252), and the astonishingly smooth quotidian operation of the corporation (Alter, 2009).

Llewelyn (2011) has suggested that everyday acts of taking the bill, that is, voluntarily paying for others’ consumption in co-consumption contexts may well concretize mutuality most pervasively and decisively in consumer culture. Arenas where consumer to consumer circulation of digital resources is constitutive such as file sharing (Giesler, 2008) or the open source maker movement (de Jong and de Bruijn, 2013; Gobble, 2013; Raasch, 2011; Stemp-Morlock, 2010; Zeleny, 2012) might be included as examples of sharing since they are characterized by a foundational volunteerism and participants often evoke a logic that is glossed in terms of generalized exchange. Similarly, cocreated consumption experiences whether on or off-line is another important empirical domain of mutuality (Jenkins, 2006; Levy, 1967; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Willer et al. (2011) have recently shown that what they call generalized exchange within Freecycle and to a lesser extent, Craigslist collectivities generate solidarity and animate expanded resource circulation. Decisively all of the above are contexts in which a third term is most apparent, that is, situations in which A gives to B who gives to C or in which C is the passive recipient of benefits conveyed by A to B (Hartmann et al., 2015).

These examples suggest that resources circulating through generalized exchange may be tangible or intangible as with shared consumption experiences or family identity (Epp and Price, 2008), relatively permanent or relatively transient as with temporary emotional collectivities, but the criteria of joint usufruct, cocreation, and generalized exchange seem defining. Research that focuses on these topics in depth rather than on some putative biopsychological universals (the sharing article’s *in utero* example, Belk, 2010: 718 being the most extreme example) could be of considerable value toward the greater analytic goal of developing an understanding not only of resource circulation but of contemporary social solidarity, in general, the problem that inspired Mauss’ original essay.

While we have presented the case for mutuality or generalized exchange in the form of contrasts throughout the discussion, thus far, a summation is in order. Consider these aspects of mutuality as a concept. First, to reiterate, mutuality or generalized exchange is a kind of action or behavior, the first moment of the gift in which generosity is expressed that invites that another party to act toward the first party in a similarly liberal fashion were circumstances reversed, with the additional expectation that this action will be extended to a third party by virtue of the mutual inscription of all in a common sociality. In this way, generosity is presupposed by the notion of a sociality of

actors. The action or behavior is the first moment of the gift, when the normative embeddedness is enacted. Second, and again to reiterate, mutuality—so often articulated through commensality—is the mechanism by which strangers are transformed into members of community or brought even closer. Third, mutuality is also definitional of almost any in-group; certain things will be made freely available within the group and other things will be expected to be provided by any member to any other on request (Graeber, 2011; Overing, 1989). Fourth, notice that mutuality “is particularly acute in both the best of times and the worst of times: during famines [and disasters], for example, but also during moments of extreme plenty” (Graeber, 2011: 178; Piff et al., 2010).

Additional descriptors may also be useful. Mutuality effectively implies the giving, receiving, or ceding of value to a generalized other in an act of social recognition. Unlike donation, it is not about the obligation to “give back.” Unlike erotic exchange, it is not embedded in an expectation of short-run reciprocity (Belk and Coon, 1993). Nor finally is it inscribed in a logic of hedonic pleasure. It is spontaneous, however. One may offer aesthetic value through the beautification of a public space in litter collection. One may offer time value through the distribution of goods late in the month when pay periods are nearing their end. One may offer place value by allowing access to one’s home in a desirable area such as in couchsurfing and thereby subverting a public–private binary. One may offer possession value through tool sharing systems. One may offer disposition value through Web sites like Freecycle and Craigslist (Willer et al., 2011). One may offer hedonic value through the classical gesture of picking up the bar tab (Llewelyn, 2011). In each event, one commits an act of generalized social recognition creating sociality and affinity through the offering of potential value, realized through active recognition, passive appreciation, and potential reciprocation (Hartmann et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

Our article represents an effort to contribute to the conversations in marketing and consumer research that try to make sense of evolving systems of resource circulation among consumers and between consumers and consumer-facing organizations in which the term sharing has been drafted by popular and theoretical commentators (Belk, 2010; Geron, 2013; Owyang, 2013; Plouffe, 2008; *The Economist*, 2013). In particular, we have provided a constructive critique of the sharing construct (Belk, 2010) on both the micro and macro scale. In the above paragraphs, we first offered a critique of a proposed definition of sharing; then, a critique of the empirical approach adopted to persuade researchers of the construct’s value. We next disputed the egocentric ontology of the conceptualization on the grounds of inconsistency with a cultural approach to consumer culture and with contemporary social theory. Central to our critique is a defense of the anti-utilitarian conception of the gift in social science as providing both an explanation for many phenomena grouped under the heading of sharing and as providing a foundation for an alternative conception. The next section of the article deconstructs the ethnocentric and anachronistic vision of the family presented as foundational to the prototypical definition of sharing. The article then turns briefly to the political dimension of the sharing concept. Finally, we concluded with a more detailed treatment of our alternative construct, mutuality, or if one prefers, generalized exchange to solidify and tie together the various themes that arise in the critique. With mutuality, the guiding metaphor becomes inclusion rather than exchange.

On the microlevel, we have shown that this project to isolate sharing as a discrete form of circulation of consumer goods fails on ontological and epistemological grounds. It collapses on ontological grounds because it inadequately distinguishes sharing from joint ownership, joint



appropriation of common property resources, inalienable wealth, and goods circulating through mutuality, or generalized exchange processes. It is only through a contestable social utilitarian construction of the gift construct that the sharing project is viable. But this construction runs counter both to the understanding of this phenomenon in the large anti-utilitarian literature about the gift as a mode of circulation qualitatively different from state or market modes (Caillé, 2000; Godbout and Caillé, 1992; Godelier, 1972; Hyde, 1983). Similarly, this social utilitarian conceptualization fails to accommodate modes of circulation and value creation within temporary, affective collectivities (Arnould and Price, 1993; Goulding et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2002) or more ostensibly instrumental ones such as corporations (Alter, 2009) or consumer-to-consumer exchange networks (Willer et al., 2012).

The project must be deemed unacceptable on epistemological grounds as well. The attempt to define the object of study through the concatenation of disparate, decontextualized examples is a mode of argumentation that inevitably and equally conflates things that appear to be similar but in fact are not, while differentiating those that are. It also adopts an implicit evolutionary phylogeny of sharing that situates its origin in a construction of the family and the place of women within it that is scientifically unsupportable. Most fundamentally, there is a fatal problem in the levels of analysis. A naive realism is employed, and this is a realism of the kind long ago abandoned as untenable by cultural theorists in favor of a variety of post-Wittgensteinian, post-Foucauldian constructivisms.

Further, on the macroscale, the argument, built on an extended project of the self, takes as axiomatic the atomistic, utilitarian, patriarchal subject against which anti-utilitarian philosophy has been arguing since Mauss and even before (Butler, 1999; Liebersohn, 2010; M.A.U.S.S., 1996). With it come the considerable political ramifications of theorizing on the Western stage alone with no apparent aim toward multicontextual applicability. Regardless of the intention behind the politicization, this concept of the self is untenable outside of the mythical assumptions about human actors and their motivations in social science traditions inspired by neoclassical economics.

The scope of our article is limited. We have not investigated the analytic boundaries between mutuality, access-based consumption, and cocreation and co-consumption between institutionally distinct market actors (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Chen, 2009; Felson and Spaeth, 1978; Lamberton and Rose, 2012). We would suggest systematic investigation of the role of mutuality or generalized exchange in such situations would shed further light on the evolving nature of the circulation and distribution of consumption resources as well as of the evolving relationship between mutuality and possessive individualism (Humphreys and Giesler, 2007). Further, such investigation might complement research on these emergent forms of circulation and use of resources that has tended to view them either through the lens of a romantic humanistic discourse (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Thompson et al., 2013) or through a critical Marxist lens (Cova et al., 2011). For the more phenomenologically inclined, research might investigate the kinds of mental accounts that organize these modes of circulation (Bradford, 2009, n.d.).

We welcome the attention to the kind of generalized exchange behavior that we prefer to label mutuality, but we have argued that the concept of sharing offered in consumer research cannot be accepted by the social scientific community for the reasons we have described. At the same time, the key point is that the many forms of circulation which social scientists like Mauss, Polanyi, Sahlins, Weiner or Graeber have described—mutuality, pooling, debt, hierarchical redistribution, or market exchange—must be understood as distinct analytic constructs or as useful metaphors but not irreducible empirical facts. By that token, all should be subject to reflexive examination (Anderson, 1986; Krippendorff, 1993) that interrogates their basis in the master tropes of mutuality

and possessive individualism. At the same time, we should remember that mutuality, the gift, market exchange, and all modes of circulation emerge in interactions. Practices through which people constitute these modes of circulation in the course of interaction have received relatively little research attention. As Araujo (2007) has observed with regard to markets, various acts of circulation should be studied as ongoing and contingent accomplishments. More future research is needed to reveal how, when, and with what consequences, people accomplish mutuality and market exchanges in interaction. And of equal importance, researchers have consistently misstepped when decontextualizing particular actions from the social and temporal systems of circulation in which they are inevitably embedded. For the social and temporal, contexts must also be established and affirmed through circulation, and they are not given a priori. Future research needs to look more closely at how contexts of interest, gratitude, debt, and obligation shape particular moments of circulation (Caillé, 1994; Llewellyn, 2011; Marcoux, 2009).

At the limit, if sharing is a distinct construct that should be retained, its domain should be considerably reduced from the claims made in the sharing article (Belk, 2010). At one end of the social scale, for example, in how people define what makes them kin or not (Marshall, 1977; Overing, 1989; Sahlins, 2012) then sharing does seem apposite. But notice that what constitutes sharing here really involves nothing more than an especially dense, recurrent network of generalized exchanges among kinsfolk; or put the other way round, kinsfolk is defined by intense transfers among moral accounts (Bradford, 2009, n.d.; Caillé, 1994; Carrier, 1991; Godbout, 1995). Among close kin, the scale is small, and the scope of mutuality is great. A second localization of sharing might lie at the macro scale where the scope is narrow, that is, in the realm of ecosystem services provided by natural endowments of air, water, and other resources (Costanza et al., 1987). Here, where new modes of management are urgently required, the challenge lies in acknowledging participation and extending mutual recognition and responsibility. Cases of successful collective appropriation of common property resources (McKean, 1992; Netting, 1981; Ostrom, 1990) provide examples upon which future research could build.

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