

“The world does not revolve around
us as individuals. We need to share
some to get some”



Together is BETTER

After years of individualism, we seem to be more interested in spending time doing things together again, sharing what we have.

Journalist Caroline Buijs asks, what set off the change and how long will it last?

As a child, I feasted on family stories about “how it used to be” when my parents were young. I especially loved my parents’ story of their first Christmas together as newlyweds, at the end of the 1950s. Nothing particularly startling happened. On the contrary, the story was just about how nice it was for them to spend time alone together, as a couple rather than with the whole family, which at that time was truly a clan: my mother had seven siblings; my father had eleven.

Coincidence or not, the year my parents celebrated their first Christmas alone together was also a moment in history that the larger society was beginning to anatomize and focus on social independence. Individuals and couples were increasingly making their own decisions and not necessarily following the directives of the social group to which they belonged – be

they religious, cultural or political affiliations – quite so automatically. From the late 1950s until now, there’s been a strong movement towards individualism, and it’s fair to say that western culture is about as individualistic today as it’s ever been.

But obviously people remain social creatures. We’ve been socializing for as long as we’ve existed. When Socrates had to choose between the cup of hemlock or exile from Athens, he chose to accept the social dictum rather than live apart and alone. Alone, we cannot survive.

On the other hand, we are individuals, and sometimes too much togetherness can feel overwhelming for us. Maybe you know that feeling, when you don’t do anything by or for yourself for a while or are always with your spouse, family members, lover or friends – especially after holidays or a weekend away. You start to lose your sense of ➤➤

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who you are, and your identity starts to become tied up with the group.

In the Beatles’ years, from 1960 to 1970, the band lived and worked together so intensely that they became like a single unit. In Martin Scorsese’s documentary *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*, Eric Clapton observes: “It seemed as if they all acted like one person. A strange phenomenon, as if they acted and thought like a little family.” And they were a little family, but of course, later it became too much and they fell apart rather dramatically.

ONLINE VS. OFFLINE

So, where are we now? In some ways, we’re a very individualistic society, but in recent years we’ve seen the emergence

of a strong sharing economy via the Internet. Through all kinds of social media sites and apps, we now swap and trade to our heart’s content. For example, a colleague recently lent her sewing machine to a friend, but she forgot to give her friend the fabric scissors that go with it. Instead of going out to buy a pair, the friend borrowed some from a neighbor that very same day through a local sharing website.

Clearly, social media does connect us in new ways, but it’s not always an effective connection. While we might feel less alone sharing our thoughts while reading the Sunday paper via group chats on WhatsApp, new research shows that people actually feel lonelier the more they connect only through

Facebook or other social media platforms. It seems there are now two ways of being together: online and offline, virtually and in real time. Sometimes they can be one and the same.

Trendwatcher Carl Rohde thinks that connecting via online communities will continue to become more attractive in coming years, but there’s a downside. “The online world offers lots of new contacts and relationships, but at the same time, all those contacts are so easy to ‘click away,’” he says. “Manners are changing: for example, ending a relationship by text message is now normal. Getting together virtually is so easy, but it’s just as easy to break up. That’s going to bother us and as a reaction, we’re going to want to be together again, offline, in smaller groups.”

Trend analyst Christine Boland thinks that the next logical step in the sharing economy is to want to make ourselves available to a smaller circle of contacts. People will become less public or more selective in how and where they broadcast their interests. A good example of this approach is Snapchat, an app that allowed you to share photos online for about eight seconds before they disappeared from the net. Meanwhile, Instagram’s newest feature makes it possible to share a picture directly with one person, without all your followers looking on.

SMALLER CIRCLES

And what will “offline” society look like in the next decade? Will we go on sharing? Will we be seeking human

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SHARE THE COMFORT

*Have you and your friends ever thought about sharing a house when you all get old? Check out this beautiful French movie, “Et si on vivait tous ensemble? (And If We All Lived Together?”); the stars include Jane Fonda.

*Here’s a nice idea: camping in someone else’s backyard. (Preferably a lush English garden, of course.) On [campinmy-garden.com](#) you will find people who want to share their gardens with you.

*Granny’s Finest is a knitwear fashion label that combines the creativity of young designers with the skills of grandmothers. This social enterprise does not focus on profit, but on solving social problems. In this case, preventing loneliness among older adults. [Grannysfinest.com](#)

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connections in “real-time?”

Boland predicts that the sharing economy will continue to grow. It’s only in the beginning stages, she says, and people are just developing a taste for it. Sharing doesn’t necessarily need to be restricted to material goods; it can be intangible things, too.

“The world is becoming flatter and more transparent,” says Boland, “and the effect of that transparency is that increasingly we see through things (or people) that are fooling us. Organic eggs aren’t always organic; the US is spying on other countries. As consumers, our illusions are being stripped away. Moreover, the economic crisis has added a lot of uncertainty to the mix. What you then see is people needing new small circles of trust and new small circles of togetherness.”

People are looking for more of a sense of direct connection and meaning in their own lives. Boland says she’s experienced that herself. “Three elderly ladies, all over 80, live across the street from me and sometimes I go over and visit them,” she says. “When I’ve spent an hour listening to their

stories about the past — they were in their teens during World War II — I can suddenly feel the enormous value of just taking the time to sit there and listen. They are grateful for my visit, and I’m grateful for their wisdom.”

INTER-GENERATIONAL LEARNING

This concept of “sharing the intangible,” especially between generations, can produce amazing results, as Sir Ken Robinson describes in his book, *Out of Our Minds*, which describes a kindergarten that was situated inside a retirement home in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The residents had all the time in the world to help the children, especially in teaching them to read. And guess what? More than 70 percent of the kids finished kindergarten with the reading skills of a third grader or higher. The residents gave them individual attention and through these relationships, the kids learned far more than just reading. And on the other side, the adults gained a new purpose in life, which gave them new energy and, strikingly, their use of prescription medications dropped

dramatically. Every now and then, the children had to be told that one of residents had died, but that’s how they learned at a young age about the natural cycles of life and death.

A comparable project took place in an Amsterdam neighborhood, De Pijp, where elementary school students interviewed older people in the area about their childhoods during World War II. The kids then wrote a book based on these oral histories. The older people found it inspiring to work with the curious children, and in some ways their preconceptions of the younger generation were changed. The children learned about history via people who’d actually lived through it and, in the process, also learned new social skills.

Other trendwatchers have observed that new types of housing are emerging for people who want to take the sharing economy into their homes. In Germany, for example, groups of singles are buying office buildings to use as a new form of cooperative-style housing, which has individual rooms but also plenty of common space. In Japan, architects ➡



“Coming together is a beginning,
staying together is progress,
working together is success”

HENRY FORD, AMERICAN INDUSTRIALIST (1863-1947)





are building homes out of impregnated paper, which can allow people to add a temporary annex onto a house, if, for example, the kids move back home after university. Carl Rohde predicts that more people will build flexible homes that can be adapted to changing familial circumstances, with flexible walls that can be shifted to make living spaces smaller or larger.

SHARING IN THE FUTURE

There's no telling what kinds of inventions will come from the shift toward sharing, not just in architecture or community planning, but in other areas of business, social and cultural life and even product design. There's so much room for innovation when it comes to shared vehicles, for example — way beyond the bicycle built for two.

The website shareable.net keeps its readers and members up to date about the sharing revolution, with articles about movements such as crowdfunding, ShareFests and co-working spaces. There's also a community section where people can join the "Sharing

Cities Network" to collaborate on local projects or just learn about such projects near them. Shareable's co-founder and chief editor Neal Gorenflo says the results of the "market economy" experiment are in and they're not positive, so it's time to come up with a new model. Gorenflo talks about ideas like participatory budgeting, where citizens allocate their own tax dollars to projects they support, and public banking or creating a bank owned by the investors, where the investments go into the local community.

It's catching on. Founded in 2009, Shareable already has millions of participants worldwide and a Facebook page with more than 35,000 Likes. On its "about" page, Shareable talks about its mission to solve some of the world's more persistent problems simply by learning how to cooperate, collaborate and share. "The sharing transformation shows that it's possible to govern ourselves, build a green economy that serves everyone and create meaningful lives together," it reads. "It also shows that we can solve

the world's biggest challenges — like poverty and global warming — by unleashing the power of collaboration." ●

WANT TO READ MORE?

* "All That We Share: How to Save the Economy, the Environment, the Internet, Democracy, Our Communities and Everything Else that Belongs to All of Us," Jay Walljasper (New Press, 2010)

* "What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption," Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers (HarperBusiness, 2010)

* Ken Robinson can be found at sirkenrobinson.com

* Carl Rohde can be found at scienceofthetime.com