Towards a Broader View of Hunter-Gatherer Sharing

Edited by Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem
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With contributions by
Olga Yu. Artemova, Ran Barkai, Nurit Bird-David, Adam H. Boyette,
Hillary N. Fouts, David E. Friesem, Peter M. Gardner, Barry S. Hewlett,
Robert K. Hitchcock, Emmanuelle Honoré, Jean Hudson, Robert L. Kelly,
Noa Lavi, Jerome Lewis, Sheina Lew-Levy, Alan J. Osborn, Spencer R. Pelton,
Magalie Quintal-Marineau, Erick Robinson, Kenneth Sillander, Penny Spikins,
Gilbert B. Tostevin, Bram Tucker, George Wenzel & Thomas Widlok
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CONTRIBUTORS

Olga Yu. Artemova
Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, 119991, Leninsky prospect 32a, Moscow, Russia.
Email: artemova.olga@list.ru

Ran Barkai
Department of Archaeology and Near Eastern Cultures, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, 69978, Israel.
Email: barkaran205@gmail.com

Nurit Bird-David
Department of Anthropology, University of Haifa, Mt. Carmel, 31905 Haifa, Israel.
Email: n.bird@soc.haifa.ac.il

Adam H. Boyette
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Department of Human Behavior, Evolution, and Culture, Deutscher Platz 6, 04103 Leipzig, Germany.
Email: adam_boyette@eva.mpg.de

Hillary N. Fouts
Department of Child and Family Studies, University of Tennessee, Jessie W. Harris Building, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA.
Email: hfouts@utk.edu

David E. Friesem
McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, Downing Site, CB2 3ER, Cambridge, UK.
Email: df360@cam.ac.uk

Peter M. Gardner
Department of Anthropology, University of Missouri, 112 Swallow Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA.
Email: GardenerP@missouri.edu

Barry S. Hewlett
Department of Anthropology, Washington State University, Vancouver, WA 98686, USA.
Email: hewlett@wsu.edu

Robert K. Hitchcock
Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, MSC01 1040, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001 USA.
Email: rhitchcock@unm.edu

Emmanuelle Honoré
McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Downing Street, CB2 3ER Cambridge, UK.
Email: eigh2@cam.ac.uk

Jean Hudson
Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 3413 N. Downer Ave. Sabin Hall 390, Milwaukee, WI 53211, USA.
Email: jhudson@uwm.edu

Robert L. Kelly
Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071, USA.
Email: RLKELLY@uwyo.edu

Noa Lavi
Department of Anthropology, University of Haifa, Mt. Carmel, 31905, Haifa, Israel.
Email: noalaviw@gmail.com

Jerome Lewis
Department of Anthropology, University College London, 14 Taviton Street, WC1H 0BW London, UK.
Email: Jerome.lewis@ucl.ac.uk

Sheina Lew-Levy
Department of Psychology, Robert C. Brown Hall RCB 5246, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6 Canada.
Email: sheinalewlevy@gmail.com

Alan J. Osborn
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Omaha, 383G ASH, Omaha, NE 68182 USA.
Email: aosborn2@unomaha.edu

Spencer R. Pelton
Transcom Environmental, 331 N. 3rd St., Douglas, WY 82633, USA.
Email: spencerpelton@gmail.com
Magalie Quintal-Marineau
Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, Institut national de la recherche scientifique 385 Sherbrooke Street E., Montreal, Canada H2X 1E3.
Email: magalie.quintalm@ucs.inrs.ca

Erick Robinson
Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology, Utah State University, 0730 Old Main Hill, Logan, Utah 84322-0730, USA.
Email: Erick.Robinson@usu.edu

Kenneth Sillander
Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, P.O.Box 16, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.
Email: kenneth.sillander@helsinki.fi

Penny Spikins
Archaeology PalaeoHub, University of York, Wentworth Way, Heslington. York YO10 5DD, UK.
Email: penny.spikins@york.ac.uk

Gilbert B. Tostevin
Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota, 395 H.H. Humphrey Center, 301 19th Ave. S Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.
Email: toste003@umn.edu

Bram Tucker
Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602 USA.
Email: bramtuck@uga.edu

George Wenzel
Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke Street W., Montreal, Canada H3A 0B9.
Email: george.wenzel@mcgill.ca

Thomas Widlok
African Studies, University of Cologne, Albertus-Magnus-Platz, 50923 Köln, Germany.
Email: thomas.widlok@uni-koeln.de
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Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem,
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Chapter 5

The demand for closeness: social incentives for sharing among hunter-gatherers and other groups

Kenneth Sillander

Sharing as a distinct type of transfer, different from exchange, and a defining feature of hunter-gatherer sociality has attracted increasing anthropological interest in recent decades. Many theories have been advanced to account for the practice, which challenges the received anthropological view derived from Mauss that precapitalistic social life was based on exchange and reciprocity, and the widespread idea that people strive to maximize self-interest through their actions. What are the reasons and incentives for transferring food and resources according to a principle that does not guarantee return for the donors or impose debt on the recipients? What explains the predominance of this transactional mode among hunter-gatherers, and what motivates individual actors to share and demand? This chapter addresses these questions by attending to the social incentives for sharing. Foremost among these, it proposes, are demands for social resources emergent from the nature of sociality among hunter-gatherers, and kinship, which as Bird-David (this volume) argues, has been marginalized in ethnographic studies of hunter-gatherer sharing.

The chapter takes as its starting points the increasingly acknowledged recognition that a rigid distinction between hunter-gatherers and other groups is untenable, and the observation that extensive sharing is found also among some of the latter. This suggests that other conditions than the hunter-gatherers’ economy and distinctive subsistence pattern may cause their propensity to share (e.g. Barnard 1983; Dentan 2011; Gell 1999; Hamilton 1982; Ingold 1986). While early attempts to explain hunter-gatherer sharing mainly emphasized economic conditions, the focus in the more recent literature has shifted to social factors. The chapter continues this trend and expands on the insights in some of the landmark works on the subject to develop a distinct contribution on how sharing is socially conditioned through practical association and aspirations for closeness. It is proposed that the social conditions that hunter-gatherers have in common with other groups that practice high-incidence sharing are central in motivating their sharing orientation.

My motivation to look at social causes of sharing beyond the economy – and beyond hunter-gatherers – is partly personal, and derives from the fact that my own fieldwork has not been with hunter-gatherers, but with the Bentian, a group of shifting cultivators of Indonesian Borneo who in many ways resemble hunter-gatherers. Thus it was my field experience with shifting cultivators that attended me to these factors, as well as kindled my interest in hunter-gatherers, initially because the literature on them provided a source of insights on shifting cultivators. An additional motivation, reinforcing this interest, was my subsequent involvement in the book Anarchic Solidarity (Gibson & Sillander 2011), which considers a number of Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators who hold in common a set of basic principles of social life, including sharing.

Many Southeast Asian shifting cultivators, and horticultural societies elsewhere, lead a social life which features abundant sharing, and many other qualities frequently attributed to hunter-gatherers, especially those labelled ‘immediate-return’ by James Woodburn (for some examples, see Atkinson 1989; Frake 1960; Gell 1999; Geddes 1954; Gibson 1986; Rival 2002; Rosaldo 1980; Schieffelin 1990; Schlegel 1972; Sillander 2011; Walker 2013). These qualities include extensive personal autonomy; weakly developed kin roles and status positions; absence of corporate groups; lack of developed authority and institutional structures; classificatory or universal kinship; egalitarianism; residential mobility and organizational fluidity; and immediacy-based sociality. Apparently participation in ‘delayed-return activities’ through farming does not rule out sharing, and unlike what Woodburn stated in 1982, not necessarily trigger the
development of corporate and hierarchic structures involving ‘binding commitments and dependencies between people’ (1982, 433).

As an example we may take the Bentian, who during my fieldwork with them in upriver villages in the 1990’s conducted extensive sharing, and maintained considerable personal autonomy along with other typical immediate-return characteristics, even while they owned houses and domesticated animals, claimed bilaterally inherited rights to land and plants cultivated by forebears (the latter notably including extensive holdings of rattan sold for trade), and reciprocally exchanged labour at certain stages in the cycle of rice cultivation. Sharing was considered an obligation, an exemplary form of behaviour between kin and neighbours expressive of an ideal that those who are close should provide care and mutual support for each other. Sharing occurred through donor-initiated distribution of game (wild boar, deer) and occasionally other food resources (fish, honey); offering of food and accommodation for short and long time visitors; provision of meals for the duration of frequent and often long-lasting rituals to anybody attending; and perhaps most importantly, frequent and explicit demands for various resources and services ranging from cigarettes, food, clothes, livestock, and dogs, to agricultural and other work assistance, ritual participation, and children for company or adoption. Asking someone for something (sake) formed a salient and framed event whereby people presented their requests in a direct and formalized way, and demands were notably never overtly rejected, even though eventually not always met, and resources often hidden.

My impression at the time was that their sharing orientation was sustained above all by concrete opportunities and constraints generated through the presence of intimate consociates and the organization of events and interaction in everyday life, combined with the recognized values of sharing and relatedness and a desire to maintain good relations. Rather than some sort of underlying economic rationality or lofty strategic scheme to obtain certain benefits (risk avoidance or equal resource distribution), the most crucial factors engendering the practice appeared to be of a more immediate and practical nature.

These observations have guided the theoretical propositions developed in this chapter. I believe that there are conditions intrinsic to the sociality of hunter-gatherers and similarly organized people that enable and motivate their sharing orientation. I concur herein with Thomas Widlok (2013, 2017) that there are certain ‘situative causes’ – grounded in the social process of interaction – that form preconditions for the enactment of sharing in practice. I am in agreement also with Tim Ingold (1986), Nurit Bird-David (1994), Nicolas Peterson (1993), and others, who in different ways have argued that the incentives for hunter-gatherer sharing are constituted essentially through social activity, or sociality. However, in contrast to some sharing theorists, I emphasize the importance of social values and aspirations for connection and integration as crucial factors motivating sharing. The key to why hunter-gatherers are inclined to share and demand, I suggest, is the nature of their sociality, which generates conditions of immediacy and intimacy among them, while rendering the values of sharing and relatedness compelling.

I examine how sociality is conducive to sharing among hunter-gatherers and similar groups by focusing mainly on two qualities of their sociality – open aggregation and relatedness – which I believe are particularly important in this respect. Other qualities are no doubt important too, and I do not mean to depreciate them; ultimately, sharing is probably multitedetermined through the combined influence of a number of interconnected aspects of their sociality rather than caused by any single factor alone (Kent 1996, 13–14). To an extent, my focus on open aggregation and relatedness reflects my assessment of what is most meaningful to address based on what earlier contributions to the theory of sharing have shown or failed to show. The general point that considering them serves to illustrate is that sharing may largely be explained by sociality, or social conditions more generally, without recourse to economic conditions. Connected to this, I accentuate that sharing is about the management of social resources as much as of material resources, and that it forms an aspect of a generalized sharing life-style based on achieved and aspired closeness.

Open aggregation

An important concept in Anarchic Solidarity which I will take the opportunity to develop further here is ‘open aggregation’. It highlights some of the variously lamented and celebrated ‘anarchic’ features of hunter-gatherer and other similarly organized societies, and represents an attempt to positively describe their social structure, which typically has been described negatively in terms of what it lacks. The term conveys a condition by means of which elements of some sort, in the manner of Lego bricks, may be attached to others in various ways to form larger composite entities, and variably detached and re-attached. Open aggregation can be defined as a state, or process, of ‘flexible association and dissociation of individuals with social units, and flexible initiation and termination of interpersonal relations within and beyond them’ (Sillander
2011, 141). It refers to the commonly encountered condition in the societies considered whereby social relations and groups can be established and dissolved with relative and often remarkable ease, compared to societies with more fixed and rigid group organization and relationship structures. A notable virtue of the concept is that it suggests that the same characteristics that enable autonomy, flexibility and flux also enable integration. I argue that there are conditions associated with open aggregation that are conducive to integration, and thereby, to sharing, as a means of realizing it, and an end or value in itself. In addition, I propose, it entails a patterning of social relations which may form a precondition for the viable practice of sharing, as a type of transfer which is not based on obligation or generosity, yet requires initiative and a ‘willingness to let go’ (Widlok 2017).

Open aggregation is closely interlinked with some other qualities of sociality. For instance, it obviously entails personal autonomy, and plausibly both promotes, and is promoted by, that quintessential feature of hunter-gatherer sociality (e.g. Gardner 1991). Ease of initiating and terminating relationships and group affiliation is recognizably much the same thing as having autonomy (although there is observably more to autonomy than this, autonomy also being about how much authority people are subjected to in their relationships, for instance). Similarly, open aggregation clearly entails – indeed in a sense is – a sort of social mobility, of a horizontal type, through which it is notably frequently linked up with spatial mobility. Change of residence often involves change of affiliation, and the influence goes both ways, with hunter-gatherers often moving in order to change relationships (e.g. Woodburn 1972). Similar mutually reinforcing relationships would seem to exist between open aggregation and a whole range of features of hunter-gatherer sociality, including egalitarianism, classificatory kinship, opportunism, and immediacy, all of which have been seen to exert a positive influence on sharing in their own right.

Where it occurs, the pattern of open aggregation is often replicated on several levels of scale and across many contexts. It pertains to smaller social units such as families, to medium-sized groups like camps and bands, and often also to larger, named, regional groupings, as well as the egocentric relations of individuals within and between all of them. An important example is marriage, whose initiation typically requires little ceremony or investment in hunter-gatherer societies (e.g. Morris 1982; Sellato 1994). Divorce, likewise, is usually not heavily sanctioned and frequently common, as are remarriages (e.g. Blurton Jones, Marlowe, Hawkes & O’Connell 2000; Hill & Hurtado 1996). Other common examples, often exemplifying both sharing and open aggregation, are adoption and various fostering and alloparenting practices, along with free-moving adolescents staying with various relatives (indicating limited parental authority as another feature associated with open aggregation). All these forms occur widely also among open-aggregated farmers (e.g. Gibson 1986) and in post-forager societies (e.g. Musharbash 2009) and may be every bit as pronounced there. Among Bentians they were much evident, such as through frequent adoption and remarriage (people commonly marrying four to five times or more; cf. Gibson 1985, 394). Here it was common also for adults to move into relatives’ houses, in many cases following repeatedly prolonged visits, and without prior decision. Significantly contributing to Bentian open aggregation was alternating residence between houses in villages and small clusters of frequently moved farmhouses in dispersed swidden fields, where many families stayed most of the year, and often chose their neighbours based on personal preferences, and frequently changed them when moving to new farming sites.

Another Bentian practice interpretable as an instance of open aggregation – exemplifying its integrative side – is occasional polygamy, including polyandry, practiced concomitantly with dominant monogamy. Outside Himalaya and parts of India, polyandry occurs mainly among hunter-gatherers and dispersed shifting cultivators (Sillander 2011, 160), arguably testifying in these societies, as among Bentian and Paliyan (Gardner 2000), to a pragmatic and permissive stance, allowing for flexible integration of several people in a union while avoiding leaving anyone out, as does sometimes polygyny in these societies. A central quality that this example bears out, which is plausibly intrinsically associated with open aggregation, is an ‘unprincipled’ attitude (Guemple 1988), a commonly reported unimportance of detailed rules for social organization and interpersonal behaviour. More than unprincipledness, this often comes out as an active stance of ‘antipathy to rules and regulations’ (see, for example, Overing & Passes, 2000, 2, who associate it with a preference for a ‘convivial sociality’ among Amazonian forager-horticulturalists), or even ‘principled anarchy’ (Gardner 2000).

This quality may in part reflect two others, which are certainly relevant in their own right for these marriage practices, and seemingly also of general relevance for open-aggregated processes in the societies where they are prevalent. These are the low population numbers, or the small-scale, of these societies, as well as their characteristic orientation of inclusiveness. Demography and scale are clearly
crucial factors influencing the form of hunter-gatherer sociality (Bird-David 2017, and this volume), and it would seem that a tolerant, ‘rule-critic’, mind-set, and a flexible orientation of inclusion, are adaptive in allowing for optimal utilization of scarce social capital, including marriage partners, and of socially mediated material resources, in their small-scale settings. In respect to the occasional unions of multiple partners, the very scarcity of people motivates this practice as a means for optimizing the reproductive potential of groups (Sellato 1994, 56; barrenness notably being an important motive), although concerns with optimizing social resources more generally (sexual, emotional, economic, etc.) also motivate such flexible arrangements judging by the Bentian and Paliyan material.

A similar utility obviously pertains to open aggregation as such, in that flexible association and dissociation in itself promotes wide access to social resources. In addition, it has the added benefit, due to the ‘safety valve’ of easy dissociation, of reducing the disruptive risks to social harmony of this recognizably tension-generating endeavour, as effectively stated by those authors who propose that hunter-gatherer flux serves to counteract social conflict (e.g. Turnbull 1968). At the same time, however, open aggregation itself exacerbates the unpredictability of social resources by allowing for easy dissociation, and easy association, which potentially subjects people to numerous multi-directional demands. Together with inclusive kinship, bringing with it demands, it is a source of a ‘socially produced scarcity’ (Peterson 1993, 870), and a socially produced uncertainty, arising from what Fred Myers calls ‘a lack of social closure’ (1986, 166), from the negotiated character of social relations, and the impossibility of ever fully stabilizing social boundaries and relations.

This situation of social indeterminacy presumably encourages several prominent cultural orientations often reported from open-aggregated groups, suggesting ‘translation’ of the social condition of open aggregation into the sphere of culture. They include an orientation to the present (e.g. Meillassoux 1981; Woodburn 1982), ‘opportunism’ (Sellato 1994), and a quality of ‘social grace’, a capacity for adaptive responsiveness to social contingency (Rosaldo 1993). The much proclaimed ‘forager mode of thought’ of hunter-gatherers (Barnard 2002), or their generalized cultural principle of ‘procurement’ evident beyond natural resource foraging (Bird-David 1992), probably largely reflects social indeterminacy rather than economic conditions. As much as adaptations to an unpredictable, ‘giving’ environment (Bird-David 1990), or immediate-return economy (Woodburn 1982), these dispositions may be responses to an open-aggregated and ‘immediate’ social environment.

### Inclusion and integration

As regards the orientation of inclusion, which is manifest not least through the practice of sharing itself – in principle unbounded and unqualified, often extended to anybody present – this quality may be both foundational for hunter-gatherer sociality (cf. Spikins, this volume), and constitutive of open aggregation, perhaps to the extent that the latter may first and foremost be seen as a principle of inclusion. Besides by sharing, this orientation is evinced by an ideal not to leave anyone out (as exemplified by polygamy); an unwillingness to make distinctions between people and groups; classificatory kinship; and the elasticity and inclusive character of designations for groups, observably often based on local words for ‘family’, ‘us’, or ‘human’ (e.g. Bird-David 1994; Gibson 1986; Myers 1986; Schlegel 1972; Sillander 2011). I propose that the orientation of inclusion and sharing in open-aggregated small-scale social formations fundamentally reflects an often marked socio-centric thrust toward integration, importantly motivated by exigencies inherent to their demographic and social-organizational predicament. Ultimately, open aggregation is perhaps best seen as expressing, not apparent disintegration and personal autonomy, but ongoing open-ended association, and the constant flow of sociality that serves to achieve it, such as through abundant multilateral visiting. This is also suggested by the often conspicuously unmarked initiation and ending of visits in open-aggregated settings, which itself expresses unbounded and continuous connection (Bird-David 2017, 71–7).

An important quality of open aggregation expressing inclusiveness is weak group boundaries, social and conceptual. Groups in open-aggregated societies are frequently ill-defined, vaguely bounded, overlapping, and not very group-like to begin with, an indication of their non-corporate nature. Thereby open aggregation conforms to a kind of social design that Ingold terms ‘unbounded inclusion’, and regards as determinative both of hunter-gatherer sociality and personal identity. ‘The key to the difference between “tribal” and “pre-tribal” [i.e. hunter-gatherer] designs lies’, he suggests, ‘in the demarcation of boundaries’ (1986, 236). The communities and groups that hunter-gatherers belong to are, in his view, unbounded and undifferentiated, essentially reflecting that they do not form part of an emergent encompassing institutional structure, or ‘society’. While individuals and groups in ‘tribal society’ are organized vis-à-vis each other through the principle of ‘segmentary opposition’, in hunting-gathering societies they are organized through the principle of ‘inclusive incorporation’, meaning that ‘a person derives his sense of belonging
... not through setting himself apart from others, but by drawing them into his own ambience' (1986, 236).

This at once makes for a thoroughgoing inclusiveness of identities, group and personal, and for the ‘freedom of association manifested in the fluidity of composition of the band’ (1986, 237), the latter entailing a condition whereby people interact autonomously in the capacity as ‘particular human beings’, rather than as incumbents of particular roles, positions or groups, as ‘components of an instituted order’ (1986, 235; cf. Needham 1959, 86). But the inclusive nature of the individual’s belonging to collectivities also ‘underwrites a particular kind of autonomy’ (1986, 237), later described by Ingold as ‘relational’, which does not contrast self and other, and ‘emerges through a history of continuing involvement with others in joint, practical activity’ (1999, 408). This, he observes (1999, 405–7), gives rise to social relations based on the principle of ‘coalescence’ (after Bird-David 1994) whereby people interact not as self-contained, opposed individuals, but merge through ‘shared activities’ and ‘joint experiences’ in close, immediate ‘we relationships’ as outlined by Bird-David.

Two important considerations that this bears out are the nature of ties in open-aggregated communities and their construction through social practice. Charles Macdonald (2011), adopting Mark Granovetter’s concept (1973), argues that open-aggregated ties, at least outside the domestic family, generally are ‘weak ties’, in that they can be severed and are not strictly obligatory. Ties in open-aggregated contexts are obviously often weak in this respect, entailing easy dissociation and high personal autonomy. But as Macdonald notes, they are also appropriately considered ‘weak ties’ in Granovetter’s intended counterintuitive understanding, because of providing much integration in society, such as by facilitating transmission of information and human traffic across group boundaries, new connections, and realignments. Sharing itself is often understood as essentially based on weak ties, providing wide resource distribution while not engendering reciprocal obligations or lasting bonds, indeed by preserving autonomy and loose connections (e.g. Widlok 2013; Woodburn 1982).

Despite these observations, I have some substantial doubts about understanding open aggregation – or sharing – as being based on weak ties. Clearly, relations in open-aggregated societies, both inside and outside the domestic family, have many of the characteristics of ‘strong ties’, such as being intimate and important. They are obviously multifacetedly important, both subjectively (commonly being compassionate and regarded as vital), and objectively, by being ‘multiplex’ (pertaining to many aspects and contexts; Riches 1981), and by involving much interaction and mediation of material resources. While people in open-aggregated societies may seem characterized by a conspicuous orientation of immediacy, moving in and out of relations, this does not mean that relations, when active, are characterized by a lack of intimacy, or the kind of moral indifference that Woodburn (1982) attributes to Hadza. Rather, as in my experience of the Bentian, these relations may better be described through Brian Morris’ (1982, 141) characterization of Hill Pandaram social relations as ‘dyadic bonds of affection’. This characterization captures, I think, the importance of open-aggregated ties, even as these are often ‘intermittent and somewhat fragile’ (1982, 141), while appositely hinting at the importance of emotions in them, including the widely reported sentiments of trust, pity and compassion, which develop within these relationships, despite their structural openness (e.g. Myers 1986; Walker 2013; Spikins, this volume).

For several reasons, it would be erroneous to characterize open-aggregated societies as atomistic. Even though integration is not provided by the principles described for ‘tribal’ societies (descent, norms, reciprocity, etc.), people are in certain ways integrated, and in some ways strongly, although the form of this integration is of an entirely different nature. The fundamental principle through which it is accomplished, I suggest, is practical association with concrete others, which fosters attachment between individuals, and thereby motivates sharing as a means to sustain it, while making the practice compelling in itself. Thomas Gibson (1985) and Charles Macdonald (2011), respectively, have proposed the terms ‘companionship’ and ‘fellowship’ to describe the mode of association in open-aggregated groups, poignantly connoting the double aspect of the resultant relations as being voluntary, yet in some ways strong.

An important consequence of this type of organization, and a central reason why it encourages sharing, co-operation, visiting and sociality more generally, is that social relations and groups, more than elsewhere, are the result of achievement. The openness of relationship and group configuration entails a fundamental, structurally predicated, unpredictability and conditionality of social resources, and calls for active demands for them, as for material resources accessible through others (suggesting one reason for demand sharing’s prevalence in these societies). Relationships and ‘community’ have here a markedly performative quality, coming into being through continuous enactment. Just as sharing tends to require initiation through demands (Peterson 1993), and action-established contextual framing to be situationally compelling and successfully executed (Widlok.
Sharing and open aggregation

This performative quality makes for a conspicuous orientation toward ‘shared activity’ (Gibson 1985), of which sharing represents a paradigmatic and influentially exemplary instance. Doing things together becomes a precondition for connection and integration, and a means for the reproduction and restoration of these conditions. Sociality in a general sense, encompassing various collective and interpersonal encounters from co-operative enterprises, meetings and religious ceremonies to visits and informal, self-purposive sociability, becomes imbued with an ongoing general social significance beyond any particular utilitarian or other concrete goal at hand. Consistent with this, sociality is intensely valued (see, for example, Lewis, this volume). Well-being, the ‘good life’, and happiness are often perceived to be about being in the company of others, while being alone represents a dreaded and unlucky state (Ekholy 2016; Myers 1986; Walker 2013). There is an inclination to engage in informal, convivial sociality, and a proclivity for physically close, tactile interaction, especially among hunter-gatherers (e.g. Overing & Passes 2000; Ekholy 2016; Hewlett et al. 2011; Hewlett et al., this volume).

In this setting, sharing provides access to both material and social resources. More than a means of transfer of food and things, it represents a means for and an instance of realizing relationships in practice through activity. This is both a needs-motivated pragmatic endeavour, and an activity purposeful in itself, realizing sentiments of belonging and the affirmation of relations acquired in a history of previous actualizations of shared activity, going back to early socialization events and interaction with parents and siblings.

Sharing is perhaps best seen here as an aspect of a generalized sharing life-style, encompassing various activities whereby intimately connected people share space, time and ‘each other’ (Ingold 1999, 408), in addition to vital or coveted material resources. It may aptly be considered, in Ingold’s phrase, as ‘an experience of mutual interpersonal involvement’ (1986, 101), being an expression and enactment of acquired connectedness and shared lives. Consequently, sharing in open-aggregated groups prominently has the quality of ‘sharing in’, in the sense of the ‘joining of individuals in common action’ (Bird-David 2005, 203), even when manifestly being about ‘sharing out’, the division and distribution of resources (Ingold 1986, 233; Widlok 2017, 181, and this volume). It represents a process whereby people are ‘drawn in’ – become associated and acquire a sense of relatedness in and through sociality.

‘Sharing in’, in this respect, is to an extent a general property of sharing. Widlok (2017) argues that sharing constitutes those involved in it as a ‘community of practice’, and that this in principle applies everywhere, not only to hunter-gatherers’ sharing, but also, for instance, to context-limited sharing in modern societies. He insightfully adopts the concept to highlight that integration among the practitioners, along with their motivation to partake in the practice, and their situated learning of the requisite skills to perform it, all essentially accrue from their recurrent participation in the activity itself. Thus the same pattern that characterizes integration in open-aggregated societies also more narrowly pertains to sharing: ‘the community of practice that is created through sharing is neither held together by strategic association of free agents nor by authoritarian verdict over unfree subjects but by “performed presence” between people who share their lives’ (2017, 157).

While Widlok makes an instructive case for practice being the fundamental principle through which sharing develops, it is perceivably not the case that participation in sharing alone suffices to explain its importance or emergence as a dominant mode of transfer in small-scale societies. Widlok also perceptively understands the community of practice to include not only the practitioners, but also the ‘objects and the settings in which they are being transferred’, and he observes that changes in the latter – in which he includes forms of kinship, conversational rhetorics and architectural infrastructure – may be enough to disrupt sharing practices (2017, 64–78). These are clearly important factors which he convincingly shows are critical for facilitating settings conducive to sharing – most essentially, it would appear, by enabling interactional conditions of immediacy and what he calls ‘practical presence’ (mutually recognized presence).

But apart from these ‘external’ factors operative in concrete sharing situations, it is crucial to highlight also some more ‘internal’ and enduring ones, carried along by individuals in and out of sharing situations, which Widlok either neglects or dismisses. In the first place, for the kind of broad-range sharing practiced by hunter-gatherers to develop and be viably maintained, long-term and intimate practical association achieved not only through sharing itself but through various forms of shared activity (and straightforward socialization) is arguably essential. Widlok admits that ‘the training continues in a lifelong way’ (2017, 192), although he generally attributes little significance to other than sharing events and the affective and rela-
tion-solidifying effects that the long-term ‘training’ would seem to have for the propensity to share, and demand. By contrast, I believe that intimacy, and associated sentiments and social values, which along with abilities and practical association develop in this process, are critical. Presumably of central significance are all those services afforded by close relatives outside the context of formal institutionalized sharing, through which individuals are nurtured into adulthood (Peterson 1993, 869).

Finally, it would seem that the social-organizational condition of open aggregation itself is conducive to the development of broad-range sharing in several ways. As argued, openness of relationships and social indeterminacy compel people to continually enact and cultivate relations. This motivates sharing of material resources and social resources as a means for maintaining or acquiring – and demonstrating the value of – relations, at the same time as it encourages active demands for the resources as a means for obtaining them – and ‘testing’ the value of the relations (cf. Peterson 1993; Macdonald 2000). But besides encouraging sharing, open aggregation observably also enables it to begin with through flexible and unbounded association of people allowing for unconstrained and open-ended circulation of resources through sharing, while conversely impeding other modes of transfer, which require relational constraints and fixity. Moreover, by encouraging practical association through shared activity as the principal mode of integration, open aggregation engenders a foundation for sharing through experiences of closeness, compassion and mutual trust which are liable to develop in this process. This capacity rests in part on the fact that this form of integration operates with minimal imposition of dominance structures and maintains ‘respect for the autonomy of the other’, qualities which as Ingold argues are crucial for trust (1999, 407). Yet more importantly, many of the very activities through which this integration is accomplished – visiting, non-instrumental sociability, care and nurture – are supremely conducive to these sentiments, and to an experience-based sense of relatedness, which I suggest critically motivates extensive sharing.

Relatedness

By ‘relatedness’ I generally mean kinship, although I use the term to indicate that what I denote is more than genealogical kinship, and essentially a form of ‘kinship’ based on practical association (Sillander 2011). This is a dominant form of relatedness in the small-scale open-aggregated societies considered (e.g. Bird-David 1994; Bodenhorn 2000; Guemple 1988; Myers 1986; Storrie 2003), and arguably a central factor facilitating sharing. However, it could legitimately be called kinship instead, since this form of relatedness relies on the genealogical idiom to designate people, even while it is extended to non-genealogical ‘relatives’ (and often non-human beings too). Thus I do not consider any kind of relatedness, but generally reserve the term for relatedness couched in the genealogical idiom.

My argument is that ‘relatedness’ is important for sharing, both in the capacity as idiom, and as ideology, that is, through the application of kinship terminology, and through the application of an associated ‘kinship ideology’, which prescribes closeness, responsibility, care, assistance, and similar values between ‘relatives’. In addition, I contend, relatedness is fundamentally important through the dispositions generated through close association between concrete people perceived as kin. Kinship or relatedness in these different respects encourages sharing in several ways: by generating the values by which it is associated; by promoting connections and closeness; and by authorizing demands and motivating sharing in sharing situations. My sense, based on fieldwork experiences and the ethnography, is that sharing in indigenous conceptions is typically motivated by relatedness. Like Bird-David, I perceive that sharing, and the resultant ‘levelling’, is ‘moved not by an egalitarian ideology, but by the force of kinship ties’ (2005, 207). Woodburn’s (1980, 441–2) suggestion that sharing in hunter-gatherer societies is comparable to taxation in modern societies is at odds with how it is ethnoculturally construed and experienced in most small-scale societies, in which conceptions of virtuous conduct, well-being, and good relations between ‘relatives’ are usually primary.

The genealogical idiom and a kinship ideology seem to be universally present among hunter-gatherers and similarly organized shifting cultivators, even as relatedness is largely based on practical association. A central quality of kinship in these societies is that it is classificatory or even ‘universal’ (Barnard 1978), and characteristically bilateral at root. Classificatory bilateral kinship along with bilocal postmarital residence has been identified as adaptive to hunter-gatherers’ mobile ways of life and their heightened demographic vulnerabilities (Kramer & Greaves 2011). Conversely, the demise of sharing has been proposed to often result from the emergence of corporate groups and the consequent weakening of open and classificatory kinship networks (Widlok 2017, 67–8). Significantly, where other forms of kinship are reckoned by hunter-gatherers or forager-horticulturalists, such as in south India (Gardner 2000) Amazonia (Rival 2002; Walker 2013), and Australia (Myers 1986), these tend
to become simplified and modified, and more alike classificatory bilateral kinship in practice.

Classificatory bilateral kinship is consistent with the open-aggregated pattern of association and observably facilitates it, while other forms of kinship recognizably entail restrictions in movement and association that compromise it. Among hunter-gatherers and cultivator groups like the Bentian it indeed functions much like an open-aggregated system in its own right. It serves as a device for creating and multiplying social ties and resources, for drawing people into personal networks and inducing them to provide support, while maintaining a considerable degree of choice, flexibility and personal autonomy. Including non-biological relatives within its scope may thus be seen as consistent with its logic of operation, or even as an extension of its main principle. The tendency to recognize relatedness based on practical association may not be restricted to groups practicing classificatory bilateral kinship, but such kinship is observably particularly well-adjusted to facilitate it.

Kinship has often been observed to be unimportant in hunter-gatherer societies since they typically lack corporate descent groups, extensive genealogies, and well-defined kinship role obligations. Since kin categories are not ‘load-bearing’ (Woodburn 1972, 197), but ‘empty’, not ‘a guide to behavioural expectations between relatives’ (Morris 1982, 136), it has been assumed that kinship is inconsequential for social action. Similarly, that relatedness is often extended to non-kin, and that relationships are largely constituted through practical association rather than strict genealogical kinship, has also been taken to express the unimportance of kinship (e.g. Meillassoux 1981; Gibson 1985). Although based on valid observations, such evaluations of kinship in hunter-gatherer and like societies are arguably misguided and misleading. Reflecting conventional and anthropological preconceptions of kinship, they disguise the role and influence that relatedness, or even kinship in stricter sense, patently has in them. People in these societies do of course practice kinship, and it matters, although this is, as Bird-David (1994, 594) has asserted, kinship of ‘a different order’. However, even when based on practical association, ‘the resulting relationships are predominantly of kinship’ (Ingold 1999, 406), that is, they are framed in the genealogical idiom, and often intimate, vital and onerous, quite like genealogical kinship relations in general.

Closeness and practice

Instead of relation-specific rules and roles, what we typically find in open-aggregated groups is a sort of generality of relationship, general principles and generalized roles, and a condition whereby ‘being a relative is more important than defining what sort of kin one is’ (Myers 1986, 107). This does not mean that being a relative is devoid of content or importance. As elsewhere, it still implies expectations of closeness, responsibility, care, and so on. What it does, instead of emptying kinship of content, is extend expectations generally pertaining to close family diffusely, and often widely, albeit decreasingly with increasing distance (for obvious practical reasons, but also because of a widespread perception that close kinship matters more). Arguably the very generality of kinship also serves to mark this content. As Myers remarks, ‘the formal classifications are encompassed by the larger metaphor of kinship as “amity”, and the categories themselves are reduced in practice to a very simple model of social life among “family”’ (1986, 217).

The generality of kinship does not obviate kinship’s ability to influence social action either, in so far as the values associated with it are recognized, and motivated by experience and practical association. Through common and often dominant use of kinship terms for address and reference, and frequent invocations of these values as moral guidelines for relations between ‘relatives’, kinship is present and operative in the life-world, salient in discourse, talk, thought, and experiences. Being addressed as a ‘relative’, or simply knowing one has such status from previous interaction, is influential because of this influence, which communicates the general validity of these values, and because it evokes experiences of practical association with concrete relatives which confers personal meaning to the term. Also, while expectations and obligations between relatives are largely generalized, they are widely applicable, and often invoked and difficult to ignore in many concrete situations.

Kinship matters, then, because of its importance in practice. As much as from continuous immersion in a discursive universe of kinship terminology and ideology, however, this importance derives from what relatives have meant for people in practice, and their continuous imposing presence. The authority of kinship has here, even more distinctly than usual, an interactional basis, which, besides the open-aggregated nature of kinship and social relations, largely reflects the intimate and immediate nature of social relations and interaction in small-scale social universes. Of particular significance for sharing, the latter form a context prolific to the emanation of expectations and demands, and felicitous to the emergence of experienced closeness and relatedness through close practical association.

In Bird-David’s view (1994), immediacy itself is what largely causes this sense of relatedness. Through vivid and unmediated presence and shared activi-
ties, the sociality of small-scale bands generates ‘we relationships’ in which people cultivate ‘shared perspectives’ on belongings, themselves, and the world around them, and experience an intimate connection expressed through self-reference as ‘us’. The resultant condition approximates what Russell Belk (2010) calls ‘aggregate extended self’, a concept designating an experience of shared identity with close others and inclusion of them within one’s (extended) self, with whom sharing consequently is not perceived as giving away, but rather as sharing with oneself (cf. Widlok 2017, 24, and this volume). By this Belk does not mean any deep or mystical emotional state or merging of distinct individuals, but rather a not too uncommon human experience of strong unity and compassion, whereby one’s close ones’ lives, and property interests, matter about as much as one’s own. As he observes, this experience of extended self, like the associated pattern of ‘intimate sharing’ which works to augment it, is common everywhere in families (although by no means the only form of transfer in them), and he suggests it is central also for understanding the rationale of sharing more generally. Similar observations were made by John Price (1975, 5, 8) who argued that sharing is the economic behaviour characteristic of ‘intimate economies’ such as households and ‘band societies’, and that it is ‘dependent upon the emotional and sentimental bonds that develop between people’ (while reciprocity, by contrast, is based on ‘intellectual calculation of returns’ and inimical to intimate personal relations) (see also Spikins, this volume).

I believe these observations deserve greater attention than generally afforded in the sharing literature. They highlight a continuum between sharing in the family and sharing more widely within the community which may be fundamental to hunter-gatherer sharing. They point to the importance not only of immediacy and proximity but also of relatedness and intimacy, as cardinal dimensions of a ‘sociality of closeness’ to which a sharing orientation is integral. Importantly, I propose, sharing in the societies under consideration is, as Bird-David notes for the Nayaka, construed as conducted ‘as among family’, or ‘as among siblings’ (1990, 189, 191). Close-kin metaphors, extended widely in social relations and beyond to non-humans in the environment, are, as she notes (1990, 194), central in hunter-gatherer societies, and I suggest that they also provide the tenor and much of the force of sharing in them (see also Bird-David, this volume).

A widely reported motivation for small-scale society sharing is maintaining close relations with relatives or close consociates, and pre-established closeness is often a precondition for making demands or eliciting shares (e.g. Macdonald 2000). This motivation is particularly pressing in societies where kinship is largely achieved and based on practical association, in which, as Widlok notes, ‘sharing receives central importance as part of the attempt to redefine kinship on the basis of performative, constitutive acts of sharing’ (2017, 64). The inclusive relatedness typical of these societies fundamentally requires achievement, since not only non-biological, but also biological, relatives need to be affirmed through practice to emerge as important from among the multitude of biological and other potential relatives (Bodenhorn 2000; Bird-David 1994; Sillander 2011; Walker 2013). Much sharing that goes on in them presumably serves the elementary purpose of reproducing the social conditions that facilitate an ongoing sense of relatedness. As Bird-David observes, ‘the cultures of sharing which are common to these peoples ... may at least in part be about sustaining the flow of joint experience, the mutual sense of immediacy, that keep people in a (near) we-relationship’ (1994, 599).

Sharing and kinship
There is an important two-way relation between sharing and relatedness which is crucial both for family sharing and broad-range sharing in small-scale societies, and for understanding why the latter is typically linked up with invocations of kinship. Sharing lends substance to kinship, and kinship – both as value conditions that facilitate an ongoing sense of relatedness – provides an incentive for, and legitimates, sharing and demanding. That sharing is central to kinship, especially when the latter is to some extent elective and possible to acquire without genealogical connection, perhaps goes without saying. Sharing, whether of material resources, or of residence, company, activity, and so on, tangibly demonstrates closeness and importance of relationship. It is appreciably eminently qualified to realizing and expressing the solidarity quite universally expected in close kin relationships. This helps elucidate, among other things, why demonstrative ‘redundant sharing’ (beyond needs) is often especially motivated in more distant (or less regularly maintained) kinship relations, whose maintenance cannot rely on the taken-for-granted everyday sharing solidifying close relations (Riches 1981; cf. Bird-David 1994, 595).

How kinship conversely legitimates and encourages sharing may be less obvious, although the nature of the genealogical idiom and its use suggests some answers. One is that the ‘concrete natural symbolism’ of the genealogical idiom ‘convey[s] the idea of there being some social locus of unquestioned obligation’ (McKinley 2001, 143). Made available by nature and bodily existence through birth, sex, age, etc., and
retaining an association with nurture, reproduction, and early childhood experiences, it naturalizes the demands expressed in the idiom by rendering the relations that it designates as given and uncontestable.

More important than naturalization as such, however, may be that the genealogical idiom – symbolically and experientially – signifies closeness and importance of relationship, because of being modelled on the ‘natural relations ... founded in the family’ (Riches 1981, 218). In David Riches’ understanding, kinship is endowed with a facility to legitimate sharing because it denotes multiplex relations – relations of multistranded importance, which one cannot afford to jeopardize – and it can credibly do so because the ‘family of procreation is ..., par excellence, the location of multiplex connection’ (1981, 217). In other words, the invocation of kinship in sharing may reflect the experienced importance of kinship in close kin relations which attributes it to an authority, and value, that may be extended to kinship in general – and to non-genealogical relations designated with the idiom that have, or are expected to attain, a similar importance.

Accepting this notably does not entail entertaining a notion that the morality of close kinship has intrinsic strength, since it too, like the morality of distant kinship, rests on ‘continuous social interactions’ (Riches 1981, 218). In many small-scale societies with performative kinship, the foundation of kinship, even in close-family relations, is thoroughly social. However, relative closeness, whether measured by genealogical or social proximity, does matter – although ultimately has the same interactional basis in both instances, making close genealogical kinship more valued than distant kinship essentially because it matters more in interaction. Due to their ‘givenness’ and intimacy developed through childhood familiarity, especially important are often sibling relations, which as Bird-David has recently shown for the Nayaka, may provide a matrix for the organization and expansion of residential and marriage relations, such as through a process, evident also among the Bentian, ‘of sibling visits leading to intersibling marriages’ (2017, 108). Sharing often follows an egocentric pattern isomorphic with the so-called Eskimo system of kinship, diminishing outward from ego (Testart 1987). Although frequently informed by an ideal of equal distribution to all, sharing in practice is often not entirely communal and unbiased. Certain close relatives (e.g. parents, siblings, spouse’s parents) are often given priority or at least ensured a share (often in one of the so-called waves of sharing; Widlok 2017, 60–3). When sharing is not institutionalized wide-ranging distribution, these relatives, or other consociates who are particularly important or proximate because of close practical association, are often the only ones to receive shares (e.g. Altman 2011, 189–90; Bahuchet 1990, 33; Headland 1987, 264; Chan 2007, 131–3; Endicott 1988, 116).

While kinship here – given its ultimately social foundation – may appear as a ‘rhetoric’ for what is essentially social relatedness, as Lee Guemple (1972, 107) argued, as such it is not spurious, but genuinely and intimately felt, and substantiated by concrete important relations which often meet the qualifications of ideal kinship. While achievable, the social relatedness established through practical association which the kinship rhetoric expresses is no less important than biological relatedness. Rather, such evidently active kinship is what matters most to people, as indicated by the fact that it may be distinguished, as among Bentian, from other kinship as ‘true kinship’. Defined and constituted by networks of shared activity, it constitutes ‘effective kinship’, involving solidarity. It is typically also relatives unified through practical association that most often make sharing demands, and among them that these are most effective (e.g. Macdonald 2000; Myers 1986; Sillander 2011; Walker 2013). This may reflect that ‘true kinship’ is especially effective in generating sentiments of trust, compassion, and pity in relations, thereby creating important ‘affordances’ for sharing.

Besides presumably being imperative for long-term motivations to engage in sharing, these sentiments – and the particular relationships they pertain to – are important in the immediate sharing context because eliciting a positive response to demands often involves deliberate attempts to awaken compassion or pity (e.g. Myers 1986; Walker 2013). They also illuminate the common observation in these societies that people want to be with their relatives, and preferences for endogamy and other marriage practices such as sororate, levirate and polygamy when found. As for the Bentian, these preferences may primarily reflect a desire to hold on to prior relations, motivated by the fact that they are relations that one already knows and trusts, and has invested a lot in emotionally and materially.

This raises some doubts over an understanding of sharing according to which it does not rest on intimacy, affection, or relations with particular others (e.g. Widlok 2017, 86, 129; Woodburn 1982, 434, 448). I believe this understanding is unduly schematic, and does not provide the full picture of how sharing works in practice. It does not allow sufficiently for the fact that the participants are ‘real people’, that is, individuals responsive to specific persons and experiences in particular situations, constrained by their affective dispositions and personal predilections, their pragmatic needs and horizons of relevance. Hunter-gatherers, too, if we are to believe Ingold (2000, 71), are
‘enmeshed in highly particularistic and intimate ties’. Although sharing networks may include individuals with whom people are not closely associated, most are intimately known and their personal qualities and relational histories presumably not only affect but provide critical motivation to share with or demand from particular others. Notwithstanding commonly found categorical imperatives for sharing in broad-range sharing societies, it is also often not really expected that sharing is to be extended to everyone (e.g. Altman 2011; Macdonald 2000). I suggest that sharing in them has to be understood within this framework of intimate and personalized relations, in which aspirations for closeness, nourished by past experiences, and relatedness and associated values, are central.

The existence in these societies of the imperative to share, and ubiquitous invocations of kinship in sharing, attest to the importance for sharing in practice of social values, which have been somewhat neglected in the sharing literature, perhaps because of a zeal to demonstrate that sharing, unlike reciprocity, is not a function of interpersonal dependencies or normative obligations, and a certain fixation with personal autonomy. By contrast, I propose that the attribution of value to sharing represents a necessary component of sharing transfers – and where sharing is extensively practiced, it is quite universally considered an obligation too. An important aspect of real life sociality which applies no less to sharing than to other social action are the meanings and values infallibly attributed to it. Human sociality is notably never immanent to itself, but profoundly shaped and informed by cultural imaginaries and ethical and ideological valuation.

Unlike Widlok (2017, 75–6), who proposes that mere co-presence is tantamount to a (silent) demand, based on a supposedly universal human disposition to interpret the other’s presence as a legitimate request for intrinsically valued resources, I assert that letting go of resources and making legitimate demands is predicated on active recognition of the value of sharing and of the social relations involved. Moreover, I suggest that the evidently strongly recognized value of sharing in extensively sharing small-scale societies is fundamentally encouraged and qualified by the value of relatedness and associated pro-social values (care, help, affection, etc.), which is an important reason why what Widlok calls ‘kin talk’ (2017, 64–8) is associated with the practice. Sharing observably is not conducted everywhere; it requires culturally contingent valuation, which in turn emerges from practice through participation in particular social contexts, social constellations, and activities, through which its validity and cogency is demonstrated and established. Without such a framework and history, demands are unlikely to elicit sharing. The basic reason why hunter-gatherers and some other groups share lies in the conjunction through practice of these conditions of social interaction and moral interpretation.

Conclusion

The principal conclusion of this chapter is that the preconditions and incentives for sharing of hunter-gatherers and similarly organized shifting cultivators are largely social, reflecting other factors than their different modes of subsistence. Practice, encompassing patterns of social interaction and moral interpretation, is in a sense the ultimate source of their sharing dispositions, with participation in ‘cultures of sharing’ recognizably being central in inculcating them. But equally important are various less obvious, informal everyday practices of providing help, care, and sustenance, and different forms of ‘shared activity’, which effectuate the ‘sharing in’ of consociates within social fields of immediacy and affective closeness, and confirm the practical authority and continuing validity of the values of sharing and relatedness.

Beyond practice as such, there are specific conditions intrinsic to the particular mode of sociality and organization of relationships in these societies, which encourage sharing more than in others. Small-scale society demographic exigencies and social indeterminacy resulting from open aggregation motivate a basic socio-centric thrust toward inclusion and solidarity, and compel active enactment of social relations through shared activity, including sharing itself as a congenial and tangible marker of social closeness and materially substantiated solidarity. Recurrent discursive invocation of classificatory kinship terminology applied flexibly to consociates along with generalized ‘kinship values’ prescribes and naturalizes an expansive moral framework of personal identity and social action. Relatedness acquired through ‘practical association’ and a ‘sociality of closeness’ authorizes the kinship values and establishes structures of intimacy conducive to experiences of trust, ‘we relatedness’, and ‘extended self’, which endow sharing with a distinctively moral quality, and makes it a personally motivated positive injunction. Sharing emerges in this context both as a practically motivated means for acquiring relationships and resources from others, imposed by ‘structural’ conditions in society, and a ‘virtue’, an intrinsically valued act (Widlok 2004), arguably perceived as purposeful in its own right mainly because of entailing affirmation of valuable social relations, and internalized social values and sentiments of affection and compassion developed in them.
References


The demand for closeness: social incentives for sharing among hunter-gatherers and other groups


