

Privacy and Anonymity in Self-Help Groups – An Anthropological Approach
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In a society marked by urban growth, the creation of egalitarian and uniform forms of identification that keep up with people's increasing mobility, crime-fighting policies, the creation of surveillance systems, the need to profile consumers, markets and trends, etc., we have a whole range of mechanisms that allow us to know more about people's actions, whereabouts and habits, in a world where technology and science play an ever growing role in the way we communicate. Anonymity, in such conditions, becomes a distinct form of interaction, assuming, in today's society, an important role in the way we relate to others.

I will attempt to convey to you an anthropological approach to the notion of anonymity, and in so doing, after the empirical data I have been gathering for the past few years, especially concerning the uses of anonymity in those self-help groups denominated as 'anonymous'. This case study focuses specifically on Families Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Anonymity's importance as an issue for reflection is quite simple to trace in broad terms. It has become increasingly relevant in the field of social studies. Furthermore, and despite the growing concern of this issue for sociologists, anthropologists, historians and other scholars, I realize that this issue suffers constant change and that there is still room for exploration. I propose a broad approach to the way in which this phenomenon has been dealt with recently in anthropology.

Daniel Terrole (1996), in his work on the homeless considers anonymity to be part of a liminal process, in which the subject gradually loses his/her personal distinctive features. Milandou (1997), based on the case study of the relationships between natives of Brazzaville, reflects on the confrontation between the anonymity which is typical of big cities, and the strategies employed by their inhabitants to be conspicuous, at least around their own neighborhood, in an attempt to preserve ways of interaction that are typical of smaller communities. Monica Konrad (2005), another anthropologist, reflects on the role of anonymity in the case of ova donation, trying to equate it with the notions of gift, reciprocity, and the namelessness of the individuals involved in this type of

relationship – ova donor and recipient. Specifically in anthropological studies about associations dealing with alcohol abuse and where it is also referred anonymity although it was not the prime subject of these authors, we find the work of Carole Cain (1991), Paul Antze (1987) and Sylvie Faizang (1996) just to give you a few examples.

I will now introduce some elements that will help us to divide this concept further. I consider anonymity to be, not only a form of personal information management, but in fact a condition that must be obeyed in some contexts for interaction to exist. The elements which I will present next, allow us to formulate these proposals based on the fact that we consider anonymity to be, besides a way to manage the personal information we give others, a necessity that must be complied to so that the action may successfully unfold in the physical presence of others.

Anonymity in ‘anonymous’ associations.

The data presented herein are the result of a *work in progress* since 2002; with Families Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Fieldwork was carried out with groups chosen in the Lisbon area, spending 9 months in participant observation of weekly meetings, at different locations and schedules. In addition, interviews were held with group members, trying, whenever possible, to register different stages of membership. We can describe these associations as developing from the model traditionally known as the *12 Steps*, which was originally used by Alcoholics Anonymous, an association which was created in the United States of America in the 1950’s. All the associations denominated “anonymous” are based on this model, which has since been adapted to different areas, and is now used worldwide.

This essay focuses only on the three oldest associations of this kind existing in Portugal, but many more follow this model. Here, you will also find groups such as Emotionals Anonymous, Nicotine Anonymous, or Co-Dependents Anonymous. There is also the case of Al-Anon, an association which is very similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, but is specifically intended for relatives of alcoholics. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), , focus on problems related to alcohol abuse. In my experience, the groups in this

association are made up mainly of male members in an age group ranging between 35 and 60 years of age. Narcotics Anonymous (NA), deal with issues concerning “addiction”. In other words, they are concerned with drug and alcohol abuse, or abuse of other chemical substances. As with the previous group, I observed a predominance of male members between 25 and 45 years of age. Families Anonymous (FA) is meant for people who have a relative with an addiction problem, mainly women between 45 and 65. All these associations are exclusively run by members, without the intervention of professional specialists in the different areas, thus their definition as self-help, or mutual-help groups.

It should also be added that, although this presentation is concerned primarily with the role played by anonymity in these groups, it obviously does not pretend to reduce the study of these associations to this perspective. As a result of sharing a common model, all three associations describe themselves as Fellowships, Non-profit Organizations, with a particular statute and organization, in which certain individuals meet to “solve” the problems that brought them there through a process of mutual identification and the sharing of common feelings and situations. According to their philosophy, the *12 Steps* are “stages” or “principles” that the subject must go through, in order to gradually reach a stable situation, both physically as emotionally, regarding the problem they are dealing with. Along with the *12 Traditions* (rules that dictate the way the group behaves), they are the basis for these associations.

The associations are divided in groups which are responsible for a weekly meeting of its members. Although we are contemplating all three associations simultaneously, they are independent of one other, while having similar rules and *modus operandi*. The same place may host a Families Anonymous group meeting on Mondays, at 7 p.m. for example, and a Narcotics Anonymous meeting on Tuesdays at 9 p.m. Meetings take place in diverse locations, although we registered a preference for religious buildings (churches and parishes), and an attempt to avoid “exposed” places, so as to ensure the privacy of anyone who seeks them. Albeit a certain religiousness or creed involved in this philosophy – which its members describe as “spiritual” – one of its principles states that acceptance of members is regardless of religion, and considers this kind of information confidential. In other words, the choice of site depends on

availability of rooms (and the agreement of an authority) rather than on other kinds of issues.

As Vasco, a member of Families Anonymous, tells us regarding the site of the meeting he attends:

The... room is quite good because it is used by junkies [Narcotics Anonymous], drunks [Alcoholics Anonymous], everybody. A lot of different reunions take place there, so nobody [from outside] can tell what people are there for. In our meeting, we also have the music group, sometimes at the same time [in the same facility]; all kinds of people.

Therefore, chosen members of the group perform distinct tasks, these persons being the ones that ensure the smooth functioning of the group. Tasks are automatically carried out near the table: ensuring enough chairs for those who are present and for those who are presumed to show up, placing specific literature on the table and some on the walls and later, the monitor begins the meeting reading a “suggested guide to the meetings” - this is a kind of introduction, which is used by all the groups. Then the co-ordinator states the meeting’s rules: 90 minutes of duration, each member may ask to speak whenever he/she wishes to, but for no longer than 3 minutes. In every meeting there is a theme and a guest member makes his statement, recording his personal experience. After this statement, each of the members speaks and most of the time what is said is very personal and has a very strong emotional charge. At the end of the meeting, the co-ordinator remembers the 12th Tradition which refers to anonymity and reads a leaflet on which is written: “What you see here, what you hear here, when you leave, let it remain here” and the meeting ends when all the members repeating the Serenity Prayer. The room is brought back to its initial arrangement, leaving it so that no one can tell that somebody was there.

This is the standard procedure followed by all these associations during a meeting, but there may be slight variations in the way, for example, the readings are given or in the arrangement of a room. Some rooms are arranged as in a conference, while in others members are seated around a table, etc. In the case of Families Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, there is an initial moment in which different

kinds of readings are proffered, whereas in Alcoholics Anonymous, it is restricted to the reading of the “Daily Inspiration”.

The members of anonymous groups want to be able to participate and do not want their acceptance to depend on the elements that are socially significant outside. We might say therefore, that from the moment they step into a meeting, or when they speak as a member, wherever it may be, that they strip themselves from all other attributes and become simply individuals with a specific problem that is common to everyone and constitutes their only bond. Elements of identity that are indicative of who a person is – such as their place of residence, profession, education or marital status – are destitute of their importance in this context. This doesn’t mean, however, that they are absent.

Meetings provide a confessional space directed specifically to a particular area of their lives. It is a space in which relevance is given to specific aspects, and which is experienced in a group spirit where everyone is conscious of the limitations; be they emotional (each person is free to decide the degree of involvement they are willing to commit to), temporal (the duration of the meetings, 1h 30ms is a fixed amount of time in which these conditions are guaranteed), or physical (the existence *a priori* of suitable facilities where no trace of their activity will remain after the meeting). All of this can only be properly assessed if we understand on one hand, the emotional charge that lies behind the motives that drive a person who seeks this kind of association, and on the other hand, the issue of anonymity. In fact, the existence and protection of anonymity are considered crucial for all the action to unfold in this manner. It is one of the basic principles in the philosophy of all these associations.

I cite as an example the 11th and 12th Traditions of Families Anonymous for their relevance to this issue, keeping in mind that since this model is common to all of these associations, they all have the same rule:

11th - Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films and TV. We need guard with special care the anonymity of our members, as well as those of other recovery programs.

12th - Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities. (in www.familiesanonymous.org)

This issue pertains, not just to the reasons members may have to consider anonymity an asset and a necessity, but to what anonymity itself provides. Anonymity is discussed here, not simply in its most common sense, which has to do with the absence of a name or any other form of individual identification, but equally important, as a form of protection searched by individuals in this context.

We must understand that in these associations, anonymity is respected outside the group as well as within it, despite face to face contact occurring in a meeting. Initially, 'not having to say who you are' proves to be paramount, even if, as Erving Goffman (1983) defends, all face to face interaction, including non verbal interaction, implies knowledge of the other. In this particular case, the fact that members come together to discuss a specific problem (common to all) without having to reveal everyday situations that could expose them is determinant, and renders all a priori descriptions irrelevant.

Anonymity is considered a guarantee and a condition of inclusion of the members in these associations, at the same time that is considered a therapeutic vehicle in itself. It applies both inside and outside the group. This means that anonymity is respected within these groups as to who and what is revealed there. Even considering that members in these groups are identified by a first name, anonymity is nonetheless observed in the sense that it isn't always possible to recognize who a person is through that person's name. Outside the meetings, anonymity is used to guarantee the confidentiality of what is said, by whom, and even the membership of subject *a* or *b*. Anonymity can be understood in this context through the reasons that bring it about: more than security, members feel it is a necessity. This results, not just from the stigma that people feel, but also from the fact that they find anonymity is a leveling element, abolishing any differences that they have between them beyond the specific motivations that drew them there.

At the time [beginning of attendance of Families Anonymous] *I found that anonymity was fundamental, because I was so ashamed, very embarrassed by what I was going through in my life.* (Maria, 47 years old, has been attending Families Anonymous for 6 years).

When you are there, it doesn't matter if you are a lawyer, or a doctor; if you are wealthy, come from royalty or off the street. The idea of starting over, a "new way of life" free of drugs, whether you have a big bank account and have never stolen anything in your life, or if you are fresh out of prison and you have had a lifetime of crime. It doesn't matter, that is not important, the name is not important, all those things don't matter. The only thing on your mind is your intention of starting something new in which drugs have no part. (Diogo, 38 years old, has been in Narcotics Anonymous for 5 years)

On the other hand, nobody is supposed to use the name of these associations for their own benefit, or act as a representative of a group or association, but more importantly, there should be absolutely no commercial or broadcast exploitation of the organization itself, for example. The following quotation is taken from Bill W's biography (he was one of the founders of AA): "...the biggest objection AA members have to anonymity breaks is the way it sets apart people who break their anonymity from the rest of the fellowship." (Hartigan, 2000:135)

Regardless of the way relationships develop among individuals in this context – we find that initially they are marked by some embarrassment and discomfort, but later assume different features – we must not rule out anonymity in a face to face interaction. In other words, even if at a certain stage, members start developing bonds of friendship and trust that go beyond the limits or goals of group meeting, the important thing is the choice provided by this rule.

For instance, I don't know where others live, and I think that is good. I don't even think I've told anyone that I live in Cacem (a place in the Lisbon area); the only person I have given my address to is you. I think it is good. Imagine if someone were to show up at my door. Even if I ever mentioned Cacem, this is still a big place! (Etelvina, 56 years old, 3 years with Families Anonymous)

The freedom to choose what to say, to whom and when, is in itself a way of making therapy possible, as well as the groups and meetings themselves. One of the questions asked during an interview is: "if you had to fill in a form with your name,

address and job in order to become a member, what would your reaction be?” 90% of all the people interviewed so far said they would not fill in such a form, or if they had to, they would probably never “return”.

If anybody had come up to me with a form to fill, I think I would have turned right around... it its like you think that is nobody's business...I would have been suspicious; why would they need to know those things, you see? So it was a relief to discover things like “all you need to be a member is the desire to stop using”, there are no obligations. All I know about everybody else is that they did drugs, I know nothing about their private lives, and I'm not really interested, I don't think it is relevant.” (Pedro, 30 years old, in Narcotics Anonymous for 5)

I would become suspicious right away. Personally, I wouldn't trust them, and I would never sign anything. I would never set foot there again, because my personal life is nobody else's business, right? In a meeting I also don't have to talk about my life, I only do if I feel like it; I don't owe anyone an explanation, right? Only if I want to. (Tiago, 50 years old, 2 years in AA)

The use of expressions like “they have no business asking me about my life”, or “it's nobody else concern” is nonetheless curious in a context where according to these same members, they feel free to share their intimacy because they are among equals. We can argue that anonymity ‘reifies’ an invisible link that bind individuals; bound (and from their point of view, understood) by their stigma, but also by anonymity. All these individuals withhold their membership, in this way controlling the amount of information they reveal about themselves.

This idea of omission may be compared to the concept of secret developed by Simmel, with a few differences that are worth looking into. According to this author, and we completely agree with him in this point, “the existence of secrecy between two individuals or groups will influence their whole relationship; for even when one of the parts is unaware of the existence of a secret, the behavior of the other part and therefore, the nature of the whole relationship, will be altered by that occultation.”

(2004:144) As we have been trying to argue, there is, among members of anonymous groups, a communion of habits, behavior and philosophy, that is brought about the use of a way of differentiating members from 'other people'. This idea leads us to notion of difference, the condition of being 'different'; which in turn is a form of power also referred by Simmel. Still with Simmel in mind, we realize that the moment at which a member, rather than disclosing a secret reveals his participation in one of these organizations to someone who didn't know about it, is also accompanied by a characteristic tension. We must acknowledge that the moment a member decides to make this revelation, he is, in his own words, "breaking (his/her) anonymity". This member is not just revealing that which Simmel would call a secret, but indeed revealing another aspect of his/her identity which had so far been kept hidden; we are referring to what Erving Goffman (1963) would call a discreditable stigma. That is, one that is only recognized the moment it is revealed. Therefore, more than a secret, the member would be revealing what *he is* beyond that which is perceptible.

Anonymity can be understood as a way a person has of managing personal information: we can talk about a specific area of our lives omitting all the rest because we decide they are irrelevant in that context, that is exactly what happens when anonymity is preserved beyond the bounds of a meeting; in other words, concealing the identity of colleagues, the content of their revelations and the motives for their presence, and at the same time protecting their own. It isn't the fact that 'Pedro' is an engineer, or is a married man and father of two sons living in Amadora (Lisbon area) that matters. Here, the relevant information is that Pedro is the father of a drug addict.

Anonymity, in our case study is a mask the member puts on both within, and without the group, in their contact with an "outside world" that they feel as judging. We are reminded of a cartoon in which two men are walking down a street, and one of them is saying: "Why want more than anonymous sex. I want anonymous intimacy." An apparent contradiction becomes feasible within anonymous groups. We can speak of an 'anonymous intimacy' made possible precisely through anonymity itself. In these groups, anonymity is more than the possibility of managing personal information; it becomes a common referent of interaction. It is a choice and an option that determines the whole action.

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