



What can self-organised group therapy teach us about anonymity?

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abstract

The article suggests a shift from an individualistic understanding of anonymity as a mechanism protecting singular data-subjects towards a broader understanding of anonymity as a mode of communication that is characterised by revealing information on the basis of withholding others. Such understanding allows studying anonymity as social practice. This not only means dealing with the question of what anonymity might do for individuals but also for groups and societies. I have developed this perspective in an ethnographic case study on the functions of anonymity in self-organised group therapy (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous in the US and Germany). In this case study I have shown how people apply anonymity not only as a tool serving to protect individuals from discrimination but also as a technique to create social equality among group members and to distribute ideas as common good with the intention of breaking through patterns of greed, possession and big-shotism. As a result of empirically studying functions of anonymity in the context of self-organised group therapy, a multi-dimensional anonymity-concept has been developed, differentiating three forms: Personal anonymity, social anonymity and collective anonymity. The concept is meant to suggest ideas for future research and to facilitate more differentiated discussions on the merits and dangers of anonymity in a digital age.

Introduction

In this paper, I focus on the particular context of self-organised addiction-therapy where anonymity plays more than just one important role and thus serves various functions – functions which are not only vital for therapy to work but sometimes even convey a culture-critical message against social distinction, hyper-individualism and big-shotism. These functions of anonymity are considered

valuable in the name of recovery and equality by members of self-organised support-groups against addiction. They also refer to the long-term objective of what in such groups is called ‘sustainable recovery’, leading from a ‘self-centred attitude’ which addicts have identified as the roots of their disease (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1935: 62) towards a ‘social attitude’ that is not only supposed to prevent individuals from relapsing but also to foster fruitful social action. Subsequently, I deal with a number of questions: What moves people in therapy to act anonymously? What would people in therapy lose, if what they once did under the condition of anonymity is no longer safe? What forms of anonymity can we differentiate and what functions do they perform? Lastly: when might practices of anonymity justify calling for political intervention and how could such interventions be legitimated?

In answering these questions, I begin with a general conceptualisation of anonymity: I propose a shift from a dominating individualistic perspective, focusing on anonymity as a device mainly serving the protection of the singular data-subject towards understanding it as a mode of communication enabling certain ways of social interaction. Understanding anonymity as an empowering mode of communication helps in broadening the perspective on how it can serve in socially sensitive contexts such as addiction therapy. This facilitates the empirical analysis of anonymity’s potential in terms of the various functions it is said to serve. Accordingly, I studied mutual support groups¹ following the approach of Alcoholics Anonymous.² Here, sufferers of addiction and similar diseases meet to support each other in recovery. For their groups to exist, anonymity is vital in a variety of ways, which I will analyse in this article. To do so I will start with an introductory overview on my field of study, providing an insight into my methodology and briefly introduce the alleged functions to be discussed. This is followed by an extensive analysis of the different functions of anonymity observed in the course of my investigations. I proceed by reflecting on transformations of anonymity that have been described in light of the digitalisation of our communication practices. Having identified and described anonymity’s various functions and transformations, I follow up by developing a concept of anonymity consisting of three different forms³. I conclude by discussing the need for protection for each of the three forms according to the different functions they serve in addiction-therapy.

1 For a more extensive discussion on the differences between the concept of ‘self-help’ and the concept of ‘mutual support’, see Helm (2016a: 17-20).

2 The most prominent of such groups are Narcotics, Gamblers, Overeaters, Families, Sex Addicts, Work Addicts and Debtors Anonymous.

3 For a more extensive description of this three-dimensional concept of anonymity see Helm (2016a).

Concepts of anonymity

Compared to privacy, conceptual approaches to anonymity are quite rare. It is still useful, therefore, to consider the word's etymological roots when undertaking a systematic assessment. The original Ancient Greek word ἀνώνυμος, an amalgamation of the two words *ano* and *nymos*, meaning 'not' and 'name', describes the condition of 'being nameless'. This was a state which people sought because it granted them the freedom to remain unreachable as committers of their actions. Yet today, in a world ruled by digital linkage and tracking, namelessness no longer achieves the objective of 'unreachability' (Nissenbaum, 1999: 142). Nowadays, it seems to make much more sense, therefore, not to define anonymity as namelessness but to open it up instead to a general translation as the condition of unreachability in order to describe what is at stake in the *digital age*.

In direct social interaction, unreachability can be achieved through masking, hiding, covering or concealing. However, digital contexts call for the introduction of more sophisticated techniques, an example which Latania Sweeny (2002) presents as *k-anonymity*, meaning that an individual becomes 'lost in the crowd'. As a means of establishing anonymity this can be operationalised digitally through programmes such as TOR, an open source software that defends users against surveillance (for instance, Kubieziel, 2010).

When thinking about anonymity as the condition of unreachability, this usually refers to the protection of single individuals as it links with identification, being defined as the act of 'connecting information to individuals' (Solove, 2006: 510) or as 'the association of data with a particular human being' (Clarke, 1994: 3). Consequently, anonymity as the condition of preventing identification is considered valuable. It protects 'people from bias based on their identities and enables people to vote, speak, and associate more freely by shielding them from danger of reprisal' (Solove, 2006: 513). This conception of anonymity as a protection mode encouraging people to speak out is strongly connected to sociological concepts of stigmatisation and discrimination which suggest that anonymity appeals mainly to socially marginalised or politically contested groups of people (Goffman, 1967).

The connection between anonymity and stigma associates the former with a certain social connotation that has implications for anonymity-politics. For instance, from a security point of view this connection can be said to work against protecting anonymity, tending to suggest that a person who chooses it most probably has something to hide. Anonymity is, therefore, notoriously linked with suspicion. From a personal rights perspective, the connection can also be laid out in favour of anonymity by presenting a metaphorical conceptualisation as an

important tool for the socially deprived. Solove, for instance, conceptualised anonymity as the opposite of identification. Understood as such, anonymity can serve to ‘enhance the persuasiveness of one’s ideas, for identification can shade reception of ideas with readers’ biases and prejudices’ (Solove, 2006: 514).

While certainly helpful and important, such definitions of anonymity can be understood as individualistic as they concern a form of anonymity that only refers to the identities of individuals, omitting important and valuable functions referring to group dimensions which I am going to elaborate upon on the basis of my empirical investigations in the main part of this article. Regarding the conceptualisation of anonymity, one finds few approaches pointing to its social embeddedness. Gary Marx (1999) notices in his overview on anonymity that, as a phenomenon, it needs to be conceptualised as fundamentally social. But while acknowledging the social embeddedness of anonymity, Marx still focuses on individuals who seek anonymity within social structures (*ibid.*). Katherine Wallace has further developed the concept of anonymity by taking its social embeddedness into consideration. She provides the following definition: ‘Anonymity is a kind of relation between an anonymous person and others where the former is known only through a trait or traits which are not coordinatable with other traits such as to enable identification of a person as a whole’ (Wallace, 1999: 23). In this constellation, at least one party is known to the other only for certain aspects of herself and her interlocutors are prevented from gaining access to others. This grants the anonymous person a form of control, which she can use for different purposes. While Wallace’s thoughts on anonymity are very instructive in that they overcome reducing anonymity to namelessness, Wallace focus in the main part still lies on the anonymity of single persons.

Investigating anonymity not just in terms of single persons’ identities, in an even more abstract manner one could state that it denotes a special mode of communication regarded as useful in granting privacy, which is widely understood as access control (Allan, 1988; Gavison, 1980; Moore, 1998). Framed as a specific, distinguishable mode of privacy, anonymity is further characterised by never being total but always being relational (Dumsday, 2009: 71) thereby distinguishing it from other forms of privacy such as isolation or intimacy. To give an example: an addict who is locking himself up in his apartment, drinking until delirious without talking about his condition to anyone could be described as private and isolated but not as anonymous. Yet, as soon as this addict goes online, starting to communicate about his drinking-problem in a chat room under a pseudonym, one would stop talking about the person’s privacy in terms of isolation but would now speak of anonymity. From this we can see that anonymity is not only related to the act of withholding something but that it also refers to the act of revealing something and therefore needs to be understood as a certain mode of

communication, quite different from other forms of privacy that refer to shutting off, forgetting, or withdrawing.

In light of anonymity's communicative dimension, it is instructive not only to apply a negative approach from the perspective of what it hinders but also to frame it positively from the perspective of what it enables. This means conceptualising anonymity as a mode of communication that is characterised by revealing certain pieces of information on the basis of withholding others. When analysing practices and functions of anonymity from the perspective of such a positive conception, anonymity is seen to meet wider objectives than just protecting individuals from being reached. To show this, I will analyse its various applications within the context of support groups, within which anonymity has been cultivated, preserved and valued for over eighty years, and where it is thought to perform many functions beyond protecting the individual from being reached.

Entering the field: Anonymity in self-organised group therapy

To illustrate the multidimensional scope of anonymity, I turn to the different functions for which it can be applied and valued in actual social practice, taking the context of support groups for people suffering from addiction. As the most assertive approach to group therapy one can consider the approach developed by Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) during the 1930s and 40s in the US (Kurtz, 1991). Here, the idea was developed that processes of mutual identification could be based on and triggered by anonymous communication taking place within the anonymous support group setting.

Although the A.A. account of addiction therapy is non-professional and self-organised, it can be considered as semi-institutionalised, working across a decentralised structure that operates on collectively developed and anonymously published principles rather than by following the directives of a single leader. Today all mutual support groups carrying the family name *Anonymous* can be considered as offspring of A.A. While all offspring carry the same family name indicating their adherence with identical principles, different first names create plurality, recognising the complexity of addiction's various symptoms. When browsing the internet one can find up to 20 groups carrying names such as *Underearners Anonymous*, *Sexaholics Anonymous*, *Overeaters Anonymous*, *Gamblers Anonymous* or *Families Anonymous*, to name just a few. All those groups have received a copyright license from A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1962: 75-77), which allows them to print, use and become identified officially with what A.A.

calls the 'Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions', small texts coding the essentials of the support programme and its corresponding principles for group work.⁴

To receive the A.A. copyright licence a group must comply with certain communication rules, in line with different forms of anonymity, whose implications and conceptualisation I aim to clarify in the course of this article. Furthermore, support groups are of particular interest in terms of questions dealing with the scope of anonymity here being used as a therapeutic vehicle, supporting people who suffer from a disease characterised by inner dependency, isolation and self-denial. Given this characterisation, recovery implies development of a new attitude to life that brings about valued conditions such as autonomy, friendship and self-acceptance (Helm, 2016b). The correlation between anonymity and addiction-therapy even points to some further-reaching conceptual considerations regarding the interrelation between anonymity and the social environment, in which the therapeutic process is embedded. Bearing this consideration in mind, I proceed by analysing five different functions anonymity is said to serve in non-professional addiction therapy:

Anonymity as withdrawing option:

This function is supposed to grant group participants the chance to reconcile their otherwise momentous revelations as addicts by shielding them from future contact with group participants.

Anonymity as social leveller:

The second function, which can be observed in the context of self-organised addiction-therapy, refers to a certain kind of group dynamic that is held to be vital in and for support groups to function efficiently because it fosters mutual solidarity. This dynamic is created by collectively withholding distinctive information about status, age, education, employment, etc., thereby channelling people's focus on communicating about shared dimensions of emotional distress, suffering, recovery and hope.

Anonymity as public relations manager:

This function concerns protection of the groups' reputation. It is supposed to shield the groups from becoming spoilt and corrupted by attention and fame-seeking individuals as well as bad press stemming from these individuals going

4 See Catarina Frois (2009), who has conducted an ethnographic study not only on A.A. but on several groups following the so-called 'Twelve-step-approach' such as Narcotics Anonymous and Families Anonymous.

public in the name of the groups. In a sense, this is management of the groups' public relations sector. It is born out of the insight that even though confidentiality is vital for the groups to be attractive for their target community their enterprise still calls for some kind of publicity. Here anonymity provides a solution because it can serve as a communication-mode, enabling transmission of the groups' message to public media without acting against their internal interests.

Anonymity as attitude:

A fourth function of anonymity can be understood as resulting from the third. It refers to the social attitude of group participants practising and praising anonymity for the sake of preserving certain principles that teach participants the importance of self-sacrifice in the name of a greater whole. This 'lesson' often is connected to a more general change of lifestyle, resulting from exchanging what is held to be a self-centred attitude on life with an attitude considered to be more 'social'. It demands abstention from direct personal gratification for the sake of sustainability.

Anonymity as culture-critical message:

This function points to the cultural aspects of anonymity. When analysing anonymity as embedded in a certain culture dominated by individualistic norms and ideals, it can also be understood as a practised social alternative to communication modes following patterns of hero-worship, thereby carrying a political message.

To illustrate how these five functions of anonymity work within support groups, what they entail, how they are preserved, for what kind of sacrifices they ask and how they are culturally embedded, I will analyse the concepts and practices of support groups taking on an actor-centred perspective.⁵

5 By explicitly referring to my perspective as actor-centred (Thiersch, 2002), I am acknowledging that the same function of anonymity, which for addicts can be considered as vital, for instance from the perspective of law enforcement agencies, might rather appear as a bar to justice than as a key to freedom. Such cases apply when group participants use the secure context of anonymity and trust among their fellow sufferers as an opportunity to confess a capital crime, which they once committed in the throes of disease. From an actor's point of view anonymity here can be understood as an important tool of therapy, granting formerly afflicted people the possibility to seek redemption and leave behind a troubling past without having to fear legal consequences, this way granting them the possibility of starting new lives. From a law enforcement point of view, anonymity can be understood here as a barrier to crime solving and doing justice to the victim.

This I will do by drawing on four kinds of sources. Firstly, there is a wide range of information material on the groups and their participants, which the groups publish through their own publishing companies. This material provides an extensive insight into their programme and their structure, including descriptions of the therapeutic program as well as personal stories written by participants. Secondly, I draw on unpublished archive material, important in providing insight into discourses on the significance of anonymity that the groups purposely withhold. Although the political and culture-critical views expressed in certain papers represent a commonly supported understanding, groups are reticent to publish in order to preserve political neutrality. They consider this as vitally important in order to maintain focus on what they call their 'Primary Purpose', which is 'to carry their message (recovery through mutual support, A/N) to the addict who still suffers' (Archive Folder: The Principle of Primary Purpose, 1950-1970). The 'Principle of Primary Purpose' forbids the publishing of anything political under the group name. To take the culture-critical reflections of (recovering) addicts into account when doing research on the scope of anonymity, it was therefore necessary to include unpublished archive material in my sample as otherwise the analysis would be biased.⁶

A third source refers to the groups' actual practices, which I analysed by participant observation in various meetings organised by support groups in New York, Woodstock, Berlin and Passau. Finally, while the phenomenon of support groups forms a deeply fascinating subject for discussing not only the personal but also social and political functions of anonymity, there are of course other areas where those functions can be observed, to which I will also refer, pointing to the general scope of anonymity.

Functions of anonymity: The perspective of addicts in recovery

Anonymity as withdrawing option

As widely understood, anonymity plays a central role in sensitive therapy contexts to prevent discrimination against people who suffer from stigmatised diseases. Moreover, there is an emotional dimension to anonymity, which has to do with shame, guilt, fear and sometimes also denial, especially striking in the context of addiction. Anonymity is thought to ease those emotions by facilitating the

6 To gain access to the unpublished papers documenting A.A.-history and internal correspondences one needs to write an official request to the General Service Offices of A.A. in New York, stating one's motive and intention. If being allowed access, one further has to appear in person at the Offices, being handed out the respective archive folders to be looked at in situ.

expression of secret problems while keeping control of possible social consequences. This possibility of control granted by anonymity provides the option to never return but also to not be found. In order to better illustrate the function of anonymity as a withdrawing option I suggest comparing anonymity here with a crutch helping people to take the critical step towards asking for help by revealing their problem in front of others without needing to confront otherwise expected (negative) consequences.

By choosing the metaphor of the crutch as an illustration of this function of anonymity I aim to point not only at the helpfulness of this function but also towards its limitations as this first function of anonymity in self-organised addiction therapy is seen by group members only as a temporarily limited solution. This is because needing a crutch is still a form of dependency. It is not *yet* recovery. The same holds true for anonymity as a withdrawing option. As long as an addicted person needs a backup even when speaking in front of fellow addicts, she is considered still a long way from disengaging herself from her disease. This is because self-organised addiction therapy qua mutual support is based on the idea that the compulsive behaviour is just a symptom while the disease itself actually implies a deeply rooted (psychological) distress. This distress roots in running away from one's feelings and desires (especially those connected with intimacy). Therefore, mutual-support-based therapy starts with radical self-confrontation, through which participants seek to develop self-acceptance. A member of Narcotics Anonymous explains this as such:

I have learned that the disease of addiction goes deeper than drug use. Some days, my head tells me to use, especially if I am hurting emotionally. Feelings like shame, guilt, loneliness, inadequacy, or fear are enough to start the whole mad cycle all over again. But today I have my own keys to my life, and one of the keys is the program and Fellowship of NA. My friends here are the main key, because they mirror my feelings and thoughts and through them I am learning how to live, to feel, and to accept me for being me. (Narcotics Anonymous, 1990: 3)

Given this understanding of addiction and its therapy, it becomes clear that depending on anonymity as an option to run away again, undoing the act of revelation, is seen as something that people should – at least on the long run – overcome for the sake of confrontation, commitment and self-acceptance.

Even though it should be considered only as a temporary aid, the withdrawing-option inherent in anonymity encourages people to try out the groups as they retrospectively report in their personal stories. The idea is that once a person has found her way inside, the atmosphere of mutual solidarity and acknowledgement will automatically initiate the therapeutic process. A participant describes this effect vividly:

I saw and heard those beautiful words of self-acceptance that night. I had feelings come over me in my first meeting that I've never experienced before in my life. Someone had written a book about me without me even knowing it. Other people had the same problems as me, but I was too self-centred to see it. The mirror of other recovering addicts told me that night that I had a chance to be free. My friends at NA taught me that I could learn to love myself by supporting others stay clean. (Narcotics Anonymous, 1990: 6)

This sense of having found a community of like-minded individuals is considered as just the entering condition into a long-term therapeutic process that support groups are aiming at. The scenario of a community where people really help each other on the basis of nothing other than shared experience is meant to persuade especially newcomers to return and start engaging in mutual support. However, truly engaging in mutual support includes further measures such as undertaking committed relationships of mutual support with other participants (called sponsoring) and committing oneself to a particular meeting by helping to organise it.⁷ Such actions usually require reachability at least to some extent since entertaining a committed sponsor-relationship with another participant or helping out in organisational affairs implies being accountable to others. In 1955 this understanding was clearly expressed at a conference dedicated to defining the role of anonymity in support groups:

We do not hide our alcoholism in guilty secrecy out of fear and shame. That would actually strengthen even further the cruel stigma that unfortunately surrounds the victims of our illness. Passing on our experience, strength and hope to other alcoholics is too important to let any fear of discovery or stigma stand in our way. (...) Within A.A. itself we stop being ashamed of our illness and freely exchange our full names. We keep address books. Also in personal, private, face-to-face relationships with non-alcoholics we are not ashamed to say we are recovered or recovering alcoholics. This in no way violates our anonymity. When you tell facts about yourself, privately, it's not an anonymity break. (Archive Folder: Anonymity Breaches, Conference Minutes, 1955)

Surprisingly, despite such clear statements, even today the idea that anonymity is primarily granting a withdrawing-option is held by many newcomers to anonymous groups as well as in the wider public.

Anonymity as social leveller

In anonymous self-organised group therapies, the therapeutic process towards sobriety and recovery is commonly understood to be facilitated by the effects of mutual identification, support and self-reflection; it is in this regard that

7 The circulation of a call list for mutual support outside the meeting can be interpreted as such an expression, since it encourages support calls at any time instead of disappearing out of reach right after the meeting.

anonymity is held to really serve addiction therapy. Catharina Frois indicated this function in her ethnographic study on Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Families Anonymous in Lisbon. She described anonymity as not only being important in protecting individuals when starting therapy but also in serving as a 'social leveller among members' more generally (Frois, 2009: 158). Drawing on Erving Goffman's *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1996), she observed that anonymity is able to facilitate the elimination of exactly those 'symbols of social status' that in everyday life create distinctions preventing people from identifying with each other.

By doing so, anonymity is being applied by participants as a tool to foster a group dynamic that renders possible effective mutual support, creating the feeling of being amongst peers. Accordingly, anonymity is enacted in order to ensure non-discrimination not only outside the groups but also within, where equality is derived from a shared illness. This particular equality can be interpreted as making participants willing to accept the experiences of others as mirroring their own emotional condition. Thinking of my own related ethnographic findings, I fully agree with Frois' interpretation. For further examination of the actual practices needed for the social levelling function of anonymity to take effect, I will now describe one exemplary meeting routine, understanding it as a certain kind of ritual process called 'rite of passage' (van Gennep, 1904).

When interpreting what is happening in support groups against the background of postmodern ritual and performance theory (Fischer-Lichte, 2012; Fischer-Lichte and Wulf, 2001; Wulf et al., 2001) as a 'rite of passage', I imply that what is said and done is embedded in a broader (sub-) cultural context. Hence certain actions can be interpreted as symbols referring to important meanings and principles at stake in this context. Through the physical enactment of symbolical movements, performance theory further suggests that such meanings and principles can become incorporated.

Bearing this in mind, I observed different speech-acts and movements being performed in the context of non-professional support groups when studying their meetings. To do so, I usually declared my identity as a researcher before the beginning of each meeting, asking for permission to attend. Always being welcomed very warmly, I participated in the entrance and closing rituals, which involve the whole group, while remaining silent for the middle part of the meeting, which is dedicated to what participants call 'sharing'. This means that single members recount their disease experiences, the solutions they found while struggling with recovery and the emotions involved. They do this in turn for about five minutes each. Nobody ever interrupts or passes judgement.

The meetings are chaired by any participant who volunteers to do so. The chair's task is to guide the group through a written routine, starting with a short explanation of sharing-rules and a statement on anonymity. After that, the so-called Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions are featured with each person reading out loud one step and one tradition. The readings are followed by the so-called 'go-around', during which each member in turn gives a personal introduction. In broad terms, one can differentiate three types: newcomers usually offer first names only; others disclose their symptoms and more familiar participants actually identify strongly with their symptoms, stating self-consciously and proudly that they are, for instance, gamblers, sex addicts or narcotic users.

During the sharing in the middle of the meeting, it is usually the third type who dominates. These are the so-called 'Oldtimers' (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952: 133-145), who have been sober for some time, who have already passed the process of accepting their status as recovering addicts and who are aware of what that means for their life-style in general. The newcomers mostly listen and at best identify with what the 'Oldtimers' openly reveal about their often destructive past, their no longer repressed feelings and desires, their former tendency to escape from their feelings and their new ways of dealing with them by connecting with other people. While exposing sensitive details of their inner lives, there is no mention of social status, employment, education, etc. After the sharing section, which is more or less free-flowing, the meeting is brought to a close by another strict routine. Unlike the opening routine, when individuals speak in turn, now participants grab each other's hands, whilst reciting a statement of hope in unison, demonstrating the idea of defeating the disease together, to which alone they had found themselves exposed powerlessly.

Viewed as a whole, the meeting features all three stages typical for a rite of passage: an entrance stage, in which people leave behind their everyday identity, preparing them for entering the central stage of the ritual, called the 'liminal space'. This space can be described as a space which is set apart from ordinary daily structure, dedicated to granting participants the creative freedom to try out new ways of relating to each other (Turner, 1967). The closing stage serves to integrate the new experiences, thereby leading back to everyday life. In the communities that they studied, ethnologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner observed ritual-processes following this structure (Turner 1969, 2000; van Gennep, 1904). Both researchers generally explain the existence of the phenomenon through its community-building effect. The same could be reasoned for the ritual action, taking place in support group meetings. Whilst the beginning of the meetings features anonymous individuals' introductions, the end sees a community having been formed that conveys a feeling of mutual solidarity, support and trust.

While one can observe striking parallels between the social levelling function of anonymity at stake in the rites of passage observed by van Gennep and Turner and those of support groups, there are also considerable differences. In the case studies by van Gennep and Turner, people have performed anonymity as a symbolic action, but were in fact at no time unreachable to each other since they actually lived together. An example is a form of initiation rite observed by Turner (1957) during his stay at a Ndembu Village. Here, before a person enters a new position that might grant him or her more power within the community and thus distinguishes him or her from other members, a ritual is performed, where everybody wears the same mask, making all look the same. In such cases, anonymity is meant to develop a symbolic power, creating a moment of social equality between ritual participants as it is meant to do within support groups' ritual process, too. However, in the latter case the option to withdraw after the meeting is still valid as well. Thus, it is possible to treat both functions of anonymity entirely separately and present vitally important insights from the therapeutic context, where both functions are valued very differently. While there is a continuous necessity for anonymity as a communicative regulator in the ritualised meeting-structure in order to develop its therapeutic effect, anonymity in the sense of providing an option to withdraw is of temporary value. Although it encourages intimidated people in particular to break through isolation, it should be overcome in the course of a therapeutic process working through mutual support, identification and commitment.

Anonymity as public relation manager

Understanding anonymity as a way of regulating and thereby enabling certain communication processes not only applies for the communication of people within support groups, but also for communication between such groups and the outside world. To illustrate this function of anonymity in more detail, I will now turn to letters, protocols, minutes and other documents, that chronicle the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. They can be inspected in the Central Archives of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York. Seen as a whole, those documents reflect a history of many trials and errors that eventually led to the establishment of public anonymity as the binding rule for all participants of support groups following the A.A. approach world-wide.

One particular case of failure is illustrative in this regard. It involves Addicts Anonymous, a group that was founded in New York City, 1950, at a time when A.A. had already established itself as a place to which helpless drinkers could turn. Addicts Anonymous was founded by Danny C., a man who fulfilled all the attributes associated with the personality of a 'charismatic leader' (Weber, 1972: 124, 140-142). His idea was to operationalise the compulsive pattern concept as

symptomatic of an underlying disease by founding a group open to all addicts, regardless of their particular symptom. The idea was ultimately successful. Addicts Anonymous grew to a number of hundred followers within just a few weeks. However, Addicts Anonymous had a weak spot in that it was associated with one single person. When that person, Danny C., relapsed, not only his personal preaching about sobriety became inconceivable but also his ideas as such (Boyd and Budnick, 2011).

The founders of A.A. followed the rise and fall of Addicts Anonymous with alarm, exchanging letters about how to deal with this issue themselves. They soon realised that they had to think about anonymity not only as a personal matter, but also as one concerning their continuing existence as a group. They came to the conclusion that they needed to set up a protection, generally preventing individual exposure from jeopardising the entire movement's reputation. The following letter exemplifies the tenor of correspondence at that time:

Dear Earl, (...) I think that our principle of Anonymity refers to the general public. It can, if we take it seriously enough, guarantee the Alcoholics Anonymous movement sterling attributes forever. Great modesty and humility are needed by every A.A. for his own permanent recovery. If these virtues are such vital needs to the individual, so must they be for A.A. as a whole. I would say the Concept of Anonymity is most responsible for our growth as a fellowship and most vital to our continuity. (...) if you ask me, for the good of A.A. as a whole, we need to keep thinking about anonymity for a long time to come. (Archive Folder: Anonymity Breaches, Bill's letter to Earl, July 6, 1951)

To put this kind of thinking about A.A.'s future into practice, the A.A.-founders started differentiating between anonymity on the private and public levels, finally publishing the following statement, explaining this differentiation in one of their books, published under the group pseudonym 'Alcoholics Anonymous':

Of course no A. A. need be anonymous to family, friends or neighbours. Disclosure on the private level is right and good and should be part of the recovery process. But 100% personal anonymity on the public level is just as vital to the life of A. A. as 100% sobriety is to the life of each personal member. Our collective anonymity is not a council of fear. It is a prudence of experience. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957: 293)

Here the variety of anonymity in terms of scope and function becomes very clear. Anonymity on the private level affects only the identity of the individual wherefore its handling is up to each person. Anonymity on the public level (collective anonymity) refers to the identity of the groups in general and needs to be considered as a binding rule for each participant as it helps in realising the preservation of mutual support long term. From a practical perspective, collective anonymity can be preserved by prohibiting individual members from publishing

anything concerning their affiliation with the groups under their full name and instead using only the group pseudonym:

The word ›anonymous‹ for us has an immense significance. It reminds us that we have renounced personal glorification in public. That our movement not only preaches but practices a true humility. [...] Our book is the product of thousands of hours of discussion. It truly represents a collective voice, heart and conscience and is therefore published anonymously. (Archive Folder: Correspondences 1939-1947, Grapevine 1946, S. 12-16)

Anonymous publication for such idealist reasons today is being practised by very few other enterprises such as *The Economist* (an English-language weekly newspaper edited in London). In ‘about us’ the newspaper explains its decision to remain nameless, using similar wording to A.A.:

Many hands write *The Economist*, but it speaks with a collective voice. (...) anonymity keeps the editor not the master but the servant of something far greater than himself (...) it gives to the paper an astonishing momentum of thought and principle. (*The Economist*, 2016)

In terms of the so called ‘copy-left license’, a strategy that has been developed for preserving the non-proprietary beginnings of the internet, one can also observe striking parallels with how A.A. handles its collective achievements’ distribution. The idea of the copy left license is that everybody may use and further develop what predecessors have achieved under one condition: they may never raise tenure on any of the further developments (Stallman, 2002). Similarly, anything developed by support groups will never be assigned to any individual but is understood as the result of collective work.

Anonymity as ‘attitude’

Looking more closely at the implications of complying with anonymity on the public level for individual group participants, the decision on whether or not identities are to be revealed when communicating about support groups on the public level needs to be considered in terms of taking responsibility not only for one’s own but also for a collective’s future. This is because individual members are urged to respect anonymity, regardless of personal desires. Anonymity, therefore, sometimes calls for a sense of responsibility that goes beyond self-interest. Being interviewed about recovery through mutual support could possibly help recovering addicts to gain public respect, redemption or fame, helping participants to learn about abstention from temptation. Otherwise they will not be able to continue benefiting from a more sustainable help, a help that the solidarity of support groups claims to offer.

Taken to be necessary for certain group dynamics to work and for the respective communication principles to persist, anonymity in A.A. is being understood as a function not only serving people but also teaching them to adopt a new attitude, which the founders of A.A. have called the ‘attitude of anonymity’. The idea of understanding anonymity as an ‘attitude’ has been born out of the personal insights of certain founding-members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Those insights are till today being adopted and replicated by their followers. In an interview, Stephen S.⁸, who is a recovering alcoholic himself and who works at the General Service Offices of A.A. in New York, explains the idea of understanding anonymity as attitude in the following words, which in my view very well express in how far A.A.’s understanding of anonymity has over the years turned into an idealistically charged one, exercising a disciplinary and moral power on group participants:

Can anonymity be compared with altruism? Yes, I think that comparison works. Anonymity serves as an antidote to a culture of self-centeredness because it forces people to develop an attitude that keeps them from thinking of their personal benefit in the first place. Recovery from addiction has to come along with developing an altruistic attitude to life. (Helm, 2016b: 338)

Anonymity as culture-critical message

The idea of staying anonymous as a collective responsibility is in tension with the ways through which public discourse is usually being managed and shaped in individualistic cultures, where personal prestige and personal achievements often play important roles. Another example from the history of Alcoholics Anonymous illustrates how collective anonymity and individualism can run into conflict. This example refers to Bill W. an A.A. co-founder. Against his own will, he had been heroified as the leader of the A.A.-movement. Being also publicly known as the man who had invented Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill was offered several honours, e.g. a doctorate of honour by Yale University, which he, as one of the most dedicated advocates of collective anonymity, steadfastly refused. The letters he exchanged express his difficulty to explain how serious he was with the idea of collective anonymity. This is what he wrote to the board of ‘Who is Who America’, refusing the honouring proposal to add him on the list:

By virtue of my singular position in the A.A.-movement, I am actually a man of two personalities, a public and a private one. One belongs to me most of the time. But not all the time. Sometimes I am circumstanced so I must act as a symbol of our whole society regardless of my private desires or inclinations. As the public symbol of Alcoholics Anonymous, which our people have insisted in making me, I am strictly bound in my personal behavior by the traditions of our society.

8 For reasons, which are obvious, the name has been changed.

Now as I guess you are aware one of our traditional cornerstones is this: A.A. does not publicize its leadership by name, picture or extensive personal description. This tradition strictly binding on me, enjoins us to place principles before personalities. Such is the scope and reach of our anonymity. To us it has immense significance; it is probably the greatest protection device against exploitation and big-shotism – things that made us sick in the first place. Now here am I, the special symbol and guardian of that tradition which I have done so much to uphold. Were you in my place, of course you would have to reply thanks deeply but I must decline. For me there is no other way. (Archive Folder: Anonymity Breaches, Feb 23, New York, 1951)

The response can be interpreted as displaying a total lack of understanding for what Bill had described as ‘the scope and reach of our anonymity’:

The editors recognize the duality of your position and ask why the man, William Wilson, should not be sketched in Who is Who so that those who know this “other self”, so to speak, and want to know more about him, can turn to Who is Who for the information they desire, while Bill, the symbol, remains anonymous? In other words, would you object to supplying the data – vital statistics – from which a sketch about Bill Wilson, investment bank, born in New York, ... etc. could be written, which sketch would contain no mention whatsoever of A.A.? (*ibid.*)

Following up on this, Bill smugly asked whether they really felt certain about including that man William Wilson in ‘Who is who’, since his achievements can be considered as less than limited:

Before including me, please note that pre A.A. my career was anything but distinguished. War saved me from not graduating, following war I was a clerk, later a criminal investigator for a security company, studied at nights but never practiced, finally I became an investigator for a large speculative clique in the Wall Street boom of the 20s. Made money for a while, but drinking cut me down to right rise. Lost all my capital and plenty of other people’s. Being a lone wolf by nature I never joined anything. I doubt who is who would publish such an ordinary and melancholy tale like this. (*ibid.*)

This and other incidents of a similar nature seem to illustrate the counter-cultural scope of anonymity to the A.A. founders. They gradually reached the understanding that collective anonymity might not only be important for their own preservation but that sticking to it can encompass also a political dimension as it carries an anti-individualistic message. For reasons of political neutrality this view on anonymity has never officially been published under the A.A.-name, but it has been expressed in dozens of unpublished letters stored in their archives. Here are just a few examples:

A.A. is not just another form of Group-Therapy for Addiction, it is a practiced social alternative to the self-centered circular ethic that is addiction and which results from a lack of sense in a culture based on a concept of life which ideals are limited to striving just for the individuals benefit. (Archive Folder: Correspondences 1939-1947, Dick S., 1942)

Our national custom of hero-worship, the transaction of great affairs by force of published personalities; these beloved characteristics of the United States cannot be for us A.A. (Archive Folder: Anonymity Breaches, March, 1951)

With Anonymity, we renounce personal prestige for our recovery and work, and place the emphasis on our principles – the power that really heals us – not on our personal selves. (Archive Folder: Anonymity Breaches: September, 1954)

Today the culture-critical message inherent in practising anonymity is still valid within anonymous support groups and has extended into other realms. With ever more public discourse being framed through social networking sites and shaped by individuals themselves, a culture of fame and prestige seeking self-exposure is increasing. Yet it also provokes counter cultures. The hacker network Anonymous, can be seen as the most prominent example. Following Gabriella Coleman's extensive ethnography on this network, anonymity can be observed as serving various ends. Coleman convincingly argues that Anonymous not only practises anonymity for the sake of protecting the individual activist, but can also be understood as the enactment of an 'anti-celebrity ethic' which is supported by the bulk of people who are considered part of the network (Coleman, 2014: 17, 47-49).

Functions of anonymity in the digital context

As part of the most recent developments regarding anonymous support groups in the US and Europe, one can observe changes regarding the ways in which the regulation of anonymity is being approached. Those changes can be understood as a reaction to a general decrease of information privacy or even a 'privacy crisis' (Solove, 2008: 104) provoked by a constant increase of communication via digital technology. Such technology usually implies using commercial software that is based on a business model treating personal data as currency and where – consequently – treating personal data as confidential is no matter of concern (Rössler, 2015). Accordingly, everything said or done through digital media needs to be considered as being said on the public level, regardless of whether it has been posted on a blog, written in a direct chat, or communicated via mail. However, this is often not obvious to the ordinary user as many platforms provide the option of using a pseudonym, seemingly providing a withdrawing option that encourages people to discuss aspects of their life normally kept private. Many social websites use this encouraging function of anonymity, without ensuring long-term preservation. As such they present a threat to enterprises such as support groups, which depend on long-term preservation of anonymity.

Support groups are, therefore, developing information-sheets, making new participants aware that in regard to talking about support groups, the rule of anonymity also applies in the digital context:

Anonymity is important to us not only off- but especially on-line, because it keeps us humble and right-sized. Therefore, nothing matters more to the future welfare of A.A. than the manner in which we use this colossus of communication (the Internet). (Archive Folder: Alcoholics Anonymous and the Invention of the Internet)

Those words appeal to a sense of responsibility that goes beyond personal protection. They refer to the long-term preservation of the groups. However, at the beginning of the therapeutic-process, participants might be overburdened with such an appeal. Drawing on a sense of responsibility that calls for a future-perspective might simply be too much for a person struggling to overcome fears and resistances about therapy in general.

This is why, apart from their appeals for collective anonymity, A.A. has also developed an 'Internet Guidelines Sheet' that can be considered as generally teaching what privacy scholars have called 'privacy literacy' (Trepte et al., 2015). They do this by warning all support group participants about the fact that apart from special, secured chat rooms and e-mails, everything they communicate digitally should not be considered as private:

Social Web Sites are not private, as it is often believed by the general public. Policies vary about confidentiality, control over your profile, posting and much more. It is the responsibility of users to know what the websites allow others to do with their information. We often find that websites state that they are maintaining your anonymity, yet frequently perform the opposite. They will also explain how they may use information put on the site to profile each person for commercial, legal, or employment purposes, either by the site itself or by access to it from outside sources. Therefore one can consider Social Web Sites akin to walking through a large crowd of unknown people. This crowd seems to provide some sort of anonymity but that sort does not serve its purpose as it does not serve privacy. Walking through that crowd is like speaking privately to a friend who is earning his money by selling records of his conversations. In such a context, would you want to share your worst drunkalogues so that the whole world and not only those who can identify may be witness? (Archive Folder: Alcoholics Anonymous and the Invention of the Internet)

Whilst these warnings might be effective from an individual's perspective, they omit to say that anonymity remains important even if the individual loses interest; for the groups in general anonymity functions as a social lever and public relations manager.

Protecting and preserving anonymity for such far-reaching functions against the economic interests present in collecting and selling data, therefore, cannot be placed as a burden on the individual only, not least because it would place the burden on group participants to use secure technical systems only when communicating with each other. However, such systems are often relatively complex to use, acting as a barrier to communication (Gürses, 2010). Requiring

use of only secure systems would, therefore, soon run into conflict with the idea of providing a low threshold, for people to become easily engaged in mutual support-relationships.

In light of these considerations the preservation of anonymity's therapeutic and regulating functions seems to be threatened. The ways in which this problem is being addressed at so-called A.A. General Service Conferences (GSC) devoted to taking general decisions affecting anonymous support groups worldwide show that this has also become obvious for many support group-participants (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2013). However, despite having long observed the political dimensions at stake with collective anonymity, support groups, bound by their principle of primary purpose, so far have chosen to stay publically silent in this regard.

Three forms of anonymity

What studying support groups can teach us about anonymity is that anonymity exists in different forms. They evolve from different contexts and can be deployed to achieve different ends ranging from protection over equality up to distributing culture-critical messages. When looking at the context of addiction therapy alone, already five different functions have been identified. As a result of studying these five functions, I now suggest differentiating between three forms of anonymity, not only to establish an order for future research, but also to provide a framework for discussing the question when and in how far certain social practices of anonymity might merit political protection in the name of democratic values (freedom and equality).

Personal Anonymity: Serves to protect individuals. It enables the act of sharing sensitive information and/or undertaking risky endeavors as it provides the actor with control over the consequences that might follow.

Social Anonymity: Serves to create social equality among members of a group/participants of a program. It enables developing a common attitude of mutual identification, solidarity and/or support albeit social differences between group members.

Collective Anonymity: Serves to establish and distribute an idea/program as common good. It enables breaking through patterns of individual possession, greed and big-shotism, conceptualising ideas, practices and programs as common rather than as personalised achievements.

Conclusion

Support groups make us aware of the fact that there is an important and basic value in personal anonymity for many people – it grants people who feel anxious about discrimination the freedom to ask for help without being paralysed by fear.

Social anonymity is not only important for individual participants to find the courage to enter support groups but is considered as vital for self-organised group therapy to work at all. This is because it is understood to be functioning as a social leveller, thus facilitating identification and confrontation, two most basic mechanisms of therapy. When discussing possible forms of protecting anonymity in digital times it is this form of anonymity that we should not lose sight of. I would consider it very valuable and worth protecting as it enables people to create spaces of social equality.

Collective anonymity is considered most important for the continuous persistence of the concept of anonymous support groups and their global network within the A.A.-community itself. This is because collective anonymity is seen as shielding the intentionally very loosely organised network from becoming internally corrupted by hierarchies and power-structures. When reflecting collective anonymity in light of other phenomena such as the hacker-collective ‘Anonymous’, who – following Coleman (2014) – practice collective anonymity as an ‘anti-celebrity ethic’, parallel stances in other cultural fields become apparent. Collective anonymity can be considered not only as valuable in that it facilitates the survival of support groups but moreover in that it transports a wider message, reminding people of the value of being part of a greater whole instead of circling just around one’s own benefits.

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