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Communication Privacy Management Theory

Significance for Interpersonal Communication

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As a college sophomore, Sam was doing well. They had great grades, a decent part-time job, close friends, and had been with their romantic partner for 2 years. However, as the Spring semester was about to start, Sam discovered their partner was cheating. Heartbroken, Sam told their friends. Upon telling them, Sam's friends said they had known about it for months. As it turns out, Sam's partner had told Sam's friends about the infidelity. Sam's partner told their friends not to tell Sam. Sam's friends had kept their promise, but should they have told Sam sooner?

Jamie had spent much of their time with Quinn in a friends-with-benefits type of relationship. They were not in an exclusive relationship, but Jamie did not have other sexual relationships. One day, Jamie felt ill—fever, sore throat, aching joints—and went to the doctor. After running some tests, the doctor informed Jamie they have a sexually transmitted disease that is curable with treatment. After picking up their antibiotic, Jamie confronted Quinn, expressing their anger at not practicing safe sex with other partners. Quinn told Jamie they must be crazy because Quinn showed no signs of gonorrhea. Despite Jamie's insistence Quinn was their only sexual partner, Quinn denied any wrongdoing. Two days later, Jamie woke up to around twelve Twitter notifications. Each Tweet tagged them with phrases such as "Hey @Jamie: #SharingIsntAlwaysCaring," "@Jamie #ClapsBack," and "A round of applause for @Jamie #ClapClapClap." Devastated at publicly exposing their private life, Jamie called Quinn and asked why they told others about their conversation. Quinn explained this is their health, too, and they have a right to do with it what they want. Although this may be true, should Quinn have shared this information with others without telling Jamie?

Sam and Jamie's stories illustrate the decisions we make about how much to protect private information, how much to share it with others, and the consequences occurring with how we manage private information. Different theoretical frameworks and research findings provide insight into why we make certain decisions, how we discuss issues with others, and how we

communicate and negotiate privacy boundaries to achieve an optimal balance between privacy and social relationships. In this chapter, we introduce communication privacy management (CPM) theory developed by Sandra Petronio (2002, 2013) as a useful theory for assisting researchers, students, and practitioners in grasping how individuals and relational others reveal, conceal, and [mis]manage private information (Petronio & Child, 2020). In what comes next, we discuss the purpose, principles, and value of CPM.

Intellectual Tradition of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a "homegrown" communication theory based on systematic research, designed to develop an evidence-based understanding of how people regulate revealing and concealing private information. Although some theories fit within one methodological paradigm, CPM spans the range of interpretivist and post-positivist paradigms because CPM was not developed with a methodological approach in mind. Because an interpretivist's research methods capture purposive and socially embedded human action "to understand the web of meanings in which humans act" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 59), CPM helps us understand human action, such as the disclosure of private information, as purposive, rule driven, and interpreted by those participating in the disclosure event. On the other hand, CPM also guides post-positivist research such as how different kinds of core and catalyst privacy rule considerations predict individual privacy management, collective boundary coordination, and boundary turbulence. According to Baxter and Babbie (2004), post-positivist researchers attempt to explain, predict, and control human behavior (see Chapter 1 of this book). As such, CPM offers principles and perspectives allowing researchers to use different methodologies.

Main Goals and Features of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a rules-based and system-based theory about how individuals, dyads, and groups of people disclose and protect different kinds of private information. We unpack each aspect of this definition and make connections to the axioms and theoretical principles underlying CPM (see Table 24.1).

Defining Private Information and Considering Disclosure Practices

CPM conceptualizes disclosure in different and important ways from previous theorizing and research. Earlier self-disclosure research focused largely on depth and breadth of disclosure resulting in deeper development of intimacy between individuals. In our opening story, we see that Sam and Jamie discussing their relational issues with friends may have lessened their

Table 24.1 CPM Axioms and Privacy Management Considerations

Axiom	Definition	Considerations
Axiom 1	People believe they are the sole owners of their private information, and they trust they have the right to protect their information or grant access to it.	★Privacy Ownership
Axiom 2	When original owners grant others access to private information, they become authorized co-owners and are perceived by the original owner to have fiduciary responsibility for the information.	★Privacy Ownership
Axiom 3	Because people own rights to their private information, they also justifiably feel they should be the ones controlling their privacy.	★Privacy Control
Axiom 4	The way people control the flow of private information is through the development and use of privacy rules. These rules are derived from decision criteria such as motivations, cultural values, and situational needs.	★Privacy Control ★Individual Privacy Boundary Regulation
Axiom 5	Successful and continued control post-access is achieved through coordinating and negotiating privacy rules with authorized co-owners regarding third-party access.	★Privacy Control ★Collective Privacy Boundary Regulation ★Privacy Turbulence
Axiom 6	Co-ownership leads to jointly held and operated collective privacy boundaries where contributions of private information may be given by all members.	★Privacy Ownership ★Privacy Control ★Collective Privacy Boundary Regulation
Axiom 7	Collective privacy boundaries are regulated through decisions about whom may become privy, how much others inside and outside the collective boundary may know, and rights to disclose the information.	★Privacy Control ★Collective Privacy Boundary Regulation
Axiom 8	Privacy regulation is often unpredictable and can range from disruptions in the privacy management system to complete breakdowns.	★Privacy Turbulence

levels of relational intimacy since the disclosures created tension between the partners. CPM theory assumes the content of *what* is disclosed between individuals is less important than *how* vulnerable the discussion of content with others makes someone feel (Petronio, 2002, 2010). It is important to stress that different people will find revealing certain types of private information more easy or difficult. Returning to our opening examples, some couples might be fine with a close group of friends knowing more about

their relationship yet mark other topics as sensitive or off limits to discuss with others. Given these differences, CPM focuses more on *how* people make choices about revealing and concealing information, how others are involved in that process, and how they control access to information within privacy boundaries.

Individual and Collective Privacy Boundaries and Ownership Considerations

CPM uses a boundary metaphor to illustrate the disclosure and management of private information. Private information not shared with anyone resides in an individual privacy boundary (Petronio, 2002). People believe they have the right to make decisions about who gets to know their private information, how much of it they get to know, and under what considerations private information might be shared with others (see Axioms 1 and 3, Table 24.1). When individuals share private information with others, it moves out of an individual privacy boundary into either a dyadic (shared with one other person) or collective privacy boundary (shared with multiple others) where the future control of private information becomes a mutual obligation for everyone who has become a co-owner and knows the private information (See Axioms 2 and 6). Thus, when Quinn shares Jamie's health information with others, this information moves from a dyadic collective privacy boundary between partners into a collective privacy boundary including the partner and friendship circle. When more people are included in a privacy boundary, controlling further management of the private information within that boundary is more difficult because it requires negotiation and agreement among the diverse co-owners about what to do with information in collective privacy boundaries (Petronio, 2013).

Rules–Based Approach to Control the Management of Private Information

As a rules-based theory (Petronio, 2002, 2013), CPM suggests when people make decisions about sharing private information with others, different rules assist in the privacy management process (see Axioms 4, 5, and 7). Privacy rules allow private information to move from individual boundaries into collective privacy boundaries. For example, relational partners may have rules about when to talk to one another about spending practices. Privacy rules can sometimes be explicit and well understood by others and other times implicit and assumed. Articulating and coordinating privacy rules for information residing within collective privacy boundaries allows co-owners to know the expectations regarding future management of co-owned information (Petronio & Child, 2020). Assumptions regarding implicit privacy rules can be inaccurate because they are not talked about directly enough to give concrete guidance.

How we navigate privacy rules and move information from individual into collective privacy boundaries is influenced by core and catalyst privacy rule criteria (Petronio, 2013). Core privacy criteria are usually stable and predictable influences across time (i.e., gender, culture, privacy orientations). For instance, young adults in the United States typically do not experience much boundary readjustment in what they reveal or conceal after accepting Facebook friend requests whereas the opposite is sometimes the case in China (Child & Westermann, 2013; Fang & Gong, 2020). In addition to global culture, we can think about families and other groups as having a culture that is created and sustained through communication (Petronio, 2002, 2010), making another type of core privacy criterion is how families create predictable norms concerning privacy expectations, or family privacy orientations, about sharing of private information within and outside the family (Serewicz & Canary, 2008).

Catalyst privacy criteria, however, influence private information management depending upon the situation, people's motivations to share or conceal, and/or making assessments about the risks versus rewards related to sharing or concealing (Petronio, 2013). For example, Wilson et al. (2019) illustrated some of the catalyst influences faced by female veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. These women determined whether to talk about mental health struggles with others out of a fear of being stigmatized and/or receiving different kinds of social support benefits like when expressing struggles, which may vary across relationships and time.

People establish different types of rules about whom, when, and what others can know regarding information shared within and outside a collective boundary (boundary linkage rules); the quantity and frequency of discussing information within and outside the collective (boundary permeability rules); and how to make decisions about further sharing the information beyond the collective (boundary ownership rules; Petronio & Child, 2020). When groups come to an agreement about privacy rules, fewer breakdowns occur in the overall management of private information within the collective privacy boundary (see Axioms 5 and 7). For example, if Jamie explicitly told Quinn to not talk about their sexual history with anyone else, Jamie has specified a type of boundary permeability rule, and private information is easier to manage when both parties respect the privacy rules.

System–Based Approach to Privacy Management and Making Readjustments

As a systems-based theory, CPM's propositions involve coordinating privacy management expectations with those becoming co-owners of private information (see Axiom 5) within relational, family, and group systems. Thus, CPM specifies considerations and processes for both individual and collective privacy management. The boundary metaphor allows consideration of boundaries with thin, moderate, or thick boundary permeability (Petronio,

2002; Petronio & Child, 2020). A thick privacy boundary is one through which little information moves out of the boundary whereas a thin privacy boundary is more porous, allowing greater breadth and depth of disclosures to move into other types of collectively owned privacy boundaries.

When people are displeased with the flow of information within different types of privacy boundaries, they will reflect on their established rules for controlling the management of private information within privacy boundaries. Privacy turbulence is when adjustments to privacy rules are needed to prevent future privacy breakdowns (see Axiom 8). As such, CPM enables analysis of the functioning of privacy rules and how well the rules prevent breakdowns from occurring (see Axiom 5). Because CPM involves relational parties, it has a recalibration process, wherein people make tweaks and readjustments to rule parameters when small parts or the entire privacy management system needs readjustments (Petronio, 2002). For instance, Sam and their partner from our opening example likely need to make several readjustments to the privacy rules guiding future disclosures, including telling their friends the type of information they believe *should* have a thin boundary and be considered collective information and information that should have a thick boundary and stay private within the couple boundary.

How Communication Is Conceptualized in Communication Privacy Management Theory

Unlike earlier perspectives on self-disclosure that focused on the sender's perspective, CPM makes the communicative process the central feature, by considering both the recipient and the discloser. As such, CPM is wholly a *communication* theory. Fundamentals of CPM and inquiries regarding its principles seek an understanding of a communication phenomenon as an interpersonal communication theory.

Coordinating Privacy Management Expectations With Others

When the discloser(s) and recipient(s) set clear privacy rules and agree to follow them, interactants can avoid privacy breakdowns (Petronio, 2002). Often, individuals assume others understand privacy expectations or know how to manage private information with others without explicit discussions (Steuber & McLaren, 2015). CPM is a communication theory as boundary coordination requires interaction about privacy management expectations. From our opening example, if Jamie would have said, "I'd appreciate you not talking about our relational problems with anyone but me and your doctor because it makes me uncomfortable for others to know about our sexual life," both Jamie and Quinn would have a clear sense of the expectations of what information should be kept private and what can be shared with others.

It is important to know that relational parties do not always agree about privacy rules. Since Jamie is a co-owner of private information with Quinn,

they may have different expectations than Quinn about discussing relational problems with friends. To keep from experiencing boundary turbulence, the two must actively coordinate privacy expectations. Quinn may say to Jamie, "I find it helpful to talk to my friends about our relational problems." Such a sentiment conveys that Quinn wants to remove the possibility of a thick privacy boundary regarding discussing relational problems with friends. When dyads and groups negotiate and coordinate the acceptable management of private information, boundary coordination occurs. Quinn may ask Jamie, "Are there specific relationship problems you don't want me to discuss with my friends and other problems that I can talk about?" As such, boundary coordination involves agreement about appropriate types of privacy rules interactants are willing and able to follow (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Child, 2020). After agreeing, Quinn would need to discuss the expected rules regarding discussion of relational problems with their friends or self-regulate information shared with friends going forward.

Achieving a shared understanding regarding private information management involves communication, compromise, and coordination between people (Petronio & Child, 2020). Inherent within this discussion of co-ownership is also the notion co-owners may not come to a coordinated understanding about how to manage collectively owned private information. This sometimes happens because a person's own privacy expectations are misaligned with the original owner, which leads us to a discussion regarding confidants in CPM.

Confidant Types and Considering the Mutual Needs of an Original Owner and Co-Owners

A confidant is someone trusted by an original owner of private information, and confidants can be reluctant, inferential, or deliberate. As we have just seen in the preceding text, an individual may make someone a co-owner of private information, and that individual may see their expectations differently from the original owner. For example, a relational party may become a reluctant confidant when they do not want to know private information shared with them by another (Petronio, 2002). In such situations, negotiating and coordinating privacy management expectations with reluctant confidants can be a complex task. For instance, suppose Quinn told their friends that having conflict in their romantic relationship frequently makes them depressed and even suicidal at times. We would not be surprised that Quinn asks their friends to not talk about this with others. Those friends may not follow Quinn's privacy rules if they do not perceive a sense of obligation to protect the information in the same way. Thus, one of Quinn's friends may widen the circle of co-ownership of private information out of a concern for Quinn's safety and social support needs as being more important than Quinn's expressed privacy expectations (Child & Starcher, 2020). However, an inferential confidant, which is someone who expects to be told things by

virtue or having some type of a relationship with the discloser, may expect to hear such sensitive private information from Quinn. Furthermore, one of Quinn's friends may have solicited the private information from Quinn, making this friend a deliberate confidant, which is when someone elicits information from the discloser (Petronio, 2002). As such, CPM is unique from other disclosure theories by considering the privacy expectations of original owners and co-owners and how these preferences may be complementary or contradictory in nature.

Ramifications of Privacy Boundary Turbulence

Often, due to incongruent expectations or misunderstanding, boundary turbulence ensues (Petronio, 2002). There are many reasons why turbulence occurs, such as privacy violations, privacy dilemmas, and misconceptions about co-ownership. In each case, there are potential negative relational ramifications when privacy boundaries become turbulent.

If a co-owner intentionally disregards co-ownership rules negotiated with them, an intentional privacy rule violation and breakdown occurs. If the original owner of the information suspects there was just a misunderstanding with the co-owner about privacy rules, they will likely respond to the situation in a different way than if they believe the rules were intentionally violated. (Petronio & Child, 2020). In the case of intentional privacy violations, corrective action may include not sharing private information with people we perceive cannot be trusted in the future. In the case of unintentional privacy breakdowns, further discussion and negotiation may allow the relational parties to return to equilibrium in terms of managing private information (Steuber & McLaren, 2015). For example, if Jamie confronts Quinn about the tweets and says, "I thought we agreed not to talk with our friends about our sex life," Quinn can explain their actions. If Quinn says, "I'm sorry. One of my friends was talking about an argument with their partner, and I forgot our rule and shared a story of our own—it was unintentional," such a conversation may ultimately enable the couple to revisit the privacy rules for collectively owned private information and make sure each is happy with their understanding of privacy expectations.

Research and Practical Applications of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a dynamic theory useful to understanding disclosure and communication issues across different types of relationships. For example, interpersonal communication researchers using CPM have studied (a) interpersonal health issues, (b) the use of social media, and (c) families. We next highlight recent CPM–related research themes in each area since the previous iteration of this chapter.

First, in the interpersonal health communication context, CPM scholars have studied interaction and privacy negotiation in a wide array of relationships such as college relationships (Zengaro et al., 2020), family members and friends (Hall, 2020; Rafferty et al., 2019), healthcare providers and patients (Bute et al., 2019), romantic partners (Brannon & Rauscher, 2019), and workplace relationships (Hall & Miller-Ott, 2019; Smith & Brunner, 2017). These scholars have a focus on the negotiation of CPM's rule-based system across relational types.

In one example, Hall (2020) studied the disclosure of mental health information with friends and found that *what* is being disclosed is not as important as *how* it is being disclosed, concluding that individuals do not always create explicit boundary linkage rules when sharing health-related information with their friends (Hall, 2020). In particular, friends often establish implicit norms and expectations grounded in the friendship to protect one another from experiencing some of the cultural stigmas about mental health. In another study, Bute et al. (2019) examined disclosures concerning how women and men reveal about miscarriage. They describe how different societal norms enable women to talk about the loss of a baby in different ways than is the case for men (Bute et al., 2019). Through CPM, we can also better understand the dilemmas physicians and their families face when there have been medical errors with patients (Petronio et al., 2013). CPM has been very valuable for enlightening the role of communication and privacy rules involved in negotiating various health issues.

Second, privacy regulation practices are an important part of navigating social media and mediated communication channels, and CPM presents useful information guiding everyday practices (Petronio & Child, 2020). Individuals, dyads, and social groups utilize different privacy rules when deciding what information to share through social media with the interpersonal and mediated networks with access to that information (De Wolf, 2020). In particular, users of Snapchat (a primarily video-and text-based application) share private information more freely than do Facebook users (Hollenbaugh, 2019). Given the diversity of people's social media networks, people often anticipate the need to make adjustments over time in how they manage private information on the platform. Social media users delete information to appropriately manage impressions, to achieve greater safety and identity protection needs, to satisfy interpersonal relationships, and to prevent legal or disciplinary action from occurring (Child et al., 2011; Child et al., 2012). For example, an underage college student might delete photos where they have a drink in their hand to prevent getting in trouble.

Third, when we think about privacy management in families, because mediated communication allows parents to digitally track children better than before, young adults today can experience a range of privacy breakdowns with parents through mediated communication channels (Ledbetter, 2019; Ledbetter et al., 2010). For example, perhaps surprisingly, Ledbetter (2019) found that young adults most frequently report their parents do not

use mediated communication to invade their privacy and they do not need to defend against parent privacy invasions. This may be because young adults are the ones teaching older generations of family members about effective social media privacy management (Child et al., 2015). Child and colleagues found that young adults spend more time helping parents and grandparents learn how to interact and manage private information effectively online whereas they provide more advice about avoiding privacy breakdowns to their siblings. These findings illustrate the importance of considering how individuals and relational parties manage private information on social media when they consider the use of social media to relate and interact with others.

Interpersonal and family communication researchers also illustrate how privacy rules adapt and change to fit evolving needs across the life span. Specifically, recent research on adapting disclosure across the life span reflects how adult children adjust what they reveal and conceal to an aging parent (Lillie & Venetis, 2020; Wenzel Egan, 2020), LGBTQIA+ individuals disclose a sexual minority orientation to family and friends (Pecoraro, 2020), married partners manage private information with in-laws (Young & DeGroot, 2019), and birth parents seek out a child relinquished through closed adoption practices (Rizzo Weller & Hosek, 2020). These studies represent applications of CPM where family members adjust privacy rules to meet changing and complex situations.

A familial change sometimes triggering privacy management readjustments is when an adult child moves away to college for the first time. Parents can respond to this adjustment by invading the privacy of their adult children or giving their child the space to manage their private information as desired (Ledbetter, 2019). When parents frequently invade the privacy of their children at college (and the children do not defend against the privacy invasions) higher levels of psychological distress are more common for the adult child. These findings illustrate the importance of maintaining an adequate balance between both sharing and protecting private information between family and friends.

Caring for aging parents can also change the type of private information shared between family caregivers and other members of the family (Lillie & Venetis, 2020; Wenzel Egan, 2020). When family members become more involved in the care of aging parents, boundary coordination processes may adjust (Wenzel Egan, 2020). Some family caregivers experience a gradual increase in access to a parent's private information. Some parents entirely relinquish ownership and control of their private information to the family caregiver. Some caregivers have a parent who oscillates between sometimes sharing and other times protecting their private information, where the parent segments access to some of their private information to different family members for different reasons. Regardless of the privacy management pattern (Wenzel Egan, 2020), adult children caregivers who engage in more topic avoidance with siblings about caregiving for an elderly parent(s) are

less relationally satisfied and more depressed than parental caregivers who do not avoid talking about the various aspects of a parent's overall health that are in flux (Lillie & Venetis, 2020).

Evaluation of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a valuable theory containing significant strengths. Unlike many previous theories adopted from other disciplines, CPM represents a theory explicitly grounded in and derived from the communication discipline. CPM helps us understand how and why we reveal and conceal private information. CPM has generated a plethora of research in contexts across disciplines including computer science, health, psychology, sociology, business, and government (Petronio & Child, 2020). CPM can be used to understand privacy and disclosure in contexts such as healthcare, education, social media, business, economics, and organizations. One criticism of CPM theory is its lack of parsimony. Because CPM reflects a complex set of rules and considerations related to understanding disclosure and privacy management systems, researchers frequently turn to utilize aspects of CPM (e.g., disclosure criteria, privacy turbulence) in their projects rather than exploring every tenet of CPM. On the other hand, one of the greatest strengths of CPM is its utility and heuristic value in both basic and applied research. As such, researchers seeking to use CPM in their studies will find that CPM works well within both post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms. However, less CPM research reflects the critical paradigm by exploring inherent power differentials within interpersonal relationships and how this may influence various decisions and outcomes regarding private information disclosure. Thus, more work is needed in developing measures and exploring various interpersonal relationships to capture the full complement of ways CPM can help us understand how people manage private information.

Continuing the Conversation

The directions for future research using CPM are numerous. Balancing privacy and disclosure is not a task found exclusively in close, personal relationships and is applicable in groups and organizations as well. For example, CPM is applicable to address questions about mediated communication and privacy management practices occurring on mobile phones (i.e., texting, phone setting use, and partner tracking practices). In the workplace, CPM can help us understand how co-workers share personal information to be held in confidence. CPM allows us to better understand what individuals disclose, what they keep private, and how private information is handled among people. Future research should continue testing the viability of the theory across applications and exploring the nuanced understandings and sense-making processes of private information disclosure. In addition, more work is needed related to privacy turbulence and repair mechanisms to teach

us how people mend, or choose not to mend, privacy breakdowns. As we have seen, the heuristic value of CPM is promising, for not only communication but also many different contexts and disciplines exploring interpersonal relationships.

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