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ABSTRACT

The boundary metaphor has been used successfully over the past two decades to explain and predict how individuals manage the tensions between the need to self-disclose and the need for privacy within interpersonal relationships. This paper explores the history of Communication Boundary Management Theories and presents suggestions for modifying the theories as well as avenues for future research. The paper suggests that research needs to more fully investigate the transactional nature of negotiated boundaries and to examine nonverbal behaviors. It also suggests that a more strategic approach for studying boundary management would be to identify key contexts where privacy and the need to disclose come into conflict. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/CR)

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Exploring Tensions Between Self-Disclosure and Privacy Needs: The Future of Communication Boundary Management Theories

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ABSTRACT

The boundary metaphor has been used successfully over the past two decades to explain and predict how individuals manage the tensions between the need to self-disclose and the need for privacy within interpersonal relationships. This essay explores the history of Communication Boundary Management Theories. Additionally, we present suggestions for modifying the theories as well as avenues for future research.

Exploring Tensions Between Self-Disclosure and Privacy Needs: The Future of Communication Boundary Management Theories

Over the years, self-disclosure has received much attention in interpersonal research. The related concept of privacy has become an important topic in the last decade (Petronio, 1991). In her ongoing research program on self-disclosure, Petronio (1991, 1996, 1997) examines the way people regulate the disclosure of private information. Petronio (1991) is interested in the "paradoxical demands requiring us to manage dialectical needs for intimacy and autonomy when we wish to disclose private information" (p. 311). This essay explores the interrelationship between Boundary Management Theory and Communication Management of Privacy Theory by overviewing their development, central tenets, strengths, and limitations. We conclude with suggestions for possible modifications of the theories as well as avenues for future research.

The History of Boundary Management Theories

The development of Communication Boundary Management Theory has been influenced by scholars relying on a "boundary" metaphor to explain self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships (Altman, 1975; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Petronio, 1991). Altman (1975) argues that social actors implement an "interpersonal boundary process by which a person or group regulates interaction with others" (p. 6). Derlega and Chaikin (1977) posit that self-disclosure is the mechanism through which we adjust our privacy boundaries. "Adjustment in self-disclosure outputs and inputs," according to Derlega and Chaikin (1977), "is an example of boundary regulation and the extent of control we maintain over this exchange of information contributes to the amount of privacy we have in a social relationship" (p. 103). Petronio (1991) extends this boundary metaphor and presents a theoretical framework for understanding the way individuals

regulate the disclosure of private information.

Boundary management research originated with a pilot study where categories were generated from open-ended responses in which participants defined self-disclosure (Petronio & Littlefield, 1982). Two major dimensions of self-disclosure emerged from the data analysis — prerequisite conditions and anticipated ramifications. According to participants, the following prerequisite conditions need to be present before individuals will disclose to others: Setting, receiver, sender; and relationship conditions. Another dimension of self-disclosure identified was anticipated ramifications, referring to the outcomes predicted by the person following his or her disclosure.

The basic thesis of communication boundary management assumes that "revealing private information is risky because there is a potential vulnerability when revealing aspects of the self...(and) receiving private information may also result in the need for protecting oneself" (Pertonio, 1991, p. 311). In order to "manage" both disclosing and receiving private information, individuals erect a metaphoric boundary. They then use a set of rules or criteria to control the boundary and regulate the flow of private information to and from others (Petronio, 1991).

Communication boundary management functions on both macro and micro levels. The macro level provides the overall structure and identifies general guidelines regulating how individuals reveal and react to private information. It suggests there is a "coordination of boundaries where partners maintain separate yet connected communicative systems that are used to protect vulnerabilities when there is a need to disclose private information" (Petronio, 1991, p. 312).

The micro level examines the strategic nature of the interactive process of communication

boundary management. The boundary management process for the disclosing partner is regulated by taking into account at least five variables: Need to tell, predicted outcomes, riskiness of telling this information to the partner, privacy level of the information, and his or her degree of emotional control (Petronio, 1991). When an individual does decide to disclose, he or she creates a demand message to frame private information. The demand message includes response expectations as well as actual content, and is communicated as either an implicit or explicit message.

Boundary management for the receiving partner generally includes evaluating expectations for responses, attributional searches to assess the motivation for the message, and determining a message response. Expectations are evaluated on the basis of two things — the sense of responsibility for action an individual feels and the amount of freedom to respond which is perceived to exist. Attributions are made taking at least five sources into account: (1) relational memory that is used to employ known information and scripts; (2) the content of the message; (3) the context in which the disclosure of private information is made; (4) the environment in which disclosure occurs; and (5) the nonverbal cues. Based on these considerations, the receiver formulates a response.

Boundary coordination represents the extent to which there is a fit between the demand (expectations) made by the disclosing partner and the reactions of the receiving partner. The theory posits that boundary coordination may result in at least four types of fit: (1) satisfactory — explicit demand message and direct response, (2) overcompensatory — implicit demand message and direct response, (3) deficient — explicit demand message and indirect response, and (4) equivocal — implicit demand message and equivocal fit. These propositions still need

direct empirical testing.

One limitation of Communication Boundary Management is its narrow use of the boundary metaphor. Petronio (1991) recognizes this weakness and calls for "the broader use of a boundary metaphor" (p. 236). While Communication Boundary Management applies the metaphor to informational self-disclosure among marital couples, this theory could also be tested in other contexts including how co-workers, supervisors, and subordinates as well as how parents and children negotiate privacy boundaries. Additionally, privacy resources could be expanded to include other resources besides information. Petronio et al. (1996; 1997) address these drawbacks in a current research program grounded in a revised theoretical framework: The Communication Management of Privacy.

Using the boundary metaphor, the Communication Management of Privacy theory (Petronio et al., 1996; Petronio & Kovach, 1997) argues that privacy is controlled through regulating the degree of accessibility and inaccessability using rules. As in the Communication Boundary Management approach, this theory contends that the regulation of boundaries ranges from open access, that reflects loosely controlled boundaries, to restricted access that refers to boundaries that are tightly controlled. However, this perspective reconceptualizes "privacy resources." Privacy resources include information about one's own self as well as our private body space, possessions in our environmental and social territories, the right to limit who witnesses our expression of emotion, and any other resources that accord humans a sense of individualism and control over one's life. Levels of accessibility to privacy resources are dependent upon how vulnerable an individual feels. "Vulnerability is at issue," according to Petronio and Kovach (1997), "because people are guarding resources they own" (p. 118). Rules

for access are used to decide the target person receiving boundary access, extent of access, and when, where and how access will occur (Petronio et al., 1996). Protection rules are based on similar criteria, although for antithetical reasons. Being motivated to guard against access to privacy resources is conceptualized as the antithesis of granting access.

The Future of Boundary Management Theories

There is heuristic merit in using boundaries to metaphorically illustrate how individuals cope with tensions arising from the paradoxical needs to share and withhold access to privacy resources. "Boundaries" provide individuals with protection from perceived risks associated with allowing others access to one's privacy resources. Additionally, Petronio and her colleagues (1996, 1997) have illustrated the pragmatic potential of the theory through its use in applied contexts. Many scholars have argued that applied research is often perceived as atheoretical and lacking scholarly rigor (e.g., Kreps, Frey, & O'Hair, 1991). This line of inquiry transcends this stereotype by exploring communication issues through analyses which are grounded in theoretical frameworks. These benefits are illustrated in two recent research projects (Petronio et al., 1996; Petronio & Kovach, 1997).

Petronio et al. (1996) explored when and why protection rules and access rules are invoked in order to comprehend the conditions under which children who are sexually abused will or will not talk about the crime. Thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with abused children and adolescents who had previously disclosed their abuse to a third party. The data revealed that participants used boundary access rules such as tacit permission, selecting the circumstances, and incremental disclosure as a basis for self-disclosing. They also used protection rules to maintain privacy borders by evaluating

target characteristics and perceived outcomes of self-disclosing.

A second article used the Communication Management of Privacy theory to explore the care-giver's perspective of privacy negotiations between health care providers and elderly persons in nursing home contexts (Petronio & Kovach, 1997). While the research with abused children focused on information as a privacy resource, this piece focused on possessions and territory as privacy resources of elderly patients. The authors conducted thematic analyses of data collected during in-depth interviews with care-givers who were employed in Scottish nursing homes. Data analysis revealed that while patients and care-givers cooperated on boundary maintenance, care-givers perceived that elderly patients still maintained privacy resources by manipulating possessions and territory.

While these two research exemplars highlight the pragmatic potential of the Communication Management of Privacy, they also illustrate shortcomings in the current applications of the theory. First, research needs to more fully investigate the transactional nature of negotiated boundaries. For instance, Petronio and Kovach (1997) argue, "each person negotiates with the other a set of access rules for the relational boundary" (p. 119). Additionally, they claim to identify, "the way the care-givers and elderly negotiate a relational privacy boundary when managing possessions and territory" (p. 115). However, the research design used in this study was linear in that it relied on interview data collected from care-givers to conceptualize boundary management in this environment. Since past literature, and common sense, suggests that it is primarily staff who affect the quality of life for institutionalized elderly, investigating care-takers' perspectives is important. Moreover, in order to explore how mutually agreed upon privacy rules are transactionally constructed, both relational partners need to be

involved in the data collection process. Because Petronio and Kovach were unable to gain access to both patients and care-givers, this project falls short of truly delving into the "negotiation" aspect of boundary management. Rather than solely depending on interviews with care-givers, future research designs should also provide patients with opportunities to discuss their lived experiences.

Of additional interest to communication scholars should be how individuals continually negotiate access and boundary rules within transactions, based on prior episodes of self-disclosure or privacy maintenance. Petronio grounds these theories in Giddens' concept of structuration in that "rules for boundary maintenance are thought of as practices where individuals develop procedures for action, or a type of formulae for granting action" (Petronio & Kovach, 1997, p. 118). She acknowledges that access and protection rules may need to be reformulated in a new situation. But these rules may be reformulated and modified all the time. Giddens' (1984) theory articulates that through interaction, individuals create structures that in turn influence future interactions. This structuration process creates a need to know how individuals evaluate episodes of "boundary coordination," since this evaluation will presumably affect future interactions and outcomes.

A second limitation of this research program is that researchers have failed to examine nonverbal behaviors. How a person maintains, manages or controls his or her nonverbal personal boundaries regarding private information has yet to be empirically examined. Extant research on self-disclosure has only focused on verbal communication. Nonexistent in the current research literature are the nonverbal communication behaviors that individuals exhibit when revealing information that ranges form semi-private to extremely private (Wood & Duck, 1995).

Depending on the degree of risk involved in disclosing some private information, individuals will also either use implicit or explicit communication strategies (Petronio, 1991). As yet, nonverbal behaviors have not been considered in relation to the communication of an implicit or explicit strategy. When an individual is attempting to disclose or is disclosing a piece of information that is of high privacy and is using an implicit demand strategy, the resulting nonverbal behaviors may be less pronounced or noticed. In contrast, the nonverbal behaviors resulting from the disclosure of a piece of low-private information using a an explicit communication strategy could be gesticularly over exaggerated.

In addition, the nonverbal behaviors of the receiving partner have not been examined using boundary management theory. The receiving partner reacts and receives expected behavioral and disclosive clues from the disclosing partner. Depending upon how private the disclosive message is, and demands the receiving partner perceives, the nonverbal behavioral reactions of the receiving partner can vary significantly. In fact, these behaviors can likely impact on further disclosive behavior.

A third limitation of this research program is that it has not coherently articulated a justification for exploring boundary management in particular contexts. Indeed, contexts for exploring boundary management have varied widely to include settings ranging from disclosure of sexual abuse to provider-patient relationships in Scottish nursing homes. The danger of this "shotgun" approach for studying boundary management is that it could have the long-term effect of seriously damaging the power of the theory.

A more strategic approach for studying boundary management would be to identify key contexts where privacy and the need to disclose come into conflict. In such contexts, the

successful manipulation of boundaries would be crucial for both relational and task outcomes. For instance, the health care context brings to the forefront the tension between privacy and task goals. In order for health care providers to successfully perform their duties, patients must disclose private information such as sexual history, drug use, and familial background. Another possible context that nonverbal disclosure of private information may play a significant role is in the courtroom. When witnesses are disclosing varying levels of private information, corresponding nonverbal behaviors can significantly contribute beyond that of what is being said. In addition, whether a witness decides to use an implicit or explicit response strategy, nonverbal communication behaviors that correspond can reveal as much or more than the verbal communication. Since the nonverbal behaviors of witnesses are highly critiqued by jurors and other trial participants, these individuals likely feel a signicant amount of pressure to maintain tight control over their nonverbal behaviors despite disclosing information that may be highly private. Future research should attempt to provide deep explanations of boundary management in key arenas including health care and legal contexts before venturing out into other contexts.

A final limitation of this research program is that it has not followed lines of inquiry to their logical conclusions in terms of consequences of disclosure. For instance, two articles grounded in a boundary framework (Petronio & Martin 1986; Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield 1984) have revealed gender differences in prerequisite conditions for self disclosure and anticipated positive and negative ramifications of disclosure. More specifically, men were more likely to predict negative ramifications of disclosure and were less likely to disclose while women found sender and receiver characteristics more important as prerequisite conditions for disclosure and were more likely to disclose. While these gender differences indicate that women

typically self disclose more than men, there is no clear indication how these differences impact communicative interactions — particularly in specific contexts such as health care.

In order for this program of research to fully accomplish its applied goals, it needs to follow such lines of inquiry. Indeed, this weakness of the program of research is also its heuristic benefit. Research has revealed that, in the health care setting, male and female medical students approach various patient populations differently (Heun, Harter, & Schambach, 1997). More specifically, women reported feeling significantly less comfortable towards anticipated interactions with dying populations, confrontational and hostile patients, and middle-aged clients than did men. These statistical differences between men and women could be due to an actual difference in the expression of emotion or they could also result from women's willingness and men's unwillingness to disclose how they feel towards certain patient populations. This question lies at the heart of the boundary issue and is critical to determining the clinical significance of the Heun et al findings. Future research could explore gender differences in boundary management as those differences are revealed in communicative interactions.

The boundary metaphor has been used successfully over the past two decades to explain and predict how people manage privacy resources. The development of the Communication Management of Privacy resulted from the need for a broader use of the boundary metaphor (i.e., definition of privacy resources). There is potential for future researchers to use this theory in a number of applied contexts that highlight the tension between needs for autonomy and openness. By investigating both verbal and nonverbal behaviors within interactions in which boundaries are transactionally negotiated, researchers using a boundary management perspective can continue to contribute to our understanding about individuals' management of privacy resources.

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