

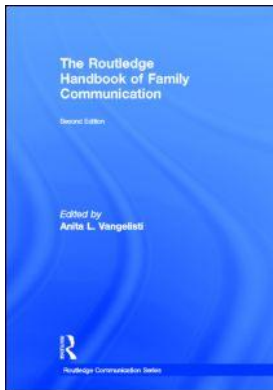
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### **When Families Manage Private Information**

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Part V  
Family Communication Processes

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# When Families Manage Private Information

*John P. Caughlin, Sandra Petronio,  
and Ashley V. Middleton*

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Popular advice admonishes people about the dangers of family members keeping “dark secrets” (Bradshaw, 1995, p. 27) or “the emotional fallout that often occurs when families keep secrets” (Webster, 1991, p. xi). Indeed, many families conspire to keep dangerous secrets like violence or child abuse (e.g., Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mont’ Ros-Mendoza, 1996; Smith, 1992). However, family members also conceal private information for prosocial reasons. For example, a wife may protect her husband from embarrassment by refraining from mentioning that he secretly wears a toupee. When family members collaborate to keep information private, it can contribute to their sense of bonding and trust with each other, protecting family privacy boundaries from outsiders (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Petronio, 2002; Vangelisti, 1994). In contrast, revealing private information about another family member can be viewed as a betrayal if the family established rules prohibiting the disclosure (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008).

Such examples may suggest that deciding whether to reveal or conceal private information about the family is easy; for example, one might have a simple rule forbidding disclosures that are harmful to family members. However, privacy issues are more complicated for three reasons. First, revealing and concealing are both necessary for family functioning (Petronio, 2002). Family members need to be connected to each other through shared confidences, but they also need to keep some information from others to negotiate or maintain their own distinct identities. Second, because both revealing and concealing are beneficial (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), families must manage the way they make choices about disclosing and retaining their privacy. Although some choices may be easy, many are not. For example, in some cases of domestic violence, family members feel two simultaneous needs: to protect the solidarity of the family by limiting disclosure, and to alleviate harmful effects of violence by disclosing to outsiders (Fitzpatrick, 2002). Third, many family privacy issues involve information that some members keep from others within the same family. In such instances, bonding with one member by sharing private information may simultaneously betray another family member (Petronio, 2002). In short, the privacy issues among and between members are myriad and have important implications for the success of the family and its members.

The current chapter examines such issues by selectively reviewing research on family privacy, secrecy, topic avoidance, and disclosure. Our intention is to illustrate main foci

of the literature rather than offer a comprehensive summary. The chapter is framed by Petronio's (2002, 2010) communication privacy management (CPM) theory, which uses a boundary metaphor to illustrate the way people manage their privacy. The theory argues that people believe they have the right to control their private information because they feel they own it and they believe controlling this information protects them from vulnerabilities. For CPM, control is achieved through the use of privacy rules that individuals develop to make decisions about how to regulate boundary permeability (i.e., degree of access to private information), linkages (i.e., connections allowing others into a privacy boundary), and ownership (i.e., the belief that one has responsibility for controlling information). In families, people typically own both personally private information and co-own information with other family members. When family members co-own private information, they are expected to coordinate privacy rules for third-party disclosures with original owners. Using the theoretical structure of CPM, the chapter is divided into three main sections:

- 1 how families manage private information;
- 2 consequences of changes in privacy rules for family privacy boundaries;
- 3 suggestions for future research on privacy within families.

### **How Families Manage Private Information**

To understand how families manage private information, two main concepts from CPM are helpful to give the big picture: family privacy boundaries and privacy rules that are used to coordinate these boundaries.

#### *Family Privacy Boundaries*

CPM theory posits that family members create and manage privacy boundaries to protect or grant access to private information.<sup>1</sup> Privacy boundaries also mark borders of ownership and levels of control (thick and thin boundaries), as well as illustrate the management process. According to CPM theory, people own information they consider belonging to them and are co-owners of, or stakeholders in, private information that is shared by others (Petronio, 2002). Co-ownership is particularly important in families given their collective nature. CPM argues that there are two types of family privacy boundaries: external and internal cells (Petronio, 2002, 2010). The external privacy boundary protects whole family information (Vangelisti, 1994). For example, some people might say, "in my family, we never tell outsiders about family finances." Because all members co-own such information, they typically coordinate regulation of this information in a unified manner often establishing a "family privacy orientation" (Petronio, 2010). Co-ownership within internal family privacy cells includes only certain members. For example, siblings sharing knowledge of one parent's extramarital affair may cooperate to keep their knowledge from both parents (Thorson, 2009). Controlling access creates a privacy boundary cell separating the siblings from the parents.

#### Linkages

Linkages into privacy boundaries (internal and external) occur both when one family member (or one group of family members) gives permission to know private information

and when one discloses personal or collectively held private information to others. The formation of such linkages depends on privacy rules that people use to make judgments about who should be privy to the information (Petronio, 2002, 2010). One common “linkage rule” children use within families is evident in the tendency of children to tell their mother more private information than they tell their father (e.g., Denholm-Carey & Chabassol, 1987).

### Permeability

Privacy boundaries vary in permeability, meaning there are gradations in the accessibility to private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010). For example, as evidenced by reports that almost all families keep some secrets from outsiders (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), the existence of a privacy boundary around family members is likely ubiquitous, yet the level of privacy control typically varies depending on a host of issues including motivations. Family members, as a consequence, regulate permeability in a number of ways. For example, family members can limit the degree of accessibility to private information by keeping a secret, which involves intentionally concealing information from others (Bok, 1983). Another way family members decrease the permeability of privacy boundaries is by avoiding topics (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Finally, family members can increase the permeability of a privacy boundary by granting greater access to private information across personal and collective boundaries (Waterman, 1979).<sup>2</sup>

### Co-ownership

Although disclosing, avoiding topics, and keeping secrets may seem to be actions individuals engage in alone, Petronio (2002, 2010) argues that collective boundaries can be constructed through the linkages that are created when individuals divulge private information or otherwise give permission for others to know it. Once information is shared, it is considered co-owned because individuals can no longer unilaterally control how the information is (or is not) disseminated. Co-owners of private information are stakeholders in the information; therefore they must collectively negotiate decisions about granting or denying access to others. There are a number of possible collective privacy boundaries with families, including ones involving dyads, larger groups, or even the whole family.

The extant literature contains numerous examples of how ownership or co-ownership of information is associated with various privacy boundaries within or around families. For example, siblings often cooperate to keep secrets from their parents (Caughlin et al., 2000). Also, most families keep at least one secret that family members co-own, which forms a privacy boundary around that information and those members (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Family members can also co-own private information with somebody outside the family and keep it from others in their family, such as when family members confide information pertinent to their family to a therapist but not to other family members (Brendel & Nelson, 1999).

Although privacy boundaries within a family must be negotiated, coordination can be difficult. CPM refers to such cases as privacy turbulence (Petronio, 2002, 2010). For example, one family member may attempt to appropriate control as in the case of parents who are perceived as invading their child’s privacy (Ledbetter et al., 2010; Petronio, 1994) or in cases when one family member’s standards for disclosures differs greatly

from another family member's (Caughlin, 2003). Likewise, family privacy dilemmas cause turbulence as does confidants receiving unwanted disclosures that obligate them to provide support (Petronio, 2010).

### *Developing Privacy Rules to Coordinate Family Privacy Boundaries*

Although numerous privacy rules are used to manage privacy boundaries, Petronio (2002) argues that there are two basic modes of privacy rules, protection rules and accessibility rules that are derived from five criteria: culture, gender, motivations, context, and perceived risk–benefit ratio. These criteria interact to shape specific decisions about whether to reveal private information, which confidant(s) should receive the information, when it should be divulged, and how it should be framed to manage impressions (Bute & Vik, 2010; Durham, 2008; Thorson, 2009). Considering the impact these criteria have on rule development and enactment helps to discern when members engage in protection or allow access (Petronio, 2010). Although all criteria have been found to predict the choices of privacy rules, three (culture, gender, and motivations) have been selected in this chapter to illustrate their utility for understanding privacy in families.

#### Privacy Protection Rules

There are many ways in which each criterion impacts protection rules for families and their members. Although we explore them individually, often these criteria work in conjunction with each other.

#### Culture

Given that privacy is often a cultural value, families from one culture regulate privacy boundaries to be more or less protective than families in other cultures. Families may import those cultural values as the basis for their family privacy orientation, teaching protection rules to preserve family integrity or guard secrets (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008; Petronio, 2010). Parents, for example, may teach their children culturally based privacy protection rules to learn when self-expression is considered inappropriate (Kim & Sherman, 2007). Cultural-based privacy rules explain why there are distinctions in how family members from different cultures protect information, such as the differences in secretive behavior between African American and Hmong adolescents (Bakken & Brown, 2010). The influence of culture can be subtle and complex. In Western cultures, there is a high value placed on openness, but this does not mean that families do not develop privacy protection rules. Consistent with the general cultural values, many families claim to be completely open, but they nevertheless carefully avoid talking about issues like sex (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2005). That is, due to a cultural preference toward openness, many families do not recognize or will not admit the privacy protection rules that are implicit in their actions.

#### Gender

Meta-analyses have shown that differences between men and women in communicative behaviors like disclosures tend to be smaller than is often assumed (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992). Nevertheless, the differences that do exist are meaningful, and privacy protection rules in families are influenced by gender and sex. Certain types of private information,

such as abortion or premarital pregnancy, may be more sensitive for women than men (and therefore need more protection). Research suggests that adolescent boys tend to be more secretive with their parents than are girls (Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010). Additionally, adolescents and young adults avoid topics more with fathers than they do with mothers (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Withholding information also can have different implications based on gender: Young adults' concealment from mothers is more likely to be associated with problem behaviors than is concealment from fathers (Smetana, Villalobos, Rogge, & Tasopoulos-Chan, 2010).

### Motivations

Individuals have many motivations for protecting privacy boundaries in families. Vangelisti (1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) conducted a series of studies in which respondents reported reasons they kept secrets from other members of their family and from outsiders. Although Vangelisti labeled these reasons "functions," they likewise can be thought of as motivations for keeping secrets. For example, bonding was a reason that involves keeping a secret because it promotes cohesiveness and identification among the family members who keep the secret. Family members also keep secrets to avoid negative evaluation (Vangelisti, 1994), as in cases when family members see a secret as a source of shame (Mason, 1993). Even when unjustified, family members may believe that they will be blamed or rejected by others if they reveal a secret such as sexual abuse (Petronio et al., 1996).

Family members also may be motivated to keep secrets for maintenance reasons, such as preventing disruptions to family closeness and stress to family members (Vangelisti, 1994). For example, parents with HIV may not disclose this to a child who is thought to be too young to understand or too likely to suffer from excessive worrying (Schrimshaw & Siegel, 2002). Some individuals also report keeping family secrets simply because they do not believe the information is other people's business (Vangelisti, 1994). Another motivation for keeping secrets is to put up a defense against the possibility that others may use the information against them. Finally, sometimes people keep secrets because they believe they do not know how to effectively disclose private information to others (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005).

### *Privacy Accessibility Rules*

#### Culture

Although privacy accessibility rules are distinct from privacy protection rules, they are based on similar criteria (Petronio, 2002, 2010). Culture influences individuals' rules for revealing information, as demonstrated by Americans' tendency to value open disclosure in intimate relationships (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Sometimes there are both similarities and differences between cultures; for example, safer-sex disclosure among sub-Saharan couples is, in some ways, comparable to that among U.S. couples, but disclosure in this context is also unique because of cultural norms that sanction the involvement of family members in couple communication (Miller, Golding, & Ngula, 2009).

#### Gender

Privacy access rules are also influenced by gender (Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984). There is a tendency for women to disclose more to their spouses and to their parents than



do men (Dindia & Allen, 1992), suggesting different rules for revelation depending on gender. As with the other privacy rule criteria, gender is salient for some disclosure decisions but not others. Serovich and Greene (1993), for instance, found that married women were more likely than married men to think it is appropriate to disclose HIV testing information to members of their nuclear and extended families; nevertheless, Serovich and Greene found no gender differences regarding disclosures to nuclear and extended families among dating individuals.

### Motivations

There are a number of motivations for revealing private information in families. Vangelisti, Caughlin, and Timmerman (2001) identified nine criteria individuals commonly use when deciding whether to reveal a family secret to outsiders. Consistent with the CPM notion that individuals engage in a complex calculus when determining whether to reveal private information, the nine criteria interacted in theoretically interesting ways. For example, one criterion was relational security (i.e., feelings of closeness and trust with the potential confidant). Although people reported that they would generally need to feel close to somebody to reveal their secret, such relational security by itself was not enough to make someone reveal (Vangelisti et al., 2001).

Individuals' tendency to reveal a family secret also may depend on whether they have an *urgent need* to talk to somebody about private information to relieve a burden (Helft & Petronio, 2007; Vangelisti et al., 2001). According to Stiles' (1987) fever model, individuals' need to talk with someone can be so great that they experience psychological distress. Decisions to reveal private information also are influenced by beliefs about whether the confidant will *accept* a family member if the private information is revealed (Durham, 2008; Johnson, Kass, & Natowicz, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 2001). For instance, gay sons and lesbian daughters are more likely to come out to a parent if they believe the parent will be accepting rather than rejecting (Ben-Ari, 1995).

Along similar lines, some family members wait for implicit or explicit *permission* before revealing private information. Permission can involve tacit permission from the confidant that revealing the information is acceptable (Petronio et al., 1996), or it can involve wanting to receive consent from other family members before revealing collectively owned private information to somebody outside the family (Vangelisti et al., 2001). From a CPM perspective, permission is an example of how decisions to reveal private information often are complicated by co-ownership of information. In some cases, the mutual responsibility implied by co-ownership is so salient that individual family members report that they would not reveal certain private information unless the potential confidant became a member of the family (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008; Vangelisti et al., 2001).

Finally, there may be times when specific criteria outweigh other factors in decisions about revealing family secrets. When individuals believe another person has an *important reason* to know the information (e.g., that person was having a crisis related to the secret), they may tell the person even if the other criteria would tend to impel them to continue concealing the secret (Vangelisti et al., 2001).

### Consequences of Changes in Privacy Rules

CPM argues that there are ramifications for the decisions people make about revealing or concealing private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010). Most notably, CPM theoretically

incorporated the fact that privacy management can and does become turbulent. Decisions to reveal or conceal have consequences that can lead to privacy management breakdowns for families and anyone else regulating private information (Petronio, 2002). This section examines the consequences for families of both concealing private information and revealing it because CPM argues that each can be better understood when both are considered.

### *Consequences of Families Concealing Private Information*

A number of outcomes can occur when family members conceal information within interior and exterior family privacy boundaries. The synchronized boundary coordination of privacy rules involved in concealment may indicate that a family is functioning well; however, rule coordination can also have negative consequences for the family and its members. Three types of consequences for concealing private information mentioned frequently in the family privacy literature are bonding, creating and maintaining boundaries, and experiencing stress from keeping secrets.

#### Bonding

Perhaps the most often cited potential benefit of concealing private information is bonding among those who are linked within a collective privacy boundary. Individuals who share private information can feel marked as insiders, leading to a sense of loyalty and cohesiveness (Bok, 1983). Sharing a bond can also motivate individual family members to keep the family's secrets (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Although bonding typically may be considered prosocial, there are potential risks. Sometimes, family members feel so connected and loyal they will not reveal a family secret, even when the costs of keeping the secret are personally very high, such as refraining from revealing when a child develops symptoms of a psychotic disorder (Saffer, Sansone, & Gentry, 1979).

#### Creating and Maintaining Privacy Boundaries

Privacy boundaries can help families with the task of creating and maintaining functional interconnections among their members. When internal privacy cells are created and sanctioned by the members, the boundaries that create these cells can be beneficial because they allow dyadic or triadic autonomy and individual autonomy, thereby respecting the rights to link only certain members while controlling others' access to particular information. When daughters, for example, disclose concerns about gynecological issues to only their mothers, there usually are no hard feelings if the exclusion is discovered by other members. In fact, when families allow for these kinds of internal privacy rules they create a more flexible, comfortable, and supportive environment (Petronio, 2010).

Even in families that have internal privacy rules that work well for them, there are life-cycle experiences that challenge the status-quo of privacy rules for families. For instance, when children reach adolescence, they often decrease the amount of permeability between themselves and their parents by concealing more information than they had previously (Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008; Petronio, 1994). Failure to respect the emergence of individual privacy rights between generations can be associated with negative outcomes for family members; for example, anorexia in daughters is sometimes linked with a parent engaging in overly zealous information-seeking regarding the daughter, which may impede the daughter's ability to establish individual autonomy

within the family (Dalzell, 2000). On the other hand, consequences of changing privacy rules and new boundary formations can be more functional than dysfunctional. As blended families form, for example, keeping some private information from new stepfamily members can sometimes help individuals adjust to their new family configuration (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Given that many children and adolescents brought into blended families feel pressure to immediately form close bonds (Bray & Kelly, 1999), keeping some information within a protected privacy boundary and not telling the new stepfamily members may allow the children to feel they own something apart from the newcomers. Concealing some private information may ease the pressure to establish “meaningful” relationships with strangers that are defined as “family” (Schrodt, 2007).

Although managing collectively defined privacy boundaries is important in families, the CPM theory suggests that privacy boundaries can become too impermeable (Petronio, 2002, 2010). For example, if a family is very successful at negotiating extremely restrictive privacy boundaries, the relatively impermeable boundary that results may have negative consequences for the family or its members. Indeed, family members’ perceptions of whether and to what extent secrets are kept are associated with dissatisfaction with their family (Finkenauer, Frijns, Engels, & Kerkhof, 2005; Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Similarly, young adult children’s satisfaction is inversely associated with the extent to which they are allowed to conceal topics from their parents (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010), and parents’ satisfaction is inversely associated with the extent to which they perceive their child avoids topics (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

### Experiencing Stress

There are many reasons why keeping a secret may cause tension or anxiety. The consequence of drawing thick privacy boundaries around personally private information can impact not only the secret keeper but also other members of a family. Parents who decide to keep an extramarital affair secret to protect the children, for example, would likely exhibit residual tension, even after the affair had ended and the couple decided to stay together. Secrets also can harm those who keep them. Keeping secrets is associated with individuals’ level of tension, loneliness, behavioral impulsiveness, and even stress related physical health problems (Kelly, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). Thus, when access is not an option for other family members, the impermeability of a member’s privacy boundaries becomes a burden because members expect to have some access. When the boundary lines are so restrictive, the outcome can be difficult for all family members.

### *Consequences of Families Revealing Private Information*

One benefit of revealing personal information is to avoid problems associated with the potential burden of keeping information private. That is, some of the consequences of revealing private information are in juxtaposition to the consequences of concealing private information. There are other effects of revealing, however, that cannot be easily deduced from knowing the effects of concealing information.

### Revealing Private Information and Family Members’ Well-Being

There is abundant evidence that disclosing secrets or traumatic experiences can have both mental and physical health benefits (for reviews, see Kelly, 2002; Smyth & Pennebaker,

2001). Although this benefit provides a strong reason for verbalizing revelations, it is important to keep in mind this does not necessarily mean that people need to tell their secrets to the target of the secrecy to get the benefits of disclosure. The research suggests that the act of disclosing enhances well-being primarily because it helps individuals better understand the circumstances surrounding whatever information they disclose (Kelly, Klusas, von Weiss, & Kenny, 2001; Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011). This implies that a person keeping a secret from one family member can benefit by talking about the secret with some other person (e.g., another family member, a counselor, or a trusted friend) or even by writing about the secret (Pennebaker, 1997).

### Revealing Private Information and Social Support

Despite the risk that family members might not be supportive when another family member divulges private information, disclosing private information is a primary way to solicit social support from family members (Derlega et al., 1993). Parents living with AIDS, for example, may find it necessary to discuss their symptoms and prognosis with extended family members to secure instrumental assistance in caring for their children (Gewirtz & Gossart-Walker, 2000). Also, disclosing one's HIV status to members of one's family of origin is positively associated with perceptions of receiving social support from the family (Kadushin, 2000).

### Consequences for Confidants

It is important to keep in mind that decisions about revealing information do not only affect the person disclosing the information; the target of such disclosures is also affected (Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). Telling a family member certain kinds of information may be hurtful to that family member, and sometimes other family members do not want to be told everything (Petronio & Gaff, 2010). Moreover, the effects on the confidant then have consequences for the discloser that need to be considered; for example, individuals vary considerably in how supportively they react to learning stigmatized information about a family member (e.g., Caughlin et al., 2009).

### *Considering Consequences of Revealing and Concealing Together*

As the preceding discussion illustrates, both revealing and concealing private information in families have a number of possible positive and negative outcomes. The impact of revealing or concealing likely depends on numerous factors such as culture, gender, motivations, and context. For example, although perceiving other family members as avoiding topics is generally associated with dissatisfaction, this association is moderated by perceived motivations, such as whether one is viewed as trying to protect oneself or relationships (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2009). Consequently, recent research emphasizes the importance of considering the motivations when examining associations between concealing information and relationship quality (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007; Afifi et al., 2005; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2009). That is, it is too simplistic to simply list the consequences of revealing and concealing because the particular consequences are contingent on the particular circumstances.

## Future Directions in Family Privacy Research

The review in this chapter hints at the richness of the literature on family privacy management. Despite the richness of this literature, there are many issues that have not been fully explored. Below we describe four areas of research that have received some attention in the literature (especially recently) but also warrant considerable focus in future research.

### *Managing Multiple Privacy Boundaries Within Families*

The CPM theory emphasizes how family members coordinate to maintain collective privacy boundaries (Petronio, 2010). As joint stakeholders or co-owners of jointly held information, family members must negotiate rules for regulating access to their private information. Although CPM gives the needed apparatus to explore multiple relationships, many studies concentrate on the relationship between individuals and the larger whole of the family (Afifi et al., 2007). However, more information is needed about how families deal with privacy management collectively. Addressing this gap in our understanding involves numerous interrelated questions. For example, when a family forms an exterior privacy boundary around private information, how do all the family members know that the information is supposed to be protected? How do members become socialized and learn expected privacy behavior?

Presumably, there are many specific means for negotiating rules regulating when, how, and if private information is revealed or concealed. Some families may reach an agreement about protecting private information through easy and implicit negotiations. The privacy rules for boundary management in these cases likely are derived from family members' previous experiences with similar situations or similar types of private information. They also may rely on relatively concrete privacy orientations that have developed over time (Petronio, 2002). In other cases, members may need to explicitly negotiate privacy rules because the privacy needs are new or different than those families have experienced before (Durham, 2008).

The complexity of families means that the joint negotiation of privacy rules and regulation of privacy boundaries may not always happen smoothly. Boundary turbulence erupts when family members are unable to reach agreement about how to handle the information, when someone makes a mistake, or intentionally violates these rules (Petronio, 2002, 2010). For example, spouses' disagreements about disclosures of infertility can cause relational challenges and privacy disruptions (Steuber & Solomon, 2010).

### *Considering the Recipient*

In the past several years, there has been a notable increase in research on the role confidants play in the family (e.g., Petronio, 2010; Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). Still, compared to the enormous literature on people who reveal or conceal private information, we know much less about recipients of private information. Family members who act as confidants often are challenged to maintain a relationship with the discloser, even if they are not prepared to cope with the information that was revealed (Petronio, Sargent, Andea, Reganis, & Cichocki, 2004). For example, the majority of mothers with HIV tell their children (Kirshenbaum & Nevid, 2002), even if some of these children are not ready to deal with such an important disclosure.

Considering the confidant underscores the need to recognize that disclosure, privacy, confidentiality, and secrecy involve both a person who reveals or conceals, and a potential

recipient (Petronio, 2010). This point is particularly evident in families because families are systemic, which implies that each individual's actions can influence the other family members. Although it is difficult to study family members functioning as a group, such group level analyses are important for understanding and investigating privacy boundary coordination and turbulence within families (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). Thus, at a minimum, considering recipients in conjunction with those revealing and concealing is the first step in coming to a more complete understanding of family privacy (Caughlin et al., 2009).

### *Communication Technology and Family Privacy*

The communication technologies available to family members have changed rapidly. Even with the most recent past generation, communication technologies like email have gone from unknown to passé (Ojalvo, 2010). Given the ready accessibility of personal information and the growing popularity of social networking sites, the question of ownership rights to this information is a challenge for families (Child & Petronio, 2011). Children using the Internet may reveal information about family income or the household's telephone numbers. Obviously, these actions may compromise parents' privacy, yet may be seen by the children as innocent actions (Branscomb, 1994). Conversely, older family members may be more apt to share personal information on social networking sites than are adolescents; for example some parents make childhood pictures of their (now) adolescent children available to others (e.g., Child & Petronio, 2011). Parents may believe they own the rights to share their family information, whereas their children may view such dissemination as a violation of their privacy.

Although parents' ability to divulge embarrassing information clearly predates the Internet, the potential speed, range, and permanence of this dissemination is heightened by such communication technologies. Computer technology is now essential to many families' everyday existence, but the implications of these technologies are far from clear. New technologies have multiple effects; for example, the expanding use of cell phones and personal computers may enable family members to communicate with one another more frequently, but increased usage of these technologies can also blur individual privacy boundaries (Ledbetter et al., 2010).

In addition to considering multiple effects of technology, family communication scholars should focus on how the *way* family members communicate with technologies matters. Understanding the privacy implications of a particular communication technology will likely depend on how families use them. For example, in some cases an adolescent may use a smartphone primarily to connect to peers or other people outside their family, which would create greater autonomy from the family. In other cases, spouses may use the same smartphone (and its embedded GPS) to monitor their partner's messages and location at all times (Gupta, 2010). Clearly, such behaviors would have very different family privacy implications.

### *Family Health and Privacy*

As with advances in technology, the changing landscape of family health has significant implications for privacy management, providing ample ground for future research. One challenge concerns the fact that family members and physicians often have different privacy rules about medical information; for example, parents of children in sudden medical crises

commonly believe that they have the right to know all medical information and observations, but physicians are more apt to conceive of specific results and observations as something that they own and can conceal until they are ready to divulge diagnoses and proposed treatments (Duggan & Petronio, 2009). Clearly, such circumstances can lead to turbulence for privacy boundary management between families and physicians, complicating the purely medical aspects of the crisis.

In addition to causing turbulence between families and physicians, medical encounters can also lead to privacy management disruptions among family members (Petronio & Lewis, 2010). Given our aging population, it is becoming more common for a family member to accompany older adults when they visit their physician to serve as an advocate and to help interpret medical diagnoses and instructions. Yet having another family member present may complicate the management of private information. Patients and other family members may assume different privacy rules during clinical visits, which can lead to turbulence in different ways. For example, family members may reveal to physicians that patients continue to smoke, even when the patient did not wish to divulge this (Petronio et al., 2004), and families with a terminally ill member can become frustrated when some members of the family want to discuss the details of the prognosis with the physician while other family members want to maintain hope and optimism by avoiding those same details (e.g., Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, & Brown, 2011).

Another potential catalyst for boundary turbulence among family members is the increased availability of genetic information and testing (Petronio & Gaff, 2010). With some conditions, parents may feel guilt about being carriers or may not even understand the nature of the disease (Fanos & Johnson, 1995). Such attitudes and beliefs about genetic diagnoses can lead family members to conceal information about diseases; for instance, some grandparents purposely conceal the presence of Huntington's Disease in the family from subsequent generations (Sobel & Cowan, 2000), and parents may hide their own or their spouse's genetic test results from their children out of fear that potential partners or in-laws may reject their child if the potential for a genetic illness is known (Petronio & Gaff, 2010).

Although such intrafamily secrets may seem extreme, disclosing such information can entail large risks to family members. Sobel and Cowan (2000) reported a case when a husband divorced his wife after he learned she tested positive for the gene causing Huntington's Disease. Given the high stakes, hiding the family history of genetic predispositions could be perceived as protecting a family member from the risks involved with testing. Equally probable, some family members may not want to know genetic testing results of a family member. If the person who was tested wants to tell other family members, but some family members do not want to know the information, this could easily create privacy boundary turbulence within families. Conversely, parents may feel compelled to disclose their adult child's illness to others in the family, despite the adult child's wishes to keep the information private (Johnson, Kass, & Natowicz, 2005).

Along with genetic testing, scientific advances in infertility treatments have implications for health and privacy in families (Bute & Vik, 2010). As advanced infertility treatments have become more well known, people in a couple's social network may feel it is appropriate to ask personal questions about those treatments. Doing so can cause dilemmas for couples both because discussing treatments can lead to further undesired disclosures about infertility challenges and because engaging in these treatments is often stressful (Bute & Vik, 2010). Further, although treatments have advanced, the stigma associated with infertility remains and can impact the level of comfort in making disclosures

about decisions to seeking treatment. Overall, infertility-related stigma appears to interact with gender such that husbands' experiences of stigma tend to suppress disclosures to friends whereas wives' experiences of stigma tend to increase disclosures (Steuber & Solomon, 2010).

## Conclusion

There were two main goals for this chapter: selectively reviewing the existing research on privacy in families and suggesting areas for future research. By using the CPM theory to frame the chapter, we discussed how family members collectively manage privacy boundaries. Family privacy issues are often complex; for instance, unlike most traditional self-disclosure scholarship, much of what is considered private information in families is co-owned among members. This has numerous implications, including the need for family members to negotiate with each other when creating and maintaining collective rules for coordinating family privacy boundaries. Although we discussed the existing literature on how family members develop privacy rules, we also advocate continued work to better understand how such rules are negotiated among family members.

This chapter also summarized a number of consequences for revealing or concealing private information pertaining to families. One theme that runs through this discussion is that consequences are often simultaneously positive and negative. When a family collaborates to keep a secret, for example, it may lead the family members to bond in a satisfying way. That same bonding, however, may make it difficult for a family member to break those family privacy rules when the member feels it is more advantageous to do so. In short, the consequences of revealing or concealing private information are typically complex, which makes simple prescriptions about telling or not telling private information unproductive.

Finally, based on the existing literature and trends in society, we suggested four corridors for future research on family privacy. From a theoretical standpoint, CPM theory points to a greater need for scholars to examine how family members simultaneously manage multiple privacy boundaries. There is also a need to balance the voluminous research on individuals who reveal or conceal information with more investigations into the potential confidants of that information. From a practical standpoint, innovative communication technologies and the intersection between healthcare and families provide important and interesting questions for scholars interested in family privacy.

## Notes

- 1 It is important to recognize that the CPM focus on private information excludes some issues that can be described as privacy issues within families. For example, the term "privacy" sometimes refers to family members' rights to make decisions without being influenced by the larger community or government. A pregnant woman's decision regarding whether she should have an abortion, for instance, can be discussed as a type of privacy issue. Such "decisional privacy" issues are beyond the scope of the current chapter.
- 2 Although disclosing private information typically is a means of creating a relatively permeable boundary (and keeping secrets or avoiding topics are typically means of creating relatively impermeable boundaries), it is important to recognize that such associations are not absolute. As Cooper (1994) pointed out in her study of a Soviet spy, disclosing private information about oneself can be done selectively to create a false impression, even if the disclosures are true. For example, one can create the impression of being an open person by disclosing about one's attitudes or personal life. In the case of the Soviet spy, the openness about some issues



functioned to prevent other individuals from questioning whether the spy might be hiding something; thus, disclosing information actually helped the spy create a very impermeable boundary with respect to some private information.

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