

## **Privacy Regulation: Culturally Universal or Culturally Specific?**

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This article examines privacy as a generic process that occurs in all cultures but that also differs among cultures in terms of the behavioral mechanisms used to regulate desired levels of privacy. Ethnographic data are examined from a variety of cultures, particularly from societies with apparently maximum and minimum privacy, and from analyses of various social relationships, such as parents and children, in-laws, husbands and wives. It is concluded that privacy is a universal process that involves culturally unique regulatory mechanisms.

This article addresses the question posed in the title, namely, is privacy regulation a culturally universal process or is it a culturally specific phenomenon? Like the rabbi of Jewish folklore faced with petitioners holding irreconcilable opinions, my answer is "yes, both positions are correct!" This seemingly paradoxical response is based on an analysis of privacy as (a) a culturally universal process involving dynamic, dialectic, and optimization features, and (b) a culturally specific process in terms of mechanisms used to regulate social interaction. Thus, I view privacy to be culturally pervasive at one level of analysis and culturally unique at another level of analysis.

The first section of the article summarizes a theoretical model and rationale for conceiving privacy as a cultural universal. Dilemmas, issues, and a strategy for dealing with the question of cultural universals are then discussed, followed by a review of ethnographic data related to privacy.

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### *A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO PRIVACY*

Recently I offered a conceptualization of privacy as the selective control of access to the self, involving dialectic, optimization, and multimodal processes (Altman, 1975). The following is a brief discussion of this theory.

#### *A Dynamic Dialectic Process*

Traditionally, privacy has been viewed as a one-way "keep out" or withdrawal process by which people attempt to avoid interaction with others. My analysis treats privacy as a dynamic and dialectic interaction with others. As such, privacy is a boundary control process whereby people sometimes make themselves open and accessible to others and sometimes close themselves off from others. As in a dialectic process in which oppositional qualities are aspects of a single unity (Rychlak, 1976), forces to be open or closed shift over time and with circumstances.

#### *An Optimization Process*

Traditional views of privacy often imply a monotonic process, to the effect that the more privacy one has the better off one is. I treat privacy as a nonmonotonic process, with departures from some optimum level of interaction in either a "too much" or "too little" direction being unsatisfactory. While the ideal amount of privacy may shift from time to time according to its dialectic feature, deviations from the optimum in either direction are hypothesized to be personally unsatisfactory. This approach integrates the concepts of crowding and social isolation with privacy: Crowding is a deviation from a desired level of interaction in a too much direction, and isolation is a deviation in a too little direction.

#### *A Multimechanism Process*

As a self-other boundary control process, privacy is viewed as involving a network of behavioral mechanisms that people use to achieve desired levels of social interaction. These mechanisms include verbal and paraverbal behaviors such as personal space and territoriality, and culturally defined styles of responding. Thus privacy regulation includes much more than just the physical environment in the management of social interaction. Furthermore, these behavioral mechanisms operate as a system. As such, they include properties of interdependence and of compensatory and substitutable action. That is, a person may use different mixes of behaviors to achieve a desired level of privacy, depending

upon circumstances. Or different people and cultures may have unique blends of mechanisms to regulate privacy.

### *Privacy Functions*

Within the preceding conceptual framework, privacy serves three functions: (a) management of social interaction, (b) establishment of plans and strategies for interacting with others, and (c) development and maintenance of self-identity.

With regard to self-identity, several writers (Proshansky, Ittelson, & Rivlin, 1970; Westin, 1967) described privacy as related to personal autonomy, identity, and self-esteem. Within the proposed framework, the issue centers around the ability of a person or a group to satisfactorily regulate contact with others. A person who can successfully control interaction with others is likely to develop more of a sense of competence and self-worth than a person who fails repeatedly to regulate contacts with others. As I have stated previously:

Privacy mechanisms define the limits and boundaries of the self. When the permeability of these boundaries is under the control of a person, a sense of individuality develops. But it is not the inclusion or exclusion of others that is vital to self definition; it is the ability to regulate contact when desired. If I can control what is me and what is not me, if I can define what is me and not me, and if I can observe the limits and scope of my control, then I have taken major steps toward understanding and defining what I am. Thus, privacy mechanisms serve to help me define me. (Altman, 1975, p. 50)

### *A CULTURAL APPROACH TO PRIVACY*

Within the preceding framework, I gradually came to speculate, as did Westin (1967) on the basis of his analysis of privacy, that the psychological viability of an individual or a group was dependent on the ability to control interactions with others, and that privacy regulation was a culturally pervasive process. This line of thinking is congruent with White's (1959) concept of personal competence, or the ability of an organism to regulate interaction with the environment, and with work by Seligman (1975) and others on learned helplessness, a state in which organisms almost become nonfunctional because of inability to regulate exchange with the environment. Thus, the possible universality of privacy concerns the capability of a person or a group to regulate interaction with others, sometimes being open and sometimes being closed, depending upon circumstances. On the other hand, privacy regulation may be culturally unique in

terms of the particular behavioral and psychological mechanisms used to regulate it. Thus, while the capability for privacy regulation may be culturally universal, the specific behaviors and techniques used to control interaction may be quite different from culture to culture.

Figure 1 summarizes the approach I used to examine cultural aspects of privacy. The small circles represent different behavioral mechanisms for controlling privacy, for example, verbal and nonverbal behavior. The divisions within circles reflect the dialectical notions of accessibility and inaccessibility. For example, within the nonverbal domain there may be mechanisms to facilitate either openness or closedness to others. Furthermore, each segment of a circle can vary in area, much as a dialectical process can occupy almost the whole circle or only the slightest part. That is, the dominance of the accessibility or inaccessibility side of a circle can shift from time to time, depending on momentary circumstances; or a particular mechanism may dominate for a long period of time and appear as a permanent cultural style—for example, walls around homes.

Let me illustrate these concepts with an example from Western culture. Office occupants often have doors that are systematically

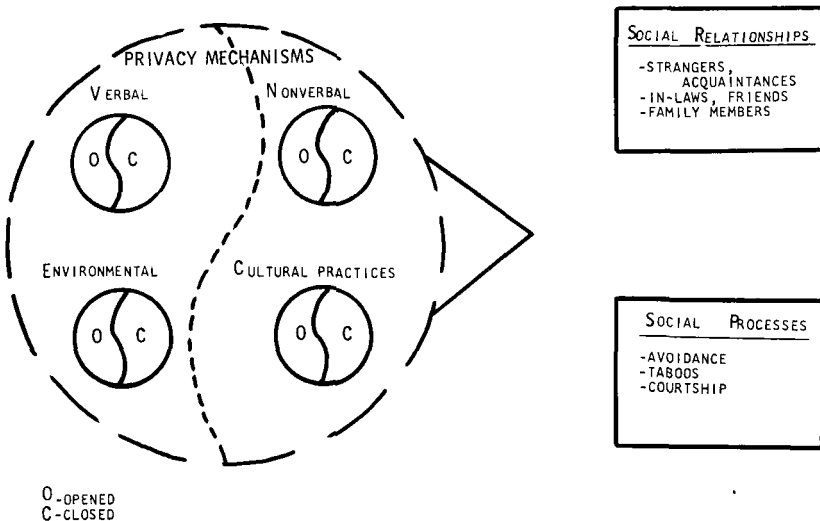


Figure 1

A framework of privacy regulation in relationship to culture.

used to control access by others. When I wish to be alone, I close my door and thereby use the physical environment to shut myself off from others. Here the "closed" part of the physical environment circle predominates. When I wish to be accessible, I leave my door ajar, and the "open" part of the circle predominates. But there are people and cultures who do not use such a mechanism, which could mean that their "environmental circle" usually has the open section occupying the largest area. The model offered here states that, although they do not use that particular mechanism, they probably have other mechanisms that operate as part of a total privacy regulation system. The superimposed circle reflects the idea that we are dealing with a complex system of privacy regulation that can include a variety of combinations of mechanisms in the smaller circles and that operates as a holistic entity. In sum, I hypothesize that all cultures have evolved mechanisms by which members can regulate privacy, but that the particular pattern of mechanisms may differ across cultures. Thus, to examine privacy as a cross-cultural phenomenon, the level of analysis must be shifted from particular privacy behaviors to a more holistic, patternlike analysis.

#### *ASSESSING THE CULTURAL UNIVERSALITY OF PHENOMENA*

In considering privacy as a cultural universal, one must realize that this is an area of long-standing concern and controversy among anthropologists and other cross-cultural researchers, and that there are many pitfalls and complexities associated with any search for universals (see Lonner, in press, for an analysis of this issue). For example, the perspective of cultural relativism states that each culture or group of cultures is unique and must be understood in its own right, not through imposition of the orientation of another culture. Thus, seeking universals may be an ethnocentric or "etic" flaw, and a culture's functioning may be misperceived by forcing on it another culture's perspective. (This, incidentally, is a complaint often raised by minority cultures in the United States.) On the other side of the coin, a purely relativistic approach may ignore generic similarities among peoples, and there is value in searching for commonalities across cultures while still recognizing cultural uniqueness.

Another issue concerns the levels of abstraction at which one describes universals. To say that all people eat, sleep, and procreate or that all cultures have such institutions as religions, families, and governance systems is to state what Lonner (Note

1) has termed "yawning truisms," which add little to our understanding. However, as some have suggested, one can proceed beyond the yawning truism level to examine the actual functioning of institutions and the behavioral dynamics of a particular social process within a theoretical framework, and thereby enhance the potential for learning about a process. To put the complexity of this issue in context, Lonner (in press) proposed a taxonomy of psychological universals that includes: (a) simple universals, for example, the universality of human sexuality; (b) variform universals, or simple universals that need to be viewed in a culturally relativistic way (somewhat like my approach to privacy); (c) functional universals, or interrelated behaviors that can have the same social consequences and that can be contrasted across cultures; (d) diachronic universals, such as basic processes of cognition and learning that are stable over time; (e) ethologically oriented universals, or behaviors with a biological link; (f) systematic behavioral universals, or theoretical and philosophical models (e.g., Freudian theory) that specify stages, forms, dynamics, and etiology of behavior in a systematic sense; and (g) cocktail party universals, or a priori, nonempirical, philosophical statements about human qualities.

Before launching into an examination of privacy across cultures, it is important to recognize several problems with such an analysis. First, it is not easy to use ethnographic materials to verify or confirm the framework of this article. Many cultural descriptions are not sufficiently explicit and were not developed with our particular model of privacy in mind. Thus, there may be instances in which a culture is described as having "no privacy," examples are provided, and the situation is left at that. If we use such material are we to conclude that our hypothesis is invalid, and/or that it is not adequately testable because the ethnography may have been incomplete in its description of the total range of privacy regulation mechanisms?

Another problem concerns the inferences one can legitimately make about the function of a particular behavior. Suppose that we describe a mechanism by which a given culture's participants make themselves more or less accessible to others. How are we to infer that these mechanisms are truly in the service of privacy regulation versus (or in addition to) serving religious, dominance, political, and other functions? Thus, labeling of behavioral events in terms of their meaning and significance can be a problem.

Given the preceding comments and the framework of the present article, I am using two lines of approach to examine

privacy in a cross-cultural context:

1. *Analyze extreme cases of privacy.* Some cultures have been described as having either minimum privacy, its members apparently unable to keep from interacting with one another, or as having maximum privacy, with little contact among certain of its members. By considering each type of culture according to the logic of the preceding framework, I would expect to find compensatory mechanisms that modulate the apparent extreme instances of total privacy or total lack of privacy.

2. *Analyze social relationships.* A second approach is to examine various processes that occur in the context of social relationships in a given culture (see the right side of Figure 1). This could involve an analysis of privacy mechanisms used by males and females, husbands and wives, in-laws, and so on, to facilitate openness and closedness. For example, if cultural circumstances forced a son-in-law and mother-in-law to have frequent and/or socially sensitive contacts, one might expect to find compensatory mechanisms that permit them to avoid one another in certain ways. Thus, an analysis of specific social bonds might reveal a network of mechanisms by which people regulate their contacts.

A more systematic way to pursue this matter would be through the Human Relations Area Files or through systematic samples of cultures, such as Murdock's (1967) *Ethnographic Atlas*. One could, for example, tap into cultures through processes related to interaction, such as joking taboos, avoidance mechanisms, sleeping arrangements, and so on. By grouping societies as high or low or present or absent on a particular behavior, one could then compare how each type of culture operated according to other areas of social interaction relevant to privacy regulation.

### *CULTURAL EXAMPLES OF PRIVACY REGULATION*

#### *Cultures of Apparently Minimal Privacy*

*The Mehinacu culture.* Gregor and Roberts (Gregor, 1970, 1974; Roberts & Gregor, 1971) provided an excellent example of a dialectic, multimechanism analysis of privacy in the Mehinacu Indians, a tribal group who reside in central Brazil. On the face of it, the Mehinacu have little privacy. In one village, five communal houses were located around a small circular plaza, so that everyone could be seen as they moved about. Furthermore, paths leading into the plaza were long and straight so that people could be observed at great distances. Villagers also recognized one another's footprints in the sandy paths around the village, and agricultural

fields were adjacent, so that everyone knew a great deal about others' whereabouts. Also, living arrangements were nonprivate because housing was communal, people entered their dwellings without announcing themselves, and the thatched walls of the structures had little sound reducing quality.

Although there was little privacy in a traditional environmental sense, Roberts and Gregor observed that the Mehinacu had a variety of practices to regulate social interaction. For example, there were secret paths and clearings in the woods around the village that people used to escape from others; it was also permissible to leave the village for several days. Some people even had houses and gardens miles away, to which they retreated with their families for extended stays. In addition, there were sanctions against women entering the men's social and religious house, people did not enter others' residences without permission, and occupants of the same building did not intrude into other families' areas. There also were strong norms against exposing others' misconduct, people did not ask embarrassing questions of one another, and lying was a regular practice used to avoid revealing information.

An interesting facet of Mehinacu life was the practice of systematic isolation, which could encompass many years of a person's life. Seclusion began with the birth of a child, when the mother, father, and child remained behind a wooden partition in their living area for several weeks or months, especially if there were no other children in the family. The child continued to be secluded until about 1-1/2 years old and was rarely taken outside. The next period of isolation occurred when boys were 9 or 10 years old. They remained inside the home behind a wooden partition and rarely had contact with others, although they were able to leave the house after sundown. Food and bathing water were brought to them, and they urinated through a wooden tube pushed through the thatched wall of the dwelling. During this period, often lasting for 2 years, boys were taught to speak quietly, to refrain from play, and to avoid emotional displays. Girls had a similar period of isolation following their first menstruation. Other instances of isolation occurred on the death of a spouse or when men learned to become religious leaders. It was possible, theoretically, for Mehinacu villager to spend up to 8 years of life in seclusion.

Roberts and Gregor interpreted this pattern of seclusion and openness in a dialectic fashion, compatible with the framework of the present article: The Mehinacu culture had evolved mecha-



nisms that permitted a balance of openness and closedness to others, with different mechanisms and different levels of accessibility shifting over time and with circumstances. Furthermore, this ethnographic analysis provides a good illustration of the value of conceptualizing privacy as involving a mixture of environmental, verbal, nonverbal, and cultural mechanisms. By focusing only on one aspect of life, such as environmental factors, one would have obtained a distorted view of the Mehinacu privacy regulation system. Gregor (1974) stated it well:

Information on rules of privacy . . . may be buried in descriptions of etiquette, or must be inferred from the characteristic house type and settlement pattern. . . . The diffuse definition of relationships and the exposed settings characteristic of many primitive communities demands a different kind of ethnography; an ethnography sensitive to the delicate interplay of privacy and publicity which emerges from social conduct. (p. 348)

*Javanese culture.* Geertz (cited in Westin, 1967) described certain groups in the Javanese culture who also apparently had little physical privacy. Families lived in unfenced bamboo homes, house walls were thin and not tightly constructed, many homes did not have doors, outsiders freely wandered in and out, and people went from room to room without announcement. On the other hand, Geertz observed that people used a variety of mechanisms to regulate social exchange. For example, social contacts were restrained, people hid their emotional feelings, decorum was elaborate, people spoke softly, and, as Geertz put it, "Javanese shut people out with a wall of etiquette" (cited in Westin, 1967, p. 16).

Thus, both Mehinacu and Javanese cultures exhibited the simultaneous presence of openness and closedness, as well as a mix of behavioral mechanisms for regulating privacy. Consistent with the thesis of this article, privacy regulation occurs in both the Mehinacu and Javanese societies as a dialectic process, and what differs between the two cultures is the particular blend of behavioral mechanisms used to control interaction.

*Pygmies of Zaire (the Congo).* Turnbull (1961) provided a rich ethnography of the Pygmies of Zaire, who reside in the northeast corner of the Ituri Forest, a heavily vegetated rain forest. Pygmies, also known as the Ba Mbuti, are a communal hunting and gathering people who live in temporary camps and who reflect well some of the principles enunciated in the present article. For example, huts were constructed out of large leaves and were repaired and rearranged on a frequent basis. Turnbull noted that the arrival

of a new family or person in a camp might result in a door being moved from one side of the hut to the other, especially if the new arrival was disliked by the older resident. One could almost keep track of arguments, jealousies, and conflicts as the directions of the huts were rearranged. People also sometimes built "spite fences" between one another's huts during serious disagreements. While largely using environmental mechanisms, this ethnography demonstrates the dynamic quality of privacy regulation among a group of people who live in close contact and who otherwise seem to have little privacy in the traditional sense.

As an example of the long term dialectic quality of privacy regulation, the Pygmies periodically separated into small family groups and lived apart from others for up to 2 months. Over time, Turnbull observed that they began to long for communal life and sought out larger encampments. It was as if the Pygmies oscillated between periods of separateness and togetherness, a cycle they followed year after year. Thus, a highly communal society that at one level seemed to have little ability to regulate privacy did, in fact, have behavioral mechanisms—some environmental, some involving long-term withdrawal—to regulate and pace the flow of their social interaction. Especially interesting from the perspective of the present article is the suggestion of a dialectic approach to privacy that not only involves the simultaneous presence of forces and mechanisms for being open and closed to others but also includes oscillating cycles of openness and closedness over longer periods of time.

*Woleia atoll.* Consider an example from a completely different part of the world—a South Pacific atoll called Woleia, a 5 mile long by 2.5 mile wide island in the Western Caroline Islands (Alkire, 1968). The population of about 600 people engaged in agriculture and fishing and lived in a close communal setting with extensive face-to-face contacts. Alkire observed the presence of elaborate rules governing interaction, which he partially attributed to the pervasive contact among people and the resulting need to minimize heterosexual competition and jealousies. In our terms, it may be the privacy mechanisms in this culture served as a counterforce to the accessibility of people to one another. For example, in communal cleaning of villages, areas were separately assigned to men and women, and they never worked together; men and women did not dance with one another, nor were men with religious training allowed to eat with women. Furthermore, areas near canoes and the beach were off limits

to women, whereas interior paths on the island were considered women's areas; when a woman had to pass near a canoe house, she took as wide a detour as possible. Also, men could not bring religious items into homes, which were women's areas, nor was a man supposed to spend time at home during the day. And, men and women walking alone did not stop to talk with members of the opposite sex. Thus, it appears that the Woleia culture had a series of practices to control interaction among men and women, perhaps because of the extensive contact that might otherwise occur given the small size of the physical environment. Thus, we see side by side in a dialectic analog forces for and against openness and closedness, as well as a series of unique cultural mechanisms for regulating social interaction. There are other societies with apparently minimal privacy: The Ngadju Dayaks of Borneo (Miles, 1970), the Choco Indians of Panama (Faron, 1962), the !Kung Bushmen of Southwest Africa (Draper, 1973). In each, close living arrangements are coupled with freedom to enter and exit easily from groups.

#### *Cultures with Apparently Maximum Privacy*

*Balinese culture.* Geertz (cited in Westin, 1967) described Balinese culture as seemingly characterized by maximum privacy, especially to outsiders. Families lived in houses surrounded by high walls, entrance ways to yards were through narrow doorways that weren't always open, and only family and close friends freely entered house yards. While this suggests an isolated existence, Geertz (cited in Westin, 1967, p. 7) noted "a tremendous warmth, humor [and] openness" among the Balinese, reflecting mechanisms to facilitate accessibility together with behaviors to restrict interaction.

*Tuareg culture.* The Tuareg are a Moslem nomadic pastoral people who live in Northern Africa in tribal and subtribal groups of 50 to several hundred people. As Murphy (1964) noted, the Tuareg wore a sleeveless underrobe and a flowing outer garment that reached from the shoulder to the ankle, along with a turban and veil. Males dressed so that only their eyes were visible, since the veil and headdress covered the forehead and the area from the bridge of the nose over the rest of the face. The veil was worn continuously once a male reached adulthood, even when he ate and slept. As Murphy indicated, the veil was a literal boundary regulation mechanism and was adjusted and readjusted, however slightly, to reflect openness or closedness to others. Thus, the Tuareg veil serves as an important behavioral mechanism

used by people in this culture to control interaction with others and reflects well the dynamic and dialectic features of privacy management hypothesized in this article.

Once again, these examples illustrate how privacy is a culturally pervasive process, if one views it as the presence of forces for people to make themselves more or less accessible to others. Yet, these examples also illustrate the cultural specificity of privacy regulation, with different behavioral mechanisms used by cultures to permit people to pace their interaction with one another.

### *SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES*

The preceding section considered privacy regulation in individual cultures. As suggested earlier (see Figure 1), one can also examine specific social relationships, such as husbands and wives or in-laws. In this section we examine privacy in three types of bonds: (a) peripheral relationships, such as strangers and acquaintances; (b) more extensive bonds, such as in-laws; and (c) close relationships, between husbands and wives and parents and children.

#### *Relationships with Strangers, Acquaintances, and Neighbors*

The African Pygmies (Turnbull, 1961) had a symbiotic relationship with Bantu Negroes, an agricultural people with whom the Pygmies sometimes worked and traded. Whenever the Pygmies made a major meat kill, such as an elephant, the villagers came into the forest to join the feast. Because their customs demanded courtesy and sharing, the Pygmies permitted the villagers to stay as long as they desired although, after a time, the visitors became an irritant. To rid themselves of their unwanted guests, the pygmies engaged the Bantu Negroes in a gambling game at which the Pygmies were far superior; within a short time, the villagers were stripped of all their possessions and soon left the camp. This is a good example of privacy regulation, since there existed side by side cultural practices to increase social contact and another set of practices to reduce contact.

Another example is from Paine (1970), who described the Lapps of Northern Europe, a reindeer herding people. In this society there was a norm that visitors could enter a tent without extensive preliminaries, sit down, and take part in the ongoing activities. The occupant could not refuse entry by visitors, yielding an apparent lack of control over privacy. Yet, mechanisms existed for closing off undesired contact. The occupant who felt negatively

about the visitor typically feigned falling asleep, which served as a signal that the visitor was unwanted. Thus, by virtue of their peculiar cultural circumstances, the Lapps closed themselves off from others in situations where cultural norms specified some initial mandatory openness.

A more paced regulation of contact with strangers characterized various groups of Australian Aborigines (Peterson, 1975). Typically, messengers or visitors remained at the fringes of an encampment or community until an escort was sent out to receive them. In some instances the escort presented the visitor with a fire stick to symbolize a welcome, or there was a brief symbolic feinting and clash of shields and weapons to welcome the visitor. Thus, both visitors and occupants had a system to regulate interaction in advance of its occurrence, whereas the Lapps and Pygmies had to alter the pace of interaction following its initiation.

Another type of relationship deals with interfamily contacts among neighbors or communal residents. For example, Anderson (1972) did a case study of Chinese families in Malaysia who lived in communal dwellings. While there was considerable contact and occasional tension, Anderson noted that families maintained separation by means of several cultural practices. These included strong taboos for entering (or even looking into) other families' sleeping areas, separate family storage areas and family stoves in various parts of the communal kitchen, clear status relationships among the elderly and young and between men and women, freedom for anyone to discipline children (with particular emphasis on punishment for invasions of privacy), and the maintenance of neutral and unemotional relationships with people from other families.

Other instances of interfamily regulation of contact appear in the ethnographic descriptions presented earlier in this article. For example, Mehinacu families lived in communal dwellings but avoided entering others' areas; they also erected partitions during periods of seclusion (Gregor, 1970; Roberts & Gregor, 1971). The Ngadju Dayaks of Borneo (Miles, 1970) resided in multifamily units but maintained separate sleeping areas and possessions, ate at different times, and had strong norms against intrusion.

In summary, an analysis of social relationships among strangers, acquaintances, or different family units suggests that when social contact is high or when certain interactions are forced, compensatory behavioral mechanisms are available that permit people to regulate their social contacts, to be open or closed as circumstances warrant. Again, these illustrations are compatible

with our concept of privacy as a culturally pervasive dialectic process, with differences among cultures revolving around the specific mechanisms used to achieve desired levels of privacy.

### *Relationships between In-laws*

The practice of "in-law avoidance" has been of considerable interest to anthropologists and refers to the observation that a spouse's parents, especially mothers-in-law, are often treated with respect, circumspection, and even hostility. This seems particularly prevalent where couples live in close proximity to the parents-in-law. One explanation for this phenomenon concerns avoidance of sexual, economic, and social exploitation that might occur among in-laws. In our framework, this practice might also be partly interpreted in terms of a dialectic process of privacy regulation. That is, because the relationship between in-laws is imposed by virtue of a marriage, and because in-laws often have close and potentially emotion-laden contacts, one might expect to find compensatory mechanisms permitting them to reduce and/or defuse their contacts.

The Yuma Indians of southeastern California exhibited in-law avoidance in the form of minimal joking between a man and his mother-in-law and infrequent positive emotional expressions, including absence of hugging, kissing, or exhibition of good feeling (Bee, 1963). A somewhat different way of avoiding contact with in-laws occurs among certain rural groups in Thailand (Tambiah, 1969). Here, newly married couples lived with the wife's parents, and a rigid arrangement of living circumstances regulated contact between a man and his mother-in-law. For example, a son-in-law was not allowed to enter the dwelling through the doorway of his parents-in-law; once in the dwelling he was forbidden to enter their sleeping area. The son-in-law also slept in a remote corner, with his wife and father-in-law separating him from his mother-in-law.

As another example, consider again the Mehinacu (Gregor, 1974). In-laws could not touch one another's sleeping hammock; they avoided meeting in the entranceway to their communal home; they stepped aside when meeting one another on a public path; they averted their eyes from one another; they never mentioned each other's names; they spoke only briefly about important issues; and a new son-in-law spoke to his father-in-law only through his wife. Thus, among the close living Mehinacu, as with the other cultures, there is a clearcut series of mechanisms for regulating contact between in-laws, which may serve to compensate

for their newly appearing physical and psychological proximity.

LeVine (1962) described another type of avoidance phenomenon—between co-wives in three polygamous African societies, the Gusii, the Kipsigis, and the Luo. These cultures had different living arrangements among the co-wives, from close proximity to considerable separation. Among the Luo, wives' homes were quite close and the women shared a common yard. Gusii wives lived in adjacent dwellings, but they often had fences separating their huts and had their own gardens and cattle pens. Kipsigis women lived at a distance from one another and had little day to day contact. LeVine noted that the often jealous and hostile relationship between co-wives was reflected in mutual accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. He confirmed the hypothesis that the closer co-wives lived to one another, the greater the attributions they made about each other's sorcery and witchcraft powers—an avoidance process that resulted in less contact between those living close to one another. Once again, the greater the forced contact between in-laws or those in analogous relationships, the more prevalent the mechanisms by which avoidance was achieved. (Naturally, it is recognized that co-wife competition may derive from sexual or inheritance competition and not exclusively from privacy regulation.)

Other examples of in-law avoidance appear in cross-cultural analyses. For example, Murdock (1971) examined mother-in-law avoidance in 89 societies selected as being representative of world cultures. His analysis of son-in-law, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, and father-in-law relationships suggested widespread occurrence of respect, formality, absence of joking, and avoidance of parents-in-law. In general, then, a variety of instances suggest the simultaneous presence of contact—almost forced by the relationship itself—and noncontact between in-laws. As stated, the particular mechanisms by which contact is modulated seem to be unique to cultures and involve different combinations of environmental, verbal, and nonverbal mechanisms.

#### *Relationships within Families*

Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony (1958) undertook a cross-cultural analysis of relationships among family members in an attempt to track factors associated with adolescent initiation rituals. They hypothesized that these rites occurred in societies where boys were especially dependent on their mothers and that one function of the rites was to break the maternal bond and to increase the boy's identification with the male role. An analysis

of about 50 societies indicated that cultures with initiation rites were frequently those in which a young boy slept alone with his mother for at least a year. In addition, these societies often had restrictions on parental sexual behavior for at least a year after childbirth. Therefore, cultures with high social contact between a mother and a young child also had mechanisms to break off that contact in later years, yielding a long term dialectic balance of mother-child and father-child interaction. Consider an example provided by Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony (1958): Among the Kwama people of New Guinea, the child remained close to the mother, slept in the mother's arms, and was nursed for 2 to 3 years. The child was also held by the mother all day, the father slept separately on his own bed, and the parents did not engage in sexual intercourse during this period. But, this changed abruptly at the time of weaning, when the child was put in his own bed, the parents slept together and engaged in intercourse in the same room as the child, and the mother no longer held the child. Thus, in a longitudinal sense, we see a cycle of high contact followed by low contact between a mother and child and, presumably, the reverse pattern between a boy and his father or other males.

One final example involves husbands and wives in the Mehinacu culture (Gregor, 1974). Among these people a married couple employed a delicate set of behavioral mechanisms to reflect their changing closeness and distance. For example, they publicly bathed together several times a day; if this did not happen, it was a clue to marital difficulties. Also, if a couple did not walk side by side others assumed some conflict between them. Another mechanism involved the position of their sleeping hammocks in the communal residence. Typically, a husband and wife hung their hammocks from the same pole, with the husband's hammock slightly higher, and with their heads only a few inches apart, indicating an intimate relationship. If they mounted their hammocks on different poles and slept several feet apart, this suggested a degree of estrangement. Similarly, if they ate from a common bowl, their bond was close; if not, it was a signal of a marital rift. Thus, the Mehinacu couple used a variety of behavioral mechanisms to pace and regulate the closeness of their interaction, to portray to each other and to the community the changing quality of their bond.

From these examples of interaction between parents and children and between husbands and wives we see behavioral practices compatible with the framework of this chapter. Cultures



seem to have developed universally a variety of mechanisms for regulating interaction between strangers, acquaintances, in-laws, or family members. These mechanisms enable people to shut themselves off from others or to be accessible to others. Also, these privacy regulation mechanisms can operate in temporal simultaneity, as in the case of the Mehinacu husband and wife, or they can function over longer cyclical periods, as in the relationship between the mother, father, and child in the Kwama culture. And, to reiterate another theme, privacy is controlled by a variety of behavioral mechanisms that may be culturally unique and adapted to the particular circumstances of a society.

### *A CONCLUDING COMMENT*

This article has presented a heuristic analysis of privacy in relationship to culture. I propose a framework emphasizing dialectic and boundary control features of privacy, whereby people can make themselves accessible or inaccessible to others. Furthermore, I suggest that privacy regulation involves more than use of the physical environment alone, but includes a variety of verbal, nonverbal, environmental, and cultural mechanisms. Thus, I conceptualize privacy as a complex and molar phenomenon that requires a broader perspective than it has received in the past.

In pursuing this line of reasoning, I have also speculated about the cultural pervasiveness of privacy regulation. It seems that the ability to regulate interaction is necessary for individual and cultural survival, and unless people have figured out ways to control interaction, their status as intact human beings can well be in jeopardy. However, to simply posit that privacy is a cultural universal does not say very much, so I have suggested that (a) people in all cultures engage in the regulation of social interaction—sometimes being accessible to others and sometimes being inaccessible to others, and (b) the behavioral mechanisms by which accessibility is controlled are probably unique to the particular physical, psychological, and social circumstances of a culture. I then explored these points through an analysis of cultures with apparently maximum and minimum privacy and through an analysis of various relationships, for example, acquaintances, in-laws, and family members.

There are many difficulties with the analysis I have proposed, including the possibilities of selective bias in case selection, imposition of an ethnocentric frame of reference on other cultures, nonrepresentativeness of cases, incomplete ethnographies, and

inaccurate labeling of cultural practices. In spite of these potential hazards, this line of analysis seems worth pursuing further, for it sheds an interesting light on the concept of privacy as a social psychological process, not only in relation to cultural phenomena but also in a way that is not readily achieved in traditional social psychological research settings.

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