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Communication Boundary Management: A Theoretical Model of Managing Disclosure of Private Information Between Marital Couples

This article presents a theoretical approach that may be used to understand the way individuals regulate disclosure of private information. The communication boundary management perspective, while more generally applicable, in this presentation focuses on the way marital couples manage talking about private matters with each other. This theoretical perspective presents a boundary coordination process representing couples' management of communication boundaries in balancing a need for disclosure with the need for privacy. The theory identifies the prerequisite conditions for disclosure and the message strategies a disclosing spouse may use to tell private information, as well as the strategic messages the marital partner may use to reply. In addition, a proposal for the way the disclosing spouse and receiving partner manage the coordination of their communication boundaries is presented.

In our relationships we often are faced with paradoxical demands requiring us to manage dialectical needs for intimacy and autonomy when we wish to disclose private information. These demands occur in parent–child relationships, friendships, relationships with our supervisors, and most obviously, with our spouses. This article presents another puzzle piece in an ongoing research program that examines the way people regulate disclosure of private information.

The basic thesis of this research program assumes that revealing private information is risky because there is a potential vulnerability when revealing aspects of the self. Receiving private information from another may also result in the need for protecting oneself. In order to manage both disclosing and receiving private information, individuals erect a metaphoric boundary to reduce the possibility of losing face and as a means of protection. Also, people use a set of rules or criteria to control the boundary and regulate the flow of private information to and from others.

Thus far, this program of research has investigated the way individuals separately manage their communication boundaries by examining conditions prerequisite to revealing private information (Petronio, 1990a; Petronio & Chayer, 1988; Petronio & Martin, 1986; Petronio, Martin & Littlefield, 1984). Also, research has investigated boundary reconstruction after invasion of privacy has occurred (Petronio, 1990b; Petronio & Braithwaite, 1987; Petronio & Harriman, 1990; Petronio, Olson & Dollar, 1988). These studies have been conducted in several contexts including families, groups, organizations, relational partners, and between parents and children.

The theory presented in this article extends the scope of previous research; it focuses on a proposal for the way two communication boundaries may coordinate when one person wishes to tell private information that another has not requested. This scenario represents only one possible way in which an individual's communication boundary may interact with another's. For example, one might also solicit private information. The boundary coordination for soliciting private information may be different from that found for unsolicited disclosure. While both conditions are important, the theoretical discussion presented in this article is limited to a disclosure condition that is punctuated by an individual giving unsolicited private information.[1]

This theoretical proposal also limits the contexts in which the discussion about boundary coordination is presented. While the principles outlined in this article may be applicable to many different arenas, interaction between marital couples is selected as a case in point. The decision to use marital couples is based on the desire to present a context in which there is high salience regarding disclosure of private information. Marital couples are expected to tell each other private thoughts and feelings to increase openness. At the same time, they are expected to maintain a sense of their own identity by protecting themselves through controlling the flow of private information to each other (Berardo, 1974).

Regulating the disclosure of private information has been identified by some as a more productive route to a successful marriage than practicing complete openness. For example, Levinger and Senn (1967) suggest that selectivity in communicating private information contributes more to marital harmony than telling everything. Bienvenu's (1970) findings suggest that selective communication in marital interactions is often preferable to complete and unrestricted disclosure about private issues and Cozby (1973) notes that "discretion may be important in preventing boredom from occurring in interpersonal relationships" (p. 88). Thus, discretion is instrumental in developing a satisfactory interpersonal bond not only because it leaves room for surprises but also because it protects vulnerabilities. These findings indicate that persons in significant relationships, such as marital couples, appear to benefit from exercising selectivity through managing disclosure of private information with each other. The notions of discretion and selectivity of disclosure may be important to a variety of relationships. However, marital relationships most clearly illustrate the dynamics involved in regulating private information within a specific context.

A couple's successful boundary management of private information may contribute to the quality of their marital relationship. Management is critical because it is the process through which the partners balance giving up autonomy by disclosing and increasing intimacy by sharing private information.

Framing the Theory: Communication Boundary Management

The theoretical perspective articulated in this article functions on two interrelated levels—macro and micro. On a macro level, the theory applies a systems ap-

proach in the form of a boundary management process. This level provides the overarching structure and identifies the general parameters within which marital couples regulate revealing and reacting to private information. On a micro level (which constitutes the majority of the essay), the strategic nature of this communication boundary management perspective is examined. For this discussion, the beginning of the process is punctuated by a spouse's unsolicited disclosure of private information. This process is represented by interactive episodes where the needs of one spouse establish expectations to be fulfilled by the other spouse. The extent to which the expectations are met may affect the marital relationship.

An explanation of the activities involved at the micro level is necessarily more specific. The interactive patterns found between the disclosing spouse and receiving partner at this level are more strategic. Miell and Duck (1986) and Chelune (1976) point out that, especially in significant relationships, disclosure is more strategic than previous literature has suggested. As Bochner (1983) notes, in general, expressiveness and disclosure highlight "a strategic predicament created by a need to balance pressures of self-revelation against pressures of self-restraint" (pp. 608–609). The strategic nature of the interaction becomes more of a theme when the disclosure is unsolicited by the spouse. As Miell and Duck (1986) point out, individuals in relationships are more strategic about their communicative interactions, especially when unexpected information is encountered.

Thus, the macro level provides a systems framework where communicative boundaries are regulated when private information is disclosed. The micro level provides an analysis of the strategic nature of the interactive process punctuated by a spouse's unsolicited decision to disclose private information to a marital partner. When the decision is made by a spouse to disclose, a sequence of events follow. The micro level of analysis is used to assess those events and to present a series of strategic decision-making options marital couples may use when communicating about and reacting to private information. The goal of the macro level is to provide a framework while the goal of the micro level is to suggest a possible set of patterns and to identify the variables salient for consideration in managing private information between marital partners.

Macro Level

Communication Boundary Management

When individuals wish to reveal private information, there is a need to regulate the way they communicate in order to control potential risk to the self. To do so, people erect a protective boundary that is used to manage the flow of private information from self to other (Altman, 1975; Altman, Vinsel & Brown, 1981). A boundary is also erected by the recipient to protect himself or herself. Since receiving disclosive information is also risky, the boundary is needed to regulate the potential vulnerability to the self as well. These boundaries represent the other perimeter of a communicative system for each individual.

These communication boundaries are regulated strategically according to decision criteria individuals use to judge expectations for interaction (Petronio & Martin, 1986). The boundaries may be loosely or tightly controlled depending

upon the degree of risk associated with the privacy of the information (Minuchin, 1974). Thus, the more private the information, the more perceived risk from the disclosed information and the more the partners feel a need to control their respective boundaries (Johnson, 1974). When boundaries are tightly controlled, access to information about the person is limited, autonomy is achieved, and vulnerability is at a minimum.

When there is a need for one partner to reveal private information, the disclosing spouse and the receiving partner negotiate the way in which their boundaries intersect. As one system opens up, the needs of the disclosing spouse set up expectations for a response from the receiving partner. Thus, revealing private information has a direct effect on the way the partner manages his or her own communication boundary. The receiving spouse's boundaries are often regulated in response to the expectations communicated by the discloser of private information.

Thus, on the macro level, this theoretical model suggests that there is a coordination of boundaries where the marital partners maintain separate yet connected communicative systems that are used to protect vulnerabilities when there is a need to disclose private information. In so doing, the marital couple works to balance their personal autonomy and relational intimacy. Because the system structure of the macro level is not detailed enough to give this theoretical perspective sufficient explanatory power it is necessary to provide a micro-level analysis.

The following three assumptions underpinning the theoretical proposal highlight the interrelationship between the macro and micro levels: (1) marital partners erect boundaries to control autonomy and vulnerability when disclosing and receiving private information. The boundary is more tightly managed with private information than with other types that are less risky to the individual; (2) because disclosing private information and receiving disclosive information is risky and may cause potential vulnerability, the marital partners regulate their communication boundaries strategically to minimize risks; (3) as the partners' individual boundary systems intersect, decision rules are used to determine when, with whom, and how much private information is disclosed as well as how to respond to the disclosure to balance personal autonomy with relational intimacy. Figure 1 illustrates the overall framework for the macro level.

Having identified the general parameters of the communication boundary management perspective, the remainder of the article focuses on the micro level of analysis where a sequence of events is triggered by one spouse disclosing unsolicited private information to his or her marital partner.

Micro Level

Overview

The theoretical perspective of communication boundary management is transactional. While the macro level represents a systems view, the micro level attempts to identify how patterns might evolve from certain kinds of transactional exchanges. The transactional patterns are marked by a demand–response sequence.

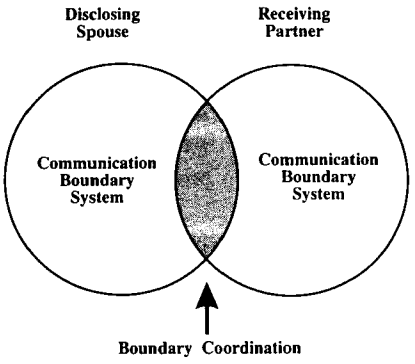

Figure 1
Macro-Level Communication Boundary Management

When a spouse discloses private information that is unsolicited by the partner and open up his or her communication boundary, there is an implied demand for a response that will satisfy certain expectations. The needs of the disclosing spouse set up expectations for the type of response that will most likely be fulfilling to the him or her.

But, the response from the receiving spouse may or may not fit with the desired expectations. The extent to which the reactions of the spouse accommodate this demand represents the level of boundary coordination achieved. Over time, the patterns of coordination may lead to increasing or decreasing relational quality and happiness.

The underlying notion suggested here is that of need complementarity. As Duck (1988) points out, complementarity develops with the relationship. Marital couples are more inclined to fulfill the needs of their partner in a complementary way (Berg & Clark, 1986). Carson (1979) suggests a general description of need complementarity. Complementarity exists when a need of one person is fulfilled by another and where that fulfillment produces satisfaction for person A, a corresponding level of satisfaction for person B, and overall satisfaction for the relationship. Thus, when there is a degree of fit between what one person needs and another is able to provide, there is an overall outcome that is positive for the relationship. This is a similar thesis to the one Rogers-Millar and Millar (1979) propose in their work on dominance and the one often used in understanding role relationships between marital couples (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Thus, managing the demand–response relationship produces a perceived outcome that results from coordinating respective boundaries. The negotiated outcome for the marital relationship represents an attempt to manage the demands of one spouse with the available responses from the marital partner. The process of management between a demand from the disclosing spouse communicating a set of expectations and a response by the receiving partner follows an episodic route in which the intersection of the couple's communication boundaries is coordinated.

Strategic Process of Boundary Management

In order more clearly to identify the episodic sequence that follows the demand–response coordination of communication boundaries between the marital partners, a discussion of the individual boundary management processes for the disclosing spouse and the receiving marital partner is first presented. In the discussion thereafter, the coordination process of the intersecting boundaries is proposed.

Generally, the boundary management process for the disclosing spouse is regulated by taking into account at least five variables: (1) need to tell, (2) predicted outcomes, (3) riskiness of telling this information to the partner, (4) privacy level of the information, and (5) his or her degree of emotional control. The consideration of these variables determines the message strategy selected to communicate the disclosive demand message. Boundary management for the receiving partner generally includes (1) evaluating expectations; (2) attributional searches; and (3) determining a message response.

Boundary coordination represents the extent to which there is a fit between the demand (expectations) made by the disclosing spouse and the reactions of the receiving partner. The interrelationship between the demands and responses may lead to four different degrees of fit or coordination: (1) satisfactory fit; (2) overcompensatory fit; (3) deficient fit; (4) equivocal fit.

Over time, the degree of coordination may result in positive or negative outcomes for the couple. For instance, over the course of a relationship, when there is a satisfactory fit between the disclosure messages and the responses given by the receiving partner, this pattern of boundary coordination may yield a benefit for the marital relationship. If there is overcompensatory fit, the response may exceed the expectations of the disclosive message for the interaction. The pattern that develops from this type of boundary coordination may be negative for the relationship. Deficient fit may produce a negative pattern for the relationship as well. When there is equivocal fit, if the response message accommodates the disclosure expectations the outcome may be positive. But, since fit is equivocal, there may also be times where the coordination results in a misfit between the disclosure expectation and the message response. Over time, if a pattern emerges, the outcome for the relationship may be more negative. In order to understand boundary coordination, it is useful to examine the disclosing spouse's and receiving partner's boundary management separately, then assess how these boundaries intersect.

Disclosing Spouse's Boundary Management

When a spouse wishes to disclose private information, he or she must take many issues into consideration. One primary concern is the demand message used to convey the private information. The demand message includes three different aspects: (1) the expectations communicated about a response to the demand message; (2) the strategy used to communicate the message, using either an explicit or implicit message type; (3) the content of the message (in this case, it is the information communicating private thoughts and feelings).[2]

The demand message is critical to the boundary coordination process between the disclosing spouse and the receiving marital partner. The judgments made by the receiving spouse concerning his or her options for response are largely triggered by the expectations communicated through the content and message strategy. Thus, interpreting the meaning of the disclosure may depend upon the way the demand message is communicated by the spouse and understood by the marital partner.

Expectations Communicated in the Disclosive Demand Message

Demand messages entail an implied expectation of a response from the partner. The disclosing spouse's expectations for the type of response are influenced by the function or purpose of the disclosure. Derlega and Grzelak (1979) suggest at least five reasons for revealing private information: (1) expression; (2) self-clarification; (3) social validation; (4) relationship development; and (5) social control. For each type of disclosure, there is a corresponding expectation communicated that influences the choice of response.

When a marital partner discloses private information for the purpose of expression, he or she wants to talk about a feeling or thought. For example, the disclosing spouse may feel sad about a friend and need the partner to listen. Such a message implies the expectation for an active listener and perhaps a supportive statement in return from the spouse. When the reason for disclosure is self-clarification, the expectation communicated is for acknowledgment of the spouse's position. For example, the disclosing spouse may reveal strong feelings about an issue. The implied message is that the partner should indicate that he or she understands the point made by the spouse. When the reason for disclosing is social validation, the spouse may wish to receive confirmation about his or her self-esteem. The expectation from the partner is for feedback ratifying the worth of the spouse. If the reason for disclosing private information is relationship development, the partner may be expected to reciprocate with private information in return. Finally, when the purpose for disclosure is to gain social control over the partner, the demand implied in the message may be for compliance by the spouse.

Hence, the purpose of the disclosive message affects the type of response expected from the receiving partner. But these expectations are understood within the context of the strategies the disclosing spouse uses to communicate the private information. The disclosive demand message is therefore a combination of the expectations the disclosing spouse has, given the reasons for revealing private information, and the strategy used to communicate the disclosure. The demand message strategy is a means by which the disclosing spouse regulates or manages his or her own communication boundary.

Disclosive Demand Message Strategies: Explicit or Implicit

Demands concerning private information are communicated through explicit and implicit message strategies. The use of one or the other has implications for the way both sender and receiver coordinate their respective communication boundaries. For the purposes of this article, these terms reflect a simplified

interpretation of the voluminous literature by scholars of speech act theory (e.g., Jacobs & Jackson, 1983; Sanford & Roach, 1987; Tracy, Craig, Smith & Spisak, 1984) and compliance-gaining researchers (e.g., Baxter, 1984; Boster & Stiff, 1984; Cody & McLaughlin, 1980; Cody, McLaughlin & Schneider, 1981; Cody, Woelfel & Jordan, 1983; Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981) as well as the discussion on explicit and implicit metacommunication presented by Baxter and Wilmot (1984), Wilmot (1980), and Parks and Logan (1988).

Explicit Message Strategy:

High Certainty Demand Characteristics

With an explicit message strategy, an imperative force is communicated (Sanford & Roach, 1987) that shapes the responses to the disclosive demand message and has implications for the boundary management process. The demands are stated without disguise, in a direct and unencumbered way. These are, thus, high certainty demand messages; the intentions of the demand are obvious, and the content is clearly articulated. Politeness is sacrificed for clarity (Lakoff, 1975). A spouse may say, for example, "Dear, stop correcting my stories; it really bugs me. They're my stories, and I will tell them the way I want." Within this explicit message system, demand strategies such as commands and statements calling for immediate action are used. The level of uncertainty is often lower because the partner issuing the demand concerning private information communicates expectations for a specific response from the marital partner in a straightforward manner. Consequently, for the recipient, managing the communication boundary to protect vulnerability may be more difficult.

With high clarity message strategies, the autonomy granted the recipient is lower (Baxter, 1984; Sanford & Roach, 1987). The partner is expected to provide a response and, because of the demand style, is limited in his or her control of the communication boundary. With a direct demand, there appears to be more pressure for compliance (Clark, 1979); the marital partner imposes an obligation that the spouse is expected to acknowledge. Thus, with an explicit message strategy, clarity of the demand is high, uncertainty is lower, and politeness is often abandoned. This strategy often places the receiving spouse in a more threatening position (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Autonomy for the receiving spouse is also lower, reducing the types of overt responses he or she has available to fulfill the demand where private information is concerned.

Implicit Message Strategy:

Low Certainty Demand Characteristics

With the implicit message strategy, the disclosive demands are stated within conversations that "frame" the expectation or assumptions. The marital partner's purpose for issuing the demand is less clear than with an explicit strategy. These are low certainty demand messages. The ambiguity functions to afford the receiving spouse more control over opening or closing his or her communication boundary. By using this message strategy the disclosing spouse gives the receiving marital partner more autonomy in responding to the demands. Disclosing spouses who couch their demands in hints, prompts, and prerequests afford their partners the choice of more varied responses. For example, the receiving spouse is able to feign ignorance concerning the expectations implied in the demand or

interpret the meaning of the information in a way that is more positive to himself or herself than perhaps intended. For example, in a discussion about the couple's relationship, the disclosing spouse may say: "Sometimes I understand things and other times I just don't." The partner is free to probe for a clarification or simply acknowledge the statement depending on the extent to which he or she wishes to pursue the information.

The equivocal communication discussed by Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullett (1990) is one type of example of an implied message strategy. Using an equivocal type of communication is less direct and may provide a shield that protects the communication boundaries for both the disclosing spouse and the partner responding. The spouse communicating the disclosive demand message is intentionally ambiguous, and this choice of message type serves a specific function within the interaction sequence.

Bavelas et al. (1990) give the following example; if someone says, "How do you like my hairdo?" The equivocal response is, "Hey, that's a real change" (p. 34). The ambiguity of the message strategy gives the spouse the option of intentionally sending mixed messages concerning the reason for revealing and expectations for a response.

The uncertainty may stimulate more interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975); however, this may be mediated by a partner calculating the positive or negative outcome of seeking clarification (Sunnafrank, 1986). The receiving partner may decide he or she is satisfied with being unclear about the information communicated. The partner may perceive the issue as threatening and be content with an ambiguous message. Thus, using an implicit message strategy tends to be low in clarity. The partner receiving the message is more careful to assess the possible meanings so as to protect his or her own boundary and avert damage to the relationship.

Given the ramifications of the choice of message strategy and the risk of disclosure of private information for the individuals involved, as well as the relationship, marital partners use certain prerequisite conditions in order to select one or the other type of disclosive demand message strategy.

Strategy Choice: Prerequisite Conditions

The decision criteria for choosing implicit or explicit message strategies in close relationships are not clearly identified in the literature (Baxter, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1978). The use of an implicit or explicit message strategy may depend upon the emotional control the partners exercise (Bercheid, 1983), predicted outcomes of the exchange (Sunnafrank, 1986), the need for disclosure, and the degree to which the information is considered private. These considerations represent additional boundary management concerns for the disclosing spouse.

Because disclosure of private information is risky, it may arouse emotions (Chelune, 1979; Stiles, 1987). The extent to which the disclosing spouse controls his or her emotions may influence the choice of explicit or implicit messages to disclose private information. The marital partner who has difficulty controlling his or her feelings while engaged in a disclosive interaction may suspend considerations of face saving for the spouse, choosing a direct demand message found in explicit message strategies. On the other hand, marital partners who exercise

more emotional control may strategically choose a more indirect approach, giving the receiving spouse more autonomy to respond by using implicit message strategies.

Using an implicit or explicit message system may also depend upon the predicted ramifications for disclosing. In order to manage privacy and protect himself or herself from potential vulnerability, the marital partner may anticipate outcomes resulting from disclosure (Petronio, Martin & Littlefield, 1984). The disclosing spouse judges the extent to which there might be positive or negative ramifications (Petronio & Martin, 1986).

When the disclosing partner perceives a negative outcome, for example, he or she may select an implicit message strategy because the ambiguity of the message affords some protection from possible adverse effects of the disclosed information. If the private information is revealed in an ambiguous way, the disclosing spouse has more latitude to shift the meaning and avoid or minimize the predicted negative outcome. The disclosing spouse may say that he or she was only kidding or that the partner misunderstood the meaning of the message.

A spouse who perceives a positive impact from disclosing private information may tend to use a more direct form of message demand. Since the partner does not predict a negative outcome, he or she may candidly communicate private information. The receiving spouse concurrently judges the extent to which his or her response requires opening up the communication boundary protecting privacy.

Marital couples may differ in their need or desire to exchange private information (Stiles, 1987). The need to tell private information is assumed in this model, but the immediacy varies. For example, certain stressful events instigate a sense of pressure to discuss the experience quickly (Stiles, 1987). A tension builds that the experience of disclosing helps ease by giving meaning to the events, such as when those living in San Francisco experienced the (November 1989) earthquake, when a person is diagnosed as having a disease, or when a person is having relationship problems.

Partners who have a greater desire to reveal private feelings, thoughts, and experiences may tend to use an explicit message strategy. In addition, this greater need carries a stronger sense of self-interest (Clark, 1979) that may affect the way the message is communicated. When the need to disclose is high, therefore, the individual may be more concerned about himself or herself than the partner. But the partner may react similarly and respond using direct message strategies. Conversely, when need to disclose is low, the partner may be more able to concern himself or herself with the feelings of the spouse. Hence, there may be a tendency to use an implicit message strategy when the need to disclose is less intense thereby allowing for more ambiguity and facesaving and giving the receiving partner more control over his or her own communication boundary.

The extent to which information is considered private also has an impact on the choice to use implicit or explicit messages. Informational privacy (Burgoon, 1986) may be thought of as information about the self to which no one else has the right to access (Schoemen, 1984). Westin (1970), in a further refinement, states that "[p]rivacy is the claim of individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is

communicated to others" (p. 7). The individual claims the right to control the disclosure of personal information that is salient to himself or herself (Johnson, 1974). This class of information represents risky personal issues for which an individual feels he or she has the right to keep hidden or make public by telling someone.

The levels of informational privacy range from very private to slightly private (Petronio, 1986). The level of informational privacy is often contingent on the perceived degree of risk involved in disclosing the information (e.g., very private information is high risk; slightly private information is lower risk). The level of informational privacy influences the decision to use implicit or explicit message strategies. More private information may lead to a greater likelihood of using an implicit message strategy. Less private information, on the other hand, may lead to a greater likelihood of using an explicit message strategy.

Thus, explicit messages may be implemented when there is less emotional control, a prediction of positive outcomes, greater need for disclosure, and when the person wishes to disclose less private information with lower perceived risk to the self. The implicit message strategies are used when there is more emotional control, a prediction of negative outcomes, lesser desire for disclosure, and when the person wishes to reveal high risk private information.

The style of communicating the disclosed private information clearly has an impact on the receiving partner's strategic choices for responding. But, there are expectations also implied in the message that influence the recipient and the overall assessment of a fit between the demand and corresponding response. The intersection of communication boundaries between the marital partners is affected by the extent to which the disclosing partner's expectations are met by the receiving spouse.

Receiving Partner's Boundary Management

The process of reacting to the disclosive demand messages represents the way in which the receiving partner manages her or his own communication boundary as a recipient of private information. In order to provide a response to the demand message, the partner may engage in the following three processes: (1) evaluation of expectations; (2) attributional search; and (3) determination of a message response strategy. Overall, the history of interaction and patterns that have developed in the relationship are important factors that influence these processes. It should be noted that consideration of these processes by the receiving partner may appear to follow a linear progression in this discussion, but the dynamic nature of interaction may lead to the enactment of these processes in any number of sequences. Hence, the receiving partner evaluates the incoming disclosure using information available to interpret the message and judge how he or she wishes to respond.

Evaluating Expectations

To evaluate the expectations for responses to private information, the receiving marital partner is influenced by at least two interrelated factors, (1) the sense of responsibility for action and (2) the degree of autonomy perceived in responding.

Responsibility. When receiving a disclosure demand message, there are two issues that influence a sense of responsibility to answer that demand for action (Rawlins, 1983). First, the disclosing spouse is presumed to have a legitimate right to ask for a response (McLaughlin, Cody & Robey, 1980). Legitimacy may often stem from the commitment implied in the definition of a marriage as well as the bond resulting from intimacy. Thus, the legitimate right of the disclosing spouse to make a demand establishes a baseline sense of responsibility for the partner to respond. The model therefore assumes that (1) the disclosing spouse has a right to expect a response because of the marital relationship; (2) the partner has at least a minimal obligation to respond in some fashion (Roloff, Janiszewski, McGrath, Burns & Manrai, 1988).

The second issue influencing feelings of responsibility is the communicated expectations for a response. The message affects the receiving partner's sense of obligation because it plays on an "egocentric bias" (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981) found in marriage and close relationships. Research suggests that partners tend to overattribute responsibility for events to themselves (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981). Thus, when receiving a message indicating an expectation to act, this type of message increases the existing sensitivity to feel responsible.

However, the extent to which the message affects the level of perceived responsibility may be mitigated by the degree of clarity with which the expectation is communicated. Thus, there may be times when a partner receives private information that clearly identifies an expectation for an action. This message has a high degree of certainty, and the receiving partner may feel a stronger sense of responsibility to meet the demand. On the other hand, if a message is ambiguous in nature, thus carrying a low degree of certainty about the expectations, the sense of responsibility for action may decrease accordingly. Of course, the obligation felt by the partner depends on a multitude of factors, but the message strategy may have a significant impact on how much responsibility is expected in that exchange.

With each message strategy, therefore, the level of baseline responsibility may vary depending upon the degree of certainty the receiving partner feels concerning the expectations to respond. If, for example, a husband says that he needs his wife to understand his position, the clarity of that message may carry a sense of responsibility to meet his demand. The demand message clearly states the expected conditions of a response. In so doing, the degree of responsibility communicated in the message may influence the receiving partner's feelings of autonomy in responding and the feeling of control over his or her own communication boundaries.

With the use of implicit message strategies, the partner may perceive more flexibility to respond with a greater number of options in meeting the demand. The receiving partner may feel a greater ability to regulate his or her communication boundary and manage a response. The sense of responsibility to respond may be lower when the disclosing spouse uses implicit message strategies. The feelings of autonomy may increase because the partner does not perceive a strong obligation to answer the demand. Again, this outcome may be influenced by the

patterns developed in the relationship. But the response may, in part, depend upon the message strategy.

The receiving partner may have varying degrees of responsibility and obligations, but, in order to respond in some fashion, he or she must assess the motivation for sending the disclosure message. Thus, the receiving partner may make attributional searches to determine the expected response to the disclosive demand message. Attributional searches represent the process of seeking information to determine reasons for the disclosive messages communicated by the spouse. The extensiveness of the attributional search is dependent, in part, upon the level of clarity and certainty found in the message strategy. Thus, when the disclosing partner uses implicit message strategies, the level of ambiguity may be high regarding the expectations for a response. The receiving partner may, therefore, rely more heavily on attributional searches for information to select a response. When the disclosing partner uses explicit message strategies, the level of ambiguity is lower. In this case, there is less reliance on attributional searches for information in order to determine an acceptable response.

Attributional Searches

The disclosing spouse who has a need to talk about his or her private feelings and experiences is imposing a demand calling for a response by the receiving partner. In order to judge an acceptable response, the receiving partner attributes motivation or reasons why the spouse is communicating private information. Recent research has shown that attributional searches evaluating motivations tend to be triggered when an event or message is unexpected (Thompson & Snyder, 1986).

When a person receives private information that is unsolicited, the information is communicated unexpectedly (Gilbert, 1977). In this case, the receiving spouse will likely try to identify the purpose for the information and the expectations for a response. Baucom (1987) argues that "attributions in marriage are most likely to occur when a spouse's behavior or a marital event is unpredictable, novel, negative or perceived as particularly important to oneself or one's marriage" (Thompson & Snyder, 1986, p. 132). The need for attributional searches may, however, vary with the degree of message certainty. Thus, for implicit message strategies, attributional searches may tend to occur with more frequency than where explicit message strategies have been used to communicate disclosive demand messages.

In order to make attributions for assessing the spouse's motivations and expectation in communicating disclosive information, the receiving partner may take at least five sources into account: (1) relational memory that is used to employ known information and scripts (Abelson, 1976; Douglas, 1983); (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.

An example of the way these factors are used in conjunction with one another is seen in the following scenario: Suppose a wife discloses private information to her husband about problems she is having with her boss. For the husband to judge the significance of this information and provide a response, he assesses her

motivation by (1) taking into account past interaction patterns (she has never complained about work before); (2) attending to the content (she remarks that she always seems to feel tired lately whenever she talks about her work); (3) attending to the context (the husband knows that the boss has been giving his wife a difficult time at work); (4) noting the environment (the disclosure occurs in their own home, away from other people, indicating that she feels uncomfortable about these events); and (5) reading the nonverbal cues (the husband interprets his wife's stooped posture, reduction of gestures, and lack of eye contact to mean she is defeated by the events at work). When taken as a whole, the husband may assess this information and conclude that the motivation for disclosing to him is to communicate a need for support and help with her problem.

Thus, the receiving spouse assesses the reasons for the disclosure to determine the response options he or she may use to meet the demand. From the attributional search the partner determines the reason for sending the private information and assesses the expectations for a response.

There are cases where the attributional search identifies a need for additional information to determine a response that the partner feels appropriately meets the demand. For example, a husband might ask his wife why she is telling him her feelings about her mother. Generally, these are times when the disclosing spouse tends to use low certainty message demand strategies. Often probes are used to access information needed to judge a response. Probes are typically questions asked by the receiving partner to clarify the message demand being communicated as suggested in the above example. The probes form a bridge between assessing the expectations for a response and a decision about the actual response strategy.

As with the disclosive demand message strategies, the receiving partner may respond with direct or indirect response messages. These responses may also range from low to high certainty in reaction to the expectations communicated by the disclosing spouse.

Response Strategies:
Direct and Indirect Message Responses

While a wide range of behavioral options could be used, in this discussion the strategies presented are limited to response *messages*. As with the demand messages, the general categories of response messages may be direct or indirect. But, the ambiguity or clarity of the message response reflects the extent to which the receiving spouse is able and/or chooses to meet the demands of the disclosing partner. The degree to which the disclosing spouse's demands are met ultimately has implications for the marital relationship.

High Certainty Responses: Direct Message Strategies. Direct strategies represent the communication of high certainty responses where the partner believes he or she is sure of the expectations communicated by the spouse and perceives he or she has adequately fulfilled the obligation of these demands. The receiving partner, therefore, sends direct messages in which he or she perceives the demands of the disclosing spouse are clearly being met. The responses are issued in a straightforward manner giving less attention to politeness, are less equivocal, and give more attention to providing information that answers the demand.

When the receiving partner uses direct response messages, he or she is reasonably certain of having assessed the demands accurately. The receiving partner is confident that he or she has used past relational information appropriately and evaluated the context, informational content, and environmental and nonverbal cues correctly. The use of this type of response strategy may also signal confidence and trust in the relationship. The willingness to risk possible vulnerability by responding in a direct manner (with the ever-present potential for mistaking the intent of the demand) might reflect the degree of trust perceived by the receiving partner. Thus, the communication boundaries are more loosely controlled when the partner uses a direct response strategy and his or her autonomy is minimized.

Low Certainty Responses: Indirect Message Strategies. Indirect strategies, such as changing the topic, metaphors, association clues, understatements, or rhetorical questions represent the communication of low certainty responses. The receiving partner sends messages that ambiguously meet the demands from the disclosing spouse when using this approach. The receiving partner may use these strategies to answer the demand because he or she is not confident of having understood the demand accurately, may have a low success rate with past responses, or is not willing to risk vulnerability because the trust level is too low in the relationship. Consequently, the receiving partner may use a more purposively ambiguous response because he or she does not predict a positive outcome for himself or herself in meeting the demand.

This functional use of ambiguity gives the receiving partner a way to meet the responsibility of responding without compromising his or her own position. Thus, the communication boundary may be more tightly controlled in this condition, thereby minimizing possible vulnerability for the partner.

Boundary Coordination: Integration of Demand and Response

The demand–response boundary management process may be assessed by examining the fit or coordination between the disclosive demand message and the receiving partner's message response. Over time, as expectations are met or violated, the patterns of interaction that develop may benefit or negatively affect the marital relationship. Coordination of boundary management may be represented in a variety of ways, but the focus of this discussion is the fit between message strategies and the implicit expectations communicated in the message.

As suggested earlier, boundary coordination may result in at least four types of fit: (1) satisfactory, (2) overcompensatory, (3) deficient, or (4) equivocal. The type of fit reflects the degree of need complementarity achieved in the interaction. As Table 1 illustrates, these degrees of fit are contingent upon the integration of message strategies from the disclosing spouse and the receiving marital partner. The interaction sequences discussed below represent the way in which the communication boundaries of the marital partners are coordinated as the boundary lines intersect during disclosure of private information.

High Certainty Demand, High Certainty Response. In the first type of boundary

Table 1
Micro-Level Boundary Coordination

Disclosive Demand Message	Response Message: Direct [High Certainty Response]	Response Message: Indirect [Low Certainty Response]
Explicit [high certainty response]	Satisfactory fit	Deficient fit
Implicit [low certainty response]	Overcompensatory fit	Equivocal fit

coordination sequence, the disclosing spouse uses explicit message strategies and the receiving partner uses direct response messages. The expectations are clear for the receiving partner, and the partner chooses to meet the demand in a straightforward manner. The outcome for this type of sequence is a satisfactory fit between the disclosive demand message and the response by the marital partner.

For example, Steve says to Sue: "I think our kids have been doing pretty well in school lately, don't you?" Sue responds by saying: "Yes, they seem to have overcome the trauma of moving." There is an explicit message about the expectations for a reply. Sue meets those expectations, and the interaction sequence is satisfactorily coordinated leading to adequate fit between the disclosive demand message and receiving partner's response.

This type of interaction pattern generally leads to positive feeling in the relationship because the communicative expectations of one spouse are being met by the other spouse. This type of coordination regarding disclosure of private information is potentially beneficial for the marital relationship.

High Certainty Demand, Low Certainty Response. In the next type of boundary coordination sequence, there is a high certainty demand message and a low certainty response. As in the first sequence, the disclosing spouse uses an explicit message strategy that clearly communicates the expectations for response to the demand. The receiving partner, however, reacts by using an indirect strategy that represents a low certainty response. Thus, whether the receiving partner has met the expectations is not clear to the disclosing spouse. As a result, there is a different fit between the demand message and the response by the partner. Because of the ambiguity of the response, the spouse is likely to feel that his or her expectations have not been met, and there is, therefore, a perceived deficient fit.

This type of coordination may be perceived as beneficial for the receiving partner because he or she may not have been ready to cope with the revealed information. Yet, the disclosing spouse may be unhappy with the response because it did not meet the expectations set up in the demand message. He or she may indicate those feelings to the partner and diminish the feelings of benefit for the receiving partner.

If this outcome occurs frequently, it may contribute to feelings of relational discontent that have potential for a negative influence on the marriage. This type of demand–response relationship may lead to further demands by the disclosing spouse in an attempt to have his or her expectations fulfilled because the first attempt had been frustrated. An example is useful to illustrate this type of boundary coordination.

Mary (the wife) says to Jim (the husband) as they are getting ready for bed: "Sometimes I feel that we just aren't as romantic as we use to be. Maybe we have too many things to do; we don't have candlelit dinners any more and you don't send me flowers just for the heck of it. You are so different from the way you used to be." Jim replies: "I don't know; it is hard to figure out sometimes."

In this exchange, Jim's response ambiguously answers the demand message, and, hence, this reaction represents a deficient fit regarding boundary coordination. Mary communicates an explicit message about her feelings concerning the relationship with a corresponding set of expectations for a specific type of response from Jim. Jim chooses to reply by using an indirect message strategy thereby tightly controlling his own communication boundary and not explicitly meeting Mary's expectations for a response.

On a short-term basis, this type of boundary coordination may result in disappointment for Mary. To cope with the exchange she may escalate the demand for a response. If Jim satisfactorily meets Mary's expectations, these interaction sequences may not be problematic for their relationship. However, if this type of interaction becomes a long-term pattern occurring when one or the other partner communicates as explicit demand message, continuous deficient fit may be detrimental to the relationship.

With this type of boundary interaction, whenever the receiving partner uses responses such as polite indirectness, interruptions, tangential responses, or impervious responses, there is a potential deficient fit between the message demand and the response message and need complementarity has not been achieved.

Low Certainty Demand, High Certainty Response. For this type of boundary coordination, there is a low certainty demand message and a high certainty response. The disclosing spouse uses an implicit message strategy that ambiguously communicates expectations to the receiving partner. Although the spouse wishes to disclose private information, he or she more tightly controls the communication boundary by sending implicit demand messages.

After the receiving partner assesses the disclosive message and corresponding expectations for a response, the partner decides on his or her reply. The certainty of the message communicates the belief that he or she has accurately assessed the appropriateness of the response. This boundary coordination results in overcompensatory fit because the disclosing spouse communicates a message that has low certainty while the receiving partner overinterprets the needs of the spouse. The receiving partner sends a high certainty message in response. The receiving partner overloads the disclosing spouse with information in his or her reply, thus exceeding the expectations. The outcome may be problematic for the disclosing spouse and/or the receiving partner. As with the deficient fit coordination sequence, if overcompensation becomes a frequent pattern it may lead to difficulties for the marital relationship.

For example, a wife (Carol) and her husband (Alex) have the following exchange. Alex says: "How was your day, Carol? I called but I guess that you were busy. I found out that my mother is ill." Carol says in reply: "I suppose that you are angry now because I wasn't around when you called. How was I suppose to know that your mother is sick?"

The receiving partner seems clear about the expectations for a specific type of

response to the implicitly communicated disclosive message. The husband is sending out a test balloon framing the statement in an implicit way, but the wife provides an excessive, overcompensating response. The receiving partner may feel guilty because she was not available when her husband called and copes by accusing her husband of being angry. This response goes beyond the expectations communicated in the demand message.

A second example of this type of coordination is presented in the following scenario. Jason (the husband) using a low certainty demand message to disclose, says: "I got a strange note today." Helen (the wife) replies: "Who was it from? I bet it was that woman you met the other day who seemed so infatuated with you. You better be careful with your response; you may lead her on."

As these examples suggest, this boundary coordination sequence may be more evident when the receiving spouse engages in escalation as a form of response. In each case there is overcompensatory fit that is problematic for the wife, the husband, and the relationship, because the response overestimates the expectations of the disclosing spouse. The disclosing spouse selects a more ambiguous message strategy to communicate private thoughts or feelings. When the receiving partner reacts by overstating the issues, the disclosing spouse is forced to cope with the direct statements of the receiving partner's actions. For each example, the disclosing spouse may not have been ready to deal with the information. Thus, the disclosing spouses may have been put into a position of addressing the partners' responses when they might have preferred to leave the issues in a more ambiguous state. As a function of the need complementarity of the exchange in making the issues more explicit, both the husband and the wife in each example must cope with the receiving partner's response.

Low Certainty Demand, Low Certainty Response. With this type of boundary coordination sequence, the disclosing spouse communicates private information using implicit message strategies that represent a low certainty demand. The receiving partner, in turn, uses indirect messages strategies to respond. The clarity of both the demand and the response is low. There is ambiguity about the expectations for a response and the extent to which the demand has been met. The outcome for the disclosing spouse in this sequence is represented by equivocal fit. Thus, the fit might be satisfactory because the disclosing spouse wishes to keep the expectations uncertain and a reply of ambiguity matches the expectations for a response. Or, if the receiving partner's choice of response does not meet the expectations communicated in the disclosive demand message this may lead to a deficient fit from the perspective of the disclosing spouse.

Examples for each type of fit outcome may be helpful. Consider first the satisfactory fit scenario when there is a low certainty demand and low certainty response. In using an implicit message strategy of previewing a problem, John and Amy have the following exchange. John (the husband) says to Amy (the wife): "I have been feeling tired lately; it's possible I have had too much on my mind." Amy replies by saying: "I have to get some work done I brought home tonight; you don't mind, do ya?"

Within the context of their relationship, this statement is a hint that John has been having a difficult time at work but is not ready to talk in depth about the

problems. He does not wish to be explicit about the issue and wants Amy to understand implicitly that there is a problem, but he indicates that he does not want to deal with this issue right now. His statement is used, however, to prepare her for the information, thereby "previewing" the topic beforehand. Amy's response satisfactorily meets the demand of the disclosive message and fulfills her husband's expectations. This demand–response coordination may contribute to their relationship because the needs of one spouse are being fulfilled by the other spouse successfully.

There is deficient fit if the receiving partner does not accurately interpret the demands of the exchange. Sometimes, when a spouse uses an implicit message strategy and is not clear about the expectations for a response, it is because he or she wants to be probed for the information. When communicating private thoughts, especially if they concern the other person or have a potential for affecting the relationship, a spouse may not want to use explicit messages because he or she would be taking on a higher level of responsibility for identifying the problem.

Thus, if the disclosing spouse uses a message strategy that only hints at the issue (not being clear about the expectations), the receiving partner may determine a need for questioning the disclosing spouse about his or her meaning to clarify the statements communicated. If shifting the responsibility is the intent of the message, and the receiving partner ignores the expectations of the disclosing spouse, this may lead to deficient fit between the disclosive demand message and the response of the marital partner.

For example, Mary and Jim are discussing Christmas vacation and Mary says to Jim: "I don't think that we should go away for Christmas this year, the timing isn't right." Jim responds by saying: "Oh, O.K." Mary wants to discuss why the timing isn't right, but she wants Jim to probe for the reason; he obviously does not do so, leaving Mary with the responsibility of continuing the discussion. Thus, there is a deficient fit between the response and the demand message that may lead to frustration and possibly conflict. This type of demand–response boundary coordination sequence over time may have a negative effect on the quality of the marital relationship.

As these examples have shown, expectations are discerned from the context of the relationship, the relational history, and the intention of the disclosing spouse for revealing private information. The demands reflect the needs of the disclosing spouse. The receiving partner must determine the expectations in order to respond to the demand appropriately. The receiving partner fulfills the expectations of the disclosing spouse to a greater or lesser extent. The degree to which these expectations are met over time may contribute to the overall benefit of the marital relationship.

Conclusion

The communication boundary management perspective suggests an extensive program of research. This theoretic proposal identifies numerous issues that are in need of empirical testing. These include both assumptions on which this theory

is based and hypothesized relationships among concepts. In hope of stirring interest, several areas of research are identified in this discussion. Limited by space, however, not all possibilities can be discussed nor can the points raised be elaborated. Thus, only a sampling of areas is presented.

There are at least five potential research areas generated by this theory: (1) macro assumptions; (2) micro assumptions; (3) the disclosing spouse; (4) the receiving partner; and (5) boundary coordination. Research issues in each area will be discussed briefly.

Macro Assumptions

The macro assumptions in this theory suggest, first, that the recipient is a critical factor in the disclosure equation. The receiver of unsolicited disclosure has been largely ignored, with the exception of Gilbert's (1977) work. We know very little about how recipients respond to disclosure and learn to cope with information that they did not request. This theory proposes ways in which the receiver might respond to unsolicited disclosure of private information. Much research is needed to understand the role of the recipient better.

A second issue relates to the use of rules. The concept of communicative rules in not new, but this theory proposes that we regulate openness and closedness by implementing rules or criteria. We know a little about the rules that people might use, but this theory challenges us to determine, in a more extensive fashion, which rules are used and how they are employed to manage our privacy boundaries and what sanctions are involved when they are violated.

A third global issue concerns the extent to which the level of privacy is important. We know intuitively that information varies in privacy, but this theory suggests the need for more extensive investigations into the impact of the privacy of information on our need for boundary control.

A fourth concern suggested by this theory focuses on the broader use of a boundary metaphor. Altman (1975) and his colleagues pioneered this approach with regard to privacy. The communication boundary management perspective extends Altman's original proposal by suggesting a process for boundary coordination, applying the concept more specifically to informational privacy, and examining expectations that reflect our boundary regulation rules. This discussion applies the boundary metaphor to coordination of marital couples, but this same proposal might also work to explain how co-workers, supervisors and subordinates, and parents and children negotiate their privacy boundaries. This perspective might provide a way to examine dyadic interaction regarding private information in a number of different situations.

Micro Assumptions

The micro assumptions that this theory identifies open several issues for investigation. For example, one can test whether the meanings disclosure has for the recipient depend on the way a message is communicated. The communication boundary management perspective assumes that the way messages are sent communicates expectations about a response and influences the meaning ascribed to the message by the receiver. In addition, the theory proposes that the expectations disclosers have regarding their messages influence the message strategies they select to communicate private information. While there is some research

available that suggests the existence of these relationships within the context of disclosure, these assumptions need direct empirical testing.

Disclosing Spouse

The proposals made regarding the person disclosing private information are numerous and in need of empirical testing. For example, how useful are hints, prerequests, or prompts as ways to forecast upcoming disclosure? Do these strategies prepare the recipient for the subsequent private information? To what extent does this type of functional ambiguity serve an important purpose in disclosure interactions?

The theory further proposes that emotional control, degree of private information, need for disclosure, and predicted ramifications are used to determine a disclosure message strategy that communicates expectations for a response. Research is needed to establish whether these elements are, in fact, utilized. From this, it is hypothesized that explicit disclosure messages are implemented when there is less emotional control, a prediction of positive outcomes, and greater need for disclosure, and when a person wishes to disclose less private information with lower perceived risk to the self. Conversely, implicit message strategies are used when there is more emotional control, a prediction of negative outcomes, and less desire for disclosure, and when the person wishes to reveal high risk private information. These hypotheses as well are in need of research.

Receiving Partner

In examining the receiving partner, the theory assumes that three elements influence the way a respondent reacts to a disclosive message: (1) evaluation of expectations, (2) need for attributional searches, and (3) making a determination about an appropriate response. The extent to which these elements function in the ways identified by the theory is an empirical question. Also, examination of whether a sense of responsibility to respond to a disclosive message by a receiving party does, in fact, influence the way a person responds should be conducted. Investigations also are needed to test whether message clarity mitigates this sense of responsibility. Further, research is needed on whether low certainty messages about expectations tend to lead to a higher need for attributional searches as suggested by the theory.

The communication boundary management perspective proposes that respondents use direct and indirect response message strategies. An examination of these message types with regard to private information is necessary. What kinds of message content are there and do these message types range on a continuum or are they discrete categories?

Boundary Coordination

In considering the final phase of this theory where the issues raised converge into boundary coordination, five questions representing the different types of boundary fit found between disclosure message and response message call for empirical investigation. First, does a high certainty disclosure message met by a high certainty response lead to feelings of satisfactory fit between the boundaries of the marital partners? Second, does a high certainty disclosure message met by a low certainty response lead to deficient fit between the privacy boundaries of the marital partners? Third, does a low certainty disclosure message met by a

high certainty response lead to overcompensatory fit between the privacy boundaries of the marital partners? Fourth, does a low certainty disclosure message met by a low certainty response lead to satisfactory fit if the desires of the spouses are to keep the messages uncertain? Or, fifth, does a low certainty disclosure message met by a low certainty response lead to a deficient fit between the boundaries if one spouse wishes the other to take more responsibility for the information?

As suggested by this discussion, these issues and relationships proposed by the theory of communication boundary management require a broad program of empirical research, some of which is currently under way. Privacy has become an important topic in the last decade and promises to be more salient in the decades to come. Understanding the dynamics of managing informational privacy is becoming acknowledged as a key to relationships of all types. This is especially true in those cultures, such as the United States, that emphasize individualism, because managing and coordinating private information contributes to a sense of autonomy and independence. While communication is the vehicle by which we are social, management of privacy is the mechanism that balances individual identity with social interaction.

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Notes

[1] For this article, private information refers to "the individual's phenomenological experience, to which no one else has direct access" (Tedeschi, 1986, p. 5) or right to access. The concept of informational privacy concerns the perceived right to control information about the self. (For a fuller discussion see Baumeister, 1986; Burgoon, 1982; Schoeman, 1984.)

[2] The content of the messages contributes to determining the expectations for a response. In addition, the content of the message communicating private information appears to have a higher probability of representing problems, issues of concern, difficult situations, and events that were embarrassing or made individuals feel uncomfortable. These reflect issues that have a level of risk if disclosed to others (Petronio, 1986).

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