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Enacting Privacy Rules and Protecting Disclosure Recipients:

Parents' Communication with Children Following the Death of a Family Member

In the United States, nearly 3 million children experience the death of an immediate family member each year; and this number does not include the deaths of extended family, friends, or others who are significant in a child's life (Social Security Administration, 2000; United States Census Bureau, 2000). By the age of 15, one out of twenty children have experienced the death of one or both parents (Schulz, Newsom, Fleissner, Decamp & Nieborer, 1997) and by the time they graduate, 90% of high school students will have experienced the death of a family member or close friend (Kandt, 1994).

Given the likelihood of a child experiencing the death of a loved one or family member before adulthood, researchers have focused on how children experience and understand death. Developmentally, children around the ages of six and seven may be able to understand the permanence and irreversibility of death (Hunter & Smith, 2008), and children as young as three are believed to experience grief and indirectly express grief through thumb sucking, bed wetting, and clinging to the surviving parent (Bowlby, 1969; Christ, 2000; Piaget, 1972).

In addition to researching the age at which children can understand death, scholars have also been interested in understanding how children learn about death. Researchers have found that media such as comic strips (Brabant, 1995), popular animated movies (Sedney, 1999), and children's literature (Poling & Hupp, 2008) can shape a child's understanding of death and the grieving process. Despite the influence of the media, parents are still believed to be a child's primary source of information about death (Glass, 1991; Grollman, 1967). Besides providing information, parents play a critical role in helping children process their grief. Children who are in families that encourage emotional expression report less intense grief over time (Schoka-

Traylor, Hayslip, Kaminiski, & York, 2003) and families better meet bereaved children's needs when they have open communication that includes sharing feelings about the loss (Davies, 1998; Hurd, 1999).

On the other hand, a lack of communication in families about death may result in adverse consequences for children. In a study of Israeli families, Silverman, Weiner, and El-Ad (1995) found that when parents held back information about terminal illness/pending death, their children experienced confusion and increased anxiety. In the same vein, the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement (1999) claimed that excluding children from discussions concerning the death of a loved one can result in children feeling isolated and confused. The work group encouraged adults to create opportunities for children to freely talk and ask questions about the loved one's death.

Nonetheless, a family's ability to be open about death and loss may be constrained by a number of factors, which demonstrates the tension between being open and private about information surrounding death. For instance, Baker and Sedney (1996) found that family members who tried to control their emotional reactions to the loss of a family member caused other family members to restrict their own emotional expressions. In some cases, parents may be uncertain about what to say to children following death (Baker & Sedney, 1996), resulting in rigid patterns of family communication (Shapiro, 2001).

Clearly, the impact parental communication may have on children and their grief is substantial; however as Hunter and Smith (2008) argued “. . . the effects of parent communication have been under-studied in the context of children's understanding of death” (p. 144). Indeed, only a handful of studies have examined whether parents *actually* talk with their children about death. For instance, Hunter and Smith (2008) predicted that a child's

understanding of death would be positively related to their mother's openness about death. Surprisingly, their hypothesis was not supported; however not all of the children in their study had actually experienced a death, which likely impacted their findings. In a study asking college students to reflect upon their first death experience as a child, Knight, Elfenbein, & Capozzi (2000) found that of the 213 participants, over half of the students reported that their parents did not talk to them about death following their first death experience. Many of these college students also indicated that, at the time of the death, they had unanswered questions about death and what had happened to their loved one. While Knight's et al. study provides insight into how some young adults experienced communication with their parents about their first death experience, it only examines the recollection of conversations students had as younger children and does not offer the experiences and perspectives of their parents.

As both Knight et al. (2000) and Hunter and Smith (2008) argued, additional research must examine parent-child communication about death. Unfortunately, very little research has focused on why parents may or may not talk to their children about death following the death of a loved one or family member. Although there are public aspects of death, such as a funeral or wake, a loved one's death may also involve information that children do not readily know, such as how the person died (i.e. suicide, accident, etc.). In light of traumatic events, families must decide how to manage private and oftentimes sensitive information (Petronio, 2010); thus, parents will likely have to decide what information about a loved one's death they will share with their children and assess the potential risks and benefits the disclosed information may bring to their children. Looking at what parents disclose to their children, as well as the reasons why they disclose, is important as a child's first death experience may impact their attitudes toward death as adults (Dickinson, 1992; Knight et al., 2000). As such, the purpose of this research was

to identify and understand what motivates parents to either talk or not talk about a loved one's death with their children.

Communication Privacy Management: Theoretical Frame

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) is a useful theoretical lens to examine parental motivations surrounding disclosures about a loved one's death as it "is a practical theory constructed to permit applications that give us an opportunity to understand everyday problems and events that people encounter in families" (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006, p. 36). According to CPM, an individual's decision to share information is often accompanied with a careful assessment of the potential costs and rewards of disclosing this information (Petronio, 2002, 2010). A core concept of CPM is private information or information one believes they have rightful control and ownership over and where there is a degree of potential vulnerability (Petronio & Durham, 2008). To indicate ownership and to control access to their information, individuals erect metaphorical boundaries that distinguish information as private or public (Petronio, 2002). In addition, individuals create and enact privacy rules based on gender, cultural standpoint, assessment of potential risks and benefits, and motivation, in order to regulate and manage these boundaries, (Petronio, 2002, p. 39).

Of particular relevance to this study is the theory's supposition that the decision to disclose private information is dialectical as individuals experiencing simultaneous and competing needs to both reveal and conceal private information (Petronio, 2002; 2010). Competing needs to both reveal and conceal information is often complicated by role factors (e.g., Thompson, Petronio, & Braithwaite, 2012), such as one's parental role. Given that familial privacy rules often socialize and instruct family members on how to react to a situation, parents may want to disclose private information about death to their children in order to influence how

their children respond to death (Petronio, 2002; 2010). On the other hand, parents may be hesitant to disclose private information about a loved one's death as potential risks of disclosing include embarrassment, shame, confusion, and a loss of control over the information (Petronio, 2002. pp.70-71).

Once an individual discloses private information, the information becomes co-owned by all parties involved, which in turn requires all interactants to engage in a process of *collective* boundary coordination to regain control and regulation of this information. To accomplish this, interacting parties communicatively negotiate new privacy rules and re-establish jointly held and overlapping boundaries. This process of boundary coordination is particularly complex in families as they try to coordinate both internal boundaries (i.e. within the immediate family) and external boundaries (i.e. extended family members) (Petronio, 2010; Serewicz & Canary, 2008). Given the complexity of multiple co-owners managing collective boundaries, it is common for violations of privacy rules to occur. When privacy rules are violated and boundaries are breached, *privacy turbulence* occurs (Petronio, 2002). To correct privacy turbulence, interactants may introduce new information or form new rules in an attempt to coordinate boundaries once again (Petronio & Caughlin, 2010).

In conclusion, scholars have found CPM to be a fruitful theory to examine parent-child communication in different contexts, including mother/daughter sex talk (Coffelt, 2009), children's disclosures of sexual abuse (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, Mon't Ros-Mendoza, 1996; Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997), and disclosures surrounding divorce (e.g., Afifi, 2003; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011). How privacy is managed within families can impact communication satisfaction in familial relationships (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Serewicz, Dickson, Huynh Thi Anh Morrison, & Poole, 2007). Several studies have also examined the

advantages and disadvantages of privacy disclosures within families (e.g., Coffelt, 2009; Petronio et al, 1996), noting that disclosure of private information carries both risks and benefits for all parties involved.

As these studies indicate, CPM is a heuristic, robust theory useful for examining the complexities that characterize parent-child communication. As Petronio (2010) noted, *critical incidents* may necessitate the renegotiation of privacy boundaries and the shifting of privacy rules (p. 186). Undoubtedly, the death of a loved one or family member requires parents to discern what information about the death is appropriate to disclose to their children. By using CPM as our theoretical framework, we were able to identify and understand the motivations of parents who decided how to talk, if at all, with children about the death (or impending death) of a family member. To do so, we posed the following research question:

RQ: What are the motivations for protecting or disclosing to children about death after a loved one dies?

Method

Participants

In order to highlight the perspectives and experiences of parents, we grounded this study in a qualitative/interpretive tradition (Creswell, 2007). Using criterion and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007), we located parents whose child experienced a family death by sending out emails to colleagues and posting notices on local bulletin boards¹. The first author conducted all interviews until recurring patterns appeared and a point of theoretical saturation had been reached (Leininger, 1994). Fourteen parents participated, including 11 females and 3 males. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with one of the interviews having both parents participate. All of the participants were currently married to their child's biological parent. All participants

¹ All research procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

were Caucasian and ranged in age from 34 to 57 years with a mean age of 40.5 years. The age of the child at the time of the family member's death ranged from 5 to 12 years with a mean age of 7.6 years. The range of time from the family member's death to the interview was 1 to 22 years with a mean of 7 years. Although some of the deaths were a number of years ago, all participants could readily recall the conversations they had with their children regarding the family member's death. Family members that died were: six grandparents (50.0%), four aunts or uncles (33.4%), one sibling (8.3%), and one parent (8.3%). Family members died from: cancer (66.7%), extended illness (8.3%), sudden illness (8.3%) and accidents (16.7%). All participants were based in the Midwestern area of the US and all identified as having some sort of Christian faith.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of various demographic questions and ten open-ended questions. Parents were informed of both the purpose of the study and their rights as research participants. They gave permission to be audio-taped and were assured that their identity, as well as the identities of their children and family members, would be kept confidential. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour, with an average of 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted at parents' convenience and location of choice, with six of them in the parents' home, 2 at the parents' place of employment, 1 at a local restaurant, and 3 via telephone. Differences in interview location did not appear to influence interviewee responses.

Data Analysis

A transcriptionist used pseudonyms created by the first author to transcribe each interview. Although the first author conducted the initial analysis, the second author served as a

data analysis consultant and peer reviewer (Creswell, 2007). Using the guiding principles of CPM, the first author used a modified version of the constant-comparative analysis to identify and develop categories/thematic patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While reading through the entire data set, she wrote initial impressions in the form of analytic memos. She then reduced the data to a more manageable size in order to refine and focus her analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, she open coded data by comparing data units to each other for similarities and differences and if differences were found, a new category was added (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When no new observable or comparable patterns/themes emerged, this portion of analysis concluded. Both authors then took these broad themes and used axial coding where “categories [were] related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Using CPM theory and other CPM research as a model (e.g., Thompson et al, 2012) our focused coding resulted in both primary themes which describe the motivations for privacy rules and secondary themes which describe ways that parents enacted these when talking to children about death. These primary and secondary themes are articulated in the results.

The second author verified the findings in three ways. First, he examined the excerpted data and verified the use of themes and axial coding presented in the results. Second, he conducted member checks by sharing the results with three parents who fit the study criteria but were not in the original sample, all of whom reported that results were consistent with their experiences suggesting both the veracity and salience of the findings. Finally, he compared exemplars from the transcripts to those in the results section to ensure an accurate representation of participants’ experiences.

Resultsⁱ

Parents in this study indicated it was important that they talked with their children about death, particularly after the death of a family member. Because their children had little-to-no prior death experience, parents wanted to make sure their children understood what happened to their family member and what they could expect when it came to the funeral and other events surrounding the death. At the same time, they also wanted to protect their children from some of the issues surrounding the death, which resulted in two primary themes that illustrate the risks and benefits of disclosure that motivated parents in deciding how to talk to children about death: (a) *Recalibrating Family of Origin Privacy Orientation Rules: Motivations for Revealing* and (b) *Protecting Children: Motivations for Balancing Revealing/Concealing*. First, unlike their own childhood (family of origin) experiences of death being a taboo/private topic, parents were motivated to talk to their children because parents wanted their children to be informed about death. Two secondary themes further explained parents' motivations to reveal: *death as a part of life* and *modeling grief*. Even though parents wanted to inform their children about death, they also wanted to protect their children (second primary theme) and this protection is demonstrated in the secondary themes of *selective honesty as a rule regulator* and *religion as a reference point*.

Recalibrating Family of Origin Privacy Rule Orientations: Motivations for Revealing

Parents in this study wanted their children to be informed about a family member's death, such as what they could expect to happen at a funeral/wake. Many parents stated that their motivation for talking about death with their children was because they had not experienced this communication with their own parents. For a number of parents, the privacy rules in their own family of origin was that death was not to be talked about, especially with children. As such, many developed new interior privacy rules for their own families that encouraged openness

about the death. Following the death of her grandfather, Donna reflected on how no one in her family talked to her about what happened:

Nobody talked to me about it. They just came up and said ‘grandpa died’. And ‘we’re going to the funeral . . . I see parents now who take their kids up to the casket and they talk about it, and that’s just so much more comforting, I think. We just didn’t get that when I was a kid.

Donna believed parents who talk with their children and take them to funerals provide more comfort and help than those who do not, such as her own parents.

Lori had a similar experience, commenting that after her grandmother’s death “I was like in kindergarten and I didn’t go to that funeral. I think it was something that when, depending on what age you were, when you were really young, they just left you out of it.” Lori went on to discuss that following her own father’s death, she took her daughters to his funeral even though they were young. As a parent, Lori feels she is more open with her own children about a number of things, not just death:

I also think that, nothing against my parents, but I’m different in that I probably have been more open and honest with my kids. But I think a lot of that is just the fact of being in different generations. They were taught to be that way.

Both Lori and Donna’s comments indicate regret that their own parents had not talked to them more following the death of their family member. Because of their family of origin’s privacy orientation regarding death, these mothers were motivated to change their family’s own internal privacy rules concerning talking with children about death.

Death as a part of life. For a number of parents, creating new privacy rules that encouraged open conversation about a loved one’s death was essential as they wanted their

children to understand that death is a part of life. For instance, Donna discussed wanting her children to know:

Death is just a natural part of life and so it's not an easy part, but it is a part, so I think just try to comfort them when they need comfort and let them have their emotions, let them have their feelings.

Likewise, Joan claimed that:

I don't think, I don't think there is anything wrong with being truthful. I think if you are not truthful it will come back to haunt you. As far as preparing for death, death is a part of living It's part of life and you have to know that those things happen.

As both Donna and Joan stated, death is an inevitable part of life and they believed that talking about their family member's death was a way their children could gain an understanding of this fact. In particular, Joan felt that not being honest about death with her children would only cause future problems.

Modeling grief. The next secondary theme, *modeling grief*, concerns parents' motivation to establish norms of grieving that were different from their families of origin. Parents in the present study wanted their children to know it was acceptable to talk openly about their grief. It was also important to parents that their children know that feelings, such as sadness and anger, were a normal part of the grieving process. Dale stated that he and his wife "just tried to spend time with them going over what had transpired and let them know that we hurt too. That they knew that what they felt wasn't an unusual thing." By sharing that he also was grieving, Dale modeled the privacy rule of openly talking about familial death. His motivation for talking about death and sharing his own grief emotions was to encourage children to not be afraid to share their own feelings as a way of managing their emotions.

Likewise, some parents discussed the grief of other family members to communicate that these types of feelings are normal. Following her grandfather's death, Joan's daughter asked why her grandmother was so quiet, and Joan used this opportunity to tell her daughter that "grandma will get better but her heart hurts right now, like yours did, you know. I said it's ok for your heart to hurt." Mary Kay echoed similar sentiments, stating "I think just being open, letting kids have their feelings, you know, validate that it's ok to have feelings like that. And it's ok to have feelings of anger because that person is not with us anymore." By talking with their children about the emotions they were feeling these parents were validating and giving their children permission to experience and disclose their emotions.

Along with validating children's feelings of grief, parents were also motivated to talk about death because they believed that children needed to participate in mourning rituals, such as going to the family members' funeral. Many parents thought that taking their children to funerals would teach them that feelings of grief are normal and that they [the child] could express them openly. James commented that:

I don't think keeping kids away from funerals is a good thing, I think that they need to go and need to see that people, that it's ok to grieve, that it's ok to cry in front of other people.

Like James, Joan also wanted her four children to know that it was okay to be emotional in front of others, "they need to know how to be sympathetic to someone else's grief. And know that there's not always something to say, sometimes a hug or a handshake is all you need to do." For both James and Joan, having their children go to funerals was a valuable teaching experience regarding the privacy boundaries of emotional expression and comforting others.

Protecting Children: Motivations for "Balancing" Revealing/Concealing:

While parents were motivated to share information about death as a way to change the privacy rules that existed in their family of origin, concomitantly, parents were cautious about their children having too much information or information that was too mature. Parents were motivated to try to protect their children (the recipients of disclosures) by using *selective honesty as a rule regular* and *religion as a reference point*. Both of these secondary themes highlight the dialectical tension of privacy decisions as parents tried to “balance” their motivations for being open with disclosure about death with their the desire to protect their children, which motivated their reasons for concealing some information.

Selective honesty as a rule regulator. A number of parents believed they should not “sugarcoat” the truth when talking to children about a family member’s death. On the other hand, parents were motivated to conceal some information about death because they believed children did not need to know every detail about the family member’s death, particularly if the child was young. For instance, Lori suggested that things such as a detailed, medical account of how a person died were not the kind of information to be shared with young children. Lori’s advice was:

I believe in being honest as far as either maybe not necessarily every single little detail about why they died or how they died. But, ah, I guess I would go ahead and tell them. Especially an older, more toward the twelve year olds I think they are old enough; they’ve had enough, read enough about things to understand what dying is.

For Lori, it was important for parents to be honest with their children; however, she believed this honesty should be appropriate to the child’s age and level of understanding. Similarly, Laura felt that as a mother she could “read” her child enough to know what to share with them, “You know it’s just a sense that you have on what they handle and what they can’t handle. But I don’t think,

I don't think there is anything wrong with being truthful.” These excerpts highlight the dialectical nature of disclosure decisions. Parents felt it important to be open with their children so that they could socialize them into open/honest discussion of death within the family, but they were also concerned about protecting their children (recipients of disclosure) by not overly disclosing details if their children were not ready.

A few parents indicated that being completely honest with their children could ultimately be problematic if the children went on to share this private information with others, which is an example of privacy turbulence resulting from children not appreciating the difference between internal and external privacy rules (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). This happened when a family member was believed to be terminally ill, but others outside the family were not privy to these details. When her younger brother was ill with brain cancer, Barbara and her husband, Kyle, felt they had to monitor what they told their two children, as Barbara's parents and siblings were not comfortable talking about her brother's illness and impending death. Kyle commented that they had to be cautious about what they said “because they were at the age [that] if they heard something like, ‘he's dying of cancer,’ that could get to Grandpa and Grandma and they would have been in big, big trouble.” For this couple, talking to their children about their uncle dying was risky as privacy turbulence could occur if the children made the external privacy boundaries with extended family members as permeable as the internal privacy boundaries. Kyle and Barbara were protecting the feelings of the grandparents; however, they were also motivated to conceal some information from their children because it also protected their children from mismanaging privacy boundaries.

Religion as a reference point. As we have discussed, parents were hesitant to tell their children certain things out of concern that their children were too young to process such

information. On the other hand, parents indicated they were very open and motivated to talk with their children about death from a religious standpoint. From our analysis, parents protected their children (disclosure recipients) by using their religious background as an anchor point to help children process a family member's death. For example, Dale and Laura remarked that they talked about Jesus with their daughter before her grandfather's death. They believed these previous conversations helped their daughter process what had happened to her grandfather.

Laura remarked:

We talked about Jesus, on a regular basis. We talked about Jesus and that he's in heaven and I think that it was kind of a natural extension that when we said grandpa's in heaven with Jesus that she had a frame of reference to go with.

For Dale and Laura, having previous conversations about Jesus and heaven made it easier for their daughter to receive and understand messages about the death of her grandfather.

Similarly, Dennie felt that their Christian background gave her sons a prior understanding of death, which helped to soften the blow of their grandfather's sudden passing:

I think they knew quite a bit just because they had always been taught about heaven and if somebody asked Jesus in their heart to forgive their sins that they would go to heaven when they died and that kind of thing. And so that, you know it wasn't an unknown thing to them. And it wasn't quite as traumatic.

According to Dennie, having prior conversations about death and heaven helped her sons better understand and cope with the unexpected death of their grandfather.

Many of the parents indicated that talking with their children about an after-life brought comfort to both them and their children. After the death of her father and their grandfather, Lori remarked that "[her children] were sad obviously, but they knew where he was, where he went . .

. So I think it would be different if we had less of a faith.” Echoing Lori, Maggie felt that their belief in an after-life helped her and her children cope with the loss of her father and their grandfather. She said that “we believe in eternal life so you know, we would focus a lot on that, that he would be in heaven and some day that we get to be with him again.” For many of these parents, talking with their children about an after-life and their shared faith motivated their disclosure decisions because they thought it helped with healing and facilitated dialogue about the family member’s death.

Discussion

In this particular study, parents were motivated to create privacy rules that they hoped would foster open patterns of communication between themselves and their children when it came to talking about death. In essence, through disclosure about death, parents in this study were attempting to help their children process and work through their grief (Davies, 1998; Hurd, 1999; Schoka-Traylor et al., 2003). Parents did this by changing the privacy orientations of their family of origin and establishing clear privacy orientations with their children. In this “new” family, death was talked about as a part of life and parents tried to model grief for their children. At the same time, parents wanted to protect their children, and, therefore, tried to balance revelation and concealment by advocating selective disclosure of information as a rule regulator and using religion as a reference point, particularly if they believed information about death was too much for their child to handle.

In this study, the context of a family member’s death presented parents with the opportunity to conceal information about the family member’s death from their children, as their own parents did, or reveal information and create new privacy rules. Unlike their own parents, many of the parents in this study decided to share information about death with their children

because they did not want to perpetuate the same privacy rule orientations they had learned as children. In essence, parents choose to create new privacy rule orientations and boundaries that were more permeable and less rigid than those of their own family of origin. Because childhood is a time when children learn about having control over information (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006), parents in the present study were creating privacy rules of openness that encouraged their children to talk and ask questions about their family member's death.

Although parents reported that they wanted their children to be open and informed about death, parents did not disclose information to their children without thinking of potential positive and negative consequences. This finding, as presented in the results, reflects Petronio's (2002) argument that individuals often assess the risks and benefits of disclosing private information. Even though parents in the present study believed that having information about death would benefit their children, parents were still concerned about how much information and what type their child could handle. Parents' cautious and selective disclosure of information speaks to Petronio's (2002, 2010) argument that disclosing private information is an inherently dialectical process. CPM posits that an individual's decision to disclose information is not an "all or nothing" approach; rather disclosing information is a contradictory process of both/and where some information may be disclosed and some may remain private. In the present study, parents' use of *selective honesty* illustrates how they attempted to negotiate the tension of both revealing and concealing information by specifically choosing what they would and would not tell their children. By selectively disclosing private information, parents tried to protect their children (recipient) from knowing too much or too little about a family member's death.

Additionally, the tension of what information to reveal and/or conceal was animated by parents' concerns that their children might pass this information on to others, which could result

in privacy turbulence (Petronio, 2002). The present study adds to the discussion of boundary coordination and privacy turbulence by providing an example of how individuals can conceal information in order to prevent the consequences of turbulence for themselves and for others (in this case, children).

This both/and nature of disclosure that was motivated by parents' assessment of risk and benefits also expands our understanding of Petronio's (2002) notion of permeability rules. She wrote that these types of disclosure rules are created to regulate "access to and protection of the co-owned privacy boundary" (2010, p. 181). As was illustrated, sometimes parents were selective in their disclosures to children regarding details surrounding death to protect that information within the larger family system, however, parents were also motivated to construct permeable boundaries as a way of protecting the recipients of disclosure (the children) as opposed to just the information itself.

Finally, the present study adds to the existing body of research surrounding death and family communication. To the authors' knowledge, no family communication scholars, to date, have explored the motivations guiding parent-child communication about death. Death continues to remain a highly taboo topic in western culture (Bowen, 2004) and scholars have found that families may struggle to discuss a loved one's death (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004); however, by creating new privacy rule orientations, the parents in this study were challenging these taboos taught to them by their own parents and were attempting to provide their children with healthier models of coping and grieving (Saarni & Buckley, 2002). Further, through the secondary themes of selective honesty as a rule regulator and religion as a reference point, these participants described how to protect recipients of disclosure while still encouraging open dialogue about death.

Privacy management can serve as a socialization tool (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio, 2010) and, in this case, parents were motivated to reveal and also conceal private information as a way to socialize their children into: (a) aspects of death in our culture in general and (b) privacy orientation expectations regarding death within their family, specifically. Our findings provide further evidence that after a critical incident, privacy boundaries may “shift when socialization and integration of new members is necessary” (Petronio, 2010, p. 184). In our study, parents did not talk about issues of death with their children until a family member had died (or death was inevitable) and this event motivated parents to create new privacy rules in order to better inform and prepare their children about death.

There are limitations of this study, which could be remedied with future research. Parents in this study believed their children reacted positively to their disclosures and communication regarding death. However, this study does not address whether the children held this same perspective. A follow-up study where the experiences of participants’ children are solicited would prove fruitful as it would allow us to determine how parents’ communication about death was actually received. Furthermore, we were not able to determine how boundaries were coordinated between parents and their children following the disclosure of information about death. With the exception of two parents, none of the other participants suggested that any of the private information they disclosed to their children was information that the children themselves would be required to manage. In other words, parents indicated that it was acceptable for their children to openly discuss or share the disclosed information with others. If a loved one’s death was more “taboo” in nature (i.e. suicide, drug overdose) it is highly likely that parents would have concerns about how their children would manage this private

information. Future research on parent-child communication about death must include a greater focus on boundary coordination as this process is at the heart of CPM (Petronio, 2002).

Finally, all of the study participants self-identified as Caucasian and Christian. To explore how parents from various cultures and faith traditions discuss death with their children, a more diverse sample of participants is needed. By not exploring how parents from different cultures talk about death with their children, both bereavement and communication scholars will continue to remain unaware of how culture influences and shapes talk about death within families. Additionally, with the size of our sample and goals for this project, we cannot make any claims about how parents are motivated differently based on the age of their children. To remedy these shortcomings, greater effort must be made to include the experiences of parents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and expand the scope of future projects.

Nonetheless, using the frame of communication privacy management provided us with insight into why parents talk with and socialize their children about death. While there was a variety of causes of death and ages of children represented in this study, it is significant that these themes emerged with all participants, without the use of directive questions. Parents encouraged their children to be open about their private feelings of death by establishing privacy rules and modeling privacy disclosures regarding the topic, and they also used selective disclosure and a religious frame to protect children. Consistent with Petronio's (2002) claim regarding the dialectics of privacy management, these parents were both open and selectively closed to both encourage and inform children while simultaneously protecting them as recipients of overwhelming details or potential causes of boundary turbulence.

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ⁱ All participants' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.