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Disciplines

Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | Family, Life Course, and Society | Gender and Sexuality | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication

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This essay presents conjoined models of parent-child sexual communication. These models rely on communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) to show how sexual information is contained within individual privacy boundaries and shared when a question is asked. Information is revealed in little bits and pieces over the course of the child's development. Privacy boundary permeability opens and the circumference of privacy boundaries expands over time. During a specific interaction, parents and children regulate how much information they share. These models apply to parent-child relationships where sexual communication is accomplished, recognizing that many parents and children never or rarely talk about sex.

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No More Birds and Bees: A Process Approach to Parent-Child Sexual Communication

Adolescent sexual behaviors and health statistics have been tracked for many years by identifying trends, problematic areas, and improvements in sexual health. Problem areas of teenage pregnancy, STDs/STIs, or HIV/AIDS concern society because of the physical, relational, and economic consequences to adolescents, their families, partners, and communities. This tracking has recently shown that between 1991 and 2011, the number of adolescents ever having sexual intercourse declined, condom use increased, and unprotected sex declined (CDC, 2012a). While these trends indicate improvements in adolescent sexual behavior, the data continue to underscore problematic areas. For example, one-half of all new STD cases are reported by youth aged 15-24 (CDC, 2012b) and 20% of those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 2009 were between the ages of 13-24 (CDC, 2011). Additionally, 40% of high school students did not use a condom and nearly 13% used no form of STD/STI protection or birth control during their last intercourse episode (CDC, 2012b). Thus, finding intervention and educational strategies to support adolescents during the initiation of their sexual lives remains an important undertaking.

Communication from parents provides one source of influence on the sexual behaviors of adolescents (e.g., Clawson & Reese-Weber, 2003; Fox & Inazu, 1980; Jaccard & Dittus, 1991; Karofsky, Zeng, & Kosorok, 2000; McKay, 2003). Parents are often deferred to as the primary socialization agent for their children (Christopher & Roosa, 1991; Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Stafford, 2004), and their communication with adolescents has been studied more than any other parental influence, such as values, socioeconomic status, parental marital status, or ethnicity, on adolescent sexual behavior (Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2000). Rosenthal, Feldman, and Edwards (1998) summarized beliefs about the role of parents by writing, "It has always been assumed that parents should play a pivotal role in the sex education of their children because of

their primary role in preparing young people for adult life and because sexuality brings with it questions of values and morality" (p. 727).

Although evidence shows that the topic of sex is an important one for parents to discuss with their children, the topic plagues many relationships in general because it is often viewed as a taboo topic (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) and is discussed relatively infrequently within families (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000; Warren & Neer, 1986). Adults report difficulty and discomfort communicating about sex with each other (Meschke et al., 2000); therefore, it is not surprising that parent-child discussions on the topic would also present challenges. Some of the difficulty may be due, in part, to the adolescent phase of child development when adolescents continue to depend on parents while simultaneously establishing independence on the path to adulthood. The awkwardness associated with sexual information coupled with the communication changes between adolescents and parents complicates parent-child sexual communication (PCSC).

Researchers have embraced this line of inquiry for decades for several reasons and with varying results. The goal of many studies has been to show that PCSC influences teens' sexual behaviors by delaying sexual activity, using contraception, minimizing sexual STDs/STIs, and/or reducing teenage pregnancy. To that end, results from studies show mixed results, ranging from those that have found no correlation, to positive correlation, or negative correlation between PCSC and teens' sexual behaviors. For example, Fisher (1988) found no relationship between the extent of PCSC and premarital sex as reported by college students. By contrast, Clawson and Reese-Weber (2003) found that as the extent of sexual communication increased with fathers or mothers, the age at first intercourse decreased and the number of sexual partners increased. However, Karofsky and colleagues' (2000) sample of 12-21-year-olds reported that the extent of sexual communication with parents was lower among nonvirgins than among virgins. Thus, it

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seems as if common research designs that measure sexual topics discussed and frequency of discussion do not provide enough information to understand how communication influences sexual behavior.

In addition, this vast body of work privileges variable-analytic research methods, underutilizes process in theory building, and treats communication as a unidirectional flow of information from parent to child. Communication scholars have much to contribute to this area of research because of the unique ways the discipline conceptualizes interaction. For example, a communication-as-process approach recognizes the dynamic way information exchange happens over time, the dyadic nature of interaction, and the mutual influence between two parties. Drawing from these strengths of the communication discipline, this paper proposes two conjoined models of PCSC that are rooted in relevant literature and empirical findings.

Teleological Process Models of Parent-Child Sexual Communication

The heuristic models advanced in this essay illustrate the process of sexual communication in parent-child relationships, likely very close relationships, and shift the research stance from a solitary, parental monologue to a series of dyadic interactions prompted by either a parent or a child. Two points need emphasis at the outset: a) the term *child* is used rather than *adolescent* because the models employ a life span approach, recognizing the advent of conversations when children are young and continue into the emerging adult years, and b) the models apply to relationships where PCSC is accomplished, rather than relationships that do not talk about sex. For purposes of this manuscript, an initial definition of *accomplished PCSC* refers to verbal conversations about sex where a parent and child agree they discussed a sexual topic. Certainly many parents and children avoid the topic of sex. Pistella and Bonati (1999) reported 20% of their sample of 249 late adolescent females indicated they never talked to a parent about

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sex. King and Lorusso (1997) also found that 59.4% of their sample of undergraduate students reported never having a meaningful conversation about sex with a parent. These models may benefit children and parents like these by steering them toward a new approach to PCSC.

The models must involve change, reflect time, contain events, and demonstrate interrelationships among events to satisfy the criteria for process (Poole, 2012). More specifically, the models adopt a teleological perspective (Poole, 2012) because they seek the achievement of goals and implement a series of communication events where each event leaves the parent-child dyad receptive to future interaction. The goals of social interaction vary with each parent-child relationship, yet likely encompass instrumental, relational, and/or identity goals (Wilson & Feng, 2007). The models further satisfy the characteristics of a teleological model because the path toward goal accomplishment varies for each parent-child dyad. No pre-determined actions are required at a given time period or age of the child in these models.

The models depict sexual information as emerging from multiple parent-child conversations about sex over time and offer contra-evidence to the static birds-and-the-bees, one-time conversation. The models showcase conversations that begin before adolescence, often prompted by a child's question, and answered appropriately by a parent. In this way, children receive relevant sexual information and come to see their parents as sources of sexual information. Questions arising in the future by either a parent or child spark other conversations. During a given interaction, the parent or child releases only relevant information, a notion called incremental disclosures, which offers a new perspective on PCSC not found in the literature. Additionally, the models recognize the influence of children on their parents' communication. A few clues permeate the literature that hint at children's communication characteristics. However, these clues, combined with other pieces of data taken from several studies, have yet to coalesce

into a presentation of the process of sexual communication. Relying on the suppositions of communication privacy management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002) and integrating empirical data (e.g., Coffelt, 2008, 2010), the models highlight the process of sexual communication and move researchers toward a richer understanding of how sexual communication operates within parent-child dyads.

To be clear, these models illustrate the accomplishment of sexual communication in parent-child relationships, rather than silence on or avoidance of the topic. Indeed, these models do not reflect the process of absolute concealment of sexual information, which arguably conveys communicative value and is an area for continued examination. Additionally, studies have shown that adolescents make fewer disclosures to their parents during adolescence (Noller & Bagi, 1985), avoid topics (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004), or withdraw (Caughlin & Malis, 2004). However, the extant research shows that many parents and children discuss sex to some extent (e.g., Heisler, 2005; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). Pistella and Bonati's (1999) study found that over 70% of teens indicated sexual communication had occurred with a parent, but only 20% said it was comfortable and easy to discuss. Thus, it is important to recognize the communicative challenges attached to sexual information and remain open to the possibility that discussing sex can be accomplished. Overall, the focus on only accomplished sexual communication shows a lack of versatility and limits the models to achieving process theory status, thus, clarifying the decision to define the models as *heuristic*. These models demonstrate the possibility of PCSC and propose a new perspective on how this discourse can be accomplished.

These models are situated within an interpretive, socially constructed paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) where parents and children co-create their patterns of interaction with no predetermined, cause-effect relationship between sexual disclosures and behavioral or relational

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outcomes. Rather, the models convey the process of sexual communication as experienced by mothers and daughters, with additional support from the literature. The linear appearance of these models reflects the need to simplify a complex series of interactions for explanatory reasons. The process, in reality, is much less tidy. Complications to the process abound. For example, children's emotional or biological forces could modify the process. Parents experience transitions, too, to different partners or different jobs that interfere with their attention to sexual conversations.

This essay prepares the reader for the models by summarizing extant literature, much of which resides in the disciplines of family studies, education, psychology, or health care, then pointing out several overarching assumptions made across these studies, and finally introducing two models as a way to shift scholars' ways of thinking about sexual communication as they advance research in this area. The first model shows the overall pattern of PCSC as seen in Figure 1: Shifting Parent-Child Privacy Boundaries around Sexual Information. Then, Figure 2: Sexual Communication Interaction Model in Parent-Child Relationships explains the flow of information during a specific communication event. After, the paper considers the defining qualities of a process and a teleological process model and synthesizes the criteria with the suppositions of these models.

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Parent-Child Sexual Communication Research

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Dimensions of Talk

A wide research net cast over several disciplines captures many articles that describe aspects of PCSC. This research organizes around five "dimensions" designated as (a) "extent of communication, (b) content of the communication, (c) timing of the communication, (d) general

family environment, and (e) style in which information is conveyed" (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1998, p. 247). These aspects of PCSC impart numerous findings.

First, researchers described the content of sexual conversations and associated or predicted sexual behaviors stemming from them. Most researchers listed several *a priori* topics and then asked respondents to indicate the frequency with which each topic was discussed. The topics selected vary across studies but generally fall within one of four factors: development and societal concerns, sexual safety, experiencing sex, and solitary sexual activity (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999).[1]

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Second, the extent of communication garnered attention from researchers because "…the channels must be opened sufficiently in order for sex discussion to become an effective part of a family's communication agenda" (Warren & Neer, 1986, p. 91). Extent of sexual communication has been ascertained by asking parents, adolescents, or emerging adults to report on a Likert type scale the extent to which a given topic (as introduced above) has been discussed. The extent of communication alone provides interesting descriptions about the nature of PCSC and reinforces the notion that control over sexual information is quite diverse across families.

Third, parents struggle to determine the appropriate time to discuss issues of sexuality with their children. Some researchers recommended that parents talk with children around age 12 (Jaccard & Dittus, 1991) or no later than age 16 to have the greatest impact (Warren & Neer, 1986). Others argued for talking with children *on-time*, which means prior to first intercourse, rather than *off-time*, which occurs after first intercourse (Clawson & Reese-Weber, 2003). Measuring the timing of sexual communication infers that interactions on the topic occur once. However, Beckett and colleagues (2010) showed that conversations happened at three key time

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periods and the topics at each moment differed, which suggests that multiple conversations may occur at various points in a child's life.

Fourth, the general family environment, or "overall quality of the relationship between parent and teen" (Jaccard et al., 1998, p. 247), has been studied in connection with adolescent sex behaviors and relational qualities. As noted above, discrepancies in findings amplify the challenges of examining the family environment and its impact on sexual behaviors.

Fifth, the style of communication refers to the manner in which sexual information is communicated (Jaccard et al., 1998). Several approaches have examined the style of parents' communication such as information seeking, turn taking, comfort, or openness/closedness. Rosenthal and colleagues (1998) set out to describe communication style in an interview study of 30 mothers. They found that mothers approached the topic with the communication styles of avoidant, reactive, opportunistic, child-initiated, or mutually interactive. The research on style of communication taps into the *how* of communication, rather than the *what*, which moves the research from description toward process. Absent from this line of research, however, is the communication style of children, such as their approachability or receptivity, and how that impacts the accomplishment of sexual communication within parent-child relationships.

In sum, the literature on PCSC focuses on content, extent, timing, family environment, and style. These approaches have been useful to describe conversations about sex and underscore communication's importance to child sexual development. The findings from this collective body of work lay groundwork for future advancements. However, future research must overcome some limitations found in this body of work.

Limitations of Parent-Child Sexual Communication Literature

Theory-building needs process. Theory organizes and summarizes knowledge obtained from data, aids in understanding observations, or provides a "heuristic sensitizing device" (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 11). Theory building in a post-positivist paradigm relies on cause and effect relationships or associations between variables. Within the PCSC literature, several researchers have asked parents or adolescents/emerging adults to respond to how often pre-selected topics have been discussed and then correlated or regressed these data on behavioral outcomes such as engaged in sexual activity (Fisher, 1988; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996; Karofsky et al., 2000; Wight, Williamson, & Henderson, 2005), or used a condom (Wight et al., 2005) or other contraception (Jaccard et al., 1996; Rodgers, 1999). The data gleaned with this approach have been useful to measure sexual communication—number of sexual topics, the frequency of their discussion, the timing of the disclosures—and multiple variables that associate with it, its predictors, or its outcomes. However, scholars have yet to present a process model or heuristic device to show process or changes over time, to see *how* sexual communication evolves as parent-child relationships change.

Through an interpretive paradigm, the experiences of parents and their offspring with sexual information replace *a priori* dimensions of talk. Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004) concur that "relatively few studies have looked at *how* communication occurs, i.e., communication *process*" (p. 304). The importance of understanding process was articulated by Poole, McPhee, and Canary (2002):

> Ideally, a narrative explanation provides an account of how and why a sequence of events typically unfolds that is sufficiently flexible to encompass a range of observed cases, yet sufficiently powerful to help the researcher discern the operation of the generative mechanism in a multitude of particularized sequences. (p. 29)

Samples. Convenience samples of emerging adults inform a considerable amount of research on PCSC, which presents issues of generalizability to adolescents when college students are asked to provide retrospective accounts of interactions with their parents. While samples of emerging adults can be problematic, there are some benefits to including their voices, as well. For example, emerging adults can recall events that unfolded over time, which is essential to seeing the process of PCSC. Research with 13-year-olds, for example, tells scholars what is known about 13-year-olds, which has value for that period of adolescence, but not when looking at the overall process. In studies linking PCSC to sexual behaviors, it is helpful to include samples of emerging adults in order to measure the occurrence of virginity loss, STDs, or pregnancy. Thus, the perspectives of emerging adults reveal their understanding of all the PCSC they have encountered and their experiences with sexual activity as soon as they have transitioned out of adolescence as possible. Process models proposed in this essay are strengthened by reviewing research findings reported by both adolescents and emerging adults. Sampling frames of parents also contribute to this body of literature. Information about the samples is included in this article to clarify whose perspective the findings were based on.

Unitary and unidirectional treatment of communication. Another limitation with the extant literature is the central, omnipotent role of the parent who is the sole conveyer of sexual information. The preoccupation with the content of parents' disclosures, their communication styles, or their values and beliefs negates the presence of children and their influence on an interaction. Some emerging adults described their communication with their mother as "one way" (Dennis & Wood, 2012, p. 210), so it is not surprising that much of the research would follow suit. Further, parents and 14-17-year-old adolescents as well as college students often disagree about whether or not sexual communication occurred (Jaccard et al., 1998; King &

Larusso, 1997); therefore, it seems important to examine sexual communication from the perspectives of parents and children.

The crux of this issue centers on the understanding of interpersonal communication. Those outside the communication discipline often restrict their definition of communication to content or amount, as described above, and as sent by a parent. However, interpersonal communication is "a complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals" (Burleson, 2010, p. 151). Through a communication lens, scholars recognize the dyad, the importance of the context, the exchange of information, and the mutual influence each interactant incites from the other. Indeed, the communication styles of children— their receptivity, curiosity, hostility, or openness—impede or spark conversations about sex. Furthermore, regardless of who starts a conversation, the interaction likely involves turn taking and a few iterations of information flowing back and forth. There are a few researchers who make these points (e.g., Pistella & Bonati, 1999) yet have not made the child's communication the focal point. A process approach to sexual communication must account for the presence of children, the initiation of interaction by children, and the reciprocity of information.

In brief, PCSC is believed to be important and has been the focus of many studies (over 90 according to DiIorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003). No meta-analysis has been conducted to the knowledge of the authors, although Wright (2009) reduced an initial search of 296 articles on PCSC down to 49 on father-child sexual communication for a review and synthesis. Further, Miller and Moore (1990) published a review of research conducted in the 1980s on parental communication and adolescent pregnancy. These are the closest attempts, yet neither is a formal, statistical meta-analysis. A thorough literature review of these studies shows the propensity for

scholars to describe the content of sexual disclosures and the extent to which sexual topics were discussed. Some work on the style of parental communication and the family communication environment shows the qualitative aspects of parent-child interaction. At this juncture, a bricolage would benefit the academic community interested in this topic to combine information and overcome the limitations of the research. Specifically, (a) theorizing needs an understanding of process; (b) a process approach needs to include samples of emerging adults, adolescents, and parents, and (c) children's influence during interaction needs attention. To overcome these deficits, two conjoined process models will be presented that describe PCSC, relying on the suppositions of CPM (Petronio, 2002) as the theoretical framework.

Parent-Child Sexual Communication and Communication Privacy Management

Communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) sets the theoretical tone because it is a theory about private information and the process by which it is managed. The test for CPM is whether or not educational sexual information qualifies as private information. Warren (1995) established definitions for sexual communication by differentiating between sex education and sexual communication where education "implies the valuation of a teaching model of information transfer, where senders seek to add knowledge to receivers' frames of reference about biological reproduction, sexuality and sexual intercourse, and birth control" (pp. 173-174), and communication "implies the valuation of a co-creation of meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values, and/or behavior" (p. 173). For example, discussing birth control could be an educational topic about different methods or a private concept when a mother discloses her choice for contraception.

CPM permits educational sexual information to qualify as private within familial relationships because family members control and regulate the dissemination of the information.

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Petronio described sexual information as "proprietary family information" (personal

communication, July 2007). The way educational sexual information is discussed in the family

becomes a private issue because how parents and children discuss these public aspects of sex are

personal, private conversations. These conversations are informed by public knowledge, yet

private talks in the ways parents and children approach the topics. While the educational aspects

of sexual information pervade the public arena, the topics are enacted at the individual level.

Further, discussions about sex, whether educational or not, are more likely when children

perceive their parents as trustworthy (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006). Trust

can be earned by keeping information confidential, which is an important concept in CPM

(Petronio, 2010). Parents protect their children from sexual information and regulate, to the best

of their ability, when to release it (Byers & Sears, 2012). Parents experience pressure to talk

about sex earlier than they would prefer (Geasler, Dannison, & Edlund, 1995), showing the

constraints they experience on their privacy boundaries. This parental control exemplifies the

need to manage sexual information in family relationships and the tenets of CPM inform the

practices parents and children undergo to regulate sexual information.

　　　　CPM uses a boundary metaphor to explain the process individuals go through to manage

and control private information as they move information across a privacy boundary from the

inner self to an outer, shared space (Petronio, 2002). As such, CPM leads the models toward a

process approach to understanding sexual communication. Additionally, the *privacy rule*

foundations of CPM discuss the rules individuals use when they contemplate revealing or

concealing private information. These rules "tangibly show the way people regulate and

therefore coordinate their privacy boundaries with others" (Petronio, 2002, p. 37). Rules about

revealing information are believed to vary not only by relationship type, such as families, but

also by the specific topic (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). The diversity across families can be

understood by considering how parents and children create privacy boundaries around sexual

information and establish rules about revealing or concealing the information.

The theory makes a unique contribution to this analysis because of its dual emphasis on

information and process. The focus of the theory is on private information, the unique

characteristics of revealing or concealing the information, and the management of information

during interaction. The models presented here apply to one topic of information, illustrate the

ways this information is concealed and/or revealed over time, and elucidate the nuances of

revealing sexual information during a specific conversation.

Shifting Parent-Child Privacy Boundaries around Sexual Information

The basic sequence of a teleological model includes several activities or stages that lead

toward achieving a goal (Poole, 2012). The first model adheres to this sequence by looking at

multiple interactions over time, each leading toward the accomplishment of sexual

communication between a parent and child. This model contains three major components, which

are pulled from CPM—information, privacy boundaries, and time—to explain the basic

sequence and the process of change.

[INSERT FIG 1]

Sexual information is the first component and refers to the content or subject matter of

the information discussed by the parent and child. In Figure 1, sexual information is represented

by the space within each circle. CPM's supposition of private information defines privacy as "the

feeling that one has the right to own private information" (Petronio, 2002, p. 6) or "perceive[ing]

it as belonging to them" (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004, p. 381). Applied to the current context of

sexual information, such disclosures might include demonstrating how to use a condom, explaining the advantages/disadvantages of birth control, or sharing one's age at first intercourse.

A discussion of private information must also distinguish between secrets and topic avoidance because the two bodies of literature are related to sexual information yet qualitatively different. Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) clarified that there is a difference between topic avoidance and secrets. Secrets imply that information is hidden and unknown to others and often contains negative information (Vangelisti, 1994), whereas topics that are avoided may be known to another, positive or negative, or not discussed with another (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). The literature on sexual topics shows that the content of sexual information often includes reproduction, pregnancy, menstruation, or birth control, among others. This information is not secretive information because it can be found in public spheres such as the sex education curriculum in schools (Kirby, 2002), the Internet, health pamphlets, or magazines. Further, college students reported obtaining sexual information during adolescence from sources other than or in addition to their parents (Daugherty & Burger, 1984; Gephard, 1977; Spanier, 1977). Therefore, sexual information is likely known by parents whereas children increase their sexual knowledge as they develop.

The failure to communicate about sexual information is, as Guerrero and Afifi (1995a) found, a result of topic avoidance, rather than an attempt to conceal personal, secretive information. However, if personal information such as pregnancy, a sexually transmitted disease or infection, or rape were the content of a conversation, then the secrets literature would be more appropriate than topic avoidance research. The public-private distinction with sexual information has not been addressed in the studies on sexual topics and the extent they have been discussed in parent-child relationships. Thus, the models presented here encompass all sexual information,

both public and private. Within the parent-child dyad, even public or educational information mimics private information because disclosing indicates to "other" that I know, want to know, or want to share this information *in our relationship*. Many parents know their children know sexual information and children know their parents know about sex, yet each avoids conversations with the other because of discomfort or embarrassment. However, when the parent or child introduces the information into their relationship, they relinquish an individual claim to the information and elect to share information within a collective boundary (Petronio, 2002).

The second component of the model is the privacy boundary each person constructs around sexual information. Privacy boundaries are shown on Figure 1 by circles that encompass sexual information. Privacy boundaries vary in permeability, ranging from thin and open, allowing substantial information to cross, to thick and viscous, thereby limiting the flow of information (Petronio, 2002). As sexual information is revealed to the other, the privacy boundaries expand to make room for the newly acquired sexual information held within a collective boundary (Petronio. 2002). Parents and children own the remaining information held within their respective privacy boundary. Ownership denotes control of the information and the ability to regulate its passage across the privacy boundary. In one study, mothers were able to distinguish which sexual information they had already discussed or intended to discuss with their adolescents, indicating their control over dissemination (Byers & Sears, 2012). Co-ownership of information in a collective boundary brings new challenges to parents and children as they rely on each other to refrain from boundary leakage, which means giving the information to another person without permission (Petronio, 2002). Thus, there are several considerations when revealing information, relinquishing control, and trusting the information with someone else.

The privacy boundaries are further depicted by the width of the boundary and breaks in the boundary. A thicker privacy boundary is more impenetrable than a thinner boundary, and the openings reflect the porosity of the boundary. More openings allow a greater flow of information to pass through whereas fewer openings permit less information to pass. The data upon which the models are based (Coffelt, 2008) showed that mothers' privacy boundaries started as open to some extent when children were young. For sexual communication to be accomplished, mothers recognized the need to release some sexual information, particularly when young children asked questions about body parts or where babies come from, for example. The model shows a few fractures in the parents' privacy boundaries to depict disclosures with little information passing through. The models suggest that young children have fairly open privacy boundaries as they randomly ask questions with little inhibition. When these early communication events received a receptive response, parents validated the child's curiosity and showed acceptance of questions on sexual topics. This tempered openness accomplished the momentary goal and generated new information for the child.

Disclosures may diminish guilt or shame associated with sexual curiosity and solidify relational trust. Certainly, the perception of comfort with sexual topics in a confidant is positively associated with sexual self-disclosures (Herold & Way, 1988). The models further suggest that as children age and their sexual curiosity crescendos, they approach parents with increasingly permeable privacy boundaries. These boundaries contain resistance, as well, as the privacy boundaries are not removed altogether. Rather, children regulate their questions and comments to their parents and test their parents' comfort with sexual information. For parents who want to share sexual information with their children, they open their privacy boundaries, as well, allowing additional sexual information to pass. Parents identified various sexual topics they

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intended to talk to their children about and the ages at which they intended to discuss the topic

(Koblinsky & Atkinson, 1982). Ages to discuss topics ranged from 3 or 4 to discuss body

differences and 11 or 12 to discuss petting, contraception, or homosexuality. The sharing of

information allows the collective privacy boundary to increase in size. The circumference of the

child's privacy boundary increases, as well, as new information enters. The acceptance and

reciprocity present with each communication event permits future interactions. Indeed, multiple

communication events may transpire as sexual information is often revealed briefly and

randomly with fragmented disclosures (Dennis & Wood, 2012).

The process of change is most pronounced when a parent or child regulates the passage

of information through the privacy boundary, which requires fluctuation in permeability or

openness (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2005) and an expansion in the circumference of the

privacy boundary. Each event relies on the success of a previous interaction. When parents judge

their children for sexual curiosity or dictate sexual behaviors, children may begin to turn away,

discontinue conversation, and restrict their privacy boundaries. However, when parents accept

their children's curiosity and open their privacy boundaries by sharing sexual information, their

children receive the information and enlarge their privacy boundaries.

Time, the third component of the model, is depicted by the box around the whole process.

Time represents the entire lifespan of child development, recognizing that sexual communication

begins earlier than adolescence. Meschke and colleagues (2000) noted a need to extend PCSC

research beyond adolescence. These models align with this claim while also arguing for

inclusion of early childhood, as well. Thus, the parent-child dyads are depicted on the model at

three different time periods—toddler/elementary years, late elementary/middle school, and late

high school/emerging adulthood because these moments represent key transitional phases in the

lives of children, which prompts surges in sexual conversations. However, these conversations could happen at any time during the development of the child. Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006) suggest that parents should "seize opportune moments" rather than plan formal conversations (p. 49). The models contend that conversations emerge in conversation when the child is ready, rather than relying on specific ages to determine when parents should reveal particular topics. A social constructionist perspective reinforces this approach by stipulating the emergent nature of conversations and the co-constructed meaning that parents and children develop for their management of sexual information.

Throughout the process, interactions between parents and children are impacted by privacy rule development criteria. The criteria, as set forth in CPM, inform the planning and coordination individuals undergo prior to or when revealing private information (Petronio, 2002). Mothers of preschool aged children identified their intentions for managing sexual information years before their children reached adolescence (Koblinsky & Atkinson, 1982), demonstrating the forethought that goes into rule development. Additionally, mothers of adolescents refined these intentions by indicating specific topics they expected to talk to their child about, such as the birth process and menstruation, body differences, reproduction, sexual morals, venereal disease, contraception, intercourse, and rape/sexual offenses, among others. Neither children, nor adolescents, nor emerging adults have been asked about their intentions to discuss sexuality with parents, which would complement the literature.

Knowledge of rule development helps understand the differences between parents and children who reveal sexual information to each other and those who do not and deepens understanding about the process of initiating conversations about sex. These criteria are culture, gender, context, motivation for revealing or concealing, and the risk-benefit ratio. An

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introduction to each criterion follows, accompanied by relevant literature that may inform the actual rules that guide family members when discussing sex.

Culture. Cultures have distinct norms about revealing private information at societal, familial, and individual levels. Western culture has particular ideologies about sexuality that guide the treatment of sexual information in interpersonal relationships. Reiss (1981) described how the history of sexuality arrived on the 20th century with "strong guilt, secrecy, and psychological qualms woven into its basic fabric" (p. 278). Thus, it is not surprising that so many people remain challenged to discuss this topic. However, there are those who accomplish discourse on this topic and the models presented here align with the experiences of those who talk about sex in their parent-child relationships.

Co-cultures within the United States are believed to have different rules about communication. However, co-cultural differences may have little impact when the topic is sex. Barber (1994) asserts that cross-cultural similarity is unique to the topic of sexual behavior because there were no significant differences about parent-adolescent disagreements over sexual behavior in his study among Black, Hispanic, and White parents. But, several examples illustrate that co-cultural differences may exist. For example, sexual communication messages by Muslim mothers were limited to two messages: "sexuality is an endowment from God," and "virginity until marriage is important and the key to successful new marital relationships" (Orgocka, 2004, p. 265). Asian-Americans reported much less sexual communication than Black, White, or Latino samples (Kim & Ward, 2007), and Hispanic mothers reported that social mobility was their primary motivator to talk to their daughters about refraining from or delaying sex (McKee & Karasz, 2006). Comparisons between African American and Latina mothers showed that

African American mothers emphasized pregnancy and STD prevention whereas Latina mothers were concerned with preventing sexual contact (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001).

These findings suggest that the content of sexual discussions and motivations to discuss sex differ across co-cultures in the United States. However, the process by which families accomplish sexual discourse may be similar. Future research on families' privacy rules from different cultural perspectives would inform this aspect of the models.

Gender. The next rule development criterion is gender. The PCSC literature shows marked differences between fathers and mothers and between daughters and sons. Mothers overwhelmingly engage in much of the communication about sex with their children. Further, daughters receive more information than sons, and they hear different information than sons (e.g., DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Fisher, 1988). For example, 13-15-year-old males received four strong messages out of a possible 12 from their parents: (a) there are negative consequences to pregnancy before marriage (58.7%); (b) sexual relations express love (31.7%); (c) it's easy for petting to lead to intercourse (20.8%); and (d) nice people don't have sex before marriage (20.4%; Darling & Hicks, 1982). For females of the same age, the topics were, in rank order: (a) the negative consequences of pregnancy (61.0%), (b) nice people don't have sex before marriage (43.8%), (c) petting too easily leads to intercourse (35.7%), and (d) sex is a good way to reflect love for someone (34.2%). While the topics discussed most frequently with males and females were the same, the percentages of males and females who heard each topic differed. Other evidence shows that conversations about sex between mothers and 11-14-year-old daughters contained more words than conversations with sons of the same age (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996). In another study, the top three topics of discussion between mothers and adolescent males were STDs/AIDS, using a condom, and sexual

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intercourse, whereas the topics with females were menstrual cycle, dating and sex behavior, and STDs/AIDS (DiIorio et al., 1999). In brief, many studies reinforce gendered differences that accompany sexual conversations.

The models presented here apply to mothers or fathers, daughters or sons. The empirical data upon which the models are derived come from mothers and daughters. Some of these mothers and daughters believed that sexual information *should* remain within same-sex parent-child relationships, whereas some mothers and daughters did not (Coffelt, 2008). However, mothers' propensity to engage in these conversations more than fathers and the differences between information shared with sons and daughters signals a need for continued research on the processing of sexual information within designated, gendered family relationships. Gender seems to impact rule development by relegating sexual conversations to mothers instead of fathers and limiting sexual conversations to same-sex family relationships. This is not to say that other families do not deviate from these norms, but rather, to say that research findings show strong tendencies in these ways.

Motivation. The third criterion for rule development influencing parent-child sexual communication is the motivation of the sender to reveal private information. The primary motivating factor of researchers has been to show that parental communication influences adolescents' sexual behaviors to keep them from having sex that may result in pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, or STDs/STIs (e.g., Clawson & Reese-Weber, 2003; Jaccard & Dittus, 1991; Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001; Rosenthal, Senserrick, & Feldman, 2001). Jaccard, Dodge, and Dittus (2002) assert their view, "We believe that parents should assume responsibility for the information that their children have about sex and birth control" (p. 22). But, are parents motivated to talk with their adolescents for the same reason that researchers believe? Fifteen to

twenty percent of parents believe it is permissible for their adolescent to engage in intercourse under certain conditions (Jaccard & Dittus, 1991). Furthermore, what motivates children to talk with their parents?

CPM identifies three types of motivation used to develop privacy rules—expressive needs, self-knowledge, or self-defense (Petronio, 2002). Expressive needs motivate individuals to disclose when they have a desire to share their thoughts or feelings. Self-knowledge needs are those in which the revealer wants to know more about him/her self and uses self-disclosure to obtain feedback from the listener. Self-defense needs are motivations that guide non-disclosure because the risks associated with revealing seem too great.

The empirical findings on which these models are based failed to show alignment with these three types of motivation. Instead, mothers identified sexual health and safety, abstinence, contraception, and relational health as reasons to reveal sexual information to their daughters, and daughters were motivated to talk to their mothers to get accurate information from a trustworthy and valued source (Coffelt, 2008). In another study, Guerrero and Afifi (1995a) identified social inappropriateness, self and relationship protection, and parent unresponsiveness as the motivations 17-24-year-olds reported to guard private information. Additionally, children may avoid the topic of sex with their mothers because of privacy or self-protection needs, as reported by 13-22-year-olds (Golish & Caughlin, 2002), and therefore leave their own sexual information within a privacy boundary.

However, when parents are receptive, informal, and composed when talking about sex, adolescents report feeling less embarrassment and discomfort (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008). Several motivating factors have been identified to reveal and conceal sexual information in parent-child relationships. Specific rules that could emanate from these findings include talking

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about sex when a child needs self-knowledge about his/her body or relationships or when a child wants to feel connected to a parent and asks for advice. Certainly, more research would propel this aspect of the process of sexual communication in necessary directions.

Context. The contextual criteria for privacy disclosures include the social environment and the physical setting (Petronio, 2002). Family structure stands as an appropriate social environment for the context of PCSC. To that end, family structure affects adolescent sexual behaviors (Wight et al., 2006) and privacy management differently in intact, single parent, and blended families. For example, Golish and Caughlin (2002) found that the motivation to avoid topics was significantly different for biological parents and stepparents. Afifi (2003) found that boundary management in stepfamilies is characterized by feelings of being caught, enmeshed boundaries, and a revealing/concealing dialectical tension, among others. While rule development was not the focus of these studies, the findings show that family structure brings about differences in privacy management and must be considered. For example, the models may be most applicable in parent-child relationships that are uniquely close, such as children of divorce and the custodial parent (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Further, the arguments of these models may be suspended during significant transitions, such as divorce or death of a parent, when privacy rules are renegotiated (Petronio, 2000).

The physical setting may have some impact on PCSC, as well. Mothers who reported being open with their daughters about sex indicated they talked with their daughters in the car, the kitchen, or in front of the TV (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004; Rosenthal et al., 1998). Considering the discomfort with the topic, a car makes sense because the forward sitting position of the driver and passenger limit eye contact and diminish some of the discomfort accompanying this topic. In all three physical spaces, the preoccupation with another activity may buffer the experience of

awkwardness. Therefore, families might develop implicit rules that sex is discussed in the car or in front of the TV, among other contextual rules.

Risk-Benefit Ratio. The risk-benefit ratio leads to understanding the differences between parents who proceed to have conversations about sex and those who do not. Communicating with a child about sex has risks such as tuning out a parent (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004) or being evaluated negatively by the adolescent (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000). However, there are some benefits of sexual communication such as closeness (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004) or fewer sexual risk behaviors during adolescence (Jaccard et al., 1996; Koesten, Miller, & Hummert, 2001; Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 1999). Using a CPM lens, the level of risk is evaluated while deciding whether or not to reveal or conceal private information. Three levels of risk, according to CPM, are high, moderate, or low (Petronio, 2002). Petronio (2002) defines high-risk information as that which causes "shame, threat or severe embarrassment" (p. 67), whereas moderate-risk information involves that which is "uncomfortable, troublesome, or aggravating" (p. 69). The views about sexual information are important in order to assess the risk that parents and children associate with sexual information. When asked about risks and benefits of talking about sex, mothers who participated in the study upon which these models are based thought giving too much information was a risk, showing their concerns about regulating the amount of information their daughters received (Coffelt, 2008). The daughters identified fear of judgment and fear of boundary leakage to their fathers as risks of talking to their moms.

A second consideration of the risk-benefit ratio criterion is the type of risk. Petronio (2002) identifies types of risk as security, stigma, face, relational, or role. Managing the disclosure of private information is guided by considering the type of risk and the benefits or costs the disclosure may impart. No known studies have asked parents or children to describe the

type of risks or benefits they associate with sexual communication and how the type of risk guides their decision to reveal or conceal sexual information. However, Afifi and Steuber (2009) found that as the risk of telling a secret increases the willingness to reveal information decreases. Thus, it seems as if individuals establish rules that they will talk about sexual issues when the benefits outweigh the risks or they evaluate the level of risk as low, regardless of the type of risk. However, parents might be willing to take relational risks for the sake of their children's health and wellness. Children might be willing to risk saving face if they have an STD, knowing the relational benefits may be sacrificed. This criterion should be included with the other rule development criteria to recognize its impact and to inform research.

In sum, the first model illustrates the gestalt of PCSC in which parents and children maintain individual privacy boundaries around sexual information, reveal sexual information incrementally over time, and generate opportunities for future interaction based on the openness during a current communication event. Rule development criteria of culture, gender, context, motivation, and the risk-benefit ratio guide parents and children in their decisions about revealing information. As the child matures, the circumference of the child's privacy boundary expands as new sexual information enters the boundary during each communication event. The child's privacy boundary is fairly open when very young and gradually expands as communication events unfold and parents and children share information with each other. In addition to expanding privacy boundaries, boundary permeability opens as well. When children view their parents as a trusted confidant (Petronio et al., 1996), they are comfortable approaching parents for more information or discussion. Parents' privacy boundaries broaden when children ask questions or disclose information about personal experiences, thereby giving parents new information about their children.

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Revealing sexual information creates a collective privacy boundary, which contains co-owned sexual information. The collective privacy boundary also expands over time when the parent and child reveal more information to each other. Each communication event paves the way for a future interaction when new information may be revealed. When parents and children interact in ways that build trust, they reinforce their receptivity to sexual discussions and leave the door open for future interactions. The first model shows the communication process as it evolves over time and depicts the changes in privacy boundaries as disclosures occur. However, part of the process occurs with each interaction. The box around Early Childhood on the first model serves as the linchpin between it and a second model called the Sexual Communication Interaction Model in Parent-Child Relationships (Interaction Model). The Interaction Model provides a microscopic view of a specific communication event.

Sexual Communication Interaction Model in Parent-Child Relationships

The Interaction Model displays the process of revealing sexual information during a *specific* communication event by highlighting three components called cause, action/interaction, and goal. The interaction model includes both the parent and child, calling attention to the dyadic nature of communication. The sequence of interaction could begin with either the parent or the child.

[INSERT FIG 2]

The model begins with the causal component, which shows the influences that prompt a specific interaction. Specifically, an external cue leads a parent or child to communicate on a sexual topic. The data upon which these models are based showed a strong propensity for conversations to begin because of an external cue such as a movie, book, or statements made by siblings or peers (Coffelt, 2008). Further, Petronio (2010) noted that a shift in privacy boundaries

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results from some catalyst. Here, the privacy rule criteria of motivation and risk assessment weigh into this decision about initiating a conversation. When motivation is high and/or risk is moderate to low, parents or children are more likely to ask a question and reveal their curiosity about a given topic. Each communication event builds on the interaction before it. When parents and children respond with openness, comfort, or acceptance, they convey their willingness to interact when the subject matter of the conversation is sex (Afifi et al., 2008; Kirkman et al., 2005). Hence, the parent or child reduces the risk or embarrassment associated with sexual topics and reinforces willingness to communicate in the future.

As the model shows, the action/interaction component unfolds after the external cue is perceived and the motivation and risk are assessed. Broadly, the interaction follows a sequence of asking a question, experiencing tension by some, regulating the disclosure, responding, and repeating the cycle. At the core of the interaction rests the concept of incremental disclosures, a strategy used by victims of child sexual abuse (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Ros-Mendoza, 1996) and by individuals when revealing a secret (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). The mothers who participated in the study upon which these models are based said they released sexual information to their children in *little bits and pieces* (Coffelt, 2008), which shows a different context for the application of incremental disclosures. In this way, sexual information is fragmented into small portions and only that which directly relates to a question flows through the privacy boundary. The fragments left behind linger inside the privacy boundary until a future inquiry calls one forth. Indeed, parents reported talking with children in grades K-8 and increased the sexual communication as their children got older (Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008). Elaboration on each component of the action/interaction segment of the model follows.

First, the interaction begins with the parent or child asking a question. Mothers who participated in the study upon which these models are derived reported that much of their sexual communication was initiated by a daughter's question (Coffelt, 2008). Similarly, some mothers talk about sex with their children only after a question has been asked (Rosenthal et al., 1998). Parents and children lack information about the other's possession of sexual information, and asking questions is an ideal rhetorical tool to supplement a lack of information (Fiengo, 2007). In brief, asking questions advances a unique approach to initiating PCSC.

Second, the next phase of the action/interaction sequence for some is the experience of tension, which may be dialectical in nature. Petronio (2002, 2010) asserts that CPM is a dialectical theory as communicators feel the tug between wanting to reveal information and simultaneously desiring to conceal the information within the privacy boundary. As Kirkman and colleagues (2005) suggested, parents may feel a contradiction in their desire to discuss sex and avoid the topic. Children may also experience this contradiction when they want to get information from a trusted source but also want to protect their sexual thoughts or experiences.

Parents and children often experience a tension between revealing and concealing or openness and closedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). As children mature, parents may privilege the pole of openness, contributing to the expansion of their children's privacy boundaries. Petronio (2002) asserts that privacy boundaries expand from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. The dialectical tension of autonomy-connectedness may also explain how some family members have been able to talk about sex during a time when adolescents, in particular, establish independence (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 2002). For mother-daughter relationships, in particular, the tug to remain connected while establishing autonomy is a lifetime tension (Miller-Day, 2004). Applied to this model, for example, children who are

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asked if they know how to use a condom might want to confirm this information to reassure a parent and at the same time, want to conceal the information so the parent does not conclude that the child is sexually active.

On the second path between asking questions and regulation, no tension appears because the data upon which these models are contrived showed that some mothers and their daughters experience no tension when talking about sex as they believe talking about sex is natural (Coffelt, 2010). Whether tension is experienced or not, individuals proceed to share information and regulate the amount of sexual information they disclose.

Regulation, the third moment in the action/interaction sequence, is a fundamental aspect of CPM (Petronio, 2002) because it shows the control individuals have over the information they possess. Individuals decide how much information to convey and how much to retain. Consider, for example, a 3-year-old-child who asks, "Mommy, how did that baby get in your tummy?" and Mommy replies with a broad answer such as, "the miracle of birth" or "this is what happens when parents love each other." Mom has vastly more knowledge about reproduction, yet holds nearly all of the information within her privacy boundary until a future time period. However, she wants to establish comfort with this topic between her and her child, so she opens her privacy boundary slightly to provide a modest answer. Information is released based on how permeable the privacy boundaries are. The maturity level of the child also affects the openness of parents (Kirkman et al., 2005). Again, as one communication event is completed, the privacy boundaries become more porous, permitting new information to flow in the future.

Fourth, the action/interaction sequence advances to a response. The response is the moment when the confidant replies to the question. As this information infiltrates the privacy boundary of another, the circumference of the privacy boundary stretches. Finally, this iteration

has the potential to repeat. The privacy rule criteria of culture, context, gender, motivation, and the risk-benefit ratio influence the decision and keep the conversation going. Or, at some point, the sequence ends or the topic shifts, which discontinues the flow of sexual information.

The final component of the model shows goals of a specific interaction that could be attained, using closeness, openness, and/or education as exemplars. The goals depicted on the model represent those specifically shared by the mothers and daughters interviewed for the original conceptualization of the models. Research further supports specific goals of PCSC. For example, as parents and 14-17-year-old adolescents increased the number of sexual topics they discussed, they reported higher relationship satisfaction (Jaccard et al., 2000). Additionally, college women who reported engaging in only one risky behavior during high school described their family communication cultures as having trust, comfort in talking to parents about a number of topics, and openness to negotiate rules (Koesten et al., 2001). By contrast, college women who engaged in at least four risky behaviors in high school felt as if they had limited opportunities for discussion or negotiation, described a lack of trust and openness in their families, and weren't comfortable talking to their parents. These findings suggest that openness and closeness are associated with PCSC. However, a close relationship does not influence whether or not parents and adolescents will talk about sex (Afifi et al., 2008) even though the perception of openness in the family communication environment led to a stronger belief that regular sexual discussions occurred (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998; White, Wright, & Barnes, 1995).

Parents or children may want to demonstrate or reinforce their relational closeness by incorporating sexual discourse into their conversations. Parents likely want to promote closeness in the parent-child relationship because adolescents who experience less closeness get more

sexual information from their peers than parents (Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993). Education may be a goal, as well, as parents may want to impart sexual education information and children might educate their parents about trendy sexual behaviors. These goals are illustrative because there could be any number of goals, such as behavior modification, agreement to go on the birth control pill, or support after a sexual encounter, for example.

In brief, the interaction model zooms in on one communication event, which occurs multiple times over the course of a child's life. These events enlarge the privacy boundaries of children as they obtain new sexual information. Parents' privacy boundaries may expand to some extent if their children share personal, sexual experiences that the parents were not aware of. If positive goals are attained, future interactions on the subject could occur with more ease. Relying on questions and the use of incremental disclosures minimizes risk and vulnerability because small amounts of information are processed with each interaction, rather than an attempt at sharing substantial amounts of sexual information in one setting. With this long term, intermittent approach, parents and children can build comfort and openness with each other.

Synthesis

These two visual depictions advance a teleological process model of sexual communication between parents and children. Poole (2012) submits four conditions to satisfy when proposing a teleological model, which are (a) "a singular entity" that "works to maintain coherence and consensus," (b) a goal or end state, (c) "a set of functional prerequisites for attaining the goal, and the activities undertaken by the entity should attempt to address them," and (d) "discernible stages which differ in form and function" (p. 393).

The models proposed in this essay satisfy these requirements as captured in Table 2. First, the parent-child dyad serves as the singular entity that works to maintain its relationship

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while managing sexual information. Second, the goals of interactions between parents and children could include instrumental, relational, and/or identity goals. (Wilson & Feng, 2007) Third, prerequisites for goal attainment include privacy boundaries, possessing sexual information, and the rule development criteria. The activities undertaken include asking questions in response to an external cue and making incremental disclosures in response to the questions. Fourth, stages differ in form and function, as noted by changes in privacy boundaries. Specifically, privacy boundaries become more permeable as time passes and more information is capable of passing through. Further, the circumference of the privacy boundary expands when new information is obtained, and new collective boundaries form where information known to both parent and child is contained. Stages are discernible not by age of children, but by surges in sexual communication in response to external cues. These surges are unique to each parent-child relationship based, in large part, on the sexual curiosity and development of the child.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

The models answer the call for a process approach to the study of sexual communication (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004) because they demonstrate how sexual information is revealed in small increments over time as well as during a specific interaction. Each conversation commences with a question that is prompted by an external cue. Sexual information passes through permeable privacy boundaries. Disclosures may be preceded by tension for some parents or children as they evaluate the risks and benefits of revealing sexual information. Regardless of tension, disclosures are made, yet regulated such that some information is revealed while other information remains inside the privacy boundary. The passage of information during one interaction may result in positive qualities, which prepares the parent and child for future interactions.

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Parents and children reveal some information at each interaction event while also concealing information. These conversations leave openings in the relationship so that future questions or needs for information can be met with openness and more disclosures. Over time, parents could retrace the conversations about sex with children and see how one interaction built from the last, connecting multiple discussions into a cohesive knowledge base about sexual health and relating. Each parent-child relationship navigates the trajectory through sexual information in a distinct path unique to the relationship, reinforcing the teleological nature of the process models. Specific topics should not necessarily be addressed at a particular age in family relationships. Rather, parents monitor their children's activities and interactions to gauge appropriate times to begin a communication event. Similarly, children observe an environmental cue that serves as the catalyst to ask parents for information.

The models show that parents' and children's privacy boundaries around sexual information converge and increase in their interconnectedness over time. This assumption contradicts other research that shows adolescents renegotiate boundaries during adolescence such that there is more separation in the parent-adolescent relationship, particularly as adolescents struggle to develop their identity (Blieszner, 1994; Erikson, 1968) and gain independence from their parents (Bell, 1967). The models most likely operate in very close parent-child relationships. The interconnectedness between parents and children necessary for these models to apply may resemble enmeshed relationships (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989) because they need very high closeness and trust to achieve communication on this difficult topic of sex.

These models acknowledge the role of children, which is critical as researchers proceed to study sexual communication in family relationships. In the past, researchers seemed to approach sexual communication as if a parent gave information to a child (e.g., Jaccard et al.,

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2002). However, these models suggest that children have agency and exercise their curiosity because they ask questions and initiate communication. Children's privacy boundaries expand only by gaining more information. Therefore, they ask questions in order to obtain sexual information. They also respond to parents' inquiries and reveal information incrementally to their parents.

Another unique attribute of these models is the inclusion of time. Sexual communication changes as children develop and the models illuminate the ways in which these changes may occur. Events such as pregnancy, the onset of puberty, statements by peers, or dating, among others, trigger sexual communication events. These contextual aspects support Petronio's (2002) claim that life circumstances require changes in boundary management. Indeed, more sexual information is revealed to children as they age, regardless of the source.

Professionals who promote public health in the area of adolescent sexual activity could apply these models in at least three ways. First, designing messages that discuss the risks and benefits of *talking* about sex could help alleviate fears, circumvent myths or stereotypes that restrict sexual communication, or promote relational goals that can result from sexual communication. Statistics about teenage sexual behaviors seem to be the dominant message and persuasive strategy used in public health campaigns or by educators. Resource providers could also share the risks and benefits of sexual communication. Recall Petronio's (2002) description of high, moderate, or low risks that are juxtaposed with benefits to decide whether or not to reveal information. Parents and children may have new insights when they understand each other's perceived risks such as children's fear of punishment or parents' concerns of being tuned out. Further, parents, in particular, may come to understand that some children may perceive the risks of sharing sexual information as too high.

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Second, adolescents could be encouraged to participate in conversations with their parents. Promoting emotional closeness and obtaining accurate information are two motivational factors that could influence adolescents to talk with their parents about sex. Such a discussion would also need to emphasize the risks they take in making disclosures and evaluating those risks with their parents. The models show that while the co-owned privacy boundary expands, each person retains sexual information within his/her individual privacy boundary. Indeed, in some situations, openness may lead to negative relational outcomes and withholding may be beneficial (Goldsmith, Miller, & Caughlin, 2007).

Third, the suggestion to communicate with young children about sex could extend many training and education programs. Because some children ask questions on sexual topics long before adolescence begins, parents could benefit from the experiences of others who respond positively when children ask questions. Such an approach could be used to help families who struggle with bringing sexual information into their conversations. Further, anyone who conducts interventions could use these models to help parents, teachers, health care providers, or children approach sexual conversations in new ways.

The models present two additional possibilities. First, they prompt additional questions for future research. For example, what would the models look like in parent-child relationships in which no sexual communication occurred? What events prompt a cessation of sexual discourse after it has been introduced into the relationship? How do biological, physiological, or emotional changes in child development alter the experience of parents and children when they talk about sex? These questions suspend the descriptive research approaches and propel the PCSC literature into relational qualities. Second, the models provide a discussion point for other contexts/topics such as romantic couple discussions about sex or parents and children talking about other risky

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behaviors such as alcohol, drugs, or smoking. The models advocate multiple conversations during the course of a child's life. They emphasize the mutual influence of parents and children, and they suggest that sharing information incrementally may help parents and children achieve relational and behavioral goals. Other applications may expand the utility of these models.

The models introduced in this essay integrate literature and empirical findings from several disciplines to present a process approach to sexual communication in parent-child relationships. These models rely on the tenets of communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) to explain the flow of sexual information through privacy boundaries erected around sexual information. Using incremental disclosures to regulate the passage of information, parents or children reveal sexual information during interaction while constricting the flow of other sexual information. Taken together, these models recognize the co-presence of parent and child. The accomplishment of sexual communication is a reality for some in our society, and their experiences benefit those who are motivated to talk with a parent or child about sex.

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