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**THE EMBARRASSMENT OF PRIVATE DISCLOSURES
NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES**

On the way over to Matt's parents' home, Jennifer asked, "Matt, why do we go over so often?" "Because my mom likes to see us," said Matt.

"But she is always asking me personal questions about our marriage. Half the time I don't know what to say – I feel embarrassed. And, why does she insist that I call her Mom? It makes me feel funny," Jennifer confessed.

"You can say anything to her; she's easy to talk to," Matt said encouragingly. "I think she wants you to feel like you are a part of the family. That is why she told you to call her Mom." Matt got the feeling that Jennifer didn't appreciate his mother, and he was confused about Jennifer's complaints. After all, he felt so pleased when he saw them spending time together.

As Jennifer sat talking to her mother-in-law, Kelly, she realized how uncomfortable she felt. She wasn't used to talking with Kelly about personal things. When she stopped to think about it, she really didn't know Kelly. Jennifer wanted to get close to Matt's mother, but Kelly expected her to act as if they had known each other all their lives. Jennifer was torn. She wanted Kelly to like her, yet she felt that her privacy was always being invaded.

Figuring this out was going to be tough, and Matt was not going to be much help. Matt just didn't see the problem Jennifer was facing. The strangest part was that it was Matt's openness that attracted her. He had no trouble telling her all about his feelings. Now the difference in how they defined privacy was beginning to be a problem.

MATT'S POINT OF VIEW

Matt loved his family. He found Jennifer's reluctance to talk to his parents and brothers difficult to understand. "Jennifer, all my life I have been open with my family, especially my mom. Why can't you just let it go and tell them the things you feel?" "Because they are not *my* parents," Jennifer complained. "Well, they are now," Matt pointed out.

Matt worried about Jennifer from time to time. She seemed so closed sometimes – like the time they moved into the new house after they were married. The bathroom had a separate shower with a clear glass door and large window looking out to the rest of the bathroom. When they picked the house out, Jennifer never said a word about the shower.

Matt remembered the first time they were in the bathroom together getting ready for work. Jennifer was in the shower, and Matt came in to shave. Jennifer yelled at him not to stare at her through the glass. She acted embarrassed – as if it wasn't appropriate even to glance her way. *We're married, for goodness sake*, thought Matt. From then on, Jennifer waited until Matt was out of the way to take her shower. Matt found this behavior hard to understand.

45 Matt has two brothers, and his parents are still together after twenty-seven years. Matt's parents
46 have always been very open with their children. The brothers all get along reasonably well. They
47 have never expected too much privacy, even when they were living together in their parents'
48 home. When they were growing up, his parents always expected the children to talk to them if
49 they were facing problems. They also really liked "family talk time" around the dinner table. In
50 fact, everyone was expected to be home for dinner and the television had to be turned off during
51 the meal. Matt has fond memories of the way he talked with his family during these times. It
52 wasn't just during dinnertime that the family confided. He remembers one incident that happened
53 with his brother Jamie.

54
55 "Say, I really need to talk to everyone about something. Could we meet in the family room after
56 dinner? I need your help," Jamie asked one evening. The family agreed. Matt recalls that they
57 were all curious, wondering what Jamie had to say; but they knew that it was up to him to tell.

58
59 Although they were an open family, they had their rules about not pushing someone to talk.
60 Jamie seemed edgy, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Matt was afraid of
61 what Jamie might say. But he was his brother and would always be there for him, no matter
62 what.

63
64 Jamie finally announced to the family that his girlfriend was pregnant. "My stomach dropped
65 out," Matt told Jennifer after they were married. "I thought his life was ruined. Everyone was
66 great, though. I was worried that Mom would go ballistic; but she was just concerned about
67 Jamie and his girlfriend." Matt's family talked it out. Jamie and his girlfriend, Alicia, wanted to
68 keep the baby. He was just finishing college and was looking forward to being on his own and
69 starting a career. Jamie and Alicia decided to get married.

70
71 "We always knew that we could come to our family with problems; but after the stuff with
72 Jamie, I was really struck by how open our family really is with each other. Even my Mom and
73 Dad come to us and tell us when they are having some problems. I like the fact that they include
74 us kids in their lives," Matt confessed to Jennifer.

75
76 "It gives me a sense of security that I know other kids don't have with their parents. My brothers
77 are always telling me things about their lives, too. I really can depend on my family to listen
78 when I need to talk. That's why I can't see your reluctance to talk to them, Jennifer," Matt
79 complained. "Well, Matt, my family is completely different from yours," stated Jennifer.

80 81 **JENNIFER'S POINT OF VIEW**

82
83 Jennifer grew up in a family that didn't believe in talking freely about problems. Her father, Lyle
84 Johnson, always commented that discretion was a valuable lesson to learn in life. Likewise,
85 Jennifer's mother, Kristen Johnson, believed that revealing too much to others would make a
86 person vulnerable. She taught her kids that, even if you are talking to other family members, it is
87 best to keep things to yourself and work them out on your own instead of bothering everyone
88 else with your troubles. Working them out showed strength. Jennifer, her two sisters, and her
89 brother all recognized the merit in keeping some things private, even among themselves.

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90 Jennifer's family respected privacy. When the kids were growing up, they did not pry into each
91 other's business. They did not touch personal property; nobody barged into another's bedroom
92 without knocking; nobody borrowed clothes, bikes, or anything without asking first. They also
93 did not often burden each other with problems.

94
95 Jennifer remembers learning a valuable lesson about privacy when she was young. Her mother
96 always warned against going through anyone else's dresser drawers or closets. She especially
97 cautioned the children not to touch a drawer in her bedroom. But, when Jennifer was a child,
98 those warnings made her curious. On one particular afternoon she was home from school, not
99 feeling well. She was supposed to stay in bed, but as a restless seven-year-old, she wandered
100 around the house ending up in her mother's room. Her mother was down in the basement doing
101 the laundry. That drawer captivated Jennifer. She wondered what was in there that would make
102 her mother warn the children so many times never to touch it.

103
104 Noticing earlier that her mother had a lot of laundry to do, Jennifer turned toward that secret
105 drawer. She quietly opened it and moved the papers around. "Hum," she thought, "only papers."
106 Then she picked one up that looked kind of old. As she read the words on that paper, they did not
107 make sense to her. She saw that it said "Birth Certificate" on the top. She remembered that she
108 had seen her own birth certificate and it had her whole name on it – "Jennifer Johnson." This
109 paper looked like it was her brother's birth certificate. Yet she was not sure. It said "William,"
110 which was her brother's name. But the last name wasn't Johnson. Instead, it said "Cramer."
111 Jennifer didn't know what to make of this discovery. She realized that she had been in the room
112 a long time. She was afraid her mother would find her, so she stuffed the certificate back into the
113 drawer and left the room quickly.

114
115 Even at Jennifer's age, her dilemma was clear. She could not ask her parents about the
116 information she found because she knew how much they valued privacy. She was also worried
117 that she would get into trouble for snooping in the dresser. She did not think it was okay to ask
118 her brother. In fact, she wondered if he even knew about this at all. She kept the secret to herself.
119 She wondered at times why her brother's certificate had a different name on it. Jennifer knew,
120 though, that she could never find out from her family. She was reminded of this incident as she
121 thought about Matt's family. They would have discussed this at some length. But she could not
122 really understand how they felt so free to disclose.

123
124 Even talking to Matt about Kelly's request to call her "Mom" was hard for Jennifer. Usually she
125 tried to work out a way to handle unpleasant situations like this one. Jennifer was trying to be
126 more like Matt, but it was not easy. "Matt," Jennifer commented, "it is hard for me to tell you
127 about this problem with your family. In my family, we don't complain to each other about things
128 like this. We just try to cope ourselves. So please know that this is very troubling to me."

129
130 "Jennifer," said Matt, "I really don't understand the fuss."

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INCIDENT WITH MATTHEW'S FAMILY

Why were she and Matt so opposite in the way they thought about privacy? Things kept coming up that made it clear Matt expected Jennifer to be very open. Part of her wanted to make Matt happy; part resisted.

One Sunday afternoon, Matt and Jennifer were visiting his family. As usual, when they finished dinner, the family joined in to clean up amid chatter about nothing and everything. Matt loved this time most when he visited – all the family doing something together and joining in on different conversations that were going simultaneously. They always were kidding and joking with each other. Matt was worried about whether Jennifer would fit into his family. She did not seem to welcome or understand that teasing was his family's way of loving each other. One family motto was "Why tease someone you hate – it is a waste of energy."

Jennifer liked a good laugh as much as anyone did. But, often Matt's family joshed about people she didn't know or made "inside jokes" that were never explained. Many times when they teased her she felt embarrassed. She really didn't like the teasing; it made her feel like they were picking on her. She felt that Matt's family was intentionally trying to embarrass her. This afternoon was especially bad for Jennifer. The whole family was at the parents' house, including Matt's two brothers, Jamie and Ed, Jamie's wife Alicia, and his parents Kelly and Michael. They all sat at the kitchen table talking.

Then Ed started to talk seriously about taking a job in another city. He wanted to change jobs so he could make more money. He also talked about a woman he was interested in and asked for some advice from his parents. Jennifer wondered why someone would seek advice so openly in front of so many people. When the conversation died down about Ed's decision, Kelly turned to Matt and asked how he and Jennifer were getting along. Matt quickly revealed that Jennifer was uncomfortable about having to call her Mom. Kelly asked Jennifer why she felt that way, but Jennifer wasn't sure how to respond. She had told Matt in confidence and thought that he would know not to tell his Mom. Kelly saved Jennifer further embarrassment by telling her not to worry, that she didn't have to call her Mom if she didn't want to. Nevertheless, Jennifer was concerned that Kelly was offended.

Just as she was thinking that she'd have to talk to Matt about disclosing like this and putting her in an awkward position with his family, Matt surprised her even more by confessing that he and Jennifer had another, more serious problem. He told his family that he and Jennifer disagreed about when to have children. Jennifer wanted to pursue a career. She had studied hard and finished her BA degree, and now she was hoping to go to law school. Matt wanted to have children right away. Jennifer knew Matt's family was hoping for grandchildren soon. She was upset that Matt raised the issue without letting her know he was going to tell his family.

Jennifer already felt miserable about Matt telling his mother that she did not want to call her "Mom." Now she wanted to scream and run away, maybe even be swallowed up by a big sink

175 hole. He had told his *whole family* they were having this problem. Jennifer's ears began to ring;
176 she thought that she might become sick on the spot and lose the fine dinner she just enjoyed.

177
178 *How could he be so insensitive!* She thought. *The nerve of him to humiliate me like that!* When
179 Jennifer calmed down enough to hear how the family was responding, she couldn't take any
180 more of it. Every member of the family had an opinion about their problem. Some of his brothers
181 were mad at her for putting a career first. Jennifer tried to explain her feelings but the family was
182 on Matt's side. She felt so humiliated that she ran from the room.

183
184 Matt and his family were not sure why Jennifer reacted this way. They were trying to help Matt
185 and Jennifer with their problem. However, Jennifer seemed so unwilling to be helped.

186
187 "What's up with Jennifer?" asked Ed. "What is her problem?"

188
189 "I don't know exactly. I better go and talk to her," said Matt.

190
191 **TIME FOR UNDERSTANDING**

192
193 "Jennifer, why did you run out of the room?" asked Matt later. "My family was only trying to
194 help us with this decision."

195
196 "You just don't get it do you, Matt," said Jennifer.

197
198 "No," Matt responded, "please help me understand."

199
200 "Our private times are not just yours alone to disclose," said Jennifer. "They belong to you *and*
201 me now. Just like if you drew a circle or boundary around them and marked them as ours only.
202 Because we are *both* responsible for our private life, I should have a say in *how* you talk about
203 us, *when* you talk about us, and *with whom* you talk about us.

204
205 "You are comfortable with your family – you have known them all your life," pointed out
206 Jennifer. "I, on the other hand, just met them. I don't know them at all; they are strangers to me.
207 My family has rules about not disclosing private information, even to other family members,"
208 explained Jennifer. "For me, talking about personal matters even with you is difficult. I have
209 been working on this, but I cannot deal with telling your whole family things that should be kept
210 private between us."

211
212 "I still don't get it," said Matt.

213
214 "I think it is up to *us* to decide when we have children. Your family should not be involved in the
215 discussion. Tonight I felt embarrassed and like a villain. It was more than I could tolerate. I don't
216 think I can look at your family, never mind have dinner with them any more," said Jennifer.

217
218

219 From Jennifer's point of view, this information is something she and Matt are responsible for and
220 should manage together. That means they have to talk about when it is okay to tell others, how
221 much of their private information can be told to others, and when or where it is told. They need
222 to agree on the way to disclose this information, and to determine when it is and is not okay to
223 make the information public.

224
225 Matt is not used to this method of sharing. Although he is very open about his feelings and
226 expects Jennifer to be open as well, jointly agreeing on when to disclose and when to keep
227 something private is unfamiliar to him. His family rule was to be open; that was the rule he had
228 always lived by. Now, he is expected to consult Jennifer before he tells anyone else something
229 about the two of them. This was going to be tough. He didn't know why Jennifer just couldn't
230 change the way she dealt with their problems. To do what Jennifer wanted, he was going to have
231 to learn new ways of dealing with privacy. But, he wondered why he was the one who had to
232 change.

233
234 Matt knew it was going to take a real effort on both parts to work this out in a way that would be
235 comfortable for him and for Jennifer. He worried about how this would affect his relationship
236 with his family and he wondered how Jennifer would ever get close to them if she would not
237 open up to them. Nevertheless, he loved Jennifer and they had to figure something out. It was
238 funny, because Matt never thought this kind of thing would be a problem. He was also sure that
239 Jennifer never expected her way to dealing with privacy would be a problem either.

240

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242

243 END NOTE

244 This case represents a composite of experiences found in open-ended questions about private
245 disclosures by newly married couples. The names are fictional.

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247

Concepts/Terminology illustrated in this Case Study

248

(there may be others from Chapter 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

249

and class lectures that I missed)

250

Impersonal vs Interpersonal Relationship
Disclosure
Transactional Model of Communication
Metacommunication
Content and Relational Dimension of Messages
Self-Concept – Presenting Self
Self-fulfilling Prophecies
Identity Management
Influences on our perceptions
Accuracy/inaccuracy of perceptions
Empathy
Facilitative/debilitative emotions
Language – gender variables, cultural variables
Language and responsibility

Types of nonverbal communication
Functions of nonverbal communication
Nonverbal and perception checking
Dimensions of intimacy
Stages of Interpersonal Relationships
Privacy
Self-disclosure (guidelines, alternatives)
Clear Message Format
Gibbs Categories
Confirming and Disconfirming communication
Defensive communication
Social penetration model

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