
PRIVACY AS A SOCIAL GOOD

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Privacy is typically conceived, in both scholarly and popular circles, as an individual good. This weakens the potential for understanding the social implications of changes in privacy and may contribute to the topic's marginal position within sociology. While not explicitly known for their conclusions about privacy, some of the discipline's classic figures have addressed, in a variety of ways, the relevance of privacy for social life. I highlight their work, neglected in privacy discourse and not well known within sociology, to demonstrate the sociological relevance of privacy for individual development, group solidarity, stratification, and social control.

A recent issue of *Contemporary Sociology* devoted its “Symposium” to surveillance studies. In this issue, five authors review the importance of works on surveillance and assess their position within the discipline. Marx (2007) notes the recent explosion of scholarly interest in surveillance, but focuses on its incoherence and the need to more clearly situate it within a broader sociological context. The sociology of privacy, as I see it, would provide a fitting home for surveillance research. Surveillance, a form of observation, is sociologically relevant insofar as it violates or transforms social norms regarding appropriate observation and leads to consequences for individuals and groups in terms of inequality and power. Observation is but one component of privacy and the experience of its invasion,

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along with extraction and intrusion (Kasper 2005). My purpose here is not to dwell on the study of surveillance, but to assert that privacy—properly understood as a central topic in sociology—would illuminate it and other fundamental areas in the discipline.

When delving into the contemporary discourse on privacy, one is confronted by an overwhelmingly diverse array of works. The topics to which privacy is deemed relevant include: surveillance, communication, feminism, the family, internet commerce, the body, and information—medical, financial, psychological, genetic, and biographical. Continuing advances in information collection and communications technology, along with a “war on terror,” have only exacerbated concerns about privacy and spurred further writing and opinion polls on the topic.

Despite the status of privacy as an issue of great public concern and the fact that a few prominent sociologists have made important contributions to privacy research, the topic of privacy remains somewhat marginal within sociology. One of the main reasons for this, I argue, is that privacy is most often portrayed as an individual good that one enjoys or is deprived of on an individual basis. This narrow conception of privacy limits the potential to understand the wider implications of changes in the phenomenon of privacy and stifles a sociological appreciation for the social significance of privacy. My purpose here is to lend support to the reconceptualization of privacy as a social good—that which is necessary for the functioning of society and which is interconnected with other fundamental societal characteristics. This would not only enhance privacy research by further clarifying its subject matter, but it would also illuminate the sociological significance of privacy, especially in relation to individual agency, group solidarity, stratification, and social control.

To these ends, I first describe mounting concerns about threats to privacy and demonstrate its relevance as a public issue worthy of more explicit sociological attention. Then, I extract and emphasize significant conclusions about privacy from classic sociology, drawing from the writings of Goffman, Moore, Simmel, and others. That I invoke sociological works in support of a claim that privacy is not prominent within sociology is not as ironic as it may initially seem. Although the works of these well known sociologists have

direct bearing on contemporary research, they are rarely cited in the privacy literature and, within sociology, their relevance for privacy remains largely unacknowledged. Here, I highlight their contributions to the sociological understanding of privacy—contributions that have been overshadowed by other themes in their work—with the dual intent of enhancing contemporary discourse on privacy and demonstrating the enduring relevance of privacy as a topic of sociological interest.

Privacy as an Individual Good

Traditional connotations of privacy include the protection of dwellings, doors, and diaries. In 1928, Justice Louis Brandeis formally described privacy as “the right to be let alone, the most comprehensive and valued of all rights” (Brandeis 1995:206). This view of privacy as a negative right remains the most commonly referenced descriptor. When viewed as the individual’s right to “be let alone” the importance of privacy seems fairly puny and a small price to pay—or at least a price that must surely be paid—in exchange for security and economic gain.

Since then, scholarly attention to privacy has grown, but there has been an especially rapid and dramatic increase in the past couple of decades. Though the authors’ concerns are extraordinarily diverse, they can be roughly divided into two camps: those who believe that we have too much privacy and need to sacrifice some of it for the common good and national security, and those who warn that the ongoing deterioration of privacy injures civil liberties and erodes individual freedoms. Whether arguing that it be diminished or protected, privacy is most often portrayed as an individual good. Such a view neglects, or encourages sustained ignorance of, the social functions that privacy serves, detracting from both sides of the privacy argument.

Academics aside, the traditional framing of privacy as an individual issue in American politics threatens individual freedoms, while at the same time endangering the long-term health of society. Priscilla Regan (1995), professor of Public and International Affairs, addresses this directly in *Legislating Privacy*, arguing that defin-

ing privacy as an individual right impoverishes political discourse around legislation and policy. She calls for a

need to rethink the value of privacy and to explore a path that has been largely uncharted in much of the philosophical thinking about privacy—the path that acknowledges the social importance of privacy . . . Privacy serves not just the individual interests but also common, public, and collective purposes. A recognition of the social importance of privacy will change the terms of policy debate and the patterns of interest-group and congressional activity (xiv).

Without diminishing the emphasis on the implications of changing privacy for individuals, it is essential to highlight the social importance of privacy as policy surrounding it evolves—and evolve it has.

In the U.S., concerns over privacy have often been piqued by the introduction of novel technologies, such as cameras, telephones, and televisions. It should be no surprise, then, that worries about privacy—both threats to it and threats of it—have skyrocketed since the 1990s and the advent of the internet, wireless, and satellite technologies, the massive growth of computer networking capacities, and a host of other developments in communications and surveillance. Efforts to combat terrorism have intensified concern over the loss of privacy while providing justification for its sacrifice. In what follows, I discuss recent changes in concerns about privacy in American society.

Why Pay Attention to Privacy?

The degree to which a person feels the desire or need for privacy varies considerably according to personality, social position, and socio-historical context. In *Privacy*, Barrington Moore, Jr. (1984) analyzes a wide range of societies that vary by population, technology, organization, culture, literacy, religion, and geography. He finds that, generally, privacy is minimal where social organization and technology are minimal, but that “at least a desire for privacy [is] a panhuman trait” (276). While every person does not feel identical privacy needs,

a desire for privacy is widely shared and an imbalance—whether too much or too little—invites disharmony and dysfunction.

Practices surrounding privacy, and the degree to which people feel a need for it, have undergone dramatic changes in U.S. society. Throughout the 20th century, privacy invasion became more salient as a public issue. Scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s began to reflect mounting concern for the loss of privacy (Carrington and Lambie 1976; LeMond and Fry 1975; Packard 1964; Raines 1974; Rule et al. 1980; Smith 1979; Westin 1967). Most were unwavering in their assertions that privacy was in danger, and their conclusions have since been confirmed.

In addition to increasing privacy invasions in the form of information collection and exchange, spam, identity theft, biometrics, air travel policy, nanotechnology, drug, personality, and psychological testing, communications interception, and surveillance at work, there has been a pronounced expansion of surveillance in public spaces. Bill Brown, founder of the privacy advocacy group The Surveillance Camera Players, estimates that there are about 6,000 cameras scattered throughout Manhattan (Smithsimon 2003:44). Charles Ramsey, D.C. police chief, explains the potential surveillance power of the station's network of cameras when he states, "We have a total of 12 cameras, but we're able to connect with existing networks of cameras from both the Virginia Department of Transportation, Maryland Department of Transportation, and our own District of Columbia Department of Transportation" (Close Watch 2002). He admits that the number of cameras they can hook into is "practically unlimited" (Close Watch 2002). Stephen Gaffigan, head of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department project, in discussing the new system that links hundreds of existing cameras to new digital cameras, reports that the department is intrigued by the British model, where more than two million cameras have been placed throughout the country in recent years (D.C. Cops 2002).

Privacy specialists call a tendency toward greater surveillance over time a "ratchet-up effect" (Swire 2004). Peter Swire, professor of law and long-standing White House privacy advisor, explains that, throughout the legislative process, privacy advocates and law enforcement lobbyists are at odds with each other. Though each side

proposes new laws that will further their respective causes, there tends to be a canceling out effect that preserves the status quo and blocks controversial provisions. This balance continues until a crisis strikes, at which time there are strong pressures to “do something” Immediately after September 11, 2001, Swire (2004) explains, the USA Patriot Act was quickly drafted by assembling previously dormant pro-law enforcement provisions from earlier proposals, but it contained none of the pro-privacy proposals. “Notably,” he adds, “it also contained a number of items from the law enforcement ‘wish list’ that had been omitted in the 2000 proposal” (2004:4). He notes a similar pattern after the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, after which legislation that increased law enforcement powers was also swiftly passed.

Tensions exist within citizens’ desires as well as among legislators’ motives. People generally support higher security, as well as measures to reduce the risk of a total surveillance society. Swire states, however, that the default position is greater surveillance. Robert O’Harrow (2005) agrees, explaining in ABC’s Primetime Live *No Place to Hide* that any resistance is “episodic and ad hoc” and that the drive continues to be in the direction of *more* monitoring, data collection, and analysis. While people may not be aware of the specifics in the ongoing battles over privacy, public opinion polls reveal that they have a distinct sense of the tendencies toward more surveillance and less privacy (Kasper 2005). This sense is made more salient through mass media features like *Reader’s Digest* (“The Scary New Threat to Your Privacy,” July 2004 and “Security v. Privacy: Where Do You Stand,” February 2005) and news programs like ABC’s Primetime Live (“No Place to Hide: Freedom and Identity,” January 2005).

The overall understanding of what is private has been transformed. This is apparent in the types of privacy invasions being committed. Whereas privacy invasions were once dominated by transparent and discrete offenses, trespasses are increasingly unseen, unknown, and ongoing. No longer delineated by tangible physical barriers, it is now one’s information, thoughts, and movements that primarily occupy the realm of privacy. Moreover, privacy is increasingly being invaded by the government and corpora-

tions—powerful social agents over which individuals have little control (Kasper 2005). Though the loss of privacy is not perfectly quantifiable, the feeling is palpable and has become a social fact with important consequences.

Escalating concern over privacy is evident in the growing numbers of books dedicated to the issue of privacy. According to *Books in Print*,¹ 87 books were published with privacy as a keyword in the 25 years between 1955 and 1979. Between 1980 and 2005, there were 1,225 such books published, 1,105 of them since 1990.² The number of organizations whose mission is to provide information about and protect people's privacy has also grown.³

Despite this flurry of activity, there is a surprising absence of attention to the issue of privacy in mainstream sociology. Employing *Ingenta* (an online academic journal resource) to search the discipline's top journals (*American Sociology Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Problems*, *Social Forces*, and *Sociological Theory*) between 2001 and 2006, one finds no articles with the term "privacy" in the title, in the abstract, or as a keyword. In fact, according to a *JSTOR* search, there has not been an article featuring "privacy" in the title in one of these journals since 1968 (*AJS* was the last). The *Annual Review of Sociology*, intended to provide examinations of scholarly advances and synthesize the developing literature within a discipline, shows that between 1930 and 2006 there have been zero articles featuring "privacy" in the title or abstract (for which data are available since 1994). By contrast, more recently coined terms and specific areas of interest have made their way into the annual review (see *Table 1 on page 172*). Given the salience of privacy as a social issue, its absence in *ARS* is surprising.

It is unclear whether the framing of privacy as an individual issue is the cause or the effect of privacy's absence in mainstream sociology scholarship. What is evident is that while privacy has not been included in the discipline's central topics, sociologists have not been completely silent on the matter either. A number of key figures have addressed the societal importance of privacy, but their insights have gone unnoticed in both sociology and in the privacy literature.

Table 1. Search term results in Annual Review of Sociology article titles, 1930-2006

Inequality	18
Gender	16
Race	10
Globalization	10
Immigration	9
Social capital	2
Environmental sociology	2
Postmodernism	1
Queer	1
Privacy	0

Classic Sociology on Privacy

Employing the observations of key sociologists, as well as those of other contemporary scholars, I demonstrate privacy's sociological significance for individual agency, group solidarity, stratification systems, and social control. Though neglected, their conclusions have direct bearing on contemporary questions about privacy and also provide a useful basis from which to pursue further sociological study of privacy.

Privacy and Individual Development

The vitality of any society is only as good as the people who comprise and animate it. Opportunities for individual development depend on some degree of privacy in the form of solitude, anonymity, and temporary releases from social duties. The need for privacy is socially created, determined by the social pressures, obligations, intrusive demands, or unwanted companionship one experiences as a member of society. Moore (1984) succinctly states,

Without society, there would be no need for privacy. The need is a consequence of the fact that in order to survive, indeed to

be or become human, men and women must live in society. For that purpose, they are imperfectly endowed by their natural or physiological and psychological equipment. Inevitably, life in human society imposes frustrations even if it is also on occasion a source of satisfaction and even great happiness. Since societies differ, the desire or need for privacy will vary historically, from one society to another and among different groups in the same society (73).

In essence, one's mere membership in society inspires a desire or felt need for varying degrees of privacy, which is integral to one's psychological, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development.

Privacy is central to one's development of autonomy, problem solving skills, and communicative capacity. We use private time to organize our interpretations about daily thoughts, behaviors, and our place in society. Goffman (1981) uses the term "self-talk" to describe the process by which people talk aloud to themselves to review their activities, rehearse or re-live interactions, judge, encourage, or blame themselves about what they are doing or have done, and verbally mark breaks and new beginnings in their physical activities (79). Self-talk, Goffman argues, is essential preparation for communication with others in addition to serving a "self-guidance function." This is especially true for children, but it "is not merely a transitional feature of primary socialization" (Goffman 1981:82). In other words, although we are more likely to see children exhibit this behavior, adults regularly perform self-talk as a means to guide themselves through difficult tasks and as ongoing preparation for social encounters. For adults, however, it is not socially acceptable behavior. If caught self-talking, one will, most likely, immediately stop or risk being seen as eccentric or insane. The rule "no talking to oneself in public" is implicit, at least in American society, but it is also generally understood that talking to oneself is an acceptable practice if restricted to the confines of solitude. The only currently permissible venue for the necessary activity of self-talk, then, is in private.

Intellectual activity, discovery, experimentation, and creation all require the opportunity for time alone. Moore (1984) associates this particular type of privacy need with modern societies in which

professions have come to be indispensable. Without sciences, scholarship, and the arts, he contends, society would grind to a halt. "The development of talent requires peace and quiet [and] . . . opportunities for reflection. In a word," Moore continues, "one needs privacy both to acquire professional skills and to exercise them" (1984:76). Janna Malamud Smith (2001) puts it this way: "Our psyches are permeable membranes. When we come in contact with others, we tend to absorb feelings, thoughts, moods, and opinions" (10). This requires sorting through all that one has taken in to review, evaluate, worry over, and draw conclusions about it. Privacy, provided by the moments one has alone, enables one to reason, think, relax, produce, and make choices free of the distractions that others introduce. Psychological research supports the idea that only in private can individuals express themselves free of inhibition (Friedman and Miller-Herringer 1991; Friesen 1972; Sundstrom, Burt, and Kamp 1980). Experiments show that people with more complicated jobs are much more satisfied in private spaces, but for all types of jobs studied, "*participants generally preferred privacy over accessibility.*"⁴ When given privacy, people can control overload, and "can tend less to maintaining appearances and more to getting the job done" (Sundstrom, Burt, and Kamp 1980:114).

On the other hand, too much privacy would do great damage to individuals and the social worlds they inhabit, impeding individual development in other ways and rendering futile any possibility of a *social* world. Excessive solitude, especially if unwanted, can make a person feel isolated and out of touch with reality. Worse, solitude and anonymity may provide occasion for dangerous behaviors, including deception, insult, crime, and assault. These levels of social isolation can also increase the risk of victimization as the ability and willingness of a community to protect its members is undermined. Too much privacy may lead to self-involvement so excessive that it compromises one's attention to social responsibilities. As Goffman (1981) tells us, "there are no circumstances in which we can say, 'I'm sorry, I can't come right now, I'm busy talking to myself'" (81). Taken to the extreme, Moore concludes, it ends in a "pathology of privacy," where individuals and corporate "persons" feel free to do whatever they want without regard for the well-being of

others. Likewise, too little privacy disallows many of the processes essential for individual development, stunting the potential growth of society's members and thus of society itself.

Privacy and Social Solidarity

Sociologists tend to insist that group solidarity depends primarily on the regular assembly of group members and, on a larger societal scale, on the connections and dependencies among them. Though some form of togetherness is important for group identity and unity, regular parting is equally necessary for the maintenance of group relations. Privacy, in terms of being able to limit contact with others, is just as important in the formation and functioning of group relationships as is actual contact time between group members. At some point, the presence of others becomes annoying, irritating, or oppressive. Barry Schwartz (1968), in "The Social Psychology of Privacy," argues, "rules governing privacy, then, if accepted by all parties, constitute a common bond providing for periodic suspension of interaction" (742). The formation and maintenance of social relationships depend on discretion, concealment, and retreat as much as on openness, revelation, and coming together.

Relationships between individuals depend on mutual knowledge of each other. They require an exchange of information—both personal and practical—and necessitate that each party reveal parts of his or her self. However, relationships are also built on a mutual non-knowledge of one another. What is taboo or off limits will vary across time and place, but such non-knowledge remains essential to the formation, development, and maintenance of social relations. People require privacy, in the sense of control over the information they release, to form social relationships. Simmel (1967) has addressed this phenomenon most extensively when he writes, "One can never know another person *absolutely*, which would involve knowledge of every single thought and mood" (308). Some of this limitation is due to the barriers of our finite abilities of expressing and sensing. But much of what we cannot see of another is due to his or her deliberate withholding. The unity of person visible to others is the portion that one permits others to see, the result of

a conscious and ongoing process of selection, stylization, and arrangement. Simmel (1967) proclaims, “we simply cannot imagine any interaction or social relation or society which are *not* based on this teleologically determined non-knowledge of one another” (312).

Simmel (1967) examines different types of social relationships and the degrees of reciprocal knowledge that participants enjoy. From the *gesellschaft* (interest groups and acquaintances) to the *gemeinschaft* (friendship, love, and marriage), he argues that, to varying degrees, each type of relation depends on the ability to conceal certain things. Especially in modern complex societies, “interaction, solidarity, and the pursuit of common purposes do not depend on everybody’s psychological knowledge of everybody else” (317). Relationships of acquaintance imply the duty of discretion, “to renounce the knowledge of all that the other does not voluntarily show us” (323). In these relations, it is acceptable for one to learn about others through observation and reflection. However, using means beyond that—eavesdropping, reading another’s mail and even intentionally using one’s psychological superiority to infer and draw conclusions about a person—is indiscretion, an invasion of privacy and a destructive force in such relationships.

In more *gemeinschaft* relationships, the accent, Simmel (1967) says, “is more on the degree of knowledge than of ignorance” (324). Friendship, for instance, rests on connections between people variously based on affection, spirituality, recreation, and intellect, or some combination thereof. Nevertheless, for the most part, each friendship depends on the exposure to select aspects of personality. “All the friendships,” Simmel argues, “present a very peculiar synthesis in regard to the question of discretion, of reciprocal revelation and concealment” (326).

Modern marriage (and other long term relationships) presents difficulty in determining the extents to which revelation and restraint play a role. This type of intimate relationship tempts one to reveal everything, with no effort toward concealment. In most cases, Simmel (1967) argues, such abandon seriously threatens the future of the relationship (307-329). Modern conventions regarding marriage and romantic relationships support this. Magazines, talk

shows, and self-help books have long advised spouses and partners (particularly women) to maintain mystery in order to attain and sustain relationships. Internet dating advisers, for example, admonish women for forgetting “to keep the mystery in our relationships,” instruct men in “how to use mystery to attract a woman,” and teach teenagers that “an air of mystery can be provocative and appealing to a man.”²⁵ Though these examples may seem frivolous, they reflect an enduring conventional wisdom about the discretion called for in romantic relationships.

Thanks to Goffman (1997), the idea that all social interaction depends upon the maintenance of front and back regions in which impressions are regulated and time released is commonplace in sociology. Without the cycles of the regular withdrawal from the public eye, which provide periodic release from having to perform in view of others, *and* participation through role playing and impression management out front, genuine social life would not be possible. For Goffman (1997), there are three general types of territories: *fixed* (geographical in nature, in which claimants’ attachment is supported legally), *situational* (particular to equipment or setting, whether owned publicly or privately, and claimed only when in use), and *egocentric* (preserves which move with the claimant and of which they are the center). It is only through the mutual understanding and respect of these various forms of privacy that social groups remain coherent or function at all.

Likewise, Schwartz (1986) discusses the group-preserving functions of privacy and argues that social relationships would self-terminate without the periodic relief of privacy. A “withdrawal into privacy is often a means of making life with an unbearable (or sporadically unbearable) person possible” (Schwartz 1968:741). Schwartz claims that there is a limit to which interaction is endurable for the parties involved and that “a mutual agreement to part company, is no less a binding agent than the ritual meeting” (742). One desires privacy from others because, as Moore (1984) puts it, “their presence has become overly demanding, oppressive, or simply boring” (72). This is an experience to which, presumably, every social being can relate. In American society, norms loosely regulate when groups (whether formal or informal) will meet, how

often, and for how long. The violation of these norms makes them more salient and tends to inspire hostility. It is not uncommon for close friends or spouses to seek time apart from one another, albeit temporarily. Though society is necessary for humans and can be a source of satisfaction and joy, it can equally be a source of frustration and tension. As such, humans organize means of withdrawing from it, for a time. The degree of withdrawal varies according to perceived demands of society and the need for a respite from them. Periods of togetherness *and* release are structured into social life for the long term health of groups and social solidarity.

The need for privacy partially stems from the perceived differential between the benefits derived from belonging to society and the costs of social obligations. While an excess of privacy can result in loneliness or social dysfunction, not allowing enough privacy to members of social groups can breed animosity, exhausts public energy, and exerts detrimental consequences on group solidarity. Schwartz (1968) confirms that, “guarantees of privacy . . . must be established in any stable social system” (742). Privacy is a socially created need, and without society, there would be no need for privacy. Given this, Schwartz (1968) offers the paradoxical insight that, since privacy presupposes the existence of social relations, the degree to which privacy is employed in a society might serve as a telling index of solidarity.

Privacy and Stratification

The manner in which privacy is allocated or obtained in a society is partially determined by one’s position and power in the social hierarchy. The higher up one sits, generally, the more privacy one is capable of attaining.⁶ Recognizing this, an analysis of how privacy is distributed and used can reveal much about systems of inequality and power. Specifically, looking carefully at how privacy is guaranteed (or not) and to whom can indicate the sort of power balance, or imbalance, that exists.

Universally, children tend to be low in the social hierarchy and are accorded little power. Lacking the ability to care for themselves, babies and small children have no privacy. Their basic bodily func-

tions—feeding, diapering, bathing, and so forth—are attended to by others. As they age, their status and power—at least within the structure of the family—increases, as does their privacy. They may begin to exercise greater autonomy over their daily decisions (what to eat, what to wear, what to play and with whom). By the age of four or five, children attend to their own bathroom needs, dress themselves, and are given time alone to play. The privacy accorded them, at least in the U.S., continues to increase until teenagers begin to spend greater amounts of time out of parents' sight, taking care of their own bodily needs, controlling their own means of communication, and occupying their own personal spaces.

Socially, privacy tends to be positively correlated with wealth and luxury. In other words, privacy costs. Historically, those with the means to do so acquire a place in which to withdraw from others, and those without the means comprise the masses, who must live huddled together for safety, warmth, or lack of space. Schwartz (1968) points out that “privacy is an object of exchange,” bought and sold as a commodity to those who can pay. A most conspicuous example is “in public restrooms where a dime will purchase a toilet, and a quarter, a toilet, sink, and mirror. In some public lavatories a free toilet is provided—without a door” (Schwartz 1968:743). Gated communities, answering services, doormen, and the like provide opportunities for privacy, which continue to be available only to those who can afford them.

The stratification reflected in and perpetuated by privacy is built into physical structures. Class stratification, for instance, is evident in home architecture. Upper class homes tend to contain more spaces, divisions, and rooms that provide opportunities for seclusion than do the residences of the lower classes, the working poor, and especially those living in poverty. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) addresses the class inequality of front and back stages when he writes, “The bathroom and bedroom, in all but lower-class homes, are places from which the downstairs audience can be excluded” (123). Bodies are cleansed, clothed, and made up for presentation to others in these private spaces. Such divisions distinguish upper, middle, and lower class living.

Occupationally, one's position is usually reflected in one's physical situation and the manner in which it either protects privacy or allows for its invasion. Those of higher rank get private offices (some at the very top even warrant off-premises work spaces), while lower ranking employees spend their time in more visible spaces. This is especially evident today in the open-concept, cubicle design of office space, but the discrepancy in privacy is not limited to white collar work. Occupational privacy tends to increase as one moves up the organizational hierarchy. The lower one's status and power, the less able one is to protect one's privacy or to avoid its invasion in other ways such as drug, psychological, or personality tests, locker and purse searches, strip searches, and the like. In her book, *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2000) describes her job as a cleaning woman in which the boss "encourages us to imagine that we are under surveillance at all times in each house" (93). In her Wal-Mart experience, she relates how drug and personality tests make the prospective employee "feel . . . down, way down, like a supplicant with her hand stretched out" (Ehrenreich 2000:150). The tests and hiring practices in jobs like these tilt the playing field, removing the possibility of confronting the employer as an equal and a free agent. Employers can demand tests of employees or interviewers, but not the other way around. Students' lockers and backpacks are subject to search at any time, but students cannot look into teachers' desks or break into principals' offices. The punishment increases with the status of the trespasser. The relationship between privacy and social power position is clear.

In *The Panoptic Sort*, communications specialist Oscar Gandy (1993) discusses the ever-growing information gathering structure as a stratifying mechanism. The "panoptic sort" refers to the "complex technology that involves the collection, processing, and sharing of information about individuals and groups that is generated through their daily lives . . . and is used to coordinate and control their access to goods and services that define life in the modern capitalist economy" (Gandy 1993:15). The relative power of individuals within this economy of personal information is slight compared with that of governmental and corporate entities. One's location in the hierarchy of such organizations garners one more

or less privacy than others—the higher one’s position in terms of class, status, and political clout, the greater the ability to protect one’s privacy. “If a person is not able to determine who does and does not have access to the realms that they define as their own, they are by definition less than whole” (Gandy 1993:186).

Foucault’s classic assertion that knowledge is power is confirmed in Gandy’s panoptic sort. In today’s massive database information system, those who do the information gathering—corporations and the government—wield the most power. The inability to keep information private represents a lack of power. Conversely, more powerful people and organizations have a greater capacity to keep secrets. Weber addresses the relationship of secrecy and power in his discussions of bureaucracy. “The tendency toward secrecy in certain administrative fields follows their material nature: everywhere that the power interests of the domination structure toward *the outside* are at stake, whether it is an economic competitor of a private enterprise, or a foreign, potentially hostile polity, we find secrecy” (Weber 1946:233). Affording less privacy to others while ensuring one’s own privacy, even to the point of secrecy, not only reduces others’ power, but also increases one’s own power.

Privacy, which is an integral component in social stratification and power structures, is too often overlooked in stratification research. A fruitful way to learn more about the stratification of a social system would be to analyze how privacy operates in it. Whose privacy is most often invaded, how and by whom? To whom is the most privacy allocated and what forms does it take? What sorts of power does privacy ensure in this system? Sociologists are accustomed to looking at money, status, and political clout when evaluating the degree to which a society or social group is stratified. I suggest that privacy can serve as a useful dimension in understanding power structures and the allocation of other resources in a society.

Privacy and Social Control

Privacy has long been a tool of social control. Its removal is a form of punishment used to regulate the behavior of individuals

and groups, as in penal institutions, concentration camps, and totalitarian societies. The classic example is Bentham's panopticon. When applied to a prison, the design creates an atmosphere in which a convict might be observed at any time without his or her knowledge. This is supposed to produce, in the inmates, a strong system of self-policing which would increase the efficiency and efficacy of prisons. Elaborating on this theme, Foucault develops the hypothesis that continuous disciplinary surveillance at work and in other settings cultivates the internalization of those social controls once imposed from without. He argues that power is not something one has, but rather something one has the means to exercise. He recognizes the relationship between surveillance and these means when he writes, "The techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power" (1977:170-71).

F. W. Taylor developed an elaborate philosophy of workplace organization designed to increase control, efficiency, and productivity. He relied heavily on surveillance of his employees and compiled dossiers on the men he sought to "break." He strove to control labor through knowledge. His theory remains the foundation of work design, and such practices remain ubiquitous today (Parenti 2003). Office workers increasingly find themselves occupying spaces that allow easy observation by superiors. Surveillance at work takes myriad forms, including cameras, surveillance of internet activity, monitoring the frequency of telephone conversations and the calls themselves, intercepting email, and measuring productivity through physical activities like key stroke speed and error frequency. In his study of the organizational use of EPMCSs (electronic performance monitoring and control systems), Bradley Alge (2001) finds that nearly 80% of workplaces monitor their employees in some respect. Employees perceive this loss of control as an explicit invasion of privacy. The more invasive the practices become, the greater the degree of social control.

Many privacy scholars see today's information industry, comprised of both public and private entities, as one of the most significant forces in escalating social control. Parenti (2003) outlines the development of the relationship between surveillance, information, and social control. Identification, he says, was the original source of

control in the form of the written slave pass, organized slave patrols, and “wanted” posters for runaways. These technologies were used to limit slaves’ opportunities for mobility, developing social networks, and for gaining literacy. Parenti (2003) extends his argument of identification as control to include modern digital surveillance. In this analysis, he describes the development of photography and early biometrics (bodily measurements, markers, handprints and fingerprints) as “the emerging architecture of the soft cage of total surveillance” (2003:78). What is most frightening about this system, Parenti claims, is that it is so mundane. We carry and use a variety of items that log our movements and lifestyle more efficiently than in the past. In isolation, each credit card, social security number, ATM card, grocery club card, drivers license, and so on, seems benign, but “each new camera, database, or ID operates in relation to a larger society wide momentum toward increased observation” (Parenti 2003:78).

After careful analysis of the evolving information industry, James Rule et al. (1980) outline the trend toward social control and assert that the rationalization accompanying modern information systems is directly responsible for increased control over people. In addition to its function of stratification, this panoptic sort is also a “system of disciplinary surveillance...guided by a generalized concern with rationalization of social, economic, and political systems” (Gandy 1993:15). As large organizations work to minimize risk and maximize profit, they use information about people to rank them in useful ways, thereby determining their opportunities and controlling which behaviors will be rewarded or punished.

Smithsimon (2003) writes about what she calls the “surveillance state,” elucidating how the ubiquitous surveillance camera breaks and alters social norms of human observation and information gathering. Since expectations of privacy hinge on social norms, and one’s expectations determine legal definitions of privacy, then the very act of invading privacy causes privacy to shrink. Ongoing surveillance in public places not only invades people’s privacy, but also works to diminish expectations of privacy and thus the extent to which privacy is legally protected. “Video monitored space[s] feel controlled, not free and public” (Smithsimon 2003:47). Public

surveillance—via cameras, curfews, barricades, fences, and motion detectors—exercises social control by inhibiting the activities in which people feel free to engage, especially political activities.

In the extreme, social controls are intended to eradicate private life in the interest of maximizing the control of those in power. Soviet society, for example, called on citizens to police each other and to recognize no space apart from the Party (Kharkhordin, 1983; Timasheff, 1946). In early 1960s Yugoslavia, Josip Novakovich (2001) describes the overall attitude that group life was state enforced, and privacy was anathema. “We were a society of gazers,” he explains (24). The spies were both employed and unemployed, formal and informal. Their eyes were everywhere, yet no one knew exactly where.

The concentration camp also exhibits the purposeful elimination of privacy and the consequential dehumanization of the inmates. Primo Levi (1989) recounts the degradation of being forced to use the collective latrine, the coerced nudity, and the regular ritual of bodily inspection.

... A naked and barefoot man feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: he is helpless prey ... [he] no longer perceives himself as a human being but rather as a worm ... he knows that he can be crushed at any moment (113-114).

He recalls how moments alone in such camps, although precious and rare, had a profound effect on one’s ability to think and feel. “We had lived for months and years at an animal level...and any space for reflection, reasoning, [and] experiencing emotions was wiped out” (1989:75). This total form of social control is a resounding theme in fiction, as well, the exemplar of which is Orwell’s *1984*. In such totalitarian societies, a complete loss of privacy lends itself to the near-complete control of people by the powers that be.

An examination of privacy arrangements can teach us much about social control. Who exerts control and over whom? How and in what circumstances? The manner in which social control is wielded, particularly regarding privacy norms and rights, reveals something important about its balance (or imbalance) with individual autonomy. There are dangers to the kind of anonymity that a lack

of social control in the form of excessive privacy could introduce, but as Parenti argues, “the risks of omniscient and omnipotent state and corporate power are far worse” (2003:212). The potential risks of an over-controlled society include social disintegration through the elimination of trust, the weakening of social relationships, and the disappearance of freedoms to think, speak, and act in ways not dependent on or approved by the reigning systems of ideology, class, and assessment.

Conclusion

Changes in perceptions of privacy and practices surrounding it have enormous sociological significance. One need not rely on the mysterious notion of an inherent need for privacy to be certain of this; rather, evidence of this need can be found in the structures of group life. As Merton (1968) points out, variations in humans’ need for privacy are products of the variation in “functionally optimum degree[s] of visibility” among social structures (399). These “social structures require arrangements for insulation from full and uninhibited visibility if they are to function adequately” (Merton 1968:398). In short, Merton concludes, “limits upon full visibility of behavior are functionally required for the effective operation of a society” (1968:399). Habermas (1998) also recognizes the fundamental importance of privacy for developing, maintaining, and protecting society. Communication in the public sphere is only possible, he argues, when there are distinct boundaries around private autonomy. Public forms of communication depend on “the spontaneous inputs from a lifeworld whose core private domains are intact” (Habermas 1998:417). In this way, “a well-secured private autonomy helps ‘secure the conditions’ of public autonomy just as much as, conversely, the appropriate exercise of public autonomy helps ‘secure the conditions’ of private autonomy” (Habermas 1998:408).

The observations of key sociologists reflect the awareness—either explicit or implicit—that privacy is not just something to be had by, or taken away from, individuals. On the contrary, privacy is a social good. The way that this type of social good is understood

and organized in society impacts social life in profound ways, especially in the areas of personal development, group solidarity, stratification, and social control. Measures of privacy could be an important tool for better understanding these social phenomena.

The current exploration of privacy as a social good is not exhaustive; rather, one could identify additional roles that privacy plays in the organization of social life. The present discussion is but a step toward lending necessary sociological support to efforts to reconceptualize privacy in a way that appreciates its social significance, and an important step toward advancing privacy scholarship. By fostering awareness of what sociology's forebears have had to say, the discipline will be better equipped to contribute useful insights into the social implications of privacy.

Notes

¹<http://www.booksinprint.com/bip/>

²The increase cannot solely be attributed to an increase in the number of books published. Compared to all other adult, non-fiction books published in the U.S., the number of books identified with privacy as a keyword has been consistently rising in recent decades. Contrasting the 25 year periods of 1955-1979 and 1980-2004 shows that the number of all books being published has increased by more than 700%; that is, there are more than seven times as many books published in the latter period than in the former. Nevertheless, the increase in privacy books between those two periods is twice that, or greater than 14 times that of the previous period. Looking at more recent five-year increments reveals that the number of all books published has steadily increased, but that the rates at which privacy books appear are higher still. See table below.

5-Year Period	(% increase from the previous 5-year period)	
	All books	Privacy books
2000-2004	+122%	+153%
1995-1999	+143%	+238%
1990-1994	+129%	+209%

³An abridged selection of some of the more well known includes: Privacy International, Electronic Frontier Foundation, U.S. Privacy Council, Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, Privacy Forum, Electronic Privacy Information Center, Global Internet Liberty Campaign, Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering, Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial Email, Private Citizen, Privacy Exchange, Privacy Foundation, Privacy Inc., and Privacy News, Information, and Action. All of these groups have been created since 1990, and most of them much more recently than that.

⁴Italics in original.

⁵Respectively, these come from: *loveletterbox.com*, *seductioninsider.com*, and *myattractiveinfoforteens.blogspot.com*.

⁶This is not without exception. It is possible for people of humble means to live in isolation from society, in this way achieving a form of privacy. Celebrities and politicians, occupying higher positions status, may have difficulty evading the watchful eyes and ears of a public that feels entitled to know things about them that it would not demand of the average citizen. At the same time, however, they tend to have greater resources with which to both “escape” and to exert influence over their public images.

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