11. Privacy from an Anthropological Perspective

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11.1 Introduction

Before writing about the anthropological perspective on privacy I will need to briefly explain what constitutes an anthropological perspective and how it comes into being. The first 'article' of my anthropological *Credo* is *context*. Anthropologists study people, practices, words, thoughts, objects, traditions, institutions, and so on *in their context*, while many other disciplines do the opposite. No spoken or written word has a fixed meaning but derives its meaning from the sentence or the wider context in which it occurs. This insight forms the basis of the anthropological research approach. We cannot be sure of the meaning of people's words or actions if they are delivered to us out of context. If we have not seen the expression on the speaker's face and the situation in which s/he was when speaking, we cannot be sure of the intended meaning of the spoken words. Was the person at ease when s/he spoke or did s/he rather feel uncomfortable or annoyed? Was s/he perhaps ironic, was s/he lying or did s/he try to flatter or just to get rid of the visitor who asked him or her impertinent private questions? Was s/he impatient or did s/he rather enjoy the conversation with this visitor? Of course, we can never be absolutely certain what someone has in mind during a conversation, but being with him or her in the same context is the best we can do to capture someone's intentions.

The necessity of knowing the context implies that the anthropologist is *present at the spot where the research takes place*. Not as an interrogator and distant observer, but preferably as an engaged participant in the conversation and a respectful and empathic observer. Doing this kind of research requires that the researcher does not present himself as someone who knows but rather as a learner. Why should anyone tell me about their life if they believe that I already know everything? The conversation (I prefer that less formal term to 'interview') would turn into an exam or interrogation, the worst that can happen in fieldwork. Presenting oneself as a learner, a not-knowing visitor is not so much a clever trick by the researcher; it is the reality. The local 'interlocutors' (an unfortunate and clumsy term) are indeed the knowers while the visiting researcher is the not-knower. Moreover, for a researcher,

not-knowing and the curiosity accompanying not-knowing are the natural and most valid motives to undertake the research.

Another crucial aspect of the anthropological perspective is that the researcher is not so much interested in drawing outsider conclusions about a certain group of people but rather wants to capture what is on these people's minds, the *emic perspective*. Anthropology not only wants to know *what* people are doing and thinking but also *why*. What is important to them? What matters? And yet, the ambitions of anthropologists are modest. They want to *understand* others, *not to explain* and predict their acting and thinking. We will see, therefore, that anthropologists rarely attempt to explain people's behaviour with respect to privacy by linking it to particular features or historical antecedents that are typical for a specific society.

Interestingly, the challenge to understanding has shifted over the years. In the early days of the discipline anthropologists thought that they had to travel far away to 'exotic' cultures to find people who posed a challenge to their understanding; they took everything happening at home for granted, as 'normal'. Gradually, however, they realized that understanding others is also a challenge in their own society. The study of privacy in the Netherlands is a splendid example: how to make sense of people who leave their curtains wide open at night but loudly protest against camera's in the street?

Finally, trying to understand others always implies introspection on the part of the researcher. We can only ask sensible questions and understand the answers, if we know from our own experience what we are talking about. This subjectivity of anthropological research is often regarded as suspect and disapproved of by other ('exact') disciplines. The overall opinion says that scientific research must be objective. But we see subjectivity as an indispensable asset rather than an obstacle to good research. The implicit comparison between 'my' and 'their' experience is a prerequisite for understanding 'them' and a sine qua non for a fruitful conversation. Does this make anthropology a subjective discipline? Yes, in the sense that we use ourselves (as subjects) to make sense of what people do, say, and think. If science requires excluding this 'subjectivity' and basing the study of human behaviour on 'objective' observations (as we do with mice in a laboratory) or on short responses to a questionnaire by respondents we have never seen, anthropology is not 'science'.

If we do not recognize anything from ourselves in them, our data will remain stale and meaningless. It would be like reading a novel about people and events which do not touch us in any way; if there is nothing we can share with the characters of the story, we will take little interest in them and fail to understand them. Instead of suppressing personal views and

feelings, therefore, the anthropological researcher should examine them carefully and try to use them in conversation, observation, and participation. Through personal exposure to an interlocutor, a deeper level of mutual understanding and appreciation will be reached. When the anthropologist Desjarlais (1991, 394) asked an old man in Nepal what happens when one's heart is filled with grief, the man smiled and gave the best possible answer: 'You ask yourself'. The need for this type of introspection becomes clear when we try to describe 'privacy', as we will see in the next section.

11.2   Meaning and function of privacy

After the above introduction about 'context', 'emic perspective', and 'introspection', it will not come as a surprise that anthropologists are reluctant to use fixed definitions of privacy in order to analyse privacy in other cultures or subcultures. They rather try to observe and discuss emotions and practices that appear akin to what they call 'privacy' in their own society. To put it differently, they use introspection to arrive at their own privacy experiences and use these to engage in a dialogue with the people they study. It implies that they do make use of a temporary working definition of privacy as a tool to explore how (and why) others think and act in situations where personal and social concerns are at play. It does make sense, therefore, to investigate descriptions and definitions of privacy in publications on Western society.

Interestingly, anthropologists have to look outside their own discipline for solid and useful discussions about privacy. Alan Westin (1970), an American law professor with a broad view on culture and society, discerns four types or aspects of privacy and four functions. The four aspects are *solitude* (being alone), *intimacy* (being alone with only one or a few close others), *anonymity* (being with others but unknown to them and unobserved, 'lost in a crowd'), and *reserve* (being with others but having erected a 'psychological barrier against unwanted intrusion') (Westin 1970, 32). The four functions or effects of privacy, mentioned by Westin, are *personal autonomy* (which includes self-identity and the ability to control communication and interaction with others); *emotional release* (the option of withdrawing and being free from observation by others); *self-evaluation* (the possibility of reflecting on one's position vis-à-vis others); and *protected communication* (sharing confidential things with selected others).

Irwin Altman (1975), a social psychologist, largely follows Westin but places more emphasis on 'the dialectic quality of privacy, the optimization nature of privacy, and privacy as a boundary regulation process' (1975, 21).

Privacy, in other words, is not only about excluding but also about including others. Altman (1975, 22) quotes George Simmel:

> We become what we are not only by establishing boundaries about ourselves but also by a periodic opening of these boundaries to nourishment, to learning, and to intimacy (Simmel 1971, 81).

A recent typology of privacy by Bert-Jaap Koops and colleagues (2017), loosely based on Westin's (1970) types and functions, shows the multilayered, multifunctional, and multifocal character of the privacy concept (see the figure below). They distinguish eight basic types of privacy occurring in four zones (personal, intimate, semi-private, and public) with a ninth type (informational privacy) that partly overlaps all eight basic types. The typology must serve as an analytic tool to understand what privacy is and does but it also shows the extreme complexity and variability of privacy.

Moreover, the concept of privacy defies a precise definition because it refers to experiences that are too close to look at objectively. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (DeCew 2013) lists a number of attempts to capture the meaning of privacy: 'control over information about oneself', 'required for human dignity', 'crucial for intimacy', 'necessary for the development of varied and meaningful interpersonal relationships', 'the value that accords us the ability to control the access others have to us', 'a set of norms necessary not only to control access but also to enhance personal expression and choice', or 'some combination of these'. I will add my anthropological attempt to grasp what privacy is, or rather does.

Privacy is the condition of life in which a person feels comfortable, safe, and secure. The metaphor of a house presents itself: a place where one can live, protected against unwanted elements from outside such as cold and heat, wind and rain, against spies, authorities, thieves, and other unwelcome visitors. A house offers the possibility to allow some people and elements in while keeping others out. Usually it accommodates love and intimacy and is a base from which we engage with others in meaningful relationships. It provides freedom and creates room for self-control, self-reflection, and self-expression, according to Smith (2004, 11250). Monitoring one's privacy can be compared to keeping one's house open to some and closed to others. This metaphor provides 'feel-knowledge' of privacy that may be more effective in defining it than a conventional definition. Privacy is the realization of security in life, a condition that forms the ground for living the type of life one wants to live, a comfortable balance between intimacy and publicity. Examples of how this security and comfortable balance is achieved in various

Fig. 11.1
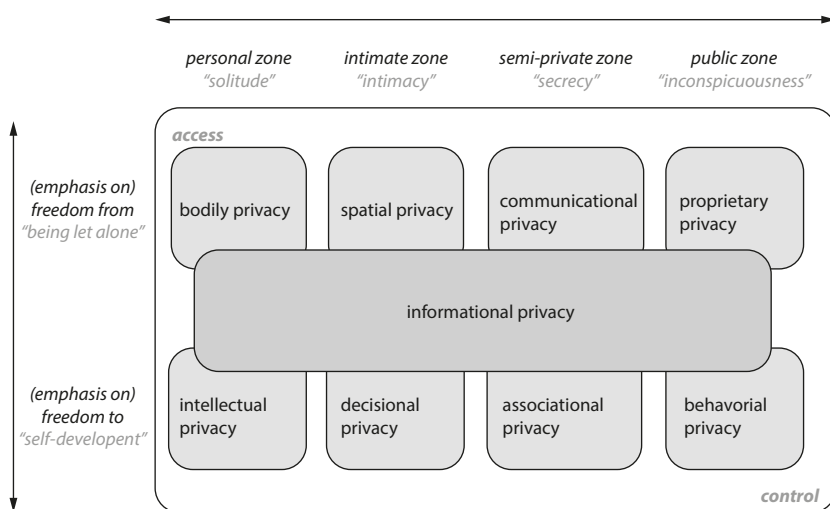
Source: Koops et al. 2017, 484.

contexts (poor or affluent, low or high class, gender-equal or -unequal, authoritarian or liberal) will be seen in the remainder of this chapter.

11.3   Classic texts and authors

Since privacy and feeling secure and comfortable appear universal human values and since modes of privacy and security seem to vary enormously between and within cultures and societies, one would expect anthropologists to be deeply interested in privacy. Surprisingly, however, there is no classic anthropological ethnography that takes local ideas and practices of privacy as its central theme of research. Anthropological observations concerning privacy are mainly found somewhat hidden in wider ethnographic studies, often 'between the lines'. There are however three anthropological texts that discuss aspects of privacy on a more general and theoretical level.

In 1959, Edward T. Hall published his bestseller *The Silent Language*, followed in 1969 by *The Hidden Dimension*. Hall was an anthropologist who had done fieldwork in 'reservations' of Amerindians in the 1930s. During his life, first in the American army and later in the US Foreign Service Institute, his attention was drawn to problems in international communication in politics and trade relations. He taught intercultural communication skills

and wrote several books on this topic. The two above-mentioned books are the most well-known.

The Silent Language starts with a complaint about the cultural ignorance and ethnocentrism of his citizen Americans in their contacts with people from other cultures. The book is an attempt to teach his readers what culture is and does to human relations interlacing his message with examples from his earlier fieldwork and his extensive travelling. Privacy is not explicitly discussed in the book but it is clearly part of the 'silent language'. The publication can be seen as a preparation for his 1969 book. In *The Hidden Dimension* he proposes the term 'proxemics', the study of space and personal territory that people in different cultures and contexts use while interacting and communicating with each other.

Hall distinguishes different sorts of distance that people maintain: intimate (0–15 cm), personal (4–125 cm), social (125–365 cm), and public (365–750 cm or more). The measurements in centimetres sound too exact and absolute to the average anthropologist, but his point is well taken: people differ in what they consider a comfortable distance in the company of different types of people. These differences are not only culturally inscribed but depend on countless other aspects of their identity and the specific situation. He first discusses proxemics in animal behaviour and then moves to human beings. Hall points out that the perception of distance is not solely based on metrical space; vision, hearing, and smell also determine what distance is comfortable and when the proximity of other people is felt as invasive, threatening, or simply unpleasant. Two chapters of the book are about cross-cultural proxemic experiences of Americans versus German, British, French, Japanese, and Arabic people. They are the most ethnographic part of the book including some intriguing – but rather generalizing – observations. Two examples:

> Germans who come to America feel that our doors are flimsy and light. The meanings of the open door and the closed door are quite different in the two countries. In offices, Americans keep doors open; Germans keep doors closed. In Germany, the closed door does not mean that the man behind it wants to be alone or undisturbed, or that he is doing something he doesn't want someone else to see. It's simply that Germans think that open doors are sloppy and disorderly. To close the door preserves the integrity of the room and provides a protective boundary between people. Otherwise, they get too involved with each other. (pp. 135-136)

> Arabs look each other in the eye when talking with an intensity that makes most Americans highly uncomfortable. (p. 161)

A third classic is Barrington Moore's (1984) monograph *Privacy: Studies in Social and Cultural History*. The first chapter 'Anthropological perspectives' draws on observations by anthropologists who worked among various Amerindian communities and the Mbuti Pygmees in Central Africa. The next three chapters, which are the main body of the study, try to tease out information on ideas and practices concerning privacy in three societies in the distant past: classic Athens, Hebrew society as recorded in the Old Testament, and ancient China. The result – unavoidably – is a rather speculative description of juridical, political and philosophical data and some rare conjectural glimpses of everyday life, mostly among the urban elite. In a concluding chapter Moore asks 'what these investigations have revealed about the factors that promote or inhibit the growth of rights against intrusion, an expression that includes both personal aspects of privacy and private rights against holders of authority' (p. 267). The limitations of his sources do not allow Moore to draw solid conclusions about the different shades of privacy. He undoubtedly makes valuable comments regarding the advances of privacy and its enemies in his time (the 1970s and 1980s), for example about the opportunities and threats regarding privacy in a modernizing bureaucratic and industrialized society but he could have made these as well without the extensive data he draws from his various sources.

Anthropologists will find the handbook by social psychologist Irwin Altman (1975) the most useful introduction to the cross-cultural study of privacy. Altman builds upon Hall's concepts of proximity and personal territory. He discusses functions, meanings, mechanisms, and dynamics of privacy and focuses on personal space and crowding. Throughout the book he relates his observations to multidisciplinary social theory and research. Cultural variations in privacy mechanisms and coping with lack of (physical) privacy receive a fair amount of attention and constitute the main focus in a separate publication (Altman 1977).

In the 1977 article Altman rightly remarks that the use of ethnographic materials to 'test' his concept of privacy is problematic.

> Many cultural descriptions are not sufficiently explicit and were not developed with our particular model of privacy in mind. Thus, there may be instances in which a culture is described as having 'no privacy', examples are provided, and the situation is left at that. If we use such material are we to conclude that our hypothesis is invalid, and/or that it is not adequately testable because the ethnography may have been incomplete in its description of the total range of privacy regulation mechanisms? (p. 71)

The problem of interpretation is closely related to this. It is often impossible to deduce from the anthropological description if certain practices that seem privacy-motivated are in fact evidence of concern about what Altman calls 'privacy'. Clearly, more detailed and context-rich ('thick') ethnography is needed to draw conclusions about the meaning of privacy from a cross-cultural perspective. In the next section I will present and discuss some examples of anthropological research related to privacy, mostly, however, in an indirect and implicit way.

11.4   Traditional debates and dominant schools

In this section, eleven different topics of discussion will be presented that I regard relevant to the anthropological perspective on privacy. These are 'Guilt and shame', 'Elias' civilizing process', 'Witchcraft', 'HIV/AIDS', 'Physical and social privacy', 'Gossip', 'Secrecy', 'Lying', 'Privacy of the anthropologist', 'Undesired intimacy', and 'Thoughts'. In most of these debates, however, the concept of privacy is only indirectly referred to, for reasons stated in the previous section.

11.4.1   Guilt and shame

The oldest debate in anthropology related to privacy is probably about the existence of so-called 'guilt cultures' and 'shame cultures'. The assumption was that in shame cultures people's behaviour was controlled by feelings of honour and shame. Good and bad were determined by what others knew about them. In guilt cultures, on the contrary, what is good and what wrong was dictated by a person's personal conscience. These dichotomist concepts became popular after anthropologist Ruth Benedict's (1946) *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, in which she depicted Japan as a shame culture versus the US as a guilt culture. This distinction is now widely rejected as ethnocentrism of Western Christian scholars towards 'Non-Western' societies and a naïve underestimation of shame in their own society. Without mentioning the word 'privacy', those supporting the two concepts were in fact suggesting that the need and desire for privacy – in the sense of acting outside of the public eye – was more prominent in so-called Non-Western societies than in their home country. It should be pointed out however that the claims about guilt and shame in these debates were rarely made on the basis of intensive anthropological research as proposed in the introduction.

11.4.2   Elias' civilizing process

The German sociologist Norbert Elias who has influenced anthropology as well, also touches on this discussion about shame and conscience in his classic *The Civilizing Process* (2000[1939]). He discerns a gradual advance of human values and practices from community-imposed to personal choice. This process can be seen in many domains of public and private life, from political organization, and the state's monopolization of violence to table manners, the regulation of emotions and the shift from external restrain to self-restrain; in other words: from shame to guilt. Through all of this runs a growing emphasis on personal intimacy and individual privacy. The distinction and separation between the public and the private sphere is a crucial element in Elias' concept of the civilizing process.

Elias and his 'school' have been criticized for their evolutionist and ethnocentric view of civilization, but others have argued that the civilizing process is not a unilinear one-directional development. Counter movements and contradictory ideas occur as well. A good example of 'inconsistencies' in the history of civilization can be found in the work of the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters.

Inspired by Elias' examination of books on manners during the past four centuries to trace processes of civilization, Wouters (1977; 2017) looked at etiquette books in various societies including Germany, UK, US, and the Netherlands. He discovered that instructions on good manners in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized social distance and respect for privacy, particularly in the higher classes. This respect for privacy helped to sustain class differences, in Wouters' words: 'the right to privacy functions to facilitate the avoidance of lower-class people' (1977, 66). Towards the end of the twentieth century manners had become much less formal, which could be observed in practices like using the informal pronoun (*du*, *tu*, *je*), calling relative strangers by their first name, and in ways of greeting (social kissing). These developments signalled an 'increasing acceptance of greater social and psychic proximity' (1977, 69) and a blurring of the sharp boundary between public and private. As we will see in the course of this chapter, privacy ideas and practices are packed with contradictions and ambiguities.

11.4.3   Witchcraft

A 'classic' seemingly perpetual anthropological interest related to privacy is witchcraft. From long before 1937 when the British anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard published his study of Azande witchcraft until today, witchcraft

has fascinated anthropologists as both an exotic and 'irrational' phenomenon and – in another sense – as a familiar experience. Witchcraft is associated with traditional rural life as well as with modern urban society. The evil that is brought about through witchcraft is believed to come from close by, in particular from relatives who know the victim well and with whom they spend the day. Evans-Pritchard (1937, 37) wrote: 'The farther removed a man's homestead from his neighbours the safer he is from witchcraft'. And: 'a witch can injure the more severely the nearer he is to his victim'.

Nearly a century later Peter Geschiere (2013, xviii) writes: 'witchcraft is [perceived as] a form of aggression that is most dangerous because it comes from inside'.

Witchcraft has been discussed from many different perspectives, for example as a problem of social exclusion (in particular of women), as an explanatory model, and as a system of social levelling. Here it is presented as a phenomenon that disrupts or annuls the safe privacy of the home.

During my own research in Ghana I noticed that suspicions of witchcraft typically circulated among relatives (Bleek 1975). My research focused on conflicts within families. One – most hidden and fearful – conflict consisted of witchcraft suspicions and accusations between family members. Out of 27 members of two generations, only two (one dead, one alive) were not in any way involved in a case of witchcraft, either as accuser, accused, or assumed victim. The most malicious aspect of these witchcraft accusations was, however, not their high frequency, but the fact that they tended to occur between relatives living closely together. Strangely enough, witchcraft accusations did not necessarily originate from conflicts. Their occurrence was more obscure. Actual conflicts could pass without any allusion to witchcraft while outwardly peaceful relationships could be riddled with witchcraft suspicions. Hidden jealousy was usually given as an explanation for this. The enemy was hiding within the family. Privacy at home was not a secure and safe condition; 'home' and therefore 'privacy' proved precarious and ambiguous concepts. Dangers lurk everywhere. Respectability and safety were not secured in relations with intimate connections.[1]

It would be too simple to regard witchcraft as an exotic superstition that will eventually disappear as did the witch craze in Europe several

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[1]   The Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti wrote that life in an African village made every member of the community dangerously naked in the sight of the other members. "It is paradoxically the centre of love and hatred, of friendship and enmity, of trust and suspicion, of joy and sorrow, of generous tenderness and bitter jealousies. It is paradoxically the heart of security and insecurity, of building and destroying the individual and community." (Mbiti, 1989: 204).

centuries ago. It also reveals a widespread awareness of the ambiguity of close proximity as exists within families. Those near you are also the ones who can harm you most severely. The Ghanaian proverb, which refers to witchcraft, also applies to the private sphere in European families: 'It is the insect in your cloth that bites you'. Familiarity does not only breed contempt; it can also destroy you.

11.4.4   Lack of privacy at home: HIV/AIDS

The recent problems around HIV/AIDS and its stigmatization illustrate this insecurity of the home. Let me quote somewhat freely from a paper I wrote with two Ghanaian colleagues who carried out research among people living with HIV/AIDS (Van der Geest et al. n.d.). One worked in the community, the other in the hospital where the patients went for treatment and medicines. Almost all HIV-positive persons whom the researcher in the community met had kept their status hidden. Thanks to the absence of overt symptoms or progression of the disease, little change occurred in their everyday lives after testing positive. They were therefore not compelled to reveal their status to those in their environment.

Many of those who were married or in a sexual relationship, especially women, did not even reveal their status to their partner. They knew what the consequences could be if their partner were to find out: breakdown of the relationship and divorce, loss of financial support, and possibly disclosure to others. More than 80% of the HIV positive people who were followed in the community had not disclosed their status to their family or friends. For those whose status had been disclosed to relatives, two consequences were most likely to happen: exclusion or collective concealment by the family, to prevent what Goffman (1968, 44) has called 'courtesy stigma': stigmatization by association. A severe example of exclusion and collective concealment was the case of a very sick woman whose relatives refused to spend an extra penny on her when they found out that she had tested HIV positive. 'She was going to die anyway and the money would go waste', a nurse explained. About three weeks after the researcher met her, he saw her obituary notice all around the community. A grand funeral was held for her. The family had rejected the live body but celebrated the dead one to avoid the shame of AIDS. In a clear act of collective impression management, the funeral was the family's strategy to keep the real cause of the woman's death 'private', even though many in the community were probably aware of the fact that she had died of AIDS.

Though people living with HIV were usually more likely to trust people in their own household than others, it was found that they were not inclined to

inform them if they were receiving treatment for HIV/AIDS. Some avoided the nearby hospital and looked for treatment further away where they would not encounter acquaintances who could ask questions about the reason for the hospital visit. At home they kept all medical records in their possession – hospital cards, prescription forms, and even their medicines – away from prying eyes. One woman explained that she hid her medicines in a locked suitcase; one man hid his pills under the family sofa. After a hospital visit, some patients disposed of the ARV packages and leaflets even before they got out of the hospital. Another strategy was to scratch off the writing on the containers or put the medicines into a different box altogether.

The researcher in the hospital remarked that in spite of dangers lurking in the hospital, people with HIV/AIDS found there a safe haven once they were inside and met companions in misfortune and caring nurses and peers who were involved in the treatment and education on a voluntary basis. All these people knew the secret of the patients and thus formed a safe audience for their stories and problems. Stigmatized individuals viewed those who shared their particular stigma as their 'own'; they belonged to the same in-group, in contrast to those who were ignorant if not hostile towards HIV/AIDS. The shared experience of stigma created a strong sense of solidarity among the clients, and health workers sympathized with them and supported them in that situation. Health workers were adopted as 'parents', nurses became 'mothers', who helped them to take decisions on treatment and marital problems, while peer voluntary workers became the 'uncles' and 'aunts' who advised and assisted where needed. Clients, finally, shared with their fellow patients as 'siblings' their worries on a wide range of issues.

The ambivalence toward and hidden insecurity of the family home should be taken into account if we try to understand that people in certain situations avoid the privacy and intimacy of their own family and rather seek help from outsiders whom they trust more than their relatives. The hospital as a 'home' illustrates this. The rejection of family care derives from this long existing ambiguity and tension in the heart of Ghanaian families. Privacy is at risk in the place where it is widely believed to be most secured.

11.4.5   Physical and social privacy

In contrast to this example of the home not securing privacy and safety, we now turn to anthropological discussions of houses and living conditions that do offer privacy in spite of the fact that physical privacy seems entirely missing.

There seems to be almost general agreement that a longing for some kind of privacy is universal (e.g. Westin 1967; Altman 1975, 1977; Moore Jr

Fig. 11.2:   Longhouse (Patterson & Chiswick 1981, 133)
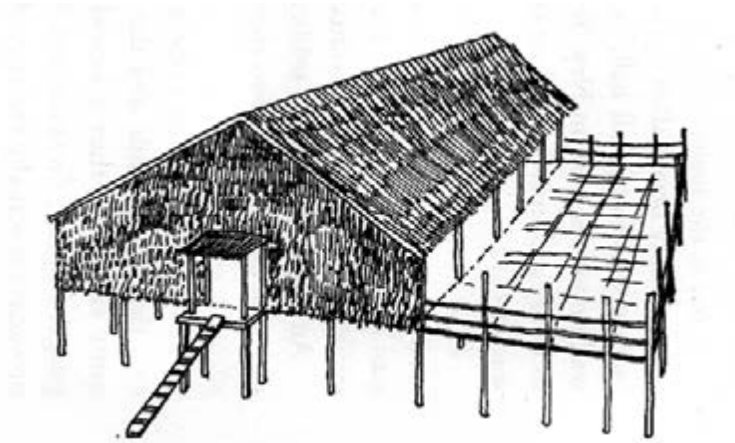
1984; Lindstrom 2015), also when the physical and social conditions that make privacy possible (or nearly impossible) vary widely. This opinion is not based on a worldwide statistically tested investigation but on the few anthropological observations in widely varying cultural settings that they could find. Where living conditions hardly provide physical privacy, rules of proper behaviour and keeping social distance create an imaginary wall that protects mutual privacy. Patterson and Chiswick (1981) described such a situation for people in Kalimantan, Indonesia, who lived in a 'long house' that was shared by 150 individuals, comprising 22 families:

> The longhouse (…) appears to offer little in the way of physical environ-mental mechanisms useful in privacy regulation. The density is relatively high, a large portion of the family's space (the gallery and deck) is semi-public and open to communal view (and often communal use), and the apartments are separated only by insubstantial walls. The walls are ineffective as a sound barrier, and family noises can be clearly heard in neighboring apartments and in the gallery. Further, there is frequent and easy access from apartment to apartment. The apartment itself offers little within-family privacy, with large families eating and sleeping in the same room. (p. 135)

But the families had social mechanisms that provided the privacy they wanted, such as rules about who could enter the house, restricted movements in the night, and working patterns that excluded other families.

Hirschauer (2005) presents a comparable yet completely different example of people in a North American elevator, 'a place where strangers come together' in a small cabin for only a few seconds. Standing order and techniques of not speaking and avoiding eye contact prevent this unusual proximity of unknown bodies from being experienced as an intrusion of privacy. These are techniques of 'civil inattention', again a term coined by Goffman (1963, 84); they are 'A display of disinterestedness without disregard' (Hirschauer 2005, 41). (cf. what Westin and Altman write about 'reserve').

Van Hekken, a Dutch anthropologist, carried out fieldwork in a rural community in Tanzania, where neighbours can hear almost everything that happens next door. The rule of safeguarding privacy is buttressed by the belief that 'making noise' can cause a sickness called *ikigune* (curse) or *mbe sya bandu* (people's breath). When the neighbours hear a father and son shout at one another in the house next door, they start talking about it and may ask the father what happened. This talking and thinking about what happens in the neighbours' house can eventually lead to the sickness of a person in the house where the quarrel has taken place (Van Hekken 1986, 70).

In the extremely poor Malawian village where Janneke Verheijen did her research, people knew almost everything about each other. They tried to hide food and small luxuries such as soap or batteries from their neighbours to prevent jealousy and evade the social obligation of sharing. George Foster (1972) in a classic article on envy writes that hiding your 'riches' is one of the most effective ways of preventing other people's envy and – as a consequence – witchcraft. But in the Malawian community hiding was nearly impossible. Hiding batteries, for example, would mean not using them. If people would hear sounds of music, they would conclude that their neighbour had got some money to buy batteries. They would wonder how she managed to get it. From trading? Or perhaps from a man, a secret lover? Batteries would thus ignite gossip that entered the private intimate sphere of a woman and her household. In a footnote, Verheijen refers to a remark by Vaughan (1987, 34) about the survival strategies of rural Malawians during the severe famine of 1949. She writes that 'the food that could be found was brought to the household at night so that neighbours would not see it, and eating was done indoors instead of outside as usual' (Verheijen 2013, 211).

The severe poverty in this Malawian village and the lack of physical distance are colossal factors leading to the anxiety about privacy among its inhabitants. Such conditions are entirely absent in most Western societies. Privacy is indeed a privilege of the more well to do. The extreme caution to keep certain things hidden from neighbours is not necessary in my Dutch neighbourhood. Of course, there is a lot that I decide not to share with my

neighbours, but it does not require any effort to do so. Technological and architectural facilities take care of this. Moreover, the neighbours have less reason to be curious about my private activities and possessions and they don't need my help to survive.

11.4.6 Gossip

In the previous two examples from Tanzania and Malawi, gossip was mentioned as a threat to privacy. Gossip has been studied and discussed by generations of anthropologists. The irony is that anthropologists themselves are invaders of people's privacy and eagerly engage in gossip to achieve their goals, not only because it provides much desired information but also because it confirms that the researcher has been accepted by the community.[2] André Köbben (1967, 42) overheard his two Surinamese co-researchers saying that anthropology is simply 'collecting gossip'. 'Not at all a bad definition of the bizarre activities of the ethnographer', he added. Indeed, for an anthropologist there is hardly better proof of success than becoming part of the local gossip network. But if that success is not reached, the researcher can himself initiate the gossip by luring or pressing someone into divulging private information about others. I must confess: it is a method that I have employed frequently. I always promised the person however that I would keep the information confidential, which is exactly what usually happens during gossip: 'I will tell you something but don't tell anyone else'.

The interesting thing about gossip is that it is private conversation about private matters. In other words, gossip remains 'private', because it is exchanged in secret, even if that secrecy is continuously broken.

11.4.7 Secrecy

Secrets – like gossip – have always fascinated anthropologists, partly for the same reason that people in general are attracted to them: what is hidden causes curiosity. But secrets also relate to 'cultural constructions of personhood, identity construction, and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships' (Lindstrom 2017, 374). When I asked an old man in Ghana what friendship is, he responded without thinking for a moment: 'A friend is someone with whom you share secrets'. The sharing of secrets 'fits' in with

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2   Interestingly, the philosopher Aristotle used the term *anthropologos* (lit. 'talk about people') in the sense of 'gossip'. It had nothing to do with present-day anthropology, but the coincidence is amusing (Bok 1989, 90).

what Koops et al. (2017) call the intimate zone: the privacy that is enjoyed by a small group of people who trust one another. Those intimates are a blessing for the one who carries the secret. A secret that cannot be shared misses its main attraction. The joy of having or knowing a secret lies in telling someone about it. The secret is like glue that binds people. Secret societies, common male groupings throughout Africa that exclude women, are based on sharing a secret (or an assumed secret). The secret of secret societies may even be that there is no secret.

If sharing secrets with another person is a common way to establish and strengthen friendship, that friendship can again be effectively destroyed 'by spilling these secrets to third parties. Personal secrets are a social currency that people invest in their relationships' (Lindstrom 2015, 377). Sharing secrets is a telling example of what Simmel called privacy as a means to include others.

11.4.8   Lying in defence of privacy

The threat to privacy mainly comes from two sources: from concrete human persons (usually those who are close to the individual) and from advanced technology (behind which distant human beings hide). The technological threat is warded off by counter-technology; the more direct human threat is countered by age-old 'social techniques' of concealment, lying for example.

To follow up on pressing interlocutors to divulge intimate information – about themselves or about others – people may resort to lying. One could argue that someone during conversation with a researcher could simply decline to answer questions that he considers too invasive and personal, but in actual practice a refusal to answer is likely to be interpreted as an implicit confession. So an explicit lie becomes the only effective option in order to keep the intruder at bay. In a context of social inequality, the resort to lying seems particularly necessary because an outright refusal ('This is none of your business') may be considered rude and disrespectful. It should be taken into account however that lying is easily detected in a conversation-like face-to-face interview and could lead to further questions and props that eventually bring about the 'true' information.[3] As a matter of fact, lies usually show the way to matters that are most relevant and point to what is really at stake. Anthropologists, therefore, take a keen interest in lies since they are the sentries to the private domain.

3   Lying and other forms of concealment to protect one's identity is fairly common and accepted on the Internet (see further below, and: Hancock 2007; Hancock et al. 2007).

Ethical guidelines stipulate that researchers should respect the privacy of their interlocutors and not cause any harm to them, for example by revealing their identity. In qualitative research – as is the case in anthropology – individual interlocutors usually play a prominent role (through case histories, narratives, life histories, and anecdotes). Anonymizing interlocutors may pose difficult dilemmas for the writer. A common practice to conceal the identity of interlocutors without impoverishing the richness of the data is giving interlocutors fictitious names and changing some insignificant details of their identity. That has also been my strategy: I did not keep silent about the confidential things I recorded (on the contrary, I collected them in order to spread them through publications), but I made sure that those who gave me the confidential information could not be traced, nor the identity of those about whom they spoke.[4]

11.4.9   Privacy of the anthropologist

When anthropologists, especially those working outside their own cultural setting, discuss privacy, it mainly is their own privacy. Lack of privacy (in combination – paradoxically – with loneliness) is a common complaint of ethnographers who practice participant observation and try to live closely with the people among whom they carry out research. Malinowski, widely crowned as the pioneer of anthropological fieldwork, preferred to live in a tent at a safe distance from Trobriand families. This enabled him to write and read (and sleep) without being disturbed by the villagers. Jean Briggs (1970) spent almost two years with an Inuit family, including two Arctic winters where she stayed with the family in an igloo. She wrote a candid reflection on that long period in which she describes her moments of loneliness and longing for more privacy. But she realized that her longing clashed with local obligations of hospitality and sociability towards her.

To add one more example out of a myriad of anthropological 'confessions', Paul Spencer (1992, 53) recalled how – after a first period of fieldwork in a Maasai community in Kenya, he needed a break and 'a dose of English culture to be able to relax with others in my own language, and to indulge in some privacy'. Such yearning for privacy in the safety of one's own culture is a well-known experience among ethnographic researchers, not only in the past, the pre-Internet era, but also today with its numerous options for communication with people at home (see for example the list of fieldwork frustrations in Pollard 2009).

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4   For a more nuanced account, see Van der Geest 2003 and 2018.

11.4.10   Undesired intimacy

'Undesired intimacy' (*ongewenste intimiteit*) is the most common, explicit and effective qualification to express anger and disgust about the transgression of boundaries of human integrity in the Dutch language. The closest equivalent in English is probably 'sexual harassment', but 'undesired intimacy' is more to the point as it names the deeper source of discomfort and disgust: unbearable violation of one's private sphere. Moreover, the expression can also refer to other forms of privacy invasion than sexual insolence or aggression. One obvious example is the privacy surrounding defecation. Defecation is a normal daily activity which is not morally wrong. Yet in almost all societies defecation is done in a private location. It is normal to lock oneself up in a small apartment to be alone, not because you are doing a shameful thing but because it would be shameful to defecate for others to be seen. If people have no access to a private toilet and must defecate in a public place or in the open field, the same rules of observing privacy apply. One should not stare at defecating people. One should as it were pretend that there is no one relieving himself (another kind of civic inattention).

The discomfort is mutual: the one confronted with another person's act or substance of defecation is as embarrassed and disgusted as the person who is 'caught' in the act. But there are exceptions that reveal the deeper cause of the discomfort. The average mother is not disgusted while changing her baby's nappy and the baby cares even less. To a lesser extent, lovers and close friends are not worried by each other's faeces, especially not at a young age. When people grow older and acquire a more prominent own identity, the (mutual) invasion of one's intimate sphere begins to be felt more strongly. The body substances of others become dirtier and unpleasant. Those of more distant others, relatives, neighbours, colleagues with whom one has a more superficial relationship are considered equally dirty and disturbing since one does not want to share intimacy with them. Hall's (1975) grades of proximity apply here, not in metric measurements but in terms of emotional and psychological distance.

Mary Douglas' (1966) concept of dirt as 'matter out of place' or 'disorder' clearly fits here as well. Sharing intimacy with a non-intimate person, whether it is bodily waste, or sex, or secret information or anything personal, upsets and causes revulsion. It is out of place, improper. But, by a remarkable twist of human experience, the amount of discomfort caused by sharing intimacy with a non-intimate person may be less disturbing if that person is a complete stranger. The stranger does not have a clear identity that invades mine. I may never see him/her again.

The example of the use of a public toilet illustrates this. When I realize that people at the airport are waiting for me to leave the toilet after I have defecated, I feel uneasy, but I can escape untainted since I will never again see the person who will enter my smell. But if the same situation presents itself at the anthropological institute where I work, I will be much more worried. Every time the student or colleague after me meets me s/he may remember the incident and feel equally uneasy. It is unintentional but nevertheless a moment of light undesired intimacy (cf. Lea 2000). It may seem a long jump, but in the same way the divulging of private information to a researcher who will disappear in a few months' time may be easier and safer than telling the same things to a relative or neighbour.

11.4.11   Thoughts

Authors agree that thoughts are the ultimate bastion of privacy. The SF fantasy of a 'thought police' is indeed the most frightening spectre of a future world that some believe to be on its way, referring to the growing power of big data technology.

Some years ago, during guest lectures in Vienna I gave the students an assignment to write about one page on what they considered most private and why. One female student wrote the following:

> I think this is an inappropriate assignment. With all respect: you are my teacher and I am your student. I think it is not important for a teacher to know this about his students. There should be a limit between the teacher-student relationship.

I accepted the critique but continued giving similar assignments during lectures on privacy at my own university. I never received the same severe rebuke, but in a more shrouded way I was told the same thing occasionally. The most frequent response, next to defecation and nakedness, was: thoughts. Three quotes from one assignment:

> What do you consider most private in your life? The first thing that came to my mind when I was asked this question was my thoughts. Even when I am physically unable to withdraw myself from public view, I can still exclude others from what I think (…).
> What if all aspects of my life, except for my thoughts, were open to the public? Everyone would know what I do every moment of every day, and thus everyone would get a pretty accurate picture of who I am, but I still

have the soothing possibility to withdraw my thoughts from the public realm, thus I still have some privacy. Nevertheless, this kind of privacy is, in practice, totally useless. If I cannot share my thoughts with a select group of people, what is the use of having private thoughts at all? (...)
In conclusion, I think intimate relationships are the most valuable thing in private life, because privacy works both ways. If there is no possibility to share my thoughts with a select group or individual, there is no point in having privacy. Privacy is often defined as a freedom, and my choice to share certain thoughts or experiences with only those who I choose, gives me that freedom.

The author escapes from the dilemma s/he formulated in the second paragraph: privacy is the freedom to share and not to share. Paradoxically private thoughts are not necessarily shared with soul mates. As we saw before, some thoughts may rather be kept hidden precisely from friends, partners, or children and shared with a passer-by or a distant acquaintance or a researcher. Privacy lies in the possibility – the freedom – to share or not to share, to open the door or keep it closed.

The possibility of keeping private thoughts secret may be in danger if we believe some pessimists and writers of dystopic fiction, as I just mentioned, but for the time being there is more reason for optimism. Thoughts represent the hard core of privacy. The old German song 'Die Gedanken sind frei' comes to mind; even where no freedom exists in the popular sense of the word, and where nearly permanent surveillance takes place, as in captivity, there is the freedom of thoughts, privacy.

> Die Gedanken sind frei, wer kann sie erraten?
> Sie fliehen vorbei wie nächtliche Schatten.
> Kein Mensch kann sie wissen, kein Jäger erschießen
> mit Pulver und Blei: Die Gedanken sind frei![5]

11.5   New challenges and topical discussions

This section will discuss two recent issues I can think of that raise questions about privacy: first the globalization through Internet and social media which according to many has deeply changed the experience and meaning of

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5   Thoughts are free, who can guess them? They fly by like nocturnal shadows. No man can know them, no hunter can shoot them, with powder and lead: Thoughts are free!

privacy; the second is the reality of living longer and the failing control over privacy it entails for the elderly. Both phenomena are frequently discussed in political debates and public media.

11.5.1   Internet and social media

In an editorial to a special issue on privacy and the Internet Jacquelyn Burkell (2008) sketches how the landscape of privacy has changed:

> Frequent flyer plans archive our travel histories, debit cards track our purchases, cell phones announce our location, online registrations for Web sites collect our identifying information, social networking profiles reflect our personal lives, blogs display to any who choose to look details about our attitudes, preferences, and desires. And that, of course, is only the start. When digitized, information held by government such as health records or income tax records becomes (at least potentially) part of the mix. Our digital shadows grow ever more complex, ever more revealing, and ever more interesting to those with a desire to know who we are, what we do, and what we think.

There is no doubt that the Internet has enormously affected and expanded the threats to our privacy but authors disagree about the question if it has indeed changed our sense of privacy and dealing with it, as Burkell seems to suggest. Some rather argue that the Internet has provided us with new potentials to secure our privacy (as we will see further below).

Anthropology is only hesitatingly engaging with the Internet as a research topic but the public debate about the loss of privacy through the Internet and social media *has* triggered a growing interest in privacy among anthropologists in contrast to their earlier negligence (see the previous section). The use of Facebook in particular has received ample attention from a group of researchers around Daniel Miller, well known for his work on material culture. Miller has now turned to 'digital anthropology'. In 2000, his first ethnography of Facebook use in Trinidad appeared, co-authored with Don Slater. They rejected the idea that the Internet constitutes a different reality and emphasized that it should be studied a part of the 'real' social world:

> We need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into

a self-enclosed cyberian apartness (Miller and Slater 2000, 4; see also Dourish and Bell 2011, 59).

In 2008, Miller and Heather Horst edited a volume on digital anthropology including contributions on media technologies in everyday life, 'Geomedia' (location-tracking technologies), disability, personal communication, social networking, and gaming. Privacy concerns are discussed in most of the chapters. In 2011, Miller published another Facebook ethnography on Trinidad, in which he followed twelve different people who all used Facebook for very different purposes to demonstrate the wide variety of meanings and goals that people attach to this social medium.

A most fascinating and efficient project on social media resulted in eleven monographs by Miller and colleagues. Nine are ethnographies about the use of social media in different locations: Brazil, Chile, China (rural and urban), England, India, Italy, Trinidad, and Turkey; one is a comparative overview all nine ethnographies, and one contrasts the visuals that people post on Facebook in England and Trinidad. The publisher UCL Press set an example of how Internet can facilitate the study of Internet by placing the entire series of eleven studies as open access on the Internet.

Let me highlight the most relevant observations and claims that have been made by the authors of this series. First of all: the traditional anthropological approach of lengthy participatory fieldwork is stressed:

> Everything we do and encounter is related as part of our lives, so our approach to people's experience needs to be holistic. The primary method of anthropology is empathy: the attempt to understand social media from the perspective of its users (…) this project was always collaborative and comparative, from conception to execution to dissemination (Miller et al. 2017, xi).

The authors of the nine ethnographies had built relationships with their interlocutors over a long period and were thus able to place their Internet practices in the context of other aspects of their lives and to look at these practices from the users' point of view.

A recurring finding is that Internet users are not helpless people that fall victim to the machinations of the Internet and lose grip on their private lives. Privacy is a process of optimal management of disclosure and withdrawal. Most users of Facebook were well aware of what they could share with whom and what not. They wanted to be 'seen' (cf. Tufecki 2008), but also knew how to hide themselves if needed. Young people in rural

China used avatars and user aliases and shared passwords with peers to conceal their identity from strangers while allowing friends to read their messages (McDonald 2016, 184-185). Costa (2016, 125) describes the case of a young woman in Turkey who strategically manipulated her presentation on Facebook:

> she made public those images in which she appeared more modest and decorous, but kept completely private those photos that could have damaged her reputation in Hasan's [her boyfriend] circle. She did her best to appear beautiful and be appreciated by her boyfriend and his family. She was well aware of all Facebook privacy settings, and she accurately changed them in every different circumstance. Her intricate uses of Facebook's privacy settings were probably much more elaborate than those envisaged in Palo Alto in California.

Marwick and boyd (2014, 1051) writing about network privacy quote a young man:

> Every teenager wants privacy. Every single last one of them, whether they tell you or not, wants privacy (…) Just because teenagers use internet sites to connect to other people doesn't mean they don't care about their privacy (…) So to go ahead and say that teenagers don't like privacy is pretty ignorant and inconsiderate honestly, I believe, on the adult's part. (1051-1052) (see also boyd 2014)

But in an earlier statement boyd (2006) had been less optimistic. She accused Facebook of making complete openness the default which had led users into unintended public exposure (especially children; see also Livingstone 2008) (quoted by Broadbent 2012, 149). Nicolescu (2016, 102) reported that 48% of respondents in a household survey in Southeast Italy declared 'they had never changed their Facebook profiles to private. Most of them did not know there was such a possibility'. Not only ignorance causes privacy risks on the Internet however, ingenuity can also be a threat. Costa (2016, 1130), for example, describes clever ways of young people in Turkey to circumvent privacy locks and leak confidential information to outsiders, often in the case of (broken) love affairs. The overall conclusion of the digital ethnographers however is that – contrary to public opinion – Internet visitors are reasonably competent to secure their privacy if they want to. But a 100% success rate in the protection of privacy is never possible, neither in 'real' life nor online.

Another notable conclusion of the researchers is that the Internet does not present a totally different reality than in ordinary life but is rather a continuation of existing living conditions and views. In his description of a rural English community Miller (2016, 5) discovered that English people exploited social media to do what they had always been doing: calibrating 'the precise distance they desire for a given social relationship – neither too cold nor too hot but 'just right''. Another observation by Miller is that Internet enables the English people to stay in contact with old friends, relatives, and colleagues who moved away from the village in this time of increased mobility:

> Facebook had helped them to return to the older experience of when this was a community, not just a shared workspace. Similarly there are many examples of WhatsApp groups that form around family members now living in different places. There are also attempts to retain the community of the school class when people drift to dispersed colleges and work. In all such cases Facebook seems a bulwark against the potential loss of community (Miller 2016, 185).

Similar observations of digital ways of continuing and enhancing existing emotions and experiences have been reported from Trinidad (Miller and Slater 2000; Sinanan 2017), Turkey (Costa 2016), and Italy (Nicolescu 2016) to mention only a few.

Social media may also change local traditions and views related to privacy. Costa (2016, 52) described how in Turkey, where everything taking place in the house was private, ordinary family events such as meals lost much of their strictly private character due to images posted on Facebook. The same applied to expressions of affection and body presentation as a result of Internet 'images of engaged and married couples holding hands or hugging each other and photos portraying the bodies and faces of women'. Girls may add strangers to their Facebook profile and have private conversations with them, which is considered morally reprehensible. 'they smartly change the privacy settings to avoid being seen by other friends and relatives or they create fake profiles', because being seen to be in touch with strangers would be condemned even if it did not have any romantic intention (p. 100).

One of the most remarkable 'discoveries' was that in certain circumstances Facebook and other social media provide a privacy that does not exist in the home; they offer an escape from the privacy-less conditions of daily life. MacDonald (2016, 186) noted that Facebook users in China were sometimes

more concerned about how their peers and family would react to their online behaviour than the administrative powers. Horst (2012, 66) writes that young people 'turn to sites like Facebook because they feel that what they can do and express in these spaces is more private than their physical homes'. She further notes that bedrooms are important spaces 'where young people feel relatively free to develop or express their sense of self or identity'. Privacy in this case is a greater problem in the house than online.

The rapidly growing literature on privacy-related repercussions of Internet use is more extensive than what I could present here. Future anthropological research should also focus on the use of personal information for commercial or political purposes and the storage of big data that contain the most diverse information on our personal habits, preferences, and movements. Excesses such as sharing private pictures and messages to harm a person, fraud, extortion, and blackmail also need more attention from a social and cultural perspective.

11.5.2 Ageing, care and privacy

Finally, I want to draw attention to one of the most pressing challenges of present-day society, *ageing*, through the lens of privacy. Much has been written about the demographic transition taking place as a result of the spectacular increase of life expectancy during the past century and its prognoses for the future. The economic burden, the shortage of professional and informal caregivers, the implications for medical facilities, the impact on family life, and many other aspects of this transition have been extensively discussed in various media. Studies of what growing old means to older people themselves in 'Western' society mainly focus on health problems, in particular (fear of) dementia, loneliness, and growing dependency (next to optimistic accounts of vital ageing and active retirement). How fragile old age affects the security and comfort of privacy is however little being studied.

When growing old leads to decreasing physical and mental well-being, it will unavoidably also affect conditions of privacy. This loss of privacy arrives in two ways. One is the way of 'normal' development. Giving up – bit by bit – parts of privacy is a natural necessity linked to the fact that older persons need the help of others to carry out activities that have become too difficult for them. The other route is that they are 'robbed' of their privacy, especially in care institutions. To start with the latter, violation of older people's privacy after they have moved from their own house to an institution is a rather common topic in anthropological studies. Mary

Applegate and Janice Morse (1994) start their account of care in a nursing home in the US with a complaint of an older person:

> What a disgrace to be seen crying by that fat Doris. The door of my room has no lock. They say it is because I might be taken ill in the night, and then how could they get in to tend me (*tend*-as though I were a crop, a cash crop). So they may enter my room any time they choose. Privacy is a privilege not granted to the aged or the young. (p. 413)

Rules for privacy are part of the institution's policy but are frequently disregarded due to the heavy workload. The objectives of the caregiver come first and privacy was invaded if care activities required it. The autonomy of the resident was thus jeopardized leading to a loss of self-worth and dignity. Patients were reduced to objects in the eyes of the researchers:

> Many times, residents were ignored as if they were invisible. Things were done to residents without consideration for their feelings, including respect for their privacy (…) staff made no attempt to knock when they entered the bathroom. One nurse was observed changing an incontinent patient's pants in the corridor. Staff did not consider the patient by requesting permission to enter their lockers. (Applegate and Morse 1994, 427)

In a similar vein Eleanor Schuster (1976) explored the experiences of older people in an institution in the US. She observed that problems arise 'when the person's ability to control the degree and form of distancing is impaired or impinged upon in some way. Often, such dissonance is seen by the individual as 'invasion of privacy'' (p. 246). Two Indian anthropologists who carried out research in a Dutch home for older people and a nursing home were fascinated by the strong desire for privacy among the residents in those institutions. They described various strategies they employed to defend their privacy, both against co-residents and staff members (Chowdhury 1990; Chatterji 2006).[6] Undesired invasion of privacy in these and other studies of ageing is indicated by terms like 'dehumanization', 'objectification', 'lack of respect', and 'loss of dignity'. Infringement of their privacy is experienced as violation of their personhood.

But there is also a loss of privacy that is a natural and unavoidable fact of life in old age. It is a loss that is necessary to grow old successfully and gracefully. The freedom and independence of the younger years allowed a

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6   For an overview of privacy studies in the context of nursing, see Leino-Kilpi et al. 2001.

Fig. 11.3: *The Steps of Ageing (Women).* **Print by Pieter Hendricksz. Schut (1619-1666), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam**

high degree of privacy but that privacy must be gradually given up when old age necessitates the older person to ask for assistance. Loss of independence – implies loss of control over privacy: the intimacy of the ageing body, private matters like bank accounts and handling money, and taking highly personal decisions about housing, hospital, and family. Growing old requires a continuous adjusting of one's life and accepting the 'interferences' of others. In this respect it represents a return to early childhood, to the position of a child that has no privacy. Popular prints from the seventeenth century illustrate this cyclical movement of life. The bed-ridden older person on the right finds herself as devoid of privacy as the new-born baby on the left. The art of growing old is to accept this circularity without turning bitter or resentful (cf. Von Faber et al. 2001). This reconciliation with the loss of one of life's most cherished values (or the failure to accept this loss) has been insufficiently studied from an anthropological perspective.

Looking at ageing as a process of losing control over privacy reveals that respect for privacy and privacy management is a challenge for the elderly as well as for the people around them, both at home and in institutions.

11.6   Conclusion

This chapter started with a brief introduction to the anthropological perspective: its contextualizing approach and its small-scale participatory style of doing research with a special interest in social and cultural differences and personal experience. The following section argued that the old definitions and concepts by Westin (1967) and Altman (1975) of privacy still provided fruitful starting points for the exploration of meanings and experiences around privacy in varying social and cultural settings. Altman's most important insight is that 'privacy' is not a more-or-less static condition but a dynamic process of having control over what one wants to share with selected others and what not.

The section on classic texts and traditional debates revealed the relative neglect of privacy by anthropologists. A surprising discovery since working in other cultures and living closely with their interlocutors confronted them with striking differences in local managements and experiences of privacy. Observations about privacy remained however largely implicit in their ethnographic work. Indirect allusions to privacy can be found in debates about shame, social manners, witchcraft, family life, stigmatization (HIV/AIDS), gossip, secrets, lying, and disgust. Privacy was given more explicit attention in discussions about social versus physical privacy, in reflections on the researcher's own privacy, and ethical accounts about confidentiality regarding interlocutors. The section ended with a few remarks about thoughts as the ultimate privacy control.

The digital age we are living in poses an important new challenge for the anthropological study of privacy. Concerns about privacy in the face of the overwhelming presence of the Internet and social media fill the chapters of this handbook. Privacy has become highly political. It is one of the hottest topics in public debates in almost every domain of society. This explosion of national and international disputes has also affected anthropologists. The past decade anthropology has devoted more attention to privacy as a central value of personhood and social living than in the entire one and a half century of its existence. The chapter ends with a plea for more ethnographic and theoretical exploration of societal processes using privacy as its lens, in particular with regard to the digitalization of our environment and the challenges of ageing.

Finally, this chapter on privacy ethnography suggests surprising similarities between privacy in the present digital era and in the pre-digital *Gemeinschaft*-type community where nearly anyone was known to anyone. Where the baker was acquainted with the family and the character of the

woman he employed in his shop and neighbours were aware of each other's peculiarities. Where families knew the family of the boy with whom their daughter had fallen in love. Where the grocer knew what his client wanted to buy before she had spoken a word. And so forth. Life in small-scale communities was not so different from Bentham's (and Foucault's) Panopticon and the present situation of increasing digitalization of information for political, commercial, and security purposes. The paradoxes and tensions in present-day navigating between privacy and the public eye (cf. Koops 2017) differ mainly in size from what past generations always have been doing and coping with. I admit the difference in size is significant, but the similarities are no less significant. Without accepting some intrusions of privacy society cannot exist.

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