

Philosophy of the Social Sciences

<http://pos.sagepub.com/>

Moving Armies of Stop Signs

Michael Dellwing

Philosophy of the Social Sciences 2013 43: 225 originally published online 9 May 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0048393112445209

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://pos.sagepub.com/content/43/2/225>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://pos.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://pos.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://pos.sagepub.com/content/43/2/225.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - May 10, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - May 9, 2012

[What is This?](#)

Moving Armies of Stop Signs

Philosophy of the Social Sciences

43(2) 225–245

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0048393112445209

pos.sagepub.com



Michael Dellwing¹

Abstract

Most work on the public-private division concerns itself with identifying the lines between both and the historical developments that shifted this line. These contributions provide an aerial view that pays little attention to the interactional micropolitics of privacy. The present article uses a pragmatist approach to analyze the local negotiation of privacy and publicity. It relies on scholarship on “accounts” and “aligning actions” to view “privacy-work” as an attempt to remove actions from having to account for them in a specific social group and “publicity-work” as a converse attempt to draw them out by demanding that actors account. Thus, I will understand privacy as whatever is hidden, situationally, behind “moving armies of stop signs” for alignment demands.

Keywords

pragmatism, private sphere, public sphere, Rorty, social constructivism

The public is merely a multiplied “me.”

Mark Twain

Existing work on the private-public dichotomy paints vast pictures with big brushes that sometimes come with decidedly normative handles attached to them. Large-scale historical treatments show the changes in meaning and delineation between the private and public spheres (e.g., Sennett 1977;

Received 8 March 2012

¹Universität Kassel, Kassel, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Michael Dellwing, Universität Kassel, Postfach, Kassel, 34109, Germany.

Email: dellwing@uni-kassel.de

Habermas 1991), often bemoaning losses of publicity or of privacy in the contemporary world. These are important contributions that clarify the historical and local contingencies of privacy constructions and the long-term processes in which these constructions change. However, any large picture is made up of small strokes; any long-term change arises as a succession of local situations. For an action to be in either the public or private camp, it has to be put there. Anything that is “private” is so because people define it as private, and privacy lives in action: when we look closely, we find that the vast canvas that theorists of privacy paint is “thickly peopled” (Strauss 1993, 25) with persons acting. Only little scholarship concerns itself with the interactional processes in which people engage in the micropolitics of privacy. Privacy and publicity are but abstracted names for interactional processes in which people *publicize* and *privatize*. These are creative practices, not merely in the sense that these practices create the categories other scholars can then analyze, but also in the sense of being creations in local situations. Definitions of privacy are achieved differently in different contexts: they fluctuate and achieve different things.

The present piece aims to incorporate a prominent line of scholarship of interactionist and dramaturgical research into the discussion of privacy and publicity, namely aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) and accounting (Lyman and Scott 1989; Goffman 1971). Research on aligning action discusses how actors fit their lines of action together when they have been disturbed to remain in “good standing” in a social group. Applied to privacy, aligning action practices show *what* exactly actors draw on to negotiate good standing and what they leave alone, what they define to be relevant for good standing and what they consider irrelevant, and in what context.

In the trenches of everyday life, people negotiate privacy in demanding and resisting alignments. People submit others to public scrutiny and push them to align, or they leave them be. Those so challenged submit to this scrutiny or resist it. This emphasis on scrutiny allows us to shift our focus to these interactional processes in which privacy is achieved in everyday life.

For a pragmatist-interactionist framework, it is then up to ethnographic observation where the line between private and public comes down in any given situation. This line will shift, not merely through time (this is obvious), but also depending on what the participants *do* with scrutiny and accounting in different situations: what they scrutinize in a situation and what they leave alone is contextual; whose and which scrutinization they heed and which they resist is contextual.

Privacy is a stop sign. It is a shield to retreat behind. Publicity, conversely, is a cannon to break it. Deploying any of them is an action in a

thickly peopled context: concepts and structures cannot act and can only have effects as interpreted, applied meanings in contexts. Researching privacy, then, means researching privatization as the practice in which actors deploy these shields as moving armies of stop signs; researching publicity means researching publicization as the equally mobile attempts to overcome these moving stop signs. On this basis, I discuss the public-private distinction as the product of situational negotiations of the bounds of accountability and suggest that any theoretical and historical treatments of this distinction need to be attentive to its foundation and activation in interaction.¹ Seeing privacy as a practical achievement in social situations, I focus on *practices* of *invoking* privacy and publicity in concrete problematic situations, negotiated in a social process rather than on lines of delineation.

Private and Public as Realms, Spheres, Degenerations, and Losses

The boundary between the public and private sphere is not just one of the “great dichotomies of western thought” (Weintraub 1997, 1); it is also a hotly contested subject in the social sciences. Observers have noted that this boundary is unclear and flexible: The categories of private and public are “relatively unexplicated and unstable” (Bailey 2000, 381), “not unitary but protean” (Weintraub 1997, 2), with a “slippery” distinction between them (Wolfe 1997, 182). Sennett seconds that “we talk about public and private as fixed states, because picturing them is easier so. They were in fact complex evolutionary chains” (1977, 91).

Commentators employ the terminology to designate the distinction between public and private goods and ownership, public spheres of debate versus rights to privacy, the delineation of intimacy and sociability (Weintraub 1997, 2) or what is “protected from anything other than personal or domestic gaze” (Bailey 2000, 384), a realm “of freedom that has to be defended against the domination of the state” (Calhoun 1993, 7). Some therefore even consider it to be at the root of the political, and “many discussions take for granted that distinguishing ‘private’ from ‘public’ is equivalent to establishing the boundary of the political” (Weintraub 1997, 2). C. Wright Mills follows a similar route when he distinguishes “private troubles” from “public issues” ([1959] 2000, 18). In these formulations, what is public is political, whereas what is private is not.

¹I am grateful to both reviewers for this formulation.

Most treatments of the public-private dichotomy look at its history to portray the shifting boundaries between the private and public spheres and the different meanings the terms had over the centuries. Not rarely, this change is presented as a story of decline. For Habermas, “the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public” (1991, 27), with “the public as carrier of public opinion; its function [that of] a critical judge” (2). The interest-balancing democracies of late modernity are already losing this function, the critics assert. To Habermas, they are merely a realm of competing private interests in which “the public” is only an agent of compromise between these private actors: “The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute to its acclamation” (176). This leads to the deterioration and “depoliticization of the public sphere” (Calhoun 1993, 24) in mass society, where political discourse makes way for a “false public” of movies and television, a “world fashioned by the mass media [that] is a public sphere in appearance only” (Habermas 1991, 171).

Richard Sennett also bemoans the “erosion of public life” (1977, 6), though differently. In industrial capitalism and secularization, so Sennett’s story goes, the “pressures of privatization” and the “mystification of material life” (19) caused the public to wane as a morally legitimate sphere in favor of an apotheosis of private feeling. Sennett regrets this invasion of the public by the “authenticity” of feeling as a process that led to an ever-expanding internalization of the world, an ever-progressing practice of seeing the “real world” as “inside of people” and their ubiquitous *feelings*. Because of this development, “confusion has arisen between public and intimate life; people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning” (5).

Pragmatist Privacies

The public and private spheres are, of course, abstractions. Much work focuses on the shifting lines between these abstractions, and scholarship on the range and development of abstractions of these kinds has its undeniable uses. As useful as abstract histories of privacy are, they threaten to create the illusion of a line that, though shifting through time, is temporarily determinable. Even for those who bemoan current movements of this line and the current fate of the contents of the spheres it separates, there is something calmingly orderly about such a picture. Pragmatists, especially

those of the neopragmatist variety represented by Fish and Rorty and proposed here as well, fear that large-scale orderly canvases of this sort betray the muddy chaos of the world. Pragmatists “feel no compulsion to transform this semi-rational/semiabsurd world into a unified, logical, communicatively purified, perfectly transparent block universe” (Shalin 1992, 272). Pragmatists and interactionists are wary of scientific work that takes place in abstractions. John Lofland quite paradigmatically holds that “abstractions alone . . . are abominations upon the land” (1976, 63). Pragmatists and interactionists have long held that the social world is a practical achievement of active human beings (e.g., Prus 1996, 1997). The world does not lay abstractions at our feet for us to discover; the world is “just there,” and categorizing it is a human activity, not “demanded” by what is categorized (Rorty 1989). As this is an action, it is necessarily situational: “there is no (normative) state, [meanings, M. D.] emerge only in situations” (Fish 1980, 307). Context provides each action with a locality that abstractions can never do justice to (Fine 2010). Therefore, pragmatists maintain that the “substitution of the general for the local has never been and will never be achieved” (Fish 1989, 320).

Local, in the sense used here, is interchangeable with “contextually social,” and social in the sense of being produced in a social scene with a *dramatis personae* of people whose expectations are continuously formed in relation to the expectations of others (Cooley’s “looking-glass self”). They are expectations that are neither static social attributes nor static personal ones. They are rather local, generated between people engaged in joint action. Abstractions only make sense as tools used by active human beings in these concrete and contextual joint actions. In them, these abstractions achieve something, “do work,” and by this work we shall measure them. This is the point driven home by William James: “The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons” ([1907] 1995, 42).

Thus, “the problem for pragmatists is not so much that the thing in itself is unknowable in principle, but that it can be known in so many different ways” (Shalin 1986, 11), can be used as a tool for so many different ends. Rorty notes,

There are lots of things you want to do with bacteria and cows for which it is very useful to have biochemical descriptions of them; there are lots of things you want to do with them for which such descriptions would be merely a nuisance. Similarly, there are lots of things you want to do with human beings for which descriptions of them in nonevaluative, “inhuman” terms are very useful; there are

others (e.g., thinking of them as your fellow-citizens) in which such descriptions are not. (1982, 197)

This brings us back to an emphasis on the local interactional processes in which privacy is negotiated. Local privacy interactions are tools, used as *a means to justify refraining from accounting*. Their reference is not the “privacy order” but an interpretation of whatever actors think others will accept as “privacy arguments” in a local situation infused with local aims and a particular cast of characters. Any attempt to paint a picture of “privacy” in the abstract can merely provide an idealized amalgamation of these diffuse situations, glossing over the many ways in which actors use claims to privacy in different situations as a tool for opposite ends.

Rorty’s own conception of private and public, though superficially appearing to endorse a fixed categorical distinction, in fact affirms a more situationalist idea of privacy. Rorty (1989) states that the private sphere is the sphere where what he calls a “strong poet,” an author who wishes most to reinvent himself and his own vocabularies, roams free to redescribe, where ironic detachment can be safely practiced and where one is safe from public redescrptions by others. The public sphere, on the other hand, is the realm of community, of solidarity, of debate and discourse, where ideas, practices, object meanings, and selves have to be submitted for approval and can be rejected. Critics often charge Rorty with viewing private self-creation on the one side, the public debate of a solidary community on the other (cp. Topper 1992): “The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange” (Rorty 1989, xv). However, Rorty’s conception ultimately emphasizes the active malleability of “privacy” as a definition of the situation that has a variety of uses. Rather than the holistic and normatively infused ideas Habermas and Sennett propose, I will contend that a pragmatist conception of privacy and publicity can be seen as one that does not posit separate realms but rather *modes* of purposeful action. People enact privacy as a social tool to detach themselves from public redescription of their activities and from the challenges of others; they equally enact publicity to build and sustain a community, where definitions have to be shared and actors have to account for deviant definitions.

In interactional processes, the claim to privacy is then a defensive claim, utilized to enable people to retreat from accounting for their actions; the claim to publicity is, conversely, utilized to challenge this retreat. The great

canvas of privacy and publicity provides malleable tools for these local conflicts and is at the same time painted from the brush strokes of these local conflicts.

Accounts, Justifications, Explanations: A Sociology of Definitional Dependence

Interactionists have long paid special attention to the processes in which humans achieve meanings through a dance of intersubjectivity “in a world in which reality is not theirs alone to determine” (Prus 1999, 9-10). One of the more prominent fields in which interactionists have elaborated this approach is the scholarship on aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) and accounts (Goffman 1971; Lyman and Scott 1989), a field with special relevance to the achievement of privacy.

Accounts and aligning actions describe the practices people engage in to mend rifts that arise in social interaction. People utilize accounts and alignments as tools for “aligning individual lines of conduct when obstacles arise in its path” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976, 839) as strategies to reestablish common, joint action (Blumer [1969] 1986) when it has been drawn into doubt. Alignments bring an actor back into a socially acceptable role after that acceptance has been withdrawn (by others or by the actor himself or herself).

Aligning is, however, not merely an action that actors use to respond to problematic behavior. The rift that aligning actions are to heal is entirely social: it is a process that can be split into at least three segments. First, rifts are not objectively there: *someone* has to define something as a problem that demands alignment. This problem is not an objective fact. Though it sometimes seems commonsensical that alignments are reactions to rule breaches, the “breach of a rule” is a definition of the situation that does not impose itself. It has to emerge through human interpretive activity (Kitsuse and Spector 1975; Fish 1989, 1994) because norms do not act: social groups act in reference to norms they *cite*. *How* these norms are cited, against whom and in what context remains unbridgeably contextual and therefore situational (Fish 1989, 1994; Dellwing 2008, 2011). Actors practically achieve rifts in what Goffman calls “challenges” (1967). Much of the social problems that literature calls these initiations “claims” (e.g., Kitsuse and Spector [1977] 2001). The challenge lets the challenged know that their behavior threatens their sociation unless they produce countering signs that prove that they see themselves as (still) part of the social group from which the challenge emanates.

Hence, *someone* stops an ongoing interaction by questioning some display in it. That person thus *diverts* the focus of joint action from whatever it was before to this questioned display, *expecting* an alignment on the other side: an apology, an explanation, or a sign of acceptance that the display was indeed questionable. Then, and this is the second segment, the actor-made-problem can respond to this definition and, by offering aligning actions, accede to it. This is the realm of the classical literature on aligning actions. Such “various tactics, ploys, methods, procedures and techniques” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976, 838) include, but are not limited to, disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), motive talk (Mills 1940; Blum and McHugh 1971; Albas and Albas 2003), quasi theorizing (Hewitt and Hall 1973), excuses, and explanations (Lyman and Scott 1989; Goffman 1971). With aligning actions of any kind, the challenged gives in to the challenge (though in differing levels of acquiescence). In this case, the actor supports the definition that a norm was indeed broken and, by acceding to this definition, makes this “broken norm” definition a shared social fact.

If a rift in interaction (a “rule-breach”) is a social creation and not an objective fact, “making the person acceptable again” is not an objective requirement either. Challenges can go sour: They can be turned around on the challenger (e.g., “what right do you have to demand an apology?”), met with silence, ridiculed, or answered with counterchallenges not directly related to the original challenge. The target can resist in many ways (cf. Young 1995; Dellwing 2012a, 2012b).

Alignment demands are, then, only offers that the challenged have to go along with. Alignments are offers that the challenged make, and it is up to the challenger to accept them to mark the problematic person “unproblematic,” to put him or her in the right again. This is the third segment of the alignment process. Only if the challenge is heeded, if alignments are provided and accepted, “interaction may proceed toward a social object” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976, 842), that is, toward the interaction interrupted before.

Classical aligning actions thus presuppose a huge swath of joint action in which actors synchronize definitions of the situation. *Both* actors need to define the situation as problematic; *both* need to define together that the problem is the responsibility, in some way, of the person asked to align; *both* need to agree that, to engage in future joint action, this problematic situation must be openly mended; and *both* need to agree that whatever alignment is offered is satisfactory for this purpose. There are multiple ways this dance of synchronization can fail (Dellwing 2012b). There are also ways this dance can be shifted to a joint definition of the situation that allows actors to *not*

synchronize other, diverging definitions. This is privacy-work, and resistance against them is publicity-work.

Publicity-Work, Privacy-Work, and Alignment: Moving Armies of Stop Signs

The dance of synchronization that aligning actions provide has a twofold significance for the sociology of privacy. For one, aligning actions show how a seemingly stable normative order is, in fact, constantly fluid and negotiated, permanently unstable and open to interpretation at the level of interaction. The “privacy” order of any given situation is equally a matter of fluid negotiation. Second, aligning actions point toward the separation between what actors negotiate socially and what they do not, that is, what they use to challenge others and what they do not. To challenge actions and actors means that a person’s “right” social standing is dramatized as dependent on this action. However, not every action and every identity has to be synchronized with a social group, and what has to be so synchronized is not merely a dependent variable of the action but nested in a complex social situation in which challenges can be used strategically, cynically, and in fluctuating manners.

Aligning actions are social negotiations of appropriateness used in specific contexts. Whatever happened is seen (by *someone*) as an obstacle to sociality, as something that puts the person asked to align in an imbalance with *others*, that is, with a relative *public*. The problem is a problem only before an audience, and the joint action chain is one that pacifies the audience through showing that the source of the rift submits to the demand for justification. The challenge or claim is a way to “draw out” whatever is seen as the locus of the disturbance, to make it “public” in whatever limited group it arises. Therefore, people make actions and people “public” when they challenge them and demand alignment; people accede to this challenge when they offer what others demand. To show the interactions in which privacy is continuously created, I will focus on the interactions where actors defend against having to give accounts: People can refuse to bow to a challenge, and then, others can increase the pressure or the person asking can retreat. People asking in the name of the public can meet resistance from those who do not share their zeal. People can refuse to accept alignments in the name of the public. In these aligning “glitches” (and they are glitches only for those whose challenges are resisted or those on whom challenges are forced against their resistance), the boundaries of privacy are continuously negotiated.

The rest of this article discusses one very specific form of interaction involving accounts: *accounts that attempt to preclude the demand for further accounts*. They are accounts that raise walls of privacy, walls that attempt to stave off public demands for aligning actions. They entail the claim that no such action is needed for continued sociation and are thus ways to negotiate continued sociation *in spite of* not accounting for one's behavior. When these accounts to preclude further accounts are successful, they put a stop sign to demands for public negotiation and thus declare the defended element "private."

"This is private" (including the many other ways to express it) can be seen to perform a distinct service: It allows conflicting actors to achieve a *common* definition of an *unshared, not commonly defined* social reality by removing the unshared portions from conversation. Consequently, "privacy" is a flexible stop sign, a tool that one has to actually, *practically* use in a *public* exchange (if the stop sign is not set, it does not come up; it is not already there) to gain a second-level agreement where first-level disagreement is feared. However, while it insulates the first-level disagreement, this insulation cannot be achieved unilaterally: Any such setup of stop signs to create a "realm of no justification" is a *public* act that itself may need justification.

In this justification process, "private" is a defensive vocabulary, while "public" is an offensive one. "This is private" is used to defend against having to justify *something*, while "this is public" is used for an attack on this retreat or a preemption of it, a demand for accounting activity before others. When both parties agree on calling something—a claim, an action, a belief, an utterance, a self-presentation, and so on—"private," they make an attempt at a definitional agreement before the matter itself is discussed (the agreement not to discuss it), close the file, and go on. When both agree that it is "public," they again come to a definitional agreement, however one that keeps debate on the matter open and waits for a definitional agreement on the *concrete* matter at hand *beyond* the agreement that it is a public matter.

It is those cases where there is disagreement whether a concrete matter is public or private that the interesting cases arise. When someone applies the vocabulary but others deny that application, they have to build coalitions and engage in negotiations to either successfully defend the privacy of a matter, that is, to be able to hold on to definitions unshared by others who shall remain significant others in spite of it, or they have to submit to others' demands for justification, thereby potentially having to give up one's differing definition. Thus, to retreat from justification necessitates what could be, in a mixed metaphor, called a "moving army of stop signs" in which retreats are used for concrete reasons in concrete situations.

When interactants claim the privacy of a matter, the challenger has three options: to give in and account; to resist the account itself but offer an account for not accounting (claiming privacy); or by resisting completely, without further explanation, perhaps leaving. The first of the three options is public negotiation, agreeing that an action or a circumstance is subject to accounting. The final option amounts to a divorce: Withdrawing without “accounting for not accounting” is tantamount to communicating “no relationship” in which alignment would have to be produced. This shows that alignment already entails an important assumption: that there is a relationship to be protected or one that will not be given up. If one participant is content to give it up, the other’s challenges or resistances will be for naught. Withdrawal or total resistance is a victory in the defense of what one wishes to keep shielded from accounting but at the price of a social relationship.

Privacy is agreed on only in the second of these options. When there is accounting about not having to account, alignment is produced to protect a relationship without having to account for the original action that is protected behind a privacy stop sign. This entails a retreat from accounting to a form of meta-accounting and holds the key to being able to continue imagining “togetherness,” solidarity, while acknowledging unshared definitions. This “public sphere,” or the shifting realms in which we account for not accounting, is the shifting and malleable plural space in which we open up our rings of solidarity to more and more people with more and more retreats from justification from us. In the innermost circle of the core family, there is already a “public” element in the sense that some definitions can be defined as “unshared” (though which they are will vary); in the wider circle of family and friends, more retreats from unshared definitions will be accepted; in specific social clubs, certain definitions central to the identity of the group will have to be accounted for if they are presented as unshared, while those that are nongermane can be protected from accounting. The widest circles are the most shallow ones, such as the political community or even “humanity.” When critics bemoan the decline of the public, they bemoan the decline of the force of this most abstract and shallow group. But there are many publics: Challenges have sources, and different groups will present different challenges. They are also relational. Some behavior within the family need not be accounted for; other behavior must be accounted for only before a smaller, relatively “close” public of wider family and friends, some before the police as a representative of a “legal public,” some before the media. Publicity is fundamentally about producing and maintaining a social relationship with whichever pool of “other me’s” one accounts to.

Negotiating “privacy” allows the members of a group to assure themselves that they do indeed define their world together even if these members do not share the very basic vocabularies of *Weltanschauung* stacked away behind the stop signs. Especially in these circumstances, it becomes clear that claims for privacy are simply attempts to continue solidary social relations while bracketing out the matter of conflict. The vocabulary of privacy is code for “I do not want to discuss this with you lest we slide into definitional conflict and endanger our public and peaceful relationship.” It saves members’ faces by not bringing strong conflicts to the front stage. Once this vocabulary is used and accepted, the parties have achieved a common definition of the situation, and action can proceed toward a shared situation. It is exactly this common acceptance of a retreat that allows for continued solidarity in pluralistic societies, as “solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created” (Rorty 1989, xv). It can only be created by mutual assumptions that one belongs together, as “feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities *strike* us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary” (192). Like solidarity, the similarities used to argue this solidarity are also not found but made; they *are* not salient but *strike* us as such. Solidarity means, then, *assuming* a shared vocabulary for the moment.

One of the most prominent applications of the stop sign can be found in matters of religion and politics, the areas in which liberal societies most obviously have to endure sharp differences of definitions of the situation while at the same time needing a mechanism to prevent these definitional rifts from tearing apart sociation, the assumption that this group still belongs together. One can share a definition by recognizing that one follows the same religion or political creed. People can also take the fact that one is willing to accept the other’s retreat from discussion without framing it as an assault on the definitional bond *as* the shared (political) creed. This allows for greater solidarity than one that requires shared definitions on concrete religious and political matters, and that is the strength of the expanded use of the vocabulary of privacy *for* public solidarity. It is in this sense that the public has “no automatic priority over such private motives” (Rorty 1989, 194): It would be a much smaller public if it did.

However, it cannot be said, abstractly, that “religious” matters are “private.” All that can be said is that “this is my religious conviction” is a *strategy* that can be used to privatize a matter, to resist having to account for it. (“This is my opinion” is a way to insulate political standpoints in this manner.) They need not succeed, and they need not even be used to negotiate retreats. The most obvious case is one in which the other side does not accept the retreat

and insists that the matter one just claimed to be private is indeed not. In religious matters, there are multiple contexts in which believers will try to convince the “unbeliever”: The believer may think, to save the other person’s immortal soul (and to follow one’s own duty as a believer), she or he has to stay on point and try to convince the unbeliever or that the believer’s own moral position claimed to be derived from one’s religious beliefs is universal and needs to be heeded by all. Political debates also use the same tropes of presumed (and therefore imposed) universality; political science is full of presumed and imposed universalities. The one who is to be convinced may see these universalization arguments as an assault on his retreat, in which case the conflict that was to be averted by said retreat arises after all (now doubly!). Here, one party claims privacy, sets a stop sign, and the other side does not heed and attempts to break through it. To stay in alignment terminology, one party resists having to account for something, the other keeps challenging. What ensues is a standoff that can, again, end with one of the three options named earlier. In the course of this standoff, each party can enlist coalition partners such as colleagues, friends, or family members, members of the congregation and, in extreme cases, sometimes even the police, enforcing legal restraining orders. However, the assumption that the legal order will intervene on one side does not constitute a “structural” fact about the state of privacy: For one, it is never finally clear what the courts will actually do (Fish 1989). Also, there is no need to involve agents of official social control, and to do so already communicates a breach of the relationship (cf. Dellwing 2010). Legal support is a never fully secure resource that has to be actively sought and then has to actively coalesce; it is not an objective frame either.

Another, less obvious case of a failure to agree with the privacy retreat is one in which the other party feels justified in not allowing the retreat because of an assumed presence of definitional agreement on the matter that was supposed to be discussed. In situations of religious debate, the privacy retreat may, for instance, fail if made to a member of one’s own congregation, maybe even one’s pastor or priest. “This is a private matter” in the sense of “I do not wish to account for this” can then be read not as an attempt to produce definitional agreement about keeping a relationship alive over conflicting major definitions of social reality but as *withdrawing* from an agreement on religious definitions that the other side considers already in place. While the other may accept this as a change in spiritual outlook and respect it, she or he may also wish to hold on to this shared definition of the situation and attempt to question the retreating party. The latter can still conceivably justify this retreat by announcing that she or he has undergone a change of faith and wishes the relationship not to be affected by it, which again would be an

attempt at offering a chance of definitional agreement on a “friendship basis” rather than the one that had existed as common members of a spiritual group. If she or he has no such explanation and asserts that his or her religious outlook has not changed, she or he may become involved in a spiritual guidance conversation that will make his or her religious judgment a public one in this limited public sphere of one’s congregation, a judgment that she or he must justify because social relationships in this limited public depend on this justification.

The most obvious example that shows how such negotiations of privacy are enmeshed in negotiations of relationships (i.e., shows that one only accounts to protect social relationships) can be seen when one party demands accounts from another, perhaps even elaborately, only to have the “offending” party listen calmly and patiently and then say “are you done?” or any other interjection that communicates indifference. Here, privacy is not protected by agreeing to set a stop sign but by setting it unilaterally, simply through cutting the cord with those who would demand accounts. This form of resistance to challenge can be one of the most powerful, as it pulls the carpet from under the entire situation: The challenge-account-accept game is built on the assumption of a social relationship that is (defined as) broken and is then reinstated through the resynchronization of definitions of the situation (thus the entire term of “alignment”). The response “are you done?” communicates that the assumption is not shared by the other side (at least not for the purposes of this conversation; analysts should not make the mistake of extrapolating a stable and innate truth from it). Without this assumption, all accounting becomes moot, all challenges become toothless. The looking-glass self-process through which we evaluate our action through the assumed eye of others does not cease to function, but it stops taking the others’ expectations as something to be lived up to, to be “in the right” with, even as something to be influenced and changed so that a compromise may put both “in the right.” This is, of course, the basis of Margaret Mitchell’s adage that “until you’ve lost your reputation, you never realize what a burden it was or what freedom really is.” What is private is what is insulated, and this can come in one of two ways: via the “meta-alignment” described above, where challenger and challenged agree to remove behavior from public accounting while upholding the relationship (to the challenger), and via “dissociation,” where the challenged refuses to align with the challenger and thus accepts the rift in sociation.

This might not look like a publically negotiated case of privacy at all, but it is: it assumes that there is the possibility to cut these cords, a social claim that others may break. This cut can still be overcome: agents of the state can

apply official pressure and thus effectively communicate that they will not allow this cord to be cut. Of course, the person could emigrate, flee to a country without an extradition treaty, and thus still cut the cord, and even when imprisoned may refuse to align actively, requiring the jailers to use force every step of the way. The family can seek medical pressure through forced psychiatric treatment, forcing a person back into a role within the family that said person had communicated to abandon in previous action. This is, of course, Erving Goffman's view of psychiatry (1971): a tool used when someone leaves one's place in a family setting and the family cannot accept the new role that the person plays but also cannot let him or her go. Here, also, the person may be subjected to all kinds of treatments without actively aligning (however, it is well known that the only way to escape an involuntary commitment is to align completely with the definitions of doctors—anything less is a “symptom”; cf. Sarbin and Mancuso 1980). In less crass (but still highly forceful) situations, friends and family members can apply “relationship pressure,” the threat to completely end an entire set of cherished relationships if the matter is not accounted for and addressed. The evermore popular practice of “interventions” does exactly this: it is a game where the social circle goes “all in,” putting all the social relationships assembled in the room in the pot to “call” a change of behavior, threatening isolation if the target of intervention does not fold. It is a form of extortion but often also a bluff. Less drastically, the challengers can simply be perseverant, fighting their battle simply by continuance, forcing the pressure to endure questioning and ignoring their attempts to end the negotiation. This, however, is pressure that only works when the offender plays along and endures this perseverance, be it due to their inability, incapability, or unwillingness to withdraw.

Thus, resistance to accounting and offering “privacy accounts”—“let's be in a solidary group without me accounting for this”—are moves in a game. Anyone can use them for retreat from any form of demand for aligning actions. Anyone can resist these moves. What ensues is a social negotiation that is not dependent on some abstract privacy order. What is justified is what can be successfully justified in a social context, and this entails supportive or hostile actions by others, and steadfastness.

What is “private” is thus always negotiated. The “private” is therefore, perhaps paradoxically, always public in the sense that others need to be publicly convinced that a matter falls under this umbrella. If that persuasion work fails and the “privacy party” opts for withdrawal from a relationship, this withdrawal can be publicly challenged as well. This makes the distinction not the description of a state but one of an interaction. Looking at these interactions

locally, they become nestled webs of challenges, resistances, acceptances, counterchallenges, coalitions, and resources.

Bringing Privacy Back “Up”: The Wider Implications of Privacy as Negotiation

Classical studies on privacy, often with an historical angle, have given us aerial pictures of the prevailing social delineations of privacy in a given period. They discussed the possibilities this “order” opens and closes and the social forces that shift these lines as well as those that enforce them (i.e., those that resist these shifts). This is a view that tends to objectify the messy collections of challenge-resistance-alignment games people play with actions they seek to protect from public accounting. The present piece does not insinuate that they are wrong: They are abstractions. As any and all abstractions, they are constructed, but they are so for a reason. They make important points. However, they are also abstractions from *practice*, and to understand how they arise and what it is they do, we need to go back “down” and analyze these practices bottom-up, starting with social scenes. These scenes are of interest to us in a double manner: first, it is from material, from interaction in these scenes that abstractions can arise in the form of later references to former action; second, it is in these situations that people use these abstractions and use them as if they were solid and real, as the reference that justifies current conduct. To interactionists, these reference points are, however, not “social facts” in any hard sense: “*any society or community consists of people acting*” (Prus 1997, 36, emphasis in original). Any order and continuance is order and continuance enacted in this situation, and “when we analyze social structures not recognizing that they depend on groups with collective pasts and futures that are spatially situated and that are based on personal relations, we avoid a core sociological dimension” (Fine 2010, 355, emphasis removed). Structures, histories, and past experiences are not things that dryly and impersonally influence the present but “meanings [that are] continually being formed and reformed given the needs of the moment” (358) *by people*. To use a cybernetic term: the social world is wetware. Stanley Fish notes, regarding legal precedent, that “precedent is the process by which the past gets produced by the present so that it can then be cited as the producer of the present” (1989, 514), a practical, active process by which it “creates and recreates continuity.”

Studies done in a more structural tradition have often noted these local productions, however without, in the end, giving them much weight. Especially

feminist scholarship has given us important work on how “privacy” and “publicity” as challenges and resistances have historically been utilized in a way detrimental to women: Feminists have fought for abortion to be a private decision not to be scrutinized in a shady realm of “the political public”—actually, not to be scrutinized by strange bureaucrats, state establishments, religious conservatives, male authorities, and the like. In the debate over “the right to one’s own body,” the defense was extended to the family and also to the father of the child, all of whom may have their challenges resisted, and the woman can (at least until now, still) expect that courts *may* back her up on this resistance (may, as it is never fully predictable what a specific court will do in a specific case). At the same time, however, women have fought for housework to be a public matter, not relegated to a private sphere of nonpayment, nonrecognition in the public sphere. In this context, critics have often seen any defense of a private-public delineation as a threat to progressive social thought (e.g., Fraser 1990), but it is clear from these two simple examples that the abstract reliance on a “defense of the public” or a “fight for privacy” can come from the same source in different situations and can be utilized completely differently in different contexts. It is not “public” and “private” as “structures” or “discourses” that do anything. These seemingly “structural” frameworks come up in local, contextual, purposeful conflicts as “enjeux,” as bets in an interactional game with which something can be *won*. Keith Topper also recognizes this: “What is striking is how conservatives and liberals seek to defend diametrically opposed agendas through appeals to . . . distinctions between the public and private” (1992, 962). This, exactly, is the function of the distinction: Some intellectual movements have successfully used the language of the public sphere to drag topics into the private sphere or out of it. The vocabulary of the public was, in these instances, successfully used to break down the stop signs others had set around these fields, while other stop signs were set around other fields. These authors had not *discovered* that these affairs were *in reality* public or private. They had successfully *utilized* descriptions to serve progressive (i.e., their) political ends. As Fish has said for calling something “free speech,” calling something “private” is “not an independent value but a political prize, and if that prize has been captured by a politics opposed to yours, it can no longer be invoked in ways that further your purposes, for it is now an obstacle to those purposes” (1994, 102).

In other words, then, it is not the mere *existence* of a distinction between private and public and also not a specific (“discursive,” “structural”) historical form it takes that is detrimental to any group and their ideas of a “good society.” It is rather the practical use made of this tool. It is not privacy and

publicity at all that is the culprit, but another *group*, other *people* and their political endeavors. As Prus and Dawson note, “the meaningful pursuit or accomplishment of any task or objective . . . depends on people acting toward the world as if something exists and can be approached in this or that manner” (Prus and Dawson 1996, 247), and privacy and publicity are such *some-things*; “structures” and “discourses” and “objects” are such *some-things*.

This local, bustling life of abstractions escapes social theorists who wield wider brushes. Habermas bemoans the loss of a public that calls for alignment and accounts and hopes for a wide social consensus. Shalin, in turn, bemoans Habermas’s universalizing stance: “Consensus appears to be communication’s *raison d’être*. . . . In the long run, dissent must yield to rational consensus. . . . A disagreement that refuses to go away is taken here as a sign of failure, and a moral one at that” (1992, 261-62). Sennett’s “fall of public man” is, to such universalizing critics, a moral fall. For them, any shift from whatever their ideal picture is spells doom unless it is “reined in,” usually through adherence to these authors’ prescriptions. However, an interactionist view takes the position that it is not the vocabulary of privacy itself that does these things. It is not the structure of public-private relations that acts. It is the people who wield it by setting stop signs in interaction around conduct. It is only if others allow these stop signs to be set that the actors manage, locally, to make a local, *political* achievement appear nonpolitical and merely given. These stop signs are, however, nothing but blocks set by human action in a situation: they are political only in the sense that those who would utilize them are. Their use can be resisted by other actors who do not play along and will, in actual, contextual situations, resist these stop signs.

In this game, “society is a semiordered chaos routinely generating unanticipated consequences” (Shalin 1992, 262). In it, we settle for “less than universal consensus” routinely. The world of interaction outcomes is a world of “jerry-built ‘reasons’ that keep the conversation going and bring it to temporary, always revisable, conclusions” (Fish 1994, 218). Looking at privacy and publicity as interactional achievements allows us to breathe a little coolness into these debates and question the culturally pessimistic diagnoses that privacy and/or public spheres are crumbling. It is hardly imaginable that the practice of people challenging others over unshared definitions could crumble. Of course, *who* challenges, whose challenges are taken seriously, or what force these challenges have, change. Which stop signs are put up in the name of privacy changes. How shared publics are delineated changes. But it does so more wildly than any structural argument thinks possible: It changes as people *use* these stop signs differently, and the very same people can use them very differently in very short order.

In outlining the games played with moving armies of stop signs, I am therefore not offering an argument about the state of the public-private distinction at all. I merely wish to describe how opening and closing fields for/from public scrutiny *works*. Engaging in these uses to defend people and activities is one activity with the aim of defending these privacies. In the matter of better or worse, I refrain from imposing any prescription or ideal distribution and call on further interaction studies not to engage in such defensive activities for certain ideals of privacy. As important as these defenses are, they obscure the interactional dynamics of “what is going on here,” as they are always already loyally committed to the defense of one side. When engaged in these interaction studies, it is not only unimportant whether the sky is falling or the kids are all right; it is positively unhelpful to shout it from the rooftops. At least for that purpose (of course not abstractly; there is no such animal as an “abstractly useful suggestion” devoid of context), following Stanley Fish’s (2008) somewhat curmudgeonly demand to save the world on our own time has its merits.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Albas, Cheryl, and Dan Albas. 2003. Motives. In *Handbook of symbolic interactionism*, edited by Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney, 349-66. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Bailey, Joe. 2000. Some meanings of “the private” in sociological thought. *Sociology* 34:381-400.
- Blum, Alan, and Peter McHugh. 1971. The social ascription of motives. *American Sociological Review* 36:98-109.
- Blumer, Herbert. (1969) 1986. *Symbolic interactionism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Calhoun, Craig. 1993. Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere. In *Habermas and the public sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 1-48. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Dellwing, Michael. 2008. Reste: Die Befreiung des Labeling Approach von der Befreiung. *Kriminologisches Journal* 38:162-78.

- Dellwing, Michael. 2010. Rituelle Spiele mit Beziehungen. *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 20:527-44.
- Dellwing, Michael. 2011. Truth in labeling: Are descriptions all we have? *Deviant Behavior* 32:653-75.
- Dellwing, Michael. 2012a. Little dramas of discomposure. *Symbolic Interaction*. Accepted for publication.
- Dellwing, Michael. 2012b. Resisting alignment. Under review.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2010. The Sociology of the Local. *Sociological Theory* 28:355-376.
- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fish, Stanley. 1989. *Doing what comes naturally*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fish, Stanley. 1994. *There's no such thing as free speech*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fish, Stanley. 2008. *Save the world on your own time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. Solidarity or singularity? Richard Rorty between romanticism and technocracy. In *Reading Rorty*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 303-21. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction ritual*. New York: Aldine.
- Goffman, Erving. 1971. *Relations in public*. New York: Basic Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1991. *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hewitt, John, and Peter Hall. 1973. Social problems, problematic situations, and quasi-theories. *American Sociological Review* 38:367-74.
- Hewitt, John P., and Randall Stokes. 1975. Disclaimers. *American Sociological Review* 40:1-11.
- James, William. (1907) 1995. *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking*. New York: Dover.
- Kitsuse, John I., and Malcolm Spector. 1975. Social problems and deviance: Some parallel issues. *Social Problems* 22:584-94.
- Kitsuse, John I., and Malcolm Spector. (1977) 2001. *Constructing Social Problems*. Piscataway: Transaction.
- Lofland, John. 1976. *Doing social life*. New York: Wiley.
- Lyman, Stanford M., and Marvin B. Scott. 1989. *A sociology of the absurd*. Dix Hills, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1940. Situated action and vocabularies of motive. *American Sociological Review* 5:904-13.
- Mills, C. Wright. (1959) 2000. *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prus, Robert C. 1996. *Symbolic interaction and ethnographic research: Intersubjectivity and the study of human lived experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Prus, Robert C. 1997. *Subcultural mosaics and intersubjective realities: An ethnographic research agenda for pragmatizing the social sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Prus, Robert C. 1999. *Beyond the power mystique: Power as intersubjective achievement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Prus, Robert and Lorne Dawson. 1996. "Obdurate Reality and the Intersubjective Other." In *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research*, edited by Robert Prus, 245-257. Albany: SUNY.
- Rorty, Richard. 1982. *Consequences of pragmatism*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sarbin, Theodore, and James Mancuso. 1980. *Schizophrenia: Medical diagnosis or moral verdict?* New York: Pergamon Press.
- Sennett, Richard. 1977. *The fall of public man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shalin, Dmitri. 1986. Pragmatism and social interactionism. *American Sociological Review* 51:9-29.
- Shalin, Dmitri. 1992. Critical theory and the Marxist challenge. *American Journal of Sociology* 98:237-79.
- Stokes, Randall, and John P. Hewitt. 1976. Aligning actions. *American Sociological Review* 41:838-49.
- Strauss, Anselm. 1993. *Continual permutations of action*. New York: De Gruyter.
- Topper, Keith. 1992. Richard Rorty, liberalism and the politics of redescription. *American Political Science Review* 89:954-65.
- Weintraub, Jeff. 1997. The theory and politics of the public/private-distinction. In *Public and private in thought and practice: Perspectives on a grand dichotomy*, edited by Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, 1-42. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolfe, Alan. 1997. "Public and Private in Theory and Practice: Some Implications of an Uncertain Boundary." In *Public and private in thought and practice: perspectives on a grand dichotomy*, edited by Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Young, Robert L. 1995. Misunderstandings as accounts. *Sociological Inquiry* 65:251-64.

Author Biography

Michael Dellwing, PhD, is an assistant at the University of Kassel, Germany. He has research interests in interactionism, pragmatism, the sociology of psychiatry, and everyday life. He has published in *Deviant Behavior* and *Symbolic Interaction* and is coeditor of the German translation of the works of Stanley Fish.