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# Socially negotiating privacy boundaries and academic identities

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## ABSTRACT

Research examining privacy in a higher education setting tends to focus on the student perspective whilst largely overlooking the academic perspective. Moreover, it fails to fully conceptualise the social, relational, and contextual complexities of privacy and the vital role it has on academics' ability to form their identity. To address these knowledge gaps, this paper draws on the *social theory of privacy* to examine how academics socially negotiate privacy boundaries and the influence these negotiations have on their identity. Data were gathered through a qualitative case study analysis of a higher education institution in the United Kingdom (UK). The findings reveal how academic preferences and context-dependent social meanings influence the construction of dialectical privacy boundaries that allow academics to create and maintain various personal boundaries. These negotiated boundaries are influenced by the nature of the relationship between individuals, the levels of trust between colleagues, and the social norms governing workplace relationships. The findings also reveal how these negotiated privacy boundaries provide an intimate territory within which academics co-construct their identity through a complex series of social interactions occurring over time.

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Privacy; social privacy; identity; workplace; higher education; university

## Introduction

Although a significant body of research has examined workplace privacy, most studies examining privacy in a higher education setting focus on the student perspective (e.g. Ifenthaler and Tracey 2016; Paris, Reynolds, and McGowan 2022; Rubela and Jones 2016). Few studies examine privacy from an academic perspective. Jones, Gaffney-Rhysa, and Jones (2014), for instance, suggest that higher education institutions should consider the legal implications of breaching academic privacy. Clow (2013) discusses privacy concerns engendered by monitoring teachers' performance. Elsewhere, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) found that conversations between teachers are characterised by their privacy and the mutual trust of colleagues. However, these studies only mention privacy. It does not form their central focus. Consequently, they produce limited insights into privacy in a higher education setting. Moreover, none of these studies outlines the specific conceptualisation of privacy underpinning their research, thereby, limiting theoretical insights into the implications of privacy in a higher education context.

Furthermore, existing research does not consider the vital role privacy has on an academic's ability to form their identity within a negotiated privacy boundary. Instead, it focuses on the

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factors influencing academic identity, such as morality and ethics (Fitzmaurice 2013), managerialism (Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis 2012; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013), organisational control mechanisms (Alvesson and Willmott 2002), performance management (Kallio et al. 2016), teaching (Kayas, Assimakopoulos, and Hines 2022), research (Leibowitz, Ndebele, and Winberg 2014), and individual and collective values (Henkel 2005). Further research is, therefore, needed to explore how these factors are influenced by an academic's ability or inability to negotiate a territory within which they can shape their identity.

To overcome these contextual and theoretical shortcomings, this research facilitates the interweaving of privacy theory with the underexplored setting of a higher education institution. Drawing on the social theory of privacy developed by Valerie Steeves (2009), this is the first study to examine social privacy in a higher education institute. Unlike the dominant informational conceptualisations of privacy, emphasising antisocial perspectives concerned with an individual's ability to control information about themselves (Dinev 2014; Stone and Stone 1990; Westin 1967), Steeves incorporates the social elements of privacy, conceptualising it as a social practice involving actors negotiating personal boundaries in intersubjective relations. She also contends that the social dimension of privacy is a prior condition to the emergence of subjectivity, allowing individuals to develop their own identities. Extant social privacy research focuses on young people negotiating their privacy in online environments and how this shapes their identity (e.g. Steeves 2009, 2015; Steeves and Regan 2014).

Thus, this paper aims to examine how academics negotiate social privacy boundaries and the influence these negotiations have on their identity. The paper contributes by providing new insight into how social relationships influence the construction of privacy boundaries that allow academics to move from isolation to intimate social interaction or vice versa. The findings demonstrate that workplace privacy involves a two-way relationship negotiated by academics that create and maintain various privacy boundaries depending on the nature of their relationship, the levels of trust between academics, and the social norms governing academic relationships. The findings also reveal that these socially negotiated privacy boundaries provide academics with a sanctuary within which they can co-construct their identity through social interactions that reshape their identity over time. Finally, the study extends the social theory of privacy to reveal how academics' emotions influence the expression or performance of their identity.

The next section discusses the social theory of privacy to map out the study's theoretical framework. The procedures adopted for data collection and analysis are then outlined. Following this, the findings are presented and discussed to elucidate the contributions. The paper concludes by discussing the study's limitations and future research opportunities.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Social privacy***

Drawing upon George Herbert Mead's work on social interactionism and Irwin Altman's work on territoriality, Steeves (2009) conceptualises privacy as a social practice involving actors negotiating personal boundaries through intersubjective communication. She recognises that instead of positioning privacy and social interaction as opposites, Altman juxtaposes openness and closedness to others, meaning privacy becomes the negotiated line between the two. In this sense, territories are bounded areas that individuals perceive as their own, and within which they may place objects and information. While an individual can invite others into their territory, trespassing is unacceptable. Steeves incorporates this view into her social theory of privacy while extending Mead's understanding of the self as a social construction. This frees privacy from the claim that individuals act in isolation from others. Instead, privacy arises through a process of socialisation, enabling 'the self to see itself as a social object' that can 'negotiate appropriate levels of openness and closedness to others' (Steeves 2009, 205). Trust is crucial when negotiating levels of openness and closedness

because it is at the heart of social relationships. It is a product of social negotiation that is important when establishing privacy boundaries. Without trust, there is no chance for reciprocity or mutuality of social negotiation (Steeves and Regan 2014).

According to Steeves (2009), conceptualising privacy as a social construction enables different privacy states to be theorised in situations of low to high contact with others. Individuals who are open to others can seek interaction within intimate relationships. Intimacy can be maintained at a range of social levels because others can withdraw from intimate social interaction, providing a social space that recognises their closeness. However, if privacy is the withdrawal of a person from the general society 'then the fullest form of privacy is social isolation' (200). Steeves argues that isolation is experienced when an individual is dissatisfied with the level of closeness to others and decides to adjust the balance in isolation from others; thus, providing the opportunity for people to withdraw from others to contemplate the self. However, she recognises that an individual can change their privacy state by withdrawing from others into isolation or moving from isolation to intimate social interaction.

By conceptualising privacy as the boundary between self and other, privacy can even be conceptualised in public or semi-public spaces such as the workplace. Steeves (2009) illustrates how an individual can move through a public space surrounded by other people but remain closed to them to achieve privacy through anonymity or reserve. That is because people who live in 'societies that experience physical crowding develop psychological mechanisms to maintain social distance' (207). From a social distancing perspective, privacy is not only recognised and institutionalised in all societies, it is essential to both social relationships and the sense of self. Privacy, then, is not dependent on people being physically separated, but on negotiated social interaction between people.

### **Social privacy and identity**

Steeves (2009) argues that social privacy is internalised 'because it is the dialogue between the self and others that enables the self to become visible to itself and identities to emerge' (206). She places privacy in a social understanding of identity and draws on Altman's (1975, 15–6) claim that if people can control 'what is me' and 'what is not me', individuals can understand and define who and what they are. For Altman (1976), one of the functions of privacy is to enable self-identity. In this context, self-identity is a 'person's cognitive, psychological, and emotional definition and understanding of themselves as human beings' (Altman 1975, 49). To complement the social theory of privacy, the study draws on Altman's (1976) conceptualisation of self-identity, recognising how emotions can also influence the expression or performance of an individual's identity. It has even been argued that privacy ought to protect people's emotions because it comprises identity itself (Warren and Brandeis 1890). Altman's (1976) conceptualisation of privacy, therefore, defines the limits and boundaries of the self. By changing the boundaries around themselves, individuals can develop a sense of individuality that can include others or keep them out.

Accordingly, Steeves (2009) contends that the social dimension of privacy is a prior condition to the emergence of subjectivity, allowing individuals to develop their personalities and inhabit roles. This role play is an integral part of the workplace, where employees must inhabit a variety of roles and relationships. From this perspective, although an individual's identity emerges from social interactions, it is not determined by them. 'If the individual's understanding of himself [*sic*] as a subject emerges through the recognition of the other and the self, privacy ... is placed at the centre [*sic*] of identity, because privacy is what allows the self to become reflexive' (204).

### **Methodology**

To address this paper's aim, a qualitative case study analysis of a university business school in the UK was undertaken. The business school was selected for several reasons. The business school is a typical case that undertakes many of the activities performed by business schools throughout the

UK higher education sector (e.g. teaching and research) (Patton 2015; Yin 2012). This enabled the study to produce informative insight by capturing the typical experiences of business school academics when negotiating social privacy and developing their identity in everyday situations (Patton 2015; Yin 2009, 2012). Although this approach led to many equally suitable business schools (Stake 1995, 2010), the business school was self-selecting because it responded to an invitation to participate in the study and was willing to grant access to documentation that provided background information into the case (Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis 2012; Knights and Clarke 2014). The business school was also selected for convenience (proximity to the researchers) (Douglas et al. 2015). Furthermore, with the researchers themselves working in UK business schools, a *within-discipline* approach was adopted to take advantage of the deep understanding they have of the nuances around the conditions, change programmes, institutional mechanisms, and language used within UK business schools as opposed to academia in general (Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis 2012; Knights and Clarke 2014; Parker 2014). Through the researchers' insider knowledge of UK business schools, this study was able to develop a novel theoretical account that produced a rich empirical analysis of social privacy in a thoughtful and empathetic fashion (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008). Pseudonyms were used to protect the institution and the participants. Hereafter, the institution is referred to as University Delta.

### **Research setting**

University Delta converted from a polytechnic to a university under the provisions of the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992. Like many former UK polytechnics, it emerged from a bureaucratic, hierarchical, and management-orientated tradition. It was previously funded by democratically elected local authorities, although this changed when it gained university status with the appointment of governors from the private sector who brought with them the notions of new managerialism. During its life as a polytechnic, University Delta was funded for teaching only. However, since gaining university status, it has transformed its strategies to emphasise both teaching and research. This study focused on the business school. It is comprised of six academic departments, employs approximately 160 academics, and offers a range of degrees at undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected through semistructured interviews. Before conducting the interviews, a series of publicly available documents were collected from University Delta's website. Although these public documents were not used as evidence in the findings, they provided valuable background insight into University Delta's particular context. The documents included annual reports, customer service strategies, governance policies, digital strategies, research strategies, strategic plans, and teaching strategies.

Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling. Through this process, 26 interviews were secured. To ensure the interviews represented different voices, interviews involved people working in different academic departments, with different roles, and at various organisational levels to yield a range of perspectives on social privacy (Myers and Newman 2007). Participants included academics with a more managerial focus: heads of department, deputy heads of department, and principal lecturers. Participants also included academics with more traditional roles: professors, readers, senior lecturers, and lecturers. The diverse pool of participants at different career stages and with different responsibilities meant diverse views on social privacy were uncovered, resulting in deeper and more nuanced insights.

Semistructured interviews were selected to provide access to fine-grained details of social privacy. Open-ended interview questions were utilised, allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions. An interview protocol was designed using the recommendations outlined by Myers and Newman

(2007). The protocol started by asking participants to describe their role at University Delta. Participants were then asked to provide examples of intimate relationships with colleagues, why they are close, how they react if a colleague breaches their trust, the importance of having a private space at work, how a private space enables them to express themselves amongst colleagues, how and why their academic identity has changed over time, and how intimate relationships enable them to develop their academic identity. During the interviews, comments were restated and discussed to enhance credibility through respondent validation. The interviews took place in rooms on campus and were recorded with consent. Each interview lasted between 40 and 110 minutes.

### **Data analysis**

The interview data were analysed during the data collection process to identify interesting areas to pursue as they emerged, enabling the formulation of new or revised questions for later interviews. This iterative approach served as a confirmation and revision mechanism through which construct validity was established. Through this process, an additional question was added to the protocol from interview two onwards. It asked academics to outline specific examples of how they would react should a colleague break their trust.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis started with transcribing the interviews to become familiar with the data and provide a comprehensive understanding of its content. The transcripts were then annotated, and the content of those annotations was used to develop codes. Coding involved analysing each transcript and identifying important elements that could form the basis of patterns (themes) across all the data. Codes identified at this stage included friendship, caring, respect, trust, secrecy, distrust, territory, social distancing, emotions, identity, and academic profile. Once the codes were identified, clusters of codes were formed around several areas, including close social relationships, trust between academics, privacy boundaries, distant social relationships, and academic identity. These clusters of codes were then used to identify and define patterns by underpinning them with central organising concepts derived from the literature. All the data pertaining to these patterns were then collated and expounded on. The patterns were reviewed and refined through an iterative process, enabling the identification of nuanced themes. The findings section presents the most typical quotations relating to each of the three themes identified: social relationships shaping academic privacy, social consequences of undermining social privacy in higher education, and social privacy shaping academic identity.

## **Findings**

### ***Social relationships shaping academic privacy***

Academics throughout University Delta emphasised the need to socially interact within negotiated privacy boundaries to participate in intimate discussions where they can express their views and emotions with colleagues they know and trust. In the following quotes, for instance, academics explained the need to relieve the tensions and stresses of programme leadership, research, and funding in an intimate space with close colleagues, whilst being free from the judgement of unwanted intruders:

You need a

sanctuary so you can talk about things. Get things off your chest. You don't want everyone knowing what's going on in your mind. You reserve that for the people you know and trust... I don't want everyone knowing about my research plans or if I'm struggling with a research grant. (I16, senior lecturer)

I need to talk openly and tell people what I'm thinking [about the programme I'm leading] without unsolicited intrusion. If you can't establish a safe space to talk with friends and colleagues, then how on earth are you meant



to build relationships?(I7, reader)

These quotes highlight that privacy involves a social process in which academics regulate levels of social interaction with colleagues by selectively managing a negotiated boundary. These privacy boundaries enable academics to invite close colleagues into their territory to discuss work-related matters such as programme leadership, funding, and research, whilst preventing those they are not close with from enjoying the intimacy it provides members. In this sense, privacy boundaries are socially restricted areas, providing academics with an intimate territory within which they can construct essential working relationships through open social interaction with close colleagues.

These privacy boundaries are constructed through an inherently social practice. It involves academics establishing high levels of trust through a series of intimate social interactions over time. Trust is essential when creating privacy boundaries because it allows academics to negotiate and agree on what can and cannot be shared beyond the boundary, as well as the terms of reciprocity when supporting each other in their professional lives. Academics who are members of a negotiated privacy boundary can speak openly and support each other during difficult situations, demonstrating a mutuality of care that reflects their dedication to and responsibility for each other. As the following quotes reveal, this sense of caring underpins the social norms governing social relationships, allowing these academics to share their views and emotions, whilst excluding others from intimacy through reserve. Privacy is thus underpinned by a negotiated boundary that is contextualised by a relationship of intimacy and mutuality grounded in earned trust, enabling these academics to intimately discuss teaching, research, publishing, or student engagement:

I've known [name omitted] for almost 20 years ... I've been through so much shit with him. I always look out for him, and I know he does the same for me. We tell each other whatever we want because we trust each other, and we feel relaxed around each other. There are things we talk about that I wouldn't dream of telling others ... When I started teaching, I'd tell him about my anxiety when delivering lectures to large cohorts, but I didn't tell everyone. (I22, senior lecturer)

[Name omitted] and I know and trust each other. We'll always phone each other up and have a private chat about things ... It could be about a rejected paper, a disagreement with the head of the department, or some student engagement gimmick ... Most things you keep to yourself. You don't go blurting it all to other people when a friend's confided in you. You've got to respect their trust in you or else it'll all come tumbling down. (I3, senior lecturer)

Academics also shared intimate details with colleagues with whom they have a close relationship extending into their personal lives. Moreover, while academics can enjoy intimate privacy boundaries with colleagues with whom they are friends outside of the workplace, they can simultaneously negotiate different privacy boundaries with those they do not have a close relationship. These privacy boundaries are negotiated through social, relational, and contextual complexities, allowing academics to navigate open social relationships inside and outside the workplace. Social privacy is therefore established through a dynamic negotiation of boundary settings that occurs between academics seeking to manage different revelations to different audiences. For instance, in the following quote, a lecturer has developed an intimate relationship with a colleague that not only enables them to openly discuss student satisfaction scores but also extends into their personal lives. Simultaneously, the lecturer navigated a closed privacy boundary governed by a different social norm concerned with respecting his officemate's decision to reserve the sharing of student satisfaction scores. Their relationship is embedded with a mutuality of respect: the officemate sets the boundary, and the lecturer agrees not to transgress the boundary, creating trust within a non-intimate but still important work relationship. Their privacy boundary reveals the dialectical nature of privacy: the lecturer can chart an intimate and open relationship that extends into his personal life, enabling open discussions about student satisfaction with one colleague, while distancing himself from another through reserve:



I've known my officemate for a few years, but she never tells me about her [student satisfaction] survey results. We talk about lots of other things, but I never discuss [student satisfaction results] with her. You've got to respect people's boundaries. It's different with [name omitted]. We get along really well. We go to the pub and football matches together ... When the [student satisfaction] survey results are released, we even have a bit of a fun about whose module's scored higher. (I4, lecturer)

In addition to negotiating social privacy boundaries through one-to-one social interactions, academics can negotiate intimate privacy boundaries between multiple colleagues. In the following quote, for example, academics witnessed a colleague becoming distressed because of a disruptive student. Despite the distressed academic's physical proximity to colleagues in the meeting, there was a social norm governing an agreement that the discussion was private and that it should not be exposed to others. Social and relational complexities allowed those present to negotiate a privacy boundary that enabled them to openly share their emotions and views, whilst preventing those absent from gaining knowledge of the situation through closedness. Small group intimacy was essential for these academics to create a privacy boundary embedded with a sense of trust and a mutuality of care for a colleague dealing with a difficult student. Moreover, the social relationships enacted within this privacy boundary were reciprocal, entailing a two-way give-and-take with multiple academics participating in a mutual exchange that respects the negotiated limits of the privacy boundary:

We had a team meeting where someone got really upset about what had been happening with a disruptive student in her class. She was telling us how stressful it was and the effect it was having on her wellbeing. As her line manager, it's never easy dealing with those sorts of situations. I reassured her that we'd keep this between us and everyone else agreed that they'd keep it private. We all know each other very well, so there was never a worry that we'd tell other people. (I25, principal lecturer)

### ***Social consequences of undermining social privacy in higher education***

There are social consequences for those who undermine the social norms governing academic privacy boundaries. This occurs when social interactions are transparent enough that academics can hold each other to account: if a colleague breaches the trust of an academic, it will be noticed and there will be social consequences. The social consequences can include an academic expressing a sense of discomfort at a violation or socially distancing themselves to limit social interaction. For example, a professor explained how she socially distances herself from a colleague who wanted to remove her from her research leadership position for career reasons: '

I had to attend a disciplinary tribunal because of accusations someone made. Nothing came of it because her whole story was about undermining my position [as director of research] for her benefit

...

I keep away from her whenever I can'

(I24, professor). The following quote reveals how another professor socially distances herself from a colleague with whom she has a poor social relationship because she does not trust her to conform to social norms governing what can and cannot be disclosed to others. Because her colleague cannot be trusted to keep conversations about the research centre confidential, she erected a 'firewall' that restricts social interaction and intersubjective communication. However, although the professor has a prima facie right to privacy in the workplace, she must interact and communicate with the untrustworthy colleague on essential work-related matters because her employment contract demands it. Moreover, the quote shows that despite erecting a firewall with one colleague, the professor can still socially interact with trustworthy colleagues, demonstrating how academics can negotiate different privacy boundaries that allow them to withdraw from some while interacting intimately with others:

If you want to keep something confidential, then never tell [name omitted] ... I've put a firewall around her because she's the WikiLeaks of our department. I'll tell her about the work things I need to, but I don't tell her anything else ... You can tell her what's going on behind the research centre's closed doors, but she'll tell others about it ... She's like that with everyone. She's got a reputation for being an alpha-class gossiper. (I2, professor)

### ***Social privacy shaping academic identity***

Academics explained how being a member of a negotiated privacy boundary with trusted colleagues allows them to develop their identity. This occurs when invited members of a territory adhere to social norms governing that intimate details should be kept private and that invited members of a territory should support an academic's professional development. Academics also stressed the importance of feeling relaxed around each other and having intimate social interactions about their subjectivity without having to worry about the judgment of others. In the following quote, for instance, a senior lecturer was able to develop a newfound sense of belief that inhibits her self-identity and gives her the confidence to express herself to others. Furthermore, it is within the confines of the negotiated privacy boundary that the following senior lecturer shaped her identity such that it emphasises a commitment to staff and students rather than any selfish career ambitions. This demonstrates a deep and strong affection for her academic work, highlighting an allegiance to the academy and an affinity for the profession:

I often have private chats with [name omitted] without having to worry about what others might think. I tell him whatever I want because I trust him. I feel relaxed around him because he's like me: he's not driven by a selfish ambition like some people. For me and him, it's about doing what's right for staff and students ... He helped me get the confidence to stand up for myself and to put my ideas forward. (I22, senior lecturer)

In another instance, a lecturer explained how the private conversations she had about the student satisfaction survey within the confines of a socially negotiated privacy boundary have influenced her identity. Initially, the lecturer perceived the student satisfaction survey as a 'tyrannical' performance management platform used by students and management to evaluate and punish her. She explained how 'distressing' she found the student feedback and any subsequent dealings with management about poor teaching performance. These emotions were embedded in her subjective self and would occupy her daily life because she lacked the inner strength needed to overcome such challenges. However, prolonged and intimate conversations with a close colleague helped her forge an inner strength. This enabled her to better manage challenging situations by moving away from an approach that quantifies her teaching, to instead learn from her lived experience and view evaluation more holistically:

I've had so many private chats with [name omitted] about how distressing it can be when you've got students using [the student satisfaction survey] to moan about your module. Honestly, it's a tyrannical platform for management to bash you over the head with. It used to make me anxious, and it'd really get me down. I'd carry that around with me for days. Now I sing a different song. I've built broad shoulders over the years. It's largely down to [a colleague] helping me build the strength to deal with these things. Thanks to her, I'm much better at taking it in my stride. (I17, lecturer)

Some academics explained how intimate conversations with close colleagues about research targets influenced their academic identity. In the following quotes, for example, academics described how research targets not only make them feel uncertain of who they are as academics but also makes them feel like a failure, undermining their commitment to the job and marginalising their identity. However, the academics went on to explain that the privacy boundaries they constructed with close colleagues helped them realise how their research forms an important part of their identity. Through these intimate social interactions, they were able to 'cast aside' their previous self-identification as a failure or as someone without an academic identity and reassert their research identities:

Our research targets are ridiculous. We've been set up to fail which makes me feel like a failure ... I was thinking of packing in my research to avoid the aggravation, but my line manager convinced me to carry on with it. She helped me to cast aside feeling like a failure. As she rightly said: "our research defines who we are." Whenever you meet a colleague, one of the first things you ask is: "what's your area of research?" (I3, senior lecturer)

With the teaching load we have, the [research] targets we're given are absurd. I actually lost my research allowance because I didn't hit my targets ... It made me unsure about who I was as an academic. It was like my identity had been stolen ... Discussions with [a professor] helped me get over it. She helped me to get a paper published. It was extra work, but it helped me rediscover who I was. (I11, reader)

Some academics explained how they define their identity differently within private and public boundaries and settings to give their (public) persona of academic a higher role in their (private) personal subjectivity. In the following quote, for instance, a lecturer stressed his commitment to the job, outlining the extra time he gives to ensure students get the best education. His commitment is bound with his 'love' of teaching and his desire to be the best he can be, denoting a dependency on his work for meaning and reflecting an allegiance to the traditional notion that being an academic is a vocation rather than a job. Importantly, while the lecturer openly shares his identity with his friend within the confines of a socially negotiated privacy boundary, he does not share it with another colleague. The privacy boundary established between academics is therefore co-created through a social process that seeks to manage identity revelations to different audiences:

The [student satisfaction survey] results are important because you can use the feedback to improve your modules. After all, that's why I became an educator. I love teaching and it's a big part of my life. I'll be working most evenings, and students will get emails from me during the weekends and my annual leave ... I'll often talk to [name omitted] about colleagues who don't really care about teaching. He's always saying that those who only care about research shouldn't be academics. He's right. First and foremost, we're educators, so we're responsible to our students. (I9, lecturer)

## Discussion and conclusion

### *Negotiating social privacy in higher education*

This is the first paper to provide an empirical analysis of privacy from an academic perspective in a higher education setting, whilst also outlining the social dimensions of workplace privacy previously neglected in the literature. The findings show that privacy involves academics acting within well-meaning social relationships that are essential to making an intimate and self-determined working life possible. Through these social relationships, academics negotiate social privacy boundaries that provide a territory from within which they can navigate the boundary between themselves and others, as well as being open or closed to social interaction. These privacy boundaries are affected by individual academic preferences and context-dependent social meanings. Privacy, then, is textured by social and relational complexities between academics. It is not just an individual one-way relationship (Dinev 2014; Stone and Stone 1990; Westin 1967): it is a two-way relationship constructed by academics through intersubjective communication and socially negotiated consent that varies depending on the nature of the social relationship, the levels of trust between academics, and the different social norms governing the relationship. Social norms governing appropriate academic behaviour include uninvited academics respecting the intimate territory of others by not transgressing its boundary, invited academics keeping intimate details within the confines of an intimate territory, invited academics supporting a colleague's professional life, and invited academics caring for a colleague during difficult situations (e.g. managing a disruptive student, losing a research allowance, or dealing with management over low student satisfaction scores). Academics who navigate social relationships such that they conform to these social norms can establish high levels of trust with colleagues over time, enabling them to openly and meaningfully discuss a range of work-related matters, including teaching, research, funding, publishing, student evaluations of teaching, student engagement, programme leadership, or career development.

However, there are social consequences should an academic fail to follow these social norms. Whilst some academics react by simply expressing their dissatisfaction, others respond with social distancing to restrict social interaction and communication with colleagues. However, these social consequences are tempered by employment contracts requiring academics to work together whatever their personal views toward each other. Moreover, even if an academic excludes an untrustworthy colleague from an intimate territory for breaching social norms, they can still enjoy social interaction with trustworthy colleagues. Thus, workplace privacy is not antisocial as previously suggested (Dinev 2014; Stone and Stone 1990): it needs to consider the social perspective to understand how social interaction influences the construction of academic privacy boundaries. Moreover, privacy is not fixed as has been previously claimed (Westin 1967): it is malleable, and it is embodied in complex social practices that academics can change over time.

### ***Social privacy and academic identity***

Although extant research focuses on how academic identities are shaped by various factors (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis 2012; Fitzmaurice 2013; Henkel 2005; Kallio et al. 2016; Kayas, Assimakopoulos, and Hines 2022; Leibowitz, Ndebele, and Winberg 2014; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013), at the time of writing, this is the first paper to consider how negotiated privacy boundaries provide an intimate territory within which academics can shape their identity through intimate social interaction with trusted colleagues who adhere to social norms. Social norms facilitating identity development include academics keeping intimate details within the confines of an intimate territory, academics supporting the development of an academic's professional life, and uninvited academics not peering into an intimate territory to obstruct identity development. Once intimate territories have been established, academic identity is shaped by work-related factors, including academics dealing with student satisfaction scores, managing difficult students, coping with research targets, developing research profiles, and dealing with colleagues attempting to undermine their position.

This paper also extends the social theory of privacy to reveal how negotiated privacy boundaries provide an intimate territory within which academics can express or perform their identity through their emotions. Drawing on Altman (1976), this paper unveils how academics who feel relaxed and reassured around trusted colleagues can openly express affection for their job, love for their students, feelings of failure, distress when dealing with managers and students, or anxiety when doubting their academic identity. Hence, negotiated privacy boundaries provide academics with an intimate territory within which they can withdraw and reflect on their identity with trusted colleagues through a complex series of social interactions to define and shape their identities, better understand themselves, express their identity through their emotions, and determine how to conduct themselves in their daily lives.

The findings also reveal that academic identities are not fixed: they are continually shaped and reshaped by social interaction and adherence or not to social norms occurring over time within renegotiated privacy boundaries. This occurs when academics uninvite previously included members of a privacy boundary for breaking their trust through the transgression of social norms or inviting previously excluded members who have since earned their trust. Such renegotiations allow academics to reshape their identity through social interactions with different colleagues. For instance, academics gaining a newfound sense of self-belief that gives them the confidence to express their views on teaching or research, developing a commitment to colleagues and students rather than their career, forging an inner strength with close colleagues to manage teaching-related challenges, casting aside self-identification as a failure to reassert their research identity, and gaining the confidence to stand up for themselves and put their ideas forward.

In addition, the findings elucidate how inclusion or exclusion from a privacy boundary influences the identity academics present to different colleagues: whilst academics present one identity to

colleagues who are members of a privacy boundary, they can present a different identity to those who are excluded from a privacy boundary.

Finally, while not this study's aim, the paper confirms previous identity studies, suggesting that academics deeply value their identity because it defines their lives and how they are recognised and understood by colleagues (Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis 2012; Kuhn 2006). It also confirms the view that academics perceive their job in more than just financial terms, but in the traditional sense that it is a vocation providing an important service to society (Knights and Clarke 2014; Kuhn 2006). Furthermore, while performance management did not form part of this paper's focus, the findings support the claim that academics' commitment to the job is being stretched by instrumental performance management demands (Kayas, Assimakopoulos, and Hines 2022).

### **Limitations and future research**

The theorisation in this paper is particularly relevant to explaining the social dimension of privacy and its effect on academic identity in a higher education setting. Nevertheless, while the sample can be viewed as a case typical of many other business schools in the UK, the study is constrained in its generalisability due to the analysis of just one university business school. Future research could address this by conducting additional case studies examining social privacy in different contexts. Furthermore, a key component of the social theory of privacy is how judgemental observations by uninvited intruders can affect identity formation. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, future research could examine how academics' ability to develop their identity in intimate territories is affected by the peering gaze of uninvited colleagues. Finally, future research could extend the social theory of privacy framework by examining how power relations between employees affect the negotiation of intimate territories and the subsequent impact this has on their identity.

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