Cultural discourses of privacy: Interrogating globalized workplace relationships in Japan

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ABSTRACT
Using Carbaugh’s (2005. Cultures in conversation. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; 2007. Cultural discourse analysis: Communication practices and intercultural encounters. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 36(3), 167–182) cultural discourse analysis and Petronio’s (2002. Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory, this study highlights four cultural premises that garner intercultural privacy management between foreign English language teachers (ELTs) and Japanese coworkers (JCWs) in Japan. The analysis revealed that ELTs: (a) expected not to be a “free space” for privacy inquisition by JCWs, and (b) expected voluntary reciprocity in (egalitarian) workplace relationships. JCWs viewed: (a) privacy inquisitions as acts of kindness/caring and (b) soliciting help from a supervisor as providing opportunities for better care. This study calls for attention to intercultural privacy management and enhances CPM’s cultural criteria.

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Globalization is not just a “state of affairs” (Stohl, 2005) and has been said to transform our social lives and work (Cheney, Lair, & Gill, 2001; Conrad & Poole, 1997; Holmer Nadesan, 2001a, 2001b). In other words, globalization is “a stretching of social, political and economic activities across frontiers such that events, decisions and activities in one region of the world can come to have significance for individuals and communities in distant regions of the globe” (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 15). Globalization challenges cultural understandings (Chen, Fletcher, & Oetzel, 2010), which leads to the need to reconceptualize the concept of culture as well as a reconsideration of modern-day influences on culture, such as globalization (Friedman, 2006; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Sorrells, 2013).

Understanding globalization poses at least three challenges (Chen et al., 2010). First, specifically naming, or developing an exhaustive list—what globalization is and is not—is problematic. Second, globalization is not homogeneous, nor is it one-dimensional. Globalization embodies “dynamic communicative, economic, cultural, and political practices and produces new discourses of identity” (Stohl, 2005, p. 247). Third, globalization’s complexity, connection, and contradictions that stretch across a wide array of spaces and
places reveal contested discourses. Through these challenges, scholars have reconceptualized the concept of culture. Within the era of globalization, culture is now viewed as a resource (Yudice, 2003) and is "conceptualized, experienced, exploited, and mobilized as a resource" (Sorrells, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, globalization calls for people to “rethink” intercultural communication in order to achieve communication competence (Inoue, 2007). As such, culture refers to situated, embodied differences that express and mobilize group identities (Appadurai, 1996).

For the purposes of this study, I define culture as both a resource and a site of contestation where meanings must be constantly negotiated (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992; Yudice, 2003). In other words, culture can be viewed as a contested resource which can be exploited for economic gain. This can lead to the commodification of culture which is the process in which cultural practices, cultural spaces, and culture itself are turned into products for purchase (Sorrells, 2010, 2013). The English language is one cultural practice that is increasingly viewed as a resource for economic growth in the globalized economy (Lan, 2011; Seargeant, 2011; Sorrells, 2013).

**Commodification of English in Japan**

Since the end of the 20th century, English has not only become a global language, but maintains a position of dominance (Ciprianova & Vanco, 2010). English education continues to be endorsed as a critical resource and asset in order to compete and participate within the global economy (Jeon, 2012; Lan, 2011; Seargeant, 2011). For those on the periphery, English “symbolizes the divisive line between wealth and poverty” (Ciprianova & Vanco, 2010, p. 126). English’s prominent position created a “massive business” language-teaching field (Kaplan, 2001, p. 4). This led to the importation of native speakers of English to serve as temporary migrant workers within the worldwide English-teaching market (Jeon, 2012; Lan, 2011). This commodification of English, and its native speakers, illustrates a setting where globalized relationships continue to increase which affects intercultural privacy negotiations.

As a cultural commodity, English—as an international lingua franca—not only allows businesses and individuals to communicate in a common language, but serves as a marker of cultural identity (Seargeant, 2011). Constructed as the “symbolic face of globalization” (Seargeant, 2011), English is viewed as both an opportunity and threat by some (Lan, 2011; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). In Japan, for example, English is associated with bringing “violent crime, reduced personal and national security, and a sense of loss and uncertainty about the future” (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011, p. 34). On the other hand, English is viewed as an opportunity for employment and economic growth (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). Perceived as a commodity, English demonstrates globalization’s power to turn culture into an object or a thing, which can be consumed, produced, and exploited.

For Japan, English education is a critical piece of the larger globalization puzzle (Grant & Lee, 2009). In fact, in 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education cultivated a strategic plan aimed at national prosperity and individual enhancement. This strategic plan involved creating “Japanese [people] with English abilities” (MEXT, 2002, 2003, March 31), which continues to increase in popularity with the coming Tokyo 2020 Olympics in order to “promote the establishment of an educational environment which corresponds to globalization” (MEXT, 2014). Such actions demonstrate that the Japanese government
operates under the ideology that the English language will lead Japan to become a more globalized society and citizenry (Baxter, 1980; Hino, 1988). This ideology is based on the belief that English has potential for expanding international understanding, uniting individuals between nations, and access to modernization, science, and technology (Phillipson, 1992). Additionally, this view sees English education as a means by which to communicate and, therefore, compete within the international economic and political arena (Butler & Iino, 2005). This explains why the Japanese government believes that obtaining English-language capital will lead to personally and nationally rewarding outcomes (Kobayashi, 2013). For native Japanese speakers, however, due to linguistic differences English is not an easy language to learn (Hino, 2009; Otani, 2007). Despite these differences, in 2008 the Ministry of Education mandated that English education should start in latter primary school grades (Hino, 2009), which created numerous opportunities for foreign employment via English-teaching organizations and recruiting companies in Japan (i.e., JET Programme, Interac, Aeon, and Borderlink). Since culture affects privacy negotiation processes (Altman, 1977; Petronio, 2002), the study of intercultural privacy negotiation is not only important, but warranted.

**Communication privacy management**

As an applied, rule-based theory, Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory contains five suppositions (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002). The first supposition states that people believe private information belongs to them. The second supposition claims a boundary metaphor to illustrate distinctions between private information and public relationships. People make these boundaries less permeable to protect private information. Since people believe they own their private information, they also believe they have the right to control and protect what they consider as private. The third supposition is that people believe private information is owned or co-owned with others, which leads to a desire for boundary control as individuals reveal and conceal information. The fourth supposition informs us that CPM understands the management of private information by utilizing a rule-based management system in boundary regulation. The fifth and final supposition refers to CPM treating privacy and disclosure as dialectic in nature. To make visible, and in order to understand privacy’s dialectical nature, Petronio (1991, 2000, 2002) argued that individuals construct rules based upon one’s gender, motivation, perceived risks and benefits, context, and culture.

**Methods**

**Participants**

For this project, I interviewed 39 English-language teachers (ELTs) and 38 Japanese coworkers (JCWs). Of the 39 ELTs, the majority self-identified as female ($n = 21$); others identified as male ($n = 15$), transgender ($n = 1$), queer-female ($n = 1$), and queer-man ($n = 1$). Participants were from the U.S. ($n = 27$), the UK ($n = 3$), Australia ($n = 3$), Canada ($n = 2$), New Zealand ($n = 2$), New Zealand/Romania ($n = 1$), and Portugal ($n = 1$). In terms of race/ethnicity, the majority self-identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 24$) or claimed a White identity in intersectional terms such as White-Greek ($n = 1$),
White-Cuban \((n = 1)\), Mexican-Caucasian \((n = 1)\), or White-Okinawan \((n = 1)\). The rest self-identified as Filipino-American \((n = 2)\), Indian-American \((n = 2)\), Chinese \((n = 2)\), Japanese-Romanian-American \((n = 1)\), Okinawan-American \((n = 1)\), Vietnamese-French-American \((n = 1)\), African-American \((n = 1)\), or Asian-American \((n = 1)\). All ELTs, except one, had a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Additionally, four had Master’s degrees and one was a Master’s candidate. ELTs ranged in age from 23 to 45 years old, with an average age of 29.5; they lived/worked in Japan from 8 months to 25 years, with an average of 4.3 years. In terms of sexual orientation, participants self-identified as heterosexual/straight \((n = 24)\), gay \((n = 6)\), straight-questioning \((n = 2)\), pansexual \((n = 2)\), lesbian \((n = 1)\), bisexual \((n = 1)\), queer \((n = 1)\), lesbian-queer \((n = 1)\), or transgendered-queer-straight person \((n = 1)\). The ELTs worked in public schools \((n = 31)\), private schools \((n = 6)\), and/or a combination of public and private schools \((n = 2)\). The ELTs worked in preschool, kindergarten, elementary, junior high, special needs, and high schools as well as English conversation schools, education centers, and universities. In other words, the ELTs in this study represented almost every type of ELT employment available in Japan. Finally, participants self-reported Japanese language ability as fluent \((n = 9)\), advanced \((n = 6)\), intermediate \((n = 7)\), conversational \((n = 6)\), or beginning \((n = 11)\).

Of the 38 JCWs I interviewed, the majority self-identified as female \((n = 27)\) and the rest as male \((n = 11)\). All JCWs identified as racially/ethnically Japanese. JCWs ranged in age from 22 to 65 years old with an average age of 40.9. In terms of sexual orientation, JCWs reported being heterosexual/straight \((n = 36)\), gay \((n = 1)\), and queer-lesbian \((n = 1)\). All participants had experience teaching with ELTs, except three who worked in administrative roles. Participants worked in public education settings \((n = 32)\), private \((n = 5)\), or both private and public settings \((n = 1)\). Participants worked at a wide variety of educational institutions including: elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, English conversation schools, and universities. The number of ELTs that JCWs worked with ranged from one to approximately 200 throughout their career. JCWs self-reported their English language ability as advanced \((n = 23)\), fluent \((n = 5)\), intermediate \((n = 5)\), beginner \((n = 4)\), and none \((n = 1)\).

**Data collection**

Over a period of five months in Japan, I solicited participants utilizing a snowball technique, recruiting people via an English-teaching conference, Facebook groups, a foreign dance night at an urban club, cold calls to schools and ELT-recruiting organizations, and foreigners met on the streets and subways. I also worked as an ELT at a junior high school and an English conversation café. As part of a larger project on intercultural relationships between ELTs and Japanese (Simmons, 2012, 2014, 2016), I advertised this study as one that sought to learn more about intercultural communication within the Japanese workplace between ELTs and JCWs.

After receiving IRB approval and participants’ consent, I conducted in-depth interviews. ELT interviews ranged from 30 min to 3 hr and were conducted via Skype \((n = 29)\), face-to-face \((n = 8)\), and email \((n = 2)\). Japanese coworker interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hr and were conducted via Skype \((n = 2)\), face to face \((n = 34)\), and via email \((n = 2)\). Using a semistructured interview guide, I asked participants to describe...
interpersonal privacy negotiations. The interview guide included a series of questions concerning participants’ past experiences of privacy negotiation in the workplace and was translated/back-translated by a volunteer whose native languages are both Japanese and English, and has experience working as a translator. Using pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality, I transcribed all (English) audio-recorded interviews utilizing Dragon Speak, a voice dictation program, and then listened to the recording to ensure transcription accuracy. In this study, I chose not to correct participant’s grammar in order to represent participant’s voice as they chose to do so. Participant’s responses were segregated throughout the study. In other words, I did not inform JCWs what ELTs reported, and vice versa. To interpret the data, I employed cultural discourse analysis.

**Cultural discourse analysis**

Housed within the world of ethnography of communication and influenced by practical theory (Carbaugh, 1989; Craig, 1989, 1999a, 1999b; Taylor, 1997), cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) was developed by Carbaugh (2005, 2007) as a way to analyze differing cultural premises (or cultural ideals) in action as they cause (mis)understanding within intercultural contexts. In this study, I define cultural premises as my “formulations about participants’ beliefs about the significance and importance of what is going on, both as a condition for that practice of communication, and as expressed in that very practice” (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 177). Such beliefs might include what is deemed proper or valued in interaction, but often unstated as they are assumed to be true: “cultural premises capture and explicate taken-for-granted knowledge which usually does not need to be stated by participants since it is believed to be part of common sense” (p. 178). CuDA conceptualizes communication as a cultural practice embedded within speech codes and cultural discourses that guide premises for appropriate communicative conduct (Carbaugh, 2005). In other words, communication, and what is deemed (in)appropriate, is guided by a social actor’s culture.

CuDA offers five cyclical and analytical models: theoretical, descriptive, interpretive, comparative, and critical (Carbaugh, 2007). The theoretical mode uses an etic perspective that allows analysts to guide subsequent modes (Carbaugh, 2007). In other words, with theory at its base, other modes, such as interpretive or critical, can lead researchers back to the theoretical mode. This move can result in theoretical insight(s). The descriptive mode tries to understand what actually happened within the interaction. The interpretive mode attempts to identify meanings within communication practice. The comparative mode allows for a cross-comparison across and among similar and dissimilar participants. This process helps to make visible what is culturally distinct. The critical mode evaluates communication from an ethical standpoint. However, first CuDA attempts to understand the communicative phenomenon before criticizing. In other words, “the analyst engages deeply in descriptive and interpretive analyses as a way of gaining perspective on the importance, salience, or relevance of critical cultural inquiry” (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 173). These modes of inquiry suggest six necessary items in cultural research:

1. careful attention to research questions and problems of concern;
2. reflection upon how the analyst understands discourse and discursive phenomena theoretically;
3. focused descriptive explorations of phenomena of concern;
4. interpretations of
the meaningfulness of those phenomena to participants; (5) comparative assessments of such phenomena across discourses of communities; and, if warranted, (6) a critical appraisal. (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 173)

Reflexivity and researcher positionality

Throughout the process of interpretive and critical analysis, I engaged in Lindlof and Taylor’s (2010) approach to reflexive analysis, as I presented and discussed my role and identity differently and adapted to the audience and social situation. For instance, when speaking with ELTs, at the start of each interview, I informed participants that I am an ELT. My workplace disclosure allowed for freer and more open conversation with ELTs. When speaking with JCWs, I stressed that I was a doctoral candidate. If asked, I disclosed that I was also teaching English; but I did not initially disclose this information in order to alleviate any concerns JCWs might have had sharing information with a foreign English teacher, due to the perception and practices that the foreign community is small and close-knit. Additionally, by not disclosing I was an ELT (unless asked), participants were more likely to describe the “mundane,” which helped me in my role as researcher/participant to not overlook everyday, taken-for-granted workplace assumptions. Although I checked back with participants to ensure we were discussing their experiences, I realized I could not separate my story from their story. As I spoke with ELTs and JCWs alike, I genuinely understood and felt their workplace frustrations, joys, and challenges: I have been there; I was there. Reflecting upon these encounters I realized that this study is not just their story. It is my story. It is our story.

Summary and research question

In order to understand how privacy is negotiated interculturally within a globalized context, I explored privacy boundary negotiations between foreign English-language teachers (ELTs) and their Japanese coworkers (JCWs) from an interpretive-critical perspective. Since the privacy world of the individual is bound to conflict with the public culture and society (Bensman & Lilienfeld, 1979), it is vital to explore instances in which individuals from differing cultures negotiate public and private intersections. Additionally, this study builds upon scant research regarding the experience of westerners in subordinate positions. With this study and conceptual framework in mind, I address the question: *What cultural premises exist amongst ELTs’ and JCWs’ privacy boundary management?* First, I will discuss the cultural premises of the ELTs. Second, I will discuss Japanese coworkers’ cultural premises.

ELT perspectives

*ELTs should not be a “free space” for privacy inquisition*

ELTs commented that they felt like a “free space” for privacy inquisition by coworkers, which violated their sense of entitlement to control and own their private information. This construction revealed ELTs’ perceptions regarding their social identities within their workplace(s), as well as expected meanings for such relationships. However, this
“free space” is not completely boundaryless but is guided by cultural premises that are perceived to be common sense. For instance, after Ren defined privacy as boundaries, she said, “Even if you delineate these [privacy] boundaries, they are not going to be taken seriously.” In other words, Ren perceived her privacy boundaries as disregarded by her colleagues. “To be taken seriously” is another way of stating that one’s “common sense” privacy expectations were violated, or at the very least were potentially violated.

Richard also commented upon the cultural divide between ELTs and JCWs. Such a presence brings questions for foreigners regarding their social identities as ELTs. He explained:

I think because of the cultural divide, a lot of the times when the ELT comes, they are exotic, just by virtue of being foreign, and usually not Japanese by race. They tend to get bombarded with a lot of questions up front whereas other [Japanese] teachers have the opportunity to do this over months, if not years; but the ELT must do it all in a week.

Richard claimed that being both foreign and non-Japanese were key attributes of some ELTs that encouraged being asked multiple, if not excessive, private questions.

Treating ELTs differently due to their “foreignness” is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s (1929, 1941) ideology of carnivalesque: The sacred is combined with the profane. A “spectacle of fools” is brought for the amusement of others. In this study, the sacred refers to an ELT’s private information, whereas the profane refers to private matters or information that is not shared at work. However, since ELTs are perceived to be the “spectacle of fools,” asking about one’s sacred privacy opens up the parade of one’s profane foreignness for the gaze of the other. Such perceptions position ELTs as a spectacle to be observed and consumed for amusement, while JCWs are positioned as observers.

Bakhtin (1929, 1941) described carnivalistic misalliances as uniting items that are typically separate. In this context, high-context collectivists met low-context individualists. Bakhtin (1929, 1941) described the carnivalesque world as including familiar and free interaction between people. For ELTs like Richard, this carnival is not one in which ELTs perceived themselves to have purchased their “ticket.” In fact, ELTs’ foreignness and race centered them as major attractions. ELTs did not anticipate this position. Due to their positionality, JCWs responded as if everyone knew the social rule that social interaction should be free and familiar. In other words, interaction should be personal. Additionally, privacy and the ability to maintain privacy violates such carnival rules and expectations. Ultimately, this perception contradicted ELTs’ premise that they should not be a free space for privacy inquisition.

When explaining his perception of JCW–ELT relationships, Edward said:

I think Japanese people feel a little bit more like they [ELTs] aren’t their usual card. I think they [JCWs] see a foreigner, and can do what they like, because they [ELTs] aren’t Japanese and they don’t play by the same rule, so let’s ask them anything.

Edward explained that due to their cultural differences, Japanese people are free from conversational, cultural norms when speaking with ELTs. In other words, some ELTs, like Edward, believe that JCWs view ELTs as a “cultural other” who can be asked any question due to perceived freedom from cultural boundaries. This conflicts with ELTs’ cultural premises regarding privacy boundaries, shared by people like Edward, on how to relate to coworkers. When JCWs asked ELTs questions about perceived privacy matters, it positioned ELTs into a carnivalized role. In other words, ELTs perceived themselves to be
constructed as someone who occupied a seemingly “rule-less” arena which violated their privacy expectations for relating within organizations. Although such an area was perceived as “rule-less,” it was still governed by certain cultural premises regarding interaction practices with cultural others and/or outsiders, such as the belief that cultural others are a “free space” for privacy inquisition. In other words, cultural others, like ELTs, can be asked anything in order to appease the spectator.

Bakhtin (1929, 1941) described eccentric, or unacceptable behavior as not only welcomed, but appreciated within the carnival. Therefore, no social consequences exist. At this carnival, JCWs might perceive themselves to be free of privacy boundary maintenance. In other words, JCWs, as spectators, expressed themselves differently than they would with other Japanese. As they interacted with ELT performers, JCWs interacted free of their own cultural privacy assumptions. However, since ELTs did not ask for, nor receive, a ticket to this show, they are caught in a mesh-up they did not yet understand.

Daniel commented upon the “cultural free space” JCWs exhibited during his intercultural interactions. ELTs reported negatively that such a “free space” comes at a cost. Being “extorted” for one’s cultural insight, left some ELTs feeling as they were unable to control their privacy boundaries. Daniel shared his perspective on this perceived social positioning, as he discussed what surprised him about Japanese coworker actions:

I guess, it was just, the general “anything is okay to ask” attitude that was surprising. And there’s nothing that was to the degree of shocking [for them]. Or, just the general attitude that I don’t know this person, but I can ask them anything, pretty much.

Daniel described his JCWs’ “anything is okay to ask” attitude as surprising, which demarcated a difference in cultural premises between the two groups. Daniel explained that, for the JCWs he worked with, no question or topic shocked them or prevented them from asking. In other words, Daniel’s JCWs treatment of his privacy boundaries shocked and surprised him due to perceived improper treatment, thus violating his expectations on how coworker relationships should act.

Cindy, too, perceived Japanese coworker cultural premises for privacy action differed from her perspective. She also discussed her perceived social positioning as influencing ways in which JCWs treated their relationships with her. She said:

Don’t expect Japanese standards of privacy to hold for you. That would be, you know, no one ever talks about what happens in the drinking party, stays in the drinking party, unless you are an ELT. And then, there is this assumption that “Oh well, you are the foreigner, so it’s okay to talk about that.” That is true.

Cindy perceived that privacy rules differ between ELTs and JCWs within work functions such as drinking parties, which denoted a perceived difference in cultural premises regarding appropriate action within relationships. Multiple times within a school year an ELT might be invited to join colleagues in a drinking party and lavish feast in order to celebrate seasons, school event success, and Japanese holidays. The phrase “unless you are an ELT” can be replaced with “if you are a foreigner,” which denotes ELTs as embodying a cultural other social positionality that includes differing privacy rules and expectations. Such a phrase also denotes “foreign” as being a space in which JCWs perceive a freedom from potentially rigid norms. Since ELTs occupy a cultural norm “free space” for JCWs, some ELTs believed this leads to excessive, intrusive questioning that exhibits differing privacy rules, or rather a lack of regard for ELT privacy cultural rules and premises.
When this cultural premise went unmet, ELTs’ premise for voluntary reciprocity was also violated.

**ELTs expect voluntary reciprocity in (egalitarian) workplace relationships**

Reciprocity has long been of interest to researchers of disclosure (Altman, 1975; Bradac, Hosman, & Tardy, 1978; Hendrick, 1987; Jourard, 1971; Petronio, 2002). Gouldner (1960) defined reciprocity as a universal code that guides social interaction. Further, he explained reciprocity as a (a) moral norm, which referred to instances in which what one does to the other requires some type of return, and (b) pattern of exchange, which referred to the idea that exchanges are owed to another once received. Jourard (1971) referred to reciprocity as the “dyadic effect” through which people build close relationships. However, when such is not returned, the ability to build close relationships is weakened and/or strained. Research revealed individuals who do not reciprocate may be perceived as cold, incompetent, unfriendly, and untrustworthy (Bradac et al., 1978; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). Petronio (2002) claimed that reciprocity can “function as a motivating factor in regulating boundaries and establishing rules” (p. 50). In other words, reciprocity is vital for privacy management as it helps regulate and establish privacy boundaries and rules. For this study, ELTs’ “expectation of reciprocity,” denoted a set of beliefs, values and cultural practices that guided what were perceived to undergird egalitarian workplace relationships. In the following quotes, ELTs revealed reciprocity as a key cultural element and expectation for Japanese coworker relationships. ELTs constructed the privacy rule of “reciprocity,” which revealed an expectation of action.

As expressed in interviews, ELTs expected reciprocity to be volunteered. Stephanie said, “They [JCWs] know more about us [ELTs] than we know about them.” In this statement, we see a perceived lack of expected reciprocity: ELTs expected reciprocity when solicited by coworkers or when they shared private information. Casey explained that she not only disclosed incrementally, but expected such disclosure to be matched reciprocally, in order to establish privacy boundaries:

I tend to be more reserved until I get a feel for them [coworkers] and let them put statements about themselves out. I invest more to match it [the disclosure] and push a little bit more and see if they [coworkers] match it and establish boundaries that way.

Following her cultural premise for action, Casey explained that she created privacy boundaries via reciprocity. When a disclosure is matched with shared information, Casey prodded deeper in order to uncover an acceptable boundary within a coworker relationship.

After coworkers at a staff drinking party tried to set up Ren on multiple dates at one particular party, she described that she now does the same. This action of “paying it back” revealed the importance she placed on reciprocity. She explained:

I try to hook my teachers up on relationships. And I don’t know if that makes them feel uncomfortable. I don’t know if the teachers ask me because I’m foreign and I’m not supposed to ask that, but it’s like a reciprocal thing right? I feel like privacy is very much a bridge, and if you ask someone for this information, you should be comfortable enough to get it back, right? So if he [a coworker] asked me, “Do you have a boyfriend?” You better tell me if you have a boyfriend.
Ren said that she tries to hook up her coworkers romantically. Although she does not know if that is crossing a line, or potentially violating Japanese coworker action premises, she continued to do so, since it was done first to her. Ren’s “pay it back” approach, revealed her perception on how coworker relationships should act. In other words, Ren could have said, “Don’t dish, if you can’t take.” Ren’s statement of “because I’m foreign” indicated that Ren believed the treatment she received may be due—in part—to her social position as a non-Japanese woman and “free space” for privacy inquisition. However, at the same time, Ren stated that if someone asks, they should be comfortable to share back, or reciprocate. Ren’s statement of “you better tell me if” indicated a belief clause that reciprocity is a precursor and expectation of any disclosed private information.

Similarly, Richard said that he is “conditionally open,” meaning that he must experience the cultural premise of reciprocity in order to feel comfortable disclosing:

Something that is private is something, I’m generally, I’m very open, but I’m very conditionally open. Like, I would say if somebody asked me something and I answer it, then, they owe me their answer for that same question. It is more about reciprocity than anything else, or anything which is none of their business.

Richard demarcated that reciprocity is an essential, expected practice when discussing private information with relational partners. Richard explicated his expectation that private information should be “matched” by his conversational partner(s). Reciprocated information is perceived to be “owed” to Richard, which denoted the salience of reciprocity as practice and action. He further described his view and cultural expectations of relational reciprocity:

I think just the idea of reciprocity; I think that if you ask a question, you need to be fully prepared to be asked that question immediately in return. I don’t think that’s anything particular to Japanese people either. I think this is a general rule.

Richard described that the solicitor must also be willing to be solicited. He revealed a lack of intercultural understanding, arguing that reciprocity is a “general” rule. In other words, Richard believed that reciprocity is a universal, shared concept that is “common sense” across/between cultures. Further, Richard revealed that reciprocity should occur immediately, thus denoting further rules for how his practice should be reciprocated within coworker relationships. However, this might not necessarily be shared by JCWs.

The cultural premise that reciprocity is not only expected, but should be mutual speaks to ways in which ELTs perceived power relations between their coworkers. Across disciplines, power is largely defined as the ability to influence another’s behavior as well as the ability to produce intended effects (Berger, 1994; Burgoon, Johnson, & Koch, 1998; Dunbar, 2004; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

**Japanese coworker perspectives**

**Privacy inquisitions are acts of kindness/caring**

All JCWs who participated in this study demonstrated a concern for ELTs’ well-being; this reflected the importance of kindness/caring in Japanese culture (Ide, 1998; Kumatoridani, 1999) and a desire to please the other in interactions. In other words, Japanese culture asks
that Japanese show kindness and concern for another before attending to one’s own needs (Matsumoto, 1988, 1989, 1993). In this study, it is important to note that caring behaviors can be representative of JCWs’ roles as team-teacher and supervisor for ELTs. Often within Japanese workplaces, supervisors and team-teachers are placed in a caretaking position to oversee well-being for ELT. As expressed in interviews, helping behaviors are both indicative of an anticipated cultural practice and visible throughout stories JCWs shared regarding their interactions with ELTs. Oshiro’s comment explicitly summarized Japanese coworker sentiments in responding to moments in which ELTs disclosed something private. He said, “If I can help something about it, I will try to do that.”

When sharing a moment in which ELTs discussed something private with JCWs, Kimura, a team-teacher, said it is better if coworkers know your health status. She said:

In the Japanese workplace it’s better, you had better know, other coworkers know your health situation I think. If you are late for school, the ELT yesterday [at her workplace] he had a, a cough, and he was coughing offen, so maybe he had a sore throat or has a cold. So, he was late. Is he okay? But, it’s like my current ELT, he don’t say anything, so I cannot imagine his bad situation.

Kimura mentioned that it is better for JCWs to know each ELT’s health situation: If JCWs know their ELT’s health situation they (the JCWs) might be able to understand behaviors such as tardiness. However, Kimura said that by not disclosing their health status, ELTs rendered JCWs unable to imagine their potentially bad situations and, thus, unable to sympathize or help. At the same time, by not sharing one’s health concerns strips JCWs of the opportunity to fulfill their cultural premise/expectations on how they should treat their foreign coworkers.

Sato, a team-teacher and supervisor, said: “I think some ELTs should be helped sometimes. But [if] they don’t need the help, they should say so.” Sato believed that ELTs need help from time to time but should also tell their coworkers when they do not need help. He explained, “For Japanese people, kindness is very important [in order to] live together. So, please understand [that about] Japanese culture.” Sato revealed that such kindness or helping behavior is a part of Japanese culture and wishes ELTs understood that.

Taniguchi, a supervisor, said that upon hearing about a conflict between ELTs, “I was very happy to hear because if they hide everything, I cannot help their problem.” Knowing this helped ensure ELTs who did not get along were placed in different groups:

So, for example, four ELTs, they are not getting along with, one female [Japanese] teacher and with each other at totally different times. So, I have heard from this person and another person, and so, okay, when I make a team [for an activity] I have to think about it … I can do something about it.

Taniguchi mentioned that, by knowing something private, personality conflicts can help her better plan teaching activities. In other words, she can do something about it.

Saito, a team-teacher, said that, before she involved others, she would ask the ELT if doing so was permissible. She explained:

I think if the problem can be solved by involving more people who are, for example, in the higher rank at work, I would ask my [ELT] colleague first. “Is it okay to share this information with other people? Because, by doing that, I think I could help you.” I would ask first, right. And I expect they would do that for me too.
Saito believed that some problems a foreigner disclosed could be fixed by those individuals at work who had higher authority. However, Saito stated she would ask an ELT first if she could solicit other people to help, if needed. She went one step further and stated that she expected this behavior to be reciprocated by the ELT. For Saito, such reciprocation would demonstrate that privacy is a “two-way street.” In other words, caring should be reciprocated and, therefore privacy inquisitions are perceived to be acts of kindness that serve as a means to obtain information to demonstrate care and concern. Additionally, JCWs illustrated involving others as a way to provide better care for another.

**Soliciting help from a supervisor provides opportunities for better care**

One way JCWs enacted caring behaviors for ELTs was by soliciting help from another. JCWs reported disclosing ELT private information to “supervisors,” such as another school the ELT works with, an ELT coordinator, and someone in a position of power to help the ELT. Such disclosures minimized logistical issues that could arise due to a potentially absent ELT.

Taniguchi worked with an ELT who visited multiple schools. This ELT’s daily schedule was different, meaning that s/he visited a different school every day. Therefore, whenever the ELT was ill, she felt it was her responsibility to contact other schools the ELT worked at, so that they might be prepared for a potential absence. She described the situation:

> One ELT has to be absent because, maybe he was sick in the morning, but Japanese, we have to call to the principal [and tell him] that the ELT will be absent because of so and so. And, also, he will visit another school the next day, so maybe we should share that information with [them] because one of the ELTs [is sick]. But, also, if an ELT can speak Japanese and contact them directly, but maybe we don’t do [that]. We don’t need to do that, but maybe there’s a miscommunication and the next day the school will wait for him, but [he] does not come. Before one [day], day-by-day they should know, so as my job I had to inform them, but maybe this is too much for ELTs. [Laughter]

Taniguchi’s laughter illustrates an understanding of differing cultural premises between the two groups. In other words, this action could be perceived as a privacy violation by ELTs. She was aware of this, but at the same time, thought that she must keep other schools informed of the ELT’s health situation in case s/he must miss work in order to fulfill her cultural premise for showing kindness/caring. Additionally, this action allowed other schools to prepare for a potential absence that might alter their daily schedule.

Hidaka, who worked for an ELT-recruiting organization, said that she shared ELTs’ private information if it was helpful when making hiring decisions.

> Of course, we have to keep information secure, but if I have heard some kind of secret from ELTs, if it’s necessary, I will share with the other coordinator. But, sometimes that information is necessary to hire the ELT. Mainly people should keep it secret.

Hidaka said ELTs’ private information should be kept secret; but at times it was important to share such information with another program coordinator, especially if it provided opportunities to demonstrate kindness/caring. For example, such information helped her company make hiring decisions which may benefit the ELT and/or the organization. However, Hidaka believed information should “mainly” be kept secret. In other words, if
the information does not serve a purpose, such as to show kindness/caring, it should not be shared.

Oshiro said that she shared information in order to help the ELT. She explained, “If I tell the information, another person will help him. I will do that. After I tell it to him, I will ask ‘Is it okay, is it okay?’ I will try to do that, but if it won’t help him I shouldn’t say it.” Oshiro said that she should not reveal an ELT’s private information if it won’t help him/her. She also stated that after she shared the information she would ask the ELT if it is ok she did so. Oshiro stated that she would not share information unless doing so helps the ELT, which demonstrates that private information is asked and shared in order to demonstrate kindness/caring.

Takahashi explained that supervisors, such as principals, needed to know ELTs’ private information in case an emergency should occur. He said, “The principal needs the ELT’s private information, but other teachers don’t need the ELT’s private information.” I asked Takahashi why the principal needed this. He responded, “If you have an accident, the principal needs the ELT’s information. [Such as] blood type, married or not married, where come from.” Takahashi also said that, when ELTs go on a trip, it is important to know “the hotel’s name. If you have an accident, we have to tell the Board of Education.” It is important to know the ELT’s private information, including trip plans, in order to take action and inform the Board of Education, who hosts the ELT’s visa, if/when an accident occurred. Such information helped Takahashi to show kindness/care to the ELT.

**Summary and conclusion**

The intercultural workplace is a dynamic environment that includes a plethora of cultural premises that garner coworker communication strategies. Cultures play a vital role in (mis)understandings of privacy negotiation. For instance, one’s embedded cultural premises can be invisible. Due to such potential invisibility, “commonsensical” understandings of what is private and how such information should be treated, managed, and maintained might not only differ, but render it challenging to conceptualize why another does not share such sentiments. Cultural beliefs can mask critical thinking or empathic communication skills that are needed in the globalized workplace. Without the ability to envision oneself in the other’s shoes, or even the ability to imagine that differences regarding privacy exist, and ways to negotiate it, individuals position themselves in a space for misunderstandings to occur.

Further, this study underscores that privacy boundary management in intercultural workplaces needs to be taken more seriously. Individuals cannot assume shared understanding since globalization highlights cultural differences, privilege, power, and positionality (Sorrells, 2013). Intentional or not, by not participating in ELT cultural expectations for reciprocity affords JCWs greater relational power and distance. Since most ELTs within this study worked as “Assistant Language Teachers,” their role within the organization might have naturally created a power discrepancy that was later reinforced by Japanese denial of ELT reciprocity expectations. ELTs within this study valued egalitarian workplace relationships, particularly related to conversations/disclosures that involved perceived private information. Collier (2002) explained that individuals within intercultural relationships must negotiate their own cultural identities, and their relational identity in addition to stereotypes, social power, privilege, and social perceptions. In other words,
Intercultural communication involving privacy negotiation is very complex. Privacy management is never just about what the ELT or Japanese coworker thinks from their own cultural lens, but also about what they perceive the other to think/do and vice versa. In other words, intercultural communication participants may not know what is guiding the other person’s decision-making thoughts and actions. Multiple rules are at play and conflict. Intracultural privacy literature assumes people are coming from the same or similar standpoint. However, globalization has complicated and, in many ways, negated the existence of “true” intracultural encounters. Imagining that others share our privacy-related cultural premises is a dangerous way of thinking that can result in relational costs.

Theoretically, CPM proved useful as a theoretical lens when examining intercultural privacy management between ELTs and Japanese coworkers. Thus, this study answers Simmons’ (2012, 2014) call and goal to examine both ELT and Japanese coworker discourses. To date, no known research is published that uses CPM to examine intercultural relationships sequentially. In particular, this study contributes to CPM’s cultural criteria by highlighting the importance of examining cultural premises. Petronio (2002) said, “Cultural expectations inform individuals about the appropriate social behavior that ultimately controls boundary accessibility” (p. 40). However, Petronio (2002) does not provide a way in which to uncover, examine, and understand cultural expectations. This study shows that using CuDA in combination with CPM enlarges the landscape. Rather than looking at symptoms of cultural expectations of privacy, identifying cultural premises gets closer to the root of privacy boundary formation. In other words, by uncovering cultural premises researchers gain a better understanding as to why privacy rules exist. At the same time, researchers should be aware of identity freezing (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). On one hand, uncovering cultural premises are extremely helpful at gaining a larger understanding of privacy boundary formation and regulation. At the same time, it is important to remember that variance exists across ELTs’ and JCWs’ experiences, despite the evident cultural premises uncovered. At the same time, this study calls for a better understanding of perceived cultural premises. Future studies should investigate one’s expectations for another culture’s cultural premise. It is plausible to assume that in today’s globalized world most educated people have some knowledge of other cultures, but this knowledge may be based on media images and/or stereotypes that construct inaccurate realities. Due to inaccurate constructed realities of others, ELTs and JCWs might have interpreted their privacy management and boundary construction based on their expectations for culture premises of the other. It could be that each is acting as they suspect the other would most appreciate. In other words, each may think they are being culturally sensitive by adhering to how they believe the other would like to be treated (perceived cultural premises). Therefore, further inquiry is warranted.

Finally, this study extends research regarding ways in which forces and processes of globalization influence intercultural relationships. In particular, this study builds upon scant literature regarding the experience of westerners in subordinate positions. As demonstrated in this study, most ELTs are not teachers licensed by the Japanese government and, therefore, require licensed supervision within the classroom, and, for visa purposes, a sponsoring board of education; many also provide extracurricular instruction. ELTs, as foreigners, proved a useful case study to explore and understand how globalization influenced this particular intercultural relationship. Even though, within the context of
globalization, “culture” is viewed as de-territorialized (Appadurai, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Sorrells, 2010), this study found distinct cultural premises that influence privacy negotiations for both ELTs and Japanese coworkers. These findings demonstrate that although culture is not nation-specific, stark differences emerged when analyzing privacy negotiations between ELTs and JCWs. At the same time, the intercultural relationships of ELTs and JCWs bring to light injustices of a nature that Sorrells (2010) characterized as brought on by Western domination and colonialism. Stohl (2005) claimed globalization requires, “flexibility, responsiveness, speed, and efficient knowledge production, generation, and dissemination” (p. 229). Yet, intercultural privacy management, as a dyadic, dynamic process, is not known, understood, or necessarily considered by participants, highlighting the need for globalization training.

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