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It takes two (or more): The social nature of secrets

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Edited by: Marjorie Rhodes, Editor

Abstract

The lion's share of research on secrecy focuses on how deciding to keep or
share a secret impacts a secret-keeper's well-being. However, secrets always
involve more than one person: the secret-keeper and those from whom the
secret is kept or shared with. Although secrets are inherently social, their con-
sequences for people's reputations and social relationships have been relatively
ignored. Secrets serve a variety of social functions, including (1) changing or
maintaining one's reputation, (2) conveying social utility, and (3) establishing
friendship. For example, if Beth has a secret about a past misdemeanor, she
might not tell any of her friends in order to maintain her reputation as an out-
standing citizen. If Beth does share this secret with her friend Amy, Amy could
interpret this as a sign of trust and think that their friendship is special. How-
ever, Amy could also choose to share Beth's secret with the rest of the friend
group to show that she is a useful member with access to valuable information
about others. Attention to these social functions of secrets emerges from a
young age, and secrets play a prominent role in human relationships through-
out the lifespan. After providing an overview of what is currently known about
the relational consequences of secrecy in childhood and adulthood, we discuss
how social and developmental psychologists could work together to broaden
our understanding of the sociality of secrets. Future steps include incorporat-
ing more dyadic and social network analyses into research on secrets and
looking at similar questions across ages.

This article is categorized under:
    Psychology > Reasoning and Decision Making

KEYWORDS
friendship, reputation, secrets, social cognition, social utility

1 | INTRODUCTION

Keeping secrets is part of human nature. A recent series of surveys on secrecy found that over 95% of participants
reported currently keeping a secret, and over 98% indicated having a secret at some point in their life (Slepian
et al., 2017). Even children learn to keep secrets surprisingly early in development (Misch et al., 2016; Peskin &
Ardino, 2003; Watson & Valtin, 1997). What counts as a secret? Here, we follow Slepian et al.' (2017) definition as any
information that someone consciously commits to conceal, regardless of (i) its content, (ii) exclusivity (whether it is
known by only the secret-keeper or also by other people), and (iii) personal relevance (whether it is about the secret-

keeper or a third-party). Secrets are kept for a variety of reasons, including privacy, relationship maintenance, and self-protection (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2009; Vangelisti, 1994). The existence of a secret hinges on the *intention* to withhold information from at least one person, not necessarily the end-result of concealment through topic avoidance or lying (Slepian, 2021; Slepian et al., 2017). This definition clearly highlights the *sociality* of secrets: secrets cannot exist outside of the social relationships in which they are kept and shared. Despite this, most research on secrecy has focused on the individual secret-keeper rather than their relationships. Isolating secrets from their social context has led to a gap in our knowledge of the relational functions and consequences of secrecy.

We begin this article by reviewing research on the emergence and development of secret-keeping abilities from both intra- and interpersonal perspectives. Then, we shift to our main interests in how secrets acquire and maintain social value across development. Finally, we highlight avenues for future research. Overall, we argue that secrets serve multiple social functions, from establishing friendship and trust to acquiring social power and dominance. Even the ways in which secrets are kept and shared depend on social factors like relationship quality, group dynamics, and social intelligence. Thus, it is critical to understand how keeping and sharing secrets influences human social relationships.

2 | KEEPING SECRETS: WHAT SECRECY MEANS FOR THE SECRET-KEEPER

As noted above, much of psychological research on secrecy has focused on the individual: what does secrecy mean for the secret-keeper? From a developmental perspective, the emergence of the ability to keep a secret is touted as an important cognitive achievement. Because secrecy requires (1) recognizing that different people have different knowledge (e.g., the self knows something that not everyone else knows) and (2) restraining oneself from disclosing the secret to other people, the ability to keep a secret suggests a developed theory of mind and at least some mastery of inhibitory control (Gordon et al., 2014; Peskin & Ardino, 2003; Watson & Valtin, 1997). Indeed, by age 5, children can distinguish information that someone would likely want to keep secret (e.g., that someone took something that wasn't his) from nonsecretive information (e.g., that someone drank milk; Anagnostaki et al., 2010), and are more likely to approve of people sharing positive information about their peers and concealing negative information (Kim et al., 2014). Thus, the roots of understanding that not all information should be shared with all people is in place by the preschool years.

Social psychological research takes a somewhat different perspective but also tends to focus on the individual, without considering the broader social context. Specifically, social psychology emphasizes that concealing secrets is cognitively burdensome (e.g., Slepian et al., 2015; Slepian & Greenaway, 2018). Even when someone successfully conceals a secret, they tend to frequently think about the secret, which is associated with lower self-control and personal well-being (Lane & Wegner, 1995; Slepian et al., 2017). Research on adolescent well-being also addresses the negative effects of keeping secrets from parents and best friends (e.g., Elsharnouby & Dost-Gozkan, 2020; Laird et al., 2013). However, researchers have not investigated similar questions in early childhood, so we have limited insight into how the challenging task of keeping a secret impacts children's physical and psychological well-being. Future research can ask whether secrets always take a cognitive toll on the secret-keeper or if this negative aspect emerges only with age.

3 | THE SOCIAL COMPLEXITY OF SECRETS: IT'S NOT JUST THE SECRET-KEEPER

Although understanding the individual experience of secrecy is certainly important, secrecy should also be examined as a broader social process, given that secrets always arise within the context of relationships. In fact, even the cognitive aspects of secret-keeping have socially-relevant elements. For instance, the size and complexity of social networks may influence the personal burden of keeping a secret. With age, children gain social ties and become part of increasingly complex social networks (Feiring & Lewis, 1991a; Feiring & Lewis, 1991b; Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Wrzus et al., 2013). Thus, the cognitive burden of keeping a secret may increase across development, as it begins to require tracking more relationships. Indeed, Slepian and Greenaway (2018) found that keeping another person's secret was perceived as more burdensome when the two people had greater overlap in their social networks, presumably because the overlap necessitated more frequent concealment and tracking of which communication partners knew the secret.

Social connections may also impact the consequences of keeping a secret via reputational concerns. The desire to manage one's reputation and perceived status emerges in early childhood and increases in adolescence (Engelmann &

Rapp, 2018; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). The obvious way to create a favorable impression is to not engage in antisocial behavior (e.g., Fu, Heyman, Qian, et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2014). But, if that fails, secrecy can conceal negative information. Indeed, people commonly report keeping secrets to avoid negative evaluation and to protect their reputations (Caughlin et al., 2005; Piazza & Bering, 2010). However, reputational concerns may increase the burden of secrecy. Frequent mind-wandering to a secret is associated with worse outcomes for the secret-keeper (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018), and people are more likely to mind-wander toward secrets they find shameful (Slepian et al., 2020) and that have reputational concerns (McDonald et al., 2020). Feeling guilty about an unconfessed secret has even been associated with an increased desire for self-punishment (Slepian & Bastian, 2017). Thus, focusing on maintaining a good reputation may augment the negative effects of keeping a secret on the secret-keeper.

Furthermore, secrecy can have negative reputational consequences if other people learn that the secret-keeper was concealing information to protect self-interests. Consistent across ages, people are evaluated negatively for falsely promoting a good reputation. Children are less trusting of those who lie to promote their own interests (Fu, Heyman, Chen, et al., 2015), and adults experience more hurt feelings and relationship distancing if they think that a secret was kept from them because the secret-keeper was trying to avoid negative evaluation or achieve personal gain (Caughlin et al., 2009). Thus, using secrecy to maintain one's reputation can be a double-edged sword: keeping a secret (by concealing negative information about the self) both increases the secret-keeper's cognitive burden and carries a risk of negative evaluation for concealing the very same information from someone who expects to be told. Variations in relationship dynamics (e.g., how intimate both parties perceive the relationship) may also impact (i) expectations of disclosure and (ii) ensuing evaluations of someone who fails to disclose. Thus, the relationship between social evaluation and secrecy across different social contexts warrants more attention in the literature, particularly given children's growing understanding of the importance of cultivating and maintaining a positive self-image across development (Box 1).

BOX 1   Secrets can have consequences for third-parties

Sometimes, people's secrets are not about themselves, but about a third-party. People may keep these secrets out of concern for the third-party or certain relational obligations. Keeping these secrets requires considering how others might evaluate the third-party should the secret become public, which may require perspective-taking abilities, and therefore become more prominent with age. Indeed, our ability to override egocentric biases and consider others' perspectives becomes less effortful and more automatic across development (Epley et al., 2004). Thus, prosocial reasons for keeping a secret (e.g., wanting to minimize others' distress) may increase over the course of childhood. Consistent with this idea, 4- and 5-year-olds are equally willing to disclose that someone (i) broke a rule, or (ii) is incompetent, whereas 7- and 8-year-olds are less likely to disclose the latter given its potential to hurt personal feelings (Kim et al., 2014). Personal and prosocial motivations may also conflict with one another, making it more difficult to conceal the secret. For instance, knowing a friend's secret may create a desire to share the information with others but also present an obligation to maintain that friend's trust. The more important keeping the other person's secret is, the more burdensome the concealment (Zhang & Dailey, 2018). Research has yet to address the simultaneity of personal and prosocial reasons for keeping a secret in relation to consequences for well-being, presenting another avenue that could benefit from incorporating developmental perspectives and tracking secrecy across the emergence of empathy and similar other-oriented emotions and mentalizing abilities.

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4 | THE SOCIAL VALUE OF SECRETS: A POTENT TOOL FOR INFLUENCING OUR RELATIONSHIPS

The preceding sections discussed how keeping a secret affects the individual, with some consideration of how social factors add to the emotional and cognitive complexities of concealment. However, keeping a secret also has important implications for *social relationships*, an aspect that has been understudied but also appears to be relatively consistent across ages. For example, children perceive keeping and sharing secrets as a powerful indicator of social relationships, including friendship and group membership. By age 5, children expect secrets to be shared with friends rather than nonfriends (Anagnostaki et al., 2013), expect friends to keep each other's secrets (Liberman, 2020), and are more likely

to keep the secrets of people in their own group (Misch et al., 2016). In fact, children see secret-sharing as an even stronger cue to friendship than other types of sharing: after hearing that a character shares a secret with person A, and shares a cookie or a fact with person B, children rate the character as closer to person A (Liberman & Shaw, 2018). Furthermore, if children find out that one person shares another person's secret, they expect this behavior to have negative implications for their friendship (Liberman, 2020). Thus, by the early school years, children know that secrets play an important role in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

These same patterns of reasoning presumably continue into adulthood. However, since evidence on secret-sharing specifically is limited, we draw inferences from related research on self-disclosure and gossip. Although secret-sharing, self-disclosure, and gossip all involve sharing personal or socially relevant information, secrecy can be differentiated based on the expectation that the information should not be shared further (Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999). Self-disclosed information does not necessarily need to be kept secret, and gossip is sometimes encouraged to spread further to enforce group norms (Baumeister et al., 2004; Dunbar, 2004; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Fonseca & Peters, 2018). Nevertheless, the overlap between these three types of information-sharing allows us to draw tentative conclusions about the social implications of secrets by drawing from the self-disclosure and gossip literatures. Self-disclosure, for instance, is robustly associated with liking, closeness, and intimacy (e.g., Bauminger et al., 2008; Collins & Miller, 1994; Sprecher et al., 2013). Likewise, being entrusted to keep a secret is perceived as a source of intimacy if the secret-keeper thinks about how close to and trusted by the confider they are (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018). In examining the correlates between friendship properties and friendship rank, DeScioli and Kurzban (2009) similarly found that secret-sharing had a consistently large correlation with friendship rank, more so than other characteristics like similarity or caring. Thus, adults do seem to associate secret-sharing with trust, friendship, and closeness in much the same way as children.

When a confidant shares a secret-holder's secret with a third-party, there may be numerous cascading relational impacts. For example, sharing a secret-holder's secret without permission is seen as a betrayal that harms the relationship (Fitness, 2001; Jones et al., 2001), especially if the confidant shares the information with a more distant social connection (e.g., an acquaintance; Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999). Such behavior provides multiple insights about social closeness. Indeed, sharing gossip can promote friendship by signaling trust, cooperation, and in-group altruism with the third-party, even though it comes at the expense of the confidant's relationship with the original secret-holder (Brondino et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012). For instance, if Amy shares Beth's secret with Carol, it could suggest that Amy is less close to Beth than Beth expected when she confided in Amy, and that Amy values her relationship with Carol more than she values her relationship with Beth. Thus, secrets carry significant weight in establishing, maintaining, or ruining friendships, requiring the ability to track secret-sharing behaviors to discern the status of various friendships within one's network.

Despite this initial evidence for an early understanding of the sociality of secrets, many open questions remain regarding the social inferences humans make about secrets across development. We close by exploring open questions for the potential role of secrecy in (1) changing or maintaining one's reputation, (2) conveying social utility, and (3) establishing friendship, incorporating evidence from both developmental and adult research.

4.1 | Reputation

One particularly interesting question is how children evaluate people who share their own secrets. Do children negatively evaluate someone who shares a secret that could harm the secret-keeper's own reputation? Or do they positively evaluate the person for being honest? Another question deals with the reputational impacts of sharing secondhand secrets. Children and adults negatively evaluate gossipers (e.g., Farley, 2011; Kim et al., 2014; Kuttler et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2003), perhaps because sharing someone's secret could demonstrate a lack of trustworthiness. But, the fact that gossip is often used to communicate group norms and police free riders (Baumeister et al., 2004; Dunbar, 2004) suggests that sharing a secondhand secret could be evaluated positively since it could help the group uphold social norms. Such tradeoffs create a dilemma for the secret-keeper, who must decide whether to divulge exploitable negative information.

4.2 | Social utility

Another social dimension of secrecy is social utility, or how others view one's value as a social connection. People want to affiliate with those who provide access to valuable knowledge or resources, creating incentives to convey such

knowledge to cultivate a network of trusted allies (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Sharing secrets can be one way to achieve this goal: people who share secondhand secrets demonstrate access to valuable social knowledge. Despite this potential function of secrecy, neither the developmental nor social psychological literatures on secrets have examined how perceived social utility impacts impression formation and affiliative decisions. For example, how do people decide whether the potential benefits of associating with someone who shares secondhand secrets are worth the risks of having a social partner who may be untrustworthy? Humans may have to weigh similar concerns when deciding on their own secret-sharing behavior: how should someone determine if sharing a secondhand secret, which may promote their own status in a Machiavellian sense, is worth damaging their relationship with the original secret-holder? People may weigh the relative status of the original secret-holder and the new social partner to determine which relationship is more likely to be beneficial. People may also consider their degree of closeness with each person when making such choices (Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999). Thus, future work should examine secrets as a potent tool for establishing social power (influence over others) and social utility (value as a social connection).

4.3 | Friendship

Divulging a secret can also establish friendship ties: people avoid publicly favoring one friend over another (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). Telling someone a secret can discreetly convey favoritism without weakening other relationships, allowing people to preserve less important but still valuable friendships. The confidentiality of a secret allows the secret-sharer to make the confidant feel special without other people finding out. For this to happen, the confidant must first understand that (1) sharing a secret indicates friendship and (2) preserving the friendship requires keeping that secret. Both children and adults seem to understand these assumptions, but the literature has yet to explore the extent to which people actually use secrets to distort perceptions of closeness across social ties. Perhaps people consistently misrepresent how broadly they share their own or other people's secrets in order to maintain multiple close relationships.

Alternatively, even if a secret's exclusiveness is not misrepresented, the benefits of sharing a secret for promoting friendship may depend on how many people also know that information. For example, adults consider how broadly a secret is known: when information is shared more widely, they see knowledge of secrets and gossip as weaker cues of friendship (Bedrov & Gable, 2021; Ellwardt et al., 2012). To successfully use this heuristic (that secrets are more telling of friendship when they are less widely known), people must track multiple social relationships and account for the probability of whether each social partner is or is not aware of the secret. These abilities require a well-developed theory of mind and sufficient attention to the fluctuating group dynamics of a sizeable social network. Therefore, as social networks increase in size and complexity across development, children need to attend to more features in order to infer friendship from secret-sharing.

4.4 | Cultural considerations

Research should also consider cultural differences in secret-sharing. For example, collectivist and individualist cultures may differ in secrecy behaviors and in their evaluations of people based on whether they keep or share secrets. Indeed, whereas children in China positively evaluate someone who shares a positive performance result with a poorly-performing peer (since the disclosure is seen as the person trying to help the peer), children in the United States see the same behavior as showing off (a negative evaluation; Heyman et al., 2008). Similarly, although Chinese children judge both lying and truth-telling as morally acceptable if it benefits the group, Canadian children are more concerned about benefits to the individual (Fu et al., 2007). Thus, cultural differences in the reputational implications of secret-sharing may depend on whether sharing the secret is meant to help others or only to help the self.

Collectivist orientations may also impact the extent to which group norms affect the regulation of privacy boundaries (Liu & Wang, 2018) and lead to differences in relational mobility (the ease of forming new friendships and ending old ones). Previous work demonstrates that people in contexts with higher relational mobility are more likely to self-disclose to friends as a strategy to maintain a close relationship (Schug et al., 2010), suggesting there may be cultural differences in overall rates of secret-sharing or in the circle of people who are considered close enough to be told a secret. However, research has yet to address whether the same cultural differences in friendship strategies apply to secondhand secrets.

5 | CONCLUSION

We began by highlighting how the literature on secrecy has disjointedly focused on different aspects of concealment, with developmental research emphasizing secrecy as a cognitive *ability* and adult research emphasizing secrecy as a cognitive *burden*. We suggest that researchers should turn their attention to social aspects of secrecy at the individual, dyadic, and group levels. As we have illustrated, many aspects of concealment depend on the surrounding social context. Secrets are more burdensome to keep when motivated by reputational concerns and can have numerous social consequences, including promoting friendship and increasing reputation and social utility. Accordingly, focusing on secrets as an inherently social phenomenon—by examining how social factors influence secrets and how secrets influence our social lives—opens numerous avenues for future research on the experiences and consequences of secrecy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Alisa Bedrov: Conceptualization (equal); visualization (lead); writing-original draft (lead); writing-review and editing (equal). **Shelly Gable:** Conceptualization (equal); supervision (equal); writing-review and editing (equal). **Zoe Liberman:** Conceptualization (equal); supervision (equal); writing-review and editing (equal).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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