



Cross My Heart: Secret-Keeping in Romantic Relationships



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Introduction

Reasons For Keeping Secrets

▪ **Family secrets** – Past research on secret functions (i.e., reasons for keeping secrets) identified 6 reasons for concealing a family secret.

(Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997)

- Evaluation
- Maintenance
- Defense
- Privacy
- Bonding
- Communication

▪ **Relationship secrets** – Can the same measure be applied to secrets kept from a romantic partner, such as a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse?

Primary Goals

- Develop a version of the Secret Functions Scale for the domain of romantic relationships.
- Identify types of reasons that predict why individuals might self-conceal from a romantic partner.

Method

Participants (N = 205)

- **Age:** 18–52 ($M = 22.98$, $SD = 5.02$)
- **Sex:** 90% were female
- **Relationship status:** dating (67.8%), almost engaged (11.2%), engaged (7.8%), married (13.1%)
- **Relationship length:** 2 months to 21.75 years ($M = 2.80$ years, $SD = 2.91$ years)
- **Sexual orientation:** bisexual (2.4%), heterosexual (94.2%), homosexual (3.4%)
- **Education:** freshmen (7.9%), sophomores (18.8%), juniors (36.1%), seniors (35.2%), post-baccalaureate students (2%)
- **Racial descent:** Asian (25.7%), African (18.8%), Caucasian (31.2%), Hispanic (19.8%), “Other” (4.5%)

Procedure

- Students from undergraduate psychology courses completed a questionnaire online via SurveyMonkey.
- Participants were required to be in a current romantic relationship of at least 2 months in length.

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Method (continued)

Select Measures

Self-Concealment from Partner Scale

(Modified from Larson & Chastain, 1990)

- A 10-item measure that taps the extent to which individuals conceal negative aspects of themselves from their relationship partners. Examples below:
 - When something bad happens to me, I tend to keep it to myself.
 - My secrets are too embarrassing to share with my partner.

Secret Functions in Relationships Scale

(Based on Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997)

- A 32-item measure of reasons for keeping secrets from one’s romantic partner. The full measure is presented below, by subscale:
 - **Evaluation ($\alpha = .90$)**
 - I worry that my partner would no longer like me if he/she knew my secret.
 - My partner would disapprove if he/she knew about the secret.
 - If my partner found out about the secret, it would disappoint him/her.
 - My secret would shatter my partner’s beliefs about me.
 - It is hard to predict how my partner would react to hearing the secret.
 - My partner would have a difficult time talking to me if he/she knew my secret.
 - I would hurt my partner’s feelings if he/she knew my secret.
 - **Maintenance ($\alpha = .85$)**
 - I keep my secret from my partner in order to protect someone.
 - I keep my secret to keep people other than my partner close.
 - Revealing my secret to my partner would really create big problems for me.
 - Keeping my secret from my partner prevents stress for me.
 - Telling my secret to my partner would hurt my relationship with others who share my secret.
 - People who already share my secret would be really upset if I revealed it to my partner.
 - People who already share my secret would be very angry at me if I told my partner.
 - People who already share my secret would never trust me again if I told my partner.
 - **Defense ($\alpha = .85$)**
 - My partner would probably tell my secret to others.
 - I can’t trust my partner with my secret.
 - I’m not sure what my partner would do with my secret.
 - My partner might use the secret information against me.
 - If my partner found out about my secret, he/she might use it against me or someone close to me.
 - My partner might take advantage of me if he/she knew my secret.
 - **Privacy ($\alpha = .73$)**
 - The secret information is none of my partner’s business.
 - My secret isn’t relevant to my partner.
 - My secret is personal information.
 - I greatly value privacy from my partner.
 - My partner really doesn’t need to know my secret.
 - **Bonding ($\alpha = .82$)**
 - It is fun to have a special secret with someone other than my partner.
 - Having a secret with someone other than my partner bonds me with that other person.
 - Having this secret with a person other than my partner makes the other person and me more cohesive.
 - Letting my secret out to my partner would spoil the specialness of the secret.
 - **Communication ($\alpha = .51$)**
 - I keep the secret because my partner is generally not very open.
 - My partner would not know how to talk about my secret.

Method (continued)

Difficulties in Modifying Measure

- “Bonding” items from original Family Secret Functions Scale did not translate well to romantic relationships context.
- **Keeping a secret for bonding reasons in a family context generally meant keeping the secret from outsiders** (i.e., people outside the family).
- In a *relationship* context, the “family unit” is the individual and his/her romantic partner.
- **Bonding, in this context, would not be keeping the secret to bond with the partner. Rather, it means keeping the secret from the partner to bond with an outsider.**

Results

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Self-conceal	.89						
2. Evaluation	.58	.90					
3. Maintenance	.30	.49	.85				
4. Defense	.48	.62	.57	.85			
5. Privacy	.19	.28	.31	.36	.73		
6. Bonding	.10*	.03*	.49	.35	.28	.82	
7. Communication	.32	.36	.52	.57	.39	.48	.51
<i>M</i>	2.10	3.51	2.67	2.69	4.10	2.70	2.63
<i>SD</i>	0.82	1.68	1.28	1.40	1.39	1.43	1.43

Note. * denotes *ns*; for all others, $p < .0001$. Reliabilities are on the diagonal.

Table 2. Regression analysis for secret functions subscales predicting self-concealment from partner

	β
Evaluation	.48**
Maintenance	-.12
Defense	.19*
Privacy	-.03
Bonding	.04
Communication	.09

Note. * $p = .04$, ** $p < .0001$

Results (continued)

Exploratory Findings

- Ps were also asked to think of a specific secret before responding to the Secret Functions in Relationships Scale. They then rated that secret on importance and valence (i.e., negative v. positive).
- The **more negative** the secret, the more likely the P was keeping secret **to avoid evaluation**.
 - The **more positive** the secret, the more likely the P was keeping secret **for bonding with others**.

Discussion

Conclusions

- All subscales (except for bonding) were significantly associated with self-concealment from partner.
- However, evaluation and defense seem to be the unique predictors.
- **Secrecy within romantic relationships** poses a problem because it **can form a maladaptive cycle of self-concealment and loss of trust between partners**. This may deteriorate future relationship outcomes. (Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012)

Limitations

- Ninety percent of the Ps were female. Males may have different reasons for concealing information from their relationship partners.

Select References

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