

Secrets and Social Networks

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Abstract

Secrets are information kept from others; they are relational. They shape the intimacy of our relationships, what we know of others and what we infer about the world. Recent research has promoted two models of voluntary secret disclosure. The first highlights deliberate and strategic disclosure to garner support and to avoid judgment. The second maintains strategic action but foregrounds that disclosures are made in contexts which shape who is in one's social network and who may be the recipient of a disclosure. Work outside of this main vein examines the mechanisms and motivations to share others' secrets as well as the potential consequences of doing so. The final avenue of inquiry in this review considers how keeping secrets can change (or avoid changing) the size and composition of the secret-keeper's social network and what information is shared within it. Understanding

how secrets spread within and form social networks informs work from public health to criminology to organizational management.

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1 Introduction

A secret is a piece of information deliberately kept from others. By definition, therefore, it is entirely relational [58] [55] [7]¹. One can hold – or share – one’s own secrets or someone else’s. Secrets are also integral to the conceptualization of social networks, if understudied empirically: the classic social network conceptualization of tie strength - or how well two people know each other - defines a strong tie as a combination of “the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” [29]. The secrets we hold are not chosen randomly. Social structure, culture and power relations within an interacting dyad, a social network or a broader community determine what is acceptable and what is not [55] [68] [43]. What is acceptable and what is not is codified in laws, enshrined in institutions and instantiated in our norms, practices and material goods. This can change, though not without considerable effort. As an example, left-handedness used to be considered a sign of wickedness in the United States and elsewhere. Children were forced to conceal this feature and were compelled to write with their right hand. After efforts by scientists, educators and activists, this is no longer the case. What people keep secret varies throughout time and geography but is a product and an indication of social structure. ²

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²For the purposes of this review, I have limited my definition of secrets to personal information that individuals take care about who learns. This excludes trade secrets or national security secrets but would include say, personal behavior at work such as

Harboring secrets affects individuals' physical and psychological well-being [46] [39] even when secret-keepers are alone or not interacting with those from whom they would like to conceal the information [56]. People feel compelled to reveal their secret, to "get it off their chests" and particularly when received well, sharing a secret is relieving [59]. When a disclosure is met with anger, judgment or rejection, it harms disclosers and relationships.

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Models of disclosing secrets fall into two general categories: purposive models and contextual models.⁴ Purposive models are more in line with rational choice approaches to decision-making whereby individuals strategically disclose and withhold information to reach their goals. Contextual models include not just deliberative decision-making regarding disclosure but that which is due to habit, spontaneity or more responsive to immediate circumstances and contexts.

Common to both approaches is that individuals draw upon their social embezzlement. The personal information investigated in this review is broad and ranges from mental illness to mortgage strain. I have also included scholarship in which the authors do not identify their topic as a secret but rather a concealable stigma.

³Social networks are sets of individuals who are directly or indirectly linked to one another [50]. Social network scholars consider data of two types: the first is sociocentric or a map of an entire social network and all the linkages within it; the second is egocentric which has data from individuals about their personal connections [50]. Examples of both are included here. Given the focus on social networks, I exclude empirical work in a lab setting in which individuals disclose to a stranger but include disclosing to a stranger in a natural setting.

⁴Here I will outline general models but there are also models for disclosing particular pieces of information such as health disclosure [30] or opinions and suggestions in the workplace [41].

networks. There is a long literature on the characteristics of social networks which primarily delineates how social networks are homophilous, that is, people associate with those who are similar to them due to a combination of the structure of available potential associates and individual preference [40]. With whom one comes into contact is shaped by where individuals are in the life-course and which organizations they are part of. Institutions are central to the formation and maintenance of social networks [35] such that as people's environment or institutional affiliations change, so do their core networks [63]. Ethnographic studies confirm this by showing how institutions such as day cares and schools facilitate friendships and relationships of mutual disclosure due to their physically common space and the frequent interactions of parents whose children attended [61] [37]. Mario Small goes so far as to describe networks as "less a 'core' network than a highly contextual support network in which people are added and dropped as actors shift from environment to environment."

With the social network established, the question remains: how does one choose to whom to disclose a secret?

2 Purposive Models of Self-Disclosure

Purposive models are in line with rational choice arguments and articulate a deliberative process whereby secret-holders evaluate the suitability of members of their social network as potential confidants.(e.g. the Disclosure Decision Model [44], the Risk Revelation Model [1] and the Disclosure Processes Model [12].)

First, individuals identify the goal of disclosure such as catharsis, increasing intimacy with others, creating mutual understanding or educating others. They then determine if disclosing will help them reach their goal [12]. They evaluate candidates for disclosure and assess the risks to protect themselves and the relationship [1] [52]. This risk assessment includes evaluating the potential reaction by those hearing the revelation and the likelihood of increased well-being for the discloser [1]. It also takes into account a sense of obligation to inform specific others [1] [53] and if they were asked by a third party to reveal the information [1].

Chaudoir and Fisher’s Disclosure Process Model incorporates the decision-making process with post-disclosure outcomes into one dynamic model. A disclosure that is met with acceptance can then result in a variety of positive outcomes. Individuals can receive emotional and material support and psychological relief; relationships can experience increased liking, intimacy and trust. This can then have repercussions for social networks or even cultures by reducing stigma and changing disclosure norms. This can result in a positive feedback loop whereby subsequent disclosures are easier. As an example, as more people “come out” about their sexuality, norms may change which facilitates subsequent people disclosing. Alternatively, a disclosure that goes poorly can result in a negative feedback loop, making subsequent disclosures more difficult and less likely [12].

There is significant empirical evidence to support many of these models of strategic disclosure. Secret-holders seek out specific confidants for specific matters; that is, there is a “role-topic” match [4]. For example, people are more likely to speak with their spouse about kids and education than anyone

else [4]. They also seek out others with a similar experience [49][23] or those who are particularly empathetic [3], whom Goffman would call “the wise” [28]. Supporting the Disclosure Process Model, well-received disclosures foster intimacy [21] and can result in material and emotional support as well as psychological relief [46].

People are also careful about who they keep secrets from, in an effort to maintain their own reputation and relationships. As such, they try to avoid judgment, keeping stigmatizing or shameful information to themselves [14] [36] [45] [2]. This can negatively affect them by restricting who they get social and material support from. As an example, concealing mortgage difficulties can lead to isolation [36] and ignorance of about mortgage assistance programs [45]. People also keep secrets in order to avoid arguments and to maintain relationships, even on matters that are not stigmatizing. For instance, Americans will avoid discussing politics with whom they disagree, though they will readily discuss with those with whom they agree [15]. While secret-keeping is done in an effort to maintain relationships, it simultaneously erodes the intimacy of those relationships as people withhold important information from those close to them.

These models tend to focus on the dyadic-pair of the secret-holder and the potential confidant. While there may be discussion of the precursors to the dyad’s existence or the broader effects of the disclosure or continued secret-keeping, that is not the empirical focus.

3 Contextual Models of Self-Disclosure

Contextual models of self-disclosure focus on individual choice within contexts [51] [60]⁵. These frameworks highlight on how social network formation and the information disclosed between individuals depend on circumstances and could even be described as idiosyncratic. They shift attention from individuals making choices to interaction which occurs in patterns and is shaped by circumstances. They do not reject the value of purposive action, just reprioritize it and place it within contexts and embedded into social networks. Contextual models foreground social networks and in particular their contingencies and changes over time. By and large, purposive models either do not attend to social networks or, as the Disclosure Process Model [12] mentioned above does, considers networks as one of a number of long-term outcomes to disclosure. In contrast, contextual models consider networks not just as an outcome of disclosure but as an antecedent of disclosure.

The empirical findings supporting contextual models would be unanticipated by models focused on purposive decision-making. People disclose to those who are merely available and seem adequate to the task, rather than based on their personal or relational characteristics [62] [61] [60]. They often disclose to someone with whom they do not have a strong relationship. Some of these disclosures are functionally necessary such as disclosing to an expert. Then, an individual discloses to another with whom they do not have a strong tie and do not discuss other important matters [48]. In other in-

⁵Not all authors whose scholarship I mention here describe their work as a model, nor have they categorized their work as contextual. I have chosen this grouping based on the orientation of the work or the bulk of the empirical findings

stances, people form intimate relationships, share secrets and material goods with those whom they barely know [19][61][62] or do not know at all but have found in a Facebook group for similarly afflicted people [24]. Some of these disclosures are based on similar life circumstance, such as extremely poor people who are in the midst of eviction, [19] students who have recently started graduate school [62] [60] or patients with similar health conditions [24][23]. Rather than a commonality of attitude or a long lasting regard as the rational choice models would predict, here it is the secret-holder's circumstances that necessitate disclosure.

People are also often compelled or required to disclose information to organizations or representatives in order to access basic needs and services. For instance, mothers applying for public services such as welfare must prove economic need and no other available resources which can entail being asked when they last had sex with their child's absent father [34]. These kinds of disclosures are required of poor people to attend to their basic needs whereas wealthier people can not only avoid these compulsory disclosures but can more successfully control information about themselves by accessing private services [9] [17]. In these instances, the context of poverty and wealth in the United States - from the culture of deservingness to the public and private institutions that provide resources - shape these disclosures.

The contextual and purposive models in many ways echo debates on the relative importance of agency vs. structure. The relative importance of each likely depends on the individual discloser's social position: their power and privilege and their point in the lifecourse. Rather than one model being more correct than another, one may be more correct than another for particular

people at particular points in their lives. For example, adults have much more control over the contexts in which they find themselves than children so it's fair to hypothesize that the purposive model fits adults' experiences more than children's.

4 How Social Networks Shape Secrets

In addition to the dyad of the holder of the secret and the (potential) confidant, we sometimes share secrets of others', thus forming a relational triad. Sometimes we share others' secrets to garner support for the person involved in the secret [14]. Sometimes we strategically denounce others to authorities to harm them or to boost our own standing [33][5]. Whether we do one or the other likely depends on three central elements in any social network: the affinity between the members of the triad, the relative standing of each of the members of the triad and their network position. For instance, Slepian and Greenaway [57] show that people report being more burdened by others' secrets to the extent they report their social networks overlap.

Friendships and sharing others' secrets [10] go hand in hand. Social capital theories argue that gossip, or the informal and evaluative discussion of others which can include secret-sharing, facilitates friendship⁶; whereas the evolutionary perspective posits that friendship is a precondition for gossip. Recent empirical research indicates a co-evolution of friendship and gossip [21].

⁶Definitions of gossip vary. Some include only negative evaluation, others specify whether the person who is discussed is present or not. Gossip does not necessarily entail conveying a secret but often does involve exchanging sensitive information.

Sharing others' secrets can help articulate group values, reinforce group norms and define group membership [66][38]. In this sense, gossiping about others' secrets is also a means by which to establish and enforce what is acceptable and what is not and therefore what is worth keeping secret in the first place.

5 How Secrets Shape Social Networks

While contexts shape what is kept secret, what is told freely and what is told to whom, secrets in turn shape social contexts, most directly social networks. Secrets can mark turning points in people's lives – an episode of severe mental illness, a bankruptcy, an extramarital affair. Turning points are opportunities for social networks to change. Examining how secrets shape social networks is best accomplished with longitudinal data composed of both closed and open-ended questions. This facilitates examining precisely how and why social networks change in light of a secret. Given the significant data requirements, very little research can reach this caliber but two recent studies do.

When people develop mental illness their networks shrink dramatically, much more so than those who are not afflicted. After diagnosis, people end relationships with those who are not supportive and are rejected by others [32] [47]. The character of the remaining relationships can also shift; either diminishing or increasing intimacy depending on the confidant's capacity to help and empathize. Sharing secrets, when well-received, can increase intimacy and discussing sensitive topics can result in longer-lasting relationships

[54].

Criminal or covert networks are unique in that they are largely formed due to a secret and their structure is specific to the activity. Networks are formed to balance security or secrecy and efficiency of communication. This affects the structure of the networks as well as who plays particular roles such as leaders or brokers [18] [64] [16] [42] [6]. For instance, networks based on a secret might be less dense, that is fewer people know each other, to prevent one person being “found out” and being able to provide information on many others.

6 Conclusion and Future Research

I propose two veins of future research. Primarily the research on secrets and social networks examines who discloses and who does not – and who hears what information and who does not – by examining pairs of people. One next step is to examine how secrets spread in networks. This information is useful in and of itself but also can inform endeavors that rely on understanding secrets or transmission errors. One technique for enumerating hard to count populations is to inquire not whether someone, say, uses illegal drugs since they may well lie if they do but to ask if they know someone who does [22] [67]. This approach relies on people sharing their secrets and therefore its progress is dependent on our knowledge specifically of secret-sharing. Similarly, knowledge about how secrets spread can inform inquiries into how people can access novel and useful information [8].

How secrets spread in social networks can be illuminated through a variety

of approaches from data collection from a social network [27] to case studies [31] [26] to asking people to report on conversations they have overheard or “hearsay ethnography” [65]. Recent research on how secrecy can work to structure and sustain organizations [31] as well as how secrets involving many people manage to be kept or revealed [25] should inform this work.

Another vein of future endeavors is to examine the effects of hearing secrets on individual and macro-outcomes. Building off the contact hypothesis literature which is primarily correlational, some recent work considers the causal effects of hearing secrets on attitudes toward the secret [20] [13]. This work requires longitudinal data. Despite the significant effort, it is worth pursuing because how secrets are shared or not affects public opinion. If hearing secrets changes public opinion then when secrets are kept, stasis can occur and polarization can be maintained. If we are shielded from knowing others’ secrets then we may erroneously believe that only “others” disagree with us or behave in ways we disapprove of. We then do not need to confront that our sister had an abortion [14] or our roommate has mental illness [20] and reconcile that with our prior beliefs.

Other macro-outcomes besides attitudes include income inequality and job turnover: learning peers’ salaries prompted those who were paid less to search for other work [11]. Similarly, the insights on when employees voice or keep secret their ideas instruct how secrets affect organizational or group effectiveness [41]. Additional inquiries into the causal effects of secrets can assist us in imagining the counterfactual in which what is commonly a secret becomes public knowledge: what inequalities would be maintained or diminished if tax returns were made public as they are in Norway? How

would we prioritize our public health efforts and treat alcoholism if it were not a condition so often attended to anonymously: Would we extend additional services or withdraw them? Given the centrality of secrets for every day life, it is an enormously rich avenue for inquiry.

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