

Review

Revealing secrets

Christine Q. Nguyen and Michael L. Slepian

Abstract

We all keep secrets, and often to the detriment of our well-being. But what happens when we reveal a secret? This review integrates research on revealing secrets, from the perspective of both the revealer and the confidant. First, revealing secrets must be differentiated from other forms of social disclosure. Second, the decision of whether to share a secret is complex, and the benefits depend on the extent to which sharing elicits social support and insight. On the other side of the revelation, recent research demonstrates antecedents (e.g., certain personality traits) and outcomes (e.g., increased relational closeness) of being a confidant. Occasionally, people reveal others' secrets, the likelihood of which depends on factors such as the perceived immorality of the secret. While many open questions remain when it comes to revealing secrets, we highlight a growing understanding of the processes of secret sharing, both for those who confide and those who are confided in.

Addresses

Columbia University, USA

Corresponding author: Slepian, Michael L. (ms4992@columbia.edu)

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We all keep secrets. By one estimate, 97% of people have a secret right now, and the average person currently has thirteen [1]. But while about a third of all secrets sit within a single mind, the other two thirds are shared with others [1]. Here we review the effects of revealing secrets, noting gaps in the literature and directions for future research.

The uniqueness of secret sharing

Revealing a secret to another person is a form of self-disclosure. Prior work has considered self-disclosure broadly (irrespective of secrecy) [2], as well as the

sharing of emotions [3]. However, revealing a secret is more specific than either.

Confiding a secret—a piece of information one intends to hold back from one or more others [4]—is not the same as self-disclosure more generally. Self-disclosure can prompt intimacy [5], and sharing one's emotions can allow for venting (seeking to relieve an emotional load by discussing the experience associated with it) [6]. In contrast, people will often reveal their secrets in pursuit of help and social support [7]. Furthermore, the revealing of a secret is arguably a more profound social act, as it entails an honest and selective disclosure of something specifically intended to be kept from others. Confiding a secret in another also involves an expectation of confidentiality which is absent in other forms of disclosure; indeed, revealing something sensitive without a request for secrecy could increase worry about the spread of the information [8].

In sum, given the distinctiveness of revealing a secret, compared to other forms of self-disclosure, there is reason to question the assumption that the large body of findings from the self-disclosure literature [e.g., 2, 9, 10] would apply to the domain of revealing secrets. More specifically, in contrast to self-disclosure and emotional expression, there are several factors that are unique to secret revelation. These include the factors that motivate the revelation—perceived personal, relational, and social risks (and rewards) of the revelation—as well as the listener's reactions to the revelation, and the consequences of those reactions.

Revealing a secret

People who confide their secrets in others tend to be healthier than people who chronically keep secrets to themselves [11–13]. And more often than not, sharing secrets brings benefits both to the person who confides and to the person who is confided in [8,14].

Decision and antecedents

The honesty that comes with disclosing a secret always involves some risk. A confidant could react negatively or pass the secret on to others (who might also react negatively) [15,16]. Yet disclosure may provide utility as

well, such as social support [e.g., 8]. Choosing to share a secret involves weighing the perceived risks of disclosure against its perceived value.

Several factors impact this calculation of risk and reward. One such factor is shame, a moral, self-conscious emotion that involves a negative evaluation of the self (often contrasted with the other self-conscious emotion of guilt, which involves a negative evaluation of a specific behavior rather than the global self) [17]. When people feel shame, either from a dispositional tendency or from a specific secret, the risks of complete honesty may seem too great. People tend to feel ashamed of secrets about immoral behavior, or those that they otherwise believe to reflect poorly on themselves [18–20]. Shame, in turn, predicts anticipations of receiving less support and thus reduced willingness to reveal a secret [11,21,22].

The more negatively people feel about a personal secret, the more they report that the secret is difficult and risky to talk about, and the less willing they are to reveal it under a variety of imagined circumstances (including if another person hypothetically has the right to know the information or directly asks about the secret) [23]. In contrast, when people report high self-esteem and communication efficacy, and feel close to an interaction partner, they are more likely to disclose a secret [23,24]. These factors may reduce the perceived risks of disclosure while increasing its perceived value.

Consequences for the person revealing

Revealing a secret can bring momentary relief [25], but what happens after? Catharsis alone can actually leave the revealer feeling worse; it is having new insights (obtained from revealing) that helps people feel better about their secrets [26].

Perhaps most important is how the confidant responds [16]. The typical response provides emotional and/or instrumental support [8]. Confiding thus typically elicits social support, and is associated with improved coping (reduced rumination on the secret and reduced harm to well-being) [8,24]. These benefits have been theorized to help people feel better about the secret [27] and even about themselves [24].

Perhaps confiding usually pays off because people prefer to reveal to others who are compassionate and decisive, qualities that often prove helpful [7]. Yet, confiding can make the confider feel worse when it does not elicit social support or help from the confidant [8,16]. Thus, how selective a secret keeper is in disclosing their secrets may moderate disclosure outcomes; those who carefully identify and selectively reveal to the right person at the right time may enjoy better outcomes than

those who reveal less discriminately. Another important predictor of the confidant's response will be the content of the secret. For example, rather than social support from the confidant, revealing a secret about morally reprehensible behavior may lead to punishment [28] (see section on Revealing Others' Secrets).

Future directions

Many questions surrounding secret sharing remain unanswered. For example, the motivation for keeping a secret influences the effects of secrecy [29], but does it also influence whether a secret is revealed, how it is revealed, and to whom? First-time sharing might be a special case: it may seem riskier, but may also be regarded as an especially intimate disclosure. What proximally precedes a revelation, and what are the effects of different forms of revelation? When do people prepare and rehearse their disclosures, first test the waters with partial disclosure, or instead leave out clues to the secret to avoid being present when the secret is first learned? Is complete honesty required to reap the benefits of confiding? Is requesting confidentiality effective in keeping the secret safe? How do the reasons for revealing influence the kind of confidant that one seeks?

Another open question is how the consequences of revealing a secret vary across individuals and social groups. For example, writing about emotional topics—specifically, the feelings and emotions surrounding traumatic experiences (not to be confused with disclosure [see 4])—has larger physical and mental health benefits for people who are extraverted and who have strong social networks (though the reasons for this difference are unclear) [30]. Perhaps individual differences such as these would impact the effects of sharing secrets. Relatedly, men have generally been found to self-disclose less than women, possibly to the detriment of their development of close friendships [31,32]. Is revealing secrets more or less common across gender or other social groups, and to what consequence?

Being revealed to

Just as speakers usually have listeners, revealers usually have confidants. In this section, we turn to the perspective of the person being revealed to.

Antecedents

Children as young as 6 years of age understand the social meaning of secret sharing and expect that, if a person shares their secret with someone, the pair must be friends; and the stronger the friendship, the greater the expected obligation to keep the secret [33,34]. It is thus an early social intuition that revealing secrets and relationship strength are mutually linked: people share their secrets selectively with close others, and doing so can deepen relationships.

Who gets confided in? Those who tend to elicit sharing from others in general (i.e., “high openers”) are more likely to be confided in than others, as a consequence of being more receptive, attentive, and asking more follow-up questions [35]. Those who are compassionate and assertive are also more likely to be entrusted with others’ secrets, whereas those who are socially enthusiastic (i.e., those who are positive, excited, and enjoy social interactions) and polite (i.e., those who are concerned with rules and norms) are less likely to be confided in [7]. While revealers may look first and foremost for trustworthy confidants that are likely to understand them and unlikely to spread the secret, it is likely that the confidant’s capability to help is what predicts whether revealers gain new insights into their secret [26].

Consequences

Just as holding onto a personal secret is associated with an array of negative outcomes, holding onto someone else’s secret exacts a toll as well. More significant secrets, more negative secrets, and secrets that constrain the confidant’s freedom of expression impose greater negative affect and cognitive burden on the confidant [36]. In addition, features of the relationship matter: confidants with a closer relationship with the confider and greater overlap with the confider’s social network report feelings of burden from having to carry the other person’s secret [14].

On the other hand, the consequences of being a confidant can be positive as well. Confiding is considered an act of intimacy, and confidants report feeling glad that the revealer trusted them enough to be honest with them about their secret [14]. Consequently, people who are confided in report feeling closer to the confider [14]. This is consistent with the general effect of liking people who self-disclose to us [e.g., 2, 37], but revealing a secret likely has unique social effects of its own. Being confided in, for instance, can give the confidant the feeling that the revealer relies on them, which can heighten a personal sense of power [38].

Future directions

It seems that the person who confides often gets help and that the person who is revealed to often feels closer and more positive toward the revealer. How does the confidant’s willingness or reluctance to be entrusted with a secret influence outcomes for the confider and confidant? Do certain people experience more of the benefits from learning others’ secrets, while others who are less fitting confidants (e.g., low openers; people who are polite and especially concerned with rules) experience more of the costs?

Importantly, the findings on what people look for in their confidants can be applied to intervention design.

For example, training healthcare professionals to focus on compassion may allow their patients to feel more trusting, open, and honest [7]. In these clinical contexts, factors like high stress levels among healthcare providers diminish their ability to be attentive to and connect with their patients [39]. Implementing compassion-based interventions among healthcare professionals may help make patients more comfortable disclosing sensitive information to their healthcare providers. This increased honesty, in turn, could result in higher-quality care and strengthened patient–provider relationships [40].

Revealing others’ secrets

When we confide our secrets in others, we of course hope those secrets stay safe. Yet by one estimate, 26% of the secrets we confide in others may be passed along to someone else [28].

Antecedents

When do people reveal others’ secrets? The more that the confidant considers the confided secret to be immoral, the more likely the confidant is to reveal the secret to someone else as a means of punishing the behavior (e.g., warning others about a bad actor, tarnishing the secret keeper’s reputation), an effect that is explained by the confidant’s emotional reactions such as moral outrage, anger, and disgust [28]. Thus, the choice of who to confide in is critical (see section on Revealing a Secret). One would be best served by confiding in someone who would not have a strong moral reaction to the secret.

Additionally, feeling close to a third party predicts divulgence of the confider’s secret to that person [41], whereas higher relationship satisfaction between the confider and confidant predicts greater discretion by the confidant, likely due to feelings of loyalty and trust [41]. In other words, being the bearer of another person’s secret may involve a tradeoff between closeness and loyalty to that person (by keeping the secret) and closeness to and honesty with a third-party audience (by revealing the secret to them), especially when the secret involves morally questionable behavior relevant to the third party [42].

Future directions

What else might predict revealing others’ secrets? Perhaps feeling burdened by another’s secret makes the confidant more likely to discuss it with someone else. Other relevant factors may include closeness with the confider, the perceived importance of the secret, the secret’s relevance to the confidant, and the availability of other ways to address or resolve the secret.

Even less is known about the consequences of passing secrets along to third parties. Recent work suggests that

confidants' decisions, when observed, can influence observers' perceptions of the confidant's morality (based on honesty) and likability (based on loyalty), in opposing directions, depending on whether the secret was kept or revealed (particularly when it comes to something unethical) [42].

Moving to the dyad, even young children appreciate the relationship maintenance function of keeping others' secrets, understanding that a failure to maintain confidentiality can harm the relationship between the confider and confidant [33]. However, empirical demonstrations of this relational harm, as well as other outcomes, are lacking. Longitudinal studies may help to capture individual, interpersonal, and social network outcomes as they evolve over time.

Confession

Finally, while revealing a secret to a third party is an instance of confiding, confessing involves revealing a secret to the person it was intentionally kept from, which often concerns wrongdoing.

Whereas feelings of remorse and guilt motivate confession, as people seek to relieve these distressing negative emotions [43], feelings of shame about the secret's content can inhibit confession, as people find it difficult to let others know what they have done [44,45]. Yet when people do confess, they experience relief from shame as well as guilt [43–46]. Confession, however, can also lead to a variety of negative personal and relational consequences [44,46].

There remain many open questions when it comes to interpersonal confessions. Do individual differences predict the tendency to be honest about a wrongdoing, and does the likelihood or consequences of confession differ as a function of the confession target or context? How do people weigh the short-vs. long-term benefits of confession?

Conclusion

Revealing a secret makes one vulnerable, both in the moment of revelation and afterward. Yet revealing is also the best way to get help with a secret, and aligns with expectations of honesty and openness in close relationships. Decisions to reveal secrets will also reflect personal and culturally variable attitudes around privacy, expression, stigma, shame, relational obligation, and group harmony. When researchers examine real personal secrets, several new insights into revealing secrets should come to light.

We are only just beginning to learn how secrecy processes unfold for those who must decide whether to confide and for those who are confided in. Much about sharing secrets remains to be revealed.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest
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