The Social Consequences of Keeping a BIG Secret

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What are the Social Consequences of Keeping a BIG Secret?
Secrets

Part of everyday life and social relationships (Vrij et al, 2002)

Difficult and distressing to keep (Lane & Wegner, 1995)

Make people physically ill (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988)
Hypotheses

Individual Level

Social Withdrawal Hypothesis
OR
Hypervigilance Hypothesis

System Level

Secrets will alter relationships, with or without others knowing about the secret
Social Network

Secret Keeper

Participant, doing phone sex for money

Ex-husband, shares custody

Uninvolved

Confidant

Best-friend, tells about calls
Secret Keeper – Secret Target Relationship

Social Withdrawal
Withdrawal

Hypervigilance
Monitor
Act “normal”
Avoid the secret

Secret Keeper

Secret Target
Secret Keeper – Secret Target Relationship

Withdrawal?
Suspicion?

Secret Target

Secret Keeper
Secret Keeper – Confidant Relationship

Social withdrawal AND
Hypervigilance
Focus on secret
Secret Keeper – Confidant Relationship

Withdrawal? Support?
Method - Overview

Real world, large secrets

Many social ties

Communication over time
Method - Participants

Recruitment: many online locations (facebook, craigslist, mechanical turk ...), flyers

1,014 screened, 179 met criteria
Inclusion criteria: big secret, active gmail user ...
Exclusion criteria: suicidal, schizophrenic, deletes many emails ...

61 secret keepers
57.4% female
19 – 45 years old (mean = 25)
Method – Procedure & Design

Questionnaires (secret keeping, personality, contacts…)

Provided a sample of incoming and outgoing emails

1 month before secret
1 - 11 months during secret
> 5 secret relevant contacts
> 10 secret irrelevant contacts
Method – Secrets

71% Romantic or sexual
32% Family, mental health, addiction
15% Financial, work
5% Physical health

“I would be completely disowned and alienated from my family and some of my friends”

“Arrest, jail, maybe prison”
Method – Email Corpus

1,014 Contacts, 67,000 Emails, 4.7 Million words

~32.9 Direct emails per contact
~70 Words per email

i finally got rid of (I think); he sent me a text message at some point (a text message!) that said, ‘is it okay to tell you i miss you?’ and i told him i didn’t want to hear from him again until/unless his marriage is over. so that’s a relief. he just doesn’t seem to understand that if i’m not having sex with him, he’s of no use to me.
Method - Analyses

Cleaned text
Grouped by secret keeper – contact
Processed with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count
Weighted multi-level models

IV: Time (before, during) X Contact type
DV$s$: Hypothesized language markers
Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship

Social withdrawal

Hypervigilance
Emails per month ↑
Present tense ↑

Secret Keeper

Secret Target
Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship

Withdrawal

Suspicion
- Emails per month ↑
- Length of emails ↑
- Question marks ↑

Secret Keeper

Secret Target
Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship

- asks about keeper's health
- sends artwork
- asks about target's sleep
- says going to doctor
- asks about keeper's health

Secret Target | Secret Keeper
Results – Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

Social withdrawal AND Hypervigilance
Focus on secret

Struggling to find meaning
Negative emotion words ↑
Past tense ↑
Insight words ↑
Causal words ↑

Secret Keeper

Confidant
Results - Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

Withdrawal

Supportive
- Emails per month
- Length of emails
- Language Style Matching

Secret Keeper

Confidant
Results – Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

“Of course, nothing will happen, but I still feel very very guilty. I had smaller crushes before, but nothing like that.”

Secret Keeper
Discussion

Individual Level

Social withdrawal hypothesis
OR
Hypervigilance hypothesis

System Level

New Methodological Approach
Discussion

Individual Level

Social Withdrawal Hypothesis
OR
Hypervigilance Hypothesis

System Level

While keeping a secret secret keepers maintained and strengthened relationships

New Methodological Approach
Discussion

Individual Level

Social withdrawal hypothesis

OR

Hypervigilance hypothesis

System Level

While keeping a secret secret keepers maintained and strengthened relationships

New methodological approach
Research conducted with …

Paul Lee, Jennifer Landa, Rachel Greene, Maria Capecelatro, Nikki Vu, Lisa Arriaga

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