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Kristyn Marie Jackson, Student

Dr. Ronald J. Werner-Wilson, Major Professor

Dr. Hyungsoo Kim, Director of Graduate Studies

SECRECY IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Kristyn Marie Jackson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Ronald J. Werner-Wilson, Professor of Family Sciences

Lexington, Kentucky

2016

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### SECRECY IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The studies included in this dissertation investigated the experiences of individual romantic partners as secret keepers and couples as collective secret keepers. Study 1 investigated the topics of secrets kept by individual romantic partners and public perception of secret keeping in the context of romantic relationships via qualitative content analysis. The analysis of secret topics resulted in the following themes: (1) secrets about the Redditors' relationship, (2) secrets about the Redditor, and (3) a discussion of secrecy. The analysis of public perception resulted in the following themes: (1) normalization, (2) advice, (3) comfort, (4) personal reactions, and (5) a request for more information.

Study 2 investigated the experiences of collective secret keepers. Inductive analysis was used in the analysis of participants' ( $n = 522$ ) responses to questions investigating: (1) the topics of collective secrets, (2) the reasons for keeping or disclosing the secret, and (3) the reasons for disagreeing over the disclosure of the secret. Further analyses revealed a relationship between secret topic and the overall relational impact of collective secret keeping ( $F(27, 385) = 1.64, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$ ); some topics were found to be more distancing than others. A relationship between relationship satisfaction and disagreement between spouses over the disclosure ( $F(1, 310) = 5.83, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ )

was also found; disagreement on the disclosure of a secret was found to result in lower relationship satisfaction.

Study 2 also investigated the relationship between collective secret functions and relational outcomes via multilevel modeling. A relationship between secret functions and the following relational outcomes were found when the collective secret was kept: relational impact ( $\chi^2 = 14.18$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), relational closeness ( $\chi^2 = 14.18$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and relationship satisfaction ( $\chi^2 = 17.60$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A relationship between secret functions and the relational impact was also found when the collective secret was disclosed ( $\chi^2 = 3.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

**KEYWORDS:** Secret Keeping, Romantic Relationships, Collective Secrets, Public Perception, Mixed Methods

Kristyn Marie Jackson

June 30, 2016

SECRECY IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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June 30, 2016

*For my mom, who always believed that I could do anything. I did it.*

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Over the past few years, I have learned quite a bit about endurance. Since meeting my husband, Lewis, I have been immersed in the world of endurance competition, proudly serving as a cheerleader at many of his races. One of the most inspiring elements to the sport of triathlon is the dedication needed to persevere—dedication that is almost always accompanied by blood, sweat, and tears. Despite the training, frustrations, and uncertain victories, Lewis has always shown up with a belief that he can do it. My dissertation has proven to be my triathlon and I will forever be grateful to Lewis for having taught me about endurance and for showing up as my cheerleader, always reminding me that I could do it, mopping up my sweat and tears throughout the entire process.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Secrecy in Romantic Relationships**

In the most intimate of relationships, secrets exist (Petronio, 1991). Regardless of the topic, underlying motivation, or the type of relationship in which the secret occurs, secrecy is known to harbor a number of consequences for both the secret keeper and the person from whom the secret is kept, most of which are negative (e.g., Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Although a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to secret keeping, few studies have yet to explore secrecy exclusively in the context of romantic relationships. Consequently, researchers do not possess a rich understanding of the effect of secrecy on romantic partners and their relationships.

The research that has been conducted has focused almost exclusively on secrets that occur within the whole family system (e.g., Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), with little focus on the romantic dyad. Researchers have not yet explicitly studied secrecy within the context of romantic relationships despite the knowledge that secrecy is a common and potentially devastating phenomenon experienced by romantic partners (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Because secrecy is a frequently experienced and complex occurrence in romantic relationships, it is important to further explore this phenomenon in order to better inform clinicians' and researchers' understanding of secrecy with the aim of contributing to research that may strengthen romantic relationships.

In order to study secrecy, it is important to first define the concept. Secrecy, which is often interchanged with the term concealment, is conceptualized as the

purposeful decision to withhold information from at least one other person (Bok, 1983).

The information that individuals withhold from each other can either relate to the self (e.g., potentially embarrassing or damaging information) or others (e.g., information that the secret keeper has been asked not to disclose). Secrets may also encompass a number of topics ranging from the benign to more distressing information (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), indicating the complexity of secret keeping.

Furthermore, secrecy within this context may also involve both romantic partners keeping a collective secret or information that is intentionally withheld from others outside of the relationship (Petronio, 2002) and may either relate to the couple or others.

The existing literature does not adequately address secrecy occurring within romantic relationships. Secrecy is a frequently misunderstood phenomenon, by both the general public and clinicians, particularly within this context. Contributing to this misunderstanding is the delicate balancing of the disclosure and concealment of personal information that romantic partners are continually engaged in within their relationships (Parks, 1982). Furthermore, secrecy may involve one romantic partner as the secret keeper or both romantic partners as collective secret keepers. Due to the many facets of secret keeping, it is important to research secrecy between romantic partners in order to develop a more refined understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Secrecy most likely occurs in all romantic relationships. However, although common, secrecy is understudied. It is unclear as to how romantic partners experience and navigate secret keeping, both as secret keepers and as the partner from whom a secret is kept. Perhaps as a result of being an understudied phenomenon, secrecy is most

frequently discussed as a negative relational event (e.g., Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). However, secrecy is also known to serve several important functions for secret keepers in the context of family relationships (e.g. Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). It is important to study this topic in an exploratory and impartial manner so that clinicians and researchers may possess a better understanding of secrecy including the topics, motivations, and relational effects of secrecy. Conducting this research was done with the goal of allowing for more open dialogue regarding secrecy within the context of romantic relationships.

### **Significance of the Study**

Secrecy is associated with a number of outcomes for both the secret keeper and the person from whom the secret is kept (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Finkenauer et al., 2009). However, little is known about how romantic partners experience secrecy and the effects that secrecy has on romantic relationships. It is important to understand how secrecy impacts the individual romantic partner and the romantic dyad as a system. Existing studies investigating secrecy have focused on why partners conceal (e.g., Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005) and how perceived concealment is experienced by romantic partners (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2009; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). While this research has made a significant contribution to understanding this phenomenon, the systemic nature of secrecy is often overlooked. It is important to acknowledge the impact that secrecy has on the individual romantic partner and the romantic dyad as a whole. As a result, the studies conducted in this dissertation attempted to contribute to this gap in knowledge by exploring the topics, motivations, and relational outcomes of secrets kept within romantic relationships. Furthermore, via a mixed

methods approach, the studies attempted to provide the reader with a larger systemic view of secrecy through the perspective of the romantic partner as an individual secret keeper and romantic partners as collective secret keepers.

### **Introduction to the Dissertation**

The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate secrecy from the perspective of the individual secret keeper and the romantic dyad as collective secret keepers. In order to address the objectives of this dissertation, a mixed methods approach was used. The first study consisted of a qualitative approach while the second study included both quantitative and qualitative elements. Throughout the exploration of secrecy in romantic relationships, the proposed studies examined the topics, motivations, and relational outcomes of secrets. The first study used data collected from an online discussion board in which participants were asked to identify the one secret that they will never voluntarily disclose to their romantic partner. The second study used data collected from an online survey administered to married couples who identified as collective secret keepers, meaning that they were currently sharing or had shared a secret that was kept from others outside of their relationship. The goal of these studies was to develop a nuanced understanding of secrecy occurring within romantic relationships.

This dissertation utilizes a traditional, five-chapter format. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the dissertation, providing background information on secret keeping. The significance of the study, rationale for the research approach, and research questions guiding the study are also discussed in the first chapter. Chapter two provides a detailed literature review. Included in the literature review is existing literature relating to secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. Chapter three describes the

methodology utilized in the studies in order to explore secrecy. Additionally, chapter three outlines the results of the dissertation. Chapter four includes a detailed discussion of the results of the studies. The discussion includes a thoughtful analysis of the study results in order to assist the reader in understanding the implications of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. Finally, chapter five includes a conclusion to the dissertation.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This dissertation used a mixed methods approach to explore secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. In order to most effectively address the purpose of this dissertation, two studies were conducted. The first study addressed secrets that romantic partners keep from each other while the second study addressed collective secrets kept by romantic partners. The first study examined secrets kept by individual romantic partners but disclosed in an online forum. The second study explored the collective secrets that are kept by romantic partners. Through the exploration and study of secrecy, these studies attempted to provide insight into secrecy in order to provide clinicians and researchers with knowledge that will assist them in understanding and addressing this phenomenon in the context of romantic relationships.

### **Research Questions**

The gap in the current literature presented a need for the study of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. In order to address the gap, this dissertation was guided by the following central research question: *How do romantic partners experience secrets in their romantic relationships?*

**Study 1 central research question.** How do individual romantic partners experience secrecy as the secret keeper?

Sub Questions

RQ1: What are the topics of secrets that romantic partners keep from each other?

RQ2: What is the reaction of outsiders to secrecy within romantic relationships?

**Study 2 central research question.** How do romantic partners experience collective secret keeping within their relationships?

Sub Questions

RQ1: What are the topics of collective secrets?

RQ2: Why are collective secrets kept or disclosed?

RQ3: Why do spouses disagree on the disclosure of a collective secret?

RQ4: What is the relational impact of keeping collective secrets, according to secret topic?

RQ5: What is the relational impact of disclosing a collective secret, according to topic?

RQ6: What is the relationship between agreement on the disclosure of a collective secret and relationship satisfaction?

RQ7: What is the relationship between collective secret functions and the self- and partner-reported relational impact of collective secret keeping?

RQ8: What is the relationship between self- and partner-reported relational closeness and collective secret functions?

RQ9: What is the relationship between self- and partner-reported relationship satisfaction and collective secret functions?

RQ10: What is the relationship between the self- and partner-reported relational impact of disclosing a collective secret and collective secret functions?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this dissertation, the following definitions are provided:

1. **Secret keeping:** The process of intentionally withholding information from at least one other individual (Bok, 1983).
2. **Collective secret:** A secret that is co-owned, or shared, between two or more individuals (Petronio, 2002).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Romantic Relationships**

The past decade has witnessed a notable transformation in the landscape of marital trends. Alternative long-term relationship options, including cohabitation, are on the rise while the rate of marriage is in slow decline (Cherlin, 2010). Researchers have also noted an increasing rate of delayed marriage, relationship dissolution, and divorce (Sassler, 2010). Consequently, the modern marriage is characterized as one that is centered on personal fulfillment rather than the assumption of traditional roles and obligations (Cherlin, 2004). For some, the simultaneous increase in informal unions and decrease in marital unions is a cause for alarm. However, it is important to note that this shift does not necessarily indicate a lessened desire for or valuing of commitment but rather a redefining of what long-term commitment looks like.

While popular media has portrayed younger Americans as holding apathetic attitudes toward commitment and marriage, researchers have found that this is not the case. Many young Americans view long-term commitment and marriage as something that is desirable and an important lifetime achievement (e.g., Gassanov, Nicholson, & Koch-Turner, 2008). Furthermore, the majority of unmarried individuals report a desire for the emotional and physical intimacy that is frequently associated with long-term romantic relationships (Sassler, 2010). Having a spouse, cohabiting partner, or steady partner is known to benefit the overall health and well-being of romantic partners in satisfactory relationships. With a changing relational landscape, it appears that now, more

than ever, it is important to understand the many factors that influence romantic relationships.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the change in today's relational landscape, research has not yet expanded to examine the increasing array of relationship types and configurations. Perhaps due to the relative ease of confining the study of romantic relationships to marital relationships, the majority of research on relationship quality has focused primarily on heterosexual marital relationships (e.g., Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). However, researchers have noted that the increase in cohabitating relationships may muddy existing theories and findings regarding the benefits of marriage for individual and relational outcomes (e.g., Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Of the research that has been conducted, cohabitation is generally known to provide greater advantages for cohabitating versus unpartnered individuals (Carr & Springer, 2010). Although, partners in cohabitating relationships do not enjoy the same economic and psychological benefits that marital partners do.

Marital quality is defined as a global evaluation of marriage based on positive and negative aspects of the relationship, attitudes towards one's partner, behaviors, and interactional patterns (Robles et al., 2014). A significant area of research over the past decade has been the examination of physical and mental health outcomes of romantic partners according to marital quality (Sassler, 2010). In a recent meta-analysis of the literature, relationship satisfaction was found to be positively related to personal well-being (Robles et al., 2014). As discussed in the review, marital satisfaction has been consistently linked to reports of global happiness and self-esteem for both wives and husbands, demonstrating the far reaching implications of marital quality. Higher marital

quality is marked by high self-reported relationship satisfaction characterized by positive attitudes towards one's partner, low levels of hostility, and few negative behaviors. Conversely, low marital quality is characterized by overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards one's partner and higher levels of hostility and negative behaviors.

A significant area of research over the past decade regarding marital quality has been the examination of physical and mental health outcomes for married versus unmarried individuals. One of the most salient findings in this body of research is that lower marital quality, marked by higher levels of conflict, has the ability to drastically affect the physical and mental well-being of both spouses (Sassler, 2010). In a meta-review conducted by Proulx, Helms, & Buehler (2007), marital quality was found to be positively related to one's personal well-being. For instance, a numerous longitudinal studies demonstrated that marital satisfaction is important for the initiation and maintenance of health enhancing behaviors such as diet and exercise, greatly benefiting an individual's overall physical health (Robles et al., 2014). Additionally, a number of cited longitudinal studies also demonstrated marital quality to be predictive of increases in depressive symptomology, a covariant for changes in depressive symptomology, and also associated with increased risk for major depressive episodes (Whisman & Bruce, 1999).

In addition to affecting physical and mental health outcomes, marital quality is also known to influence social-cognitive and affective processes. The way in which spouses think about their relationships in unhappy versus happy marriages may play an important role in explaining the association between marital quality and the aforementioned physical and mental health outcomes that are known to exist (Proulx,

Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Robles et al., 2014). For instance, spouses in unhappy marriages often assign blame for their own negative behaviors to their partner while simultaneously failing to acknowledge their partners' positive behaviors (e.g., Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011). Distressed couples also display greater negative affect, hostility, and escalation of conflict during conversations with their partners compared to non-distressed couples which ultimately interferes with the level of intimacy experienced by these couples (Heyman, 2001). Based on these findings, emotional regulation appears to play a central role in the link between marital satisfaction and overall well-being.

In the discussion of today's changing relational landscape, it is also important to mention the importance of studying same-sex relationships. Unfortunately, up to this point, sexual orientation is not a factor that has been extensively studied in the context of relational quality and relational outcomes (Robles et al., 2014). What is known about same-sex relationships is that many same-sex couples share similarities with opposite-sex couples, including a change in relationship satisfaction over the progression of their relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 2004). With regard to differences, same-sex couples are much more likely to experience discrimination as a result of their sexual orientation in ways that may contribute to physical and mental health issues as well as relationship quality and stability (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Taken together, the research that has been conducted on romantic relationships demonstrates the importance of conducting further research in order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the relational events and processes that may affect individual and relational outcomes for romantic partners. In particular, it is important to understand the

influence of communicative processes that allow for emotional regulation and conflict resolution within romantic relationships. A brief review of the communication in romantic relationships follows.

### **Communication and Romantic Relationships**

Communication consists of both verbal and nonverbal elements, meaning that it is not only what is said that matters but also what is done or perceived. The communication that occurs in romantic relationships has the potential to influence how romantic partners think about each other, behave toward each other, and how they feel about the overall health of their relationship (Vangelisti, 2011). Researchers are even able to predict, with astonishing accuracy, whether or not a relationship will continue or end based on the presence or absence of various communicative behaviors known to predict relationship satisfaction and stability (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Although only one aspect of a romantic relationship, the influence that communication patterns exert on the overall well-being of romantic relationships demonstrates the importance of understanding the communication processes in these relationships.

The most satisfied couples are those who are able to overcome difficulties in their relationships, most often accomplished through clear and effective communication (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). Unlike non-distressed couples, distressed couples are often caught in a cycle of negative reinforcement, engaging in fewer supportive behaviors with each other over time (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Furthermore, distressed couples spend more time in conflict and exhibit more conflict avoidance than do non-distressed couples (Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988), contributing to a negative relational environment. Researchers see more criticizing, complaining, disagreeing, and

sarcasm exhibited in conflictual situations (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1983). Eventually, the negative affect so frequently demonstrated in conflictual interactions becomes reciprocal, with both partners showing more negative than positive affect toward each other (Weiss & Heyman, 1990; Levenson & Gottman, 1985), resulting in markedly lower relationship satisfaction. These findings demonstrate the need to further explore communication within the context of romantic relationships. In particular, it seems imperative that researchers examine secrecy, which is more often perceived than communicated explicitly, but nevertheless has the potential to drastically influence relationship outcomes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To adequately address the complexity of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships, this dissertation pulls from two complementary theoretical backgrounds. Family systems theory conceptualizes the family as a whole, where the actions of each individual member have the potential to impact other family members and the entire system (Broderick, 1993). In the discussion of secrecy, it is logical to include the systemic effects of such a phenomenon. Regardless of whether or not that secret is eventually disclosed, the secret will carry repercussions for the entire family system, as it also influences the individual family member acting as the secret keeper.

Another theory of value to consider is communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2010). What CPM offers to the foundation of this dissertation is an explicit discussion of how individuals manage private information, including how individuals decide on what information they will conceal, from whom they will conceal that information, and how they will accomplish that concealment. It is important to have

a clear theoretical backing for the process of secrecy. Together, family systems theory and CPM provide a framework through which to conceptualize the process of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. Both of these theories are reviewed in detail below.

**Family systems theory.** Family systems theory emerged from general systems theory (GST), a theory developed to explain the behavior of complex, organized systems (von Bertalanffy, 1975). Since the introduction of GST, many theories, including family systems theory, have arisen to explain the interactions and behaviors of specific systems. There are several core assumptions of GST that are applicable to the study of all systems, including the interactions and behaviors that occur within the family system.

A core assumption of GST is that systems theory has the potential to unify science (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Systems theorists believe that, through the general study of systems, all systemic processes share similarities in the way that they operate. A key term used by systems theorists is isomorphism, which refers to the ability of the components and interrelationships of one system to be placed in direct correspondence to those of another system. This assumption implies that the same basic rules apply to the understanding of all systems; many of these rules are used in the study of family relationships, including romantic relationships.

A significant contribution of GST to the study of families is the assumption that any system under examination must be studied as a whole (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Systems theorists argue that there is no way of understanding a system through the examination of its individual parts in isolation. Wholeness emerges from the unique arrangement of each family system and the transactions between family members that

result from the arrangement. Without the consideration of wholeness, systems theorists argue that it is not possible to see or understand certain interactions or behaviors. Family theorists, in particular, assert that the holistic quality often attributed to families results from the unique characteristics, rules, roles, communication patterns, and power structure that each family possesses (Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2009), which are important considerations to take into account when studying secrecy between romantic partners.

Systems theorists also assume that all individuals and families are self-reflexive, meaning that individuals and families are capable of self-monitoring (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Self-reflexivity allows for an individual's and family's interactions and behaviors to be the object of examination, leading to important feedback that is made possible through communication among family members. The process of self-reflexivity also allows for families to establish and accomplish goals. Through communication between family members and input from the environment surrounding the family, families are able to create meaning for themselves as a whole. A related assumption made by systems theorists is that of equifinality. Equifinality refers to the belief that all systems may achieve the same goal through different means which is determined through the self-reflexivity of the particular family or system.

All family processes are assumed to occur as a part of the system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). What this means is that the focus is shifted away from individual family members to the family. Families are said to exhibit interdependence and mutual influence, meaning that the behaviors of family members influence the entire family system in some manner. However, rather than focusing on the study of specific

behaviors, family theorists focus their attention on how individual family members interact and function under a set of assumed rules (Smith et al., 2009) that are often established through the hierarchy that exists among the family's subsystems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). These rules result from repetitive patterns of interaction that are reinforced by feedback loops which are closed circuits along which information is traced from one point in the system to another. Established feedback loops allow for the system to maintain a pattern of behavior. Negative feedback loops are used to restore or maintain equilibrium in the family when a deviation occurs. Usually, negative feedback occurs when one or more family members attempt to initiate a change. Positive feedback loops, on the other hand, occur when change is deemed necessary, allowing for and sometimes encouraging deviations.

Systems theorists also assume that each system possesses boundaries (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Within a family system, boundaries determine: (a) the degree of involvement within the family and (b) the emotional connectedness or separation among family members. These boundaries dictate the family members' commitment to each other as well as their interactions with the outside world (Smith et al., 2009). More open family systems possess more permeable boundaries which allow for greater interaction with the outside world whereas closed family systems possess more rigid boundaries which often discourage interaction with the outside world. When discussing secrecy, particularly collective secrecy, it is important to consider the role that boundaries may play in influencing how secrecy is managed.

Family theorists have also proposed specific family types that are based on the permeability of the boundaries established by the system (Smith et. al, 2009). Open

families are described as democratic. Members of open families enjoy the protection of individual rights and permission to interact with the outside world surrounding them, allowing for healthy interactions. Additionally, open families exhibit love and respect which is referred to as mutuality. Conversely, random families possess minimal boundaries and are often described as disengaged with family members making transitory commitments to each other and the system. Closed families are those that are overly involved in the lives of each other. In this type of family, individual identities are difficult to foster and the family is described as closed off from the surrounding world.

Family systems theorists have also advanced assumptions in the study of family relationships that complement the existing assumptions of GST (Smith et al., 2009). The first of these assumptions is that relationship problems are the result of pathological communication. Pathological communication refers to an unclear and confusing way of communicating and includes both mystification and indirect communication.

Mystification refers to situations in which the speaker denies the reality of the situation when saying that nothing is wrong when there obviously is something wrong. Indirect communication refers to instances in which family members beat around the bush rather than communicating clearly about an issue. In both instances of pathological communication, dysfunction results.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of general systems theory, family systems theorists assert that each family member in a system takes on a unique role (Smith et. al, 2009). Roles are defined as patterns of behavior that are fostered through interactions between family members. These roles are used to fulfill various family functions. It is through communication between family members that families determine how each

unique family role should be played out. These roles, therefore, may be unclear or unsatisfactory to family members if pathological communication is present in the family system.

As a result of these core assumptions and the contributions of family systems theorists, systems theorists have made several important contributions to the study of family interactions. Hess and Handel (1959) studied various family interactions and concluded that there are five “essential processes” associated with families. Two of these processes are very relevant to the study of secrecy between romantic partners. The researchers argued that family interaction allows for the establishment of patterns of separateness and connectedness and also establishes boundaries in the system’s interaction with the external world. The concept of separateness-connectedness, which is an integral component of communication privacy management theory, is critical to understanding how romantic partners manage secrecy within the confines of their relationships.

**Communication privacy management (CPM) theory.** The management of private information is a complicated process, especially when it occurs within the context of a family system. Individual family members simultaneously strive to maintain a sense of self and connectedness through the careful balancing of the concealment and disclosure of their private information within the system (Petronio, 2010). When private information is shared, the discloser makes the decision to break a personal privacy boundary that cannot be reestablished. The finality of breaking such a boundary reflects the careful consideration that must be taken prior to disclosing any information. Regardless of the nature of the relationship shared, CPM argues that every individual

feels entitled to keep their private information private. The finality of sharing private information explains the vulnerability associated with the disclosure of information such as secrets. Once something is shared, it cannot be unshared.

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory discusses the regulation of private information between two or more individuals (Petronio, 2010). The theory is particularly useful in conceptualizing the exchange of concealed information between individuals who share an intimate relationship, such as romantic partners. CPM was originally framed to address private information management through a communicative perspective while embracing a systems approach. The unique approach of CPM has allowed for many meaningful contributions to researchers' understanding of concealment. Most notably, CPM has advanced a dialectical framework that can be used to understand the complexity of sharing and withholding private information.

CPM posits that family members are both connected and separate from each other, reflecting the dialectical tension between openness and closedness that occurs in every intimate relationship (Petronio, 2010). Within the confines of the family system, the disclosure of private information means opening a personal boundary to other family members, making that information public to the family. The sharing of such information presents risk for the discloser, as he or she no longer has direct control over the information. Therefore, Petronio argues that individuals must use caution when deciding what and how much is disclosed to others. Revealing too much may leave the discloser feeling a lack of individuality and conflict. It can be argued that what an individual values about private information management is the decision to choose how much and what someone else knows about them.

CPM asserts that the dialectical tension experienced by individuals is what necessitates private information management (Petronio, 2010). Individuals are continually making decisions about how they will manage their private information. Part of this management process is the consideration of others. Decisions are made about whether others may be trusted with the information and how the disclosure of the information will impact the existing relationship. CPM makes a unique contribution to the understanding of secrecy by demonstrating how individuals in intimate relationships establish interconnected privacy boundaries as well as an indication of why some intimate partners may experience difficulty in disclosing some pieces of private information.

CPM also accounts for the recipient of disclosed private information. In the context of a romantic relationship, in particular, individuals are faced with the demands of managing needs for intimacy and autonomy (Petronio, 1991). When a romantic partner discloses private information, they must manage how the information is disclosed in order to minimize the risk to themselves and to their romantic partner. Consequently, communication boundaries are regulated according to how the interaction with the recipient of the disclosure is perceived to proceed. The response from the receiving partner may or may not fit with the discloser's perceived expectations. Other research argues that positive outcomes result in relationships in which there is complementarity (Markey & Markey, 2007), meaning that when a need of one partner is fulfilled, there is a corresponding level of satisfaction for the other partner and the relationship. Therefore, the disclosure of private information, including secrets, can be argued to be a rather complex process. Sometimes, perhaps due to a lack of perceived complementarity,

romantic partners may choose to keep secrets to protect themselves, their partners, and their relationships.

There are several key principles underlying CPM (Petronio, 2010). The first of which is the idea that private information is owned. Private information is defined as any piece of information that is perceived as belonging to an individual. With the perception of ownership is also an assumption of a basic right to privacy. Therefore, individuals view any private information shared as privileged information. Additionally, when ownership is assumed, it is thought that the information may be managed in any way that the owner sees fit. The owner of private information has no obligation to share that information with any other individual, including a romantic partner.

The second CPM principle discusses the control of private information. Because individuals perceive ownership over their private information, they are argued to believe that they have the right to control the information however they see fit. This level of control varies according to the degree of privacy that the individual desires to maintain. For instance, more distressing pieces of private information will most likely have impermeable boundaries that greatly restrict access to that information. On the other hand, a less distressing piece of information will have more permeable boundaries. As is demonstrated by these first two principles, private information management is a highly subjective process.

The third CPM principle discusses the rules-based system that exists around private information (Petronio, 2010). The owner of the private information is the sole decision maker when it comes to determining when, how, and with whom the information may be shared. For instance, the information owner may decide that the

information is never to be shared or that he or she will only ever share that information with their romantic partner. If the private information is shared with another individual, as may be the case with a collective secret, new rules will be negotiated that will discuss how the information will be handled, reflecting the adaptability of the rules-based system (Durham, 2008). The fourth principle relates to co-ownership of private information, a principle that is particularly salient when discussing collective secret keeping between romantic partners. Co-ownership is established whenever private information is shared with another individual. It is expected that co-owners of private information will mutually agree upon privacy rules, meaning that there will be a discussion. However, while this information is now considered the property of multiple individuals, it is often found that the original owner still perceives ultimate authority over that information (Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). This perception of ultimate ownership may help to explain any discrepancies or disagreements that occur between co-owners of private information.

The complexity of private information management and co-ownership inevitably leads to complications, as discussed by the fifth CPM principle (Petronio, 2010). Boundary turbulence violations occur whenever a private information management rule is broken. These violations may be intentional or unintentional. For instance, unclear boundaries may lead one romantic partner to disclose information that the other romantic partner is not comfortable disclosing which would result in boundary turbulence. The intricate nature of coordinating co-ownership reflects the importance of clear discussion of how the private information will be managed.

The way that privacy management is conceptualized by CPM makes it a valuable theoretical lens through which to study concealment in the study of romantic

relationships. CPM takes the family system into account, recognizing that private information management is not a process that occurs in isolation. Whether or not a romantic partner decides to share private information with his or her romantic partner or other individuals, there are multiple systemic considerations to be made; CPM demonstrates this to be an active rather than passive process.

The use of family systems theory and CPM allows for the conceptualization of secrecy as an interactive and fluid process. Regardless of how a romantic partner is involved (i.e., either as a co-owner of the secret or as a target of the secret), both romantic partners and the relationship will, in some manner, be affected. The use of both theoretical lenses has led the researcher to develop the primary research question: *How do romantic partners, both individually and collectively, experience concealment within the context of their romantic relationships?* Through acknowledging a systemic influence on secret keeping, this approach will add depth to the understanding of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. In order to provide further background information for this dissertation, the current literature discussing concealment will be reviewed in the following section.

### **Secret Keeping**

Secret keeping is discussed as an aspect of private information management. However, while secrecy can easily be categorized as a form of private information management, it is also a unique phenomenon. Unlike other pieces of private information, secrets are distinct in that they contain information that is intentionally withheld and hidden from others (Bok, 1983). Compared to other types of private information, secrets are less accessible and are known by fewer people (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis,

1993), indicating the importance of recognizing the impact that secrecy may have on intimate relationships.

Like many communicative processes, secrecy does not exist in isolation. Whether or not secrets are eventually disclosed, secrets are known to affect a number of individuals including the secret keeper and the target of the secret (e.g., Cottle, 1980). Those secrets pertaining to secrets kept within a family system are frequently referred to in the literature as family secrets. Family secrets take one of the three following forms: (a) a secret held by the entire family system from outsiders, (b) a secret held by some family members from others in the family system and outsiders, or (c) a secret kept by one family member from others in the family system and outsiders (Karpel, 1980). Because family system relationships are some of the most intimate and influential relationships experienced, it is important to understand the implications of family secrets on individual family members and the family system.

**Secret keeping in romantic dyads.** While romantic partners may choose to believe that they share an open relationship void of secrets, it is well known in the literature that this type of relationship is rare and perhaps even harmful (e.g., Cole, 2001). Rather, romantic partners often choose not to disclose various pieces of information to each other; instead, making the conscious decision to withhold and hide information as a result of the vulnerability associated with disclosure and a desire to maintain a sense of individuality (Petronio, 2002). Secrecy in romantic relationships has frequently been cited as a form of relationship preservation (e.g., Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005), protecting both the secret keeper and his or her romantic partner from the perceived consequences of disclosing the secret.

As mentioned, the relational ramifications of disclosure are often reported as a primary concern for secret keepers in romantic relationships (Caughlin et al., 2005). However, despite the goal of relationship preservation, it is known that a number of negative consequences exist for both the secret keeper and his or her partner (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Secret keepers and their romantic partners report experiencing decreased relationship satisfaction (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Vangelisti, 1994) as well as lower levels of perceived closeness (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Furthermore, romantic partners who have some intuition that their partner is keeping a secret from them frequently experience resentment (Finkenauer et al., 2009) as a result of the emotionally distancing message that secrecy conveys (Petronio, 1991). Only in rare circumstances (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000) are secrets reported to be beneficial in the context of romantic relationships.

Secrecy can best be described as a slippery slope. In addition to affecting relationship satisfaction, secrecy also negatively affects trust within a relationship (Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012). As a result of lowered relationship satisfaction and trust, romantic partners often engage in a reciprocal pattern of secret keeping (Uysal et al., 2012). Rather than addressing perceived secrecy, the romantic partner who perceives the secrecy often begins keeping secrets of their own. Eventually, engaging in reciprocal secrecy corrodes the very foundation of the relationship, leading romantic partners to share less with each other, ranging from the mundane to their more significant thoughts, beliefs, and values. As evidenced by the existing literature, when an individual keeps a secret from his or her romantic partner, there are a number of negative consequences for both partners. Consequently, it is important to understand what topics romantic partners are not

comfortable sharing with each other and why that may be so that researchers and clinicians may work in tandem to improve romantic relationships.

**Collective secrets.** Secrecy involves a relational element that is further complicated when there is more than one secret keeper (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). The creation of a collective secret introduces the concept of co-ownership (Petronio, 2002), which entails an explicit agreement among the secret keepers regarding how that information will be further managed. Additionally, collective secret keepers are creating a new boundary for both themselves and for others (Friedman, 1977; Riess, 1981), deciding how much others will know about them and their relationship. Some researchers have gone so far as to assert that when a collective secret exists, that secret dictates every interaction between the secret's co-owners. The intimate and encompassing nature of collective secret keeping undermines the importance of understanding how romantic couples navigate the process of creating and managing these secrets.

Collective secrets cover a wide number of topics ranging from shared family traditions to the more stigmatized topics such as substance abuse or family traumas (Imber-Black, 1993; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). While little is known about the specific collective secrets that romantic partners may keep together, Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) reported that substance abuse, sexual preferences, physical and psychological abuse, and marital problems are commonly reported as collective secrets kept by the entire family system. Some of these topics may arguably be more stigmatized in the society at large (Bradshaw, 1995), leading some couples and families to be more secretive about certain topics compared to others.

For some, collective secrets may provide both positive and enhancing functions (e.g., Bochner, 1982), while collective secrets may be experienced as a harmful stressor for others (e.g., Imber-Black, 1993). A research study conducted by Vangelisti (1994) explored the specific functions that collective secrets serve for the individuals who share them. Among these functions are: (a) *bonding* which results when families report experiencing increased cohesiveness, (b) *avoiding negative evaluation* from others outside of the family system, (c) *maintenance* which allows the family system to remain close while avoiding outside stressors, (d) *preservation of privacy* allowing for information irrelevant to others to remain within the family system, and (e) *defense* which protects the family system from any malicious attack that may result from disclosure of the secret information. While it may be tempting to assume that some of these functions are positive and preferred, it is important to keep in mind that collective secrets serve different functions for different family systems (Imber-Black, 1993) and that the importance of these functions will also vary according to the family system in which they occur.

The majority of the existing literature suggests that collective secrets lead to a number of negative consequences. For instance, it has been argued that withholding information from others outside of the family system can result in harmful emotional consequences (Pennebaker, 1990). However, it has also been argued that secrecy fosters a unique bond between the secret keepers, perhaps even defining the very nature of certain relationships and interactions (Imber-Coppersmith, 1985). Much of this discrepancy may be explained by the topic of the collective secret. Imber-Black (1993) categorized collective secrets as follows: (a) *taboo topics* – those topics considered inappropriate for

discussion such as extramarital activity, (b) *rule violations* – those topics involved with breaking rules that are common to many families such as not allowing underage minors to drink, and (c) *conventional secrets* – those secrets focusing on information that is not necessarily bad but that is inappropriate for discussion such as sexual preferences. Essentially, what may be considered a taboo topic by one family but not be considered to be so by a different family.

With regard to those secrets that are exclusively kept by romantic couples, little research has been conducted. The research on collective secrets kept by romantic couples has focused almost exclusively on family planning decisions (e.g., Durham, 2008; Durham & Braithwaite, 2009). Little is currently known about how romantic couples navigate collective secrets and how collective secrets impact their relationships. However, as is acknowledged by family systems theory, the family system is one that is heavily influenced by all interactional processes occurring between its members (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2008), including communicative processes. Therefore, it is important to understand how collective secrets uniquely contribute to the relational well-being of romantic partners.

### **Disclosure of Secrets**

The disclosure of private information, including secrets, is an inherently vulnerable process (Petronio, 1991). When an individual makes the decision to disclose a piece of personal information, he or she has no way of predicting how the recipient of the disclosure will react. Despite the uncertainty surrounding disclosures, individuals disclose deeply personal information in a variety of settings (e.g., Derlega, Winstead, Folk-Barron, 2000; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001). What is key for a

discloser is possessing the belief that the recipient of their disclosure will be accepting, supportive, and open to the disclosure (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Ros-Mendoza, 1996). However, it is also important to note that disclosures may vary according to the content and context in which they are to occur (e.g., Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992). Thus far, little research has been conducted to explain disclosure of secrets in the context of romantic relationships.

Several theoretical frameworks exist that may help in explaining why secret keepers choose to disclose their secrets. The fever model posits that when individuals conceal troubling information, it builds up, resulting in distress (Stiles, 1987). The distress experienced is compared to that of a fever resulting from an infection. Individuals are thought to be likely to disclose the troubling information in order to alleviate the distress and return the mind and body to a healthier state (Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992). Similar to the fever model is the preoccupation model of secrecy (Lane & Wegner, 1995). According to the preoccupation model, secrecy results in rumination. The model posits that, in order to suppress a secret, individuals must actually think often about the secret in order to avoid revealing any information related to it. In attempts to avoid the secret, thoughts related to the secret are continually reintroduced into one's consciousness, commonly resulting in disclosure. An additional model, the self-perception theory, proposes that concealment leads to negative perceptions about the self as well as shame and guilt which eventually result in disclosure (Bem, 1972).

More active models such as the disclosure decision model (DDM; Omarzu, 2000) view disclosure as a conscious decision. DDM argues that people identify goals that they wish to accomplish as a result of disclosing private information. These goals are often

established to achieve positive self-image, relief, catharsis, or becoming closer to someone. The benefit of reaching these goals is weighted against any potential risk of disclosing before the final decision to disclose is made. Relatedly, the revelation risk model (RRM; Afifi & Steuber, 2009) posits that individuals first assess the risk associated with the disclosure of their secrets. Based on this risk assessment, a disclosure is made if the risk to themselves, their relationships, and other people are considered low. RRM also argues that people are more willing to disclose under certain conditions including: (a) catharsis, (b) if the recipient of the target has a right to the information or needs to know, and (c) if others are encouraging the person to disclose the information.

**Disclosure of secrets kept from romantic partners.** Little is known about the disclosure of information that romantic partners keep from each other when it occurs outside of the romantic dyad. However, what is known is that there are certain contexts in which the disclosure of secret information is more likely to occur. One such context is the Internet. The Internet is unique in that it offers a number of arenas in which to disclose personal information. These arenas include online forums, social networking sites, and personal blogs among others (Joinson & Paine, 2010). Given that the Internet is a widely accessible arena in which people do disclose secrets related to their relationships, it is an interesting arena to explore the disclosure of secrets kept from romantic partners.

The online disclosure of personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences is a rather common occurrence (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998), especially with the introduction and widespread use of social media. The willingness to disclose information online has been best described as the “stranger on the train” phenomenon. Essentially, individuals disclose intimate details about their lives to complete strangers with the knowledge that

they will, in all likelihood, never encounter those individuals again (Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011), thereby avoiding many of the frequently cited consequences of disclosures and perhaps providing the disclosure with sought after relief.

A number of factors including anonymity (Bargh & McKenna, 2004), an increase in private awareness and decrease in public awareness (Joinson, 2001), and an online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) have all been investigated to provide an explanation as to why online disclosures are both frequent and intimate for some individuals. However, some researchers suggest that none of these factors are responsible for the vast amount of online disclosures that occur. Rather, online disclosures are thought to be a goal-oriented behavior (Attrill, 2012; Qian & Scott, 2007) in which disclosures are carefully thought out and disclosers select a context that they believe to be appropriate to reveal certain personal information (Tang & Wang, 2012).

The most extensive and intimate disclosures have long been observed on message boards, blogs, and forums with general audiences (Barak & Gluck-Offri, 2007). The depth and intimacy of disclosures made in these contexts is reflective of the depth and intimacy of disclosures made by the initiators of these messages, indicating that an established norm of disclosure exists online. Once a norm of disclosure is established among those participating, both the intimacy and reciprocity of disclosures are found to increase (Barak & Gluck-Offri, 2007; Dietz-Uhler, Bishop-Clark, & Howard, 2005). Therefore, for those individuals who choose to disclose secrets that they are keeping from their romantic partners in an online venue, doing so may be a normalizing experience.

While much research has been conducted on online disclosures, no single theory has yet been able to account for differences in the type and amount of online disclosures

(Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012). For instance, some researchers have found disclosures to be greater online (e.g., Attrill, 2012; Baker, 2005) while other researchers have found online disclosures to differ little from those that occur in face-to-face interactions. A recent meta-analysis revealed that the degree of online disclosures relies more on the relationship between the communicators, the mode of communication, and the context of the interaction rather than the fact that the disclosure occurred online (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012). What is evident based on this research is that the online disclosure environment is unique and may provide romantic partners who are keeping secrets with a unique opportunity to solicit feedback from others regarding their secret information as well as the opportunity to disclose the secret without any apparent consequence to their relationship.

**Disclosure of collective secrets.** The disclosure of collective secrets is an understudied phenomenon, especially in the context of romantic relationships. However, collective secrets affect relationships between family members (e.g., Cottle, 1980), revealing disclosure as a potentially important communicative act. The effect of disclosing a collective secret is known to be based on several factors including how the discloser identifies with the secret and how close the discloser feels to the other familial secret keepers (Bok, 1983). Consequently, revealing a collective secret has the potential to reveal a lot about the discloser's relationship both with the other secret keepers and with the person to whom the secret is told.

What is supported is the notion that the tendency to keep collective secrets is directly related to the secret keeper's relational satisfaction (Imber-Black, 1993; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Because disclosure involves the risk of disapproval from

others, disclosure is thought to indicate a disregard for others' approval and dissatisfaction with the relationship when the disclosure is not first discussed with the other secret keepers (Imber-Black, 1993). Individuals who report being unlikely to disclose family secrets more frequently cite secret function such as evaluation, maintenance, privacy, and defense as important compared to those individuals who report being more likely to disclose family secrets (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Despite this existing research, little is known about how couples navigate the disclosure of collective secrets and how the disclosure of such secrets may affect their relationships. Consequently, an aim of this dissertation was to explore the disclosure of collective secrets in the context of romantic relationships.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

#### **Overview of Dissertation Methodology and Research Design**

A mixed methods approach was used to examine the research questions proposed by this dissertation. Such an approach resulted from the decision to explore secrecy within the context of romantic relationships from a comprehensive perspective. There is much to learn about secrecy within this context. For the purposes of this dissertation, secrecy was explored from the perspective of the individual secret keeper and the couple as secret keepers.

Mixed methods consist of qualitative and quantitative data analyses. Qualitative research provides the researcher with the ability to collect rich, deep data describing the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013) while quantitative data is particularly useful in the study of family processes by allowing the observation and measurement of various outcomes (Wampler & Halverson, 2009). While many mixed methods studies occur sequentially, with the quantitative study occurring first and the qualitative study following, this dissertation is non-sequential, meaning that the studies were conducted in no particular order. Study 1, a qualitative analysis of individual secret keeping behaviors in romantic relationships, aimed to examine the topics of secrets kept from romantic partners and public perception of such behavior. Collective secret keeping, or secrets shared by both romantic partners but kept from others, was examined in Study 2 through the use of quantitative measures and qualitative analysis. As mentioned, the goal of this dissertation was to provide the reader with an exploratory understanding of secrecy

within this context. The inclusion of multiple perspectives was done so with the hope of making a unique contribution to this topic of study.

## **Study 1: Methodology and Results**

### **Method**

Study 1 utilized a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the individual secret keeping behaviors of romantic partners. Qualitative content analysis is frequently used in the examination of communication materials ranging from narrative responses to printed media, including online discussion forums (Cho & Lee, 2014). The use of such an approach allows for the subjective interpretation of the content of textual data through the processes of coding and identifying themes or patterns that are present in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For this particular study, qualitative content analysis allowed for the researcher to gain an understanding of the individual secret keeping behaviors of romantic partners as well as the public response to this behavior through the systematic examination of textual data. A description of qualitative data analysis, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and strategies for ensuring validity and reliability follows.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

The objective of qualitative content analysis is to systematically describe the meaning of textual material (Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis is frequently used to answer questions such as what, why, and how in the investigation of social phenomena (Cho & Lee, 2014). To answer these questions, the researcher identifies patterns using an established set of codes to organize the data. Qualitative content analysis is also unique in that it allows for the researcher to approach the research

questions inductively, deductively, or as a combination of both approaches (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). An inductive approach is used when existing knowledge of the phenomenon is limited making it an appropriate approach for the study of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. A final element of qualitative content analysis that made it appropriate for the present study is that it allows for the study of manifest and latent meaning of content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In the present study, the researcher examined the manifest, or surface, content of the data as well as the latent, or underlying meaning, of the content.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

In recent years, the online context has become an increasingly social environment in which people interact in a number of ways (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Participation in social media sites has resulted in the online disclosure of personal information (McKenna & Bargh, 2004). With the knowledge that an increasing number of social interactions are occurring online, particularly those of an intimate nature, data was collected from a popular online forum, Reddit. Reddit is a social networking website that allows for registered community members to submit content, including text, images, and links to outside websites. Registered users are able to vote submissions “up” or “down” to organize posts on the discussion board. More popular posts appear at the beginning of the discussion board. A wide number of topics are discussed on Reddit, reflecting the user based orientation of the website.

Reddit has a strict privacy policy. While some user data is collected to allow for participation in the Reddit community, Reddit does not readily share user information with outsiders. Private information is shared in the following instances: to stop spam,

gaming, or when legally mandated. When a Reddit user creates an account, they are required to provide a username and password and may opt to provide an email address. Reddit logs, and retains indefinitely, the IP address from which the account is created. At no point did the researcher have access to Reddit users' IP addresses. Concerning posts and comments made by Reddit users, they are considered public and are, therefore, never deleted from the Reddit server. Reddit stores the IP address associated with posts, comments, and private messages for 90 days after they are made.

In the past several years, Reddit has surged in popularity. To date, Reddit has 208 million visitors each month, 64% of which are male and 36% of which are female, who view an average of 8 billion pages. The median Reddit user age is 35.20 years and has a median annual household income of \$67,973. Reddit users, on average, spend 11 minutes and 11 seconds on Reddit for each viewing session.

The online discussion board from which the data was collected was generated by a Reddit user, referred to as the original poster (OP), and was designed to ask community members about secrets kept from their significant others. The OP posed the following question to Reddit users: "*Dear Reddit: Do you have any secrets that you will never tell your significant other (SO), no matter how close you get to him/her?*" In order to study this discussion board, the following questions will be used throughout the analysis:

- What are the secret topics discussed in the discussion board?
- What are the reactions of the online community members to the disclosed secrets?

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis involves the systematic coding and categorizing of textual materials (Cho & Lee, 2014). This method of analysis requires that the researcher

reduce the data, meaning that the focus of the study is placed on selected aspects of data. Doing so allows for the researcher to stay closer to the essence of the words and events present in the data. Essentially, qualitative content analysis precludes the researcher from over-interpretation of the data, allowing the data to speak for itself (Sandelowski, 2000).

The present study followed the procedural steps outlined by Mayring (2000). The researcher: (a) selected a unit of analysis (the disclosure and subsequent responses from community members), (b) created categories based on the text, and (c) established themes based on the created categories. Selecting the unit of analysis was dependent upon the research questions and allowed for the reduction of data to a focused and manageable amount. Further reduction occurred when the researcher broke down the data into categories that shared similar meaning and allowed for cohesive interpretation (Weber, 1990). An important feature of categories is that they are both mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Cho & Lee, 2014), meaning that there is no overlap and no possibility of data falling between two categories. After the categories were established, the researcher identified themes as a means of linking the underlying meaning of categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The researcher used the following guidelines proposed by Mayring (2000) for the analysis of the forum discussion:

1. Identification of the research question(s)
2. Determination of categories and levels of abstraction
3. Development of inductive categories from the data
4. Revisions of the categories
5. Final working through of the text
6. Interpretation of the results

**Strategies for validating findings.** When evaluating the findings of qualitative content analyses, evaluation is based on the credibility, transferability, and dependability of the data (Guba, 1981). To ensure that these three criteria are met, researchers may use several strategies including triangulation, member checking, the use of representative quotations, external audits, and peer debriefing. For the purposes of the current study, the researcher employed peer debriefing, external audits, and representative quotations, each of which is discussed below.

*Peer debriefing.* Peer debriefing, also known as peer review, involves an external audit of the research procedure and analysis. The researcher identified a peer who served as the reviewer. The peer encouraged the researcher to remain honest through asking questions about the methods, interpretation, and meanings of the findings which will be facilitated by a discussion of the researcher as instrument. The peer review was ongoing throughout the study. The researcher met with the peer prior to data collection in order to help familiarize them with the study and to practice the coding method in order to enhance the coding process.

After collection of the data was complete, the peer played a greater role throughout data analysis in order to encourage the researcher to provide a more accurate illustration of the results. The peer helped to create codes, and provided feedback throughout the data analysis process.

*External Audits.* External auditing requires the researcher to allow external consultants to assess the methods and findings of the study. In order to complete the external audit, researcher gathered the opinions of the dissertation committee members. The external audits occurred in two core sessions. First, the external audit occurred

during the dissertation proposal meeting. The committee had the opportunity to provide feedback that will be aimed at strengthening the study. A second audit will occur once the dissertation is submitted to the committee. The committee will analyze the results and discussion, and will assist the researcher in strengthening any present weaknesses of the study. In addition to these audits, the dissertation chair and committee members were available throughout the course of the study to provide feedback.

*Representative quotations.* Representative quotations involves including segments of the data in the reporting of the study findings. The inclusion of such quotations allows for the reader to gain a clearer understanding of how the researcher arrived at the categorization and interpretation of the data. The researcher selected several key text segments that represented the coding process and resulting themes.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Researchers serve as the key data collection instrument for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). The researcher collects data by interacting face-to-face with participants, combing through archived information, and by other means that could potentially invite bias. It is important to emphasize that the personal experiences and biases of the researcher have the ability to impact each stage of the study from the conceptualization of the study to the interpretation and presentation of findings. The process of exposing personal experiences and biases that may influence the research is referred to as bracketing. As the qualitative researcher and key data collection instrument in this dissertation, I will disclose my own experiences and biases that may have influenced my interpretations.

My interest in researching secrecy within the context of romantic relationships stems from my personal, professional, and educational experiences. As a spouse, I believe that intimacy attained through openness is a valuable and critical element to my marriage. However, I also believe that complete openness is unrealistic in any relationship. I do not advocate harboring damaging secrets that would have the potential to seriously rupture my relationship but I do advocate keeping enough hidden to maintain a sense of individuality within the confines of my marriage. The secrets that I choose to keep often relate to issues that I have not yet figured out how to think about or how to handle. In a sense, these secrets are to protect myself from exposing a vulnerability that I am not yet ready to expose. I do, however, believe in a policy of openness as far as admitting to my spouse that there are things that I have not yet disclosed to him. It is my own curiosity of learning more about secrecy and the impact that secrecy has on relationships that has led me to research this phenomenon. This curiosity is what also may influence my interpretation of the study findings.

In addition to my personal experiences, my professional work has also greatly influenced any beliefs or biases that may be present in this dissertation. Most significant is my work as a marriage and family therapist. I have maintained a private practice over the past few years in which I routinely work with romantic couples. Throughout my clinical experiences, I have learned that secrecy is a common phenomenon experienced by the majority of couples who I have worked with. Although both partners may acknowledge that secrecy is something that is common and to be expected, there is also a certain level of discomfort that I have detected while working with these individuals. I have encountered numerous situations in which a secret or knowledge of a secret has

been revealed. The effects of these revelations are wide ranging—some romantic partners react rather favorably and do not chide their partner for keeping the secret while other partners experience a deep sense of betrayal.

Through my clinical work, in particular, I have developed a desire to gain a clearer understanding of how romantic partners navigate and experience secrecy. I believe that it is fair to say that my work with couples has left me with certain beliefs or biases regarding secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. For example, I believe that the way in which romantic partners react to secrecy is largely influenced by societal trends. For example, with the rise of social media, I often hear individuals expressing concern over what activities their partner may be secretly engaged in, citing the laissez-faire attitude of social media users when it comes to discretion. Additionally, I believe that secrets are not altogether a negative relationship event. I have witnessed the revelation of secrets that have both damaged and strengthened relationships—I cannot help but think that individual and relational characteristics are what truly contribute to the impact that secrecy has on romantic relationships. As a result of these beliefs, the manner in which I will interpret the data may be biased.

In addition to my personal and professional experiences, my clinical training and education may also influence this dissertation. Throughout my graduate education, I have been encouraged to think systemically when interpreting social phenomena. As a result, I believe that any action made by an individual has an effect on the entire system to which he or she belongs. Secrecy, therefore, is a phenomenon that is best understood in the context of a system rather than as an occurrence that affects one individual. The study findings will, therefore, unavoidably be interpreted through a systemic lens. While my

experiences and beliefs have the potential to bias the findings of this dissertation, several strategies will be used to minimize the effects of these biases. These strategies will include: peer review, rick, thick description, clarifying researcher bias, and external audits, all of which were previously discussed.

## **Results**

### **Secret Topics**

The secrets shared in the Reddit thread conveyed a common belief that there are some things left better undisclosed in romantic relationships (see Table 3.1). Participating Redditors anonymously responded to the thread with secrets that they never intend to disclose to their romantic partners. The first research question focused on investigating the topics of these secrets. Through careful analysis, three main themes emerged: (a) information about the Redditor's relationship with his or her significant other, (b) information about the Redditor, and (c) the discussion among Redditors of why secrecy is even a topic for discussion.

**Let's not talk about us.** A number of Redditors reported keeping secrets about the very nature of their relationships with their romantic partners. There were three areas that Redditors deemed off limits: (a) dissatisfaction with one's romantic partner, (b) extradyadic activity, and (c) former relationships. The overarching sentiment throughout this theme was the thought that disclosing such information would harm either the Redditor, the Redditor's romantic partner, or the relationship.

*Dissatisfaction with partner.* Redditors reported keeping secrets about their dissatisfaction with their romantic partners from their romantic partners. Dissatisfaction manifested in terms of questioning commitment, making negative judgments about one's

Table 3.1

*Themes and Subthemes of Secrets Kept from Romantic Partners by Reddit Users*

Theme	Description	Example	Frequency
Let's not talk about us	Secrets pertaining to the Redditor's relationship	"I no longer feel the same way about her."	90 (29.13%)
<i>Dissatisfaction with partner</i>	Secrets related to commitment, negative judgments about one's partner, or dissatisfaction with one's sexual relationship	"He is hands down the worst lover I have ever had."	28
<i>Extradyadic activity</i>	Secrets related to any romantic or sexual thought or behavior that threatened the integrity of the Reddit user's relationship	"I develop crushes on people I know."	31
<i>Former relationships</i>	Secrets related to former romantic or sexual relationships	"That all those tricks she loves in bed I learned from an ex who was a stripper."	31
My skeletons	Secrets pertaining to the Reddit user	"I lied to almost all the girlfriends I had, including the current one, about professional trips around the country. I do do this so I have some me time."	129 (41.74%)
<i>Mental health</i>	Secrets related to the Reddit user's mental health issues ranging from substance abuse to clinical disorders	"That I think about killing myself every single day."	45

Table 3.1 (continued)

<i>Unaccepted sexual behavior</i>	Secrets related to what Reddit users perceived as unacceptable sexual behaviors	“I prefer masturbation over any kind of sex ever, and I feel uncomfortable talking about it even to my closest friends.”	43
<i>Personal identity</i>	Secrets related to the Reddit user’s identity or personal insecurities	“I’ll never tell him how often I cry before I see him because I don’t want him to touch the fat on my body.”	41
Why are we even talking about secrets?	A discussion between Redditors regarding the occurrence of secrets in romantic relationships	“It always makes me ponder, we won’t tell our S.O.’s the secret, yet we will tell Reddit.”	90 (29.13%)
<i>I am not sharing my secret with Reddit</i>	Reddit users who discussed an unwillingness to disclose on the thread but admitted to keeping secrets	“You have no reason to share everything. It can be the end of a good relationship.”	55
<i>We share everything</i>	Reddit users who reported that they do not keep secrets from their significant others	“If he’s the right one, he will understand and accept me.”	35

Note. N = 309

partner, and being dissatisfied with certain aspects of the sexual relationship. With regard to commitment, Redditors reported questioning their initial attraction to their partner and of being unsure of the current or future state of the relationship. For instance, one Redditor reported that “I no longer feel the same way about her” while another reported “That she’s not the one.” Redditors frequently stated that it was better to keep these questions of commitment to themselves in order to avoid hurting their significant other. In most cases, Redditors reported that their significant others were more committed to the relationship than they were as was evidenced by statements such as, “I really don’t want to break her heart.”

With regard to sex, Redditors reported dissatisfaction with their sexual relationship as a result of poor quality, frequency, or an inability to suggest new sexual acts with their partners. Dissatisfaction was expressed in statements such as, “while he is the best relationship I have ever had, he is hands down the worst lover I have ever had.” There appeared to be a protective factor here—Redditors did not want to make their partners feel inadequate or to embarrass them. For other Redditors, the secret appeared to serve as protection for themselves against rejection from their romantic partners. One Redditor shared, “That there’s one or two things I’d want to try in the bedroom, but I already know from our conversations that she wouldn’t be interested in trying.”

Along these same lines, Redditors also reported choosing to protect their partners by withholding negative judgments about their character flaws rather than discussing them. One Redditor stated, “All of her problems are her own doing, and she lacks the willpower and motivation to do anything about it and it really makes me despise her sometimes.” As a result of their feelings for their partners, Redditors reported being

hesitant to disclose these judgments. A post shared on the thread detailed an instance in which the Redditor's ex-girlfriend drunkenly blamed him for his brother's suicide. In the same post, the Redditor shared his decision to not discuss the incident with her by stating, "I know that she would never forgive herself for having said that, and there's enough pain in the world."

*Extradyadic activity.* Redditors reported keeping secrets from their romantic partners about extradyadic activity in which they had engaged. In this analysis, extradyadic activity was defined as any romantic or sexual thought or behavior that threatened the integrity of the relationship. Redditors reported extradyadic behaviors ranging from outside attractions to affairs. For some Redditors, attraction to another individual was considered something that could never be disclosed. One Redditor stated, "I develop on crushes on people I know...It's almost like having a celebrity crush on someone I see regularly." For others, the secrets related to an outside love. In one post, a Redditor reported: "I have been married for 1 year now and the only reason I'm with my wife is because I am in love with her identical twin sister." Admissions of emotional affairs appeared to be accompanied with a concern for the impact that such a disclosure would have on their current relationship. Physical affairs were also reported. For example, one Redditor stated, "I have also had sex with three different women on the same day, one being you. I'm sorry." In most cases the Redditors do not appear to condone their behavior; if anything, the Redditors appeared ashamed of their extradyadic activity and even uncertain as to why they chose to pursue an extradyadic encounter. One Redditor remarked: "I guess we sometimes just get bored."

*Former relationships.* Former romantic or sexual relationships were also reported as topics that will never be disclosed to the Redditors' romantic partners. The thought behind keeping these secrets was summed up by a Redditor who stated: "Just a general policy. Not going to discuss anyone that I had sex with before you, in any way. Not how many, or what they looked like compared to you, or what they were especially skilled at, or their dimensions, or their gender or species for that matter." Redditors who reported an unwillingness to disclose information about former romantic or sexual relationships reported the thought that there would be no benefit to disclosing details of such relationships. For instance, one Redditor alluded to possible consequences for his current relationship should he discuss a former sexual relationship: "That all those tricks she loves in bed I learned from an ex who was a stripper."

**My skeletons.** Redditors also reported keeping many secrets about themselves from their significant others. There were four subthemes that were reported as secrets: (a) mental health concerns, (b) unaccepted sexual behaviors, and (c) matters of identity. The Redditors who reported such secrets reported a desire to preserve the favorable image that their romantic partner had of them.

*Mental health.* There were certain mental health issues that were shared as secret topics that will never be disclosed. The mental health issues discussed in this thread included substance abuse, suicidal ideation or attempts, and clinical diagnoses. A number of Redditors reported a reluctance to discuss former or current substance abuse with their romantic partners. The substance abuse ranged from experimentation: "I will never tell my girlfriend that I've experimented with LSD and mushrooms" to ongoing substance abuse: "I will never tell my ex that I did a bunch of drugs while I was dating her."

Suicidal ideation and former attempts were also classified as secrets by Redditors participating in the thread. One post stated, “That I think about killing myself every single day,” while another post stated, “I tried to hang myself. Not a problem anymore.” These posts highlight the varying reasons reported by Redditors for keeping such secrets. For some, the secret was kept in order to prevent burdening one’s romantic partner while others viewed it as an irrelevant issue. For similar reasons, Redditors also reported keeping clinical diagnoses secret from their romantic partners. A Redditor stated: “I’m bipolar, I was diagnosed my freshman year of college...I don’t see a point in telling a girl, it’s no different than not telling a S.O. about having diabetes, it requires medicine and lifestyle changes, but doesn’t affect your partner if controlled.”

*Unaccepted sexual behavior.* There were a number of Redditors who reported keeping what they perceived as unacceptable sexual behaviors from their significant others. For many, there seemed to be an air of uncertainty about how their significant others would react to such information. The behaviors included in this category were: masturbation, risky sexual behaviors, virginity loss, and sexual fantasies. With regard to masturbation, one Reddit user reported, “None of the guys I’ve dated and slept with know that I prefer masturbation over any kind of sex ever, and I feel uncomfortable talking about it even to my closest friends.” Other sexual preferences were deemed off limits, as illustrated by the following secret: “I am extremely kinky. My wife has an inkling of it and has told me that she prefers not to know.” For those Redditors who kept secrets about the loss of their virginity, there seemed to be a protective factor for the Redditor’s romantic partners. One Redditor stated, “I actually had sex with a serious girlfriend before her, but couldn’t tell her because I was her first boyfriend (first with everything)

and wanted to be my first.” Here, the sentiment appeared to be that there was no way that the Redditor’s significant other would accept or understand the sexual behaviors that the Redditors had engaged in or desired.

*Personal identity.* There appeared to be a number of disclosures on the Reddit thread that related to an inability or unwillingness to share personal insecurities or matters of identity with one’s significant other. Redditors reported not sharing embarrassing incidents, personal insecurities, and even their true identity with their significant other. For instance, one Redditor was fired and pretended like it had never happened: “Only a couple of days after my wife moved in with me (when we were dating), I got fired from my job...I told her that I had quit my job.” Another Redditor discussed body image issues: “He knows I have body image issues, but I’ll never tell him how often I cry before I see him because I don’t want him to touch the fat on my body.” Another Redditor stated, “I lied to almost all the girlfriends I had, including the current one, about professional trips around the country. I do this so I have some me time.” The Redditors appeared unable to reason that their significant others could be accepting of these personal issues relating to various aspects of their identities.

**Why are we even talking about secrets?** A subset of Redditors chose to participate in the thread but did not share their secrets with the Reddit community. Rather, these Redditors commented on the occurrence of secrets in romantic relationships. Redditors who participated in this manner were divided into two groups. One group of Redditors reported keeping secrets from their romantic partners but refused to disclose their secrets. This group posed the question of why an individual would disclose a secret to anyone in any forum if it were truly a secret. The other group of

Redditors denied keeping secrets from their romantic partners, reporting that they saw no reason to not tell their romantic partners everything.

*I am not sharing my secrets with Reddit.* For Redditors who did not disclose on the thread, the belief appeared to be that it is best not to disclose secrets in any forum, including an anonymous Reddit thread. For example, one Redditor stated, “It always makes me ponder, we won’t tell our S.O.’s the secret, yet we will tell Reddit. Funny how that goes.” Additional posts revealed that the hesitation to share in such a context was also related to the possible consequences of doing so: “You have no reason to share everything. It can be the end of a good relationship.” Some of these consequences, were reported as those that would directly damage the secret keeper. Apparently, some secrets were a source of shame for Redditors: “It’s a secret that I won’t tell anybody, not even a therapist. I’m too ashamed.” Others advocated for the importance of maintaining an individual identity in a romantic relationship. One Redditor shared, “Nobody has to know everything about you, not even your S.O. It’s good to keep some things to yourself, that way you never lose you in a relationship.”

*We share everything.* Redditors who denied keeping secrets from their romantic partners were adamant that secrets should not be kept in romantic relationships both to ward off possible negative consequences and to enrich one’s relationship. One Redditor shared an experience that he had with his romantic partner that supported this belief: “I found out a lot of unpleasant things about her and I actually feel like our relationship has become stronger as a result.” There was a common sentiment here that if the Redditor’s romantic partner was the right one, that the partner would be accepting of any secret: “I’m planning on marrying my S.O., I tell him everything. If he’s the right one, he will

understand and accept me.” Others alluded to shame, dismissing it: “I had told my boyfriend my deepest, darkest secrets after we’d been dating for a week. He did the same for me. I have no idea why, but we were never once ashamed of our pasts with each other.” Interestingly, shame was also something discussed by the group of Redditors who chose to participate in the thread but not to disclose. Regardless of the exact reason for sharing everything, these individuals appeared to have an open book policy with their romantic partners.

### **What Reddit Thinks about Secrets**

Reddit is a unique internet phenomenon in that individuals who post to threads are provided with a slew of comments from the Reddit community that are both solicited and unsolicited. The second research question investigated the response of the Reddit community to the secrets disclosed on the thread. The analysis of these responses revealed five main themes: (a) normalization, (b) advice, (c) comfort, (d) personal reactions, and (e) comments requesting more information. Each individual theme is discussed in more detail below (see Table 3.2).

**You are normal.** Many of the responses were geared at normalizing the experiences of the secret keepers. Commenters frequently stated that the secret keepers were not alone in their experiences and that their experiences were even those that were shared by the commenters themselves. Many of the responses included words and phrases emphasizing that the secrets disclosed on the thread were “normal,” “common,” and “healthy.” One commenter, in response to negative feedback from other Redditors stated, “Don’t listen to these people. What they don’t realize (or more likely don’t want to realize) is that you are no outlier, you are not rare, you are the voice of thousands and

Table 3.2

*Themes and Subthemes of the Reddit Response to Secrets Kept from Romantic Partners*

Theme	Description	Example	Frequency
You are normal	Responses geared toward normalizing the experiences of the secret keepers	“Once again, Reddit proves that there is always at least one other person that has the same issues I do.”	134 (21.44%)
Here is my advice	Responses designed to provide advice to the secret keeper	“You are hurting your S.O. by not telling her.”	152 (24.32%)
<i>To tell or not to tell</i>	Responses discussing whether the secret keeper should eventually disclose the secret to his or her significant other	“If she can’t handle it, she has a problem.”	43 (28.29%)
<i>Situational improvement</i>	Responses providing advice aimed at improving the secret keeper’s current situation	“Work on your self-esteem.”	109 (71.71%)
Comfort	Responses that attempted to comfort the secret keeper as a result of the content of the disclosed secret	“You did what you had to do.”	41 (6.56%)
Let’s talk about me	Responses containing a personal reaction from the commenter	“God damn it. This infuriates me.”	215 (34.40%)
Tell me more	Responses meant to solicit more information from the secret keeper	“Out of curiosity, what changed?”	83 (13.28%)

Note.  $N = 625$

thousands of people who find themselves in the same position, but who wouldn't even be able to admit it on an anonymous thread.”

Other commenters attempted to normalize the secret keepers' experiences by sharing their own personal experiences. The essence of these responses was conveyed by statements such as, “same issue I have,” “I am speaking from experience,” and “you're not alone.” The communal aspect of Reddit was emphasized by the following statement made by a commenter: “Once again, Reddit proves that there is always at least one other person that has the same issues I do.” These responses communicated a sense of solidarity with the secret keepers as well as a reassurance to the commenters themselves that their experiences were normal.

**Here is my advice.** Reddit commenters also responded to the secret keepers' disclosures with advice. The original intent of the thread was to provide a forum in which to share secrets kept from romantic partners, not necessarily to be a place in which to give and receive advice. Interestingly, many commenters felt compelled to offer advice. The advice offered covered two categories: (a) whether the secret should be disclosed to the Redditor's romantic partner and (b) advice geared toward improvement of the secret keeper's current situation.

*To tell or not to tell.* Commenters were especially interested in providing advice as to whether the secret should be disclosed at some point to the secret keeper's romantic partner. Of the commenters who reasoned that disclosure would be beneficial, there were comments such as, “there is no reason not to share,” “it is important that your S.O. understands where you are coming from,” “if she can't handle it, she has a problem,” and “you are hurting your S.O. by not telling her.” The responses highlight a concern that the

Reddit community had for the secret keeper's significant other as well as the secret keeper. Commenters appeared to dismiss the potential consequences of disclosure in favor of the possible benefits that could result from disclosure.

Others strongly advised against disclosure under any circumstance. These commenters made statements such as: "The point is being alone is scary, and being with someone is better than being alone. We all have secrets we are ashamed of (mostly unnecessarily), and because you don't share every intimate detail with someone doesn't mean that person doesn't know you intimately." These responses not only discouraged disclosure to the Redditors' significant others but also discouraged future disclosures in any other context. For example, multiple commenters advised secret keepers, "take it to the grave," referring to the secret disclosed on the thread. However, there were also some responses that encouraged Redditors' disclosures on Reddit, including: "Airing your heart to an anonymous horde is what the Internet is for."

*Situational improvement.* Beyond advice about disclosure, advice related to the improvement of the Redditor's current situation was also provided. This advice extended to both self-improvement and the improvement of the Redditor's romantic relationship. The secret keepers were encouraged to do things such as "work on your self-esteem," "lighten up," and "get over this or you'll cause a lot of people a lot of pain, especially yourself." Commenters also provided relationship advice, with a particular emphasis on the future direction of the relationship. Comments included, "end your relationship," "don't settle," and "mutually establish the boundaries of your relationship." Here, the attitude of the commenters appeared to be that the secret keepers' significant others were not the right partners for the secret keeper if the secret existed.

Some commenters, who acknowledged that they did not have the answers for the secret keepers' problems but that help was needed, advised the secret keepers to seek out professional help. The commenters simply stated, "get help" or suggested specific resources with statements such as "look for online resources," "seek out a lawyer," or "see a therapist." These comments intimated a genuine concern for the well-being of the secret keeper and the person or people impacted by the secret.

**Comfort.** Numerous disclosures were also met with attempts by the Reddit community to comfort the secret keeper as a result of the content of the disclosed secret. In response to some disclosures, commenters offered praise to the secret keepers. Comments included phrases such as, "there's a lot of strength in you," "you did nothing wrong," and "you did what you had to do." The emphasis here was on ensuring the secret keeper that he or she had nothing wrong with them.

Commenters also responded to certain disclosures with apologies and well wishes. In response to particularly difficult disclosures, such as those referring to childhood trauma at the hands of one Redditor's parents, apologies included statements such as, "sorry you had to endure this," "sorry to hear," and "sorry that happened to you." Apologies were most common when the Reddit community appeared to feel that the discloser had been wronged in some way. Many of these disclosures were also met with well wishes. These statements included thoughts such as, "I wish you the best," "stay strong," and "sending positive thoughts your way."

**Let's talk about me.** In some instances, the commenters responded to the secret keepers' disclosures with a personal reaction. Many commenters responded by sharing the emotion that the disclosed secret elicited. Comments ranged from emotional upset: "I

am crying” and “made me sad” to delight: “I’m giggling” and “I needed to hear this today.” In response to particularly difficult disclosures, comments were made including this statement made in response to the disclosure of parental neglect: “God damn it. This infuriates me.” Along the same limes, commenters also responded with humor. One post on the thread joked about using Internet Explorer to which commenters responded with statements including, “You’re dead to me” and “Absolute scum of the earth.”

On occasion, commenters also conveyed their discomfort with the disclosures by responding with mocking or judgmental statements. Negative judgments included words and phrases such as, “gross,” “not something to be casual about,” “this is not okay,” and “you’re a horrible person.” Commenters also engaged in name calling in this same vein of thought, using a number of profanities to refer to the secret keepers. With regard to mocking, one example is the following statement: “Wow, you’re just gonna hog all that guilt? Not share it with some poor third world children who are DYING of lack of guilt? Ok then, feel free to continue using up all that precious guilt while the rest of the world suffers.” Whether the negativity was expressed through an explicit statement or sarcasm, it was apparent that the commenters were very disapproving of the secret disclosed and, in many cases, the way in which the secret keeper was handling the situation.

**Tell me more.** Some disclosures left the commenters wanting more. These responses either indicated that the disclosure left the commenter confused or that the commenter wanted clarification, more details, or wanted to know if the secret keeper was a specific person. For example, “story, please?” “out of curiosity, what changed?” “Could you elaborate on how you started building your confidence? Could be very useful to me.”

These responses seemed to indicate that the Reddit community was interested in and viewed participation in the thread as a conversation that was to be continued.

## **Study 2: Methodology and Results**

### **Method**

Study 2 consisted of quantitative and qualitative analyses in order to investigate the collective secret keeping behaviors of romantic partners. This approach allowed for the examination of the content of collective secrets as well as the relational ramifications of both keeping and disclosing collective secrets on marital relationships. The data was collected from married individuals who participated in an online survey designed to assess collective secrets. The online survey asked participants to complete several measures as well as to answer several open-ended questions focused on providing an explanation of the topics of their collective secrets, the reasons why they may have disclosed their secrets, and why, if applicable, they have disagreed with their spouse on disclosure of the collective secret. A detailed description of the sampling procedure and data collection procedures will follow.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The present study utilized a snowball sampling procedure (Babbie, 2012). Snowball sampling involves requesting that earlier study participants recruit future participants from their acquaintances. Undergraduate students participating in an introductory communications course were provided with an opportunity to earn extra course credit if they referred one married couple to participate in the study. The students were asked to provide potential participants with the researcher's contact information. After communication was established between potential participants and the researcher,

the participants were provided with an electronic link to the survey. Participants were eligible to participate in this study if they met the following criterion: (1) were over the age of 18, and (2) were currently married. The requirement for couples to be married was included to ensure that couples who were participating in the study were in committed relationships. While there are many couples who are in long-term committed relationships but who are not married, including same-sex couples who are prevented from doing so by state law, the inclusion criteria ensured that the participating couples would have enough knowledge of each other and their relationship to be able to answer the survey questions.

### **Sample**

The present study consisted of 522 married individuals, for a total of 261 married couples. The sample was 50% female and 50% male. 52.9% of couples were married 21 years or longer, 10.0% between 16 and 20 years, 4.5% between 7 and 10 years, 4.5% between 4 and 6 years, 14.4% between 1 and 3 years and the remaining 7.9% less than 1 year. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 80 ( $M = 43.18$ ,  $SD = 12.93$ ). The sample was primarily Caucasian (83.5%), followed by African American (6.0%), Asian American (1.4%), Hispanic American (2.2%), and Other (7.0%).

### **Informed Consent**

The informed consent (see Appendix A) was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to recruitment of participants. The IRB reviewed the informed consent in order to ensure the ethical treatment of all participants. All research participants read the informed consent prior to participating in the online survey. The informed consent consisted of several sections, including: the purpose of the study, the

study procedures, the benefits and possible risks of participating in the study, confidentiality and privacy information, and the participant's right to discontinue the study at any time without penalty. Completion of the survey indicated that informed consent had been granted.

### **Online Survey**

The online survey (see Appendix B) consisted of several established measures designed to assess secrecy, relational ramifications, and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, participants were asked several open-ended questions about the secrets that they have kept with their spouse from others outside of their relationship as well as information pertaining to the disclosure (if applicable) of the collective secret. Demographic information was also collected. The following questions and measures were used:

**Collective secret topics.** All participants who reported keeping one or more collective secrets with their spouse were asked, "Please identify and describe the most recent collective secret that you have kept with your spouse."

**Secret functions.** Vangelisti and Caughlin's (1997) secret function measure was used to assess the functions of the reported collective secrets. A total of 31 items rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) were used. All items were subjected to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation, using the criteria of a primary loading  $> .70$  and no secondary loading  $< .30$ . Two questions were dropped due to their failure to capture a unique function. The scree plot and eigenvalues indicated a seven-factor solution accounting for 74.86% of the variance (see Table 3.3). The seven factors and their respective reliabilities are as follows:

Table 3.3

*Rotated Factor Loadings and Communalities for Secret Function Items*

Factor	Item	Factor loading							$h^2$
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. Others' disapproval	1	<b>.83</b>	-.03	.12	.01	.21	-.05	.03	.75
	2	<b>.80</b>	-.06	.20	-.01	.20	-.10	.05	.73
	3	<b>.85</b>	.15	.04	.17	.08	-.01	-.12	.79
	4	<b>.82</b>	.19	.09	.16	.01	.02	-.16	.76
	5	<b>.83</b>	.10	.18	.11	.12	-.01	-.02	.76
	7	<b>.77</b>	.03	.17	.09	.12	.00	.05	.65
2. Protection from stress	9	.15	<b>.89</b>	.06	.14	.07	.11	.10	.86
	10	.13	<b>.88</b>	.24	.13	.03	.06	.03	.87
3. Relational damage	11	.17	.15	<b>.75</b>	.00	.21	.10	.06	.67
	12	.13	.10	<b>.89</b>	.14	.02	.08	.02	.85
	13	.16	.05	<b>.89</b>	.16	.08	.01	.02	.85
	14	.26	.04	<b>.74</b>	.06	.22	-.04	.06	.67
4. Third party ownership	15	.18	.11	.09	<b>.83</b>	.04	.12	-.02	.75
	16	.19	.04	.23	<b>.77</b>	.26	.22	.07	.80
	17	.11	.19	.07	<b>.71</b>	.26	.20	-.08	.67
5. Exploitative value	18	.29	.05	.17	.21	<b>.81</b>	.07	.05	.82
	19	.17	.02	.14	.11	<b>.86</b>	.14	.12	.83
	20	.23	.05	.20	.16	<b>.86</b>	.07	.08	.86
6. Privacy	21	.01	-.05	.09	.23	.05	<b>.75</b>	-.04	.63
	22	-.08	.04	-.01	-.13	.13	<b>.78</b>	.03	.65
	23	-.04	.12	.06	.23	-.07	<b>.77</b>	.02	.68
	24	-.02	.08	-.02	.19	-.01	<b>.77</b>	.12	.65
	25	-.00	.01	.07	.00	.17	<b>.86</b>	-.05	.77
7. Bonding	26	-.04	-.02	-.04	-.05	.13	-.10	<b>.84</b>	.73
	27	-.05	.06	.09	.00	-.01	.06	<b>.90</b>	.82
	28	-.04	.05	.04	-.02	-.05	.12	<b>.86</b>	.77
	29	.01	.04	.05	.04	.15	-.01	<b>.77</b>	.62

*Note.* Boldface indicates highest factor loadings.  $h^2$  = communality.

(a) *others' disapproval* (.92) – the perception that other individuals would judge or disapprove of the couple should the secret be disclosed; (b) *protection from stress* (.94) – the thought that keeping the secret prevents stress for the couple; (c) *relational damage* (.88) – the perception that keeping the secret protects the secret keepers' relationship from potential damage upon disclosure; (d) *third party ownership issues* (.81) – referring to the lack of control that secret keepers have over the dissemination of the information upon disclosure; (e) *exploitative value* (.91) – concerning how others may intentionally use the secret against the couples; (f) *privacy* (.86) – the belief that the secret is no one else's business; and (g) *bonding* (.87) – referring to the cohesiveness felt by the secret keepers as a result of keeping the secret.

**Relational ramifications.** The relational ramifications, or consequences, or both keeping and disclosing collective secrets were assessed using a modified version of the Consequences of Hurtful Episodes Scale (Leary et al., 1998; Zhang & Stafford, 2008). The original scale (Leary et al., 1998) was designed to assess decreased liking, trust, and relational weakening. The modified version (Zhang & Stafford, 2008) was adjusted to account for positive as well as negative consequences by inverting items from the original scale, resulting in 9 Likert-type items ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (7). For the purposes of the current study, the scale was further modified to include 6 items determined appropriate to address the relational ramifications of keeping and disclosing collective secrets. Items consisted of statements such as, “Keeping (disclosing) the collective secret has made me trust my partner less,” “Keeping (disclosing) the collective secret has made me dislike my partner,” and “Keeping (disclosing) the collective secret has made me trust my partner.” The scale was scored by

inversing items 4, 5, and 6 and then summing all items – higher scores were indicative of more negative relational ramifications. Cronbach’s alpha for the relational ramifications of keeping the secret was .72 and .83 for disclosing the secret.

**Secret disclosure.** Several questions were used to assess the disclosure of collective secrets. Participants were asked to answer whether or not the collective secret had been disclosed, who disclosed the secret, if the disclosure was agreed upon by both spouses, and why the secret was disclosed.

**Relationship satisfaction.** The Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ; Huston et al., 2001) includes eight semantic differential items and one global item designed to measure relationship satisfaction. The semantic items asked participants to select a number most closely representing their feelings toward their relationship based on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The differential items included “Miserable to Enjoyable,” “Hopeful to Discouraging,” and “Empty to Full.” The global item asked participants to rate how satisfied they have recently felt in their relationship, rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from *completely satisfied* (1) to *completely dissatisfied* (7). The MOQ is scored by averaging the semantic items and then adding the average to the global item, dividing the resulting sum by 2. Scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .96.

**Relational closeness.** Relational closeness was assessed using Vangelisti and Caughlin’s (1997) closeness items. For the purpose of the current study, five items were used from the original scale. The items were rated on a Likert-type scale with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The items included

questions such as, “How much do you enjoy spending time with your partner?” and “How important is your relationship with your partner to you?” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .89.

**Demographic information.** Participants were asked to provide demographic information including their sex, age, and race/ethnicity. Additionally, participants were asked to report the number of years married to their current spouse.

## **Results**

Study 2 examined how married couples experience collective secrets within their relationships. Under the central research question were 10 sub-research questions designed to investigate the relational effects of collective secrets as they are kept and disclosed. A variety of analytical techniques were used to address each research question.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Preliminary analyses included the calculation of means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all study variables (see Table 3.4). No issues of multicollinearity were found. The topics of collective secrets (*RQ1*) were examined in the study. The research participants were asked to describe their most recent collective secret in an open-ended question. The responses were coded via inductive analysis (Bulmer, 1979). The initial coding scheme mirrored the coding scheme utilized in a prior study of putative secrets (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009). The majority of the original categories were retained; however, new categories were created when necessary as they emerged. To establish coding reliability, two coders independently coded 25% of the data with a resulting Cohen’s kappa of .99, indicating excellent interrater reliability. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion between the coders to ensure

Table 3.4

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Independent and Dependent Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Relationship satisfaction	6.14	1.01										
2. Relational closeness	6.48	.80	.77**									
3. Relational impact of keeping the secret	17.56	6.11	-.19**	-.16**								
4. Relational impact of disclosing the secret	17.11	6.70	-.08	-.07	.57**							
Secret Function												
7. Others' disapproval	2.92	1.51	-.35**	-.17**	.21**	.09						
8. Protection from stress	4.26	1.66	-.13**	-.05	.07	.01	.26**					
9. Relational damage	3.46	1.59	-.20**	-.16**	.25**	.12*	.39**	.30**				
10. Third party ownership	4.75	1.37	.02	.02	.02	-.01	.34**	.34**	.34**			
11. Exploitative value	3.31	1.66	-.10*	-.06	.20**	.16**	.42**	.19**	.40**	.44**		
12. Privacy	5.94	1.07	.14**	.18**	-.11*	-.12*	-.02	.16**	.13*	.34**	.19**	--

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

consensus throughout the coding process. Labels and discussion of the categories are presented in Table 3.5.

A similar coding procedure was used to examine the reasons for keeping or disclosing collective secrets (*RQ2*). The participants were asked, via an open-ended question, to report why they had chosen to keep or disclose the collective secret that they shared with their spouse. Out of a total of 413 participants who responded, 161 participants reported that they had disclosed their collective secrets while 252 participants reported that they had not. A coding scheme was created through inductive analysis (Bulmer, 1979). Two independent coders coded 25% of the data, with a Cohen's kappa of .74, indicating good interrater reliability. See Table 3.6 for results.

Analysis also focused on the reasons why spouses disagreed on the disclosure of secrets (*RQ3*). In some instances, the participants reported that their collective secret had been disclosed, but without the agreement from both spouses to do so. These spouses were asked to report on the reason for the disagreement in an open-ended question. A total of 161 participants reported that their collective secret had been disclosed. Of these participants, a total of 121 spouses reported that they agreed on the disclosure whereas 40 participants reported that they had not agreed on the disclosure. Inductive analysis was used to create categories describing the reasons for the disagreement (see Table 3.7). Two independent coders coded 25% of the data with a resulting Cohen's kappa of .99, indicating excellent interrater reliability.

### **Secondary Analyses**

Using the collective secret topic categories established in the preliminary analyses, the relational impact of keeping a secret according to topic was examined

Table 3.5

*Reported Topics of Collective Secrets*

Description	Example	Frequency
<i>Neutral financial event</i> : a financial matter that does not have clear positive or negative implications	“How much my parents gave us for a down payment on our house.”	81 (19.3%)
<i>Sexual preferences or orientation</i> : preferred sexual behaviors or orientation	“Open relationship.”	37 (8.8%)
<i>Family planning</i> : plans for future children, biological or adopted	“Our secret pregnancy from our parents, who do not live in the same state as us.”	31 (7.4%)
<i>Children</i> : information related to parenting	“The decisions we made on who would be the guardian of our children should we both pass away.”	31 (7.4%)
<i>Physical health</i> : medical concerns related to physical health	“Health. I have been having some medical trouble and we haven’t told anyone because we don’t want them to worry.”	30 (7.2%)
<i>Negative financial event</i> : a harmful financial matter	“That we borrowed from our 401K.”	28 (6.7%)
<i>Positive financial event</i> : a beneficial financial matter	“We had a surprise windfall.”	27 (6.4%)
<i>Career/job</i> : information related to job decisions	“A new business decision that is looming.”	16 (3.8%)
<i>Marital distress</i> : any marital problem	“That we are fighting, talking about divorce, and seeking counseling.”	15 (3.6%)
<i>Family issues</i> : problems encountered by family members	“My brother went in rehab for alcohol and depression and we didn’t tell people – especially my dad.”	15 (3.6%)
<i>Other</i> : any topic that did not clearly fit within an established topic	“We had a very small discussion of the possibility of getting rid of our dog.”	13 (3.1%)

Table 3.5 (continued)

<i>Extra-dyadic affair of the participant</i> : an affair that the participant engaged in	“I have three lovers.”	10 (2.4%)
<i>Troubled children</i> : problems that the participant’s children have experienced	“We caught our son drinking underage.”	9 (2.1%)
<i>Information about others</i> : information that another individual has asked the participant not to share	“Damaging information about a friend.”	9 (2.1%)
<i>Not telling</i> : participants who declined to disclose topic	“No, that’s why it’s a secret.”	8 (1.9%)
<i>Substance abuse</i> : abuse or dependence of alcohol, drugs	“Alcoholism, my husband had a serious problem with alcohol that almost killed him, but we kept his rehabilitation and withdrawals a secret.”	7 (1.7%)
<i>Relocation</i> : a physical move to another location	“Re-homing outside of the U.S.”	7 (1.7%)
<i>Origin of relationship</i> : how the spouse’s relationship began	“Living together before marriage.”	7 (1.7%)
<i>Social events</i> : participation in various social gatherings	“Not sharing my kids’ sport activity times.”	5 (1.2%)
<i>Mental health</i> : mental health diagnosis or concern	“My dealing with an eating disorder and depression after my father’s death.”	5 (1.2%)
<i>Life before relationship with spouse</i> : prior relationships	“Prior partner contacted me.”	4 (1.0%)
<i>Extra-dyadic affair of third-party</i> : a member of the participant’s social network is cheating	“My best friend and boss is dating a married person.”	4 (1.0%)
<i>Surprise/present</i> : surprising or gifting someone else	“Cost of gift purchases.”	4 (1.0%)

Table 3.5 (continued)

<i>Sex/name of future baby:</i> information related to future baby	“We are not discussing the sex of our unborn child with certain family members and friends.”	3 (0.7%)
<i>Cosmetic surgery:</i> cosmetic surgery of the participant or participant’s spouse	“Liposuction surgery.”	3 (0.7%)
<i>Abortion:</i> an abortion that involved the participant	“Abortion.”	2 (0.5%)
<i>Illegalities:</i> any illegal activity	“My DUI that resulted in me going to jail, losing my license temporarily.”	2 (0.5%)
<i>Sexual abuse/victimization:</i> any form of sexual victimization	“Rape by former teacher, gang rape, over a period of 4 years.”	2 (0.5%)
<i>Miscarriage:</i> miscarriage that the participant or participant’s spouse has experienced	“The miscarriage.”	1 (0.2%)
<i>Sexual history:</i> former sexual relationships	“Past sexual history.”	1 (0.2%)
<i>Drinking/partying:</i> recreational alcohol or drug use	“Partying behavior pre-children.”	1 (0.2%)
<i>Uncodable:</i> insufficient information to code		24 (5.7%)

Note. *N* = 419

Table 3.6

*Reasons Why Collective Secrets are Kept or Disclosed*

Description	Secret Disclosed	
	Example	Frequency
<i>May be disclosed:</i> there is no clear decision to not disclose the secret	“There’s a chance we may reveal the secret to our parents but no one else, not even our siblings.”	5 (2.0%)
<i>Positive benefit:</i> a benefit to disclosing the information exists	“If we do, it will be to a financial advisor at some point in order to better plan for our future.”	4 (1.6%)
<i>Others need to know:</i> information affects others in some way	“Yes, because we are 3 months pregnant now and need to let our families know.”	32 (12.7%)
<i>Diminished importance:</i> the secret will lose its importance	“More than likely. As time goes on, it won’t be as important.”	15 (6.0%)
<i>Excitement/bonding:</i> revealing the secret will allow for shared excitement, bonding	“Probably because we will become excited once we found out the sex and will want to tell members of our family.”	4 (1.6%)
<i>Others’ reactions:</i> if others’ reactions are perceived as favorable	“If we think people will accept it more than they would now.”	4 (1.6%)
<i>Able to disclose:</i> change in circumstance allows for disclosure	“Yes, eventually we will disclose the information but we won’t disclose until we are absolutely sure we are ready for people to know.”	2 (0.8%)
<i>Another person will reveal:</i> someone else will reveal the secret outside of the relationship	“Yes. We keep the secret only at the request of the concerned relative. I anticipate the relative will eventually reveal the relationship and the information will no longer be regarded as secret.”	1 (0.4%)

Table 3.6 (continued)

Description	Secret Kept Example	Frequency
<i>Eventual need</i> : anticipation that the secret will have to be disclosed	“Yes. It will eventually need to be.”	1(0.4%)
<i>No one else’s business</i> : the information concerns no one else	“It is no one’s business but me and my spouse.”	76 (30.2%)
<i>Privacy</i> : the information is private, pertinent to no one else	“I do not see this being disclosed. This is an extremely difficult and private matter.”	30 (11.9%)
<i>Protecting others</i> : disclosing would harm another	“No, because it would hurt someone else’s feelings and future.”	11 (4.4%)
<i>Protecting relationship</i> : disclosing would harm relationship	“No, it would hurt family relationships.”	10 (4.0%)
<i>No benefit</i> : no identifiable gain to disclosure	“I do not plan to disclose the secret as no one has anything to gain.”	6 (2.4%)
<i>Protecting self</i> : disclosing would harm self	“My husband and I do not wish to disclose our past decisions. Our family would be very upset if they knew I had an abortion and when we do decide to have children I do not want others to comment on my abortion to my future children”	6 (2.4%)
<i>No reason</i> : no identified need of disclosure	“No, I don’t feel there is any need to disclose it.”	6 (2.4%)
<i>Trust</i> : others not trusted with information	“I don’t really trust others with this information.”	2 (0.8%)
<i>Secret will resolve itself</i> : the secret will eventually disappear	“No. We will solve the problem and then there won’t be a secret.”	2 (0.8%)

Table 3.6 (continued)

<i>Respecting spouse's wish:</i> spouse has asked that the secret not be disclosed	"No. It is important to my wife that we don't."	2 (0.8%)
<i>No reason given:</i> participant does not provide a reason of why they would or would not disclose		22 (8.7%)
<i>Uncodable:</i> insufficient information to code		11 (4.4%)

*Note.*  $N = 252$

Table 3.7

*Reasons for Spousal Disagreement on Disclosure of Collective Secrets*

Description	Example	Frequency
<i>Desire to protect self:</i> preference for secret to be kept to avoid harm to self	“Because it’s personal information and extremely embarrassing for me.”	10 (25.0%)
<i>Privacy:</i> the information is private, pertinent to no one else	“It’s private.”	5 (12.5%)
<i>Permission not sought:</i> spouse was not consulted	“I just didn’t ask.”	4 (10.0%)
<i>Unnecessary disclosure:</i> disclosure served no purpose	“I was not sure it was needed.”	3 (7.5%)
<i>Need for advice:</i> advice sought from outsider	“I really need to talk to someone about it because I wasn’t sure how to handle it so I told my grandmother. I was relieved afterward and it helped me to be able to talk to him about our issue.”	3 (7.5%)
<i>Diminished importance:</i> information less important	“As time went on, the secret became less important and irrelevant.”	3 (7.5%)
<i>Different views:</i> spouses simply hold different opinions on disclosure	“My husband thinks it doesn’t matter if anyone else knows.”	3 (7.5%)
<i>Third party asked:</i> individual directly asked about information	“Someone recently became suspicious and asked me about it so I confirmed without disclosing details.”	2 (5.0%)
<i>Not mine to tell:</i> information belongs to someone else	“The secret is just about one of us. He may not agree with me to disclose it.”	1 (2.5%)

Note. N = 40

(*RQ4*). A one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in the relational impact of keeping collective secrets across the secret topics ( $F(27, 385) = 1.64, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$ ). Specifically, the relational impact of secrets related to sexual preference or orientation was found to be worse for the relationship whereas secrets related to a positive financial status were found to be better for the relationship, indicating that secrets pertaining to positive financial status are less distancing compared to those related to sexual preference or orientation. The relational impact of disclosing collective secrets, according to topic was also examined using the established collective secret topic categories (*RQ5*). A one-way ANOVA indicated that the disclosure of collective secrets does not have a relational impact, according to secret topic, ( $F(27, 278) = 1.02, p = .43, \eta^2 = .10$ ).

To examine how agreement on the disclosure of collective secrets impacts relationship satisfaction, a one-way ANOVA was conducted (*RQ6*). The results indicated that agreement on the disclosure of collective secrets does affect relationship satisfaction,  $F(1, 310) = 5.83, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . Specifically, spouses who agreed on the disclosure orientation appeared to be more satisfied, compared to those spouses who did not agree on the disclosure orientation of the collective secret.

The remaining research questions investigated the effect of perceived secret functions on various relational constructs for both spouses (*RQ7, RQ8, RQ9, RQ10*). Given the nonindependent nature of the dependent variables due to the dyadic data, it was important to use a statistical technique that did not assume independent cases. The main analyses utilized multilevel linear modeling (MLM), a maximum likelihood analytic technique used to deal with nonindependent data through nesting techniques (Hox, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). In MLM, the nonindependence of

observations are both accounted for and a central component of the analysis (Park, Eveland, & Cudeck, 2008). MLM handles nesting by treating the data at two levels. In this study, the dependent data were nested within dyads. The analyses thus accounted for the correlations between spousal scores within each assessment as well as the correlations of the variables across assessments.

A preliminary step was to examine the unconditional model in which the lowest level of data (Level 1) was modeled without any predictors (Level 2). The direction of the effect was determined by examining the slope for the independent variables, and the size of the effect (i.e., the proportion of variance accounted for) was determined by examining changes in standardized within-groups variance. For the main analyses, separate models were constructed for each dependent variable (i.e., relational closeness, relationship satisfaction, relational impact of keeping the collective secret, and relational impact of disclosing the collective secret).

Results are presented in separate tables for each dependent variable. The baseline model provides information regarding the variance in the dependent variable; the baseline model must contain significant variation between the dyads in terms of the dependent variable in order to reasonably explain variation in that variable. The baseline model also provides a benchmark with which to compare the models that include predictors. The estimate for the fixed effect in each baseline model represents the grand mean of each dependent variables for participants across all dyads. The *t* statistic in the baseline model is not reported because it merely indicates if the estimate is significantly different from zero.

In the following tables, each row represents a separate analysis and describes a model in which a single aspect of the independent variable was entered as a Level 2 predictor in the analysis (e.g., the second row in Table 3.8 represents the association between others' disapproval and the relational impact of keeping a secret). The coefficient estimate (*b*) is a slope that indicates the unit change in the independent variable for every unit of change in the dependent variable (e.g., according to Table 8, every unit increase in others' disapproval results in an increase of .81 points of the self-reported impact of keeping a collective secret). The *t* statistic indicates if the slope coefficient is significantly different from zero. A significant *t* statistic demonstrates that the independent variable is significantly associated with the dependent variable. Finally, the proportion of variance accounted for shows how much variance in the dependent variable between dyads is accounted for by the independent variable as calculated by the decrease in variance between the baseline model and the model with the predictor variable added (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). MLM analyses were used to answer the research questions pertaining to the effects of keeping and disclosing collective secrets on various relational constructs. Results related to each research question are presented below.

The seventh research question examined the relational impact of keeping a collective secret according to secret function. Findings related to this research question appear in Table 3.8. There was statistically significant variation in the relational impact of keeping a collective secret ( $\chi^2 = 14.18$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and five predictors were significantly related to the self-reported relational impact of keeping a secret: the self-reported relational impact of keeping a secret was positively related to others'

Table 3.8

*Secret Functions Predicted Reported Relational Impact of Keeping a Collective Secret*

Model	Self-reported relational impact				Partner-reported relational impact			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for
Baseline	-.49	.51			.49	.51		
Others' Disapproval	.81	.20	4.00*	$S_1 = .06, S_2 = .03$	.47	.23	2.08*	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .10$
Protection from stress	.25	.18	1.41	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .00$	-.00	.20	-.00	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .06$
Relational damage	.87	.18	4.80*	$S_1 = .04, S_2 = .07$	.14	.21	.70	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .07$
Third-party ownership issues	.14	.22	.65	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	-.23	.26	-.89	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .06$
Exploitative value	.69	.18	3.82*	$S_1 = .03, S_2 = .04$	.29	.20	1.43	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .08$
Privacy	-.58	.29	-2.01*	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .02$	-.48	.33	-1.43	$S_1 = .06, S_2 = .07$
Bonding	1.40	.20	6.97*	$S_1 = .12, S_2 = .11$	.58	.23	2.51*	$S_1 = .09, S_2 = .09$

*Note.*  $S_1$  indicates variance accounted for by the husband and  $S_2$  indicates variance accounted for by the wife. \* $p < .05$

disapproval, relational damage, exploitative value, and bonding, but related negatively to privacy. There was evidence that secret functions were significantly associated with the relational impact of keeping a collective secret. Two predictors were significantly related to the partner-reported relational impact of keeping a collective secret: a positive relationship was found for others' disapproval and bonding. The various secret functions accounted for between 0% and 12% of the variance in the relational impact of keeping a collective secret. The results suggest that the relational impact of keeping a collective secret for both spouses are related to secret functions.

The eighth research question examined relational closeness according to secret function. Findings related to this research question appear in Table 3.9. There was statistically significant variation in relational closeness according to secret function ( $\chi^2=9.13$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and three predictors were significantly related to self-reported relational closeness: self-reported relational closeness was negatively related to others' disapproval and relational damage, but positively associated with bonding. There was no evidence that secret functions were significantly associated with partner-reported relational closeness. The various secret functions accounted for between 0% and 4% of the variance in relational closeness. The results suggest that the secret functions for the individual (but not the partner's) are related to perceived relational closeness.

The ninth research question examined relationship satisfaction according to secret function. Findings related to this research question appear in Table 3.10. There was statistically significant variation in relationship satisfaction according to perceived secret function ( $\chi^2=17.60$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and six predictors were significantly related to self-

Table 3.9

*Secret Functions Predicted Reported Relational Closeness*

Model	Self-reported relational closeness				Partner-reported relational closeness			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for
Baseline	.00	.05			-.00	.05		
Others' Disapproval	-.09	.02	-3.88*	$S_1 = .04, S_2 = .01$	.01	.02	.65	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Protection from stress	-.01	.02	-0.44	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	-.02	.02	-.91	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Relational damage	-.06	.02	-3.08*	$S_1 = .04, S_2 = .03$	.00	.02	.17	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Third-party ownership issues	-.01	.03	-.35	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	.03	.03	1.11	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Exploitative value	-.03	.02	-1.34	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .00$	.01	.02	.38	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Privacy	.11	.04	3.18*	$S_1 = .03, S_2 = .04$	.01	.03	.44	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Bonding	.04	.02	1.53	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .01$	-.01	.02	-.28	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$

*Note.*  $S_1$  indicates variance accounted for by the husband and  $S_2$  indicates variance accounted for by the wife. \* $p < .05$

Table 3.10

*Secret Functions Predicted Reported Relationship Satisfaction*

Model	Self-reported relationship satisfaction				Partner-reported relationship satisfaction			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for
Baseline	-.07	.07			.07	.07		
Others' Disapproval	-.16	.03	-4.82*	$S_1 = .07, S_2 = .05$	-.03	.03	-1.02	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .00$
Protection from stress	-.05	.03	-1.78*	$S_1 = .02, S_2 = .02$	-.04	.03	-1.29	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .00$
Relational damage	-.11	.03	-3.97*	$S_1 = .05, S_2 = .04$	.00	.03	.05	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .00$
Third-party ownership issues	.01	.04	.15	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	.01	.04	.34	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Exploitative value	-.06	.03	-2.05*	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$	.01	.03	.44	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$
Privacy	.11	.05	2.41*	$S_1 = .02, S_2 = .03$	.06	.05	1.13	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Bonding	.08	.03	2.45*	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$	-.00	.03	-.07	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$

*Note.*  $S_1$  indicates variance accounted for by the husband and  $S_2$  indicates variance accounted for by the wife. \* $p < .05$

protection from stress, relational damage, and exploitative value, but positively associated with privacy and bonding. There was no evidence that secret functions were significantly associated with partner-reported relationship satisfaction. The various secret functions accounted for between 0% and 7% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. The results suggest that the secret functions for the individual (but not the partner's) are related to relationship satisfaction.

The tenth research question examined the relational impact of disclosing a collective secret according to secret function. Findings related to this research question appear in Table 3.11. There was statistically significant variation in the relational impact of disclosing a collective secret ( $\chi^2 = 3.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ), and five predictors were significantly related to the self-reported relational impact of disclosing a secret: the self-reported relational impact of disclosing a secret was positively related to others' disapproval, relational damage, exploitative value and bonding, but related negatively to privacy. There was no evidence that secret functions were significantly associated with the relational impact of disclosing a collective secret for partners. The various secret functions accounted for between 0% and 4% of the variance in relational closeness. The results suggest that the secret functions for the individual (but not the partner's) are related to the relational impact of disclosing a collective secret.

Table 3.11

*Secret Functions Predicted Reported Relational Impact of Disclosing a Collective Secret*

Model	Self-reported relational impact				Partner-reported relational impact			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Variance accounted for
Baseline	-.94	.59			.94	.59		
Others' Disapproval	.47	.23	2.08*	$S_1 = .02, S_2 = .00$	.06	.06	.23	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .03$
Protection from stress	-.08	.20	-.04	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	.29	.23	1.26	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .04$
Relational damage	.48	.21	2.33*	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$	.05	.24	.21	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Third-party ownership issues	.02	.25	.07	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$	-.41	.29	-1.39	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .00$
Exploitative value	.70	.20	3.52*	$S_1 = .04, S_2 = .01$	-.23	.23	-1.00	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .01$
Privacy	-.73	.32	-2.30*	$S_1 = .01, S_2 = .01$	-.14	.38	-.38	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .02$
Bonding	1.00	.23	4.31*	$S_1 = .04, S_2 = .04$	.26	.27	.97	$S_1 = .00, S_2 = .03$

Note.  $S_1$  indicates variance accounted for by the husband and  $S_2$  indicates variance accounted for by the wife. \* $p < .05$

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. Earlier studies have demonstrated that secret keeping is a relational phenomenon, impacting the secret keeper as well as the person from whom the secret is kept (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2009). What is lacking is an understanding of how secrecy unfolds between romantic partners. Much of the existing literature has focused on individual secret keepers and family secrets. The two studies included in this dissertation addressed this gap by examining secrecy from the perspectives of the individual romantic partner as secret keeper, the romantic couple as secret keepers, and public perception of secret keeping within the context of romantic relationships. Following is a detailed discussion of the results from both studies.

#### **The Romantic Partner as Secret Keeper**

The findings from Study 1 suggest that secrecy is a complicated relational phenomenon involving a number of considerations for romantic partners when they act as secret keepers. A qualitative content analysis of an online forum revealed that there are a number of topics deemed off limits to Redditors' romantic partners, most of which concerned the Redditors' relationships with their significant others (e.g., sexual dissatisfaction) or information about the Redditors themselves (e.g., a prior suicide attempt) that was considered to be potentially harmful to his or her relationship. The use of a secondary data source provided a candid snapshot of the secrets categorized by romantic partners as likely harmful to their relationships, supporting earlier research emphasizing the protective function that secrecy serves for many secret keepers (e.g.,

Afifi & Steuber, 2009). It appears that there are some pieces of information that romantic partners consider fatal to their relationship and are, therefore, those that will never be shared with one's significant other.

When the family systems perspective is taken into account, the findings from Study 1 suggest that the romantic partners were consciously acting in the role of secret keeper. The Redditors who shared their secrets on the thread frequently cited a concern that disclosing the secret to their significant other would result in harm to either themselves or their romantic partner. In these instances, the Redditors were self-monitoring by making conscious decisions about which topics could and could not be discussed. The occurrence of self-monitoring suggests that it is not necessarily an issue of an inadequate level of intimacy or emotional connectedness that is missing in the relationship for a disclosure to occur but rather the threat of damaging the intimacy or connectedness existing within the relationship. There appear to be some topics that are perceived as so taboo or damaging that the secret keeper is unable to share the information in, what is arguably, their most intimate of relationships (e.g., Sessler, 2010). As is argued by communication privacy management (CPM) theory, when private information is shared, it cannot be unshared (Petronio, 2010). The findings from Study 1 support the assertion that secrets are viewed by romantic partners as important pieces of information laden with a number of consequences.

### **Public Perception of and Response to Secret Keeping**

Little is known about the public's perception of or response to secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. Much of what is reported is in the media—mostly sensationalized reactions to secret scandals. Study 1 investigated the responses of the

Reddit community to secrets disclosed on the thread that were reported as those that the disclosers had kept from their romantic partners. The study results revealed that there is no clear consensus on whether secret keeping is an acceptable relational event. Rather, there are many considerations to take into account when responding to secrecy within this context.

Rather than sharing a secret in response to the Reddit thread's prompt, there were many Redditors who participated in the thread by sharing their opinions. There were those Redditors who reported a belief that secret keeping is a healthy relationship event, serving the secret keeper by allowing him or her to maintain a sense of self within the relationship. These findings support earlier research emphasizing the potential benefits of secrecy (e.g., Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Petronio, 2002). There were also those Redditors who reported the belief that secrecy is detrimental to both the secret keeper and his or her romantic partner, also supporting existing research findings supporting the notion that secrecy is a negative relational event (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2009). With a lack of widespread discussion or acknowledgement of the fact that secrets do exist within romantic relationships, it is not surprising to observe such a mixed public reaction. It may be that the public is unsure of how to respond to secrecy within this context because of the widespread belief that secrets are taboo (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Imber-Black, 1993) or simply because secrecy is perceived differently in different situations. What the results suggest and contribute to the research community is that more discourse is needed between romantic partners, the public sector, and in the research community concerning secrecy in order to determine what is considered as acceptable.

The study also examined the comments made by the Reddit community in response to the secrets that were disclosed on the Reddit thread. The comments included normalization, emotional reactions, the sharing of personal experiences, comfort for the secret disclosers, and requests for more information. It appeared that there was a genuine sense of support and curiosity with regard to secrecy within romantic relationships. One of the most interesting elements to the Redditors' reactions was the sense of community that the Redditors shared with each other. In part, the communal aspect may be the result of the online environment in which the disclosures occurred (e.g., Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). However, it may also be the result of a public acknowledgement that secrecy within this context is a common occurrence; the commenters found themselves identifying with their fellow Redditors and may have been reassured by the thought that they were not alone in their secret keeping experiences. The sense of community may also be explained by the privilege experienced by the recipients of the secrets (Petronio, 2002); after all, the secrets shared on the thread were those that were qualified by the secret keepers as too vulnerable to be shared with the secret disclosers' significant others.

### **Collective Secrets**

This dissertation included the investigation of collective secrets. The results from Study 2 demonstrate that collective secrets are also experienced as a complex relational phenomenon (see Table 12). In contrast to the findings from Study 1, collective secrets were found to be more inclusive of a variety of topics and contexts that were not limited solely to the secret keepers themselves of their relationships. Prior research has demonstrated that collective secrets tend to cover a number of topics ranging from those concerning the couple to those concerning others outside of their relationship (e.g.,

Table 3.12

*Statistically Significant Associations between Secret Importance, Secret Functions, and Relational Impact*

Secret Importance and Function	Relational Impact of Keeping a Secret	Relational Impact of Disclosing a Secret	Relationship Satisfaction	Relational Closeness
Others' disapproval	O (+), P (+)	O (+)	O (-)	O (-)
Protection from stress			O (-) p = .07	
Relational damage	O (+)	O (+)	O (-)	O (-)
Third-party ownership issues				
Exploitative value	O (+)	O (+)	O (-)	
Privacy	O (+)	O (-)	O (+)	O (+)
Bonding	O (+), P (+)	O (+)	O (+)	

*Note.* "O" indicates self-reported outcome, "P" indicates partner-reported outcome, "+" indicates a significant positive association, and "-" indicates a significant negative association.

Imber-Black, 1993). Whether implicitly or explicitly identified as a collective secret, those secrets reported in the present study were those that were believed to be exclusive to the confines of the participants' marriage and one that served a particular function.

With regard to the question of whether collective secrets are good or bad for the secret keepers' relationship, the results suggested that some secrets are more harmful than others, highlighting the complexity of the secret keeping process. It is important to keep the dyadic nature of collective secrecy in mind when discussing the results—a collective secret is one that is shared by two individuals who may have different perceptions and motivation concerning the secret, resulting in differences concerning the relational impact of keeping the secret. The differences in relational impact found according to topic demonstrate that it cannot be assumed that collective secret keepers are comfortable with the secret being kept. While CPM asserts that it is often considered a privilege to co-own a secret (Petronio, 2010), this sense of privilege may depend on the topic of the secret shared as evidenced by the relational effects of collective secret keeping.

Study 2 also investigated the relationship between the functions served by the collective secrets and the impact on the collective secret keepers' relationship. Much of the prior research has focused on the relational impact of secret keeping on the individual secret keeper or the person from whom the secret is kept rather than what was accomplished in the present study, which was a dyadic investigation. The results revealed that the functions or reasons for keeping a collective secret do affect self-reported relational closeness, relationship satisfaction, and overall relational ramifications.

The relationships of collective secret keepers were found to benefit from the sharing of a collective secret when the secret was kept to serve certain functions. When

collective secrets were kept for the purposes of maintaining privacy or bonding, there were higher reports of relational closeness and relationship satisfaction. In these instances, the secrets appeared to be serving functions that were fostered intimacy or a sense of togetherness between the secret keepers which contrasts the emotional distancing that is reported when one romantic partner keeps a secret from his or her partner (Petronio, 1991). The results suggest that both partners were in agreement that the secret was something that would be beneficial, therefore making it an acceptable and beneficial secret. In some cases, it is reasonable to argue that secrets could be intentionally created and maintained by romantic partners to foster or enhance intimacy.

Negative relational consequences were also found to exist for collective secret keepers according to secret function. When the collective secret was kept for the purposes of avoiding others' disapproval, protection from relational damage, protection from the exploitative value of the secret, or protection from stress, there were marked decreases in relational closeness and relationship satisfaction as well as more overall negative relational consequences. There may be a number of external factors that influence these findings such as resentment as a result of having to keep the secret, anxiety over possible disclosure of the secret, or tension between the couple concerning the very content of the secret. Collective secrets, as evidenced by the results reported earlier, cover a number of topics which may result in distress for the secret keepers and subsequent disclosure (e.g., Bem, 1972; Lane & Wagner, 1995; Stiles, 1987). In conjunction with the reasons behind keeping the secret, this distress, may negatively impact the romantic partners and their relationship by leading to the unexpected disclosure of collective secrets.

## **Disclosure of Collective Secrets**

Study 2 examined an additional element of collective secret keeping, the eventual disclosure of the secret. Some of the study participants reported that their collective secret had been disclosed. Reasons for the disclosure ranged from there being a positive benefit to the disclosure to an ability to disclose the secret after the passage of time. However, in some instances, these disclosures were not made with agreement from both partners, resulting in a violation of the rules and boundaries surrounding the secret. Earlier research has demonstrated that what individuals value about secrecy is the decision to decide how much and what someone else knows about them (Petronio, 2002). The disagreements that were found to occur in the present study concerning disclosure of collective secrets highlights the issue of personal violation as well as ownership. It is apparent that a question of ownership exists over the collective secret—although collectively shared, one spouse may assume ultimate ownership of the collective secret (e.g., Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). The findings revealed that romantic partners who reported that they agreed on the disclosure of a collective secret reported being more satisfied in their relationships compared to those partners who disagreed. In instances of agreement, it was clear that the spouses discussed or had a clear idea of their partners' disclosure preferences before the disclosure was made.

Based on the findings that disclosure of collective secrets does occur without consensus from both secret keepers, it appears that the needs of the individual sometimes overrides the needs of the couple. Prior research suggests that disagreement concerning disclosure is indicative of a disregard for one's partner or dissatisfaction with one's relationship (Imber-Black, 1993). However, it may not necessarily be solely disregard or

dissatisfaction that influences disclosures. The participants in the current study reported disclosing their collective secret for reasons ranging from a belief that it was acceptable to share the information (e.g., advice from a third party was needed) or because a third party asked about the secret. Much like the decision to keep a collective secret, the decision to disclose a collective secret appears to be complex.

What the results from both studies reveal is that secret keeping is a relational process wrought with a number of considerations for both individual romantic partners as secret keepers and romantic couples as collective secret keepers that are, perhaps, shaped by the public perception of secrecy. There does not appear to be a clear answer to the question of whether secrecy harms or benefits romantic relationships, both positive and negative consequences exist. However, it is apparent that secret keeping is idiosyncratic. The results from this dissertation demonstrate that topics of secrets, reasons for keeping secrets, and consequences of secret keeping vary according to the romantic partner and his or her situation.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this dissertation. First, Study 1 utilized a secondary data source. While there were identifiable benefits to using the Reddit thread (e.g., lack of researcher influence, an unfiltered snapshot of secret keeping behaviors, convenience), the use of this data source inhibits the generalizability of the study results. The Redditors who participated in this study may have been more comfortable disclosing their secrets compared to the larger population. Additionally, Redditors may have felt more comfortable with an online context for disclosure compared to the larger population. The exact composition of the study sample is unknown due to the anonymous

nature of Reddit—Redditors are not asked to disclose their demographics. A second limitation is that the researcher had no means of verifying whether the Redditors who participated in the thread and labeled themselves as secret keepers were actually secret keepers who had kept or were currently keeping a secret from their significant other. Finally, as with any qualitative analysis, bias may exist in the researcher's interpretation of the themes reported despite the researcher's efforts to ensure the validity of results through peer debriefing, external audits, and representative quotations.

There were also limitations to Study 2. First, the study was limited by the assumption that secret keepers would willingly disclose their secrets in an online survey. As demonstrated by the study results, there are those secret keepers who do not believe that a secret should be disclosed for any reason. Second, due to the nature of the research topic, it is possible that there was self-report bias. The study participants may have altered their responses to appear more favorable to the researcher or to maintain their collective secret. It is also possible that the participants' responses were influenced by the assumption that the researcher was investigating secrecy as a negative relational phenomenon. Collecting dyadic data allowed for self-report bias to be taken into account in the interpretation of results but it is important to address.

The use of self-report measures allows for the possibility of measurement error. The measures used may have not adequately capture the experience of collective secret keeping for the participants. To address this concern, a mixed methods approach was utilized. However, for those constructs that were assessed via self-report measures, there may be a difference in the participants' reality concerning the topic of study and the participants' answers on the survey. Finally, there are limits to the conclusions that may

be drawn from the study. The results are specific to collective secrets kept between married couples. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other contexts. Additionally, the sample was primarily Caucasian and was comprised of individuals participating in an extra credit opportunity for their children, other family members, or friends.

### **Future Study and Implications**

The results from this dissertation pose questions for future study. First, Study 1 utilized secondary data obtained from a publicly accessible Internet forum. It would be valuable for researchers to investigate what it is about the online context that makes individuals comfortable disclosing the secrets that they keep from their romantic partners. Doing so may assist clinicians in understanding the conditions that are deemed as necessary by romantic partners to disclose. Knowledge of such conditions may assist clinicians in facilitating disclosures that are considered necessary by the secret keeper. Second, in some instances, the Redditors reported having a hunch or knowledge that their romantic partners did not want to know the content of the secret that they were believed to be keeping. In those relationships, it appears that the Redditor may have been fulfilling a secret keeper role in the relationship in order to maintain equilibrium within their relationship. However, as evidenced by the fact that the Redditor disclosed the secret on the thread, there are some secrets that secret keepers feel compelled to disclose. Exploring the contexts in which romantic partners disclose secrets outside of their relationships as well as the consequences of doing so would be appropriate questions for further study.

Furthermore, the results from Study 1 demonstrated that public perception of secret keeping within the context of romantic relationships is not cut and dry. There appear to be a number of factors that influence how the public assesses secrecy. Further exploration of why secrecy between romantic partners is deemed appropriate or inappropriate would be valuable. For instance, addressing the question of when it is acceptable to keep a secret from a romantic partner and when, if ever, it should be disclosed. Additionally, an exploration of individuals' attitudes toward others' secret keeping behaviors compared to their own secret keeping behaviors would be interesting to determine if a difference between public and private attitudes regarding secrecy within romantic relationships exists.

The results from Study 2 also provide questions for future study. The findings revealed that collective secrets do have the ability to impact the collective secret keepers' relationship. Some secret functions were found to negatively impact the relationship while others were found to be beneficial. However, why a difference exists between the functions is unknown. Examining how each secret function influences the individual romantic partner's view of him- or herself may be valuable. For instance, does keeping a collective secret that serves the function of protecting one from exploitation induce shame? Additionally, the results from Study 2 revealed no relational impact of disclosing collective secrets according to topic. In other words, no difference was found between disclosing a neutral topic and a negatively charged topic. These results seem to suggest that a disclosure is merely a disclosure, regardless of the content of the disclosure. What was revealed to matter according to the study results was the function that the disclosed

secret served. Future research could investigate the lack of relational impact according to topic.

The results from this dissertation have important implications for clinicians working with romantic partners and couples. Clinicians should be aware that romantic partners are likely to be keeping secrets from each other. While some of these topics may have little impact on the relationship, clinicians should be aware that there is a considerable amount of variation in the information that is withheld. What is determined to be threatening by one partner to his or her relationship may be not be considered so by another individual. Furthermore, in the practice of therapeutic modalities designed for couples such as emotionally focused therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004), vulnerability is encouraged. It is important that the clinician assesses how secrets interact with vulnerability. For example, if the romantic partners define vulnerability as complete openness, including the disclosure of personal secrets, the clinicians should first address the readiness of the secret keeper to disclose the secret as well as the romantic partner to receive the disclosure.

Clinicians must also be aware that there are secrets that couples keep together as collective secret keepers from others outside of their relationship. These secrets cover a wide range of topics and are kept to serve a number of functions. With the knowledge that collective secrets have the potential to affect relationship satisfaction and relational closeness, clinicians should address collective secret keeping within the therapy room. A couple may not be willing to share the content of their collective secrets with their therapist but a general discussion of how these secrets influence relationship satisfaction is important. The findings from Study 2 demonstrate that couples must engage in more

explicit conversations concerning the meaning behind keeping a collective secret as well as the rules and boundaries surrounding that secret.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation studies secrecy via an exploratory approach to provide clinicians and researchers with a better understanding of secrecy within the context of romantic relationships. The topics, motivations, relational effects, and public perception of secrecy were investigated via a mixed methods approach designed to result in a larger, systemic view of secret keeping behaviors. Previous research on secrecy within this context had largely focused on the consequences of secret keeping rather than the whole experience of engaging in secrecy.

The results of this dissertation reveal that secret keeping within the context of a romantic relationship is a complex phenomenon wrought with a number of considerations for the secret keeper or keepers. The secret keeper must decide what to keep secret, the possible consequences (negative or positive) of disclosing the secret, and who to disclose the secret to. Individual romantic partners keep secrets from their partners and also keep secrets with their romantic partners from others outside of their relationships. The findings from both studies revealed that these secrets are kept purposefully, serving a number of important functions.

As a concept, secrecy often elicits a negative reaction. However, the results discussed in this dissertation reveal that secrets are not inherently bad. There are those secrets that are relatively benign in nature and those secrets that have the potential to damage. Overwhelmingly, despite the content of the secret, secrets kept within the context of romantic relationships are designed to protect. Furthermore, in investigating public perception of secret keeping and the relational consequences of secrecy, the results

revealed the idiosyncratic nature of secrets. Secrets that are damaging for one couple may be beneficial for another. Although this dissertation is only one step in understanding secrecy within this context, the findings underscore the value of applying a systemic lens to the study of secrecy. Secrecy does not occur in isolation; it affects all involved.

## Appendix A

### **Informed Consent Text - Nonstudent Version**

**Who is conducting this research study?** This project is being conducted by Kristyn Jackson, a graduate student in the Department of Family Science as well as by Dr. Scott in the Department of Communication at the University of Kentucky.

**What is this study about?** This is a study designed to explore how married couples manage private information. We hope to use our findings to make recommendations to married couples to help them better manage private information as a couple.

**What will I be asked to do if I choose to participate?** If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey about how you and your spouse manage private information. Completing the survey will take approximately 20-30 minutes.

**Your participation in this study is voluntary.** You may choose, if you want, to participate in this study. If you begin the project, you may choose to stop participating at any time, which means that you may choose not to answer any question on the survey. You can even contact me after you are done and tell me that you do not want me to use your data. Your decision to participate or not to participate will have no effect on any future relations you may have with the University of Kentucky.

**Your participation in this study is confidential.** Information that you share during this study will be kept confidential. The questions you answer will be private, which means the researcher will not connect your name to your specific answers. The data collected from this study will be presented to other researchers and written up for publication, but no information that could identify you will be included in any reports about the study. However, the researchers are required to report any disclosure of criminal activity to the appropriate authorities.

**Are there any risks to being part of this study?** The risks of participating are minimal, but you may experience some discomfort when thinking about the private information that you and your partner share. Additionally, it is conceivable that completing the survey may influence you and your spouse to talk about the survey content together which may cause distress. If answering questions about how you manage your private information will be too difficult for you, it is okay to decide not to participate. If you do experience unexpected distress, you can call the following toll-free numbers or visit the following websites where you can find local counseling and support services (1-888-568-1112; <http://www.counselingservices.org/>).

**Are there any benefits to being part of this study?** People often find it interesting or helpful to reflect on their experience(s) with privacy in their romantic relationships. Your participation also benefits the scholarly community by helping us to better understand the motivations and impacts of managing private information within committed relationships.

This could lead to recommendations to other people about what might be helpful when dealing with private information.

**Will I be compensated in any way for participating?** You will not be compensated for participating.

**Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?** If you have any questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Kristyn Jackson at xxxx@uky.edu or xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9424 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. In addition, you may print a copy of this informed consent agreement to keep for your records, if you wish.

**Agreement:** By clicking on the link below, you are certifying that you have agreed to participate in this study, you have read and understood the information presented to you here, and you are at least 18 years old.

### **Informed Consent Text - Student Version**

**Who is conducting this research study?** This project is being conducted by Kristyn Jackson, a graduate student in the Department of Family Science as well as by Dr. Scott in the Department of Communication at the University of Kentucky.

**What is this study about?** This is a study designed to explore how married couples manage private information. We hope to use our findings to make recommendations to married couples to help them better manage private information as a couple.

**What will I be asked to do if I choose to participate?** If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey about how you and your spouse manage private information. Completing the survey will take approximately 20-30 minutes.

**Your participation in this study is voluntary.** You may choose, if you want, to participate in this study. If you begin the project, you may choose to stop participating at any time, which means that you may choose not to answer any question on the survey. You can even contact me after you are done and tell me that you do not want me to use your data. Your decision to participate or not to participate will have no effect on any future relations you may have with the University of Kentucky.

**Your participation in this study is confidential.** Information that you share during this study will be kept confidential. The questions you answer will be private, which means the researcher will not connect your name to your specific answers. The data collected from this study will be presented to other researchers and written up for publication, but no information that could identify you will be included in any reports about the study. However, the researchers are required to report any disclosure of criminal activity to the appropriate authorities.

**Are there any risks to being part of this study?** The risks of participating are minimal, but you may experience some discomfort when thinking about the private information that you and your partner share. Additionally, it is conceivable that completing the survey may influence you and your spouse to talk about the survey content together which may cause distress. If answering questions about how you manage your private information will be too difficult for you, it is okay to decide not to participate. If you do experience unexpected distress, you can call the following toll-free numbers or visit the following websites where you can find local counseling and support services (1-888-568-1112; <http://www.counselingservices.org/>).

**Are there any benefits to being part of this study?** People often find it interesting or helpful to reflect on their experience(s) with privacy in their romantic relationships. Your participation also benefits the scholarly community by helping us to better understand the motivations and impacts of managing private information within committed relationships. This could lead to recommendations to other people about what might be helpful when dealing with private information.

**Will I be compensated in any way for participating?** You will receive course credit for participating in the study or for referring a participating couple to the study.

**Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?** If you have any questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Kristyn Jackson at [xxxx@uky.edu](mailto:xxxx@uky.edu) or xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9424 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. In addition, you may print a copy of this informed consent agreement to keep for your records, if you wish.

**Agreement:** By clicking on the link below, you are certifying that you have agreed to participate in this study, you have read and understood the information presented to you here, and you are at least 18 years old.

## Appendix B

### Collective Secret Keeping Survey

1. Are you currently keeping, or have you ever kept, a collective secret from other individuals outside of your relationship?
  - a. Just to double check, are there any collective secrets that you have kept or are keeping with your partner?
2. Think about the collective secret(s) that you have kept with your partner over the course of your relationship. Please list the topics of the collective secret(s) in the space provided below.
3. Please describe the information that you and your partner are keeping secret from others. Please provide as much detail as possible.
4. Referring back to the list of topics that you provided in Question 2, please identify and describe the most recent collective secret that you have kept with your partner in the space provided below.
5. Is the most recent collective secret that you identified in the previous question a collective secret that you are keeping currently or that you kept in the past? (1 = past, 2 = current)
6. On the scale provided below, please rate the importance of the collective secret that you have identified ranging from extremely unimportant (1) to extremely important (7) by selecting the appropriate number.
7. On the scale provided below, please rate what you believe the importance of the collective secret is for your partner ranging from extremely unimportant (1) to extremely important (7) by circling the appropriate number.

The following set of questions will ask you about possible reasons why you have kept the collective secret that you have kept with your partner from others outside of your relationship. For each question, please answer by selecting the most appropriate number ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

8. I worry that people would no longer like me if they knew the secret.
9. I worry that people would no longer like my partner if they knew the secret.
10. People outside of our relationship would disapprove if they knew about the secret.
11. If people outside of our relationship found out about the secret it would disappoint them.
12. The secret would shatter other's beliefs about my partner and I.
13. It is hard to predict how others outside of our relationship would react to hearing the secret.
14. Others outside of our relationship would have a hard time talking to me and my partner if they were to know the secret.
15. Revealing the secret would really create big problems for my partner and I.
16. Keeping the secret prevents stress for me.
17. Keeping the secret prevents stress for my partner.
18. Telling the secret to others outside of our relationship would hurt my relationship with my partner.

19. My partner would be really upset if I revealed the secret.
20. My partner would be very angry if I revealed the secret.
21. My partner would never trust me again if I revealed the secret.
22. Others outside of our relationship would probably tell other people the secret.
23. I can't trust others outside of our relationship with the secret.
24. I'm not sure what others outside of our relationship would do with the secret.
25. Others outside of our relationship might use the secret information against us.
26. Others outside of our relationship might take advantage of us if they knew about the secret.
27. If others outside of our relationship found out about the secret they might use it against me or my partner.
28. The secret is no one else's business.
29. The secret isn't relevant to other people.
30. The secret is personal information.
31. My partner and I greatly value our privacy.
32. Others outside of our relationship really do not need to know the information.
33. It is fun to have a special secret like this.
34. Having a secret provides a thing that bonds us together.
35. Having this secret has made my partner and I more cohesive.
36. Letting the secret out would spoil the specialness of the secret.
37. We keep the secret because we are generally not very open with others.
38. My partner and I keep the secret because we do not know how to talk about the secret.

Couples sometimes report that the collective secret that they have kept has impacted their relationship in some way, either positively or negatively. The following questions will ask you to rate the impact that the collective secret has had on your relationship. For each question, please circle the most appropriate number ranging from not at all true (1) to absolutely true (7).

39. Keeping the collective secret has made me trust my partner less.
40. Keeping the collective secret has made me dislike my partner.
41. Keeping the collective secret has weakened my relationship with my partner.
42. Keeping the collective secret has made me like my partner less.
43. Keeping the collective secret has made me trust my partner.
44. Keeping the collective secret has strengthened my relationship with my partner.
45. Has the collective secret that you identified as most important in Question 3 been disclosed to anyone outside of your relationship by you or your partner?
46. Do you anticipate that you will eventually disclose the collective secret? Please explain why you do or do not anticipate disclosing the secret in the space provided below.
47. Did you or your partner disclose the secret?
48. Please explain why you or your partner decided to disclose the collective secret in the space provided below.
49. Did you and your partner agree to disclose the secret?

50. If you answered no to Question 48, please explain why you and your partner disagreed to disclosing the secret in the space provided below.

Couples sometimes report that the decision to disclose the collective secret that they have kept has impacted their relationship in some way, either positively or negatively. The following questions will ask you to rate the impact that sharing the secret has had on your relationship. For each question, please circle the most appropriate number ranging from not at all true (1) to absolutely true (7).

- 51. Disclosing the secret has made me trust my partner less.
- 52. Disclosing the secret has made me dislike my partner.
- 53. Disclosing the collective secret has weakened my relationship with my partner.
- 54. Disclosing the collective secret has made me like my partner.
- 55. Disclosing the collective secret has made me trust my partner.
- 56. Disclosing the collective secret has strengthened my relationship with my partner.

Now think about the relationship you have currently with your partner. Select the number that most closely describes your feelings toward this relationship recently.

- 57. Miserable...Enjoyable
- 58. Hopeful...Discouraging
- 59. Empty...Full
- 60. Interesting...Boring
- 61. Rewarding...Disappointing
- 62. Doesn't give me a chance...Brings out the best in me
- 63. Lonely...Friendly
- 64. Worthwhile...Useless
- 65. All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your relationship with your partner recently?

The following set of questions refers to your current partner. Please select the most appropriate answer for each question.

- Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7

- 66. How close are you to your partner?
- 67. How much do you like your partner?
- 68. How important is your partner's opinion to you?
- 69. How much do you enjoy spending time with your partner?
- 70. How important is your relationship with your partner to you?
- 71. Are you male or female?
- 72. Please enter your age (in years) in the space provided.
- 73. How long have you and your partner been married?
- 74. What is your ethnicity?

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### PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

#### PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

- Parker, T. S., **Blackburn, K. M.**, Perry, M. S., Hawks, J. M. (2013). Sexting as an intervention: Relationship satisfaction and motivation considerations. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 41*, 1-12.
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- Hunter, J. L., **Jackson, K.**, & Gillen, M. (2016, March). *Promoting Consumer Vitality through Financial Education*. Presented at 2016 Family Economics and Resource Management Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.
- Blackburn, K. M.** *An Examination of the Effect of Attachment Style on Perceived Secrecy in Marital Relationships*. Poster presented at the 2014 National Council on Family Relations Conference, Baltimore, MD.
- Blackburn, K. M.**, Parker, T. S., Werner-Wilson, R. J., & Wood, N. *Therapist brain activity and the therapeutic relationship*. Poster presented at the 2013 American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Annual Conference, Portland, OR.
- Blackburn, K. M.**, & Ma, X. *An examination of individual and couple factors explaining attitudes toward divorce*. Poster presented at the 2013 National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Hawks, J. M., **Blackburn, K. M.** *Inside the brain: Couples' Affect, Empathy, and Frontal Alpha Asymmetry*. Poster presented at the 2013 National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Blackburn, K. M.**, & Parker, T. (2012, September). *Relationship satisfaction and health care planning*. Poster presented at the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Annual Conference, Charlotte, NC.
- Puckett, J. M., Nordquist, E., Parker, T., **Blackburn, K. M.**, Kimberly, C., & Werner-Wilson, R. (2012, September). *Couple's empathic interactions and physiological linkage*. Poster presented at the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Annual Conference, Charlotte, NC.
- Blackburn, K. M.**, Frey, L. M., Werner-Wilson, R. J., Parker, T., & Wood, N. D. (2011, November). *PTSD, attachment, and IPV in a military sample: A preliminary analysis*. Poster presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Orlando, FL.

- Parker, T., **Blackburn, K. M.**, Puckett, J. M., Werner-Wilson, R. J., & Wood, N. D. (2011, September). *The elephant in the room: Physiology at work in therapy*. Workshop presented at the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Annual Conference, Fort Worth, TX.
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- Werner-Wilson, R. J., Lianekhammy, J., Compton, L., Wood, N., Parker, t., Kimberly, C., Perry, M. S., **Blackburn, K.**, Smith, L., Terrana, K., Puckett, J., & Dalton, M. (2011, November). *Alpha asymmetry in female military spouses following deployment*. Poster presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Orlando, FL.