



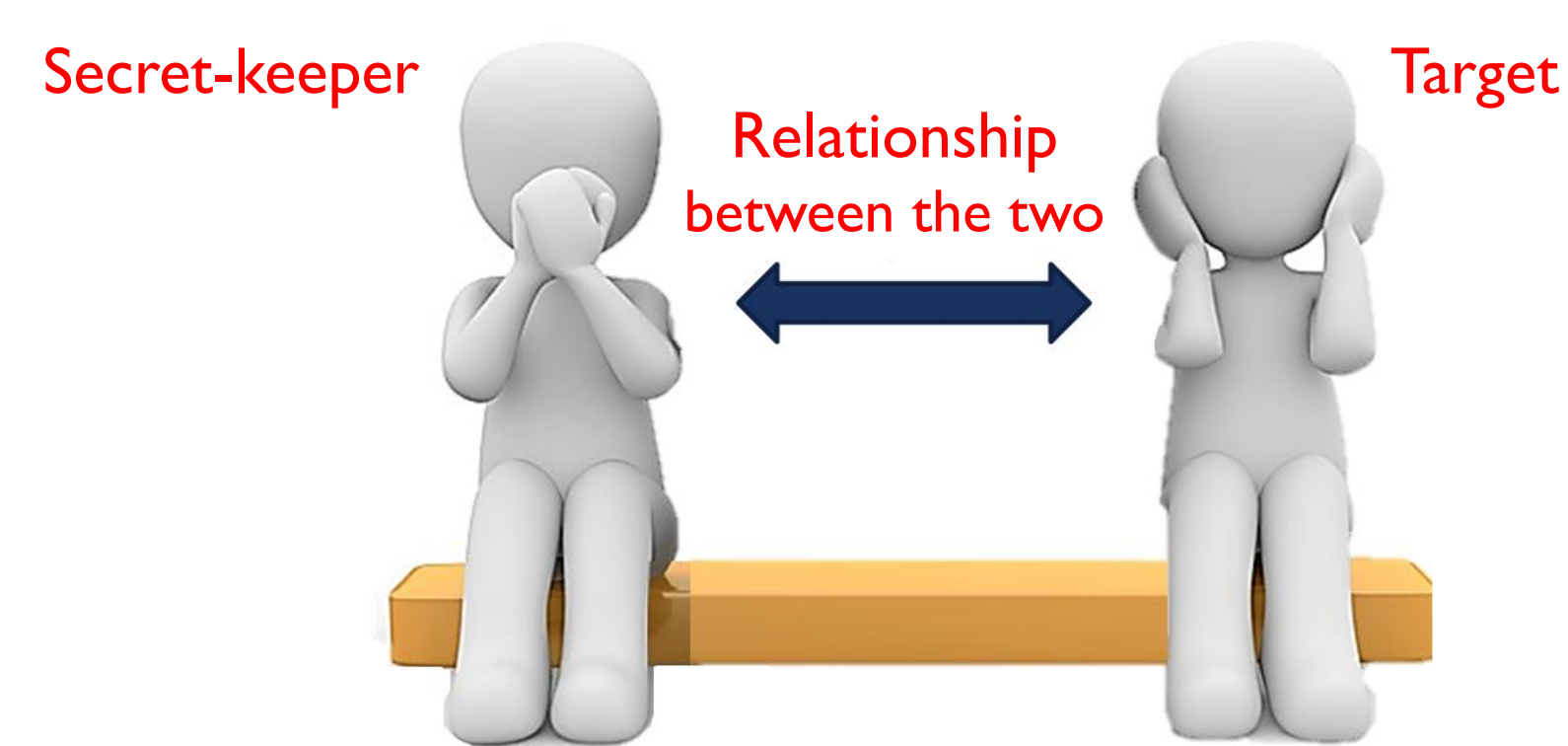
What You Don't Know Might Hurt Me: Keeping Secrets in Interpersonal Relationships

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Introduction

- Secrecy is the conscious concealment of information from someone who would otherwise expect to be privy to that knowledge.¹
- Studying secrets requires attention to three things:


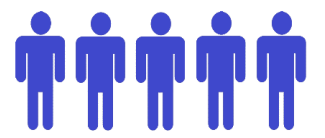


- Keeping a secret typically involves constant inhibition of thoughts and emotions² and mental preoccupation with the secret.³
- Secrecy is associated with lower physical well-being, psychological well-being,⁴ and relationship satisfaction.⁵
- People are more willing to reveal a secret to someone if past self-disclosures were received more positively than expected and without verbal aggression.⁶

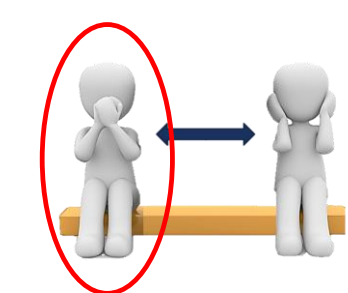
Research Question

How do relationship quality and the secret's relevance to the target affect the experience of keeping a personal secret?

Method

- Online self-report questionnaire, ~ 30 min. to complete
 - | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------------------|
|  | 104 females | } 249 valid responses |
|  | 145 males | |
 - MTurk users, ages 19 - 72
 - Responded to questions on 5- or 7-point rating scales
- e.g. *How often do you think about the secret?*
How open and honest are you with [target]?
To what extent is the information that you are keeping secret relevant to [target]?

Results



Experience of secrecy for the secret-keeper

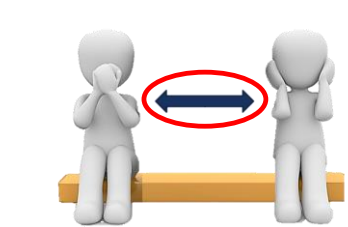
- Participants perceived the secret to have a more negative impact on their well-being when it involved high effort and difficulty, frequent rumination, and expectations of negative consequences.

Demands on the Secret-Keeper		Anticipated Consequences of Revealing	
	Perceived impact on well-being		Perceived impact on well-being
Difficulty of keeping secret	-.25**	Negative social consequences	-.17*
Effort invested in keeping secret	-.16*	Negative emotional consequences	-.45**
Rumination over secret	-.28**	Overall good consequences	.20*

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

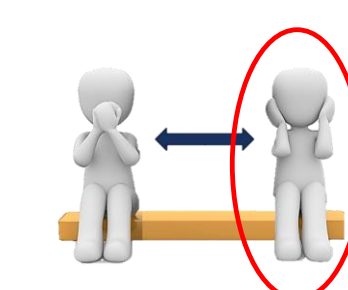
* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

- Lying and denial were used as concealment tactics when the secret was more important to keep and participants expected negative consequences upon revealing.



Relationship Quality and Secrecy

- Insignificant correlations:
 - Relationship quality Impact on well-being
 - Prior norms of information sharing Impact on well-being
 - Interaction frequency (overall, 1-1, group) Difficulty
- Significant correlations:
 - Relationship quality Reasons for keeping the secret
 - Communication frequency (in-person, text, phone calls) Difficulty



Secret's Relevance to the Target

- The burden of keeping the secret was higher when the secret was more relevant to and expected to negatively affect the target.

Relevance to the Target		How Target Would Be Affected	
	Relevance to the target		How target would be affected
Impact on well-being	-.16*	Relief of secrecy burden	.17*
Effect on the relationship	-.25**	Negative emotional consequences	-.59**
Difficulty of keeping secret	.28**	Effort invested in keeping secret	-.17*

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

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Results

Personality Moderators of Secret-Keeping

- Fear of negative evaluation and anxious attachment were related to keeping the secret out of concern with negative evaluation.
- Avoidant attachment was related to keeping the secret out of concern with public image and the relationship.
- Interpersonal trust was not related to any variables.

Implications

- Secrets are burdensome to keep and can negatively affect one's personal and relational well-being.
- The quality of a relationship is connected to people's reasons for keeping a secret and their expectations of how the target would perceive the information.
- Interpersonal secrets with relevance to the target are associated with a higher burden of secrecy in terms of difficulty, effort, and impact on well-being.
- The interpersonal nature of secrecy requires that future research considers the secret-keeper, the target, and their relationship.

Acknowledgements

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