Comparison of family secret forms with family cohesion levels

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A COMPARISON OF
FAMILY SECRET FORMS
WITH FAMILY COHESION LEVELS

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1995

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August 8, 1995
In this study characteristics of family secrets and possible associations between family secret form and family cohesion levels were investigated. The subjects studied were 113 students in introductory interpersonal communication classes at a mid-sized northwestern university. Eighty-three female and twenty-nine male students (one respondent did not report gender) answered a questionnaire containing twelve open-ended questions regarding a secret in their family of origin and completed Olson's (1985) FACES II Scale to measure perceived levels of cohesion in their family of origin.

Secret form (individual secret, internal secret, or shared secret) was found to have a weak association with family cohesion level. The first finding was that respondents from families with midrange levels of cohesion chose to report an internal secret more often than respondents from other family types. The second finding was that respondents from families with low levels of cohesion chose to report an individual secret more often than individuals from other family types. The third finding was a non-significant trend suggesting that family adaptability level and secret form were dependent upon each other.

This study's results support the contention that regulating self-disclosure is healthy in relationships by indicating that internal secrets exist within families with midrange levels of cohesion.
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Finally, a very special thanks to Daniel, who never wavered in his belief that the project would reach completion.
Communication is the fabric of family life. Family members construct and maintain relationships by the ways in which they express themselves. The rules, boundaries and patterns of communication that evolve in the family impact the family system and its member's lives for better or worse. A significant research base exists in the area of family communication and family life, springing from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and interpersonal communication. However, research to date from the communication field has focused on the overt aspects of family communication, leaving another dimension of family communication relatively unexplored.

It is time to ask a new question in communication research: "What are the role and impact of secrecy in family communication?". This "invisible side" of family interaction is fascinating and elusive. The very nature of secrecy does not lend itself to straightforward research -- secrecy is not observable or measurable in a communication sequence. Research efforts must rely on interview or questionnaire data and overcome at least two obstacles. First, respondents may not be aware of existing family secrets. Second, the very fact that information is or has been kept secret may lend a negative valence to the topic that inhibits subjects from participating in research.
investigating secrecy. Ask a person "do you have any secrets in your family?" and the honest response may be "no." Two conditions may be present in this situation. The family member may be unaware of an existing secret or s/he is continuing to keep the information secret.

Current literature discussing secrecy in families often views secrecy negatively. For example, Lerner (1993) describes the impact of secrecy in *Secrets: How They Can Hurt the Ones You Love*:

"Family secrets, more often than not, are profoundly destructive, even for the secret-keepers. Secrets erode connection, block authentic involvement and trust, and strip the family of spontaneity and vitality. They not only rob individuals of relationships within their families but rob the family itself of external supports. Keeping a secret from the outside world lowers family self-esteem and may lock the family into an atmosphere silence, and social isolation" (pg. 71).

However, it is possible that secrecy may serve other, more positive functions in families. A dialectical approach to secrecy in families suggests that secrets function as oppositional forces in the relations between family members.

Using this perspective, the following research will explore the characteristics of family health and family secrecy in the families of 113 subjects.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Framework

The phenomenon of secrecy has fascinated humanity for centuries. From mythology, through biblical accounts, and into present-day society, secrets are the subject of stories and accounts that create archetypes that influence our lives today. Secrecy continues to affect culture on these levels, from symbolic representation to actual circumstances in everyday life.

As a culture secrecy enthralles us. Contemporary society blends secrecy into everyday life through literature and television. The popularity of mystery novels illustrates the fascination we have for discovering what others know but we do not know. Television programs such as soap operas and detective shows base their themes on the secret involvements of the characters. A more obvious example is the television game show "Family Secrets." At this level, secrecy provides entertainment and mental stimulation. On a more tangible level, such as real life family interaction, secrecy may not be so innocuous. This is precisely what we do not know - the positive and negative functions of secrecy in family communication.

The present project explores the role of secrecy in family communication. The functions of secrecy in family systems are investigated using a dialectical perspective.
Dialectical Perspective

Dialectical theory is applied to social behavior by various authors. Three features of dialectical theory remain constant in these discussions: (1) opposition or polarity, (2) unity of opposites, and (3) the dynamic relationship between opposites (Altman et. al., 1981). The ideas that relationships contain opposing forces (such as independence and interdependence) that are unified by their polarity (one cannot exist without the other) and are engaged in a process of balancing opposite forces, are reinforced when applied to family communication and secrecy.

Simmel (1964) alludes to the dialectical nature of secrecy, "Peculiarly enough, these attractions of secrecy are related to those of its logical opposite, betrayal..." (pg. 332). Simmel describes the interplay of secrecy in the development of human relationships:

"...every human relation is characterized, among other things, by the amount of secrecy that is in and around it. In this respect, therefore, the further development of every relation is determined by the ratio of persevering and yielding energies which are contained in the relation" (pg. 334).

More recently, Altman, et. al. (1981) describe specific properties of dialectics such as openness-closedness and stability-change in their analysis of the dialectics of social behavior. Baxter (1988) proposes additional properties of dialectics in interpersonal relationships. She describes a set of dialectical poles that encompass (1)
autonomy-connection, (2) open-closed, and (3) predictability-novelty. The role of family secrets in dialectical contradictions presents a fascinating and complex picture of family communication. The following discussion presents four unique qualities that exist in the relationship between family secrets and dialectical forces. First, secrets can relate alternately to both poles on any given dialectical contradiction. Second, secrets can relate concurrently to one pole of multiple contradictions. Third, internal secrets (defined below) provide the opportunity for family members to experience both poles of a dialectical contradiction simultaneously. Finally, three different forms of secrecy allow multiple contradictions to exist regarding separate, nonrelated secrets.

Secrets relate alternately to both poles of a contradiction

Secrets are necessarily transitory in nature, and as their status changes, so does the dialectical pole with which they identify. For example, when a secret is kept, it identifies with the closedness pole of openness-closedness, and the stability pole of stability-change. When a secret is revealed, it is identified with the openness pole of openness-closedness and the change pole of stability-change. A secret can relate alternately to either pole of the dimension depending on the status of the secret (being kept or being revealed). Secrecy's applicability to each pole of
dialectical contradictions suggests that secrecy can successfully fulfill dual functions across a wide range of dimensions.

**Secrets involve multiple contradictions concurrently**

Due to the variable nature of a secret's status, a secret can function in connection with one pole of multiple dialectical contradictions concurrently. For example, the poles of "autonomy-predictability-closed" are engaged when a secret is being kept and the poles of "interdependence-novelty-open" are engaged during secret disclosure. This quality of secrets requires a complex view of dialectical processes. A multidimensional view is necessary to fully grasp the intricacies of their interactions in interpersonal relationships.

**Secrets fulfill multiple functions simultaneously**

An interesting quality of secrecy in families is the dual-role that internal secrets play and the opportunity they provide for fulfilling dual functions simultaneously. Internal secrets are secrets held by at least two family members from at least one other family member (Karpel, 1980). Internal secrets provide the opportunity for the secret keeper (who has also shared the secret with at least one other family member) to experience both poles of a dialectical contradiction simultaneously in a network of
relationships. For example, family members with internal secrets experience both poles of the autonomy-connection dialectic with different family members. The keeper of an internal secret is withholding information from a family member (experiencing autonomy) and sharing the same information with another family member (experiencing connection). Thus, the keeper of an internal secret has the luxury of experiencing both poles of the dialectical contradiction simultaneously.

A premise of dialectical theory is that the movement between dialectical poles is sequential from one dominant pole to another. For example, sequential movement characterizes the autonomy-connection dialectic. First, people move toward connection with bonding behavior and then reach a point where they seek more autonomy. Then their behavior shifts toward more individualized activities until autonomy is the dominant pole. This pattern is necessarily sequential in nature, according to dialectical theory. The simultaneous functioning of secrets on both dialectical poles offers a new perspective on dialectical processes in family communication. This perspective requires a shift from a dyadic view to multi-relationship view of dialectics in communication.

So far, the literature on dialectics maintains a singular dyadic perspective, examining the contradictions inherent in one relationship between two people (Baxter,
1988; Montgomery, 1992; Wilmot, 1994) and the movement from one pole to another within one relationship. Consider the simultaneous nature of dialectical contradictions among wider networks of relationships in family systems, specifically when internal secrecy is involved. For example, two of the three siblings in a family are keeping a secret from the rest of their family. They are experiencing one pole of a dialectical contradiction within the secret-sharing dyad (i.e., connection) and the opposite pole of the contradiction with the family members who are unaware of the secret simultaneously (autonomy). The secret is essentially "wearing two hats" simultaneously as it provides opposite functions within two different levels (the secret-sharing dyad and the secret-keeping relationship within the larger family system).

Multiple contradictions may exist independently

Secrets within families exist in different forms. A family member can keep a secret from all other family members (an individual secret), two or more family members can keep a secret from at least one other family member (an internal secret) or the entire family can keep a secret from everyone outside the family (a shared secret; Karpel, 1980). A family member has the potential to experience a different set of dialectical contradictions in all three secret forms. A family member can also be involved in all three variations
of secrecy at once, experiencing different dialectical contradictions in all three secret forms independently.

Secrets within families provide a unique opportunity for family members to engage the dialectical processes inherent in relationships on at least three independent dimensions. The first dimension is at the dyadic relational level, where secrets follow the agreed-upon dialectical process of facilitating sequential movement from one pole to another. Secrets can also function on a more complex dimension, when multiple poles of different dialectical contradictions are functioning concurrently. Next, a third dimension exists on a wider system level, where the interaction of internal secrets suggests an even more complex function of secrecy. It is on this dimension that secrets fulfill opposite functions on two different levels simultaneously. Finally, three different forms of secrecy within families offer separate opportunities for family members to experience a multitude of dialectical contradictions.

The dialectical interplay of secrecy in family communication can serve as a framework for the analysis of family secrets. According to the dialectical perspective, the idea of the unity of opposing forces includes the complementarity and integration of opposites and the strength and balance of opposites (Altman et al., 1981). In addition, openness and closedness "contribute to a higher
order boundary regulation system in which they are separate but related components" (pp. 120). The function of secrecy in families then may be one of boundary regulation. As a foundation for investigating the role of secrecy in families, (1) a common definition of family secrecy is constructed, and (2) current research on family secrecy and the distinction between privacy and secrecy is reviewed.

Defining Family Secrecy

Our knowledge of secrecy is primarily from sociology (Simmel, 1964) or psychology and other therapeutic fields (Avery, 1982; Karpel, 1980; Friel & Friel, 1988). Historically, secrecy is a topic that has received limited attention in communication research. However, interest is emerging among communication scholars investigating the role of secrecy in human communication (Parks, 1982; Cowan, 1987 unpub.; Vangelisti, 1994).

Definitions of family secrets are diverse, ranging from abstract to concrete. One perspective views family secrets as metaphors that represent the unconscious needs and fears of family members (Pincus and Dare, 1978; Roman and Blackburn 1979). Family secrets have also been defined as certain family knowledge withheld from people outside the family unit (Avery, 1982; Waterman, 1979), or as factual knowledge withheld from family members and/or outsiders (Karpel, 1980). The work of these authors and others helps
us construct a working definition of family secrets.

No individual discipline systematically examines the dynamics of family secrecy. However, two definitions from the mental health field provide the basis for a functional definition of family secrets. A combination of criteria from Karpel (1980) and Friel and Friel (1988) describe and delineate family secrets.

Karpel (1980) describes family secrets as information withheld or differentially shared, usually intimate in nature, and generally about facts rather than feelings or thoughts. Friel and Friel (1988) on the other hand, believe secrets can be about thoughts, feelings or behavior. It is the author's perspective that a functional definition of family secrets encompasses both factual and mental/emotional components. Family secrets involve information withheld or differentially shared, involving facts, feelings, thoughts or behavior.

Current Research

Recent research by Vangelisti (1994) examines family secrecy by describing the secret topics, forms, functions, and perceived relationship of secrecy to family satisfaction. This research shows clearly that family secrets exist in most families surveyed. In Vangelisti's study, 99% reported having "internal" secrets, 96% reported having "shared" secrets, and 85% reported having
"individual" secrets in their families.

In addition, Vangelisti's research explores the perceived functions of secrecy, indicating that protection of family members and privacy is the predominant function. Respondents did not indicate cohesion and communication as primary functions of secrecy, although a follow up study did reveal bonding as a primary function. Vangelisti's work is the first empirical research addressing the positive functions of secrecy.

The prevailing assumption in early self-disclosure literature is that secrecy is negative and disclosure is positive. There was not universal agreement on this assumption, however. One author argues that a bias exists in communication literature in favor of high levels of disclosure (Parks, 1982). Parks notes that the current "ideology of intimacy" views disclosure as beneficial and secrecy as detrimental. Parks points to literature claiming that successful communicators do not keep secrets or use deception (e.g., Brooks, 1978; Buley, 1977; DeVito, 1980; Rossiter & Pearce, 1975; Scott & Powers, 1978).

The tremendous amount of early research generated in the area of self-disclosure has focused on the benefits of disclosing and the detriments of withholding information. Unfortunately the opposite question has not received equal attention as phenomena in its own right - namely the benefits of withholding and the detriments of revealing
Investigating secrecy is an important avenue to pursue to gain unbiased knowledge about the "other side" of disclosure. One perspective shedding light on secrecy is found in the literature on information control.

Parks (1982) argues for the importance of information control, which "no adequate communication theory can ignore" (pg. 90). Information control includes two related but different areas - privacy and secrecy. Parks contends that information control contributes to intimacy, individual identity, group cohesion, authority and power, and social action. Examining the specific role of secrecy in these processes will help delineate the differences between secrecy and privacy.

Karpel (1980), Warren and Laslett (1977), and Bok (1983), discuss the distinction between privacy and secrecy. They use different criteria for determining the conditions of private information versus secret information. For Bok (1983), intentionality is the deciding factor, with secrets referring to information that is intentionally protected. According to Karpel, the distinction is dependent on the relevance of the information for the person(s) unaware of the secret. The more relevant the information is for the unaware, the closer the information comes to being considered "secret" as opposed to "private." Information is considered private when knowledge of the information has no implications for the unaware. Protection is a another
quality that influences the distinction between secrecy and privacy. According to Karpel (1980), when protection of the unaware is a motivation for concealing information, the information is considered secret. Karpel points out that while a secret holder may be considering the welfare of the unaware in the decision to keep information secret, the bottom line is that the secret keeper is also protecting him/herself.

Another viewpoint considers a wider social context. Warren and Laslett (1977) use moral content as the definitive feature in the distinction between privacy and secrecy. Information falls under the rubric of privacy when the content is either morally neutral or valued by society and the information holder. Society sanctions a "right to privacy" regarding information that is morally acceptable but withheld from others. Warren and Laslett (1977) also claim there is no equivalent "right to secrecy" sanctioning the withholding of information with a negative moral valence.

The term secrecy then is currently reserved for information that is intentionally concealed, immoral or negatively valued by the unaware. In addition, "secrecy is not only a strategy for hiding acts or attributes which others hold in moral disrepute, but it is also a means to escape being stigmatized for them" (Warren & Laslett, pg. 44). These authors suggest that if information is not
private and is kept secret, it is automatically immoral by the very fact that it is being kept secret. The issue of stigmatization adds another layer of negativity to secrecy. This suggests that not only is knowledge of the secret itself damaging, it carries the power of creating a negative stigma for people involved in the secret.

The theories of Bok, (1983), Karpel (1980) and Warren and Laslett (1977) regarding the differentiation between privacy and secrecy fail to address the intricacies of privacy and secrecy. Considering the diversity of people, families, situations, and behaviors that exist it is difficult to apply a blanket theory to the topic of secrecy and privacy. Karpel acknowledges that families will probably have different definitions of secrecy versus privacy depending on the levels of cohesion in the family. One family considers information private (using Warren and Laslett's distinctions) and another family considers the same information very secret. In addition, individuals may have different conceptions of whether information that is being withheld is private or secret, and may have unique motivations for keeping information private or secret within their familial context. Family secrets blur the distinction between privacy and secrecy as described by Bok (1983), Karpel (1980) and Warren and Laslett (1977). Within families, secrets exist with different definitions, motivations and impacts on family members and the family
system.

This author contends that research on secrecy within families requires a new perspective. Issues such as the morality of the content, implications for the unaware and the distinction between privacy and secrecy will be discarded. These criteria indicate a negative perspective toward secrecy, assuming that the information is immoral or will be damaging to the unaware in some way. Consider the possibility that secrets fulfill positive functions in family relationships. A dialectical perspective suggests secrecy can function as a balancing force in relationships and family systems.

Functions of Secrecy

Secrecy has positive (Bok, 1983; Tournier, 1963) and negative (Karpel, 1980) functions in families. Both positive and negative qualities influence family dynamics such as power, loyalty, interpersonal boundaries and system rules (Karpel, 1980; Bok, 1983). Secrecy is a functional aspect of this process. For example, parental secrecy over their sexual relationship maintains conventional parent-child roles by asserting power and control over private issues. Loyalty between partners reinforces the uniqueness of the marital dyad, establishes rules and maintains clear boundaries. Children assimilate appropriate familial privacy
norms and boundaries through these experiences. Children construct a sense of personal identity through secrecy. The healthy use of secrets is natural to children, as they begin to individuate from their parents and define a personal sense of self (Tournier, 1963). "The child experiences a quite new feeling of power, for he has an awareness of possessing something in his own right, his very own...he acquires a truly personal possession only by receiving or getting something without their knowledge" (pp. 10). According to Simmel (1964), "the secret is a first-rate element of individualization" (pp. 334). Experiences with secrecy in childhood may contribute to the process of individuation and maturation in later stages of life.

Secrecy also provides much needed protection in peoples' lives. Knowledge of certain facts, feelings, thoughts or behaviors by the wrong parties may prove detrimental to their source. A mixed-race couple planning to marry may want to conceal their plans from the white supremacist group in town. The wife of an abusive, alcoholic husband is likely to keep feelings of disengagement and plans to move away with the children secret until the last minute to protect their safety. It wouldn't be prudent for an elderly person living in a dangerous neighborhood to make possession of a valuable object public knowledge. Secrecy within the marital relationship is also important.
Intimate knowledge of another's deepest secret is not necessarily desirable in a marital relationship. Revelation of undesirable actions committed in the distant past may shock one partner in a dyad into breaking their commitment to the relationship. Sharing a long-ago homosexual experience with a strict Christian spouse could needlessly damage the relationship beyond repair. Secrecy in this situation is healthy and maintains the status quo. The same holds true for cross-generational secrets.

Undesirable circumstances in previous generations may be perceived as information that should be kept secret. Revealing information concerning tragic situations over which there is no control can do more harm than good. For instance, the knowledge that a visiting distant cousin had killed her violent father at age 18 was withheld from children in one family. Knowledge of the tragedy would have scared the children, affected their relationship with the relative, and may have caused unnecessary pain to resurface. Secrecy about the distant past allowed more comfortable relations in the present.

In these examples, secrecy enables the individual or the family to function more successfully. As Bok says, "In seeking some control over secrecy and openness, and the powers it makes possible, human beings attempt to guard and to promote not only their autonomy but ultimately their sanity and survival itself" (1982, pp. 23).
Conversely, secrecy may influence individual and family systems negatively when issues are forced underground. Using secrecy as leverage to coerce family members is an abuse of power. When family members manipulate bonds of loyalty, feelings of suspicion and exclusion are the result (Karpel, 1980). Healthy boundaries and rules are broken by making controversial demands on another or by forcing a facade of normalcy to be presented. Shame may result, with attending feelings of hurt, fear and rage (Kaufman, 1985). For instance, sexual abuse of a child by a parent involves injunctions not to reveal the situation to the other parent in a majority of cases. The child is placed in compromising position, because she/he has been hurt and needs to seek comfort, yet has been forced into hiding the act and protecting the perpetrator. Not only is there an invasion of a physical boundary, the injunction to keep the secret tampers with the loyalty to the protective parent. This undermines the normal trust a child has in a parent. As Kaufman (1985) states, "the child has been abused by one parent and abandoned by the other." Besides negative impacts upon individuals, secrecy can inflict widespread harm, causing dysfunction throughout the system. Discussion of perpetration concerning the secret is lacking in the literature. A person may have vastly different motivations for concealing information about an event s/he perpetrated, as opposed to an event in which s/he was victimized by
There are claims that secrecy is the hallmark of dysfunctional families. Friel and Friel (1988) contend that secrecy underlies feelings of shame about circumstances in childhood. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and sexual abuse within the family are a few symptoms of individual dysfunction that impact the system as a whole. This perpetuates feelings of fear, guilt, shame and/or inadequacy. Keeping these issues secret is understandable, but not necessarily the most functional response to alleviating the stress resulting from the situation. Friel and Friel (1988) assert that secrecy can evolve into a problem rivaling the actual event being kept secret, enabling dysfunction to continue and fosters feelings of fear, guilt, and shame.

According to Friel and Friel (1988) dysfunctional families have boundaries and rules that inhibit individual growth and emotional self-sufficiency. Security and nurturing are needs that are not completely fulfilled. The individual’s sense of internal security is negatively affected, leading to a need to find security outside the self (i.e., by over-dependency on others), in a misguided attempt to find the inner security that is lacking. Abusing power is one example.

An imbalance of power results from knowledge being withheld from family members. The secret-holder has the ammunition to intimidate other family members by threatening
to disclose information to relatives who are unaware of the secret. According to Karpel (1980), "the secret-holder has a sort of relational nuclear bomb that can be kept for later use" (pg. 297). A spouse aware of his/her partner's drug or alcohol addiction is one example. The secret information could be overtly held as a threat to coerce behaviors from the spouse, "You better do X or I'll tell your employer/parents/children you have a drinking problem."

Secrecy can also create covert power that affects relationships. A family member sexually abusing a child has the power to shatter the family structure by revealing the abuse (Swanson & Biaggio, 1985). The victim can be unaware of the power he/she holds, but be intuitively aware that secrecy regarding inappropriate sexual behavior will ward off a family catastrophe. Maintaining secrecy gives the secret holder the potential to control the behavior of other family members. In this way, secrecy is a strategy overtly or covertly used to attain a goal.

Strategies are part of complex process of system regulation. Strategies are recurring patterns of interactional sequences, emerging when people live in the same social field (Kantor and Lehr, 1975). Communication strategies such as secrecy regulate information and behavior. Interacting with rules and boundaries, secrets function to achieve the goal of system maintenance. To better understand secrecy dynamics in family systems,
Karpel's discussion of secret forms and Olson et. al's (1981) Circumplex Model of family systems will be considered.

**Forms of Secrecy**

Karpel (1980) identifies three forms of secrets that exist in families. "Individual" secrets exist when one person's secret is not shared with any other member of the family. "Internal" family secrets involve two or more family members being aware of a secret, with at least one other person unaware of the secret. "Shared" family secrets exist when all family members know a secret, but keep the information secret from people outside the family unit.

The existence of individual, internal, and shared secrets within the family system suggests an interesting question. Karpel's delineation of secret forms revolves around the kinds of boundaries secret patterns create within the relational system (pg. 290). Olson's Circumplex Model asserts that balanced ("healthy") families have fairly equal levels of emotional bonding and individual autonomy. They also have the ability to respond to stress by adjusting power structures, role relationships, and rules. If the assertions of Bok (1983) and Tournier (1963) are valid, "balanced" families will have secrets, indicating that healthy families display the use of secrecy as a
communication strategy. Consequently, internal secrets should be more prevalent in balanced families, due to the existence of emotional bonding and individual autonomy among family members, in concert with their ability to have flexible power structures, role relationships, and relationship rules.

The Nature of Family Systems

Family characteristics have been described using the framework of general systems theory (Kantor and Lehr, 1975; Galvin and Brommel, 1982). Systems theory originally evolved from a biological perspective, and was later applied to families. Von Bertalanffy (1968) states that a system consists of "entities standing in interaction." Littlejohn (1978) elaborates that a system is a collection of objects or entities that interrelate with each other to form a larger whole. Kantor and Lehr (1975) explain two qualities of a system as they apply to families. First, the parts of the system are directly or indirectly related to one another in a network of reciprocal causal effects. Second, each component part relates to one or more other component parts in a stable way during any particular period. In family systems, rules and boundaries evolve to regulate communication and behavior as the related components seek stability.

Rules perform an important function in the maintenance
of the family system. Rules are relationship agreements which prescribe and limit the behavior of family members (Wilder, 1979), can be overt or covert (Raush, Greif & Nugent, 1979), and are specific to individual family systems. Rules develop through direct negotiation or emerge through patterns of interaction as family members participate in creating stability in their family environment. Rules affecting information flow can influence and condone secrecy as a means to insure stability. Secrecy can function to establish rules regarding access to information and acceptable behavior for family members. Besides prescribing and limiting behavior, rules regulating information flow influence individual and system boundaries.

The formation of boundaries occurs in different ways. Hess and Handel (1974) delineate four dimensions establishing boundaries: (1) the differentiation of individual personalities, (i.e., how self-directing individuals are or will be), (2) the extent of experience from outside the family, (3) the intensity of subjective experience, and (4) the tendency to evaluate experience. Altman, et.al. (1981) describes this process as part of a dialectic, where the oppositional qualities of openness and closedness contribute to boundary regulation systems. Secrecy, with its potential impact upon both openness and closedness in family systems, influences the nature of the
boundaries in a given family system.

Clear boundaries are an important aspect of family systems. Boundaries exist between the family and the outside world, between subsystems of the family, and within each member (Hess and Handel, 1974; Waterman, 1979). Individuals in families mutually influence their experience of the world by responding to events and behavior. Well-defined boundaries mean that family members are aware of the boundaries, and that the boundaries are appropriate to the demands confronting the family (Bochner and Eisenberg, 1987).

The parental dyad functions as a boundary-setting unit. Parents determine external boundaries by using rules to regulate the amount of interaction the family will have with the neighborhood and the community. The healthy parental subsystem shows clear boundaries in its exclusive nature. Parents also influence the internal boundaries of family members by structuring the norms for privacy and secrecy.

Secrecy in a family may influence the development and existence of both rules and boundaries in the family system. Rules and boundaries are related qualities of family systems regulating the flow of information and behavior inside the family and with the outside world. Boundaries evolve in relation to family rules, and secrecy is a condition that affects the development of family rules. This interaction creates highly individual circumstances for secrecy and its
functions in family systems.

**Circumplex Model of Family Systems**

The communication, sociology and family therapy fields identify different types of family systems. Olson, et al. (1979) developed the Circumplex Model to identify types of marital and family systems. The development of the model emerged from the perceived need to integrate the wide variety of concepts used to describe family types and place them in a systematic model. Two aspects of family behavior underlying a majority of concepts in the family field are cohesion and adaptability. Olson et al.’s (1979) family typology places families into 16 categories based on four levels each of cohesion and adaptability (see Figure 5-1). The Circumplex Model proposes that a balanced level of both cohesion and adaptability is functional for family development and stability.

The Circumplex Model provides a framework to consider family functioning and is useful in this research because of its dialectical structure. The model’s design encompasses cohesion and adaptability, two concepts related to boundary regulation (for a discussion of boundary regulation, see page 10). The Circumplex Model represents boundary regulation in its dimensions of cohesion and adaptability. The cohesion dimension is characterized by four levels, disengaged, separated, connected, and enmeshed, which relate
to the dialectical poles of openness-closedness. The adaptability dimension is also characterized by four levels, rigid, structured, flexible, and enmeshed, which relate the dialectical poles of stability-change. Each dimension directly represents a dialectical framework relating to boundary regulation.

The definition of family cohesion given by Olsen et al. (1979, pp.5) is "the emotional bonding members have with one another and the degree of individual autonomy a person experiences in the family system". Levels of cohesion range from the low extreme of disengaged to separated, connected and enmeshed at the high extreme. Olson, et al. hypothesize that a balanced degree of family cohesion is the most effective.

Secrecy and family cohesion interact in at least two ways. First, withholding information decreases opportunities for increased closeness through shared interaction, as well as increasing individual autonomy. Decisions to exclude family members from awareness of certain events creates a power imbalance in the system. Conversely, secrecy interacts with cohesion by facilitating the use of boundaries and the process of individuation. Depending on the rules and boundaries present, secrecy interacts with the level of cohesion experienced in the system. Thus, mid-range families (in the Circumplex Model) should achieve a balance between secrecy and disclosure.
In concert with cohesion, adaptability influences family functioning.

The Circumplex Model's second dimension, adaptability, refers to a system's response to change. Olson et al. define adaptability as "the ability of a marital/family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress" (pp. 12, 1979). Secrecy is available as a communication strategy to influence information flow and behavior. A family system experiencing stress can employ secrecy to mitigate its impact by restricting access to knowledge of certain events. Secrecy may influence adaptability by providing a means for family members to withhold information or release information to family members.

Olson et al.'s (1979) Circumplex Model of family types is a way of classifying families by the characteristics of cohesion and adaptability that allows comparisons with other family characteristics. This study uses the Circumplex Model and Karpel's (1980) construct of secret form to answer questions about the function of secrecy within family systems (see page 23 for a discussion of secret forms).

Using the Circumplex Model and secret form as a framework, the author expects that families with different levels of cohesion will choose to report different forms of secrets. Therefore, the following hypotheses are posed:
H1: Individuals from disengaged families will report more individual secrets than other family types.

H2: Individuals from separate/connected families will report more internal secrets than other family types.

RQ1: What is the association between family adaptability and secret form?
CHAPTER III

Method

Subjects.

The subjects who participated in this study were students in introductory interpersonal communication classes at The University of Montana. All subjects participated in the study voluntarily. Their rights were protected by an anonymous system of questionnaire collection and data coding. One hundred and thirteen students participated in the study, including 83 females and 29 males (one respondent did not report sex). A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, giving a response rate of 26%. Four subjects completed only the third section of the questionnaire, reporting information related to the cohesion and adaptability levels in their family and omitting information regarding a secret in their family. The subjects' ages ranged from 18 to 60, with the greatest percentage falling between the ages of 19 and 22.

Students were asked to complete the questionnaire regarding a secret they were aware of in their family of origin. If they were not aware of any secrets or did not wish to fill out the questionnaire, they were asked to return the questionnaire blank.

Confidentiality was insured in two ways. First, the questionnaire was designed so respondents did not use their own name or any names of family members when answering
questions. Family members were referred to as "oldest brother", "mother", "youngest sister", etc. Second, questionnaires were accompanied by a return envelope. Respondents were asked to return the questionnaires via the campus mail system, leaving no possibility that the researcher could identify the respondent with her/his returned questionnaire.

**Questionnaire**

The questionnaire included three sections. The first section consisted of a cover letter which explained the purpose of the study. The letter emphasized that secrets are not necessarily negative, but also occur in positive situations such as keeping a secret about a surprise gift. The cover letter explained the voluntary nature of the study and indicated how confidentiality would be maintained. The cover letter also included the names and telephone numbers of local counseling resources in case any respondent was distressed by the topic of the questionnaire.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of demographic items, including age and sex, and twelve open-ended questions asking the respondent to identify a family secret and to describe communication patterns involving the secret (Appendix 2). Respondents were asked to think of one secret occurring in their family of origin and to answer all questions regarding that particular secret. A variety of
questions were asked to provide descriptive information about the secret, the breadth of knowledge among family members and people outside the family, patterns of secret disclosure, how individuals became aware of the secret, and impacts that knowledge or lack of knowledge has had upon the respondent and family members.

The third section of the questionnaire consisted of the FACES II scale, a questionnaire designed by Olson (1982), that identifies the respondent's perception of her/his family's levels of cohesion and adaptability (Figure 5-2). Combining the two levels allows the family to be categorized into a typology of sixteen different family systems (Figure 5-1).

**Coding Procedure**

Data from the questionnaires was categorized using inductive content analysis (Bulmer, 1979). Initial categories were established for each secret topic and a definition for the categories was constructed. Secret topics were then recoded based on the definitions, with several categories becoming more refined and some categories deleted. The reliability of the coding was verified by a second coder who reviewed 85 (75%) of the secrets.

The same procedure was followed for questionnaire items asking for information about how respondents became aware of the secret, effect of secret on respondent and their family
and event associated with the secret. Categories were developed depending on the general areas that emerged in the responses. After the questionnaires were coded by one person, they were coded independently by a person not affiliated with the research project. Disagreements on items were discussed and some categories redefined based on discussion. Items asking for disclosure pattern information (who became aware of secret first, second, etc.) were given numerical codes by the researcher based on family position or relationship to family. Acceptable inter-coder reliability was obtained (Scott's $\pi = .95$) (Scott, 1955).

Data reported as secret form and secret type were given numerical codes by the researcher based on information taken from a combination of questions. Secret form was determined by disclosure pattern questions and secret type was determined by secret topic and effect of knowing or not knowing the secret on respondent and their family.

A combination of information from questions provided the basis for categorizing the form of family secrets into the categories of individual, internal, or shared. Individual secrets are those secrets kept by one family member from all other family members. Internal secrets are kept by at least two family members from at least one other family member, and shared secrets are known by the entire family but kept secret from anyone outside the family.
CHAPTER IV
Analysis and Results

This chapter presents the statistical analysis of the data collected in the study that is directly related to the hypotheses and research question posed. The chapter also reports exploratory information regarding the secret topic, form, type, effect and disclosure patterns.

Exploratory Findings

The topics of secrets reported by subjects were most often related to breaking a family or social rule, followed by hidden relationships, victimization, pregnancy or abortion and drug or alcohol use. Secret topics reported least frequently concerned money and illegal activities. Even though instructions in the cover letter requested subjects to describe positive secrets (such as a surprise gift) as well as negative secrets, the great majority of secrets were negative in nature.
TABLE 1
SECRET TOPIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breaks family or social rule</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidden relationship or parentage</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy or abortion</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs/Alcohol use</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual preference or relationship</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Responses 109 100

Missing cases = 4

Secrets were examined by topic and effect and categorized into positive or negative types by the researcher. Table 2 shows a majority of secrets (91.7%) fit into the classification of "negative".

TABLE 2
SECRET TYPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Responses 109 100

Missing cases = 4

As described in Table 3, the effect of knowing the secret on the respondent was reported positive in 25.7% of
the cases, neutral in 19.3% of the cases and negative in 43.1% of the cases. Combining the responses of positive and neutral (45%) indicates that a nearly equal number of respondents reported the effect of knowing the secret was not a negative experience.

TABLE 3

EFFECT OF KNOWING SECRET ON RESPONDENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the respondent's perception of the impact of knowing the secret on the family. This impact was also reported "negative" in the greatest number of cases where an impact was specified (26.6%). Combining unspecified impact, positive impact, and no impact (56.7%) indicates that a higher percentage of respondents perceived a non-negative impact of knowing the secret on their family than a negative impact (26.6%).
### TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified impact</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive impact</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family unaware of secret</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total responses                    | 104   | 100.0                |

Missing cases = 9

As noted in Table 5, a majority of respondents (55%) reported that keeping the secret did not effect their family. It is interesting that only 7.3% of the respondents believe that keeping the secret had a negative effect on their family. Combining unspecified effect, no effect, and positive effect (73.2%) shows a very high percentage of respondents perceived a non-negative effect of keeping the secret.
TABLE 5
EFFECT ON FAMILY OF KEEPING SECRET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No effect</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified effect</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effect</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive effect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No longer a secret</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>109</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing cases = 4

As described in Table 6, respondents were asked to recall if they associated any particular time or event with the disclosure of the secret. Results revealed that the actual discussion of the secret was considered an event by 18.3% of respondents. Holidays were identified nearly an equal number of times as the event associated with learning the secret. This suggests that ritual family gatherings such as holidays provide an opportunity for disclosing secrets nearly as often as occasions when disclosure of a secret did not coincide with a family gathering.
### Table 6

**Event Associated with Revealing Secret**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing of secret</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit from relative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family gathering</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During conflict</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No event specified</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>88</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing cases = 25

Table 7 indicates the first person in the family to be aware of the secret, family members subsequently aware, and family members unaware of the secret. Family members were identified by their relationship to the respondent (e.g., oldest brother, cousin, father). The results indicate that mothers are most often the first to know a secret (17.6%), followed by fathers (14.8%), oldest sister (sister 4) (9%) and oldest brother (brother 4) (7.8%). When other family members become aware of a secret already disclosed to someone in the family (an internal secret), fathers and aunts rank exactly the same (9.4%) as being made aware of the secret. The high number of responses in column 1 (who
was first aware), column 3 (who was subsequently aware) and column 5 (who was unaware) are due to the simultaneous knowledge or lack of knowledge by multiple family members.

Combining all four sister categories (22.2%) shows sisters as the family member most often becoming aware of a secret first followed by mothers, brothers, and fathers. Combining all female family members (mother, sisters, aunts and grandmothers) shows that 46% of the time a female knew about the secret first. Males (fathers, brothers, uncles and grandfathers) were first aware of a secret 34.4% of the time.

Interestingly, when family members who are unaware of a secret were identified, mothers and fathers were named an equal number of times (14.1%), suggesting that in this situation one parent is not systematically favored. The wide distribution of possibilities for secret disclosure suggests that there is considerable variability in patterns of disclosure among family members.
Table 7

FIRST AWARE, OTHERS AWARE, AND THOSE UNAWARE OF SECRET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Who was Aware of Secret First</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Who was Subsequently Aware of Secret</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Unaware of Secret</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother 3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother 4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandpa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepmother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepparent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resp.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inlaws</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step sibs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the people outside the family who were aware of the secret, the majority were "friends" (Table 8). This suggests that friends serve an important function as receivers of knowledge about family secrets that are rarely shared with any other person.

**TABLE 8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF FAMILY WHO KNOW SECRET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category Label</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No outsiders know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing cases = 4

Table 9 shows that the way outsiders became aware of the secret was through intentional communication in a majority of cases. This suggests that friends serve an important function in regard to providing a listening ear for family members who share family secrets outside the family unit.
**TABLE 9**

**HOW OUTSIDERS BECAME AWARE OF SECRET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Told directly</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in secret</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental discovery</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing cases = 4

In addition to the exploratory information reported above, information exploring family type was gathered. Family cohesion and adaptability was measured by using Olson’s Circumplex Model of family types.

The level of cohesion in the respondent’s family of origin is represented in Table 10, which indicates that 68.2% of respondent’s families had midrange levels (separate or connected) of cohesion. The percentage of families with disengaged or enmeshed characteristics totaled 31.8%.
Table 10 describes the adaptability levels in the family of origin of the respondent. These figures show that 69% of respondents reported midrange levels of adaptability (i.e. flexible or structured) and 30.5% indicated rigid or chaotic levels of adaptability.
TABLE 11
ADAPTABILITY LEVELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigid</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>108</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing cases = 5

Hypothesis Testing

Two hypotheses were posed in this research, indicating an association between family cohesion and secret form. One research question was examined relating to family adaptability.

H1: Individuals from disengaged families will be more likely to report an individual secret than other family types.

H2: Individuals from separate/connected families will be more likely to report more internal secrets than other family types.
RQ1: What is the association between family adaptability and secret form?

The following tables have collapsed the two midrange levels of cohesion (separate and connected) and adaptability (structured and flexible) previously reported in Tables 10 and 11, respectively. This was done to distinguish between the extreme levels of each dimension and the two mid-range levels. Family types and secret form were compared using chi-square analysis. The results of the chi-square analysis of family cohesion and secret form approached significance (chi-square = 7.92, d.f. = 4, p = .09). It was expected that individuals in the separate/connected category would have more internal secrets. In fact, this appeared to be true. The frequency of internal secrets in the separate/connected category was nearly significant (p < .10) according to the adjusted standardized residual. As expected, subjects from disengaged families reported more individual secrets than other family types (p < .05).
Table 12
SECRET FORM AND FAMILY COHESION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHESION LEVEL</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Shared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate/Connected</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enmeshed</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A non-significant trend was found suggesting that adaptability levels and secret form were dependent upon each other (chi-square = 7.6, d.f. = 4, p = .11). The results showed that subjects from families with rigid levels of adaptability reported more shared secrets than subjects from other family types (p < .05). Families with structured/flexible adaptability levels had significantly fewer shared secrets than other family types (p < .05). There were no differences found between all other family types.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECRET FORM</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Shared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigid</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured/Flexible</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>31.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 13
SECRET FORM AND FAMILY ADAPTABILITY
CHAPTER V
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore characteristics of family secrets and possible associations between secret forms and family types. Two hypotheses were partly supported, indicating a weak association between family cohesion and secret form. A non-significant trend was found suggesting that adaptability levels and secret form may be dependent upon each other.

A discussion of the results of the study is presented in the following pages, beginning with findings from the exploratory data. Next, the findings related to the hypotheses and research question posed are explored. Finally, implications of these results and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Exploratory Findings

The data revealed that voluntary subjects chose to report secret topics which were most often related to breaking family or social rules, hidden relationships, victimization, pregnancy or abortion and drug or alcohol use. This supports the notion that secrets have an overall negative orientation, and are kept to conceal information that may be debilitating or destructive if known by certain other people either inside or outside the family. This
corroborates the findings that, when classified as either positive or negative, secrets revealed in this research were negatively valenced in the great majority of cases. In addition, data related to the perceived influence of secret keeping and secret sharing suggest negative orientations toward secrets. It is noted that subjects who volunteer to participate in a study of secrecy may represent a group of individuals who have a particularly salient experience with a family secret. The results may therefore represent more negatively valenced secrets in general due to this condition.

The subjects' perception of the impact on their family of knowing the secret was "negative" more often than "positive" or "no impact", although not by a large percentage. This suggests that subjects have more favorable perceptions of the secret being kept than of being disclosed. Evidently, when the impacts of a secret being revealed are known, the impacts are seen more negatively than when the secret was kept. This supports the following findings that respondents perceive keeping the secret less negatively than sharing the secret.

Subjects reported that keeping a secret had a non-negative effect on their family in a great majority of cases. This indicates that keeping the secret is experienced more positively by respondents than the experience of having other family members become aware of
the secret. It could be that keeping the secret maintains the status quo, and respondents are concerned that if family members become aware of the secret, impacts will be negative.

The subjects' responses indicated that the effect of knowing a secret upon him/herself was negative and non-negative a nearly equal amount of times. Thus, there was no clear pattern of responses among subjects pertaining to the effect upon him/herself of knowing the secret. Subjects' mixed reactions to knowing a secret may be due to their more direct knowledge of the effect on themselves than on their family as a whole. The self-evaluation of whether knowing the secret was negative or non-negative may have resulted in reports of more known negative personal effects than perceived negative family impacts.

Exploratory findings also indicated that one of the events most often related to the revelation of a secret was the actual sharing of the secret itself. This was an unexpected answer, given that the question asked for information regarding an actual event related to revealing the secret. This suggests that learning of a secret is of substantial importance to the subjects. Data from this question also revealed that holidays were the event most often associated with learning a secret, suggesting that when family members come together around ritual gatherings, secrets are shared.
Disclosure patterns indicated that females become aware of secrets more often than parents, and neither parent is systematically favored when a secret is disclosed. The fact that a female sibling is most likely to be the first to know is interesting. This indicated that respondents chose to report a secret that had been initially disclosed to a sister. This is congruent with perceptions that females know more intimate knowledge about family members than males. It further supports data in this study indicating that internal secrets were chosen to be reported most often.

Finally, exploratory data indicated that friends are the first people outside the respondent's family to know a secret, indicating that friends serve an important function as receivers of knowledge about secrets. It could be that respondents gained satisfaction from discussing their family secret with a non-family member. Respondents also may have disclosed the secret to a friend to help lift the weight of knowing or keeping their family secret. This also suggests that friendship serves an important function as an outlet for confidential family information.

In summary, exploratory data found that respondents provided mixed responses regarding negative effects of knowing the secret they chose to report. Respondents also reported that keeping a particular secret is preferable to family knowledge of the secret. Sisters and other females were most often first aware of the secret. Learning the
secret was an important event, and they most often chose to disclose the secret to a friend than any other person outside the family.

One potential explanation for respondent preferences that the secret remain intact is potential negative impacts of other family members knowing the secret. However, respondents themselves handled knowledge of the secret with less negative effects than they believed other family members would experience. Sisters may be perceived as the safest receivers of potentially damaging information, perhaps because females are traditionally more understanding and focused on "keeping the peace" within families than males. Siblings were also more likely to know a secret than parents or other relatives, possibly because negative consequences would be less severe from a sibling than a parent. Friends were also apparently "safe" receivers of a secret, most likely because no negative consequences would result within the family from the friends' knowledge (as long as the friends' knowledge was kept a secret from the family!)

**Hypotheses and Research Question**

As noted previously, the particular secret respondents chose to report may have been selected because it is a particularly salient secret in their family. Therefore, the following conclusions must take into account the possibility
that cohesion levels reported reflect information linked specifically to a secret that is particularly salient to the respondent.

It was posited in the first hypotheses that individuals from families with midrange levels of family cohesion would choose to report an internal secret more often than individuals from other family types. This hypothesis was partially supported. This suggests that participants whose families exhibit moderate levels of cohesion more often report secrets that are held between at least two family members, and kept from at least one other family member. In other words, families with healthy cohesion levels have secrets among family members. It may be that internal secrets play a role in the construction and/or maintenance of boundaries between and among family members. Internal secrets may facilitate cohesion between those who are aware of the secret by building coalitions among family members.

The second hypothesis predicted that individuals from families with low levels of cohesion would choose to report an individual secret more often than individuals from other family types. This hypothesis was partially supported, suggesting that subjects from families who exhibit lower levels of cohesion choose to report secrets that are not shared among family members. It is possible that subjects from low-cohesion families have more salient individual secrets because of less intimate communication.
among family members. If family relationships are not perceived as "close", family members may not want to risk eroding relationships further by disclosing a secret.

Finally, the research question examined the adaptability levels of subjects' families and secret form. A non-significant trend was found suggesting that adaptability and secret form were dependent upon each other. It was also found that subjects from families with rigid adaptation styles were more likely to report a shared secret than other family types. This suggests that subjects from families who exhibit lower levels of adaptability tend to report secrets all family members know, but are not shared outside the family unit. It may be these respondents reported a shared secret because they feel their family is not tolerant of information shared with some, but not all, family members. A family rule may exist that limits information-sharing behavior to "either you tell all of us, or you don't tell any of us."

The results of this study support the contention that regulating self-disclosure is healthy in relationships by indicating that internal secrets exist within healthy families. It is possible that the existence of secrets within families is related to the rules and boundaries of the family system, and therefore related to the health of the family system. When families indicate balanced levels of cohesion and adaptability, they display midrange levels
of bonding and autonomy as well as the ability to react flexibly to stress and change. Secrecy and self-disclosure may serve as a means for the family system to maintain balance or homeostasis. While secrecy and self-disclosure may seem contradictory, they are also complementary means for family members to experience individuation, boundary development, and bonding.

Family therapy literature portrays the negative aspects of keeping family secrets (Grolnick, 1983; Karpel, 1984; Wendorf and Wendorf, 1985). Karpel explains that disclosing family secrets also has negative effects. Family members "often feel 'sworn to silence'. Disclosing the secret would be experienced as an act of betrayal and would arouse guilt over disloyalty" (pp. 297). The secret holder "has the threat of 'unused ammunition'" and "a sort of relational nuclear bomb that can be kept for later use" (pp. 296). Karpel goes on to explain,

"There is a dangerous and unstable tension inherent in these power dynamics of secrets because, in order to be able to savor the full effect of the secret, to squeeze every ounce of cruelty from it, the secret-holder must reveal it. Then s/he can see the reaction of the other person s/he realizes s/he has been deceived. There is therefore, an inherent instability in such patterns always pressing toward destructive disclosures" (pp. 296).

The negative impacts of both keeping and revealing secrets within families cannot be denied. However, implications of the present findings may suggest a new perspective on the role of secrecy in family systems as one
of boundary regulation. For example, the family therapy field may find an interest in the dialectic of secrecy in clients' family relationships. In addition to the assumptions that revealing secrets within the family is a positive and useful step and can also have a negative impact, therapists can consider internal secrecy as a useful boundary regulation function in clients' lives. An interesting aspect of these processes is the dialectical function of self-disclosure when internal secrets exist.

An internal secret is created when two things have happened: (1) at least one family member has disclosed guarded information to at least one other family member (or two or more family members were initially involved in the secret together) and (2) a decision was made by these individuals to exclude at least one other family member from knowing the information. The existence of these circumstances indicates a dialectical interplay between secrecy and self-disclosure as a means of boundary regulation.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, it is difficult to conduct research on secrecy. Potential subjects may have been reluctant to participate due to privacy concerns. Family rules against revealing a secret
also inhibit participation. Subjects may also be unaware of secrets that exist and therefore decline to participate in research.

Second, the qualitative format of the questions resulted in answers that were sometimes vague or incomplete. Follow-up questions to clarify potentially vague answers would have been helpful.

Third, subjects were all college students and were not representative of varying age groups or non-academically oriented families.

Fourth, the questionnaire did not identify blended families. This resulted in some confusion among subjects from blended families because the questions asked for information from their family of origin.

Finally, the sample size was too small to classify families based on the combination of cohesion and adaptability. In Olson et al.'s (1989) Circumplex Model, there are sixteen family types, derived by crossing four levels of cohesion with four levels of adaptability. This approach ensures the independence of cohesion and adaptability dimensions.

Directions for Future Research

The small sample size limited the capability of this research to compare extreme and balanced family types with both cohesion and adaptability levels combined. The
configuration of secret form and family type needs to be investigated across both cohesion and adaptability dimensions. This would help identify whether an association between secrecy and adaptability exists that is independent from that of secrecy and cohesion.

It may be useful to conduct research that distinguishes between the impact of keeping a secret on families and the impact of families resulting from the actual content of the secret. It is not possible to know whether negative orientations toward secrecy stem from the content of the secret (such as alcoholism and or stealing) or the fact that information was hidden from family members. The concept of secrecy as boundary regulation assumes that negative impacts result from the act of keeping information hidden rather than the actual content of the secret.

Summary

The relationship between secret form and family type was investigated in this study. Hypothesis 1, "Individuals from disengaged families will report more individual secrets than individuals from other family types" was partially supported, suggesting that families with low levels of cohesion do not share secrets amongst family members. Hypothesis 2, "Individuals from separate/connected families will report more internal secrets than other family types" was also supported suggesting that families with midrange
levels of cohesion do keep secrets from some family members while sharing them with others.
REFERENCES


(Eds.), *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 540-563).


relationships. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.


Inc.: New York.


Appendix A

Sample Questionnaire
Dear Participant:
The following questionnaire is part of a research project on family communication. The topic area is family secrecy - types of secrets, why they are kept or disclosed, and family communication about the secret. The focus of this research is secrecy in your family of origin - the family you grew up in, such as your grandparents, parents, siblings, and any other persons you considered "family" during your childhood.

Secrets are information known by at least one family member, and hidden from at least one other family member. Family secrets can be about facts, thoughts, feelings or behavior. Secrecy is not necessarily negative, as secrets can be kept to enhance an activity or situation - for example, a surprise homecoming may involve secrecy.

Understanding family communication is an important step to improving the quality and health of our family relationships. Your participation in this research project is a crucial link in the process of increasing our understanding of family communication and the quality of family life. Your participation is strictly voluntary.

The information on this questionnaire is totally confidential. Please do not put your name on it, or use anyone else's name. It is designed to be answered using only relationship labels for family members, i.e., "oldest brother", "youngest sister", etc.

Please return the questionnaire within one week. Seal it in the envelope provided and send it through campus mail.

The data gathered from the questionnaires will be used as part of my Master's thesis, which should be completed by January 1992. If you have any questions regarding the study or would like a copy of the results, please contact me at the address listed below.

Thank you for sharing this information. If upsetting feelings have surfaced in response to answering these questions, please contact one of the several counseling services on campus (Counseling and Mental Health Services 243-4711; Clinical Psychology Center 243-4523; Guidance and Counseling Department 243-5252) or one of the several in the community (New Creation Counseling Center 721-6704; Western Montana Mental Health Center 728-6817).

Thank you,
Pamela Mangus
Dept. of Interpersonal Communication
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812 Telephone: 406/543-1936
Part I. This section asks you to answer questions about you and your family (age, gender) and about secrecy in your family.

Your Age __
Female ___ Male ___

Please think of one secret occurring in your family of origin (the one you grew up in) and answer all of the following questions regarding that one particular secret.

1. Please describe the secret.

Now, think of how you became aware of the secret. If you were the original keeper of the secret, please skip to question #3.

2. How did you become aware of the secret?
3. What affect, if any, does knowing the secret have upon you?

Think of who else in the family knows about the secret and answer the following questions. If no one else in the family is aware of the secret, go to question #9.

4. Which family member(s) first became aware of the secret? (Include yourself if appropriate). Please list them by their relationship to you, for example "oldest brother", "youngest sister".

   __________   __________   __________
   __________   __________   __________

5. Who else in the family knows the secret? Please list them by their relationship to you.

   __________   __________   __________
   __________   __________   __________

6. How did they find out? Please indicate which member(s) (by relationship) revealed it to them. for example "youngest sister told youngest brother", etc.
7. Do you associate a particular time or event with the disclosure of the secret?

   If yes, please explain.

8. Did knowledge of the secret have an impact upon the family?

Please answer the following questions regarding who may not know the secret.

9. Which members of your family of origin are not, to your knowledge, aware of the secret?

   __________  __________  __________
   __________  __________  __________
10. Is keeping the secret affecting the family? Please explain.

11. Are other people outside your family of origin family aware of the secret? If so, please indicate by relationship (i.e., neighbor, best friend).

12. How did they become aware of the secret? Please indicate which member(s) revealed it to them (i.e., father told his friend).

Please add any additional comments here.
Part II. This section contains questions about your family to determine overall characteristics of your family communication. Think about the period of time when the secret you previously described existed, and respond to each question by circling the number to the right of the question.

1. Family members are supportive of each other during difficult times.  
2. In our family, it is easy for everyone to express his/her opinion.  
3. It is easier to discuss problems with people outside the family than with other family members.  
4. Each family member has input in major family decisions.  
5. Our family gathers together in the same room.  
6. Children have a say in their discipline.  
7. Our family does things together.  
8. Family members discuss problems and feel good about the solutions.  
9. In our family, everyone goes his/her own way.  
10. We shift household responsibilities from person to person.  
11. Family members know each other's close friends.  
12. It is hard to know what the rules are in our family.  
13. Family members consult other family members on their decisions.  
14. Family members say what they want.  
15. We have difficulty thinking of things to do as a family.

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<th>Sometimes Frequently</th>
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<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
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-please continue to next page
16. In solving problems, the children's suggestions are followed. 1 2 3 4
17. Family members feel very close to each other. 1 2 3 4
18. Discipline is fair in our family. 1 2 3 4
19. Family members feel closer to people outside the family than to other family members. 1 2 3 4
20. Our family tries new ways of dealing with problems. 1 2 3 4
21. Family members go along with what the family decides to do. 1 2 3 4
22. In our family, everyone shares responsibilities. 1 2 3 4
23. Family members like to spend their free time with each other. 1 2 3 4
24. It is difficult to get a rule changed in our family. 1 2 3 4
25. Family members avoid each other at home. 1 2 3 4
26. When problems arise, we compromise. 1 2 3 4
27. We approve of each other's friends. 1 2 3 4
28. Family members are afraid to say what is on their minds. 1 2 3 4
29. Family members pair up rather than do things as a total family. 1 2 3 4
30. Family members share interests and hobbies with each other. 1 2 3 4

--please continue to next page--
Thank you for participating in this research on family communication and family secrecy. Little is known about secrecy in families, and the goal of this research is to increase our knowledge in this area.

It is not the intent of this research to encourage participants to reveal secrets, or imply that secrecy in family relationships is undesirable. There is no evidence that revealing family secrets has a favorable effect upon family members or family relationships.
FACES II ITEMS

by

David H. Olson, Joyce Portner, and Richard Bell

1. Family members are supportive of each other during difficult times.
2. In our family, it is easy for everyone to express his/her opinion.
3. It is easier to discuss problems with people outside the family than with other family members.
4. Each family member has input in major family decisions.
5. Our family gathers together in the same room.
6. Children have a say in their discipline.
7. Our family does things together.
8. Family members discuss problems and feel good about the solutions.
9. In our family, everyone goes his/her own way.
10. We shift household responsibilities from person to person.
11. Family members know each other's close friends.
12. It is hard to know what the rules are in our family.
13. Family members consult other family members on their decisions.
14. Family members say what they want.
15. We have difficulty thinking of things to do as a family.
16. In solving problems, the children's suggestions are followed.
17. Family members feel very close to each other.
18. Discipline is fair in our family.
19. Family members feel closer to people outside the family than to other family members.
20. Our family tries new ways of dealing with problems.
21. Family members go along with what the family decides to do.
22. In our family, everyone shares responsibilities.
23. Family members like to spend their free time with each other.
24. It is difficult to get a rule changed in our family.
25. Family members avoid each other at home.
26. When problems arise, we compromise.
27. We approve of each other's friends.
28. Family members are afraid to say what is on their minds.
29. Family members pair up rather than do things as a total family.
30. Family members share interests and hobbies with each other.