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It's Both What You Shared and the Way You Shared It: Secret-Sharing and Interpersonal

Evaluations

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Psychological & Brain Sciences

by

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June 2021

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ABSTRACT

It's Both What You Shared and the Way You Shared It: Secret-Sharing and Interpersonal

Evaluations

by

Alisa Bedrov

Sharing secrets is common in everyday life, yet we know relatively little about how secret-sharing behaviors influence evaluations of those who share secrets. The present studies examined how we evaluate others based on the type of secret (personal vs. secondhand), who shares the secret (close friend vs. acquaintance), and its sharing breadth (exclusive vs. nonexclusive). Participants read brief vignettes about a secret being shared and evaluated the secret-sharer on trustworthiness, closeness with the recipient, and social utility. In Study 1, sharing a personal secret led to higher ratings of trustworthiness and closeness relative to sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of who shared the secret, and sharing a secondhand secret led to higher ratings of social utility. In Study 2, we found a consistent interaction between secret type and sharing breadth. Compared to sharing a secret exclusively with one person, sharing a personal secret nonexclusively decreased closeness ratings, and sharing a secondhand secret nonexclusively decreased trustworthiness ratings. Lastly, social utility was highest for sharing a personal secret nonexclusively. These findings suggest that both the type of secret and how many people it is shared with have important implications for intimacy and trust in close relationships, as well as demonstrating social value.

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I. Background

A secret is information that is not supposed to be known by others, and yet we often share secrets within our social circles. Total secrecy is quite rare for our own secrets (Vrij et al., 2002), and even explicit requests to not pass on another person's secret are regularly ignored (Petronio & Bantz, 1991; Venetis et al., 2012). The reasons for doing so often include an uncontrollable urge to share the information, alleviating the burden of secrecy, or not seeing the harm in telling only one or two trustworthy people (Barasch, 2020; Petronio & Bantz, 1991; Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999). However, secret-sharing also has important social implications and can be a potent tool for establishing trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility. The purpose of this research is to examine how we evaluate others and our relationships with them based on secret-sharing behavior, with a specific focus on comparing personal and secondhand secrets.

A. Self-Disclosure and Gossip vs. Personal and Secondhand Secrets

First, it is important to distinguish among secret-sharing, self-disclosure, and gossip. Self-disclosure involves revealing personal information about the self (Collins & Miller, 1994) and is commonly mentioned as the opposite of secrecy. In fact, the secrecy literature frequently draws on self-disclosure theories to explain the benefits of secret-sharing (e.g., Jaffé & Douneva, 2020; Son & Padilla-Walker, 2019). The two behaviors do overlap, but the key distinction is that sharing a secret implies that the information should not be shared further (Yoveitch & Drigotas, 1999), whereas self-disclosure does not necessarily require such discretion. Furthermore, secret-sharing does not always require that the information be about the self. A secret can be about the person who shares it (i.e., *personal secrets),* or about a third-party (i.e., *secondhand secrets).* The latter is most similar to gossip, except that

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gossip typically includes an evaluative component and may be subject to inaccuracy (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Fonseca & Peters, 2018; Foster, 2004; Peters & Fonseca, 2020). Furthermore, given that gossip is often used to enforce group norms and discourage uncooperative behavior (Baumeister et al., 2004; Dunbar, 2004), people may be motivated and even encouraged to share the information with others. A secondhand secret, on the other hand, contains truthful information, does not require an evaluative component, and is expected to not be shared further. Thus, secret-sharing can be defined as revealing information about the self or others with the understanding that the information should not be shared freely with other people.

B. Social Implications of Secret-Sharing

Most research on secret-sharing has focused on its effects at the individual level. For example, sharing a personal secret has been associated with improved health and well-being, increased self-esteem, and decreased rumination and mind-wandering (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Kelly, 1999; Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2019). However, secrets are at their core a social phenomenon, for they are always kept from or revealed to another person. Additionally, because secrets often contain stigmatizing information that would help others avoid social losses or fitness costs if made aware of it (Piazza & Bering, 2010), knowing such information can increase one's value as a group member. Consequently, when people become aware of a secret being shared, they can make inferences about the secret-sharer's trustworthiness, closeness to the recipient, and social utility. The current research focuses on these specific evaluations because they represent the two universal dimensions of social value: *warmth* (i.e., likeable, trustworthy) and *competence* (i.e., intelligent, capable; Cuddy et al., 2008; Darnon et al., 2009; Fiske, 2018). These inferences may vary depending on whether the information is a personal or secondhand secret, known exclusively by one

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person or widely by multiple people, and shared by a close friend or casual acquaintance. We discuss the potential implications of each feature for evaluating the secret-keeper in turn.

1. Trustworthiness

To be a trustworthy person is to fulfill other people's positive expectations (Levine et al., 2018). In the context of secrets, this expectation is to not spread information to others. When people share their own secrets, they risk their reputation or relationships by revealing exploitable negative information (Barasch, 2020). Such vulnerability can then act as a guarantee of trustworthiness. For example, if Sarah shares a personal secret with Taylor, Taylor can feel reasonably safe in reciprocating the disclosure, because if Sarah fails to be discreet, Taylor can retaliate by spreading Sarah's secret. Accordingly, intimate self-disclosure correlates with the recipient's trust in the discloser and tends to be reciprocated (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Sprecher et al., 2013), illustrating the positive association between sharing personal secrets and perceived trustworthiness.

When people share secondhand secrets, however, they explicitly ignore another person's request for secrecy, thus violating that positive expectation. Accordingly, people who gossip are perceived as less trustworthy (Turner et al., 2003), and sharing secrets is considered a form of betrayal that can undermine good relationships (Fitness, 2001; Jones et al., 2001). Even when sharing a secondhand secret is meant to demonstrate trust in the recipient (Ellwardt et al., 2012), the recipient might be skeptical of whether the secret-sharer will not similarly spread their own secrets to others. Thus, whereas sharing personal secrets may promote trust in the secret-sharer, sharing secondhand secrets may have the opposite effect and indicate the secret-sharer's lack of trustworthiness.

2. Closeness

Trustworthiness and closeness are related, but the two constructs can be differentially affected by different secrets. For personal secrets, the effects are relatively similar: the secret-sharer is perceived as more trustworthy and as closer with the recipient. In fact, the secret-sharer's demonstration of trust and vulnerability is often what helps foster closeness (Barasch, 2020; Collins & Miller, 1994; Slepian & Greenaway, 2018), and sharing personal secrets has been strongly associated with friendship (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). However, these effects may be different for secondhand secrets. Instead of leading to a negative evaluation (as with trustworthiness), sharing a secondhand secret could encourage closeness in much the same way as sharing a personal secret does. Indeed, research on gossip has shown that it too promotes friendship and intimacy by demonstrating in-groupness, shared interests with, and trust in the recipient (Brondino et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Rosnow, 2001). So, if Sarah shares a secondhand secret with Taylor, Taylor might not trust Sarah enough to reciprocate the disclosure but could still interpret it as a sign of friendship.

Trustworthiness and closeness may also deviate in how they are affected by the selectivity of disclosure. It goes without saying that the more people a secondhand secret is shared with, the less trustworthy the secret-sharer would be. Yet for personal secrets, sharing the information with multiple people does not necessarily suggest a lack of trustworthiness – the secret-sharer can share their own information with whomever they want. Closeness, however, could depend on the selectivity of disclosure *regardless* of secret type. Indeed, research on romantic desire shows that selective interest in one person positively predicts reciprocated interest, whereas general liking for everyone negatively predicts returned interest (Eastwick et al., 2007). Similarly, relationship-specific self-disclosure is a better predictor of relationship satisfaction in families than dispositional self-disclosure

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(Finkenauer et al., 2004), and excessive gossip or secondhand secret-sharing can undermine perceived closeness and likability (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Farley, 2011). Thus, people prefer being the unique recipient of information or desire and will experience less closeness the more broadly a secret is shared with others.

Secret-sharing may also be interpreted differently depending on pre-existing levels of intimacy. Indeed, disclosing personal information to a stranger or casual acquaintance is often considered inappropriate and can lead to lower ratings of likability relative to disclosing to a close friend (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). Similarly, when sharing secondhand secrets, people are evaluated more negatively if they pass information from a higher-level intimate to a lower-level intimate than vice versa (Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999). That is, if Sarah and Taylor are friends, it is more acceptable for Sarah to tell Taylor a secondhand secret about her casual acquaintance than about her best friend. Thus, the effects of sharing a personal or secondhand secret on perceived closeness may depend on both who is sharing the secret and how broadly.

3. Social Utility

The preceding evaluations of trustworthiness and closeness speak to social *desirability*, or the extent to which someone is perceived as likeable, friendly, and moral (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005; Darnon et al., 2009). However, secret-sharing can also indicate social *utility*, or the extent to which someone is competent, socially able, and powerful within the group (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005; Darnon et al., 2009). Even if someone is not necessarily likable, they might still provide benefits like access to information, social connections, or other resources. Knowing information about socially-relevant others is personally advantageous, for it allows one to make informed decisions about who will be a good cooperative or relationship partner (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Consequently, sharing

a secondhand secret can demonstrate value as a well-informed social connection. Indeed, gossip has been suggested to enhance perceptions of power, expertise, and influence over others (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). When gossip has been negatively associated with perceived power and credibility (e.g., Farley, 2011; Turner et al., 2003), the results have been attributed to the Transfer of Attitudes Recursively (TAR) effect, which suggests that expressing a negative evaluation of someone causes the source to acquire a similar negative evaluation (Gawronski & Walther, 2008). However, these concerns might not be as relevant for secondhand secrets given that they do not always have an evaluative component. Thus, sharing a secondhand secret may increase a secret-sharer's social utility.

C. Overview of Studies

To assess interpersonal evaluations based on secret-sharing, we conducted two studies in which participants read brief vignettes about a secret and evaluated the secret-sharer on trustworthiness, closeness to the recipient, and social utility. In both studies, we compared personal and secondhand secrets, hypothesizing that sharing a secondhand secret would lead to lower trustworthiness, no difference in closeness, and higher social utility relative to sharing a personal secret. In Study 1, we examined whether these effects were moderated by the secret-sharer's relationship with the recipient (low vs. high intimacy) and secret valence (positive vs. negative). We did not have any hypotheses regarding the effects of secret valence but did hypothesize that the effects of secret type would be weaker for high-intimacy relationships given that people typically have strong positive beliefs about close friends and are less likely to update those impressions in light of new information (Kim et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). In Study 2, we limited the vignettes to negative secrets shared between close friends (the typical focus of secrecy research) and examined whether the extent of secret-sharing (one person vs. multiple people) moderated the effects of secret

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type. Specifically, we hypothesized that broadly sharing either secret type would not affect social utility because the displayed social knowledge is the same regardless of sharing breadth. However, we expected greater sharing breadth to decrease perceptions of trustworthiness and closeness, particularly for secondhand secrets, due to the secret-sharer's indiscretion and lack of preference for that relationship.

II. Study 1: Secret Type & Relationship Level

A. Method

This study's sample size, design, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered through AsPredicted.org (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=sy9a9z).

1. Participants

Estimating a small effect size, we recruited 1200 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for US$0.25 and 226 participants from the undergraduate subject pool at a large public university for research credit. After excluding participants who failed to pass the attention check or completely the study too quickly, the total combined sample had 1385 participants ($M_{age} = 37.04$, $SD = 15.0$, range = 17-78; 56% female), allowing us to detect an effect size of $f = 0.09$ with 90% power, according to a sensitivity analysis conducted in G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009).

2. Design

The study design was a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed-subjects design. The three between-subjects independent variables were relationship to the secret-sharer (acquaintance vs. close friend), type of secret (personal vs. secondhand) and secret valence (positive vs. negative). The within-subjects variable was domain of secret (relationships vs. work). By including

different domains, we could examine a broader variety of secrets and rule out the possibility that any observed effects were caused by the information itself rather than general qualities of the secret. The dependent variables were evaluations of the secret-sharer on trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility.

3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight between-subjects conditions and asked to imagine themselves in two brief scenarios. In each scenario, a close friend or acquaintance shared a personal or secondhand secret that was either positive or negative in content. The first secret was about relationships – either the secret-sharer or two other people in the friend group had recently started dating *(positive secret)* or were going through a break-up *(negative secret)*. The second secret was work-related – either the secret-sharer or another person in the friend group had recently received a promotion *(positive secret)* or was laid off *(negative secret)*. Each scenario ended with a request to not say anything to other people to imply secrecy.

Following each scenario, participants rated how they felt about the secret-sharer on 15 items (1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*). Five items were from the Trust in Close Relationships Scale (e.g., "I could rely on X to keep the promises they make to me"; Rempel et al., 1985), and the rest were written to capture aspects of closeness (e.g., "X sees me as a close friend") and social utility (e.g., "X is knowledgeable about other people in our friend group"). The items were grouped into three subscales to assess trustworthiness (5 items, α = .92), closeness (7 items, α = .93), and social utility (3 items, α = .80). The full subscales and additional measures not discussed in the results can be found in the Appendix.

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B. Results

Participants' ratings of trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility did not differ based on secret domain (relationships vs. work) or valence (positive vs. negative). Thus, participants' ratings were averaged across domains, and all analyses were aggregated across secret valence, resulting in four conditions with n's ranging from 339 to 354.

A 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (friendship level: acquaintance, close friend) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the secret-sharer's trustworthiness revealed a main effect of secret type, $F(1, 1370) = 178.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .115$, 95% CI [.086, .147] and a main effect of friendship level, $F(1, 1370) = 134.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .090$, 95% CI [.063, .119], but no two-way interaction. Close friends were rated higher on trustworthiness than acquaintances, and sharing a personal secret led to higher perceived trustworthiness than sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of friendship level.

A 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (friendship level: acquaintance, close friend) between-subjects ANOVA on feelings of closeness with the secret-sharer revealed a main effect of secret type, $F(1, 1381) = 219.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .137$, 95% CI [.105, .170] and a main effect of friendship level, $F(1, 1381) = 173.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .111$, 95% CI [.082, .143], but no two-way interaction. As with trustworthiness, close friends were rated higher on closeness than acquaintances, and sharing a personal secret led to higher levels of closeness than sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of friendship level.

Lastly, a 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (friendship level: acquaintance, close friend) between-subjects ANOVA on the secret-sharer's social utility revealed a main effect of secret type, $F(1, 1381) = 33.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .024$, 95% CI [.011, .042] and a main effect of friendship level, $F(1, 1381) = 74.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .051$, 95% CI [.031, .076], but no two-way interaction. Close friends were rated higher on social utility than acquaintances,

and sharing a personal secret led to lower levels of social utility than sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of friendship level.

C. Discussion

Study 1 suggests that people are evaluated differently depending on whether they share a personal or secondhand secret. Specifically, sharing a personal secret leads to higher perceived trustworthiness and closeness relative to sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of whether the secret-sharer is a close friend or an acquaintance. Furthermore, sharing a secondhand secret leads to higher ratings of social utility. In hindsight, we noted that explicitly saying that the participant was either very close or not particularly close with the secret-sharer may have overly influenced closeness ratings. Therefore, we designed a follow-up study to be less explicit in manipulating closeness, but this adjustment did not change any of the primary results (for details, see Section 4 of the Appendix). Overall, these results demonstrate that the type of secret has meaningful implications for a secret-sharer's perceived trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility, regardless of secret valence, content, or friendship level.

This study restricted the recipient of the secret to one person: the participant. However, secrets are often shared with multiple people. Study 2 aimed to examine whether these effects might be moderated by sharing breadth. Indeed, our evaluations may shift upon discovering that we were not the only person entrusted with a secret. Study 2 varied both secret type and sharing breadth, focusing specifically on negatively-valenced secrets shared among close friends. Additionally, we employed a more direct, single-item measure of closeness to see whether the similarity in results for trustworthiness and closeness could have been due to the scale items inadvertently capturing both constructs (e.g., "I would like

to become closer friends with X" might have assessed both perceived trustworthiness and closeness).

III. Study 2: Secret Type & Sharing Breadth

A. Method

1. Participants

Estimating a small effect size, we recruited 800 participants through MTurk for US$0.50. After excluding participants who failed to pass the attention check or had fraudulent responses (nonsensical or copy-and-paste entries to free response questions), the total sample had 693 participants (M_{age} = 37.48, SD = 12.07, range = 18-89; 46% female). The G*Power sensitivity analysis indicated that this sample size could detect an effect size of f = 0.12 with 90% power.

2. Design

The study was a 2x2 between-subjects design. The two independent variables were secret type (personal vs. secondhand) and sharing breadth (exclusive vs. nonexclusive). The dependent variables were evaluations of the secret-sharer's trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility.

3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions and read a short vignette about three close friends who work together. After a manipulation check to establish that all three friends were equally close, participants read about a phone call between two of the friends. For reference, the Sharer calls to share information, the Target receives the

information, and the Mutual Friend is not involved in the call. In the *personal exclusive* condition ($n = 169$), the Sharer tells the Target that they were broken up with and that no one else knows. In the *personal nonexclusive* condition ($n = 177$), the Sharer tells the Target the same information but also mentions telling the Mutual Friend. In the *secondhand exclusive* condition ($n = 175$), the Sharer tells the Target that the Mutual Friend is being laid off at work and that no one else knows (the Mutual Friend is already aware). In the *secondhand nonexclusive* condition ($n = 173$), the Sharer tells the Target the same information but also mentions telling another coworker. All conditions end with the Sharer asking the Target to not say anything to imply secrecy.

Participants rated how close each of the friends were (1 = *not at all close,* 10 = *extremely close),* the Sharer's value as a social connection (1 = *not at all valuable,* 7 = *extremely valuable*), and how much the Target could trust the Sharer to keep future information to themselves (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*). Additional measures are in the Appendix.

B. Results

A 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (sharing breadth: exclusive, nonexclusive) between-subjects ANOVA on the Sharer's trustworthiness with future information revealed no main effect of sharing breadth, $F(1, 689) = 0.80$, $p = .372$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.012], but a significant main effect of secret type, $F(1, 689) = 168.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .101$, 95% CI [0.063, 0.145]. The interaction between sharing breadth and secret type was also significant, $F(1, 689) = 19.20$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.034]. An analysis of simple main effects showed that for personal secrets, sharing breadth did not affect perceived trustworthiness, $F(1, 344) = 2.82$, $p = .094$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.037], but for secondhand secrets, the Sharer was less trustworthy for sharing the secret nonexclusively rather than exclusively, $F(1, 345) = 6.07$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.054] (see

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Figure 1). These effects held when controlling for closeness ratings between the Sharer and Target. Thus, sharing someone else's secret can undermine trustworthiness regardless of perceived closeness, particularly if shared with multiple people.

**Figure 1. Simple main effects of sharing breadth across secret type for trustworthiness**
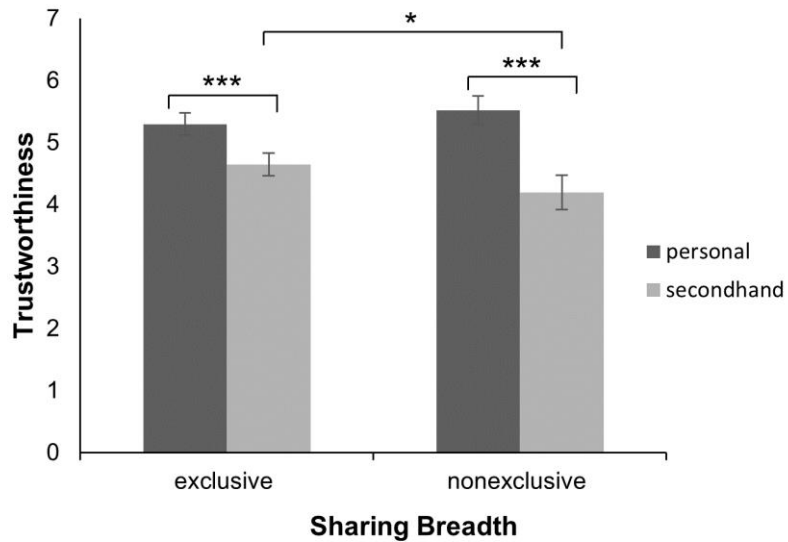
A 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (sharing breadth: exclusive, nonexclusive) between-subjects ANOVA on closeness between the Sharer and Target revealed a significant main effect of sharing breadth, $F(1, 689) = 7.63$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.031] but no main effect of secret type, $F(1, 689) = 1.52$, $p = .218$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.015]. The interaction between sharing breadth and secret type was marginally significant, $F(1, 689) = 3.831$, $p = .051$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.022]. An analysis of simple main effects showed that for personal secrets, the Sharer and Target were perceived as closer when the secret was shared exclusively rather than nonexclusively, $F(1, 344) = 12.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .036$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.082], whereas for secondhand secrets, sharing breadth made no difference in closeness, $F(1, 345) = 0.30$, $p = .582$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.018] (Figure 2). Thus, exclusively sharing a personal secret indicates higher closeness between two people.

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Figure 2. Simple main effects of sharing breadth across secret type for closeness
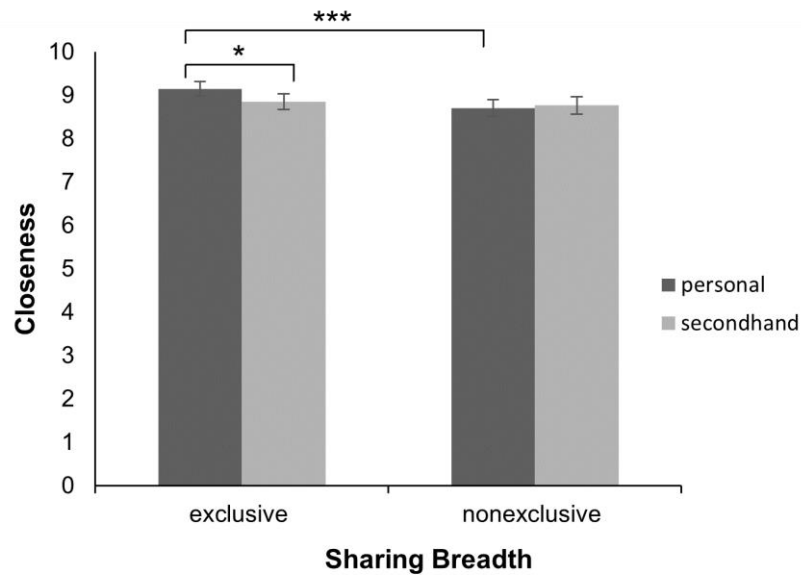
Lastly, a 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (sharing breadth: exclusive, nonexclusive) between-subjects ANOVA on the Sharer's value as a social connection revealed no main effect of sharing breadth, $F(1, 689) = 0.08$, $p = .774$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.007], or secret type, $F(1, 689) = 2.47$, $p = .117$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.018], but a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 689) = 7.84$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.032]. An analysis of simple main effects showed that for personal secrets, the Sharer was perceived as more valuable when the information was shared nonexclusively, $F(1, 344) = 5.44$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$, 95% CI [0.0002, 0.051], whereas for secondhand secrets, social utility did not differ across sharing breadth, $F(1, 345) = 2.83$, $p = .094$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.037] (Figure 3). This effect held when controlling for closeness between the Sharer and Target. Thus, broadly sharing personal information with multiple people seems to indicate high social utility.

Figure 3. Simple main effects of sharing breadth across secret type for social utility
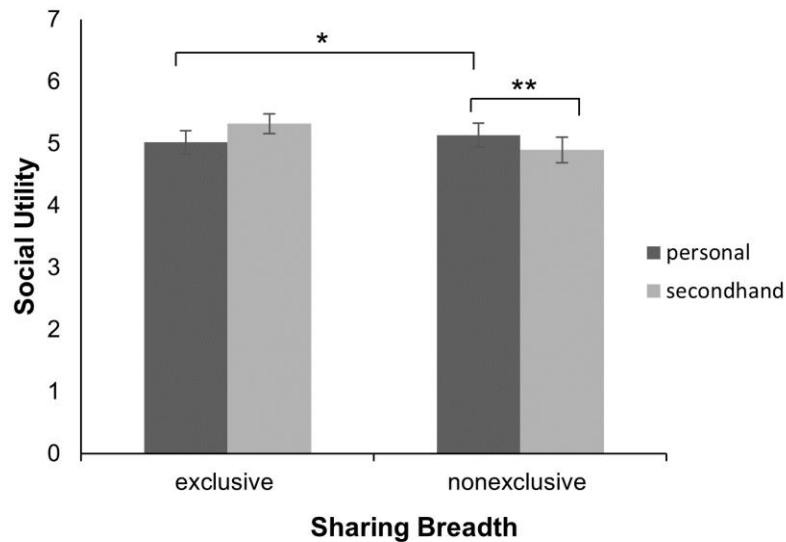
C. Discussion

Study 2 shows that trustworthiness and closeness are differentially affected by secret-sharing and suggests that people also consider sharing breadth in their evaluations. People are perceived as less trustworthy after sharing a secondhand secret compared to a personal secret, especially if shared with multiple people. Similarly, sharing a personal secret is associated with more closeness when shared exclusively with one person. However, contrary to Study 1, social utility was higher for broadly sharing a personal secret, not for sharing a secondhand secret. We consider possible explanations for this discrepancy in the general discussion.

IV. General Discussion

Across two studies, we demonstrate that secret-sharing is a meaningful basis of interpersonal evaluation, specifically for trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility. For these evaluations, people consider the type of secret (personal vs. secondhand) and sharing breadth (one person vs. multiple). This paper is one of the first to compare personal and

secondhand secrets to show that sharing each type has unique consequences for our relationships. Overall, these results provide compelling evidence that secrets are a social phenomenon that ought to be examined more broadly within dyadic and group contexts.

Consistent with hypotheses, sharing a secondhand secret led to lower perceived trustworthiness than sharing a personal secret. The lack of an interaction between secret type and friendship level suggests that the standards for trustworthy behavior are consistent across relationships. Indeed, trustworthiness is one of the most valued character traits across many interdependence contexts, including family members, romantic partners, employees, and acquaintances (Cottrell et al., 2007). Gossip similarly decreases perceived trustworthiness for both friends and strangers (Turner et al., 2003), so even in well-established relationships, violating someone's trust can cast doubt on the secret-sharer's trustworthiness.

However, if one does share a secondhand secret, limiting the disclosure to one person can mitigate some of the negative consequences. Compared to selective gossip in one relationship, excessive gossip with multiple people suggests that the gossiper cannot be trusted (Ellwardt et al., 2012). Our results similarly show that sharing a secondhand secret with even one additional person decreases trustworthiness, whereas the same negative association is not found for sharing a personal secret with one other person. However, we did not manipulate who the other recipients were. People could be perceived as more or less trustworthy depending on whether they share a secret with people from the same or different social groups, or with someone of higher or lower intimacy. Exposing someone's secret in a close friend group might be a more severe violation of trust than sharing the secret with a distant third-party. However, sharing secrets of a high-intimate friend with a less-intimate acquaintance is also perceived negatively (Yoveitch & Drigotas, 1999). Future research

should examine how trustworthiness depends on both how many people a secret is shared with and who those people are relative to the secret-sharer and involved parties.

Our results were mixed regarding the effects of secret-sharing on closeness relative to trustworthiness. In Study 1, both closeness and trustworthiness were higher after learning a personal secret compared to a secondhand secret, consistent with research on the relational benefits of self-disclosure (Barash, 2020; Collins & Miller, 1994). However, in Study 2, exclusivity was important for evaluating closeness for personal but not secondhand secrets, whereas for evaluating trustworthiness, the reverse was found in that exclusivity mattered for secondhand but not personal secrets. These results support the idea that a principal component of friendship and closeness is a demonstrated preference for that relationship over others (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009; DeScioli et al., 2011). By sharing a secondhand secret, the secret-sharer implies that they also have a close relationship with someone else, hence their knowledge of that secret, which would then reduce its effectiveness in fostering closeness.

Sharing a personal secret, however, can promote closeness to the extent that it stays limited to that relationship and is not broadly shared. It would be interesting to see at which point information is no longer considered a secret based on how widely known it is. Furthermore, intimacy arises specifically from being confided in rather than hearing a secret through someone else (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018), but we have yet to fully understand the extent to which connotations of secrecy provide additional relational benefits beyond self-disclosure (although see Jaffé & Douneva, 2020).

Along with assessing features of likability, we also examined how secret-sharing affects social utility. Study 1 supported hypotheses in that sharing a secondhand secret led to higher social utility than sharing a personal secret. Study 2, however, found that secret-sharers were

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valued for sharing a personal secret with multiple people. This discrepancy may be due to how social utility was operationalized across studies. Study 1 explicitly defined social utility as being well-integrated and knowledgeable about others, whereas Study 2 used general phrasing of 'value as a social connection.' Participants may have considered other characteristics of good social connections, including trustworthiness and likability. Exploratory analyses of free response questions showed that participants saw broadly sharing a personal secret as indicative of friendship and willingness to trust others. However, participants in secondhand secret conditions mentioned the secret-sharer's value in providing information or social resources, lending some support to our initial hypotheses.

Nevertheless, more research is needed on the connection between secret-sharing and social utility, particularly in regard to affiliative tendencies. On the one hand, people who share secondhand secrets can be risky relationship partners, but their access to social information makes them desirable utilitarian connections. Indeed, gossip enhances perceptions of power and social influence (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), and if the recipient has less social power than the secret-sharer, they may be motivated to maintain that relationship, particularly given that low power status is associated with greater affiliative tendencies (Case et al., 2015). Furthermore, investing energy in a relationship may eventually lead to an "immunity" such that one no longer worries about their secrets being shared. Future research should examine how people balance these tradeoffs among trustworthiness, closeness, and social utility, as well as the subsequent relational effects. This question relates back to the warmth and competence dimensions of the Stereotype Content Model, the evaluations of which affect interpersonal behavior and emotional reactions to others (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske, 2018). One can reasonably expect that a

friendship based on social utility would be quite different than one based on trust and closeness.

Social utility also ties into other questions of power and hierarchy, including the consequences of sharing information about someone of low vs. high social status. People want to know information about high-status individuals (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002), but sharing their secondhand secrets is risky given potential social repercussions. People typically share gossip *with* people of higher status rather than *about* them, or if they do gossip about high-status others, they use praise and deference rather than criticism (Young, 2001). Thus, the temptation to share secrets about powerful others might limit the extent of benefits for social utility.

Secrets are difficult to study given that researchers cannot force people to reveal sensitive information or betray someone's trust. To move beyond the limitations of retrospective self-report, we utilized vignettes to capture participants' immediate reactions to secret-sharing from both first-person (Study 1) and third-party perspectives (Study 2). However, these scenarios had limited relational context and lacked behavioral cues that would otherwise influence interpersonal evaluations, including facial expressions to indicate guilt or shame or vocal cues to suggest excitement or judgment. Future studies could address these limitations by fabricating secret-sharing scenarios in the lab or using experience sampling to assess immediate reactions to secret-sharing.

Another limitation was the variation in secret content. Although Study 1 showed no difference between relationship- and work-related secrets or positive and negative secrets, other studies have shown variability across secret content and valence (e.g., Grosser et al., 2010; Kowalski et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2003; Zhang & Dailey, 2018). Further research is necessary to determine how secret content influences interpersonal evaluations. More

research is also needed on the role of the recipient's relationship with the secret-sharer. Study 1 found no differences between low- and high-intimacy relationships, but given the lack of prior relations between the participant and secret-sharer, we should refrain from discounting intimacy until these findings are replicated with real-world relationships.

In sum, our studies show that secret-sharing has important implications for how we evaluate others, with key differences emerging between the two secret types. Specifically, sharing a secondhand secret undermines trustworthiness, whereas sharing a personal secret promotes closeness. Both effects depend on how broadly the secret is shared. Secret-sharing also influences social utility, but more research is needed to better understand these effects. Future studies should avoid confounding social utility with social desirability and further explore the connection between secrets and power. Overall, secrets can be a potent tool for influencing our relationships and should be studied accordingly within the broader context of social dynamics, not just at the individual level of the secret-sharer.

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Appendix

Section 1: Survey Items Grouped by Subscales for Study 1.

S1.1 Trustworthiness

I would feel comfortable telling X anything about myself, even those things of which I

am ashamed.

I could rely on X to react in a positive way when I expose my weaknesses to them.

I could rely on X to keep the promises they make to me.

X has proven to be trustworthy.

If I found out information about someone in our friend group, I would tell X.

S1.2 Closeness

I feel closer to X because they shared that information with me.

I would like to become closer friends with/continue being close friends with X.

X sees me as a close friend.

I like X.

I see myself as similar to X.

I feel certain that X will share things with me.

I want to maintain good relations with X.

S1.3 Social Utility

I would come to X for information about others in our friend group.

X is well-integrated in our friend group.

X is knowledgeable about other people in our friend group.

Section 2: Example Vignettes and Additional Measures from Study 1.

S2.1 Example Vignettes

Positive Personal – Close

Megan/Jack is one of several people in your friend group. She/he is one of your closest friends, and you spend a lot of time talking with her/him one-on-one. One day when you and Megan/Jack are grabbing lunch, she/he says, "I wasn't going to say anything, but I just got a promotion at work that comes with a big salary increase." She/he asks that you not tell others about this.

Negative Personal – Acquaintance

Megan/Jack is one of several people in your friend group. You two are friendly, but you haven't spent much time talking with her/him one-on-one. One day when you and Megan/Jack are grabbing lunch, she/he says, "I wasn't going to say anything, but my partner recently broke up with me. I'm having a really rough time right now." She/he asks you to not tell other people in the group about this.

Positive Secondhand – Acquaintance

Megan/Jack is one of several people in your friend group. You two are friendly, but you haven't spent much time talking with her/him one-on-one. James and Mary are also two people in your friend group. One day when you and Megan/Jack are grabbing lunch, she/he says, "I don't think I'm supposed to say anything, but James and Mary recently started dating. They told me things are going really well between them right now." She/he asks you to not tell other people in the group that you know about this.

Negative Secondhand – Close

Megan/Jack is one of several people in your friend group. She/he is one of your closest friends, and you spend a lot of time talking with her/him one-on-one. Taylor is also someone in

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your friend group. One day when you and Megan/Jack are grabbing lunch, she/he says, "I don't think I'm supposed to say anything, but Taylor was recently laid off at work because the company is downsizing." She/he asks that you not tell others that you know about this.

S2.2 BFI-10 (Big Five Inventory)

How well do the following statements describe your personality? *(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*

I see myself as someone who…

    is reserved
    is generally trusting
    tends to be lazy
    is relaxed, handles stress well
    has few artistic interests
    is outgoing, sociable
    tends to find fault with others
    does a thorough job
    gets nervous easily
    has an active imagination

S2.3 SNPT-R (Social Norm Processing Task)

You will now be presented with a series of sentences. Please imagine yourself in the following scenarios.

How embarrassing do you consider this behavior? *(1 = not at all, 7 = extremely)*

How inappropriate do you consider this behavior? *(1 = not at all, 7 = extremely)*

    You receive a cookie your friend baked. You dislike it and spit it out.
    You go to your mother-in-law's for dinner. You do not like the food and spit it out.
    You drink a glass of coke for lunch at the office. You see your boss and burp in front of him.
    You are playing soccer. You purposefully kick the ball in your own team's goal.
    While visiting family, your nose starts to run. You wipe your nose on the tablecloth.
    You are baking an apple pie with your friends. You use salt instead of sugar as a joke.
    You've arranged to meet a friend for coffee. You decide not to turn up.
    You are pet-sitting for your neighbor. You decide not to feed the hamster, and it dies.
    You are on the phone with a friend. You feel bored with the conversation and hang up without saying goodbye.

Section 3: Example Vignettes and Additional Measures from Study 2.

S3.1 Example Vignettes

Personal Secret – Exclusive

One night, Bree [Mike] calls Kiana [Isaiah] and says that her [his] partner unexpectedly broke up with her [him]. She [He] wasn't quite sure how to process this and felt very upset. After talking about it with Kiana [Isaiah], Bree [Mike] mentioned that she [he] had not told Taylor [Peter] about this and that she [he] would like Kiana [Isaiah] to not say anything for the time being.

Personal Secret – Nonexclusive

One night, Bree [Mike] calls Kiana [Isaiah] and says that her [his] partner unexpectedly broke up with her [him]. She [He] wasn't quite sure how to process this and felt very upset. After talking about it with Kiana [Isaiah], Bree [Mike] mentioned that she [he] had also told Taylor [Peter] about this and that she [he] would like them to not say anything for the time being.

Secondhand Secret – Exclusive

One night, Bree [Mike] calls Kiana [Isaiah] and says that, because the company is downsizing, Taylor [Peter] is going to be laid off at work. This came as a devastating shock to Taylor [Peter] and she [he] wasn't quite sure how to process it. After talking about it with Kiana [Isaiah], Bree [Mike] mentioned that she [he] should probably not say anything for the time being and that she [he] was the only other person who knew.

Secondhand Secret – Nonexclusive

One night, Bree [Mike] calls Kiana [Isaiah] and says that, because the company is downsizing, Taylor [Peter] is going to be laid off at work. This came as a devastating shock to Taylor [Peter] and she [he] wasn't quite sure how to process it. After talking about it with Kiana

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[Isaiah], Bree [Mike] mentioned that she [he] probably should not say anything for the time being, even though Bree [Mike] had also told another co-worker about this.

S3.2 Additional Measures

Participants were randomly assigned to answer one free response question:

[Free Response – closeness] What effect (if any) did Bree [Mike] sharing the secret have on Kiana's [Isaiah's] relationship with Bree [Mike] and why?

[Scale – costliness] To what extent might Bree [Mike] face negative consequences by revealing this information to Kiana [Isaiah]? (1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal)

[Free Response – costliness] What would those consequences be (if any)?

[Free Response – social comparison] What (if anything) can Kiana [Isaiah] conclude about Bree's [Mike's] relationship with Taylor?

[Scale – social utility] To what extent is Bree [Mike] a valuable social connection to have? (1 = not at all valuable, 7 = extremely valuable)

[Free Response – social utility] Please provide a brief explanation for your answer.

[Scale – trustworthiness] If Kiana [Isaiah] shares something with Bree [Mike], to what extent can she [he] trust Bree [Mike] to keep that information to herself [himself]? (1 = not at all, 7 = completely)

Participants in the exclusive conditions read the following additional statement + question:

Personal Secret

A week later, after assuming she [he] was the only person who knew this information, Kiana [Isaiah] finds out that Bree [Mike] had told Taylor about the break-up around the same time she [he] told Kiana [Isaiah] but had asked both of them not to say anything.

Secondhand Secret

A week later, after assuming she [he] was the only other person who knew this information, Kiana [Isaiah] finds out that Bree [Mike] had told another co-worker about Taylor [Peter] being laid off around the same time she [he] told Kiana [Isaiah] but had asked both of them not to say anything.

[Free Response – exclusivity] What effect (if any) would Bree [Mike] sharing the secret with other people have on Kiana's [Isaiah's] relationship with Bree [Mike] and why?

[Scale – emotional reactions] To what extent do you think Kiana [Isaiah] experienced the following emotions upon learning this? (1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal)

- Confused

- Indifferent

- Relieved

- Jealous

- Irritated

- Disappointed

- Happy

- Sad

Section 4: Method, Results, and Discussion for Study 1b.

Method

   Participants. We recruited 600 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk
(MTurk) for US$0.25. After excluding participants who failed to pass the attention check or
had fraudulent responses, the total sample had 577 participants ($M_{age} = 36.55$, $SD = 10.94$,
range = 18-74; 43% female), with n's ranging from 142 to 149 per condition. The G*Power
sensitivity analysis indicated that we would be able to detect an effect size of $f = 0.14$ with
90% power.

   Design. The study design was a 2 x 2 between-subjects design. The two independent
variables were relationship to the secret-sharer (roommate vs. neighbor) and type of secret
(personal vs. secondhand). We eliminated the positive secret and work-related scenarios
from Study 1a given the lack of significant differences. The dependent variables were the
same as Study 1a, namely evaluations of the secret-sharer's trustworthiness, closeness, and
social utility.

   Procedure. The procedure and questions were the same as Study 1a, except that
participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions and only responded to one
vignette. The crucial difference was that instead of explicitly saying that the participant was
very close or not particularly close with the secret-sharer we manipulated friendship level by
saying the secret-sharer was either the participant's roommate (instead of close friend) or
neighbor (instead of acquaintance) to more indirectly imply the level of intimacy.

Results

   For trustworthiness and closeness, the results were identical to Study 1a: there was a
main effect of secret type, main effect of friendship level, and no two-way interaction. As
before, close friends/roommates were rated higher on trustworthiness and closeness than

acquaintances/neighbors, and sharing a personal secret led to higher trustworthiness and closeness than sharing a secondhand secret, regardless of friendship level.

Also consistent with Study 1a, the 2 (secret type: personal, secondhand) x 2 (friendship level: neighbor, roommate) between-subjects ANOVA on the secret-sharer's social utility revealed a main effect of secret type, $F(1, 573) = 6.88$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$, 95% CI [.001, .035] and a main effect of friendship level, $F(1, 573) = 22.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .037$, 95% CI [.013, .073]. However, there was also a significant two-way interaction between friendship level and secret type, $F(1, 573) = 5.23$, $p = .023$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$, 95% CI [.000, .031]. An analysis of simple main effects revealed that for roommates, the type of secret made no difference in social utility, $F(1, 282) = 0.04$, $p = .938$, $\eta_p^2 = .0001$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.013]. However, for neighbors, the secret-sharer was perceived to have higher social utility when they shared a secondhand secret compared to a personal secret, $F(1, 291) = 9.95$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.082] (see Figure 1). Thus, sharing a secondhand secret seems to augment social value for people who are not already close with the recipient, more so than sharing a personal secret.
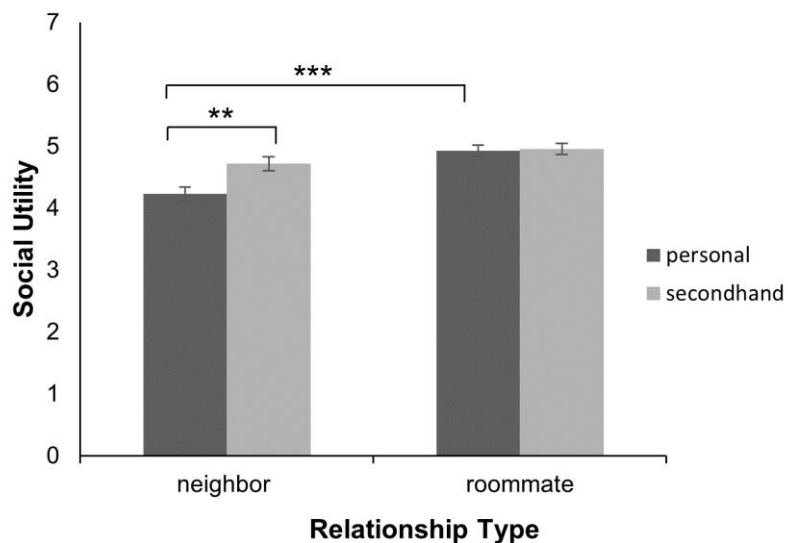

Figure 1. Simple main effects of friendship level across secret type for social utility.