

The Social Consequences of Keeping a BIG Secret

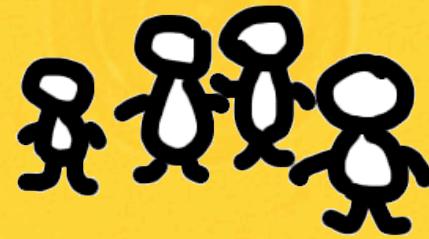
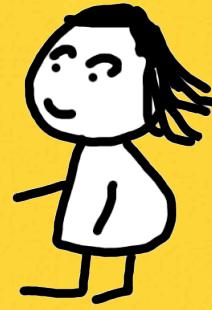
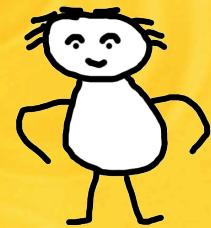


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What are the Social Consequences of Keeping a BIG Secret?



Secrets

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

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

Make people physically ill (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988)

Hypotheses

Individual Level

Social Withdrawal Hypothesis

OR

Hypervigilance Hypothesis

System Level

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

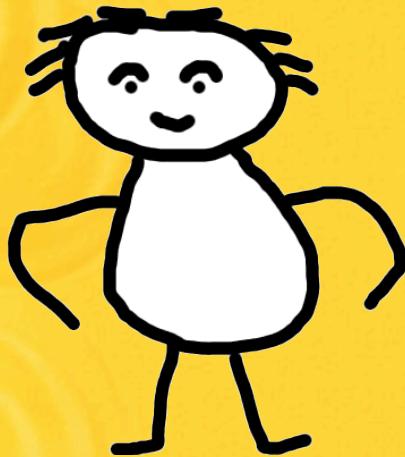
Secret Target



Ex-husband,
shares custody

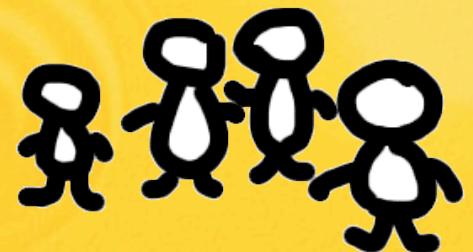
Social Network

Secret Keeper



Participant,
doing phone sex
for money

Uninvolved



Confidant



Best-friend,
tells about calls

Secret Keeper – Secret Target Relationship

Social Withdrawal
Withdrawal



Secret Target

Hypervigilance
Monitor
Act “normal”
Avoid the secret



Secret Keeper

Secret Keeper – Secret Target Relationship

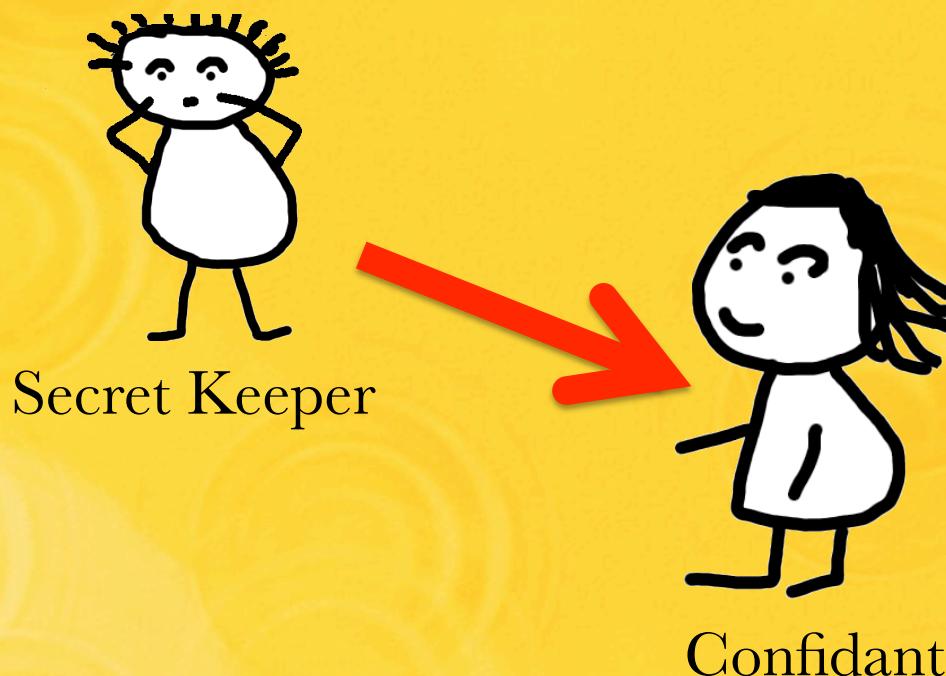
Withdrawal?
Suspicion?



Secret Keeper – Confidant Relationship

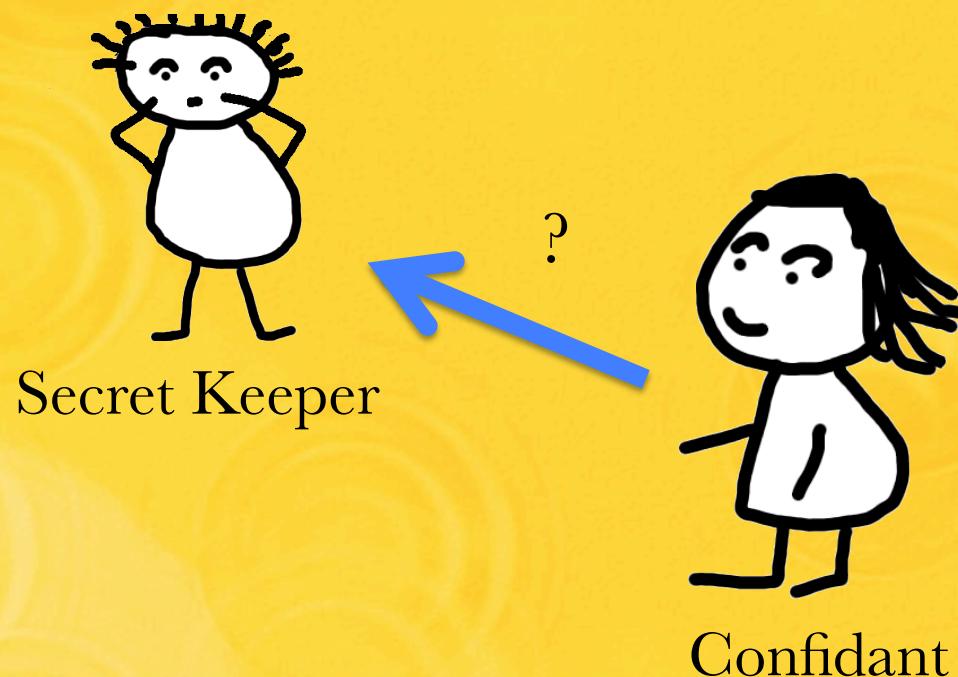
Social withdrawal AND
Hypervigilance

Focus on secret



Secret Keeper – Confidant Relationship

Withdrawal?
Support?



Method - Overview

Real world, large secrets

Many social ties

Communication over time

Method - Participants

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



1,014 screened, 179 met criteria

Inclusion criteria: big secret, active gmail user ...

Exclusion criteria: suicidal, schizophrenic, deletes many emails ...



61 secret keepers

57.4% female

19 – 45 years old (mean = 25)

Method – Procedure & Design

Questionnaires (secret keeping, personality, contacts...)

Provided a sample of incoming and outgoing emails

1 month before secret

1 - 11 months during secret

> 5 secret relevant contacts

> 10 secret irrelevant contacts

Method – Secrets

71% Romantic or sexual

32% Family, mental health, addiction

15% Financial, work

5% Physical health

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

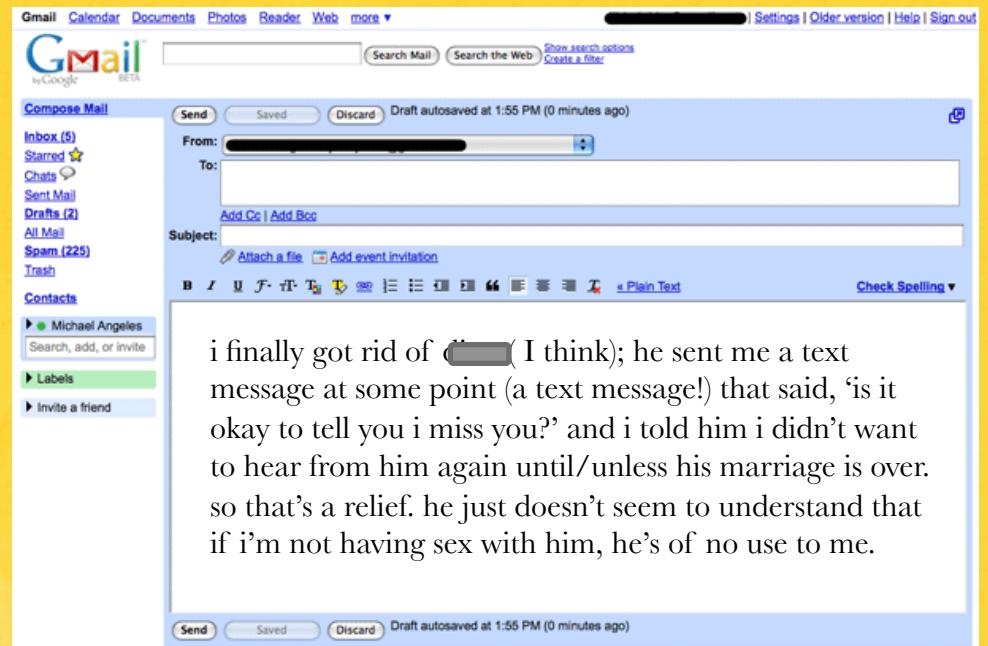
“Arrest, jail, maybe prison”

Method – Email Corpus

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

~32.9 Direct emails per contact

~70 Words per email



Method - Analyses

Cleaned text

Grouped by secret keeper – contact

Processed with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count

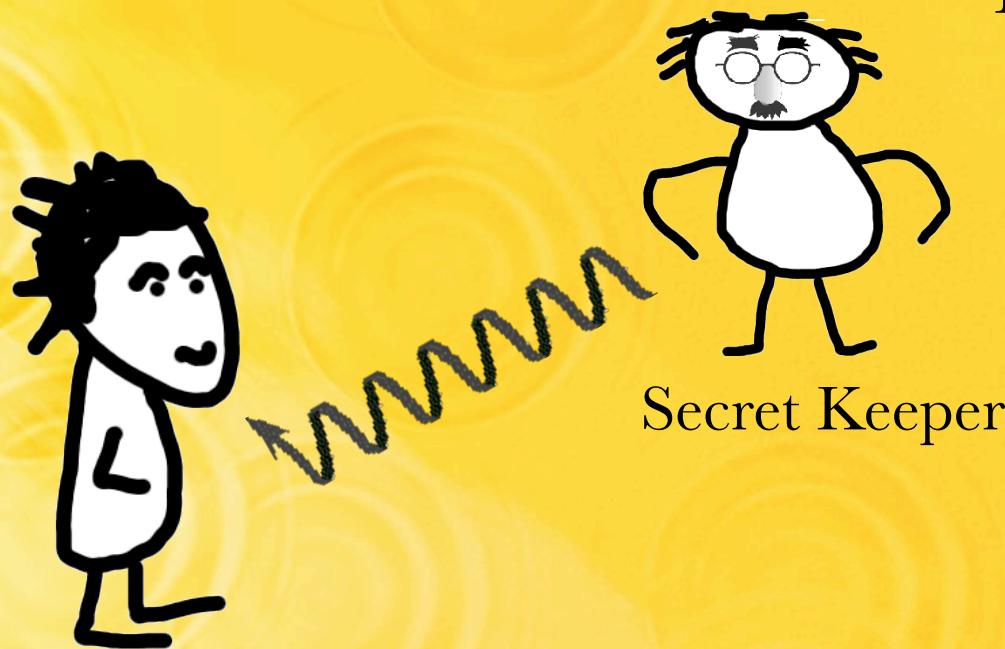
Weighted multi-level models

IV: Time (before, during) X Contact type

DVs: Hypothesized language markers

Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship

Social withdrawal



Secret Target

Hypervigilance

Emails per month ↑
Present tense ↑

Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship

Withdrawal



Secret Target



Secret Keeper

Suspicion

Emails per month ↑
Length of emails ↑
Question marks ↑

Results – Secret Keeper & Secret Target Relationship



Secret Target

asks about keeper's health

sends artwork

asks about target's sleep

says going to doctor

asks about keeper's health

...



Secret Keeper

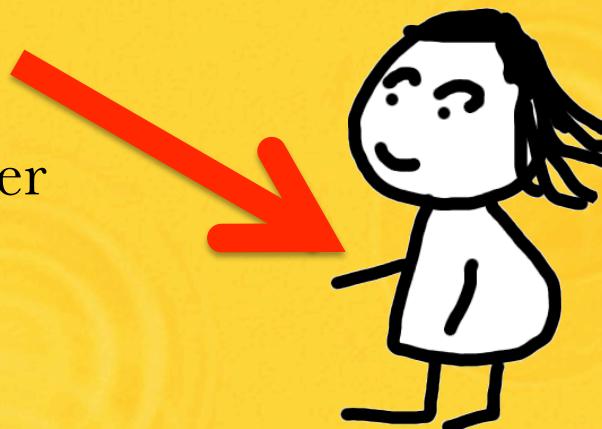
Results – Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

Social withdrawal AND
Hypervigilance
Focus on secret



Secret Keeper

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



Confidant



Results - Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

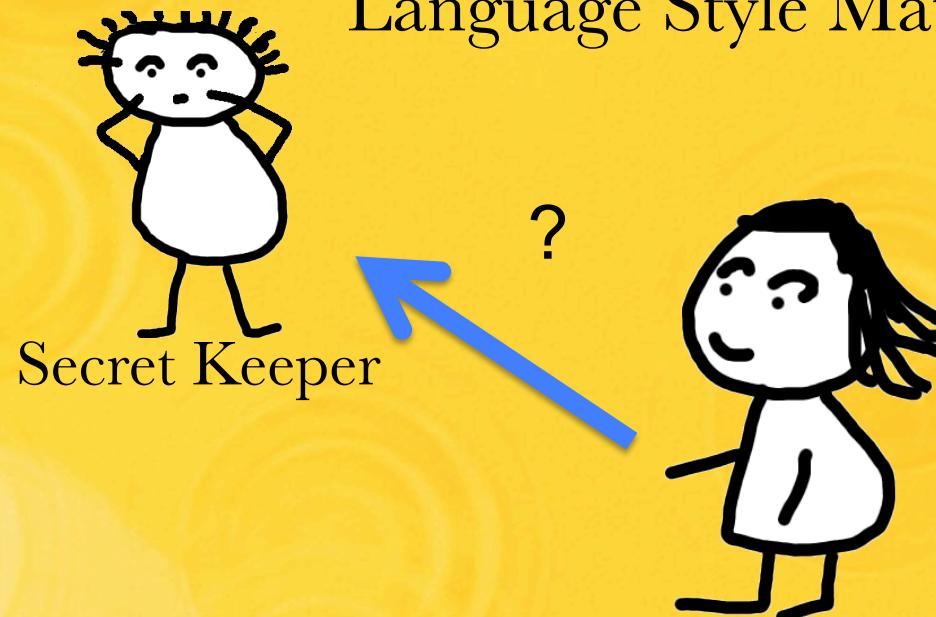
Withdrawal

Supportive

Emails per month ↑

Length of emails ↓

Language Style Matching ↑



Confidant

Results – Secret Keeper & Confidant Relationship

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



Secret Keeper

Discussion

Individual Level

Social withdrawal hypothesis

OR

Hypervigilance hypothesis

System Level

New Methodological Approach

Discussion

Individual Level

Social Withdrawal Hypothesis

OR

Hypervigilance Hypothesis

System Level

While keeping a secret secret keepers maintained and strengthened relationships

New Methodological Approach

Discussion

Individual Level

Social withdrawal hypothesis

OR

Hypervigilance hypothesis

System Level

While keeping a secret secret keepers maintained and strengthened relationships

New methodological approach

Research conducted with ...

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

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for our study!

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