



Keeping secrets from friends: Exploring the effects of friendship quality, loneliness and self-esteem on secrecy



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ABSTRACT

The tendency to keep secrets in adolescents has been studied in particular in their relationships with their parents and associated with psychosocial disadvantages. The current study focused on peer relationships and investigated the effects of friendship quality, loneliness in a multidimensional perspective, and self-esteem on secrecy from friends. Italian adolescents ($N = 457$; 47% male; 100% white) aged between 13 and 19 years ($M = 16.11$; $SD = 1.53$) reported their secrecy from friends, peer and parent-related loneliness, aversion and affinity for aloneness, their self-esteem and the quality of their relationships with their friends. The results showed that peer-related loneliness, affinity for aloneness and self-esteem in particular affect keeping secrets from friends, independent of the participant's gender. Moreover, peer-related loneliness and affinity for aloneness mediated the relationship between self-esteem and secrecy. The data were discussed in the light of adolescence developmental tasks.

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Introduction

Secrecy is the tendency to intentionally conceal personal information from others (Bok, 1989; Kelly, 2002). This propensity is very widespread during adolescence, given the developmental tasks in which teenagers are involved (Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013).

The main task of this period is the development of the self and the identity in social relationships (Erikson, 1959, 1968). With regards to the relationship with their parents, the self and identity task is realized through the separation-individuation process (Blos, 1967, 1979; Koepke & Denissen, 2012), which leads to achieving emotional autonomy (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) and a sense of self separated from that of their parents (Kroger, 1998). In light of this, the tendency to keep secrets from parents could help young people to construct a personal space of autonomy and to experience a new separate self (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002). Regarding relationships with their peers, the development of the self and identity takes place mainly through social comparison and the acceptance of a social self (Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Rubin, 2004). On the one hand, social comparison allows the identification of aspects of oneself that are similar to or different from those of peers. On the other, social acceptance allows adolescents to find a confirmation of their identity in the social context

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(Palmonari, 2011). Moreover, social comparison and acceptance favor the construction of long-lasting relationships, when friendship, romantic and sexual behaviors are highly explored by adolescents (Brizio, Gabbatore, Tirassa, & Bosco, 2015). However, social comparison can highlight aspects or characteristics of oneself that could undermine social acceptance (Pomery, Gibbons, & Stock, 2012). In light of this, the tendency to keep secrets from friends could help young people to maintain social acceptance (Frijns et al., 2013). Therefore, the exploration of relationships, in order to achieve social acceptance and confirmation of their identity, requires adolescents to be able to balance what to conceal and what to reveal of themselves, particularly with regards to their feelings and intentions (Brizio et al., 2015).

In sum, the comprehension of what to conceal or what to share with others is fundamental during adolescence and the tendency to conceal or reveal something of oneself can assume a developmental relevance depending on the relationship involved (parental or with peers).

Keeping secrets from parents

Secrecy in the parental relationship has been extensively investigated (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Keijsers & Laird, 2010; Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). The studies agree that secrecy from parents grows in this period (Keijsers et al., 2010) and it is functional in promoting adolescents' emotional autonomy (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002). However, disadvantages have been associated with secrecy from parents (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), such as low quality of the parental relationship, low self-esteem, loneliness, depression and antisocial symptoms (Frijns et al., 2013; Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005; Keijsers et al., 2010). Several authors have explained the psychosocial disadvantages of secrecy from parents, referring to the physical and psychological work necessary for keeping the secret. Indeed, one must constantly monitor his/her behaviors, feelings and thoughts (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Lane & Wegner, 1995; Pennebaker, 1989) to keep information concealed. Moreover, keeping failures and worries secret from parents results in avoidance of the parents' support and validation (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002).

Keeping secrets from friends

Unlike secrecy from parents, secrecy from friends has rarely been studied and it has been always associated with secrecy from parents (Frijns et al., 2013; Laird, Bridges, & Marsee, 2013). Both kinds of secrecy are longitudinally associated with depression (Laird et al., 2013) and low relationship quality (Frijns et al., 2013; Laird et al., 2013; Villalobos Solís, Smetana, & Comer, 2015), but only secrecy from parents is related to antisocial problems (Laird et al., 2013).

Differences in psychosocial disadvantages might underline a different developmental meaning of secrecy depending on the relationship in which it occurs, parental or with peers. While adolescents gradually acquire emotional autonomy by keeping secrets from parents, they gradually learn to confide secrets to peers to enhance their social position (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). In this increasing trust in peers rather than parents as confidants (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995), friends can assume a protective (Hartup, 1996) and a social developmental role (Brizio et al., 2015) for adolescents. The importance of friendship in adolescence is remarked by the definition of adolescence itself, considered as a period in which socio-cultural and psychological changes occur at universal and local or contextual levels (Brizio et al., 2015). The appearance of autonomy and self-government is a universally recognized goal of adolescence but, especially in Western cultures, the recognized goals are the facing of feelings and the development of social cognition (Brizio et al., 2015). Numerous researches demonstrate the development of the peer social network in adolescence (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013 for a meta-analysis), where the individuals can test themselves in several social roles. In this view, peers and friends work as projective representations of descriptive or normative social rules and expectations that are enforced by the family or the social membership group (Brizio et al., 2015). Thus, adolescents are pushed to compare themselves to and disclose things with friends rather than parents. Specific contexts can encourage young people to reveal their secrets to friends. In particular, Gerrish, Philyaw, Payne, Rabow, and Brar (2016), in a qualitative study, found that some classroom environmental, intrapersonal and relational factors could facilitate the disclosure of secrets. When there are trusting relationships among classmates, the classroom setting can be perceived as a safe place in which to share their secrets.

However, if disclosure of the self could affect their social acceptance, adolescents could also keep secrets from their friends. It is not surprising that adolescents choose different information to keep secret from parents and friends. With the former, adolescents keep secret those behaviors that their parents would not approve of, whereas with the latter, adolescents keep secret those features of themselves they are not satisfied with (Frijns et al., 2013).

In other words, self-disclosure could function as a social protector or could affect their social acceptance, depending on the adolescent's self-image. In addition, the trust that teenagers have towards their friends as possible confidants may depend on the degree of perceived support in the social context (Frijns et al., 2013). Consequently, if adolescents feel alone in the context of peer relationships and they do not feel peer support, they will probably tend to keep their secrets. As a result, in a perspective in which parents and friends are both fundamental in social support during the separation-individuation process (Palmonari, 2011), it could be relevant to investigate the effects of self-esteem and loneliness on the tendency to keep secrets from friends. The few studies on secrecy from friends have extensively investigated the role of friendship quality, but not of self-esteem and loneliness. In light of the facts discussed above, such psychosocial factors could have an influence on secrecy from friends.

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