

5-2012

Is Keeping Secrets from Friends Associated with Adolescent Depression and Behavior Problems?

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IS KEEPING SECRETS FROM FRIENDS ASSOCIATED WITH ADOLESCENT
DEPRESSION AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS?

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of Psychology
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree of
Bachelor of Science, with University Honors
and Honors in Psychology

by

Brittanee Bridges

ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Robert Laird for all of his help in completing this thesis, and for all of his advice and help in finding materials related to secret keeping behavior. I would also like to thank him for letting me use the data from his longitudinal study for my thesis.

Special thanks to Dr. Monica Marsee and Dr. Carl Malmgren for their input and help with formulating this final copy of my thesis.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Secrecy.....	2
Past Research Concerning Secret-Keeping from Parents and Friends.....	3
Why Secrets from Friends may have Negative Effects.....	4
Methods.....	6
Participants.....	6
Procedure.....	7
Measures.....	7
Secrecy.....	7
Friendship Quality.....	8
Depression.....	9
Behavior Problems.....	9
Results.....	9
Discussion.....	11
References.....	15
Table 1.....	18
Table 2.....	19
Table 3.....	20

Abstract

Secrecy is a growing topic of interest in research, but little research has been done on adolescents keeping secrets from their friends. The purpose of this study was to find out if keeping secrets from friends was related to elevated depression and more behavior problems. The data in this study were obtained from 197 adolescents who were interviewed the summer after their 6th ($n = 182$, M age = 12.4, $SD = 1.01$) grade school year in southern Louisiana. This sample was 50.8% female, and the majority of the adolescents self-identified themselves as being white, non-Hispanic (47.7%) or African American (46.7%), while few self-identified themselves as being of other ethnicities (6.1%). Results showed that keeping secrets from friends is associated with higher levels of depression but not with more behavior problems. Keeping secrets from friends accounted for unique variance in depression after controlling for keeping secrets from parents. Secrets from friends accounted for the association between low friendship quality and depression. The link between secrets from friends, depression and behavior problem was not moderated by friendship quality and depression.

Keywords: secrecy, friend, parent, adolescent, depression, behavior problem

Introduction

Researchers have studied secrecy between adolescents and parents and the effect of keeping secrets from parents on the developing adolescent (e.g., Bumpus & Hill, 2008). Researchers have also studied why adolescents keep secrets from their friends (e.g., Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). However, very little research has been done concerning the effects of keeping secrets from friends on the developing adolescent. Keeping secrets from parents appears to lead to depression and behavioral problems in the adolescent (Bumpus & Hill, 2008; Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Meeus, & Finkenauer, 2010; Laird, 2011; Laird & Marrero, 2010; Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst & Engels, 2005). It is plausible that keeping secrets from friends may exhibit similar effects. To get a more complete picture of how secrecy affects the growing adolescent, it is imperative to learn not only about the effects of keeping secrets from parents but also about the effects of keeping secrets from friends.

Secrecy

Secrecy involves an active protection of the information that is being withheld in order to ensure other people do not discover it. Although this definition encompasses non-disclosure, it expands on that concept by adding a constant mental struggle that is associated with not revealing the secret information. In not disclosing information, the adolescent simply chooses not to tell the information, in secret-keeping, the secret keeper actively avoids talking about the information that is being with-held. Secrecy includes more than simply not revealing information to others; and therefore it is not simply the opposite of self disclosure (Frijns et al., 2005). It is equally important not to confuse secret-keeping with lying, which is defined as intentionally divulging false information in

order to protect the information that is being withheld (Engels, Finkenauer, & Kooten, 2006).

Frijns and Finkenauer (2009) found that keeping secrets predicted an increase in psychological problems in the adolescents tested; however, adolescents who reported psychological problems the first time they were tested were no more likely to keep secrets than other adolescents studied. These researchers propose that the psychological factors involved in keeping a secret may be the underlying cause of the psychological problems reported. The mental angst involved in secret-keeping, they suggested, explained why secret-keeping was related to having psychological problems later. Their study did not, however, determine who the adolescents were keeping their secrets from. This is a weakness of their study, because there may be different psychological problems related to keeping secrets from different groups of people, or no psychological problems related to keeping secrets from a certain group of people. For instance, keeping secrets from siblings or friends may not be as important as if keeping secrets from parents.

Past Research Concerning Secret-Keeping from Parents and Friends

Although some researchers postulate that withholding secrets from parents may promote a sense of autonomy for the adolescent and be a part of their healthy development (Finkenauer, Engels & Meeus, 2002), the majority of research has emphasized the negative aspects of keeping secrets from parents (Laird & Marrero, 2010; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Bumpus & Hill, 2008). Frijns et al. (2005) believed that their study would emphasize the positive aspects of secret-keeping, especially related to the adolescent gaining more self control, but their conclusion was exactly opposite of what they expected. Their results showed that secret-keeping is not associated with a higher

sense of self control, but rather with a lower sense of self-control and with elevated depression. Other researchers have shown that keeping secrets from parents during adolescence may be associated with depression, antisocial behavior, loneliness, and other negative qualities (Laird, 2011; Laird & Marrero, 2010; Keijsers et al., 2010; Bumpus & Hill, 2008). Considering the evidence provided showing that secret-keeping from parents may be linked to poor adolescent adjustment, it is necessary to determine if keeping secrets from friends has similar associations. Although studies have shown that adolescents do keep secrets from their friends (Dolgin & Kim, 1994; Merten, 1999; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), it is unknown whether keeping secrets from friends is tied to poor outcomes as is keeping secrets from parents.

Why Secrets from Friends may have Negative Effects

Friends are the first people with whom adolescents make conscious choices to be close. Not surprisingly then, adolescents identify their closest friend as being the one who understands them most (Kon, Losenkov,& Lissovoy, 1978). This may be because adolescents seek out friendships with people who are similar to themselves (Hartup, 1996). If an adolescent feels closest to their best friend but is still making a conscious effort to withhold information from them, it may have detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of the adolescent. The secret that adolescents would keep from the person they are closest to may be a secret that they believe would have a negative effect on their relationship with that person. The secret may be something that is very embarrassing to them, or it may be something that, if the situation was reversed, would cause the adolescent to choose not to be close to their friend. As with keeping secrets from parents, keeping secrets from friends may lead to depression and behavior

problems. Furthermore, adolescents who keep secrets from their parents as well as their friends may be likely to be more depressed and exhibit more behavior problems than adolescents who solely keep secrets from their parents.

In the current study, secrecy from friends is expected to be associated with depression and behavioral problems, similar to the way that keeping secrets from parents has been previously observed to be associated with both depression and behavior problems (e.g., Keijsers et al., 2010). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that keeping secrets from friends will add to the negative effects of keeping secrets from parents. If adolescents are keeping secrets from both their parents and their friends, they may feel that they do not relate to anyone well enough to divulge their secret information, and therefore are constantly plagued with the mental angst of keeping secrets from everyone. It is expected that if adolescents keep secrets from both their friends and parents, they will be more depressed and have more behavioral problems than an adolescent who solely keeps secrets from their parents.

It is also possible that friendship quality may be associated with secret-keeping. It is arguable that adolescents who have higher quality friendship may not keep as many secrets from their friends as adolescents who have lower quality friendships. Because of both lower friendship qualities and the act of keeping the secret, the teen may exhibit more behavioral problems and become more depressed than adolescents whose friendships have a higher presence of positive qualities, and thus a lower presence of secret-keeping behavior. Keijsers, Branje and Frijns (2010) found that girls tend to keep secrets from their parents more when they have poorer relationships with them. Also, Laird and Marrero (2010) found that adolescents who disclose less to their parents tend to

have more behavior problems than adolescents who disclose more to their parents. They also found that in general, adolescents who disclosed more to their parents tended to have better relationships with them. Lower positive friendship quality may be associated with adolescents' secret-keeping from their friends, which in turn leads to depression and behavior problems. It may be possible that secret-keeping behavior, which is associated with low friendship quality, may be most directly responsible for the depression. Lastly, keeping secrets from friends may have different effects depending on the friendship quality. Secret-keeping coupled with a great amount of positive friendship qualities may have less detrimental effects on the adolescent than secret-keeping coupled with a lower level of positive friendship qualities. If there is a high presence of secret-keeping in a relationship that has a lower level of positive friendship qualities, the adolescent may exhibit more behavior problems and have a higher chance of becoming depressed. If there is a high presence of secret-keeping in a relationship that is also high in positive friendship qualities, there may be no significant appearance of behavior problems or a depressed mood (Laird & Marrero, 2010).

Methods

Participants

The data in this study were obtained from 197 adolescents who were interviewed the summer after their 6th (M age = 12.4, SD = 1.01) grade school year. This sample was 50.8% female and 74.4% of the adolescents lived in a two-parent home when the data were collected. The majority of the adolescents self-identified as being white, non-Hispanic (47.7%) or African American (46.7%), while few self-identified as being of other ethnicities (6.1%).

The data were obtained from a larger longitudinal study of 218 families that started one year prior to the data used in this study (see Laird & Marrero, 2010; Laird et al., 2010). Secrecy was not assessed in the first wave of the larger longitudinal study; therefore, this study only uses information obtained from the second wave.

Procedure

After approval from an Institutional Review Board and the school administrator, research assistants handed out information letters in fifth grade classrooms in 20 elementary schools in Baton Rouge, LA. Parents who wished to participate in the study returned a consent form to their child's school and were contacted by the researcher to set up an appointment for an in-home interview. Twenty percent of the families enrolled in the schools expressed interest in participating in the study, and 94% of those who expressed interest finished phone interviews and then agreed to participate in three annual at-home interviews with the researchers. Participants were compensated \$70 per family for completing the post grade-6 interviews.

Before the mothers provided consent for the at-home interviews, mothers and adolescents were given an overview of the interview procedure. Adolescents were interviewed privately in a separate area of the home. The interviewer read questions while the adolescent privately recorded the answers on a response sheet. The structured interviews took about 45 minutes and focused primarily on parent-adolescent interactions and relationships.

Measures

Secrecy. To assess adolescents' secrecy from their mothers and friends respectively, adolescents completed Larson and Chastain's (1990) 10-item Self-

Concealment Scale twice, once in reference to secrecy from mothers and once in reference to secrecy from friends. Sample items are: “There are lots of things about me that I keep from my mother.” and “I’m often afraid I’ll reveal something to my friends that I don’t want to.” Adolescents reported the extent to which they agreed with each statement using a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (scored 1) to “strongly agree” (scored 5). *Secrecy* from parents and friends was scored as the means of the respective 10 items ($\alpha = .91$ & $.89$).

Friendship Quality. Supportiveness of the participants’ current best friend was reported using selected items from the Friendship Quality Scale (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Bukowski et al. (1994) reported evidence to support the criterion validity for the Friendship Quality Scale, and Laird, Pettit, Dodge, and Bates (1999) demonstrated acceptable internal consistency and predictive validity. To minimize the length of the interview, the three highest loading items from each of the Help, Security, and Closeness subscales were used to assess support provided by the best friend (e.g., “If other kids were bothering me, my friend would help me”). During the interviews, adolescents were told that the next set of items asked about their best friend. If adolescents reported that they did not have a best friend, they were instructed to skip the questions. If adolescents reported that they had multiple best friends, they were instructed to think about the “best of the best friends” when answering the questions. Only one participant skipped the best friend questions. Adolescents responded to the questions about their current best friend on a five-point scale from “never” to “always”. An index of *friendship quality* was computed from the mean of the nine support items ($\alpha = .91$)

Depression. Adolescents reported their depressed mood using the six item (e.g., “In the last month, how often were you very sad?”) Modified Depression Scale (Orpinas, 1993). Each item was scored on a five-point scale from “never” (scored 0) to “always” (scored 4). The mean of the six items was computed to index *depression* ($\alpha = .75$).

Behavior Problems. Adolescents reported the frequency of behavior problems, using 26 items (e.g., “in the last month, how many times did you steal from someone?”) from the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (Farrell, Kung, White, & Valois, 2000). The items assess physical and non-physical aggression, delinquency, and drug use. Each item was scored on a five-point scale from “never” (scored 0) to “seven or more times” (scored 4). The mean of the 26 items was computed to index *behavior problems* ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the variables studied. As observed by the means of the measures, the majority of the adolescents studied kept very few secrets from their friends and from their parents, the adolescent’s friendship quality was reported as very high, their depression was reported as just above median point, and they reported a low presence of behavior problems. More secrets from friends was linked with more secrets from parents, lower friendship quality, and elevated levels of depression. Also, boys reported more secrets from friends than did girls. More secrets from parents was related to elevated levels of depression, lower friendship quality and more behavior problems. More positive friendship quality was related to less depression. Girls reported higher friendship qualities than boys. Lastly, more depression was linked with more behavior problems.

Table 2 provides information on whether secrets from friends added to secrets from parents in predicting depression and behavior problems. Depression and behavior problems were regressed on secrets from friends and secrets from parents simultaneously to determine if secrets from friends additively predicted depression and behavior problems. Both more secrets from friends and more secrets from parents were independently associated with more depression. Only more secrets from parents was associated with more behavior problems.

As shown in Table 1, individuals reporting a higher presence of secret-keeping also reported less positive friendship quality. Neither friendship quality nor secrets from friends was correlated with behavior problems, but it is possible that secrets from friends is only linked to behavior problems at high or low levels of friendship quality. Depression and behavior problems were regressed on friendship quality and secrets from friends, and the friendship quality by secrets from friends interaction to determine if secrets from friends accounts for the link between friendship quality and adjustment. Depression and behavior problems were also regressed on friendship quality and secrets from friends, and the friendship quality by secrets from friends interaction to test whether the effect of secrets from friends on adjustment differs as a function of friendship quality. As shown in Table 3, when controlling for secrets from friends, friendship quality was no longer associated with depression, but more secrets from friends remained associated with more depression. The friendship quality by secrets from friends interaction was not significant for depression or behavior problems.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if adolescents who keep secrets from their friends exhibited elevated levels of depression and behavior problems, and to determine if adolescent's secrecy from friends added to the elevated levels of depression and behavior problems found in adolescents keeping secrets from their parents. Secrets from friends was found to be related to depression, but not to behavior problems. Secrets from friends in addition to secrecy from parents was associated with elevated depression, but not with behavior problems. Another purpose of this study was to determine if more secrecy from friends was found in relationships that have lower positive friendship qualities and if so, to determine if secrecy was responsible for the effects of elevated depression and behavior problems seen in relationships exhibiting lower friendship qualities. The cross-sectional association showed that as secrecy from friends increased, friendship support decreased. Secrecy from friends seemed to explain the link between friendship quality and depression. Lastly, this study sought to determine whether the link between secrecy from friends and adjustment in adolescence varies as a function of the quality of the friendship. The results show that secrecy from friends did not depend on the relationship quality. Keeping secrets from friends was related to elevated levels of depression.

Secrecy from friends was found to be related to depression. When secrets from parents were combined with secrets from friends, there was an elevated level of depression. This may mean that adolescents who choose to keep secrets from both their parents and their friends are more depressed than adolescents who keep secrets from only their parents or only their friends. This is an important discovery because knowing what

causes adolescents to become depressed may help clinicians resolve the depressed feelings of the adolescents they are working with. Knowing that not only keeping secrets from parents, but also keeping secrets from friends leads to depression may open the door for research to be done on secret-keeping in general and why it may lead to depression. Perhaps it is a personality trait of the adolescent (i.e., the adolescent does not confide in anyone) that causes them to be depressed rather than the act of keeping secrets. In other words, it is possible that depression and secrecy share a common cause, or that depression causes secrecy. It is also possible that if adolescents do not have any friends that they are close enough to confide a secret, they may become depressed and lonely, not because they are keeping a secret, but because they have no one to share their secret with (Hartup, 1996).

Friendship quality was associated with secrets from friends. It is uncertain whether the adolescent is keeping the secrets from their friends because of the negative friendship quality, if the secret-keeping behavior is responsible for the negative friendship quality, or if there is a third variable causing the relationship. It could be that a person who is less trusting in others would have lower friendship quality due to their lack of trust in people, and then become depressed. Or it may be the type of secret being kept instead of the act of keeping the secret that is responsible for the depression. For instance, a secret that is embarrassing to the secret keeper may be associated with higher levels of depression than one that is not. Secrecy seems to explain the link between depression and friendship quality, exhibiting mediation, meaning that friendship quality is associated with adolescents' secret-keeping behavior, but it is the secret-keeping behavior that is more associated with depression than friendship quality (Baron & Kenny,

1986). However, there was no evidence of secret-keeping in a relationship with high friendship quality having less detrimental effects than secret-keeping in a relationship with negative friendship qualities. This means that secret-keeping was a more important factor than friendship quality in relation to depression for the adolescents studied.

The current study expected to find that secrets from friends was linked to depression and more behavior problems, because previous studies of secret-keeping from parents has shown such links (e.g., Laird & Marrero, 2010). However, only secret-keeping from parents was related to more behavior problems and depression, whereas secret-keeping from friends was related only to higher levels of depression. This may be due to the type of secrets adolescents keep for their parents differing from the type of secrets adolescents keep from their friends. An adolescent may be more likely to keep a secret from their parent that relates to something they have done wrong in order to escape punishment (Bakken & Brown, 2010), whereas they would be less likely to keep a secret of that type from their friends who may not react negatively to something the adolescent has done wrong. As such, secrets from parents might be a better sign that the adolescent is engaging in rule breaking behavior than secrets from friends.

The limitations of this study include that it can only be generalized to adolescents living in the geographical area studied. Also, because the study involved home interviews, and required both parents and adolescents to partake in the interview process, some adolescents and parents may not have been studied who may have different qualities than the ones who were studied. Another limitation is that the data used for this study are only from one year, which can be considered a weakness because the long term effects of secret-keeping were not studied. It is unknown whether keeping a secret long

term is associated with depression, or if keeping secrets from friends, over a long period, is associated with behavior problems. A strength of the current study is its ability to differentiate between secrets from parents and secrets from friends rather than simply focusing on secrecy. Because of this, the current study was able to show that secrecy from friends has links to depression that are similar to secrets from parents, but that only secrets from parents is associated with behavior problems.

This study has shown that secrecy from friends is associated with elevated levels of depression. It has also shown that secrecy from friends coupled with secrecy from parents may be associated with even higher levels of depression in adolescents. This is an important discovery that needs to be further researched. There is still much to learn about secrecy in general and its effects on the developing adolescents, but being able to differentiate between who the adolescents are keeping their secrets from may prove to be an important factor in understanding the negative effects demonstrated by secret-keeping. Further research should focus on the different groups of people adolescents keep secrets from (parents, sibling, friends, teachers, etc.), and the detrimental effects associated with keeping secrets from each group of people.

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Table 1

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlations					Sex (boy)	<i>Descriptiv e Statistics and Correlatio ns</i>
			Secrets from Friends	Secrets from Parents	Friendship Quality	Depression	Behavior Problems		
Secrets from Friends	1.96	.76							
Secrets from Parents	2.08	.80	.54***						
Friendship Quality	4.23	.72	-.46***	-.24**					
Depression	2.50	.75	.46***	.55***	-.16*				
Behavior Problems	1.30	.41	.07	.27***	-.03	.27***			
Sex (boy)	.49	.50	.26**	.07	-.41***	.05	.12		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Secrets from Friends and Secrets from Parents as Possible Predictors of Depression or Behavioral Problems

Predictor	Depression				Behavior Problems			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
Secrets from Friends	.22	.07	.22	.002	-.06	.05	-.12	.16
Secrets from Parents	.37	.06	.43	.001	.16	.04	.35	.001

Table 3


Secrecy from Friends as Possible Mediating or Moderating Variable

Predictor	Depression				Behavior Problems			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
Friendship Quality (FQ)	.06	.08	.06	.45	< -.001	.05	-.005	.95
Secrets from Friends (SF)	.48	.07	.48	< .001	.04	.05	.06	.45
FQ by SF	.12	.10	.08	.22	.02	.06	.02	.79

APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Brittanee Jeanne Bridges has successfully completed
her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

*Is Keeping Secrets from Friends Associated with
Adolescent Depression and Behavior Problems?*


Robert D. Laird Director of Thesis


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Honors Program

April 27, 2012
Date