The chilling effect and family secrets:

Examining the role of self protection, other protection and communication efficacy

Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to test two theoretical models of the psychological and communicative links that mediate the impact of the chilling effect on the continued concealment of secrets in families. More specifically, we argued that individuals’ continued concealment of a secret from aggressive family members would be mediated by the desire to protect one’s self (model 1) and to protect others (model 2). It was also hypothesized that the need for self protection and other protection would negatively influence whether people felt that they had the communication efficacy to reveal their secret to these family members, which would also foster continued concealment. The results suggested that self protection and other protection did mediate the connection between family members’ aggression and individuals’ concealment of secrets from them. In addition, regardless of whether people believed they could communicate the secret to aggressive family members or not, they were likely to continue to conceal the secret if they were afraid that it would either hurt themselves or others.
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Family members should feel comfortable confronting one another about sensitive information like secrets because of the enduring and intimate nature of their relationships. Yet, it is sometimes because of the familiar nature of their relationships that it is difficult for them to reveal secrets to one another. Largely due to their relational histories and past exposure to each others’ behavior, family members may be likely to withhold secrets from each other if they expect the reactions to their revelations to be negative.

Research on the chilling effect suggests that people often withhold complaints from close others for fear of the repercussions that such information may evoke (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). The basic premise of the chilling effect is that people refrain from confronting powerful others about complaints (or in this case, secrets) because of the fear of how they will react (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). But, it is unclear what specific psychological and communicative processes underlie that fear or the decision to conceal negative information when faced with a potentially aggressive respondent (Makoul & Roloff, 1998).

Research on information regulation (e.g., disclosure, avoidance, secrets) suggests that people refrain from disclosing sensitive information for two primary reasons: self-protection and other-protection. Extending this literature to families characterized by aggression, it is quite likely that when a family member has reacted aggressively to prior revelations, it produces a fear of how current revelations might affect one’s self or one’s relationships. Because a family member has reacted aggressively in the past, individuals may refrain from revealing a secret for fear of judgment and ridicule or that the information will be used against them (self-protection). Moreover, they may be afraid that that the revelation will somehow deter the nature of their relationship with that person and others in the family (other-protection).

Because of the fear of how an aggressive family member will react, individuals may also feel as if they are unable to communicate the secret to this person, preventing the revelation of it. The individual may not know how to communicate secrets to this person because such attempts have been met with aggressive responses in the past and have produced harm to one’s self or others. This lack of communication efficacy may perpetuate the continued concealment of the secret. Thus, the purpose of this study is to test the argument that the individuals’ continued concealment of a secret from an aggressive
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family member is mediated by their desire to protect themselves (model 1) and to protect others (model 2). In these models, the need for self protection and other protection will also influence whether family members feel that they have the communication efficacy to reveal their secret, which also fosters continued concealment. In order to substantiate this argument, the literature on the chilling effect and information regulation are examined in the following sections.

The Chilling Effect and the Pressure to Conceal Secrets in Families

Researchers studying the chilling effect have examined the association between the power of one’s partner and the withholding of relational complaints. Interpersonal power in this research has assumed two primary forms: dependence power and punitive power (Solomon & Samp, 1998). Dependence power is the control that the partner who is less reliant upon the relationship develops from the dependent partner’s perspective (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). People accrue dependent power when they do not depend upon their partner for benefits or various resources and have access to relational alternatives outside of their relationship (Solomon et al., 2004). Punitive power exists when one’s partner is believed to have the ability to inflict psychological and/or physical harm (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). Roloff and Solomon have examined punitive power in terms of a partner’s past or potential psychological (symbolic) aggression and physical aggression (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Solomon et al., 2004). Their research has shown that the aggressive potential of one’s marital or dating partner can stifle the expression of relational grievances (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). In general, this body of work indicates that perceptions of partners’ symbolic and physical aggression are positively associated with the decision to withhold irritations from them.

Although the chilling effect has traditionally been applied to dating and marital relationships (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Solomon et al., 2004), a similar phenomenon should exist in families. As T. Afifi and Olson (in press) note, because of the involuntary nature of families, family members typically cannot exit their families and find alternative ones. But, family members are still committed to each other to varying degrees and depend upon one another for a host of emotional, material and physical resources. Children often rely on their parents for down payments on homes, babysitting, school loans, emotional support and advice well into their adult years (White, 1992). For instance, because
of the dependence upon their relationship, children may be afraid of revealing secrets to their parents for fear that their parents will withhold financial and emotional resources from them out of anger.

Parents, in turn, depend upon their children for emotional, physical and financial support as they age (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000).

Families are also an important context in which to analyze the chilling effect because of their intimate, enduring and collective nature. Aggression can produce significant consequences in families because of the longevity of family relationships. Family members may be likely to withhold secrets from one another because they have to endure the ramifications once the information is revealed. Norms and rules for conformity in families may also foster patterns of concealment (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Negative violations of expectations for proper behavior may prompt children to conceal secrets for fear of how their parents will react. Some families might also construct an environment of secrecy when powerless individuals, who have been socialized not to confront aggressive family members, sustain their own oppression by continuing to conceal secrets (T. Afifi & Olson, in press; Cloven & Roloff, 1993).

The current study extends the work by T. Afifi and Olson (in press) who applied the chilling effect to family members’ concealment of secrets. These authors tested two models of the association between the chilling effect and concealment. The direct effects model argued that the aggressive potential of family members was directly and positively associated with concealment of secrets. In contrast, the indirect model suggested that the aggressive potential of family members indirectly affected concealment by negatively affecting family members’ closeness and commitment to one another. Their results revealed that the direct effects model was a better explanation of coercive power and concealment in families.

While this research suggests that the chilling effect has a direct effect on continued concealment of secrets in families, it is unclear in this model and other research (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon & Samp, 1998) what communicative and psychological processes comprise the fear that perpetuates it (Makoul & Roloff, 1998). Insight into the reasons why people refrain from revealing negative secrets to aggressive family members can be gathered by examining the research on information regulation.

Self Protection and Other Protection as Mediators of Past Aggression and Concealment
While there are numerous reasons why individuals withhold secrets from their family members, Karpel (1980) and others (e.g., Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Lane & Wegner, 1995) argue that the primary function is protection. As Karpel (1980) contends, people who are keeping secrets are often protecting themselves from their family members’ anticipated anger, withdrawal of love, disappointment or revenge. As Petronio (1991, 2000, 2002) also points out in her Communication Privacy Management theory, individuals have a desire to regulate their disclosures due to the risk associated with revealing sensitive information. Revealing information leaves people vulnerable because it exposes the self to potential judgment, ridicule, and hurt. As a result, people construct metaphorical boundaries around themselves to manage the amount and type of information they reveal and conceal to others (Petronio, 2000, 2002).

When faced with an aggressive family member, the degree of risk involved with revealing secrets increases and, consequently, so does the need to protect one’s self from the harm that such revelations might induce. These fears are exacerbated when past aggression suggests that the family member will respond negatively.

Whether or not people continue to conceal secrets from other family members, however, also depends upon the valence of the secret and the form that it assumes. As numerous scholars (Brown-Smith, 1998; Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001) point out, secrets can be positive and serve important functions in families. For example, Vangelisti (1994) identified six factors underlying the functions of family secrets: bonding, evaluation, maintenance, privacy, defense, and communication. As she notes, secrets can build cohesion when family members view the secret as something unique to their relationship. Secrets can also be ways that family members signal ownership of information and delineate “outsiders” from “insiders” (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Caughlin et al., 2000; Petronio, 2002). In Vangelisti’s (1994) study, however, bonding appeared to be more of a function of intra-family secrets, in which some family members were keeping a secret from other family members, or whole family secrets where an entire family was keeping a secret from outsiders. When secrets are kept at the intra family or whole family level, there may be a greater tendency to bond family members together than when they are individual level secrets being kept from other family members. This bonding may also be more applicable with positive secrets than negative secrets because suppressing potentially harmful information is more stressful than suppressing positive information. Because the
chilling effect is likely to result from withholding negative secrets rather than positive secrets, this study only examines the former.

As Vangeli’s (1994) study illustrates, the reasons why people withhold secrets are probably more complex than just one overarching construct of protection. What is argued here is that protection can be dimensionalized into self and other protection and that, while not exclusively so, these two dimensions are at the core of why people continue to conceal secrets from aggressive family members. Although she was not examining secret keeping from aggressive family members, Vangeli (1994; Vangeli & Caughlin, 1997) found that respondents’ secrets were most often driven by protection motives. Most of the functions of negative secrets from Vangeli’s work (e.g., 1994; Vangeli & Caughlin, 1997; Vangeli et al., 2001) could also be embedded within the rubric of self or other protection. For instance, evaluation and defensiveness are forms of self-protection. Evaluation is the fear that other family members will disapprove of the secret, be disappointed, be judgmental, or react unpredictably if they find out the secret (Vangeli, 1994). Defensiveness is the fear that other family members could use the information against the person or take advantage of the person if they find out about the secret (Vangeli, 1994).

Maintenance, which involves keeping relationships from deteriorating and reducing stress for other family members (Vangeli, 1994), is rooted in protecting relationships. The category of “communication,” or family members’ inability to communicate effectively about secrets, is reframed here as a separate mediating variable that reflects the participants’ communication efficacy, or the (in)ability to talk about the secret.

Research on topic avoidance (e.g., T. Afifi & Schrodt, 2004a, 2004b; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Caughlin & T. Afifi, 2004; Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & W. Afifi, 1995a, 1995b; Rawlins, 1983) also confirms the underlying dimensions of self and other protection. While secrets involve information that others do not know exists and it is often more consequential than simply avoiding topics (Kelly & McKillop, 1996), they are grounded in similar functions. Guerrero and W. Afifi (1995a, 1995b) identified four reasons why adolescents avoid discussing certain topics with their parents: self protection, relationship protection, social inappropriateness, and lack of responsiveness. In this context and others (see W. Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; W. Afifi & Guerrero, 1998), these authors found that self protection was the primary reason why people used avoidance. In addition,
while social inappropriateness and a lack of responsiveness were constructed as separate reasons for avoidance, they still have underlying protection functions. For instance, perceiving that a parent will not respond to one’s disclosures is grounded in the desire to protect one’s self from the hurt that results from an undesirable response.

Caughlin and T. Afifi (T. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a, 2003b; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Golish & Caughlin, 2002) expanded upon Guerrero and W. Afifi’s typology by including other reasons for avoidance, such as a lack of closeness, maintaining privacy and preventing conflict, in first marriage families and post-divorce families. Nevertheless, these categories can also be constructed as part of the larger function of self or other protection. For example, family members may avoid talking about a topic to prevent conflict. But, they long to avoid conflict because it is likely to either harm (or alter) their relationship or their sense of self.

As this body of literature suggests, self and other protection are fundamental to secret keeping regardless of the aggressiveness of one’s family members. But, they become even more salient when aggression is involved. The decision to reveal or conceal secrets is based upon the evaluation of how others would respond if they obtained the information (Erickson, 1979). From a social exchange theory perspective (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), an individual weighs the expected benefits of revealing the secret to the expected consequences of the exposure (Brown-Smith, 1998). The expected benefits and consequences are grounded in fears of what will happen to one’s self and others if the secret is revealed, which are based upon exposure to the target person’s reactions to prior revelations.

What is rather clear from the research is that individuals’ fear of revealing secrets to aggressive family members is dependent upon their desire to protect themselves. For example, if individuals with HIV believe that a family member will respond negatively to their disclosure of their illness, they are unlikely to disclose it because it leaves them vulnerable to negative reactions (Greene & Faulkner, 2002). People’s natural response to aggression may be to defend themselves because it is a direct attack on their identity (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Straus & Sweet, 1992). These attacks can be psychological or physical and overt (e.g., yelling, angry outbursts, physical violence) or covert (passive aggressiveness, disappointing looks, stonewalling, crying) in nature (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Whatever their form, if past behavior suggests that revealing a secret will prompt similar reactions, individuals’ most primal instinct is
probably to shield themselves from the hurt that such a revelation may evoke by continuing to conceal it. More specifically, people will protect themselves from being evaluated and defend themselves from the possibility that the person could use the information against them. Thus, the first model (hereafter referred to as the self protection model) argues that the direct association between past aggression and continued concealment will be mediated by family members’ desire to protect themselves, which consists of the fear of evaluation and defensiveness.

While the mediating role of self protection is probably a primary concern for the secret holder, “other protection” is also likely to play an important role in continued concealment. Protecting others is likely to assume two primary forms: protecting the other person and that relationship and protecting other family members. People often refrain from revealing secrets in order to protect the target of the secret and that relationship from harm (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti et al., 2001). Even if a family member is aggressive, other family members may still value their relationship with this person and might not want to threaten it. There is also probably a desire to maintain the good aspects of the relationship or at least not make the relationship even more estranged by prompting negative responses.

Individuals also often attempt to protect other family members from an aggressive or abusive family member by engaging in behaviors that preempt the aggression (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Revealing a secret may not only result in aggression toward the secret keeper, but also toward other family members who are exposed to this person’s behavior on a regular basis. This may result in this person, and other family members, losing access to material and/or physical resources (Karpel, 1980). Consequently, a second model is tested whereby past aggression and continued concealment are mediated by family members’ desire to protect others (hereafter referred to as the other protection model), which is comprised of protecting the target/the relationship with the target and protecting other family members.

Communication Efficacy and Continued Concealment

Although the desire to protect one’s self and/or others is likely to determine whether or not people will continue to conceal secrets from aggressive family members, it still does not fully explain why individuals are unwilling to disclose the secret. When confronted with potentially aggressive family members, people may feel as if they are unable to communicate their secret to them. People’s confidence
in their ability to confront others about sensitive information is likely to determine whether a confrontation actually takes place (Makoul & Rolloff, 1998).

According to Bandura (1977), whether or not people believe that they can successfully perform certain behaviors, or self efficacy, is grounded in their predictions of what will happen as a result of those behaviors. Closely related to self-efficacy is communication efficacy or people’s beliefs that they can communicate their thoughts to others (see W. Afifi & Weiner, 2004). The fear of what might happen to one’s self or others, is likely to result in a perceived inability to articulate the secret in a way that would prevent a negative response. Past negative reactions to disclosures may slowly wear at people’s sense of self and their relationships, such that they feel as if they can not communicate the secret in a way that it would be received positively. Thus, if people do not believe they have the communication efficacy to reveal the secret to an aggressive family member, they may simply continue to conceal it.

Unlike disclosure more broadly, keeping a secret is also a very active, conscious decision to conceal information that often has adverse consequences if revealed (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Pennebaker, 1990). The purposeful and consequential nature of secret-keeping makes it particularly likely that people think about the potential outcomes of revealing the secret and whether they have the communication efficacy to reveal it. As Lane and Wegner (1995) contend, secret keeping creates thought suppression because people actively attempt to prevent inadvertent disclosures. This suppression results when people are surrounded by others from whom the secret is being kept. This thought suppression, in turn, produces intrusive thoughts about the secret. It is possible that the aggression of family members further contributes to this cycle of suppression and lack of communication efficacy because people are continually reminded of what might happen if they reveal the secret and of the difficulty they would have revealing it.

Therefore, in both the self protection model and the other protection model, communication efficacy should play an important role in concealment. Past aggression should foster a need to protect one’s self (figures 1 and 2) and protect others (figures 3 and 4) from the aggression, which encourages continued concealment. However, the need for self protection or other protection also influences one’s communication efficacy, which, in turn, determines whether a secret will continue to be concealed. In order to assess whether the self protection model or the other protection model is a better fit to the data, separate models are constructed.
Study 1

Method

Participants

This sample was comprised of 171 families (629 family members), which consisted of at least three \( (n = 22) \) and potentially four family members \( (n = 149) \). All of the families included one or two parents \( (n = 311) \) and one or two adult children \( (n = 318) \). The sample represented a relatively equal number of mothers \( (n = 163; 52\%) \) and fathers \( (n = 149, 48\%) \), but more daughters \( (n = 197, 62\%) \) than sons \( (n = 119, 37\%) \). Although there was a wide age range for the adult children (Range = 18 to 52 years old; \( SD = 5.00 \)), the average age of the children was 22.32 years. The mean age of the parents was 51.17 years \( (SD = 5.40; \text{Range} = 39 \text{ to } 78 \text{ years old}) \). The families resided across the North Eastern part of the United States and were predominantly white \( (n = 141, 82\%) \) and middle class. Of the families that participated, 143 of them \( (84\%) \) were considered first marriage families, 18 \( (11\%) \) were single parent families, and 10 \( (.06\%) \) were stepfamilies. None of the adult children currently lived in the same household as their parents.

Procedures

In order to promote consistency in the sample in terms of the number and type of family members who were withholding secrets from one another, numerous criteria were used to recruit the families. The families had to consist of one or two parents and at least two adult children ages 18 and over, with the parents and two of these children agreeing to participate. They could be biological, adoptive, or formed through other emotional/parental means (i.e., primary care-giver other than one’s parent). The families ideally consisted of two parental figures, but this did not prevent single parent families or divorced families from participating. For divorced families, it was requested that the custodial and noncustodial parents (rather than a parent and stepparent or only one parent) complete the survey when possible. Because there may have been instances where children felt that other family members (e.g., a stepparent or grandparent) were their care-givers, the adult children were told that the parents who completed the surveys should be those with whom they felt were their primary parental figures. Therefore, if they considered their stepparent a parental figure and this person had been a part of their family for a number of years, the custodial parent and stepparent could complete the surveys. The sample also consisted of some single
parent families where only one parent completed the survey because the other parent was deceased. In a few divorced and non-remarried families, only one parent participated because of the discomfort produced by having both parents complete the survey. These three-member families were kept in the sample in order to increase the sample size and, thus, the power to detect significant differences.

Two network sampling procedures were used to recruit the families for this study. First, the researchers entered university classrooms and recruited families through undergraduate students. After explaining the general purpose of the study and ensuring confidentiality, the students were offered a nominal amount of extra credit if they were able to locate a family that fit the description and that would be willing to participate. After talking with the families themselves, the students provided the researchers with addresses and phone numbers of potential families. The researchers then contacted each family member (either by mail or telephone), discussed the purpose of the study, and asked if they would be interested in participating. Once their participation was confirmed, a separate survey was mailed to each family member. The participants were instructed in writing and/or over the telephone to complete the survey in private, sign the back seal of the enclosed stamped envelope, and return the survey and consent form back to the researcher. Follow-up telephone calls were used to remind family members to return the surveys.

A second form of data collection also included network sampling, but this time the students were given the surveys, consent forms, instructions to the family members, and return envelopes that they mailed to each family member. The family members then mailed back their surveys to the researchers in the sealed and signed envelopes. As a verification check, 20% of the family members were called at random to confirm their participation and that they completed the survey themselves and in a private location.

All respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be completely confidential. In particular, family members were informed verbally or in writing that other family members would not have access to the information in the survey. The participants were instructed to think of a secret that they were keeping from one of their family members who was also participating in the project. In open-ended questions, they identified the person from whom they were keeping the secret and the secret they were keeping from him/her. They were asked to keep this secret and this target family member in mind when completing the rest of the survey. These instructions were reiterated throughout the survey.
Measures

Past Aggression. Past aggression was assessed with a revised version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Mason & Blankenship, 1987; Straus, 1990), which measures both symbolic (psychological/verbal) and physical forms of aggression. As it is noted above, participants were asked to think of a specific secret that they were withholding from a certain family member. They were then asked to indicate whether this family member had enacted (as indicated by a “yes” response) or had not enacted (as indicated by a “no” response) certain aggressive behaviors in the past when they revealed secrets to this person. Seven items measured the extent to which this family member responded with symbolic aggression (e.g., verbal abuse, sulking or refusing to talk about it, insulting the person, becoming cold or less affectionate) in the past. Because the CTS tends to overemphasize physical aggression at the expense of verbal and other types of aggression, eight additional items that measured psychological/verbal aggression were used to augment these existing items. The items included “Gave me a disappointing look,” “Attacked my character,” “Made me feel bad,” “Made me feel stupid,” “Lost his/her temper and said rather strong things to me,” “Criticized my shortcomings,” and “Got back at me in some way.” The second set of items consisted of 7 items that asked about the family member’s past physical aggression (e.g., threatened to hit or throw something, slapped the respondent). Separate summed scales were created for physical aggression and symbolic aggression. An initial confirmatory factor analysis revealed that these were two separate constructs. Consequently, they were treated as separate manifest variables in different models in the analyses.

Self-Protection. Self-protection was measured as a latent construct consisting of two manifest variables, “evaluation” and “defense,” that were taken from items generated by Vangelisti (1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Participants were asked to indicate how likely they thought that certain behaviors or actions would happen if they told their secret to their target person. They were asked to rate their responses along a seven point Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 with “1” being very unlikely and “7” being very likely.

“Evaluation” measured the extent to which the participant feared that he/she would be judged, ridiculed, disliked, or would disappoint the family member if the secret were revealed to him/her. Four items were used to measure this construct (e.g., “This person would no longer like me if he/she knew the
secret,” “This person would disapprove if he/she knew about the secret”). The family-level Cronbach’s Alpha for these items was .82 (M = 3.54; SD = 1.62). The second part of self-protection, “defense,” assessed the degree to which the participant felt that if the secret were revealed that the family member could potentially use it against him/her in some way. This construct consisted of four items (e.g., “If I told this person the secret, he/she would tell other people the secret,” “This person would use the secret information against me”). The family level alpha coefficient for these items was .72 (M = 2.60; SD = 1.41). Evaluation (.91 and .95) and defense (.57 and .55) also loaded strongly onto the latent construct of self-protection.

Other-Protection. The latent construct of “other-protection” was based upon previously tested scale items from Vangelisti’s work (1994, Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) on family secrets. Other-protection was broken down into two manifest variables: “maintenance with others” and “maintenance with target.” Similar to the items for self-protection, the instructions for other-protection asked participants to respond according to how likely they thought that certain behaviors or actions would happen if they told their secret to their target family member. They were to respond along a seven point Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 with “1” being very unlikely and “7” being very likely.

“Maintenance with others” consisted of nine items that measured the extent to which the participant feared that telling the secret to the target would create stress for other family members, potentially harm or alter the nature of their relationship with other family members, or weaken the bonds that the family members share with one another. Example items included: “Revealing the secret would create stress for other family members,” and “Telling the secret to this person would hurt my relationship with other family members.” The family level alpha coefficient for maintenance with others was .86 (M = 3.05; SD = 1.37). “Maintenance with the target” determined the degree to which the respondent felt that revealing the secret to the target would weaken or change their relationship or harm this person in some way (e.g., “If I revealed the secret, my relationship with this person would never be as good as it is now” and “Revealing the secret would do nothing but harm the relationship we have now”). The family level alpha for maintenance with target was .91 (M = 2.96; SD = 1.75). Maintenance with others (.72 and .73) and with the target (.93 and .93) also loaded strongly onto the latent construct of other protection.
Communication Efficacy. Communication efficacy was constructed based upon previously established items by W. Afifi and Caughlin (2004). The items were taken from a larger scale that asked participants, along a 7 point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), to rate the extent to which they thought that certain outcomes would result if they were to tell the secret to their target person. The items assessed the degree to which the participant felt that he/she could even talk about the secret or would know how to communicate the secret to this person. The four items consisted of the following: “I wouldn’t know what to say if I tried to tell him/her the secret,” “I wouldn’t even know how to begin telling this person the secret,” “I can’t think of any way to tell him/her the information,” “I don’t know how to even approach the issue with him/her.” The items had excellent reliability (α = .91; M = 3.48; SD = 1.86).

Continued Concealment. Continued concealment of a secret was measured with five items adapted from Vangelisti et al.’s (2001) criteria for revealing secrets. The items measured the degree to which participants believed they would continue to withhold their secret from the target of the secret. The 7 point Likert scale ranged from “not at all likely” to “extremely likely.” One item asked the participants how likely they were to reveal their secret to one of their family members who was also participating in the project (who they identified in a prior section) in the near future. The other four items were also on a 7 point Likert scale that ranged from 1 being “strongly disagree” and 7 being “strongly agree” and measured participants’ resistance to ever revealing the secret to the target family member (e.g., “I would never tell this family member,” “No matter what, I will keep the secret from this family member”). The items were averaged, resulting in an alpha of .90 (M = 3.36, SD = 1.76).

Results

Data Analysis Plan

Because the consequences of revealing positive secrets would most likely not result in aggressive behavior from target family members, the analyses in this study were restricted to negatively valenced secrets. Two items from Vangelisti’s research (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti et. al., 2001) on people’s perceptions of their family secret were used to measure the valence of the secret. These seven-point semantic differential items assessed whether the participants perceived the secret to be extremely bad to extremely good and extremely negative to extremely positive. Only family members with scores .5 above the median on negativity were used in the analyses (M = 4.77; SD = .97). Of the 171 families, 112 of
them were able to be used in the family-level analyses. The remaining families that were removed from the sample either had two or more family members who only had positive secrets or who claimed to not be keeping any secrets from other family members. Cases where all of the family members were reporting on the same person were also omitted from the analyses. In cases where multiple family members were reporting on the same family member simultaneously (e.g., two siblings were reporting on the same parent), the mean of the two reports of the target family member was computed. In the following models, the variables represent the mean reports of multiple family members’ own behavior/beliefs or the behavior of their target family member.

The correlations for parents and children and the other family relationships (siblings, spouses) within the sample were all moderately correlated, permitting the use of aggregate family data in the analyses. The family level correlations for the models are provided in Table 1. Structural equation modeling (using AMOS 5.0) was used to test the hypothesized models. The direct paths in the models represent hypotheses, as it was discussed in the literature review. Maximum likelihood estimation was used to estimate all models and to account for missing data. All of the parameters shown in the figures and tables for the models are standardized.

Self-Protection Model

Separate models were constructed for past physical aggression and past symbolic aggression to test the hypothesized paths in the self protection model. Both of the self-protection models for symbolic aggression \( \chi^2 (3, N = 112) = 4.13, p = .25, \text{NFI} = .97, \text{CFI} = .99, \text{TLI} = .97, \text{RMSEA} = .06 \) and physical aggression \( \chi^2 (3, N = 112) = 6.12, p = .11, \text{NFI} = .95, \text{CFI} = .97, \text{TLI} = .90, \text{RMSEA} = .09 \) were a good fit to the data. All of the hypothesized paths in both models were significant and in the correct direction, except for the direct path from communication efficacy to continued concealment (see Figures 1 and 2). As predicted, the direct paths from symbolic past aggression (\( \beta = -.05, \text{ns} \)) and physical past aggression (\( \beta = .08, \text{ns} \)) to continued concealment were both non-significant when the indirect paths to self-protection were included in the models. For the symbolic aggression model, the paths from symbolic aggression to self protection (\( \beta = .53, p < .001 \)) and from self-protection to continued concealment (\( \beta = .48, p < .01 \)) were significant. Similarly, for the physical aggression model, the paths from physical aggression to self
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...protection (β = .26, p < .05) and from self protection to continued concealment (β = .39, p < .05) were significant.

Further evidence of mediation effects was found when the direct and indirect paths to concealment for both of the self protection models were analyzed in isolation. When the indirect paths were removed and the direct path from past symbolic aggression to continued concealment was analyzed, the direct path became significant (β = .19, p < .05). The direct effect from past physical aggression to continued concealment also emerged as significant (β = .18, p < .05) when the indirect effects were removed. These mediating paths were verified with the Sobel test. The mediating paths were significant for symbolic aggression (z = 1.72, p < .05), but not for physical aggression, which was approaching significance (z = 1.72, p = .086). Symbolic aggression also appeared to be a stronger predictor of self protection than physical aggression, accounting for 28% of the variance for self-protection compared to 7%.

As it was hypothesized, self protection also had a strong, direct impact on communication efficacy for the symbolic aggression (β = .68, p < .001) and physical aggression (β = .66, p < .001) models. In addition, symbolic aggression (β = .05, ns) and physical aggression (β = -.05, ns) were not directly associated with communication efficacy, but were indirectly associated with it through self protection. Unlike what was expected, however, communication efficacy was not associated with continued concealment when either symbolic aggression or physical aggression were included in the models. When the path from self-protection to concealment was removed from the models, the path from communication efficacy to concealment became significant for both symbolic aggression (β = .23, p < .05) and physical aggression (β = .25, p < .01). Nevertheless, when the self-protection path was included in the models, it appeared to be assuming most of the variance to concealment.

Other-Protection Model

The other-protection models tested the same paths as the self protection models. Similar to the aforementioned models, the other-protection models for symbolic aggression [χ² (3, N = 112) = 2.36, p = .51, NFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, RMSEA = .01] and physical aggression [χ² (3, N = 112) = 3.25, p = .36, NFI = .98, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .03] both produced an excellent fit to the data. The other protection models appeared to produce a slightly better fit to the data. There was evidence for a mediation effect through other protection, with all of the hypothesized paths in both models, except for the path from...
communication efficacy to concealment, being significant (see Figures 3 and 4). The paths from symbolic aggression to other protection ($\beta = .50, p < .001$) and from other protection to continued concealment ($\beta = .46, p < .01$) were significant. The paths from physical aggression to other protection ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) and from other protection to continued concealment ($\beta = .42, p < .05$) were also significant. The findings for other protection revealed that the association between past physical aggression to concealment ($z = 1.99, p < .05$) and past symbolic aggression to concealment ($z = 2.31, p < .02$) were mediated by other protection. Symbolic protection also emerged as stronger predictor of other protection than physical aggression, assuming 25% of the variance for self-protection compared to 10%. In support of a mediation effect, the direct paths from symbolic past aggression ($\beta = -.01, ns$) and physical past aggression ($\beta = .06, ns$) to continued concealment were both non-significant when the full model was analyzed and were significant when the indirect effects were removed.

Other protection also had a strong, direct impact on communication efficacy for symbolic aggression ($\beta = .74, p < .001$) and physical aggression ($\beta = .73, p < .001$). Symbolic aggression ($\beta = .02, ns$) and physical aggression ($\beta = -.12, ns$) were not directly associated with communication efficacy, but were associated with it through other protection. Communication efficacy was also not related to concealment for symbolic aggression ($\beta = -.07, ns$) or physical aggression ($\beta = -.05, ns$). When the path from other protection to concealment was removed from the models, the path from communication efficacy to concealment became significant for both symbolic aggression ($\beta = .23, p < .05$) and physical aggression ($\beta = .25, p < .01$). Like the models for self protection, however, when the path for other protection was included in the models, other protection seemed to be accounting for most of the variance to concealment.

Study 2

The purpose of study one was to test two theoretical models of the psychological and communicative links that mediate the impact of the chilling effect on the continued concealment of secrets in families. A second study was constructed in order to verify these models and to examine these connections in greater depth. Therefore, a random sub-sample of individuals from study one was interviewed to validate the models and to provide insight into other theoretical connections not included in them.
Method

Participants

Twenty-five participants from study one agreed to be interviewed about their family secrets for study two. The sample consisted of nineteen adult children (14 women, 5 men) and six parents (4 women, 2 men). The mean age of the adult children was 25 years (range = 22 to 37) and the mean age of the parents was 49 years (range = 48 to 52). The participants represented a wide range of occupations, including journalists, servers, correction officers, business owners, bartenders, salesperson, and accountants. Their education levels ranged from high school diplomas to medical degrees, with most participants ($n = 16$) holding a bachelor’s degree. All of the participants resided in the Northeastern part of the United States and were middle class. Seven of the participants were currently unemployed, but this was primarily the result of 12 of them being college students or finishing their bachelor’s degrees. Twenty-two (88%) of the participants were European American, two were African American (8%), and one did not identify a race. None of the participants were from the same family.

Procedures

The survey for study one contained a response sheet that asked each participant if he/she would be willing to engage in a follow-up interview on this topic. Participants who indicated that they could be contacted for an interview and who had negative secrets (as operationalized in study one) were randomly selected and called approximately eight to twelve months after the original survey was administered. Because the participants were from different cities across the Northeastern part of the United States, a combination of face-to-face ($n = 13$) and telephone interviews ($n = 12$) were conducted. The researchers informed the participants of the purpose of the study, their rights as human subjects, and that their interviews would be kept confidential. In order to help maintain confidentiality, the participants’ names were stripped from the data and replaced with pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in a private room (preferably when they were alone) and at a time that was convenient for the respondents.

At the beginning of the interview the participants described their relationship with each member of their family. They were then asked if they remembered the secret that they were withholding from their target family member. All of the participants remembered the secret they were keeping from their family member (which was verified from study one). They were then asked if they were still withholding this
secret or whether they had revealed the secret to this family member. Five of the participants had revealed their secret and 19 were continuing to conceal it. If they revealed the secret, the participants were asked to talk about how they revealed it, the family member’s reaction to the revelation, how they felt during and after the interaction, and how it changed the nature of their relationship and their desire to reveal information (if it did at all). A variety of questions were then posed, covering the following areas: the secrets being withheld from other family members, the reasons why these secrets were being withheld, the family members’ level of aggression (particularly past aggressive behaviors upon revealing previous secrets, and how, if at all, this has shaped their willingness to reveal secrets to them), the family members who were more likely than others to be the recipients of sensitive information and what it was about their communication that enabled these disclosures to occur, and, finally, the methods they would use to reveal their secrets to their family members, if they were to reveal them, and what would have to happen for them to reveal their secrets to their family members. Because the participants were talking in detail not only about the secret they were withholding from their original target family member, but also numerous secrets they, and other members of their family, were withholding from other family members, it was difficult to “quantify” their experiences in any true sense. Consequently, a completely interpretive approach was used to describe the participants’ experiences with the phenomena in this investigation.

Data Analysis Procedures

An interpretive, qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to further uncover the reasons why individuals continue to conceal secrets from certain family members and how, if at all, aggression is related to this concealment. Because of the dearth of research that has examined the connection between the chilling effect and family secrets, a qualitative approach enables us to examine the dimensions of this association in greater depth.

The data analysis consisted of three phases. Two of the researchers first read through the data independently and brainstormed overarching themes that surfaced with the general models from study one in mind. The researchers then read through the data a second time, examining themes that a.) potentially confirmed and disconfirmed the models from study one, and b.) provided information about other links that should be explored that were unidentified in the first study. The researchers were very purposeful in their attempts to remain open-minded to divergent themes. Finally, the investigators met and discussed their
ideas about the overarching themes with one another. The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to refine the themes and their properties based upon new insights and discrepant cases.

Results: Validation and Extension of the Models

*Past Aggression, Continued Concealment, and Distinctions in Self and Other Orientation*

Consistent with the concealment models presented in study one, the interviews revealed that individuals often refrained from revealing secrets for fear of how their family member would respond, which was based upon aggressive reactions to prior revelations to this person. When the target family member was aggressive, however, self protection appeared to be more at the heart of that fear than other protection. Participants often feared being ridiculed, judged, perceived as a disappointment, or feared that the information could be used against them. Tricia mentioned that she feared her father’s anger, primarily because she thought she would be judged. As she stated,

My father can be very stand-offish, stubborn, you know, ignore people, make, you know, comments behind their back and TO them. He’s very straightforward. Um, very smart. But, the relationship between him and I was fear…. I feared my father. I feared anything I did, he’d have something to say. Anything I wanted to do, he wouldn’t want me to do, or he’d have a comment or an opinion…. My father was taught from his father DISCIPLINE. (3:15:1)

Self protection also occurred when individuals feared the emotional hurt that came from being embarrassed or regarded as a disappointment. Mary was hiding the fact that she was not a virgin from her mother. When asked why she was keeping this secret from her she stated,

Mostly, I don’t want her to be disappointed in me…. She can be very judgmental in her personality sometimes… She can be harsh. Like, you know, if she’s stressed or when she hasn’t had a cigarette, and…you know, she can be very [pause] not quite biting, but—well, sometimes biting—yes. (5:15:1)

These interviews offered several reasons why individuals might conceal information to protect themselves, especially in the face of potential verbal aggression.

In situations with moderately aggressive family members, the participants also revealed strong other protection motives for concealment. The participants stated that if they revealed their secret to an aggressive family member they would risk upsetting that individual and exposing other family members to
the effects. These participants were afraid of hurting the target family member and/or of damaging the bond between themselves and that person. As a forty-nine year old woman revealed about her relationship with her mother,

I may be wrong. She may be more open and understanding now. I don’t know, but all I know is based on my beliefs and her lifestyle and what she’s told me and showed me through the years. I don’t think she would understand and I don’t want to hurt the relationship I have. (4:14:2)

Often the information being concealed had the potential to hurt the parties involved or their relationship with each other, which contributed to its continued concealment.

In some cases, the secrets being kept by participants were being kept by another family member. Occasionally, entire families were keeping secrets from a single aggressive individual.

As Peter explained,

I know that the rest of the family feels the same way if it’s something not that big and we can handle it on our own because he gets upset so easily. He does, he’ll yell and he’ll swear. So we all kind of feel that we’ll keep it from him if we can because the way that he used to respond. (1:18:1)

In these instances, family members were concealing a secret from one family member because this person was likely to become aggressive if the information was revealed to him/her. The family members feared that this person’s aggression could psychologically hurt the secret keeper and damage the family as a whole due to the stress that would be produced. In other cases, the participants were keeping the secret of another family member from an aggressive individual in the family. For instance, a participant was hiding his brother’s drug use from their father because of his temper. In essence, sometimes family members acted as buffers, protecting the secret keeper from the aggression of other family members.

Consistency and Predictability of Family Member’s Aggressive Responses

While family members’ past aggressive behaviors to prior revelations influenced whether participants revealed secrets to them, the unpredictability of their reactions also emerged as a substantial factor in deciding whether or not to reveal a secret to them. Just as the participants were likely to conceal a secret when they were confident that the response to it would be negative, they also stated that they were uncomfortable revealing secrets to specific individuals if they were unable to anticipate the aggressiveness
of their reaction. The consistency or inconsistency of past behaviors shaped their willingness to reveal their secret and the manner in which they would reveal it. As Suzanne remarked,

Oh, this is great, I’m backed up with ALL the information I need to respond to any of his questions’, and yet he STILL, like, went off the handle, and I wasn’t prepared for that, and I had planned according to all my previous experiences with him. (2:18:1)

Inconsistency in previous negative reactions seemed to foster uncertainty about future reactions, resulting in a tendency to continue to conceal secrets. The participants noted that they had to be able to trust the reactions of target family members in order to avoid aggressive responses and to accurately assess their communication efficacy.

In contrast, consistently positive reactions from the target family members tended to promote greater trust and communication efficacy about the revelation of the secret. At times, family members would violate the participants’ expectations of aggression by responding in a way that seemed uncharacteristically understanding, supportive, or calm. In these cases, individuals remained “guarded” about how the family member would respond, but hopeful about a possible change in behavior.

But, at the root of the fear of the family members’ reactions was the need to protect one’s sense of self. Even if the family member violated their expectations and reacted positively to the revelation, the participants were still cautious about revealing the secret because of the potential damage it could do to their identity. Even though they were also afraid of damaging the relationship, they seemed to be more afraid of exposing themselves to hurtful messages. In many ways, this fear seemed to paralyze the participants’ ability to communicate their secret. The participants stated that they did not even know how to introduce the secret to their family member because they had been so accustomed to not communicating openly with this person.

Communication Efficacy

The interviews reinforced the important role of communication efficacy for concealment of secrets. The results from study one suggested that people may continue to conceal negative secrets from aggressive family members, regardless of whether or not they felt they could communicate the secret to them. The interviews provided some insight into this complex process. In general, the participants felt as though they could not communicate the secret to aggressive family members, and did not have any desire
to ever communicate it, because of their fear of what might happen to them. If past experiences were consistently negative and fear inducing, participants stated that there was no way that they could communicate the secret in such a way that it could produce a positive response. In this case, they felt as though they had little or no ability to affect the interaction. Over time, family members’ past aggression and negative reactions appeared to slowly deteriorate the participants’ self-confidence and, consequently, their ability to voice negative information in a way that could be productive. Even if they felt that they could communicate the secret to them, they often chose not to do so.

If the participants felt that they needed to reveal the secret for some reason, they often learned over time how to reveal it in a way that minimized some of the negative impact, thereby enhancing their communication efficacy. One strategy individuals used to increase their efficacy was to rehearse and plan the revelation ahead of time. This rehearsal or preparation was accomplished in two ways. The first method consisted of testing the secret with a third party. This enabled the participants to gather information about how their family members might react through the use of role playing. As one respondent noted:

> When you test it out [with your friends], then you kinda have, like, that little role-play to fall back on when you’re searching for words. You already kinda have in your mind what things YOU can say and what responses you can give. So, it makes it a little easier going into the situation, because when you – you – it’s almost like you’ve already told them, but it wasn’t them. (22:10:1)

As this quote also illustrates, a second process of rehearsal involved script building. Many of the participants discussed planning the way in which they would reveal the secret in accordance with anticipated responses to it and how they would respond in turn to their family members’ reactions. That is, they created a detailed account for how they would reveal the secret and how they would respond to their family members’ responses to it.

Some individuals also engaged in incremental disclosures of their secrets as a way to predict family members’ responses to the revelation of their secret. The participants revealed small parts of the secret in order to “test” the responses of the target family member. As one participant explained, “I would tell my dad part of the truth, but not the whole truth because I knew he would probably think and listen but get the problem in a calmer manner than if he were to know everything” (1:13:1). These partial and
incremental disclosures served several functions. First, they helped reduce uncertainty regarding the reactions of that family member. Second, they allowed the participants to minimize the magnitude of the secret and have greater control over the responses to the secret by revealing selected parts of it. Third, it helped to improve communication efficacy because the participants were able to gage the family members’ reactions to the secret. Finally, they benefited by having relayed enough of the secret that they felt they were not lying by omission, relieving some of the guilt of concealing the secret.

Additional Insights and Potential Moderators

In addition to providing insight into the effects of communication efficacy, the interviews offered greater specificity about potential moderators of the chilling effect and family secrets. For example, the age of respondent appeared to buffer the chilling effect. Older respondents stated that they learned how to minimize the aggression of another family member over time and, consequently, were more confident confronting them with sensitive information. As Karen stated, “I’m comfortable as long as – I know what to say and what not to say. I know what I could say that wouldn’t make me comfortable, so I just sort of learned” (6:11:1).

The data also revealed that rigidity in a family member’s values, standards and opinions may shape the continued concealment of secrets. One reason for this could be that conformity orientation in families heightens the fear of disappointment (T. Afifi & Olson, in press; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). As one participant remarked, “He’s a perfectionist, and he [pause] um, he just has very, very, very high standards and expectations, and so we’ve just sort of learned that we’re never gonna meet those” (6:9:1). This conformity and fear of judgment was further illustrated by another participant who was afraid of telling her mother that she had an abortion because her mother was a pro-life activist. This dogmatism can also lead to a lack of communication efficacy due to the potential for disappointment and opposition to other family members’ points of view.

Another potential moderator that emerged fairly strongly throughout the interviews was the amount of time that participants spent with their family members and their willingness to reveal secrets to them. Time seemed to affect how close they felt to their family members, which, in turn, impacted their concealment of secrets. The participants suggested that they would need additional time with the family members in order to feel close enough to reveal their secrets and be better able to predict their responses.
The respondents also gauged the longevity of the impact of the secret if it were to be revealed to their family member(s). If the impact was perceived to be short lived, individuals were more likely to reveal the information than if the effects of aggression were expected to be long lasting. The quality of the familial relationship and the perceived long-term threat of the secret for the health of the relationship interacted to determine their continued concealment. Relationships in which sensitive information had the potential to affect the relationship for a long time appeared to have greater risks associated with the revealing of that information.

Several participants also felt that the secrets they were keeping no longer carried the impact that they once did. As Harry explained, “With time, everything is diluted” (9:17:1). The change in the potential weight or severity of the secret was due to the age of participants, the passage of time, and changes in the circumstances that prompted the secret. In these situations participants did not reveal the secret because it was no longer relevant, or they stated that they would simply reveal the secret if they were asked. Participants also expressed a willingness to reveal their secrets if they felt that it would be beneficial or necessary for the family member to receive the information.

Discussion

This study provides an important connection between two interrelated and yet distinct bodies of literature on the chilling effect and family secrets. In doing so, it sheds insight into the fear that prevents the revelation of sensitive information. The results of this study suggest that self protection and other protection mediate the connection between family members’ aggression and individuals’ concealment of secrets from them. In addition, whether people believed they could communicate the secret to aggressive family members or not, they were likely to continue to conceal the secret if they were afraid that it would either hurt themselves or others.

The Mediating Role of Self and Other Protection and the Continued Concealment of Secrets

An important theoretical contribution of this investigation is the confirmation of the mediating effects of self and other protection when there is a pressure to conceal secrets in families. While other protection seemed to be a slightly better fitting model compared to self protection, both models were a good fit to the data. Past symbolic aggression and physical aggression were indirectly associated with continued concealment through other protection. Self protection, however, only proved to be a significant
mediating link between symbolic aggression and concealment. In general, these findings are consistent with the work on the chilling effect (e.g., T. Afifi & Olson, in press; Cloven & Roloff, 1993), given that exposure to aggressive reactions to prior secrets produced a fear of confronting family members with secrets.

What was unclear from previous research was the components that drive this fear of confrontation (Makoul & Roloff, 1998). Similar to what Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) and the empirical work on family secrets and topic avoidance suggest (e.g., W. Afifi & Guerrero, 1995a, 1995b; Caughlin & T. Afifi, 2004; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), people are often motivated to conceal sensitive information to protect themselves and/or to protect others. When faced with a potentially aggressive response to the revelation of one’s secret, family members have a desire to protect themselves from being evaluated. They may also feel the need to defend themselves if they are afraid that the family member will use the information against them (Vangelisti, 1994). The interviews from study two also illustrated that unless there are other moderating circumstances (e.g., enough time has past, the secret is no longer relevant, the person needed to know the information), individuals are likely to continue to conceal their secret if they feel as if their sense of self is being threatened.

The results from this study also revealed that other protection played a strong mediating role in continued concealment. Past aggression influenced people’s concealment of their secrets to the extent that they felt that the secret would hurt the person from whom they were keeping the secret, would damage their relationship with that person, or would hurt other people in the family. The interviews also suggested that people were afraid of making an already tenuous relationship worse by making the person angry. As Karpel (1980) notes, individual family members and the family as a whole often suffer the loss of relational resources as a result of secrets. As he contends, “secrets interfere with the person-to-person relationships that are essential in differentiated and reciprocally balanced systems. They may contribute to pseudo-bonds instead of genuine alliances, and they can create unnecessary estrangements” (p. 300).

Although the data focused primarily on secrets that individuals were keeping from other family members, the interviews also pointed to the importance of family members keeping intra family secrets from an aggressive family member. For example, participants noted that everyone in the family knew their secret but they agreed not to tell their father about it because they knew he would become angry. In
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essence, family members acted as protective agents for one another by concealing information from the aggressive family member.

Communication Efficacy and the Continued Concealment of Secrets

Communication efficacy was also a factor in individuals’ continued concealment, even though it did not emerge as it was originally hypothesized. As it was predicted, past aggression fostered a desire to protect one’s self (or others) and this need for protection was associated with a lack of communication efficacy about the secret. However, communication efficacy was not associated with continued concealment when protection (self or other) was included in the model. In other words, the desire to protect one’s self or others appears to override whether a person will actually communicate the secret to an aggressive family member. Even if people believe that they can communicate the secret, they may still continue to conceal the secret because of the fear of what might happen to themselves or others.

As other research on secrets suggests (e.g., Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), people who are unlikely to ever reveal their secret may differ from those who are willing to reveal their secret. Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) found that family members who were unlikely to reveal their secret more strongly endorsed evaluation, maintenance, and defense functions than those who were either moderately likely to reveal it or highly likely to reveal it. Moreover, individuals who were highly likely to reveal their secrets were more psychologically close to the target of the secret than those who were unlikely to disclose the secret. People, in general, may be unlikely to reveal secrets to aggressive family members because they lack closeness and fear the consequences of their revelations (T. Afifi & Olson, in press). The interviews in the current investigation indicated that the participants would have been more likely to reveal their secret to their family member had they been closer and more open with this person. Even then, they may not have revealed the secret because of the fear of the negative outcomes.

The overriding need for protection may help explain why communication efficacy did not impact whether or not people would reveal their secrets. Makoul and Roloff (1993) found that people were likely to reveal complaints to their partners when they had high self efficacy. In the current study, communication efficacy also would have been negatively associated with continued concealment if self protection and other protection were not included in the models. Communication efficacy may be further linked to concealment, however, when rehearsal and planning of the revealment of the secret are involved.
The interviews suggested that participants felt more confident in their ability to reveal their secret when they rehearsed it ahead of time by themselves or with a third party. When they had established a script for their revelation, it made them more confident in their ability to disclose it and to anticipate the reactions of the target. Individuals may plan or rehearse their revelations of negative information, reducing their anxiety about an upcoming confrontation (Stutman & Newell, 1990) and, therefore, enhance their communication efficacy.

**Limitations and Other Implications for Future Research**

The contributions of this study must be set within the limitations of it. Most of the children in this study were adults in their twenties and thirties who were living independently from their parents. The chilling effect may be even more salient for adolescents who are often vying for autonomy from their parents and who are dependent upon them for more resources than adult children. Research is also necessary that examines power and concealment of secrets in dyads within the family. For instance, there may be less pressure to conceal information in sibling relationships, where there is more equity than in parent-child relationships (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). To the extent that there is aggression or a power imbalance that exists, a similar pattern of concealment should apply across relationship types.

The cross-sectional nature of this study also does not lend itself to determining causality. For example, an endless cycle of secret keeping may be set into place because a person’s expectations for negative outcomes to revelations have become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Longitudinal research is required to test this cyclical process and people’s reactions to their revelations. Caughlin, W. Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, and Miller (in press) found that after people revealed their secrets to their partners, they were actually relieved because their partners’ reactions were more positive than what they had expected. The interviews from the current study also suggested that when positive violations of revelations occur, people may slowly begin to increase their communication efficacy. However, even then, they may be guarded about revealing their secret if this person has been aggressive in the past. In addition to consistently negative reactions, inconsistency also fostered uncertainty and an unwillingness to reveal secrets. Future research ought to determine how consistency in aggressive reactions to secrets and expectations of the reactions to the revelations impact actual revelations of secrets over time.
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*Figure 1. Self Protection Model with Past Symbolic Aggression*

Note. All parameter estimates are standardized. * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001. Numbers to the immediate upper right of the endogenous variables represent the squared multiple correlations of their associated predictor variables.
**Figure 2.** Self Protection Model with Past Physical Aggression

*Note.* All parameter estimates are standardized. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$. Numbers to the immediate upper right of the endogenous variables represent the squared multiple correlations of their associated predictor variables.
Figure 3. Other Protection Model with Past Symbolic Aggression

Note. All parameter estimates are standardized. * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001. Numbers to the immediate upper right of the endogenous variables represent the squared multiple correlations of their associated predictor variables.
Figure 4. Other Protection Model with Past Physical Aggression

Note. All parameter estimates are standardized. * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001. Numbers to the immediate upper right of the endogenous variables represent the squared multiple correlations of their associated predictor variables.
References


Table 1. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Variables in the Models

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Note. * = p < .05, ** = p < .01