



The impact of pressured information management on boys' and girls' psychological functioning



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ABSTRACT

This study involving 463 adolescents examined the impact of pressured information management with mothers on boys' and girls' subsequent psychological functioning. This novel concept of pressured information management involved both pressured secrecy and disclosure and was defined as the degree to which adolescents feel they have no choice but to engage in these strategies. While pressured secrecy was especially aversive for girls, yielding associations with both depression and anxiety, it was related to stress only in boys. Pressured disclosure was less detrimental, and in fact, had a positive influence on girls' anxiety over time. Alternate models for these effects were considered but not supported by the data. Together, these findings highlight the importance of considering teens' reasons for engaging in different information management strategies and suggest adolescents who feel they have no choice but to keep secrets or disclose information to mothers may experience psychological consequences that are gender-specific.

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The role of adolescents as active agents who make strategic decisions about the information they do and do not provide parents about their daily activities has become increasingly recognized (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Tilton-Weaver & Marshall, 2008; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010). This process, referred to as adolescent information management (Marshall et al., 2005; Tilton-Weaver & Marshall, 2008), includes deliberate choices made by adolescents to spontaneously disclose information about their behavior to parents, as well as judicious decisions to keep aspects of their lives secret from them. The psychosocial outcomes associated with these different information management choices have recently received considerable research interest. These outcomes include relations with delinquency, depressed mood (e.g., Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Laird & Marrero, 2010), aggressive behavior, stress and self-esteem (e.g., Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005), as well as associations with loneliness, self-control, the quality of the parent–child relationship (e.g., Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009) and physical complaints among youths (e.g., Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013). However, the psychological impact of choosing information management strategies for particular reasons is not yet well understood. The aim of the present study was therefore to conduct a focused inquiry into the emotional consequences of engaging in disclosure and secrecy with mothers when teens feel pressured to use those information management strategies.

Pressured information management

Conceptualized as “pressured information management”, this process occurs when teens feel compelled to spontaneously disclose or conceal information from others because they perceive implicit pressure from the potential target to do so. While this target could be anyone in the adolescents' life from whom they perceive such pressure, teens' endorsement of pressured information management with mothers was the focus of this study. However, this is not to suggest this new concept of pressured information management applies to mothers exclusively. On the contrary, pressure to disclose information or keep secrets may occur in relation to any person the adolescent shares a meaningful relationship with, including fathers, siblings, or even peers. Indeed, the implications of pressured information management may well vary as a function of the source of this perceived pressure. Therefore, this study focused on teens' use of pressured information management with mothers.

Comprising both the concepts of “pressured disclosure” and “pressured secrecy”, this theoretical innovation was offered to provide a more nuanced understanding of the implications associated with teens' information management decisions. In doing so, consideration was extended to the motivations teens use to justify these choices based on their relational and disclosure history with mothers. The impact of engaging in pressured disclosure and secrecy with maternal caregivers on boys' and girls' subsequent emotional functioning was thus investigated in this short-term longitudinal study.

Pressured disclosure

Stattin and Kerr's (2000) and Kerr and Stattin's (2000) influential papers published over a decade ago called into question the previously well-established relation between parental knowledge and adolescent

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adjustment by highlighting the importance of how this information is obtained for teens' developmental outcomes. They demonstrated that of the different ways parents can access information about their teens' behavior, spontaneous disclosure from youths is both the most important source and correlates more highly with adolescent adjustment than any other parental knowledge mechanism. These findings led to a proliferation of studies concerned with identifying the varied consequences associated with spontaneous youth disclosure (e.g., Almas, Grusec, & Tackett, 2011; Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Smetana et al., 2009; Tasopoulos-Chan, Smetana, & Yau, 2009; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011).

To date much of the research examining the implications of teens' willingness to divulge information to parents has tacitly assumed that spontaneous youth disclosure is synonymous with teens' willingness to voluntarily reveal information about their behavior. In this study, we argue that although it may sometimes appear that adolescents have chosen to spontaneously reveal information about their behavior to mothers, in the sense that their mother did not explicitly ask for these details first, some teens may do so because of an underlying belief they have no choice but to provide this information. That is, while adolescents may offer information about their lives in the absence of direct maternal solicitation, and thus, seemingly spontaneously, the degree to which these disclosures can be regarded as truly voluntary warrants further consideration. Indeed, whether the results obtained by Stattin and Kerr (2000) and others which attest to the positive influence of spontaneous adolescent disclosure on youth adjustment can be generalized to disclosures which appear to have occurred spontaneously but from the perspective of the teen arise from implicit pressure to divulge those details requires further examination.

It should, however, be noted that youth disclosure about their daily activities is not synonymous with self-disclosure, which involves sharing thoughts, feelings and concerns with others (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Unlike self-disclosure, disclosure involves divulging information about one's behavior to parents and does not necessarily occur for the purpose of building intimacy, nor is it usually expected to be reciprocated (Marshall et al., 2005). In this study, of chief interest were the outcomes associated with youths' disclosure about their behavior; more specifically, where teens believe they are under implicit pressure to provide this information.

Pressured secrecy

Similar to pressured disclosure, a teenagers' decision to keep secrets from their mother about their behavior may be underscored by the belief that they have no choice but to conceal that information, given their relational history and the reactions to disclosure they anticipate. For example, the teen may recall having been subjected to harsh criticism, severe punishment, intense conflict or maternal rejection when having communicated openly with mothers in the past (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010). In these cases, it is possible teens make the judicious decision to deliberately withhold information about their daily activities from maternal caregivers, believing this is their best, or perhaps, only option. The motivations which guide secret-keeping of this nature thus differ from those most typically associated with more volitional concealment from youths (e.g., concerns about privacy or the desire for emotional and physical autonomy from caregivers; Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006; Finkenauer, Engels, & Kubacka, 2008; Finkenauer et al., 2002; Marshall et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2009; Trost, Biesecker, Stattin, & Kerr, 2007). This is consistent with the view espoused by Finkenauer et al. (2002), who argue that although secrecy entails personal choice, it is possible some teens engage in secret-keeping because they believe they have limited recourse to do otherwise, particularly where a negative relationship with their caregiver prevents them from confiding information to them. These teens may thus perceive implicit pressure to withhold details about their activities from mothers, believing that secrecy is their only option.

Links to psychological adjustment

The reasoning that underscores youths' information management decisions may play a role in determining outcomes for adolescents. This is consistent with the view of Laird and Marrero (2010) who posit that the implications of different information management strategies may vary as a function of the relational context and motivations underpinning these decisions. Thus, to enhance understanding about the consequences of different information management tactics for adolescent adjustment, the way in which youths' perceptions of relations with their parents contextualize their choices to engage in these strategies needs to be considered (Keijsers & Laird, 2010). Yet, there exists a paucity of research investigating this issue. The current study aims to bridge this gap by examining the relation between pressured information management with mothers and teens' subsequent experience of three negative emotional states: depression, anxiety and stress. Exploring the psychological outcomes associated with pressured information management is especially crucial as past research has shown avoidance of negative parental reactions is a primary factor guiding teens' information management decisions (Marshall et al., 2005; Tilton-Weaver & Marshall, 2008).

Although no studies have explicitly examined the impact of pressured information management on teens' psychological functioning, the wealth of research concerning the consequences of secrecy and disclosure in general for adolescents is suggestive. For example, keeping secrets from parents has been found to be associated with a range of negative emotional, physiological, psychological and relational consequences, leading to the proposal of a secrecy-maladjustment link (Frijns et al., 2010). These negative outcomes include concurrent and longitudinal relations between teens' use of secrecy with caregivers and increased depressive symptoms (Finkenauer et al., 2002; Frijns et al., 2005), poorer quality parent-child relationships (Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Smetana, Villalobos, Rogge, & Tasopoulos-Chan, 2010), more problem behavior (Frijns et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2010) and the use of maladaptive coping strategies (Almas et al., 2011). Teens who willfully withhold information from caregivers also experience more physical complaints (Finkenauer et al., 2002), as well as increased stress levels, lower self-esteem and less self-control over time (Frijns et al., 2005). Although the impact of secrecy on adolescent anxiety has not been explored directly, items used in previous studies to assess depressive mood may be considered synonymous with anxiety symptoms (e.g., feeling nervous; Finkenauer et al., 2002; Frijns et al., 2005). It is thus possible that adolescents who withhold information from mothers about their behavior also experience more anxiety, perhaps due to the fear of being 'found out'.

These negative consequences of secret-keeping derive from the immense psychological and physiological toll concealing information exacts on the secret-keeper (Larson & Chastain, 1990; Pennebaker, 1989). It requires constant active monitoring and inhibition of one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors to avoid inadvertently revealing the concealed information, which can lead to higher physiological arousal and thus, increased stress (Frijns et al., 2010). Adolescents who withhold information from parents also deny themselves the opportunity to challenge the content of their thoughts with respect to parental input and may thus ruminate on potentially distorted perceptions (Frijns et al., 2010). More importantly, the teen who keeps secrets is not afforded parental advice as to how they might best navigate high-risk situations, which can cause the adolescent undue anxiety as they negotiate these situations. Furthermore, consciously withholding information from others is commonly associated with having something that is shameful to hide and tends to be appraised by individuals, including the secret-keeper, as negative (Bok, 1989; Frijns et al., 2010). This can lead to maladaptive thinking patterns that can adversely impact the adolescents' mood, perhaps already at risk due to the negative relational consequences associated with keeping secrets. These include undermining intimacy, communicating separateness and creating distance with the person from whom the secret is kept (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Finkenauer et al., 2002, 2008).

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