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What parents don't know: Disclosure and secrecy in a sample of urban adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Research with two-parent European households has suggested that secrecy, and not disclosure of information *per se*, predicts adolescent adjustment difficulties. The present study attempted to replicate this finding using data from a 4-wave study of 358 poor, urban adolescents (47% male; M age = 12 yrs) in the United States, most of whom (>92%) were African American. Adolescents self-reported secrecy, disclosure, depressive symptoms, and delinquency at each wave. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that a two-factor model with secrecy and disclosure as separate, but correlated, factors was a better fit than a one-factor model. However, predictive models differed from previous research. Secrecy did not predict depressive symptoms, rather depressive symptoms predicted secrecy. For delinquency, there were significant paths from both secrecy to delinquency and delinquency to secrecy, as well as from delinquency to disclosure. These results did not differ by age or sex. Comparisons with previous findings are discussed.

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An extensive body of research over the last 15 years has demonstrated the importance of adolescent disclosure on adjustment (Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2003; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Researchers have noted that adolescents' disclosure of information is the key contributor to parental knowledge of their behavior (Kerr & Stattin, 2000), and the single most powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Recently researchers have argued that disclosure has been confounded with another construct, secrecy (Frijns et al., 2010). Presenting data from two-parent households in the Netherlands, they suggest that secrecy, and not disclosure *per se*, predicts adjustment difficulties (Frijns et al., 2010).

Parental monitoring, child disclosure, secrecy, and overall relationship quality between children and their parents are heavily influenced by the larger context in which they happen. Previous research focusing on parenting in high poverty neighborhoods indicates that parents compensate for the heightened violence in the community by more closely monitoring their offspring and engaging in more restrictive practices compared to parents from middle-class families (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Jones et al., 2008; Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001; Rankin & Quane, 2002). Given the variability in parenting across contexts, the present study investigated whether the results reported by Frijns et al. (2010) could be replicated in a different cultural context – that of poor, urban adolescents in the United States – using a similar design and sample size. Using procedures similar to Frijns et al. (2010) we evaluated (1) the factor structure of the disclosure measure, and (2) tested whether secrecy or disclosure was more strongly associated with internalizing and

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externalizing behaviors of adolescents living in this poor, urban context. Further, because patterns of child disclosure and secrecy change across development, and youth may be more at-risk for varying outcomes as a result of age and sex (e.g., Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005; Frijns et al., 2010; Laird, Bridges, & Marsee, 2013), moderator analyses of these relations based on age and sex were conducted.

The importance of adolescent disclosure

Adolescence is marked by biological, social, and cognitive changes, including puberty, increased perspective-taking abilities, and the shift from concrete to formal operational thought (Arnett, 2010). It is also the developmental stage where youth move to developing moral reasoning that follows principles of reciprocity, justice, and mutual respect rather than following rules laid down by authority figures (Kohlberg, 1963; Piaget, 1965). Thus, it is not surprising that parent-child conflict intensity tends to increase with the beginning of adolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Those early conflicts typically are about everyday issues like household chores, curfews, homework, and choice of activities; all issues that mostly occur at home and are easily monitored by parents. As adolescents grow older and strive for more autonomy, however, they start spending increasing amounts of time away from the direct supervision of their parents. At the same time, conflict frequency decreases and conflict intensity peaks (Laursen et al., 1998; Smetana, 2008; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Along with increased perspective-taking ability and the capacity to conceal true emotions, adolescents also get better at withholding information or lying to their parents, particularly when conflicts with parents are intense. It appears that as adolescents age, they choose to conceal information rather than being confronted by their parents (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006). Consequently, child disclosure becomes increasingly important in determining how much information parents can access (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). For example, during mid-adolescence teenagers are more often in the position to decide to either disclose or withhold information about their activities from their parents and sharing shifts to more voluntary and spontaneous exchanges (Frijns et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2006). Ample research has shown that non-disclosure increases in middle adolescence, and even in good relationships, parents overestimate their adolescents' disclosure, particularly with regard to peers (Laursen et al., 1998; Smetana, 2008; Smetana et al., 2006).

However, there is a substantial body of research showing that adolescents do apply their ability for advanced moral reasoning in evaluating justifications for lying (Smetana, 2008). Perkins and Turiel (2007) found that adolescents differ in what they would lie to parents or friends about, and only think it is morally correct to conceal matters which they perceive to be outside of their parents' jurisdiction. These findings suggest that adolescents base their decisions about deception on complex moral evaluations (Smetana, 2008).

Numerous studies have found that high parental monitoring (i.e., knowing where and with whom one's children are and what they are doing) is associated with better adjustment outcomes through adolescence (Smetana, 2008). However, the recent research around selective disclosure has suggested that by mid-adolescence, protective parental monitoring mainly refers to high parental knowledge about their child's activities, and this knowledge largely is determined by child disclosure (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In their seminal work reconsidering the child-driven aspects of parental monitoring, Stattin and Kerr (2000) found that high child disclosure increased parents' knowledge about adolescents' whereabouts, friends, and activities, and this, in turn, led to less norm breaking and delinquency. In contrast, children of parents who sought information by asking questions, increasing their supervision or exerting control, were more likely to break norms. This research suggests that the main protective power of high monitoring does not necessarily lay in parents' active attempts to set limits and control behavior, but in maintaining a relationship that invites adolescents to share their experiences voluntarily (Smetana, 2008). In support of this idea, Tilton-Weaver (2014) found that perceived parental support predicted more disclosure in a cross-lagged model with 874 Swedish adolescents aged 12 to 16. Further, delinquency positively predicted and support negatively predicted secrecy.

In summary, research shows that as they age, adolescents become more differentiated in their judgment regarding when and how withholding information or lying is acceptable. While it is true that parents overestimate the extent to which their children disclose information to them, the majority of adolescents do not endorse a global view that it is acceptable to deceive parents. Research reveals that even older students believe it is within a parent's legitimate jurisdiction to give directives regarding academic welfare, like expecting homework to be finished (Perkins & Turiel, 2007; Smetana, 2008; Smetana et al., 2006). However, providing an environment that encourages disclosure has been hypothesized to be a stronger protective factor against adjustment difficulties than high parental control (Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Tilton-Weaver, 2014).

Distinguishing between disclosure and secrecy

In a recent study by Frijns et al. (2010), the mechanism of the protective relationship between child disclosure and adjustment has been called into question. In their study, the authors suggest that the common operationalization of adolescent disclosure incorporates the two separate constructs of secrecy and disclosure, which are based on distinct cognitive processes. In this theory, mere non-disclosure is comparatively more effortless, whereas keeping a secret requires a conscious decision to conceal information and can be hard work. In accordance with that hypothesis, cross-lagged models of secrecy and disclosure with internalizing behaviors and delinquency showed that more secrecy was associated with higher levels of delinquency and depression; less disclosure, however, was not associated with greater problem behaviors. Based on

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