

Book Review: *The Secret Life of Secrets: How Our Inner Worlds Shape Well-Being, Relationships, and Who We Are*

By

Michele Hoffnung

Everyone has secrets. Michael Slepian, author of *The Secret Life of Secrets: How Our Inner Worlds Shape Well-Being, Relationships, and Who We Are* (New York: Crown, 2022) opens this book with his family's weighty secret -- that both he and his brother were conceived with donor sperm. When his father revealed this secret, Slepian was already an adult with a Ph.D. in psychology. That revelation led him to investigate secrets or "why we hold back from others, and the consequences of not letting other people into our inner worlds (p. XII)."

A secret is a part of your inner world that you keep from others. Slepian points out that not all secrets are harmful. For example, Tony Soprano, lead character in *The Sopranos* tv series, kept his regular visits to his therapist a secret, because he did not want to appear weak. He feared that revealing these visits would undermine his power as mob boss. Keeping his therapy secret harmed no one, but it weighed heavily on Tony because revealing it would put him at risk.

Think of your own secrets. Some are embarrassing things you did long ago. Likely, they do not press on you. Such secrets can easily stay in the past. Some secrets are active lies that shame you and would hurt someone(s) you care about if revealed. Likely, they *do* press on you and may need attention. Depending upon the secret, it may be harmless or harmful and it may or may not be preoccupying. Secrets that require regular evasion are hardest to keep private. Slepian's research

studies found that not all secrets are bad; not all secrets are painful; and not all secrets need to be kept secret.

He analyzed responses to questions about their secrets from 50,000 research participants and found they fell into 38 categories. The most frequent secrets fell into the following categories: a lie told (60%), a romantic desire (61%), sex (58%), and finances (58%). Slepian found that, on average, people have thirteen secrets: eight that they have shared with someone and five they have shared with no one (pp. 18-19).

As I read his list, I found myself thinking of my own secrets. I have at least one in each of the most common categories, but most are insignificant. Only one makes me feel awkward. It is not something that would hurt anyone; it is something I prefer to keep private because it is embarrassing. Slepian makes a distinction between secrecy and privacy "by considering secrecy as an intention to hold specific information back, and privacy as a reflection of how much you broadcast personal information" (p. 21). In my case, I choose privacy.

Another way in which Slepian analyzed secrets is along three dimensions: 1. how morally wrong we believe our behavior to be; 2. whether the secret involves our relationships; and 3. whether our secret relates to our personal or professional goals (Chapter 4). We are more likely to share our actions that are morally good than those that are morally questionable or bad. When they are morally bad and we do *not* share them, we feel shame because most people believe

immoral behavior should be punished and private immorality is left unpunished. “Shame is a particularly painful punishment that people inflict on themselves, prompting feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and low self-worth” (p. 91). Secrets of this type may need to be resolved. A common highly relational secret is about infidelity, because this type of secret involves sex and betrayal. Infidelity means different things to different people, because personal and cultural views of sex vary a great deal, but it is a frequent cause of marital/relational discord and dissolution. Professional/goal-orientation secrets often relate to work, school, and money. A common example is keeping financial secrets from family members, for example hiding money or spending secretly.

Although a secret may involve evading questions or biting our tongues, it may not. Slepian’s parents had a hard time keeping artificial insemination secret when their babies were young and friends and family were assessing who they looked like. But most of the time, their secret was easy to keep. A secret is an intention, “I intend for people not to learn this thing” (p. 8). Although you may share the information with someone(s), if you intend to keep it from someone else, it remains a secret.

In *The Secret Life of Secrets*, Slepian presents some of his research designed to understand secrets. In doing so, readers get insight into how research psychologists learn about human experience. From Slepian’s research, readers learn about the development of cognitive ability required to keep secrets, types of secrets, the impact of secrets, and ways to reveal and relieve distress caused by secrets.

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of children’s ability to keep secrets. “To intend to keep a secret, you must be able to understand that something in your head is not necessarily in others’ heads.” (p. 27). This ability is what psychologists refer to as Theory of Mind (ToM), the ability to attribute mental states to ourselves and others. Typically, ToM takes about 18 months to develop in human babies. In both humans and animals. For example, chimps can understand what another chimp can see or *not* see, but they *cannot* understand what knowledge they hold that another chimp does not. This ability is measured by the false belief test.

The false belief test is useful for studying babies who cannot yet talk. In a typical experiment, the children witness a toy being put in a green box, which is next to a yellow box. In half the cases, the child and the assistant watch as the toy is moved to the yellow box. In the other half of the cases, the assistant is out of the room when the toy is switched to the yellow box. When

the assistant comes back in the room and goes to the green box to get the toy, children 18 months and older understand that she has been tricked and point to the yellow box. Younger children do *not* understand that the assistant has the false belief that the toy is still in the green box.

False belief tests enable researchers to see the development of the ToM, that one person can hold a perspective that is different than another’s (Astington & Dack 2020; Premack & Woodruff 1978). With this development comes their ability to keep secrets, although often imperfectly because of incriminating evidence. For example, I remember a grandson asserting that he had not been in the cookie jar, when he had crumbs on his face and a piece of cookie in his hand.

Though this book is research based, the content is easily accessible to lay readers because Slepian wrote in an engaging style, including lots of personal stories about a topic that involves us all. For example, revelations about paternity have become more common since the readily available access to DNA testing through Ancestry and similar services. What seemed like an interesting opportunity to know more about your family history has caused many individuals to discover that they were adopted or had a biological father other than the father they knew. I have not yet heard or read stories of finding out that one was conceived with a donor egg, but that is also a possibility. Keeping such a secret from one’s children is often difficult and deprives them of vital health information, which is why adoptive parents and those using reproductive technologies are encouraged to be open about the circumstances. Nonetheless, many birth secrets remain because they are the result of transgressions that are embarrassing and or painful to reveal, or because parents are embarrassed by their inability to reproduce without infertility treatment – in these cases the secret involves relationships.

In one study, Slepian surveyed 7,000 participants from 26 different countries to find out if these individuals had secrets (they did) and whether they felt badly about keeping the secret from someone (only 20% did). He found large cultural differences. In countries with relational mobility, which allow for easily forming new relationships, people self-disclose more and keep fewer secrets. When you can choose friends who share your worldview, you can reveal more and be more trusting than you could in a closed social environment. Likewise, in collectivist cultures, one may be called upon to keep a secret because the group requires it, although singly you would prefer openness.

The subtitle, “*How Our Inner Worlds Shape Well-*

Being, Relationships, and Who We Are,” indicates why secrets are so important. If you have a dark secret that causes distress, Slepian has some suggestions for easing the impact. Find someone who is not involved, with whom you can share your secret. “It often takes a conversation with another person for you to feel less alone with your secret.” Another person can offer new perspective, which may be helpful. Also, consider the value your secret has in protecting someone(s) from distress. That may make it worth keeping, in spite of your discomfort.

Or trust those with whom you are close. “When the road is rocky, we may feel hesitant to open up to a romantic partner, fearing a negative response, or that the admission would only make matters worse. But there is one lever we can use to break these harmful cycles of concealment: trust. Trust your partner and yourself. It may take some courage and vulnerability to initiate a conversation, but don’t let your fear close the door on the conversation before it begins. If you think the other person might be unprepared to discuss the issue, avoid blindsiding them. For especially difficult conversations, give some kind of preview or heads-up. And remember, these things take time. You may not resolve everything in a single sitting, but simply starting the conversation is real progress (p. 111).”

This book contains a lot of very interesting and useful information, mostly about negative secrets. Readers will be up to date on the research that has been done in this area and find ideas about how best to handle their own secrets. What has *not yet* been studied is the impact of positive secrets. Although Chapter 7 focuses on them, it does not answer the questions that came to my mind: Why do people keep positive secrets? What is their impact on well-being?

References

- Premack, D., & Woodruff, G. 1978. “Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1(4): 515–526. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00076512>
- Astington, J.W. & Dack, L.A. 2020. “Theory of Mind.” Marshall M. Haith and Janette B. Benson, Editors *Encyclopedia of Infant and Early Childhood Development*, Vol. 3, 365-379.

About the Reviewer: Michele Hoffnung, who trained as an experimental psychologist, earned her PhD from University of Michigan. She is Professor Emerita of Psychology at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT where she taught scientific research methods and the psychology of women for more than 40 years. Hoffnung has authored many articles, books, and book reviews about lifespan development, women’s roles, women’s choices, and motherhood. Her most recent book is *Being Grandma and Grandpa* with sociologist Emily Stier Adler.