Article

Who has secrets and who keeps them? Individual differences in disclosure and secrecy

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Abstract
Recent work has made great strides in understanding the *situations* that prompt people to disclose information or keep secrets. Through four studies (N = 24,684), this article provides new insights into disclosure and secrecy through the lens of individual differences. Studies 1 and 2 find that higher levels of private self-consciousness are associated with greater disclosure, while higher levels of public self-consciousness are associated with greater secrecy. Studies 3 and 4 examined the Big Five personality traits and life satisfaction, finding reliably distinct patterns when it comes to keeping secrets and having the kinds of experiences people typically keep secret. Taken together, the studies provide several new insights into individual differences as well as future research directions.

Keywords
disclosure, secrecy, concealment, self-consciousness, personality, life satisfaction

Researchers have long known about the power of disclosure. Defined as "the verbal transmission of information" (Willems et al., 2020), disclosure has been linked with liking and being liked (N. L. Collins & Miller, 1994), closeness (Aron et al., 1997), and intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Given the benefits of disclosure, one would think that forming, maintaining, and deepening relationships should be quite simple: just reveal. Yet disclosure of certain information can have negative effects on relationships. For example, a disclosure about a current stressor to one's romantic partner can go poorly and bring negative relational outcomes (Afifi & Afifi, 2020). When the truth hurts another person's feelings unnecessarily, people believe that concealing the truth is a compassionate choice (in comparison to honesty; Levine, 2022; Levine et al., 2020). At the same time, when the revelation could hurt one's reputation or relationship, create conflict, or harm status, people are motivated to withhold that information (Gibson et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2020), and secrecy—defined as "the intention to keep information unknown from one or more others" (Slepian & Kalokerinos, 2024) is related to lower well-being and relationship quality (Slepian, 2024).

Consequently, both the decision to disclose personal information and the decision to reveal a secret are complex and multiply determined. A high-quality social interaction might prompt disclosure (Nguyen & Slepian, 2022), disclosure may signal the desire for advice or social support (Slepian & Kirby, 2018; Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2019), or we may reveal a secret because we are afraid it will be discovered or because we seek insight into the secret (Davis et al., 2021; Liu & Slepian, 2018). A person with certain experiences (e.g.,

infidelity) is more likely to have secrets to keep (e.g., Salerno & Slepian, 2022; Slepian & Bastian, 2017). Alternatively, a person can have an unhealthy tendency toward keeping secrets without having had such experiences. Thus, a tendency to keep secrets and a tendency to have the kinds of experiences that people typically keep secret are distinct from each other, and both are distinct from the tendency to disclose one's thoughts and feelings more generally.

Previous research has overlooked these important distinctions, and thus, the current work employs measures that account for differences between disclosure and secrecy within the same empirical context. Moving beyond prior work that has largely focused on situational factors, like perceived risks and rewards to a given disclosure (Omarzu, 2000), the current work takes an individual differences approach to gain insight into disclosure and secrecy—focusing on the roles of self-consciousness and the Big Five personality traits—with implications for well-being.

The Current Work

How much of ourselves do we share with others? We consider this question within the context of two established

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literatures. First, we consider self-consciousness, which characterizes how people attend to their selves, and thus should relate to how much they share with others. Self-consciousness has two distinct aspects. People high in *public* self-consciousness focus on one's self as a social object and consider social relationships influential to their identity (Fenigstein, 2009). Public self-consciousness is linked to self-monitoring and impression management behaviors (Briggs et al., 1980; Fenigstein, 1979; Newheiser et al., 2015). In contrast, those who are high in *private* self-consciousness focus more on internal motives, emotional states, and past experiences, which they consider integral to their identity (Fenigstein, 2009), which they may share with others. Consequently, we predict that *private* self-consciousness will be associated with a tendency to disclose, whereas *public* self-consciousness will be associated with the tendency to conceal, even holding constant the experiences that one may choose to reveal or conceal.

Second, we consider the Big Five personality traits. The five-factor model of personality has a rich history with a broad and deep literature (Widiger, 2017). Personality shapes how people understand themselves and their social world as well as how they communicate with close and distant others (Leung & Bond, 2001; Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Personality traits may guide how much people choose to keep secret versus disclose to others, with important implications for health, well-being, and social functioning (Roberts et al., 2007). Just as personality traits guide self-disclosure in online contexts (Caci et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2017), personality may similarly inform how much people choose to disclose in daily life.

Although intuitive associations between personality traits and secrecy seem plausible (i.e., extraversion predicting lower secrecy and neuroticism predicting more secrecy), such intuitive hypotheses may require numerous caveats. For example, two aspects of extraversion—enthusiasm and assertiveness—have distinct and sometimes divergent relationships with both intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors (Smillie et al., 2013, 2015). Because people generally disclose different content than what they conceal, it is crucial to assess how *often* a person has the kinds of experiences that people typically keep secret. For example, while infidelity is commonly kept secret, one cannot keep such a secret without having had the experience.

While our predictions concerning private and public self-consciousness are well-grounded in existing literature, given the complexities surrounding personality traits and secrecy, we take an investigative approach to examining the Big Five personality traits. We conduct exploratory work using large samples to assess the unique variance explained by each personality trait, examining two distinct aspects of each personality trait and implementing two different personality measures. This approach to the Big Five is supported by previous research. For instance, meta-trait plasticity (an aggregate of extraversion and openness/intellect) is nearly identical to acquisitive self-monitoring

(Wilmot et al., 2016). In addition, neuroticism has been found to positively relate to public self-consciousness and is unrelated to private self-consciousness (Darvill et al., 1992). In recognizing the interplay between self-consciousness and the Big Five, we consider how both frameworks, through their shared emphasis on internal and external perceptions of the self, may converge in influencing an individual's propensity toward secrecy and disclosure.

Finally, we examine whether individual differences in the propensities for disclosure and secrecy relate to life satisfaction. Prior research has examined secrecy and disclosure in tandem with respect to personal and relational outcomes, particularly in adolescent relationships (Baudat et al., 2022; Jäggi et al., 2016; Smetana et al., 2006). Existing theory has broadly suggested that disclosure should benefit life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2018), and secrecy should harm life satisfaction (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). Yet, holding a secret can, at times, benefit well-being—if, for example, the secret avoids a negative outcome and brings no burden to the keeper and no harm to others (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Kelly & Yip, 2006; Maas et al., 2012). At the same time, a tendency to keep secrets is an unhealthy coping strategy for dealing with distress and ongoing problems (Larson & Chastain, 1990; Larson et al., 2015). These complexities provide an opportunity to further understand disclosure, secrecy, and their relationships with well-being within the same empirical context, accounting for the fact that what people tend to disclose differs from what they tend to keep secret.

In all studies, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), and all measures. All data, analysis, and code are available at OSF (https://osf.io/v5u2h/).

Study 1

Private and public self-consciousness emerged from early research on self-awareness, concerned with how individuals acquire self-knowledge (Bernstein & Davis, 1982; Franzoi, 1983). Building on this research, Franzoi and Davis (1985) hypothesized that self-knowledge facilitates self-disclosure, and found a positive correlation between private self-consciousness and the tendency to disclose (Davis & Franzoi, 1986; Franzoi & Davis, 1985). The authors reasoned that private self-consciousness provides more material for disclosure. However, public self-consciousness should also provide material for disclosure (e.g., "I don't look good in red"). Focusing on how one appears to others should also prompt impression management, which may prompt secrecy rather than disclosure. Accordingly, self-consciousness, in general, may not be related to disclosure; rather, we predict the relationship may be specific to *private* self-consciousness, whereas *public* self-consciousness may instead relate to the tendency to keep secrets.

Table 1. Study 1 Descriptive Statistics

IV	M (SD)	α	Private	Public	Disclose
Private	2.75 (.62)	.82			
Public	2.65 (.70)	.86	.42***		
Disclosure	2.71 (.84)	.90	.25***	.17**	
Secrecy	2.94 (.99)	.90	.23**	.42***	−.12*

***$p < .0001$, **$p < .01$, *$p = .05$.

Method

Study 1 recruited 250 TurkPrime participants; 247 participants completed the study (103 women, 143 men, 1 other; $M_{age} = 36.20$ years, $SD = 10.75$). A sensitivity power analysis reveals this sample size can detect a correlation of $r = .177$ (80% power, $α = .05$). Participants self-rated *private* and *public self-consciousness* using the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975), *disclosure* using the Self-Disclosure Index (Miller et al., 1983), and *secrecy* using the Self-Concealment Scale (Larson & Chastain, 1990). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

The Private Self-Consciousness scale captures the extent to which individuals attend to their inner world (8 items; e.g., "I'm always trying to figure myself out"), whereas the Public Self-Consciousness scale captures the extent to which individuals attend to their self as an object of others' attention, including a concern with impressions and appearances (8 items; e.g., "I'm concerned about what other people think of me"); *1 = not at all like me to 4 = a lot like me.*

The Self-Disclosure Index (Miller et al., 1983) measures the extent to which individuals socially reveal a variety of topics (10 items; e.g., "my personal habits," "my worst fears," "things I have done, which I feel guilty about"), *1 = do not at all discuss with others to 5 = discuss fully and completely with others.*

Finally, the Self-Concealment Scale measures the tendency to keep secrets as a manner of dealing with ongoing problems or distress, capturing a mix of keeping secrets and worrying about how others would respond to such secrets (10 items; e.g., "If I shared all my secrets with my friends, they'd like me less"), *1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.*

Results and Discussion

Both private and public self-consciousness capture a general tendency to focus on oneself. By entering both into a regression, we partial out this shared variance to isolate the unique relationships with our dependent measures.

Results indicate that simply having more material to disclose does not mean that *all* information will be shared. Private self-consciousness uniquely predicted self-disclosure (Table 2), whereas public self-consciousness uniquely predicted secrecy (Table 3).

Accordingly, trait tendencies to disclose and to keep secrets are dissociated by their unique relationships with

Table 2. Predicting Self-Disclosure, Study 1

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	.30	.09	.12, .49	3.27	.001
Public	.09	.08	−.07, .25	1.07	.286

Note. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error; df = 244 (variables entered simultaneously).

Table 3. Predicting the Tendency to Keep Secrets, Study 1

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	.10	.10	−.10, .30	0.98	.328
Public	.56	.09	.38, .74	6.13	<.0001

Note. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error; df = 244 (variables entered simultaneously).

private and public self-consciousness, respectively. Thus, *how* people think about themselves relates to how much they share with others.

Study 2

Study 1 found that private self-consciousness predicts the tendency to disclose, whereas public self-consciousness predicts the tendency to keep secrets. Yet what people tend to disclose is different from what they tend to keep secret. These results therefore may have less to do with revealing or concealing, and more to do with *what* is frequently revealed or concealed. As such, Study 2 employs a measure of secrecy that holds constant the set of experiences under examination, in addition to measuring tendencies to disclose and conceal. Because people tend to keep negative information secret (e.g., Liu et al., 2023; Slepian, Kirby & Kalokerinos, 2020), it is important to account for a general tendency toward negative affective states (e.g., neuroticism, Widiger, 2009), particularly in Study 2, where we also explore implications for life satisfaction. Here we predict that the results from Study 1 will hold, even when accounting for neuroticism, and that disclosure and secrecy will be associated with greater and lower life satisfaction, respectively.

Method

Study 2 sought 500 TurkPrime participants and received 504 responses. A sensitivity power analysis reveals this sample size can detect a correlation of $r = .125$ (80% power, $α = .05$). During a final honesty check, five participants indicated they fabricated their answers, yielding a final sample size of 499 participants (272 women, 223 men, 4 other; $M_{age} = 40.42$ years, $SD = 12.34$). Participants completed the Study 1 measures, the Common Secrets Questionnaire

Table 4. *Study 2 Descriptive Statistics*

IV	M (SD)	α	Private	Public	Disclosure	Secrecy	# Sec	# Exp	Neur
Private	2.77 (0.54)	.77							
Public	2.62 (0.71)	.86	.53***						
Disclosure	2.87 (0.85)	.90	.27***	.16**					
Secrecy	2.81 (1.04)	.92	.23***	.35***	−.22***				
Num. Secrets	12.52 (7.92)	-	.20***	.25***	−.14**	.53***			
Num. Experiences	20.38 (7.63)	-	.24***	.19***	.07	.44***	.72***		
Neuroticism	2.71 (0.87)	.83	.23***	.40***	−.10*	.45***	.27***	.22***	
Life satisfaction	4.29 (1.63)	.94	−.06	−.14**	.34***	−.36***	−.27***	−.18***	−.41***

Note. Per each category of secret, participants were given five response options. As per Slepian and colleagues (2017), if participants indicated they had the experience and kept it secret from everyone (1) or at least some people (2), it was counted as a secret. If participants indicated that they had the experience and once kept it a secret but that it is no longer secret (3), this was counted as a non-secret experience, and if participants indicated that they had the experience (that other people might typically keep secret), but they do not keep it secret (4), this was also counted as a non-secret experience. A final response option (5) allowed the participant to indicate they have never had the experience. See the Appendix in Slepian et al. (2017) for exact wording.
***p <.0001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

Table 5. *Predicting Self-Disclosure, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	.41	.08	.25, .56	5.10	<.0001	Private	.42	.08	.26, .57	5.31	<.0001
Public	.03	.06	−.09, .15	0.49	.626	Public	.12	.06	−.01, .25	1.88	.061
Note: df = 496						Neuroticism	−.19	.05	−.28, −.10	−4.25	<.0001
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

(CSQ; Slepian et al., 2017), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (5 items; e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal,"*1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree*; Diener et al., 1985).

The CSQ allowed us to hold constant the material considered, and measure whether it was disclosed or kept secret. Provided with 38 common categories of secrets, participants indicated which experiences they have had, and per each, they indicated whether they kept the experience secret (or have disclosed it). We tallied the number of experiences participants had from the list and how many of those experiences were kept secret (see Table 4, note).

Results and Discussion

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics of all variables measured.

Self-Consciousness. Replicating Study 1, private self-consciousness predicted greater disclosure, whereas public self-consciousness predicted greater secrecy (Tables 5 and 6). Importantly, these effects held when controlling for neuroticism (the trait tendency toward negative affective states; Widiger, 2009).

We next conducted analyses with the number of secrets as our dependent measure. Specifically, across the 38 categories of secrets captured by the CSQ, participants

indicated whether they had that experience in the past, and whether it was currently secret from at least some people.[1]

Importantly, people can only keep secret the experiences they have had, and so in predicting the number of secrets from the CSQ, we also need to control for how many of the experiences participants have had (secret or not). For example, keeping 5 experiences secret out of 5 total experiences indicates more secrecy than keeping 5 experiences secret out of 10 total experiences. Paralleling the earlier analysis of trait secrecy (Tables 5 and 6)—now when holding constant the set of experiences under consideration—individuals with higher public self-consciousness kept more of their experiences secret (Table 7), including when controlling for neuroticism.

We next conducted an analysis predicting the number of experiences participants have had from the list (i.e., the number of categories they indicate yes to having had that experience), controlling for the number of secrets. When holding constant the number of categories of secrets participants reported having at the time of measurement, this analysis considers what predicts the frequency of encountering these situations that people tend to keep secret (Table 8).

Intriguingly, while private self-consciousness was not uniquely associated with keeping more secrets from the common set of secrets (Table 7), it was associated with having more experiences that people typically keep secret (Table 8). In contrast, public self-consciousness was not

Table 6. *Predicting the Tendency to Keep Secrets, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	.12	.10	−.07, .31	1.26	.209	Private	.10	.09	−.08, .27	1.10	.274
Public	.46	.07	.32, .61	6.34	<.0001	Public	.26	.07	.11, .40	3.54	.0004
Note: df = 496						Neuroticism	.44	.05	.34, .55	8.67	.0001
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 7. *Predicting Num of Secrets from Private and Public Self-consciousness, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	−.69	.54	−1.74, .36	−1.29	.196	Private	−.69	.53	−1.74, .35	−1.30	.193
Public	1.60	.41	.80, 2.40	3.95	.0001	Public	1.26	.43	.42, 2.10	2.95	.003
# Experiences	.73	.03	.67, .80	22.25	<.0001	# Experiences	.72	.03	.65, .78	21.66	<.0001
Note: df = 495						Neuroticism	.76	.31	.16, 1.37	2.49	.013
						Note: df = 494					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 8. *Predicting Num of Experiences, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	1.83	.51	.82, 2.83	3.57	.0004	Private	1.82	.51	.81, 2.83	3.55	.0004
Public	−0.61	.40	−1.39, .17	−1.54	.125	Public	−0.72	.42	−1.54, 0.10	−1.72	.086
# Secrets	0.68	.03	.62, .74	22.25	<.0001	# Secrets	0.68	.03	.62, .74	21.66	<.0001
Note: df = 495						Neuroticism	0.25	.30	−.34, .84	0.85	.397
						Note: df = 494					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 9. *Predicting Num of Secrets from Tendencies to Disclose and Keep Secrets, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Disclosure	−1.22	.28	−1.76, −.67	−4.38	<.0001	Disclosure	−1.22	.28	−1.76, −.67	−4.37	<.0001
Secrecy	1.74	.25	1.25, 2.24	6.93	<.0001	Secrecy	1.68	.27	1.14, 2.22	6.15	<.0001
# Experiences	0.65	.03	.59, .72	19.41	<.0001	# Experiences	0.65	.03	.59, .72	19.36	<.0001
Note: df = 495						Neuroticism	0.17	.29	−.40, .75	0.60	.551
						Note: df = 494					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

uniquely associated with having more experiences that people typically keep secret (Table 8), although it was associated with keeping such experiences secret (Table 7).

Finally, we examined trait self-disclosure and trait secrecy as predictors of the number of categories of secrets from the CSQ. Trait secrecy and trait disclosure, positively and negatively, respectively, predicted the number of categories of secrets from the CSQ (Table 9), including when controlling for private and public self-consciousness (Table 10).

In conjunction with the other analyses, one interpretation of these results is that public self-consciousness is related to increased trait secrecy, which in turn predicts the number of categories of secrets from the CSQ. In contrast, greater disclosure, including as a function of private self-consciousness, is related to having fewer categories of secrets from the CSQ.

Life Satisfaction. Finally, we examined each of our focal pairings as simultaneous predictors of life satisfaction, with and without controlling for neuroticism. There was no relationship between private self-consciousness and life satisfaction. Public self-consciousness predicted lower life satisfaction, an effect that was eliminated when controlling for neuroticism (Table 11). Thus, it appears that the self-consciousness variables do not uniquely have direct links to well-being and that relationships between self-consciousness and

Table 10. *Predicting Num of Secrets With Controls, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Disclosure	−1.42	.29	−1.99, −.84	−4.82	<.0001	Disclosure	−1.42	.30	−2.00, −.84	−4.82	<.0001
Secrecy	1.47	.27	.94, 2.00	5.47	<.0001	Secrecy	1.49	.28	.94, 2.04	5.31	<.0001
Private	−0.08	.51	−1.09, .92	−.16	.871	Private	−0.08	.51	−1.08, .92	−0.16	.876
Public	1.04	.39	.26, 1.81	2.63	.009	Public	1.06	.41	.26, 1.86	2.61	.009
# Experiences	0.65	.03	.59, .72	19.43	<.0001	# Experiences	0.65	.03	.59, .72	19.41	<.0001
Note: df = 493						Neuroticism	−0.08	.30	−.68, .52	−0.25	.800
						Note: df = 492					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 11. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by Self-Consciousness, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Private	.04	.16	−.27, .35	0.24	.810	Private	.08	.15	−.21, .36	0.53	.595
Public	−.33	.12	−.57, −.10	−2.75	.006	Public	.03	.12	−.20, .27	0.29	.773
Note: df = 496						Neuroticism	−.78	.08	−.95 −.62	−9.34	<.0001
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 12. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by Disclosure and Secrecy, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Disclosure	.53	.08	.37, .68	6.70	<.0001	Disclosure	.53	.08	.38, .68	7.07	<.0001
Secrecy	−.47	.06	−.59, −.34	−7.24	<.0001	Secrecy	−.25	.07	−.38, −.11	−3.64	.0003
Note: df = 496						Neuroticism	−.58	.08	−.73 −.42	−7.19	<.0001
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 13. *Predicting Life Satisfaction Including Disclosure, Secrecy, and Self-Consciousness, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Disclosure	.60	.08	.43, .76	7.10	<.0001	Disclosure	.55	.08	.39, .71	6.85	<.0001
Secrecy	−.40	.07	−.53, −.26	−5.62	.0001	Secrecy	−.24	.07	−.38, −.10	−3.34	.0001
Private	−.16	.15	−.45, .13	−1.08	.282	Private	−.13	.14	−.41, .15	−0.93	.355
Public	−.17	.11	−.39, .06	−1.47	.143	Public	.03	.11	−.19, .25	0.26	.799
Note: df = 494						Neuroticism	−.57	.08	−.74, −.41	−6.79	<.0001
						Note: df = 493					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

well-being may exist as a function of their relationships with disclosure and secrecy.

Next, trait disclosure and trait secrecy were positively and negatively associated with life satisfaction respectively, including when controlling for neuroticism (Table 12). These results persisted when controlling for private and public self-consciousness (Table 13).

Next, having more secrets from the CSQ was associated with lower well-being, but not having more experiences that people tend to keep secret, and these results remained when controlling for neuroticism (Table 14) and private and public self-consciousness (Table 15).

Trait measures aside, having more secrets—rather than having more experiences that are typically kept secret—is related to lower life satisfaction, including when controlling for neuroticism (Table 14).

Notably, the measures of disclosure and secrecy showed strong links with well-being (Tables 12–15), whereas the links between self-consciousness and well-being were weaker (Table 11). In sum, private and public self-consciousness are associated with disclosure and secrecy, respectively, and disclosure and secrecy are associated with life satisfaction, independent of private and public self-consciousness. Thus, disclosure and secrecy seem closely

Table 14. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by Number of Secrets and Experiences, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
# Secrets	−.06	.01	−.08, −.03	−4.47	<.0001	# Secrets	−.04	.01	−.06, −.02	−3.31	.001
# Experiences	.004	.01	−.02, .03	0.29	.770	# Experiences	.01	.01	−.02, .03	0.67	.501
Note: df = 496						Neuroticism	−.68	.08	−.83 −.52	−8.60	<.0001
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 15. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by Number of Secrets, Experiences, and Self-Consciousness, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
# Secrets	−.05	.01	−.08, −.03	−4.09	<.0001	# Secrets	−.04	.01	−.07, −.02	−3.40	<.0001
# Experiences	.003	.01	−.02, .03	0.21	.833	# Experiences	.01	.01	−.02, .03	0.55	.583
Private	.10	.16	−.21, .40	0.63	.526	Private	.11	.15	−.18, .39	0.75	.455
Public	−.21	.12	−.45, .02	−1.77	.077	Public	.09	.12	−.14, .32	0.79	.431
Note: df = 494						Neuroticism	−.72	.08	−.88, −.55	−8.52	<.0001
						Note: df = 493					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 16. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by the Tendency to Keep Secrets and Number of Secrets and Experiences, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Secrecy	−.47	.08	−.63, −.32	−6.15	<.0001	Secrecy	−.48	.08	−.63, −.33	−6.20	<.0001
# Secrets	−.02	.01	−.04, −.001	−2.10	.036	# Secrets	−.03	.01	−.05, −.003	−2.16	.031
Note: df = 496						# Experiences	.01	.01	−.01, .04	0.86	.392
						Note: df = 495					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 17. *Predicting Life Satisfaction by Number of Secrets, Experiences, Disclosure, and Secrecy, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Secrecy	−.39	.08	−.53, −.24	−5.13	<.0001	Secrecy	−.38	.08	−.52, −.23	−4.95	<.0001
Disclosure	.52	.08	.37, .68	6.67	<.0001	Disclosure	.54	.08	.38, .71	6.68	<.0001
# Secrets	−.02	.01	−.04, −.001	−2.05	.041	# Secrets	−.01	.01	−.04, .01	−0.93	.355
Note: df = 495						# Experiences	−.01	.01	−.04, .01	−0.94	.349
						Note: df = 494					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

related to well-being, whereas any links between private and public self-consciousness and well-being seem to exist only as a function of their relationships with disclosure and secrecy.

A final set of life satisfaction analyses considered trait disclosure and secrecy in conjunction with the number of categories of secrets and experiences that people typically keep secret. Both trait secrecy and the number of categories of secrets from the CSQ predict lower life satisfaction, including when controlling for the number of categories of experiences participants have had from the CSQ (Table 16). Compared to state secrecy (i.e., having more categories of secrets at the time of measurement), the more reliable predictor of lower well-being was trait secrecy (Table 17).

Finally, we enter all measures as predictors of life satisfaction, including when controlling for neuroticism (Table 18). Whereas the number of categories of secrets predicts lower life satisfaction, including when controlling for the number of categories of experiences (Table 16), this effect is eliminated when also controlling for disclosure (Table 17). In contrast, trait secrecy survives all controls, including the largely beneficial effect of trait disclosure.

Contrary to prior work on concealable stigma—which finds that concealment is more harmful than disclosure is helpful—we find that trait disclosure and trait secrecy independently contribute to life satisfaction. That is, while disclosure of a concealable stigma is not uniquely related to higher life satisfaction (after accounting for the harm of

Table 18. *Predicting Life Satisfaction By All Measures, Study 2*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Disclosure	.61	.09	.44, .78	7.03	<.0001	Disclosure	.56	.08	.40, .73	6.74	<.0001
Secrecy	−.32	.08	−.48, −.16	−3.99	<.0001	Secrecy	−.17	.08	−.32, −.01	−2.11	.036
# Secrets	−.01	.01	−.03, .02	−0.66	.509	# Secrets	−.01	.01	−.03, .01	−0.77	.443
# Experiences	−.01	.01	−.04, .01	−1.04	.300	# Experiences	−.01	.01	−.03, .01	−0.86	.390
Private	−.13	.15	−.41, .16	−0.85	.395	Private	−.10	.14	−.38, .18	−0.72	.472
Public	−.17	.11	−.39, .05	−1.49	.137	Public	.03	.11	−.20, .25	0.23	.817
Note: df = 492						Neuroticism	−.57	.08	−.73, −.40	−6.74	<.0001
						Note: df = 491					

Note. Variables entered simultaneously. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

secrecy; Camacho et al., 2020), we find that disclosure, in general, is related to higher life satisfaction, independent of the harmful tendency to keep secrets. Having fewer secrets corresponds with a healthy tendency to disclose one's thoughts and feelings to others, which itself relates to the tendency to seek out insights into one's self.

Studies 3 and 4

Studies 1 and 2 show that how we attend to the self relates to how much of it we share with others, which in turn relates to life satisfaction (including when controlling for neuroticism). Studies 3 and 4 include the rest of the Big Five personality traits. Understanding personality traits' links to secrecy is important because it can help reveal who is most inclined to hide versus divulge self-relevant information. For instance, several meta-analyses show robust statistically significant relations between personality characteristics and important life and work outcomes, such as subjective well-being, divorce, mortality, and work success (Pinon, 2019; Roberts et al., 2007).

Study 3

The Study 3 data set was amassed by aggregating several MTurk studies where participants completed the CSQ. Collected with the intention of later aggregation, these studies included (upon entry into the study), the Big Five Aspects Scale (BFAS, DeYoung et al., 2007; 20 items per Big Five domain, *1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree*). The sample size was limited to the size of the aggregated dataset (see Hehman et al., 2017 for a similar approach); 1,098 participants completed the BFAS, the CSQ, demographics, and passed an honesty check (692 women, 406 men; M_{age} = 34.40 years, SD = 11.17). A sensitivity power analysis reveals this sample size can detect a correlation of r = .084 (80% power, α = .05).

Study 4

The Study 4 data set was also amassed by aggregating several MTurk studies where participants completed the CSQ.

Collected with the intention of later aggregation, these studies included (upon entry into the study) a different measure of the Big Five (the Ten Item Personality Inventory [TIPI]; Gosling et al., 2003), a measure of life satisfaction (as per Study 2, the Life Satisfaction Scale; Diener et al., 1985), or both. The personality measure was intentionally different from Study 3 to capture any potential variations that could arise from differences in the scales utilized. Keeping the Study 4 personality measure short (10 items; 2 per domain; *1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree*) enabled a larger sample size.

All participants completed the CSQ; 11,562 participants also completed the TIPI (7,186 women, 4,366 men, 10 other; M_{age} = 34.70 years, SD = 12.85), 22,340 participants also completed the life satisfaction measure (13,601 women, 8,683 men, 56 other; M_{age} = 34.72 years, SD = 12.15), and 7,288 of those participants completed each of the scales (4,504 women, 2,779 men, 5 other; M_{age} = 33.67 years, SD = 12.05). The sample sizes were limited to the number of complete cases for each analysis (including only participants who passed an honesty check). A sensitivity power analysis reveals this sample size can detect a correlation of r = .033 (80% power, α = .05).

Seeking generalizable findings, Studies 3 and 4 use two different measures of personality. Study 3 implemented a comprehensive measure of personality, using the BFAS composed of 100 items (20 per each Big Five domain). Study 4, in contrast, used a much coarser measure of personality (Chiorri et al., 2015). Given its brevity, the TIPI domain measures *would* be more reliable if they captured a narrow conception of each Big Five domain; yet each pair of items seeks to cast a broad net. Thus, we expect lower reliabilities for the TIPI domains than for the BFAS domains. While Study 3 has the advantage of a more comprehensive measure of the Big Five, Study 4 has the advantage of a much larger sample size, with 11,562 participants completing the TIPI rather than 1,098 completing the BFAS.

Finally, prior work finds that the Big Five domains of personality can also be represented by two higher-order factors (i.e., meta-traits; Strus & Cieciuch, 2017), as the domains are correlated with one another and are not orthogonal. Accordingly, to isolate unique variance explained by

Table 19. *Study 3 Descriptive Statistics*

IV	M (SD)	α	Agree	Open	Consc	Extrav	Neur	# Secrets
Agreeableness	3.82 (0.54)	.88						
Openness/Intellect	3.77 (0.50)	.85	.41					
Conscientiousness	3.45 (0.57)	.88	.25	.19				
Extraversion	3.30 (0.59)	.89	.21	.39	.33			
Neuroticism	2.83 (0.71)	.93	−.15	−.18	−.42	−.43		
Num. Secrets	13.30 (7.10)	-	−.05†	.12	−.18	−.14	.25	
Num. Experiences	20.14 (7.72)	-	−.11	.11	−.25	−.06†	.23	.75

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .01$, except where noted with †.

Table 20. *Study 4 Descriptive Statistics*

IV	M (SD)	α.	Agree	Open	Consc	Extrav	Neur	# Secrets	# Exp
Agreeableness	5.10 (1.23)	.43							
Openness	5.16 (1.19)	.42	.21						
Conscientiousness	5.35 (1.24)	.59	.24	.14					
Extraversion	3.62 (1.59)	.72	.05	.26	.09				
Neuroticism	3.43 (1.48)	.72	−.30	−.18	−.37	−.20			
Num. Secrets	14.31 (7.83)	-	−.12	.02†	−.14	−.08	.18		
Num. Experiences	22.35 (7.85)	-	−.16	.05	−.20	−.02†	.21	.70	
Life satisfaction	4.36 (1.50)	.91	.16	.06	.27	.24	−.34	−.18	−.13

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .01$, except where noted with †.

Table 21. *Predicting Num of Secrets, Study 3*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Agreeableness	.32	.29	−.26, .89	1.08	.280
Open/Intellect	1.00	.33	.34, 1.65	2.99	.003
Conscientiousness	.57	.28	.01, 1.13	2.00	.046
Extraversion	−1.30	.28	−1.85, −.74	−4.60	<.0001
Neuroticism	.71	.23	.25, 1.17	3.02	.003
# Experiences	.67	.02	.64, .71	35.00	<.0001

Note. df = 1091 (variables entered simultaneously). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 22. *Predicting Num of Secrets, Study 4*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Agreeableness	.05	.04	−.03, .13	1.26	.207
Openness	−.04	.04	−.12, .04	−0.90	.366
Conscientiousness	.15	.04	.07, .23	3.72	.0002
Extraversion	−.29	.03	−.33, −.23	−9.68	<.0001
Neuroticism	.14	.03	.07, .21	4.08	<.0001
# Experiences	.75	.01	.73, .76	115.69	<.0001

Note. df = 11555 (variables entered simultaneously). Whereas Study 3 measures openness in a broad manner (e.g., love to reflect on things), Study 4 measures openness to new experiences. CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

each, and to provide analyses that parallel the earlier studies, we entered all measures as simultaneous predictors of the number of secrets kept (from the CSQ). We include additional analyses related to the meta-traits—plasticity and stability—in the Supplementary Materials.

Results and Discussion

Tables 19 and 20 present descriptive statistics.

Big Five Traits (Studies 3 and 4). In both Studies 3 (Table 21) and 4 (Table 22), extraversion predicted keeping fewer secrets, whereas conscientiousness and neuroticism predicted keeping more secrets. Agreeableness was not predictive in either study, and openness predicted keeping more secrets in Study 3 only.

Aspects of the Big Five (Study 3). Given that the BFAS identifies two aspects per domain, Study 3 offered additional nuance. Notable divergences emerged for conscientiousness and neuroticism (Table 23). *Lower* industriousness (e.g., "Postpone decisions," "Mess things up") was associated with having more secrets, and *higher* orderliness (e.g., "Keep things tidy," "Want everything to be 'just right'") was associated with having more secrets. Volatility (e.g., "Get upset easily," "Get easily agitated") was associated with having *fewer* secrets, whereas withdrawal (e.g., "Am

Table 23. *Predicting Num of Secrets, per each Big Five domain, Study 3*

Domain	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Openness/Intellect	Openness	.70	.26	.19, 1.21	2.68	.008
	Intellect	−.21	.25	−.70, .28	−0.83	.405
Conscientiousness	Industriousness	−.59	.25	−1.08, −.10	−2.36	.018
	Orderliness	.70	.27	.17, 1.23	2.60	.009
Neuroticism	Volatility	−.51	.25	−.99, −.02	−2.06	.040
	Withdrawal	1.39	.26	.89, 1.90	5.39	< .0001
Agreeableness	Compassion	.03	.25	−.46, .53	0.12	.904
	Politeness	.45	.30	−.14, 1.05	1.50	.133
Extraversion	Enthusiasm	−.67	.24	−1.14, −.19	−2.76	.006
	Assertiveness	−.43	.22	−.87, .01	−1.92	.055

Note. df = 1094 (each domain is a separate analysis, and the two aspects per each domain are entered simultaneously along with the number of categories of experiences from the CSQ). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 24. *Predicting Life Satisfaction, Study 4*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
# of Secrets	−.03	.002	−.04, −.03	−19.04	<.0001
# Experiences	−.002	.002	−.01, .001	−1.41	.159

Note. df = 22337 (variables entered simultaneously). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

easily discouraged," "Am afraid of many things") was associated with having *more* secrets.

Life Satisfaction. As in Study 2, life satisfaction was negatively related to keeping more experiences secret, but was unrelated to having more experiences that people tend to keep secret (Table 24).

Experiences Typically Kept Secret. Finally, openness and extraversion were associated with getting involved in *more* situations that people typically keep secret, while being agreeable and conscientious were associated with getting involved in *fewer* situations that people typically keep secret (Tables 25–27).

While less agreeable people and people with high openness more often find themselves in situations that people tend to keep secret, agreeableness and openness were *not* reliably related to the number of secrets kept. People with high conscientiousness find themselves less often in these situations, but when they experience them, they keep more of them secret. People with high extraversion find themselves more often in these situations but keep fewer of them secret. Finally, one aspect of neuroticism, volatility, is associated with having more of these experiences, while another aspect, withdrawal, predicts keeping them secret (cf. Table 23 and 26).

Across Studies 2 to 4, those who are prone to negative affect (neuroticism) and those who are especially concerned with appearances (public self-consciousness) tend to keep more secrets. In contrast, people who keep fewer secrets tend

to be extraverted and likely to reflect on (a) things in life (openness in the broad sense as measured by the BFAS) as well as (b) private inner states (private self-consciousness).

General Discussion

In every social interaction, people have the opportunity to disclose or conceal. While research has begun to document how secrecy operates in different situations (e.g., concealing vs. mind-wandering; Bianchi et al., 2024) and different people (e.g., secretive people are more vulnerable to psychological symptoms, Kelly & Yip, 2006), the current work examines reliable differences between persons using an individual differences approach and provides several new insights across four studies.

Studies 1 and 2 showed that it is not self-consciousness in general that is associated with disclosure (i.e., simply producing more material for disclosure; cf. Davis & Franzoi, 1986; Franzoi & Davis, 1985), but specifically *private* self-consciousness. Studies 1 and 2 found that private self-consciousness was associated with the tendency to disclose, whereas public self-consciousness was associated with the tendency to keep secrets. These results suggest that those high in private self-consciousness more strongly desire self-insight, which conversations may provide (Liu & Slepian, 2018). In addition, public self-consciousness was associated with the tendency to keep secrets. Heightened attention toward oneself as a social object (Franzoi & Brewer, 1984) seems counterproductive in the current context, as secrecy was associated with lower life satisfaction (Studies 2 and 4). Thus, while public self-consciousness was not directly associated with lower life satisfaction, it was associated with greater secrecy, which was independently associated with lower life satisfaction (Study 2).

In addition to self-consciousness, Studies 3 and 4 found that conscientiousness and neuroticism are associated with keeping more secrets. In contrast, people who are extraverted and exhibit openness (in a broad sense, cf. Study 3 and Study 4) tend to keep fewer secrets. Beyond exploring individual differences in self-consciousness and the Big Five personality

Table 25. *Predicting Num of Experiences, Study 3*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Agreeableness	−1.12	.31	−1.74, −.51	−3.57	.0001
Open/Intellect	.85	.36	.15, 1.56	2.38	.018
Conscientious	−1.68	.30	−2.28. −1.09	−5.56	<.0001
Extraversion	1.15	.31	.55, 1.75	3.78	.0002
Neuroticism	.35	.25	−.14, .85	1.39	.164
# of Secrets	.78	.02	.74, .83	35.00	<.0001

Note. df = 1091 (variables entered simultaneously). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 26. *Predicting Num of Experiences, per each Big Five domain, Study 3*

Domain	IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Openness/Intellect	Openness	.11	.29	−.45, .67	0.39	.694
	Intellect	.27	.27	−.27, .80	0.98	.327
Conscientiousness	Industriousness	−1.03	.27	−1.55, −.50	−3.85	.0001
	Orderliness	−.52	.29	−1.09, .05	−1.79	.074
Neuroticism	Volatility	.75	.27	.21, 1.28	2.75	.006
	Withdrawal	−.32	.29	−.88, .25	−1.10	.272
Agreeableness	Compassion	.23	.27	−.30, .77	0.86	.392
	Politeness	−1.45	.32	−2.09, −.82	−4.49	<.0001
Extraversion	Enthusiasm	−.13	.27	−.65, .39	−0.49	.624
	Assertiveness	.82	.02	.16, 1.12	2.61	.009

Note. df = 1094 (each domain is a separate analysis, and the two aspects per each domain are entered simultaneously along with the number of categories of secrets from the CSQ). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

Table 27. *Predicting Num of Experiences, Study 4*

IV	b	SE	95% CI	t	p
Agreeableness	−.32	.04	−.40, −.25	−8.39	<.0001
Openness	.36	.04	.28, .44	9.08	<.0001
Conscientious	−.47	.04	−.55. −.39	−12.13	<.0001
Extraversion	.20	.03	.15, .26	7.00	<.0001
Neuroticism	.23	.03	.16, .29	6.72	<.0001
# of Secrets	.72	.01	.71, .73	115.69	<.0001

Note. df = 11555 (variables entered simultaneously). CI = confidence interval; IV = independent variable; SE = standard error.

traits, the current work also uniquely distinguished between secrecy and having the kinds of experiences that people commonly keep secret. For instance, while people with high private self-consciousness and people with low agreeableness more often encounter situations that people tend to keep secret, these tendencies were not associated with the tendency to keep those experiences secret. And while people with high conscientiousness and people with low extraversion find themselves less often in these situations, they more frequently keep these experiences secret.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our correlational approach restricts the ability to establish causality, and the exploratory nature of Studies 3 and 4

lacked the specificity and directionality of hypotheses that are characteristic of confirmatory research and pre-registration (H. K. Collins et al., 2021). In addition, the use of single-informant self-report cannot comprehensively capture the multifaceted nature of the current constructs, and while diverse in certain respects, the use of online participant pools may not fully represent the broader population. Future work would benefit from experimental methods and could consider how traits interact with each other to influence disclosure and secrecy behaviors.

The results suggest several future research directions. For instance, which individual differences lead people to feel more burdened by their secrets, and which cause people to handle their secrets in a way that reduces the burden? While the results for extraversion were seemingly intuitive—

extraverted individuals get more involved in the situations that people commonly keep secret but keep fewer of them secret—as were the results for neuroticism—volatility was associated with more involvement in situations people tend to keep secret, and withdrawal was associated with more secrecy, the results for agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness present new pictures of these personality traits. Considering these traits further, as well as how different personality traits moderate the effects of disclosing or keeping secrets, is a ripe area for further research.

Future research could also consider the content of the secrets (e.g., Slepian et al., 2023; Slepian & Koch, 2021). In addition to predicting the likelihood of having certain categories of experiences that people might keep secret and predicting the number of categories of secrets, researchers could predict groupings of the categories (e.g., combining cheating at work/school with emotional and sexual infidelity), and predict the extent to which people keep certain kinds of secrets. The content of secrets could also interact with personality traits to predict how harmful those secrets are to well-being.

Conclusion

Recent work on secrecy has explored the different situations people are in when a secret comes to mind and the consequences of these different secrecy situations (Slepian, 2022). Complementing this growing body of work, the present research illustrates that individual differences in self-consciousness and personality traits relate to how much of ourselves we share with others, with important implications for well-being.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Note

1. For ease of presentation, we label this the number of secrets participants have from the list, but this is actually an underestimate because a participant could have two (or more) secrets in a given category. This underestimation aside, we consider this number closer to state secrecy, whereas self-concealment is a measure of trait secrecy. The CSQ captures the number of categories of secrets participants have at the time of measurement, whereas self-concealment asks participants about their general tendencies to hold back from others.

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