

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

**YOUNG ADULT SIBLING GROUPS AND DISCLOSURE: IMPLICATIONS
OF SHARING PRIVATE INFORMATION**

A Thesis in

Communication Arts and Sciences

by

Audrey L. Deterding

© 2007 Audrey L. Deterding

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2007

The thesis of Audrey L. Deterding was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Miller-Day
Associate Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences
Thesis Adviser
Chair of Committee

Jon F. Nussbaum
Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences

Dennis S. Gouran
Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences and
Labor Studies & Industrial Relations

Edgar P. Yoder
Professor of Agriculture Education & Extension

James Price Dillard
Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences
Head of the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences

* Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that young adults value their relationship with their siblings (Milevsky, 2005; Pulakos, 1989), yet little is known about how siblings communicatively manage these relationships. As young adults struggle for autonomy from family, they actively manage their private information by selectively sharing or withholding information from family members (Petronio, 2002); however, research involving the disclosure of private information is largely limited to dyads such as romantic partners or friends (e.g. Derlega et al., 1994). There is no systematic research relating the management of private information in sibling relationships. Since young adults describe siblings as important sources of support and influence (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001), this deficiency is unfortunate. The aim of the descriptive research reported herein was to illuminate how young adults manage private information in interactions with their siblings.

In the first part, a two-phase study, 104 young adult participants completed a web-based questionnaire concerning what siblings share and withhold from one another and the functions sharing and withholding serve. In the second phase, 19 young adults participated in focus group interviews to provide additional findings for Research Questions One and Two from the first phase of the study and to answer Research Question Three by identifying criteria for revealing private information to siblings.

The results revealed that, in general, young adult siblings tend to share a good deal of private information with each other, with some tendency to share more intimate information such as sexual relationships with siblings of the same gender. The data suggested that siblings are important providers of social and family support to one

another. They are rather open with their disclosures in general even though they share more private information with siblings of the same gender. The primary function of sharing private information with siblings appears to be relational maintenance, which becomes more prominent in the relationship as they move away from the parental home. Focus group participants also indicated that protection of self or sibling influences choosing to whether share or withhold private information.

The results revealed several criteria for the disclosure of private information to siblings—fixed criteria (such as criteria that focused on receiver characteristics) and situational criteria (such as criteria specific to the message). According to this study, fixed criteria for revealing private information to a sibling includes if the sibling is (1) closeness in age, (2) emotional closeness, (3) complementary personality, and (4) unlikelihood of disclosing private information to parents. Criteria specific to such disclosures were (1) life experience, (2) interest in topic, and (3) physical location. Additionally, private information was more likely revealed to siblings who would “get” or “identify with” the content of the private information.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE.....	1
Chapter 2. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP.....	8
Sibling Groups.....	8
Lifespan Development.....	10
Relational Maintenance.....	12
Privacy.....	15
Communication Privacy Management.....	17
Private Information and CPM in Sibling Groups.....	22
Topics of Private Information Withholding.....	25
Functions of sharing or withholding private information.....	27
Criteria for sharing or withholding private information.....	28
Research Questions	31
Chapter 3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES.....	33
Criteria and Recruitment of Participants.....	33
Web-Based Survey.....	33
Focus Groups.....	34
Participants.....	35
Web-Based Survey.....	35
Focus Groups.....	36
Data Collection.....	37
Web-Based Survey.....	37
Focus Groups.....	39
Data Analysis.....	41
Web-Based Surveys.....	41
Focus Groups.....	43
Chapter 4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION.....	47
Topics.....	47
Reasons.....	59
Criteria.....	64
Gender.....	71

Chapter 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.	74
Contributions to Family Secrets Literature.....	76
Communication Privacy Management.....	79
Contributions to Sibling Communication.....	82
Limitations.....	86
Future Directions.....	87
Conclusion.....	89
References.....	91
Appendices.....	106
Appendix A- Email to web-based survey participants	106
Appendix B- Focus Group Questions.....	107

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographics of Web-Based Survey Participants.....	36
Table 2: Demographics of Focus Group Participants.....	36
Table 3: Topics Shared with All Siblings.....	48
Table 4: Topics a Majority Did Not Discuss with Any Siblings.....	52
Table 5: Topics Discussed with Some Siblings.....	55
Table 6: Topics Withheld in the Sibling Relationship.....	58
Table 7: Perceived Functions of Sharing and Withholding Information From Siblings.....	60
Table 8: Criteria for Sharing and Withholding Private Information.....	65
Table 9: Gender and Topic.....	72

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with all projects, this one is certainly the product of a number of people. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Michelle Miller-Day who unflinchingly jumped on board somewhere in the middle of all of this and provided more comfort and support than I probably deserved.

I am thankful for Dr. Jon Nussbaum, who saw me through a series of committee changes, and went the distance by being the only committee member from beginning to end. Thanks also to committee member Dr. Dennis Gouran for the best and most detailed editing I've ever seen, and Dr. Ed Yoder who somehow fit me into his impossibly busy schedule.

I am also grateful for my master's adviser, Dr. E. Duff Wrobbel who transitioned amazingly from professor to friend. His consistent belief in me kept me going when I just wanted to quit. Without doubt, I would not be a fellow doctor if not for him.

A big thank you to Mr. Frank Machi. Like many others, he also arrived later in the process but provided much needed discipline, even if I didn't appreciate it- or him- at the time. When I didn't think I could handle one more hour in front of the computer, somehow he convinced me that I actually wanted to be there for two more hours.

My feet were planted early on the road to education by my parents who shamelessly say they sent me to kindergarten at age four to get me out of the house, and then belatedly tack on to the story that also, oh yeah, I was ready to go.

Dad, Dr. Dauds has finally arrived!

[

Chapter 1

Introduction and Rationale

I feel really comfortable with my siblings. I've known them for so long. They've seen me through good times and bad times. They just accept me for who I am and they can judge me but I really don't care because they still love me whatever I do, and I kinda feel the same way about them.

- Male focus group participant

Background and Statement of Problem

The sibling relationship is typically the longest lasting relationship one has throughout life, yet relatively little is known about the dynamics of this relationship. Much of the research literature concerning sibling relationships has focused on childhood (e.g., Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002; Dunn, Slonkowski, Beardsall, & Rende, 1994; Howe & Ross, 1990) or the end of the lifespan (e.g.; Avioli, 1989; McKay & Caverly, 1995). Sibling relationships however are not only important during childhood and later life, but are maintained during adulthood and across the lifespan. Nevertheless, adult sibling relationships have been virtually ignored in communication research.

Not only do siblings maintain their relationships across the life course (Cicirelli, 1995), but there is also a substantial amount of developmental change experienced by each sibling as he or she moves into adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2004; Nelson & Barry, 2005). The first major change most siblings undergo occurs when they establish their lives away from the parental home, often as they leave for college (Goldscheider &

Goldscheider, 1994). Going away to college is an important transition for siblings because contact becomes limited compared to what they experienced when they lived together in their family of origin (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). After this period of transition, when all siblings eventually leave home and establish their independence from the family, contact can be even more limited, with the transition from a relatively involuntary relationship to one that is increasingly voluntary (Goetting, 1986; Stocker, Lanthier & Furman, 1997). Even though Connidis and Campbell (1995) reported that staying in contact requires more effort as siblings marry and start families of their own, they discovered that most siblings chose to remain in contact.

Previous research in the area of interpersonal communication and friendship has shown that the sharing of private information positively relates to liking (see Collins & Miller, 1994, for a review) and also serves to maintain and enhance relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). However, Floyd (1995) observed that closeness among siblings depends much less on verbal reinforcement and shared disclosures than do friendships. Likewise, Cole and Kerns (2001) determined that emotional attachment to siblings remains strong despite growing distance and a decrease in joint activities. Therefore, pairs of siblings may consider their relationships to be close while actively withholding private information from other siblings.

Unfortunately, little scholarly attention has been paid to the sibling relationship as adolescents enter young adulthood (Cicirelli, 1995), despite the fact that sibling relationships persist throughout this period. Although previous research on adolescence indicates siblings contribute little compensation for a lack of parental or friend support by siblings (i.e. Van Aken & Asendorpf, 1997), the role of siblings as a source of social

support seemingly evolves in emerging adulthood. During the transition to adulthood, siblings often provide strong social support networks for one another (Cicirelli, 1980a), often to the extent of compensating for lack of support from parents (Milevsky, 2005). Buhrmester and Furman (1990) note the sibling relationships become more egalitarian and symmetrical as siblings age. Of specific interest in the developmental transformation of sibling relationships is how young adult siblings manage their relationships as they move from their families of origin to increasingly autonomous lives.

Since sibling relationships are important to an emerging adult's individual development (Milevsky, 2005; Sharf, Shulman & Avigad-Spitz, 2005) and little is known about how siblings manage these relationships communicatively as they move into adulthood, investigations of the information siblings share and withhold promise to provide insight into family spheres of influence and support in young adulthood. Tucker, McHale, and Crouter (2001) produced evidence that adolescents approaching emerging adulthood see their siblings as sources of support in solving social and educational matters, as well as familial issues. Likewise, Cicirelli (1980a) reported that young adult siblings have as much or more influence with one another than parents do. Within the context of the sibling relationship focusing on the entire group of siblings, the idea of privacy, secrets, and secret keeping is central to beginning to developing a better understanding of the uniqueness of this type of relationship.

Because sibling relationships can and do affect other sibling relationships, privacy within those relationships is extremely important. During emerging adulthood, offspring begin pursuing autonomous interests (Arnett, 1998; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003), yet seek support from others in their families. The contradictory needs

for openness and closedness can become highly pronounced during this time of differentiation (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). As siblings move away from the parental home, the sibling relationship changes, and communication begins to set a pattern of future adult interactions with one's siblings. There are few theories and very little research relating to sibling information management during the young adult development period. Theoretical development in this area would assist scholars, clinicians, and others working with young adults and families to understand more fully the role that young adult siblings play in one another's lives, as well as the significance of the relationship during the developmental period of emerging adulthood.

Not only has there been a lack of research attention to the young adult sibling relationship, but also there are methodological issues relating to the study of siblings. The limited research literature has focused predominately on dyadic, or two person interactions (e.g., Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005; Stewart, Verbrugge, & Beilfuss, 1998), and the same is true of much of the communication research literature (e.g., Martin, Anderson, Burant & Weber, 1997; Myers 1998, 2001; Myers & Knox 1998; Myers, Black, Bulkaty, et al, 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004; Rocca & Martin, 1998). Although a dyadic approach is obviously acceptable for partners such as husbands and wives, it may not be the best focus for all familial relationships. Studying only dyadic relationships in family contexts is limiting, as there may be more than two siblings in a single family. Researchers have long noted the limitations of studying only select siblings and then commenting on sibling relationships as a whole (Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997; Rocca & Martin, 1998). Another problematic limitation with current scholarship is allowing participants to select either a random sibling to serve as a

target sibling in a study (e.g., Myers et al., 2001), or requiring a participant to select the sibling closest in age when there is more than one sibling (e.g., Sharf et al., 2005), which may not be an accurate representation of the sibling network relationship. It will be more instructive, then, when the entire sibling network is included in research projects to understand the *entire* sibling group rather than a single sibling relationship (dyad) or the perspective of only one sibling within the sibling network.

Satir (1972), as well as Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) note, all members of a family influence the communication of all others in the family. For example, Pulakos (1990) determined that the family environment relates to the nature of the sibling relationship in young adulthood. Researchers would benefit from viewing siblings as networks rather than as independently functioning dyads. A sibling relationship affects all other relationships in the family, including other sibling relationships. For example, the relationship between Sibling A and Sibling B can affect the relationship between Sibling A and Sibling C, as well as the relationship between Sibling B and Sibling C. As more and more siblings are added to the network, the pairings grow exponentially (Donley, 1993).

When the sibling group in a family is consists of at least three members, the dynamics are very different from one or two sibling families. First, the siblings may be classified as a group, which creates multiple dyadic combinations (Keyton, 1999). Second, the siblings may choose to confide to some, but not all of the other siblings and create an in-group, out-group dynamic (Petronio, 2002). Third, siblings can create power structures by either simple majority (for instance, two siblings against one), forming a

coalition (Schvaneveldt, 1983), or by sharing or withholding information (Meyers & Brashers, 1999).

Investigating the communication within a group of siblings can help to create an important map of the actual communication processes in which they share or withhold secrets from one another. With the steady increase of family communication research but a lack of research on young adult siblings, it is important to study the sibling group systematically as an important and unique subsystem of the family.

The sibling relationship is important in and of itself (Parens, 1999) and deserves more scholarly research attention to uncover any unique communication characteristics that may distinguish it from other relationships within the family system. Most individuals see value in their sibling relationships and, during young adulthood, make an effort to stay in contact with their siblings (Rocca & Martin, 1997). Consequently, to inform the maintenance of sibling relationships during young adulthood, it is important to have a better understanding of the communication that occurs in the sibling relationship during that developmental period. Moreover, to address some of the limitations of previous research, it is also essential that all siblings within a sibling group be represented in any study of sibling communication.

Drawing on Communication Privacy Management as a theoretical framework (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002), the central aim of this descriptive study was to increase understanding of the kinds of private information and reasons for managing private information in young adult sibling relationships. To accomplish this aim, this research involved eliciting individual reports from entire young adult sibling networks concerning

what types of information members share and withhold from each other, their underlying motivations for doing so, and the criteria they use in decisions to share and withhold.

Chapter 2

Review of Previous Scholarship

Sibling Groups

Even though family communication as an area of study has been quickly expanding over the past decade to include various family forms, the sibling relationship has received very little research attention. This inattention is unfortunate, as the sibling relationship is an important one in families and is often people's longest-lasting relationship (Ponzetti & James, 1997). As Pulakos (1987) notes, this relationship can last an entire lifetime beginning with birth and continuing to the death of one of the siblings. Although Parens (1999) reports that the sibling relationship plays a meaningful part in people's lives, surprisingly little is known about it. What is known about sibling relationships has typically been limited either to early childhood or later life with the intervening years largely ignored with the early adult sibling relationship the most neglected of all (Cicirelli, 1995). In the communication field, research addressing the sibling relationship is often coupled with aging research (see Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000) and stresses the importance of the relationship and the need to understand how it functions.

Sibling relationships, as most family relationships, are involuntary. Biological siblings do not choose their siblings, yet they have to deal with them for a lifetime (Greer & Meyers, 1992). In early adulthood, siblings become increasingly independent of others in the family. Although siblings cannot terminate their relationships with one another, adulthood marks a point at which they can purposefully choose to limit contact with one another (Myers et al., 2001). As siblings reach adulthood, the nature of their

relationships changes (Goetting, 1986; Stewart et al., 2001), as does communication between them. Petronio (2002) noted that there are multiple family combinations in which members can share and withhold private information, and as the sibling relationship develops across time, the form and function of sharing and withholding information may also change.

Research concerning the disclosure of private information focuses primarily on such dyads as romantic partners or friends (e.g. Derlega et al., 1994). Likewise, current research relating to the family is most often approached from a dyadic perspective, even subsystems that may logically include more than two people, such as the sibling relationship. Although by their very nature romantic relationships are dyadic (Duck & Pittman, 1994), sibling relationships can, and often do, involve more than two siblings. As families expand and more siblings become part of the system, the dynamics change. Therefore, focusing on sibling dyads obscures the complexity of the family suprastructure. As noted by Donley (1993), "The addition of each child involves interlocking triangles to be managed within the family" (p. 17). The more siblings there are in a family, the more complex the overlapping relationships become. When there are three or more siblings, it is possible to share private information with only one sibling and, therefore, to create information boundaries within the larger sibling group. In contrast, with a sibling dyad, the other sibling either is or is not aware of the information.

Life-Span Development

The age range 18-30 encompasses a variety of labels, the most common of which is "young adulthood" (e.g.; Dubas & Petersen, 1996; O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003; Trim, Leuthe, & Chassin, 2006). This period of

life is one of frequent change as those in it explore various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews (Erickson, 1968; Rindfuss, 1991). However, an article by Arnett (2000) suggests that such a label is a misnomer because most people in that age range do not yet consider themselves adults. Rather, he suggested that ages 18-25 be considered “emerging adulthood” as adolescents begin the process of becoming an adult, with ages 25-29 representing the as the final transition to young adulthood, which begins at age 30.

During emerging adulthood, there are significant developmental changes occurring in the individual, as well as in family relationships. Such changes include: leaving the parental home (Dubas & Petersen, 1996), the redefining of life goals (Roberts, O’Donnell, & Robbins, 2004), personality development (Roberts et al., 2003), increased egalitarianism in relationships with parents (Lefkowitz, 2005), and less conflict and rivalry with siblings (Scharf et al, 2005)

Sibling relationships continue to develop and change over the course of the life span (e.g., Cicirelli, 1985; White & Riedmann, 1992), but it is the beginning and end of the lifespan that have consistently received the most research attention. In early childhood, the sibling relationship is characterized by disputes involving property (Ross, 1996) and competition for parents’ attention (Teti, 2002). During childhood, primarily strong emotional ties, both positive and negative, mark the sibling relationship as siblings may serve as playmates, caretakers, sources of support, and major nuisances (Furman & Giberson, 1995). As children age, they begin to develop their own identities separate from those of their families, which may lead to a decreased interest in siblings and joint activities (Dunn et al., 1994). By the time adolescents reach 12th grade, they report feeling more distant from and spending less time with their siblings, as well as showing

less affection, intimacy, and caring toward siblings than do 3rd, 6th, and 9th graders (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). However, despite being more distant and a decrease in engaging activities with siblings, the emotional attachment between siblings remains moderately strong throughout adolescence (Cole & Kerns, 2001).

At the later end of the lifespan, the sibling relationship once again becomes an important one for many people (Leigh, 1982). Typically, older adult siblings express greater emotional closeness than younger sibling relationships (Goetting, 1986). However, Folwell, Chung, Nussbaum, Bethea, and Grant (1997) detected a marked difference in closeness in older age sibling relationships attributable to critical events and/or life stressors, which tend to either bring siblings closer together or create a rift in the sibling relationship. Regardless, one of the primary functions of the sibling relationship in later life is to provide social support (for a review of social support functions provided by siblings in later life, see Avioli, 1989).

Emerging adulthood tends to be characterized as a period of consistent change (Arnett, 2000), both inside and outside sibling relationships (Scharf et al., 2005). As siblings approach emerging adulthood, their relationship tends to become more egalitarian (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), and the rivalries from childhood seemingly decrease (Cicirelli, 1985). However, the question of whether or not rivalry between siblings actually declines in adulthood is a matter of debate, with conflicting findings (Cicirelli, 1995). For example, a recent study by Hoffman, Kiecolt, and Edwards (2005) revealed that physical violence, such as pushing, slapping and throwing or hitting with an object, is still prevalent in sibling relationships during the 12th grade, with brother-brother relationships having significantly higher levels of sibling violence than brother-sister or

sister-sister sibling relationships. In contrast, in a longitudinal study, Updegraff, McHale and Crouter (2002) found that participants reported an increase in intimacy with their siblings as they approach late adolescence.

During emerging adulthood, siblings tend to rely on one for social support. Cicirelli (1980a) discovered that college aged siblings prefer their siblings to a mother or father for garnering emotional support. Milevsky (2005) more recently observed that sibling support compensated for low support from mothers for depression and self-esteem, and from fathers in respect to loneliness, self-esteem and life satisfaction. Of particular interest is that sibling support also compensated for low support from friends to a larger degree than for low mother or father support. Although this area of inquiry has little evidence, what is known is that young adult siblings do rely on one another to fulfill supportive roles in their relationships.

Relational Maintenance

For personal relationships to survive, they need to be maintained by the members who are part of that relationship. Significant scholarly attention has focused on the communicative aspects of relational maintenance (for example, Canary & Stafford, 1994, and Canary & Dainton, 2003). People tend to engage in a variety of communicative actions and activities to sustain the desired relational definition (for a review of relational maintenance strategies, see Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993). When such communication between relational members stops, it is likely the relationship will end (Dindia, 2003). Most of the research concerning relational maintenance has focused on married couples (e.g., Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994), romantic partners (e.g., Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford, 2003) or friendships (e.g., Dainton,

Zelley, & Langon, 2003; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005), at the expense of familial relationships, perhaps, in part as a result of their involuntary nature (Vogl-Bauer, 2003).

There has, however, been some exploration on maintenance strategies in familial relationships (Myers et al, 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004; Noller, 1994; Steen & Schwartz, 1995). Although Hess (2003) indicated that some familial relationships might be considered undesired, according to Cicirelli (1991), most siblings have a commitment to their sibling relationships that extend beyond simply sustaining obligatory familial ties. Additionally, during the transition to adulthood when siblings begin to differentiate themselves from the family, the sibling relationship continues to be one that family members maintain through the use of emotional exchanges that perpetuate feelings of warmth (Scharf et al., 2005).

Myers and colleagues (Myers et al., 2001; Myers & Weber, 2004) examined the use of relational maintenance behaviors in family relationships, and discovered that relational maintenance is as important for involuntary relationships (such as the sibling relationship) as for voluntary ones. Myers and colleagues assessed the importance and use of five relational maintenance strategies identified by Canary and Stafford (1992), positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and sharing tasks, in nonvoluntary relationships. Positivity refers to communicating with a partner in a way that is enjoyable, cooperative, cheerful, and optimistic. Openness focuses on the self-disclosure of feelings about the nature of the relationship. Assurances indicate a desire to remain involved in and committed to the relationship. Networks are common memberships or affiliations to which both belong. Sharing tasks involves both partners participating in and sharing responsibility for tasks unique to the relationship. Myers's line of research

also revealed that in non-voluntary relationships, sharing tasks tended to be used most often, and openness used least frequently. Perhaps this is because the relationship is involuntary, a discussion of the nature of the relationship may not be appropriate. Nevertheless, although Myers' study did not exclusively focus on emerging adults, a large percentage (72%) of the participants was college students, which may provide some insight into young adult sibling communication.

Other research suggests that maintaining family relationships often depends on the communication skills of the family members. For example, Steen and Schwartz (1995) determined that family members who have poor listening skills show a higher likelihood of withholding information from each other, or limiting the conversation between family members. Additionally, Vogl-Bauer (2003) reported that "relational maintenance strategies implicitly, as well as explicitly, rely on family members' willingness to self-disclose information to each other" (p. 34). Privacy, self-disclosure, and who has access to the information seem to be key factors in maintaining familial relationships. A more in-depth review of why family members, and siblings in particular, prefer to keep secrets and not share information with other siblings follow to help understand the sibling relationship in young adulthood.

Privacy

Maintaining individual and family privacy, and even keeping secrets from family members and outsiders, serves important functions for families, including protecting members from the revelation of embarrassing information about them (Vangelisti, 1994) or excluding those who are not considered part of the family from access to which people see them as not entitled (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Petronio (1991) claims that

families withhold information from outsiders to save face and to prevent possible negative reactions to disclosures. Likewise, individual family members or groups of family members may choose to withhold information from the rest of the family (Caughlin & Petronio, 2002).

When a family as a whole conceals information from non-members, or outsiders, this may serve to create an in-group/out-group distinction creating a more cohesive “in-group” family unit (Vangelisti, 1994). According to Meyers and Brashers (1999), the in-group and out-group distinction involves the use some kind of social category (such as access to information) to separate the latter from the former.

A similar arrangement might occur within families whereby some members co-own information and other members are excluded from that information (Caughlin & Petronio, 2002), but for reasons that are rather different, such as those below. As this separation occurs, the family structure may begin to splinter and create a less cohesive family unit. Additionally, it can create a pattern of whom to share information with for future disclosures (Petronio 1991, 2002).

Previous pertinent research has most frequently focused on parental withholding of information from children or children’s withholding from parents (see, for example, Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Parents may not want to tell their children that one of them has cancer, for example, and the children may not want to tell their parents that they have had sex. Numerous other combinations exist within a family system, such as spouse withholding from a spouse, sibling withholding from a sibling, and any number of combinations among extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the like (Petronio, 2002).

Secret keeping also occurs among siblings in a family. As in other relationships, when siblings establish privacy boundaries that exclude other siblings, keeping that information from those siblings may serve as a way to gain and maintain power over the uninformed sibling (Bok, 1984). Investigating secret keeping in sibling groups could reveal important information relating to fostering alliances and sustaining power structures within sibling networks. When a sibling group is characterized by information boundaries that exclude some siblings, rifts are a likely result (Petronio, 2002). Secret keeping may enhance cohesion among the siblings who know the secret but may alienate those who are not privileged to this information. Furthermore, as family relationships can and do exert influence on the family, the sibling relationship may play an important role in the unity of the family. Since the sibling relationship is often the longest lasting one a person has (Ponzetti & James, 1997), selectively sharing private information with only some siblings can have long lasting consequences and implications.

Although it is genetically impossible to dissolve biological ties with one's family of origin, an individual can choose to remain on the fringes or outside the family boundary with specific family members or the family as a whole. Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink and Buerkel (1995) observed that a family member, although present in the family dynamic, might be considered to be functionally absent as a result of his or her limited involvement. Such a condition can also exist within a sibling structure of at least three siblings as the parties create alliances with other siblings. The sharing and withholding of positive, negative, or neutral personal information among siblings may demonstrate information boundaries within the sibling structure (Petronio, 2000, 2002). When alliances form, power dynamics may also come into play. Emerson (1962) pointed out

that social relations are mutually dependent, and because of that, the people involved can and do exert power over each other. The implication of siblings creating alliances goes far beyond just the sibling network and affects the entire family (for a review of how individuals and groups affect each other, see Haslett & Ruebush, 1999).

Communication Privacy Management

Examination of the relationships among siblings is guided by Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002). CPM borrows from both Dialectic Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and from a systems perspective (von Bertalanffy, 1968) in the sense that each member of an interaction influences and is influenced by one another. However, it is the focus on privacy boundaries that differentiates CPM from similar theories. CPM uses the metaphor of a boundary to describe how and why people regulate private information like secrets. A boundary is a metaphorical border that one erects around personal information in order to separate that information from other people (Petronio, 2000) and mark ownership (Petronio, 2002). Choosing to share personal information can be risky because people are making themselves vulnerable by disclosing that information. Boundaries are erected to minimize feelings of vulnerability, to create a sense of control over the information, and guided by boundary structures and role management systems.

Boundary structures determine who is and who is not granted access to private information (Petronio, 2002). Even though all people have boundaries that separate information from others, the boundaries are not uniform for everyone. Boundaries occur across varying levels of people and have differing degrees of permeability (Petronio, 2000, 2002). In families, for example, there are boundaries around the family,

boundaries around individuals, and boundaries that include sub-groups of family members (Caughlin et al, 2000). As those boundaries are created and maintained, a person may simultaneously admit some family members and deny others access to the information (Petronio, 2002). For instance, in a family with three sisters, the oldest sister may choose to share information concerning her sexual behavior with the middle sister but not tell her parents, thus drawing a boundary around the two sisters. However, the older sister may choose not to include her youngest sister within this information boundary. In this scenario, the middle sister could then potentially exert power over the youngest sister because she has access to information to which the youngest sister does not have access. When such situations occur, Mannix and Neale (1993) noted that those with less power, the younger sister in this scenario, attempt to restore an equitable balance of power in the relationship. Petronio (2000, 2002) suggests that the more private the information is deemed to be, the more rigid the boundaries become because of the heightened risk of disclosing sensitive information.

Although boundaries help regulate the flow of private information, when information is shared, it is considered to be co-owned (Petronio, 2002). Boundaries mark ownership of information, and when more than one person is within the boundary, each of the people involved can claim ownership of it. As Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) point out, co-ownership of information is often a way that people establish who is "in" and "out" of their family. They further contend that being able to negotiate multiple information channels and having a more flexible boundary system is central if one is to move from being "out" to being "in" the family. In much the same way, sibling A might be privy to a secret from sibling B and a secret from C. If

siblings B and C do not share their secrets with each other, sibling A must be able to successfully manage the flow of information as appropriate to the boundary conditions.

These boundary structures are regulated by a rule management system that is used to monitor the flow of information (Petronio, 2000, 2002). In order to regulate access to private information, people construct rule management systems or decision rules to determine the conditions under which the information is shared. Privacy rules establish what information one can reveal, to whom, and under what conditions (Petronio, 2002). Rules about access and protection govern boundary management. Access rules govern when the information will be shared and protection rules indicate what information it is appropriate to share. For instance, what secrets need to be kept only to the individual to whom they belong? If a female has been sexually assaulted, should she tell her brother? If she does, she will also need to determine when to tell him, as well as what information to reveal. The privacy rules used by the individual with the private information will ultimately dictate the level of information shared and to whom that information is shared.

When information becomes co-owned with others, it results in a need to coordinate it. Maintaining multiple privacy boundaries involves people communicatively managing them together (Petronio, 2002). The easiest type of information to coordinate is private information that is not shared with anyone. However, for all other types of information, the shared boundaries must be coordinated to assure that the information is private. The more people who share information, the more coordination is needed to maintain private information (Petronio, 2002). For instance, if a sibling shares a secret about violating curfew with one other sibling, that information is common only to those two siblings. However, if that information is shared among the

members of a sibling group of four, then there are multiple members who share that information and multiple boundaries that need to be maintained and coordinated to keep the information a secret. The complexity of boundary coordination becomes evident due to the multiple layers of boundary structures.

Because boundaries are not always perfectly coordinated, boundary turbulence can occur (Petronio, 2002). Turbulence exists when the rules for privacy management have been violated. Petronio (2002) identified six factors that may contribute to boundary turbulence: intentional rule violations, boundary rule mistakes, unclear boundaries, dissimilar boundary orientations, boundary definition predicaments, and privacy dilemmas. An intentional violation involves someone knowingly sharing private information with someone outside of the information boundary, and thus betraying the individual who initially shared it. A boundary rule mistake refers to someone accidentally compromising an information boundary. It may be the result of a lapse in judgment or not understanding the coordination boundary in the first place. When the boundaries about who owns or co-owns the information are not defined, an unclear boundary exists and causes boundary turbulence because the rules are uncertain. Dissimilar boundary orientations cause turbulence because people may be operating from different perspectives concerning how private information is shared. When the systems are vastly different, such as being very open or extremely reserved, it creates a rift in how to best manage the information. Finally, privacy dilemmas come into play when there is no clear way to solve an issue. When the boundaries are in conflict, it requires greater effort and more precise management of private information. Although it is often unpleasant, Petronio (2002) indicated that boundary turbulence creates learning situations

in which people become more aware of privacy boundaries and learn how to better manage them.

Families have multiple privacy boundaries that members must manage and coordinate. Petronio (2002) classifies family boundaries into two distinct categories: external boundaries that separate all family members from non-family members, and internal boundaries, which separate boundaries within the family. Within the internal familial infrastructure, boundaries are often highly complex because of the sheer number of boundary combinations (Caughlin et al., 2000). Although some research has focused on these internal structures, typically the parent-child relationship has received the most scholarly attention (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Noller, 1995). One such combination of boundaries within the family is between and among siblings. While some literature focuses on siblings withholding information from parents (e.g. Caughlin et al., 2000) and creating a collective boundary around them, but researchers have yet to examine how siblings create boundaries within their sibling group. This topic area is explored in greater depth in the following sections.

Private Information and CPM in Sibling Groups

Preventing private information from circulating too far requires that the parties involved keep the information to themselves by creating boundaries between those who know and those who do not know the secret. The extant literature concerning secret keeping within the context of the family is largely the work of Vangelisti and colleagues (1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Caughlin & Timmerman, 2001).

Vangelisti (1994) performed a two-tier analysis of secrets. For the first phase, she gathered responses to open-ended questions to generate categories of secret topics and

functions. This consisted of six open-ended items, divided into three sections. Each section addressed a unique form of family secrets (whole family, intra-family, and individual). Participants described a secret for each of those forms. In addition, each indicated he or she they thought that information was kept a secret. The data generated in the first phase was used to form categories of secret topics and functions of those secrets. Three categories of secrets emerged: taboo, rule violation, and conventional. Six categories of functions also surfaced: bonding, evaluation, maintenance, privacy, defense, and communication. Each category is discussed in more detail in the following section.

In 1997, Vangelisti and Caughlin expanded the 1994 study to determine the likelihood of revealing family secrets to outsiders on the topic and function of the secret, the satisfaction with one's family, and the quality of the relationship with the potential target of the revelation. The relationships in this study were characterized as one of five possible types: boyfriend/girlfriend, best friend, friend, classmate/coworker, and acquaintance. Perceptions of the non-family relationship fell into three categories: psychological closeness, similarity, and everyday centrality. The research was conducted in two phases. The first part of each phase asked the respondents to describe a secret that their family kept from outsiders. Results from the first phase revealed that people who were likely to tell their secrets felt more strongly that their secrets were kept to avoid evaluation, to maintain their family relationships, to preserve privacy, and to defend the family. Overall, family members' tendency to keep their secrets was associated with members' relational satisfaction.

In phase two, semantic differentials were administered to assess participant's perceptions of their secret and their likelihood of telling their secret to the target relation

in the near future. These results indicated that people who were unlikely to reveal their secrets were more satisfied with their families than those who were moderately likely to reveal their secrets. Family members were also reportedly more likely to disclose a secret if they felt psychologically close to the target person. When compared to those unlikely to reveal their secret, those who were more likely to reveal their secret also indicated being “more similar” to the potential target. The topic of the secret did not appear to affect the likelihood of revealing a secret.

Vangelisti, Caughlin and Timmerman (2001), examined the criteria people use when deciding whether or not to divulge secret information about their families. As with the previous articles by Vangelisti (1994) and Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997), a two-phase study was utilized. In the first part, the participants indicate a secret that their family, as a group, kept from outsiders. Second, participants were asked to identify someone who they were least likely to reveal the secret they had just described. Third, they provided open-ended descriptions of the criteria they would use to determine whether to tell the secret to that individual. Finally, they indicated to whom they would be most likely to reveal the secret. In the second phase, the investigators refined the criteria that surfaced in phase one to explore predictors of revealing the secret. Ten criteria emerged as determining whether or not to reveal a family secret: intimate exchange, exposure, urgency, acceptance, conversational appropriateness, relational security, important reason, permission, family membership, and would never reveal.

These studies of secret keeping have contributed interesting information to the family communication literature in identifying a variety of forms, functions, and criteria for revealing secrets inside and outside the context of the family system (Vangelisti,

1994; Vangelisti, & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Caughlin & Timmerman, 2001). This information has been very useful in revealing the importance of secret keeping in the family context as a whole. However, most of this research attention had focused on the examination of sharing family secrets with non-family members, or in parent-child relationships, and hence does not provide a complete examination of the intra-family boundary management, especially that which occurs with information sharing and withholding among siblings.

Building on Vangelisti's work, Caughlin and associates (2000) explored intrafamily secrets in the context of blended, single-parent and nuclear families and determined that siblings often confided to other siblings rather than parents, and also that they disclose to biological siblings more often than to step-siblings. This study is one of the few that has provided a closer look at disclosures of private information among siblings; however, it was limited to comparing disclosures of siblings in relation to parents, with secret keeping among siblings assuming a minor role in the investigation.

Because the sibling relationship is distinct from all other familial relationships (Floyd, 1995; Ponzetti & James, 1997), and since intimacy in sibling relationships increases (Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 2002) as siblings enter emerging adulthood and since reliance on siblings as a means of social support also increases during this life stage (Cicirelli, 1980a), it stands to reason that information sharing and withholding between siblings may also exhibit unique characteristics. On the other hand, sibling relationships may or may not exhibit the same patterns that emerged in Vangelisti and colleagues research relating to family systems. Consequently, to determine whether siblings in emerging adulthood exhibit uniqueness in the forms, functions, and criteria

they use for revealing private information to one another required additional study. The present such determination is its goal.

Topics of private information withholding. In families, there are two main types of information withholding: Private information family members withhold from non-family members and information they withhold from other family members (Karpel, 1980). Modeling Karpel, Vangelisti (1994) categorized family secrets (information withheld) to three forms: whole, intra-family, and individual. A whole family secret is one all family members know but keep from non-family members. An intra-family secret is one only certain family members know and keep from other family members. An individual secret is one only the person knows and keeps secret from the rest of the family.

It is the second type of secret, the intra-family secret that is salient to the composition of the sibling structure as siblings can choose to include only some siblings and not others within the sibling group. The valence of the secret may either be negative such as abuse or neglect but can also be positive such as a surprise birthday party (Brown-Smith, 1998). However, some secrets may not completely fit into either category, yet are kept for other reasons, which Caughlin and Petronio (2004) call "prosocial" reasons. These types of secrets may be kept to protect the owner of the secret from embarrassment.

Choosing what information to share can be a taxing undertaking, but the type of information being shared may ease that process. As previously noted, Vangelisti (1994) identified three categories of family secrets: taboo topics, rule violations, and conventional secrets. Taboo topics are ones that are condemned or stigmatized by a

family, and sometimes by the whole of society. Examples of taboo topics would be an affair, sexual preferences, and finances. Rule violations relate to nonobservation of conditions a family tries to uphold. Examples of rule violations include cohabitation, drinking, and partying. Finally, conventional secrets relate to information that, while possibly not carrying any stigma nonetheless appear to be inappropriate to discuss, especially with non-family members. One's religious and political beliefs, personality conflicts and various sorts of likes and dislikes are examples of conventional secrets.

Disclosing information can make a person feel vulnerable and may be embarrassing (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Parks, 1982; Petronio, 2002). Because of the potential risk of sharing private information, an individual may choose not to disclose the information to avoid the perceived risks (Petronio, 2002). Although openness is valued in Western culture, most individuals harbor personal information they actively avoid disclosing (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). It is not clear from this research, however, if certain types are more actively avoided in certain kinds of relationships- such as sibling relationships.

From the perspective of CPM, once an individual under what conditions he or she is willing to disclose private information, the decision has relational implications. For instance, once an individual determines boundary permeability, it can often become routinized, which would result in that topic being avoided in future similar situations (Petronio, 2002). Over time, decisions concerning topic avoidance can result in influencing perceptions about communicating in relationships (Petronio, 1991). A sibling may fail to become a potential confidante from something as seemingly innocuous as a one-time decision.

Functions of sharing or withholding private information. Keeping secrets from family members involves more than simply not sharing private information. It also serves important functions for the family as a whole, or for specific family members. Because intra-family secrets are often intentionally concealed from certain family members, these secrets are generally less likely to be disclosed than other types of private information (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). When people withhold a secret, they do so for a reason. Vangelisti (1994) identified six functions of secrets: evaluation, defense, maintenance, privacy, communication, and bonding. Family members who conceal private information from outsiders or other family members tend to do so for protective reasons, especially when the secret is negative in some respect. Evaluation relates to the fear that other family members will judge or disapprove of the individual if they find out (Vangelisti, 1994). Defensiveness is a response to the fear that one might use the guarded information against the possessor (Vangelisti, 1994). Maintenance involves efforts to keep the relationship between those who share the information from deteriorating, and may also be a protective measure (Vangelisti, 1994). The final function, bonding, is one that is a positively valenced. Family members see sharing information with only select family members as a way to have a special relationship with that person, or to create an even more cohesive relationship (Vangelisti, 1994). Although Vangelisti (1994) provides a foundation for intra-family secrets, the combinations of family members who keep secrets from the rest of the family can be quite complex. Such combinations as mother-child, father-child, husband-wife, and sibling-sibling all represent examples of family members who may keep secrets from

other family members. It is unclear, however, whether sibling-sibling secret keeping serves the same functions as it does in other relationships.

Although siblings disclose private information, as do other family members, keeping secrets may serve different functions for them. Not disclosing private information may be a way to have control and exercise power, so as to minimize vulnerability and control by others (Derlega & Chaiklin, 1977). Shared secrets can also strengthen internal cohesion as those who know the secret in some senses constitute a single entity (Vangelisti, 1994). According to Imber-Black (1993), secrets define boundaries separating who knows and who does not know certain information, which results in creating varying degrees of distance and closeness in families. From a CPM perspective, people can use privacy boundaries to separate themselves from others, as well as filter incoming and outgoing information (Petronio, 2000, 2002). Similarly within sibling groups, sharing private information with only select siblings may create or reinforce boundaries separating part of the sibling group from the rest of it. Or, sharing private information may be used to exclude only one sibling, which may occur in families comprised of, say, three siblings.

Criteria for sharing or withholding private information. When considering sharing private information, people develop rules to determine to whom the information is revealed and under what circumstances. Research suggests that people are more likely to reveal private information to those whom they trust and to who they are close. Even if the secret keeper is close to the potential recipient of the information, disclosure is often an incremental process. For instance, Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, and Mon't Ros-Mendoza (1996) identified three criteria victims use when disclosing information concerning

sexual abuse: tacit permission, selecting the circumstances, and incremental disclosure. Tacit permission further consists of the subcategories of inquiries and reciprocity. Selecting the circumstances allows for the person with the secret to determine environments in which to disclose. Finally, in incremental disclosure, bits of information are disclosed with each subsequent disclosure becoming more and more intense. Responses of acceptance and positive reactions to the disclosure encourage further disclosures. Although the study focused on the negatively valenced secret of sexual abuse, these criteria for sharing secrets may more generally enter into decisions to reveal other types of secrets as well.

In all of the cases in this study, telling a secret was an interactional process: the target had to be accepting, or the secret keeper would quit disclosing. Similarly, Vangelisti, Caughlin and Timmerman (2001) found that relational security is necessary for someone to divulge a secret. Relational security within the sibling structure may manifest itself in different ways from how it does in other relationships because the sibling relationship is involuntary. Withholding information from a sibling, however, may be one way that siblings communicate the desire for distance or the fact that they are uncomfortable communicating sensitive information to a sibling.

As mentioned earlier, Vangelisti, Caughlin and Timmerman (2001) identified ten criteria individuals use in deciding to reveal a family secret. Each of the ten criteria addresses: 1) the appropriateness of revealing the secret to another person in light of the secret-holder's relationship with him or her, and 2) if an important reason exists for sharing the information. According to Petronio (2000), emotional closeness plays an important role in determining with whom to share private information. Although these

criteria aid in understanding how and why family secrets are revealed to others, the strength and rigidity of the boundary also plays an important role. If a boundary is rigid, then one is less likely to reveal private information, or a secret, led because there are clear rules for who should and should not have access (Petronio, 2002). Likewise, if the boundary is strong, the owners of the information are in agreement about the information's being kept from others (Petronio, 2002). If these criteria also hold true for siblings, they may account for why a sibling would choose one sibling over another as a confidant.

Although information management within the sibling structure may serve similar functions similar to those in other relationships, there is virtually no research that specifically focuses on siblings and information sharing and withholding. Petronio (2002) notes that sharing private information makes people vulnerable because they may be embarrassed, uncomfortable or exposed. Because of the potential negative consequences of sharing private information, siblings may choose only specific other siblings with whom they trust in allowing co-ownership of private information and refrain from sharing private information with all siblings.

While the disclosure of private information is linked to enhanced closeness in friendships and romantic relationships, the uniqueness of the sibling relationship suggest that sharing private information may not strengthen the sibling relationship in the same way it des other relationships. As Petronio (2000, 2002) points out, disclosing secrets creates boundaries of shared information. Numerous studies indicate that disclosing private information (i.e. self-disclosure) is a positive experience (Collins & Miller, 1994; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Likewise, although Johnson

(1974) found that people become more intimate with their relational partners when they disclose, siblings already have an extensive understanding of shared personal history (Teven, Martin, & Neupauer, 1998) by the time they reach adulthood. Because siblings are already in possession of a significant amount of personal history information about each other, sharing private information in young adulthood may be an extension of the role siblings played in childhood as confidants to one another. Hence, sharing private information may not fulfill the same role as it does in romantic relationships.

Furthermore, Cicirelli (1980a) observed that although college-aged women typically had no preference for a mother or sibling when they needed a confidante, they preferred siblings to fathers. Thus, it is unclear whether or not sharing private information strengthens and results in closer sibling relationship, but should it, the phenomenon may be gender specific.

Research Questions

There is evidence that suggests that sharing private information serves important functions, such as increased intimacy in non-familial relationships and to protect members in family relationships (Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001).

Moreover, criteria for revealing private information in general family and non-family relationships includes the degree of security one feels in his or her relationship with the receiver of the information. However, from the current research literature it is unclear whether withholding and sharing of private information serve the same functions and entail use of the same criteria in sibling relationship as in non-family or other family relationships. Vangelisti's research (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) offers the most promising framework for understanding the management of private

information in adult sibling relationships. Therefore, this research was guided by the following overarching question: Do the same forms, functions, and criteria for revealing secrets that Vangelisti describes in non-family and general family relationships also apply specifically to sibling groups? To answer this overarching question, required assessing information pertinent to each of the following research questions:

RQ1: What topics do siblings share or withhold from some or all of their other siblings?

RQ2: What are the perceived functions of sharing or withholding private information in sibling relationships?

RQ3: What criteria do siblings use when choosing to include/exclude another sibling from access to private information?

Chapter 3

Methods and Procedures

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase entailed collecting data to answer the first two research questions. Data from the second phase provided a basis for answering the third research question and soliciting additional detail to research questions one and two. In the first phase, college students from a major Northeastern university and each sibling in their respective sibling groups completed a web-based survey concerning communication with siblings. In the second phase, another group of students from the same university participated in focus group interviews.

Criteria and Recruitment of Participants

Web-based survey. To be eligible for the first phase of this study, all potential participants needed to satisfy three criteria: (1) have *at least* two biological siblings; (2) all siblings were willing to participate; (3) have sibling status based on biology (shared parentage) or adoption-- stepsiblings and half-siblings were excluded from this study. The first criterion was necessary to examine patterns of exchange among siblings in a network and answer research questions pertaining to whom participants revealed and did not reveal private information. The second criterion was necessary to collect information from the entire network of siblings. As previously noted by Satir (1972), since all members of a group can and do influence one another, it was important that all members of the sibling group equally be involved to obtain a more accurate understanding of the communication practices within the sibling group. The third criterion was necessary because research relating to step and blended families indicates that these families are

different from nuclear families in how they use information boundaries (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Caughlin et al., 2000; Kelley, 1992; Peek, Bell, Waldren & Sorrel, 1988).

Therefore, to assure a consistent family type, only biological and adopted sibling groups were recruited.

Participants were drawn from a population of college students from a major Northeastern university who were enrolled in an entry-level general education communication course. Students in this course were required to participate in a research study or prepare a critique of a speech as part of their participation grade. Students from all sections of this introductory course were directed to a website and asked pre-screening questions to determine whether they were qualified for this particular study. Students who satisfied the above-mentioned criteria were invited to participate and subsequently received information about the nature of the study. These students then completed a web-based survey. To receive the credit for their participation, all siblings in the sibling group also had to complete the survey.

Focus groups. The criteria for participation in the web-based survey may have introduced a selection bias. These inclusion criteria increased the probability that the participating sibling groups would exhibit more emotional closeness and experience more frequent contact with one another than would a random sample of sibling groups. Therefore, to counteract this possible bias, focus group interviews were added to the study design. University students with at least two biological siblings were recruited for these focus groups. There was no criterion for sibling participation, increasing the possibility of assessing sibling experiences in emotionally distant, low contact sibling relationships. The first objective of the focus group interviews was to elicit additional

information regarding the topics and functions of information sharing and withholding in sibling groups, the data gathered in these group interviews served to compliment the data collected in the web-based survey and contributed to answering research questions one and two. Additionally, since there was no previous research available on the criteria siblings use for keeping information private, formative research was necessary to address the third research question. Therefore, the second objective for the focus group interviews was to generate a variety of criteria siblings report to use when choosing to include/exclude another sibling from access to private information.

Participants

Web-based survey. A total of 139 participants completed the web-based survey, representing 44 distinct family units. Of those, only 34 families had complete sets of surveys from all siblings in the sibling group. One family unit was excluded from the study because one sibling was identified as a half-sibling, and not a full biological sibling. This exclusion resulted in a sample of 33 intact sibling groups for a total of 104 participants. Five of the sibling groups were four-sibling families, and the remaining 28 had three siblings each. Sibling groups of four represented only 15.2% of the participants for the survey, most likely because the more siblings, the more difficult it was to get all of them to agree to be part of the study, and also because demographically, they represent a smaller portion of the population. Three of the sibling groups of three included a set of twins, and one group of four siblings had a set of triplets. No other multiple births were mentioned (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographics of Web-based Survey Participants

Gender		
	Female	50% (n = 52)
	Male	50% (n = 52)
Age		
	Mean	22.4
	St. Dev.	3.1
Marital Status		
	Single, never married	85.6% (n = 89)
	Cohabiting	4.8% (n = 5)
	Married	9.6% (n = 10)
Sibling Group Size		
	Three	84.8% (n = 28)
	Four	15.2% (n = 5)
Multiples		
	Twins	9.1% (n = 3)
	Triplets	3.0% (n = 1)
	None	87.9% (n = 29)

Focus groups. Nineteen unrelated individuals participated in the focus groups. There were four such groups of 3, 4, 5, or 7 participants. A surprising number of these participants reported multiples in their sibling groups (see Table 2 for demographic information).

Table 2: Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Gender		
	Female	57.9% (n = 11)
	Male	42.1% (n = 8)
Marital Status		
	Single, never married	100% (n = 19)
Multiples		
	Twin	15.8% (n = 3)

Triplet	5.3% (n = 1)
None	78.9% (n = 15)
Data Collection	

Web-Based Survey

For the web-based survey, participating students received several electronic mail messages explaining the study (see Appendix A), and noted that the entire sibling group had to participate for the student to receive credit. Those who did not wish to participate as well as those who had answered the prescreening questions but did not satisfy the study criteria could do an alternate task (n = 21), which left 53 families. The initial researcher-participant contact was with the target sibling from the introductory speech communication course.

The participants had an encrypted link to an introductory page of the web-based survey. This page included an informed consent form, and once a respondent provided consent, he or she could link to the survey questions. The first part of the survey asked for demographic information about the respondent and his or her siblings. Information concerning the siblings enabled the researcher to crosscheck the accuracy of each person's self-report by comparing demographic data across all reports. This also served as a way to insure that the individual surveys were collated into the correct family units. The questionnaire also contained items concerning the nature of secrets and secret keeping in the sibling group, with a focus on their sibling relationships in emerging adulthood, and not childhood. The participant was asked to focus on each sibling separately so that each dyadic sibling relationship would be distinct.

Elements of the survey derived from on Vangelisti and colleagues' studies of family secrets (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Caughlin &

Timmerman, 2001) with particular emphasis on information concerning sharing and withholding private information in sibling relationships. To obtain data for answering the first research question, the initial items addressed “topics” of private information in sibling relationships. Using the list of twenty topics Vangelisti (1994) generated, each participant indicated how often, if ever, he or she discussed each topic with each sibling. The list of topics included: marital problems/divorce, substance abuse, finances, sexual preferences, illegalities, mental health, extramarital affairs, premarital pregnancy, cohabitation, drinking/partying, sexual relationships, disobedience of rules, physical health problems, death, religion, personality conflict, traditions/stories, dating partners, and grades/achievement in school. The response options included: have talked about; have not talked about; would not talk about; would actively avoid talking about this topic; and does not apply.

The remaining items served to elicit information for use in addressing the second research question and required siblings to indicate why they share or withhold private information from siblings. Specifically, “Thinking about the list of topics from the previous question, indicate why you would or would not disclose to this sibling.” The functions Vangelisti (1994) had identified were listed and each respondent had to select one or more in respect to reasons for sharing or withholding the private information from the particular sibling: it is fun to have a special secret; it provides a thing that bonds us together, it makes us more cohesive; letting it out would spoil the specialness of the secret; others would disapprove; if others found out it would disappoint them; it is hard to predict how others would react to hearing it; I love my sibling; to keep my sibling close; to prevent stress for other family members; it’s no one’s business; it isn’t relevant to

others; it's personal information; others could use the information against me (us); others might take advantage if they knew; my family is generally not very open; and we wouldn't know how to talk about it.

The questionnaire also contained information concerning privacy and confidentiality to ensure that the siblings understood that their participation was voluntary as well as what they said would not be shared with others. To maximize confidentiality, each family was assigned a code, and each participant was assigned a number corresponding to their birth order in the sibling group. A master list of names and families was created with corresponding number (interview numbers). The master list was housed in a locked cabinet. Once the study was complete, the master list, surveys, and the audiotapes were also kept in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed by 2009 in accordance with APA guidelines.

Focus Groups

As indicated above, focus group interviews were designed to generate information about criteria used when choosing to include/exclude another sibling from access to private information (research question #3) and also to provide additional detail and more in-depth discussion of the issues that emerged in the web-based survey data. Participants were instructed to focus on their disclosures during young adulthood. Vangelisti and colleagues' (2001) research involving criteria for revealing family secrets did not serve as a basis for the focus group interviews because it focused solely on disclosure of taboo secrets to non-family members and, thus, did not relate to the goal of the third research question. Since there was currently no existing research relating to criteria for sharing and withholding information from siblings, formative research was necessary to generate

them. The focus groups permitted discoveries of criteria people use in managing information in sibling relationships.

Focus groups are group interview situations, which allow for people to come together and listen to one another, offer comments, and discuss similar situation (Krueger, 1994). For this study, focus groups consisted of participants unrelated to each other. This encouraged participants to disclose information honestly and without concern that their siblings would become aware of what they revealed. The focus group also served as a means of exploring in greater depth the types of information obtained from the initial group of participants in the web-based survey, as well as criteria for sharing and withholding information from siblings. Having diverse individuals for the focus groups was ideal for these purposes because they place dissimilar participants in situations in which group dynamics allow for the surfacing of data that otherwise might not be accessible (Frey & Fontana, 1991; Morgan, 1988).

The questions for the focus group interviews focused on considerations involved in sharing and withholding information from siblings and served as well to elicit additional, more detailed, information concerning the topics and functions of information sharing and withholding in the sibling relationship (see Appendix B for focus group questions). At the beginning of each focus group session, the participants received two informed consent forms. The researcher asked them if they required any clarification about the subject matter or the format of a focus group. The participants then signed both forms. They kept one for their personal records, and returned the other to the researcher.

The participants in the focus groups were to direct their comments to one another rather than to the discussion facilitator. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Data Analysis

Web-based surveys

The web-based surveys were printed and collated according to individual family groups. Because some participants referred to their siblings by nicknames (e.g. Tommy versus Thomas), the demographic data were necessary to cross-validate the coordination of families into accurate groups. Family groups were organized by birth order and had numerical codes. Each family had a distinct number (01-33), and the siblings each a letter code to correspond to their birth order. The oldest sibling was coded as “A”, the second sibling as “B”, and to allow for four sibling families, the youngest sibling was coded as “D” so families with four siblings could have another middle sibling who was coded “C”. This permitted identification of the family group to which any respondent belonged, as well as his or her birth order.

After being sorted by family, the data were initially transferred into Microsoft Excel. Prior to the analysis, however, some preliminary work on the data was necessary. First, the responses to open-ended questions concerning the sibling relationship were transferred to a Microsoft Word file because they could not be treated in numerical terms. Next, the file was converted to a rich text format file and coded by use of NVivo, a textual analysis computer program.

Data were entered into SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and examined for outliers and data entry errors. Answering Research Question One required determining what topics siblings shared and which they withheld from some or all siblings. The data were coded according to the following scheme: 0 = does

not apply; 1 = have talked about; 2 = have not talked about; and 3 = would actively avoid talking about. The responses of “would not talk about” and “would actively avoid talking about this topic” were collapsed into one category because they were related to topics withheld. There were separate tabulations for each sibling pair. For example, for a three-sibling family, sibling A reported his or her communication with sibling B and then, subsequently with sibling D. Sibling B reported on his or her communication with sibling A and then with sibling D. Sibling D reported on his or her communication with sibling A and after completion, subsequently reported on their communication with sibling B. In SPSS, individual families were assigned numeric codes (e.g. 01, 02, 03) and the siblings were coded A, B, C, and D, respective to birth order, so that for a four sibling family, 01A was the oldest sibling in this family, 01B was the oldest middle sibling, 01C was the youngest middle sibling, and 01D was the youngest sibling in the family. For three sibling families, the oldest sibling would be 02A, the middle sibling 02B, and the youngest 02D. This procedure served to keep coding consistent: the oldest was always coded as “A”, and the youngest was always coded as “D.”

To answer the first research question, a frequency analysis was conducted to reveal what topics were shared in none, some, or all of the sibling pairings and which ones were withheld. The response options included: have talked about; have not talked about; would not talk about; would actively avoid talking about this topic; and does not apply. The two responses to indicate not talking about topics were collapsed into a single category indicating the participant withheld discussing the topic. Because the research project focused on sharing and withholding, the response “have not talked about” was not coded since the response did not indicate a desire to share or withhold. The remaining

responses were coded as a 1 for have talked about, and 0 for withholding. This created a dichotomous data set for research question one.

To answer the second research question, a frequency analysis was conducted to reveal the functions of sharing and withholding information in sibling relationships. The listing of functions generated a dichotomous dataset, with each function assigned a value of 1 (yes, this was a function of withholding or revealing private information) or a value of 0 (no, this was not a function of withholding or revealing private information).

Focus Groups

The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim by both the researcher and professional transcribers and then crosschecked by an independent auditor for accuracy. Vocal pauses, stutters, and repetitions were omitted to make the interview easier to read and more compelling (Lindlof, 1995). An interpretive approach was used to capture the essence of the conversations of the participants in the focus groups (Creswell, 1998). This allowed the participants to recount the experience of sharing or withholding information from their siblings, and how they understood those experiences (Maxwell, 1996). Focus group transcripts were analyzed separately for each research question by multiple readings and coding for excerpts that provided information for answers to the research questions: topics, functions, and criteria for sharing or withholding information from siblings.

The qualitative data software program NVivo was used for the management and analysis of the qualitative data. This program allowed for electronic storage of transcribed material, as well as provided methods for coding the data, including linking and collapsing categories, and for data search and retrieval functions.

Interview transcripts were read once for comprehension and then analyzed on a line-by-line basis for information pertaining to three large domains: information about topics, information about reasons, and information about criteria for withholding/revealing. To add to the data from the web-based survey, focus group interview transcripts were first coded for information pertaining to topics and reasons. A priori codes were listed based on the topics identified by Vangelisti (1994) and functions by Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997). Any topics or reasons mentioned by participants that were not represented by the a priori codes were inductively identified and provided with a label for the unique code.

After coding for topics and reasons, the next step in the coding process was to code the interview transcripts for information about criteria for withholding/revealing private information. Since there was no previous research available about the criteria for withholding/revealing private information, no a priori codes were used. All information pertaining to criteria, then, were inductively identified and provided with a code label. When analyzing the transcripts for information about criteria, an inductive qualitative approach was used where all information are coded in to open—or general—codes and then organized by connections and relationships into axial—or organized—codes. Open coding involves naming and categorizing through close examination of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) whereas axial coding entails a series of procedures that allow for new combinations of the data by identifying connections between the categories developed in open coding.

Open coding enabled the researcher to conduct a line-by-line analysis of each transcript to identify various criteria for sharing and withholding information that the

participants mentioned. For example, the following two excerpts from focus group interviews were coded as “interest in topic”: “I guess if I think they’ll care, I’ll tell them” and “Obviously, I’m not going to talk to my younger brother cause he doesn’t care.” Both statements fit the definition of this category which was “siblings indicating a level of concern or care about a topic another sibling may talk about.” Once a criterion was identified in the transcript, it received a label or “code” and a conceptual definition. Constant-comparison techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used in examining each line of the transcript to identify other comments that fit this definition. If a data unit (word, sentence, or phrase) fit the conceptual definition for the code, it was designated as such (e.g. “interest in topic”). If the data unit was determined to fit a unique criterion for sharing or withholding information, a new code and conceptual definition was created. Additionally, the researcher made efforts to label the units with “*in vivo*” codes, using the same language as the participants, which allowed for the most accurate reflection of the participants’ voices. After initial open coding, 14 different codes representing separate criteria for sharing or withholding information were identified.

As coding continued, the relationships among differing concepts were considered (axial coding). Axial coding allowed for the examination of relationships within and between categories of codes and to create overarching groupings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To create these groupings, semantic relationship questions were applied (i.e., “X is a kind of Y,” “X is a reason for doing Y,” “X is a step in Y,” “X is a place to do Y”) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this process, the relationships among the initial 14 codes from the open-coding stage were examined and then on the basis of the relationships

among these codes, were collapsed into a more parsimonious grouping of eight categories. For example, during open coding, the two codes labeled “positive reactions” and “negative reactions” to disclosure served as separate criteria but during axial coding, were collapsed into the category “reaction to disclosure.” Because these codes were conceptually linked and merely valenced in different directions, the decision to collapse these codes served to simplify the explanation and make it more parsimonious-- that is, to have the simplest grouping of criteria with the greatest explanatory power. Also, criterion codes such as history, birth order and no decision were ultimately collapsed into a single category. History referred to whether siblings had a history of sharing private information with other siblings. Birth order indicated whether siblings shared private information because they were close in age as a consequence of their birth order. For example, a middle sibling may share information with the youngest sibling because they are closer in age than the middle sibling and the oldest sibling. Finally, “no decision” referred to comments by focus group participants indicating that they already knew to which sibling they would disclose, and, therefore, did not have to make a conscious decision. After initial coding, these three categories appeared to be related concepts, and were combined into a single category labeled “relational history.”

Chapter 4

Results and Interpretation

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies provided data to answer the three research questions posed in this study, the purpose of which was to discover what topics siblings share and withhold from one another, as well as the reasons that sharing or withholding serve. Specifically, the participants identified which of the 20 different topics in Vangelisti's (1994) list they shared with and withheld from their siblings and which of the 17 functions Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) note they saw such information management serving. Additionally, participants identified the criteria they used when deciding whether or not to share information with siblings.

To determine which topics or reasons were salient to the participants, the researcher chose to focus on those topics or functions that had a simple majority of participants indicating they shared or withheld discussion on certain topics, and did so for certain reasons. For example, topics of private disclosure, which had three possible responses, had to have at least 50% of respondents select a specific response. Furthermore, no other response for that topic could have been more than 30% to identify it as a majority.

This chapter presents the findings for both the web-based survey and focus group interviews, and presents the data from both an individual participant perspective and also the entire sibling group. These data address how young adult siblings share with and withhold information from one another. Focus group excerpts will be used to provide specific illustration of the study findings, enabling for the voices of participants to be

represented in some small way. A summary of the overall findings is provided at the end of the chapter.

Topics

One of the primary goals of this study was to determine whether the typologies posed by Vangelisti and colleagues (e.g., Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) of topics and functions of information management in families pertain specifically to sibling relationships. The first research question was, “What topics do siblings share or withhold from some or all of their other siblings?” Contrary to research concerning family systems, such as that by Vangelisti (1994), the findings from this study suggest there are few topics about which siblings would withhold information from one another, participants in this study indicated several topics that were considered irrelevant or withheld from siblings. Because participants could choose “does not apply” for any topic in the web-based survey, the valid number of responses for a topic ranged from 79 to 104 ($n = 104$). Topics relating to marital issues such as extramarital affairs and divorce were reported as not applying to sibling disclosures; whereas, conventional secrets such as religion, grades in school, and dating partners were considered applicable topics to all participants.

Although all siblings reported sharing private information within sibling groups, across topic categories, siblings shared information differentially. Siblings who reported talking about a topic with one sibling indicated that they would not necessarily share that information with all siblings. Of the 20 categories Vangelisti (1994) determined as topics family members *withhold* from one another, four surfaced as ones about which 50 percent or more of the participants reported sharing information with all siblings:

drinking/partying, traditions/stories, dating partners, and grades/achievement in school (see Table 3). Interestingly, these topics represented four of the eight topics that all participants indicated applied to their sibling group.

Table 3: Topics shared with all siblings

Topic	Shared with none	Shared with some	Shared with all
Drinking/Partying	21.2%	27.8%	51.0%
Traditions/Stories	16.3%	17.4%	66.3%
Dating Partners	25.0%	23.1%	51.9%
Grades/Achievement in School	17.3%	9.6%	73.1%

Fifty-one (51%) of the participants reportedly discussed drinking and partying with all siblings. Eighty-two (78.8%) indicated discussing it with at least one sibling. Focus group data indicated that gender may be a contributing factor for deciding which topics to talk about with other siblings. For example, one male stated, “There’s definitely certain things-- guy things-- that I will talk to my brother about which I would never say anything about in front of my sisters cause I don’t want them to know anything about them.” In the case of drinking and partying, the female focus group participants with all female siblings commented that they talk about drinking as just part of their everyday lives. As one woman commented, “We talk about everything- talk about drinking.” However, when focus group participants had a sibling not of the same gender, they indicated more reluctance to discuss drinking and partying. As one woman pointed out, “I don’t tell my brother more stuff about drinking and guys cause he gets into the preacher thing. I just don’t want to hear it.” Another woman, however, had a very different reason when she explained why she chose not to discuss her drinking activities

with her brother. “I don’t talk about drinking in front of my brother cause he’s four years sober, and, he used to be an alcoholic so that would not be cool.”

Seventy-eight (75%) participants discussed dating partners with at least one sibling, and 54 (51.9%) discussed this topic with all of their siblings. Some participants, however, viewed talking about dating as more of a normal activity, not a private matter involving secrets. One woman commented: “I talk to them [brother and sister] a lot [about our boyfriends and girlfriends] just like everyday activit[ies]” and later noted that some of her everyday activities include talking to “about guys and stuff.” Another stated that she and her sister “talk about anything- talk about drinking, talking about guys, talk about really anything” and yet another noted that she and her sisters had “conversations about guys or random nights going out.”

Among focus group participants, although more females than males reported sharing information about dating with siblings, more of the male participants indicated that they shared private information generally with their siblings, too. “It was my brother who I’m closest with. Honestly, I would share anything with him.” Another male indicated, “I don’t think I’ve ever withheld anything from my brother in my life.” Although the males did share information, the data indicated that they tended to disclose to brothers rather than sisters. Females similarly indicated that they disclosed more to their sisters than brothers.

In addition to dating partners, traditions and stories are also a very integral part of siblings’ lives. Sixty-nine participants (66.3%) indicated that they talked about this topic with their entire sibling group, and 18 other participants (17.4%) acknowledged

discussing it with at least one of their siblings. One female focus group member noted that the shared childhood history she had with her brothers remains a topic of discussion.

I love getting together with the whole family and talking with my brothers about back in the day. It's like some of the greatest conversations when we just remember all that goofy stuff from childhood. Those are great. I feel bad for people who don't have siblings to reminisce. What do you do?

Many focus group participants felt a sense of connection with siblings because they shared similar experiences and backgrounds; that is, they enjoyed sharing their experiences with siblings since they viewed the world with similar perspectives. As one female noted,

Just because you grew up in the same house, you had the same upbringing, and it's like you think about things in the same way. A lot of the same things. I mean, I guess to some degree, or at least you're familiar with theirs and them with yours.

Depending upon placement in the birth order, many siblings have known other siblings for their entire lives, and the history of their relationship provided them a foundation for communicating with those other siblings.

Grades and achievement in school were also topics about which siblings exchanged information. Seventy-six (73.1%) had discussed grades with their entire sibling group, and 86 (82.7%) had talked about school to at least one sibling. Although many focus group participants felt that their siblings did not particularly care about their schoolwork, they still felt a need to talk about it. "Probably the topic of my major generally doesn't interest them [my siblings] very much. But I do tell them. I usually don't talk about academics very much with them or try to compare myself with them."

Another focus group respondent commented that even though he felt his academics are of little importance to his siblings, that did not keep him from talking about it.

I always try to inform them. . . I'm a double major of history and theatre. Theatre you can't relate, except for just trying to give a point to them, but like the history part, just trying to throw it at them. It doesn't work, but I still try.

Half of the topics identified by Vangelisti (1994) as topics of family secrets were not ones the informants reported sharing with siblings. At least 50% of those completing the web-based study indicated that these topics were not discussed (see Table 4). The focus group results indicated that many of these topics did not entail any secrets.

Table 4: Topics a majority did not discuss with any siblings

Topic	Shared with none	Shared with some	Shared with all
Marital Problems/Divorce	69.0%	20.2%	10.0%
Substance Abuse	67.7%	18.3%	14.0%
Sexual preferences	61.6%	24.2%	14.1%
Illegalities	50.5%	25.8%	23.7%
Mental Health	58.3%	23.3%	18.4%
Extramarital Affairs	84.8%	10.2%	5.1%
Physical/Psychological Abuse	79.3%	9.8%	10.9%
Premarital Pregnancy	70.4%	18.4%	11.2%
Cohabitation	60.6%	22.2%	17.2%
Sexual Relationships	56.7%	29.8%	13.5%

The majority of the topics in Table 4 were ones focus group interviews, reported not discussing at all. The topics reportedly not discussed were: marital problems/divorce, substance abuse, sexual preferences, mental health, extramarital affairs, physical/psychological abuse, and cohabitation. The remaining three topics, illegalities,

premarital pregnancy, and sexual relationships were ones focus group members mentioned discussing.

In the survey, the topic of illegalities showed an almost even split between being shared with siblings (49.5%, n = 48) or not (50.5% n = 49). This topic also was one that participants discussed in conjunction with the topic of drinking/partying, as indicated by the following excerpts from the focus groups. Some of the focus group participants had discussed drinking and smoking with their siblings while they were in high school. However, those focus group participants also indicated that they discussed illegal activity only after high school. As one female focus group member noted:

When my brother visited my sister like the first time at college, and he was still in high school, he tried his first cigarette with my sister. I would never know that, until now. I found out like a year ago. I thought, I was like, "What?"

Another focus group participant discussed her experience of sharing information about her illegal high school activities with her brother. "So we had this really goofy conversation . . . and it turns out that we both drank 40's of Coors Light. That was what we drank in high school."

Only one member of a focus group indicated discussing the topic of premarital pregnancy. Results from the web-based survey, moreover, were consistent. Only eleven (11.2%) reported discussing it with their entire sibling group, and only slightly more did so with one or more other siblings. The one participant who discussed premarital pregnancy discussed his older sister getting pregnant in high school and his response to it. "[My older sister] did get pregnant in high school. So, I was, like, 'Yes. I can't screw up in high school now. My parents won't get upset.' But I, I should have been there for her

the day she was talking to my parents about everything.” Although the participant did not discuss the topic specifically with his sister, his response indicated a feeling of responsibility for supporting his sister.

Not many of the focus group participants reportedly disclosed information concerning sexual relationships to siblings. This topic led to the following exchange from one of the focus groups.

Female 1: I have two brothers so like I wouldn't talk about sex at all. (speaking to a male) I'm sure you wouldn't want to hear about that with your little sister.

Male: No, I'd never talk about sex with [my younger sister or my older sister] I don't wanna know what they do.

Female 6: I don't talk about sex with my brother or sister either because my sister is so much older than me- she's 8 years older than me and my brother- I'd never talk to my brother about that stuff.

Female 5: Yeah we don't really talk about sex either just cause my little sister is really sweet and innocent and like, you know, I don't really talk about that.

Although these participants were discussing why they did not disclose about sexual relationships, the participants did not necessarily consider sexual relationships to be matters of secrecy. Rather, they viewed the topic as something personal.

In another focus group, a participant explained why she does talk to her sisters about sexual relationships. “Me and my sisters are all very similar when it comes to sex and other things like that.” Consistent with focus group findings, groups consisting of all female siblings in the web-based survey also showed a higher tendency to share private disclosures across all siblings within the family, rather than single out one sibling.

There were also a number of topics that participants viewed as neutral; that is, they neither actively shared nor withheld information concerning them from their siblings. These topics were not consistent to the criteria of having a majority of participants select one of the three possible responses. These topics were: finances, disobedience of rules, physical health problems, death, religion, and personality conflict (see Table 5). A majority of the participants reported sharing information about these topics with siblings when the responses for “shared with some” and “shared with all” were combined. The topics in the web-based survey that nearly had a majority of responses in one of the three categories: death (47.7% in “shared with none”), physical health problems (41.3% in “shared with none”), and religion (43.3% in “shared with all”), were ones members of the focus groups reportedly did not discuss. Of the six topics, only personality conflict and finances were even mentioned in the focus group interviews.

Table 5: Topics discussed with some siblings

Topic	Shared with none	Shared with some	Shared with all
Finances	38.8%	25.2%	35.0%
Disobedience of Rules	35.9%	30.2%	34.0%
Physical Health Problems	41.3%	25.0%	33.7%
Death	47.7%	24.3%	31.1%
Religion	30.8%	26.0%	43.3%
Personality Conflict	39.4%	22.2%	38.5%

In the focus groups, information relating to personality conflicts reportedly involved either about roommates or other siblings. One female focus group participant indicated that she would talk to her sisters about “friend issues like roommate issues. I’ll call home ‘cause I have three roommates. I live in an apartment so if anything really

happens between us I'll call home and talk to [my sisters] about that." Another female focus group participant said:

When I was like fighting with one of my romantic partners friends a couple years ago, it was like really, really little, but it caused that much tension cause we lived together, so I wanted to call home and talk to my sister so I have an ally, cause I felt if I said anything to one of my roommates, it would have got back to her, so I like to call my sister and bitch and then I know that she wouldn't find out, and then she [my sister] went, "Oh, my God. That's so messed up." And I was like "Ahh, finally."

Yet another focus group participant stated that she talked to her sister about her roommate problems, but not her brother. "I talk to her about my friends like my roommates and anything that's going on with them. 'Cause I live with five girls. So, but, yeah, my brother, I don't really talk to him about that stuff."

Only a few focus group participants mentioned the topic of finances. A male focus group participant observed that "I don't really tell anyone about things like my financial troubles here at [college] and how I got into them." Another female member indicated that she chose not to discuss the subject with her siblings because they are in a different place, financially, than she was.

I watch carefully what I say to [my brother], and, actually, now since she graduated and working, sometimes I watch what I'm saying to [my sister], too, just cause I don't want to burden her with insignificant things like, "I need money to go to the bar." They're talking about buying cars and buying a house. I'm, like, "Wow! I just bought a bike." That was my big purchase.

Because young adulthood is marked by significant changes, there may also be considerable disparity among siblings' lifestyles and financial obligations as siblings experience changes at different times. One male commented that he felt his financial situation was "insignificant" compared to his sister's because although he might complain about not having enough money to go to the bars, she had to pay the electricity bill.

In addition to the topics that Vangelisti (1994) identified, focus group interviews revealed an *emergent topic* of interest among siblings: family members. One member indicated often talking about parents with siblings and observed that they were "all in cahoots bitching about parents. We always talk about parents." Some also indicated that they talk about their other siblings. For instance, "My brother's really [been] immature for the longest time and so me and my sister would bitch about him a lot together."

It is important to understand what kinds of information siblings share; however, that does not reveal much about secret keeping. For that, it was necessary to identify information that individuals electively withheld from siblings. To determine which, if any, of the topics Vangelisti (1994) identified participants considered to be secret in the sibling relationship entailed noting what they said they would avoid talking about with their siblings (see Table 6). As Table 6 shows, siblings generally did not perceive information about any of these topics as secret.

Table 6: Topics Withheld in the Sibling Relationship

Topic	Withheld from none	Withheld from some	Withheld from all
Marital Problems/Divorce	88.8%	7.5%	3.8%
Substance Abuse	88.1%	6.5%	5.4%
Finances	87.4%	10.7%	1.9%
Sexual preferences	74.7%	14.1%	11.1%
Illegalities	84.5%	10.3%	5.2%
Mental Health	86.4%	11.7%	1.9%
Extramarital Affairs	75.9%	12.7%	11.4%
Physical/Psychological Abuse	83.7%	10.9%	5.4%
Premarital Pregnancy	77.6%	13.3%	9.2%
Cohabitation	88.9%	5.0%	6.1%
Drinking/Partying	90.4%	9.6%	0.0%
Sexual Relationships	62.5%	22.1%	15.4%
Disobedience of Rules	90.3%	7.7%	1.9%
Physical Health Problems	92.3%	4.8%	2.9%
Death	92.2%	5.8%	1.9%
Religion	91.3%	7.7%	1.0%
Personality Conflict	95.2%	2.9%	1.9%
Traditions/Stories	98.0%	1.9%	0.0%
Dating Partners	92.3%	7.7%	0.0%
Grades/Achievement in School	97.1%	2.9%	0.0%

A substantial majority of those who completed the survey reported that they did not withhold information about any of these topics from their siblings. However, there was one topic for which many participants *did* indicate purposefully withholding information from their siblings—sexual relationships. For this topic, 37.5% of participants indicated they had withheld communicating about this topic with at least some of their siblings. This was considerably greater than any other category.

Reasons

The second research question in this study was, “What are the perceived FUNCTIONS of sharing or withholding private information from siblings?” Although Vangelisti (1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) used the term “function” in previous scholarship, the 5 functions identified in this research were aggregate categories of 17 “reasons” for revealing or withholding private information. In this study, the web-based survey included the seventeen items that Vangelisti (1994) identified as reasons for sharing or withholding family secrets and asked siblings to select those that explained why they shared or withheld information from their siblings (see Table 7). Therefore, henceforth in this document, the term *reasons* will be used instead of the term functions, except when referring directly to Vangelisti’s work.

Answering this question involved a two-layer analytical process. Using a similar process to the analysis of the information about topics of private information, there were a large number of the *a priori* “reasons” that comprised the initial codebook. For only three of the possible 17 reasons did a majority of those in the survey choose them as reasons why they disclose to their siblings. Those reasons were: “It provides a thing that bonds us together,” and “I love my sibling,” and “To keep my sibling close” as a reason for sharing private information with siblings. The latter case, however, also had a substantial number of participants (36.5%) cited it as a reason for withholding information.

When focus group participants were asked why they shared or withheld private information from their siblings, the overarching reason was because of the strong link

between siblings. As one focus group participant commented, “They just can’t leave no matter what you tell them. They’re still related to you.” Another said, “They have to love us,” a sentiment echoed by a participant in a different focus group: “I look at my brothers as like they are going to love me no matter what, right? So I can tell them.”

Table 7: Perceived reasons for sharing and withholding information from siblings

	Chosen for none	Chosen for some	Chosen for all
<u>Bonding</u>			
It is fun to have a special secret	84.6%	12.5%	2.9%
It provides a thing that bonds us together	28.8%	22.2%	49.0%
It makes us more cohesive	50.0%	17.3%	32.7%
Letting it out would spoil the specialness of the secret	99.0%	1.0%	0.0%
<u>Evaluation</u>			
Others would disapprove	88.5%	9.6%	1.9%
It others found out it would disappoint them	80.8%	13.4%	5.8%
It is hard to predict how others would react to hearing it	73.1%	17.3%	9.6%
<u>Maintenance</u>			
I love my sibling	28.8%	17.4%	53.8%
To keep my sibling close	36.5%	23.1%	40.4%
To prevent stress for other family members	74.0%	11.5%	13.5%
<u>Privacy</u>			
It's no one's business	80.8%	12.5%	6.7%
It isn't relevant to others	79.8%	14.4%	5.8%
It's personal information	64.4%	16.4%	19.2%
<u>Defense</u>			
Others could use the information against me (us)	91.3%	3.8%	4.8%
Others might take advantage if they knew	91.3%	6.7%	1.9%
<u>Communication</u>			
My family is generally not very open	91.3%	6.7%	1.9%
We wouldn't know how to talk about it	84.6%	12.5%	2.9%

The underlying factors of bonding and maintenance were among the most commonly cited reasons why siblings shared private information with their siblings. One

focus group participant noted this clearly in discussing a felt need to share information with his brothers.

Everyone should know their siblings [their] entire life, and I feel real comfortable with my brothers. I can always guarantee that I can tell my brothers if I can't tell somebody else. Then the other part, too, is keeping that relationship going. If you don't talk to your siblings, eventually you'll lose that relationship with them over the course of years. Honestly I don't want that to happen. I like having my brothers around, and I like talking to them.

Other focus group participants agreed that maintaining relationships with their siblings was important, but acknowledged that it sometimes felt more like a responsibility than a legitimate desire to share information with their siblings. For instance, "There's still stuff that I'm not totally comfortable sharing with them, but I feel like it's kind of my job to. Sometimes it's more just like an obligation thing." One focus group participant who was away at college while her older and younger sisters were at home indicated that maintaining her relationships with her sisters was very important. "I choose to share stuff with my sisters because they're both at home, and I'm the only one that's out of the house now. So it's kind of like my link to stay really close to them." Other focus group members agreed with this participant, as did this female focus group participant who indicated that she felt "left out if I don't know what's going on" since her other sisters lived at home. She concluded by saying that "I just need to know since I'm not there."

In addition to maintaining relationships, focus group participants also indicated that they shared private information with siblings because of the bond they felt with a specific sibling or with the sibling group as a whole. One focus group participant noted

that he shared information with his younger sister because, “I feel really close to my one younger sister because we really grew up together and we’re really close.” However, he went on to comment that his older sister “wasn’t around for really a lot when I was younger, even for when I was growing up in teen years, so I didn’t get to see her so much. We really didn’t develop that bond.”

Although the close sibling bond from childhood is an indicator of why siblings share private information, it is possible for siblings to become closer in young adulthood and subsequently begin to share private information. A female focus group participant said of her sibling group of sisters:

I mean when we were younger, of course, we had our petty little fights about stupid stuff like I wanted to wear her shirt, but I think as we got older, I think we’ve definitely gotten a lot closer, just, just kind of closer. It’s weird to hear stories about other people about how they hate their siblings.

Another focus group participant felt that if she shared more private information with her siblings, their “relationship would probably be stronger.”

The focus group data suggested that siblings also seem to serve as a form of mutual support and counsel, and siblings are willing to share private information with their other siblings to gain this support and advice. One focus group participant commented on the strong link between siblings in the following way. “Even if you might not have the best relationship with your brother and sister, you know that you can always fall back on them.” A male focus group participant who was the youngest sibling in his sibling group indicated that he shares information with his siblings to obtain advice. “My two siblings are oldest, and probably maybe they’ve been through it and they could help

me. I feel I can get some help from them, get some perspective on whatever I'm dealing with." Another focus group participant indicated that, "It helps to have someone who know[s] how I feel."

In addition to why siblings share private information, there are also reasons why they choose to withhold this information. The main reason focus group participants indicated for withholding private information was protection, either for oneself or for a sibling. The motivation in the first instance seemed to be a fear of being judged by or disappointing one's siblings. Although focus group participants indicated that they are not fearful of losing their siblings' love, they nevertheless reportedly refrained from sharing possibly damaging information to them. As one female focus group participant commented,

It hurts more to know that my sister is kind of judging me, and I don't want my sister to look at me in a different way, but there are a lot of things that my sisters have done that I wasn't very thrilled with, and I know I got really disappointed, and I don't want them to be disappointed in me.

Participants were very cognizant of how they perceive their siblings opinion of them and took that into account when deciding whether or not to share private information. A male focus group participant who had indicated that he told his siblings most things about his life said he would draw the line at disclosing "stupid" or "embarrassing" things because he was concerned it could "change their approval of me." An older sister indicated that her younger sister is "real sweet and innocent" and noted that she felt "bad telling her things that I do up here [at college] when she's at home."

Many focus group participants agreed that they would choose not to share private information if doing so would hurt their siblings. According to one, “The only thing I won’t share is something that’s gonna hurt [my sister’s] feelings or self-esteem.” Another focus group participant who was a younger brother commented that he held his older sister in “high esteem” and would choose to keep private information from her to “maintain her feelings.” Other focus group participants also indicated that they withhold private information from them to protect their siblings from stress. As one said, “If [the information] would make them worry, and they don’t need to worry about something at that particular moment, then I don’t tell them.”

The data suggested that young adult siblings share information as a way to maintain their relationships and to bond. In addition, they selectively choose what private information to share with siblings as a way to protect themselves, as well as their siblings, from disclosures that could be harmful.

Criteria

The third research question was, “What criteria do siblings use when choosing to include/exclude another sibling from access to private information?” Criteria are standards a one uses to make decisions—in this case whether to share or withhold private information with siblings. Focus group data provided a basis for answering this question. The participants identified how they decide with which siblings, if any, to share private information. For many participants, the criteria for sharing and withholding were implicit, and as such, not necessarily something of which they were consciously aware. Nevertheless, two categories emerged in the focus group discussions: *predetermined criteria* and *criteria specific to the situation* (see Table 8). The first category includes

one has stored and uses in deciding whether or not to disclose information to a sibling. The second category consists of criteria that are specific to the private information at hand.

Table 8: Criteria for sharing and withholding private information

Fixed	Gender
	Relational History
	Personality
	Share with Parents
	Reaction (positive or negative)
Situational	
	Life Experience
	Interest in Topic
	Physical Location

One of the main reasons informants mentioned choosing to disclose private information to their siblings, was gender of the target. As one male commented, “I probably wouldn’t talk about sex and that sort of thing with [my sister], but I would probably let only my brother know what I’m doing.” A male with three older sisters was adamant about not talking about the opposite sex. “I wouldn’t say anything about women.” Yet another male commented that, “My brother and I would talk about topics that might be something that would hurt my sister’s feelings, but my brother and I can talk about it.”

The relational history with the target sibling also seemed to be a factor when considering disclosing information to siblings. Siblings who had been close since childhood tended to disclose to those siblings. The age of the target sibling seemed to be linked to how close the siblings felt to one another. As a male participant noted,

I feel really close to my one younger sister is because we really grew up together, and we're really close. We did a lot of stuff together. We played sports together and that sort of thing. But my one sister, who's the older sister, she wasn't around for really a lot when I was younger, even for when I was growing up more, like, in teen years, so, I really didn't get to see her so much. So, we really didn't develop that bond. So, I wouldn't really feel as comfortable talking to her with as much stuff. But with my [younger] sister, since we're so close, I tell her a lot more.

Although siblings often maintain the close bonds developed in childhood, such bonds can also develop in adulthood, which may prompt one to share private information with such siblings as well as those to whom he or she was close to in childhood.

In addition to gender, age, and relational closeness, siblings also indicated making decisions about those with whom to share private information on the basis of the personality of the prospective target. One female participant noted that her sisters had very different demeanors, which affected her decisions to share or withhold private information.

My sisters both have very different personalities, so it's not necessarily their age or what they're doing. I can share stuff easier with my middle sister. She's less judgmental and more interested in giving me advice than telling me what I should do. [My older sister]'s just more like she's mom so I tend to not tell her things when I don't feel like being judged and telling me what to do.

Another participant indicated that it was not that her siblings' personalities that differed but that *her* personality was different from each of theirs and the matching or

mismatching of personalities was what determined with whom she shares information. “It depends on personality a lot, because my younger sister and I are kind of like polar opposites in a way, and my older sister, our personalities are a lot alike, so she can kind of relate.”

Another criterion for sharing or withholding private information from siblings was whether the prospective target might share the information with parents. Although there is a marked change in autonomy as siblings leave the parental home for college, there is still a certain level of dependence on parents, as well as younger siblings who have not yet left home. Because of this, the notion of a sibling’s telling the parents of others’ private disclosures was a major criterion. As one participant said in respect to her older sister, the possibilities of her informing parents played a key role. Specifically:

Even with my sister, she’s 25; sometimes she does tattletale on me. Still, not as much as she used to before, but still there’s certain things that I feel she would still tell on me. Like when she was here, and I wasn’t going to class, for instance, she would call my parents and tell them. ‘You’re paying for her, and she’s not going and doing this.’ Just, it’s annoying.

Still other participants noted that telling parents is standard for some of their siblings, even if the sibling is specifically requested to not inform the parents. For instance, “That’s the bottom line. That’s the way, how I present this, like, ‘Promise you won’t tell Mom.’ But, it’s like that’s an automatic line right to my parents. So, I, I don’t need that.”

The final criterion participants reported using when choosing to share or withhold private information from their siblings was the perceived feedback or response they

believed they would elicit. Most indicated that they generally had a good idea what kind of response disclosures of private information would evoke, and took that into account when choosing with which, if any, sibling to disclose. As one participant said, “It’s more or less what I want to hear cause I know what kind of response I’m gonna get from each of them.”

As one might imagine, perceived negative reactions from siblings typically precluded sharing private information with that sibling. A younger brother indicated that he chose not to share private information with one of his older sisters because “if I tell her and what I should do, she’ll just keep talking about what I should do, and I have no need for that.” A participant who was the youngest in her sibling group lamented that when she shares her stories, her brother “gets into the preacher thing” and lectures her rather than listen to her, and because of that, “I don’t want to hear it.” Because of the history of negative reactions she has received from him, she chose to disclose little to him.

Although young adult siblings are cognizant of negative reactions from their siblings, they are equally aware of positive reactions. As one participant indicated, because she did not react negatively to topics that the oldest sister did, her middle sister disclosed to her. “My middle sister’s dating a guy that I don’t think my family really approves of, and she said that she can come to me because I won’t yell at her, whereas my other sister would.”

Although there were a number of criteria that participants indicated as generally applicable, there were also situation specific criteria when they were deciding whether and if so, and to whom, they would disclose private information. The ones that surfaced

were: life experience, physical location of target sibling, interest of the target sibling to the information, the topic, and the probable reaction of the target sibling upon hearing the private information.

When choosing to disclose private information to siblings, one criterion that participants indicated as situation specific was the life experience of the target sibling. According to one male participant, “If I know they’ve been through something similar, I might kind of talk to them. But if it’s something that I think they have no perspective on, I’m not going to tell them about that.” Because participants and their siblings differ in age, with the exception of multiples, younger siblings tended to feel that their older siblings had experienced similar events in their lives, and as a result, the younger ones could rely on their older siblings for advice. Conversely, older siblings tended to indicate that life experience is the very reason why they chose *not* to tell their younger siblings about certain events; younger siblings, they believed, were simply not able to relate to some matters. Younger siblings, moreover, realize that they often did not have the same experiences as their older counterparts, and, hence, could not appreciate certain types of disclosures. One female participant said of her older sisters, “I think my sisters hold back is just, in general, that I can’t relate as well. They can talk to each other easier about working, boyfriends, and whatnot. I just don’t have the levels to relate to them.”

In addition to life experiences, some participants also considered how interested their other siblings might be in a topic as a criterion for determining whether or not they would disclose to them. In general, the participants reported concerns about sharing information with their siblings that they might perceive as unimportant. As a male participant pointed out, although he was close to both siblings, as well as realized that

both of them might eventually come in possession of private information, he chose which sibling to tell first on the basis of his perception of their interest levels.

If it's something that I want to share that's more controversial, you know, something I did [that was] stupid, I'll tell my brother. I talk to him because I can. He has that personality; whereas, if it's something more serious, like a relationship or something, I'll go to my sister cause that would just fall into her category. I mean, eventually if it's something serious, they're both going to know, but as far as who I choose to share it with first, I would choose a category in stuff that I think they would be interested in.

Some participants also indicated that the topic of the disclosure also determined which sibling, if any, with whom to share private information. A female informant who was a triplet with two brothers indicated, "Usually I have very distinct types of topics where I tell one sibling and not the other." A male participant who had an older and younger brother agreed with this sentiment that certain topics seem more appropriate for different siblings. "If it's more life-related, then I'd probably tell my older brother first before I tell [my younger brother] 'cause I think it'd be more interesting to him being he's in the working world and being engaged and that sort of thing."

For members of the focus groups who indicated their entire sibling group was generally more open, the criterion of physical location was a consideration in choosing to disclose private information. Those in close in proximity to their entire sibling groups indicated that the sibling in whose company they found themselves determined the decision to disclose. As one member of an all female sibling group said,

Who I tell kind of depends on like the situation, like who's there during the

conversation. If we get into a conversation about some topic that I have someone to talk about or whatever, it just depends on if my older sister's there or my twin sister's there and since I hang out with my twin sister more, it's usually her, but it's not like I choose to tell her parts. It's just that I hang out with her more.

It is important to note that this criterion was not universal, since siblings groups whose members are not emotionally close form dyads that are more likely to disclose to one another rather than simply sharing with the first sibling who is available.

Gender Differences

Because the focus group interviews revealed that gender seemed to be a factor when determining whether or not to disclose, a post-hoc Pearson's chi-square analysis was performed to determine if gender differences would be discovered in the web-based survey data. The results indicated that there were statistically significance differences between males and females when sharing private information on certain topics (see Table 9).

Analysis of whole sibling groups indicated that all female groups seemed to disclose more information to the group as a whole and about more topics than females in mixed gender sibling groups or all male groups. Although there were only three all male sibling groups in the web-based survey, the results indicated that these groups tend to disclose the least compared with all other combinations of sibling groupings.

Table 9: Gender and Topic

	<i>df</i>	x^2	<i>p</i>
Marital Problems/Divorce	4	6.7	.15
Substance Abuse	4	3.2	.53
Finances	4	8.3	.08
Sexual preferences	4	4.2	.38
Illegalities	4	7.4	.12
Mental Health	3	6.5	.09
Extramarital Affairs	4	2.8	.59
Physical/Psychological Abuse	4	5.7	.22
Premarital Pregnancy	4	4.5	.34
Cohabitation	4	9.2	.03*
Drinking/Partying	3	11.6	.02*
Sexual Relationships	4	6.8	.15
Disobedience of Rules	4	17.7	.00*
Physical Health Problems	4	12.2	.02*
Death	4	13.6	.01*
Religion	4	8.7	.07
Personality Conflict	4	8.4	.08
Traditions/Stories	4	9.3	.06
Dating Partners	4	13.0	.01*
Grades/Achievement in School	2	8.2	.02*

* $p < .05$

There were no statistically significant gender differences for taboo topics. However, three topics involving rule violation secrets revealed a significant relationship: cohabitation ($x^2 = 9.237, p < .05$), drinking/partying ($x^2 = 11.617, p < .05$), and disobedience of rules ($x^2 = 17.718, p < .05$), with more females sharing information about these topics than males. Finally, for conventional private information, there were four topics showing significant gender differences; physical health problems ($x^2 = 12.240, p < .05$), death ($x^2 = 13.579, p < .05$), dating partners ($x^2 = 13.034, p < .05$), and

grades/achievement in school ($\chi^2 = 8.189, p < .05$). More females than males shared private information across all three of these topics.

The results of this study suggest that siblings share private information about a great many topics with one another and elect to withhold private information for only a select few topics. The participants tended to use maintenance and bonding functions as reasons for sharing or withholding private information, as well as protection of self or sibling. Criteria for sharing and withholding private information varied but the participants tended to have two categories of criteria: a fixed list based on the long and comprehensive history siblings had with each other, and situation specific. The final chapter discusses the implications of these findings by using Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory as a lens.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

Principal Findings

This study focused on the sharing and withholding of private information in young adult sibling group relationships. Previous research involving family secrets (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) served as a foundation for this present study. Because this dissertation study focused on a specific family relationship, siblings, rather than the entire family system, the findings contribute to a more precise understanding of the disclosure of private information within a particular family unit. The results suggest that although Vangelisti's earlier work is an excellent starting point for understanding disclosure in family relationships, it does not fully provide an accurate portrayal of sharing and withholding private information in the sibling relationship. Although the topics about which siblings decided to share or withhold information were similar to Vangelisti (1994), many of these topics were much less salient to siblings and additional topics arose in this current study--such as private information about other siblings. Given the findings of Vangelisti's work, the results of this study were somewhat surprising. Vangelisti (1994) identified a significant list of topics of private information withheld from family members, however it is noteworthy that few siblings in the present study indicated they withheld disclosure from their own siblings regarding these same topics. In fact, the majority of these topics identified in the research literature were not even viewed as secretive by the participants.

One of the most striking differences of this study from Vangelisti and colleagues research is the narrow range of reasons sibling report for sharing and withholding secrets from one another. Although Vangelisti and colleagues identified 17 reasons for sharing and withholding secrets from family members and these reasons were grouped into 6 different functions, siblings in this present study reported only two of these functions (bonding and relationship maintenance) as most relevant to their experience.

In general, the results of this study indicated that young adult siblings tend to share private information with each other, with a tendency to share more intimate information--such as sexual relationships--with siblings of the same gender, especially within sibling groups comprised of all females. Moreover, the reasons cited for sharing private information most frequently involved “maintaining the sibling relationship” and “bonding” with siblings. The focus group data suggested that these reasons become especially salient to siblings as they begin to live apart from one another and lead separate lives.

The siblings in this study stated multiple reasons for choosing specific siblings with whom to share private information, including disclosure to siblings who were closest in age and with whom they had a close relationship since childhood. These findings suggest that siblings who have had permeable relational boundaries in childhood tend to maintain them well into young adulthood. However, many of the siblings in the focus groups indicated that their relationships with their sibling group had positively evolved since leaving the parental home for college, and that sibling relationships that were not close during childhood had started to become more so and tended to be characterized by increasing amounts of disclosure.

Contributions to Family Secrets Literature

It is important to note that the present study was not a replication of Vangelisti's earlier research on family secrets, but instead was an extension of that work. Vangelisti's work identified family secrets as an aggregate of multiple relationship types with heavy emphasis on the parent-child relationship and made generalizations about the nature of secrets to the family as a whole. The current project focused on a specific type of family relationship, the young adult sibling relationship, to determine if it was appropriate to examine family relationships as one entity rather than considering each type of family relationship to be unique.

The topics of secrets among family members that Vangelisti (1994) identified were not as universally acknowledged as salient among the sibling participants in this study. Given that all web-based survey participants were young adult siblings, and most of them were single ($n = 89$; 85.6%), topics relating marriage (marital problems/divorce and extramarital affairs) were not ones they generally perceived as applying to their lives. Additionally, because a majority of the participants were students ($n = 61$; 58.7%), topics of greatest significance related to college life (e.g., drinking/partying, dating partners, and grades/achievement in school). Data pertaining to topics about the participants actively withheld information from siblings both the web-based survey and focus group discussions indicated that there simply may not be much private information siblings withhold from one another.

Although there were key differences in Vangelisti's (1994) work and the current findings, there was also some similarity. The results from the present study corroborate the types of secretive topics identified by Vangelisti (1994): taboo, rule violations, and conventional secrets. As expected, the topics that were considered taboo were not ones siblings discussed, with the exception of finances. However, many participants did not consider most of the taboo topics as even relevant to sibling disclosures. Rule violations were reportedly matters of discussion in sibling groups, with topics involving conventional topics of private information that siblings most often discussed.

The current study also revealed that there were gender differences in sharing and withholding private information. Consistent with research by Floyd (1996), who discovered that female siblings consider self-disclosure to be more important than cross-sex or male siblings, the results of several chi-square analyses indicated that females shared private information more than males.

Of the seventeen functions Vangelisti (1994) identified as reasons for sharing or withholding private information, among participants in the present study the majority of participants reported a relational maintenance function. A largest number of participants selected "I love my sibling" and "to keep my sibling close" as reasons for choosing to share or withhold private information from their siblings. The focus group data reinforced the survey data, with the data emphasizing the importance of relational maintenance to disclosure decisions in the sibling relationship. The participants also noted that choosing to share private information with siblings was a way to enhance the sibling bond. An emergent reason for sharing or withholding private information that arose in the focus group interviews was "protection." Vangelisti (1994) did not identify

protection as a reason for choosing to share or withhold private information, yet it seems logical that withholding information can protect the target person, especially if it involves information about him or her. The participants tended to be conscious of how another sibling might react to hearing certain information, and, as much as possible, sought to protect their siblings.

The results from both components of this study indicated that siblings share private information with each other as a way to maintain their sibling relationships, which seems to be more salient as they leave the parental home for college and often become separated from the sibling group for the first time. When siblings no longer live together, their everyday lives no longer intersect, and as a result, their communication patterns change, similar to other long distance relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Guerrero, Elvov, and Wabnik (1993) determined that for relationships to escalate or remain stable, maintenance strategies of openness, positivity, and assurances may be necessary. For siblings, this would include deliberate sharing of personal information, and changes in privacy boundaries.

The focus group results suggested that many individuals increase sharing with a sibling when at least one has left the parental home for college. This finding is consistent with Myers and Knox (1998) who observed that the reason siblings communicate more in young adulthood is that there may be more information to convey as life changes, such as new experiences relating to college, marriage and childbirth, occur. As siblings talk more with each other and share more private information, the boundaries surrounding this information become more permeable and allow greater mutual access.

When deciding whether or not to disclose a secret, Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) discovered individuals are more likely to disclose to a non-family member if they feel “more similar” to the potential target. Participants in the focus group indicated that they were more likely to disclose to a sibling who had a perceived complementary personality. They also indicated that they were less likely to disclose to a sibling with a mismatching personality or one who could not identify with the information. Gender and age of the target sibling were factors in decisions relating to disclosing certain types of information, such as that involving sexual relationships or illegalities, to other siblings.

Communication Privacy Management

The results from this study can be meaningfully interpreted from a Communication Privacy Management (CPM) perspective. CPM posits that people have preferences for a certain level of permeability in their privacy boundaries. Furthermore, it identifies a number of characteristics that influence preferences for the strength of boundaries, including gender, culture, individual differences, and individual motivations (Petronio, 2000; Petronio et al., 1996). Any of these characteristics could influence the topics about which members of specific young adult sibling groups disclose private or personal information. Consistent with Petronio’s (2000) research, the chi-square analyses revealed that gender did influence the siblings’s disclosure.

Generally, the results indicated that the boundaries surrounding private information in the sibling relationship are highly permeable. As Petronio (2002) explains, such boundaries allow for the greatest access to the information within those boundaries, and a highly permeable boundary indicates that the individual is more

forthcoming with the information within that boundary. Topics such as grades and partying are examples of information for which siblings have marginal rigidity.

However, the results also indicated that there are topics, such as sexual orientation and premarital pregnancy, surrounded by more rigid, thicker boundaries.

The results of this study are consistent with Petronio's (2002) observations concerning the changing nature of information boundaries as well as who has access to the information within those boundaries. As siblings age, the closeness they feel for one another may change, and several focus group members indicated, individuals often come to share information with siblings in whom they would not have confided a few years earlier.

Petronio (2002) suggests that people use rules to regulate self-disclosure, that these rules are learned through socialization, and that they carry sanctions for violations. Although the current study clearly supported the notion that there are rules to regulate disclosure, the rules seem to work implicitly. On a surface level, focus group participants felt that there was not a decision-making process in place for determining to which sibling or siblings one wishes to disclose private information. Further reflection indicated there is a process but that some of the rules for boundary management are so ingrained (e.g., "I never tell her because she always tells my parents"), siblings do not recognize them as such, or as criteria, for disclosure.

The intriguing part of Petronio's (2002) theory is that rules for self-disclosure are learned through socialization. Members of sibling groups with intact families ostensibly undergo similar forms of socialization. Therefore, it follows that not simply individuals, but *entire sibling groups* may be more or less inclined to share information with one

another as a result of their upbringing. Siblings who are more open as a group may have been socialized to be open with each other, whereas sibling groups whose members do not share private information may have likewise been socialized to refrain from doing so.

That the participants tend to be open with siblings was another important finding of this study. Petronio (2002) notes that private information boundaries evolve throughout the lifespan and are typically small at the beginning and end of the lifespan and most expansive occurring during adulthood. What is interesting is that although the boundaries may become more expansive as a result of the possession of private information, the participants' boundaries, at least with their siblings, also seemed to be rather permeable and thin. Perhaps a focus on the *characteristics* of the boundary rather than the *size* would aid in better understanding how siblings manage and share private information with other siblings.

Boundary management is a key aspect of CPM. The present study provides some indication of how siblings manage privacy boundaries. When siblings in the focus groups indicated that they shared information with only specific siblings, rather than all of them, they reportedly understood that the information would eventually be shared with the other siblings or, that the disclosure would not be shared further. Both of these illustrate how the siblings coordinate their boundaries either to include or exclude other siblings in the information-sharing process. Most focus group participants who shared information with siblings were confident that the information would remain private—from all other family members. This indicated a sense of control over information and perceived security resulting from the strength of the boundary. The participants also

seemed to have a good sense of when another sibling would violate privacy rules, and hence, when to withhold of private information from them.

The risk to benefit ratio criteria posited by CPM was also evident in the findings of this study. Petronio (2002) suggests that one criterion for self-disclosure decisions is weighing the perceived risks against the probable benefits. She lists five common types of risk: security risks, stigma risks, face risks, relational risks, and role risks. Petronio (2002) also observes that “[A]lthough [these risks] are presented as independent categories, it is likely that they are not mutually exclusive” (p. 69).

The present study showed evidence of such risks influencing participants’ disclosure decisions. Many were aware of potential face risks in withholding potentially embarrassing information from younger siblings. Siblings who chose not to share information with siblings because of a perceived threat of disappointing their other siblings illustrate a stigma risk. This also suggests awareness of a relational risk, as some worried about disappointing their siblings to such an extent that the relationship would change. Depending on birth order, this example illustrates role risks, as an older sibling may lose the position of “role model” to younger siblings. Focus group participants who were oldest in their sibling groups corroborated this as a real risk, and therefore, as a reason for not sharing their less-than-stellar moments with their younger siblings.

Contributions to Sibling Communication

This study made a number of contributions to the sibling communication literature. First, the results generally indicated that siblings communicate with each other about a relatively broad range of topics and communicate with one another quite

frequently. These findings support the findings of Sharf, Shulman, and Avigad-Spitz (2005) who reported that siblings have frequent exchanges. Privacy boundaries also tend to be overlapping and somewhat permeable. Although siblings will withhold information for protection or other reasons, siblings tend to share a vast amount of private information across many topics with some or all siblings.

One of the assumptions about sibling group research mentioned previously was that siblings can and do create an in-group/out-group distinction as siblings decide with whom to share private information. The data in this study lends support to this assumption since a large number of participants shared private information with some siblings, but not others. The focus group data shed additional light on this practice, with participants asserting that selective disclosure may not be problematic because the excluded sibling is usually unaware of his or her exclusion. Additionally these data suggest that exclusion criteria may have been influenced by trust issues; essentially, the sibling did not trust that the other sibling would keep the information private, therefore excluded that sibling from the information. Nevertheless, overall, the data suggest that siblings are relatively open about their lives with each other.

This dissertation provided little additional information concerning power dynamics in sibling relationships. Although sibling relationships are becoming more egalitarian in nature as youth enter young adulthood (Lefkowitz, 2005), focus group participants who had older siblings indicated that their older siblings would often be parental with them and give unsolicited advice and “tell [them] what to do.” However, there was no mention of power structures created by access or denial of private information. The lack of power structures can be partly explained by the openness of the

siblings groups. The focus group participants indicated they withheld little information from their other siblings. Likewise, the web-based survey results that few topics are actively avoided. However, when looking at sibling groups as a single entity, this study provides some evidence that siblings sometimes communicate about certain topics with select siblings, thus possibly creating such distinctions of inclusion and exclusion. When all siblings are included within an information boundary, there is no possibility of an in-group out-group distinction or alliances based on the sharing or withholding of private information. It would be of interest to future research to provide a more detailed exploration of the dynamics that occur in sibling relationships when the disclosure of private information creates a distinction of exclusion.

Most of the research literature concerning sibling relationships has focused either on childhood or end of life relationships. The current study helped to overcome the dearth of literature about sibling communication in young adulthood in providing evidence for the claim that young adults view their siblings as sources of support (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001). Focus group participants specifically indicated a proclivity to disclose to siblings who provide positive responses and those who would likely provide the most support. The focus group data also suggested that young adults tend discuss problems with their siblings rather than a their parents, which complements earlier research by Cicirelli (1981), who observed that siblings have as much or more influence on their siblings than do parents.

This study enhances our understanding of the communicative processes that occur in young adult sibling groups. Participants generally indicated that they are in frequent contact with one another and that they feel a certain obligation to remain in contact.

However, despite any felt obligation, the participants in this study also conveyed a genuine interest in maintaining relationships with their siblings and in disclosing information about their lives. Several indicated that they desired mutual disclosure. They wanted to tell their siblings what was happening in their lives and in turn wanted information concerning their siblings' lives.

Although, generally, participants in this study indicated a willingness to maintain relationships with their siblings, there were some exceptions. All siblings in one all-male sibling group reported they do typically do *not* share information with one another of any consequence. This finding should be of interest to sibling scholars, not only for the gender issues, but also because these siblings apparently do not rely on one another as a means of support or advice.

Investigating the communication among a group of siblings as a group presented many challenges but also provided useful information. Previous sibling communication research involving siblings revealed the limitations of standard forms of data collection that entailed asking either a single sibling to report about sibling relationships or requiring that participants select a specific sibling to discuss. What this study uncovered is that what one sibling may report about another sibling and vice versa may not always be congruent. The relationships become even more complex when there are more than two siblings, as was the case with the present study.

The main benefit of the study was an improved understanding of the communication patterns in sibling groups, as each sibling reported about every other sibling in his or her group. The perceptions of communication differed among the siblings. Although these results illustrate the importance of collecting data from entire

groups rather than an individual sibling, they also show disparities among reports from the same sibling group, as well as a need to delve further into the dynamics of sibling group relationships and uncover more of the complexities of this category of family relationships.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. First, the sample used in the study was a convenience sample, and the sibling groups were identified by contacting students in an introductory communication class. Surveys from all siblings in the student's family were required for the participants to receive course credit. Because this required the siblings' assistance, it is probable that the group members as a whole were closer and in more frequent contact than a random sample of siblings might have been. Sibling groups that are high in conflict would possibly be less likely to secure all siblings for the completion of the survey, thus, not be included in this study.

Second, recall was also an issue. Due to the nature of this study, some participants might not have accurately remembered whether they had discussed all of the listed topics with each sibling, especially if the number of times was limited. Additionally, social desirability factors may have influenced the validity of the sibling reports in the focus group discussions. Some participants may not have felt comfortable sharing stories with others that portrayed them in a bad light, such as instances of breaking laws or rules.

Third, the current study focused solely on emerging adult sibling groups. Since an entire sibling group had to be considered within the young adult developmental period to participate in this study, many sibling groups were ineligible, and larger siblings

groups often did not fit the criteria because of spacing among siblings. Hence, the representativeness of the sample is open to question.

Future Directions

This study has contributed to our overall understanding of young adult sibling group relationships regarding the management of private information in several ways and has some implications for the study of family relationships. The following discussion focuses on directions for future research.

Future researchers should continue to explore the young adult sibling relationship as it could prove beneficial in revealing how siblings who have left the parental home communicatively manage their relationships with their siblings who are still at home. When siblings begin to leave home, this marks the change of the sibling relationship from involuntary to more voluntary in nature (Goetting, 1986). Although previous research indicates that siblings maintain contact (Connidis & Campbell, 1995), there is little explanation of *why* or how they communicatively manage their newly defined relationship, although social support seems to play a role (Milevsky, 2005). The process of siblings separating as an older sibling leaves home is typically the first major change experienced in sibling relationship development, and focus group participants noted that leaving siblings at home, when they moved away to college, changed their relationship with the often younger sibling, typically for the better. A better understanding of this shift in the relationship might provide clues to how siblings manage their relationship throughout the lifespan and other benchmarks of relationship development.

Second, it would be of benefit for researchers to examine sharing and withholding private information in sibling groups of more diverse age ranges that could prove useful

in determining whether communicative behavior in childhood transfers to adult relationships, or, if as this study indicated, childhood rivalries and alliances tend to evolve into warmer and more egalitarian relationships. Although focus group data suggested that sibling relationships tended to improve over time in regards to closeness and communication, there were also references to relationships that were declining over time as older siblings had more responsibilities, such as marriage or children, while college-aged participants were more concerned with partying or getting good grades.

Third, it may also be fruitful to examine sibling groups from a longitudinal perspective to see how life changes impact sibling relationships over time. Although the current study did not approach sibling relationships from a longitudinal perspective, focus group participants indicated that their relationships had changed with siblings as they aged. A more systematic examination of the changing nature of sibling relationships could aid researchers in achieving a greater understanding of the sibling relationship as a whole, and not just from a specific age demographic. For example, social support has been examined at various stages of the lifespan (e.g. Milevsky, 2005; Van Aken & Asendorpf, 1997) but typically only within isolated periods of the sibling relationship.

Fourth, future research should explore how disclosure of secrets may differ among the relationships present in different family structures. Although the present study only examined sibling groups comprised of full biological and adopted siblings, the prevalence of divorced, single parent, and blended families in society indicate a need to explore the relationships in those families in regards to disclosing private information.

Finally, future researchers should continue to utilize intact sibling groups. Although there are numerous challenges of researching groups rather than dyads, the

results are a more fully developed understanding of the sibling relationship as perceived by both the siblings in the relationship, and the other siblings in the group. As this study has shown, siblings frequently communicate with their entire group, not just a single sibling, and to focus on single dyads is to overlook the dynamic properties of the collective entity of the group. Systematically focusing on the group relationships in families could also provide avenues for new theory and research tools.

Conclusion

This research provided insight into a number of aspects of family communication. First was how young adult siblings manage private disclosures in their sibling relationships. These findings provide interesting and important insights into the dynamic and evolving nature of the sibling relationship, and also provoke a need for additional research on sibling groups. Second, this study demonstrated the need to refine the definition of family secrets. Topics long believed to be secrets—that is, withheld from others—in family relationships were not found to be particularly secretive by the young adult siblings in this study. Third, when family relationships involve more than a dyad, every effort must be made to include all members in the research. Although studying groups is more complex than studying dyads or asking a single participant to comment on a family dyad, dismissing multiple members for parsimony also limits the results. As this study demonstrated, multiple members of a sibling group can provide multiple perceptions, all of which contribute unique information and a more complete picture of the sibling relationship.

Although this study has contributed to what is known about young adult sibling groups, it is clear that there is still much more to learn about this ever-evolving dynamic

family relationship during transition to adulthood and beyond. The results indicated that participants value their siblings and work to remain a part of each other's lives as they move away from one another. As the male focus group participant noted about his siblings, siblings have known each other a long time, have seen each other through all kinds of situations, and often rely on them for unconditional love and acceptance. Every effort must be made to continue to research and better understand this important, unique relationship.

References

- Abramovich, R., Corter, C., & Pepler, D. (1980). Observations of mixed-sex sibling dyads. *Child Development, 51*, 1268-1271.
- Afifi, W. A., & Guerrero, L. (2000). Motivations underlying topic avoidance in close relationships. In S. Petronio (Ed.), *Balancing the secrets of private disclosures* (pp. 165-180). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Arnett, J. J. (1997). Young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood. *Youth & Society, 29*, 3-23.
- Arnett, J. J. (1998). Learning to stand alone: The contemporary American transition to adulthood in cultural and historical context. *Human Development, 41*, 295-315.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*, 469- 480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Avioli, P. S. (1989). The social support functions of siblings in later life. *American Behavioral Scientist, 33*, 45-57.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Baxter, L. A., & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). Taboo topics in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 2*, 253-269.
- Braithwaite, D. O., Olson, L. N., Golish, T. D., Soukup, C., & Turman, P. T. (2001). "Becoming a family": Developmental processes represented in blended family discourse. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 29*, 221-247.

- Bok, S. (1984). *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelation*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Brown-Smith, N. (1998). Family secrets. *Journal of Family Issues, 19*, 20-42.
- Buerkel-Rothfuss, N., Fink, D., & Buerkel, R. (1995). Communication in the father-child dyad: The intergenerational transmission process. In T. J. Socha & G. H. Stamp (Eds.), *Parents, children and communication: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp. 63-85). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Buhrmester, D., & Furman, W. (1990). Perceptions of sibling relationships during middle childhood and adolescence. *Child Development, 61*, 1387-1398.
- Buhrmester, D., & Prager, K. (1995). Patterns and functions of self-disclosure during childhood and adolescence. In K. Rotenberg (Ed.), *Disclosure processes in children and adolescents* (pp. 10-56). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Canary, D. J., & Dainton, M. (2003). *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1994). *Communication and relational maintenance*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Canary, D. J., Stafford, L., Hause, K. S., & Wallace, L. A. (1993). An inductive analysis of relational maintenance strategies: Comparisons among lovers, relatives, friends, and others. *Communication Research Reports, 10*, 5-14.
- Caughlin, J. P., Golish, T. D., Olson, L. N., Sargent, J. E., Cook, J. S., & Petronio, S. (2000). Intrafamily secrets in various family configurations: A communication boundary management perspective. *Communication Studies, 51*, 116-134.

- Caughlin, J. P., & Petronio, S. (2004). Privacy in families. In A. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (pp. 379-412). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1980a). A comparison of college women's feelings toward their siblings and parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42, 111-120.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1980b). Sibling influence in adulthood: A lifespan perspective. In L. W. Poon (Ed.), *Aging in the 1980's* (pp. 455-462). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1985). Sibling relationships throughout the life cycle. In L. L'Abate (Ed.), *Handbook of family psychology and therapy*, Vol. 1. (pp. 177-214). New York: Dorsey Press.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1991). Sibling relations in adulthood. *Marriage and Family Review*, 16, 292-310.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1995). *Sibling relationships across the life span*. New York: Plenum.
- Cohen, P., Kasen, S., Chen, H., Hartmark, C., & Gordon, K. (2003). Variations in patterns of developmental transitions in the emerging adulthood period. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 657-669.
- Cole, A., & Kerns, K. A. (2001). Perceptions of siblings qualities and activities of early adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 21, 204-226.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crispell, D. (1996). The sibling syndrome. *American Demographics*, 18(8), 24-30.

- Dainton, M., & Aylor, B. (2002). Patterns of communication channel use in the maintenance of long-distance relationships. *Communication Research Reports, 19*, 118-129.
- Dainton, M., Zelle, E., & Langan, E. (2003). Maintaining friendships throughout the lifespan. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variation*. (pp. 79-102). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Deater-Deckard, K., Dunn, J., & Lussier, G. (2002). Sibling relationships and social-emotional adjustment in different family contexts. *Social Development, 11*, 571-590
- Derlega, V., & Chaiklin, A. (1977). Privacy and self disclosure in social relationships. *Journal of Social Issues, 33*, 167-175.
- Derlega, V. J., Metts, S., Petronio, S., & Margulis, S. T. (1993). *Self-disclosure*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dindia, K. (2003). Definitions and perspectives on relational maintenance communication. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 1-30). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dindia, K., & Baxter, L. (1987). Strategies for maintaining and repairing marital relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 4*, 143-158.
- Donley, M. G. (1993). Attachment and the emotional unit. *Family Process, 32*, 2-20.

- Dubas, J. S., & Petersen, A. C. (1996). Geographical distance from parents and adjustment during adolescence and young adulthood. In J. A. Graber & J. S. Dubas (Vol. Eds.), *Leaving home: Understanding the transition to adulthood: Vol. 71. New directions for child development* (pp. 3-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Duck, S., & Pittman, G. (1994). Social and personal relationships. In M. L. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication*, 2nd ed. (pp.676-695). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dunn, J., Slomkowski, C., Beardsall, L., & Rende, R. (1994). Adjustment in middle childhood and early adolescence: Links with earlier and contemporary sibling relationships. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 35, 491-504.
- Dunn, J., & Kendrick, C. (1982). Siblings and their mothers: Developing relationships within the family. In M. E. Lamb & B. Sutton-Smith (Eds.), *Sibling relationships: Their nature and significance across the lifespan* (pp. 39-60). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Emerson, R. M. (1962). Power-dependence relations. *American Sociological Review*, 27, 31-41.
- Erickson, P. (1979). The role of secrecy in complex organizations. *Cornell Journal of Social Relations*, 114, 121-138.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Floyd, K. (1995). Gender and closeness among friends and siblings. *The Journal of Psychology*, 129, 193-202.

- Floyd, K. (1996). Communicating closeness among siblings: An application of the gendered closeness perspective. *Communication Research Reports, 13*, 27-34.
- Floyd, K., & Parks, M. R. (1995). Manifesting closeness in the interactions of peers: A look at siblings and friends. *Communication Reports, 8*, 69-76.
- Folwell, A. L., Chung, L. C., Nussbaum, J. F., Bethea, L. S., & Grant, J. A. (1997). Differential accounts of closeness in older adult sibling relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 14*, 843-849.
- French, J. R. P., Jr., & Raven, B. R. (1959). The basis of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150-167). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Frey, J. H., & Fontana, A. (1991). The group interview in social research. *The Social Science Journal, 28*, 175-187.
- Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the qualities of sibling relationships. *Child Development, 56*, 448-461.
- Furman, W., & Giberson, R. S. (1995). Identifying the links between parents and their children's sibling relationships. In S. Shulman (Ed.), *Close relationships and socioemotional development* (Vol. 7, pp. 95-108). Stamford, CT: Ablex.
- Goetting, A. (1986). The developmental tasks of siblingship over the lifecycle. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48*, 703-714.
- Gold, D. T. (1989). Sibling relationship in old age: A typology. *International Journal on Aging and Human Development, 28*, 37-51.
- Goldscheider, F., & Goldscheider, C. (1994). Leaving and returning home in 20th century America. *Population Bulletin, 48*(4), 1-35.

- Guerrero, L. K., & Chavez, A. M. (2005). Relational maintenance in cross-sex friendships characterized by different types of romantic intent: An exploratory study. *Western Journal of Communication, 69*, 339-358.
- Guerrero, L. K., Elvoy, S. V., & Wabnik, A. I. (1993). Linking maintenance strategies to relationship development and disengagement: A reconceptualization. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10*, 273-283.
- Haslett, B. B., & Ruebush, J. (1999). What differences do individual differences in groups make?: The effects of individuals, culture and group composition. In L. R. Frey, D. S. Gouran, & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *The handbook of group communication theory and research* (pp. 115-138). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hess, J. A. (2003). Maintaining undesired relationships. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 103-124). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hoffman, K. L., Kiecolt, K. J., & Edwards, J. N. (2005). Physical violence between siblings: A theoretical and empirical analysis. *Journal of Family Issues, 26*, 1103-1130.
- Howe, N., & Ross, H. S. (1990). Socialization, perspective-taking, and the sibling relationship. *Developmental Psychology, 26*, 160-165.
- Imber-Black, E. (1993). *Secrets in families and family therapy*. New York: Norton.
- Johnson, C. (1974). Privacy as personal control. In S. Margulis (Ed.), *Privacy* (pp. 29-54). Stony Brook, NY: Environmental Design Research Association.

- Karpel, M. A. (1980). Family secrets: Implications for research and therapy. *Family Process, 19*, 295-306.
- Kelley, P. (1992). Healthy stepfamily functioning. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 73*, 579-587.
- Kelly, A. E., & McKillop, K. J. (1996). Consequences of revealing personal secrets. *Psychological Bulletin, 120*, 450-465.
- Keyton, J. (1999). Relational communication in groups. In L. R. Frey, D. S. Gouran, & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *The handbook of group communication theory and research* (pp. 192-222). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lefkowitz, E. S. (2005). "Things have gotten better": Developmental changes among emerging adults after the transition to university. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*, 40-63.
- Leigh, G. K. (1982). Kinship interaction over the family life span. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44*, 197-208.
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The seasons of man's life*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- McKay, V. C., & Caverly, R. S. (1995). Relationships in later life: The nature of inter- and intragenerational ties among grandparents, grandchildren, and adult siblings. In J. F. Nussbaum & J. Coupland (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and aging research* (pp. 207-225). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mahoney, C. (1997). Common qualitative methods. In J. Frechtling, L. Sharp, & Westat, Inc. (Eds.), *User-friendly handbook for multi-method evaluations*. Washington, DC: Division of Research, Evaluation and Communication, National Science Foundation.
- Mannix, E. A., & Neale, M. A. (1993). Power imbalance and the pattern of exchange in dyadic negotiation. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, 2, 119-133.
- Martin, M. M., Anderson, C. M., Burant, P. A., & Weber, K. (1997). Verbal aggression in sibling relationships. *Communication Quarterly*, 45, 304-317.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meyers, R. A., & Brashers, D. E. (1999). Influence processes in group interaction. In L. R. Frey, D. S. Gouran, & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *The handbook of group communication theory and research* (pp. 288-312). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Milevsky, A. (2005). Compensatory patterns of sibling support in emerging adulthood: Variations in loneliness, self-esteem, depression and life satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22, 743-755.
- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Myers, S. A. (1998). Sibling communication satisfaction as a function of interpersonal solidarity, individualized trust, and self-disclosure. *Communication Research Reports, 15*, 309-317.
- Myers, S. A. (2001). Relational maintenance behaviors in the sibling relationship. *Communication Quarterly, 49*, 19-34.
- Myers, S. A., Black, J., Bukaty, A., Callin, A., Davis, L. A., Fairbanks, S. L., Gieron, M. E., Ferry, M. F., Kappenman, K., King, M., McGuire, M., Nix, F. D., Saniuk, J., Tracy, M. M., Triolo, T. N., Valentino, T. (2001). Relational maintenance behaviors in the sibling relationship. *Communication Quarterly, 49*, 19-34.
- Myers, S. A., & Knox, R. L. (1998). Perceived sibling use of functional communication skills. *Communication Research Reports, 15*, 397-405.
- Myers, S. A., & Weber, K. D. (2004). Preliminary development of a measure of sibling relational maintenance behaviors: Scale development and initial findings. *Communication Quarterly, 52*, 334-346.
- Nelson, L. J., & McNamara Barry, C. (2005). Distinguishing features of merging adulthood: The role of self-classification as an adult. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*, 242-262.
- Newman, J. (1994). Conflict and friendship in sibling relationships: A review. *Child Study Journal, 24*, 119-152.
- Noller, P. (1994). Relationships with parents in adolescence: Process and outcome. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Personal relationships during adolescence* (pp. 37-77). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Nussbaum, J. F., Thompson, T. L. , & Robinson, J. D. (1989). *Communication and aging*. New York: Harper & Row.
- O'Connor, T. G., Allen, J. P., Bell, K. L., & Hauser, S. T. (1996). Adolescent-parent relationships and leaving home in young adulthood. In J. A. Graber & J. S. Dubas (Vol. Eds.), *Leaving home: Understanding the transition to adulthood: Vol. 71. New directions for child development* (pp. 39-52). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Parens, H. (1999). *Twins and other siblings*. In S. A. Akhtar & S. Kramer (Eds.), *Brothers and sisters: Developmental, dynamic, and technical aspects of the sibling relationship* (pp. 53-68). Northwale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Parks, M. R. (1982). Ideology in interpersonal communication: Off the couch and into the world. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 6* (pp. 79-107). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Peek, C. W., Bell, N. J., Waldren, T., & Sorrell, G. T. (1988). Patterns of functioning in families of remarried and first-married couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 699-708.
- Petronio, S. (1991). Communication boundary management: A theoretical model of managing disclosure of private information between marital couples. *Communication Theory*, 1, 311-335.
- Petronio, S. (2000). The boundaries of privacy: Praxis of everyday life. In S. Petronio (Ed.), *Balancing the secrets of private disclosures* (pp. 37-49). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Petronio, S., Reeder, H. M., Hecht, M. L., & Mon't Ros-Mendoza, T. (1996). Disclosure of sexual abuse by children and adolescents. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 24*, 181-199.
- Ponzetti, J. J., Jr., & James, C. M. (1997). Loneliness and sibling relationships. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 12*, 103-112.
- Pulakos, J. (1987). Brothers and sisters: Nature and importance of the adult bond. *The Journal of Psychology, 121*, 521-522.
- Pulakos, J. (1989). Young adult relationships: Siblings and friends. *The Journal of Psychology, 123*, 237-244.
- Pulakos, J. (1990). Correlations between family environment and relationships of young adult siblings. *Psychological Reports, 67*, 1283-1286.
- Rindfuss, R. R. (1991). The young adult years: Diversity, structural change, and fertility. *Demography, 28*, 493-512.
- Roberts, B. W., Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T. E. (2003). Work experiences and personality development in young adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 582-593.
- Roberts, B. W., O'Donnell, M., & Robins, R. W. (2004). Goal and personality trait development in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*, 541-550.

- Rocca, K. A., & Martin, M. M. (1998). The relationship between willingness to communicate and solidarity with frequency, breadth, and depth of communication in the sibling relationship. *Communication Research Reports, 15*, 82-90.
- Ross, H. S. (1995). Negotiating principles of entitlement in sibling property disputes. *Developmental Psychology, 32*, 90-101.
- Scharf, M., Shulman, S., Avigad-Spitz, L. (2005). Sibling relationships in emerging adulthood and adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*, 64.
- Schvaneveldt, J. D. (1983). Power relationships between siblings. *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality, 17*, (2), 40-60.
- Stewart, R. B., Kozak, A. L., Tingley, L. M., Goddard, J. M., Blake, E. M., & Cassel, W. A. (2001). Adult sibling relationship: A validation of a typology. *Personal Relationships, 8*, 299-324.
- Stafford, L. (2003). Maintaining romantic relationships: Summary and analysis of one research program. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 51-77). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Steen, S., & Schwartz, P. (1995). Communication, gender, and power: Homosexual couples as a case study. In M. A. Fitzpatrick & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), *Explaining family interactions* (pp. 310-343). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stewart, R. B., Verbrugge, K. M., & Beilfuss, M. C. (1998). Sibling relationships in early adulthood: A typology. *Personal Relationships, 5*, 59-74.
- Stocker, C. M., Lanthier, R. P., & Furman, W. (1997). Sibling relationships in early

- adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *11*, 210-221.
- Stocker, C., & McHale, S. (1992). The nature and family correlates of preadolescents' perceptions of their sibling relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *9*, 180-195.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (pp. 158-183). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Teti, D. M. (2002). Retrospect and prospect in the psychological study of sibling relationships. In J. P. McHale & W. S. Gronlick (Eds.), *Retrospect and prospect in the psychological study of families* (pp. 193-224). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Teven, J. J., Martin, M. M., & Neupauer, N. C. (1998). Sibling relationships: Verbally aggressive messages and their effect on relational satisfaction. *Communication Reports*, *11*, 179-186.
- Trim, R. S., Leuthe, E., & Chassin, L. (2006). Sibling influence on alcohol use in young adult, high-risk sample. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 391-398
- Tucker, C. J., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. (2001). Conditions of sibling support in adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*, 254-271.
- Updegraff, K. A., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. C. (2002). Adolescents' sibling relationship and friendship experiences: Developmental patterns and relationship linkages. *Social Development*, *11*, 182-204.

- Van Aken, M. A. G. & Asendorpf, J. B. (1997). Support by classmates, parents, friends, and siblings in preadolescence: Covariation and compensation across relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 14*, 79-93.
- Vangelisti, A. L. (1994). Family secrets: Forms, functions and correlates. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 11*, 113-135.
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (1997). Revealing family secrets: The influence of topic, function, and relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 14*, 679-705.
- Vangelisti, A. L., Caughlin, J. P., & Timmerman, L. (2001). Criteria for revealing family secrets. *Communication Monographs, 68*, 1-27.
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Huston, T. L. (1994). Maintaining marital satisfaction and love. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 165-186). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Vogl-Bauer, S. (2003). Maintaining family relationships. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 31-50). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- White, L. K., & Riedmann, A. (1992). Ties among adult siblings. *Social Forces, 85*-102.

Appendix A

Email to web-based survey participants

My name is Audrey Deterding, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. My area of interest is family communication, and I am currently working on my dissertation, which focuses on sibling relationships in young adulthood. I am interested in learning more about how siblings share and/or withhold private information from one another. To do this, I am conducting an online survey and am looking for sibling groups to fill it out. As you might imagine, trying to get entire groups of siblings is not an easy task. So, I am asking your cooperation and assistance.

To be eligible for my study you must meet the following criteria:

1. You must be 18 years of age to participate.
2. You must have at least 2 biological and/or adopted siblings (at least 3 siblings in your group).
3. You may not have half siblings or stepsiblings that you live with or have lived with.
4. Your entire sibling group must be between 18-30.
5. Everyone in your sibling group must take the online survey.

If you or your siblings are not interested in completing this survey, you will have the opportunity to complete the alternate assignment for your research participation points.

If your siblings are interested in filling out the survey, reply back to me with their email addresses, and I will send out the link for the online survey to you and your siblings.

The survey length is dependent upon the number of siblings you have, but will probably take you about 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Audrey Deterding
Doctoral Candidate
Penn State University
ald233@psu.edu

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. To get started, let's first go around the circle, and tell us about your sibling group:
 - a. How many
 - b. Gender/Age
 - c. Where you are in the order

2. Let's first start out with topics. What I'd like to do is just generate a list of topics. The important thing is to just use your personal experiences to talk about what you share with your siblings.
 - a) What kind of information do you share with all of your siblings?
 - b) What topics would you discuss with some siblings and not all of them?
 - c) Have you ever shared what one sibling has told you to another sibling?
 1. Did you tell this sibling that you told someone else?
 2. What happened?
 - d) What kind of things would you not tell any of your siblings?

3. Now let's talk about reasons that you might share (or not share) secrets with your siblings. (Perceived functions)
 - a) Why do you share information with your siblings?
 - b) Why are there things that you don't share with your siblings?
 - c) In what way(s) do you think this affects your relationship with them?
 - d) How do you think your disclosures have changed as you've gotten older?

4. Let's now talk about how you decide which sibling to share secrets with. (criteria)
 - a) How do you decide what private information to share?
 - b) Do you purposefully not tell some siblings?
 1. Why?
 - b) Do you think they reciprocate? Why do you think that?
 - c) Do you think you share more information than your other siblings?

5. Do you ever specifically ask siblings not to share your secrets with others?
 - a) How successful do you think that has been?
6. Do you think that your siblings share your private disclosures with your other siblings?
7. Do you think that your siblings share private information that you aren't privy to?

Curriculum Vitae
Audrey L. Deterding

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Communication Arts and Sciences (2007), College of Liberal Arts, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

M.A. Speech Communication (2001), College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL.

B.A. Speech Communication and English (1998), Department of Speech Communication and Department of English, McKendree College, Lebanon, IL.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Assistant Professor, Indiana University Southeast, New Albany, IN (2007- present)
Fixed Term I Faculty, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA (2006-2007)
Teaching Assistant, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA (2002-2006)
Teaching Assistant, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL (1999-2001)

SELECTED CONFERENCE PAPERS

Deterding, A. L. (2005). *A neglected paradigm: Families as decision-making groups*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association conference, Boston, MA, November, 2005. Top Paper.

Deterding, A. L. (2004). *Anxiety threshold management*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association conference, Cleveland, OH, April 2004.

Deterding, A. L. (2003). *Student organizations: Needs and communication*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association conference, Miami, FL, November 2003.

Deterding, A. L. (2000). *The necessity of repetition in adult-child conversation*. Paper presented at the Western States Communication Association conference, Sacramento, CA, February 2000.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- National Communication Association, Language and Social Interaction, Group Communication, and Family Communication divisions
- Central States Communication Association
- NASPA (National Association for Student Personnel Administrators)