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**Parents, Privacy, Parentification: Exploring Parental Disclosures of
Family Secrets, Parentification, Privacy Management, and Relationship
Satisfaction**

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Family Secrets, Parentification, Privacy Management, and Relationship
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by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2023

Dedication

For Mami and Papi, who provided all I have ever needed and more. My love for the parent-child relationship comes from the relationship we have, and the love you've poured into it.

Team Hernandez, always.

And for Nora. Auntie loves you!

Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank, and who have contributed to my growth, inspiration, and eagerness to complete this project. Dr. Rene Dailey answered every question I could come up with. Dr. Erin Donovan always provided a listening ear and awareness of my coffee dependence. Your support and care for young scholars has forever impacted me. Thank you.

To Dr. Anita Vangelisti, thank you for being the mentor and incredible person you are. Your willingness to pour time, energy, and consideration into my passion has guided me to this point. Your belief in me and genuine excitement over my progress has helped shape my confidence as a scholar. Thank you, as always.

Dr. Roselia Mendez Murillo, your ongoing support and kindness has made me feel seen and cared for throughout every step of this journey. Thank you for making this institution feel more like home with your presence. You've made a difference here, and in my life. Thank you.

To the cohort of 2021, you all forever have a special place in my heart. Thank you for being writing buddies, a support group, and friends.

To Izzy, Melissa, and Matthew: Being your sister is fun. I'm glad we get to do life together. Growing up with you all is one of life's greatest gifts.

I would also like to thank every child who I have ever worked with and cared for. Thank you for gifting me a tiny part of your precious childhood. Especially Alice and Ollie. You have both taught me so much about life, and I am constantly inspired to continue learning about parents and children because of you. Being your nanny has been one of my greatest joys.

Abstract

Parents, Privacy, Parentification: Exploring Parental Disclosures of Family Secrets, Parentification, Privacy Management, and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract: When a parent discloses a family secret to their adult-child, they may impact different elements of the parent-child relationship. To explore the perspective of adult children when a parent discloses a family secret, this study utilizes a communication privacy management framework (CPM; Petronio, 2002), surveying adult-children between the ages of 18 and 25 (N = 383), to investigate the positive association between privacy management and relationship satisfaction (H1), the negative association between relationship satisfaction and parentification (H2), and the positive association between parentification and privacy management (H3). Additionally, the current study explored whether parentification moderates the relationship between privacy management and relationship satisfaction (H4), and whether relationship satisfaction moderates the association between parentification and privacy management (H5). Results demonstrate

significant associations between both privacy management and relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction and parentification. There was no association found between parentification and privacy management. Further, parentification was not found to moderate the relationship between privacy management and satisfaction, and satisfaction was not found to moderate the relationship between parentification and privacy management. These findings inform family communication scholarship regarding parent-child relational behaviors, dyadic functioning, and family dynamics.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The parent-child dyad is unique compared to spousal and sibling relationships, as it connects two generations within a family through a hierarchical (vertical) relationship. When a parent discloses a secret to their adult-child within this relationship, the parent makes the child a co-owner of the information and places a level of responsibility onto a child (Petronio, 2002). The decision to either reveal or conceal a secret disclosed to a child by a parent may be associated with the phenomenon of parentification, where a child assumes parent-like tasks and duties (Jurkovic, 1998). The parentification of a child may occur throughout an individual's lifetime, as an individual may experience this phenomenon at any age. Parentification can influence the trajectory of an individual's overall mental health. For example, parentification has been positively associated with rates of depressive symptoms in adulthood (Cho & Lee, 2018). Further, relationship satisfaction within the parent-child dyad is associated with lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms (Hong et al., 2021). The goal of this study is to inform communication researchers, clinicians, and families on the maintenance and well-being of the parent-child relationship. To do so, this study explores how parental disclosures of family secrets to their children, which may have been shared at any point in adult-children's life, may be connected to the adult-children's reports of privacy management, parentification, and relationship satisfaction.

The current study explores parentification and satisfaction within the parent-child context, looking at the communication process which takes place when a parent discloses a secret to their adult children. The presence, concealment, and revelation of secrets are

related to individuals' level of family satisfaction (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), in addition to individuals' marital satisfaction (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Yet, little research has explored how secrets may influence individuals' relationship satisfaction within their parent-child dyad after a parent discloses a secret about the family to the child. Given the pivotal role the parent-child relationship plays in a family's functioning (Dodge & Coleman, 2009) and the influence a parent or parent-like figure has on a child's lifelong behaviors, health, and well-being (Fernald et al., 2013; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019), research exploring the connection between parental disclosures of family secrets and an adult-child's relationship satisfaction will be beneficial.

Building on communication privacy management's (CPM; Petronio, 2002, 2004, 2010, 2020) framework, the current study aims to explore how a parental disclosure of a family secret to an adult-child connects to the adult-child's level of satisfaction within the parent-child dyad, and how parentification may influence the possible relationship between disclosures and satisfaction among adult-children, aged 18-25 years old. When parents disclose a secret to their child, they create a co-owner of the secret who must then decide whether to reveal this secret to another individual, or to conceal the secret (Petronio, 2002, 2004). This management process may be explained by the level of satisfaction adult-children experience in their relationship with the parent who disclosed the family secret to them. As an individual experiences a higher or lower level of satisfaction within dyadic relationships, the individual may be encouraged to either conceal or reveal the secret. Further, adult-children's satisfaction may vary depending on levels of experienced parentification. By providing parents with information regarding

how they might improve satisfaction within this dyad which influences a child's health, parents may learn about healthy versus unhealthy family behaviors and communication patterns that may help adjust their behaviors for the benefit of the family and future families to come.

Parentification is a process which occurs specifically within the parent or parent-like figure and child dynamic. Understanding how interactions, such as parental disclosures of family secrets, are influenced by the process of parentification enables scholars to inform families and clinicians about behaviors which may influence relational well-being. The purpose of this study is to explore the association between parental disclosures of family secrets, looking at how adult-children's relationship satisfaction with the parent who discloses a secret to them influences their management (revelment or concealment) of the family secret, and how parentification informs this potential relationship.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT (CPM)

The management of private information has been well studied in the communication field. In 2002, Petronio's CPM theory was posited to predict and explain the communicative and cognitive processes people engage in when revealing and concealing private information. Since its development, it continues to be implemented across a broad range of contexts such as online privacy management, workplace communication, and communication within family relationships (Petronio & Child, 2020). The framework for CPM is actively being revised and developed to evaluate a person's management of private information by outlining how individuals manage their private information using three core elements: privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence (Petronio, 2002, 2004, 2010, 2020). When individuals disclose private information to another person, they create a co-owner of the information shared (i.e., privacy ownership). The new co-owner then maintains a level of control and responsibility over this information.

There may be rules put in place by the original owner of private information regarding further sharing of the information, and these rules are turned into boundaries which the owner of the private information expects the new co-owner to follow. These rules may be stated explicitly or implicitly by the original owner, the new co-owner, or both. The decision to follow these rules, or not, belongs to the co-owner of the information. When these rules are broken and the private information is not managed as the original owner intended, privacy turbulence may occur. Privacy turbulence, described

by the issues in privacy management when private information is not managed according to original owners' guidelines (Petronio, 2002) may create conflict in relationships. Scholars have applied CPM to family relationships and the management of private information within the family system to examine such conflict. For example, parents may invade the privacy of their children by seeking out information about the child through different formats and contexts, such as online social media platforms like Facebook (Child & Westerman, 2013). When parents engage in this type of information seeking, their children are likely to evaluate the ownership of the private information they have on their Facebook profile, and whether the information should be revealed to or concealed from their parent.

In the study by Child and Westerman (2013), adult-children revealed their private information to their parent, granting access to their personal Facebook pages. The adult-children reported not experiencing privacy dilemmas when managing this information and deciding whether to reveal or conceal the information. However, this management process may be specific to online disclosures of information on behalf of the adult-child and may look different when the information the adult-child is managing does not solely belong to them, but is a secret shared with them by a parent. Although family secrets are known to function as a form of relational maintenance and bonding for family members (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), there may also be instances where parental disclosures of family secrets are managed based on the degree to which children experience parentification and satisfaction, rather than parents' efforts to bond. Understanding if and

when such instances may occur would contribute to the parent-child communication literature and may inform parents decisions to disclose family secrets.

Children might also be exposed to unwanted information, such as when a parent burdens a child with personal disclosures and causes the child to feel “caught between custodial and non-custodial parents” (Afifi, 2003, p. 729). In her work, Afifi (2003) explored the dialectical tensions between a child, their custodial parent, and their non-custodial parent. In these situations, children may find themselves in the uncomfortable position as parents may attempt to engage in peer-like relationships with their children after a divorce. Afifi (2003) found that when one parent disclosed private information to their child, the child reported feeling “caught” between revealing and concealing the information to their other parent. This situation also made it difficult for stepparents to become involved in a parent-child relationships with their stepchild, creating tensions related to loyalty and disloyalty within the family unit.

To work through these triangulation issues and tensions, Afifi (2003) noted that families developed rules for parents to “monitor the amount and type of information they reveal and conceal to their children” (p. 750). Although disclosing private information takes a level of courage and includes vulnerability on behalf of the discloser, Afifi’s work demonstrates the importance of evaluating the risks and benefits of revealing or concealing information, as the negative impact of a parental disclosure within the parent-child dyad may outweigh the benefits. Further, parental disclosures place a level of responsibility onto children, as they must manage the information a parent shares with them. Afifi noted the parentification children experienced when receiving private

information from one of their parents, yet the implications of parentification in these situations were not examined in terms of their impact on children's satisfaction. Being parentified may influence the level of relationship satisfaction experienced by children who are treated as their parent's confidant. If this is the case, scholarship on the child's decision to either conceal or reveal the parental disclosure would be informed by examining the link between children's parentification and satisfaction.

Thorson (2015) looked at adult-children's experiences managing boundary turbulence after learning about a parent's infidelity. Respondents from her study noted that the children were often victims of unwanted stress and that they shouldered unwanted responsibility for managing a secret disclosed to them by their parent, which impacted the entire family unit. In Thorson's study, respondents were treated by parents as peers as they were given the parent-like responsibility of managing information which held the family together. The disclosure of parental infidelity to a child places a level of responsibility onto the child which requires mental, behavioral, and communitive work as the child decides to either keep the information hidden, or to share it.

While Thorson (2015) noted that communication surrounding the infidelity was as important as the event itself, this particular study did not explore how managing the information about infidelity might influence the adult-child's relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed, or the level of parentification the child experienced. Expanding this to understand how relationship satisfaction, parentification, and privacy management function together may allow scholars and families alike to navigate pivotal issues a family may face. Further, this work will provide guidance on parental decision-

making regarding disclosures of secret information, as the current study aims to understand how the adult-child's management of the family secret may be associated with satisfaction levels, and parentification levels.

CPM informs the communication literature about how parents and children navigate boundary turbulence when private information is disclosed within the dyad, noting how an individual assesses risks and benefits before disclosing information and creating a co-owner. The present study aims to contribute to the CPM literature by investigating the impact parental disclosures of family secrets may have on the parent-child relationship, including imminent risks and potential benefits which should be considered in these communication interactions. Further, this work explores how satisfaction within this relationship may influence an adult-child's management of the family secret, and how parentification may moderate the relationship between parental disclosures of family secrets and information management.

As parents consider the risks and benefits of disclosing a family secret, this study may help them uncover the potential negative impacts on the relationship satisfaction, and overall mental health of the child. Further, as parents understand the role parentification may have in increasing or decreasing relationship satisfaction, and the implications this satisfaction may have on the management of family secrets, they may more carefully consider any decision to disclose such secrets to their child at any point in their child's life.

Brashears and DiVerniero (2015) found that when a parent discloses their LGBTQ identity to their adult child, the adult-child sees the information as belonging to

their parent, rather than being a shared family secret. In this study, the children managed the secret by viewing their parents as the owner of the information and by concealing the information as if they were not a co-owner. Although a parental disclosure of identity affects the parent-child relationship, Breshears and DiVerniero did not evaluate how such disclosure influenced the adult-children's relational satisfaction with the parent who disclosed, or how that satisfaction may have influenced their chosen method of privacy management.

Further, parentified children may view the disclosure of LGBTQ identity differently from non-parentified children because parentified children may view their parents' identity as enmeshed with their own identity. The possibility that children may take ownership over their parent's information, such as identity, may extend into children taking ownership over other forms of information, such as secrets. Parentification, thus, may influence the process of satisfaction within the parent-child dyad, and adult-children's decisions to reveal or conceal the disclosed information. Understanding children's satisfaction and parentification in terms of parental disclosures contributes to the understanding of CPM's tenant of privacy management and furthers the understanding of family communication processes which lead to greater or lesser satisfaction and well-being.

The process of revealing and concealing private information contributes to family functioning as secrets are managed within the family to create a shared identity (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004). Although certain parental disclosures of private information may leave adult- children feeling afraid, confused, and highly anxious when they are put in a

position to manage the new information (Thorson, 2015), it is possible that such feelings are linked to a child's satisfaction with the parent-child relationship rather than the disclosure itself. Therefore, this study looks closely at the relationship satisfaction reported by adult-children regarding their relationship with the parent who disclosed a family secret to them. In addition, rather than looking to parental disclosures as the only influential factor on children's relational satisfaction with the parent who disclosed, this study explores the role parentification may have in influencing adult-children's satisfaction, and how satisfaction stemming from parentification may influence the adult child's decision to reveal or conceal the family secret disclosed to them.

Communication research benefits from understanding the role parental disclosures play in parent-child dyadic health and relational functioning, especially as it regards the secrets held by a parent within the family. As parents often serve as a stronghold for the family unit, their decision to reveal or conceal secrets about the family can influence the trajectory of familial health and functioning (Kennedy et al., 2010; Qiao et al., 2013). Understanding these communicative patterns and processes within the family informs discussions regarding parental disclosures of family secrets, proper assessments of risks and benefits related to disclosures, and connections between privacy management and parentification processes may take place to inform clinicians and scholars of family practices and behavioral development.

PARENTIFICATION

Parentification is defined as a parent-child role reversal, referring to children “who assume excessive responsibility for other family members and often the family as a whole” (Jurkovic, 1998, p. 237). The parentified child is expected to fulfill parental duties, such as acting as a caregiver for the family unit (Byng-Hall, 2002). Parentification is divided into three facets: emotional caregiving, instrumental caregiving, and perceived fairness within the role-reversal (Jurkovic & Thirkield, 1998). Emotional tasks involve regulating family affection and emotions, and instrumental tasks include the physical actions a child performs for the family, including but not limited to household chores, financial management, and sibling caretaking. Lastly, perceived fairness involves the extent to which parentified children view their caretaking as justified or not.

When parents disclose a secret which requires a child to perform a physical task, the instrumental dimension is in effect. For instance, in multilingual homes where a parent or both parents only speak one language, and a child is bilingual, the child often acts as a language broker and translates for their parent(s). While this can be considered a form of parentification, scholars have noted that although stressful, many children report that language brokering can be a positive experience depending on levels of family support they receive during these brokering exchanges (Murillo & Kam, 2021). Likewise, there may be times when parental disclosures of family secrets may increase relationship satisfaction, or when they elicit positive feelings for an adult-child. Given this, the current study explores whether parentification is associated with relational satisfaction levels in the parent-child dyad.

Often when a parent becomes ill, parentification takes place as a child instrumentally and emotionally cares for the sick parent or takes over the duties the parent can no longer perform for the family. This may involve physical (instrumental) tasks, such as administering medication, or it may involve emotional tasks encouraging a parent through pain and illness. Like Murillo and Kam (2021), Tompkins (2007) noted that “parentification was not associated with maladaptive parenting or child outcomes” (p. 120) in the case of children who experienced parentification in conjunction with their mothers’ HIV diagnoses. However, research has yet to explore the difference between positive and negative experience alongside levels of parentification as reported by adult-children. It may be the case that adult-children enjoy taking care of their parents and the family, and therefore their increased levels of parentification coincide with increased levels of satisfaction. Understanding the relationship between parentification and levels of satisfaction will extend current literature by identifying whether parentification influences increased levels of relationship satisfaction.

Further, the process of parentification heavily involves the child taking over parent-like duties and responsibilities. Given the parent’s role in managing family information, private information, and family secrets, a child who is parentified may feel pressured to conceal the family information. As such, this study explores if parentified children are more likely to conceal the family secret disclosed to them by their parent. Such information informs the parent-child dynamic by highlighting the potential dangers of disclosing family secrets to a child if greater negative outcomes are reported. Further, the study provides information on adult-children’s management of family secrets in

connection to levels of both parentification, and relationship satisfaction.

Scholars have attempted to explain the association between parental secrets and parentification of children, with Yarrow (2011) investigating a parent's active withholding of a traumatic secret about themselves and whether this withholding led to increased parentification behaviors for the child. Children in this study were "aware of their parent's secret keeping and trauma-reactive behaviors from a very young age" (p. 151). Although the parents in the study did not disclose the secret to their children, the children became aware of the secret through "verbal cues, emotional distress, parent's topic avoidance, lying, and distancing behavior" (p. 151). The children in Yarrow's study demonstrated parentified behaviors in association with a desire to protect and care for their family, yet Yarrow's work did not explore whether the children revealed or concealed the secret. It also did not examine how the displayed parentification behaviors may or may not have influenced relationship satisfaction with the parent who withheld the traumatic secret.

Children's satisfaction with their parental relationship may be linked to their parentification. On one hand, children who experience parentification may enjoy the level of responsibility placed upon them, they may feel empowered by taking care of others in their family, and they may feel satisfied in their role as a parentified child. On the other hand, a parentified child may desire less responsibility over the family unit and feel less satisfied in their role as a caretaker for their parents and family. In both cases, the resulting feelings of satisfaction may work to influence adult-children's decision to conceal the family secret disclosed to them by their parent. The present study seeks to

understand how the potential relationship between parentification and satisfaction works to influence adult-children's management of a family secret. Children's relationship with their parent is influenced when they know information is being concealed or withheld from them (Yarrow, 2011), yet little research explores how this dyad is influenced once a family secret is disclosed by the parent to the child.

SECRET DISCLOSURE AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Within the family context, secrets may take on different forms and serve different functions, with positive consequences of sharing a family secret including familial bonding and relational maintenance (Vangelisti, 1994). However, family secrets can also have negative consequences when kept private or when shared. Individuals may opt to keep a secret out of fear of what their family will say or do (Vangelisti et al., 2001), because they believe the secret will cause harm to the family unit and relationships (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), or to avoid family conflict and disagreement within the unit (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Experimental research demonstrates that children between the ages of 5 and 6 can differentiate secretive and non-secretive information through verbal cues and content of information shared (Eccles, 1999). The children often withheld secrets shared with them and chose more restrictive disclosure patterns when sharing this information with a non-friend versus a friend. However, the secrets shared with children in this experiment came from a puppet, and the secrets did not involve members of the family unit.

As children age and experience similar scenarios during their life, where an

individual discloses a secret to them, they may manage the information differently based on the dyadic relationship in which the disclosure occurs. As Eccles' study demonstrated, as children develop socially and biologically, their knowledge of roles and relationships within the family unit become clearer, and more in their control (Eccles, 1999). In alignment with this development, the current study focuses on adult-children to understand how they report their level of parentification, and how this may influence their privacy management.

Further, as children reach adolescence and emerging adulthood (13-18), they tend to experience psychosocial problems such as “depressive mood, low self-concept clarity, low-self-control, loneliness, and poor relationship quality” in response to concealing a secret only they know (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009, p. 145). While Frijns and Finkenauer found negative health effects associated with the concealment of a secret, they did not explore variables which may have been associated with the adolescent's choice to conceal or reveal the secret. Such health effects can further be addressed by understanding the potential relationship between satisfaction and secret management within the parent-child dyad, specifically looking at an adult-child's decision to conceal or reveal the family secret in connection to their level of relationship satisfaction. The level of parentification experienced by a child may influence their level of satisfaction, and their decision to conceal or reveal the family secret.

When exploring the association between self-disclosure and satisfaction in family units consisting of two parents and two children all co-habiting in the Netherlands, Finkenauer and colleagues (2004) found that, in general, individual members of the

family who reported high levels of self-disclosure to other members of the family also had higher levels of satisfaction with their overall family relationships. Based on this association between disclosure and satisfaction, the current study explores how relationship satisfaction within the parent-child dyad from the perspective of an adult-child may influence the management of a family secret disclosed by a parent. Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) note that “members who are relatively dissatisfied with their family relationships may be more likely to reveal family secrets than those who are not” (p. 685). This aligns with Gordon and colleagues’ (2014) findings, that a child who kept a secret on their parent’s behalf reported higher levels of parental trust. However, there is little research which investigates potential links between satisfaction and privacy management with consideration of parentification, and how parentification may inform the parent-child relationship when parental disclosures of family secrets are involved.

The hierarchical, parent-child relationship has been explored extensively because of its pivotal role in the family system, and the family system serves as one of the most influential factors in an individual’s life course (Wambolt & Wambolt, 2000). Investigating the disclosure of family secrets within this dyad provides insight into functional and dysfunctional elements of this relationship which may correspond to experienced satisfaction within the pairing. Further, the extent of parentification experienced by adult-children may influence adult-children’s management of the family secret, impacting their relationship with their parent, their personal health, and the health of their current and future families as they continue to age. Therefore, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the likelihood an adult-child will conceal a family secret disclosed to them by their parent, and their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed.

H2: There is a negative relationship between an adult-child's level of parentification and their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed.

H3: There is a positive relationship between an adult-child's level of parentification and their likelihood to conceal a family secret disclosed to them by their parent.

H4: Parentification moderates the relationship between an adult-child's likelihood to conceal a family secret disclosed to them by their parent and their reported relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed.

H5: Relationship satisfaction moderates the relationship between an adult-child's level of parentification and their likelihood to conceal the family secrets disclosed.

Chapter 3: Methods

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

After approval from the Institutional Review Board, participants ($N = 383$) were recruited using Prolific, an online participant pool that screens possible respondents to make sure they meet the study's criteria. Survey completion times ranged from 5 to 25 minutes, and each participant was paid \$4.00 for completing the survey. Eligibility for participation required individuals to be between the ages of 18 and 25 to ensure they were young-adults, and to have at least one person in their life whom they consider a parent or parent-like figure. In total, participants were administered 99-items. Three attention-checks were included in the survey, with the items stating, "If you are reading this question, please respond with 'Strongly Agree.'" Respondents who failed two of the three attention check items were removed from the sample. In total, two respondents failed attention checks, and were therefore excluded from the final sample.

Participants identified as 49.8% male, 45.7% female, and 3.9% non-binary/third gender, with remaining participants preferring not to respond. Most respondents were White/Caucasian (65.8%), followed by Black/African American (14.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (10.0%), Native American/Alaskan Native (0.7%), with remaining participants preferring not to respond. Forty-three participants (11.0%) identified as being of Hispanic/Latine descent. In response to whether they were currently living with their parents, 52.9% indicated "yes" and 47.0% indicated "no." The participants' average age was 22.3 ($SD = 2.1$), with ages ranging from 18 to 25.

FAMILY SECRETS

To ensure that participants focused on the disclosure of a particular family secret, they were provided an open-ended question with a prompt instructing them to describe a time their parent or parent-like figure disclosed a family secret to them (see Appendix A).

The prompt read as follows:

For this study, we are interested your communication with your parent or parent-like figure. Think of a time your parent or parent-like figure disclosed a secret to you about your family. It could be a secret about either your immediate (parent, sibling) or extended (grandparent, aunt/uncle, cousin) family. Tell us who disclosed the secret to you and describe the secret below including as much detail as possible.

Follow-up questions inquired about whether the adult-child revealed the secret to another individual or not. For example, respondents were asked “How old were you when your parent or parent-like figure shared this secret with you?” and to provide an estimate if they could not recall. Further, respondents were asked if they had already revealed the secret to someone, and if so, to whom. If they had not revealed the secret to someone, they were asked why they have not done so. In total, four items were presented to participants in this section to collect details regarding the parental disclosure of a family secret.

COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT (CPM)

To measure how participants managed the specific family secret disclosed to them, items were developed based on the Blogging Privacy Management measure (BPM; Child et al., 2009). The BPM was initially designed to assess the dimensions of boundary ownership, boundary permeability, and boundary linkages when looking at how individuals manage their online presence through their blogging behaviors. Items were modified for the current study to fit the context of family secrets, with items such as “If the information I posted looks private, I might delete it” adjusted to read as “The information my parent told me needs to be kept hidden from others.” Additional items were developed to measure individuals’ tendency to reveal or conceal the family secret, including items such as “It is my responsibility to conceal this family secret from others” and “The secret my parent told me belongs to me.” Participants were asked to rate each item using a Likert-type scale. Each item ranged from strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5] (see Appendix B). The Cronbach’s alpha for the revised scale maintained high reliability ($\alpha = .87$), and respondents were presented with ten items to evaluate the likelihood they would conceal the family secret ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.57$).

PARENTIFICATION

The parentification questionnaire (PQ; Jurkovic & Thirkield 1998) was fielded to participants to measure parentification. This instrument was developed to be used as a retrospective assessment of various levels of parentification and has been widely administered throughout the psychology literature and clinical realm. Consistent with

Jurkovic's (1998) three-dimensional framework for understanding parentification, the PQ includes three sections relating to the dimensions of emotional, instrumental, and perceived fairness. Emotional parentification consists of seven Likert-type items, with statements such as "I often felt like a referee in my family" and "It seemed like family members were always bringing me their problems." Instrumental parentification posits five Likert-type items, including the statements "I was rarely asked to look after my siblings or others in the home" and "I often did the family's laundry." The third and final dimension, perceived fairness, consists of nine Likert-type items, with statements such as "I often felt let down by members of my family" and "My parents often tried to get me to take sides in conflicts."

The PQ originally included 23 total items in its early implementation (Jurkovic & Thirkield, 1998). However, over time, the evaluation of its psychometric properties identified reliability and validity among 21 of the 23 original items. Therefore, in alignment with literature surrounding the PQ, this study utilized the 21-item. The instrumental dimension of the PQ presents three items involving sibling relationships to measure a child's caretaking responsibilities over others in the family, such as parents and siblings. However, the purpose of this study was to explore parent-child behaviors regardless of the presence or relationships an adult-child maintains with siblings. Therefore, these three items referring to sibling relationships were removed from the study, resulting in 18-total items presented to participants (see Appendix C) in a Likert-type format ranging from [1] strongly disagree to [5] strongly agree ($\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.75$).

RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Hendrick's (1988) relationship assessment scale (RAS) was used to measure satisfaction in the parent-child relationship from the perspective of the adult-child. Developed as "a generic measure of relationship satisfaction" (p. 93), the RAS has been used consistently since its creation to measure relationship satisfaction levels in various interpersonal dyads. Each of the seven items were modified for the present study to target the parent/parent-like figure and child relationship, with questions such as "How well does your partner meet your needs?" revised to "How well does your parent meet your needs?" Each item is presented in a question format, with scores ranging from [1] low satisfaction to [5] high satisfaction (see Appendix D). In total, seven items were fielded to participants to measure relationship satisfaction from the adult-child's perspective, with the measure retaining high reliability ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.05$).

Chapter 4: Results

A linear regression analysis was used to test if adult-children's likelihood of concealing the family secret disclosed to them predicted their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed (H1). Relationship satisfaction served as the dependent variable and the independent variable was the adult-children's report of the likelihood they would reveal the secret. Results were significant, with adult-children's likelihood to conceal the family secret disclosed to them predicting their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed, $R^2 = .01$; $F(1, 386) = 6.33$, $p = .0$.

To test H2, which investigated whether an adult-children's level of parentification predicts their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed the family secret to them, a linear regression was conducted. Again, relationship satisfaction was the dependent variable. The independent variable was the adult-children's level of parentification. Results supported the hypothesis, providing evidence that there is a negative relationship between adult children's level of parentification and their relationship satisfaction with their parent who disclosed, $R^2 = .45$; $F(1, 374) = 309.1$, $p < .001$.

A third linear regression analysis was completed to test if adult-children's level of parentification predicts the likelihood they will conceal the secret disclosed to them (H3). In this case, the adult-child's reported tendency to conceal the secret served as the dependent variable. The independent variable was the adult-children's level of parentification. Results from this analysis were not significant, $R^2 = .00$; $F(1, 374) = 1.17$, $p = .27$.

A fourth linear regression was conducted to test the role of parentification as a moderator of the relationship between an adult-children's likelihood of concealing the secret disclosed to them by their parent and their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed (H4). Relationship satisfaction served as the dependent variable. The adult-children's likelihood of concealing the secret, the adult-child's parentification, and the interaction between them served as the independent variables. Results were not significant, with evidence failing to support the role of parentification as a moderator of the relationship between an adult child's satisfaction with their parent who disclosed the family secret and their likelihood of concealing it, $R^2 = .46$; $F(3, 372) = 108$, $p = .13$.

A final linear regression was conducted to test the role of relationship satisfaction as a moderator of the relationship between adult-children's level of parentification and the likelihood they would conceal the family secret disclosed to them (H5). The adult-children's likelihood of concealing the secret was the dependent variable. The independent variables were the adult-children's level of parentification, relationship satisfaction, and the interaction between parentification and satisfaction. Results were not significant, $R^2 = .01$; $F(3, 372) = 2.61$, $p = .81$. These findings suggest that relationship satisfaction does not moderate the relationship between parentification and privacy management.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Secrets are held among, between, and from members in the family unit (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Scholars have explored the complexities family members undergo when deciding to reveal or conceal a secret to another individual within and outside of the family (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Petronio, 2002; Vangelisti et al., 2001; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). The implications of a parent disclosing a family secret are especially important to understand given the power dynamic present within the parent-child relationship. Although individuals may disclose secrets in efforts to bond or to maintain a relationship (Vangelisti, 1994), this process of disclosure may have powerful influences on children by placing a level of responsibility onto them as they become a co-owner of the secret. Therefore, this study extends research regarding how such a responsibility is managed by the adult-child, how satisfaction within the parent-child relationship influences this management process, and how parentification informs relationship satisfaction and privacy management within this pairing.

HYPOTHESIS 1

Results for H1 demonstrate a significant positive relationship between the likelihood adult-children will conceal the family secret disclosed to them by their parent and their relationship satisfaction with the parent who disclosed. Therefore, the more that children report keeping the secret hidden from others, the greater their reports of relationship satisfaction with the parent who shared the secret with them. This finding presents a new direction to explore in terms of secrets and satisfaction, given that most of

the prior research has identified associations between concealment of a secret with negative outcomes. For example, Frijns and Finkenauer (2009) found an association between young individuals' tendency to keep a secret hidden and lower self-esteem, increased depression symptoms, lower self-control, and lower parent-child relationship quality as reported by adolescents.

Additionally, past research has associated concealment of a secret with fear of family reactions (Vangelisti et al., 2001), or avoiding conflict which may arise if the secret is revealed (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Contrary to prior research, the current study found increased satisfaction linked to a greater likelihood that adult-children would conceal a secret. In the case of parental disclosures of a family secret to adult-children, evidence now shows that the management process is influenced by the children's satisfaction with their parent who shared the secret.

Research has historically noted the association between individuals' concealment of a secret and increased feelings of anxiety and betrayal for keeping the secret (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Karpel 1990; Pennebaker, 1990). The current study reveals a different perspective on concealing a family secret. This new perspective demonstrates the complexity of the parent-child relationship, and the need to continue exploring how this relationship functions in terms of disclosures, secrets, and the role of parentification.

HYPOTHESIS 2

The second hypothesis yielded significant results, demonstrating that as adult-children's level of parentification increases, their relationship satisfaction with the parent

who disclosed to them decreases. These results support earlier assumptions made by scholars regarding associations between parentification and negative health outcomes (Borchet et al., 2022). They illustrate the possible influence of increased parentification on lower relationship satisfaction within the parent-child relationship, which is one of the most pivotal and anchoring relationships a child experiences (Shepard, 1995).

Further, the negative association between parentification and satisfaction raises interesting questions and areas for further inquiry among the contexts of parentification. Earlier research has highlighted potential areas where increased parentification may bring satisfaction to a child's life. For instance, Murillo and Kam's (2021) work on language brokering within the parent-child relationship indicated that when children translated for parents, children viewed this exchange as a positive experience depending on the level of support they received during the exchange. Although the responsibility placed onto these children to translate for their parents is classified as a form of instrumental parentification, the level of support allowed for the exchange to be positive.

By contrast, the findings of the current study note that an increased level of parentification is associated with decreased satisfaction as reported by adult-children regarding their relationship with the parent who disclosed. This result offers an interesting perspective on how the experience of parentification informs relational well-being from the perspective of adult-children. Parentification levels may be reported differently based on the respondents age, which may contribute to the negative association between parentification and satisfaction as adult-children may be able to identify and recognize their role in the family more accurately than a child under the age

of 18. This information is relevant to educating scholars, clinicians, and families alike on the functions of parentification among an adult-population given the heavy focus of previous research on the child and adolescent populations (children 18 and under).

HYPOTHESIS 3

To further explore questions regarding the circumstances under which parentification may increase relationship satisfaction, H3 investigated the effect of parentification on adult-children's likelihood of concealing the family secret shared with them. Given that parentification involves caretaking and parent-like responsibilities being placed onto a child, the current study sought to explore how the disclosure of a family secret works to elicit a similar response by placing the responsibility of secret management onto adult-children. The current study hypothesized that as parentification levels increased, the likelihood of concealing the secret would also increase, as a parentified child may seek to protect and conceal the family's private information. However, results were not significant, demonstrating there was not a relationship between levels of parentification and the adult-child's privacy management.

These findings are especially interesting given the significance of H1 and H2. As adult-children's likelihood of concealing the family secret increases, their relationship satisfaction also increases, and as adult-children's level of parentification increases, their level of relationship satisfaction decreases. However, the finding of H3 did not yield evidence to support the claim that as adult children's' level of parentification increases, their likelihood of concealing the family secret increases as well. There may be other

elements influencing the relationship between the level of parentification and an adult child's privacy management of the family secret disclosed to them.

Although parental disclosures place a level of responsibility on children which, in turn, may influence levels of parentification, this study suggests that other factors, such as the topic of the secret, the family member who the secret was about, or the family member who disclosed the secret, may be more important when considering how the adult-child chooses to manage the secret disclosed to them. If the child does not feel responsible over the extended family, but solely the immediate family, then the parent disclosure of a secret relating to the extended family may not have the same impact regarding an adult-child's likelihood of concealing the secret. Scholarship may continue to explore this connection between parentification levels and privacy management to further understand how the adult-child views their level of responsibility over this secret.

HYPOTHESIS 4

To further investigate the relationship between adult-children's likelihood of concealing the secret disclosed to them by a parent and their level of relationship satisfaction with that parent, H4 tested the role of parentification as a moderator of that relationship. The results of H4 were not significant, demonstrating that parentification does not alter the effect of privacy management on parent-child relationship satisfaction as reported by adult-children. These findings indicate the independent effects of parentification and privacy management as predictors of relationship satisfaction, rather than the interaction between the two variables. The predictive value of the main effects as

opposed to the interaction is important in helping scholars better understand the relationship between privacy management, satisfaction, and parentification in the parent-child relationship. Knowledge about the independent impact that parentification and privacy management may have on satisfaction within the parent-child dyad, may encourage scholars to focus on the specific elements of these variables and their respective impact on satisfaction.

Understanding the impact these variables have independently contributes to family communication literature by informing scholars about the impact parentification has on the relational maintenance and health of the parent-child dyad throughout the life course. Further knowledge regarding how an individual's privacy management of secret information disclosed to them by a parent or parental figure also contributes to the literature, as this work increases awareness of CPM's functions within the family context. This work informs researchers and families on parent-child communication and relationship maintenance behaviors.

This finding has implications for how communication researchers and clinicians approach interventions aimed at improving parent-child interactions, relationship well-being, and levels of satisfaction among individuals who experience parentification. However, it also informs scholars on the lack of influence parentification may have on the likelihood individuals' will conceal a family secret disclosed to them by their parent. Such findings encourage researchers to further explore the impact parentification may have on other forms of disclosure, such as disclosures of different topics, disclosures between

different family dyads, or disclosures maintain different levels of responsibility for adult-children.

Different risks accompanying such disclosures may also be examined and considered. With this, scholars may evaluate whether other variables elicit different, similar, or significant outcomes. Additionally, the lack of significance of parentification as a moderator of privacy management and relationship satisfaction indicates that other elements may be working to increase the relationship between the latter two variables. Identifying these other elements and studying the way they influence the link between privacy management and relationship satisfaction is an interesting avenue for future work. Researchers might also examine family elements, such as birth order, relational, closeness, or family satisfaction.

If adult-children are satisfied with their family, they may have different feelings associated with parentification and with assuming parent-like duties over their family unit. In turn, this may explain why there is not a relationship between the likelihood of concealing the family secret and the level of parentification, as the association between the likelihood of concealing the family secret and the level of satisfaction within the parent-child relationship is greater. Another potential explanation for the absence of a relationship between parentification and privacy management is the age of the participants within this sample. The current study surveyed young adult-children ranging between 18 and 25 years old. It is possible that younger children (i.e., under the age of 18) may have a greater sense of obligation to conceal the secret if they are parentified. Because these individuals are more likely to reside with their parents or parent-like

figures, they may be more frequently reminded of the demands of their role in the family. This, in turn, may have an impact on privacy management depending on their level of parentification.

Testing these potential explanations would require further exploration of parentification, parental disclosures of secrets, and influences of satisfaction within the parent-child relationship. Together, the findings of this study work to extend current family communication literature, explain the effects of parentification on relationship satisfaction, and the effects of privacy management on relationship satisfaction within the parent-child relationship.

HYPOTHESIS 5

Although results did not demonstrate an association between parentification and the likelihood adult-children would conceal the family secret disclosed to them, research suggests that relationship satisfaction may moderate such an association rather than serving only as a predictor or outcome variable (Caughlin & Afifi, 2014). Caughlin and Afifi's work shows that satisfaction functions as a moderator of the relationship between withholding putative secrets and conflict within romantic pairings. The current study utilized a similar framework to test whether relationship satisfaction serves as a moderator between levels of parentification and privacy management. However, results showed that relationship satisfaction did not moderate the link between parentification levels and the likelihood of concealing a family secret disclosed to adult-children. The lack of a significant relationship between privacy management and parentification opens

the door for further exploration of these variables, in addition to how relationship satisfaction may inform these two variables given the positive association between relationship satisfaction and concealment, and the negative link between relationship satisfaction and parentification.

Findings further suggest that although relationship satisfaction is important for both the likelihood of concealing and levels of parentification, it may not influence the way in which these constructs operate together. This may hold implications for interventions, therapy, and education aimed at addressing parent-child relational issues, as it informs professionals that relationship satisfaction may not necessarily change the dynamic between the likelihood individuals will conceal a secret disclosed to them by a parent, and their parentification experience. These results lay the groundwork for further investigation of relational health, relational maintenance, and the function of relationship satisfaction within the parent-child dyad.

LIMITATIONS

In retrospect, the current study was limited by evaluating “family secrets” as a generalized category rather than exploring the different typologies of family secrets, and how those types may create a shift in privacy management and the level of satisfaction that individuals experience. Adult-children may feel less responsibility over a secret about a member of the extended family, and that secret and management of that secret may not much influence on the level of parentification. As such, the current study was limited by its general conceptualization of family secrets which included those about both

the immediate and extended family.

Additionally, regarding the secret, the current study did not evaluate differences between parents, or whether the respondent had a single parent. These distinctions may be important, as they may relate to different levels of responsibility placed onto the adult-child. For example, a single parent may need to place more financial, emotional, and instrumental tasks onto an adult-child, whereas parents with partners may rely on each other's support without needing to place tasks onto the child. This difference may also impact relationship satisfaction within the parent-child dyad from the perspective of the child.

Given the noted importance of the parent-child relationship, and the influential role parents have on children's life outcomes, this study was limited by examining adult-children's perspectives. Dyadic data would allow for a clearer picture of the relationship being evaluated. Additionally, the current study considered the role of parentification, but was limited by not inquiring about the role participants took in conjunction with their birth order. The different roles associated with "first-born," "middle child," and "youngest" may influence levels of satisfaction, privacy management, and parentification.

The current study did not analyze the age participants were when their parent disclosed the family secret. This information may further inform the current findings, as there may be differences between disclosures which occurred before the age of 18 and after the age of 18. As children age into adolescence and young adulthood, their understanding of their role, identity, and self-concept may become more evident. In

alignment with this, adult-children may view a parental disclosure of a family secret which occurred before 18 differently than a disclosure occurring after 18. This difference may influence the reported level of satisfaction between the parent-child dyad, and the likelihood for adult-children to reveal or conceal the secret. The findings of the present study suggest the importance of further exploring the parent-child dyad.

LOOKING FORWARD

The current study lays a framework for expanding investigation of the connections between privacy management and parentification within the parent-child dyad. The current study explored the role of family secrets within this pairing, focusing on the perspective of adult-children when a parent discloses a family secret about either the immediate, or extended family.

Future research may expand beyond the adult-child's perspective by investigating dyadic data, inquiring from both the parent and the child involved in the disclosure interaction. This expansion allows for diverse perspectives within the parent-child relationship to be considered in terms of experienced satisfaction, and whether these pairings express symmetric feelings of satisfaction, which contribute to privacy management. Further, this dyadic data would enable discussion regarding privacy rules involved in management, which this study did not explore. The implicit, explicit, and assumed rules involved in managing a family secret disclosed to a child by a parent may inform the relationship satisfaction and functioning of this dyad. Therefore, future research would benefit from studying how the added elements of dyadic data and privacy

rule regulation informs the relational maintenance of this dyad when a parental disclosure of a family secret is involved.

Another area to build on from this study is the phenomenon of parentification. The goal of this study was to understand how adult-children manage the family secret disclosed to them by their parent, and how their level of parentification informs that process. Moving forward, scholars should investigate how the process of parents disclosing family secrets may contribute to parentification and compare family-centered secrets to non-family centered secrets to explore whether the management of secret information depends on the family's involvement in the secret, or if it is influenced by another factor yet to be considered.

While this study examined the role of parentification in conjunction with privacy management and parent-child satisfaction, there is more to investigate regarding the facets of parentification. Given that each element of parentification (emotional, instrumental, perceived judgement) describes different tasks which encourage a child to take on the role of caretaker within the family, understanding how these different tasks influence privacy management and satisfaction is a valuable next step to take in research. Breaking apart the elements of parentification will allow for scholars to investigate whether one form serves a unique function in terms of relational well-being, functioning, or dysfunction. For example, emotional parentification involves the tasks of caring for the family's feelings by regulating emotions. When a parent discloses a secret to their child, the parent may be emotionally burdening the child and creating a context in which the child is required to regulate the parent's emotions. A secret serving this function may be

managed differently than a secret which elicits a response involving instrumental parentification, or the act of completing a tangible task. Further, there may be different levels of satisfaction associated with different forms of parentification. Future work should explore the different dimensions of parentification as such work would inform parents, families, and professionals on behaviors and processes necessary to foster well-being within the family unit.

Additionally, while parentification affects the role children may assume within the family unit, children who are not parentified may also assume roles which influence the way they manage family secrets and report relationship satisfaction. For example, scholars have noted differences in children's birth-order and the responsibilities children within a family unit take on (Ernst & Angst, 2012; Harris & Howard, 1968). These differences in birth order may contribute to the process of parentification, and to the level of satisfaction reported by children regarding their relationship with their parents.

A parent may disclose more secret information to a certain child more than another. This may be done for a plethora of reasons, only one of which being birth order. Scholarship would benefit from unraveling the extent to which birth order versus other variables, such as relationship satisfaction, influence parents' choice about which child they disclose to. This would be especially interesting to investigate given the results of the current study, which demonstrate a positive association between concealment and relationship satisfaction. For instance, does an increase in a parent's level of disclosure of family secrets to their child also work to increase the level of relationship satisfaction in this dyad?

Future research also may investigate the difference in responses between siblings when they were told the same secret by a parent. Siblings' responses may vary in terms of their feelings of relationship satisfaction, parentification, and privacy management regarding the secret disclosed to them. By exploring the connections of sibling response to parent-disclosures of secrets, birth-order, levels of parentification, relationship satisfaction with the parent, and privacy management, future research will be able to explain family functioning on a deeper level.

Research would also benefit from exploring if parents and children discussed privacy ownership rules prior to the parental disclosure, during the parental disclosure, or whether conversations of privacy ownership took place. The current study focused on how adult-children managed the secret information, however future research may expand on the current study by exploring the role of privacy ownership and how adult-children form their rules for either revealing or concealing the secret information. Further exploring the different facets of communication privacy management alongside parental disclosures of family secrets will allow for a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics of the hierarchical, parent-child dyad. In culmination, the options for expanding the current study each pose a new element of parent-child research that has yet to be fully explored.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The results of this study present exciting advancements for the family-communication literature which inform scholarship on parent-child functioning. Literature has explained the value of understanding family interactions, yet little has explored the relationship between the parent-child phenomenon of parentification, and how this serves to impact parental disclosures of family secrets. When a parent discloses a family secret to an adult-child, there is a level of responsibility placed onto the child as they decide how to manage the new information. This study aimed to explore how the process of parentification may inform that decision.

Further, provided the responsibility the disclosure of a secret places onto a child, this study sought to understand whether there was an association between the way adult-children manages the secret and their level of satisfaction with the parent who disclosed. Results of this study provide new insight on the parent-child relationship, demonstrating that the level of satisfaction is positively associated with the likelihood adult-children will conceal the secret. This work also informs clinicians, professionals, and family members on the negative relationship between the experience of parentification and levels of relationship satisfaction. With this, interventions aimed at increasing positive family experience, family well-being, and dyadic satisfaction may consider these findings when working with families and communities.

Although there is not a clear explanation connecting adult-children's privacy management to their experience of parentification, with satisfaction lacking significance as a moderator of this relationship, the current study provides potential areas of

exploration to continue this endeavor of understanding. Moreover, parentification did not moderate the relationship between privacy management and satisfaction, insinuating that the experience of concealing a family secret may be related to the positive outcome of relationship satisfaction.

The present study provides new insights on family communication, utilizing a communication privacy management perspective to explain parental disclosures within the parent-child dyad. This study demonstrates that parentification should be further considered in communication research, as it may work to explain other facets of family functioning, relationship satisfaction, and privacy management within other contexts of family situations. Together, the findings offer greater understanding of family dynamics, and insight to increasing well-being and positive outcomes for parents and children.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: FAMILY SECRETS

1. For this study, we are interested your communication with your parent or parent-like figure. Think of a time your parent or parent-like figure disclosed a secret to you about your family. It could be a secret about either immediate (parent, sibling) or extended (grandparent/s, cousin/s, aunt/uncle) family. Tell us who disclosed the secret to you, and describe the secret below, including as much detail as possible.
2. How old were you when your parent shared this secret with you? Give a rough estimate if you do not recall.
3. If you have already shared this secret with someone, who did you reveal it to, and why did you reveal it?
4. If you have NOT already shared this secret with someone, why not?

APPENDIX B: PRIVACY MANAGEMENT

1. I limit the people I share this family secret with if I share it at all.
2. I use or would use fake names and limited details when talking about this secret.
3. The secret my parent told me belongs to me.
4. It is my responsibility to conceal this secret from others.
5. I am slow to talk about the secret my parent told me with people, if I talk about it at all.
6. The secret my parent told me needs to be kept hidden from others.
7. I am going to share this secret at some point.
8. I do not talk about this secret with others.
9. I do not share the secret that my parent/parent-like figure told me with anyone.
10. I have shared the secret that my parent/parent-like figure told me.

APPENDIX C: PARENTIFICATION

1. It seemed like my family members were always bringing me their problems.
2. In my family, I often made sacrifices that went unnoticed.
3. I often felt like a referee in my family.
4. At times, I felt like I was the only one my parents could turn to.
5. I did a lot of the shopping (e.g., groceries, clothes) for my family.
6. I often felt like my family could not get along without me.
7. I helped manage my family's financial affairs (e.g., making decisions about purchases, paying bills).
8. I was frequently responsible for the physical care of some member of my family (e.g., washing, feeding, dressing).
9. I often did the family's laundry.
10. Members of my family understand me well.
11. My parents were very helpful when I had a problem.
12. It was hard for me to trust my parents.
13. It seemed that my feelings weren't considered in my family.
14. I felt let down by members of my family.
15. I felt caught in the middle of my parents' conflicts.
16. I could not depend on my parents to meet my needs.
17. My parent's tried getting me to take sides in conflicts.
18. My parents often criticized mt efforts to help at home.

APPENDIX D: RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

1. My parent meets my needs.
2. In general, I am satisfied with my relationship.
3. My relationship is good compared to most.
4. I often wish I wasn't in this relationship.
5. My relationship meets my expectations.
6. There is a lot of love in my relationship.
7. There are a lot of problems in my relationship with my parent.

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