

Emotional echoes of family secrecy in childhood: A grounded theory study in a Maltese context

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Abstract

This paper explores the mutual influence of emotions and family secrets, a central theme emerging from a qualitative inquiry, using grounded theory analysis, involving seven adult children who experienced family secrecy during childhood. Utilising the elements of constructivist grounded theory, the research employed in-depth interviews, which were conducted and analysed simultaneously. The findings illuminate how emotions both shape and are shaped by the presence of secrets, silences, partial truths and disclosures within families where secrecy is integral to their communication patterns. Key themes, such as loss, grief, family loyalties, attachment patterns, family dynamics and fractured relationships, are critically examined, emphasising the profound emotional impact of secrecy within the family context. The study introduces an ‘emotional rollercoaster’ diagram, which not only encapsulates the collective experiences of the participants but serves as a conceptual model for potentially guiding therapeutic interventions with individuals and families affected by such dynamics. This model offers a framework for understanding the complex emotional trajectories from childhood to adulthood within secretive family environments.

KEYWORDS

childhood, emotions, family dynamics, family secrecy, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Family secrecy has long been a topic of interest across various fields, with extensive research examining its typology (Berger & Paul, 2008; Imber-Black, 1998; Rober et al., 2012), the motivations behind revealing or concealing secrets (Imber-Black, 1998; Vangelisti et al., 2001) and the communicative dynamics in secretive family systems (Afifi et al., 2015). Sociological and cultural factors influencing the practice

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Key points

- Understanding emotional and relational impact of family secrecy: Family secrets often create complex emotional experiences that shape attachment patterns, disrupt communication and create trust issues within families. Secrecy can perpetuate emotional fragmentation, role reversals and cycles of dysfunction that impact individual and relational wellbeing.
- Facilitating disclosure and open communication: Open dialogue within families can help break cycles of secrecy and facilitate the development of coherent family narratives. By fostering a supportive and safe environment, practitioners can help family members process the emotional intensity involved in sharing or addressing secrets.
- Utilising metaphors and visual tools: Employing metaphors like the ‘emotional rollercoaster’ can help clients articulate and navigate their emotional experiences. This visual tool can make complex emotional states more relatable, assist in tracking emotions over time and prepare clients for the potential highs and lows associated with disclosures.
- Empowerment and emotional processing for healing: Systemic therapists should emphasise the importance of processing underlying emotional experiences linked to secrecy as part of the therapeutic journey. By addressing suppressed emotions and encouraging resilience, therapy can facilitate healing, promote adaptive interactions and ultimately lead to emotional stability and strengthened family connections.

of family secret-keeping have also been explored (Nico et al., 2023). Some research studies, more specifically case study research, focus their lens on the impact of a climate of family secrecy on children's lives (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; Helimaki et al., 2021; Rober, 2017; Rober et al., 2012). However, there is a notable gap in understanding the long-term effects of family secrecy on adult children, particularly from a systemic and relational perspective. To address this gap, this study employs a small-scale qualitative approach, utilising retrospective in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of individuals raised in secretive family environments. The following research question was identified and explored: *How do adult children perceive and navigate their encounters with family secrets and disclosures within their families of origin?*

In Malta, a densely populated microstate with an ever-increasing population of over 540,000 inhabitants in an area of 316 km², family secrecy operates as a necessary sociocultural mechanism, shaping interpersonal relationships and societal norms. The act of keeping or revealing secrets, often perceived as an ‘act of intimacy’ (Nico et al., 2023), reflects broader cultural values that emphasise discretion and loyalty. Local folklore, encapsulated by the adage ‘wash your dirty linen at home’, reflects a collective desire to shield the family—and, by extension, the nation—from external scrutiny. This secrecy contributes to a complex web of social dynamics, where image and adherence to traditional values are paramount. As Sultana and Baldacchino (1994) describe, the ‘microstate behaviour syndrome’, the inclination to withhold sensitive information, suggests an internalised resistance to exposing vulnerabilities within a small nation state context. Despite its influence, the topic of family secrecy remains largely unexamined within Maltese sociological literature, rendering it a potent yet unexplored dimension of Maltese identity. Similar dynamics can also be observed beyond Malta, where ethnic minorities in countries such as Australia and New Zealand often form microstate-like communities. These communities, akin to isolated family systems, establish tight boundaries and heightened regulation of energy and information flow to protect their internal cohesion. This shared focus on secrecy as a protective mechanism within families points to the idea that microstate behaviour transcends geography, adapting to various socio-cultural contexts (McGoldrick et al., 2005; Waldegrave et al., 2003).

This paper presents a critical analysis of a tentative core category that emerged from the data—‘Riding the Emotional Rollercoaster: Emotions that Shape Family Secrets and Family Secrets That Shape Emotions’. This central category highlights the intricate and reciprocal relationship



between emotions and family secrecy, illustrating how secrecy impacts emotional experiences and is deeply intertwined with emotional dynamics over time. The study illuminates the profound effects of family secrecy from childhood through adulthood, offering new insight into the ongoing influence of emotional experiences shaped by family secrets, making a case for its exploration in systemic therapeutic practice.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Conceptualising family secrecy

Seen as an 'act of intimacy' (Nico et al., 2023), the practice of withholding or sharing family secrets is deeply intertwined with the systemic dynamics within families, as it not only influences internal relationships but shapes the family's interactions with the broader social world. Family secrecy, defined as 'the intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it' (Rober et al., 2012, p. 530), operates as a powerful force within relational systems, creating alliances, boundaries and hierarchies that maintain or disrupt familial homeostasis (Imber-Black, 1998).

The act of keeping or revealing secrets to outsiders is reflective of how individuals manage their self and familial presentations, navigate expectations of conduct and morals and adhere to the social norms embedded within their culture. This process is symbolic of the 'social values in a given temporally anchored society' (Nico et al., 2023, p. 973), highlighting the broader sociological implications of family secrets. These dynamics can lead to the formation of triangles and shifting proximities among family members, with secrets playing a crucial role in the complex interplay of power, loyalty, protection and boundaries within family systems (Karpel, 1980).

The presence and emotional impact of family secrets in childhood and adolescence

Family secrecy during childhood profoundly impacts emotional development, relationships and overall wellbeing into adulthood. Children, even without explicit knowledge of secrets, sense their existence through silences, forbidden topics and missing family narratives (Helimaki et al., 2021; Imber-Black, 2018; Rober, 2017). This compels them to create stories to fill in gaps, leading to fragmented realities and incomplete narratives (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; Imber-Black, 1998). Research on the disclosure of family secrets to children and the developmental, emotional and relational impact of these concealed truths is sparse. Most studies focus on the withdrawal of information or the disclosure of secrets to adults. Sela and Bat-Or's (2023) study highlights how adults from secretive families experienced childhood as fragmented. Yarrow's (2012) study finds that awareness of parental secrets leads to parentification, but disclosure can foster relief and stronger family bonds.

Secrecy in specific familial traumas protects the family from judgement but intensifies the child's suffering. Studies by Klebanov and Katz (2023) reveal that silencing child sexual abuse experiences perpetuates relational dysfunction, leading to long-term isolation and difficulty forming relationships due to trust issues. Similarly, Cain's (2006) research on parental suicide shows that secrecy surrounding traumatic events fosters maladaptive coping mechanisms passed down through generations. Studies on paternity issues by Smart (2009) and Berger and Paul (2008) highlight how withholding genetic information strains family dynamics, leading to betrayal and a fractured sense of self.

Secrecy surrounding parental struggles, particularly mental illness, exacerbates children's anxiety, as shown by Radley et al. (2023). This culture of fear leads to unproductive coping strategies persisting into adulthood. The concealment of parental alcoholism, explored by Silvén Hagström and Forinder (2022), creates a façade of normalcy, leaving children unprepared to handle turmoil, resulting in mistrust and difficulties in relationships. The impact of secrecy surrounding parental imprisonment and infidelity



is similarly profound. Studies by McGinley and Jones (2018) and Shaw (2022) reveal that such secrecy exacerbates shame, stigma and trauma, leading to alienation and resentment persisting into adulthood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of emotions in systemic therapy

Early systemic therapy largely dismissed emotions, focusing on behavioural change over emotional exploration (Haley, 1976; Krause, 1993). However, recent developments in systemic therapy recognise emotions as integral to family dynamics, serving as both indicators and drivers of interaction (Flaskas et al., 2005; Fredman, 2004). Emotions are now understood as deeply relational, shaping and being shaped by family connections (Bertrando & Arcelloni, 2014). Dallos and Draper (2015) describe emotions as the ‘engine house of family life’, where behaviour patterns and belief systems are formed. Johnson (1998) argues that emotions must be addressed in therapy, as their expression is central to developing relationships.

In families entangled in secrecy due to trauma, conflicts or unspoken truths, emotions often become suppressed or distorted, contributing to cycles of dysfunction. Systemic therapy now views emotions as dynamic elements that evolve within the therapeutic process, influencing and being influenced by interactions within the therapeutic setting (Cecchin, 1987). The primary goal is to give relational meaning to emotions by recognising their systemic nature within broader social contexts.

Family systems theory and attachment theory

The analysis of the reciprocal influence between emotions and family secrecy is grounded in family systems theory and attachment theory. Family systems theory, as developed by Bowen (1978), offers a framework for understanding the emotional interdependence within families, emphasising how the homeostatic nature of family systems and the concept of circular causation (Bateson, 1972; Bateson & Donaldson, 1991) contribute to the creation and perpetuation of family secrets. This theory highlights the significance of triangulation, emotional cut-offs and generational patterns in shaping family dynamics across different stages of family life cycles, where secrets may serve to either maintain or disrupt familial stability (Bowen, 1978; Dallos & Draper, 2015).

Attachment theory, as articulated by Bowlby (1988), further enriches this perspective by exploring how the quality of bonds between caregivers and children—whether secure or insecure—affects the development and maintenance of family secrets. Insecure or disorganised attachment patterns can create environments conducive to secrecy, as these dynamics often lead to role reversals and the internalisation of burdens by children within secretive family contexts (Crittenden et al., 2014; Dallos & Vetere, 2009). The integration of these theoretical frameworks provides a robust basis for understanding the complex interplay of emotions, secrecy and attachment, and how these factors collectively influence individual experiences and the long-term effects on family systems.

METHODOLOGY

Constructivist grounded theory approach

Considering the relatively unexplored territory of the presence and impact of family secrecy in childhood, elements from a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) were used to examine the experiences and repercussions of being raised in a climate of secrecy as a child and adolescent. This qualitative approach acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants, embedding the researchers within the analytic process and emphasising the interpretative



and iterative nature of data generation and analysis (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). It also meant locating the study in an interpretative and social-constructionist paradigm (Creswell, 2008). Influenced by a pragmatist ontology, grounded theory embraces subjective meanings and changing truths, viewing knowledge as a matter of perspective, determined by consensus within a community of inquirers. As researchers, we align with this ontological perspective, seeking to develop a picture that is faithful to participants' situations and open to diverse interpretations.

Research participants

The demographic information of participants is provided in Table 1. Age range is provided rather than a specific age to preserve anonymity. The main family secret outlined in the interviews is listed—however, most families tended to have multiple secrets or operated in a climate or culture of secrecy, silence or premature disclosure of information to children.

Illustration of the study's family secrecy scenarios

Ylenia, the eldest of three, recounts a childhood overshadowed by secrecy around her mother's untreated postpartum depression, which left her feeling isolated and betrayed. Denied the understanding needed to cope, she endured neglect and was burdened with caregiving and confidante roles, deeply impacting her trust and emotional processing.

Nina's childhood was defined by contradictions: strict moral expectations contrasted with hidden truths of infidelity within her family. This dissonance, coupled with maternal rejection, left her feeling invisible, with her grandmother as her sole refuge of comfort.

Vivian's narrative revolves around the illness and death of her birth mother and her father's remarriage, which introduced emotional distance and denial of her mother's existence. Shielded from distress, she grieved someone she barely knew and struggled when her half-sister questioned their lineage, balancing truth and family loyalty.

Lisa faced secrecy and a distorted reality involving hidden financial struggles and her parents' marital discord. Confused and distrusted for challenging the lies, she found solace in her grandmother.

Adam presented a story that stands out for its relative stability and security, marked by a nurturing upbringing but marred by secrecy regarding the paternal side of his extended family. A revelation about an attempted murder over an inheritance shifted his understanding of family dynamics.

Emma's childhood, characterised by a mix of warmth and turmoil, was overshadowed by secrets of infidelity, domestic violence and a young relative's suicide. Despite these challenges, she remained protective of her family's reputation.

TABLE 1 Demographic information of participants.

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Relationship status	Main family secret
Ylenia	45–50 years	F	Separated	Parental depression/paternity
Nina	50–55 years	F	Divorced	Secretive atmosphere in general
Vivian	30–35 years	F	Married	Maternal illness
Lisa	45–50 years	F	Married	Parents' financial difficulties and marital issues
Adam	35–40 years	M	Married	Family inheritance, miscarriage and adoption
Emma	45–50 years	F	Divorced	Parental infidelity
Simon	20–25 years	M	Single	Abuse in stepfamily context



Simon, raised in a stepfamily as the ‘black sheep’, endured abuse, drama and neglect, compounded by his mother’s silence driven by fear and guilt. Alienated, he found refuge in adolescence when confiding in a supportive relative, marking a turning point that helped him escape the cycle of silence and abuse.

Recruitment of participants and ethical considerations

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Engaging participants for a study on family secrets was anticipated to be complicated due to the sensitive nature of the topic being explored. Ethical approval was sought from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee, and the study was approved and deemed to be in line with the University’s research code of practice. Being a retrospective study, participants needed to have reached adulthood (18+ years of age), which was done purposely to examine childhood experiences without necessarily interviewing children who may not be prepared to deal with the triggers or who may not be able to provide their full assent to participate and talk about sensitive familial issues. To mitigate the risk of psychological harm related to triggering past trauma, participants were debriefed and given a list of support services which they could access if they felt discomfort or distress following the interviews.

Data collection and data analysis

In line with the iterative and comparative nature of the data collection and analysis of CGT (Charmaz, 2014), in-depth interviews were held with each of the seven participants, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using constant comparison within and across data. Similarities and differences emerged across transcripts, particularly in how participants navigated secrecy within their families. For instance, despite both Lisa and Emma assuming parentified roles, their responses to secrecy diverged, influencing their sense of belonging. Memo-writing facilitated reflection on the researchers’ assumptions, questions and emerging ideas. One key issue explored was the ambivalence in Emma’s childhood, characterised by both profound familial bonds and experiences of fear, abuse and violence. Torn between protecting her siblings from her father’s rage and avoiding further family turmoil, she chose silence, maintaining the secrecy within her home. This raises questions about whether her developmental stage limited her ability to discern acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, particularly within a context of authoritarian parenting, where discipline was rigid and questioning authority was not encouraged.

A progression from an analysis of in-vivo codes and gerunds, the identification of specific categories through focused coding, the making of connections between categories through axial coding and the development of broader concepts and core categories through theoretical coding facilitated the emergence of some important insights that were grounded in the data. Umbrella terms to link initial codes into more focused ones using colour coding to categorise data from different interviews were identified during the process of data analysis and constant comparison. These are illustrated in Figure 1, where one can see, for instance, how *Children in transition: from innocence to awareness of family secrecy* coded as 4.1.1 becomes the umbrella term for a series of focused codes that illustrate the transitory moments where, as children, participants began a process of a ‘lifting of the veil’ and of ‘putting the pieces of the puzzle together’. This lengthy and iterative exercise led to the emergence of seven key categories, each of which attempts to represent participants’ perceptions and experiences of family secrecy in their childhood.

FINDINGS

Presenting the core category

The metaphor of an ‘emotional rollercoaster’, depicted in Figure 1, serves as a context for understanding the participants’ experiences from childhood through to adulthood as they navigated familial

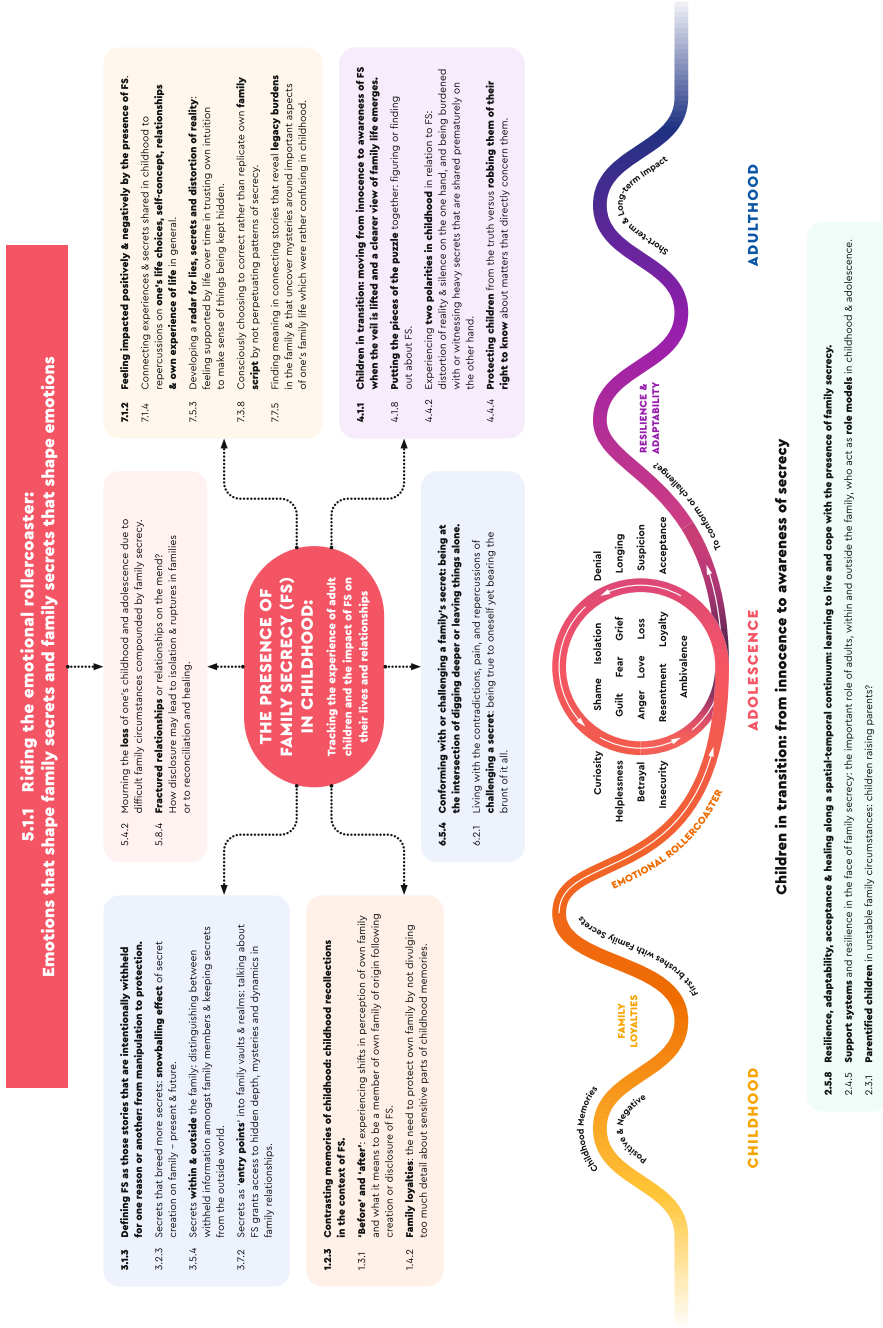


FIGURE 1 Proposed Model of Emotional Rollercoaster: Tentative Core Category & Sub-categories.



environments characterised by secrecy, silences, half-truths and the avoidance of important topics. This diagram also maps the interactive processes that the seven participants collectively experienced as they recounted their stories about the presence of family secrets during their formative years.

Spurred by the core category *Riding the emotional rollercoaster: emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions* (numbered 5.1.1) as a connecting and running thread that traversed the narratives told by the participants, the diagram goes on to illustrate the richness and complexity of the analysed data as codes and categories were constantly compared, tested and re-analysed, and relationships between the main category and subcategories were identified. Being raised in a secretive atmosphere or a family environment marked by secrecy is thus likened to an emotional rollercoaster that involves unpredictable twists, turns, sudden drops and fluctuating emotions and uncertainties that are also sometimes tainted by moments of intense internal or external upheaval, marked as *turning point moments*.

Participants in this study experienced a complex mix of emotions, such as excitement, fear, anticipation and ambivalence, as they navigated family dynamics shrouded in secrecy. This emotional journey resembled the sudden accelerations and decelerations of a rollercoaster, with the revelation or concealment of family secrets causing rapid shifts from elation or relief to confusion, distress and betrayal. As the researchers and interviewees explored the impact of family secrecy, initial positive childhood memories often gave way to more troubling recollections linked to these secrets.

The researchers identified a subcategory titled *Contrasting memories of childhood: childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy* (numbered 1.2.3), which included two codes selected for deeper analysis (see [Figure 1](#) for the selected codes in all seven subcategories). As the interviews progressed, participants revealed varied perceptions of family secrecy, encapsulated in the subcategory *Defining family secrets as those stories intentionally withheld for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection*. Another critical phase of the interview process paralleled participants' childhood experiences categorised as *Children in transition: moving from innocence to awareness of family secrecy* (4.1.1). Here, the participants as children began to piece together a clearer understanding of their family life.

The 'lifting of the veil' in the participants' stories marked the more challenging moments of their emotional rollercoaster, where emotions and secrecy intersected, revealing their reciprocal influence (5.1.1). Within their family systems, emotions and secrets often reinforced each other, with secrets typically arising from feelings of shame, guilt or protection. This dynamic created inner circles of those aware of the secrets and outer circles of those kept in the dark, further complicating the family's secretive environment (Imber-Black, 2018; Karpel, 1980).

When a family secret was revealed, individuals faced the decision to conform to, resist or challenge it, as highlighted in the subcategory *Conforming with or challenging a family's secret: being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone*. Participants' childhood experiences with secrecy emphasised their resilience and adaptability, a category captured in subcategory 2.5.8, which also addresses parentification and support systems. Finally, the researchers and participants explored the short- and long-term effects of growing up in a secretive family environment, marked by the subcategory *Feeling positively and negatively impacted by the presence of family secrets* (7.1.2).

It is important to note that participants' reflections on family secrets distinguished between 'being a child' and 'not being an adult', leading to the collective classification of early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence as 'childhood memories and recollections'. This is visually represented in the diagram as a continuum beneath the rollercoaster image.

Additionally, the study recognised the cultural, religious and societal norms surrounding family and gender roles, loyalties, duties and power dynamics, which influenced participants' experiences with family secrecy. These factors are inseparable from the participants' encounters with secrecy and must be considered in the broader context (Nico et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

The nexus between emotions and family secrecy presented in the case studies of Ylenia, Nina, Vivian, Lisa, Adam, Emma and Simon illustrates the profound impact that secrecy has on emotional systems,



relational dynamics and individual wellbeing. Integrating this analysis with the literature on family secrecy, emotions and systemic therapy, and attachment theory helped us to better understand how these factors interact within family systems.

The emotional foundations of family secrecy

Family secrecy is deeply rooted in emotional experiences that are often driven by shame, guilt, fear and the desire to protect oneself or others. These emotions can lead to secrets within families, sometimes spanning generations or confined to a small group (Afifi et al., 2015; Sinko, 2017). Simon's mother kept an abusive family environment secret out of fear, shame and guilt, denying validation to her children and generating helplessness and ambivalence, creating 'silenced stories' (Bornemisza et al., 2022). Lisa's father hid financial difficulties out of shame and fear due to societal expectations for men to be providers and problem-solvers (Imber-Black, 1998).

The role of family secrecy in shaping emotional experiences

Family secrecy, as intentional concealment, is embedded in systemic family dynamics (Rober et al., 2012). The participants' stories show how secrecy fosters complex emotions, especially during critical developmental periods. Ylenia's experience with her mother's concealed mental illness led to isolation and betrayal, aligning with research highlighting that children with incomplete information about a parent's illness develop anxiety and confusion, compounded by stigma and secrecy (Cogan et al., 2005; Radley et al., 2023). Nina's struggle with her family's hypocrisy created dissonance and anger, mirroring Yarrow's (2012) findings that early exposure to secrets and parentification leads to emotional fragmentation.

The reciprocal influence of emotions and secrecy in family systems

Family systems and attachment theories reveal the impact of secrecy on family stability (Bowen, 1978) and how insecure attachments foster secrecy, leading to role reversals and children internalising burdens (Crittenden et al., 2014). Secrecy influences alliances and boundaries within families (Imber-Black, 1998). Vivian's narrative of denied lineage highlights how secrecy disrupts family loyalty and identity, reflecting findings on genetic concealment's emotional toll (Berger & Paul, 2008). Lisa's experience of financial secrecy led to distrust and highlights how secrets distort communication and relationships (Nico et al., 2023). Adam's inheritance story shows how secrets can heighten family tension and shape emotional development, impacting trust and attachment styles.

The emotional and relational impact of secrecy in families

The disclosure or withdrawal of family secrets can trigger a wide array of emotions, including shock, betrayal, resentment, insecurity, isolation and ambivalence (McGinley & Jones, 2018). For instance, Ylenia experienced isolation and a sense of responsibility for her brothers due to her mother's unrecognised depression. Emma felt shocked every time she uncovered a new family secret: 'There were things that were spoken too early about in front of children by some adults ... I always wished I did not know so much about people in my family---it felt wrong somehow' (Emma's interview). These emotional responses are critical in shaping the individuals' ongoing relationship with their family narratives and the coherence of their personal stories.

Additionally, more positive emotions such as curiosity, love and loyalty may also emerge as individuals navigate their family histories, as seen in the cases of Adam, Nina, Ylenia and Emma. Nina contends: 'I discovered at the time that my great grandmother had been born in Egypt. I found this



very intriguing, and eventually went to the public archives to look her up and confirm this information' (Nina's interview).

Participants' experiences illustrate secrecy's role in consolidating or fracturing family connections (Imber-Black, 2018). Adam observed that inheritances exacerbate family conflicts, while Vivian, Lisa and Simon experienced strained relationships due to challenging secrecy. Vivian described isolation as a 'conflicting and lonely experience' (Vivian's interview). When looked at from a systemic and relational perspective, these emotional experiences act as indicators and drivers of interactional processes (Bertrando & Arcelloni, 2014). Emma's fragmented childhood amid parental infidelity and violence shows how hidden truths foster neglect and emotional turmoil.

Secrecy, loss and grief in family narratives

Stories of rejection, abuse, abandonment and reality distortion permeate the participants' narratives, which in turn are underlined by a profound sense of loss, grief and sadness as they relate ways in which they tried to make sense of or remedy the distress caused by family secrecy (Campbell et al., 2003; Svedin et al., 2002). Nina mourned the absence of a nurturing mother–daughter bond lamenting the persistent '... gap between me and my mother that has always been there and still is and that I do not really understand' (Nina's interview). Vivian, reflecting on her mother's death, felt manipulated by being deprived of truth, complicating her grief: 'I had a right to know the truth' (Vivian's interview).

Carefully navigating stigma and shame stemming from the dysfunction in their families (McGinley & Jones, 2018; Murphy et al., 2017), Simon and Emma both carry the weight of their tumultuous pasts, marked by secrecy and adversity within and beyond their families, with Emma reflecting on her childhood awareness of adult complexities with a sense of sorrow, stating that 'I feel sorry for myself as a child who knew so much about the adult world' (Emma's interview). Similarly, Simon ruminates on the impact of withheld information or denial of the adverse reality, believing that had he known 'what was going on before, my life would have started a bit earlier. I would be more confident with people and more open, and I'd overthink a bit less' (Simon's interview).

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Healing through disclosure and systemic therapy

For some participants, the disclosure of family secrets in adulthood, often aided by therapy, facilitated healing and strengthened bonds (Helimaki et al., 2021). This is seen in the stories of Vivian, Emma, Nina and Lisa, who used therapy to create coherent narratives and break cycles of secrecy and dysfunction (Byng-Hall, 1995). Emma's case, where a family tragedy served as a catalyst for healing, draws attention to the potential for positive change amid deep-seated secrets: 'Relationships changed, and distance and coldness resulted ... yet I still believe this was for the better as healthy boundaries were created' (Emma's interview).

Systemic therapy implications include breaking cycles of secrecy, fostering open communication and providing a safe environment for disclosures, considering family reactions, the appropriateness of sharing with children and preparing clients for potential emotional fallout. Therapists must be sensitive to complex emotions, using interventions to help clients process trauma and grief while promoting reconciliation. Recognising the transformative power of revelations, clinicians can mediate discussions, guiding families through difficult conversations about secrets and their impact on relationships. This active facilitation helps individuals, couples and families navigate the emotional aftermath and foster healthier family dynamics.



Using the proposed model of an ‘emotional rollercoaster’ in therapy

Therapists play a crucial role in helping clients understand their emotions as reflections of the broader family system, particularly in families with deep-rooted secrets. Recognising the systemic nature of emotions can help break cycles of suppression and disconnection, fostering emotional insight and a sense of belonging. This relational understanding can transform emotional landscapes, leading to more adaptive interactions and the resolution of long-held family secrets.

The proposed model of the emotional rollercoaster in [Figure 1](#) can be a powerful therapeutic tool for facilitating conversations around family secrecy. The rollercoaster, with its ups, downs and unexpected turns, reassures clients that the emotional highs and lows they experience are typical reactions to complex family secrecy. This can reduce feelings of shame or confusion and provides simple, relatable language to discuss complex emotions. Clients can use the metaphor to articulate where they are on the rollercoaster at various points in therapy, such as feeling ‘at the peak’ with anxiety before revealing a secret or ‘upside down’ when navigating the shift from ‘not knowing’ to partial clarity or confusion.

This metaphor helps clients prepare for the emotional journey that comes with disclosure. Discussing potential ‘drops’ and ‘climbs’ they might experience can make the process more manageable, guiding them to consider strategies for handling emotional intensity or fallout, like building a support system. This fosters a sense of agency and opens up conversations about the long-term impact of secrecy on relationships, mental health and emotional stability. Clients may identify moments when they felt emotionally trapped and work towards empowerment.

The rollercoaster metaphor can symbolise the journey through emotional processing and healing. Just as a rollercoaster ride eventually ends, there is the potential for resolution after the turbulence of confronting family secrets. Therapists can use this imagery to encourage clients to stay engaged in therapy, highlighting that while the emotional ride may be difficult, it can lead to greater stability, understanding and resilience. This shared language can also be valuable for systemic work with other family members, promoting open communication and mutual understanding.

Overall, using the rollercoaster as a therapeutic metaphor helps clients track their emotional journey, articulate difficult feelings and prepare for the challenges of disclosure. It supports the exploration of how emotional ups and downs have shaped their relationships and wellbeing, ultimately helping them move towards a place of empowerment and agency.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the nexus between emotions and family secrecy reveals a profound interplay that significantly influences the emotional and relational landscapes of family members. As illustrated in the findings, secrets often generate complex emotional experiences that ripple through family systems, shaping attachment patterns, relational dynamics and individual wellbeing. Integrating insights from family systems theory and attachment theory, it becomes evident that secrecy not only distorts communication and trust within families but perpetuates cycles of dysfunction and emotional fragmentation. The therapeutic process, particularly when supported by models such as the proposed ‘emotional rollercoaster’ above, offers a vital avenue for clients to navigate the turbulent emotions associated with family secrets. By fostering open dialogue and emotional processing, therapy can facilitate healing, reconciliation and resolution, allowing individuals and families to transform the lingering emotional echoes of secrecy into opportunities for growth, connection and resilience within themselves and their families, current and future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. As co-authors, we have reviewed and approved the content of the manuscript, with no financial interests to disclose. We confirm that this submission is original work and is not under review by any other publication.



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