Relational Social Work

«Shhhh! Can You Keep a Secret?»: Reflecting upon the experience of working with «secret keepers» in social work

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Abstract

Working with adults who keep secrets can be complex, both in a practical sense and in terms of assessing and managing risk. This paper uses the theoretical framework of social construction to explore the intersubjective meaning-making of secrets and secrecy in social work, drawing upon current research, UK legislation and contemporary social work practice. The overall aim of this investigation is to explore the perception of secrets from the service user's and the social worker's points of view, as well as exploring the impact this has on the behaviour of all concerned. Meaning-making in relation to secrets and secrecy may become a source of tension between service users and social workers due to the different socially constructed understandings of secrets, the privacy of family life and the intervention role of social services. From this theoretical position, a critical reflection on secrets held by service users and their negotiated relationship with social workers demonstrates how complex the issue is in practice and offers insights into how this dilemma can be solved.

Keywords

Secrets, secrecy, social work, social work practice.

Introduction

In our experience as social workers, the perception that people who use social services (for the purposes of this paper, service users) keep secrets from the professionals

working with them, is a common occurrence. This can lead to complex dilemmas when working with service users whom we suspect are keeping secrets from us, and although there are many reasons why secrets are kept, e.g. shame, guilt, and fear, social workers need to negotiate a way thorough this in order to provide the right sort of help and support for these families or individuals (Agllias & Gray, 2013).

This paper adopts a social constructionist lens (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2003) to view the phenomenon of service users keeping secrets from their social worker and the intersubjective meaning-making between the two. When it is believed that secrets are being kept from social workers, through gaps or contradictions in narratives, concerns may arise, especially where there are challenges in assessing, supporting and safeguarding people who may be considered «at risk». This perception can lead the social worker into thinking that they do not have all the information required to guide their decision-making and, furthermore, that keeping secrets may represent a barrier, impacting on other people's safety as well as the individual service user.

«To keep a secret from someone, is to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally: to prevent him [sic] from learning it» (Bok, 1982: 5-6). Secrets and secrecy are often sustained as a form of protection, either self-protection or protection of others, from a perceived harm should the secret be revealed. The higher the perceived risk of disclosure, the less likely people are to disclose their secrets (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Afifi & Steuber, 2009).

When considering service users' rights to privacy and sustaining secrets, it is a human right to have a private and family life (Human Rights Act 1998). However, in the United Kingdom, this is a qualified right, and may be restricted in certain circumstances, such as if the information being withheld relates to a safeguarding issue. For example, if a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (Children Act 1989 s.47) then relevant information can be shared appropriately, as part of a safeguarding enquiry, and consent to share information does not have to be obtained if it puts the child or young person's safety or their wellbeing at risk (General Data Protection Regulation; Data Protection Act 2018). It is, however, seen as best practice to remain transparent in practice and gain consent whenever possible.

In respect of confidentiality, which is anchored in law, we need to think about how information is gathered, stored, reported and communicated. The Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018: 6) is commonly used to guide social workers to work towards high standards of ethical practice and ethical outcomes. Principle 6 states:

- 6.1: Social workers respect and work in accordance with people's rights to confidentiality and privacy.
- 6.2: Such rights to confidentiality and privacy might be breached when there is risk of harm to the self or to others.
- 6.3: Social workers recognize that a person's right to confidentiality and privacy is restricted in certain statutory settings.

- 6.4: Social workers inform the people that they work with about such limits to confidentiality and privacy.
- 6.5: In some cultural contexts, characterized by we-centered, communitarian living, social workers respect and abide by the people's right and choice to shared confidentiality, in so far as this does not infringe on the rights of individuals.

Sharing information is, at times, an essential part of safeguarding others. However, if information is disclosed without consent or without justification, then this is a breach of someone's privacy (Social Work England, 2020).

Parton (2008) suggests that priority is increasingly given to the gathering and analysis of information within children's services as a way of keeping children safe. He notes that this is «the emergence of the "preventative-surveillance" state» (2008: 166). It is implied by this that the more knowledge is gained and communicated by social workers, the more children can be kept safe (Lees, 2017). Does this information gathering strategy cross the divide into public interference into private life?

Given the priority of gathering and analysing information, which is an ongoing process, not a single event, it is necessarily seen that an important source of this is from service users themselves. Through flexible negotiations between service user and social worker when information sharing, the service user should be the one to benefit (Van Haute et al., 2018). This need for information is seen as key to social work, being necessary for safeguarding, informing assessments, and accessing interventions or resources (Steen et al., 2017). When a service user does not share important information, it may be seen as evidence of defensive behaviour and subsequently social workers may be led into making emotion-driven and/or value laden judgements based on absent or incorrect information. This could potentially lead to what social services deem to be an inappropriate outcome.

The difference between a secret and a private matter is therefore important. Imber-Black (1998: 21) explains that: «hiding and concealment are central to secret-keeping, but not privacy […] it [is] useful to consider whether withholding information impacts another person's life choices, decision-making, capacity, and well-being. When it does, then it is secrecy rather than privacy». It is therefore, secrets and secrecy that are central to this paper, as this relates to safeguarding and risks to wellbeing.

This paper will explore secrets kept within families who then also do not wish to disclose the secret to the social worker. The primary focus will be on secrets kept from the social worker because of the potential repercussions of disclosure, although there may be some secrets kept that are not necessarily relevant to safeguarding e.g., sexual or romantic affairs, many health conditions, or certain criminal activities. This paper will not be exploring in depth, adults who keep secrets for the purpose of abusing others, as they would be fully aware that the information they hold pertains to illegal activity and therefore incriminating and therefore essential for the social worker to know in order to safeguard. Finally, it must be recognised that gathering information, especially from

reluctant service users who are unwilling or unable to share their secrets, creates a power imbalance. The divisive nature of power through knowledge held or information withheld will be discussed in the light of the evidence used in this paper, to consider the impact on behaviours of the secret holder and the «unaware».

The impact of secrets on the «secret keeper»

The following sections focusing on secrets draws upon the literature which explores secret keeping within family/intimate relationships to help set the scene on why people wish to keep secrets from others. The literature notes that people feel vulnerable when they fear their secret may be revealed. Individuals will place boundaries of varying degrees, to guard their secrets, depending upon the level of perceived risk from the repercussions of their secret being revealed (Oliver, 2021).

Keeping secrets can have both a psychological and physical negative impact upon the secret keeper (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002), including low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and poor relationship quality and stress (Frijins et al., 2005; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Laird et al., 2013).

Berger and Paul (2008), and Finkenauer, Engels, and Meeus (2002) suggested that the reason for the negative symptoms associated with keeping secrets is that it takes a psychological toll due to topic avoidance strategies and lying. The individual is unable to talk through their secret with someone else as a cathartic exercise or with any possibility of resolving the issue. These strategies require effort and energy to maintain and therefore can lead to physical and psychological problems.

How the perception of revelation-risks shapes the behaviour of the secret keeper

When people distrust each other, necessitating the keeping of a secret, more rigid boundaries will be implemented, limiting, for example, what may or may not be talked about. Conversely, disclosure is more likely to occur if the secret-keeper perceives that their confidant will be accepting and open following their revelation (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). For example, an individual will sustain a secret if they are concerned about emotional or psychological harm, such one that causes them to feel ashamed of something in their past (Petronio, 2002; Finkenhauer & Righetti, 2011). Having said this, they are more likely to disclose the secret if they feel that their confidant will respond openly and/or the secret holder has the ability to manage the discussion positively (Afifi & Steuber, 2009, 2010).

Depending on the nature of the secret, the secret keeper may also be afraid of damaging a relationship once their secret is revealed, for example describing a romantic/

sexual affair or criminal behaviour. People may also fear punishment or the breakdown of a relationship, which can lead them to sustain a powerfully negative secret. Finkenauer and Righetti (2011) explained that victims of child abuse often kept this a secret through fear of punishment and further actual harm, and clients kept secrets from therapists because they perceived a fear of being misunderstood or rejected. This fear of revelation and the perceived repercussions is therefore a powerful motivator to sustain secrets and may, in some circumstances, limit the ability to disclose a secret as this would also hand power to the recipient.

Another example of how fear leads to concealment of secrets is given by Afifi and Steuber (2010), who found that a family member's previous verbally aggressive reactions to disclosures lead the secret keeper to further concealment, because they were concerned about the response they may receive. An additional factor that may prevent revelation of a secret is the use of coercive control, a form of domestic abuse (UK Domestic Abuse Act 2021), which is an act or pattern of behaviours used to control someone's behaviour and interactions with others, in this example, putting pressure upon others to sustain a secret (Afifi & Olson, 2005). Such fears in turn lead to a repetitive cycle of concealment to avoid further abuse and harm (Afifi and Steuber, 2010).

Concerns over how other people will perceive and respond to the secret appears to be a key influence upon secret keeping and revelation. The potential negative impact, the cost, of keeping secrets can be severe. Individuals protect their identity and public image, especially if they think that revealing certain information about themselves will receive negative responses, or where it is closely tied to their own self esteem (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). Petronio (2002) explained that information is concealed to protect the inner self, the sense of self-identity. The risk involved in revealing a secret is that it may lead to stigmatisation or a discredited sense of selfhood, which can lead to poor psychological and physical wellbeing, as well as damage or reduce the quality of relationships (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013) and sometimes can lead to actual physical harm. It can draw the person into telling lies, alter or create gaps in their life-narratives and, to some degree, suppression of thoughts (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006).

How secret keeping behaviour impacts on the «unaware»

The effect of keeping secrets on the «unknowing» or «unaware» person can be severe, as it can lead to lower relational well-being, dissatisfaction and mistrust (Finkenauer et al., 2005). When someone perceives that a secret is being kept from them, they may feel that they cannot trust the secret keeper, and experience a lowered relationship well-being with them (Finkenauer et al., 2009).

The impact of topic avoidance on the «unaware» may also have a negative effect. Karpel (1980) reached the conclusion that the «unaware» are likely to feel tensions when

discussing areas around the secret with the secret keeper/s, due to topic avoidance. Orgad (2015), who wrote about the culture of family secrets from a more systemic perspective, explained that secrets generate «holes» in the secret keeper's narrative, such that the «unaware» may feel anxiety and negative emotions about their discussions, but not understand why. This could affect both personal well-being as well as the quality of the relationship.

Social workers need to understand why service users wish to keep secrets or withhold information from them, and «keep them in the dark». The impact of such a perceived concealment may adversely affect their decision-making, by creating a barrier to engagement and ultimately hindering the provision of the best possible support for the service user. As practitioners experiencing this, feelings of there being an unknown, possible secret, can be dominating over and above the initial reason for intervention.

To summarise, the «unaware» become suspicious and distrustful, and this adversely affects their meaning-making.

The intersubjective relationship between social worker and service user

The socially constructed, intersubjective relationship between social worker and service user is central to the problem of secret keeping. Intersubjectivity is a «pattern of influence». Each person will see the «other» as separate but also similar, and therefore interactions are reciprocal and of mutual influence, with a shared validation of what each is trying to express. This is not just in relation to the discussion, but also feelings and meaning making (Benjamin, 2005). It is also important to make sure that any differences noted, do not lead to them being discounted in any way. Through upholding this notion, McCarty (2020) notes that the social worker will be a more capable practitioner, they will be able to attune themselves to the needs and emotions of others and therefore, provide a safe space for further dialogue.

On the other hand, when this intersubjective position breaks down, both treat each other as objects, rather than subjects (McCarthy, 2020). Benjamin (2005) argues that when the «pattern of influence» erodes, the space between the two subjects falls in on itself and the understanding of mutual influence and respect of other people's right to a different view is lost. This can then lead to a pattern of acting and reacting to one another, rather than a shared space. Each person will feel the other's power and feel powerless, a sense of being controlled and not able to do anything about it (McCarty, 2020). As she McCarty (2020: 62) notes:

> Individuals might feel forced to defend themselves or be unable to hear what the other person is saying, because of being stuck in a mire of rightness. The resentment can become palpable and effective growth is halted as a consequence. Within this collapse,

> social workers become more prone to frustration when the client behaves counter to their own wishes, because the client is seen as an extension of the professional, rather than a separate person. The social worker is unable to recognize how personal actions are affecting the client, and the ability to collaborate is impaired or even derailed.

An example of how this may be seen in social work, is by Roose et al. (2013), who explored parental engagement and the engagement of social work services. They argue that society sees children as «passive victims who are vulnerable and at risk of being psychologically scarred» (2013: 451). They argue that society sees the parent's role as that of being primarily in charge of the child's welfare, and the state as having a duty to make sure that parents fulfil this role, thereby, creating an, at times, problematic relationship.

When considering the intersubjective nature of the relationship between the state and parents, Feathersone et al. (2011) address parental advocacy for families who are involved with children's services. They note that social workers often feel as if they are part of a system that is «very intimidating» (2011: 274). It is not unthinkable that parents may choose to keep secrets from social workers, due to their subjective realities. They no-longer trust the state or the system in which social workers operate, especially if service users perceive themselves as being punished for not meeting the expectations of the state/social worker. As Roose et al. (2013) observe, previous research has shown that the underlying message perceived by parents working with children's social care services is that if the parent's behaviour is in line with the expectations of the social worker, then the latter will uphold their parental rights, but if it does not, then proceedings for children to be removed from the home may be started.

An example of this would be a service user hiding information about who was living in their household. The service user may be scared to «tell the truth» about a number of factors due to fear of repercussions from social services. As a practitioner, we have heard service users speak about the physical effects of living with such fears, including shaking and being sick when the social worker is expected.

When refocusing this to the scenario in which the social worker perceives the service user to be withholding a secret from them, Orgad's (2014) paper explores family secrets through the lens of mediated narratives, where secrets are being constructed in the space between subjects, because they are socially constructed and not just an internal psychosis. It is therefore arguable that family secrets should be investigated in terms of the intersubjective processes between the secret keeper and the «unaware». This recognises that unconsciously motivated behaviours require conscious effort for secrets to be sustained and it may be possible to explore this between the service user and the social worker.

How society perceives secrets and secrecy may add further layers of subjectivity to the way in which service users keep secrets from social workers. As Agllias & Gray (2013: 8) note «clients' — and indeed practitioners' — attitudes and responses to family secrets are culturally, politically, and socially embedded». Anything that goes against the prevail-

ing social norms regarding healthy relationships, including secrets and secrecy, will be seen as dysfunctional (Agllias & Grey, 2013).

As information sharing is such common parlance for social workers, it is altogether too easy to forget that what one might call «information» may actually be private or personal to a family and may be considered a secret. Van Haute et al. (2018) identify in their research that private information used without an «explicit dialogue» with families leads to the positioning of families as objects of intervention. Doing so may break their trust and create barriers to future collaborative working and relationship building with their social worker. The service user may therefore wish to keep certain private information from the social worker for fear of their reaction, illustrating what can happen when the intersubjective space breaks down. The result of such discord is that both people may end up in a pattern of acting and reacting to each other's distrusts.

When considering the relationship between social worker and service user, we can also consider the position of power and powerlessness between social worker (the «unaware») and service user (secret keeper), with the perceived secret held in the space between them, destroying their positive reciprocal experience. Stuck in stalemate, there is pressure upon the service user to reveal their secret to the social worker, whereas the social worker may feel powerless and possibly frustrated that they are not receiving a disclosure. This results in having to live with an unknown risk, and possibly dangerous safeguarding issues. The perception of power/powerlessness and the power to intervene/offer help are key aspects within this relationship: they cannot be ignored.

The Interplay of Power between the State, the Social Worker and the Service User

Power has been defined by Bell and Hafford-Letchfield (2015) as the «ability or capacity to act or to exercise influence» (2015: 64). They then note that social work is underpinned by professional values, that seek to readdress power and redistribute it via anti-oppressive approaches to practice, such as person-centred approaches. Yet it is complicated due to social work's roles within the welfare state. It does however, need to be made clear that social workers have considerable power which is legally sanctioned, and can therefore intervene in people's personal lives.

The social construction of power in social work practice is sustained through political power constructed within the macro systems within our society and sustained within the institution of social work itself by the application of various codes of practice (Bell & Hafford-Letchfield, 2015). This includes social divisions such as economic class, and power within social interactions (Thompson, 2006), which can lead to oppression experienced by service users. Examples of such oppression include restricting access to services, changing

thresholds for support (Bell & Hafford-Letchfield, 2015) and silencing some voices, such those of young disabled people.

To explore this further, Foucault's notion of «governmentality» (Foucault, 1991) is worthy of consideration in regard to social work. He explained that governing institutions regulate and have power over subjects within society, such as prisons or schools (Foucault, 1977, 1991; Goodson et al., 2016). Foucault theorised that such institutions govern/regulate societal norms by defining what is «normal/abnormal», thereby exerting a subtle form of social power. He argued that oppression and inequality are constructed and sustained through subtle practices which are perceived as «human social practices» (Garrett, 2020: 485). If power is dispersed throughout society as Foucault suggests, it will create certain desirable behaviours and restrict others (Foucault, 1967, 1977). Social work is an obvious example of where power is exercised over those individuals whose behaviour is considered to be socially undesirable.

Arguably, social workers normalise people by guiding them to conform with what is currently considered acceptable behaviour (Bell & Hafford-Letchfield, 2015). Garrett (2020) argued that, over time, power has been given to certain bodies to lead others, often those who are seen as, in some way, problematic or experiencing misfortune. On a practical level, this may be seen in the way social workers perform assessments, and evaluate the outcomes, offer advice and guidance as well as implementing safeguarding procedures. From this, it can be hypothesised that power within social work can manifest through the institution itself, and social worker's practices.

Social discourse and reality are therefore interlinked. Such discourse shows how power is used and sustained within and by society, and that meaning-making is derived from social practices, not just through the actual words spoken, but also through how language is used, contextualised and re-produced by society (Foucault 1967, 1977). For example, Kendell's (2011) study showed that the way social workers construct and interpret service user's causal narratives of their behaviours and problems, coupled with the service user's perceived ability to change, affected decisions about the intervention plans offered. This could lead to oppressive practice and in turn negatively affect the social worker/service user relationship.

Through this very brief exploration of Foucault's concept of social power and governmentality, or how government directs how we act or conduct ourselves, it becomes clear why service users may struggle when engaging with social services and social workers, when there is such a complex and diffuse way in which power is constructed and sustained. The most powerful is the state, which in turn governs what social workers can actively do, and also defines how they should behave, thus marginalising some individuals and categorising them as in need of help, effectively making them powerless. It follows that to reveal a secret to someone, especially a social worker that the service user may perceive as very powerful, could lead to a deeper sense of mistrust and vulnerability.

Discussion

It can be hypothesised that it is not the secret itself which creates the barrier to an effective relationship between service user and social worker, but the meaning- making of the secret and what it represents within the power dynamics of the two subjects. To the service user, the risk of sharing the secret, with its potential repercussions, may be more than the risk/cost of sustaining the secret.

To the social worker, it feels risky not to know the secret. Both positions are in tension, both feeling powerless and possibly not quite knowing how to proceed. Yet, there is a power differential at play, creating an asymmetrical relationship, which could cause further breakdown of the intersubjective space between the two subjects. Therefore, communicating, not the secret, but what the keeping or disclosing of the secret means to each other, could be meaningfully explored through a carefully negotiated dialogue. Mutual understanding will then develop, and ethical practice will have been seen to be employed by both parties.

It is therefore important for social workers who are experiencing this to reconceptualise the understanding of secret keeping, starting with understanding the lived experience of service users who are keeping secrets, and their previous experiences or fear associated with some kind of retaliation that could result from revelation (Featherstone et al., 2011; Roose et al., 2013). This moves the social worker's meaning-making from personal intuition towards a shared, negotiated, understanding of the service user's problems.

Secrets are kept as a form of self-protection or as protection of others (Petronio, 2002; Afifi & Olson, 2005; Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Afifi & Steuber, 2009). It is important to consider how social workers respond (or react) to the possibility that a secret may be kept from them, whilst simultaneously supporting the human rights of the service user to have a private family life, and maintaining client confidentiality, balanced with the need to share professional information when necessary. This can result in social workers feeling uncomfortable. A critically reflexive social worker will recognise their emotions and «embrace» their feelings, including exploring how those emotions impact upon practice and decision-making. In order to do this, critical reflection is essential to uncover any potential unconscious bias and help mitigate the risk of defensive practice (Parker, 2021).

Social workers need to critically investigate their subjective experience and meaning-making of the unknown risk and how they are influencing the service users subjective experience, no matter how uneasy or defensive this makes them feel. They also need to be aware of how their own values and judgements can influence decision-making, and through the conscious effort of critical reflection, exploring judgements and beliefs, to understand better what is happening and develop their practice (Dewey,1933; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2019). Through this reflexive approach, a discussion could be carefully held with the service user, to further explore and understand their meaning-making (without revelation). This would involve working

back and forth to slowly develop a mutual respect of each other's positions, a positive intersubjectivity and the desired safe space in which meaningful dialogue can take place. This does not mean that the secret will necessarily be revealed, but it may help to create a safe space in which a partnership may develop and perhaps in time, create a space for sharing secrets.

If the reflexive approach fails, and there is a lack of progress in developing an understanding between the social worker and service user, this may result in serious life experiences remaining under-discussed, or hidden from view altogether, and the real possibility of bio-psycho-social or emotional harm being caused through the negative consequences of sustaining secrets (Finkenauer et al., 2002; Frjins et al., 2005; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Laird, Bridges, & Marsee, 2013). Consequently, people who are keeping secrets may be rendered silent and eventually invisible to support services, and thus left unprotected and unsupported.

Conclusion

This limited reflective paper explored the intersubjective meaning-making of service users and social workers regarding the former's keeping of secrets, through the methodological devises of the social-construction of cultural reality and societal power differences. It drew on literature regarding the impact of secrets upon the secret keeper and the «unaware», which can be detrimental to both. The focus was on the impact, perceptions and behaviours of secret holders and the effects this has on the «unaware» social worker, and explored some of the ambiguities concerning confidentiality and privacy, and how social workers assess risk, if they suspect that a secret is being kept from them.

To conclude, the reflections drawn from this paper suggest that social workers need to develop a critically reflexive space in order to understand the subjective experiences of their service users regarding keeping and/or revealing secrets. This would enable them to re-conceptualise what keeping secrets means, both in terms of risk and protection, as well helping them develop patterns of mutual influence to create a safe space for effective communication.

Further research into the nature of secrets and ethical information sharing in social work, as well as the exploration of the social construction of secrets from the lived experiences of the service users themselves, and how «secrets» are constructed and re-constructed in social work, would be useful in terms of how to navigate this complex situation in practice. This requires the development of new social policy and ethical anti-oppressive practices in social work with, perhaps, service users taking the lead. This may go some way towards helping social work being perceived more positively by society.

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