12 The Role of Self-Disclosure and Secrecy in Adolescent–Parent Relationships

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Self-disclosure is a fundamental component of almost all human relationships. It is a dynamic process through which individuals reveal personal information to others. By disclosing information about themselves to others, people reveal their inner thoughts and feelings to others, information that would otherwise remain hidden. Beyond the content of the disclosure itself, self-disclosure also conveys important information about the relationship between the person who discloses and the person to whom information is disclosed, such as trust, love, social support, or social disapproval. As a result, self-disclosure plays a critical role in almost all interpersonal relationships, particularly in adolescent–parent relationships.

Adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, as young people in all cultures think about their future and their goals in education, career, and family. During adolescence, young people explore and develop their identities and try to figure out who they are and what they want (Finkenauer, Engels, Meeus, & Oosterwege, 2002). In addition to profound changes in all aspects of life, ranging from physical and physiological changes (e.g. puberty) to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes (e.g. sexual, romantic interests) to changes in social relationships (e.g. increased attention to social status), it is a time of profound challenges and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, adolescents are discovering what is unique about themselves. They develop a sense of self, including their beliefs and ideas about their characteristics, abilities, and preferences about who they are as a person in relation to others. On the other hand, adolescents have a strong desire to fit in and to avoid being different. They are vulnerable to feelings of social inadequacy and failure and are "sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others" (Erikson, 1959, p. 80). Thus, adolescence confronts young people with important social challenges and, as we will show in this chapter, self-disclosure plays an important role in successfully navigating these challenges.

Although adolescents strive to become less dependent on their parents (Smetana et al., 2004) and develop their own social networks, research consistently shows that families – parents in particular – remain important providers of support throughout development (e.g. Rueger et al., 2016; van Harmelen et al., 2016) and that parental support is crucial for the well-being of young people around the world (Bi et al., 2021). Self-disclosure plays a fundamental role in the maintenance of high-quality adolescent–parent relationships and parental

social support. It fosters social connectedness, closeness, and trust. These indicators of high-quality relationships, in turn, are predictors for physical and psychological well-being across the lifespan, but particularly during adolescence (Yang et al., 2016).

Scope and Organization of the Chapter

Self-disclosure does not occur in isolation but is part of ongoing social interactions between relationship partners. In this chapter, we will take a social perspective on self-disclosure and explore its implications for adolescent–parent relationships. Adolescent–parent relationships are similar in many ways to relationships with significant others (e.g. friends, siblings, romantic partners), but they are also different from these relationships. In part because of these differences, some research traditions emphasize the importance of distinguishing intimate self-disclosure from, for example, routine disclosure, that is, disclosure about activities and whereabouts (the who, what, and where of daily life) (e.g. Tilton-Weaver et al., 2014). Here, we consider that both types of disclosure are key to understanding relationship dynamics, including those between adolescents and their parents, because they function as monitors of relationship quality and serve to regulate closeness in relationships (Willems et al., 2020).

In this chapter, we will first conceptualize the adolescent–parent relationship, highlighting similarities and differences with other close relationships. We will then delve into the construct of self-disclosure and provide an overview of the dynamics of disclosure that are common to almost all relationships, including adolescent–parent relationships. We will then address the processes that are unique these relationships and the distinction between different types of disclosure. Here, we will also discuss the interrelations between disclosure and secrecy in adolescent–parent relationships. Next, we discuss how self-disclosure may vary depending on social norms regarding the adolescent–parent relationship and their cultural backgrounds. Finally, we will explore the implications of our suggestions for future research on self-disclosure processes in adolescent–parent relationships, with a particular focus on the burgeoning field of new communication technologies.

Conceptualizing Adolescent–Parent Relationships

Although researchers continue to define relationships differently, most agree that in order to have a relationship, people must be mutually *interdependent*. In adolescent–parent relationships, adolescents and their parent(s) are interdependent, because their cognitive, affective, or behavioral outcomes in myriad interactions are dependent on each other (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). For example, an adolescent may share their worries about an exam with their parents. In response, parents may feel empathy and provide support and encouragement, which may help the adolescent feel more confident and better equipped to cope.

Additionally, adolescent–parent relationships, like relationships with close others, are *communal relationships* (Clark & Mills, 1979). In communal relationships, as opposed to exchange relationships (e.g. with a mechanic), people invest according to each other's needs without expecting anything in return. For example, a mother may cancel work and stay at home with her sick adolescent because she genuinely cares for the adolescent's well-being, not because she expects something in return. Such communal motivation, concern for the welfare of others, is essential for building and maintaining close and supportive relationships, including those between adolescents and their parents.

Adolescent–parent relationships also differ from other relationships. The literature distinguishes between *horizontal* relationships and *vertical* relationships (Finkenauer et al., 2004). Horizontal relationships are egalitarian and involve reciprocal exchanges of benefits, such as knowledge, care, and support. Friendships are typically considered to be horizontal relationships, because friends receive and provide care and support about equally over time. Vertical relationships are hierarchical and involve unequal – or complementary – exchanges of benefits. Adolescent–parent relationships are typically considered to be vertical relationships because parents have more power and authority than their children. Parents are responsible for meeting their children's basic needs (e.g. safety, food, shelter), but not necessarily the other way around, at least not in adolescence. For example, in parent–child relationships, the child typically receives care and the parent typically provides it.

Thus, like other relationships with close others, adolescent–parent relationships are interdependent and communal. But they are also different in that they are vertical relationships in which parents and their adolescent children have different roles and responsibilities. Because disclosure is an inherently social process that occurs between parents and adolescents who determine what, when, where, and how they disclose information to each other, some aspects of disclosure processes are unique to adolescent–parent relationships, while others are essential to all types of relationships. In this chapter, we will consider the similarities and differences in the role of disclosure in adolescent–parent relationships and other types of relationships.

Conceptualizing Self-Disclosure

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition, most researchers define self-disclosure as the *intentional revelation of personal information* to another person through verbal communication (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Self-disclosure can include personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. For example, adolescents may disclose their insecurities about their future to their parents for support or understanding. They may share their opinions about current events, music, or politics to develop common ground and engage in conversations. Adolescents may also disclose their aspirations, fears, or struggles to receive guidance and advice from their parents. Regardless of the

content of the information or people's goals, they are not flipping a coin, but making a conscious decision to disclose information about themselves to another person. In fact, indiscriminate self-disclosure is viewed as problematic, an issue we will return to when we discuss social norms.

Here, we conceptualize self-disclosure as an intentional, verbal self-disclosure to another person. This implies that the person disclosing and the person to whom the information was disclosed are aware that personal information has been disclosed (Finkenauer et al., 2018; Jourard, 1971). This awareness is important, because it allows individuals to decide what they want to share, with whom, and under what circumstances (Petronio, 1991), and because it underscores that self-disclosure is inherently relational.

Self-disclosure as we conceptualize it here is related to several concepts in the literature. As mentioned, it is related to *routine disclosure* (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2014), *catching up* (Sigman, 1991), and *debriefing* (Vangelisti & Banski, 1993), which refer to the regular sharing of information about one's daily activities, whereabouts, and experiences. It is also related to *intimate self-disclosure* (Jourard, 1971), which refers to the voluntary sharing of personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with another person that are private and otherwise not accessible to the recipient. Finally, it is related to *social sharing of emotions* (Rimé et al., 1998), which refers to the sharing of emotional experiences with others after an emotional event has occurred. Despite their differences, self-disclosure and these related concepts involve the communication of information that the other person would likely not know about if the information had not been disclosed. They are also inherently interpersonal, in that one person discloses information to another person.

The fact that disclosure occurs between people is important for understanding its role in relationships. It unfolds within relationships and is shaped by the characteristics and perceptions of both partners. For example, information that may feel trivial, routine, or mundane to one person may feel intimate and personal to another person (Pronin et al., 2008). Parents and adolescents may differ in what can be viewed as routine and private, making it difficult to distinguish between different types of disclosure (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2014). In addition, what is considered intimate or personal information can vary considerably across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which is reflected in differences in adolescents' self-disclosure to parents from different cultures (e.g. Yau et al., 2009). Self-disclosure also varies across generations, with younger generations being more open and willing to discuss and disclose personal information with others than older generations (Crossler, 2011). Thus, the meaning and value of the information disclosed is – albeit in part – in the eye of the beholder: The same type of information may have a different meaning to the person who discloses than to the person to whom it is disclosed.

In this chapter, we propose that self-disclosure, regardless of whether it involves routine, intimate, or emotional information, is an important means of maintaining ongoing relationships (Finkenauer et al., 2018). Our conceptualization of self-disclosure does not differentiate between different types of verbal

disclosure (but see Tilton-Weaver et al., 2014 for a different perspective), because we are interested in elucidating its relational effects, particularly in adolescent–parent relationships. However, we will refer to specific disclosures where appropriate.

The Relation between Disclosure and Secrecy

One cannot talk about disclosure without talking about secrecy and in ongoing adolescent–parent relationships, disclosure and secrecy can often coexist. For example, when telling their parents about last night's party, an adolescent may disclose that they have a crush on their classmate who attended the party. They may also share who else was there, what music was played, or what jokes that were told, but they may keep the fact that they drank alcohol a secret. This example shows that several types of disclosure and secrecy can co-occur simultaneously. A particular piece of information that is disclosed is not kept secret (e.g. the crush), and vice versa (e.g. the drinking), but disclosure and secrecy co-occur.

A growing body of evidence suggests that more disclosure (i.e. regardless of type, content, or domain) is beneficial for adolescent well-being at both the individual and relationship levels, whereas keeping secrets and more secrecy may be harmful. For example, a two-wave longitudinal study of 278 Dutch adolescents aged thirteen to eighteen years examined the relation between disclosing versus keeping secrets and adolescents' psychosocial adjustment (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). Results showed that adolescents who kept at least one specific secret, information that they had never shared with anyone, experienced an increase over time in several psychosocial problems, including more depressive symptoms, less self-concept clarity, less self-control, more loneliness, and poorer relationship quality. When adolescents disclosed their secret to others during the course of the study, they experienced fewer psychosocial problems after six months. However, if they continued to keep their secret or started to keep a secret, they experienced more problems. Similar results have been found for adolescents who keep more secrets from their parents, which is associated with more psychosocial problems (Frijns et al., 2010), poorer mental health (e.g. negative affect), and worse health outcomes, such as poorer sleep quality (Imami et al., 2017), even when disclosure and secrecy are assessed and analyzed simultaneously (e.g., Frijns et al., 2010).

Similar patterns of results are found for adolescents' relational well-being. Specifically, adolescents disclose more to people they like, and more disclosure and less secrecy are associated with more emotional closeness and higher quality relationships with friends (Kenny et al., 2013) and parents (Vieno et al., 2009), especially for girls (Keijsers et al., 2010). One of the robust findings in related literature on routine disclosure is that adolescents' decisions to disclose or keep secrets strongly reflects the quality of their relationship with their parents: They disclose less and keep more personal secrets from their

parents when they have poorer relationships with their parents (Smetana & Rote, 2019). These findings suggest that disclosure and secrecy are indicators of relationship quality (e.g. intimacy, closeness, trust, understanding) both in adolescent–parent relationships and in other types of relationships. Because relationships evolve dynamically over time, what and how adolescents disclose to or keep secret from others is linked to their perceptions of the relationship and its quality, and, conversely, the quality of the relationship is linked to the content, meaning, and subsequent correlates of disclosure and secrecy.

Overall, the evidence suggests that more disclosure in adolescence is consistently associated with more positive outcomes in adolescence, while more secrecy has opposite links with the same outcomes, both at the individual (e.g. health, well-being) and the relationship levels (e.g. trust, intimacy). Although disclosure and secrecy are partly independent processes, they are also interrelated. In what follows, we will first zoom in on how adolescents use disclosure and secrecy in their relationships with others, particularly parents. We will then zoom out and focus on the literature that emphasizes the dyadic nature of disclosure (and secrecy) processes in relationships.

Adolescents Use Disclosure and Secrecy Simultaneously

In their daily lives, adolescents may simultaneously keep certain information secret from some people (e.g. parents) while disclosing the same information to others (e.g. friends). Therefore, we distinguish between *shared secrets*, secrets that adolescents report disclosing to at least one person, but keeping from at least one other person, and *private secrets*, secrets that adolescents report never sharing with anybody (Frijns et al., 2013). Shared secrets provide adolescents with a sense of belonging and control, because the secret is disclosed, most often to a confidant (Frijns et al., 2013). In this sense, shared secrets can be seen as a specific type of disclosure with similar associations with the quality of the relationship with the confidant. Sharing secrets can strengthen intimacy and connection. Disclosing a secret that is kept from others but shared with a specific confidant signals that the relationship is unique and of high quality (Willems et al., 2020). Adolescents disclose their secrets to people they trust, who they perceive as accepting and understanding, and who they believe can provide insight and support (Finkenauer et al., 2009).

Unlike secrets kept from parents, secrets shared with peers may allow adolescents to balance contradictory developmental tasks: By disclosing their secrets to their friends, adolescents can form new, trusting relationships and build their social networks. At the same time, by keeping certain secrets from their parents, they can assert their autonomy and independence from their parents (Finkenauer, Engles, & Meeus, 2002). Parents are concerned about their children's safety and health and adolescents may avoid sharing risky and exploratory behaviors with them (e.g. drug and alcohol use, sexual behavior) because they are concerned about how parents might respond (Smetana et al., 2006).

However, sharing such behaviors with friends, may help to gain social status or to explore what it would be like to disclose to parents. Friends may provide advice and insight that can help adolescents to verify (or falsify) their concerns about disclosing the information to parents (cf. Caughlin et al., 2005).

Extending the findings of research that examines disclosure and secrecy as independent but related factors, research suggests that shared secrets may mitigate the harmful effects of secrecy in adolescence. Sharing secrets may help adolescents to cope with emotional events and adversity, because it may act as a catalyst for diverse types of social support (Feeney & Collins, 2014). In a large sample of adolescents (ages twelve to nineteen), we found that most adolescents reported having shared secrets, while only one third reported having an individual secret that they had never shared with anyone (Frijns, 2005; Frijns et al., 2013). The confidants were mostly intimates, mainly best friends (67 percent) and family members (60 percent), including mothers (27 percent) and fathers (17 percent). The shared and private secrets concerned romantic or sexual relationships (53 percent) (e.g. having a crush, kissing), parents or the family (25 percent) (e.g. conflicts with parents, divorce) and friends (25 percent) (e.g. a secret confided by a friend, problems with friends), feelings of inadequacy (22 percent) (e.g. I can't do anything right), transgressions (17 percent) (e.g. stealing, breaking something), and plans for the future (17 percent) (e.g. dreaming of becoming a top model, studying). However, adolescents' descriptions of their secrets did not predict whether the information was kept as a private or shared secret. These findings suggest that it is the quality of the relationship adolescents have with others and the perceived impact of sharing information on a particular relationship, rather than the content of the information, that determines whether information is shared with another person. Consistent with this suggestion, private secrets were associated with declines in individual and social wellbeing, including more delinquency, physical complaints, depressed mood, loneliness, and lower quality relationships. In contrast, shared secrets were only associated with greater interpersonal competence. Additionally, adolescents reported sharing secrets with confidants with whom they had better relationships (Frijns et al., 2013).

Adolescents Strategically Adjust Their Self-Disclosure in Relationships

Self-disclosure is not, as suggested by social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), a linear process in which partners increasingly deepen (i.e. increase the intimacy of their topics) and broaden (i.e. disclose about more diverse topics) their self-disclosure as their relationship grows closer. Rather, self-disclosure should be viewed as a dynamic process in which disclosing partners continuously oscillate between more and less openness within (e.g. Villalobos Solís et al., 2015) and across relationships (Campione-Barr et al., 2015). Because disclosure occurs between adolescents and others around them, it allows

adolescents to actively manage and control information about themselves and their lives (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Adolescents decide with whom, when, where, and about what they want to share information. Disclosing intimate information is risky because adolescents are potentially vulnerable to being hurt, rejected, ridiculed, or humiliated by others. To manage vulnerability, adolescents strategically create more closeness or distance in relationship by regulating others' access to the self through more or less self-disclosure and more or less secrecy.

Consistent with this suggestion, research shows that adolescents play an active role in parent–child communication. One line of research that highlights this has focused on adolescents' management of routine information in the context of *parental monitoring*, which refers to the strategies and techniques parents use to keep track of their adolescents' activities, friendships, and whereabouts, including asking questions. A longitudinal study of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds and their parents found that what parents knew about their children's daily lives depended more on what their children chose to disclose than on the questions parents asked about their children's lives. Adolescents were more likely to disclose routines to their parents when they perceived the relationship as warm, supportive, and trusting (Kerr et al., 2010). Thus, a high-quality, trusting relationship may foster a positive cyclical process, because increased disclosure may lead to better relationships, which in turn may encourage further disclosure by adolescent children (Smetana et al., 2006).

When adolescents perceive their parents' questions as a sign of interest and care for their well-being, they may be willing to self-disclose more about their feelings and inner lives, and by disclosing more information about themselves, they may maintain better relationships with their parents. However, when adolescents perceive their parents' questions as intrusive and controlling, feel obliged to disclose, or disclose because they do not want to disappoint their parents (Baudat et al., 2022; Smetana et al., 2019), they disclose less and may even lie about their activities and whereabouts, worsening the relationship (Laird et al, 2018). Consistent with these suggestions, daily diary studies show that disclosure varies as a function of relationship quality, both in close adult–adult relationships and in adolescent–parent relationships. To illustrate, using daily diaries, Villalobos Solísand colleagues (2015) found that adolescents disclosed more to and concealed less from their mothers and best friends on days when they reported higher relationship quality. These findings show that disclosure and relationship quality are strongly intertwined. Adolescents' disclosure varies as a function of (their perception of) relationship quality with their parents. They balance the need to feel connected by disclosing more and the need to feel autonomous and independent from their parents by disclosing less or even keeping secrets from them. Key to maintaining high-quality relationships with parents during adolescence is adolescents' ability to oscillate between high and low levels of disclosure (and secrecy). This ability allows them to weigh the costs and benefits of disclosure for themselves (e.g. being hurt versus receiving more social support) and for the relationship with their parents (e.g. signaling trust versus hurting their parents) (Finkenauer et al., 2009).

Adolescent Disclosure and Parents' Responsivity

For people to disclose their deepest thoughts and feelings to another person, they need to feel that the other person understands, accepts, values, and cares about them (Reis et al., 2017). If people feel that disclosure would result in the other person judging them, trying to change them, gaining control over them, or not paying attention to them, individuals – adults and adolescents alike – will refrain from disclosing (Afifi & Steuber, 2010). They may even develop negative feelings about themselves (e.g. "I don't meet the other's expectations; I'm unworthy") and about the relationship (e.g. "Why would they try to change me if they loved me?" or "They don't really care about me").

Not surprisingly, adults and children tend to disclose to people whom they trust, who are understanding, and who accept them for who they are (e.g. Afifi & Afifi, 2020; Reis et al., 2017). If adolescents perceive that they are not accepted for who they are, experience conflict, or feel betrayed, they may be reluctant to disclose information about themselves, and may even consider ending friendships (cf. Flannery & Smith, 2021). Obviously, as compared to friendships, ending an adolescent–parent relationship is much more difficult because of the biological ties and social structures that contribute to the persistence of the relationship. Nevertheless, conflict and perceptions that children desired change in parents were related to lower relationship satisfaction and disclosure in parent–child relationships (Sillars et al., 2005). In addition, a daily diary study found that adolescents disclosed more to their mothers on days when they perceived their mothers to be more responsive than usual. Mirroring the findings among their children, mothers perceived that their adolescent shared more with them when they were responsive (Villarreal & Nelson, 2022). Thus, to feel comfortable disclosing personal information to others, adolescents need to feel that the other person is accepting, responsive, and attentive to their needs.

Self-Disclosure Reciprocity

So far, we have discussed disclosure processes that are important in horizontal and vertical relationships. As we have shown, when people disclose to another person, they generally tend to develop better relationships with that person, particularly if that person is responsive to their needs and values them (Reis & Shaver, 1988). One of the most replicated findings in the disclosure literature is that when one person shares information about themselves, the other person reciprocates by liking them more and disclosing more about their own lives. This *disclosure reciprocity* (Jourard, 1971) indicates that people match each other's levels of self-disclosure, sharing more when the other person shares and sharing less when the other person holds back. As we will show later, disclosure reciprocity differs in horizontal and vertical relationships.

Disclosure reciprocity has been consistently linked to numerous relationship benefits, including liking, trust, intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction in adult

relationships (Sprecher et al., 2013), parent–child relationships (Finkenauer et al., 2004), sibling relationships (Campione-Barr et al., 2015), and friendships (Villalobos Solís et al., 2015). Being the recipient of intimate information can make one feel special (Finkenauer et al. 2004), because it signals that the discloser likes and trusts the recipient. This, in turn, may lead the recipient to reciprocate the disclosure as a sign of trust or to maintain equality (Dindia et al., 1997).

In everyday life, conversations between parents and children cover important or intimate information as well as mundane or routine information, such as who they met during the day, what they saw on TikTok, what chores they did (not) do, or what their plans are for the weekend. Parents and children, in both intact and divorced families, experience such catching up and recapitulating the day's events as an important form of disclosure (Rodriguez, 2014; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007). Engaging in such disclosures on a daily basis signals that the relationship is intact and helps to maintain a sense of connectedness and common ground (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015; Rodriguez, 2014).

When Vertical Relationships Matter for Self-Disclosure Processes between Adolescents and Their Parents

Social norms reflect what most people in a group are like or do (i.e. *descriptive* norms) or what they *ought* to be like or do (i.e. what most people in a group would approve or disapprove of; *injunctive* norms, Cialdini et al., 1990). Social norms often guide the expectations about the roles and responsibilities of people in relationships. For instance, as mentioned, parents are generally expected to provide care, guidance, and support, while children are expected to respect and obey their parents. These social norms may influence the patterns of disclosure and responsiveness in adolescent–parent relationships.

Reciprocity and responsiveness to self-disclosures are expected and more prevalent in horizontal relationships (e.g. friendships, romantic relationships, relationships between parents). These expectations do not necessarily apply to vertical relationships that involve unequal exchanges of benefits, such as parents caring for their children and family members supporting people with vulnerabilities (e.g. disability, mental health problems, chronic illness). Therefore, in vertical relationships, self-disclosure reciprocity and responsiveness are often unequal. Children and adolescents typically self-disclose more to their parents than vice versa, and parents are expected to be more responsive to their children's disclosure than vice versa. Research showed that in intact families, disclosure reciprocity was higher in horizontal relationships (i.e. between parents, between siblings) than in vertical relationships (i.e. parent-to-child, child-to-parent) (Finkenauer et al., 2004). Additionally, children and adolescents disclosed more to parents with whom they had a high-quality relationship. However, disclosure and relationship quality were not related in parents' relationships with their children, suggesting that, consistent with social norms, parents do not necessarily expect their children to be responsive to their needs, whereas children expect parents to be responsive to their needs and desires.

Parents may violate social norms of self-disclosure reciprocity in their relationships with their children. *Emotional parentification* occurs when parents turn to their children for support and treat them as confidants to fulfill their emotional needs, potentially compromising the child's well-being (Jankowski et al., 2013). *Parental co-rumination* occurs when parents excessively share their problems, worries, or negative emotions with their adolescent children (Waller & Rose, 2013). Such violations of social norms in adolescent–child relationships are proposed to blur, or even reverse, the hierarchical boundaries between parents and children. They can be confusing and distressing for children, because they involve children taking care of their parents rather than the other way round (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Parentification is more likely to occur in divorced families than intact families because divorced parents may be more inclined to rely on their children for emotional support (Perrin et al., 2013). Research suggests that parentification is associated with lower quality of parent–child relationships (Peris et al., 2008) and more depressive symptoms and behavioral problems in children (Khafi et al., 2014). Similarly, co-rumination about the mothers' problems is associated with more anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents (Waller & Rose, 2013). However, research findings on emotional parentification have been inconsistent. Adolescents who experienced more parentification from one parent have also been found to report a greater closeness to that parent compared to those who experienced less emotional parentification (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2012).

Thus, social norms about disclosure in adolescent–parent relationships may influence patterns of reciprocity. Although disclosure and responsiveness play key roles in the maintenance of horizontal and vertical relationships, reciprocity is less likely to occur in vertical relationships such as relationships between adolescent children and their parents. By disclosing information about themselves and by being responsive to each other's needs, people maintain their relationships and signal that they accept and care about each other. However, in vertical relationships between parents and adolescents, disclosure need not, and perhaps should not, be reciprocated to a comparable degree.

These findings again emphasize that decisions about disclosure are made not only by the discloser, but by both partners in the relationship and by the social norms in which self-disclosure occurs. Self-disclosure has implications for the person who discloses information, for the recipient, and for the relationship. Therefore, relationship partners may disclose or keep certain information secret from each other because of the impact the disclosure may have on the relationship and because the nature of the relationship and the social norms surrounding it impose certain communication inequalities.

Cross-Cultural Variations in Self-Disclosure in Adolescent–Parent Relationships

An intriguing example of the social norms that can be involved in regulating self-disclosure is illustrated by the Turkish proverb "Fathers are always the last to know." Why would this be the case, even figuratively? The assertion that

fathers are typically informed about certain matters later than other family members can likely be attributed to the presence of patriarchal and hierarchical family dynamics, in Turkey or elsewhere (Georgas et al., 2006; Kagitçibasi, 2007). In such cultural contexts, for fathers and other male family members, as well as for mothers and children, disclosure of certain topics may violate prevailing gender roles. Indeed, conversations about such topics as sexuality (e.g. Bennett et al., 2018) could be perceived as compromising the role of the patriarchal father figure (e.g. Boratav et al., 2014).

However, even with less sensitive topics than sexuality, social and/or cultural norms can get in the way and family members may feel ashamed to disclose certain information. A recent study by Li and colleagues (Li et al., 2023) showed that adolescents employed different profiles of disclosure depending on the topic and whether they spoke (or did not speak) with their father or their mother. Strikingly, the disclosure profiles used also differed by ethnic group. In general, the social roles that reflect cultural values can facilitate or hinder the extent to which individuals engage in self-disclosure and determine to whom they disclose. Culture, at the societal level and at the family level (Akkuş et al., 2017), establishes what is considered acceptable and desirable through values and norms (e.g. Schwartz, 2012). Consequently, the decision of to whom to disclose information about oneself and what topics to disclose is likely influenced by cultural values and norms, which can vary across different cultural groups (e.g. Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009).

There are several cultural prisms that one could use to discern how cultural values might play a role in self-disclosure, each with its own lenses and blind spots (Akkuş, 2021). For instance, one could argue that the ability to disclose one's individual desires requires conceptualizing oneself as an independent individual (cf. Markus & Kitayama, 2010). In collectivist cultures, where group interests are prioritized over individual interests, an interdependent self-construal is more prevalent, and thus, the individual family member may not feel the need, or freedom, to disclose any personal information that does not align with the interests of the family as a whole.

Another cultural prism, cultural tightness and looseness highlights the degree to which (cultural) groups tolerate deviation from the social norms and the severity of the consequences of deviance (e.g. Gelfand et al., 2011). Possibly, in tighter communities, family members may feel less freedom to self-disclose information that deviates from the prevalent norms than in looser communities. Research involving a sample of sixty-eight countries showed that values of self-expression are positively related to cultural looseness (Utz, 2015), indicating that expressing oneself may be more acceptable, and therefore easier, in "looser" contexts.

It is worth noting that the level of self-disclosure within any culture is influenced by various factors, including personality traits, individual preferences, and situational contexts (e.g. Smith et al., 2013). While collectivist[1] cultures may prioritize

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[1] We are aware of and acknowledge the conceptual caveats associated with individualism–collectivism as a cultural distinction, most notably its lack of nuance, but also recognize its usefulness, as described by Triandis and Gelfand (2012).

group cohesion and harmony, there are individuals within these cultures who may possess a more individualistic orientation and engage in more explicit self-disclosure (Vignoles et al., 2016). Similarly, individuals from individualistic cultures can exhibit varying levels of self-disclosure based on their personal inclinations and the specific social contexts in which they find themselves. The methods and channels of self-disclosure may differ across cultures (Vignoles et al., 2016). In more individualistic and in looser cultures, where independence and self-expression are prioritized, self-disclosure may be more explicit and direct. People, including adolescents, may openly express their thoughts, feelings, and desires, as a means of self-assertion and personal authenticity. In contrast, collectivist cultures may favor more indirect forms of self-disclosure, such as nonverbal cues, shared activities, and context-dependent communication. In these cultures, self-disclosure may be conveyed through subtle cues, gestures, and shared experiences, allowing people to navigate the complexities of social norms while still expressing their needs and desires (e.g. Vignoles et al., 2016).

The interplay between cultural norms and personal needs becomes even more intricate and complex when considering the roles family members assume, as in the case of communication between parents and their adolescents. Deferential norms may demand almost unconditional respect from children for the status and authority of parents (e.g. Baptiste, 2005). Also, adolescents may withhold facts or feelings that are not in line with expectations their parents have of them (Baudat et al., 2022), for example regarding their academic achievements and ambitions (Costigan et al., 2010). And such parental expectations are known to vary between cultures (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Nonetheless, within the cultural margins, when adolescents *do* disclose more about their thoughts, feelings, and desires to their parents, they tend to have better relations with their parents and higher well-being (Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). Empirical research confirms that parenting (e.g. Dimitrova, 2018) and parent–child relationships (e.g., Kagitçibasi et al., 2010) may vary across cultures. Yet, the positive association between self-disclosure and both better child–parent relations and adolescent well-being is confirmed across different cultural groups (e.g. Campione-Barr et al., 2015; Dost-Gözkan, 2022; Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020).

Thus, self-disclosure seems to be a widespread phenomenon that is involved in fostering relationships, evident across cultures. Sharing personal thoughts, needs, and desires often takes place within the confines of trusted confidants, such as family members, friends, or community members who are seen as extensions of one's own identity (cf. Postmes et al., 2015). However, the extent to which cultures prioritize family interests may shape the boundaries of the selection of confidants and patterns of self-disclosure in certain types of relationships.

Future Directions

We are now almost a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, and the future is here: On the one hand, emerging technologies (e.g. smartphones)

and social trends in the use of digital media (e.g. social media) have significantly altered the ways in which people interact and communicate, thus potentially reshaping adolescent self-disclosure patterns and processes within families. On the other hand, the twenty-first century has provided researchers with new and advanced methodologies (e.g. experience sampling) and analytic strategies (e.g. latent class analysis) that previous generations could only dream of, thus potentially providing us with a much richer view of self-disclosure in adolescent–parent relationships. We will briefly discuss these two developments in turn.

Future Technologies and Trends Affecting Self-Disclosure in Adolescent–Parent Relationships

People in close relationships, including adolescent–parent relationships, interact and disclose through a variety of communication modes, both online and offline (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). The ever-increasing ubiquity of the smartphone coupled with the rapid spread and development of social media and other digital communication tools, have expanded family interactions well beyond face-to-face communication. Text messaging, instant messaging, video calling, and social media platforms have become integral parts of family communication. Some studies have found that these digital modes of communication can complement face-to-face interactions and provide additional opportunities for family members to stay connected, share information, and provide support (Danielsbacka et al., 2023). Research suggests that there is a positive relation between the number of modes of communication and relationship closeness (Ledbetter, 2010; Miczo et al., 2011). A study of Dutch adolescents found that adolescents who used WhatsApp more frequently experienced higher levels of friendship closeness with their close friends (Pouwels et al., 2021). With respect to social media use, the literature seems to suggest that individuals who benefit from its use, use it to interact directly and maintain close relationships (Hall & Liu, 2022). Nevertheless, research mostly focused on adolescent peer relationships, and research on child–parent relationships in adolescence is lacking.

Research suggests that most adolescents use social media in the pursuit of adolescent developmental tasks, such as identity development, aspirational development, and peer engagement (Uhls et al., 2017). To our knowledge, the evidence on the potential harm and ill-effects of social media use and adolescent individual and relational outcomes remains inconsistent, although there is increasing evidence that the association between social media use and mental health problems is mostly driven by those adolescents whose social media use is problematic (Boer et al., 2021). Again, most research focuses on adolescents' peer relationships or their social media use in general. We know very little about how problematic social media use, and especially adolescent self-disclosure to parents on social media, affects adolescent–parent relationships in the short and long term, and this is an important avenue for future research.

Research on the use and effects of different modes of digital communication in families is scarce. In general, social media and other new technologies are

used to connect with close others who are not physically present (Hall & Liu, 2022). In this sense, social media use in families may complement face-to-face interactions. Yet, research on the use of different modes of communication and disclosure in families either compares online and offline conversations or focuses on the effects of one mode of communication. More research is needed to enhance our understanding of the patterns and interplay of self-disclosure across different communication channels in adolescent–parent relationships.

Future Waves of Research on Self-Disclosure in Adolescent– Parent Relationships

As pervasive as new technologies have become in the lives of adolescents and adults alike, the developments in the methodological and analytical tools available to the researchers studying them are no less impressive. These developments have brought with them an increased awareness of the limitations and pitfalls of past research. Although we have sketched quite a consistent picture of adolescent self-disclosure in the adolescent–parent relationship in this chapter, we recognize that the points recently made about research on adolescent secrecy (Frijns et al., 2020) may apply to self-disclosure as well. That is, we need to be aware of common fallacies in past research and realize that between-person or between-family effects do not necessarily provide insights into within-family processes of self-disclosure, that these within-family processes are not necessarily homogeneous across adolescents and families, and that longer-term effects of self-disclosure are not necessarily identical to short-term processes of daily disclosure (see also Keijsers, Chapter 5 in this volume). Ongoing developments in methodological and analytic strategies have led to new waves of research that tap into and compare different levels of inference, test for heterogeneity across families, and consider nonlinearity of effects over time. These studies can not only significantly advance our understanding of self-disclosure processes in adolescent–parent relationships, but new methods such as experience sampling and person-specific time series models may also prove useful in providing family-specific advice for promoting healthy family dynamics and maintaining high-quality adolescent–parent relationships.

Conclusion

While self-disclosure plays an important role in most relationships, we hope to have convincingly shown that it is particularly important for adolescents and their relationships with their parents. Much of the existing literature suggests a positive association between self-disclosure and relationship quality in adolescent–parent relationships. Self-disclosure can be seen as an effective means to navigate the important social challenges and developmental tasks of adolescence. It can help adolescents to regulate closeness, monitor relationship quality, and maintain high levels of parental social support at a time when their relationship is transitioning from a vertical to a more horizontal one.

To paint a more complete picture of disclosure, we also described some of the boundary conditions of disclosure (e.g. parentification, vertical relationships) and showed that disclosure and associated outcomes may vary as a function of social and cultural norms. We have provided consistent evidence that underscores the inherently social nature of disclosure and secrecy and emphasizes that they should be considered together. Although our review of the role of disclosure in close relationships suggests a beneficial association with individual and social well-being, for adolescents, keeping secrets from parents but sharing them with their friends may be an adaptive way to cope with the transition to adulthood. Sharing secrets with friends may increase feelings of closeness and intimacy and keeping secrets from one's parents may increase feelings of autonomy and independence. Yet, anxiously keeping secrets from everyone else is stressful and deprives adolescents of important social resources. Undoubtedly, the systematic study of disclosure in adolescent–parent relationships has helped us to better appreciate the pervasive influence disclosure has on such relationships. We have elucidated the intra- and interpersonal correlates of disclosure among adolescents and their relationships with their parents. We are beginning to understand some of the mechanisms by which these may arise. However, many questions remain. Recent analytic and methodological developments hold particular promise for furthering our understanding of the role of disclosure in adolescent–parent relationships. We hope that this chapter will contribute to stimulating such research.

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