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"I Know Something that You Don't Know": Secret-Sharing as a Social Form Among Israeli Children

**"I KNOW SOMETHING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW":
SECRET-SHARING AS A SOCIAL FORM AMONG ISRAELI CHILDREN**

Tamar Katriel¹

Introduction

Simmel's (1950) seminal analysis of secrets as a social form has highlighted the general sociological and psychological significance of secretive exchanges. Interestingly, in attempting to characterize the nature of secrets he appealed to observations of children's conduct. His comments address both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal functions of secrets and suggest that, for children, the ability to engage appropriately and meaningfully in secretive exchanges is socially acquired:

In comparison with the childish stage in which every conception is expressed at once, and every undertaking is accessible to the eyes of all, the secret produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity. The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former (Simmel: 330).

And later:

Among children, pride and bragging are often based on being able to say to the other: "I know something that you don't know" - and to such a degree that this sentence is uttered as a formal means of boasting and subordinating the others, even where it is made up and actually refers to no secret. This jealousy of the knowledge about facts hidden to others, is shown in all contexts, from the smallest to the largest (Simmel: 332).

A number of more recent studies have been devoted to an exploration of the role of

secrecy in human affairs, e.g. Bok's (1982) discussion of secrets from the standpoint of ethics and Schwimmer's (1981) study of secrecy and power which develops a semiotic framework for the analysis of secrets along the lines set out by Simmel. From another angle Sacks' (1980) enlightening analysis of the "button button" game discusses children's social learning with regards to the control, detection and manipulation of personal information. The present study suggests, by analogy, that children's intensive preoccupation with secrets in non-play situations serves, *inter alia*, as a practice ground for learning the subtleties of information control in social life. This is extremely important given young children's initial (egocentric) assumption of a non-differentiated discursive world similarly shared by all partners to an exchange.

Although discussions of secrecy tend to include references to children, to the best of my knowledge children's trafficking in secrets as a social activity has not been specifically addressed. This paper thus draws on the aforementioned general discussions of secrets to analyze Israeli children's rules and meanings for secretive exchanges, regarding them as an aspect of the development of their communicative competence (Hymes 1972). As I will try to show, by focusing on the ways in which the themes of concealment and revelation are shaped and negotiated in a particular culture of childhood, we can gain some significant insight into fundamental aspects of social learning among children generally.

Schwimmer's (1981) semiotic account of secrets can help to characterize the structure and functions of secretive exchanges in a more formal vein. He draws a distinction between "code secrecy" (e.g. secret languages) and "fact secrecy" (e.g. concealment of information), focusing mainly on code secrecy. The concern of this paper, by contrast, is mainly with fact secrecy. Schwimmer's account of fact secrecy foregrounds two interrelated aspects of such exchanges, both of which are independent of their content: a) the structure of participation they imply; and b) the nature of the information circulated. Their interrelationships provide a structural link between the secretive and

the manifest worlds inhabited by the partners to the exchange.

As far as participation is concerned, secretive exchanges imply a three-person system: the two (categories of) persons between whom the secret is shared (for example, A as sender of the message and B as receiver) and the (category of) persons from whom the secret is excluded (for example, C). Regardless of the specific content of the message exchanged, the nature of the information is presupposed to have some bearing on the excluded party (or on his or her relationship to the sender).

This characterization of secrets has an important developmental implication: in secretive exchanges not only knowledge of facts but also knowledge about one's own and others' exchanges is a spontaneous indication of their ability to make meta-cognitive assessments that are essential to communicative conduct in general. Notably, quite a number of the very young children (around age 5) who were probed on their understanding of secret-sharing characterized secrets as "a surprise", "a surprise you shouldn't know", "something you shouldn't reveal" and/or as "something you whisper in the ear". That is, they oriented themselves to one's knowledge or lack of knowledge of some fact (usually without any indication of what kind of fact it might be), or to the form the exchange takes; they did not indicate an understanding of the subtle configuration of relative states of knowledge implied by the full-fledged concept of a secret as it figures in the older children's social life.

The nature of the information circulated depends on the type of secret involved; in discussing secrets many children explicitly drew a distinction between two major, variously designated categories of secrets. The first category includes secrets referred to as big (*gadol*), serious (*retsinn*), personal (*ish*) and most confidential (*soci bejoter*). The second category includes secrets referred to as small (*katan*), simple (*pashut*), nonsensical (*shvut*) and teasing (*mitgare*). These two categories of secrets differ both in the types of information they convey and in their social uses. The communicative acts of sharing them may be semantically distinguished in the children's register: the act of sharing a secret of

the serious variety is typically spoken of as *legalot sod* (to reveal a secret) while the act of sharing a non-serious secret is typically spoken of as *ledaber/lehagid sodot al* (to speak/tell secrets about), a child-marked expression constructed in analogy to the expression 'to gossip about' (*lerabe/ ah*). Also, the telling of a 'serious' secret is usually spoken of in the singular (e.g. *lesaper sot* - to tell a secret), while the use of the plural usually implies the exchange of secrets in gossiping activities (*lesaper sodot* - to tell secrets). I will therefore refer to the first category in an ideal/typical sense as 'self-disclosive secrets' and to the second as 'gossip-like secrets'. These functions of secretive exchanges sometimes blend into each other, and it is not always easy to say which one dominates in a given case. After a brief methodological description I discuss these two types of secrets in turn. I then consider some party games in which the issue of concealment/revelation are thematized, relating them to children's concern with secrets as discussed in this paper. Finally, I conclude with some general comments concerning the findings of this and previous studies of Israeli children's peer group culture.

Research Method

The study of secret-sharing among Israeli children is part of a research project that seeks to identify the communicative forms which children use to construct and negotiate their social world in a culturally situated context. The data collection has followed standard ethnographic procedures (Spradley 1979, 1980), and the research has focused on a number of 'named' interactional frames which have been identified during a year of non-participant observation and informal interviewing in a predominantly middle class small town in the northern part of Israel. The social forms thus identified were subject to a good deal of elaboration among the children of this study both in terms of the place they occupy in their spontaneous accounts and in terms of the stylized behaviors associated with them. They would probably be regarded as instances of conversational genres as defined by Abrahams (1976), and are thus one step removed from the flow of

spontaneous talk. These communicative forms are important resources in children's management and coordination of social conduct in a particularly elusive domain of experience: the domain of informal peer-group relations where they socialize each other into being proper peer-group members. A great deal of this peer-group socialization takes the form of the stylization and ritualization of social exchanges. Two previous studies have analyzed other aspects of peer-group interaction among Israeli children: one deals with a stylized conflict frame natively known as *brogez* (literally, "in anger") that involves the suspension of ordinary communication and taking 'time out' (Katriel 1985). The other analyzes the ritual sharing of treats among Israeli children which functions primarily as a gesture of 'respect' interpreted as social inclusion (Katriel, forthcoming). As I argue below, secret-sharing is a similarly stylized and rule-governed activity among Israeli pre-adolescents with its own distinctive communicative and social functions.

In addition to naturally occurring secretive exchanges and spontaneous reports about them, this study is based on data derived from open-ended interviews specifically dealing with secrets, conducted by myself and by university students (150 in all: about one third were tape recorded; the rest were taken down in the form of fieldnotes). The interviews were aimed at elucidating children's 'scriptal knowledge' of these forms (Schank and Abelson 1977; Corsaro 1983) to the extent that it could be inferrable from their accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968; Harre and Secord 1972). In addition, I was able to consult the texts of over 300 compositions written by fourth, fifth and sixth graders (roughly ages 9-12) on such topics as "I kept a secret", "My secret", "Secrets" and so on given by grade school teachers at the time this study was underway (see examples in the appendix). Although most of my data pertains to pre-adolescents, interviews were also conducted with some pre-school and first grade children (5-7) whose understanding of the concept of secrets was only beginning to form. These interviews provided a better appreciation of the social learning that has gone into the pre-adolescents' preoccupation with secrets. Some discussions with older teenagers (aged 14-15) clearly suggested that the motivational

grounds for this intense preoccupation tends to subside with the move into adolescence and the accompanying change in social orientation (e.g. Dunphy 1963).

Self-disclosive Secrets

Instances of seriously disclosed secrets typically range over a number of experiential domains. Knowledge of such things, as one child put it, "makes the mouth locked". The following categories of topics were repeatedly mentioned:

- a) sensitive information concerning one's family (e.g. "Mom is pregnant");
- b) discrediting or sanctionable information about the self (e.g. "My baby brother fell to the ground when I was taking care of him");
- c) information related to bodily development (e.g. "I started wearing",
gloss: a bra);
- d) romantic information (e.g. "The name of the boy I love");
- e) a piece of information requiring unusual protection (e.g. "I found a precious stone on the way home from school").

Disclosing information of this type is a serious matter. Such acts of disclosure serve important intrapersonal and interpersonal functions: a) in intrapersonal terms, secrets involve demarcating and giving privileged standing to particular 'bits' of knowledge about oneself. These assume a formative role as they become a source and anchor for the child's self-identification and his or her self-reflective activity; b) in interpersonal terms, secrets serve crucial social functions in peer-group relations in that they provide a social form through which interpersonal bonds can be negotiated and re-affirmed.

Children's accounts of secrets were mainly addressed to their role in creating or maintaining social relations. Of the two actional elements involved in secretive exchanges which figured in Schwimmer's semiotic analysis - 'telling to B' and 'keeping from C' - it is the 'telling to' element that is mainly brought out in children's discussions of self-disclosive secrets. They reiterated that such secrets can only be disclosed to very close friends; at the same time, in discussing close friendships, they repeatedly claimed that a

good friend is someone you can trust not to reveal your secrets. Sharing a secret with a close friend is described as an act of unburdening which may also have a consultative value. The following locutions illustrate the way this is talked about: "It takes a stone off my heart"; "I feel better after I tell about it to my best friend"; "I feel I will burst if my friend is sick and I cannot tell it to her right away in the morning"; "I know what I can do with my problem after I tell it to my friend". Secret-sharing of this kind requires a great deal of mutual trust, which is ordinarily presupposed in a close-friend relationship. Thus, secret-sharing and secret keeping become the ultimate test of friendship.

The exchange of secrets, like all other forms of human exchange (Gouldner 1960; Homans 1961) implies an interpersonal or social 'contract' which is predicated on a norm of reciprocity. Secret-sharing among the children of this study can be viewed as gift exchanges; secrets are, so to speak, gifts of tongue and, as such, they are used to both express, reaffirm and reinforce social ties (Mauss 1954; Firth 1973). The expectation of reciprocity which attends these exchanges induces a measure of continuity and coherence into children's interpersonal exchanges thereby helping to structure the social domain. Moreover, the value of the verbal gift and its relational potential partly depends on the identities and social status of the parties to the exchange: thus, many children remarked that the secrets of a more popular child are more valuable than those of less popular children; more popular children are likewise likely to have more secrets disclosed to them. The exchange of secrets, therefore, is woven into the general flow of social relations in the group both as an expression of existing configurations and as a dynamic force in reshaping them.

From the standpoint of social development, pre-adolescents' concern with secrets makes a great deal of sense. According to Youniss (1980), it is at this stage that children's social experience begins to shift: younger children's social experience is dominated by adult-child relations, which are characterized by differential power relations and the mode of complementary reciprocity. Pre-adolescents move more and more into the mode of

symmetrical reciprocity which is typical of child-child relations. As the many conflicts and betrayals associated with secret-sharing suggest, the norm of symmetrical reciprocity cannot be taken for granted. This is similarly suggested by the need some children feel to explicitly verbalize the condition: "I'll tell you my secret if you tell me yours", as I have overheard a ten year old girl say to her friend. A similar function is served by the ritual hedging often given to secretive exchanges: the act of disclosure tends to take place in a spatially removed location ("I take her to the side/to the corner", as some put it). It may be both preceded and followed by the elicitation of promises not to tell. When the secret is very important, or the friend it is told to is not fully trusted to keep the information to herself, an oath not to tell (not just a promise) may be demanded. Examples of such oaths would be "I swear to God", "On my mother's life" or "On the Bible". I have not found as elaborate and stylized expressions for secret-keeping as those reported by Opie and Opie (1959: 121-128) for English children. It seems that the more accentuated the hedging devices, the more important the secret is taken to be, and the more difficult to keep, according to some.

In sum, the sharing of self-disclosive secrets provides a form and a context in which intrapersonal experiences can be given palpable shape and in which interpersonal bonds can be objectified. When a child says, "I wanted to have a secret" or "I thought and thought: What will my secret be?", in the words of two informants, what is expressed, I believe, is both a quest for a self-identifying, verbally objectified sense of self, and a dependence on secrets as a resource in children's social life.

Gossip-like Secrets

Unlike self-disclosive secrets that tend to be a dyadic affair, gossip-like secrets are more of a group affair. They are less a matter of 'telling to' with its implication of interpersonal choice and more a matter of 'keeping from' and 'using against' as an expression of social rivalry and peer-group tactics.

A child who declares, or more subtly lets out that he or she "has a secret" automatically invites persistent and insistent questioning and pestering not to be 'a pig' and to tell his or her secret. This is an ideal means of drawing social attention to oneself - a precious commodity within the peer group. A nine-year-old girl spoke to this issue when she said: "If you go and you say 'I have a secret', then it can't be a real secret, because everyone will nag you. 'Tell me, tell me', and you will end up telling. A real secret - it's a secret that it's a secret."

Indeed, the idea of discretion was not easy for me to convey to many of my young informants; they usually felt that secrets whispered around them were very much their business. This was not only a matter of sheer curiosity but also a matter of wariness: children, especially girls, seemed to be very sensitive to the possibility of finding themselves the topic of gossip-like secretive exchanges (of having secrets "told against/about them"). Secrets of this type function very much like gossip (Havilland 1977) They involve social commentary about others' conduct, appearance, or character and thus provide a channel through which social standards and expectations are articulated and reaffirmed.

These secrets, when exchanged between A and B, impart social information that is pertinent to C, the party from which the secret is kept. In this, as well as in their game-like quality, they differ markedly from the self-disclosive secrets described in the previous section. Furthermore, unlike self-disclosive secrets, gossip-like secrets are not kept from some 'generalized other' but specifically from the person the secret is about and his or her associates. You do not tell a secret about C to C's friends: "I made a blunder," a girl told me. "I told G. a secret against M. and didn't know she was her friend. Now they're both angry with me." The gossip who is denigrated when he or she passes on self-disclosive secrets is recognized as a convenient vehicle for passing on information for which one does not want to be held accountable.

Gossip-like secretive exchanges, however, are also used as deliberate teasing devices. Complaints like the following one reported by a nine year old girl who explicitly used 'gossiping against' and 'telling secrets about' as synonymous locutions are common occurrences: "I went to the teacher and told her that they were telling secrets about me, that they were gossiping against me". Actual or imputed secretive exchanges of the teasing variety may trigger a conflict resulting in *brogez*, the ritualized suspension of communication (cf. Katriel 1985).

As partners to these exchanges children are aware of their teasing potential, and some were able to be quite explicit about the nonverbal cues that they use in order to mask them: not wanting a child to know that a secret is being told 'against' him or her, one will take care not to look in his or her direction and maintain body posture facing away from the target child. Awareness of the irritation induced by the whispering of secrets has produced the generally recognized and often verbalized moral, formulaic injunction: "*lo omrim sodot behevrá*" (one should not tell secrets when in company). A secret will thus usually make its unofficial, though highly predictable, passage from child to child until it reaches the ears of the child it is about. That child may either choose to ignore it or not. A piece of social information, usually criticism of some sort, has been thus conveyed to a specific child in such a way as to involve minimal commitment on the part of senders and receiver alike: just as anyone can deny having said it, the target child can pretend not to have heard it and exempt him/ herself from the need to respond to the affront.

In conclusion of this section we might say that through their intense preoccupation with gossip-like secrets children chart and rechart their group relations, enhance or undermine their own and each other's social standing, and reaffirm or shift social loyalties. In all this ongoing activity the content of the secrets exchanged becomes secondary to all but the child the secret is 'about' or 'against', and secret-sharing as social form becomes a strategic tools for the manipulation of social relationships.

Secret-sharing Games

The secret-sharing practices described in this study as part of the flow of pre-adolescents' social life have their more stylized counterparts in their party game repertoire. For this age group in Israel, parties held in private homes typically involve the whole school class whether the party is considered a 'school class party' (*erev kita*) or a birthday party (the role of parties in the ritual construction of the school class as a social unit for Israeli children is discussed in Katriel and Nesher 1986). I will briefly discuss two games which are generally felt to be the high point of these parties and which manifest a concern with the control of personal information. One is a combination of two 'kissing games' described by Sutton-Smith (1974): the 'spin the bottle' game and 'truth or consequence'; it combines the chance element of bottle spinning with the choice element implied in the choice between disclosing the name of the boy/girl one loves and performing some ludicrous or embarrassing act (which may, but need not be, kissing or otherwise touching). It is called *emet o hova* (literally, "truth or duty"). The other game, less common than the first, is called *vidui* ("confession") and involves naming three opposite-sex classmates: a loved one, a liked one and an admired one (considered to be in decreasing order of weightiness).

Both games provide a ludic context in which the concealment/revelation issue is thematized, but while in everyday life it is to concealment in secretive exchanges that attention is mainly directed, in the party context attention is focused on the moments of revelation. They are both played at the end of the party and only part of the class remains to participate in them. Usually roughly the same children take part, and they may become identified by their peers as "the kids who play *emet o hova* and games like this". Although nobody is officially excluded from playing, a child may find that he or she is never paired up and drops out complaining that the game is boring. *Emet o hova* is lighter in tone than *vidui*. *Vidui* provides no slots for tension release in the form of funny acts and requires a

higher differentiation of feelings (the children's own version of sociometric nominations).

The most interesting point about these games from the standpoint of this study is that they mark a play context in which the self-disclosive and gossip-like functions of secret-sharing as discussed earlier become inextricably fused. The excitement attending the revelations in the game context has, of course, to do with the topic of love. From a social, not a romantic point of view, the act of naming the person one loves permits the playing child to have his or her preferences ratified in a public way through the mechanism of choice, and thus to exert some control over the web of his or her social relations. That this is the case is indicated by the ways in which such disclosures are later elaborated in gossip, or become the basis for pairing up couples in the paper-and-pencil matchmaking games usually played in school during break time.

Observations of these party games suggest that this social right is not limitless. The group does not automatically ratify any statement made by playing members. The voice of the group steps in first of all when a child says he or she does not love anybody, or, asked to kiss the child she loves, claims "he is not here". Such conduct is interpreted as evasion, and a player who regularly acts this way is considered a spoilsport. Observations of such games have, however, also yielded instances in which a player's statement was rejected by peers as insincere: "We know who you really love". Surprised by such occurrences, I probed my informants about them and encountered casual responses like: "Yes. They want her to say what they gossip".

These games, then, are double-edged affairs: they provide occasions for individual self-disclosure as well as occasions for the exercise of social control by peer-group members who may interfere with the individual's attempt to define his or her interpersonal preferences. In the context of these games, the precarious balance of revelation and concealment is openly negotiated between the individual and the group: self-disclosure feeds into the system of gossip and gossip may become the measure of its

validity. They can therefore be considered as a means for charting and recharting the group's relational web through a relatively 'safe' process of social negotiation. Moreover, as playful counterparts of secretive exchanges in everyday life, these party games can be considered stylized meta-comments on secrets and their uses in children's social experience.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has sought to trace the social uses of secret-sharing among Israeli children. Following the children's lead in distinguishing between self-disclosive and gossip-like secrets, I have identified the major functions played by each category of secrets in children's social lives: self-disclosive secrets contribute both to a heightened sense of self and to the establishment of intimate relations through the dramatization of interpersonal choice. The exchange of gossip-like secrets often serves an agonistic, strategic function in the establishment or shifting of social hierarchies and social groupings.

Secret-sharing can be contrasted with the ritual sharing of treats described elsewhere (Katriel 1986): while the latter serves to demarcate the outer boundaries of Israeli children's social worlds, operating within acquaintanceship relations, the former serves to delimit the intimate domain. Children who exchange secrets will not ordinarily treat each other with the token gift characteristic of ritual sharing, but rather will divide their 'goods' equally.

The partial learning of the secret-sharing script manifested by younger children indicates that it involves a complex exercise in social cognition and behavioral control. The ability to comport oneself in relation to secret-sharing is an important aspect of children's social learning; repeated failures to keep a secret will brand a child as someone who "does not deserve to be in the company of other children", as one informant put it.

and are an oft-cited reason for the declaration of *brogez* (the suspension of ordinary communication).

At the same time, if a state of *brogez* has been declared between two friends for some other reason, the agonistic frame is felt to relieve the *brogez* partners of the duty to keep each other's secrets. This has an inhibiting effect in two directions: since children are aware of the fluctuating nature of their peer relations in which casual and friendly relations are punctuated by spells of *brogez*, the possibility of one's secret being revealed is taken into account. For example, a thirteen year old boy told me that he and his best friend had made an explicit pledge to keep each other's secrets even in case of a *brogez*. On the other hand, the mutual disclosure of personal information tends to inhibit the declaration of *brogez* between close friends. The general feeling, however, seems to be that a secret once revealed will eventually spread out: secret-sharing is fraught with risk and, therefore, all the more bathed in excitement.

The problematics of revelation and concealment which underlies secretive exchanges can also be found to underlie party games played with considerable intensity by Israeli pre-adolescents. In addition to their more commonly discussed psychological functions, games of this kind can be shown to have significant social functions as they both build on and filter into their everyday social experience. The line between the serious and the playful, which is so difficult to draw in so many instances of children's activities, becomes particularly blurred in this case.

¹ Tamar Katriel is a visiting scholar from the School of Education, University of Haifa, and author of Talking Straight: 'Dugri' Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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Appendix

The following are examples of compositions written by sixth graders on the topic "I kept a secret". They illustrate some of the issues children typically raised in discussing the problematics of secrecy:

a) One day I told a secret to a girl from the class. I told her not to tell anybody because this was something only between the two of us (and I didn't want her to reveal it). One day passed and the next day when I came to the class (after one lesson and another one) suddenly during breaktime that girl came to me and told me she had revealed the secret to somebody in the class and told me who that girl was. And then I got terribly angry and asked her why she had revealed. Then she said she had to tell. And then the girl she told it to revealed it and it passed through the whole class. And in the end everybody know about the secret I kept for myself, and then the girl I had told it to first came, and was sorry she had told the whole class.

b) One day when I came to school my best friend ran to me and said she had been trying to keep something in for some days, and now she must tell something nobody must know: a secret. I promised her I would not tell even though I knew it would be a little hard not to reveal. "My Mom is pregnant" she whispered in my ear. "Really? What fun! And what month is it?" I asked. "She is in the third month," my friend said. Later all through the school day we kept whispering secrets concerning her mother. When I got home I really felt like telling my big sister, because she surely would have been able to explain everything, as she is older than I am. But I know that I had promised not to tell, and really in all these days I never told anybody.

c) I kept a secret that T. told me. Oof, how many oaths she made me take before she told me! The next day I went to visit K. and I died to tell her the secret because we simply talked and chatted and gossiped a little, so at the very last moment I didn't tell her the secret. The next

day I went to T. again: "Did you tell the secret?" she asked. She shouted and threatened me that if I told the secret then... Even if I had revealed it I wouldn't have told her I had after all her talk. And so T. and I keep telling secrets to each other and although I want to I never tell anybody.

d) When I myself found out who I love (I won't mention names) I told K. and K. swore she would not tell anybody. After a while G. came to me. I wanted to tell G. I made her take an oath (and she swore in the name of her mother, her father and all her family members) and finally I revealed the secret, and what do I hear from G.? That K. had told her. How I got angry! I could have killed her and she begged me not to tell K. And then M. came and asked me to tell her. I wondered how she knew about it and then almost all the class knew who it is I love.

e) During break-time they called me out to the yard. They said: we have a very confidential secret to tell you. Promise not to tell anybody. I said: I promise. So listen, we decided to prepare a surprise party for one of the kids in the class. I asked: For whom? When? Where? Tomorrow at 5:30 by the lawn. I said o.k., so they said "let's start planning."