EMOTION LABOR AS A MEDIATOR OF RELATIONAL RISK AND QUALITY IN THE

CONTEXT OF FAMILY SECRETS

by

Sarah Annis

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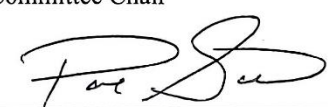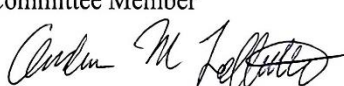**Master of Science**

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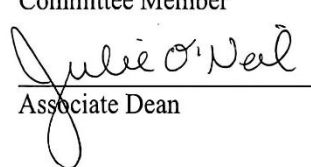
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_____   4/26/23
Committee Chair   Date

_____   4/26/23
Committee Member   Date

_____   4-26-23
Committee Member   Date

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Associate Dean   Date

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Sarah Annis

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ABSTRACT

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Sarah Annis

Communication Studies, M.S., 2023
Department of Communication Studies
Texas Christian University

Advisor: Kristen Carr, Ph.D., Associate Professor

This study extended communication privacy management theory by examining the associations between family members' relational risk of revealing a secret and their emotion labor, investigating the impact of emotion labor on relational quality, and testing whether emotion labor explains the relationship between relational risk and quality. Participants ($n = 454$) completed an online survey by recalling a family secret and reporting their emotion labor (i.e., surface and deep acting) and relational quality with family members. Relational risk was negatively associated with relational quality and positively associated with both surface and deep acting. Additionally, both surface and deep acting were negatively associated with relational quality between secret keepers and with the rest of the family who did not know the secret. However, only surface acting mediated the relationship between relational risk and quality between secret keepers. Findings demonstrated that emotion labor is valuable for understanding how family secrets impact relational quality.

INTRODUCTION

Families are one of the most influential groups of which a person is a member throughout their lifetime. Family members share experiences and information with one another, which develops individuals' notions about themselves, their family, their society, and their roles in these social groups. In other words, what is—and is not—shared within a family shapes a person and their subsequent interactions both inside and outside the family.

Perhaps because of their interdependence and influence, families do not typically exhibit completely open sharing of information, suggesting that people often navigate deliberately concealed information, or *secrets*, in family relationships. The involuntary nature, high level of interconnectedness, and shared knowledge of families provide plentiful opportunities for the existence of secrets (Vangelisti et al., 2007). Although the extent to which family members keep or share secrets often does not change whether the relationships continue, it can influence the way family members feel about and experience them. Thus, decisions about disclosing secrets to family members may have serious, long-lasting consequences for family relationships.

One unique characteristic of family secrets is that they often exist within smaller subsets of the family system. For example, family secrets can be kept between one or more members, and from one or more members. Thus, the decision to keep or reveal family members' secrets has the potential to impact relational quality with both the owner of the secret as well as with the family as a whole. Relatedly, secret keeping in families often involves reluctant confidants, whereby one family member receives an undesired disclosure from another, leaving them with the burden of either keeping the secret, the risks of revealing it, or some combination of the two (Petronio, 2002).

One theory that offers insight into how these disclosure decisions are made is communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002). According to CPM, these disclosure decisions are important components of privacy, helping protect against vulnerability and aiding relationship maintenance with family members. As a protective mechanism, then, privacy is imperative in the presence of family secrets. The content of family secrets often threatens one or more family relationships. Indeed, if no threats existed, there would be little reason to conceal secrets from family members. Theoretically, then, maintaining privacy by successfully managing who is and is not permitted to know a secret should help defend family relationships against the threats associated with the secret.

One way to understand the threats associated with family secrets is through evaluating the risk associated with revealing it. A key risk in revealing family secrets is relational risk, in which specific family relationships are threatened by revelation of the secret. Family members with secrets may be forced to decide the lesser of two evils: (1) sharing the secret, thereby hurting family relationships, or (2) concealing the secret, mitigating the risks in revealing it even if doing so creates additional stress or inhibits the quality of family relationships. Either way, these family relationships are typically involuntary and ongoing, so decisions about what to do with the secret may impact these family relationships over long periods of time. In sum, secrets are naturally accompanied by risks, which might in turn stress involuntary family relationships or impact one's sense of closeness in or satisfaction with these relationships as individuals protect the secret.

Perpetually managing family relationships without revealing secrets to the wrong family members or at inopportune times requires considerable attention and effort. One form of effort that may accompany management of secrets is emotion labor (i.e., when a person speaks or acts differently from how they feel). In one sense, emotion labor may help to maintain the status quo

in family relationships, thus functioning as another protective mechanism for relational quality. However, the process of emotion labor, even when motivated by protection of relationships with others, is generally believed to be taxing on individual well-being (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2012; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Schrodt, 2020; Tracy, 2005). Although emotion labor may have some positive effects on interpersonal relationships and other task-oriented benefits in an organizational context (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011), emotion labor is often detrimental in families, impacting factors such as the mental health, stress, and self-esteem of individuals who engage in emotion labor with family members (Hochschild, 2012; Schrodt, 2020; Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019). Consequently, the process of managing family secrets may impact relational quality, in part, through the effects of the type and degree of emotion labor required.

Relatedly, little is known about how emotion labor may be distinctly related to relational quality, either between secret keepers or between a secret keeper and the rest of the family who does not know the secret. Therefore, clarifying the extent to which emotion labor uniquely influences relationships between family members who are "in on" a secret or between those "in on" the secret and others who are ignorant of the secret is an additional aim of the present study. Understanding the influence of secret-keeping strategies on relational quality is an important addition to the literature because secrets impact not only individuals but also interconnected members of a larger family unit, or system. Thus, the proposed study will expand the literature on emotion labor in families by exploring it as an explanatory mechanism for how secret management influences relational quality with family members.

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Theoretical Perspective

Families constitute a unique relational context, given their involuntary membership and generally high level of interdependence. Families also play a central role in socialization and most often are the first relationships in which a person learns about themselves, their family, and their society. Additionally, the interconnectedness of families implies that family members are often important sources of information, support, and advice as well as a group of people who depend on each other to accomplish personal or shared goals. One common social expectation is that family will be family forever regardless of the quality of these relationships. Even estrangement is typically discussed as a person being estranged from their family member(s), implying that they are, in fact, still a member of the family. Thus, continuously ongoing, highly interdependent relationships further reinforce the involuntary nature of families and intensify the relational implications of revealing family secrets.

Specifically, the interconnected nature of families may heighten the impact of the risks involved in concealing or revealing family secrets. For example, when an adolescent shares a secret with their parents, they may be revealing sensitive information that simultaneously threatens their relationship with a sibling, a friend, a confidant, and a source of support since their sibling may fulfill all those roles. Furthermore, even when secrets jeopardize the unity or trust of the family, members often continue encountering one another in daily life or, at the very least, during annual events and obligations such as holiday celebrations. Additionally, secrets may pose threats to one's identity and acceptance from other family members, particularly when the content of the secret or the beliefs of its owner diverge from family norms. In the context of typical families with involuntary and ongoing membership, decisions about what to do with the secret may be equally, if not more, about long-term impacts on family relationships as they are about mere management of who knows which information. Finally, viewing families as

interconnected systems implies that the secret management decisions made by one person impact not only that person but also members of their entire family.

The Role of Secrets in Families

Although families tend to have high degrees of shared knowledge, very few families are completely open in sharing information between members. In fact, high degrees of interconnectedness and shared knowledge may be two reasons for individuals to refrain from openly sharing personal or sensitive information with other family members. The act of refraining from sharing such information creates family secrets. Family secrets are a natural and, potentially, adaptive mechanism for managing on-going family relationships. Family relationships most often continue regardless of the extent to which family members keep or share secrets, yet the management of these secrets may influence the experience of quality, satisfaction, and closeness in these relationships.

Generally, family secrets take three forms in terms of how many people (do not) know the secret: individual-level secrets, intrafamily secrets, and whole family secrets (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Karpel, 1980). One person keeps *individual-level secrets* from all other family members (Karpel, 1980). *Whole family secrets* are those shared by all family members and concealed from outsiders to the family (Afifi & Olson, 2005). *Intrafamily secrets* are those revealed to some members within the family and concealed from other members (Caughlin et al., 2000) and are the focus of this study. Intrafamily secrets span personal and system levels as they often begin with an individual's personal secret strategically revealed to some family members and concealed from others which, in turn, necessitates privacy management by both the owner of the secret and others who are also keeping it.

Indeed, the nature and extent of privacy management required by family members keeping a secret likely depends on a number of factors. Although family secrets may have a positive or negative valence, they commonly contain risky or vulnerable information about group members. A person may have a variety of reasons for revealing a family secret including a need for relational security, reciprocal disclosure with another person, being asked directly about the secret, or for acceptance in the family or family subgroup (Vangelisti et al., 2001). However, a person's self-evaluation of their willingness to reveal their secret to another person does not necessarily predict their actual disclosure to the person (Aldeis & Afifi, 2013). In other words, a person may believe they are willing to disclose their secret to a specific family member, yet not actually disclose it. Communication efficacy (i.e., one's belief in their ability to talk effectively) about the secret also predicts the likelihood that a person reveals the secret to others (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). Although a person may be willing to reveal their secret to another family member, a perceived lack of communication efficacy may hinder the likelihood of their disclosure.

Furthermore, individuals may be the recipients of in-depth personal disclosures, experiences, or secrets when they never asked for or desired the information, making them reluctant confidants (Petronio, 2002). Such disclosures burden the recipient with responding to or offering solutions to the problems of the discloser despite the recipient never having desired such a role. In the stranger on a plane phenomenon, the recipient may be a captive audience for the duration of the interaction and experience discomfort from the unsolicited disclosure (Petronio, 2002), but afterward they most often part ways, unlikely to interact with the stranger again in the future. The unique context of ongoing family relationships means that the reluctant confidant cannot simply leave the conversation, the relationship, or continue the relationship as though the secret disclosure never happened. Rather, reluctant confidants of family secrets must

determine ways to maintain their relationships considering, or despite, the secret they have learned. One theory that helps explain this process is CPM theory (Petronio, 2002).

CPM and Family Secrets

Communication privacy management theory explains how individuals communicatively manage private information with others (Petronio, 2002). According to CPM, people consider themselves owners of their private information, desire control over ownership of the information, and develop and follow systems of rules to manage this ownership (Petronio, 2002). *Personal privacy* boundaries and *collective boundaries* are metaphors for marking lines of ownership of private information (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Petronio, 2002). These boundaries are formed through regulation of information. Boundaries range from permeable (i.e., when a variety of information is relatively freely shared across the boundary) to impermeable (i.e., when information is guarded and concealed more carefully to prevent it crossing the boundary), representing how tightly the private information is protected and kept exclusively among the people who know the information. Privacy boundaries protect individuals from the vulnerability and potential personal and relational threats associated with undesired disclosures of their private information (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Petronio, 2002).

Privacy rules are a tool for collective privacy management as they are used by information owners to regulate the flow of information across boundaries (Petronio, 2018). Effectively, these rules dictate who may and may not be given access to private information and once established, often are shared collectively by family members (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). For example, one sibling may determine rules (i.e., "Don't tell Mom!") when disclosing a secret to another sibling. The sibling subgroup then collectively enacts the rule by (1) not telling their mother and (2) warning additional siblings not to tell their mother before revealing the secret to

them. Rules are established based on social and situational factors and ultimately guide people's choices about (not) disclosing private information.

Rules also help determine *co-ownership status*, the degree to which the recipient is responsible to protect the information (Petronio, 2018). Such responsibility may be especially important in the context of family secrets because of the perceived risk of personal and relational consequences of revealing secrets to other family members. Extending the sibling example, siblings may warn others not to be a "tattletale" or a "snitch", threatening negative consequences to the siblings' relationships should one disclose the secret to their mother. Alternatively, once siblings are jointly responsible for the secret, they share the risk of a potentially threatening or unsettling "How could you have known about this and not tell me?" interaction between the mother and one or more children upon the mother's discovery of the secret. In this way, when managing secret disclosure, siblings may experience tension between conflicting needs or desires to protect their relationship with siblings, their relationship with their mother, and other siblings' relationships with their mother. The higher the perceived risk related to revealing the secret, the harder a recipient of a secret may need to work to uphold their responsibility to protect the information from other family members who are not supposed to know the secret.

Boundary turbulence occurs when one or more information co-owners break privacy rules. Family members must then adjust their communication and revisit the rule system, changing rules, if necessary, to reestablish a sense of balance and protection from further vulnerability (Petronio, 2002). Thus, privacy boundaries and rules are subject to change over time as relationships develop and new information is shared within the family system. Family secrets are one type of private information that often causes increased tension and boundary turbulence within families.

Topic avoidance and family secrets have been identified as strong indicators of

boundaries in families (Caughlin et al., 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). *Topic avoidance*

occurs when an individual intentionally refrains from addressing specific issues with a family

member, even if the other family member knows about the topic (Golish & Caughlin, 2002).

Secrets, in contrast, involve information known by one or more family members and unknown

by one or more other members.

      According to CPM, secrets are a form of highly restricted private information

with rigid boundaries and rules protecting them (Petronio, 2002). The primary feature

distinguishing secrets from other types of private information is an "outsider's" belief that they

have a right to know the original owner's private information, regardless of whether they do have

a right to know the information. Because of the interconnected nature of families, family

members may tend to believe they have the right to know other members' private information.

      Additionally, the recipient may be asked or expected to conceal the secret from others,

creating a dilemma in which they must abide by boundary management rules that stress

relationships with other family members or face the negative consequences of breaking those

rules. Another type of dilemma may occur when, as part of the privacy management process, an

individual is caught between decisions that are best for the self and best for other family

members or their relationships with those family members (Petronio, 2018). Keeping the secret

may increase stress for the individual but prevent unwanted conflict in relationships with other

family members. In contrast, revealing a secret may relieve stress for the individual yet expose

other family members or relationships with those family members to greater vulnerability or risk

of stigmatization.

The Relational Risk of Secrets and its Impact on Relationship Quality

      Decisions to reveal or conceal family secrets have varied implications and potential

outcomes for family members. Disclosing a secret may lead to increased emotional or

instrumental support from other family members (Vangelisti et al., 2001). For example, a person may keep their romantic partner's infidelity a secret from family but decide to disclose the secret to one trusted family member who they believe can provide emotional or instrumental support as they navigate the aftermath of infidelity. Concealing a secret may provide control that limits others' ownership of the information and, thus, lowers the risk of vulnerability and other negative relational consequences. For example, the fewer family members know the secret of the partner's infidelity, the less vulnerable the individual will be to undesired disclosures of the sensitive information or potential scrutiny from family members about the romantic relationship.

In other cases, actual or anticipated negative responses from family members after the disclosure of a secret can have negative outcomes such as the *chilling effect*, in which anticipation of an aggressive or otherwise negatively valanced response prevents the secret holder from disclosing to another family member (Afifi & Olson, 2005). Finally, disclosing a secret allows an individual to highlight separation from or hurt another family member (Vangelisti et al., 2001). Managing family secrets also may have both positive and negative implications for family members, potentially at the same time. Disclosure decisions may strengthen relationships with some family members while simultaneously hurting relationships with other family members. Furthermore, such decisions may simultaneously highlight separation from or hurt one family member while emphasizing closeness or support for another family member. In sum, the complexity of family relationships causes secrets to have positive, negative, and sometimes conflicting consequences that family members must balance when making secret-disclosure decisions.

When faced with the tensions resulting from being brought into the secret keeping process between family members, a person is likely to consider what will happen if they reveal the secret to other family members. In the context of families, the most salient risk in revealing

another family member's secret is to the relationship. *Relational risks* describe the anticipated threats to an ongoing relationship should the secret be revealed (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Hammonds, 2015). Examples include the threat of rejection, fear of burdening a recipient with the information, the recipient responding with anger or withdrawing resources, damage to an existing familial bond, or negative effects on the overall family dynamic. For example, when an LGBTQ+ individual is keeping their gender identity or sexual orientation secret from family members, a relational risk is the person's perception that family members may no longer want to associate with them upon learning the secret. Specifically, a sibling may not allow their children (i.e., nieces and nephews) to see the queer individual for fear that they will be an unwanted influence on the children. In this example, disclosure of the secret could threaten estrangement in previously positive family relationships. Concealing secrets, then, may help protect against relational risks threatening multiple co-owners of the secret, but the awareness of these risks comes at a larger relational cost.

Similarly, addiction and substance use disorders are examples of topics that are highly stigmatized in society. These experiences often significantly affect both the people struggling with addiction and their family members (O'Shay-Wallace, 2020). Relational risks are highly pertinent to the management of family secrets about these topics. Individuals concealing secrets about addiction or substance use disorders must decide to what extent the risk-benefit ratio (i.e., how the relational risks compare to benefits expected upon revealing the secret), justifies sharing their information with some, or all, family members (Hammonds, 2015).

Although the concept of risks, by definition, implies negative consequences (Hammonds, 2015), a person's perception of the overall consequences of revealing the secret is not always negative (Vangelisti et al., 2001). The benefits of revealing some secrets to one or more family members may outweigh the risks of doing so. The amount of social support expected, or the

trust and intimacy gained upon revealing a secret, for example, may be greater than the perceived risks to relationships. Alternatively, even if personal (i.e., stress relief) or relational (i.e., improved trust) benefits do not outweigh the risks of disclosing the secret, such benefits may, at times, figuratively lessen the blow of the risks should they become reality. A person weighing this risk-benefit ratio may perceive that they will have increased their access to help, gained social support, or experienced another desirable benefit that could help buffer against the potentially negative effects of breaking a family member's trust.

Despite some situations facilitating these types of positive risk-benefit ratio assessments, the nature of many family secrets does cause people concern or stress when considering the consequences of revealing the secret to others. Considering the relational risks is a meaningful way to conceptualize the consequences in revealing the secret, because this risk captures a deeply personal, potentially stressful repercussion a secret may have: threats to one's valuable relationships.

When taken collectively, the task of managing such threats to important family relationships may influence their quality. Specifically, if a secret has considerable relational risk which requires a person to expend psychological or emotional effort to keep the secret, the individual may experience those factors as burdensome to their relationship. Awareness of the relational risk of keeping the secret may, for example, diminish relational satisfaction or inhibit the closeness one feels with the person who asked them to keep the secret because of the burden it places on the secret keeper. Consequently, the relational quality between the secret keeper and the person who asked them to do so is likely to be diminished by the risk that secret poses to their relationship.

H1: The relational risk of a family secret is negatively associated with the relational

quality (i.e., closeness and satisfaction) between the secret keeper and the person who

asked them to do so.

Relational Risk and Emotion Labor

As the inherent risks of revealing a secret increase, a person may feel a stronger need to

act in a way inconsistent with how they truly feel. Taken broadly, the term *emotion labor*

describes the process by which family members manage the expression and experience of their

emotions to be consistent with others' expectations (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019).

Families typically have shared expectations and norms for appropriate emotional

expression. The term "emotion labor" was first used by Hochschild (2012) in her Delta Airlines

study on how individuals manage their emotional expression to meet the demands of their

organization. Emotion labor is a form of impression management in which an individual

manages the expression and experience of emotion to match what they believe to be the

expectations or rules of their conversation partner or a social group (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019).

Emotion labor takes two forms: surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 2012). *Surface

acting* involves hiding or faking emotions outwardly to match what a person believes to be

acceptable emotional expression in the situation. *Deep acting* involves a genuine personal

attempt to experience the emotion that the other individual or social group is expecting the

person to feel (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019).

The realities of involuntary family membership and long-lasting consequences for

disclosure decisions warrant investigation of emotion labor as a meaningful process co-occurring

with other strategies for managing family secrets. As individuals conform to familial privacy

boundary rules, manage risks, offer support, and protect relationships with important others in

the family, they may simultaneously engage in emotion labor. Additionally, the greater the

relational risks of revealing a secret, the less likely a person is to reveal the secret (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Afifi & Steuber, 2009). Since greater risk creates higher stakes for concealing the secret, greater risk may also necessitate greater emotion labor as one works to prevent undesired disclosures of the secret.

The perception of relational risk associated with a secret may cause an individual to decide whether to engage in surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting is one strategy individuals may use to help conceal secrets and prevent undesired disclosures. The emotional façade characteristic of this strategy is an attempt to disguise what is felt and pretend to feel something different (Hochschild, 2012). One must deceive others about what they feel yet must also deceive themselves about their true feelings. Hochschild (2012) explains that "muted anger, conjured gratitude, and suppressed envy" are but a few examples of this tactic (p. 18). A person who is told a secret by another family member may feel shocked or angry to have been told the secret and asked to help guard it, yet they may use surface acting to express warmth and support to the family member, believing it to be expected or necessary to maintain the relationship. In effect, they may emotionally communicate, "I'm so glad you told me," to hide their true sentiment, "I wish I had never known this secret."

The other emotion labor strategy one may use to manage secrets is deep acting. Whereas surface acting involves deceiving others about what is felt, deep acting requires a person to work toward feeling what is expected or desired. To conceal a secret from other family members, a person may "psych themselves up," force themselves to have a good time, or push their anger down when around the rest of the family (Hochschild, 2012, p. 39). Such tactics, while exhausting, may allow the person to maintain family relationships by hiding the fact that a secret is being kept from the others. Over time, the intent of deep acting is to transform undesired

emotions into desired or expected ones, allowing the person to continue relationships with others despite the information they know and the way they feel about it.

Different amounts of emotion labor are likely necessary in distinct scenarios. For example, a secret with low relational risk when revealed (i.e., a parent letting slip information about their child's birthday gift) likely requires different emotion work than a secret with high relational risk (i.e., revealing a family member's HIV diagnosis to others). Thus, variations in the relational risk associated with a secret are likely to uniquely promote the emotion work of surface and deep acting.

Previous research suggests that topic avoidance is a strategy used, at times, to protect oneself and their relationships and to reduce perceived risk (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). By disguising feelings or deceiving people about those feelings, emotion labor may function similarly to topic avoidance regarding secrets, allowing a person to avoid addressing the secret with family members. Surface acting may be sufficient for managing relationships in the presence of secrets with low to moderate perceived risks. However, as perceived risks increase, a person may no longer feel able to successfully deceive others about their feelings. The person may neither trust their ability nor have the emotional energy to always sustain their façade. In that case, deep acting, transforming one's own feelings to match what is expected or desired, may be necessary to effectively manage family relationships.

Additionally, relational risk is negatively associated with one's likelihood to reveal private information to family members (Hammonds, 2015). As relational risk increases, perhaps individuals need increasingly powerful strategies for managing their secrets and successfully preventing undesired revelation. Thus, as relational risk increases, a person may need to not only convince others but also convince themself of their feelings to successfully conceal the secret. In

sum, risk in revealing the secret perceived as less significant may be managed through surface acting, whereas more significant risk is more likely to require deep acting:

H2: Relational risk in revealing a family secret will be negatively associated with surface acting.

H3: Relational risk in revealing a family secret will be positively associated with deep acting.

Emotion Labor and Relational Quality

Although some claims have been made that emotion labor may have positive consequences when used strategically in an organizational setting, emotion labor has been found most often to contribute to a range of negative psychosocial effects such as stress, depression, powerlessness, and detriments to mental well-being (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2012; Schrodt, 2020; Tracy, 2005). Extant literature has focused primarily on emotion labor in organizational contexts (e.g., Hochschild, 2012; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Tracy, 2005). More recently, however, scholars have applied the concept to family relationships (Decker & Schrodt, 2022; Schrodt, 2020; Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019). Hochschild (2012) argues that emotion labor may be the strongest in people's most personal bonds with others such as relationships with family and romantic partners. Emotion labor facilitating family secrets occurs in the context of what may be a person's most personal bonds and, potentially, with some of a person's most personal, or most closely guarded information.

However, the interdependent and ongoing nature of family life increases the likelihood that emotion labor also has important consequences for relational well-being in the family context, as supported by the fact that young adults' emotion labor with parents is associated with negative relational quality outcomes with both parents (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019). The present study explores emotion labor and relational quality in two types of relationships: (1) the

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relationship with the family member who told the individual the secret and (2) the relationship with the rest of the family members who do not know the secret.

Emotion labor, as discussed, is commonly associated with negative psychosocial effects. One may infer, then, that all emotion labor (i.e., surface acting and deep acting) will be associated with negative relational quality effects, as well. However, previous research has revealed distinct findings about the two forms of emotion labor in different relational contexts. A meta-analysis of emotion labor in organizational contexts (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011) supports different patterns of surface acting and deep acting such that surface acting is associated primarily with negative outcomes whereas deep acting is associated with positive outcomes. However, Schrodt and O'Mara (2019) found similar patterns for surface acting and deep acting in families such that both forms of emotion labor are negatively associated with relational quality with parents. Surface acting and deep acting may function in the present study similarly to how they did in Schrodt and O'Mara's (2019) study, as both focus on family relationships.

Surface acting likely will have a negative association with relational quality between secret keepers because of the emotional exhaustion that ensues when one is burdened by putting on a façade to fake a feeling they are not experiencing. The influence of deep acting may be more complex than that of surface acting, however. Despite deep acting being negatively related to relational quality with parents (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019), the circumstances of a family secret may provide conditions in which deep acting may serve to bolster a sense of camaraderie or shared responsibility for the secret between secret keepers. Such camaraderie, in turn, may be associated with positive relational quality effects. Additionally, both surface acting and deep acting could be justified by an individual as an act of social support for the other secret keeper. Even so, framing emotion labor as provision of social support could either enhance a sense of closeness and relational quality with the family member or damage relational quality, given that

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the person may feel no choice but to engage in the stressful process to help their family member.

Further evidence is needed to help explain the nuances of emotion labor in relationships between family secret keepers, thus one aim of this study is to compare the roles of surface acting and deep acting for relational quality:

H4: Emotion labor (i.e., surface acting and deep acting) will be associated with relational quality between secret keepers.

Furthermore, secrets naturally affect not only one's relationships with the other secret keeper but also relationships with the rest of the family. Emotion labor also may influence relational quality with the rest of the family in addition to that with the other secret keeper. First, the exhaustion caused by surface acting may strain relational quality with the rest of the family much in the same way it does in one's relationship with the person who told them the secret. Having to maintain an emotional façade to protect a secret is likely taxing for all affected family relationships.

Whereas the influence of surface acting on relational quality with the other family members appears to be straightforward, the influence of deep acting may, once again, be more nuanced. Both surface acting and deep acting are exhausting experiences. However, surface acting is an outward form of cover-up involving slight deception that provides a temporary relational solution without requiring the individual to change their true feelings. Deep acting, on the contrary, means the individual must both manufacture and experience the emotion deemed necessary for the situation. By definition, this process requires an attempt at personal change.

Depending on the motivations for and success of such change, deep acting has potential either to strengthen or diminish relational quality with the rest of the family. If deep acting is viewed as a way of protecting relationships and family members from potential stigma, this emotion labor strategy may have a positive effect on relationships with family members who do

not know the secret. Hochschild (2012) explains that at times, people "offer up feeling as a momentary contribution to the collective good" in family and interpersonal relationships (p. 18). Convincing oneself that deep acting is "for the good of the family," while by itself an exhausting experience, may nonetheless have positive influences on perceptions of relational quality. Whether an emotional contribution for the collective good of the family is perceived as an honorable sacrifice or an unwanted burden may depend on cultural context and individual factors such as personality and values, yet investigation of this specific phenomenon is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, deep acting also could have a similar effect to surface acting because of exhaustion and could lead to feelings of resentment toward other family members.

Finally, the reality that a person must attempt, either on the surface or deep within themselves, emotional expression different than what they truly feel may be a detriment to relational quality no matter how the experience is framed. A person's inability to truly express their natural self and emotions around their family because of secrets may be universally stressful for individuals and, in turn, their relationships with family. A relationship between emotion labor and relational quality with family members ignorant of the secret is expected, yet empirical evidence is needed to explain the nature of this relationship. As a result, the following hypothesis posits this relationship nondirectionally:

H5: Emotion labor (i.e., surface acting and deep acting) will be associated with relational quality between the secret keeper and the rest of their family who do not know the secret.

**The Mediating Effect of Emotion Labor**

Over time, diminished relational quality may be accepted as a necessary cost to prevent the consequences of revealing the secret, or it may contribute to an individual's decision to reveal the secret to additional family members. Thus, although the perceived relational risk in

keeping or revealing a secret is likely to negatively impact relational quality, the explanatory mechanism underlying this association remains unclear. Taken broadly, emotion labor may be one mechanism that explains why the relational risk of a secret influences relational quality.

The assessments of risks in revealing a secret may affect a person's decision to engage in surface acting or deep acting with the other secret keeper to help manage the secret. Surface or deep acting, in turn, may diminish or promote the quality of the ongoing relationship with the other secret keeper. For example, creating and maintaining an emotional façade through surface acting may be associated with emotional exhaustion and decreased relational quality, whereas efforts to align emotionally with the other secret keeper through deep acting may form or strengthen senses of connection and identification with the other person. When the task of concealing the secret is framed by family members as "our problem" and there is shared investment in protecting the relationship, deep acting may serve as an indirect mechanism for improving relational quality between secret keepers. Therefore, emotion labor is positioned as an explanatory mechanism for how the relational risk of a secret affects relational quality in the following hypothesis (See Figure 1):

> H6: Surface acting and deep acting, as distinct family secret management strategies, mediate the relationship between perceived risk in revealing the secret and relational quality with the other secret keeper.

Figure 1.   Hypothesized Model for the Effects of the Risk in Revealing a Secret and Emotion Labor on Relational Quality
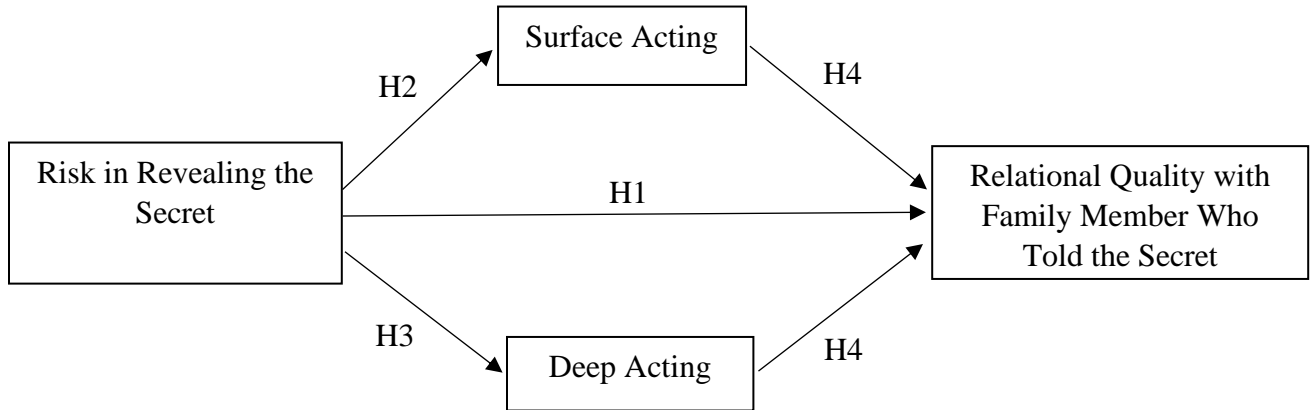
Note. Although not labeled here, H5 predicts that surface acting and deep acting will be associated with relational quality between the secret keeper and the rest of their family who do not know the secret. Additionally, H6 predicts that surface acting and deep acting mediate the relationship between risk in revealing the secret and relational quality with the family member who shared the secret.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 454 individuals who had previously been told a secret by a

family member and had, for any length of time, helped keep that secret from other family

members. Participants in this study included 330 (72.7%) females, 122 (26.9%) males, and two

people who identified their biological sex as "other." These participants ranged from 18 to 55

years of age ($M = 19.20$, $SD = 2.76$). The majority of participants identified as White (81.7%, n

$= 371$), with 6.8% ($n = 31$) identifying as Latinx/Hispanic, 4.0% ($n = 18$) as Multi-ethnic/racial,

3.3% ($n = 15$) as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 3.1% ($n = 14$) as Black/African American,

0.4% ($n = 2$) as Native American/American Indian, and 0.4% ($n = 2$) as Other. The majority of

participants reported that their primary role is that of a child (99.3%, $n = 451$) in the family,

whereas 0.4% ($n = 2$) were parents, and one participant identified as "other" but did not specify

their role in the family. Most participants reported their family's marital status as married or in a

domestic partnership (75.6%, $n = 343$), with 13.0% ($n = 59$) divorced, with 8.1% ($n = 37$)

single/never been married, with 1.8% ($n = 8$) widowed, and with 1.3% ($n = 6$) other. When

asked which member of the family shared the secret with them, 41.6% ($n = 189$) of participants

reported their mother, 18.1% ($n = 82$) their father, 17.4% ($n = 79$) a sister, and 13.2% ($n = 60$) a

brother. The remainder of the participants identified other individuals or combinations of

individuals (e.g., two parents, two or more siblings, one parent and one sibling, a sibling-in-law,

a stepparent, etc.). The majority of participants (73.6%, $n = 334$) considered the person who told

them the secret to be the owner of the secret, whereas 26.4% ($n = 120$) did not consider the

person the owner of the secret.

Most participants indicated that the family member who told them the secret asked them

to withhold the secret from other family members (78.6%, $n = 357$). More than half of the

participants (64.1%, *n* = 291) reported that they were no longer keeping the secret, because either they told family members (16.1%, *n* = 73) or someone else told the family members, or they found out the secret by other means (48.0%, *n* = 218). Conversely, 35.7% (*n* = 162) indicated that they were still keeping the secret at the time of data collection. The amount of time those no longer keeping their family secret had kept the secret ranged from less than one week to 20 years or longer, with 79.5% (*n* = 361) having kept the secret between one week and five years. Participants were also asked to report on the stressful impact of the secret they were told. The stressful impact of the secrets ranged from "not stressful at all" to "the most stress I have ever experienced", and the average stressful impact was low (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 1.46). Although analyzing the specific nature of the secrets is beyond the scope of this analysis, participants reported on a wide variety of secrets, including sexuality, relationship issues, financial issues, infidelity, surprises, addiction, health issues, and academics.

Procedures

After gaining Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited through communication courses at a southwestern university and through social and personal networks. Networks included social media (i.e., Facebook and Instagram). All participants were: (1) at least 18 years old, (2) had at some time been told a secret by an immediate family member, and (3) had, for any length of time, helped keep that secret from other family members. Participants who met these criteria were invited to follow a link to the online Qualtrics survey (See Appendix).

Before beginning the survey, participants were asked to read the informed consent form and to provide their informed consent. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Upon completing the survey, students participating to receive minimal course credit in the university communication course were directed to a separate Qualtrics survey and asked to provide their

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name and identifying information about their section of the course. This information was kept separately from their responses and was only used so that course credit could be accurately administered for students' participation in the survey. Participants who did not complete the survey for course credit were not directed to provide any additional information.

The survey required about 30 minutes to complete. Additionally, participation could have been terminated at any time without penalty by closing the browser window. The survey involved completing measures related to the nature of the secret, the perceived risk in revealing the secret, emotion labor, and relational quality with two categories of other family members (i.e., the family member who told them the secret and the rest of their family members who did not know the secret).

Measures

First, the survey began with demographic questions. The items inquired about participants' family composition and their frequency of contact with immediate family members. Participants were directed to recall a specific secret that an immediate family member told them and, for any length of time, requested they help keep this secret. To conclude the opening section of the survey, participants were asked about the general content of the secret, how stressful they perceived the secret to be, and for how long they had been keeping (or had kept) the secret.

Relational Risk of Revealing a Secret

Because threats to one's relationships are important repercussions people often consider when managing secrets (Hammonds, 2015), a measure of relational risk was used to measure the risk in revealing a secret. Relational risk was adapted to the context of family secrets from Derlega et al.'s (2002) two subscales capturing: (a) *fear of rejection* (e.g., "I worried that my

family member would no longer like me if I revealed the secret") and (b) *protecting the other* (e.g., "I haven't disclosed the secret to others because I wouldn't want to upset this person"). Both subscales included a 5-point Likert type scale from *not at all a factor* (1) to *very likely a factor* (5). Previous research using this measure (Derlega et al., 2002) has achieved high reliability for the fear of rejection ($\alpha = .81$) and protecting the other ($\alpha = .84$). This study also achieved high reliability for the *fear of rejection* ($\alpha = .87$) and *protecting the other* ($\alpha = .89$) subscales.

Emotion Labor

The Emotion Labor in Families (ELF) scale (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019) was used to measure emotion labor. Participants were instructed to complete the items in this scale considering their interactions with the family member who told them the secret they had in mind. The 18-item scale included 13 items pertaining to *surface acting* (e.g., "In conversations with my family member, I express feelings to my family member that are different from what I feel inside") and five items pertaining to *deep acting* (e.g., "When talking with my family member, I try to create certain emotions in myself to present the emotions that s/he desires) that the respondent engages in during conversations with family members. All items were assessed on a 7-point Likert type scale from *never* (1) to *almost always* (7). One item regarding *deep acting* ("I work on not caring much about my family member's emotions when talking with her/him") was reverse coded such that higher scores indicated greater deep acting. Additionally, higher scores on all three subscales indicated more emotion labor. Previous research using this measure (Decker & Schrodt, 2022) has achieved high reliability ($\alpha = .98$). The reverse-coded item on the *deep acting* subscale was deleted due to low reliability. Ultimately, this study also achieved high reliability for the ELF scale (total $\alpha = .96$; SA $\alpha = .97$; DA $\alpha = .94$).

Relational Quality

Two measures were used to assess relational quality. First, *relational closeness* was assessed using a version of Buchanan et al.'s (1991) measure adapted to fit the context of family secrets. This was a 10-item scale (e.g., "How close do you feel to your family member?") with responses on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (5). Higher scores on this measure indicated more relational closeness. Previous research using this measure (Buchanan et al., 1991) has achieved high reliability (α = .89). This study also achieved high reliability for closeness with the family member who shared the secret (α = .87) and closeness with the rest of the family (α = .91).

Second, *relational satisfaction* was assessed using an adapted version of Huston and colleagues (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ). This 11-item scale was adapted to reflect the participant and their family member keeping the secret. The scale includes 10 responses on a 7-point semantic differential scale (e.g., "miserable-enjoyable," "empty-full"). One item assessed global satisfaction with responses ranging from *completely dissatisfied* (1) to *completely satisfied* (7). Higher scores on this measure indicated better relational satisfaction. Previous research using this measure adapted to assess family satisfaction rather than marital partner satisfaction (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007) has achieved high reliability (α = .95). This study also achieved high reliability for satisfaction with the family member who shared the secret (α = .97) and satisfaction with the rest of the family (α = .98).

Both measures of relational quality were presented twice. The first time, participants were asked to respond considering their relationship with the family member who told them the secret, whereas the second time, they were asked to respond considering their relationship with the rest of their family who do not know the secret. They were instructed to consider these family members as a group when completing these items.

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Data Analysis

Data collected regarding relational risk in revealing the secret, emotion labor, and relational quality were used for hypotheses testing, and preliminary analyses were conducted using demographic variables to determine if control variables were needed in the main analysis. Pearson's product moment correlations were used to test H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5. The mediation path model proposed in H6 was tested in Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro for SPSS.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and Pearson's product-moment correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1. After examining the pattern of missing data, Expectation-Maximization Imputation (EMI) was used to produce imputed values representative of the existing distribution of data. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant associations between possible control variables (e.g., secret keeper relationship, length of time secret was kept, etc.) and study outcomes. Thus, each mediation model was tested without the inclusion of control variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Product-moment Correlations for All Variables (N = 454)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Risk in revealing secret[a]	2.17	1.05	--						
2. Surface acting[b]	2.37	1.44	.39**	--					
3. Deep acting[b]	3.12	1.04	.34**	.75**	--				
4. Closeness with secret keeper[a]	3.98	.74	-.13**	-.47**	-.33**	--			
5. Satisfaction with secret keeper[b]	5.84	1.27	-.24**	-.61**	-.48**	.71**	--		
6. Closeness with rest of family[a]	3.77	.94	-.02	-.21**	-.15**	.46**	.26**	--	
7. Satisfaction with rest of family[b]	5.59	1.32	-.19*	-.33**	-.17**	.50**	.57**	.61**	--

Note. [a]Responses were solicited using a five-point scale. [b]Responses were solicited using a seven-point scale. *p* < .05. **p* < .01.

Primary Analyses

The bivariate results reported in Table 1 generally offer support for the first five hypotheses. Specifically, H1 predicted that the relational risk of keeping a family secret is negatively associated with the relational quality between the secret keeper and the person who asked them to do so. Results revealed small, but meaningful negative associations between relational risk and both closeness ($r = -.13$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$) with the other secret keeper. Greater relational risk in revealing the secret was associated with lower closeness and relational satisfaction between secret keepers. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Additionally, H2 predicted that perceived risk in revealing a family secret would be inversely associated with surface acting. In contrast, results indicated that relational risk was positively associated with surface acting ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), such that those who perceived greater relational risk in revealing the secret tended to engage in *more* surface acting. Thus, although H2 was not supported, the results reflected a significant positive correlation between relational risk and surface acting.

Next, H3 predicted that perceived risk in revealing a family secret would be positively associated with deep acting. Indeed, results indicated that relational risk had a small, but meaningful positive association with deep acting ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), meaning those who perceived greater relational risk in revealing the secret tended to engage in more deep acting. Thus, H3 was supported.

Additionally, H4 predicted that emotion labor (i.e., surface acting and deep acting) would be associated with relational quality between secret keepers. Results indicated that surface acting was inversely associated with closeness ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = -.61$, $p < .01$) with the family member who shared the secret. Deep acting was also inversely associated

with closeness ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$) with this family member. Together, these results provide support for H4.

Similarly, H5 predicted that emotion labor would be associated with relational quality between the secret keeper and the rest of their family who did not know the secret. Once again, results indicated that surface acting was inversely associated with closeness ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$) with the rest of the family. Deep acting was also inversely associated with closeness ($r = -.15$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$) with the rest of the family. Thus, H5 was supported. Although the magnitude of the associations is greater between emotion labor and relational quality with the person who shared the secret than between emotion labor and relational quality with the rest of the family, emotion labor was, in fact, significantly and inversely correlated with relational quality with both types of family members.

The final set of analyses tested H6, which predicted that surface acting and deep acting would independently mediate the relationship between perceived risk in revealing the secret and relational quality with the other secret keeper. To test these claims, Model 4 in PROCESS was used with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrapped samples. As illustrated in Table 2, participants experiencing greater relational risk experienced increased surface acting ($a = .53$) and deep acting ($a = .34$). Those with increased surface acting also reported lower closeness with the other secret keeper ($b = -.27$). However, there was not a significant association between deep acting and closeness with the other secret keeper, although the total effect was significant ($r = -.09$, $p < .01$, 95% CI: -.16 to -.03). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of relational risk on closeness through surface acting ($ab = -.15$ did not include zero (95% CI: -.20 to -.10), providing evidence of a significant indirect effect. However, a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect through deep acting did include zero (95% CI: -.02 to .05), indicating no indirect effect through deep acting. In sum, there was a significant

indirect effect of relational risk on closeness with the other secret keeper through surface acting, but not through deep acting, offering partial support for H6.

Table 2

Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information Depicting Relational Risk on Closeness with Other Secret Keeper through Surface and Deep Acting (N = 454)

		Consequent										
		M_1 (Surface Acting)				M_2 (Deep Acting)				Y (Closeness)		
Antecedent		Coeff.	SE	p		Coeff.	SE	p		Coeff.	SE	p
X (RelRisk)	a_1				a_2				c'			
M_1 (SA)		.532	.059	< .001		.341	.044	<.001		.043	.032	.177
M_2 (DA)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_1	-.273	.033	<.001
Constant	i_{M1}	—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	.034	.045	.452
		1.220	.143	< .001	i_{M2}	2.379	.106	<.001	i_Y	4.43	.109	<.001
		R^2 =.151				R^2 =.117				R^2 = .225		

Note. RelRisk = Relational Risk; SA = Surface Acting; DA = Deep Acting.

Model 4 in PROCESS was also used with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrapped samples to test for indirect effects on relational satisfaction with the other secret keeper. As illustrated in Table 3, participants experiencing greater relational risk experience increased surface acting ($a = .53$) and deep acting ($a = .34$). Those with increased surface acting also reported lower satisfaction ($b = -.52$). However, there was not a significant association between deep acting and satisfaction with the other secret keeper. The total effect was significant ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: -.41 to -.19). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of relational risk on satisfaction through surface acting ($ab = -.23$) did not include zero (95% CI: -.31 to -.16), providing evidence of a significant indirect effect. However, a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect through deep acting did include zero (95% CI: -.06 to .03), indicating no indirect effect through deep acting. In sum, there were significant indirect effects of relational risk on both closeness and satisfaction with the other secret keeper through surface acting, but not through deep acting. Thus, H6 was partially supported.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information Depicting Relational Risk on Satisfaction with Other Secret Keeper through Surface and Deep Acting ($N = 454$)

					Consequent						
	M_1 (Surface Acting)				M_2 (Deep Acting)				Y (Satisfaction)		
Antecedent		Coeff.	*SE*	*p*		Coeff.	*SE*	*p*		Coeff.	*SE*	*p*
X (RelRisk)	a_1	.532	.059	< .001	a_2	.341	.044	<.001	c'	-.008	.049	.876
M_1 (SA)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_1	-.518	.051	<.001
M_2 (DA)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	-.041	.069	.553
Constant	i_{M1}	1.220	.143	< .001	i_{M2}	2.379	.106	<.001	i_Y	7.221	.166	<.001
		$R^2 = .151$				$R^2 = .117$				$R^2 = .378$		
		$F(1, 453) = 80.370, p < .001$				$F(1, 453) = 60.257, p < .001$				$F(3, 451) = 91.292\ p < .001$		

Note. RelRisk = Relational Risk; SA = Surface Acting; DA = Deep Acting.

Discussion

Previous research has identified relational risk as an important factor in family members' management of secrets (Hammonds, 2015). Additionally, emotion labor tends to be detrimental to family relationships (Hochschild, 2012; Schrodt, 2020; Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019). However, CPM literature has not yet examined how relational risk and emotion labor may both be associated with relational quality in the context of family secrets. Consequently, the overarching goals of this study were to (a) examine the possible associations between family members' perceived relational risk of revealing a secret and their emotion labor; (b) to consider the impact of emotion labor on relational quality, and (c) to test whether the two forms of emotion labor explain the relationship between the relational risk of revealing the secret and relational quality across family relationships. In general, family members who perceived a greater relational risk in revealing a secret engaged in more surface acting and deep acting. Both forms of emotion labor negatively predicted relational quality such that emotion labor tended to accompany lower closeness and relational satisfaction with the other secret keeper and the rest of the family. However, the magnitude of these effects is generally higher between surface acting and relational quality than between deep acting and relational quality. Furthermore, surface acting emerged as a mediator explaining the inverse association between risk in revealing the secret and relational quality with the other secret keeper. Surprisingly, deep acting did not mediate this relationship as predicted. Taken together, these results indicate that both surface acting and deep acting are involved in family secret keeping and that the two forms of emotion labor are related, yet distinct processes with somewhat distinct outcomes for family members' relational quality.

First, the results from this study expand upon findings from previous research regarding how relational risk in revealing secrets influences disclosure (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Hammonds, 2015). Specifically, Hammonds (2015) found that relational risk is inversely associated with

one's likelihood to reveal private information to their parents such that greater relational risk creates a lower likelihood of revealing the information. The greater the relational risk, the greater effort a person is likely to expend to conceal the secret from other family members. Thus, the results of the present study are consistent with Hammonds' (2015) findings, as greater relational risk predicted greater emotion labor. Emotion labor is one form of the effort a person is likely to expend that both becomes more necessary and requires additional energy as the relational risk of revealing the secret increases.

Second, the results of this study are consistent with Schrodt & O'Mara's (2019) findings that young adults' emotion labor with parents predicts negative relational quality outcomes with parents. Due to recruitment procedures, most of the participants in this study were young adults between the ages of 18 and 21. Over half of the participants reported that a parent shared the secret with them, whereas for the other participants, parents were naturally included in the "rest of the family who does not know the secret" category. Notably, the results of this study indicated that emotion labor predicts lessened relational quality (i.e., closeness and satisfaction) regardless of whether a person's parent told them the secret or was included in the rest of the family category. Consequently, these findings support the assertion that emotion labor generally has a detrimental impact on relational quality among family members, which aligns with the more general assertion that emotion labor often has a negative impact on psychosocial factors across organizational and family contexts (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2012; Schrodt, 2020; Tracy, 2005). Over time, emotion labor requires a burdensome amount of energy and may cause a person to feel less like themselves, or less true to themselves and their feelings. Indeed, a correctional officer explained that performing emotion labor at their job is like "putting on a separate personality" (Tracy, 2005, p. 271). An individual is likely to feel less close with

the other secret keeper if they feel obligated to be someone other than their natural, or truest self. Although co-ownership of important information could encourage intimacy or relational satisfaction, the inhibition of self-expression caused by emotion labor tends to strain relational satisfaction. Furthermore, the sensation of separation or detachment from one's true emotions is not easily compartmentalized to one specific relationship, especially in the family where relationships are highly interconnected. Rather, the separation from what a person knows to be their natural emotion may leave them cognitively and emotionally exhausted when engaging in relationships with other family members, thus also hindering their sense of closeness and relational satisfaction with the rest of the family.

Additionally, keeping the secret and performing emotion labor with the other secret keeper may be an isolating experience. Tracy (2005) found that one challenge for correctional officers who used emotion labor in their jobs was little opportunity for interaction with similar others who understood their experience (e.g., other correctional officers). Through the lens of CPM in this study, similar others are family members who know the secret. Communicating with other family members who know the secret should ideally allow an individual to let their guard down and feel understood without having to conceal information or explain their feelings or behavior. However, results revealed that secret keepers may not have this experience with the person who shared the secret, given the prevalence of emotion labor particularly as relational risk increases. Rather than experiencing understanding or openness, the individual must hide or fake their natural emotions in front of the other secret keeper. The rest of the family is outside the metaphorical privacy boundary and, therefore, lacks the shared knowledge of the secret that could provide comfort, solace, or relief for the secret keeper. Thus, the rest of the family is a group of dissimilar others, and unfortunately, the individual may feel compelled to manage their emotion when relating to the only similar other (i.e., the other secret keeper). This pattern may

cause the secret keeper to feel relationally isolated, thus decreasing closeness and satisfaction with both the other secret keeper and the rest of the family.

As expected, relational risk was negatively associated with relational quality. This was true for both relational quality with the family member who shared the secret and for relational quality with the rest of the family. It appears that greater threats to the relationship do, in fact, lead to a greater sense of burden for the secret keeper, even though a sense of loyalty to the person who shared the secret may motivate the individual to conceal the secret. One of the aims of this study was to examine whether emotion labor explains this relationship. Although both forms of emotion labor were negatively associated with relational quality with the other secret keeper, results revealed that surface acting, but not deep acting, mediated the relationship between the relational risk of the secret and relational quality. Hochschild (2012) and Schrodt and O'Mara (2019) describe emotion labor as an impression management process in which a person manages the experience and expression of emotion. Both surface acting and deep acting have been included in communication research (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019; Tracy, 2005), yet these processes were first conceptualized in Hochschild's (2012) discipline of sociology. In other words, emotion labor was adopted from sociology first into the organizational communication discipline and, more recently, into family communication. Considering emotion labor is not a homegrown communication construct, perhaps surface acting is more communicative in nature than deep acting. Surface acting, by definition, requires a person to hide or fake their emotions to convince others they are experiencing a desired emotion. Hiding, faking, and convincing other people all require communication. In contrast, deep acting is primarily a cognitive and emotional effort in which a person genuinely attempts to convince themself that they feel the desired emotion. This process can include a person voicing an emotion to their family member and simultaneously working to believe that this is their true

feeling. However, communication is not inherently necessary for this person to engage in the cognitive and emotional effort of deep acting. Thus, surface acting requires communication, whereas deep acting may be accompanied by communication but perhaps does not require it.

This fundamental distinction between surface acting and deep acting is one explanation for why surface acting, but not deep acting, mediates the relationship between relational risk and quality. Clearly, greater relational risk predicts greater emotion labor, and greater emotion labor (i.e., both surface and deep acting) predicts diminished relational quality. Managed emotion is generally unhelpful for relationships with family members (Hochschild, 2012; Schrodt, 2020; Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019). However, perhaps it is the communication of managed emotion (i.e., surface acting) rather than merely the presence of managed emotion (i.e., deep acting that may not be communicatively expressed) that explains how the relational risk of secrets is connected to diminished relational quality.

Overall, the results of this study have several implications. First, these results offer a novel extension of CPM theory in the context of family secrets. Findings assert that emotion labor is used in the context of family secrets and does help explain the relationship between secrets and family relational quality. Second, these results contribute to CPM literature by affirming that keeping secrets involves not only managing information, but also managing emotion as an extension of privacy in the context of secrets. Third, these results provide additional support for the notion that surface acting and deep acting are related, yet distinct processes occurring in family relationships. Finally, these findings help explain the experience of reluctant confidants, people who are brought into the secret against their wishes (Petronio, 2002). Reluctant confidants may be particularly vulnerable to the patterns that emerged in this study. Their disapproval, disappointment, or frustration at being told the secret clashes with expectations that they, as the trusted family member, express empathy and support. In other

words, reluctant confidants may be predisposed to engage in more emotion labor because of the conditions under which they were shared the secret. This dilemma only intensifies as the relational risk of revealing the secret increases.

Furthermore, the results of this study provide several practical implications. For example, the effects of emotion labor are not confined to the interpersonal dyad of secret keepers, but they trickle, or transfer, out to relationships with the rest of the family. In other words, even secrets that remain unshared have the power to impact entire families. Additionally, emotion labor is undoubtedly a strategy people use when managing family secrets. However, both surface acting and deep acting tend to accompany diminished relational quality. Thus, there is a relational cost for relationships with the whole family when a person uses emotion labor as they manage their secrets. What remains unclear is whether people consider the risk-benefit ratio of emotion labor to a greater or lesser extent than they consider the risk-benefit ratio of revealing the content of the secret (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Hammonds, 2015). Finally, if one were to make a conscious choice between surface acting and deep acting, it appears that in the context of family secrets with low stressful impact and moderately low relational risk, deep acting is the lesser of two evils. Making the cognitive effort to convince oneself of experiencing the desirable, or expected emotion for the situation is personally taxing but may minimize negative impacts to relationships with family members.

Like any study, these results and implications must be considered alongside the limitations. First, the stressful impact of the secrets that participants considered in this study was low. Similarly, the mean relational risk for revealing the secret was moderately low, only slightly higher than two on a five-point scale. Perhaps stronger, or distinct, effects would emerge with higher stressful impact and relational risk. One direction for future research is to narrow the focus to secrets with moderate to high stressful impact, relational risk, or both.

Additionally, nearly all the participants identified as a child in their family which could impact the generalizability of these findings to other family members. Too few participants identified as parents to look for differences between parents and children in the patterns of risk, emotion labor, and relational quality. Therefore, this study is unable to provide insight as to whether one's role in the family (i.e., parent or child), or the power associated with that role, has a meaningful impact on perceived relational risk, the necessity of emotion labor, or the implications for relational quality with family members. Future research should focus additional recruitment efforts outside the university setting to attract a greater number of parents that would allow the researchers to test for comparisons based on familial roles.

Finally, the retrospective self-reported accounts are an important limitation. Given that participants could report on any family secret, from any time in life, regardless of whether they were still keeping the secret at the time of the study, there may be discrepancies in the accuracy and consistency of participants' retrospective accounts of emotion labor and family relationships. For example, one participant could have been reporting on a secret they were told one week before their participation in the study, whereas another participant could have been reporting a secret they learned twenty years before the time of the study. Discrepancies could also have been caused by the fact that some participants were still keeping the secret, some participants' families had recently learned the secret, and others' families learned the secret years ago. Participants may report their perceptions about their family relationships differently when the experience is in their lived present than when they are recalling the experience from years in the past. Because family relationships are constantly in flux, retrospective accounts of secrets from farther in the past are vulnerable to being clouded by the participants' perceptions of how relationship quality has developed or deteriorated since the time of the events they are recalling. Therefore, another future direction is to narrow the focus of study either to secrets that are still

being kept, or that the rest of the family has already found out. In the case of secrets that the family has already found out, researchers should consider placing parameters on how long ago the secret was first shared with the participant and how long ago the rest of the family found out the secret. Taking these measures will promote greater accuracy and consistency of participants' retrospective accounts of their family relationships.

In addition to those already mentioned, two more directions for future research would provide additional theoretical insight and may provide information helpful for guiding or counseling those who are managing family secrets. First, communication researchers should continue exploring the notion of whether surface acting is indeed more communicative in nature than deep acting, as additional evidence is needed to more thoroughly support or refute this claim. Clarity on this conceptual nuance may be helpful for the ongoing adoption of emotion labor into the family communication discipline, particularly if future research also reveals distinct effects between surface acting and deep acting for outcomes other than closeness and satisfaction. Second, future research should explore moderating factors that mitigate the negative effects of emotion labor on relational quality. The results of this study affirm that emotion labor is a common strategy for people keeping secrets between family members. If we know that this is, indeed, a common strategy that is correlated with lessened closeness and satisfaction, then it is worth considering the extent to which other communicative practices such as affectionate communication, relational maintenance, or communicated perspective taking lessen the severity of the negative relational outcomes of emotion labor. It is extremely difficult to avoid secrets in families. Furthermore, the results of this study should not be taken to mean that all secrets should be avoided, as keeping secrets can serve adaptive functions for families. Nonetheless, understanding which communicative behaviors lessen the impact of emotion labor

on relational quality would provide people with specific actions they can take to protect the health of their family relationships in light of the secrets they are keeping.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that emotion labor is commonly involved in managing family secrets and should be considered to best understand the impacts of secrets on family members' relational quality. The current study extends theory by capturing the role of a unique emotional process in managing privacy among family members. The fact that surface acting had a consistently stronger influence on family relational quality than did deep acting supports the notion that the communicative element of secret keeping is fundamentally important to relational outcomes. Specifically, it may be the communication of managed emotion rather than merely the presence of managed emotion that best explains why the relational risk of secrets is detrimental to family relationships. Regardless of the type of emotion labor performed, however, it is imperative to consider that emotion labor between secret keepers strains the dyadic relationship and creates a ripple effect, also hindering relationships with the rest of the family. Taken together, the results from the present study reveal the importance of identifying which behaviors, if any, mitigate the detrimental effects of emotion labor on relational quality in the context of family secrets. Secrets may be inevitable for families, and one's involvement in them may be uncontrollable as in the case of reluctant confidants. Therefore, communication researchers should seek to understand tactics that compensate for the relational strain of family secrets and emotion labor. This study provides an initial step toward helping everyday people promote health in their relationships in light of the family secrets they keep.

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Survey Instrument

Note. The formatting of this survey may change during conversion to online format in Qualtrics.

As a reminder, we're investigating how secrets affect family relationships. You qualify to participate in this study because you are 18 or older, have been told a secret by an immediate family member, and have, for any length of time, helped them keep that secret.

Demographic and Family Information

Instructions: The following items ask general background questions about you and your relationship with your family. Please select only one answer. Answer each question as accurately as possible.

What is your age (in years)? _____

What is your biological sex (please select one)?
- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Non-binary
- d. Other (Please specify) _____

What is your sexual orientation?
- a. Straight
- b. Gay
- c. Lesbian
- d. Bisexual
- e. Pansexual
- f. Queer
- g. Fluid
- h. Asexual
- i. Polyamorous
- j. Other (Please specify) _____

Which of the following describes your race/ethnicity?
- a. Latinx/Hispanic
- b. Black/African American
- c. White
- d. Native American/American Indian
- e. Asian American/Pacific Islander
- f. Multi-ethnic/racial _____
- g. Other (Please specify) _____

Instructions: In this survey, we will ask you to recall a time when someone in your family shared a secret with you. You might think about either the people in your family who you

currently live with or the family you lived with most of your life. We will refer to this group as your "immediate family" for the rest of this survey. Please answer this item regarding the immediate family most connected to the secret you have in mind.

Please identify your role in your family.

I am the:

A. Parent
B. Spouse/romantic partner with no children
C. Child
D. Other (Please specify) _____

How many people are in your immediate family?

[Insert small text box.]

How would you describe your family's composition?
a. Single/Never been married
b. Married/Domestic Partnership
c. Divorced
d. Widowed
e. Other _____

How would you describe your immediate family's geographic distribution?
1. Living in same household
2. Living in multiple households in the same city or area
3. Living in multiple households long-distance
4. Other (Please specify) _____

For the next series of questions, we'd like you to think about a specific secret that you helped keep from other family members.

Please describe the general **content of the secret** you helped keep from other family members. For example, you might write, "health issues," or "sexual orientation," or "financial trouble," or "surprise party." You can include as much or as little information as you'd like.

[Insert medium text box.]

Thinking about the secret you just described, how stressful was it for you to keep this secret from your family member(s) **when you were first told it**?

Not stressful at all						The most stress I have ever experienced
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thinking about the same secret, how stressful is this secret **<u>now</u>**?

Not stressful at all						The most stress I have ever experienced
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thinking about the same secret, how much did this secret impact your family **overall**?

Not at all						A great deal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Which immediate family member shared the secret with you?

    [Insert small text box.]

Do you consider this person to be the owner of this secret in your family?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Did this family member ask that you withhold the secret from another family member(s)?
    a. Yes
    b. No

On average, how often do you talk with your FAMILY MEMBER WHO ASKED YOU TO KEEP THE SECRET during a typical week (in hours and/or minutes)? ____hours _____minutes

On average, how often do you talk with OTHER IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS during a typical week (in hours and/or minutes)? ____hours ____minutes

Are you still keeping the secret from your other family members <u>today</u>?
    a. Yes (from all)
    b. Yes (from some)
    c. No (I told them)
    d. No (They found out/someone else told them)

For how long did you keep the information secret from other family members? If you are still keeping the secret, how long have you been keeping it?

a. Less than a week
b. 1 week – Less than 1 month
c. 1 month – Less than 1 year
d. 1 year – Less than 5 years
e. 5 years – Less than 10 years
f. 10 years – Less than 20 years
g. 20 years or longer

How likely are you to reveal the secret to the family member(s) who don't already know the secret?

If you have already revealed the secret and/or all of your immediate family members know, you can skip this question.

Not at all likely						Very likely
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Excellent! For the next set of questions, we'd like you to think about **the family member who told you the secret**. Okay?

a. Sure
b. Got it

Consequences of Revealing a Secret
Relational Risk (Derlega et al., 2002)
Subscale One: Fear of Rejection

Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the family member who you told you the secret.**
1. I was concerned that my [family member who told me the secret] wouldn't understand what I was going through
2. I worried that my [family member who told me the secret] would no longer like me if he or she knew [that I revealed the secret to another family member(s)]
3. I was concerned about how my [family member who told me the secret] would feel about me after hearing [that I shared the information with another family member(s)]
4. I didn't feel my [family member who told me the secret] would be supportive

Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the family member who you told you the secret.**
1. I didn't want my [family member who told me the secret] to have to make sacrifices for me

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2. I didn't want to put my [family member who told me the secret]'s life into an uproar
3. I didn't want my [family member who told me the secret] to worry about me
4. I didn't want my [family member who told me the secret] to experience any pain over things I was going through [because I shared the secret with another family member(s)]

Emotion Labor
Emotion Labor in Families Scale (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019); 7-point scale from 1(never) to 7 (almost always)

Surface Acting
Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the family member who you told you the secret.**
1. I resist expressing my true feelings when talking to my family member.
2. I pretend to have emotions that I don't really have around my family member.
3. I do a good job of hiding my true feelings in front of my family member.
4. I put on an act in order to talk to my family member in an appropriate way.
5. I fake a good mood when interacting with my family member.
6. I put on a "show" or "performance" when talking to my family member.
7. I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display around my family member.
8. I put on a "mask" in order to display the emotions I need around my family member.
9. In conversations with my family member, I express feelings to my family member that are different from what I feel inside.
10. When talking with my family member, I fake the emotions I show.
11. I hide my true feelings when talking to my family member.
12. I have to cover up my true feelings when talking with my family member.
13. I don't act like myself when talking to my family member.

Deep Acting
Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the family member who you told you the secret.**
1. To get along with my family member, I talk myself into showing emotions that are different from what I feel.
2. When talking with my family member, I try to create certain emotions in myself to present the emotion s/he desires.
3. I talk myself out of feeling what I really feel when talking to my family member.
4. In conversations with my family member, if I think s/he would not approve of my real feelings, I try to change those feelings.
5. I work on not caring much about my family member's emotions when talking with her/him (reverse-coded).

Relational Quality

Relational Closeness (Buchanan et al., 1991); 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very)

Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the family member who you told you the secret.**

1. How openly do you talk with your [family member who told you the secret]?
2. How careful do you feel you have to be about what you say to your [family member who told you the secret]?
3. How comfortable do you feel admitting doubts and fears to your [family member who told you the secret]?
4. How interested is your [family member who told you the secret] in talking to you when you want to talk?
5. How often does your [family member who told you the secret] express affection or liking for you?
6. How well does your [family member who told you the secret] know what you are really like?
7. How close do you feel to your [family member who told you the secret]?
8. How confident are you that your [family member who told you the secret] would help you if you had a problem?
9. If you needed money, how comfortable would you be asking your [family member who told you the secret] for it?
10. How interested is your [family member who told you the secret] in the things you do?

Relational Satisfaction

Adapted from Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston et al., 1986)

Instructions: Below are some words and phrases which we would like you to use to describe how you feel about your relational satisfaction with the **family member who told you the secret**. Please indicate your impressions of your relationship with this person by selecting the appropriate number between the pairs of adjectives below. The close the number is to an adjective, the more certain you are of your evaluation.

1 Boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Interesting
2 Miserable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Enjoyable
3 Hard* 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Easy
4 Useless 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Worthwhile
5 Lonely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Friendly
6 Empty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Full
7 Discouraging 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Hopeful
8 Tied-down* 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Free
9 Disappointing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Rewarding
10 Doesn't give me much chance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Brings out the best in me
11 Low relational satisfaction 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 High relational satisfaction

You're doing great! For the next set of questions, we'd like you to think about the **rest of your immediate family members** who do not/did not know the secret. Okay?

a. Got it
b. Sounds good

Instructions: When answering the following items, please consider **the rest of your immediate family members who do not know the secret**. Consider your relationship with them **as a group**, not as individual relationships.

Relational Closeness (Buchanan et al., 1991); 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very)
1. How openly do you talk with the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret]?
2. How careful do you feel you have to be about what you say to the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret]?
3. How comfortable do you feel admitting doubts and fears to the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret]?
4. How interested are the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] in talking to you when you want to talk?
5. How often do the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] express affection or liking for you?
6. How well do the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] know what you are really like?
7. How close do you feel to the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret]?
8. How confident are you that the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] would help you if you had a problem?
9. If you needed money, how comfortable would you be asking the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] for it?
10. How interested is the [rest of your family members who do NOT know the secret] in the things you do?

Instructions: Below are some words and phrases which we would like you to use to describe how you feel about your relational satisfaction with **the rest of your immediate family members who do not know the secret**. Consider your relationship with them **as a group**, not as individual relationships.

Please indicate your impressions of your relationship with the rest of your family by selecting the

appropriate number between the pairs of adjectives below. The closer the number is to an adjective, the more certain you are of your evaluation.

       1 Boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Interesting
       2 Miserable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Enjoyable
       3 Hard* 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Easy
       4 Useless 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Worthwhile
       5 Lonely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Friendly
       6 Empty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Full
       7 Discouraging 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Hopeful
       8 Tied-down* 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Free
       9 Disappointing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Rewarding
       10 Doesn't give me much chance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Brings out the best in me
       11 Low relational satisfaction 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 High relational satisfaction

Note: Items should be reverse ordered randomly to avoid a response effect.
*Items eliminated due to weak factor loadings

If you are taking this survey to receive course credit for TCU's COMM10123, please click the following link to input your name and the name of your lab instructor. You must provide this information in order to receive course credit. This information will not be associated with your responses. If the hyperlink does not work, copy and paste the web address into another browser. Thank you for your time!

[Insert link to Qualtrics survey for basic communication course participants.]

VITA

Personal Background	Sarah Annis
	Omaha, NE

Education	Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies
	Bachelor of Arts, Spanish
	Bethel University, St. Paul, MN, 2020
	Master of Science, Communication Studies
	Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 2023

Experience	Graduate Teaching Assistant
	Texas Christian University, 2021-2023

Honors and Awards	Undergraduate Research Accepted to
	Central States Communication Association Conference
	Bethel University, 2020
	Lambda Pi Eta Member
	Bethel University, 2018-2020