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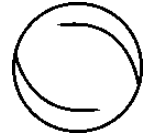
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# Bringing Secrecy into the Open: Towards a Theorization of the Social Processes of Organizational Secrecy

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## Abstract

This paper brings into focus the concept of organizational secrecy, defined as the ongoing formal and informal social processes of intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organizations. It is argued that existing literature on the topic is fragmented and predominantly focused on informational rather than social aspects of secrecy. The paper distinguishes between formal and informal secrecy and theorizes the social processes of these in terms of identity and control. It is proposed that organizational secrecy be added to the analytical repertoire of organization studies.

## Keywords

control, identity, information, secrecy, social process, transparency

## Introduction

Consider the following phenomena that may occur daily within organizations: the development of plans for new products or strategies which must be concealed from competitors; the protection of personal data relating to customers or employees; a private agreement between two colleagues over lunch as to how to handle a meeting that afternoon; an exchange of confidential gossip in the corridor. All of these, and many other similar examples, relate to some form or other of organizational secrecy, which we will define as *the ongoing formal and informal social processes of intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organizations*.

In considering secrecy in both a formal and an informal sense, we are invoking a longstanding distinction within organization studies which has been used to understand a wide range of

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phenomena encompassing organizational structures, hierarchies, groups, leadership and much else. At the most general level, 'formal' refers to the official realm of an organization, e.g. its official rules, goals, structures and positions, whereas 'informal' refers to the unofficial realm, e.g. social activities, relationships and persons (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Scott, 2008). In a similar way, by 'formal secrecy' we mean cases such as trade secrecy which are officially sanctioned and organized through prescriptive rules or laws; by 'informal secrecy' we mean examples such as confidential gossip which operate unofficially and are organized through social norms.

In considering secrecy in this way, we aspire to explore theoretically how secrecy can fundamentally shape behaviour and interactions in organizations, regulating what is said and not said by whom and to whom. Such regulation not only is a result of and a source of control, but also shapes particular identity constructions, that is, how individuals, groups and organizations define 'who they are'. In this way, the paper shows how secrecy is relevant for a broad range of important organizational phenomena and concepts, such as change, leadership, politics, communication, trust, networking and gossip. Yet none of these in itself captures the specific issues of intentional concealment and its interrelation with control and identity processes, which may run through them. If we can understand the concealed elements of organizational relationships then it follows that we will have a fuller and deeper picture of organizational life than would otherwise be possible.

Indeed, by drawing attention to the social dynamics of secrecy we are able to demonstrate that it involves much more than is typically realized. Extant studies mainly approach organizational secrecy from what we will call an *informational* perspective, in that they assume that its significance lies primarily in the protection of valuable information<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Beamish, 2000; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; Hannah, 2005; Katila, Rosenberger, & Eisenhardt, 2008; Louis, Blumenthal, Gluck, & Stoto, 1989; Roberts, 2012). While there are scattered and passing references to the social aspects of secrecy in the organizational literature, especially in 'classic' organizational studies texts (e.g. Argyris, 1957; Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Moore, 1962; Schein, 1985), a systematic analysis of secrecy is still missing.

This paper deploys sociological theorizations of secrecy (e.g. Bok, 1989; Goffman, 1959, 1963/1990; Simmel, 1906/1950; Zerubavel, 2006) to theoretically develop in detail the social nature of secrecy in organizations in contrast to the dominant informational focus. In line with these theorizations, we propose that the focus should be on *secrecy as a social process* rather than simply on secrets and their informational content. Secrecy is constituted through social interactions and, specifically, needs to be understood in terms its conditions and consequences for identity and control. By depicting social process in terms of conditions and consequences we suggest that what is at stake is not a linear cause-and-effect relationship but an ongoing, iterative and dynamic relationship (see Hernes, 2007; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). For example, members of an informal organizational network may share a secret with each other, and if the members keep that secret then the social bonding within the network is reinforced and further secrets may be shared; secrecy here is both a condition and a consequence of the organizational relationships, such as the creation and cementing of a group identity, over time.

Because organizational secrecy potentially encompasses a broad range of phenomena, we narrow what would otherwise be an unmanageable discussion. First, and as already mentioned, we do not take an informational approach, meaning that we are not concerned with the information being concealed, e.g. its value and strategic relevance, or to discuss whether, when or how this concealment should occur. Second, our discussion concentrates on the intra-organizational processes of secrecy rather than its wider, extra-organizational effects. Third, we do not focus on organizations which are themselves secret, i.e. clandestine organizations such as secret political societies or terrorist groups (e.g. Stohl & Stohl, 2011), but, rather, on secrets within non-secret organizations. Finally, and perhaps most contentiously, we do not engage with the highly ethically charged debates

to which secrecy often gives rise. There are sound analytical reasons for this. The first and most elaborate sociological theorization of secrecy, that of Georg Simmel (1906/1950), emphasizes the need to approach secrecy not simply from the standpoint of ethics: 'We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the manifold ethical negativeness of secrecy. Secrecy is a universal sociological form, which, as such, has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents' (Simmel, 1950, p. 463; see also Bok, 1989, p. 14; Birchall, 2011a). This emphatically does not mean that we are uninterested in, or dismissive of, the way that the social process of secrecy may have an ethical dimension for organizational actors. Indeed, it often will: ethically charged issues of loyalty, fidelity, shame, guilt and so on are very likely to structure the experience of organizational secrecy. Our point is, rather, that we do not start from the position that secrecy is either inherently 'good' or 'bad'. For example, it is desirable that medical staff maintain patient confidentiality, but not that they conceal malpractice.

This approach is, indeed, contentious from the point of view of some important discussions of transparency and democratic accountability, especially in public organizations (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Hood & Heald, 2006; Roberts, 2009), which typically start from the normative position that secrecy is undesirable and problematic (for fuller critical discussion, see Birchall, 2011b; Van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010). This is clearly one area where considerations of secrecy are important, but our intention is to provide a much more general and overarching analysis of the social processes of secrecy which may be deployed in the analysis of organizations which valorize secrecy as much as those which valorize transparency. Moreover, in what is already a lengthy paper, space precludes doing justice to the transparency debates. Nevertheless, while sidestepping these debates in pursuit of our main focus, our analysis has significant implications for them. For example, as we will suggest, it may be that an organization setting formal standards of disclosure may as an unintentional by-product encourage organizational members to engage in informal practices of concealment. Indeed, this would be an example of how recognizing the distinction of formal and informal secrecy serves to supplement existing understandings of organizations.

The paper proceeds as follows. After developing our definition of organizational secrecy, we consider the various ways in which organizational secrecy has been approached within existing literatures. While extant research has predominantly taken an informational approach, we show the significance of social approaches to secrecy, specifically in relation to identity and control. In arguing that treatments of secrecy need to move beyond the informational focus and incorporate the social aspects of secrecy, we introduce the distinction of formal and informal secrecy as an insightful way for doing so. We present these as 'ideal types' and outline their dynamic relation within organizational contexts. The discussion theorizes the principal social processes of formal and informal secrecy, namely, those upon identity and control. Finally, we return to the proposal that organizational secrecy be added to the repertoire of organizational studies, and some of the implications of doing so.

## Towards a Definition of Organizational Secrecy

The terms 'secrecy' and 'secret' derive from the Latin noun *secretus* (separate, set apart) and the verb *secernere* (*se-* apart and *cernere* sift). In this meaning, secrecy is to exclude, segregate and distinguish – that is, to create a boundary between the known and the unknown. But this reflects only the first of the 'three related logics' of *secretus*, *arcanum* and *mysterium* (Horn, 2011). The term *arcanum* 'emphasizes withdrawal from communication and knowledge by locking something away' (Horn, 2011, p. 109). The logic of *mysterium* refers to secrets or secrecy in terms of the 'supernatural', 'the religious or cultic' (Horn, 2011, p. 108) so that secrecy holds an aura of mystery that can 'elicit awe' (Luhmann, 1989, p. 138).

These dimensions of a mysterious separation of hidden information coalesce to give the central, generic defining characteristic of secrecy as '[being] the methods used to conceal ... and the practices of concealment' (Bok, 1989, p. 6). For Bok, for concealment to denote secrecy it needs to be intentional, as people must be aware of the ways they differentiate between those with whom they share or from whom they conceal information. Thus, forgetting to mention something would not be secrecy, nor would be the omission of all kinds of irrelevant information in a particular interaction. Moreover 'thoughts or feelings ... that people are incapable of communicating to others are not secrets' (Tefft, 1980, p. 14). It is important to stress that the term 'intentional' does not mean that secrecy necessarily results from some kind of consciously crafted plan (although, of course, on many occasions that may be so). To take an example from Argyris (1986), employees in a meeting may keep their opinion towards the manager's decisions secret, but not because they have planned together to do so before the meeting for a specific reason. Such secrecy may happen for a variety of unplanned reasons: one participant may fear to disagree with the manager, while another may not want to embarrass the manager by pointing out his or her mistakes in front of others. Here there is intentionality but no 'conspiracy'. Similarly, informal secrecy might be an unintended by-product of organizational attempts to decrease formal secrecy. Still, for it to be secrecy as opposed to simply accidental omission, those involved must know what they are doing.

While secrecy and secrets have the same etymological root they are not, of course identical. Secrecy refers to the *process* of keeping secrets, while secret refers to the *content*, the actual 'things' – more precisely, the information about 'things' – that are being intentionally concealed. In this paper we focus on secrecy as an ongoing social process of intentional concealment, that is '*how* [in this case, secrets] are constituted, maintained, and change over time' (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p. 19), as our interest lies in theorizing its conditions and consequences among the organizational actors involved in secrecy. As secrecy is therefore not a one-off event, the keeping of a secret requires continuing concealment or, alternatively, the breaking of the secret through revelation. This means that for secrets to exist actors need to constantly engage in practices of concealment, such as silence, disguising or fabricating information, in front of outsiders: 'it is not possible to conceal and to fence off without sensing the corresponding possibility of revelation' (Bok, 1989, p. 37). This possibility is assessed by actors taking into account the sanctions facing revelation: 'the keeping of the secret is something ... unstable [and] the temptations to betrayal are ... manifold' (Simmel, 1950, p. 473). The means through which secrecy as intentional concealment is achieved and enforced are quite varied, but, as developed in detail later on, a key distinction to be drawn is between formal mechanisms of law or regulation and informal mechanisms such as trust or social norms.

While the intentional concealment of information is central to secrecy, it is inadequate to approach secrecy simply in informational terms (i.e. focusing on the information being concealed). As our focus on secrecy as a social process highlights, intentional concealment is a *social phenomenon* in that it is carried out by social actors in concert and is likely to involve a rich array of symbolic and ritualistic practices whereby, for example, the signing of a confidentiality agreement or the giving of a promise (e.g. formally, on oath or, informally, 'on my life') are potent markers of the boundary between being or not being 'in the know'. Indeed, secrecy has potential *social consequences* (upon those social actors and others) above and beyond the concealment of information, one example being the possible awe and mystery that surrounds them (*mysterium*) but others include, potentially, shame or guilt or other effects on identity, as will be discussed later. Thus, secrecy needs to be understood as a *social process*: it not only 'involves at least two people' (Keane, 2008, p. 171) but also 'structures social ... relations' (Horn, 2011, p. 109).

Drawing together these various considerations, we can now see what underpins our definition of organizational secrecy as *the ongoing formal and informal social processes of intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organizations*.

## Approaching Organizational Secrecy

Liebeskind (1997, p. 625) stated that ‘an extensive literature search revealed that there is very little in the current business, organizational theory or institutional economics literature on the issue of organizational secrecy’. Ten years later, introducing a short special section on the topic, Jones (2008, p. 95) noted that ‘secrets are rarely studied by organizational scholars’, and one of the contributions points out that ‘secrets in organizations are pervasive [but] have not been studied in any systematic way’ (Anand & Rosen, 2008, p. 97).<sup>2</sup> Where it does exist, the approach of much of the extant literature is what we call *informational* in character. Such an informational approach assumes that ‘the foundation of all secrets, whether related to government or business, is to protect an *informational* asset perceived to be of high value – whether tactical or strategic’ (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008, p. 103; emphasis added).

These informational discussions of secrecy can be found scattered across a range of different literatures. Important examples include the economic and legal theory of intellectual property ownership (e.g. Anton & Yao, 2004; Cheung, 1982; Epstein, 2004; Maurer & Zugelder, 2000; Scheppele, 1988; Stead & Cross, 2009; Swedberg, 2003); and, relatedly, the organizational dilemmas of protecting innovations (Delerue & Lejeune, 2011; Dougherty, 2001; Hannah, 2007; Katila et al., 2008; Knott & Posen, 2009; Teece, 1986). These literatures are mostly concerned with what Goffman calls ‘strategic secrecy’ (1959, p. 141), namely, the protection of valuable organizational assets through concealment.

A different stream of work has been concerned with ‘dark secrecy’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 141) – the keeping or breaking of shameful or ‘dirty’ secrets (e.g. Anand & Rosen, 2008; Keane, 2008; Miceli & Near, 1992; White & Hanson, 2002). In a related vein are studies of transparency, corruption and accountability in organizations, which in various ways point towards forms of concealment, lying and deception (e.g. Arellano-Gault & Lepore, 2011; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, & Trevino, 2008; Dubbink, Graafland, & van Liedekerke, 2008; Flyverbom, Thøger Christensen, & Krause Hanson, 2011; Gray, 1992; Grover, 1993; Halter, Continho de Arudda, & Halter, 2009; Hebb, 2006; Madsen, 2010; Neyland, 2007). Such research has looked at the ways in which transparency is treated as the antonym of secrecy, how organizations and/or external stakeholders seek to control secrecy through mechanisms of accountability, and the kinds of regimes of control, controversies and debates this gives rise to, particular in the context of public organizations (e.g. Birchall, 2011a; Garsten & Lindh de Montaya, 2008; Hood & Heald, 2006; Levay & Waks, 2009; Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). The important point to note for present purposes is that this stream of literature also conceptualizes secrecy in terms of the concealment of a valuable informational asset – valuable because its disclosure would lead to reputational or legal damage, for example. We now turn to studies which are more concerned with the social processes of secrecy. Specifically, classic organization studies texts have hinted at these. However, their insights have found their way neither into existing treatments of organizational secrecy (with the partial exception of Feldman, 1988) nor into organization studies more generally – perhaps reflecting the ‘disconnect’ with classical studies in our field (Hinings & Greenwood, 2002).

### *Social approaches to organizational secrecy*

The importance of secrecy in organizations was already recognized by Max Weber (1978) in his account of bureaucracy: ‘the concept of the “official secret” is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and few things it defends so fanatically as this attitude which ... *cannot be justified with purely functional arguments*’ (Weber, 1978, p. 992, emphasis added). This insight is of central importance because it immediately opens up a new terrain of investigation: it is this terrain which

we are denoting as the social aspect of secrecy. For if secrecy is not just a matter of ‘pure functionality’ (for example, and in particular, to protect valuable informational assets) then what else might be at stake?

**Secrecy and identity.** In his foundational work on *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Schein (1985/2010) provides one kind of answer in linking secrecy to group identity. While for Schein it is, indeed, group identity that is central, we, as discussed in greater detail below, follow a processual, social constructivist approach to identity (e.g. Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), stressing the interrelations between individual and group identity constructions. Being ‘entrusted with group secrets’ constitutes a fundamental way in which groups are defined, as it marks ‘who is in the new group and who is not in’ (2010, p. 97). This key insight, which of course reprises Simmel’s sociological theorization of secrecy and Goffman’s delineation of ‘inside secrecy’ as erecting a boundary between in- and out-groups (discussed in more detail shortly), can also be found in Melville Dalton’s (1959) *Men Who Manage*. Dalton observes how informal groups, particularly ‘cliques’, are intimately bound up with secrecy: ‘cliques and secrets [are] inseparable and essential for group life’ (1959, p. 52); cliques build ‘closer ties to conceal departmental actions and alternatives from outsiders ... keep ... secrets from ... marginal members [and foster] obedience ...’ (1959, p. 56). These cliques formed around secrecy structure organizational relations and, instead of official rules and structures, govern organizational life. Secrecy is therefore fundamental to organizations to the extent that ‘one may well ask, what organization is without secrets held by some members’ (1959, p. 53; for a critical discussion, see Feldman, 1996, 2004).

In both Schein’s and Dalton’s discussions secrecy does not refer to a discrete ‘thing’ – some specific piece of information being protected – but something woven into the fabric of organizational life. In a similar way, Jackall (1988) regards ‘secrecy [as] a pervasive corporate phenomenon’ (1988, p. 122), something which, in a more critical tone than Dalton, he links to managerial misconduct. Jackall underlines secrecy’s role in group formation processes, as managers ‘experience the peculiar bonds with one’s fellow produced by shared secrecy’ (1988, p. 203). Sharing secrets can greatly affect managers’ identities, in terms of their enactment of self:

Secrecy [is] at the core of managerial circles not as a suppression of dissent but an integral component of a compartmentalized world where one establishes faith with others precisely by proving that one can tolerate the ambiguities that expedient action and stone-faced silence impose. (Jackall, 1988, p. 133)

Secrecy can also shape the relation between managers and employees. Argyris (1957) describes how, ‘reinforced by pseudo-human relations and communication programs’ that emphasize harmony and loyalty, there is a ‘tendency for secrecy’ among subordinates who ‘in the presence of leaders ... are careful to communicate only that which they know is approved by the leader’ (1957, pp. 158–9). Such a ‘barrier of secrecy serves an important function for the employees because it prevents their informal behavior from being discovered, and decreases the possible embarrassment and conflict with management’ (1957, p. 163).

**Secrecy and control.** Both Jackall and Argyris can be read as confirming the social nature of organizational secrecy but their work also points towards the idea that it is in various ways linked to control<sup>3</sup> (e.g. in terms of controlling behaviour of and between managers and employees). In *The Conduct of the Corporation*, Moore (1962) makes this link explicit: ‘if knowledge is power, then differential knowledge is likely to enhance the position of its possessors’ (1962, p. 69). There is therefore a ‘temptation to maintain power by restricting knowledge, that is to keep potentially common knowledge uncommon’ (1962, p. 70). Distinguishing between secrecy where knowledge

is inaccessible except to experts (i.e. professionals) and that where ‘readily understandable information ... is kept from common currency by deliberate blocks to communicate’ (1962, p. 70), Moore notes: ‘The second kind of secrecy may be used to fake the first [as] the aura of mystery ... may give occult power to those whose privileged position could not withstand full disclosure’ (p. 70). This connects to the definitional point about mystery and secrecy (*mysterium*) made earlier, namely, what is kept secret may not be valuable as such but acquires ‘symbolic value’ through the process of secrecy:

Access to secrets may come to have symbolic value, both because it indicates that one can be trusted and practically no one is immune to the heady sense of importance in being able to say, or preferably to think and not to say, ‘I know something you don’t know’. (Moore, 1962, p. 74)

From this reading of some classic works we can begin to see glimpses, at least, of a more sustained theorization of the social aspects of secrecy, those aspects which are largely neglected within an informational approach.

### *Connecting informational and social approaches*

One important reason to ‘problematize the assumption’ (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) that the sole function of secrecy is to serve the protection of valuable information is that secrets may be kept for their own sake – for their ‘symbolic value’, as Moore (1962) put it – rather than for their intrinsic value. This is consistent with Feldman and March’s (1981) insight that the significance of information may lie more in its symbolic dimension rather than its actual informational value.

However, it is important to stress that the implication of this should not be taken to be that there are two separate domains of secrecy – the informational and the social – it is rather that these are two aspects of secrecy which are *always intertwined together*. They are conceptually distinct, in the sense that one refers to the thing being kept secret and the other to the social process of keeping the thing secret. But empirically they are always linked: it is impossible to envisage a situation in which something was kept secret and yet no one engaged in keeping it secret; equally, it is impossible to envisage a situation in which people were engaged in the practice of secrecy and yet were not keeping anything secret. Thus Weber’s insight that organizational secrecy does not exist for ‘purely functional’ reasons does not mean that functional reasons for secrecy do not exist, but that they exist alongside and are inseparable from social and symbolic value. The interweaving of the informational and social aspects of secrecy is captured in Goffman’s (1959, pp. 141–2) foundational work in social psychology which proposes the aforementioned three meanings of secrecy (in the context of teams) as strategic, dark and inside secrets (the latter refer to secrets making insiders feel distinct and special). These meanings are not, for Goffman, incompatible or discrete in practice – indeed, strategic and dark secrets can function as inside secrets – but they underline how secrecy is a social process with a variety of motivations.

This is also well-illustrated by the case of government intelligence services – arguably, one of the strongest exemplars of functionally mandated informational secrecy. Michael Herman occupies an unusual position in having been a senior practitioner in the UK’s intelligence community who subsequently became a leading scholar in the intelligence studies field. He points out that the very existence of strict secrecy bestows upon intelligence practitioners a feeling of ‘specialness’ into which newcomers are inducted through special rituals, secret language and elaborate precautions (reflecting the point we made earlier that the social process of secrecy is replete with such ritualism). In this way, he suggests that a deeply ingrained and lifelong sense of being a member of a privileged inner circle develops (Herman, 1996, p. 328–30). The consequence of such a culture



can be to make secrecy the default position so that 'secrecy is often overdone; special code words and limited distributions become departments' badges and means of protecting and extending their territory' (Herman, 1996, p. 93). This 'insider' account is consistent with Simmel's foundational theorization of secrecy: 'not quite so evident are the attractions and values of the secret beyond its significance as a mere means – the peculiar attraction of formally secretive behaviour irrespective of its momentary content' (Simmel, 1950, p. 332).

There is therefore a need to move beyond the predominant informational understanding of secrecy towards a social one; secrecy is not just about the legitimate or illegitimate concealment of valuable information, but is also about social aspects of organizational life, such as the cementing of group identity. The boundary between the informational and social aspects is shifting, complex and context-specific. For example, secrecy, such as military or commercial secrecy, may take place for clear reasons of functional value, namely to protect valuable information, and simultaneously or only incidentally cement group identity (e.g. Keane, 2008). Thus, the informational side is likely to be particularly central in organizations whose existence and functioning is based on specialist knowledge, e.g. biotech companies; or where client confidentiality is central, e.g. healthcare; or where strategic or politically significant knowledge is at stake, e.g. intelligence services. The informational side of secrecy is clearly also particularly central and, indeed, fiercely debated in organizations, such as public bodies, facing strong pressures for transparency. Yet it may be – as Schein in particular implies – that the social aspects of secrecy, such as the creation of group identity, are primary and the informational ones secondary. As argued in greater detail below, for instance, in complex, politicized and conflictual organizational environments the social aspects of secrecy are likely to be especially important.

Equally, informational and social aspects may coalesce in different ways. For example, as Herman (1996) suggested in the case of intelligence services, organizations which habitually keep secrets for obvious functional reasons may, precisely because secrecy becomes socially habituated, keep information secret even when it has no real value. Here, the social and informational aspects are divergent. But, to take the obverse case, the group identity consequences of secrecy may be read as playing a role in the functional protection of information by making group members less likely to reveal secrets, so the social and informational aspects are complementary. Thus, although existing literature seems to fall broadly into either an informational or a social approach (with the principal exception of Feldman, 1988), it is better to understand secrecy as both/and, with the two coexisting in a variety of ways.

It is important to clarify that we are using the term 'social' in a very precise sense here, to mean the causes and consequences of the social act of keeping information secret for the actors involved in organizations. This does not mean that there are not all sorts of other social and societal dimensions to information. In particular, there are hot contested political issues around the disclosure or non-disclosure of information by public bodies, as, for instance, the literature on transparency has pointed out (e.g. Hood & Heald, 2006; Garsten & Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Roberts, 2006). The way that government agencies and public services account for their actions and finances is frequently a matter of intense debate, recent examples in the UK being the mortality rates in certain public hospitals, or the failures of child protection agencies. Equally, the ways that corporations and governments access the secrets of individuals and of other corporations and governments are also the subject of political and moral controversy (e.g. Horn, 2011), the recent case of allegations about the extent of the US National Security Agency in harvesting data on public internet use, and the involvement of internet companies in this, being one high-profile example.

Clearly such issues, debates and controversies are themselves social in nature, and equally clearly they relate to secrecy or the violation of secrecy. Yet in our terms they remain *informational* in character because they are predominantly concerned, precisely, with the disclosure or protection

of information: was such-and-such a piece of information wrongly concealed or wrongly disclosed, and with what consequences? These are indeed social questions but they are not about the social process in the precise meaning that we are concerned with here because they are not about the actual acts of secret-keeping, for example, the ways that this may have an impact on the identities of those engaged in secret-keeping. Where these *generic* meanings of ‘social’ and our *particular* focus on social process may intersect, however, is that, for example, the identity effects of secret-keeping may help to explain why actors in public organizations behave in secretive ways that may be deemed socially unacceptable. Thus, precisely, a consideration of social process moves us beyond an informational understanding of secrecy: rather than focus on the information that has been concealed or accessed, or the generic social significance of this, we can focus on the specific social process among those concealing or accessing information. It is this process with which the remainder of this paper will be concerned.

## **Towards a Framework of Formal and Informal Secrecy**

In both its informational and social aspects, secrecy can be seen to operate in both formal and informal ways. The distinction between the formal and informal has, of course, been a longstanding and central analytical device in the study of organizations (e.g. Barnard, 1938; Crozier, 1964; Rothlesberger & Dickson, 1947; Roy, 1960) up to the present day (e.g. Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Gulati & Puranam, 2009; Soda & Zaheer, 2012; Vogel, 2012; Yu, 2012). Applied to a variety of organizational phenomena, such as structure, groups, networks, hierarchies and so forth, it captures how ‘in contrast to informal organizations ... formal organizations stress positions over persons and roles over personalities’ (Scott, 2008, p. 514). Thus, for example, in relation to hierarchy, Diefenbach and Sillince (2011, p. 1516) differentiate ‘between the official structures and rules allocating formal roles and positions at different levels and unofficial stratification among members of a social system because of conscious or unconscious social processes’. Most importantly for our purposes, the distinction between the formal (the rationalized, official, recorded and impersonal) and the informal (the unofficial, unrecorded and inter-personal) has been especially applied to understand the social organization, and identity and control in particular (Kanter, 1977; Kunda, 1992; Parker, 2000; Roy, 1960; Schein, 2010). It is thus not surprising that this distinction surfaces in the treatments of organizational secrecy in classic studies (e.g. Argyris, 1957; Dalton, 1959; Schein, 2010; Weber, 1978) and its importance for studying secrecy is explicitly identified by Feldman (1988).

### **Formal secrecy**

Formal secrecy can be defined as the intentional concealment of information by actors in officially defined, established and recorded ways. It involves laws, rules, regulations and constitutions that govern what is to be kept secret and how, who can be entrusted with secrets and what sanctions apply to secrecy breach. Organizational members become insiders in a formal manner, e.g. by signing a confidentiality agreement. The insider–outsider boundary is marked by an explicit enrolment, that is, through formal socialization. The practices of concealment, such as the requirement of silence, can be officially defined, e.g. through non-disclosure agreements. Formal secrecy features centrally in the existing economic-legal literature mentioned above. Besides product knowledge, strategic plans and pay secrecy, it may take the form of client confidentiality in the professions or data protection protocols, often as a result of legal or regulatory requirements (Milberg, Smith, & Burke, 2000). At the level of state bureaucracy it may take the form of military and other security-related secrecy (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008).

One central feature is the property-like character of the information being kept secret – it is owned by those ‘privy’ to it. This is very clear in relation to the legal aspects of Teece’s (1986) ‘regimes of appropriability’ where the aim (whether or not realized) is to render a secret into a form of owned property, over which the owner has legal rights. Other ways in which concealment might be enforced include formal organizational rules. Liebeskind (1997) shows how some organizations use rules to, for example, restrict the contact that employees can have with those of other organizational units and may also physically segment an organization by restricting access to particular parts of the premises (e.g. a laboratory). Both of these practices have been repeatedly observed in ‘skunkworks’ (i.e. secret development projects) at high-tech companies such as Intel (Burgelman, 1994) and at Lockheed (Rich & Janos, 1994) where

Every piece of paper dealing with the [Stealth Fighter] project had to be stamped top secret, indexed in a special security filing system, and locked away ... They imposed a strictly enforced two-man rule: no engineer or shop worker could be left alone in a room with a blueprint. If one machinist had to go to the toilet, the co-worker had to lock up the blueprint until his colleague returned. (Rich & Janos, 1994, p. 23)

The revelation of formal secrets consists of deliberate or accidental breaching of laws or organizational rules so that outsiders become aware of information which is not properly theirs. It might result from deliberate espionage or whistle-blowing, or inadvertently, for example from accidental data loss. If detected, such revelations may well result in organizational sanctions such as disciplinary procedures, including dismissal, or legal penalties, such as prosecution.

### *Informal secrecy*

In informal secrecy the intentional concealment of information by organizational actors takes place in unofficial and unwritten ways, and is not subject to formal rules and laws. Such secrets cannot be subject to ‘appropriation’ in the form of legal property rights. Instead, socially negotiated norms, beliefs, morals or conventions regulate what is to be kept secret and how, who is to be entrusted with the secret and what the sanctions for secrecy breach are. Informal secrecy takes place within cliques, networks or in-groups between and within organizational units, which may be in line with or may cut across the formal organizational structure (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Feldman, 1988; Jackall, 1988; Schein, 2010). For instance, Parker (2000) describes how informal secrecy structures relations between organizational departments by ‘keep[ing] information from each other’ (2000, p. 137). Respondents in his study describe the finance department ‘as a powerful and secretive department’, where people ‘are keeping their area as an empire and they want to keep it as a secret’ (Parker, 2000, p. 137).

Informal secrecy can also take place vertically, between employees and managers (e.g. Argyris, 1957; Schein, 2010). For instance, the ‘hidden economy of the shopfloor’ (Collinson, 1992, p. 140), that is the appropriation of production, may be informally shared among workers and create a bonding in opposition to management. Managers may engage in informal secrecy over change management plans prior to their announcement to the organization at large (Steele, 1975, p. 105). Informal secrecy can also constitute a vehicle for coalition building (Pettigrew, 1973) or other forms of organizational politics, as is explicit in Feldman’s (1988) study of decision-making in a telecommunications firm and implicit in many accounts of such politics (e.g. Buchanan & Badham, 1999). Such ‘politicking’ is endemic within organizations (Mintzberg, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981) and informal secrecy will often be a part of it. A common example would be the way that the formal conduct of meetings can be preceded by confidential pre-meetings of certain actors to agree a common approach or agenda. Handy (1985, p. 243) identifies such tactics as one form of ‘information control’ common

within organizational politics, along with use of ‘the filters of “confidential” and “restricted”.’ This tactic is empirically illustrated by Pettigrew’s (1973) study of computer programmers where, in the absence of written records, programmers used their secret knowledge to advance their group interests, as a form of knowledge hiding (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). More elaborately, as Dalton’s (1959) work on managerial cliques illustrates, power blocs within organizations can form as semi-permanent unofficial coalitions, dependent upon informal secrecy to sustain themselves as groups. In line with our earlier point about intentionality, it may of course be the case that secrecy in these kinds of cases, while intentional on the part of those engaging in it, may well be an unintended by-product of, for example, highly politicized organizational contexts. That is to say, individuals finding themselves in such contexts may feel that they have little choice but to be wary of sharing information for fear that it will make them vulnerable.

Becoming part of a group sharing a secret takes places through informal socialization (Rodriguez & Ryave, 1992), ranging from simply being told to ‘keep this between us’ to engaging in some initiation ritual, such as participating in social or sporting events, to enter organizational in-groups. The required practices of concealment, their scope and nature, are not officially defined but negotiated and established through social interaction. While there may be sociologically systematic membership criteria for the in-group, e.g. belonging to a certain social class (Schein, 2010, p. 100), informal secrecy may be shared in less structured ways, whereby a certain level of trust and closeness is necessary (Feldman, 1988; see also Claire, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005) which may take time to develop (of which more below). Schein (2010) remarks:

What is at the heart of a culture will not be revealed in the rules of behavior taught to newcomers [i.e. the formal instructions]. It will only be revealed by members as they gain permanent status and are allowed into the inner circles of the group where group secrets then are shared. (2010, p. 19)

Informal secrecy can be associated with the widely explored phenomenon of networking and social capital in organizations (e.g. Brass, 1995; Stohl, 1995). Much of this entails the communication of information, e.g. of technical nature (e.g. Papa, 1990) or relating to career opportunities (e.g. Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). In turn, much of this communication is informal (Dirsmith & Covaleski, 1985) and it is reasonable to speculate that at least some of this is in the nature of informal secrecy. Yet informal secrecy is not identical with networking and social capital formation in that by no means all of the latter is secretive, while informal secrecy is not necessarily to do with networking and social capital formation.

Organizational taboos, defined as ‘a social prohibition against a particular act, object, word, or subject’ (Land, 2008, p. 1195), can overlap with informal secrecy; both phenomena entail informal forms of intentional concealment and the breaking of taboos can explain actors’ engagement in secrecy in the first place (e.g. Argyris, 1980; Buchanan, 2005; Hoon, 2012; Martin, 1990). But while taboos are concerned with sacred, forbidden and morally charged matters, this is not necessarily the case for informal secrecy. Moreover, taboos cannot themselves be secret since to operate as taboos they must be widely, perhaps universally, known. As a result they do not entail the same kind of identity effects, such as in-group creation, individuals’ sense of exclusivity, etc., that we are concerned with here; they are more to do with the maintenance of dominant norms and the definition of deviant conduct and identity.

There are also many routine encounters within organizational life which can be defined as informal secrecy, such as confidential gossip sharing (e.g. Dalton, 1959, p. 64). Organizational gossip has been the subject of a growing literature (e.g. Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Van Iterson & Clegg, 2008; Waddington, 2012) but it is again important to see that informal secrecy both overlaps with and yet is distinct

from gossip. It overlaps to the extent that individuals engaging in gossip can seek to keep this secretive and that gossip sharing involves boundary creation – of the ‘in’ and ‘out’ crowds – and therefore ‘plays a vital role in group formation, regulation and perpetuation’ (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 32). However, informal secrecy differs from gossip, as what defines much gossip is informal *communication* rather than concealment (see Bok, 1989, p. 91; Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 25). Gossip does not need to entail secrecy and indeed is sometimes associated with its breach: ‘Secrecy sets barriers between men [sic], but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip’ (Simmel, 1950, p. 466; see also Bok, 1989, p. 91). In short, some but not all organizational gossip may be a form of informal secrecy and some organizational gossip may involve breaches of secrecy.

The revelation of informally held secrets can vary considerably depending on how extended or restricted they are, and this has very much to do with context and the nature of relations. For example, when gossip is passed on in confidence, the expectation is not necessarily that it will not be passed on at all, but that it will not be passed to ‘inappropriate’ people. The revelation of informal secrecy may not really be a matter of telling outsiders, as is the case with formal secrecy, but telling the ‘wrong sort’ of insiders. In other cases, informal secrecy may indeed entail the intention to not be passed on at all, and this is likely to be signalled when the secret is told, and understood within the context of a particular relationship. There is a considerable fluidity and indeterminacy in play here, and it can be predicted that accidental revelations are quite likely as a result, since it would be easy for an informal secret to ‘slip out’ by mentioning it to the ‘wrong’ person. The way in which this type of secrecy is enforced is necessarily informal and rests upon trust. Violations of that trust are likely to be met with social sanctions, such as group exclusion and discrimination in form of ridicule, criticism or the inducement of shame.

### *Secrecy in context: the dynamic relation of formal and informal secrecy*

Informal and formal secrecy are not to be understood in static ways; not only is secrecy, as we defined it earlier, an ongoing process, but also there can be a dynamic interplay between formal and informal secrecy (as between formal and informal organization more generally). To understand this dynamic interplay, secrecy needs to be understood as embedded in specific organizational contexts.

For instance, it is easy to envisage that some organizations have secrecy as their primary, defining characteristic – obvious cases being state intelligence agencies and diplomatic organizations. In such cases, ‘a strong code of secrecy’ marks ‘long-established norms’ and relations (Roberts, 2004, p. 411) so that secrecy – both formal and informal – is heavily culturally supported and, as noted earlier, may become the default way of operating so that even information with little real value is treated as secret. By contrast, some organizations may exhibit cultures of transparency – perhaps most obviously, creative organizations with flat hierarchies which put a premium on internal knowledge-sharing – and here secrecy is likely to be regarded as anomalous and even illegitimate. It seems likely that most organizations fall between these extremes, with some elements of secrecy being present and legitimate – say, the protection of new product plans – without there being an overall culture of secrecy. Moreover, a ‘great deal of corporate secrecy is maintained not by conscious design but by the mere fact that the corporation is so complex’ (Tefft, 1980, p. 2), an example of what we refer to elsewhere as informal secrecy sometimes being a by-product of routine organizational relations. This is underlined by the observations of organizational secrecy in the context of high levels of organizational role segmentation and compartmentalization found in complex organizations (Jackall, 1988, p. 133), inter-departmental conflicts (Parker, 2000), ‘battles between staff and line groups’ (Feldman, 1988), ‘power struggles in the line’ (Dalton, 1959) and

conflictual employee–management relations (Collinson, 1992) – as highlighted below, the reported prevalence of formal and informal secrecy in complex, politicized and conflictual organizational settings can be understood through secrecy’s interaction with identity and control.

Moreover, the likelihood of secrecy interacts with the presence or absence of trust in an organization. At the most generic level, trust entails having the confidence to confide in another (Lewicki, McAllistair, & Bies, 1998; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In the context of secrecy the terms ‘confidence’ and ‘confide’ take on a literal meaning since secrecy is concerned with the ‘confidential’ holding of information. Formal secrecy seeks to proceduralize confidence through rules, but nevertheless requires some degree of trust in that, despite rules, people can and do reveal formal secrets (Hannah, 2005, 2007). Informal secrecy is much more heavily dependent upon trust as its primary regulatory mechanism, in the same way that trust is more generally central to control in informal contexts (Grey & Garsten, 2001). For trust to emerge between organizational members, familiarity and closeness, established through repeated and direct interactions, are crucial (Adler, 2001; Bigley & Pearce, 1998). This is more likely to be found in organizations that have been around for a longer time and where organizational membership is not highly volatile. Schein (2010) underlines this when linking informal secrecy to longstanding and established groups of actors that share ‘historical accounts’ (2010, p. 99) of the organization and which newcomers can only join after having been around for a period of time. For instance, this is likely to apply to the case of confidential organizational gossip.

Importantly, in relating secrecy to certain organizational contexts, such as cultures of secrecy and trust, we do not propose there to be a linear and determined relation but rather a dynamic and indeterminate one: for instance, while trust may foster secrecy, secrecy can also reinforce trust, given the ways in which insiders rely on each other in form of keeping up a continuous concealment (Luhmann, 1989; Simmel, 1950); moreover, actors are more likely to engage in specific acts of secrecy within a general culture of secrecy and in this way in fact (re)produce such a culture.

Such a dynamic relation also marks formal and informal secrecy. Formal secrecy, such as pay secrecy enforced through formal organizational rules (Colella, Paetzold, Zardkoohi, & Wesson, 2007; Schuster & Colletti, 1973), can turn into informal secrecy where organizational members confidentially share their pay levels (Dalton, 1959, p. 64; Kanter, 77, p. 60). For formal secrecy to turn into informal secrecy, insiders need to discuss and share the secret with organizational members who are supposed to be outsiders. This move from formal to informal secrecy can involve semi-revelation; the restrictions posed by formal secrecy, concerning membership and concealment, are breached, yet the secret still remains hidden from wider public view (that is, it is still a secret albeit of a different sort). Such semi-revelation may also result from accidental revelation by the insider towards outsiders that the insider seeks to ‘correct’ through altering the revelation into informal secrecy (e.g. ‘I shouldn’t really have told you that, please treat it as confidential ...’).

Informal secrecy can turn into formal organizational secrecy. For example, in a small organization actors may keep valuable information informally secret, but as the organization and hence also the scale of secrecy (i.e. the number of insiders) grows the members may seek to officially record and regulate secrecy. This transformation may relate to the need for enforced restriction and coordination provided by official laws and rules as there might be too little trust between organizational members, e.g. given membership size and staff turnover. Insiders may also feel the need to legitimize the engagement in secrecy (e.g. to newcomers) – something that formal secrecy is more likely to offer, as informal secrecy is often associated with ethical wrong-doing (Beamish, 2000; De Maria, 2006).

The interaction between formal and informal secrecy is therefore complex and highly context-dependent. The boundaries may be quite easily breached as a result. For example, confidential organizational gossip passed by word of mouth can be regarded as informal secrecy; but the same

information passed using the organization's email system might have quite a different character and in some circumstances be regarded as a breach of organizational rules or even of law. On the other hand, it may be informally quite permissible for some kinds of formal secret, for example, new product plans, to be disclosed to some organizational actors who are not properly supposed to be party to it.

## Social Processes of Organizational Secrecy: Identity and Control

Following the theorizations of secrecy in the social science literature (e.g. Bok, 1989; Goffman, 1990; Simmel, 1950; Taussig, 1999; Zerubavel, 2006), its social processes can be primarily understood in terms of the broad categories of identity and control, albeit that these are highly interrelated (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). The relation between organizational secrecy, identity and control is dynamic: secrecy is intertwined with control both as a medium and source of control; while secrecy leads to differentiation between actors – the insiders and outsiders of secrecy – and thus the formation of the identity of groups and their members, differentiation itself also spurs actors' engagement in secrecy in the first place.

### *Identity processes*

At the heart of the social process of organizational secrecy are the complex ways in which it may affect identity, defined here as the social process through which actors construct themselves, their group or organization. In line with a growing body of identity research (e.g. Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas & Fleming, 2009; Kenny et al., 2011), we regard identity not as a fixed entity but as a social, contingent, discursive and dynamic phenomenon. The significance of secrecy for identity formation through differentiation between oneself and others was already central in Simmel's (1950) analysis. For the construction of identity, such differentiation is necessary (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz 2002) because all meaningful identities are predicated upon the construction of both an 'us' or a 'me' and a 'them'. Specifically, secrecy is pertinent to the construction of group identity (Behr, 2006), as it reinforces and leads to differentiation through the construction of clear social and cognitive boundaries between insiders (those in the know) versus outsiders (those who do not know). Although secrecy is obviously by no means the only source of identity it is a potentially significant one. While we might relate secrecy particularly to group identity, this does not imply it is not equally important for individuals' identities. On the contrary, given our approach emphasizing that identities are formed, negotiated and enacted in social interactions, individuals' identity constructions are highly interrelated with the groups they do or do not belong to. Following this, the social processes of secrecy in groups also affects the individual group members' identities.<sup>4</sup>

One way in which secrecy and identity inter-relate concerns the ways in which secrecy requires and fosters awareness of the group and its members, because concealment practices and the accompanying boundary creation are intentional. Such awareness is in turn crucial for identity formation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ybema, Keeony, Oswick, & Beverungen, 2009). Simmel identified this in noting the '*consciousness of being a [secret] society – a consciousness which is constantly emphasized during its formative period and throughout its lifetime*' (Simmel, 1950, p. 362). The significance of secrecy is made manifest in the rituals around it (Simmel 1950, p. 358); ritualism can '*dominate the group and the group's awareness of itself*' (Luhmann, 1989, p. 158), manifesting and fortifying its differentiation from others (Little, 1949).

Secrecy can fortify social bonding among those in the know, in terms of emotional closeness, strength of ties and coalition-making (Rodriguez & Ryave, 1992). This social bonding is shaped by the strength of the 'promises of secrecy' embedded in the reciprocal confidence and trust of keeping a secret (Bok, 1989, p. 121), regularly (re)confirmed through continuing ritualistic proofs, and underscored by 'the cost of betrayal' (Luhmann, 1989, p. 160). It is this ongoing process of secrecy which allows for the maintenance and reproduction of a group and thus its members' identity over time; hence the importance, identified earlier, of not regarding secrecy as an event. Moreover, as members of the group sharing secrecy have a common point of identification and thus of differentiation from others, secrecy can also enhance social cohesion (Simmel, 1950, p. 369).

Alongside the sense of being part of a group in possession of secrets inevitably runs the sense of exclusivity (Simmel, 1950, p. 487), of knowing something that others do *not* know. This can provide individuals with feelings of distinctiveness, which in turn positively affect members' identification with the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Again, it is important to note that this can happen irrespective of the actual informational value of the secret in the first place, as Moore (1962) also indicates. Indeed it may even be that what is kept secret only acquires its value by virtue of *being* kept secret. To take an extreme example, it is commonplace for children to form 'secret societies' which conceal information of no real value at all and yet belonging, for their members, has huge significance.

The sense of exclusivity may depend on how others (are assumed to) perceive those holding the secret. For this to be positive in the form of being coupled with prestige, those holding the secret cannot be negatively perceived by others. If individuals keep information secret which, if revealed, would place them in negative light, the sense of exclusivity will be absent (see Goffman, 1959). Thus, exclusivity with its accompanying sense of self-enhancement can only occur if insiders expect outsiders to perceive them as distinct in a positive sense (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Following this, to be perceived as distinct, individuals holding a secret can be prone to hint at its existence to outsiders: 'there is desire to signalize [sic] one's own superiority as compared with ... others' (Simmel, 1950, p. 486). This hinting of superiority based on being in the know is important in relation to one of foundational logics of secrecy (*mysterium*) because a secret that was completely locked away (*arcanum*) would not provoke awe since outsiders would, simply, be completely unaware of it. This issue points to the indeterminacy of how informational and social aspects of secrecy interact. We suggested earlier that in some cases the group identity fostered by possession of a secret might work to reinforce the effective keeping of secrets. But, equally, the way that identification with the secret-holding group entails a sense of exclusivity may lead group members to 'boost' their identities by hinting at, or even revealing, secrets.

The identity consequences of formal and informal secrecy are likely to operate in differently inflected ways. In formal secrecy, the boundary between insiders and outsiders may be more rigid than in informal secrecy where this is potentially more fluid. This is precisely because in the former case the boundary is defined by a set of official rules, such as access to secrets being granted to those occupying a particular hierarchical or professional role, or even in receipt of a particular level of security clearance. There is also more capacity for overt rituals to attend enrolment into a formal secret, such as signing an explicit confidentiality agreement. For instance, a group of military or intelligence personnel with access to 'ultra secret material' and subject to strictly prescribed rules of how to engage in secrecy may exhibit greater social cohesion than, for instance, two employees exchanging confidential gossip about the boss in a casual manner because the latter case has little in the way of ritualistic markers. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that the cohesiveness of group identities based on informal secrecy is necessarily weaker than when it is founded on formal secrecy. Collinson's (1992) observation of secrecy among factory workers exemplifies this, as here



secrecy is bound with the construction of a highly emotionally invested anti-management counter-identity. Social cohesion may also be strong in the case of informal secrecy when the informal group engages in a high level of ritualism as a form of cultural control – discussed more below.

Informal secrecy can have a particular potency for actors' identity because membership of the in-group involves being chosen by others and requires a greater degree of reciprocal trust than the more bureaucratically orchestrated procedures associated with formal secrecy. While formal secrecy might even signal to individuals that they are not sufficiently trustworthy to protect secrets and need to be subject to official rules, the informal sharing of secrets signals to individuals that they are trusted to keep the secret. In informal secrecy, being part of those engaging in secrecy is therefore bound up with the individual person rather than the rational-legal position of that person, so that identification with, and hence emotional investment in, the group and the secrecy may be greater. Here social bonding is likely to counteract more strongly the sense of separation from outsiders. By contrast, in formal secrecy, although such separation between insiders and outsiders is more clearly defined, actors' identification with those in the in-group may be lower (as the relations are formally defined rather than informally negotiated and established).

However, compared to formal secrecy, informal secrecy, especially that of a rather casual kind, such as confidential gossiping, is particularly vulnerable to revelation as what it means to breach it may be rather indeterminate and sanctions for breach may be fairly weak. Hence, while in informal secrecy social bonding may be especially prevalent, there can also be a great risk of secrecy breach. For similar reasons – that is to say, the relatively weaker sanctions – the likelihood of insiders hinting to outsiders that they are in possession of secrets is likely to be more prevalent in informal secrecy.

### *Control processes*

The second main theme found within the sociological literature on secrecy is control, which in an organizational context may be defined generically in terms of the capacity to influence the behaviours and beliefs of organizational actors (see Sewell, 2008) and this entails directive, evaluative and disciplinary mechanisms (Reed, 1992, p. 158). More specifically, we understand organizational control to encompass, at least, the two now classic senses of bureaucratic and normative control (Etzioni, 1961; Kunda, 1992). The literature uses a range of terminologies for these so that bureaucratic control is also referred to as coercive or technological while normative control is sometimes described as cultural, concertive or socio-ideological (e.g. Barker, 1993; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), but for simplicity, we will use the terms 'bureaucratic' and 'normative'. While the former form of control attempts to influence behaviour directly, the latter seeks to do so indirectly by shaping meaning, values, norms and beliefs in organizations. In linking organizational secrecy to control, this does not mean that secrecy is a fully controlled or controllable process – as already pointed out, it is inherently vulnerable to revelation (Bok, 1989; Simmel, 1950) – but rather that it offers the potential of certain sorts of control.

*Secrecy as bestowing control.* Organizational secrecy can provide individuals with control and, more precisely, the sense of being *in* control over the information held secret and over the process of concealment. For '[t]o have no capacity for secrecy is to be out of control' (Bok, 1989, p. 19). This means that engaging in secrecy places individuals in control: 'to hold a secret is to assert ... control' (Luhrmann, 1989, p. 161). This is very obvious in the economic-legal literature: actors keep information secret in order to control its availability to others; the more information insiders have, the more control they have, or hope to have, over a situation (e.g. Pettigrew, 1972). However, following Feldman (1988), such an understanding of informational control does not account for the

social construction of information as valuable and hence for its significance in politics, e.g. in decision-making processes in conflictual organizational cultures (see also Van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). In other words, it is not that information does (or does not) have a value in an objective sense, then to be controlled politically, but that the ascription of value to certain information is itself a political matter. From this perspective, the issue is how insiders, in concealing, manipulating or distorting information, attempt to shape how outsiders construct, perceive and enact organizational reality. The meanings and assumptions in organizations that form the basis for actors' ways of behaving are an outcome of what is being articulated and what is omitted or evaded. In other words, secrecy relates not just to concealing specific pieces of information but to 'controlling [the] scope of ... discourse' (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 15) in organizations. In this way, secrecy may be seen as having a role in the operation of Lukes's (1974) second and third 'dimensions of power', where non-decisional agenda control and the control of meaning – as against simply decisional power – are central.

In the case of formal secrecy, information takes on a property-like character owned by insiders and inaccessible to outsiders so that the enforcement of information control can be strong; there are official rules and laws that provide clear boundaries between what may and may not be spoken about when insiders interact with outsiders, thereby regulating the discursive regimes in organizations. Examples of this can be found in Liebeskind's (1997) discussion of how organizations may create 'Chinese walls' between different departments or work groups, controlling what may and may not be disclosed by organizational actors.

Informal secrecy provides greater scope for shaping organizational discourse through information distortion, manipulation and omission, as it is more adaptable and indeterminate, but at the same time can also produce greater ambiguity (e.g. insiders use different concealment practices when interacting with outsiders, leading to contradictory meanings). Parker (2000) describes 'the "fog" that a lack of real information brought' (2000, p. 110) given the secrecy surrounding particular organizational units, and how this can alter the organizational meaning systems. In line with the greater fluidity of informational control, insiders in informal secrecy may partially reveal or insinuate that which is held secret so as to create ambiguity among outsiders:

The content of secrets is alluded to through metaphor, through speech that only partially reveals their meaning ... it is precisely in the use of such metaphorical speech that ambiguity resides and that the meaning of hidden thoughts is subject to ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation. (Piot, 1993, p. 358; see also Bellmann, 1984)

**Secrecy as exerting control.** While secrecy may bestow control, conversely, it exerts control upon those engaging in it: 'promises of secrecy' may be 'exacted with the ... intent of burdening someone' (Bok, 1989, p. 95). This may be seen in organizational settings where managers entrust specific employees, for example trade union representatives, with secrets as a way of exerting control and binding them into key decisions. Secrecy places demands upon those involved, namely, to keep the secret from outsiders. This again highlights the crucial significance of approaching secrecy as both an informational and social phenomenon. The control of information by organizational actors always and necessarily requires that those actors are controlled in terms of who they disclose that information to. It requires of them appropriate forms of concealment and visits sanctions upon those who do not observe this concealment.

Compared with the identity aspects of secrecy, its control aspects are much more directly linked to whether that secrecy is formal or informal; after all, part of what defines formal and informal organization is a distinct mode of control (at its most generic, official rules and norms, respectively). Formal secrecy involves bureaucratic forms of control, which attempt to directly regulate

behaviour, either through formalization and standardization (e.g. organizational rules prescribing who may or may not have access to information) or indeed through legal enforcement. Informal secrecy works through normative forms of control, which indirectly attempt to shape individuals' behaviour through instilling certain norms, values and beliefs. Secrecy shapes how actors understand, experience and behave towards themselves and others, fostering 'self-discipline' among group members (Simmel, 1950, p. 475). Norm regulation goes hand in hand with social control in form of exclusion and inclusion mechanisms (Keane, 2008). The threat of exclusion serves the exercise of norm regulation, making individuals prone to adhere to the rules of secrecy, e.g. of maintaining 'stone-faced silence' in front of outsiders (Jackall, 1988, p. 133). In this sense, informal secrecy may be considered to be both a medium and outcome of normative control.

While in an ideal-typical way we can see that formal and informal secrecy are associated with different forms of control, this does not mean that in any given situation both will not be present. Indeed, in general, bureaucratic control entails a normative dimension (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004) and the same is true in the case of secrecy. The scope of bureaucratic control is by definition restricted because it is externally imposed (Bendix, 1956; Kunda, 1992). Normative control (as in the case of informal secrecy) is potentially more potent, as the norms governing the group are established, negotiated and enforced by the group members themselves (Barker, 1993; Kunda, 1992). At the same time, normative forms of control involved in informal secrecy allow for greater ambiguity and space for negotiation, for example, over exactly who is to be included within the circle of secret-holders.

## Concluding Discussion

Our core argument in this paper has been that secrecy is a rich and under-explored topic in organization studies. It is not adequate to regard secrecy simply in terms of the information it conceals. Instead and additionally, we must grasp the social conditions and consequences of secrecy. This matters because if secrets are present in organizational life, and if research aspires to give a realistic account of that life, then the social processes of secrecy need to be included within that account. This paper has provided a theorization of these by developing the concepts of informal and formal secrecy and discussing their interrelations with identity and control in organizational contexts.

This theorization provides insights into the complex ways in which secrecy shapes and is shaped by behaviour, interactions and relationships in organizations – something that, as the illustrations throughout the paper have shown, is directly relevant for the study of a broad array of important organizational phenomena, for example, those of change, communication, innovation, politics and leadership. For instance, in studies of change management the focus on secrecy can help to understand how decision-making may be shaped by actors' belonging to an exclusive network, formed around the sharing of informal secrets and involving strong forms of normative control. Similarly, studies of organizational politics can gain from including secrecy in their analysis to understand how, say, a department seeks to exert control over other departments through officially classifying information as secret – something that reinforces members' sense of belonging to that department, making them emotionally invested into keeping the secret in front of members of other departments. Our theorization can also add to studies of innovation, for instance by explaining why actors are particularly likely to conceal information about new or innovative products when there is a strong group identity, formed and maintained through normative control processes involving a rich array of ritualistic practices.

The implications of secrecy for identity in particular should suggest that secrecy has the potential to be very strongly embedded in organizations. Thus, supposing that organizations seek to be more, or fully, transparent in the way often urged on publicly accountable organizations in

particular (e.g. Birchall, 2011b; Roberts, 2004), then the powerful allure of secrets becomes highly relevant. Attempts at organizational transparency may be resisted (e.g. Arellano-Gault & Lepore, 2011; Roberts, 2004), precisely because secrecy has the possibility to bestow a strong sense of belonging and specialness. Our theorization is of great relevance in such contexts, given its distinction of formal and informal secrecy: the avowed policy of organizations may be one of transparency and thus the elimination of formal secrecy, while the informal practices remain secretive. Here actors may engage in informal secrecy for image creation by decoupling the information they provide to outsiders from their actions, and/or actively misinform outsiders (e.g. Brunsson, 1989; Levay & Waks, 2009; Power, 1997).

In drawing attention to why and how actors can be so strongly invested in the keeping of secrets, our study can explain why transparency measures may not only be difficult to enforce but also be based on an illusory understanding of organizational dynamics (Tsoukas, 1997) that can create dilemmas, especially in public organizations (e.g. Roberts, 2004), where transparency needs to be particularly strongly espoused in public, yet daily organizational life itself might be deeply bound up with secrecy (e.g.; Hood & Heald, 2006; Horn, 2011; Neyland, 2007; Strathern, 2000). This may occur precisely as actors seek to maintain a sense of being in control as opposed to being controlled through externally imposed transparency programmes.

Similarly, where organizations seek to promote not so much public transparency but internal knowledge-sharing, the attractions of secrecy may help to explain why organizational 'silos' remain stubbornly resistant to such endeavours. On the other hand, take the converse case, where it is deemed important for commercial or other reasons for an organization to guard secrets, whether internally or externally. Then, an understanding of the social processes of secrecy becomes important because, for example, it explains why people may gain a sense of importance by hinting at, and thus potentially compromising, their possession of secrets.

Empirical investigations of organizational secrecy are by definition difficult (Greve et al., 2010, p. 69). However, it may also be, as Keane (2008) suggests, that the very ubiquity of secrecy means that researchers do not even notice it. If so, the value of identifying the concept of organizational secrecy lies in sensitizing researchers to its possible existence. More concretely, historical methods or anonymized questionnaires may be useful and, for informal secrecy in particular, in-depth participant observation is necessary (see Schein, 2010, p. 100). Clearly the way in which concepts of secrecy are brought to bear will vary considerably according to the research context, and a sensitization to specific contexts is at the heart of what we have proposed in this paper. Secrecy will manifest itself in different ways within these different settings, which may not be immediately obvious. Indeed, our point has been that we need to notice secrecy in organizations and, when we notice it, recognize that potentially more is at stake than the simple concealment of information for functional reasons of organizational value. We have suggested that, so far, the social processes of organizational secrecy, while not absent in the existing literature, lurk marginally in the shadows of organization studies, almost as secrets in themselves. With this paper, we hope to have brought them into the light.

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## Notes

1. The various literatures relating to secrecy utilize the terms information and knowledge variously or indiscriminately, although their meaning, distinction and relationship is the subject of a debate (see e.g. Blackler, 1995; Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001) which is beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Thus, to take an admittedly limited but nonetheless revealing sample of the literature, within the entire history of five of the leading organizational theory journals – *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Science* and *Organization Studies* – only nine papers have the words ‘secret(s)’ or ‘secrecy’ in their title or abstract (this is based on an EBSCO search, conducted in September 2012, and only included the following articles: Coates & Pellegrin, 1957; Schuster & Colletti, 1973; Louis et al. 1989; Langlois, 2006; Colella et al., 2007; Lehman & Ramanujam, 2004; Stohl & Stohl, 2011; Hannah 2005; Katila et al., 2008. These studies either do not discuss secrecy in any depth or focus only on a particular kind of secret, e.g. trade secrets, from an informational approach.
3. Within the organization studies literature, the terms power and control are often used interchangeably and indeed there are many complex debates about both concepts and their interrelationship (see, e.g., Clegg, 1990; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006) which are beyond the scope of this paper. For present purposes, we use the term ‘control’ except when drawing upon authors who use the term ‘power’ to mean roughly what we mean by control. While there are various definitions of control, as discussed below, we use the term to refer to attempts to influence actors’ behaviours and minds in an organizational context.
4. The social identity theory literature has also drawn attention to how an individual’s and group’s or organization’s identity may overlap or not (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994), bringing about member identification, disidentification and so forth. While this stream of research is helpful in understanding group member dynamics, e.g. relating to distinctiveness (as cited below), we do not entirely follow this approach as it assumes ‘fairly stable views of the organization and the self’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164), whereas we see identity (at the level of the individual, group and organization) as processual, malleable and fluid. Moreover, as we regard identity as inherently social and therefore individual and group identity as highly interrelated and since we are, indeed, interested in the ways secrecy interacts both with individual and group identity, we use the general notion of identity unless particularly referring to its significance for a group or its individual members.

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