

THE PRESENCE OF FAMILY SECRECY IN CHILDHOOD

An investigation into the impact of family secrets in childhood on adult
children's lives and relationships



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Abstract

Existing literature has extensively explored family secrecy; however, a notable gap remains regarding the influence of childhood family secrets on the later lives and relationships of adult children, particularly from a systemic and relational perspective. This study fills this void by employing elements of constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) to investigate how adult children navigate their encounters with family secrets, silences, and disclosures. In-depth interviews with seven adult participants who had experienced the presence of family secrets during their childhood were conducted. Using constant comparison and memo writing throughout the simultaneous data collection and data analytic process, the following tentative core category was presented: *Riding the emotional rollercoaster: Emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions*. This central theme encapsulates the complex nature of navigating family contexts marked by secrecy, illustrating the mutual influence of emotions on family secrecy. Sub-categories include contrasting childhood memories, the transition from innocence to awareness of family secrets, secrecy as a portal into intricate family dynamics, resilience amidst emotional turmoil, and the short- and long-term impact of family secrecy during childhood. Implications for practice highlight the importance of fostering safe spaces for disclosure and employing creative approaches to facilitate conversations about the emotional weight of family secrets without necessarily revealing them. Additionally, a proposed model using the imagery of an emotional rollercoaster offers a potentially valuable framework for exploring individuals' encounters with family secrets and their decisions surrounding disclosure.

Key words: family secrecy, adult children, disclosure, family dynamics, grounded theory

Dedication

To my children, Sebastian and Valentina,

Your unwavering love and remarkable strength of character have been my greatest inspirations throughout this journey. This work is dedicated to you, and to your future families, with the hope that it stands as a testament to the strength and beauty of healthy family bonds. May you always find the courage to be true to yourselves, bravely and unapologetically, and to allow others the same grace of openness and honesty, acting always from a place of love and integrity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Dedication	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
TABLES AND FIGURES	7
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	8
1.1 Preamble	8
1.2 Rationale of the Study	8
1.3 The Study's Research Questions.....	10
1.4 Philosophical Underpinnings and Theoretical Frameworks	11
1.6 Definition of Terms	12
1.7 Structure of the Dissertation.....	13
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	14
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Search Strategy.....	15
2.3 Overview of the Literature	15
2.4 'Family Secrets' as a Systemic and Sociological Phenomenon	17
2.5 The Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood and Adolescence.....	19
2.6 Exploring the Dynamics of Family Challenges in a Cluster of Studies	20
2.7 Systemic Practice, Family Therapy and Family Secrets	24

2.8	Conclusion	25
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY		26
3.1	Introduction.....	26
3.2	Aims of the Study	26
3.3	Research Questions	26
3.4	Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Research	27
3.5	Methodology	28
3.6	Research Procedure	31
3.7	Data Collection, Analysis and Auditing Criteria in Constructivist Grounded Theory	33
3.8	Self-reflexivity.....	34
3.9	Ethical Considerations	35
3.9	Conclusion	36
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS		37
4.1	Introduction.....	37
4.2	Representation and Synthesis of the Key Findings of the Study	37
4.3	Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion	41
4.4	Participating in a research study on family secrecy: Emotions, reflections and internal processes shared by participants during the data collection process	62
4.5	Concluding Comments	63
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION		64
5.1	Introduction.....	64
5.2	Summary of Key Findings	64

5.3	Limitations of the Study	66
5.4	Implications for Practice and Training	67
5.5	Recommendations for Future Research.....	68
5.6	Concluding Comments	69
REFERENCES		71
Appendix A: Interview Schedule (Original) ENGLISH		79
Appendix B: Mistoqsijiet tal-intervista (Originali) MALTESE		82
Appendix C: Updated Interview Schedule_ENGLISH		85
Appendix D: Mistoqsijiet tal-Intervista Updated (MALTESE).....		88
Appendix E: Line by line Coding & Constant Comparison between the 7 Interviews.....		91
Appendix F: FREC Approval Documents & Ethics Documentation.....		126
Appendix G: Proposed Model of Emotional Rollercoaster: Tentative Core Category & Sub- Categories		133
Appendix H: Chapter 4 with Quotes in the Original Language		134

TABLES AND FIGURES

List of Tables

Table 1	Demographic information of participants
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List of Figures

Figure 1	Grounded theory process of data collection and analysis
Figure 2	Proposed model of emotional rollercoaster: Tentative Core Category & Sub-categories

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Preamble

The phenomenon of *family secrecy* has been studied from various angles including typology (Berger & Paul, 2008; Imber-Black, 1998; Rober et al., 2012), reasons for revealing or concealing secrets in families (Imber-Black, 1998; Vangelisti et al., 2001), the communicative dimension in families governed by secrets (Afifi et al., 2015), and sociological and cultural elements that underlie family secret-keeping (Nico et al., 2023). Some research studies, more specifically case study research, focused their lens on the impact of a climate of family secrecy on children's lives (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; Helimaki et al., 2021; Rober, 2017; Rober et al., 2012). However, literature on the consequences of the presence of family secrets in childhood on adult children's lives and relationships, particularly in terms of a systemic, relational perspective, both locally and internationally, is almost non-existent.

This led to a methodological decision to adopt a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2014) with the aim of addressing this gap in the literature. Considering the relatively unexplored territory of the way adult children are impacted by the presence of family secrets in childhood, this methodology seemed to present a good-enough starting point for an exploration of this pertinent and relevant phenomenon.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

In both my personal life and professional work, I have frequently met with individuals who were in some way impacted by family secrets. Being brought up in a village in the southern part of Malta, the understanding that all families may have secrets and that these should not be disclosed was a given. The values of 'family' and 'family loyalties' constituted

a core element and core value in my upbringing – being privy to some family secrets or half-truths at a relatively young age was also part of my personal baggage, a baggage which undoubtedly influenced the kind of parent I wished to become for my children when I became a mother. Becoming a parent does not come with a manual, but I was very clear in my mind what I wanted to replicate from my family script and what I wished to correct (Byng-Hall, 1995). In my case, I felt that the half-truths or family secrets that were shared with me in my early adolescence by significant people in my life may have played a crucial role in my outlook towards life and love, as well as in some of the choices I made growing up. Moreover, as an educational professional who has worked with younger and older children for two decades before embarking on systemic family therapy training, I am also informed by a child-centred philosophy which upholds child participation in society and in family life, manifested through a positive image of the ‘child’ as capable and competent (Corsaro, 2005; Malaguzzi, 1996).

When the notion of ‘family secrecy’ as a systemic phenomenon came up in my systemic family therapy training, it struck more than one chord. Researching the topic, I began to understand its connection with other systemic concepts such as family scripts, intergenerational patterns, trauma legacies, patterns of attachment, and relational functioning or dysfunction. It also became evident that the presence of family secrets may add several dimensions and layers of complexity to family lives, relationships, and well-being. I was intrigued by the impact of family secrecy on family lives and relationships, and by how different family members, especially children and adolescents, react to, and position themselves within a secretive family climate, both inside and outside the therapy room. These, together with the gap in the international literature, formed part of the process of developing my initial research question for this study.

1.3 The Study's Research Questions

1.3.1 Initial Research Question

Seeking to address the research gap from a systemic and relational perspective, an initial research question emerged from my curiosities and questions as I began my research and investigation into the presence of secrets in families. Having a special interest in children's experiences and participation in families, I knew I wanted to explore this notion from a childhood lens, yet ethically I was also concerned and aware about the repercussions of such an enquiry on children and adolescents. This automatically led to the second-best option – that of engaging adult children who would have experienced and been impacted by the presence of family secrets during their childhood years. To this end, the following research question was initially developed:

How does the presence of family secrets in childhood impact adult children's lives and relationships?

During the data collection and analysis process, it was refined to include a main research question and two sub-questions as follows:

How do adult children perceive and navigate their encounters with secrets, silences, and disclosure within the families in which they were raised?

The two sub-questions are:

How do adult children raised in the presence of family secrecy understand the influence of secrets, silences and disclosures on their life trajectories, relationships and overall worldview?

What is their perception of the potential destructive and/or life-affirming aspects of family secrets during childhood and adolescence, and what supportive elements aided them in navigating these territories growing up?

1.4 Philosophical Underpinnings and Theoretical Frameworks

1.4.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

Prior to selecting an appropriate methodology, several ontological and epistemological beliefs were considered. Opting for a qualitative research design and a grounded theory methodology meant locating the study within an interpretative and social constructionist paradigm (Creswell, 2008). Grounded theory methodology was chosen for its ability to inductively construct substantive theories on a relatively unknown phenomenon, providing a robust yet flexible framework. This approach acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants, embedding the researcher within the analytic process and emphasizing the interpretive and iterative nature of data generation and analysis. (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008).

1.4.2 Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical frameworks inform this exploration of family secrets in childhood. Both Family Systems Theory (Bateson, 1972; Bowen, 1978) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) provide a theoretical basis for understanding and investigating the presence of family secrecy in childhood, and the meanings that adult children may attribute to their experiences of being raised in a secretive atmosphere, or, in some cases, of having become the bearer of a family secret at a young age.

Family Systems Theory views families as emotional units influencing relational processes across generations, emphasizing concepts like homeostasis and circular causation to understand dysfunction (Bateson, 1972; Bateson & Donaldson, 1991). It also considers

stages of family life cycles and triangulation as factors shaping family organisation and dynamics including alliances, emotional cutoffs, external and internal demands for change (Bowen, 1978; Dallos & Draper, 2015). Attachment Theory explores how relationships between caregivers and children influence attachment patterns and roles within the family, highlighting the consequences of traumatic experiences on attachment formation as conditions for dysfunction, insecure or disorganised attachment patterns, and reversed roles are engendered (Bowlby, 1988; Crittenden et al., 2014; Dallos & Vetere, 2009). Integrating these theories provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding family secrets in childhood and their lasting effects on individuals and family systems.

1.6 Definition of Terms

‘Family’ in this dissertation refers to a group of two or more people who are related to each other by blood, marriage, or some other bond. Defined as “... the intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it” (Rober et al., 2012, p.530), family secrets are understood as hiding information about a range of topics linked to family life (Berger & Paul, 2008) and that impact directly or indirectly the lives of members of a family. Secrets are often created out of fear or shame, to protect, deceive, or control others (Imber-Black, 1998). The term "family secret" refers to information withheld or selectively shared among family members, with the nature of what is considered a secret being subjective and varying between individuals and families (Karpel, 1980). In the retrospective analysis of the prevalence of familial secrecy during *childhood*, this study considers individuals classified as children or adolescents, up to the age of 18, thus adopting a demarcation that delineates those who have not yet attained legal adulthood.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

Following this introduction to the dissertation, Chapter Two provides an initial critical review of the literature on family secrets with a focus on childhood. Chapter Three outlines the research design, rationale for using constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006), data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Next, Chapter Four presents the data and the findings that emerged from the analysis, the tentative core category and sub-categories, discussing them in relation to the literature to substantiate the arguments. This serves as a form of a second stage literature review, that is characteristic of a grounded theory methodology. Chapter Five concludes with implications and recommendations for family therapy practice and future research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

A thorough review of the literature is a contested issue in grounded theory methodology with differing views around whether researchers seeking to develop substantive theories that are grounded in the data should, at the outset, allow themselves to be influenced by earlier ideas that are found in the literature or not. Glaser and Strauss (1967) are advocates for a delay in conducting a literature review in classic grounded theory to avoid shackling their analysis by what is known as ‘received theory’, and Glaser (1992, 2012) also postulates that extant ideas should not be permitted to contaminate the researcher’s analytic process. On the other hand, others, including Thornberg (2011), Charmaz (2005), and Clarke (2005) refute the possibility of pure induction in grounded theory, and, instead, Thornberg (2011) suggests what he calls an ‘informed grounded theory’, in which:

... both the process and the product have been thoroughly grounded in data by GT methods while being informed by existing research literature and theoretical frameworks ... an informed grounded theorist sees the advantage of using pre-existing theories and research findings in the substantive field in a sensitive, creative and flexible way instead of seeing them as obstacles and threats. (Thornberg, 2011, p.7)

This dissertation is informed by the latter view, and consequently, this chapter presents a review of the literature surrounding notions that explore the presence of family secrecy in childhood and its impact on individual, relational and family functioning of adult children.

2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of the literature using EBSCO Host via the University of Malta was conducted, where several databases including HyDI (Hybrid Discovery), Academic Search Ultimate, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Web of Science were accessed. The search used a combination of keywords to look into the published literature on the presence of family secrets in childhood and adolescence: “family secrets”, “family secrecy”, “silence”, “topic avoidance”, “disclosure”, “children”, “childhood”, “child”. Additionally, I also added the following keywords to review the literature on the short and long-term impact and legacy of family secrecy on the lives and relationships of children, adolescents, and adults: “legacy”, “intergenerational transmission”, “family patterns” and “family communication”. Although the search was limited to the last two decades of research and literature (from the year 2000 onwards) on the subject area, seminal books and articles pertaining to previous decades were also consulted.

2.3 Overview of the Literature

Overall, qualitative studies were more prevalent than quantitative ones when researching the topic of secrets within families. The search indicated that studies specifically investigating the presence and impact of family secrets in childhood as a phenomenon were almost non-existent, although three studies directly addressed the immediate impact of family secrecy on children or adolescents (Frinjs et al., 2013; Sela et al., 2023; Yarrow, 2012).

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics, most research was retrospective, although 12 studies involved participants aged 6 to 18. The research typically focused on specific types of secrets or family issues, often exploring secrecy as a consequence or coping mechanism, such as in cases of sexual abuse (Baker et al., 2003; Bass et al., 2006; Hunter, 2010; Jones & Morris, 2007; Klebanov & Katz, 2023; McElvaney et al., 2012; Svedin et al., 2002; Tener,

2018), loss and trauma (Bornemisza et al., 2022; Cain, 2006), and sexual identity (Meoded-Danon & Yanay, 2016; Perlesz et al., 2006). Parental illness – physical or intellectual/developmental (Imber-Black, 2014; Silven & Forinder, 2022; Tompkins, 2007; Weiber et al., 2020) or mental illness (Cogan et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2017; Radley et al., 2023), parental infidelity (Kawar et al., 2019; Lusterman, 2005; Salih & Chaudry, 2023) and donor assistance (Berger & Paul, 2008) were also investigated in relation to silence, secrecy and/or topic avoidance.

In addition, some studies tackled stigma, secrecy and shame resulting from parental alcoholism (Bugeja & Galea, 2022; Silven Hagstrom & Forinder, 2022; Werner & Malterud, 2016), parental imprisonment (McGinley & Jones, 2018; Shaw, 2022) or status of care in foster care children (Dansey et al., 2019).

The use of therapeutic approaches, strategies, and tools in working with families affected by family secrecy was also a central issue in a few articles (Dumont, 2008; Helimaki et al., 2021; Rober et al., 2012; Sela & Bat-Or, 2022) as well as dealing with ethical issues pertaining to family secrets in therapeutic contexts (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; Jones & Morris, 2007; McCurdy & Murray, 2003).

Furthermore, family secrecy was sometimes also explored through theoretical or conceptual notions such as family communication (Botswick & Johnson, 2018), self-protection and protection of others (Afifi et al., 2005), ‘memory’ and ‘narrative inheritance’ (Goodall, 2005; McNay, 2009, Rober & Rosenblatt, 2015; Smart, 2011), family secrets as ‘legacy burdens’ (Sinko, 2017), triangulation, boundary-crossing and parentification (Byng-Hall, 2008; Campbell et al., 2003) and legal issues around genetic truths (Smart, 2009).

This review begins by looking briefly into broader concepts that underpin the investigated domain, such as definitions, typology,- the sculpting of family secrets, as well as

a sociological examination of the research area. This initial focus on overarching conceptual ideas and the sociological aspect of family secrecy is employed to introduce and explore a more comprehensive and systemic view of the construct of secrecy whilst locating the investigation within a local context. Subsequently, the review narrows its focus on the presence of family secrets in childhood and adolescence, thereafter, delving into an exploration of the perceived ramifications of family secrecy on the lives and interpersonal relationships of adult offspring. Finally, it discusses the interconnections between systemic practices, family therapy, and family secrets, drawing insights from clinical case studies and therapists' perspectives within therapeutic settings.

2.4 'Family Secrets' as a Systemic and Sociological Phenomenon

2.4.1 Definitions, Typology and Sculpture of Family Secrecy

Defined as "... the intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it" (Rober et al., 2012, p.530), family secrets hide information about a range of topics linked to family life (Berger & Paul, 2008). They are created out of fear or shame, to protect, deceive, or control others (Imber-Black, 1998). Some secrets are helpful in certain familial contexts, such as the secrets teenagers keep from their parents as they are forming their own identities and 'differentiating the self' (Bowen, 1978), or to distinguish the boundaries between a parent and a child (Dalzell, 2000) – these are termed 'essential' secrets (Imber-Black, 1998). However, family secrets that are 'toxic' or 'dangerous' are said to possibly implicate a dysfunction in the family dynamic or cause harm to some family members (Berger & Paul, 2008; Imber-Black, 1998; Selvini, 1997).

Secrets in families act like 'magnets in family relationships, attracting some members whilst repelling others' (Imber-Black, 2018, p. 1123). The creation, keeping or opening of family secrets may result in a reorganization of family lives as alliances and triangles are

formed, resulting in degrees of proximity and distance amongst different family members (Imber-Black, 1998, 2018). From a systemic perspective, Karpel (1980), a seminal figure in the early exploration of family secrets, identified the interplay between power, loyalty, protection, boundaries, and alliances in an analysis of the intricacies of relational systems and subsystems within couples and families.

Rober et al. (2012) argue that family secrecy reveals the complex nature of family communication, highlighting the tension between what is shared and what is withheld. This approach, supported by Afifi et al. (2015), emphasizes that social and contextual factors are crucial in determining whether disclosure or concealment leads to positive or negative outcomes.

2.4.2 The Sociological Aspect of Family Secrets

Seen as an ‘act of intimacy’ (Nico et al., 2023), the practice of withholding or sharing family secrets offers insights into personal and social relationships at a sociological level. They are indicative of the way people manage their own self and familial presentations and projections onto the world, the expectations they and others have in terms of conduct and morals, the social norms that are embedded in their culture, and how all this is symbolic of the ‘social values in a given temporally anchored society’ (Nico et al., 2023, p.973).

Undertaking a sociological inquiry of a nation means delving deeply into the fabric of society, understanding the determinants of how a society functions at both the macro and micro levels. It helps reveal, amongst other things, power dynamics, interpersonal relationships, societal rituals, and the use of language in positioning individuals (Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994). With a population exceeding 540,000 inhabitants over an area of 316km² (Regional Statistics Malta, 2024), Malta is the European Union’s smallest national nation. It is to be expected that, within the confinements of such a relatively small land,

secrets constitute an important part of the societal texture, where the locals seek to project a positive-enough image of their nation, in the same ways that a family may feel duty-bound and be influenced by loyalties towards its own members to avoid exposure of aspects of their family that may instigate stigma or taboo in the outer world. Sultana & Baldacchino (1994) discuss the ‘microstate behaviour syndrome’ that, on a larger, more national scale, cautions against probing into sensitive national matters through sociological investigations. This is mirrored in the notion of ‘washing dirty linen at home’, and in proverbs such as ‘rajt ma rajtx, smajtx ma smajtx’ and ‘id-demm qatt ma jsir semm’¹ that characterise Maltese values, culture and beliefs.

Local literature on family secrecy in Malta is scarce, despite its occasional mention in sociological texts, historical books, and news. No studies have directly examined family secrecy in Malta from a systemic perspective, making this a particularly elusive and challenging topic to research due to the inherently private nature of secrets.

2.5 The Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood and Adolescence

Children, often shielded from toxic family secrets, may sense unspoken truths through silences and hesitations (Rober, 2017), forbidden topics (Helimaki et al., 2021), or gaps in family stories (Imber-Black, 2018). Growing up in secrecy can drive children to invent stories, creating myths to comprehend incomplete information and make sense of their reality (Imber-Black, 1993; Deslypere & Rober, 2020; Rober, 2017).

Research on the impact of parents revealing family secrets to children and its effects on their development and well-being is limited. However, Sela and Bat-Or (2022, 2023) conducted a phenomenological study using art-based methods with eleven adults who grew

¹ English version or translation of Maltese proverbs: ‘seeing but not looking, listening but not hearing’ and ‘blood is thicker than water’.

up with family secrets. Their findings highlighted the tension between visibility and concealment and revealed participants' struggles to piece together fragmented information and form coherent life narratives.

Frinjs et al. (2013) surveyed 790 Dutch adolescents, finding that shared secrets were linked to improved interpersonal skills, while private secrets correlated with negative outcomes like delinquency and loneliness. Yarrow's retrospective study (2012) found that adult children from families with traumatic secrets were aware of their parents' secret-keeping and trauma-related behaviours from an early age. This awareness created a push-pull dynamic, resulting in paradoxical feelings and conflicting messages, often leading to parentification. However, the study also highlighted that when parents disclosed their trauma, it had positive outcomes, fostering relief and deeper family connections.

2.6 Exploring the Dynamics of Family Challenges in a Cluster of Studies

In the studies presented in section 2.3, the concept of ‘secrecy’ in familial contexts emerged not merely as a passive element but as an active response or coping mechanism deployed in the face of challenging family dynamics. Section 2.6 deals with distinct clusters of family secrets.

2.6.1 Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Identity, Loss and Trauma, and Paternity Issues

2.6.1.1 Child Sexual Abuse

Studies on child sexual abuse (CSA), particularly intrafamilial cases, emphasize the prevalence of secrecy within afflicted families, driven by the societal taboo surrounding CSA. Klebanov & Katz (2023), Svedin et al. (2002), and Tener (2018) highlight pervasive silencing mechanisms, leading to relational dysfunction, safety concerns, and perpetuation of violence. The resulting loneliness and isolation experienced by abused children are emphasised. Examining closeness and distance dynamics, Bass et al. (2006) explore sibling incest,

revealing how families cope through 'collaborative secrecy,' reframing abuse based on family cohesion and external perceptions. Historical and social factors making disclosure challenging are elucidated by Hunter (2010), including respect for authority and sexual taboos. McElvaney et al. (2012) conceptualize disclosure as the 'containment of the secret,' identifying strategies like active withholding, negotiating conflicted emotions, and confiding in trusted individuals.

2.6.1.2 Sexual Identity

In examining both cases of intersexuality and lesbian-parented families, a common thread emerges in the cause and impact of secrecy on children within these systems. Meoded-Danon and Yanay (2016) emphasise how secrecy about intersexuality leads to confusion, anger, and a lack of language to express experiences. This denial of visibility prevents individuals the ability to understand their own bodies fully. Similarly, Perlesz et al. (2006) note an increase in secrecy among children in lesbian-parented families due to fears of bullying and judgment. As they navigate mainstream and marginalized spaces, children become more guarded about their family structure, using concealment as a coping mechanism against external scrutiny.

2.6.1.3 Loss and Trauma

In two separate retrospective studies, Bornemisza et al. (2022) and Cain (2016) explore the experiential and transgenerational impacts on family dynamics associated with family secrets and loss. Bornemisza et al.'s investigation into the grief experiences of bereaved children (2022), revealing the loss of a sibling, especially in the context of perinatal loss, generates concealed narratives within families. Surviving siblings recount stories that reflect a life-transforming experience, marked by both explicit details and notable omissions, often silenced by insensitive external communication which contributes to the transformation of bereaved children's narratives into 'silenced stories.'

Similarly, the ramifications of secrecy around a parent's suicide are examined by Cain (2006) in a study on the parenting practices of adult offspring of suicide victims. The study identifies recurring behavioural patterns and the complex maintenance of family secrets to mitigate shame. Defensive barriers against depressive affects and a reluctance to engage with third-generation parenting prospects are also highlighted.

2.6.1.4 Paternity Issues

A body of research emphasizes the evolving landscape surrounding the disclosure of genetic information and points out the interplay between family dynamics, family communication patterns, and the overall impact on the well-being of individuals with donor-assisted origins. Smart (2009) notes a shift towards favouring the revelation of genetic truths, challenging past beliefs of concealing origins like adoption or infertility. Using the UK's Mass Observation Project, Smart explores legal and philosophical implications, asserting children's inherent right to know their genetic makeup for informed decision-making. Berger and Paul (2008) find parental avoidance of discussing donor assistance negatively affects family functioning, especially among adult donor offspring. Golombok (2013) suggests that children born through donor assistance were negatively affected by their mother's elevated levels of distress rather than because of the revelation of their birth origins. Dansey et al. (2019) reveal foster children's internalised stigma due to secrecy about their care status, driven by a need to protect identity and family.

2.6.2 Parental Illness, Substance Abuse, Incarceration, and Infidelity

The studies reported hereunder sought to investigate the impact of unique familial challenges such as illness, addiction, infidelity and imprisonment on different family members including children, with secrecy resulting as a consequence of or a coping mechanism for the homeostasis of the family rather than the focus of the research.

2.6.2.1 Parental Illness – Intellectual, Physical and Mental Illness

Radley et al. (2023), Murphy et al. (2017), and Cogan et al. (2005) delved into the impact of parental mental illness on children, revealing that incomplete information and societal stigmas contribute to children's anxiety and confusion. Resulting behavioural changes often foster a culture of familial secrecy, preventing children from seeking external support and prompting non-productive coping strategies. Imber-Black (2014) emphasized the intricate dynamics of proximity and distance in families dealing with chronic illnesses, and Tompkins (2007) linked secrecy to lower social competence and externalizing issues in children. Weiber et al.'s (2020) qualitative study illuminated challenges faced by children with mothers with intellectual/developmental disabilities, detailing a distressing childhood marked by neglect, abuse, and internal conflicts between maintaining secrecy and seeking external intervention.

2.6.2.2 Substance Abuse/ Alcoholism

Studies by Hagstrom and Forinder (2022), Werner and Malterud (2016), and Bugeja and Galea (2022) highlight how parental alcoholism profoundly impacts children, leading to secrecy, avoidance, disrupted social interactions, and family routines. Children often face tension, blame, and manipulation, compounded by a sense of betrayal from the non-alcoholic parent. Despite these challenges, children grapple with whether to disclose their family situation, often maintaining a facade of normalcy, which limits support and professional help. Bugeja and Galea (2022) describe growing up with an alcoholic parent as navigating an open secret and a Pandora's box of emotions, leading some children to cope through creative outlets.

2.6.2.3 Parental Imprisonment

McGinley and Jones (2018) highlight the pervasive influence of stigma, shame, and secrecy in the childhoods of children with incarcerated parents, adding an extra burden of

deciding whether to disclose their family situation. Shaw (2022) further emphasises the compounding challenges these children face, including deception, topic avoidance, and potential separation from the incarcerated parent, often resulting in fragmented knowledge and long-lasting emotional trauma.

2.6.2.4 Parental Infidelity

Recent research by Lusterman (2005), Kwar et al. (2019), and Salih and Chaudry (2023) extensively explores the profound impact of parental infidelity across various developmental stages. Lusterman (2005) presents the devastating effects of discovered parental infidelity on individuals of all ages, emphasising secrecy's role in breaching trust and causing complex emotional trauma. Kwar et al. (2019) find that adult children aware of parental infidelity tend to exhibit lower scores on the Relational Ethics Scale, potentially leading to problematic relationships with both family and partners. Salih and Chaudry (2023) identify adultification, detachment, and a pervasive loss of self as consequences of knowing about parental infidelity, while also noting the positive impact of parental honesty and openness in addressing its aftermath.

2.7 Systemic Practice, Family Therapy and Family Secrets

Helimaki et al. (2021) suggest that in systemic family therapy, children strategically exhibit symptoms to divert attention from underlying 'invisible constructions of secrets,' influencing family dynamics marked by ambivalence and tension (p.96). Deslypere and Rober (2020) explore how therapists navigate the impact of family secrets, emphasising their substantial influence on children's development and the creation of elaborate fantasies around hidden family matters. In an autoethnographic study on family secrecy, Rober and Rosenblatt (2015) illuminate the dual nature of silence in family secrecy, recognizing its

potential for being both destructive and life-affirming, particularly in the context of clinical practice.

While studying the use of family maps in therapy, Dumont (2008) cautions against pushing children into territories they may not be ready to navigate, especially when family secrets are involved. Secrets can function as necessary self-protective measures for some children, and therapists should be attuned to non-verbal cues indicating a child's unreadiness to explore certain aspects of their lives.

2.8 Conclusion

In reviewing the literature on the presence of family secrecy in childhood, it became evident that the research on family secrets is multifaceted, encompassing several family challenges and themes, and employing both empirical and theoretical approaches. Qualitative studies and retrospective designs have offered nuanced insights into this realm, yet there is a lacuna in targeted research exploring the explicit and implicit repercussions of secrecy within familial contexts. This study addresses this gap, examining childhood family secrecy's impact on adult children's lives and relationships. It fills a local research void and contributes to broader discussions on systemic practices and family therapy, enhancing understanding of family dynamics and their enduring effects. The subsequent chapter will detail the study's methodology and approaches.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present the research design and method of inquiry employed to conduct this qualitative research study. It articulates the foundational epistemological and ontological underpinnings that form the basis of this study. The rationale for adopting a constructivist grounded theory methodology, as developed by Charmaz (2014) is explicated, delineating the theoretical framework guiding the inquiry. The method of data collection, procedures used to recruit participants, and to gather and analyse the data simultaneously are also presented together with the method of verification used. Finally, ethical considerations and auditing criteria are described.

3.2 Aims of the Study

This qualitative study is concerned with exploring how the presence of family secrets, silences and disclosure during childhood may impact the life experiences, relationships, worldview, and trajectories of adult children from their own perspectives.

3.3 Research Questions

The main research question of this research inquiry is:

How do adult children perceive and navigate their encounters with secrets, silences, and disclosure within the families in which they were raised?

The following sub-questions were also developed:

How do adult children raised in the presence of family secrecy understand the influence of secrets, silences and disclosure on their life trajectories, relationships and overall worldview?

What is their perception of the potential destructive and/or life-affirming aspects of family secrets during childhood and adolescence, and what supportive elements aided them in navigating these territories growing up?

3.4 Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Research

The chosen research approach in investigating the phenomenon of family secrecy in childhood reflects a deliberate departure from a positivist, quantifiable orientation towards a more nuanced, interpretivist stance. The awareness of the inherent idiosyncrasies in individual interpretations of experiences within secretive family environments accentuated the necessity for an interpretive lens (Yarrow, 2012). This orientation aims not at generalizing findings but at situating them within the specificities of each participant's individual and relational context (Creswell, 2008).

The research question's exploratory nature and the desire to delve into the richness and depth of participants' encounters with family secrecy naturally led to the adoption of a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research, in all its diverse forms and methods, assumes the premise that there is no universal truth or objective reality. The subjective view of participants and their meaning-making processes are sought through qualitative methods of data collection, built on the belief that knowledge production is context-specific and this context is crucial for understanding and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2008; Lyons & Coyle, 2021).

Significantly, there is an acknowledgement that the dynamic between the researcher and the participants constitutes an integral part of the contextual framework in which the study is conducted, and in turn this influences the research process (Coyle, 2021). This process is known as 'reflexivity' and is a pivotal characteristic of qualitative research, assuming an openness to diverse and richer outcomes and interpretations that inevitably

emerge from a qualitative process of inquiry. Ultimately, the inquiry, rooted in qualitative methodology, endeavours to bring forth the participants' voices, integrating the researcher's reflexivity (which is intertwined along the chapters and sections of this dissertation but also addressed in section 3.8), and offering a dynamic and complex understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon in question, and the way it contributes to knowledge or proposes change (Creswell, 2013).

3.5 Methodology

Located within an interpretative and social constructionist paradigm, this qualitative study was mainly concerned with investigating adult children's understanding of their experiences and encounters with family secrecy, silences, and disclosure during their formative years. Moreover, it also sought to explore the perceived impact of these secrets, silences and disclosure on their lives, worldview, and relationships.

3.5.1 *The Choice of Constructivist Grounded Theory as Method of Inquiry*

Payne (2021) contends that the application of grounded theory proves invaluable for researchers who seek to investigate a comparatively new area/ topic or challenge established theoretical frameworks. Considering the relatively unexplored territory of the way children are impacted by the presence of family secrets in childhood, and the potential for such study to represent a critical exploration within the realm of psychological and family dynamics, a grounded theory methodology seemed to provide a good starting point for an exploration of this pertinent and relevant systemic phenomenon. After careful deliberation, it was decided that a *constructivist grounded theory* methodology would be best suited to align with the study's overarching objectives.

The constructivist grounded theory methodology, as elucidated by Charmaz (2014), stands out for its emphasis on inductive data collection and analysis. This approach

endeavours to organically construct a substantive theory through comparative, iterative and abductive logic, allowing the emergent insights to organically derive from the data itself. implications for the individuals involved. Central to the constructivist grounded theory is the recognition of the researcher as an integral part of the analytical process. As posited by Charmaz and Henwood (2008), the constructivist stance acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between the researcher and participants.

3.5.2 Epistemological and Ontological Underpinnings

Considering the narrow scope of a master's degree rather than aiming for a substantive theory, I utilised a grounded theory analytic approach to understand a phenomenon that is specific to participants' situations. It is important to point out at this stage that, given the time and word limit constraints inherent in a dissertation at this level, the research process involved engaging in the initial steps of a grounded theory methodology, rather than a fully-fledged approach. Hypotheses for further grounded theory work will be offered in the recommendations for future research.

Grounded theory, influenced by a pragmatist ontology, diverges from traditional logico-deductive scientific methods that produce grand theories. Embracing subjective meanings and changing truths, pragmatism views knowledge as a matter of perspective, determined by consensus within a community of inquirers. As a researcher, I align with this ontological perspective, seeking to develop a picture that is faithful to participants' situations and open to diverse interpretations, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between the researcher and participants.

Symbolic interactionism, a key theoretical perspective in grounded theory's earlier forms (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), posits that individuals' actions and interactions are based on the meanings they attribute to objects, people, events, and experiences. Grounded theory

aligns with this perspective by constructing ideas grounded in data relevant to specific contexts, diverging from grand or generalizable theories. However, it is essential to note that contemporary grounded theory, particularly Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), adopts a more interpretative and socio-constructionist stance, recognizing the researcher's role in data creation and interpretation (Charmaz, 2000; 2014).

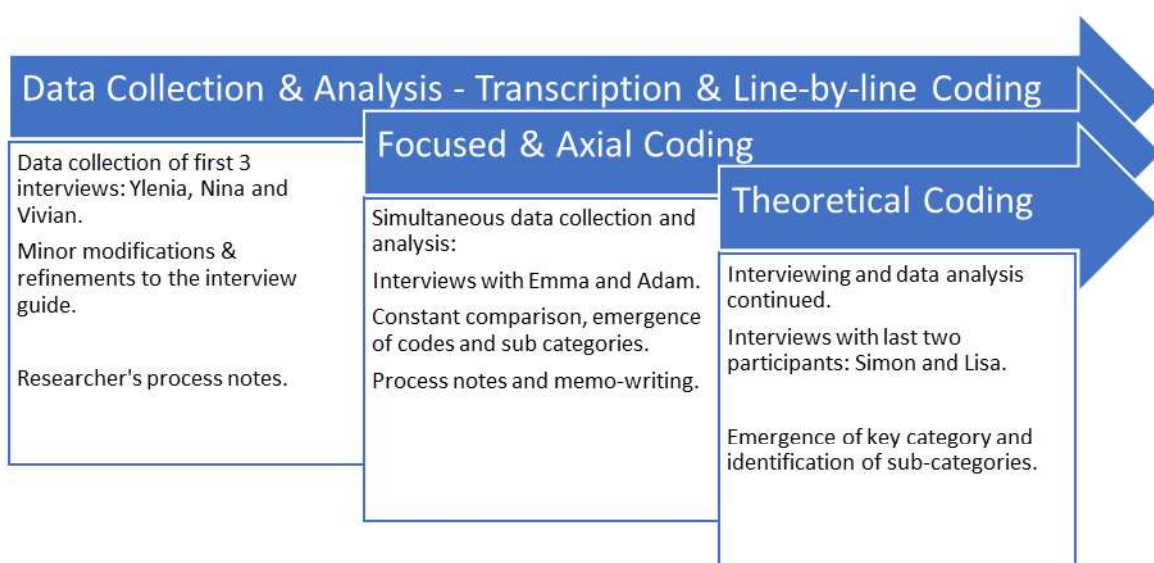
3.5.3 The Design

The following stages constituted the research process for this inquiry:

- a. In line with the *iterative and comparative* nature of the data collection and analysis of CGT, the interview schedule and interview method with the first few participants allowed for minor modification and refinements to the interview guide and process (see Appendices A, B, C & D), subsequently engaging with the rest of the interviews for a total of 7 participants;

Figure 1

Grounded theory process of data collection and analysis



- b. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and *constant comparison* occurred within and across data during collection and analysis. *Memo-writing* facilitated reflection on the researcher's assumptions, questions, and emerging ideas. Participants had the option to express themselves in Maltese or English during interviews, but English was selected for line-by-line coding and subsequent coding (refer to Appendix E);
- c. A progression from the identification of specific *categories* through *focused coding*, the making of *connections between categories* through *axial coding*, and the development of *broader concepts and theories* through *theoretical coding* facilitated the emergence of some important insights that were grounded in the data.

3.6 Research Procedure

3.6.1 Research Tool

This study employed semi-structured one-to-one interviews as the primary data collection method. Charmaz (2014) identifies the key features of interviews as befitting a CGT approach to collecting and analysing data – both the research tool and the research method are seen to be “... open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (p.85). This method enables in-depth explorations of participants' perceptions and experiences, providing firsthand knowledge on specific topics. Insights from early interviews inform and potentially modify subsequent questions, ensuring a responsive and evolving data collection process.

Using one-to-one interviews as a data collection method presents challenges, such as the potential emphasis on collective narratives over individual stories and the assumptions about participants' ability to share their experiences authentically (Charmaz, 2014; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Additionally, despite the collaborative nature of CGT, the inherent power dynamic generally favours the researcher/interviewer over the participant.

The interview guide aimed to capture participants' perceptions and experiences of family secrecy during childhood. Early interviews prompted minor adjustments to delve deeper into childhood and adolescent experiences of secrets, silences, and disclosures, as well as refining the focus to address conflated memories. The revised guide explored secrecy's impact on participants' development and sought to identify supportive elements in their childhood. These changes also led to amendments in the research question, transitioning from a single question to a main question accompanied by two sub-questions to guide the inquiry. This approach aligns with Charmaz's (2014) depiction of the dual objectives inherent in interviewing within the CGT framework, emphasizing attentive consideration of participants' narratives alongside the concurrent construction of theoretical analyses.

3.6.2 The Recruitment Process

Engaging the participants for a study on family secrets was anticipated to be complicated due to the sensitive topic being explored. Participants were recruited using convenience, purposive and snowballing sampling, mainly through two procedures: (1) the engagement of systemic family therapists, through the Malta Association of Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (MAFT), who would act as intermediaries to invite past or current clients they know were impacted by the phenomenon of family secrecy to take part in the study, and (2) an email sent out through my personal and professional contacts and university channels (through the Registrar's Office) to invite any individuals who might be interested to take part. Participants could be of any gender and needed to have reached adulthood (18+ years of age). I managed to locate three participants through the email sent to MAFT and the rest of the participants through my personal and professional contacts.

3.6.3 The Participants

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Relationship Status	Main Family Secret
Ylenia	45-50 years	F	Separated	Parental depression/ paternity
Nina	50-55 years	F	Divorced	Secretive atmosphere in general
Vivian	30-35 years	F	Married	Maternal illness
Lisa	45-50 years	F	Married	Parents' financial difficulties & marital issues
Adam	35-40 years	M	Married	Family inheritance, miscarriage and adoption
Emma	45-50 years	F	Divorced	Parental infidelity
Simon	20-25 years	M	Single	Abuse in stepfamily context

Table 1 provides some salient information about each participant. Age range is provided rather than a specific age to ensure anonymity. The main family secret outlined in the interviews is listed – however, most families tended to have multiple secrets or operated in a climate or culture of secrecy, silence or premature disclosure of information to children.

3.7 Data Collection, Analysis and Auditing Criteria in Constructivist Grounded Theory

After reading the information letter and signing the consent form, participants chose a convenient mode, time, and location for their interview. Five opted for face-to-face

interviews in my office or a quiet place of their choosing, while two preferred online interviews. As data was collected, I transcribed interviews verbatim, added in-vivo codes and gerunds to capture participants' perspectives and processes (Charmaz, 2006), and included memos using Microsoft Word. After the second and third interviews, I started identifying connections, similarities, and differences within and between the interviews. The constant comparison exercise became more meaningful after the third interview, when sufficient data allowed for a more comprehensive analysis.

As I analysed in-vivo codes and gerunds, I identified umbrella terms to link initial codes into more focused ones, using colour coding to categorise data from different interviews. This led to axial coding, connecting categories and revealing emerging theoretical constructs as new data was collected and analysed. Through ongoing reflection and deeper interactions with the data, I identified core categories and developed theoretical codes that captured significant processes. The lengthy and iterative process, conducted partly with my supervisor's help for auditing purposes, ensured the analysis was authentic, systematic, and analytically sound.

It is important to point out that theoretical sampling and saturation were beyond the scope of this degree, but that I was aware of the possibility for this study to be extended through the recruitment of more participants and the engagement in a process of verification and credibility checks that a more extensive research study affords.

3.8 Self-reflexivity

This inquiry stems from my commitment to transparency and open communication in my interactions with others, as well as my professional dedication to fostering respectful exchanges with children and adolescents, whom I view as active, capable participants and agents in their own development and relational interactions (Corsaro, 2005; Malaguzzi,

1995). Throughout the study, I have kept track of my own thoughts, reflections and shifts in perspective that naturally occurred as I delved deeper into the study.

Initially, I focused on how children may be burdened with family secrets, influenced by my own experiences and my aim to promote mindfulness of children's emotional well-being. My mission as a mother, teacher, and trainee systemic family therapist includes giving children a voice in matters affecting them and supporting them through difficult situations.

As I collected and analysed data, I discovered diverse perspectives and experiences related to family secrets. Discussions with my supervisor helped me navigate the tensions and dilemmas, revealing that silences and distortions of truth in families are more common than burdening children with information beyond their understanding. This process highlighted my subjective stance on family secrets and allowed me to consider other possibilities and experiences. Maintaining a reflective attitude helped me understand how my positioning influenced the interpretation of findings, broadening my perspective on the complex dynamics of family secrecy in childhood.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive research topic and intensive interviewing, several ethical considerations were addressed before starting. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC) via the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), focusing on consent, anonymity, confidentiality, data storage and dissemination, and protection from harm (see Appendix F). Consent was secured from recruitment channels (e.g., MAFT and university channels) and participants, who read and signed consent forms before interviews.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants' names were pseudonymised, and identifiable information was excluded from transcripts, complying with GDPR (2018).

Data was stored on an encrypted, password-protected computer, with audio recordings deleted after transcription and the data planned to be wiped by December 2027 to allow for dissertation finalisation and possible publication.

Finally, to mitigate the risk of psychological harm related to triggering past trauma, the study exclusively involved adult participants reflecting on their childhood experiences, avoiding interviews with children. Participants were also debriefed and provided with a list of support services to access if participation evoked any traumatic memories requiring further processing.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the main methodological and ethical issues considered when designing the research process including the research questions, design, procedure, and analytic process. The next chapter presents and discusses the findings that emerged from this study.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present and discuss the findings that emerged from the gathering and analysis of the qualitative data pertaining to the manifestation of family secrecy during childhood and its ramifications on adult children's lives and relationships. Employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, it became evident, during the simultaneous data collection and analytic process, that achieving theoretical saturation within the confines of a master's degree investigation would not be possible. Consequently, instead of attempting to formulate a substantive or middle-range theory, the analysis was directed towards the coming up with a tentative core category and establishing links between subcategories and constructs that were showing up as being important to the participants.

In the initial part of the chapter, the diagram and model presented in Appendix G developed to illustrate and synthesise the findings through a tentative core category, along with subsequent key and sub-categories are explained. Furthermore, the parallel processes that make up the participants' upbringing in a family environment characterised by secrecy are delineated together with the representational and interactional processes that constituted the telling of their stories. The next section offers a detailed exposition of the tentative core category, key categories, and sub-categories. Finally, the concluding segment of the chapter addresses issues pertinent to the interview participation process and the consequential impact of the interviewing procedure on the participants.

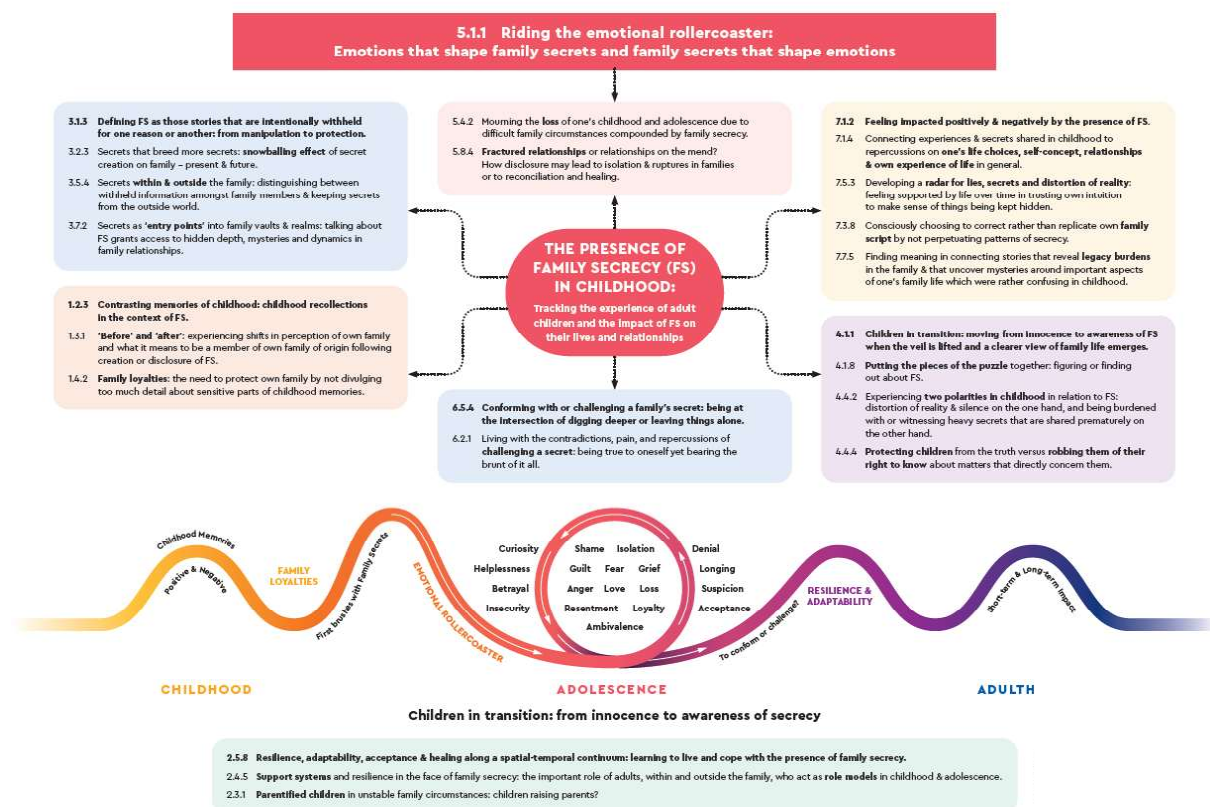
4.2 Representation and Synthesis of the Key Findings of the Study

The 'emotional rollercoaster' metaphor in Figure 2 (see Appendix G for a larger version) illustrates the participants' journeys from childhood to adulthood within secretive family environments. This diagram encapsulates the collective experiences of seven participants, emphasizing the core category: *Riding the emotional rollercoaster – emotions*

that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions (5.1.1). The diagram highlights the complexity of the data, showing how codes and categories were continually compared and relationships between main and subcategories were identified. Growing up in a secretive atmosphere is likened to an emotional rollercoaster, featuring unpredictable twists, turns, sudden drops, and fluctuating emotions. These experiences often included intense internal or external upheavals, marked as 'turning point moments'.

Figure 2

Proposed Model of Emotional Rollercoaster: Tentative Core Category & Sub-Categories



Participants experienced a mix of excitement, fear, anticipation, and ambivalence as they navigated family dynamics shrouded in secrecy, akin to the sudden accelerations and decelerations of a rollercoaster. The revelation or concealment of family secrets caused rapid

emotional shifts, from elation or relief to confusion, distress, and betrayal, encapsulating the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of their emotional journey during childhood.

As researcher and interviewees explored family secrecy's impact, initial positive childhood memories were often shared, followed by heavier ones linked to family secrets. The sub-category *Contrasting memories of childhood: childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy* (numbered 1.2.3) was further composed of another two codes, which were selected for a deeper analysis from a wider range of codes (the latter can be found in Appendix F). The selected codes for each of the seven sub-categories can be found in Appendix G.

As the interview proceeded, the participants revealed diverse perceptions of 'family secrecy', with a sub-category utilised to highlight these: *Defining family secrets as those stories that are intentionally withheld for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection*. The next phase in the interviewing process which runs parallel to the participants' lived reality in childhood is categorised as: *Children in transition: moving from innocence to awareness of family secrecy when the veil is lifted, and a clearer view of family life emerges* (numbered 4.1.1). This is where, as children, individuals impacted by family secrets begin a process of 'putting the pieces of the puzzle together'.

The 'lifting of the veil' in participants' stories marks the steeper, more difficult moments of their emotional rollercoaster, where emotions and family secrecy intersect, revealing their reciprocal influence (category 5.1.1). Emotions and secrets mutually reinforce within family systems, with secrets often born from shame, guilt, and protection. This dynamic creates inner circles of those aware of the secrets and outer circles of the uninformed, further complicating the family's secretive climate (Imber-Black, 2018; Karpel, 1980).

The revelation of a family secret brings the decision to conform, resist, or challenge it, highlighted in the sub-category *Conforming with or challenging a family's secret. Being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone*. Participants' childhood experiences with secrecy emphasize resilience and adaptability, captured in sub-category 2.5.8, which also addresses parentification and support systems. Finally, the short and long-term impact of being raised in the shadow of a family secret or in a secretive family climate is marked by the sub-category: *Feeling positively and negatively impacted by the presence of family secrets* (numbered 7.1.2).

Before proceeding with a more detailed exploration of the identified codes and categories, it is worth noting that participants' reflections on family secrets revealed a distinction between 'being a child' and 'not being an adult'. Consequently, memories spanning early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence were collectively qualified as 'childhood memories and recollections'. This is visually represented in Appendix G as a continuum displayed beneath the image of the rollercoaster.

Furthermore, another notable observation pertains to the contextual backdrop against which the participants lived and experienced the presence and impact of family secrets in childhood. Specifically, references to religious, cultural, and societal norms and expectations concerning family and gender roles, loyalties, duties, and obligations, as well as dynamics of power and control within family structures, are indicative of the social paradigms, belief systems, and values ingrained within their cultural and temporal contexts (Nico et al., 2023). These elements undoubtedly exert influence and remain inseparable from the participants' encounters with family secrecy.

In accordance with an interpretative and socio-constructionist framework, as the researcher, I recognise the significance of acknowledging my role and the multiple factors

impinging upon ‘theory construction’ (Charmaz, 2014). It is therefore crucial to point out my involvement in interpreting and structuring the participants’ perceptions and experiences regarding their childhood encounters with family secrecy and their perceived ramifications. From a pragmatic perspective, ‘theory construction’ does not necessitate the formulation of a ‘grand theory’. Rather, the direction in this investigation is towards more fluid and tentative interpretations built upon the convergence between participants’ and the researcher’s subjective attributions to their experience of the phenomenon. Using the imagery of the rollercoaster as metaphor, this study stresses the intensity and intricate nature of participants’ emotional odysseys as they navigated and grappled with the silences, secrecy, partial disclosures and oversharing prevalent within their family dynamics.

4.3 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

4.3.1 Childhood recollections

4.3.1.1 Contrasting memories of childhood: Childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy [1.2.3]

I think I had a very good childhood, I can’t complain because it was a very caring and nurturing environment. I was surrounded by a lot of people who loved me and cared for me, even nowadays the values that I have I attribute it to my upbringing. (Adam, pg. 4)

With our parents, we had a good childhood. What I also remember quite vividly however, is the change I saw in my mum after the birth of my twin brothers. We think, that she must have been suffering from a post-partum depression. She never took care of the depression and I somehow figured things out for myself from what I observed growing up. (Ylenia, pg. 3)

While Adam’s narrative stands out as a testament to a nurturing and secure family environment, the stories of Ylenia, Vivian, Nina, Simon, Emma, and Lisa indicate a multilayered childhood (Sela & Bat-Or, 2022) with a complex interplay between contrasting

memories, themes of neglect and abuse, emotional turmoil, and the impact of family dynamics on individuals' perceptions of reality. Generally, for all the participants, the more positive experiences pertain to happier memories of 'togetherness', specifically when doing things together as a family or with members of the extended family. The participants talk about "two sides to my childhood" (Emma), "bittersweet memories" and "nice memories of being a child but they are all the time with a grey cloud around them, it was pretty heavy" (Nina).

Ylenia's memories highlight the pervasive sense of physical and emotional neglect resulting from her mother's chronic undiagnosed depression, which often left her questioning the authenticity of her own experiences. Similarly to stories of children living with parental illness, the missing information and stigma around the condition manifested as confusion and anxiety (Murphy et al., 2017; Radley et al., 2023). Vivian's narrative, characterised by the loss of her birth mother and subsequent integration into a new family dynamic with the remarriage of her father, points out the disruptive and devastating effects of parental illness and death, particularly when it is shrouded in secrecy. This correlates with Imber-black's (2014, 2018) contention that secrets act like magnets, accentuating spaces of distance and proximity between family members. Lisa's recollections add another layer of complexity, with positive memories of bonding with her grandmother contrasted with experiences of eviction, vandalism on the family home, and familial turmoil. Nina's portrayal of childhood invisibility and her yearning for acceptance in a climate of reality distortion and unspoken truths juxtaposes with her vibrant persona, bringing out the dissonance between internal struggles and external façades. The themes of visibility versus concealment, blindness versus sight, and clarity versus obscurity are likewise represented in a study by Sela and Bat-Or (2022) with adults who grew up in the shadow of a secret.

4.3.1.2 'Before' and 'after': Experiencing shifts in perception following creation and disclosure of family secrets [1.3.1]

It was like an unlocking of sort of 'wow, I had no idea'. I never really expected something like that for our family, most especially for my grandfather. [Adam, pg. 6]

Ylenia, Vivian, Emma, Adam, and Simon mention a shift in their perception and/or experiences of being a member of their family of origin, following a specific event or series of events such as the birth of their siblings, the opening of a secret regarding infidelity, and the loss of family members, all of which served to activate the notion of secrecy in their respective families. According to Imber-Black (1998), this shift is tied to a change in the sculpture and location of the secret. These pivotal moments act as catalysts, shaping and reshaping perceptual shifts in children who are trying to make sense of their world, at times prompting a re-evaluation of familial bonds and their place within the family structure.

I was around 11 years old. It did feel wrong. I remember feeling upset, an ugly feeling inside me – my stomach hurt and I recall contemplating telling my mum, which I obviously did not. It was a moment when the penny dropped. [Emma, pg. 5]

Bringing to mind the etymology of the term 'secret' which implies the inclination for individuals to set themselves apart or distance themselves from distressing or shameful life events or situations as a form of defence mechanism (Termini, 2018), Ylenia and Emma recall childhood experiences of *feeling different and alien within and outside the family as a result of family communication patterns of secrecy and silence [1.5.3]*, in a way that was manifested through their introversion and sensitivity as they navigated inconsistent family structures. Lisa and Emma questioned their paternity at different points in their childhood, creating stories in their mind of hidden adoption to explain this persistent feeling of being 'different' from the rest of the family. The participants reveal the way family dynamics, roles, and expectations affected their identity formation, behaviours, beliefs, and values –

linking these recounts to learning to keep silent or to hide in their own world to avoid getting into trouble.

I have like bittersweet memories in a way, like my mother used to treat me very differently from my brother, and that used to upset me so much. She used to compare me to my paternal grandmother and call me names, and I knew she hated her, she still does. And then I became very quiet, and was always scared to speak up [Nina, pg. 3]

Stepfamily dynamics for both Vivian and Simon diminish paternal presence and children's agency, and lead to frustration and relational difficulties with their birth parent. Nina and Vivian discuss suppressing creativity due to familial disapproval. Patriarchal gender roles and power dynamics, including the expectation of female obedience and caretaking, are prevalent. Lisa and Nina describe a matriarchal dynamic with a marginalized father. Vivian's father remarries with the intention to provide more stability for his daughter, reinforcing gendered caregiving roles. All this supports research that demonstrates how difficult childhood experiences are to be evaluated against the social and historical contexts in which they occur, whereby multiple factors may influence and exacerbate the conditions surrounding the disclosure or concealment of family secrets (Hunter, 2010).

Despite familial distress, participants recall positive memories of extended family gatherings, emphasizing togetherness and family values. Lisa and Nina found refuge with their grandmothers from maternal rejection. Nina's hatred towards family friends, based on her mother's stories rather than her own memories, illustrates the confusion caused by fragmented narratives (Sela & Bat-Or, 2023). Vivian's lack of memories of her birth mother, due to parental shielding from distress, highlights the manipulation of familial narratives to maintain stability amidst adversity.

4.3.2 Defining family secrecy

4.3.2.1 Defining family secrecy as stories that are intentionally withheld for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection [3.1.3]

Well, a family secret for me, as I've come to uncover and learn about my family, is an event or a big life-changing revelation or view on family life that you thought was one way but then discovered it was another. [Adam, pg. 6]

For me, a family secret would be something that happens in a family, something that impacts the family, information that has a certain degree of seriousness to it which is not shared with any or all family members. Even if others are aware of it, there is this kind of rule that nobody talks about it. [Vivian, pg. 7]

Apart from focusing on the intentions and motivations behind the creation and perpetuation of family secrecy, which could vary from manipulation to protection towards self and others (Imber-Black, 1998), it becomes evident that participants interpret family secrecy through the lens of their own encounters with this mode of family communication. There is also an acknowledgement of the magnitude of a secret and its impact on family members or dynamics (Rober et al., 2012), which could potentially be life-changing for an individual or a family unit.

4.3.2.2 Secrets that breed more secrets: The snowballing effect of secret creation on family - Present and future [3.2.3]

There is a sense, in participants' stories, that once a family secret is created, there is no end to its widespread impact since it automatically generates a schism between those who are privy to the secret and those who are excluded from the secret-sharing (Imber-Black, 2018). Moreover, one is also aware that what usually begins as a modestly concealed truth, often intended to safeguard one or more family members, swiftly turns into an uncontrollable force akin to a snowball effect, often causing harm to some members of a family (Berger & Paul, 2008; Selvini, 1997).

Vivian recollects the complications that arose from her half-sister's lack of knowledge regarding her biological origins. Born out of her father's second marriage, Vivian's sister remained unaware of the truth surrounding her older sibling's distinct parentage i.e. having a different mother. Vivian recalls how things became complicated as her sister began to ask questions about her family lineage, which she was forbidden to answer. It is no wonder that, in such a situation, a child might violate family rules and norms established by adults who seek to perpetuate the silence (Vangelisti et al., 2001), leading to a rejection of their authority and a fostering of a sense of internal conflict within the family dynamic. Being forced to not only hide one's identity but to deny her own and her birth mother's rightful place and position within her family of origin creates complex layers of interactions marked by rejection, disapproval, and ultimately, deception. This complex interplay of family communication patterns leads to a nexus of emotional discord and strain in the family, highlighting tensions in relational systems and subsystems between things that are spoken about and those that are kept hidden (Rober et al., 2012).

My sister used to see photos of my dad's second marriage and I was obviously in the photos myself. So, it started becoming suspicious, but they still kind of stuck at all costs to this idea that his wife is my mother. [Vivian, pg. 13]

Nina, a perceptive child, was puzzled by her family's behaviour. Despite projecting a moral image, they lived double lives, maintaining piety publicly while engaging in contradictory behaviours in private. This hypocrisy left Nina confused, struggling with the disparity between their public image and their true selves, which was manifested in intrafamily secrets and a complex communication boundary system. (Caughlin et al., 2000).

One of my unmarried aunts met a foreign doctor when she was in hospital – she used to mention his kindness. At the time, we used to go to these popular 'high teas' at a

local hotel. I remember how once she pretended to take me to the bathroom, and instead she went to the telephone booth and called him. I was around seven or eight at the time. I remember being told at the time to keep this to myself. [Nina, pg. 34]

Emma's narrative indicates a culture of secrecy within her immediate and extended family to such an extent that secrets percolated many aspects of her upbringing, underpinned by invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Family secrecy as a form of communication was in many ways a *modus operandi* for their family interactions (Bostwick & Johnson, 2018). Emma recalls how at one point there was a culmination of events that eventually led adults in her family to finally realise they had to stop messing around or leading complicated lives, if not for their own sake for the sake of the younger generations.

It was a time when things were happening in our extended family – a time when many things imploded and what was previously kept silent or spoken only in hushed voices began to be exposed in conversations or arguments. It was a time where a suicide happened in the family too – a terrible event that opened many other secrets to speculation, to assumptions, and led to further aggravation and distance between different family members. [Emma, pg. 21]

4.3.2.3 Secrets within and outside the family: Distinguishing between withheld information amongst family members and keeping secrets from the outside world [3.5.4]

In a process of starting and maintaining secrets within and outside the family, it becomes evident that a web of lies, concealment, unspoken truths and silences with family members who fall within and outside the secret-bearing group is created and perpetuated. This, in turn, engenders stories of connection and disconnection, thus balancing proximity and distance in relationships impacted by one or more family secrets (Imber-black, 1998, 2018).

Ylenia was never able to discuss her mother's undiagnosed depression with anyone, which left her feeling isolated and burdened by this awareness that was never openly acknowledged by her family (Murphy et al., 2017). She only found some form of consolation and support in an aunt's efforts to make up for her mother's negligence and lack of care towards her and her brothers, yet never openly discussed the 'secret' with anyone, thus adopting a non-productive coping style (Cogan et al., 2005). Her story exemplifies the isolating effects of unacknowledged family secrecy.

Simon suffered silently through an abusive and distressful childhood in a stepfamily environment that positioned him in many ways as the 'black sheep' in his family. His struggles caused by the constant drama and limited parental support mimic those experienced by children raised in adverse family circumstances that end up being lived as the everyday normality (Bugeja & Galea, 2022; Werner & Malterud, 2016). He grappled with feelings of alienation and rejection throughout his childhood and was only able to find some form of validation and refuge later on in his adolescence when he mustered the courage to confide in a supportive family member who immediately took action and provided him with a secure space that enabled him to stop this cycle of negativity and abuse.

Constrained by a perceived need to 'keep up appearances' and adhere to a rather strict moral code in her family, Vivian also confronts a family reality rife with hidden truths and distorted perceptions, both within their family unit and hidden from the outside world. Her experience brings out the insidious nature of family secrecy, perpetuating a façade of normalcy while concealing underlying tensions and conflicts.

[4.3.2.4 Secrets as 'entry points' into family vaults and realms: talking about family secrecy grants access to hidden depth, mysteries, and dynamics in family relationships \[3.7.2\]](#)

The stories told by the seven participants exhibit a broad spectrum of secrecy, encompassing various themes such as parental depression, life-threatening illness, questions

of paternity, financial struggles, parental infidelity, instances of violence and abuse, and family inheritance (Berger & Paul, 2008). Looking at the notion of ‘family secrecy’ in isolation fails to capture the complexities of relational interactions between family systems and subsystems and the way it could open a wealth of information about delicate issues such as illness, suicide, betrayal, and loss (Rober et al., 2012). Each narrative in this study unfolds distinct family secrets, which not only stand as discrete revelations but also function as portals into more intricate family dynamics and underlying issues.

The multiple secrets that marked Emma’s childhood and adolescence serve as starting points for conversations around diverse family themes including parentification, violence, abuse, and infidelity. A thorough examination of each family secret unveils a distinct and multi-faceted realm that is replete with an array of family-related issues and a spectrum of emotions to be explored and analysed. This process potentially provides a window into the complexities and intricacies of Emma’s family, shedding light on its enduring repercussions on her development, maturation and interpersonal relationships.

There were many secrets I became privy to at a very young age through being a confidante for my parents. Secrets about infidelity they experienced or inflicted on our family, secrets about marital issues between them, secrets about violence and aggression, secrets about other members of the family regarding paternity issues, betrayal, and abuse. [Emma, pg. 8]

Similarly, the secrets disclosed by each of the remaining five participants demonstrate a comparable pattern, mirroring an observation articulated by Imber-Black (1998) regarding secrets as systemic phenomena. In this context, the individual secrets shared by each participant serve as microcosms of larger family patterns, reflecting the interplay of secrecy, communication dynamics, and relational complexities within their respective family units.

4.3.3 Children in transition: From innocence to awareness of family secrecy

Some of the participants' stories portray a transition from a state of innocence and unawareness regarding family dynamics to a realisation of things that are perceived as shocking, or to knowledge that rocks a child's world. These moments are experienced by some participants as 'turning points', unexpected moments where the proverbial veil is lifted, and there is an awareness that there is more to their parents or relatives than meets the eye.

4.3.3.1 Putting the pieces of the puzzle together: Figuring or finding out about family secrets [4.1.8]

Using the imagery of the rollercoaster, this become the stage in the emotional ride where the participants experience a heightened emotional turmoil as they grapple with the newly discovered realities about their families, truths that are far from easy to process or handle. These realities are sometimes revealed by another member of the family, such as a parent or another adult, as in the case of Emma and Adam. However, in most cases, the participants relate how they came to understand or figure things out for themselves, with some likening it to putting the pieces of a puzzle together (Imber-Black, 1998; Yarrow, 2012).

It was so ingrained not to ask questions, I remember one of my last memories of my late mother before she passed away, was of me peeking through her bathroom door, and seeing her removing her wig, and I remember thinking as a young child, why is she removing her hair. [Vivian, pg. 9]

Rober and Rosenblatt (2015) discuss the way children create myths as they try to make sense of the silences around family stories and point to the destructive and life-giving aspects of silence and secrecy in families. Some participants only figured some aspects of their family's past and the secrets pertaining to it later in adulthood, when they had the resources to look up information, indicating how important it was for these participants to continue to unravel the pieces of this puzzle that comprised their family history and lineage.

No, because it was very recent actually that I was going through, I had read the book on “It doesn’t start with you” by Wolynn, and I was very interested in the family history all of a sudden. So I brought up the topic about generational trauma with my mother and she started mentioning things that make a lot of sense, and then we had the discussion in more detail. [Adam, pg. 9]

4.3.3.2 Experiencing two polarities in childhood in relation to family secrecy: Distortion of reality and silence on the one hand, and being burdened with or witnessing heavy secrets that are shared prematurely on the other hand [4.4.2]

The following passages illustrate a shared experience for individuals growing up in families with inconsistent communication patterns and emotional dynamics. Developing a sensitivity to non-verbal cues and an intuition about emotional dynamics, Lisa and Emma describe how they would pick up cues about things that were not explicitly shared (Yarrow, 2012). There is also a clear dichotomy with certain topics being openly discussed, perhaps without considering the impact on the children involved, and instances of secrecy or distortion of information that would inevitably lead to confusion and distrust. The conflicting signals from adults were not easy to navigate, with both Lisa and Emma understanding they knew too much on the one hand, yet at the same feeling frustrated with the lack of consistency and honesty in communication.

There were moments in time where as a child I would be the one picking up things that were not said or lies that were being told. Then there were those moments where I would be the recipient and witness of intense emotions and stories that I firmly think would have been more suitably shared with an adult. [Lisa, pg. 11]

I do feel that I have been brought up in two polarities – on the one hand, there were things that were spoken too early about in front of us children by some adults ... On the other hand, some other things were kept hidden or were distorted, so that it created confusion in my mind as a child. [Emma, pg. 7]

4.3.3.3 Protecting children from the truth versus robbing them of their right to know about matters that directly concern them [4.4.4]

Ylenia and Vivian share a deep sense of injustice due to the unfair decisions made by the adults in their families. Ylenia's mother's mental health issue was kept from her, depriving her of validation and support. Similarly, Vivian's family hid her mother's life-threatening illness and lied about her sibling's relation, leaving her feeling betrayed and invalidated. These stories illustrate how families withholding crucial information from children can lead to feelings of betrayal and injustice, robbing them of the chance to navigate their realities in a supportive environment.

If I were still a child, I would want to know the truth around what is really happening in my family, especially because I was constantly observing how different our reality was from that of other families. It would have saved me a lot of heartache and confusion. [Ylenia, pg. 58]

Lisa and Nina, like Ylenia and Vivian, are frustrated by the lies and distorted realities within their families, highlighting the harm of concealing truths. However, some families, like Adam's, choose to delay disclosure of sensitive information until children are older, which he appreciates. Similarly, Simon accepts his mother's attempts to protect him from their family situation. This suggests that delaying disclosure can sometimes be beneficial (Dumont, 2008), allowing children to process information more maturely. These examples show the complexity of parental decisions and their intentions, even if not always ideal.

In analysing these perspectives collectively, it becomes evident that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to disclosing family secrets to children (Berger & Paul, 2008; Rober et al., 2012). A common factor in their narratives is the realisation that prioritising the well-being of a child involves a delicate balance of honesty and transparency, and consideration for their emotional readiness (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; McElvaney et al., 2012).

4.3.4 The nexus between emotions and family secrets

The data in this study brings to the foreground the emotional impact of secrecy on family members, and the mutual influence of emotions and family secrets. As previously mentioned, this has been chosen as a tentative core category for its pivotal role in understanding the participants' experiences.

4.3.4.1 Riding the emotional rollercoaster: Emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions [5.1.1]

The emotional impact of secrecy in families emerged as a central focus of this research investigation, highlighting the importance of emotions in shaping and being shaped by the presence of family secrecy in childhood. Emotions like shame, guilt, and the desire to protect oneself or others often contribute to the creation and continuation of family secrets, whether across generations or within a close-knit group (Afifi et al., 2005; Sinko, 2017). For example, Simon's mother kept their abusive stepfamily situation a secret out of fear, shame, and guilt, denying her children validation and leaving them feeling helpless and ambivalent. Similarly, Lisa's father hid his financial difficulties to shield his family from distress, driven by a fear of not being supported or understood due to societal expectations of men as providers. These examples illustrate how secrecy can generate complex emotions and silence important family stories (Bornemisza et al., 2022; Imber-Black, 1998).

Families' disclosure or withholding of information can evoke a range of emotions, including shock, betrayal, resentment, insecurity, isolation, and ambivalence (McGinley & Jones, 2018). Emma was consistently shocked by family secrets, while Ylenia felt isolated and burdened by her mother's unrecognized depression. Nina's ambivalence coloured her childhood and the coherence in her life stories, while Vivian's narrative was marked by betrayal and resentment stemming from loss. Conversely, curiosity about family history, as seen in Adam and Nina's stories, and love or loyalty, demonstrated through efforts to shield or

normalize negative behaviours (Tener, 2018; Werner & Malterud, 2016), such as in Ylenia and Emma's experiences, can also be present.

4.3.4.2 Mourning the loss of one's childhood and adolescence due to difficult family circumstances compounded by family secrecy [5.4.2]

Stories of rejection, abuse, abandonment, and reality distortion permeate the participants' narratives, which in turn are underscored by a profound sense of loss, grief and sadness as they relate ways in which they tried to make sense of or remedy the distress caused by family secrecy (Campbell et al., 2003; Svedin et al., 2002). Nina grapples with the absence of a nurturing mother-daughter relationship from her childhood, lamenting the persistent "... gap between me and my mother that has always been there and still is and that I do not really understand" (Nina, pg. 6). Therapy seems to have offered her a semblance of reconciliation and a path towards understanding and acceptance.

Vivian mourns not only her mother's untimely death but also the lost opportunities to forge deeper memories with her while she was still present. Driven by a desire to shield her from pain, her parents inadvertently deprived her of meaningful connections with her mother, leaving Vivian to navigate the void left by her absence and complicating her grieving process. Carefully navigating stigma and shame stemming from the dysfunction in their families (McGinley & Jones, 2018; Murphy et al., 2017), Simon and Emma both carry the weight of their tumultuous pasts, marked by secrecy and adversity within and beyond their families, with Emma reflecting on her childhood awareness of adult complexities with a sense of sorrow, stating that "I feel sorry for myself as a child who knew so much about the adult world" (pg. 8).

4.3.4.3 Fractured relationships or relationships on the mend? How disclosure may lead to isolation and ruptures in families or to reconciliation and healing [5.8.4]

A key theme that emerged strongly in the data collected through the interviews with participants who were impacted by family secrecy in their childhood is that of proximity and

distance in family relationships. It becomes evident that secrets tend to impinge on the way people consolidate, rupture, or transform their connections with family members, thus sculpting relationships (Imber-Black, 2018). Adam's narrative about the inheritance of a large estate, highlights how significant events can exacerbate existing family tensions, stating "when inheritance like that comes about in a family, it tends to break up the family" (pg. 21). His grandfather became a target when he was still a child, possibly by family members, just like his father was ostracised by his own siblings. Nowadays, Adam still feels a degree of loyalty towards his father and discomfort when it comes to reestablishing some form of relationship with that side of his family, despite his parents being open to a possible reconnection on his part. Vivian, Lisa, Nina, and Simon mention the strained or fractured relationships with close family members and the ramifications that disconnection, rejection, and abandonment may have on themselves and future generations (Sinko, 2017).

Participants often found healing through the disclosure of family secrets, usually in adulthood when they felt more empowered to ask questions and speak openly. Conversations with parents or close family members helped reconcile aspects of their stories and strengthen bonds or initiate healing. Therapy, particularly for Vivian, Emma, Nina, and Lisa, was instrumental in creating a more coherent narrative and integrating their childhood experiences into healthier scripts for adulthood (Helimaki et al., 2021). Many participants expressed a commitment to breaking cycles of secrecy and dysfunction within their families for themselves, their offspring, and future generations (Byng-Hall, 1995). Emma's case is particularly striking, showing how tragedy can catalyse reconciliation and healing within families.

The death of a young person and the ensuing pain that this suicide brought into the whole family opened the eyes of many - it was the start of a journey towards reconciliation, resolution, and healing for the family. Relationships changed, and

distance and coldness resulted between family members, yet I still believe this was for the better as boundaries, healthy ones, were created where there were none before.

[Emma, pg. 22]

4.3.5 Conforming with or challenging a family's secret?

4.3.5.1 Conforming with or challenging a family's secret: Being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone [6.5.4]

Some participants have grappled throughout life with the dilemma they face between adopting their families' patterns of secrecy or rebelling against it, challenging certain information, or refusing to conform to the secret-keeping cycle in their family (Berger & Paul, 2008; Afifi et al., 2015). Adam, Vivian, Nina, Lisa and Simon's stories describe what happens when a family member begins to question certain family communication patterns or chooses to confront family members about the inconsistencies and secrets in their families. Simon, for instance, experienced a distancing from his mother and sister because of his refusal to continue to comply with the unspoken family rule of not talking about the abusive stepfamily scenario.

4.3.5.2 Living with the contradictions, pain, and repercussions of challenging a family secret: Being true to oneself yet bearing the brunt of it all [6.2.1]

The feeling of isolation and loneliness both in childhood as well as growing up is prevalent in the stories told by Nina, Lisa, Emma, Simon, Ylenia and Vivian, whilst Adam alludes to the rejection and isolation his grandfather and father experienced. These emotions tend to be experienced irrespective of the type of family secret or family issue around which the disclosure, topic avoidance or silence revolve whether one is opening or hiding a secret about an illness, a paternity issue, infidelity, complex relationships, or a loss in the family (Bornemisza et al., 2022; Cain, 2006; Silven & Forinder, 2022).

4.3.6 Resilience and adaptability, acceptance, and healing along a spatial-temporal continuum: Learning to live and cope with the presence of family secrecy [2.5.8]

A redeeming feature that emerges in every story told is the way participants, as children, negotiated and managed the complex, uncertain, often unsettling familial landscapes marked by secrecy. Developing resilience and finding ways to adapt amidst the confusion, ambivalence and sadness that run through some of these experiences come across as important aspects of their stories (Lusterman, 2005; Tener, 2018). As children, they developed distinct coping mechanisms either through their own resourcefulness, or through the support of adults within or outside their families (Bugeja & Galea, 2022). Sadly, some participants talk about their conscious efforts to stay away from their family home to cope with the distress and adverse circumstances. Others mention the notion of ‘homeostasis’ where in many ways their conforming or rebellious nature served the function to establish some stability in their home (Helimaki et al., 2021; Selvini, 1997).

4.3.6.1 Support systems and resilience in the face of family secrecy: The important role of adults, within and outside the family, who act as role models in childhood and adolescence [2.4.5]

Ylenia, who suffered through neglect and rejection, mainly due to an absent mother living with depression and an overwhelmed father, found solace in being guided by some adult women she encountered along the years – as a child and an adolescent, they taught her how to take better care of herself, her clothes, and her belongings.

Simon talks about how powerful his relationship with his aunt, who supported him in breaking free from the abusive cycle at home, was at a moment when he was beginning to give up on life, too early in his life. He also mentions a mentor he encountered in the Scouts group who saw him, validated him, and believed in his leadership skills, encouraging him to be involved in the group as a leader. Lisa mentions some role models she encountered in her childhood and adolescence, adults who opened a whole new world and helped her move away from feeling so different and rejected.

4.3.6.2 Parentified children in unstable family circumstances: Children raising parents? [2.3.1]

The interviews revealed that five out of the seven participants were the eldest siblings in their families, with only Lisa and Simon being the middle children. As the eldest, they assumed roles of responsibility, self-reliance, and protection towards siblings and sometimes towards parents, thus experiencing triangulation and boundary-crossing (Byng-Hall, 2008; Campbell et al., 2003). Ylenia and Emma took on very distinctive caregiving roles towards their younger siblings, potentially linked to their birth order – protecting and caring at both the physical and emotional level.

During their formative years, a process of reversed roles began to unfold in their families, with some participants actively seeking to care and protect family members, being themselves, their siblings, or their parents (Byng-Hall, 2008; Chase, 1999). In the absence of adults who could take on and stand accountable for their responsibilities, as children, participants made conscious or unconscious decisions to become a ‘parent’ for themselves, their siblings, and sometimes their parents. This was the case for most participants, except for Adam whose story is unique in this aspect.

Both emotional and instrumental parentification are usually associated with harmful outcomes, leading to developmental and relationship problems (Hooper, 2007). For most participants, but not for all, being the eldest seem to have impinged on taking on a parentified role. This meant growing up too soon, and for some most especially for Ylenia and Emma, it also meant they took on the task of raising their parents in more ways than one, with its undeniable impact on their attachment (Crittenden, 2008). Emma describes herself as being always seen as mature beyond her years, from her early childhood, whilst Ylenia reflects that:

My mother always behaved as if she were the child. Up till today, I do not see her as such as my mother because I am the one who keeps caring for her. It was always like this, even as a child. [Ylenia, pg. 18]

Being burdened with family secrets by adults who see them as their confidantes is also part of this process of parentification for some participants (Chase, 1999). There is a sense of a lost childhood, of heavy burdens, of unfairness and injustice towards them as children and adolescence (Byng-Hall, 2002; 2008). Yet at the same time, as children, this could also act as a validating act, making them feel somewhat seen for their ability to listen, to keep secrets from others, leading to this sense of ambivalence as they tried to make sense of what was happening to them, both internally and externally.

4.3.7 Short-term and Long-Term Impact of the Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood

4.3.7.1 Connecting experiences and secrets shared in childhood to repercussions on one's life choices, self-concept, relationships, and own experience of life in general [7.1.4]

Similarly to other retrospective studies the effects of living in the shadow of a secret or a secretive atmosphere can be both temporary and/ or long-lasting (e.g. Bornemisza et al., 2022; Bugeja & Galea, 2022; Silven & Forinder, 2022; Tener, 2018; Weiber et al., 2020; Yarrow, 2012). Participants made direct and indirect connections between the experiences and secrets shared in childhood and the effects these had on one's identity, personal and professional life trajectories, and relationships (Afifi et al., 2005). Emma, for instance, expresses her sorrow at having taken up adult responsibilities prematurely due to being privy to secrets in her family, feeling very strongly that this early exposure may have led to heightened sensitivity and feelings of fear and insecurity (Byng-Hall, 2002). The emotional strain and uncertainty that comes from being a confidante to one's parents raises questions about the appropriateness of burdening children with adult concerns (Byng-Hall, 2002, 2008). Nina, Lisa, Vivian, Ylenia, and Simon also carry the weight of being burdened with partial disclosures, family secrets or things that were not said. Questioning their own experiences and perceptions sometimes led to self-doubt or a distorted sense of self at particular junctures in their lives for the participants (Salih and Chaudry, 2023; Sela & Bat-Or, 2023). The

feeling of isolation and carrying a sense of being ‘different’ from others was not always easy to carry as children – this was the case for Lisa, Emma, Nina and Ylenia.

All participants made a direct link between the presence of secrecy in childhood and their current commitment to create healthier spaces for communication and emotional expression for children and offspring in their personal lives. Interestingly, Vivian, Lisa, Emma, Adam, and Ylenia also chose a career trajectory that would make this commitment possible even through their professional roles as educators, mentors, or therapists.

4.3.7.2 Developing a radar for lies, secrets, and distortion of reality: feeling supported by life over time in trusting own intuition to make sense of things being kept hidden [7.5.3]

Several participants discuss the effects of having been brought up in a secretive atmosphere on their developed sensitivity to falsehoods, lies and reality distortion. All participants place a significant emphasis on their pursuit of authenticity in relationships as a response to family secrecy in their childhood. Vivian, Lisa, Simon, Ylenia and Nina in particular seemed to have developed strong emotions related to the detection of lies, inauthenticity and manipulation.

I get really upset with lack of authenticity in my relationships. And then there is the issue of religiosity, which also belongs to my family kind of. Pretending something which is not really the case, just to externally abide by a strict moral code, yet then living a double life is something that triggers a lot of anger in me [Nina, pg. 72].

4.3.7.3 Consciously choosing to correct rather than replicate own family script by not perpetuating patterns of secrecy [7.3.8]

Overall, the participants share narratives of resilience and agency in overcoming the legacy of family secrecy, offering insights into ways in which individuals strive to correct and replicate certain family scripts (Byng-Hall, 1995). Across the stories, there is an underlying tone and commitment of wanting to break unhealthy family patterns.

Being the youngest participant, Simon feels strongly about wishing to build his current friendships and possibly his own family in the future based on trust and transparency, vowing not to keep secrets from the people closest to him. Ylenia reflects on the absence of positive role models in her and her siblings' upbringing, particularly in terms of healthy communication and decision-making within her family. Her awareness prompts her to prioritise constructive conflict resolution and honesty in her own relationships, and in her role as a mother, aiming to correct the pattern of the dysfunctional dynamics she experienced.

Committed to honesty and intervention in the face of deceit within her family, Lisa seeks to disrupt harmful patterns and promote integrity and accountability among family members to actively confront untruthfulness, which comes with its own repercussions of isolation and disapproval at times. Prompted by her desire to break free from the negative influence of her childhood experiences of marriage and family communication patterns, Emma recounts her intentional decision to select a partner with contrasting qualities to her family members, only to realise later in life, that merely replicating opposing traits in one's choice of partner may not be enough to ensure happiness and fulfilment in a marriage.

Vivian, Ylenia, and Emma recount their commitment to advocating for children's voices as professionals working with children, and Lisa, Nina, Adam, and Simon join them in their pursuit to promoting transparency in relationships as a means of breaking the cycle of secrecy within families.

The multifaceted impact of family secrecy on individuals' emotional wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and sense of agency is highlighted through these seven narratives. Indeed, the study sheds light on the complex dynamics underlying the transmission and transformation of family legacies across generations when past experiences, present

behaviours and reactions, and future aspirations and hopes are interconnected (e.g. Cain, 2016; Kwar et al., 2019; Sinko, 2017).

4.3.7.4 Finding meaning in connecting stories that reveal legacy burdens in the family and that uncover mysteries around important aspects of one's family life which were rather confusing in childhood [7.7.5]

Some participants have found solace in delving deeper into their family histories, employing several means including therapeutic exploration of family patterns and legacy burdens, the use of systemic constellations to uncover entanglements and relational patterns, pursuing genealogical inquiries, and engaging in self-growth by reading related books or pursuing their studies in a relevant field. For instance, Adam expresses his fascination with family history and systemic constellations, instigated by his encounter with book on inherited family trauma. This sentiment is also shared by other participants, namely Lisa, Emma, and Nina who have engaged in similar pursuits through therapeutic and professional help which has helped them to unveil hidden connections and gain insights into legacy burdens and its link to their own development and relationships (Imber-Black, 2014; Rober, 2017).

4.4 Participating in a research study on family secrecy: Emotions, reflections and internal processes shared by participants during the data collection process

An interesting process which must not be left unnoticed in this study, is the underlying internal process that the participants underwent as they generously shared their stories related to the presence of family secrecy in their life trajectories. From the start of this study, I was aware of the delicate nature of this topic and, as expected, some potential participants withdrew their interest when they realised they were not comfortable nor ready to share information about family secrets.

The interview process itself mirrored the emotional rollercoaster induced by family secrecy. Many participants were selective about what aspects they shared, with Emma, for example, choosing not to delve into details about a family member's suicide out of respect for

their memory. The strong sense of family loyalty could be felt in the way she was also reticent about details of some of the stories she mentioned, stating that she felt some stories were not hers to share. Vivian remained very uncertain about her participation till the last moment, again due to the sensitive nature of her story. Adam used a non-binary pronoun to talk about a family member mentioned in one of the stories he shared, not because this person defines themselves as non-binary, but again to protect the identity and respect the individual's story.

4.5 Concluding Comments

The examination and interpretation of the data, using a tentative key category and corresponding sub-categories, have addressed the primary research question and its associated sub-questions. The data points to similarities and differences in adult children's perceptions and experiences of their encounters with family secrets, silences, and disclosure alongside their perceived ramifications on their lives and relationships. The analysis reveals insights into the inherent tensions between the detrimental and constructive facets of family secrecy, highlighting the significance of robust support systems and personal resilience in navigating and surmounting the darker side of family secrecy. In conclusion, one participant's reflection brings together the consequential impact of the interviewing procedure on participants and the healing potential of disclosing experiences or burdens associated with family secrecy during childhood.

Being able to speak on this subject is testimony to the fact that one can transcend the difficulties one may initially encounter in trying to talk about such a sensitive subject. Throughout the interview, I felt a certain kind of tension as I tried to express a story that is coherent enough to also hold and do justice to its complexities – a tension that reflected the wish to protect the people while making space for this discomfort that I felt and rendering justice to the complexities of our family story. [Lisa, pg. 35]

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

Following the analysis and discussion of the tentative core category and sub-categories that emerged from the study, I shall hereby present a summary of the main findings and outline the limitations of this study. Subsequently, the implications for practice and recommendations for future research will be put forward.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

Consistent with the literature, participants defined family secrets as intentionally withheld stories motivated by a need to protect or a need to manipulate. Participants portray diverse experiences and perceptions of secrecy within families, which vary from intrafamilial secrets and secrets from the outside world. Secrets become ‘entry points’ into a realm of several themes and family dynamics that reveal a complex tapestry of personal, familial, societal, religious, and cultural norms, beliefs, and values.

According to the participants, being raised in a secretive atmosphere and becoming the bearer of one or more family secrets during childhood are two distinct realities. They may lead to similar emotional processes that become entangled within the family system, often causing a reorganisation of the subsystems – participants shared stories of abandonment, isolation, triangulation, cut-offs, distance, and proximity (Bowen, 1978). Learning about a family secret can happen deliberately or accidentally – most participants tended to figure things out for themselves through observation and intuition, which led to ambivalence, confusion, and insecurity as they grappled with the discrepancies between what they were told and what they sensed or observed. However, some also spoke about being burdened with one or more secrets by adults who sought to confide in them, despite their young age, pointing to the phenomenon of parentification, which often coincided with their birth order as the eldest in the family.

Feeling robbed of their childhood and their innocence, participants relate a narrative rife with contrasting memories that also reveal a palpable tension between a sense of loyalty towards their family or towards an idea of ‘family’, and their real-life experience that positioned them as ‘children raising parents’ or ‘children raising themselves’. The discovery or revelation of family secrets in childhood is expressed in terms of a movement between two points – from innocence to awareness – where the proverbial veil is lifted, spurring a transition into a more adult-like, less naïve perception of the world. Children’s voices in families afflicted with secrets are often silenced, with those who conform to the patterns of secrecy making themselves invisible while those who rebel and violate family rules becoming openly or covertly marginalised from their own family. Either way, they describe a childhood lived at the periphery, marked by complex emotional challenges.

The key category points to emotions and family secrets as being mutually reinforcing dynamics within family systems, creating an uneven, turbulent, and inconsistent landscape for children raised in the presence of family secrecy, irrespective of the type or pervasiveness of the culture of secrecy in a family. Life and relationships are thus underpinned by a myriad of emotions that unfold along a developmental continuum over time and, sometimes, across generations. This process is aptly depicted in the study using the metaphor and imagery of an emotional rollercoaster in Appendix G.

Participants demonstrate resilience and adaptability in coping with the contradictions and uncertainties of a secretive atmosphere in their family. Supportive adults, within or outside the family, who act as role models, partly meet the participants’ core emotional need to be seen and validated in a family environment that has otherwise silenced them or made them invisible. Yet the relief is often temporary, and their stories still portray a childhood that has been marred by the intricacies and complexities of family secrecy. Playing specific roles such as that of the parentified child or the ‘black sheep’ of the family serves to maintain their

family system's homeostasis and to keep the attention away from the secrets.

Retrospectively, the participants seem to acknowledge and reflect on the heaviness and burdens they endured as children growing up in the presence of family secrets at the expense of a lighter, carefree existence. Notwithstanding, they also express an ability over time to understand, grieve, accept their reality, and heal.

According to the participants, the short- and long-term impact of being raised in a secretive atmosphere encompasses emotional, psychological, relational, and professional aspects of their lives, shaping their experiences and relationships into adulthood. Participants have been and still are striving to correct and rewrite their own narratives and family scripts. They are also consciously aware of the impact of their childhood encounters with secrecy on their own interactions with others, upholding authenticity and honesty as important values in their relationships. Becoming self-sufficient and having a difficulty to trust and rely on others seems to be a by-product of having been raised in family environments that did not always meet their need for safety and security. Participants also place an emphasis on wishing to create healthier spaces in their personal and/ or professional lives where, in accordance with a rights-based perspective, children are supported in having difficult conversations and a say in matters that directly affect them. Being open and curious to find out more about their family history and legacies seems to also be regarded as a path towards healing.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

While considerable care has been taken in the data collection and analysis process, it is important to acknowledge several limitations affecting this research study. Constraints pertaining to the scope of a master's degree exist, which imposes restrictions on the number of participants and interviews that can be analysed, making it impossible to achieve 'theoretical saturation'. Furthermore, the data for each participant was collected at a single

point in time, meaning the experiences shared reflect their recollection during one interview, potentially influenced by various factors. Some participants may have been hesitant to disclose certain details about family secrets, circumstances, and members due to the delicate nature of the topic, possibly limiting the depth of analysis and understanding of the consequences of secrecy on their lives and relationships. Additionally, there is the inherent subjectivity in how participants recall family events or perceive the presence and impacts of family secrets. The research process is also influenced by the dynamic between the researcher and the participant, both during and after the interview. Moreover, the analysis, selection, and interpretation of the key categories forming the main findings of the study represent one possible construct among several others. It is my discretion, as the researcher, to focus on specific categories and sub-categories based on my own interpretation of recurring themes and experiences across the participants.

5.4 Implications for Practice and Training

In view of some participants' recognition and validation of the benefits of therapy to process the ebbs and flows of being raised in a culture of secrecy or in the shadow of a family secret, one can deduce a need for systemic therapists to cultivate safe spaces for disclosure, whilst remaining sensitive to the complexities that these individuals may bring to the therapeutic space. Recognising that disclosure may not always be feasible, especially for children or adolescents fearing reprimand or disloyalty, systemic therapists can facilitate conversations around the emotional weight of family secrets. This involves acknowledging and exploring the burdens individuals and families carry in either conforming to or possibly challenging family patterns of secrecy.

It is evident that the presence of family secrecy in childhood can] have significant implications for both the individual and their families, including the impact on their psychological and emotional wellbeing, identity formation, family dynamics and conflicts,

issues with trust and communication, and trauma and healing. Family secrets can thus serve as gateways to crucial themes and dynamics within one's upbringing and family life, presenting avenues for exploration and understanding in therapy. Receiving training in recognising and validating those aspects of their clients' stories that are left unsaid or are partially disclosed may help a practitioner to become attuned and to navigate the more sensitive, sometimes hidden parts of their clients' life trajectories. Moreover, creative techniques and metaphors may facilitate the opening and expression of the myriad of emotions surrounding secrecy within their family, offering clients alternative avenues for processing their experiences. The emotional rollercoaster model developed for this study provides a valuable framework for exploring the parallel processes that clients may experience as they recall their encounters with family secrecy whilst also making decisions around what to share, when, where, to whom and how to reveal it.

Systemic approaches offer pathways to healing and reconciliation, whether through the bringing together of various family members in therapy, or collaboratively rewriting alternative narratives and family scripts with the individual. Societal and cultural factors in which the family secrecy is situated need also to be considered when unpacking and processing its presence and overarching impact on the clients.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the relatively small sample size of the current study, it would be interesting to extend the research study using a full-scale constructivist grounded theory methodology, recruiting more participants to strive towards theoretical saturation. Moreover, one could also seek to triangulate the data by exploring other perspectives, including those of participants' parents and other family members involved in the pattern of family secrecy.

Using participatory methods with children, one could obtain a richer understanding of children's experiences of family secrecy during childhood, possibly recruiting children who

are currently being supported through therapy to talk about their experiences with family secrecy. This would add a layer of understanding to retrospective accounts of the presence of family secrecy in childhood.

Using the theoretical model of the emotional rollercoaster presented in Figure 3, it would be interesting to use it as a basis for therapeutic practice when working with family secrecy with both adults and children and subsequently explore its validity and effectiveness for facilitating therapeutic conversations around this sensitive topic. To this end, different methodologies could be used including qualitative research with systemic family therapists and/or clients, as well as treatment effectiveness research.

5.6 Concluding Comments

This process of researching the presence of family secrecy in childhood has been a deeply satisfying and intriguing learning experience on both a personal and a professional level. Insights have been gained into how, at the micro level, family rules, norms, and practices may catapult children into unsafe and unpredictable territories, keeping them stuck at the intersection between secret-keeping and secret-sharing. As a trainee systemic family therapist, I became increasingly aware of the unhealthy and unproductive cycles in which family secrecy, as opposed to family privacy, positions children raised in the presence of secrecy along an emotionally charged developmental continuum right into adolescence and adulthood. At the macro level, these family patterns are often embedded in an ingrained culture of secrecy and silence, particularly around topics that instigate shame and guilt.

In terms of the contribution to knowledge, this study provides a powerful glance into the experiences of seven individuals, who vary in age, profession, and status, and who shared unique stories depicting the presence and impact of family secrecy during childhood on their lives and relationships. It adds to the literature on retrospective accounts on how children experience the presence of family secrecy during the formative years, particularly in a field

that is lacking in terms of a systemic, relational perspective at a local and international level. The concurrent processes participants experienced as they lived through the emotional upheaval, ambivalence and inconsistencies that characterised their formative years due to family secrecy, and at the same time during the retelling of their experiences are represented through the imagery of an emotional rollercoaster. This model could be adopted as a basis upon which systemic therapists may aid clients impacted by family secrecy to uncover and explore the multitude of layers and emotions that constitute their upbringing and life journey.

Finally, it is my hope that the stories shared by the participants inspire therapists, practitioners and adults raising and/or working with children to cultivate safer spaces that can support children's conversations through the presence of responsive, sensitive adults who are willing and able to help them contain and process strong emotions during difficult times. Creating child-friendly environments where children feel secure enough to express, overcome or deal with the emotional cataclysms caused by unhealthy patterns of family communication including family secrecy could help break dysfunctional cycles in families, ultimately creating room for happier, lighter childhoods.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule (Original) ENGLISH

The presence of family secrets in childhood

Background Information

Tell me about you and your family – who are you? Where do you come from?

How were you as a child? How was your childhood?

Can you share any memories that stayed with you from your childhood? Happy ones?

Difficult ones?

Meaning ascribed to ‘family secrets’

What do you understand by the term *family secrets*?

How do family secrets feature in your family of origin? Growing up, do you consider yourself to have been brought up in a climate of secrecy? In what way/s?

What kind of secrets did you grow up with?

Do you consider secrets in families to be a burden or a benefit for a child carrying them?

Were there topics or issues that were/are not spoken about in your family?

Earliest recollections of disclosure/discovery of a family secret

What was the first family secret that you recall learning about? How did you learn about it?

Who disclosed it? Or did you discover it? Tell me more.

Why do you think the adult/s felt fine with disclosing the secret specifically to you despite you being a child?

What did you do when you learnt about the secret? Were there expectations regarding the withholding of the family secret? How did you learn about these expectations?

Who knew about the disclosure or discovery of the secret?

Who supported you? Or did you feel alone as a child privy to a family secret?

How did it feel at the time? How do you feel now? What emotions does this memory evoke in you?

How did the secret position you within your family? What about other family members? If at all the case, who moved closer or further apart from you or other family members?

Is this secret still a secret? Did you or anyone else disclose it to other family members or outsiders? How and why?

Was it the only family secret you were privy to? Were there other family secrets that you learnt about during your childhood?

Impact of the presence of family secrecy in childhood

Do you feel somehow impacted by the presence of family secrecy in childhood? Tell me more.

What was the impact on your childhood experiences?

Do you feel that the presence of family secret/s in childhood may have affected your life growing up as well as your life now as an adult? If yes, why and how?

What about the influence of family secrecy as a child on your relationship building? How did it impact your relationships growing up and your relationships as an adult? Can you give me an example?

What are your views about secrets kept or shared by adults during the formative years? Do you see them as a resource or a hindrance for a child growing up in a secretive atmosphere?

Would you think that secret-keeping and disclosure has an impact on a child's psychological, emotional and social development? Can you give me some examples?

What is your position vis a vis silences and hidden truths in families? Do you think children are able to sense these? Have you experienced this yourself? In what way?

Open-ended

Is there anything else about family secrecy in childhood that you wish to share?

Appendix B: Mistoqsijiet tal-intervista (Originali) MALTESE

Il-Preżenza ta' Sigrieti tal-Familja fit-Tfulija

Informazzjoni Kuntestwali

Ghidli ftit dwarek u dwar il-familja tiegħek ... min inti? Minn fejn ġej/ġejja?

X'tghidli dwar it-tfulija tiegħek? Kif tiddekrivik bħala tifel/tifla?

Għandek xi memorji mit-tfulija li baqgħu miegħek? Memorji ta' ferh? Memorji iktar diffiċli forsi?

Is-sens li wiehed jagħti lill-kunċett ta' *Sigrieti tal-Familja*

X'tifhem bil-kliem 'sigrieti tal-familja'?

B'liema mod setgħu dawn is-sigrieti familjali kienu parti mill-familja originali? Tikkunsidrak li trabbejt fi klima ta' sigrieti inti u tikber? B'liema mod/i?

X'tip ta' sigrieti trabbejt fihom?

Thoss li s-sigrieti tal-familja jistgħu ikunu ta' toqol jew benefiċċju għal tfal li jgorrhom?

Kien hemm xi sugġetti jew topiks li ma kienux jigu mitkellma fil-familja tiegħek? X'kienu? Għaliex?

Memorji ta' żvelar jew skoperta ta' sigriet familjali

X'kien l-ewwel sigriet fil-familja li tiftakar li sirt taf dwaru? Kif sirt taf? Min qallek? Jew skoprejt wahdek jew b'kumbinazzjoni? Ghidli ftit iktar.

Għaliex taħseb li l-adult/i hassu/hassewhom komdu/i li jaqsmu dan is-sigriet miegħek avolja kont għadek tifel/tifla?

X'ghamilt meta sirt taf bih dan is-sigriet? Kien hemm xi aspettattivi dwar kif iżzommu s-sigriet tal-familja? Kif indunajt b'dawn l-aspettattivi?

Min kien jaf b' dan is-sigriet u dwar l-iżvelar/skoperta tiegħu?

Min ghenek jew uriek support dak iż-żmien? Jew hassejtek wahdek bħala tifel/tifla li kien/kienet qed iġorr/iġġorr sigriet dwar il-familja?

Kif hassejtek dak iż-żmien? Kif thossok illum dwar dak li ġarrabt? X'inhuma l-emozzjonijiet li din il-memorja tqanqal fik?

Kif thoss li ppozizzjonak dan is-sigriet fil-familja tiegħek? U kif ippozizzjona membri oħra fil-familja? Jekk kien il-każ, min thoss illi resaq iktar viċin jew żamm iktar distanza minnek jew minn membri oħrajn tal-familja?

Dan is-sigriet għadu sigriet fil-familja tiegħek? Matul is-snin qsamt u ma' xi hadd jew forsi xi hadd ieħor żvelah lil membri oħra tal-familja jew lil xi barranin? Kif ġara dan u xi thoss li kienet il-motivazzjoni wara dan l-iżvelar?

Kien l-unika sigriet fil-familja li sirt taf bih? Jew kien hemm sigrieti oħrajn barra dan li sirt taf bihom fi tfulitek?

L-impatt tal-preżenza ta' sigrieti tal-familja fi tfulija

Thossok li b'xi mod ġejt milqut/ ikkundizzjonat mill-preżenza ta' dawn is-sigrieti familjali li sirt taf bihom fi tfulija? Ghidli iktar dwar dan.

X'tahseb li kien l-impatt fuq l-esperjenzi tiegħek bħala tifel jew tifla?

Thoss li l-preżenza ta' dawn is-sigrieti segħtet b'xi mod jew ieħor affetwatlek haġtek inti u tikber minn tifel/tifla għal adoloxxent u wkoll haġtek bħala adult/adulta? Jekk iva, għaliex u b'liema mod?

X'tahseb li jistghu ikunu l-effetti/ influwenzi ta' dawn is-sigrieti li garrejt fi tfulija fuq ir-relazzjonijiet li inti bnejt? Kif affettwaw l-abilta tiegħek li tiffirma relazzjonijiet int u tikber kif ukoll meta sirt adult/adulta? Tista' tagħtini xi eżempji?

Mistoqsija Miftuħa

Hemm xi haġa oħra dwar sigrieti fi tfulija li tixtieq taqsam mieghi?

Appendix C: Updated Interview Schedule_ENGLISH

The presence of family secrets in childhood

Background Information

Tell me about you and your family – who are you? Where do you come from?

How were you as a child? How was your childhood?

Can you share any memories that stayed with you from your childhood? Happy ones?

Difficult ones?

Meaning ascribed to ‘family secrets’

What do you understand by the term *family secrets*?

How do family secrets feature in your family of origin? Growing up, do you consider yourself to have been brought up in a climate of secrecy? In what way/s?

What kind of secrets did you grow up with?

Do you consider secrets in families to be a burden or a benefit for a child carrying them?

Were there topics or issues that were/are not spoken about in your family?

Earliest recollections of disclosure/discovery of a family secret

What was the first family secret that you recall learning about? How did you learn about it?

Who disclosed it? Or did you discover it? Tell me more.

Why do you think the adult/s felt fine with disclosing the secret specifically to you despite you being a child?

What did you do when you learnt about the secret? Were there expectations regarding the withholding of the family secret? How did you learn about these expectations?

Who knew about the disclosure or discovery of the secret?

Who supported you? Or did you feel alone as a child privy to a family secret?

How did it feel at the time? How do you feel now? What emotions does this memory evoke in you?

How did the secret position you within your family? What about other family members? If at all the case, who moved closer or further apart from you or other family members?

Is this secret still a secret? Did you or anyone else disclose it to other family members or outsiders? How and why?

Was it the only family secret you were privy to? Were there other family secrets that you learnt about during your childhood?

Impact of the presence of family secrecy in childhood

Do you feel somehow impacted by the presence of family secrecy in childhood? Tell me more.

What was the impact on your childhood experiences?

Do you feel that the presence of family secret/s in childhood may have affected your life growing up as well as your life now as an adult? If yes, why and how?

What about the influence of family secrecy as a child on your relationship building? How did it impact your relationships growing up and your relationships as an adult? Can you give me an example?

What are your views about secrets kept or shared by adults during the formative years? Do you see them as a resource or a hindrance for a child growing up in a secretive atmosphere?

Would you think that secret-keeping and disclosure has an impact on a child's psychological, emotional and social development? Can you give me some examples?

What is your position vis a vis silences and hidden truths in families? Do you think children are able to sense these? Have you experienced this yourself? In what way?

Open-ended

Is there anything else about family secrecy in childhood that you wish to share?

Appendix D: Mistoqsijiet tal-Intervista Updated (MALTESE)

Il-Preżenza ta' Sigrieti tal-Familja fit-Tfulija

Informazzjoni Kuntestwali

Ghidli ftit dwarek u dwar il-familja tiegħek ... min inti? Minn fejn ġej/ġejja?

X'tghidli dwar it-tfulija tiegħek? Kif tiddekrivik bħala tifel/tifla?

Għandek xi memorji mit-tfulija li baqgħu miegħek? Memorji ta' ferh? Memorji iktar diffiċli forsi?

Is-sens li wiehed jagħti lill-kunċett ta' *Sigrieti tal-Familja*

X'tifhem bil-kliem 'sigrieti tal-familja'?

B'liema mod setgħu dawn is-sigrieti familjali kienu parti mill-familja originali? Tikkunsidrak li trabbejt fi klima ta' sigrieti inti u tikber? B'liema mod/i?

X'tip ta' sigrieti trabbejt fihom?

Thoss li s-sigrieti tal-familja jistgħu ikunu ta' toqol jew benefiċċju għal tfal li jgħorruhom?

Kien hemm xi sugġetti jew topiks li ma kienux jigu mitkellma fil-familja tiegħek? X'kienu? Għaliex?

Memorji ta' żvelar jew skoperta ta' sigriet familjali

X'kien l-ewwel sigriet fil-familja li tiftakar li sirt taf dwaru? Kif sirt taf? Min qallek? Jew skoprejt u waħdek jew b'kombinazzjoni? Ghidli ftit iktar.

Għaliex taħseb li l-adult/i hassu/hassewhom komdu/i li jaqsmu dan is-sigriet miegħek avolja kont għadek tifel/tifla?

X'ghamilt meta sirt taf bih dan is-sigriet? Kien hemm xi aspettattivi dwar kif iżzommu s-sigriet tal-familja? Kif indunajt b'dawn l-aspettattivi?

Min kien jaf b' dan is-sigriet u dwar l-iżvelar/skoperta tiegħu?

Min ghenek jew uriek support dak iż-żmien? Jew hassejtek wahdek bħala tifel/tifla li kien/kienet qed iġorr/iġġorr sigriet dwar il-familja?

Kif hassejtek dak iż-żmien? Kif thossok illum dwar dak li ġarrabt? X'inhuma l-emozzjonijiet li din il-memorja tqanqal fik?

Kif thoss li ppozizzjonak dan is-sigriet fil-familja tiegħek? U kif ippozizzjona membri oħra fil-familja? Jekk kien il-każ, min thoss illi resaq iktar viċin jew żamm iktar distanza minnek jew minn membri oħrajn tal-familja?

Dan is-sigriet għadu sigriet fil-familja tiegħek? Matul is-snin qsamt u ma' xi hadd jew forsi xi hadd ieħor żvelah lil membri oħra tal-familja jew lil xi barranin? Kif ġara dan u xi thoss li kienet il-motivazzjoni wara dan l-iżvelar?

Kien l-unika sigriet fil-familja li sirt taf bih? Jew kien hemm sigrieti oħrajn barra dan li sirt taf bihom fi tfulitek?

L-impatt tal-preżenza ta' sigrieti tal-familja fi tfulija

Thossok li b'xi mod ġejt milqut/ ikkundizzjonat mill-preżenza ta' dawn is-sigrieti familjali li sirt taf bihom fi tfulija? Ghidli iktar dwar dan.

X'tahseb li kien l-impatt fuq l-esperjenzi tiegħek bħala tifel jew tifla?

Thoss li l-preżenza ta' dawn is-sigrieti segħtet b'xi mod jew ieħor affetwatlek haġtek inti u tikber minn tifel/tifla għal adoloxxent u wkoll haġtek bħala adult/adulta? Jekk iva, għaliex u b'liema mod?

X'tahseb li jistghu ikunu l-effetti/ influwenzi ta' dawn is-sigrieti li garrejt fi tfulija fuq ir-relazzjonijiet li inti bnejt? Kif affettwaw l-abilta tieghek li tiffirma relazzjonijiet int u tikber kif ukoll meta sirt adult/adulta? Tista' taghtini xi eżempji?

X' tahseb fuq sigrieti mistura jew maqsuma minn adulti mat tfal waqt is-snin formattivi taghhom? Tarhom bhala rizorsa jew xkiel ghat tfal huma u jikbru f ambjent mimli sigrieti u silenzji?

Tahseb li meta adulti jzommu jew jaqsmu sigrieti mat tfal, din tista taffetwhom psikologikament, emozzjonalment u socjalment? B liema mod? Tista' taqsam mieghi xi eżempji?

X inhi l pozizzjoni tieghek fejn jidhlu silenzji u informazzjoni mistura fil familji? Tahseb li t tfal ihossu dak li jkun qed jigri fil familja taghhom anke meta ma jghidulhomx id-dettalji? Gratlek lilek? B'liema mod?

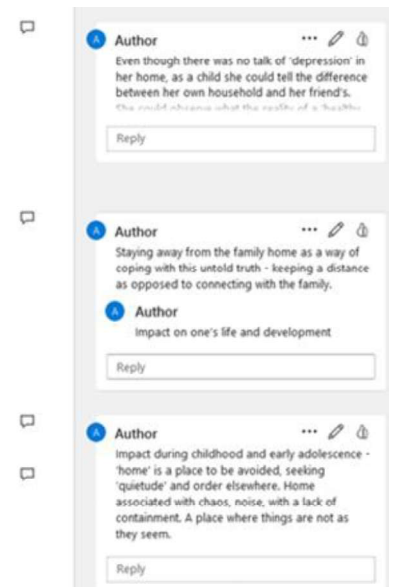
Mistoqsija Miftuha

Hemm xi haġa ohra dwar sigrieti fi tfulija li tixtieq taqsam mieghi?

Appendix E: Line by line Coding & Constant Comparison between the 7 Interviews

Excerpt from interview with line-by-line coding, focused codes and memo writing

P1	Esatt, ha- jien. li peressomlu mmur ghond habiba tiegħi wara l-iskola u nara l-borma fuq in-pat, id-dar nadifa, kollox f'postu, nahi d'atmosfera, x'differenza.	Noticing the differences between her home and her friends' households, even though she was still a child.	Children in transition: from innocence to awareness. When the veil of innocence drops: learning things about the adult world that may shock or confuse a child.
RC	X'kont thoss tahseb hekk bhala tifla dak iz-zmien apparti li tinnota d-differenza?		
P1	Jien kont fejn oista' nabra mid-dar nabra nabaqad meta kbirt iktar.	Staying away from the family home as a way of coping with this untold truth - keeping a distance as opposed to connecting with her family.	Choosing to be away from own home as a form of escapism and self-preservation. Connection and disconnection: balancing proximity and distance in relationships impacted by a family secret.
RC	X'eta qed titkeillem?		
P1	Jien naf eta ta' 9, 10 years u early secondary.		
RC	Xorta tifla bax. Mhux hekk.		
P1	I.e. xorta tifla, childhood. Kont mmur noraqad befra ghond li xliet peressomlu li xliet nabaqad bhalli-mummy knew.	Associating 'home' as a place to be avoided. Seeking 'quietude' and order outside her home.	Experiencing internal and external chaos as secrets are created, kept or disclosed. Seeking order and stability amidst confusion, ambivalence and chaos.



Constant Comparison

Similarities & Differences between the Stories of Ylenia, Nina, Vivian, Emma, Simon, Lisa and Adam

Childhood Recollections in the Context of Family Secrecy (FS)

- Positioning in Family of Origin (FOO) and birth order as eldest in the family [1.1.1]
- Positioning in FOO and reconstituted family and birth order: changes over time and their impact on FS [1.1.2]
- Family composition and origins – identifying own family as mixed-nationality [1.1.3]

- ‘Before’ and ‘after’ – experiencing shifts in perception of own family & changes in experience of what it meant to be a member of own FOO following creation or disclosure of FS [1.3.1]
- ‘Before’ and ‘after: experiencing shifts in perception of own family and changes in experience as memories become heavier in terms of childhood experience following significant transitions in childhood [1.3.2]
- Recalling happy childhood memories of travelling abroad as a family[1.2.1]
- Recalling happy childhood memories of ‘togetherness’ with the extended family [1.2.2]
- Being raised in two different cultures led to an openness and an understanding of diversity in cultures [1.1.4]
- Contrasting memories of childhood: childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy [1.2.3]
- Contrasting memories of childhood: recalling the good ‘together’ times as a family on the one hand and the largely fear-stricken recollections related to life within the reconstituted family home on the other [1.2.4]
- Contrasting memories of childhood: happy memories around playing and being creative versus more negative memories linked with being perceived as ‘different’ and almost a nuisance [1.2.5]
- Connecting the more negative childhood memories with the experience of secrecy in the family: being implicated in an act of violence held over her parents’ home which led to confusion in a child’s mind [1.2.6]

- Experiencing significant transitions in childhood that led to a secretive family atmosphere: divorce, moving to another country, violence and abuse [1.3.3]
- Making sense of significant transitions in one's early childhood: doing what your parents decide for you and not having much of a say [1.3.4]
- Family loyalties: conveying a sense of guilt in talking about unhappy recollections of own childhood and feeling as if one has no right to speak badly about her childhood [1.4.1]
- Family loyalties: Feeling the need to protect own family out of a sense of loyalty and respect by not going into certain details about very sensitive parts of one's childhood stories during the interview [1.4.2]
- Memories tainted by lack of clarity and truthfulness about one's family circumstances [1.2.7]
- Memories based on what was repeated by a parent or another family member [1.2.8]
- Dialectically opposing pictures of happy childhood memories contrasted with darker ones [1.2.9]
- Self-concept and image of 'me' as a child: being made to feel there was something wrong with being 'me' and pursuing the things one is good at [1.5.1]
- Self-concept and image of 'me' as a child: freedom to be 'me' outside the home versus feeling stifled and silenced inside the family home [1.5.2]
- Self-concept and image of 'me' as a child: feeling 'different' and 'alien' within and outside the family as a result of family communication patterns of secrecy and silence [1.5.3]

- Self-concept and image of ‘me’ as an active, inventive and curious child who loved to pull things apart [1.5.4]
- Feeling ‘different’ from the rest of one’s family in terms of personality, sensitivity, and outlook towards life [1.5.5]
- Attributing the feeling of being ‘different’ or ‘alien’ within her family and community to own perception of what makes sense or not from a very young age: noticing how adults would feel threatened or disapproving of her questions or observations [1.5.6]
- Feeling ‘different’ from the rest of one’s family: being treated differently and unfavourably [1.5.7]
- Emphasising the notion of ‘difference’ experienced as a lack of belonging in childhood that pervaded one’s experiences within and outside the home [1.5.8]
- Family relations & dynamics: relationship with mum, dad, siblings and other family members [1.6.1]
- Linking own childhood experiences and identity formation with pursuing a career in the helping profession: using the metaphor of the bridge [1.5.9]
- Relationship with parent: strained relationship when stepparent was around [1.6.2]
- Relationship with stepparent: strained relationship built on fear and unpredictability [1.6.3]
- Relationship with stepparent: attributing childhood struggles to the conflictual relationship with stepparent [1.6.4]
- Relational dynamic with parents: leading separate/ connected/enmeshed lives [1.6.5]

- Family values, beliefs and practices: men who provide and women who take physical and emotional care of the family [1.6.7]
- Power & control: family and gender roles ascribed and adopted by men and women in the family that lead to domination and submission, provision and caregiving [1.6.6]
- Being raised in a culture where women and children were expected to remain silent and be invisible as a girl who did not conform to this model of girlhood and eventually womanhood [1.6.8]
- Learning about family history: feeling a sense of kinship with a family member [1.6.9]
- First brushes with family secrecy in childhood: loosely shared information, hushed voices, half-truths and silences that a child finds hard to make sense of [1.7.1]
- First brushes with family secrecy: invented stories and myths, distorted reality and accusations which create confusion in a child's mind [1.7.2]
- Use of photos as memory aid and/or confirmation of factual information that is denied or ignored by others [1.7.3]
- Making sense of loss, grief and trauma in childhood and adolescence [1.7.4]
- Memory imprint of a significant moment in childhood: recalling a childhood incident or event that marked the individual for being obscured by mystery, secrecy or silence [1.7.5]
- Significant moment in childhood that left an indelible mark on one's memory: experiencing a physical injury that was labelled an 'accident' but that was a result of abuse [1.7.6]

- Making sense of stories of violence, abuse and family secrets [1.7.7]
- Childhood recollections of an implied understanding that ‘what happens within the family stays in the family’ [1.7.8]
- When difficult childhood memories are compounded by a lack of clarity and truthfulness around the real motivation behind parents’ decision-making: the need for transparency and authentic family conversations around difficult and important issues [1.7.9]
- Stories of abandonment, rejection and being raised outside the family home – trying to make sense of this in the context of a secretive atmosphere and family dysfunctional patterns [1.6.10]

Resilience and Adaptability in Unstable Family Circumstances

- Childrearing practices, parenting styles, care and neglect: feeling loved or feeling rejected? [2.1.1]
- Childrearing practices: practical versus emotive caregiving in family of origin where emotional needs remained largely unmet [2.1.2]
- Being neglected in childhood and developing ways of caring for oneself and siblings: growing up too soon yet not having a way to reach out for support [2.1.3]
- Being raised with the idea that the world is a safe place by parents who consciously provided security and protection to their children [2.1.4]
- Being raised in a very caring and nurturing environment: feeling loved and well cared for by adult who invested in their children’s upbringing [2.1.5]

- Being raised by parents who shielded their children from information they felt they could not handle as children whilst providing secure base [2.1.6]
- Finding alternative and safer places to home where 'home' does not meet her physical and core emotional needs [2.2.1]
- The interplay between parenting styles, affection, and discipline: inconsistency and ambivalence in parenting, discipline and care [2.1.7]
- The interplay between parenting styles and discipline: recalling a series of punishments handed by stepparent throughout own childhood [2.1.8]
- Passive or absent parents in the family system: learning to fend for oneself or stay out of the way [2.3.3]
- Homeostasis in family systems: unique behavioural, emotional and interactional patterns developed and maintained to enhance 'stability' in the family [2.2.1]
- Decision-making and problem-solving in difficult familial circumstances: to conform or to rebel? [2.6.9]
- Parentified children in unstable family situations: children raising parents? [2.3.1]
- Reversed roles in FOO: taking on more responsibilities at a young age [2.3.2]
- Support systems and resilience in childhood: finding some respite through friends and family [2.4.1]
- Supportive family members in adverse familial circumstances: overcompensation for the experienced loss? [2.4.2]
- Resilience and adaptability: seeing the 'silver lining' in the clouds [2.5.1]

- Resilience and adaptability: seeing the ‘silver lining’ when looking at the way creativity has left a positive mark on her growth and development despite difficult childhood memories [2.5.2]
- Coping mechanisms, resources and healing: finding ways of withstanding and dealing with secretive atmosphere and its repercussions [2.6.1]
- Using creative media to make sense of and express strong emotions in childhood and adolescence helped to ease the pain and hurt of not being raised within the family home with own siblings [2.6.2]
- Therapy as a safe space for the unspoken to be opened up [2.6.3]
- Regaining trust in others and learning not to be crushed by the shadow of FS through therapy [2.6.4]
- Using humour to soften the memory of something that is painful, hard to remember or talk about [2.5.3]
- Learning to stay out of the way and low-key as a child: navigating volatile home environment [2.2.2]
- Choosing to be away from own home as a form of escapism and self-preservation [2.2.3]
- Finding own voice and learning to be more authentic despite the secretive atmosphere in which one is raised [2.6.1]
- Accepting own reality and making peace with knowledge that the biggest support system can be found within oneself – learning to cope amidst difficult life moments [2.5.4]

- Questioning whether knowing more about the family secret and legacy burdens at a young age might have been experienced as a burden or an eye-opener [2.6.6]
- Being in touch with oneself and trusting own gut instinct is a great resource for people affected by family secrecy [2.6.5]
- Finding solace and sustenance in the love and/or guidance of significant people in one's life, those still present and those who passed [2.4.3]
- Starting to develop a sense of belonging when interacting with like-minded individuals who viewed the world differently sharing a vision and similar passions creates a sense of kinship and a sense of fitting in [2.5.5]
- Making new plans for the future: building trusting relationships with others despite the difficult childhood experiences that eroded one's sense of trust and faith in others [2.5.6]
- Finding joy in the company of children and animals: upholding their innocence and light-heartedness above all else and seeking to create an unburdened climate for them [2.4.4]
- Adopting a positive attitude towards life in general as a reaction to earlier hardships – one of acceptance rather than resistance [2.5.7]
- Resilience, adaptability, acceptance & healing along a spatial-temporal continuum: learning to live and cope with the presence of FS [2.5.8]
- Support systems and resilience in the face of FS: The important role adults, within and outside the family, who act as role models in childhood and adolescence [2.4.5]
- Making new friendships that are experienced as the family one chooses [2.4.6]

- When barriers between significant people in one's life are raised: coping with the loss through silence and topic avoidance [2.6.7]
- Appreciating unique moments of connection with disconnected family members [2.6.8]

Culture of Secrecy, Silence, and Topic Avoidance in Families

- Snowballing effect of family communication patterns of secrecy, silence and topic-avoidance: secrets that breed more secrets [3.2.1]
- Mapping family secrets: secrets as part of a larger family context and a specific function in a family [3.2.2]
- Severity of the 'secret' and its widespread impact on family members [3.2.3]
- Defining family secrecy in terms of one's experience with this form of family communication [3.1.1]
- Defining family secrecy in terms of the changes that take place on one's view of how things were thought to be and how things turned out to actually be [3.1.2]
- Defining family secrets as those stories that are intentionally not shared for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection [3.1.3]
- Identifying two polarities and all the shades in between when analysing the motivation behind keeping or opening family secrets: wanting to protect oneself and/or others from the truth to doing it intentionally to manipulate [3.3.1]
- Distinguishing between creating a secret out of a malicious intent to deceive others and doing so out of a sense of protection for own self and others [3.3.2]

- When a family secret is opened, it is experienced as an ‘unlocking’ of something that opens one’s eyes to the truth behind who somebody is/what the person does which comes as a surprise/shock [3.4.1]
- Conceiving family secrets to be stories that happen within one’s family and that are kept secret from the outside world or that are not acknowledged nor spoken openly about within the family [3.1.4]
- Distinguishing between family secrets that are important and labelling them as ‘big ones’ and those that are not [3.1.5]
- Family secrets around financial matters: a man’s duty to be a provider and a problem-solver [3.5.1]
- Unspoken rules, omissions, and topic avoidance: patterns of family communication that are conducive to FS [3.1.6]
- Secrets that create more secrets in the family: a snowballing effect [3.2.2]
- Distortion of reality as a way one parent/family member operates which determines the way the family relates with one another: not always able to distinguish between factual and invented information [3.7.6]
- Topic avoidance manifested in not addressing important issues or ignoring there is a problem or issue to see to [3.1.7]
- Knowing as a child that something is not quite right yet there is no recognition and validation from adults around what is the matter [3.8.1]

- Concealing the truth of what has actually happened leading to the creation of a narrative that distorts the reality in the mind of those who experienced it first-hand: minimising the abuse or severity of the situation [3.8.2]
- Things that are and remain unsaid – perpetuation of confusion, distance and/or denial between family members [3.7.7]
- Family communication patterns: not addressing important emotional issues in conversation [3.1.8]
- Acknowledging the impact of things that remain hidden in a family on a child's upbringing [3.2.7]
- Use of metaphors or sayings to describe impact of family secrecy [3.1.9]
- Understanding that family members may be differently impacted by the presence of family secrecy in childhood: one's experience is not necessarily everybody's experience of the family situation [3.2.8]
- Creating or perpetuating patterns of secrecy both within and outside the family [3.7.8]
- When perpetuation of silence or fear of opening up in a family leads to a situation of 'not-knowing' [3.7.9]
- Culture of secrecy and silence ingrained in family dynamics and practices [3.7.10]
- Being raised in a secretive atmosphere – secrets that percolate every aspect of one's life with patterns of secrecy evident in a family where hidden/ half-truths are part of the communication patterns [3.7.11]
- When things implode: the devastating impact on children and adolescents of hidden truths, silences, chaos and/or oversharing in a family [3.2.9]

- Knowing as a child there is more to a story than meets the eye, yet not fully understanding it until the secret is revealed [3.8.3]
- Relational difficulties and dysfunction in family dynamic viewed as ‘normal’ [3.2.9]
- Making sense of legacy burdens and inheritance of family patterns [3.6.1]
- Concealing the truth about one’s relationship status as part of a pattern and culture of family secrecy [3.5.2]
- Suspicion and distrust of the world: treating family matters (from the most trivial to the most significant) as private and not to be disclosed to the outside world [3.3.3]
- ‘Keeping up appearances’: portraying an almost ‘perfect’ family image to outsiders [3.3.4]
- When things are not quite like what they seem: portraying a different image of what was happening within their family to the extended family [3.3.5]
- Keeping the severity of their situation hidden from their extended family: feeling unprotected and isolated [3.7.1]
- Learning to remain silent: protection, fear, obedience and ambivalence in the face of things that are not clear or not spoken of [3.3.6]
- Secrets that breed more secrets: snowballing effect of secret creation on family – present and future [3.2.3]
- Secrets as ‘entry points’ into family vaults and realms: talking about FS grants access to hidden depth, mysteries and dynamics in family relationships [3.7.2]
- Being at the intersection of secret-keeping and secret-sharing [3.2.4]

- Giving/denying people their rightful place in families: acknowledging and honouring individuals rather than hiding their existence or denying who they are/were [3.6.2]
- Secrets about paternity and miscarriages in a family: keeping quiet out of guilt, shame, and fear [3.5.3]
- Deciding for others: when secrets are created/kept without realising the consequences of ‘not knowing’ on those denied of the truth [3.7.3]
- Family secrets perceived and lived as heavy burdens in childhood and adulthood [3.2.4]
- Feeling strongly that family secrecy and how one views and lives it is a very unique and subjective experience [3.2.5]
- Connection and disconnection: balancing proximity and distance in relationships impacted by a family secret [3.2.6]
- Creating a web of lies, concealment, unspoken truths and silence in a family with people who fall within and outside the secret-bearing group [3.7.4]
- Having a silent expectation as a family not to talk about certain family secrets within and outside the family, depending on the severity and widespread impact of the secret [3.7.5]
- Respecting the way a secret may have impacted the person who opened it in terms of having found closure or it still being an open wound when deciding whether to talk about it or keep it hidden [3.2.10]
- Perceived impact of family secrecy on relationships greater when there are closer bonds and connections [3.2.11]

- Omissions, half-truths, lies and secrets that are passed on from one generation to another so that the truth gets lost in the telling and passing of the stories across generations [3.6.3]
- Systems, including institutional, religious and judicial, that reward rather than discourage distortion of the truth – a culture of silence, half-truths and lies [3.6.4]
- Secrets as ‘entry points’ into family vaults and realms: talking about family secrecy grants access to hidden depths, mysteries and dynamics within familial relationships [3.7.12]
- Secrets within and outside the family: distinguishing between withheld information amongst family members and keeping secrets from the outside world [3.5.4]

Children in Transition: From Innocence to Awareness of FS when the Veil is Lifted and a Clearer View of Family Life Emerges [4.1.1]

- Balancing truthfulness and caution when revealing information to children [4.5.1]
- Balancing truthfulness and caution when revealing information to children: feeling his brother’s hospitalisation was adequately explained by his parents and family [4.5.2]
- Developing keen observation skills and intuition as a result of a lack of clarity and inconsistent family communication patterns [4.3.1]
- Being positioned in a tight spot as a child because of own tendency to seek and speak the truth in a family culture that operated on silence, topic avoidance and secrecy [4.3.2]
- Being burdened with a secret as a child and told not to share it with own family [4.4.1]

- Experiencing two polarities in childhood in relation to family secrecy: distortion of reality and silence on the one hand, and being burdened with or witnessing heavy secrets that were shared prematurely on the other hand [4.4.2]
- Becoming a ‘safe place for secret-sharing’ for adults: personality, disposition, maturity beyond one’s years? [4.3.3]
- Finding oneself being the recipient of many stories told by adults who confided in her when she was still a child [4.4.3]
- Receiving validation and recognition by adults who saw her as a child who was mature beyond her years and very perceptive may have led to her embracing the role of a confidante for parents/grandparents [4.3.4]
- Being exposed as a child to stories of unfaithfulness and betrayal in relationships: understanding something is amiss with some adult relationships in the family but not being mature enough to fully grasp what is happening [4.2.1]
- Being silenced as a child and learning not to speak one’s mind as this usually led to criticism, contempt and/or punishment [4.6.1]
- When parents create stories to justify or hide reality: being told she was the target of an act of violence for getting high grades at school when it was evident that this had nothing to do with it [4.2.2]
- Trying to revisit some of the most confusing stories lived in childhood with own family as an adult: denial and refusal to accept they had actually happened [4.7.1]
- Denying the truth or blaming it on a false memory: when talking about family secrecy leads to further pain and rejection [4.7.2]

- Feeling baffled at the stories and myths invented in her family home by a parent who seemed to thrive in creating stories to justify or excuse things that did not make sense or to hide some aspects of their family life [4.7.3]
- Parental difficulty to be accountable: when parents find it hard to talk about or acknowledge painful childhood memories that were caused by their behaviour/attitude with their adult children [4.7.4]
- Feeling alone as a child in being the bearer of family secrets [4.1.2]
- Feeling stifled in ability to grow and develop due to the secretive atmosphere at home [4.1.3]
- Facing the truth: removing a parent from the pedestal [4.1.4]
- Learning to hide/ remain silent about the family situation out of a strong sense of loyalty towards own family/ parent [4.1.5]
- Clash between own socially adept personality and possibility to pursue friendships and relationships with the outside world due to the fearful and stressful home environment [4.1.6]
- Connection between toxic family secret and difficulty faced in childhood to create and maintain stable friendships [4.1.7]
- Feeling paralysed when faced with an opportunity to open up to others or seeking protection/ support from the outside world [4.6.2]
- Being made to feel 'bad' for something one has no recollection of about own presumed behaviour/ strong feeling towards somebody else: trying to make sense a memory that was passed on rather than recollected [4.6.3]

- Putting the pieces of the puzzle together: figuring or finding things out about family secrets [4.1.8]
- Figuring things out about the impact of family secrecy on one's life and relationships [4.1.9]
- Sensing as a child that something was amiss from the tone of voice and hushed voices of the adults [4.1.10]
- Feeling like an outcast in own family when own story is rejected and denied as false which increases the sense of not fitting in or not belonging to one's family [4.7.5]
- Children keeping secrets: learning to remain silent [4.6.4]
- Children who ask questions: 'curiosity killed the cat' yet 'satisfaction brought it back' [4.6.5]
- Using scaffolding as a technique to reveal or share delicate or difficult information with children [4.5.3]
- Keeping in mind an unwritten policy that if a child asks then they are ready to talk about the topic: being attuned to the child's needs [4.5.4]
- Understanding that different children may reach a good level of maturity at a different age than their peers: not having specific rules about ages but more being in touch with a child and knowing when the right time to talk would be [4.5.5]
- Being raised by adults who are not able to care for their children due to their own issues and difficulties: beginning of things that are not said [4.8.1]
- Navigating an upbringing with a parent who was not emotionally available and/or who would constantly disapprove of who his/her child is [4.8.2]

- Expressing anger towards a parent who remains ‘invisible’ and is not able to protect nor guide [4.8.3]
- Becoming a confidante for one’s parent/s: bonds that are consolidated by the secret-sharing [4.2.3]
- Becoming a confidante for one’s parents and hearing stories that should have been shared with other adults or professionals: being robbed of own childhood/ innocence [4.2.4]
- Protecting children from the truth versus robbing them of their right to know about matters that directly affect them [4.4.4]
- Grappling with a dilemma: to tell or not to tell [4.4.5]
- Telling the truth was never questioned by her as a child: for her there was never any other way, which may have been inconvenient for adults around her [4.3.5]
- Being raised in a culture of silence, secrecy or distortion of reality: pushing for the truth despite the persistence of her family to conform to this pattern of family communication [4.3.6]
- Mythical thinking: when hushed voices, half-truths and spilled information lead to the creation of stories in children’s minds [4.7.6]
- Adults’ refusal to allow children to ask questions or talk about certain topics: quickly learning to be quiet [4.6.6]
- Making sense of new knowledge and decision-making around whether to tell or to keep secret [4.1.11]

- Being caught in the middle of keeping a parent's secrets and experiencing a sense of split loyalty to the other parent/ family member [4.4.6]
- Being caught in the middle as a confidante for parents who confess their secrets about relational issues with the other parent [4.4.7]
- As a child, feeling shocked by the divulgence of the secret yet special that one is regarded as trustworthy enough to be able to carry such knowledge [4.3.7]
- 'Turning point' moment – facing the reality [4.1.12]
- 'Turning point' moment: facing the reality that life could only improve by being away from the source of conflict and distress [4.1.13]
- 'Turning point' moment – facing the reality started a series of events that led to a form of resolution [4.1.14]
- When the veil of innocence drops: learning things about the adult world that may shock or confuse a child [4.1.15]
- When the veil of innocence drops: learning that the family situation was toxic and dysfunctional [4.1.16]
- Making sense of a parent's silence around important family issues: understanding the difficulty to speak as being stuck in a process of holding on and letting go [4.8.4]
- Learning to hide one's reality as a child out of self-doubt and fear of not being believed [4.6.7]
- Learning about an important family secret about family inheritance and legacy: the opening of a complex family situation that was kept hidden from the children [4.5.6]

- Feeling sheltered during one's childhood from the reality and severity of a family secret [4.5.7]
- Appreciating parents' success in shielding their children from toxic family secrets and being a secure base despite the family history [4.6.1]
- Contrasting the burden that children in secretive homes carry with the lightness and freedom of those who don't have the same experience [4.6.2]
- Distinguishing between burdening children with information that is not within their responsibility to carry and hiding information that a child would have the right to know when revealed in a child-friendly, contextualised and contained manner [4.6.3]
- Secret-sharing and secret-keeping in childhood thwarts children's sense of security and safety when they are raised by adults who may not always be reliable, consistent and honest [4.6.4]
- Reflecting on how parents' revelations or secret-sharing in a way helped to put the pieces of the puzzle together, yet knowing these confessions should have been shared with an adult or professional [4.6.5]
- Contrasting parents' secret-sharing with their child as confidante with the refusal to openly address issues and family secrets that were important for the child to tackle: one-way traffic [4.6.6]
- Learning early on to see and accept two sides to a parent's behaviour and personality: the dark and the loving side [4.6.7]
- Learning to trust only a select few: keeping private matters private [4.7.1]

- When children decide not to abide by the rules of the adult world: rebellion within the family unit [4.7.2]
- Calling out the hypocrisy in adults' behaviour: knowing things are done for the sake of appearances [4.7.3]
- Parents who talk about other people's secrets in front of a child yet who then hide aspects of their own behaviour that created secretive family situations [4.7.4]
- Appreciating differences in adult behaviour: valuing honesty and integrity over tendency towards secrecy, lies and topic avoidance [4.7.5]
- Feeling that information should be shared with children based on age and maturity levels rather than opening up a secret for the sake of transparency and honesty [4.7.6]
- Compromised relationships: when unspoken family rules about secret-keeping becomes a burden too heavy to carry [4.7.7]
- Secrets that breed more secrets: when you know something your closest family members do not know [4.7.8]
- Spilling the beans: purposely or unintentionally letting parts of the secret out or instilling doubt about a known fact to set a process of secret disclosure in motion [4.4.8]
- A parent's right to keep a secret from own children versus a child's right to have a say in matters that directly affect them [4.4.9]
- When adults overshare private matters about themselves and others in front of children: information that is shared out of context and without a valid reason or an explanation [4.2.5]

- Being raised in a secretive atmosphere manifested through hushed voices, gossiping and judgemental attitude towards others [4.4.10]
- Being caught in the middle: wanting to provide answers to a child but understanding it is not your secret to open [4.5.8]
- Failing to talk openly about a ‘secret’ with the person concerned/impacted by it even when it is in the open: feeling a sense of betrayal and guilt at knowing about the secret and never revealing it despite the close connection? [4.1.17]
- The significant role of the adult/parent to buffer the impact of the disclosure of a family secret [4.5.9]
- The significant role of a parent to shield from/buffer the impact of a family secret [4.5.10]
- Discerning whether the opening of a secret to a child may do more harm than good whilst believing children should not be kept in the dark of important matters in their life [4.5.11]
- Developing a strong belief that children should not be burdened with information that does not directly concern them and, when needed, to be done within a context in a supportive and safe manner [4.5.12]
- Noticing when own children adopt similar relational and communication patterns as parents/grandparents: linking legacy burdens, intergenerational patterns and family scripts [4.1.18]

The Nexus between Emotions and Family Secrets: Riding the Emotional Rollercoaster

[5.1.2]

- Riding the emotional rollercoaster: emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions [5.1.1]
- Emotions that shape and are shaped by the secret-keeping and secret-sharing [5.1.3]
- Reflecting on the connection between emotions and a pattern of secrecy in families: hiding things or remaining silent out of shame, fear or ridicule [5.1.4]
- Mourning the ‘loss’ or ‘absence’ of significant people due to things that are not said or kept hidden [5.4.1]
- Mourning the ‘loss’ of one’s childhood and adolescence due to difficult family situations compounded by secrecy [5.4.2]
- Experiencing distress and disappointment when recalling a parent’s silence and inaction [5.4.3]
- Making sense of a parent’s silence around the abuse that was taking place in the family home: feeling a sense of acceptance and understanding that opening up would have its repercussions [5.7.3]
- Reflecting on a plausible reason for a parent to keep a family secret: possibly due to a feeling of a lack of safety to open up and be understood and supported [5.7.4]
- Experiencing a strong desire to be loved and cherished by one’s parent/s: realising as an adult how much one wishes to take the rightful place as their parent’s offspring [5.8.2]

- Experiencing internal and external chaos as secrets are created, kept or disclosed [5.7.5]
- Seeking order and stability amidst confusion, ambivalence and chaos created by secretive atmosphere [5.1.7]
- Feeling concerned and worried as a child to see own parent going through a difficult time [5.7.6]
- Impact of family secrecy on identity: things that remain unspoken of in families manifested as low self-esteem, shame, guilt and/or a distorted sense of self [5.7.7]
- Reflecting on a general sense of confusion around important aspects of one's life built on a shaky foundation with parents who were inconsistent [5.2.4]
- Feeling a sense of humiliation and a lack of safety in own home whilst trying to figure out what was happening in an atmosphere where things were not spoken about: understanding how traumatic an event was in relation to feeling safe and acknowledged [5.2.5]
- Feeling shaken and unsafe in own home: the consequences on children of parents' financial messes [5.7.8]
- Parent-child relationship marked by a perennial sense of ambivalence and a lack of emotional bonding, linked to the things that could not be spoken of [5.8.3]
- Fractured relationships or relationships on the mend: disclosure of long-held secret can lead to reconciliation, resolution, and healing or to isolation and ruptures in families [5.8.4]
- Fear of emotional fallout as a result of challenging or revealing a family secret [5.8.5]

- Intense emotions that are heightened with the opening or persistence of secretive atmosphere – betrayal, confusion, isolation and/or a sense of helplessness [5.1.8]
- Feeling more comfortable talking with the mother about emotional aspects of their family story: connecting gender with family secrecy [5.8.6]
- Reacting strongly to inauthenticity in people – a direct link made between this trigger and own experience with family secrets in childhood [5.1.9]
- Validating emotions that are linked to secret-keeping and secret-divulgence: anger and resentment [5.4.4]
- Wishing for validation not denial of own childhood experiences: validation would bring comfort despite the negative memories tied to a childhood story [5.5.2]
- Strong emotions related to secret-keeping or a secretive atmosphere in family especially when one feels an injustice has been made [5.1.10]
- Longing for healing: repairing emotional injury [5.4.5]
- Fractured relationships: when family secrets exacerbate familial conflicts or rupture them irreparably [5.8.7]
- Fear of loss of significant people in one's life when secrets are opened [5.8.8]
- Fear of emotional fallout as a result of digging deeper into one's family history: being given permission to act freely by own immediate family yet feeling helpless in deciding how to go about it or which way to go [5.1.11]
- Strengthening of bonds between family members when they share a secret or are impacted by its disclosure or concealment [5.8.9]

- Denial as a defence mechanism – ignoring the reality or consequences of the reality at all costs to cope with distressing feelings [5.4.5]
- Walking on eggshells: being silenced by a parent/family member's unpredictable behaviour [5.7.3]
- Fear of letting go – silence as a way to hold onto people, memories, ideas? [5.4.6]
- Shame and guilt as motivators for persistence with secret-keeping or refusal to face reality [5.4.7]
- Unprocessed grief: coping with loss and grief through problem-solving, silence and topic avoidance [5.4.8]
- Caught up between own confusion/sadness in the face of loss and confusion around how to be of help for own family during a difficult time [5.7.3]
- Feeling robbed of own reality through manipulation and decisions taken by others [5.7.4]
- Feeling a sense of betrayal when people continue to use same pattern of family secrecy into adulthood [5.8.10]
- Feeling devoid of the necessary vocabulary when it comes to expressing feeling and emotions which one learned to hide: a language that was not acquired in childhood and therefore leads to struggles with emotional expression in adulthood [5.1.12]
- Feeling intrigued by one's family history and legacy: doing research to untangle the knots in one's family story [5.1.13]

Conforming With or Challenging a Family's Secret: being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone [6.5.4]

- Opening a family secret at a later stage in a family life cycle [6.3.1]
- Starting a conversation: feeling nervous about addressing topics that have been avoided or hidden in the past [6.3.2]
- Striking a balance between showing interest and curiosity about the family history and being respectful of parents' privacy [6.4.1]
- Living with the contradictions, pain, and repercussions of challenging a family secret: being true to oneself yet bearing the brunt of it all [6.2.1]
- Feeling that it would be easier to conform rather than rebel against one's family secret-keeping culture [6.1.2]
- Persisting with the denial and refusal to talk about the family secret by one person leads to frustration and confusion in another [6.5.1]
- Being left behind: stories of disapproval, exclusion and cut-offs [6.2.2]
- Distinguishing between figuring things out or discovering family secrets and knowing there may be some secrets that are yet to be opened or that will remain hidden [6.5.2]/
- Ambivalence around whether something can be qualified as a secret or not: taking on responsibility for unspoken truth as if not acknowledging there is a secret in the family makes it a fruit of one's imagination [6.5.3]
- Motivation behind the decision to challenge a family secret and be more truthful [6.2.3]
- Loss after loss: accepting the reality of losing some people when family secret-keeping is contested [6.2.4]

- When opening a conversation about things that are not spoken about leads to arguments and further distance/disconnection in the family [6.3.3]
- Conforming or challenging a family secret: Being at the intersection of digging deeper and leaving things alone: which way to go? [6.5.4]
- Reflecting on possibility of things becoming clearer or changing for the family if this secret is opened fully for the problem to finally be solved [6.3.4]
- Breaking away from the pattern of secrecy can be very isolating and heartbreaking for the individual who may lose some family relationships or be kept at a distance by significant people [6.6.1]
- Feeling a sense of liberation at choosing not to conform to the pattern or culture of secrecy in families, saying things as they are and not covering up the wrongdoings of other people [6.6.2]
- Understanding the complexity of a secret that was revealed to some but not all family members [6.6.2]
- Feeling torn between the need to understand more by digging deeper into the FS yet at the same time feeling that ‘what is done is done’ [6.5.5]
- Reflecting on own positioning when secret-sharing is encouraged and supported whilst other family members are still not aware of it [6.5.6]
- Living the experience of opening up family secrets as an opportunity rather than an entitlement: when conversations about family matters are experienced as a process of bonding and healing in a family [6.3.5]

- Carrying similar burdens of secret-keeping and topic avoidance into adulthood – feeling certain things cannot be spoken about with significant people out of a need for self-protection or protection of others [6.1.3]
- Conforming to the patterns of family secrecy into adulthood so not to burden family members with ‘heavy’ information or to ‘keep up appearances’ [6.1.4]
- Choosing to be cautious in divulging information about somebody else’s secret: believing strongly this is not one’s secret to open [6.3.6]

Making Sense of it All: the Short-term and Long-term Impact of Family Secrecy in Childhood [7.1.1]

- Feeling impacted both positively and negatively by the presence of family secrecy in childhood [7.1.2]
- Learning to live with introversion and solitude: impacted by the need to hide family situation or secret [7.2.1]
- Realising in adulthood the significance of being the bearer of family secrets at a young age: ‘children raising parents’ [7.6.1]
- Long-term impact of living in the shadow of family secrecy [7.1.3]
- Short-term impact on friendships and long-term impact on trusting others in friendships and relationships [7.3.1]
- Long-term impact of childhood adverse experiences and lack of transparency: seeking to be a positive presence in the life of those who may have experienced a similar childhood circumstance affected by childhood secrecy [7.4.1]

- Becoming more sensitive to subtleties, hidden information, presentation of a ‘false self’ or concealment of true self in others as a result of being raised in a culture of family secrecy [7.5.1]
- Developing an acute sensitivity to a lack of clarity and truth in people’s stories as a result of being raised in a culture of silence and secrecy [7.5.2]
- Developing a radar for lies, secrets and distortion of reality: feeling supported by life over time in trusting own intuition and sense of things being kept hidden [7.5.3]
- Developing a sensitivity towards inauthenticity and withholding of important information growing up as a result of the ambivalence in own family around family secrecy [7.5.4]
- Long-term impact of being raised in a secretive atmosphere: becoming self-reliant, finding it hard to ask for help and sometimes rejecting help from those who are willing to give it [7.3.2]
- Connecting childhood experiences and secrets shared in childhood to repercussions on one’s life choices, self-concept and own experience of life in general [7.1.4]
- Impact of presence of secrecy in childhood on parenthood [7.3.3]
- Valuing a parent’s choice to protect their child from a toxic family secrecy during childhood and providing them with some answers depending their level of maturity at a later point in their life [7.5.5]
- Valuing presence, authenticity, commitment, provision and support in parenthood: planning to rewrite own family script [7.5.6]

- Acknowledging own reaction to the silences and the hidden history of her family by wanting to be transparent and open with own children as a mother [7.5.7]
- Developing an awareness of how parents and ancestors can impact the life trajectory of own children – wanting to make sense of own past especially family secrets to stop the cycle of dysfunction in the family [7.1.5]
- Feeling impacted by own childhood experiences with silence, hidden truths and dysfunction in one's relationship choices [7.3.4]
- Feeling impacted by the childhood abuse and secrets around it in terms of confidence and openness to others [7.2.2]
- Overthinking as a result of being raised in silence, half-truths and secretive atmosphere [7.2.3]
- Learning to hide one's feelings out of fear of damaging the relationships or friendships [7.3.5]
- Feeling frustrated with people who hide things and distort reality so that it suits their needs: being aware of these triggers that persisted into adulthood [7.3.6]
- Understanding that there is a limit to how far one could go with being open, truthful and precise – fearing this repercussion of living in the shadow of family secrecy to turn into an obsession [7.5.8]
- Perpetuation of stories of violence, abuse and/or infidelity into adulthood [7.3.7]
- Developing a sensitivity towards children who are suffering or who come from a difficult background: impact of secrecy and adverse childhood circumstances on professional & career path/ choices [7.4.2]

- Valuing truth, honesty and transparency in one's interactions with others [7.5.9]
- Looking at the bright side: advocating for children's voices to be heard and full participation in matters that concern them [7.4.3]
- Upholding clarity and truthfulness in one's communication skills [7.5.10]
- Developing a strong belief that protecting children does not mean lying to them or hiding the truth [7.5.11]
- Being attuned to children's wishes and need to open up or keep things for themselves: creating safe spaces as opposed to forcing children to talk [7.4.4]
- Creating safe spaces for more authentic and child-friendly ways to tackle difficult conversations [7.4.5]
- Understanding the severity of the secrecy or secretive climate in the family later on in adulthood [7.1.6]
- Realising one's fear of being judged by others and difficulty to experience a sense of belonging may be linked to one's childhood experiences with family secrecy [7.2.4]
- Choosing not to replicate one's family script but to rewrite it by not perpetuating patterns of secrets [7.3.8]
- Overcompensating for the neglect or lack of clarity in one's childhood by oversharing or being too open about private matters [7.2.5]
- Focusing on providing the support that children may need to cope with difficult news rather than protecting them through topic avoidance, silence or lies [7.5.12]
- Conceiving 'secrecy' as dishonest and undesirable due to own impactful experience of family secrecy in childhood [7.5.13]

- Awareness of how the presence of family secrecy may have left a significant mark on one's self-concept both in childhood and in adulthood [7.2.6]
- Ability to develop and maintain adult relationships impacted by childhood stories of family secrecy [7.3.9]
- Pattern of secret relationships in own extended family – adult children who have experienced family secrecy in childhood [7.3.10]
- Replicating versus changing family scripts: dysfunctional relational interaction between parents not ideal as a good model of what healthy relationships look like [7.3.11]
- Coming to terms with parents' inability to take on a protective and guiding role: understanding they were in many ways 'children' who still needed a lot of growing up to do [7.7.1]
- Empathising with own parent for fearing telling the truth to others outside their immediate family [7.7.2]
- Understanding the intergenerational impact that creates certain beliefs and values that are then passed on down the generations [7.7.3]
- Feeling the need to discover more about one's ancestors and family history: finding satisfaction in unravelling the puzzle about own family which can be complex but can serve as part of the healing process [7.7.4]
- Finding meaning in connecting stories that reveal legacy burdens in the family and that uncover mysteries around important aspects of one's family life which were rather confusing in childhood [7.7.5]

- Becoming interested in systemic work such as systemic constellations, therapy, or genealogy to understand one's family history and dynamics [7.7.6]
- Seeking to understand and work through her family's repeated patterns through systemic work with professionals [7.7.7]
- Making peace with the understanding that sometimes secrets are required for self-protection or protection of others despite feeling very strongly about being authentic and open as an adult who has experienced the confusion and ambivalence of being raised in a climate of secrecy [7.5.14]



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

FREC Feedback Sheet

Part 1: Applicant and project details

Name and Surname	Rosienne C. Farrugia
REDP Application ID	SWB-2023-00394
Course	Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice
Supervisor	Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri
Co-Supervisor	N/A
Title of Research Project	The presence of family secrecy in childhood: an investigation into the impact of family secrets in childhood on adult children's lives and relationships

Part 2: Self-assessment

<i>Numbers on the REDP Form labelled as <u>Yes</u> or <u>Unsure</u> are marked with x here</i>			
1. Risk of harm to participants	x	12. Data collected from animals	
2. Physical intervention		13. No written permission from data controller	
3. Vulnerable participants		14. Live animals, lasting harm	
4. Identifiable participants		15. Live animals, harm	
5. Special Categories of Personal Data (SCPD)		16. Source of dead animals, illegal	
6. Human tissue/samples		17. Cooperating institution	x
7. Withheld info assent/consent		18. Risk to researcher/s	
8. 'opt-out' recruitment		19. Risk to environment	
9. Deception in data generation		20. Commercial sensitivity	
10. Incidental findings		21. Other potential risks	
11. Data collected from human participants		22. Official statement	

Detailed evaluation

<i>Are more elaborate answers provided for the numbers ticked in the self-assessment checklist?</i> <i>Are the answers of the Research Ethics and Data Protection (REDP) Form following the recommendations provided by the Research Code of Practice and the Research Ethics Review Procedures?</i>
Reviewer's comments
All issues raised in the previous submission have been addressed. Permission from the Malta Association of Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (MAFT), Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) and the Registrar's Office, University of Malta has been obtained.

Attached documents (x indicates that it was attached to student's application)	
Do <u>ALL</u> consent forms, recruitment letters and/or information sheets follow the Research Code of Practice and other UREC requirements?	X
If <u>Number 17</u> is ticked, did the researcher include the draft letters of request ahead of sending to cooperating institutions?	X
Are the full trails of emails provided? (Ideally as PDF format, indicating email addresses, dates and entire correspondences)	X
Does the researcher provide the guiding questions/questionnaires/any tests that are to be carried out?	X
Additional comments	



Rosienne Camilleri <rosienne.cam11@gmail.com>

Fwd: Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed

Rosienne C Farrugia <rosienne.c.farrugia.98@um.edu.mt>
To: Rosienne Camilleri <rosienne.cam11@gmail.com>

28 May 2024 at 08:19

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **SWB FREC** <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>
Date: Mon, 17 Jul 2023, 11:45
Subject: Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed
To: Rosienne C Farrugia <rosienne.c.farrugia.98@um.edu.mt>
Cc: Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri <clarissa.sammutsцерри@um.edu.mt>, Ms Ingrid M. Grech Lanfranco <ingrid.grech-lanfranco@um.edu.mt>

REDP Application ID: SWB-2023-00394

Dear Rosienne C. Farrugia,

Your ethics application regarding your research titled *The presence of family secrecy in childhood: an investigation into the impact of family secrets in childhood on adult children's lives and relationships* has been **approved**.

Attached find a copy of the feedback sheet containing FREC's feedback and approval. Kindly check the sheet in case of any comments from FREC.

Faculty Research Ethics Committees are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University of Malta, except in the case of sensitive personal data. In this regard, your ethics proposal **does not need to be sent to UREC-DP**. Hence, **you may now start your research**.

Disclaimer: The research team should note that only the English versions of the documents submitted have been reviewed by FREC. It is the duty of the research team to ensure that all documents in Maltese (or any other language) are faithful translations of the English version.

Regards,



**L-Università
ta' Malta**

Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Faculty for Social Wellbeing
Room 113, Humanities A Building
+356 2340 2237 / 3956 / 3220
um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics



[SWB-2023-00394 - Feedback Sheet 2].pdf
115K

The Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood: An Investigation into the Impact of Family Secrets in Childhood on Adult Children's Lives and Relationships

6th September 2023

Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Rosienne Camilleri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *The presence of family secrecy in childhood: An investigation into the impact of family secrets in childhood on adult children's lives and relationships*; this is being supervised by Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri (clarissa.sammutter-scerri@um.edu.mt). This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to investigate how the presence of family secrets in childhood impacted the life experiences, relationships, worldview, and trajectories of adult children, from their own perspectives. Your participation in this study would shed light on the phenomenon of family secrecy that is present in childhood and its impact on adult children's lives and relationships. It would thus help contribute to further the knowledge in the field of systemic practice and family therapy. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to first read this information sheet and sign the consent form if you agree to take part. Data will be gathered through the use of one-to-one interview. You would thus be required to sit for an approximately one hour/ one hour and a half long interview which will happen face-to-face at a place, date and time that is convenient for both researcher and you as participant. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will also be able to refuse to answer any questions you may not feel ready or comfortable to answer during the interview.

Data collected will be treated confidentially and will be pseudonymised. Personal data will only be accessed by the researcher, and research data will be accessed by both researcher and dissertation supervisor, and in exceptional cases, by the examiners of the dissertation. Data will be stored in a password-protected computer in an encrypted file.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits for you. However, there may be indirect benefits through your contribution to this study as you will help shed light on the phenomenon of family secrecy that is present in childhood and its impact on adult children's lives and relationships. You will thus be contributing to further the knowledge in the field of systemic practice and family therapy. Your participation may potentially entail a psychological risk related to the potential trigger of past trauma – to counter for this possibility however, as a researcher, I will prioritize

ethical considerations by ensuring that you are an adult who is talking about their childhood experiences in retrospect. I will also ensure that at the end of the interview, you will be debriefed and I will share with you a list of support services (that are free of charge or against a fee) that you can access should you feel the need to obtain further support about this topic. Moreover, you are also advised to avoid disclosing any family secrets about possible crimes that may not have been reported – in the case of disclosure of a secret about a crime that has not been previously reported, I as the researcher would be obliged to report it myself.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be kept for two and a half years after the study is concluded, i.e. December 2027 – it will then be permanently deleted. Your identity will not be revealed or attributed to you at any point during or after the study is undertaken and concluded.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at rosienne.cam11@gmail.com or rosienne.c.farrugia.98@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: 2340 3061 or via email: clarissa.sammud-scerri@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

Rosienne Camilleri

Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri

rosienne.cam11@gmail.com

clarissa.sammud-scerri@um.edu.mt

Rosienne.c.farrugia.98@um.edu.mt

Tel: 2340 3061

Participant's Consent Form

The Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood: An Investigation into the Impact of Family Secrets in Childhood on Adult Children's Lives and Relationships

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Rosienne Camilleri. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a one-to-one interview in which the researcher will ask questions to adult participants during the interview to *investigate* the presence and impact of family secrecy in childhood. I am aware that the the interview will take approximately one hour/ one and a half hour. I understand that the the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation may potentially entail a psychological risk related to the potential trigger of past trauma – to counter for this possibility however, the researcher will prioritize ethical considerations by ensuring that I am an adult who is talking about my childhood experiences in retrospect. Moreover, the researcher will also ensure that at the end of the interview, I will be debriefed and a list of support services (that are free of charge or against a fee) that I can access should I feel the need to obtain further support about this topic will be provided before the start of the interview.
5. Moreover, I understand that I am being advised to avoid disclosing any family secrets about possible crimes that may not have been reported – in the case of disclosure of a secret about a crime that has not been previously reported, I have been informed that the researcher would be obliged to report it herself to the authorities.
6. I understand that *there* are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. However, there may be indirect benefits through my contribution to this study to myself and others since I will help shed light on the phenomenon of family secrecy that is present in childhood and its impact on adult children's lives and relationships. I will thus be contributing to further the knowledge in the field of systemic practice and family therapy.
7. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
8. I understand that all data collected will be *erased on completion of the study and following publication of results/within two and a half years of completion of the study* i.e. by December 2027.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this the interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

11. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].

12. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

13. If I feel that the interview has distressed me in any way, I may make use of the support services information that Rosienne Camilleri will give me at the beginning of the the interview. I am aware that this document comprises a list of free services. The document also includes fee-paying services which I understand I will have to pay for should I decide not to use free services.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

[Rosienne Camilleri

[rosienne.c.farrugia.98@um.edu.mt

[Tel: 77591955]

[Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri]

[clarissa.sammut-scerri@um.edu.mt]

[Tel: 2340 3061]

5.1.1 Riding the emotional rollercoaster: Emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions



Appendix H Chapter 4 with Quotes in the Original Language

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present and discuss the findings that emerged from the gathering and analysis of the qualitative data pertaining to the manifestation of family secrecy during childhood and its ramifications on adult children's lives and relationships. Employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, it became evident, during the simultaneous data collection and analytic process, that achieving theoretical saturation within the confines of a master's degree investigation would not be possible. Consequently, instead of attempting to formulate a substantive or middle-range theory, the analysis was directed towards the coming up with a tentative core category and establishing links between subcategories and constructs that were showing up as being important to the participants.

In the initial part of the chapter, the diagram and model presented in Appendix G developed to illustrate and synthesise the findings through a tentative core category, along with subsequent key and sub-categories are explained. Furthermore, the parallel processes that make up the participants' upbringing in a family environment characterised by secrecy are delineated together with the representational and interactional processes that constituted the telling of their stories. The next section offers a detailed exposition of the tentative core category, key categories, and sub-categories. Finally, the concluding segment of the chapter addresses issues pertinent to the interview participation process and the consequential impact of the interviewing procedure on the participants.

4.2 Representation and Synthesis of the Key Findings of the Study

The 'emotional rollercoaster' metaphor in Appendix G illustrates the participants' journeys from childhood to adulthood within secretive family environments. This diagram encapsulates the collective experiences of seven participants, emphasizing the core category:

Riding the emotional rollercoaster – emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions (5.1.1). The diagram highlights the complexity of the data, showing how codes and categories were continually compared and relationships between main and subcategories were identified. Growing up in a secretive atmosphere is likened to an emotional rollercoaster, featuring unpredictable twists, turns, sudden drops, and fluctuating emotions. These experiences often included intense internal or external upheavals, marked as 'turning point moments'.

Participants experienced a mix of excitement, fear, anticipation, and ambivalence as they navigated family dynamics shrouded in secrecy, akin to the sudden accelerations and decelerations of a rollercoaster. The revelation or concealment of family secrets caused rapid emotional shifts, from elation or relief to confusion, distress, and betrayal, encapsulating the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of their emotional journey during childhood.

As researcher and interviewees explored family secrecy's impact, initial positive childhood memories were often shared, followed by heavier ones linked to family secrets. The sub-category *Contrasting memories of childhood: childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy* (numbered 1.2.3) was further composed of another two codes, which were selected for a deeper analysis from a wider range of codes (the latter can be found in Appendix F). The selected codes for each of the seven sub-categories can be found in Appendix G.

As the interview proceeded, the participants revealed diverse perceptions of 'family secrecy', with a sub-category utilised to highlight these: *Defining family secrets as those stories that are intentionally withheld for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection*. The next phase in the interviewing process which runs parallel to the participants' lived reality in childhood is categorised as: *Children in transition: moving from innocence to*

awareness of family secrecy when the veil is lifted, and a clearer view of family life emerges (numbered 4.1.1). This is where, as children, individuals impacted by family secrets begin a process of ‘putting the pieces of the puzzle together’.

The 'lifting of the veil' in participants' stories marks the steeper, more difficult moments of their emotional rollercoaster, where emotions and family secrecy intersect, revealing their reciprocal influence (category 5.1.1). Emotions and secrets mutually reinforce within family systems, with secrets often born from shame, guilt, and protection. This dynamic creates inner circles of those aware of the secrets and outer circles of the uninformed, further complicating the family's secretive climate (Imber-Black, 2018; Karpel, 1980).

The revelation of a family secret brings the decision to conform, resist, or challenge it, highlighted in the sub-category *Conforming with or challenging a family's secret. Being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone*. Participants' childhood experiences with secrecy emphasize resilience and adaptability, captured in sub-category 2.5.8, which also addresses parentification and support systems. Finally, the short and long-term impact of being raised in the shadow of a family secret or in a secretive family climate is marked by the sub-category: *Feeling positively and negatively impacted by the presence of family secrets* (numbered 7.1.2).

Before proceeding with a more detailed exploration of the identified codes and categories, it is worth noting that participants' reflections on family secrets revealed a distinction between ‘being a child’ and ‘not being an adult’. Consequently, memories spanning early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence were collectively qualified as ‘childhood memories and recollections’. This is visually represented in Appendix G as a continuum displayed beneath the image of the rollercoaster.

Furthermore, another notable observation pertains to the contextual backdrop against which the participants lived and experienced the presence and impact of family secrets in childhood. Specifically, references to religious, cultural, and societal norms and expectations concerning family and gender roles, loyalties, duties, and obligations, as well as dynamics of power and control within family structures, are indicative of the social paradigms, belief systems, and values ingrained within their cultural and temporal contexts (Nico et al., 2023). These elements undoubtedly exert influence and remain inseparable from the participants' encounters with family secrecy.

In accordance with an interpretative and socio-constructionist framework, as the researcher, I recognise the significance of acknowledging my role and the multiple factors impinging upon 'theory construction' (Charmaz, 2014). It is therefore crucial to point out my involvement in interpreting and structuring the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding their childhood encounters with family secrecy and their perceived ramifications. From a pragmatic perspective, 'theory construction' does not necessitate the formulation of a 'grand theory'. Rather, the direction in this investigation is towards more fluid and tentative interpretations built upon the convergence between participants' and the researcher's subjective attributions to their experience of the phenomenon. Using the imagery of the rollercoaster as metaphor, this study stresses the intensity and intricate nature of participants' emotional odysseys as they navigated and grappled with the silences, secrecy, partial disclosures and oversharing prevalent within their family dynamics.

4.3 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

4.3.1 *Childhood recollections*

4.3.1.1 *Contrasting memories of childhood: Childhood recollections in the context of family secrecy* [1.2.3]

I think I had a very good childhood, I can't complain because it was a very caring and nurturing environment. I was surrounded by a lot of people who loved me and cared

for me, even nowadays the values that I have I attribute it to my upbringing. (Adam, pg. 4)

Mal-ġenituri kellna childhood sabiha. Li niġtakar ħafna imma l-bidla li rajt f'ommi wara li kellha t-twins. Naħsbu li kellha qisu post-partum depression. Qisu qatt ma ħadet ħsiebha u jien qisni ndunajt jien u nikber u bdejt nara l-affarijiet. (Ylenia, pg. 3)

While Adam's narrative stands out as a testament to a nurturing and secure family environment, the stories of Ylenia, Vivian, Nina, Simon, Emma, and Lisa indicate a multilayered childhood (Sela & Bat-Or, 2022) with a complex interplay between contrasting memories, themes of neglect and abuse, emotional turmoil, and the impact of family dynamics on individuals' perceptions of reality. Generally, for all the participants, the more positive experiences pertain to happier memories of 'togetherness', specifically when doing things together as a family or with members of the extended family. The participants talk about "two sides to my childhood" (Emma), "bittersweet memories" and "nice memories of being a child but they are all the time with a grey cloud around them, it was pretty heavy" (Nina).

Ylenia's memories highlight the pervasive sense of physical and emotional neglect resulting from her mother's chronic undiagnosed depression, which often left her questioning the authenticity of her own experiences. Similarly to stories of children living with parental illness, the missing information and stigma around the condition manifested as confusion and anxiety (Murphy et al., 2017; Radley et al., 2023). Vivian's narrative, characterised by the loss of her birth mother and subsequent integration into a new family dynamic with the remarriage of her father, points out the disruptive and devastating effects of parental illness and death, particularly when it is shrouded in secrecy. This correlates with Imber-black's

(2014, 2018) contention that secrets act like magnets, accentuating spaces of distance and proximity between family members. Lisa's recollections add another layer of complexity, with positive memories of bonding with her grandmother contrasted with experiences of eviction, vandalism on the family home, and familial turmoil. Nina's portrayal of childhood invisibility and her yearning for acceptance in a climate of reality distortion and unspoken truths juxtaposes with her vibrant persona, bringing out the dissonance between internal struggles and external façades. The themes of visibility versus concealment, blindness versus sight, and clarity versus obscurity are likewise represented in a study by Sela and Bat-Or (2022) with adults who grew up in the shadow of a secret.

4.3.1.2 'Before' and 'after': Experiencing shifts in perception following creation and disclosure of family secrets [1.3.1]

It was like an unlocking of sort of 'wow, I had no idea'. I never really expected something like that for our family, most especially for my grandfather. [Adam, pg. 6]

Ylenia, Vivian, Emma, Adam, and Simon mention a shift in their perception and/or experiences of being a member of their family of origin, following a specific event or series of events such as the birth of their siblings, the opening of a secret regarding infidelity, and the loss of family members, all of which served to activate the notion of secrecy in their respective families. According to Imber-Black (1998), this shift is tied to a change in the sculpture and location of the secret. These pivotal moments act as catalysts, shaping and reshaping perceptual shifts in children who are trying to make sense of their world, at times prompting a re-evaluation of familial bonds and their place within the family structure.

Kelli madwar hdax-il sena. Niftakarni nhossni upset, feeling ikrah go fija – l-istonku beda jugaghni u niftakar nikkontempla li nghid lil ommi, pero ovvjament m'ghamiltx hekk. It was a moment when the penny dropped. [Emma, pg. 5]

Bringing to mind the etymology of the term ‘secret’ which implies the inclination for individuals to set themselves apart or distance themselves from distressing or shameful life events or situations as a form of defence mechanism (Termini, 2018), Ylenia and Emma recall childhood experiences of *feeling different and alien within and outside the family as a result of family communication patterns of secrecy and silence [1.5.3]*, in a way that was manifested through their introversion and sensitivity as they navigated inconsistent family structures. Lisa and Emma questioned their paternity at different points in their childhood, creating stories in their mind of hidden adoption to explain this persistent feeling of being ‘different’ from the rest of the family. The participants reveal the way family dynamics, roles, and expectations affected their identity formation, behaviours, beliefs, and values – linking these recounts to learning to keep silent or to hide in their own world to avoid getting into trouble.

I have like bittersweet memories in a way, like my mother used to treat me very differently from my brother, and that used to upset me so much. She used to compare me to my paternal grandmother and call me names, and I knew she hated her, she still does. And then I became very quiet, and was always scared to speak up [Nina, pg. 3]

Stepfamily dynamics for both Vivian and Simon diminish paternal presence and children's agency, and lead to frustration and relational difficulties with their birth parent. Nina and Vivian discuss suppressing creativity due to familial disapproval. Patriarchal gender roles and power dynamics, including the expectation of female obedience and caretaking, are prevalent. Lisa and Nina describe a matriarchal dynamic with a marginalized father. Vivian's father remarries with the intention to provide more stability for his daughter, reinforcing gendered caregiving roles. All this supports research that demonstrates how difficult childhood experiences are to be evaluated against the social and historical contexts in which

they occur, whereby multiple factors may influence and exacerbate the conditions surrounding the disclosure or concealment of family secrets (Hunter, 2010).

Despite familial distress, participants recall positive memories of extended family gatherings, emphasizing togetherness and family values. Lisa and Nina found refuge with their grandmothers from maternal rejection. Nina's hatred towards family friends, based on her mother's stories rather than her own memories, illustrates the confusion caused by fragmented narratives (Sela & Bat-Or, 2023). Vivian's lack of memories of her birth mother, due to parental shielding from distress, highlights the manipulation of familial narratives to maintain stability amidst adversity.

4.3.2 Defining family secrecy

4.3.2.1 Defining family secrecy as stories that are intentionally withheld for one reason or another: from manipulation to protection [3.1.3]

Well, a family secret for me, as I've come to uncover and learn about my family, is an event or a big life-changing revelation or view on family life that you thought was one way but then discovered it was another. [Adam, pg. 6]

For me, a family secret would be something that happens in a family, something that impacts the family, information that has a certain degree of seriousness to it which is not shared with any or all family members. Even if others are aware of it, there is this kind of rule that nobody talks about it. [Vivian, pg. 7]

Apart from focusing on the intentions and motivations behind the creation and perpetuation of family secrecy, which could vary from manipulation to protection towards self and others (Imber-Black, 1998), it becomes evident that participants interpret family secrecy through the lens of their own encounters with this mode of family communication. There is also an acknowledgement of the magnitude of a secret and its impact on family

members or dynamics (Rober et al., 2012), which could potentially be life-changing for an individual or a family unit.

4.3.2.2 Secrets that breed more secrets: The snowballing effect of secret creation on family - Present and future [3.2.3]

There is a sense, in participants' stories, that once a family secret is created, there is no end to its widespread impact since it automatically generates a schism between those who are privy to the secret and those who are excluded from the secret-sharing (Imber-Black, 2018). Moreover, one is also aware that what usually begins as a modestly concealed truth, often intended to safeguard one or more family members, swiftly turns into an uncontrollable force akin to a snowball effect, often causing harm to some members of a family (Berger & Paul, 2008; Selvini, 1997).

Vivian recollects the complications that arose from her half-sister's lack of knowledge regarding her biological origins. Born out of her father's second marriage, Vivian's sister remained unaware of the truth surrounding her older sibling's distinct parentage i.e. having a different mother. Vivian recalls how things became complicated as her sister began to ask questions about her family lineage, which she was forbidden to answer. It is no wonder that, in such a situation, a child might violate family rules and norms established by adults who seek to perpetuate the silence (Vangelisti et al., 2001), leading to a rejection of their authority and a fostering of a sense of internal conflict within the family dynamic. Being forced to not only hide one's identity but to deny her own and her birth mother's rightful place and position within her family of origin creates complex layers of interactions marked by rejection, disapproval, and ultimately, deception. This complex interplay of family communication patterns leads to a nexus of emotional discord and strain in the family, highlighting tensions in relational systems and subsystems between things that are spoken about and those that are kept hidden (Rober et al., 2012).

My sister used to see photos of my dad's second marriage and I was obviously in the photos myself. So, it started becoming suspicious, but they still kind of stuck at all costs to this idea that his wife is my mother. [Vivian, pg. 13]

Nina, a perceptive child, was puzzled by her family's behaviour. Despite projecting a moral image, they lived double lives, maintaining piety publicly while engaging in contradictory behaviours in private. This hypocrisy left Nina confused, struggling with the disparity between their public image and their true selves, which was manifested in intrafamily secrets and a complex communication boundary system. (Caughlin et al., 2000).

One of my unmarried aunts met a foreign doctor when she was in hospital – she used to mention his kindness. At the time, we used to go to these popular ‘high teas’ at a local hotel. I remember how once she pretended to take me to the bathroom, and instead she went to the telephone booth and called him. I was around seven or eight at the time. I remember being told at the time to keep this to myself. [Nina, pg. 34]

Emma's narrative indicates a culture of secrecy within her immediate and extended family to such an extent that secrets percolated many aspects of her upbringing, underpinned by invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Family secrecy as a form of communication was in many ways a *modus operandi* for their family interactions (Bostwick & Johnson, 2018). Emma recalls how at one point there was a culmination of events that eventually led adults in her family to finally realise they had to stop messing around or leading complicated lives, if not for their own sake for the sake of the younger generations.

Dan kien żmien meta bdew jiġru ħafna affarijiet fil-familja estiża taġġna – żmien meta ħafna affarijiet qishom imploded and what was previously kept silent or spoken only in hushed voices began to be exposed fil-konverżazzjonijiet tal-kbar. Kien żmien meta traġikament garrabna suwiċidju fil-familja – event terribli li fetax ħafna sigrieti

*ohrajt - it opened many other secrets to speculation, to assumptions, u wassal għal
ħafna aggravazzjoni u argumenti bejn membri tal-familja.* [Emma, pg. 21]

4.3.2.3 Secrets within and outside the family: Distinguishing between withheld information amongst family members and keeping secrets from the outside world [3.5.4]

In a process of starting and maintaining secrets within and outside the family, it becomes evident that a web of lies, concealment, unspoken truths and silences with family members who fall within and outside the secret-bearing group is created and perpetuated. This, in turn, engenders stories of connection and disconnection, thus balancing proximity and distance in relationships impacted by one or more family secrets (Imber-black, 1998, 2018).

Ylenia was never able to discuss her mother's undiagnosed depression with anyone, which left her feeling isolated and burdened by this awareness that was never openly acknowledged by her family (Murphy et al., 2017). She only found some form of consolation and support in an aunt's efforts to make up for her mother's negligence and lack of care towards her and her brothers, yet never openly discussed the 'secret' with anyone, thus adopting a non-productive coping style (Cogan et al., 2005). Her story exemplifies the isolating effects of unacknowledged family secrecy.

Simon suffered silently through an abusive and distressful childhood in a stepfamily environment that positioned him in many ways as the 'black sheep' in his family. His struggles caused by the constant drama and limited parental support mimic those experienced by children raised in adverse family circumstances that end up being lived as the everyday normality (Bugeja & Galea, 2022; Werner & Malterud, 2016). He grappled with feelings of alienation and rejection throughout his childhood and was only able to find some form of validation and refuge later on in his adolescence when he mustered the courage to confide in

a supportive family member who immediately took action and provided him with a secure space that enabled him to stop this cycle of negativity and abuse.

Constrained by a perceived need to ‘keep up appearances’ and adhere to a rather strict moral code in her family, Vivian also confronts a family reality rife with hidden truths and distorted perceptions, both within their family unit and hidden from the outside world. Her experience brings out the insidious nature of family secrecy, perpetuating a façade of normalcy while concealing underlying tensions and conflicts.

4.3.2.4 Secrets as ‘entry points’ into family vaults and realms: talking about family secrecy grants access to hidden depth, mysteries, and dynamics in family relationships [3.7.2]

The stories told by the seven participants exhibit a broad spectrum of secrecy, encompassing various themes such as parental depression, life-threatening illness, questions of paternity, financial struggles, parental infidelity, instances of violence and abuse, and family inheritance (Berger & Paul, 2008). Looking at the notion of ‘family secrecy’ in isolation fails to capture the complexities of relational interactions between family systems and subsystems and the way it could open a wealth of information about delicate issues such as illness, suicide, betrayal, and loss (Rober et al., 2012). Each narrative in this study unfolds distinct family secrets, which not only stand as discrete revelations but also function as portals into more intricate family dynamics and underlying issues.

The multiple secrets that marked Emma’s childhood and adolescence serve as starting points for conversations around diverse family themes including parentification, violence, abuse, and infidelity. A thorough examination of each family secret unveils a distinct and multi-faceted realm that is replete with an array of family-related issues and a spectrum of emotions to be explored and analysed. This process potentially provides a window into the complexities and intricacies of Emma’s family, shedding light on its enduring repercussions on her development, maturation and interpersonal relationships.

Kien hemm hafna sigrieti li jiena sirt naf bihom bhala l-confidante tal-ġenituri tiegħi. Sigrieti dwar infedelta fil-familja, tagħhom jew li garrbu huma, sigrieti dwar il-problemi li kellhom bejniethom, sigrieti dwar vjolenza u aggressjoni, sigrieti dwar nies oħra fil-familja rigward paternita', vjolenza u abbuż. [Emma, pg. 8]

Similarly, the secrets disclosed by each of the remaining five participants demonstrate a comparable pattern, mirroring an observation articulated by Imber-Black (1998) regarding secrets as systemic phenomena. In this context, the individual secrets shared by each participant serve as microcosms of larger family patterns, reflecting the interplay of secrecy, communication dynamics, and relational complexities within their respective family units.

4.3.3 Children in transition: From innocence to awareness of family secrecy

Some of the participants' stories portray a transition from a state of innocence and unawareness regarding family dynamics to a realisation of things that are perceived as shocking, or to knowledge that rocks a child's world. These moments are experienced by some participants as 'turning points', unexpected moments where the proverbial veil is lifted, and there is an awareness that there is more to their parents or relatives than meets the eye.

4.3.3.1 Putting the pieces of the puzzle together: Figuring or finding out about family secrets [4.1.8]

Using the imagery of the rollercoaster, this become the stage in the emotional ride where the participants experience a heightened emotional turmoil as they grapple with the newly discovered realities about their families, truths that are far from easy to process or handle. These realities are sometimes revealed by another member of the family, such as a parent or another adult, as in the case of Emma and Adam. However, in most cases, the participants relate how they came to understand or figure things out for themselves, with some likening it to putting the pieces of a puzzle together (Imber-Black, 1998; Yarrow, 2012).

It was so ingrained not to ask questions, I remember one of my last memories of my late mother before she passed away, was of me peeking through her bathroom door,

and seeing her removing her wig, and I remember thinking as a young child, why is she removing her hair. [Vivian, pg. 9]

Rober and Rosenblatt (2015) discuss the way children create myths as they try to make sense of the silences around family stories and point to the destructive and life-giving aspects of silence and secrecy in families. Some participants only figured some aspects of their family's past and the secrets pertaining to it later in adulthood, when they had the resources to look up information, indicating how important it was for these participants to continue to unravel the pieces of this puzzle that comprised their family history and lineage.

No, because it was very recent actually that I was going through, I had read the book on "It doesn't start with you" by Wolynn, and I was very interested in the family history all of a sudden. So I brought up the topic about generational trauma with my mother and she started mentioning things that make a lot of sense, and then we had the discussion in more detail. [Adam, pg. 9]

4.3.3.2 Experiencing two polarities in childhood in relation to family secrecy: Distortion of reality and silence on the one hand, and being burdened with or witnessing heavy secrets that are shared prematurely on the other hand [4.4.2]

The following passages illustrate a shared experience for individuals growing up in families with inconsistent communication patterns and emotional dynamics. Developing a sensitivity to non-verbal cues and an intuition about emotional dynamics, Lisa and Emma describe how they would pick up cues about things that were not explicitly shared (Yarrow, 2012). There is also a clear dichotomy with certain topics being openly discussed, perhaps without considering the impact on the children involved, and instances of secrecy or distortion of information that would inevitably lead to confusion and distrust. The conflicting signals from adults were not easy to navigate, with both Lisa and Emma understanding they knew too much on the one hand, yet at the same feeling frustrated with the lack of consistency and honesty in communication.

Kien hemm mument i fejn bħala tifla kont nippikja li mhux qed jiġu mghejjuda kliem u stejjer u fatti li suppost kienu qed jingħadu, jew gideb li kienu jgħidu. Imbagħad kien hemm mument i fejn ntqalu stejjer emozzjonijiet li nħoss li ma kellhom jintqalu lili b'dak il-mod u li jien kont il-witness tagħhom ukoll. (Lisa, pg. 11)

I do feel that I have been brought up f'żewġ estremitajiet – minn banda, there were things that were spoken too early about in front of us children mill-adulti ... Mill-banda l-oħra, some other things were kept hidden or were distorted, u dan kollu holoq konfużjoni f'moħħ ta' tifla. [Emma, pg. 7]

4.3.3.3 Protecting children from the truth versus robbing them of their right to know about matters that directly concern them [4.4.4]

Ylenia and Vivian share a deep sense of injustice due to the unfair decisions made by the adults in their families. Ylenia's mother's mental health issue was kept from her, depriving her of validation and support. Similarly, Vivian's family hid her mother's life-threatening illness and lied about her sibling's relation, leaving her feeling betrayed and invalidated. These stories illustrate how families withholding crucial information from children can lead to feelings of betrayal and injustice, robbing them of the chance to navigate their realities in a supportive environment.

Kieku għadni żgħira kieku rrid inkun naf x'kien qed jiġri verament fil-familja, speċjalment għax jien kont ninduna kemm kienet differenti r-realta' tagħna minn ta' familji oħrajn. Kont niffranka hafna wġiħ ta' qalb u konfużjoni. (Ylenia, pg. 58)

Lisa and Nina, like Ylenia and Vivian, are frustrated by the lies and distorted realities within their families, highlighting the harm of concealing truths. However, some families, like Adam's, choose to delay disclosure of sensitive information until children are older, which he appreciates. Similarly, Simon accepts his mother's attempts to protect him from their family situation. This suggests that delaying disclosure can sometimes be beneficial

(Dumont, 2008), allowing children to process information more maturely. These examples show the complexity of parental decisions and their intentions, even if not always ideal.

In analysing these perspectives collectively, it becomes evident that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to disclosing family secrets to children (Berger & Paul, 2008; Rober et al., 2012). A common factor in their narratives is the realisation that prioritising the well-being of a child involves a delicate balance of honesty and transparency, and consideration for their emotional readiness (Deslypere & Rober, 2020; McElvaney et al., 2012).

4.3.4 The nexus between emotions and family secrets

The data in this study brings to the foreground the emotional impact of secrecy on family members, and the mutual influence of emotions and family secrets. As previously mentioned, this has been chosen as a tentative core category for its pivotal role in understanding the participants' experiences.

4.3.4.1 Riding the emotional rollercoaster: Emotions that shape family secrets and family secrets that shape emotions [5.1.1]

The emotional impact of secrecy in families emerged as a central focus of this research investigation, highlighting the importance of emotions in shaping and being shaped by the presence of family secrecy in childhood. Emotions like shame, guilt, and the desire to protect oneself or others often contribute to the creation and continuation of family secrets, whether across generations or within a close-knit group (Afifi et al., 2005; Sinko, 2017). For example, Simon's mother kept their abusive stepfamily situation a secret out of fear, shame, and guilt, denying her children validation and leaving them feeling helpless and ambivalent. Similarly, Lisa's father hid his financial difficulties to shield his family from distress, driven by a fear of not being supported or understood due to societal expectations of men as providers. These examples illustrate how secrecy can generate complex emotions and silence important family stories (Bornemisza et al., 2022; Imber-Black, 1998).

Families' disclosure or withholding of information can evoke a range of emotions, including shock, betrayal, resentment, insecurity, isolation, and ambivalence (McGinley & Jones, 2018). Emma was consistently shocked by family secrets, while Ylenia felt isolated and burdened by her mother's unrecognized depression. Nina's ambivalence coloured her childhood and the coherence in her life stories, while Vivian's narrative was marked by betrayal and resentment stemming from loss. Conversely, curiosity about family history, as seen in Adam and Nina's stories, and love or loyalty, demonstrated through efforts to shield or normalize negative behaviours (Tener, 2018; Werner & Malterud, 2016), such as in Ylenia and Emma's experiences, can also be present.

4.3.4.2 Mourning the loss of one's childhood and adolescence due to difficult family circumstances compounded by family secrecy [5.4.2]

Stories of rejection, abuse, abandonment, and reality distortion permeate the participants' narratives, which in turn are underscored by a profound sense of loss, grief and sadness as they relate ways in which they tried to make sense of or remedy the distress caused by family secrecy (Campbell et al., 2003; Svedin et al., 2002). Nina grapples with the absence of a nurturing mother-daughter relationship from her childhood, lamenting the persistent "... gap between me and my mother that has always been there and still is and that I do not really understand" (Nina, pg. 6). Therapy seems to have offered her a semblance of reconciliation and a path towards understanding and acceptance.

Vivian mourns not only her mother's untimely death but also the lost opportunities to forge deeper memories with her while she was still present. Driven by a desire to shield her from pain, her parents inadvertently deprived her of meaningful connections with her mother, leaving Vivian to navigate the void left by her absence and complicating her grieving process. Carefully navigating stigma and shame stemming from the dysfunction in their families (McGinley & Jones, 2018; Murphy et al., 2017), Simon and Emma both carry the weight of their tumultuous pasts, marked by secrecy and adversity within and beyond their families,

with Emma reflecting on her childhood awareness of adult complexities with a sense of sorrow, stating that “I feel sorry for myself as a child who knew so much about the adult world” (pg. 8).

4.3.4.3 Fractured relationships or relationships on the mend? How disclosure may lead to isolation and ruptures in families or to reconciliation and healing [5.8.4]

A key theme that emerged strongly in the data collected through the interviews with participants who were impacted by family secrecy in their childhood is that of proximity and distance in family relationships. It becomes evident that secrets tend to impinge on the way people consolidate, rupture, or transform their connections with family members, thus sculpting relationships (Imber-Black, 2018). Adam’s narrative about the inheritance of a large estate, highlights how significant events can exacerbate existing family tensions, stating “when inheritance like that comes about in a family, it tends to break up the family” (pg. 21). His grandfather became a target when he was still a child, possibly by family members, just like his father was ostracised by his own siblings. Nowadays, Adam still feels a degree of loyalty towards his father and discomfort when it comes to reestablishing some form of relationship with that side of his family, despite his parents being open to a possible reconnection on his part. Vivian, Lisa, Nina, and Simon mention the strained or fractured relationships with close family members and the ramifications that disconnection, rejection, and abandonment may have on themselves and future generations (Sinko, 2017).

Participants often found healing through the disclosure of family secrets, usually in adulthood when they felt more empowered to ask questions and speak openly. Conversations with parents or close family members helped reconcile aspects of their stories and strengthen bonds or initiate healing. Therapy, particularly for Vivian, Emma, Nina, and Lisa, was instrumental in creating a more coherent narrative and integrating their childhood experiences into healthier scripts for adulthood (Helimaki et al., 2021). Many participants expressed a commitment to breaking cycles of secrecy and dysfunction within their families for

themselves, their offspring, and future generations (Byng-Hall, 1995). Emma's case is particularly striking, showing how tragedy can catalyse reconciliation and healing within families.

Il-mewt ta' żagħżuġh u l-uġiġh li dan is-suwiċidju ġab fil-familja kollha fetaħ għajnejn hafna nies – kien il-bidu ta' vjaġġ ta' rikonċiljazzjoni, resoluzzjoni, u healing for the family. Ir-relazzjonijiet inbiddu, u rriżultat distanza u bruda bejn ċerti membri tal-familja, pero xorta nemmen li dan kollu kien ta' ġid to a certain extent, għax għen biex jinholqu boundaries, healthy ones, fejn ma kienx hemm qabel. (Emma, pg. 22)

4.3.5 Conforming with or challenging a family's secret?

4.3.5.1 Conforming with or challenging a family's secret: Being at the intersection of digging deeper or leaving things alone [6.5.4]

Some participants have grappled throughout life with the dilemma they face between adopting their families' patterns of secrecy or rebelling against it, challenging certain information, or refusing to conform to the secret-keeping cycle in their family (Berger & Paul, 2008; Afifi et al., 2015). Adam, Vivian, Nina, Lisa and Simon's stories describe what happens when a family member begins to question certain family communication patterns or chooses to confront family members about the inconsistencies and secrets in their families. Simon, for instance, experienced a distancing from his mother and sister because of his refusal to continue to comply with the unspoken family rule of not talking about the abusive stepfamily scenario.

4.3.5.2 Living with the contradictions, pain, and repercussions of challenging a family secret: Being true to oneself yet bearing the brunt of it all [6.2.1]

The feeling of isolation and loneliness both in childhood as well as growing up is prevalent in the stories told by Nina, Lisa, Emma, Simon, Ylenia and Vivian, whilst Adam alludes to the rejection and isolation his grandfather and father experienced. These emotions tend to be experienced irrespective of the type of family secret or family issue around which

the disclosure, topic avoidance or silence revolve whether one is opening or hiding a secret about an illness, a paternity issue, infidelity, complex relationships, or a loss in the family (Bornemisza et al., 2022; Cain, 2006; Silven & Forinder, 2022).

4.3.6 Resilience and adaptability, acceptance, and healing along a spatial-temporal continuum: Learning to live and cope with the presence of family secrecy [2.5.8]

A redeeming feature that emerges in every story told is the way participants, as children, negotiated and managed the complex, uncertain, often unsettling familial landscapes marked by secrecy. Developing resilience and finding ways to adapt amidst the confusion, ambivalence and sadness that run through some of these experiences come across as important aspects of their stories (Lusterman, 2005; Tener, 2018). As children, they developed distinct coping mechanisms either through their own resourcefulness, or through the support of adults within or outside their families (Bugeja & Galea, 2022). Sadly, some participants talk about their conscious efforts to stay away from their family home to cope with the distress and adverse circumstances. Others mention the notion of ‘homeostasis’ where in many ways their conforming or rebellious nature served the function to establish some stability in their home (Helimaki et al., 2021; Selvini, 1997).

4.3.6.1 Support systems and resilience in the face of family secrecy: The important role of adults, within and outside the family, who act as role models in childhood and adolescence [2.4.5]

Ylenia, who suffered through neglect and rejection, mainly due to an absent mother living with depression and an overwhelmed father, found solace in being guided by some adult women she encountered along the years – as a child and an adolescent, they taught her how to take better care of herself, her clothes, and her belongings.

Simon talks about how powerful his relationship with his aunt, who supported him in breaking free from the abusive cycle at home, was at a moment when he was beginning to give up on life, too early in his life. He also mentions a mentor he encountered in the Scouts group who saw him, validated him, and believed in his leadership skills, encouraging him to

be involved in the group as a leader. Lisa mentions some role models she encountered in her childhood and adolescence, adults who opened a whole new world and helped her move away from feeling so different and rejected.

4.3.6.2 Parentified children in unstable family circumstances: Children raising parents? [2.3.1]

The interviews revealed that five out of the seven participants were the eldest siblings in their families, with only Lisa and Simon being the middle children. As the eldest, they assumed roles of responsibility, self-reliance, and protection towards siblings and sometimes towards parents, thus experiencing triangulation and boundary-crossing (Byng-Hall, 2008; Campbell et al., 2003). Ylenia and Emma took on very distinctive caregiving roles towards their younger siblings, potentially linked to their birth order – protecting and caring at both the physical and emotional level.

During their formative years, a process of reversed roles began to unfold in their families, with some participants actively seeking to care and protect family members, being themselves, their siblings, or their parents (Byng-Hall, 2008; Chase, 1999). In the absence of adults who could take on and stand accountable for their responsibilities, as children, participants made conscious or unconscious decisions to become a ‘parent’ for themselves, their siblings, and sometimes their parents. This was the case for most participants, except for Adam whose story is unique in this aspect.

Both emotional and instrumental parentification are usually associated with harmful outcomes, leading to developmental and relationship problems (Hooper, 2007). For most participants, but not for all, being the eldest seem to have impinged on taking on a parentified role. This meant growing up too soon, and for some most especially for Ylenia and Emma, it also meant they took on the task of raising their parents in more ways than one, with its undeniable impact on their attachment (Crittenden, 2008). Emma describes herself as being always seen as mature beyond her years, from her early childhood, whilst Ylenia reflects that:

Ommi dejjem gabet ruhha qisha tifla jigifieri. Jiena anke l-mummy sal-lum, jien mhix il-mummy ghalija, qisni jiena rrid niehu hsiebha. Qisu kien hemm minn dejjem dan il-kuncett, anke meta kont tifla. (Ylenia, pg. 18)

Being burdened with family secrets by adults who see them as their confidantes is also part of this process of parentification for some participants (Chase, 1999). There is a sense of a lost childhood, of heavy burdens, of unfairness and injustice towards them as children and adolescence (Byng-Hall, 2002; 2008). Yet at the same time, as children, this could also act as a validating act, making them feel somewhat seen for their ability to listen, to keep secrets from others, leading to this sense of ambivalence as they tried to make sense of what was happening to them, both internally and externally.

4.3.7 Short-term and Long-Term Impact of the Presence of Family Secrecy in Childhood

4.3.7.1 Connecting experiences and secrets shared in childhood to repercussions on one's life choices, self-concept, relationships, and own experience of life in general [7.1.4]

Similarly to other retrospective studies the effects of living in the shadow of a secret or a secretive atmosphere can be both temporary and/ or long-lasting (e.g. Bornemisza et al., 2022; Bugeja & Galea, 2022; Silven & Forinder, 2022; Tener, 2018; Weiber et al., 2020; Yarrow, 2012). Participants made direct and indirect connections between the experiences and secrets shared in childhood and the effects these had on one's identity, personal and professional life trajectories, and relationships (Afifi et al., 2005). Emma, for instance, expresses her sorrow at having taken up adult responsibilities prematurely due to being privy to secrets in her family, feeling very strongly that this early exposure may have led to heightened sensitivity and feelings of fear and insecurity (Byng-Hall, 2002). The emotional strain and uncertainty that comes from being a confidante to one's parents raises questions about the appropriateness of burdening children with adult concerns (Byng-Hall, 2002, 2008). Nina, Lisa, Vivian, Ylenia, and Simon also carry the weight of being burdened with partial disclosures, family secrets or things that were not said. Questioning their own experiences

and perceptions sometimes led to self-doubt or a distorted sense of self at particular junctures in their lives for the participants (Salih and Chaudry, 2023; Sela & Bat-Or, 2023). The feeling of isolation and carrying a sense of being ‘different’ from others was not always easy to carry as children – this was the case for Lisa, Emma, Nina and Ylenia.

All participants made a direct link between the presence of secrecy in childhood and their current commitment to create healthier spaces for communication and emotional expression for children and offspring in their personal lives. Interestingly, Vivian, Lisa, Emma, Adam, and Ylenia also chose a career trajectory that would make this commitment possible even through their professional roles as educators, mentors, or therapists.

4.3.7.2 Developing a radar for lies, secrets, and distortion of reality: feeling supported by life over time in trusting own intuition to make sense of things being kept hidden [7.5.3]

Several participants discuss the effects of having been brought up in a secretive atmosphere on their developed sensitivity to falsehoods, lies and reality distortion. All participants place a significant emphasis on their pursuit of authenticity in relationships as a response to family secrecy in their childhood. Vivian, Lisa, Simon, Ylenia and Nina in particular seemed to have developed strong emotions related to the detection of lies, inauthenticity and manipulation.

I get really upset with lack of authenticity in my relationships. And then there is the issue of religiosity, which also belongs to my family kind of. Pretending something which is not really the case, just to externally abide by a strict moral code, yet then living a double life is something that triggers a lot of anger in me [Nina, pg. 72].

4.3.7.3 Consciously choosing to correct rather than replicate own family script by not perpetuating patterns of secrecy [7.3.8]

Overall, the participants share narratives of resilience and agency in overcoming the legacy of family secrecy, offering insights into ways in which individuals strive to correct and

replicate certain family scripts (Byng-Hall, 1995). Across the stories, there is an underlying tone and commitment of wanting to break unhealthy family patterns.

Being the youngest participant, Simon feels strongly about wishing to build his current friendships and possibly his own family in the future based on trust and transparency, vowing not to keep secrets from the people closest to him. Ylenia reflects on the absence of positive role models in her and her siblings' upbringing, particularly in terms of healthy communication and decision-making within her family. Her awareness prompts her to prioritise constructive conflict resolution and honesty in her own relationships, and in her role as a mother, aiming to correct the pattern of the dysfunctional dynamics she experienced.

Committed to honesty and intervention in the face of deceit within her family, Lisa seeks to disrupt harmful patterns and promote integrity and accountability among family members to actively confront untruthfulness, which comes with its own repercussions of isolation and disapproval at times. Prompted by her desire to break free from the negative influence of her childhood experiences of marriage and family communication patterns, Emma recounts her intentional decision to select a partner with contrasting qualities to her family members, only to realise later in life, that merely replicating opposing traits in one's choice of partner may not be enough to ensure happiness and fulfilment in a marriage.

Vivian, Ylenia, and Emma recount their commitment to advocating for children's voices as professionals working with children, and Lisa, Nina, Adam, and Simon join them in their pursuit to promoting transparency in relationships as a means of breaking the cycle of secrecy within families.

The multifaceted impact of family secrecy on individuals' emotional wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and sense of agency is highlighted through these seven narratives. Indeed, the study sheds light on the complex dynamics underlying the transmission and

transformation of family legacies across generations when past experiences, present behaviours and reactions, and future aspirations and hopes are interconnected (e.g. Cain, 2016; Kwar et al., 2019; Sinko, 2017).

4.3.7.4 Finding meaning in connecting stories that reveal legacy burdens in the family and that uncover mysteries around important aspects of one's family life which were rather confusing in childhood [7.7.5]

Some participants have found solace in delving deeper into their family histories, employing several means including therapeutic exploration of family patterns and legacy burdens, the use of systemic constellations to uncover entanglements and relational patterns, pursuing genealogical inquiries, and engaging in self-growth by reading related books or pursuing their studies in a relevant field. For instance, Adam expresses his fascination with family history and systemic constellations, instigated by his encounter with book on inherited family trauma. This sentiment is also shared by other participants, namely Lisa, Emma, and Nina who have engaged in similar pursuits through therapeutic and professional help which has helped them to unveil hidden connections and gain insights into legacy burdens and its link to their own development and relationships (Imber-Black, 2014; Rober, 2017).

4.4 Participating in a research study on family secrecy: Emotions, reflections and internal processes shared by participants during the data collection process

An interesting process which must not be left unnoticed in this study, is the underlying internal process that the participants underwent as they generously shared their stories related to the presence of family secrecy in their life trajectories. From the start of this study, I was aware of the delicate nature of this topic and, as expected, some potential participants withdrew their interest when they realised they were not comfortable nor ready to share information about family secrets.

The interview process itself mirrored the emotional rollercoaster induced by family secrecy. Many participants were selective about what aspects they shared, with Emma, for example, choosing not to delve into details about a family member's suicide out of respect for their memory. The strong sense of family loyalty could be felt in the way she was also reticent about details of some of the stories she mentioned, stating that she felt some stories were not hers to share. Vivian remained very uncertain about her participation till the last moment, again due to the sensitive nature of her story. Adam used a non-binary pronoun to talk about a family member mentioned in one of the stories he shared, not because this person defines themselves as non-binary, but again to protect the identity and respect the individual's story.

4.5 Concluding Comments

The examination and interpretation of the data, using a tentative key category and corresponding sub-categories, have addressed the primary research question and its associated sub-questions. The data points to similarities and differences in adult children's perceptions and experiences of their encounters with family secrets, silences, and disclosure alongside their perceived ramifications on their lives and relationships. The analysis reveals insights into the inherent tensions between the detrimental and constructive facets of family secrecy, highlighting the significance of robust support systems and personal resilience in navigating and surmounting the darker side of family secrecy. In conclusion, one participant's reflection brings together the consequential impact of the interviewing procedure on participants and the healing potential of disclosing experiences or burdens associated with family secrecy during childhood.

Nhoss li being able to speak on this subject huwa testimonjanza ta' how we transcend the difficulties li forsi niltaqghu magħhom meta nippruvaw nitkellmu fuq dan is-sugġett delikat. I was aware while speaking about this tension li bdejt inhoss jien u

naqsam l-istorja b'mod li tkun kowerenti b'mod li tonora l-kumplessitajiet kollha – tensjoni li tirrefletti x-xewqa li niehu hsieb dawn in-nies li nhobb waqt li nagħmel spazju għal dan id-discomfort li hassejt u li jkun gust fejn tidhol l-istorja tal-familja tagħna. (Lisa, pg. 35)

In the next chapter, I will present a summary of the key findings, draw conclusions, outline the limitations of the study, and explore the implications for practice and for future research.