

# “IN SEARCH OF A TALE THEY CAN LIVE WITH”: ABOUT LOSS, FAMILY SECRETS, AND SELECTIVE DISCLOSURE

Peter Rober

*Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies, University of Leuven*

Geertje Walravens

*The Training Institute IPRR*

Leen Versteijnen

*University of Leuven*

*Several authors have written about family secrets in the family therapy literature in interesting ways. According to these authors, the questions “who knows the secret?” and “who does not know the secret?” are central. In the present study, we have qualitatively analyzed the documentary film *Familiegeheim* (Family Secret) by the Dutch director Jaap van Hoewijk. The film shows van Hoewijk’s investigation into the death of his father in 1974 and tells the story of a family in which the suicide of the father is kept secret from the three children. Our analysis of the film highlights the complex ways in which families deal with sensitive issues like loss, grief, and suicide. The concept of family secrets seems to poorly capture this complexity, focusing one-sidedly on the destructive effects of withholding delicate information. The concept of selective disclosure is proposed as an alternative. Selective disclosure refers to the complex processes involved in dealing with the dialectic tension between sharing information and keeping it secret. The concept is not only focused on the destructiveness of secrecy but, in addition, also makes room for an appreciation of the caution with which family members deal with sensitive family issues.*

. . .and then mother said ‘daddy was in an accident and daddy is dead.’ . . .  
(Quote from the movie *Familiegeheim*)

As family therapists, we are privileged that we can listen to families talk intimately about their struggles, their love for each other, their worries, their sorrow, and their pain. However, in our practices, very often we meet families in which some important things are not said. We are in conversation with them, and first there is talk, but then there is a slight hesitation, a vague movement of the body, and a silence. And then they talk about something else.

This article will report on a qualitative study we did on family secrecy, and on some of our reflections about the concept of family secrets that developed from doing this study. In the first part of the article, we will review the literature on the subject of family secrecy, and then, in the second part, we will analyze as a case in point the documentary film *Familiegeheim*<sup>1</sup> (Family Secret) by the Dutch director Jaap van Hoewijk to reflect on the complexity of the concept of family secrets. *Familiegeheim* is a film van Hoewijk made about his own family and in particular about the death of his father in 1974. The film tells the story of a family in which a traumatic

---

Peter Rober, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and family therapist at Context, UPC K.U. Leuven, Belgium, and professor at the Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies, University of Leuven, Belgium; Geertje Walravens, BA, is a family therapist at Context, UPC K.U. Leuven, Belgium, and trainer at the training institute IPRR, Belgium; Leen Versteijnen, MA, is a clinical psychologist at the Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies, University of Leuven, Belgium.

We want to extend our sincere appreciation to Jaap van Hoewijk for his permission to study his film and for his generous cooperation in this project. We also want to thank Prof. Dr. Rosenblatt (University of Minnesota, USA) for his help in writing this article.

Address correspondence to Peter Rober, Context, UPC K.U. Leuven, Kapucijnenvoer 33, 3000, Leuven, Belgium; E-mail: Peter.Rober@med.kuleuven.be

event (the suicide of the father) is kept secret from the three children. Instead of talking about the suicide, the mother told the children that their father was killed in a motorcycle accident.

The present study is not focused on mapping so-called reality. Rather, it questions one of the concepts we commonly use in our family therapy practice: the concept of *family secrets*. More specifically, the analysis of this film, *Familiegeheim*, will illustrate that the concept of family secret, with its one-sided focus on the withholding of information, only weakly captures the complexity of family communication around sensitive issues like loss and grief. As an alternative, we will propose the concept of *selective disclosure*. This concept refers to the process of dealing with sensitive issues in communication and highlights the dialectical tension between things told and other things left untold. Rather than being focused on information, this concept connects with a dialogical frame emphasizing the importance of the creation of room to talk. The concept shows promise in being particularly useful in family therapy practice.

## THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY SECRETS IN THE LITERATURE

Family secrets are defined as the intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it (Berger & Paul, 2008; Bok, 1982; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) state that secrets can be conceived as a form of information control, in which some information is under the control of someone who purposefully hides this information from someone else. According to Imber-Black (1993), the questions “who knows the secret?” and “who does not know the secret?” are central. These questions imply that there are at least two persons involved: the one who knows and conceals (the secret holder) and the one who does not know and from whom the information is concealed. Family secrets encompass a wide variety of topics referring to family life: incest, alcoholism, extramarital affairs, suicides, homicides, artificial procreation, adoption, mental or physical illnesses, and so on (see, e.g., Berger & Paul, 2008; Bok, 1982; Imber-Black, 1993, 1998; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Some authors have also written about less likely family secrets. Goodall (2006, 2008), for instance, describes his life growing up in a family in which his father is a CIA agent in the cold war, and the resulting secrecy in the family.

Several authors have emphasized that in family secrets, the information that is withheld is critical to the one whom the information is concealed from because it has an impact on his or her life (Berger & Paul, 2008; Bok, 1982; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). This is important to differentiate secrecy from privacy (Berger & Paul, 2008; Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980). As Imber-Black (1998) writes: “I’ve found it useful to consider whether withholding information impacts another’s life choices, decision-making capacity, and well-being. When it does, then it is secrecy rather than privacy that holds sway. . . . What is truly private doesn’t impact our physical or emotional health” (p. 21). Still, as Imber-Black also explains, it is sometimes slippery to differentiate secrecy from privacy: what one person calls privacy, another might call secrecy. Also, the definitions of secrecy and privacy are historically, sociopolitically, and culturally anchored (Imber-Black, 1998). Interestingly, Imber-Black (1998) suggests that privacy may be considered healthy, while secrecy is unhealthy (p. 19): secrets are called “toxic” (p. 21), “dangerous” (p. 21). In that way, the concept of family secret fits with some of the implicit truths of our Western culture. In our culture, there seems to be a bias against secrecy (Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005), as open communication is valued and revealing secrets is considered to be healing and morally superior to keeping them (Ellis, 2008). This is, for instance, illustrated in the recommendation to adoptive parents and to parents who conceived with donor gametes to tell their children as soon as possible the story about the way the family developed (e.g., McGee, Brakman, & Gurmankin, 2001).

Notwithstanding the cultural bias against secrets, some authors have also described positive aspects of concealing information. Afifi, Olson, and Armstrong (2005), for instance, describe how a person can protect him- or herself by concealing information from close others who are powerful and potentially violent. Ellis (2008) states that secrets can help establish bonds between people and might permit social order to continue uninterrupted. Other authors have highlighted the good intentions of people who hold secrets, reflecting how secret holders want to protect others by withholding information (e.g., Afifi et al., 2005; Papp, 1998).

Although secrets can be held with the best intentions, often there is a price to pay. Family secrets can seriously affect family relationships (Imber-Black, 1998; Paul & Berger, 2007). They

create barriers and coalitions and affect family communication (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Family members may experience tension, anxiety, loneliness, and stress-related symptoms like sleeplessness and headaches (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980). Furthermore, as Imber-Black (1998) mentions, secrets can lead to a “developmental deep freeze” (p. 47): this can happen when secrets are made between a parent and a child at key points in a family’s development, hindering the natural growth of individuation and independence.

## THE DIALECTICS OF DISCLOSURE

In the context of this article, it is interesting to refer to researchers who have tried to understand some of the ways families manage information and keep secrets. One of the mechanisms families use in keeping secrets is topic avoidance (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Paul & Berger, 2007). The concept of topic avoidance refers to the way family members may deal with failures, negative experiences, or deviant choices by avoiding these topics in family conversations. Several techniques can be used: withdrawal from the discussion, omission of certain issues from conversation, changing the subject, looking away, becoming silent, and so on (Caughlin et al., 2005; Paul & Berger, 2007).

Rather than focusing on family conversations, some researchers have studied the way individuals manage private information and make decisions about revealing and concealing information in personal relationships (Caughlin et al., 2000; Petronio, 2000, 2002). Petronio’s model of Communication Privacy Management (CPM; Petronio, 2002), for instance, is based on the concept of privacy boundaries with varying permeability depending on cultural values but also on the vulnerability of the persons involved and the perceived risks of sharing the information. Petronio (2002) proposes two distinctive kinds of boundaries in families: external boundaries that protect private information belonging to the whole family and internal boundaries within the family. Family members are socialized into rules governing these boundaries and managing the disclosure of private information. Sometimes these rules are explicit (e.g., when a mother tells the child not to talk with her friends about something that happened in the family), but these rules can also be implicit. In that case, the rule about boundary management will only be revealed when the family’s boundaries are challenged. For instance, going to a therapist can be such a moment in which a family member might feel invited to talk about a sensitive family issue, which raises the implicit question “can I talk about this, or will I break a family rule if I do?” for the person involved.

An interesting concept that needs to be mentioned here is selective disclosure (Leask, Elford, Bor, Miller, & Johnson, 1997; McKee, Karasz, & Weber, 2004). This concept refers to the way people decide to disclose sensitive information (e.g., HIV diagnosis) to close others, and to the observation that disclosure happens selectively; to certain people, certain things are said, while other things remain unsaid. For instance, Leask et al. (1997) found that when a gay person with HIV decides to disclose his or her diagnosis to the family, he or she does not usually inform the whole family in the same way. Many of the participants in Leask and colleagues’ sample had disclosed the HIV diagnosis to their mother or sister, but not to their father or brother. This illustrates that a selection has taken place. The concept of selective disclosure furthermore suggests that disclosure in families may vary in time (e.g., with the passing of time, gradually more is revealed) and that in children disclosure may increase with age, but that children, as they get older, also rely more on friends rather than on parents as confidants (Petronio, 2002).

As Petronio (2000, 2002) illustrates, keeping things secret or disclosing them involves complex decisions. Using traditional systemic concepts like information, boundaries, and rules, Petronio sheds light on some of the processes involved in disclosure of information: the dialectic between the said and the not said. Baxter (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) approaches this dialectic from a more dialogical perspective. Baxter recognizes a constant tension in relationships between the two contradictory needs: the need for disclosure and the need for secrecy. She relies on some of Bakhtin’s concepts (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986), especially on his idea that language is the product of dynamic, tension-filled processes in which two tendencies are involved: the centripetal (centralizing, unifying) forces and centrifugal (decentralizing,

differentiating) forces. Contrary to Hegelian dialectics that prescribes the finalization of dialectic tensions in a synthesis, according to Bakhtin, these dialogical processes are unfinalizable: the tension between the two opposing forces never finds a final solution. As Baxter (2004) writes, “This view stands in sharp contrast to dominant approaches to relational communication . . . [that] . . . have articulated the grand narratives of connection, certainty, and openness” (Baxter, 2004, p. 114). In such approaches, autonomy is linked with distance and secrecy between partners. Intimacy is linked with openness, and closedness is viewed as problematic and unhealthy. From a dialectical perspective, however, these approaches underestimate the importance of the continuous dynamic interplay of centripetal and centrifugal forces, as well as the uniqueness of every moment and the shaping force of the time and place of the dialogical exchange. In other words, there is a constant tension between expression and nonexpression in relationships, and what is actually said or not said in relationships is not the final outcome of a process, but rather is a momentary freeze frame of the tension, uniquely shaped by the dialogical context. It can never be understood as the final solution of the tension between disclosing and keeping a secret.

### AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHICAL VOICES

The complexity of family secrecy is further revealed in some of the auto-ethnographical publications about family secrets (e.g., Goodall, 2006, 2008; Kuhn, 1995; Pelias, 2008; Poulos, 2008). Auto-ethnography is an approach to qualitative inquiry in which narrative writing about personal experiences is seen as a road to shared understanding (Holman Jones, 2005; Lapadat, 2009). This approach adds a fresh, humane perspective to the traditional family therapy literature on family secrets. Pelias (2008), for instance, tells the story of his adopted sister and the secret of her biological parents, and he also tries to understand why people sometimes feel the need to hide the truth: “we are too ashamed, too afraid, or too accountable to share what we know. We live with our secrets . . . sometimes in comfort and sometimes in pain” (pp. 1310–1311). Pelias does not only empathize with people concealing important aspects of family stories. As he speaks of “our lives” and “we,” he includes himself and us (the readers) as secret holders, implying that we all hold secrets and that nobody is exempt. This was the story Pelias’s sister, Michelle, and her siblings were told: Michelle was adopted after her biological parents left her when she was still a baby. This was the story she grew up with. When she was 30, however, Michelle went looking for her biological parents. After a long search, she found out that her adoptive father was actually her biological father, and that her biological mother was a woman his father had had an affair with. The original adoption story was, however, kept in the family, even after the disclosure of the truth. Michelle’s parents continued to tell that story, and Michelle and her siblings simply smiled and nodded. As Pelias (2008) writes: “[our parents’] tale is a good story, one with a happy ending and one, as best we can tell, they can live with” (p. 1310).

A similarly compassionate attitude toward secret holders is also expressed by Goodall (2006), who writes that he wants his readers to see his parents (the secret holders) “as incomplete and vulnerable persons, like all of us, made more so by the secrets they kept and by the lies they told, but good people nonetheless” (p. 295). Ellis (2008) writes: “We may never reconcile with our parents, but eventually, as part of growing up and moving on, we have to figure out how to accept our families as they were and the secrets they lived. We hope our children will do the same for us” (p. 1315). Such an empathic view of secret holders contrasts markedly with some of the distanced observations that characterize a lot of the literature on family secrecy. Especially in some of the family therapy literature, the authors sometimes seem to be especially sympathetic to the position of the children who are indignant over their parents’ secrecy. They seem to have difficulty in empathizing with the parents (the secret holders), forgetting that we all have secrets we do not want to be told, and we count on our loved ones to keep the truth hidden and to keep silent what is too vulnerable for us to be revealed.

### JAAP VAN HOEWIJK’S MOVIE

The documentary film *Familiegeheim* (Family Secret) by the Dutch director Jaap van Hoewijk is an auto-ethnographical study in its own right. The film shows van Hoewijk’s investiga-

tion into the death of his father in 1974 and tells the story of a family in which the suicide of the father is kept secret from the three children. Our analysis of the film is based on repeated viewings of the film, discussions of the film with colleagues and students, and two interviews we did with the director, Jaap van Hoewijk.

Using visual methodologies in qualitative research is not uncommon in the social sciences (e.g., Rose, 2007; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). However, usually photography or art are analyzed (e.g., Bach, 1998; Rose, 2007). Films and television are not so often used as body of data. Sociologists Clough (1988), Denzin (1989a, 1989b), and Basic (1992) are noteworthy exceptions as they have analyzed Hollywood movies to learn something about certain social realities (e.g., alcoholism, corruption). As sociologists, they were especially interested in the influence of cultural representations on lived experience, and in the way ideas of society are imbedded in films. In contrast to these sociological approaches, we will analyze the film as we would approach a family therapy case, focusing on verbal as well as on nonverbal family communication on different levels (e.g., content or report), listening as carefully as we can to the story told and looking for richness of the meanings conveyed in the film. Furthermore, we also will be alert to meanings that are less explicit and more subtly expressed in the formal characteristics of the film. To address concerns about researcher bias and reliability of our understandings, we worked as a team of researchers and, even more importantly, we discussed our interpretations with the director, Jaap van Hoewijk, himself. Jaap also read the final version of the article and gave his permission to publish it. In that way, he functioned as an external auditor for our research (Elliott, 2004, unpublished data; Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997).

Our main research question is “what conceptual tools do we as family therapists have to talk and think about family secrecy in its complexity?” The film will serve as our primary body of data.

Our qualitative study of the film consisted of two analyses: a thematic analysis (Riesman, 2008) and a narrative analysis (Crossley, 2007). In the thematic analysis (Riesman, 2008) of the film, we used Nvivo software to get an overview of what the film is about. First, we watched the film several times to familiarize ourselves with it and develop initial ideas about the analysis. Then, we used the transcript of the film we obtained from the director to categorize the main themes of the film. Three main thematic categories emerged. This made us realize that the film is not only a film about a family with a secret (category 1). It is also a film about the disclosure of a family secret (category 2). Furthermore, the thematic analysis made us realize that the film itself is a disclosure (category 3). After we did the thematic analysis, we decided to do a narrative analysis (Crossley, 2007). While our thematic analysis in a sense took the film apart in thematic chunks, our narrative analysis was meant to reintegrate the chunks into a meaningful whole enriched by what we learned from the thematic analysis. In this narrative analysis, we furthermore tried to articulate the film’s richness, by retelling the story of the film theme by theme, and highlighting some of the implicit meanings in the film (Giorgio & Giorgio, 2003). Through this analysis, we became especially interested in the conceptual questions the film raised as it became clear to us that the concept of family secrecy only poorly captures the complexity of family communication about sensitive issues as it is depicted in the film.

The film starts with a telephone conversation between Jaap and his uncle Jan (Jaap’s guardian). Jaap asks his uncle whether his father has killed himself. With some hesitation, the uncle answers, “Yes.” Although Jaap suspected that his father had committed suicide, still this blunt answer came as a shock. As Jaap grew up, he had been told that his father died in a motorcycle accident. That was in 1974 and Jaap was 11 then. He had two younger sisters who were 8 and 5 years old at that time. The film tells the story of Jaap’s quest for the truth. It is set up like a thriller in which all the time new information is released. The film illustrates that the truth is elusive as with every revelation, new questions are raised.

In the beginning of the film, van Hoewijk says in a voice-over: “*I wanted to find out what I was not allowed to discover.*” So he talks to his neighbors, to his mother, to his aunt, and to his uncle. It becomes clear that everybody knew about his father’s suicide, except him and his sisters. His mother and her twin sister, Aunt Fred, had told the children that their father was killed in a motorcycle accident, and after the funeral, they removed everything from the house that was reminiscent of him. Even the photographs of his father were ripped out of the photo album. For the rest of their youth, his father was not talked about anymore. It was as if he never existed.



The movie shows the gradual discovery of the untold story of his father's death. Of course, as it becomes clear to van Hoewijk that his father committed suicide, he is confronted with new questions and new concerns: Why did his father kill himself? In what circumstances did he do it? How did he die exactly? Talking to his mother does not bring clarity. At first, she sticks to her motorcycle accident story. And when she finally admits that it was suicide, she states that his she does not know why he did it because everything was fine in the family, there was nothing wrong. However, talking to the neighbors and to family members, the story begins to emerge that his father had been unhappy in his marriage. He came from a poor family and his father was a worker on ships in the harbor of Rotterdam. Then, he married the daughter of the schoolteacher, and this meant that he married above his status. Although Jaap's mother and her sister Fred deny it outright, it seems that Jaap's father never felt accepted in his wife's family. The neighbors, for instance, talk about the gossip in the community that he was not accepted by his wife's family and that he struggled to make his wife happy but failed to do so. Finally, he embezzled money from the firm he worked at. This money he used to give his family a better life with new furniture, a new piano, and a family holiday in Spain. However, after some months he was found out. A few days later, he committed suicide.

## ANALYSIS OF THE MOVIE

Here, we will present a retelling of the film's story as it resulted out of the narrative analysis. The retelling is structured by the main themes that emerged out of the thematic analysis.

### *The Movie as a Story About Family Secrets*

This film tells the story of a family secret in the van Hoewijk family and focuses on what was not talked about: the father's suicide. This secret, however, is linked with other secrets: for instance, the secret about the father's not feeling accepted in the mother's family, the secret of the father's struggle to be a worthy husband for his wife, and the secret about the embezzlement. The film also shows the impact the secret had on the children growing up. One of the sisters says that her childhood had been stolen from her. The other sister mentions that she does not know who her father was because he was hardly ever talked about after his death. From the little that was said about him, she constructed the vague image of a somewhat dull man who had no distinct features, like the neutral black-and-white photograph of her father she had. It was the only photograph of her father her mother had given her. In the movie she says: "By keeping the secret, the memory of my father was taken away."

The film also shows that what was kept silent was covered up with other stories. The mother did not say anything about suicide, but she said that there had been an accident. Instead of saying that the father was unhappy in his marriage, she said that everything was fine between them, and so on. So it seems that some stories are left untold, while half-truths and lies were told instead. In that way in the van Hoewijk family, a complex web of stories was created, where one story linked to the other. But still there remained the sense with the children that important things were left unsaid, and that it even was prohibited to ask questions about it. This left the children dazed and confused. It was left up to them to fill in the gaps they sensed in some way, but were not allowed to talk about. For instance, as a child, the youngest daughter, Willie, had fantasies of her father lying on the road with all the bones in his body broken, waiting for help. Jaap's sister Rookje had vague suspicions about the motorcycle story, but she never mentioned these suspicions, not until 1997 when Jaap told her about their father's suicide. Throughout their childhood, the children were disappointed and outraged that their mother acted as if their father never existed. But there was no room in the van Hoewijk family for these feelings, leaving the children alienated and puzzled about what was happening around them.

The film recounts some of the ways in which their mother avoided the topic of their father. For instance, she acted indifferently when their father was mentioned. It was as if she had forgotten him, Jaap says in the movie. Also, his mother removed his father's pictures from the family photo album. Interestingly, she did not dispose of them nor did she destroy them. Rather, she put the photographs in a special envelope she kept hidden for the children. Why did she keep the photographs? Was she planning to give them to the children when they would

be old enough to face the truth? This may be what often happens: parents hide the truth for their children because they are still so young, and tell themselves that they will tell the children the truth when they grow up. As we know from studies on donor insemination (e.g., Golombok et al., 1996), notwithstanding their intention to disclose the sensitive secret information, a lot of parents tend to keep postponing the moment of disclosure.

### *The Movie as a Story About Disclosure*

The film is not only a story about secrets but also about disclosure. It shows the interactions between the knowers (mother, aunt Fred, Uncle Jan) and Jaap dealing with what has not been said for many years. The viewer witnesses Jaap's attempts to find out what has happened to his father. Jaap asks the questions that have been on his mind for such a long time and tries to get his family members to talk about what they have kept silent. We can see in the film some of the immediate emotions that are evoked in Jaap. For instance, there is the scene where Jaap talks to the park ranger who saw the father just a few hours before he killed himself. When the ranger comments on the son's composure and his being strong, the son starts to cry and says, "Of course this touches me very much."

The tension between Jaap and his mother throughout the film is most noteworthy. Jaap is determined to find out as much as he can about what could not be said and at the same time his mother is reluctant to reveal more information. It is as if his mother is continually making a selection, weighing what she can say and considering how much she will reveal. In several scenes throughout the film, the anger of the son toward his mother is tangible, especially as she keeps on concealing and hiding information in the face of all of Jaap's questions. As Jaap van Hoewijk explained to us in the interview, his anger also had to do with his realization that she had known all along about his father's suicide, and that she had not said anything.

The following sequence illustrates the tension in the conversations between Jaap and his mother. She has just shown Jaap some photographs she had kept hidden for several decades, and Jaap wants to know whether there are more photographs that she keeps hidden.

*Jaap: But how do I know that that's all there is?*

*Mother: You don't know . . . you cannot know . . . you have to depend on me . . . and that is very difficult.*

*Jaap: Why?*

*Mother: Because I have lied enough . . . I can imagine that you don't believe anything about what I say anymore . . . and still you are dependent on me . . . and that is your impotence. . .*

This sequence illustrates the gradual and tension-filled road from secret to disclosure, but it also shows that revelations do not resolve Jaap's *need to know* (Goodall, 2006). While Jaap welcomes each new revelation as a new victory, he does not seem to find any relief or closure as each revelation evokes new questions. Also for these new questions, he is looking for answers. In a sense, this sequence illustrates that what Jaap misses in the relationship with his mother is not solely information; he misses someone he can trust. He cannot believe his mother anymore, and he is never sure whether she is telling the complete truth. In a sense what Jaap is looking for is a dialogical space in which his mother is open to his questions, in which she provides truthful answers as much as possible and maybe even shares her own doubts and questions with him. As Jaap says in the film: "When I look back I realise that I never had a good relationship with my mother." It seems that what Jaap missed in his family was not only a question of the concealed information of his father's death. Rather, what he longed for was a trustful relationship with his mother.

### *The Movie as a Performance*

While we can focus on the story told in the movie, we must not forget that the movie is also a performance in a social context. It not only tells the story about the family secret and the disclosure of the secrets, but the movie itself is also the performance of a disclosure.

It is interesting to reflect a moment on Jaap van Hoewijk's motives for making this film. Of course he has always missed his father, and he wanted to find out the truth about his father's death. But the question is not only why the truth was so important for him but also why he wanted to make it into a movie. In the interview we did with him, he said that the movie was part of an ongoing battle with his mother about the truth of his father's death. It was his reaction to his mother's "killing his father with silence" (*doodzwijgen* in Dutch). That is why he wanted to make a film to show in film theaters and on TV. In a sense, the film is a tribute to his father: as Jaap told us in one of the interviews, he wanted to give his father a face. In the interview, he further explained that making the film was a constant struggle with his mother, who first denied that there had been a suicide and then kept on coming up with new stories about what had happened. Even now, several years after he made the film, Jaap confided to us that he is left with a lot of questions about what really happened.

This suggests that if we consider this film to be a disclosure then it is a *selective* disclosure (Leask et al., 1997; McKee et al., 2004). As we know from our interview with Jaap van Hoewijk, he suspects that most probably even now his mother has made a selection of what she wanted to disclose to him. Jaap is convinced that she did not tell him everything that she knows. Furthermore, in making his movie Jaap himself made selections of what he wanted to share with the viewers, and what he preferred to keep hidden. For one thing, in the interview, Jaap confided to us that he had been severely depressed when he was 14. He was sent to a psychologist. In the first session, this psychologist asked about his father. Jaap started to cry and the psychologist started to ask more questions. When Jaap came home, he told his mother that the psychologist had asked about the death of his father, and his mother said: "You are not going back to that psychologist. It's finished. It is better if you find a way out of your depression yourself." In retrospect, as Jaap van Hoewijk explains in the interview, this angers him still: although she knew that his father's death probably had something to do with her son's depression, she did not talk about it. Even though it was an important episode in his life, and it could have been a perfect illustration of his tense relationship with his mother, in the film Jaap does not mention his depression. This illustrates that also in Jaap's storytelling, there have been selections as to what to disclose. As Jaap told us in the interview, his film *Familiegeheim* was his attempt to create *a story he can live with* (Pelias, 2008). The revelations of hidden stories about his father have pushed him into reframing his life and coming up with a new story to be told, with the audience in mind when selecting what can be disclosed and what is better left concealed.

## DISCUSSION

### *Using a Film as the Body of Data*

In this article, we present some reflections on concepts that can help family therapists deal with family secrecy. We did a case analysis of the family secret around the death of a father, as it is depicted in the documentary film *Familiegeheim*. Using a film as the primary body of data is rather uncommon in the social sciences and in particular in family psychology. One reason may be because working with films leads to problems of selection (e.g., which film to analyze? Flick, 2006). In our study, we selected the film because it presents a rich description of the complexity of family secrecy, as several family members, neighbors, and friends are interviewed and asked for their account. Of course, although the description is rich, it is also biased. Our analysis shows that the film, as a performance, is part of an ongoing battle with the mother, who, according to the director, is responsible for keeping the secret and "killing the father with silence" (*doodzwijgen*).

Another problem with using film in qualitative research is that it may lead to problems of interpretation (e.g., how to understand the material). In comparison with interviews and focus groups, there is a bigger emphasis on nonverbal, visual material (Flick, 2006), and visual data can be more polysemic than verbal data (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Working with a team of researchers, using consensus procedures (Elliott, 2004, unpublished data; Hill et al., 1997), and recruiting the director, Jaap van Hoewijk, himself as an external auditor gave us the best possible guarantee for the credibility of our understandings and our interpretations. This issue of



credibility refers not only to the researchers, as it also has to do with the question of whether a film is a record of reality or a construct (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). As is illustrated in our analysis, often visual data are both records and constructs at the same time: The first two themes that came out of our study (*the movie as a story about family secrets* and *the movie as a story about disclosure*) deal mainly with the film as a record of family life. The third theme (*the movie as a performance*) refers explicitly to the film as a construct. It addresses the film as a product of an author with intentions, biases, blind spots, and so on.

### *Complex Family Dynamics*

Family secrets have been addressed in the family therapy literature in interesting ways. Authors like Imber-Black and others have succeeded in mapping a lot of the territory (Imber-Black, 1998). They defined family secrets as an intentional concealment of information by one or more family members who are impacted by it. They distinguished family secrets from privacy, stating that in family secrets information that is withheld is critical to the one whom the information is concealed from because it has an impact on his or her life. Furthermore, they categorized the main topics of family secrets (e.g., suicide, adoption), and they identified the different types of family secrets. Importantly, they also mapped some of the destructive effects family secrets can have on family members. Implicitly or explicitly, these family therapeutic approaches advised family therapists to carefully and expertly aim at disclosure of the family secret, as it would free the family members from the burden of the secret (Imber-Black, 1998).

However, as Imber-Black (1998) writes, secrets are complex and defy simplistic truths: “Dealing with secrets is the high-wire act in the circus of life” (p. 22). Our analysis of the film shows that focusing on family secrets immerses the researcher in complex family dynamics. The film recounts that when the father died, the mother for all kinds of reasons decided to hide that he committed suicide and to steer clear of the topic of the father’s death in their life as much as possible. The film shows that the secret is kept through silence, through topic avoidance, and through the telling of stories that cover up the gap left by the hidden story. The film shows also that everybody knew (the neighbors, uncles and aunts, the friends) except the three children. It was as if the whole community was bound by some implicit rule that “nobody speaks to the van Hoewijk children about their father” (Petronio, 2002). Although nobody officially had issued this rule or had explicitly voiced it, it is as if there were some kind of taboo to talk about Jaap’s father and especially about how he died. It seems that everybody implicitly understood the rules for maintaining the secret, with whom they could share it, and under what condition *what-really-happened* could be talked about.

The film also tells the story of the confusion and the loneliness of the children, and their growing up with the void the father left. It tells of the anger of the son toward his mother and about the mother’s lying and about the son’s dependency. It tells about the perseverance of the son in finding out the truth about his father’s death, and about his pain and sorrow of coming face-to-face with some of the painful things that have happened.

### *The Concept of Family Secrets*

Our analysis of Jaap van Hoewijk’s film seems to point out that the concept of family secrets may offer a somewhat impoverished picture of the complexity of what happens in a family when shocking or traumatic things are kept unsaid. Let us reflect on the concept in more detail for a moment. The concept of family secrets suggests that the truth is hidden and that what really happened is concealed. The concept also implies that some family members know what is concealed, while others—although they may suspect that something is not said—do not know, leaving them suspicious and insecure. Furthermore, the concept suggests that, because of the destructive effects of the concealment, it would be better to disclose what was concealed. Finally, the metaphor also implicitly promises that the revelation of what really happened would resolve the suspicion and the insecurity of the ones who did not know the truth. Our analysis of Jaap van Hoewijk’s film highlighted some interesting additional complexities about the way families may deal with sensitive issues. For instance, our analysis reveals that while it is clear that the mother did not talk about the father’s suicide, other things were said instead. This seems to suggest that while some stories are not told (e.g., the father’s suicide), the gap

this left was covered up with other stories (e.g., motorcycle accident). Also, it seems that while some things were kept secret for some, the same things were no secret for others. So it seems that there was a kind of selection in the disclosure of information: some things were said to all, while other things were said to some, but not the others, and still other things were said to none. Furthermore, our analysis also shows that the revelation that the father committed suicide did not stop the son from asking questions and feeling that his mother held out on him. Maybe the son was not only seeking the revelation of what really happened but was also looking for a space of trust in which more questions could be raised and in which there could be a dialogue about what happened in the family that might help him understand why his father committed suicide. This suggests that for the son, revelation of the hidden information is not enough, and that in addition he needs room for dialogue to be created.

While these reflections point to the limited usefulness of the concept of family secrets, in addition there are also other issues that should be mentioned. The concept of family secrets not only implies that there is a certain truth kept hidden, but it also implicitly suggests that it is possible that that truth would be revealed. The concept suggests there is one solid truth out there that may be uncovered as if the complete story will ever be told. As can be seen in our analysis of the film *Familiegeheim*, even after the disclosure of what happened to Jaap's father a lot of questions remained, and new questions arose. It seems that the complete story of the death of Jaap van Hoewijk's father will never be told. The message from the film seems to be that the closest Jaap will ever come to the truth is to listen to the different stories that are told, knowing full well that not any one of these stories expresses the whole truth, and that there will always be things left untold. As Goodall (2006) writes, the stories we tell are always "a version of the truth, not the whole truth" (p. 155). Pelias (2008) adds, "Stories . . . always fall short of full representation, even when we believe we have all the facts at hand" (p. 1311).

Based on our analysis, the question can be posed if it would not be best to use the concept of family secrets with care in family therapy practice. In families like van Hoewijk's, it may make more sense to say that "there is little space for questions and stories in the family on the issue of the father's death" rather than to say "there is a family secret." Maybe secrecy in families is not so much a form of information control as some authors have stated (e.g., Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997), but rather an absence of a space in which to ask questions and to tell stories. Maybe it is not only about knowledge being withheld but also about being deprived of a space in which to say what is on your mind, what bothers you, or what puzzles you.

### *Selective Disclosure*

Inspired by some publications in the field of family therapy (Leask et al., 1997; McKee et al., 2004), we have started using the concept of selective disclosure in addition to the concept of family secrets whenever we are confronted with secrecy in families in our work as family therapists. While the concept of family secret offers us a narrow focus on the way family members may withhold information and the uneven power issues involved, the concept of selective disclosure seems to somehow more fully grasp the complexities of family communication when delicate information is not revealed. The concept highlights that what we are dealing with is a multifaceted continuing process in time: a process filled with tensions, small decisions, and good intentions. It refers to a process of selection as to whom to tell what, how much to tell, when to tell, and so on. Implied in the concept of selective disclosure is the idea that the sharing of secret information would not resolve everything, as it suggests that whatever is said, other things remain unsaid. In addition, the concept suggests that what is needed, rather than more information, is the creation of a dialogical space in which questions can be asked and some things can be said, knowing and accepting that not everything will be revealed.

The concept of selective disclosure is not only focused on the destructiveness of secrecy but in addition makes room for an appreciation of the cautious way in which family members deal with sensitive family issues. In that sense, selective disclosure is not linked with special, pathological cases, but rather it is a process that is taking place in some form or another in all families, all the time. Therapeutically, rather than aiming at complete disclosure of the information withheld, in line with the concept of selective disclosure, the therapist is aiming at the creation of a room in which to talk. Such a room represents an unfinalized (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986)

process in which people continually negotiate the tension of what is said and not said. It is a dialogical space in which people listen to what is said, accept that not everything can be said, respect that there are good reasons why things cannot be said, and are open to whatever is said that has not been said before. Such a view based on the concept of selective disclosure invites compassion and empathy and recognizes secret holders as well as those who do not know in their struggle to find stories they can live with (Pelias, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Much research remains to be performed to really understand what it means for a family when important information about sensitive events is withheld from members in the family. Our study of Jaap van Hoewijk's film is qualitative in nature and cannot claim to have generated any hard truths or new discoveries. While qualitative analysis entails making sense not only of words and texts, but also of rich data like "cities, gardens, non-verbal behavior, films, photographs, and paintings" (Reavey & Johnson, 2008, p. 297), it could be argued that essentially it is about *seeing* (Daly, 2007). Rather than testing hypotheses, qualitative research methods help researchers to be more present to the full experience of family life and notice what remained unobserved until then. Qualitative methods invite researchers to systematically listen and watch the density of family life as it is reflected in the research data. Careful reflection on these observations and their possible meanings then can lead to new hypotheses and assumptions, or as is the case in the present study, to new concepts that seem to better grasp the full complexity of some aspect of family life.

In terms of future research on the concept of selective disclosure, we are at the moment finishing a qualitative analysis of a chapter from James Agee's famous novel *A Death in the Family*, which describes in minute detail how one family member discloses the way a father died in a car accident to other family members. Furthermore, we developed an interview protocol focused on the selective disclosure of sensitive issues in families. We are going to use this protocol in research on family communication in adoptive families, in families who lost a child, in families who relied on donor insemination, in families of depressed patients, and so on. In that way we hope to further our understanding of the way families deal with questions around sharing information and keeping secrets about delicate family matters.

The present study has surely helped us to better understand some of the issues involved. Before we started our analysis of the film *Familiegeheim*, we considered the film to be a story about the disclosure of a secret in the van Hoewijk family. We thought it depicted the closing stage of a family process that started with a "secret" and ended with a final "disclosure," resolving all the tension surrounding the secret. Now we see it differently. What the film presents looks more like a snapshot of one moment in an ongoing process of selective disclosure in which the different family members negotiate with each other in a dialogical space. This continuous negotiation seems to imply some kind of dialectic tension between what is disclosed and what is considered to be unfit to be revealed because of dangers sensed by one of the family members. As we see it now, the film pictures the family as a group of people living together looking for a "*tale they can live with.*"

## REFERENCES

- Afifi, T. D., Olson, L. N., & Armstrong, C. (2005). The chilling effect and family secrets: Examining the role of self protection, other protection and communication efficacy. *Human Communication Research*, 31, 564–598.
- Bach, H. (1998). *A visual narrative concerning curriculum, girls, photography, etc.* Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Qual Institute Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Basic, M. M. (1992). Reading the alcoholic film: Analysis of *The Country Girl*. *Sociological Quarterly*, 33, 211–227.
- Baxter, L. A. (2004). Dialogues of relating. In R. Anderson, L. A. Baxter, & K. N. Cissna (Eds.), *Dialogue: Theorizing difference in communication studies* (pp. 107–124). London: Sage.

- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Berger, R., & Paul, M. (2008). Family secrets and family functioning: The case of donor assistance. *Family Process*, 47, 553–566.
- Bok, S. (1982). *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelations*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Caughlin, J. P., Afifi, W. A. (2004). When is topic avoidance unsatisfying? Examining moderators of the association between avoidance and dissatisfaction. *Human Communication Research*, 30, 479–513.
- Caughlin, J. P., Afifi, W. A., Carpenter-Theune, K. E., & Miller, L. (2005). Reasons for, and consequences of, revealing personal secrets in close relationships: A longitudinal study. *Personal Relationships*, 12, 45–59.
- Caughlin, J. P., Golish, T. D., Olson, L. N., Sargent, J. E., Cook, J. S., & Petronio, S. (2000). Intrafamily secrets in various family configurations: A communication boundary management perspective. *Communication Studies*, 51, 116–134.
- Clough, P. T. (1988). The movies and social observation: Reading Blumer's movies and conduct. *Symbolic Interaction*, 11, 85–97.
- Crossley, M. (2007). Narrative analysis. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (pp. 131–144). London: Sage.
- Daly, K. J. (2007). *Qualitative methods for family studies and human development*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989a). *The research act* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989b). Reading *Tender Mercies*: Two interpretations. *Sociological Quarterly*, 30, 1–19.
- Ellis, C. (2008). Do we need to know? *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 1314–1320.
- Flick, U. (2006). *An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Giorgio, A., & Giorgio, B. (2003). Phenomenology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology* (pp. 25–50). London: Sage.
- Golombok, S., Brewaeys, A., Cook, R., Giavazzi, M., Guerra, D., Mantovani, A., et al. (1996). The European study of assisted reproduction families: Family functioning and child development. *Human Reproduction*, 11, 2324–2331.
- Goodall, H. L. (2006). *A need to know: The clandestine history of a CIA family*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Goodall, H. L. (2008). My family secret. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 1305–1308.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Afifi, W. A. (1995). Some things are better left unsaid: Topic avoidance in family relationships. *Communication Quarterly*, 43, 276–296.
- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Nutt-Williams, E. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *Counseling Psychologist*, 25, 517–572.
- Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 763–792). London: Sage.
- Imber-Black, E. (1993). Secrets in families and family therapy: An overview. In E. Imber-Black (Ed.), *Secrets in families and family therapy* (pp. 3–28). New York: Norton.
- Imber-Black, E. (1998). *The secret life of families*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Karpel, M. A. (1980). Family secrets. *Family Process*, 19, 295–306.
- Kuhn, A. (1995). *Family secrets: Acts of memory and imagination*. London: Verso.
- Lapadat, J. C. (2009). Writing our way into shared understanding: Collaborative autobiographical writing in the qualitative methods class. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15, 955–979.
- Leask, C., Elford, J., Bor, R., Miller, R., & Johnson, M. (1997). Selective disclosure: A pilot investigation in family relationships since HIV diagnosis. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 19, 59–69.
- van Leeuwen, T., & Jewitt, C. (2001). *Handbook of visual analysis*. London: Sage.
- McGee, G., Brakman, S. V., & Gurmankin, A. D. (2001). Gamete donation and anonymity: Disclosure to children conceived with donor gametes should not be optional. *Human Reproduction*, 16, 2033–2036.
- McKee, D. M., Karasz, A., & Weber, C. M. (2004). Health care seeking among urban minority adolescent girls: The crisis at sexual debut. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 2, 549–554.
- Papp, P. (1998). The worm in the bud: Secrets between parents and children. In E. Imber-Black (Ed.), *Secrets in families and family therapy* (pp. 66–85). New York: Norton.
- Paul, M., & Berger, R. (2007). Topic avoidance and family functioning in families conceived with donor insemination. *Human Reproduction*, 22, 2566–2571.
- Pelias, R. J. (2008). H. L. Goodall's *A Need to Know* and the stories we tell ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 1309–1313.
- Petronio, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Balancing the secrets of private disclosures*. Mahwah, NJ: LEA.
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Poulos, C. N. (2008). *Accidental ethnography: An inquiry into family secrecy*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Reavey, P., & Johnson, K. (2008). Visual approaches: Using and interpreting images. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 296–314). London: Sage.

- Riesman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2007). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Tardy, C. H., Hosman, L. A., & Bradac, J. J. (1981). Disclosing self to friends and family: A reexamination of initial questions. *Communications Quarterly*, 29, 263–268.
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (1997). Revealing family secrets: The influence of topic, function and relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14, 679–705.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Familiegeheim. The Netherlands, 2001 (Dutch language, color, 35 mm, 54 min). Produced by Jan Heijs, Ruud Monster, and Wouter Snip. Directed and written by Jaap van Hoewijk. Distributed by Lava Film Distribution. First shown in Amsterdam in 2001. Later broadcasted several times on Dutch, Swedish, and Flemish national television.