

January 11, 2005

## **The Secret Lives of Just About Everybody**

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

One mislaid credit card bill or a single dangling e-mail message on the home computer would have ended everything: the marriage, the big-time career, the reputation for decency he had built over a lifetime.

So for more than 10 years, he ruthlessly kept his two identities apart: one lived in a Westchester hamlet and worked in a New York office, and the other operated mainly in clubs, airport bars and brothels. One warmly greeted clients and waved to neighbors, sometimes only hours after the other had stumbled back from a "work" meeting with prostitutes or cocaine dealers.

In the end, it was a harmless computer pop-up advertisement for security software, claiming that his online life was being "continually monitored," that sent this New York real estate developer into a panic and to a therapist.

The man's double life is an extreme example of how mental anguish can cleave an identity into pieces, said his psychiatrist, Dr. Jay S. Kwawer, director of clinical education at the William Alanson White Institute in New York, who discussed the case at a recent conference.

But psychologists say that most normal adults are well equipped to start a secret life, if not to sustain it. The ability to hold a secret is fundamental to healthy social development, they say, and the desire to sample other identities - to reinvent oneself, to pretend - can last well into adulthood. And in recent years researchers have found that some of the same psychological skills that help many people avoid mental distress can also put them at heightened risk for prolonging covert activities.

"In a very deep sense, you don't have a self unless you have a secret, and we all have moments throughout our lives when we feel we're losing ourselves in our social group, or work or marriage, and it feels good to grab for a secret, or some subterfuge, to reassert our identity as somebody apart," said Dr. Daniel M. Wegner, a professor of psychology at Harvard. He added, "And we are now learning that some people are better at doing this than others."

Although the best-known covert lives are the most spectacular - the architect Louis Kahn had three lives; Charles Lindbergh reportedly had two - these are exaggerated examples

of a far more common and various behavior, psychologists say. Some people gamble on the sly, or sample drugs. Others try music lessons. Still others join a religious group. They keep mum for different reasons.

And there are thousands of people - gay men and women who stay in heterosexual marriages, for example - whose shame over or denial of their elemental needs has set them up for secretive excursions into other worlds. Whether a secret life is ultimately destructive, experts find, depends both on the nature of the secret and on the psychological makeup of the individual.

Psychologists have long considered the ability to keep secrets as central to healthy development. Children as young as 6 or 7 learn to stay quiet about their mother's birthday present. In adolescence and adulthood, a fluency with small social lies is associated with good mental health. And researchers have confirmed that secrecy can enhance attraction, or as Oscar Wilde put it, "The commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it."

In one study, men and women living in Texas reported that the past relationships they continued to think about were most often secret ones. In another, psychologists at Harvard found that they could increase the attraction between male and female strangers simply by encouraging them to play footsie as part of a lab experiment.

The urge to act out an entirely different persona is widely shared across cultures as well, social scientists say, and may be motivated by curiosity, mischief or earnest soul-searching. Certainly, it is a familiar tug in the breast of almost anyone who has stepped out of his or her daily life for a time, whether for vacation, for business or to live in another country.

"It used to be you'd go away for the summer and be someone else, go away to camp and be someone else, or maybe to Europe and be someone else" in a spirit of healthy experimentation, said Dr. Sherry Turkle, a sociologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Now, she said, people regularly assume several aliases on the Internet, without ever leaving their armchair: the clerk next door might sign on as [bill@aol.com](mailto:bill@aol.com) but also cruise chat rooms as Armaniguy, Cool Breeze and Thunderboy.

Most recently, Dr. Turkle has studied the use of online interactive games like Sims Online, where people set up families and communities. She has conducted detailed interviews with some 200 regular or occasional players, and says many people use the games as a way to set up families they wish they had, or at least play out alternative versions of their own lives.

One 16-year-old girl who lives with an abusive father has simulated her relationship to him in Sims Online by changing herself, variously, into a 16-year-old boy, a bigger, stronger girl and a more assertive personality, among other identities. It was as a more forceful daughter, Dr. Turkle said, that the girl discovered she could forgive her father, if

not change him.

"I think what people are doing on the Internet now," she said, "has deep psychological meaning in terms of how they're using identities to express problems and potentially solve them in what is a relatively consequence-free zone."

Yet out in the world, a consequence-rich zone, studies find that most people find it mentally exhausting to hold onto inflammatory secrets - much less lives - for long. The very act of trying to suppress the information creates a kind of rebound effect, causing thoughts of an affair, late-night excursions or an undisclosed debt to flood the consciousness, especially when a person who would be harmed by disclosure of the secret is nearby. Like a television set in a crowded bar, the concealed episode seems to play on in the mind, attracting attention despite conscious efforts to turn away. The suppressed thoughts even recur in dreams, according to a study published last summer.

The strength of this effect undoubtedly varies from person to person, psychiatrists say. In rare cases, when people are pathologically remorseless, they do not care about or even perceive the potential impact of a secret on others, and therefore do not feel the tension of keeping it. And those who are paid to live secret lives, like intelligence agents, at least know what they have signed up for and have clear guidelines to tell them how much they can reveal to whom.

But in a series of experiments over the past decade, psychologists have identified a larger group they call repressors, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the population, who are adept at ignoring or suppressing information that is embarrassing to them and thus well equipped to keep secrets, some psychologists say.

Repressors score low on questionnaires that measure anxiety and defensiveness - reporting, for example, that they are rarely resentful, worried about money, or troubled by nightmares and headaches. They think well of themselves and don't sweat the small stuff.

Although little is known about the mental development of such people, some psychologists believe they have learned to block distressing thoughts by distracting themselves with good memories. Over time - with practice, in effect - this may become habitual, blunting their access to potentially humiliating or threatening memories and secrets.

"This talent is likely to serve them well in the daily struggle to avoid unwanted thoughts of all kinds, including unwanted thoughts that arise from attempts to suppress secrets in the presence of others," Dr. Wegner, of Harvard, said in an e-mail message.

The easier it is to silence those thoughts and the longer the covert activity can go on, the harder it may be to confess later on.

In some cases, far stronger forces are at work in shaping secret lives. Many gay men and

some lesbians marry heterosexual partners before working out their sexual identity, or in defiance of it. The aim is to please parents, to cover their own shame or to become more acceptable to themselves and society at large, said Dr. Richard A. Isay, a psychiatrist at Cornell University who has provided therapy to many closeted gay men.

Very often, he said, these men struggle not to act on their desires, and they begin secret lives in desperation. This eventually forces agonizing decisions about how to live with, or separate from, families they love.

"I know that I did not pursue the orientation that I have, and know that I have always been as I am now," one man wrote in a letter published in Dr. Isay's book "Becoming Gay." "I know that it becomes more difficult to live in the lonely shell that I do now, but can see no way out of it."

When exposure of a secret life will destroy or forever poison the public one, people must either come clean and choose, or risk mental breakdown, many therapists say.

Dr. Seth M. Aronson, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, has treated a pediatrician with a small child and a wife at home who was sneaking off at night to bars, visiting prostitutes and even fighting with some of the women's pimps.

At one session, the man was so drunk he passed out; at another, he brought a prostitute with him. "It was one of those classic splits, where the wife was perfect and wonderful but he was demeaning these other women," and the two lives could not coexist for long, Dr. Aronson said.

In a famous paper on the subject of double lives, published in 1960, the English analyst Dr. Donald W. Winnicott argued that a false self emerged in particular households where children are raised to be so exquisitely tuned to the expectations of others that they become deaf to their own longings and needs.

"In effect, they bury a part of themselves alive," said Dr. Kwawer of the White Institute.

The pediatrician treated by Dr. Aronson, for example, grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household in which his mother frequently and disapprovingly compared him to his uncle, who was a rogue and a drinker. Dr. Kwawer's patient, the real estate developer, had parents who frowned on almost any expression of appetite, and imprinted their son with a strong sense of upholding the family image. He married young, in part to please his parents.

Both men are still getting psychotherapy but now live one life apiece, their therapists say. The pediatrician has curtailed his extracurricular activities, returned home mentally and confessed some of his troubles to his wife. The real estate developer has separated from his wife, but lives close by and helps with the children. The break caused a period of

depression for everyone involved, Dr. Kwawer said, but the man now has renewed energy at work, and has reconnected with friends and his children. The secret trysts have stopped, as has the drug use, and he feels he has his life back.

"Contrary to what many people assume," Dr. Kwawer said, "quite often a secret life can bring a more lively, more intimate, more energized part of themselves out of the dark."