



## LAWFUL POSSESSION: A CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO JEALOUSY STORIES

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**Abstract**—Traditional approaches to jealousy have treated the emotion as unitary and individual. In the present paper, we construe jealousy as an embodiment of multiple, often conflicting, social judgements which are discursively constituted. Our project aims to apply constructionist theory to an empirical investigation of jealousy stories. Data from 32 storytellers was analyzed using a “positioning triad.” This “triad” includes the storyline through which the episode is unfolded, the positions of persons involved in the story, and the social acts performed. We classify each story according to three narrative forms (progressive, regressive, stable) and identify three positions which are crucial to the resolution of the storyline (*victim, avenger* and *outsider* positions). We also describe the conflicting rights and judgements of the different positions. In conclusion, we discuss the problems we encountered in our project and the difficulties of conducting empirical research based on constructionism. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

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In the last 20 years there has been a move away from traditional theories of emotion as palpable and unitary psychological entities (Gergen, 1995) to an understanding of emotions as discursively constructed (e.g. Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990; Oatley, 1993; Stenner, 1993). Within a constructionist approach, emotions are considered as embodied processes, lived in social contexts. We have found this conceptualization influential in our own discursive approach to jealousy. We agree that “an emotional feeling, and the correlated display, is to be understood as discursive phenomena, an expression of a judgement and the performance of a social act” (Harré & Gillett, 1994, p. 147). That is, we take emotion to be embodied judgment embedded in social context. This paper reports our attempt to use recent constructionist theorizing to conduct empirical research on jealousy.

Unlike researchers using more traditional approaches (e.g. Buss, Larsen, Westen & Semmelroth, 1992; Mullen & Martin, 1994) we have taken as our starting point the notion that jealousy is constituted as an emotion in a social context. Hupka (1981) points out that the experience of jealousy is different in different social contexts. At this time, often called the “postmodern,” social contexts are multiple and heterogeneous (Kvale, 1992) and we assume that the experience of jealousy will vary between, and even within, different local contexts. A particular local context will include shared discursive resources (Potter & Wetherell, 1987)

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which people use to make sense of their experiences of jealousy. We assume different usage of these shared discursive resources will produce variations within local contexts. By identifying these resources researchers may produce more refined understandings of the complexity and diversity of emotion experiences.

Harré and Gillett (1994) argue for two aims for discursive research: identification of resources, and an examination of how these resources are put to work. In its broadest sense this study set out to identify discursive resources in jealousy texts. As our first step we collected written text on jealousy experiences. Written text has the advantage of being readily available for analysis without mediating operations, such as transcription. More importantly it enabled us to ask people to describe a painful, and often private, emotional experience anonymously. We thought that anonymity might better provide us with accounts using personal sense-making resources.

We invited second and third year undergraduate psychology students to submit a description of an experience of jealousy. We assumed that within this group there would be little variation in such gross social categories as class, age and ethnicity. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with the following written instruction:

We'd like you to write a description of one particular incident that involved jealousy. We'd like you to describe the incident in as much detail as possible including details that might seem trivial or irrelevant.

They were also given an envelope in which to return their text anonymously. We collected texts from 32 participants.

Our next task was to decide how to conceptualize the discursive resources we would identify. We began by reading the texts a number of times. As a result of our reading and discussions it became clear to us that the jealousy descriptions took a narrative form. According to some contemporary constructionist theory, narratives are among the socially available, discursive resources through which experiences are organized and made meaningful. Theorists, such as Bruner (1990), Howard (1991) and Sarbin (1986), describe narrative as a pervasive organizing structure for creating meaning from experience. This is a very broad description, and for analytic purposes we needed a theoretical framework which grounded narrative in psychology. This would enable us to make specific links between "stories" and "emotions." After much reading and discussion we decided to work with the "positioning triad" which Harré and Gillett (1994) attribute to Hollway (1984). This "triad" includes the storyline through which the episode is unfolded, the relative positions of persons involved in the story, and the social acts performed. This tripartite approach enables social context to be incorporated into the analysis through examining the interrelationship of the story, the storyteller and the social force of storytelling. Each aspect of this triad is discussed in more detail below.

The notion of a storyline is linked to the basic element of narrative which is its inherent sequentiality (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1981). The events that are related in any narrative derive meaning from their place in the sequence of the narrative as a whole, or its plot. In narrative theory "plot" has two aspects: the underlying structure of a story, and emplotment or the activity of sensemaking. In this activity speakers employ culturally shared forms to make sense of their experience (Gergen, 1988) and the reader or hearer draws on these forms to actively engage in making sense of the story (Good, 1994).

Gergen (1988) proposes a model of narrative which privileges emotional engagement and this seemed most appropriate for our purposes. Gergen's model suggests that a successful narrative must establish a valued endpoint, or a goal towards which the story is directed.

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