

Sex differences in human jealousy

A coordinated study of forced-choice, continuous rating-scale, and physiological responses on the same subjects

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Abstract

Previous investigators have confirmed the evolutionary hypothesis that the sexes differ in their responses to sexual vs. emotional infidelity and have taken their results as suggesting the existence of a mechanism that regulates the perceptions of threat, the emotional responses, and the physiological reactions that constitute jealousy. This notion implies that these three categories of response should occur systematically in the same group of subjects. However, no study has been done to confirm this implication. This study is the first to demonstrate the traditional findings concerning these three categories of response on the same group of subjects. Overall, the results of this investigation are consistent with the core evolutionary hypothesis of sex differences in human jealousy. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

One of the most widely disseminated conclusions of evolutionary psychological research is that male and female jealousy is inspired by different threats (Buss et al., 1999; Buunk,

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Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; Symons, 1979). While male jealousy is more likely to be inspired by threats of sexual infidelity, female jealousy is more likely to be inspired by threats of emotional infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Buunk et al., 1996; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993). Such sex differences have been observed in the United States (Buss et al., 1992; Buunk et al., 1996; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996), the Netherlands, Germany, Korea, Japan (Buunk et al., 1996), and Sweden (Wiederman & Kendall, 1999). According to Buss (1994), sex differences in the eliciting factors of human jealousy are probably a human universal.

The evidence that supports this conclusion arises from three kinds of studies: (1) forced-choice studies in which men and women are asked which sort of situation — sexual infidelity or emotional infidelity — they would find most upsetting (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Buss et al., 1992; Buunk et al., 1996; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993); (2) continuous rating-scale studies in which men and women are asked to report their emotional reactions in response to the two sorts of situations (deWeerth & Kalma, 1993; Geary, Rumsey, Bow-Thomas, & Hoard, 1995; Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000); and (3) physiological response studies, in which several physiological variables of male and female subjects are tracked as they imagine the two sorts of jealousy-inducing situations (Buss et al., 1992; Harris, 2000). These studies have typically included variables thought to reflect an individual's defensive and/or aggressive responses to relationship threats and have included (1) heart (pulse) rate (HR), (2) electrodermal (palm sweating) activity (EDA), (3) electromyographic (frowning) activity of the forehead muscle (EMG), and (4) systolic and diastolic blood pressure (BP).

In her concise commentary on the evolutionary psychological literature on jealousy, Harris (2000) has raised doubts about the relationship between the widely disseminated conclusion and the purported evidence for it. She pointed out that in the forced-choice procedure, while men and women universally vary in the proportions that would be more upset by sexual infidelity than by emotional infidelity, different studies report different proportions. For example, while a clear majority of women report that they would be more distressed by emotional infidelity, ranging from approximately 62% (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996) to 86% (Buss et al., 1992), only a slight majority of men reported that they would be more bothered by sexual infidelity, ranging from 47% (Harris & Christenfeld, 1996) to 60% (Buss et al., 1992).

From her review of studies that have employed continuous rating-scales, Harris (2000) concludes that sex differences implied by the forced-choice studies are not always confirmed. For example, deWeerth and Kalma (1993) found that more women than men reported that they would verbally or physically aggress against a rival or a mate in response to sexual betrayal. Moreover, in two additional studies, male and female college students who had experienced a mate's infidelity did not significantly differ in their assessment of how damaging sexual infidelity was to their sexual relationship (Hansen, 1987), or in their amount of focus on the sexual and emotional aspects of the infidelity (Harris, 2000).

Similarly, with respect to Buss et al.'s (1992) physiological results, Harris (2000) reminds us that only one out of Buss et al.'s three attempted measures (EDA) showed a significant

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