

Sex differences in jealousy: The recall of cues to sexual and emotional infidelity in personally more and less threatening context conditions

Achim Schützwohl*, Stephanie Koch

Department of Psychology, University of Bielefeld, Postfach 100 131, 33501 Bielefeld, Germany

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Abstract

We tested the prediction derived from the evolutionary view of jealousy that men preferentially recall cues to sexual infidelity, whereas women preferentially recall cues to emotional infidelity. This preferential recall was predicted to be more pronounced in a personally more threatening than in a personally less threatening context condition. In the personally less threatening context condition, the participants listened to a story about an anonymous couple spending an evening together; in the personally more threatening context condition, the same story referred to one's own romantic relationship. Integrated in this story were five ambiguous cues each to sexual and emotional infidelity. As predicted, in a surprise recall test, men preferentially recalled cues to sexual infidelity, whereas women preferentially recalled cues to emotional infidelity. This preferential recall was significant for both men and women only in the personally more threatening context condition.

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1. Introduction

A central assumption of evolutionary psychological research is that the fundamental building blocks of the mind are domain- and content-specific information-processing

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: achim.schuetzwohl@uni-bielefeld.de (A. Schützwohl).

mechanisms (e.g., Buss, 1999; Cosmides & Tooby, 1994). These specialized mechanisms have evolved because they solved specific recurrent problems of individual survival or reproduction. Domain specificity means that the mechanisms are activated and employed only in those contexts or situations (domains) signaling the presence of the adaptive problem they evolved to solve. Moreover, a content-specific mechanism is assumed to preferentially (i.e., rapidly, reliably, and efficiently) process only those classes of information that are relevant for the solution of the specific problem.

Infidelity in sexual relationships is an essential problem of individual reproduction (Cosmides & Tooby, 1994) and the jealousy mechanism (JM) is a plausible psychological adaptation to it. Thus, the domain of the JM is a sexual relationship in which a mate's infidelity might threaten one's own reproductive success. To solve this adaptive problem, the JM is assumed to preferentially process (e.g., attend, encode, store, and retrieve) information indicating a mate's (potential) infidelity.

Men and women's JMs may differ in the nature of information they preferentially process because men and women's reproductive success has been recurrently threatened by different types of infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Symons, 1979). Specifically, a woman's sexual infidelity deprives her mate of a reproductive opportunity and may burden him with years of investment in a genetically unrelated child. In contrast, a man's infidelity does not burden his mate with unrelated children, but it may divert resources away from his mate's progeny. This resource threat may be signaled by his level of emotional attachment to the other female. As a consequence, men's JM is hypothesized to preferentially process information about a mate's sexual infidelity, whereas women's JM is hypothesized to preferentially process information about a mate's emotional infidelity.

The evolutionary view of a sex-specific JM spawned an impressive body of research during the past decade (e.g., Buss et al., 1992, 1999; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; DeSteno, Bartlett, Salovey, & Braverman, 2002; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Geary, Rumsey, Bow-Thomas, & Hoard, 1995; Grice & Seely, 2000; Harris, 2000, 2002; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996; Pietrzak, Laird, Stevens, & Thompson, 2002; Sagarin, Becker, Guadagno, Nicastle, & Millevoi, 2003; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993; Wiederman & Kendall, 1999). This research has been primarily devoted to testing the hypothesis that the female JM responds with stronger emotions to a mate's emotional infidelity, whereas the male JM generates stronger emotions in response to a mate's sexual infidelity (see Harris, 2003, for a critical review). The most widespread measure used in this research consists of a forced-choice method: The participants are asked to indicate which form of a mate's imagined infidelity would distress or upset them more. In her meta-analysis on the results from the forced-choice measure, Harris (2003) concluded that "there does appear to be a sex difference . . . with heterosexual samples. This effect, however, is greatly reduced in samples that are . . . older than the typical college age" (p. 105; but see Hofhansl, Vitouch, & Voracek, 2004, for a more recent and complete meta-analysis that supports the evolutionary view). In contrast, other self-report measures failed to clearly demonstrate a sex difference in the content specificity of the JM. In addition, physiological measures as indicators of the strength of the emotional responses to a partner's imagined sexual versus

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