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Sex differences in jealousy: Information search and cognitive preoccupation

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Abstract

Two experiments test the prediction derived from the evolutionary view of jealousy that men are particularly concerned with a mate's sexual infidelity and women with a mate's emotional infidelity. Experiment 1 examines sex differences with respect to the information men and women actively request from their partner when suspecting her or his infidelity. Experiment 2 tests the hypothesis that within a heterosexual romantic relationship men are more occupied with thoughts about a mate's sexual infidelity, whereas women are more occupied with thoughts about a mate's emotional infidelity. The results of both experiments support the evolutionary view of sex-specific jealousy mechanisms. The implications of the present findings are discussed.

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Keywords: Sex differences; Jealousy; Information search; Cognitive preoccupation

1. Introduction

Evolutionary psychologists view jealousy as a psychological mechanism that has been shaped by natural selection because it recurrently solved a specific problem of reproduction in our evolutionary history (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Symons, 1979). The evolved jealousy mechanism is hypothesized to (a) take in only a

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narrow range of information as input, where input can be actively extracted or passively received from the environment; (b) process this input according to specific procedures in a privileged manner (i.e. requiring only minimal neural processing) that ensures its rapid transformation into output that (c) elicits emotional (subjective, physiological, and behavioral) reactions that solve the specific adaptive problem (e.g., Buss, 1995, 2004; see also MaDougall, 1908/1960, and Tooby & Cosmides, 1990, for a similar view on emotions in general).

A distinctive feature of the evolutionary view is the assumption of a sex-specific evolved jealousy mechanism (EJM) because different types of infidelity have recurrently threatened men and women's reproductive success. 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 sexual infidelity does not burden his mate with unrelated children, but he may divert resources from his mate's progeny. This resource threat may be signaled by his level of emotional attachment to another female. As a consequence, men's EJM is hypothesized to be particularly concerned with a mate's sexual infidelity, whereas women's EJM is hypothesized to be particularly concerned with a mate's emotional infidelity.

The evolutionary view of a sex-specific EJM spawned an impressive body of research during the past decade that has been primarily devoted to testing the hypothesis that the female EJM responds with stronger emotions to a mate's emotional infidelity whereas the male EJM generates stronger emotions in response to a mate's sexual infidelity (see Harris, 2003, for a critical review; and Hofhansl, Vitouch, & Voracek, 2004, for a more recent and complete meta-analysis that supports the evolutionary view).

The present research does not share the focus on emotional responses of these previous studies. Rather, extending recent studies examining sex differences with respect to various cognitive processes (Schützwohl, 2004, 2005; Schützwohl & Koch, 2004), the following experiments address two rather general assumptions derived from the EJM view about men and women's cognitive concerns. First, suspecting a mate's infidelity men and women should differ with respect to the information they actively extract from the environment. More precisely, to be able to decide whether the adaptive problem that the jealousy mechanism has evolved to solve obtains, men are assumed to preferentially extract information from the environment concerning a mate's sexual infidelity and women about a mate's emotional infidelity. This prediction is tested in *Experiment 1*.

Second, within a romantic heterosexual relationship men and women's cognitive processes should be more concerned with the adaptively primary infidelity type (i.e., female sexual and male emotional infidelity, respectively). Accordingly, men should be more occupied with thoughts about her being sexually unfaithful, whereas women should be more occupied with thoughts about him being emotionally unfaithful. This prediction is tested in *Experiment 2*.

2. Experiment 1

To test the hypothesis that men and women preferentially search for information about the adaptively primary infidelity type, the participants had to report what kind of information they would actively request from their partner if there were reason to suspect his or her infidelity. Two scenarios were presented that differed with respect to the likelihood of a mate's suspected

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