

The intentional object of romantic jealousy[☆]

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Abstract

Three studies tested the hypothesis derived from evolutionary psychological considerations of sex differences in the intentional object of romantic jealousy. In Studies 1 and 3, participants had to indicate in a forced choice whether their jealousy would be primarily directed towards the partner or the rival. In Study 2, participants rated separately the extent to which their jealousy would be primarily aimed at the partner and the rival. In Studies 1 and 2, the participants' answers referred to either a mate's actual emotional or sexual infidelity; in Study 3 they referred to suspected infidelity. As predicted, in each study, significantly more women than men reported that their jealousy would be primarily directed at the rival. Also, as predicted, these sex differences were especially pronounced when confronted with the adaptively primary infidelity type (i. e., male emotional and female sexual infidelity, respectively). Finally, Study 3 additionally showed that these sex differences are moderated by the participants' current relationship status and their own unfaithfulness. Limitations and implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

When we love, hate, pity, or fear, then we typically love, hate, pity, or fear someone or something. And when we are angry, proud, or surprised, then we are typically angry at, proud of, or surprised about someone or something. This *someone* or *something* toward which emotions are directed is traditionally called the *intentional object* of the respective emotion. The intentional object has been considered a fundamental characteristic shared by all mental phenomena including emotions by both philosophical and psychological emotion theorists (e.g., Brentano, 1874/1973; Green, 1992; Meinong, 1894; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Searle, 1983; Siemer, 2005). In the above examples of emotions, the intentional objects are usually readily identifiable: if we love

or hate someone, the intentional object of our love or hate is the person concerned; if we are proud of the achievement of our child, the intentional object of our pride is the achievement of our child, and if we are surprised about the unexpected success of our favorite soccer team, that success is the intentional object of our surprise. Furthermore, these examples suggest that emotions can be directed either at individual things (e.g., people) or at states of affairs (e.g., Meinong, 1894). Ortony et al. (1988) further refined this classification by proposing that emotion can be directed at three different aspects of our world: objects, agents, and events. In the above examples, the focus of love is on an object, the loved person, and her properties; pride is directed towards the actions of an agent; and surprise focuses on an event and its consequences.

With respect to the intentional object of romantic jealousy, however, matters seem to be considerably more complicated: Although there is widespread agreement in the literature with respect to the causes and consequences of romantic jealousy, no agreement exists on its intentional object. That is, most authors agree that romantic jealousy is (*a*) aroused by a perceived threat to a valued romantic relationship generated by a real or imagined attraction

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between the partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival and (b) motivates behavior aimed at countering the threat (e.g., Buss, 2000; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; White & Mullen, 1989). In contrast, as concerns the intentional object of romantic jealousy, many prominent theories of jealousy simply fail to specify this object (cf. Paul, Foss, & Galloway, 1993), and others consider either objects, events, or actions as the intentional object of jealousy. To illustrate, Spinoza (1677/1948) defined jealousy as hatred towards the partner together with envy of the rival; presumably, then, being a mixture of two other emotions, jealousy has *two* intentional objects. More recently, Solomon (2000) conjectured that the object of romantic jealousy involves “not only a threatened loss but a perpetrator as well (perhaps the threatened object as a perpetrator too), and possibly the larger social situation in which jealousy involves not only loss but humiliation as well” (p. 11). At an empirical level, Pines and Friedman (1998) provided some evidence that women might focus their jealousy more than men on the threat to the relationship imposed by a mate’s infidelity. In the scheme of Ortony et al. (1988), *hatred* and *envy* are directed at a person qua object, whereas the threat to the relationship imposed by a mate’s infidelity focuses on an event and its consequences. Moreover, emotional and sexual infidelity can be conceived of as events, but they can also be construed as actions by two agents (the partner and the rival).

The diversity of the proposed objects of jealousy could simply reflect the complexity of jealousy itself. Indeed, authors such as Spinoza (1677/1948) and Freud (1924) have argued that jealousy may not be a discrete emotion but should be considered to be a compound of several other emotions, such as hate and envy; grief and enmity; or sadness, fear, anger, self-pity, rage, or hate, each of which is directed at a specific object (cf. Hupka, 1984). However, the disagreement about the intentional object of romantic jealousy could also reflect that jealousy theorists have not paid sufficient attention to this issue, possibly because they considered it to be of only minor significance for the understanding of this emotion. In contrast, I believe that the intentional object of jealousy is essential for a proper understanding of this emotion for at least three reasons. First, any jealousy theory is incomplete without the identification of its intentional object. Second, the identification of the intentional object of jealousy contributes to the delineation of jealousy from other emotions that might co-occur in the context of a partner’s suspected or actual infidelity but have other intentional objects. And third, it seems crucial for the deduction of hypotheses relating to the regulation of cognitive and behavioral processes motivated by men’s and women’s jealousy mechanism. For it is the intentional object—and not necessarily the cause or elicitor—of jealousy that presumably guides and directs these cognitive and behavioral processes. Daly et al.’s (1982) definition of jealousy as “a state that is aroused by a perceived threat to a valued relationship or position and motivates behavior aimed at countering that threat”

(p. 12) may help to illustrate this point: if we want to understand more precisely *how* men and women will try to counter the perceived threat to a valued relationship in the typical case, it is not sufficient to know that jealousy has been aroused by that threat; we also need to know the intentional object of jealousy because the threat will presumably be countered primarily by taking action against the object of jealousy.

In this article, I propose a functional, evolutionary psychological perspective on the issue of the intentional object of romantic jealousy. Evolutionary psychologists view jealousy as a psychological mechanism that evolved because it recurrently solved an essential problem of individual reproduction in our evolutionary history: infidelity in reproductive relationships (Daly et al., 1982; Symons, 1979). A distinctive feature of the evolutionary view is the assumption of a sex-specific, evolved jealousy mechanism because different infidelity types have recurrently threatened male and female 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 are predicted to be more concerned than women with the prevention of the (re-)occurrence of a mate’s sexual infidelity, whereas, conversely, women are predicted to be more concerned than men with the prevention of the (re-)occurrence of a mate’s emotional infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Schützwohl, 2005, 2006; Schützwohl & Koch, 2004).

Thus, jealousy is not just a complex or combination of other emotions but a discrete emotion the intentional object of which is likely an *individual* (the partner or rival), rather than just a particular event or an act of infidelity involving these individuals. Although jealousy is typically evoked by specific events or acts of infidelity involving the partner and a rival, it would not be functional to be jealous about a particular transient act of infidelity that can take on many different forms because this act is only a potential and often ambiguous signal of a deeper and more enduring adaptive threat. Rather, to successfully cope with this threat it appears essential to identify temporally stable local causes of these acts potentially signaling infidelity because only then is it possible to predict and—possibly—to prevent the occurrence of future acts of infidelity (Heider, 1958). The temporally stable local causes of these acts, however, are the partner and the rival who therefore lend themselves as the preferred intentional objects of romantic jealousy.

Several arguments suggest sex differences with respect to the preferred person as the intentional object of jealousy. Each of these arguments by itself might not be entirely conclusive but given the fact that they all arrive at the same

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