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Sex drive, attachment style, relationship status and previous infidelity as predictors of sex differences in romantic jealousy

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ABSTRACT

Recent research examining sex differences in jealousy suggests that more men than women tend to be distressed by sexual infidelity, and that more women than men tend to be distressed by emotional infidelity. The primary explanation for these findings is that evolution has shaped men's and women's responses to enhance their chances of reproductive success. However, within-sex differences are also found in terms of relative level of distress at sexual or emotional infidelity. This study examined the effect of alternative variables, particularly those associated with attachment and sexual motivations, on both between- and within-sex differences in relative distress at sexual and emotional infidelity. A community sample of 437 adults provided data using a self-report questionnaire. The results showed that sex drive was a significant predictor of distress at jealousy for both men and women, while attachment avoidance and previously being the victim of a sexual infidelity were significant predictors for men only, and relationship status was a significant predictor for women only. Overall, these findings support the evolutionary model of jealousy, and suggest that sex-specific evolved psychological mechanisms underpinning jealousy are influenced by attachment and sexual motivations.

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1. Introduction

Over 30 years ago, evolutionary psychologists began observing that anthropologic, forensic, and clinical data suggested that the sexes appear to differ in their reactions to infidelity cues (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Symons, 1979). Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) provided the first empirical evidence that sex is a major predictor of romantic jealousy in response to sexual and emotional infidelity cues, a finding supported by over 30 studies to date (Sagarin, 2005). Sexual infidelity cues refer in this literature to signals that a partner is contemplating or actually engaging in sexual intercourse with a third party. Emotional infidelity cues signal that a partner is diverting emotional and material resources away from the relationship and investing them in a third party (Buss et al., 1992). Symons (1979) and Buss et al. (1992) hypothesised that the greatest infidelity-related threat to a heterosexual man's evolutionary fitness was his female partner falling pregnant to another man; hence men are predicted to be more likely to feel jealous in response to sexual infidelity cues. In contrast, the greater threat to a heterosexual woman was her male partner diverting emotional and material

resources she needed to raise her children to another woman; hence women are predicted to be more likely to feel jealous in response to emotional infidelity cues. Buss (1995) suggested that sex-specific evolved psychological mechanisms underpin these jealousy reactions to sexual and emotional infidelity cues. The adaptive pressures specific to each sex mean that the two kinds of infidelity are weighted differently for each sex, as described above (Buss et al., 1992).

Studies investigating this evolutionary explanation of patterns in jealousy have used a forced-choice methodology which presents participants with two potential infidelity situations – one representing emotional infidelity, and the other sexual infidelity – and asks them to choose the one they find most distressing (Buss et al., 1992, 1999). Studies using the forced-choice items have found that men outnumber women in rating sexual infidelity as more distressing than emotional infidelity, while women outnumber men in rating emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity (Sagarin, 2005). As first noted by Buss and colleagues (1992), sex does not account for all of the variance in these findings. Forced-choice methodology studies typically find that most participants, regardless of sex, rate emotional infidelity scenarios as more distressing, while a minority of both sexes rate sexual infidelity as more distressing. This suggests that sex is not the sole, or even the most important, predictor of the most distressing type of infidelity (Buss, 1995; Buss et al., 1992; Sagarin, 2005).

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Buss (1995) suggested that the evolved mechanisms underpinning jealousy are likely to be sensitive to relevant ontogenetic and immediate contextual factors; in addition to their sex, an individual's history and current circumstances will predict how distressed they are by sexual or emotional infidelity. Studies that examine the influence of variables other than sex upon sexual and emotional jealousy usually limit their scope to a small number of predictors. Two variables which have attracted considerable attention are current relationship status, and previous experience of infidelity. Studies looking at current relationship status have yielded inconsistent findings (Murphy, Vallacher, Shackelford, Bjorkland, & Yunger, 2006; Voracek, 2001). Murphy and colleagues (2006) did not demonstrate that variance in the level of commitment to a romantic relationship predicted sex differences in jealousy. However, Voracek (2001) found that relationship status was a significant predictor of sex differences in jealousy, with men in committed, unmarried relationships reporting significantly more concern over sexual infidelity than women in this group. Studies examining previous experience of infidelity – either with oneself or one's partner as the perpetrator – have also produced inconsistent findings (Becker, Sagarin, Guadagno, Millevoi, & Nicastle, 2004; Berman & Frazier, 2005; Sagarin, Becker, Guadagno, Nicastle, & Millevoi, 2003). Sagarin and colleagues (2003) found sex-specific interactions between a person's role in infidelity and jealousy, with male victims and female perpetrators of infidelity reporting greater sexual jealousy. However, Berman and Frazier (2005) found that, in a group of participants who had experienced a past infidelity, the same proportions of men and women rated sexual infidelity as worse than emotional.

While investigating individual, common-sense variables such as relationship status and previous exposure to infidelity is one approach to the question of likely predictors of relative distress at emotional or sexual infidelity, the approach taken in this paper is to consider the question of candidate variables in the broader context of evolutionary theory. This approach is derived from Symons (1979), who stated that motivational factors are significant in determining reproductive success. In mammals, the two key motivational systems that govern the production and survival of offspring are the attachment and sexual motivation systems (Levy & Kelly, 2010; Mathes, 2003; Symons, 1979). Therefore, it is not surprising that emotional and sexual threats trigger specific forms of jealousy, the function of which is to protect the primary relationship (Buss, 1995). The attachment motivational system, first defined by Bowlby (1988), is thought to be important in regulating both parent–child and adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As such, attachment style is regarded by some researchers as a plausible predictor of relative distress at sexual and emotional jealousy in adult romantic relationships (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001; Levy & Kelly, 2010; Levy, Kelly, & Jack, 2006). Levy et al. (2006) demonstrated that men, but not women, high on attachment avoidance found sexual jealousy more distressing than emotional jealousy. Using a different measure, Levy and Kelly (2010) found that attachment avoidance increased sexual jealousy for men and, to a lesser extent, women. Knobloch et al. (2001) found that attachment anxiety was associated with higher continuously measured emotional jealousy, but this relationship did not significantly differ by sex. While there is little research on jealousy in infancy, one study has shown that jealousy in young infants is triggered by the diversion of the attachment figure's attention to another child (Hart, Carrington, Tronick, & Carroll, 2004). This study suggests that jealousy may initially be a form of emotional jealousy appropriate to the needs of infancy, where the child needs to ensure that the caregiver remains emotionally invested in the child to continue caregiving.

The sexual motivational system forms a complement to attachment in adult romantic relationships by driving an individual to

engage in sexual intercourse, thereby completing the actions that will allow them to pass on their genes (Symons, 1979). Studies demonstrate that men have a higher average level of motivation to engage in sexual activities, or sex drive, than women (Lippa, 2006; Mathes, 2003). Sex drive has also been indirectly connected with emotional and sexual jealousy. Mathes (2003) asked participants to complete both a modified version of Buss and colleagues' (1992) jealousy items and an item asking them to choose whether the loss of emotional warmth or sexual gratification in a relationship would be more distressing. He found that participants who endorsed higher sexual jealousy also reported more distress at loss of sexual gratification. This relationship was substantially stronger for men than for women (Mathes, 2003). These findings suggest that for men, in particular, sexual gratification is an important part of a romantic relationship, and its loss may contribute to greater distress at sexual infidelity (Mathes, 2003). This is consistent with the evidence reviewed by Symons (1979) that suggests that men have a stronger sexual motivation than women.

1.1. *The current study*

This study uses an exploratory approach to test hypotheses derived from considering within- and between-sex differences in relative distress at sexual and emotional infidelity. This investigation is conducted with consideration of the sexual and attachment motivational systems that have evolved to regulate romantic relationships between the sexes. The following hypotheses are proposed to assess how these systems interact with each other to influence the expression of jealousy in reaction to sexual and emotional infidelity cues: (a) replicating previous studies, men and women will show a significant difference in distress at infidelity cues, with more men than women rating sexual infidelity as more distressing than emotional infidelity, and more women than men rating emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity; and (b) when simultaneously controlling for each other, attachment avoidance, sex drive, relationship status and previous personal experience with sexual infidelity will significantly interact with sex of participant as predictors of distress at sexual infidelity. Based on the literature, men higher in attachment avoidance will report higher sexual jealousy than women high in attachment avoidance. However, the patterns of interaction with sex for sex drive, relationship status and previous personal experience are not able to be predicted given the mixed evidence to date. In the same model, attachment anxiety will predict lower distress at sexual infidelity but will not interact with the sex of the participant.

2. **Methods**

2.1. *Participants and procedure*

A community sample of 437 individuals (139 men) completed a self-report, online questionnaire. The majority of participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. Participants were aged from 18 to 64 years, with a mean age of 26.35 ($SD = 8.35$) for men and 26.52 ($SD = 9.36$) for women. The majority of participants were involved in an exclusive romantic relationship (67%) at the time of testing.

2.2. *Measuring distress at sexual versus emotional infidelity*

The six forced-choice items developed by Buss and colleagues (1992, 1999) were used to assess distress at sexual or emotional infidelity. The forced-choice methodology was used as the majority of the literature to date has used this methodology, meaning a comparison between this study and previous literature can be

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