



Sex differences in jealousy in response to infidelity: Evaluation of demographic moderators in a national random sample

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ABSTRACT

Studies examining sex differences in jealousy have often relied on student samples and were restricted to the evaluation of a selected few moderators. In this study, a nationally representative survey of American households was presented with either an actual or a hypothetical infidelity scenario (which appeared as either a forced choice or as continuous measures). Significant sex differences only emerged for forced choice measures and not for continuous measures. Importantly, this effect appeared most strongly in participants reporting reactions to an actual infidelity. We also explored a number of potential moderators of this effect. These moderators were more influential for the hypothetical than for the actual infidelity scenario. Exploratory analysis of additional demographic variables was conducted.

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1. Introduction

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, sex differences in jealousy are seen as a result of differential challenges faced by ancestral men and women when confronted with possible infidelity of their mating partner (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). From this perspective, ancestral men are seen as particularly vulnerable to sexual infidelity as it put them at risk of taking care of a child that was not their own. In contrast, ancestral women had to fear the loss of child-rearing support from a mate in case of an emotional infidelity and possible abandonment by their partner. Men therefore faced the challenge of paternal uncertainty whereas women faced the challenge of ensuring paternal investment (Buss et al., 1992). According to the theory, these different ancestral challenges boosted men's jealousy in response to sexual infidelity and women's jealousy in response to emotional infidelity (Sagarin, 2005).

1.1. Methodological issues

Sex differences in jealousy were originally researched through a forced choice measure that presented participants with a hypothetical infidelity scenario and asked them to select which type of infidelity (sexual or emotional) would make them more dis-

tressed or upset (Buss et al., 1992). Across numerous studies, the hypothesized sex differences generally emerged in which a greater proportion of men than women choose the sexual infidelity as more distressing (Harris, 2003). However, when reactions to sexual and emotional infidelity were assessed separately on continuous measures, the hypothesized sex difference often failed to appear (Harris, 2002, 2003) including within a large random sample (Green & Sabini, 2006). This failure, along with several other weaknesses in the methodologies used to study sex differences in jealousy, were noted in Harris's (2003) critical review of the theory. Specifically, Harris criticized the heavy use of hypothetical infidelity scenarios and the heavy reliance on student samples to evaluate sex differences. Harris (2003) noted, in particular, that Harris (2002) had failed to find a sex difference within an adult sample reporting their past experiences with actual infidelity. However, as discussed in Sagarin (2005), Harris (2002) did not measure participants' distress, upset, or jealousy. Rather, Harris (2002) asked participants which aspect of the infidelity (sexual or emotional) they focused on more—a difference that Sagarin (2005) speculated could have led to the failure of the sex difference to emerge.

Although the discussion about possible methodological issues continues (DeSteno, 2010; Edlund, 2011) a recent meta-analysis (Sagarin et al., in press) that included data from the present study demonstrated that sex differences in jealousy are not an artifact of the forced-choice format but also emerge using continuous measures. Nevertheless, the large variance in effect sizes synthesized by Sagarin et al. suggest the influence of moderators that are yet to be explored.

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1.2. Moderators

A variety of moderators for the sex difference in jealousy have been evaluated. Sagarin et al. (in press) focused primarily on methodological moderators such as scale length, measured emotion, random sampling, population type, and inclusion of a forced-choice question. Other researchers have examined moderators such as age (Tagler, 2010), previous infidelity experience (Burchell & Ward, 2011; Tagler, 2010), sex drive, relationship status (Burchell & Ward, 2011), attachment style (Burchell & Ward, 2011; Levy & Kelly, 2010), race and social dominance (Bassett, 2005) and the individual difference “chronic jealousy” (Miller & Maner, 2009).

For example, Tagler (2010) found sex differences in jealousy only among adults who had not previously been a victim of infidelity. Burchell and Ward (2011) noted that relationship status was only a moderator for women but not for men. Additionally, Green and Sabini (2006) found no effect for age or SES on sex differences in jealousy.

1.3. Current study

The current study was designed to examine the sex difference in jealousy while systematically manipulating two methodological moderators (hypothetical infidelity vs. actual-experience with infidelity; continuous- vs. forced-choice measures). Furthermore, the study addressed the limitation of most past studies on sex differences in jealousy of relying on university-based convenience samples by including a representative sample in the US obtained through Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS).

One additional benefit of obtaining a sample through TESS is that TESS routinely collects a variety of demographic variables that are also passed on to researchers. Although we did not have input on which demographics were collected, this unexpected wealth of data enabled an analysis of possible demographic moderators of the sex difference in jealousy. Of particular theoretical interest were the variables age, household income, marital status, and infidelity experience, as these variables allowed us to replicate and extend previous findings by Tagler (2010), Burchell and Ward (2011), and Green and Sabini (2006). Exploratory analyses were also conducted for the additional demographic variables collected by default through TESS.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

4507 participants contributed to the TESS study. The sample consisted of 2204 men (48.9%) and 2303 women (51.1%). Participants were predominantly Caucasian (71.1%), however, a significant minority of African Americans (11.7%), Hispanics (11.4%) and Bi-racial individuals (3.0%) were also represented. The remaining 2.9% of participants identified themselves as “Other, Non-Hispanic”.

There were 258 participants (5.7%) who chose not to answer any of the infidelity questions. Tests comparing these participants to the rest of the sample across all demographics showed significant differences for age, household size, presence of children age 13–17, ethnicity, and employment status. However, the effect sizes were small (for continuous variables $\eta^2 \leq .001$, for categorical variables Cramer's $V \leq .053$). The detailed results are listed in [Supplementary Material: Appendix A](#). For the rest of the sample, ages ranged from 18 to 93 ($M = 47.49$, $SD = 17.08$) with 25.6% indicating that they were single and had never been married.

2.2. Procedure

The study consisted of a 2 (sex: male vs. female) \times 2 (type of measure: forced-choice vs. continuous) \times 2 (type of infidelity scenario: actual vs. hypothetical) between-subjects factorial design, with participants randomly assigned to one of the four cells of the design. However, because we anticipated that some participants assigned to an actual infidelity condition would not have personally experienced an infidelity, twice the number of participants were assigned to the actual as compared to the hypothetical infidelity conditions. Of the 1697 participants who were assigned to and willing to answer the forced-choice actual infidelity questions, 912 had not experienced any infidelity (53.7%) and were therefore unable to answer the questions. Similarly, of the 1674 participants assigned and willing to answer the continuous actual infidelity questions, 878 had not experienced any infidelity (52.5%).

In the actual infidelity condition participants were asked “Have you had any experiences in which someone you were romantically involved with cheated on you?” Participants who confirmed this in the forced choice condition were then asked “Which aspect of the cheating made you more jealous?” and had the choice between “The emotional aspects of the cheating” and “The sexual aspects of the cheating”. For the continuous measure conditions, participants were asked to rate on a 1–7 scale ranging from “not at all jealous” to “extremely jealous” (with only the two extreme scores labeled) “How jealous did you feel about the emotional aspects of your partner's infidelity?” and “How jealous did you feel about the sexual aspects of your partner's infidelity?” The term “jealous” was used rather than other emotional labels based on findings by Becker, Sagarin, Guadagno, Millevoi, and Nicastle (2004) that sex differences emerged for “jealousy” but not for “anger”, “hurt”, or “disgust”.

In the hypothetical condition participants were asked to “Please think of a serious committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you currently have, or that you would like to have. Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved cheated on you” (text adapted from Buss et al., 1992). Participants in the forced choice condition were then asked “What aspect of the cheating would make you more jealous?” and had the choice between “The emotional aspects of the cheating” and “The sexual aspects of the cheating”. For the continuous measure conditions, participants were asked to rate on the same 1–7 scale as above “How jealous would you feel about the emotional aspects of your partner's infidelity?” and “How jealous would you feel about the sexual aspects of your partner's infidelity?”.

Additionally, participants were asked to provide their age, if they lived in a dual income household, their education, race, gender, if they were the head of their household, the size of their household, the housing type, the household income, their marital status, if they lived in a metropolitan or non-metropolitan area, if their household had internet access, the US state they lived in, the number of household members between the ages of 0–1, 2–5, 6–12, 13–17, and 18 and above. They also provided their current employment status.

3. Results

The analysis of the data was split into the main analysis of sex differences in jealousy for the forced choice and continuous measures and the additional analysis of moderator effects. For the forced choice measure logistic regression was used with gender as only covariate. For the continuous measures, a mixed model ANOVA was used with the aspect of the infidelity (emotional vs. sexual) as the within-subject variable and sex as the between-subjects

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