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Culture and gender differences in romantic jealousy



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ABSTRACT

Jealousy is an intense emotion that is experienced in the context of romantic relationships. Previous research reported gender differences in ratings of jealousy over a sexual versus emotional infidelity. This study explored culture and gender differences in jealousy using a mixed methods survey design. One hundred and forty-five undergraduates from the University of Hawai'i at Hilo participated. The Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism Scale, Self-Report Jealousy Scale, and a modified Emotional and Sexual Jealousy Scale were used for analyses. Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed that gender was a better predictor than culture in jealousy ratings involving an emotional infidelity; but culture was a better predictor for jealousy ratings involving a sexual infidelity. *t*-Tests also revealed that those who experienced an infidelity in the past reported significantly higher jealousy ratings and that women reported significantly higher jealousy ratings in emotional but not in sexual infidelity than men. The qualitative results revealed four dominant themes related to participant's causal attributions of jealousy: Infidelity, Expectations of Time and Commitment, Social Media and Self-Esteem. The authors suggest that future research focus on intersexual and intrasexual differences in jealousy, as well the role social media may play in relationship expectations.

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1. Introduction

The expression of jealousy is related to feelings of depression, anxiety and anger, and a significant loss of self-esteem. Jealousy results in a wide variety of behaviors including destruction of romantic relationships, violence, suicide, murder, marital problems, and depression (Pines & Aronson, 1983). Explanations of jealousy have focused on evolutionary theory, personality traits, and relationship history. Cross-cultural studies exploring gender differences in emotional and sexual infidelities have been consistent with the evolutionary explanation of jealousy; however, the extent to which individuals feel distress when made aware of sexual and emotional infidelities varies across cultures. Moreover, because gender equality and same-sex marriage is becoming more ubiquitous within modern day society, the question remains whether gender differences in reactivity toward emotional versus sexual infidelity are still reliable.

While research emphasized cultural differences in attribution of human emotions, there has not been an exploration of potential differences in how a culturally diverse set of individuals attribute

their feelings of jealousy. The purpose of the current study is to explore the attributions of jealousy in a multi-cultural population where there is potential to develop a more representative paradigm through the interaction between gender and culture.

1.1. Jealousy coping strategies and evolutionary theory

According to Parrot and Smith (1993), jealousy occurs specifically in the context of personal relationships, where the individual fears losing a relationship due to a potential rival. Similarly, Spielman (1971) defined jealousy as an "attitude of vigilant guarding against the threatened loss and an effort to preserve the status quo, to maintain possession" (p. 62). In this particular definition, it is assumed that jealousy is used as a protective mechanism, where the individual is vigilant in guarding her or his threatened loss of relationship.

The way in which an individual experiences jealousy is assumed to be fairly stable throughout an individual's lifetime and can be identified as a specific personality trait (Pines & Aronson, 1983). One study found that people whose partners were unfaithful in the past reported being more jealous than their counterparts, while at the same time individuals who reported being unfaithful to their partner also reported being more jealous (Pines & Aronson, 1983). This suggests that unfaithful individuals may express jealousy just as often as their partners. While jealousy may manifest in many

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different forms across an individual's lifetime, the feeling of jealousy in a romantic relationship can be viewed as a complex mechanism. To encompass the many manifestations of jealousy, the present study used White and Mullen's (1989) definition of jealousy as a "complex of behaviors, thoughts and emotions resulting from the perception of harm or threat to the self and/or the romantic relationship by a real or potential rival relationship" (p. 56).

Different jealousy mechanisms are activated in men and women determined by the types of cues associated with abandonment or cuckoldry (Buss, 2008; Confer & Cloud, 2011). Sexual jealousy in men is a possible psychological adaptation selected to contend with the latent costs of being cuckolded (Buss, 2008) whereas women typically report more distress when confronted with an emotional infidelity. Therefore, women's expressions of jealousy tend to focus specifically on cues about the males' long-term investment (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). These gender differences are described as adapted patterns of protective behavior within romantic relationships.

Initial research validated the inference of evolved mechanisms that are specific to the sex linked adaptive patterns in jealousy. Subsequent studies found that the sexual dimorphism in emotional reactivity to jealousy was not confounded by cultural differences (Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996). In addition to psychological distress, past research has also provided evidence for gender differences by examining sexual versus emotional determinants of jealousy (Buss et al., 1999; Buunk et al., 1996; Strout, Laird, Shafer, & Thompson, 2005), through the likelihood of terminating relationships after an infidelity (Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002), memory recall (Schutzwohl & Koch, 2004), cognitive preoccupations in response to sexual and emotional cues (Schutzwohl, 2006), and different patterns of brain activation during fMRI imagery of either a sexual or emotional infidelity (Takahashi et al., 2006). However, there are many studies that have found conflicting results regarding specific gender differences in ratings of distress when approached with a sexual versus emotional infidelity scenario (Sagarin et al., 2012). For instance, Zengel, Edlund, and Sagarin (2013) found that significant gender differences only emerged when a forced choice measure was used, and that continuous measures did not produce significant gender differences.

The majority of studies exploring differences in romantic jealousy and differences in the expression of jealousy have tested mostly European and Asian respondents (Buunk et al., 1996). There have also been inconsistent findings when using continuous measures for the gender difference in emotional versus sexual jealousy (Edlund & Sagarin, 2009; Zengel et al., 2013). Taking the past literature into consideration, the current study explored causal attributions of romantic jealousy and hypothesized that gender would be a better predictor than culture in ratings of jealousy toward an emotional or sexual infidelity. The present study also goes beyond previous research in that it utilized a qualitative measure exploring causal attributions and perceptions of jealousy in romantic relationships through a cross-cultural sample.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The current study used a mixed methods survey design with undergraduate students ($N = 145$) attending the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. The research project was approved by the University of Hawai'i Committee on Human Studies. A total of 101 females and 44 males participated and the average age of participants was 21 with a range of 18–49 years old. Due to the overwhelming amount of female participants, the current study may have produced a ceiling effect related to gender. The partici-

pants varied in ethnicity, with most self-identifying as multi-ethnic which is congruent with the overall population residing in Hawai'i. Mixed ethnicities and cultures included Pacific Islanders, Filipinos, Hawaiians, Japanese, Koreans, African Americans, Chinese, Native Alaskans, Americans and Europeans. The relationship status of the participants varied with 46.2% reporting being single, 25.5% dating, 22.8% in long-term relationships, 4.8% married, and .7% separated. Ninety percent identified as heterosexual, 7.6% reported as bisexual, 1.4% lesbian, and .7% gay. Eighty-eight percent of women identified as heterosexual, 10% reported bisexual and 2% lesbian. Ninety-six percent of men identified as heterosexual, 2% reported bisexual and 2% gay. Participants were also asked whether or not they, or their partners, had engaged in a sexual activity with someone other than their partner, in a current or past relationship. Twenty-one percent reported having engaged in sexual activity with someone other than their partner, 24.8% reported that their partner engaged in a sexual activity with someone other than them, and 17.2% did not know if their partner engaged in sexual relations with others.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were notified about the research study by the Human Subjects Pool website provided by the University of Hawai'i at Hilo psychology department. Each participant scheduled individual appointments to complete the survey in private. After discussing and obtaining the signed informed consent, the participants typically finished the survey in less than 30 minutes.

2.3. Measures

The survey asked participants about their gender, ethnicity, age, relationship status, and sexual orientation. The participants were also asked two questions related to their involvement in a romantic relationship: whether or not they had ever been sexually involved with someone other than their partner, and whether or not their partner had ever been sexually involved with someone other than them. The participants were then asked to provide a brief description of a jealousy-evoking event and what they thought caused their feeling of jealousy. These descriptions are discussed in the qualitative results section. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics. A modified version of Buss's original Emotional and Sexual Jealousy Scale (Buss et al., 1992) was used for analysis. Buss's original scale only analyzes the difference in *distress* toward a sexual and emotional infidelity, as opposed to the feeling of *jealousy*. Due to the methodological issues involved with a forced-choice formatted question (Zengel et al., 2013), two questions asked the participants to respond on a Likert scale with "1" for "Not at all Jealous," up to "9" for "Extremely Jealous," for imagining their partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another individual. The second question asked the participant to imagine their partner engaging in sexual relations with another, and was displayed on a reversed scale for "1" as "Extremely Jealous" and "9" as "Not at all Jealous." The measures included in the survey were the Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism (HVIC) Scale (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Mean	SD
Age	20.81	6.04
Emotional infidelity	7.49	1.58
Sexual infidelity	2.42	2.53
Collectivism	36.63	5.68
Individualism	25.44	8.64

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