



## The green eyed monster in the bottle: Relationship contingent self-esteem, romantic jealousy, and alcohol-related problems



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- RCSE is associated with drinking to cope and problems via jealousy.
- RCSE and relationship satisfaction interact to predict jealousy.
- Cognitive jealousy is a unique mediator of the RCSE–drinking associations.

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### ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that both jealousy and relationship contingent self-esteem (RCSE) are related to alcohol use and alcohol-related problems. No work, however, has examined these two constructs together as they relate to motives for alcohol use and alcohol-related problems. The current study aims to build upon emerging literature examining different types of jealousy (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral), relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, closeness), RCSE, and alcohol use. More specifically, the current study aimed to examine the associations between RCSE and drinking to cope and RCSE and alcohol-related problems, in the context of the different types of jealousy. Moreover, the current study aimed to assess whether the associations between RCSE, jealousy, and drinking outcomes vary as a function of relationship quality. Two hundred and seventy seven individuals (87% female) at a large southern university participated in the study. They completed measures of RCSE, relationship satisfaction, commitment, closeness, and jealousy as well as alcohol-related outcomes. Using PROCESS, moderated mediational analyses were used to evaluate different types of jealousy as mediators of the association between RCSE and drinking to cope/alcohol-related problems. Further, we aimed to examine whether relationship quality moderated the association between RCSE and jealousy in predicting alcohol-related variables. Results indicated that cognitive jealousy mediated the association between both RCSE and drinking to cope and RCSE and alcohol-related problems. Further, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and closeness were all found to moderate the association between RCSE and cognitive jealousy such that at lower, but not higher levels of satisfaction, commitment, and closeness, cognitive jealousy mediated the association between RCSE and drinking to cope and RCSE and alcohol-related problems.

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### 1. Introduction

Negative interpersonal events are an important determinant in predicting the motivation underlying drinking and alcohol-related problems (DeHart, Tennen, Armeli, Todd, & Affleck, 2008; Husson, Hicks, Levy, & Curran, 2001; Marlatt, 1996; Mohr et al., 2001). The current study aims to build upon previous research examining relationship contingent self-esteem (RCSE), romantic jealousy, and drinking behavior. More specifically, previous research has shown that both relationship contingent self-esteem and romantic jealousy are associated

with alcohol-related problems (DiBello, Neighbors, Rodriguez, & Lindgren, 2014; Rodriguez, Knee, & Neighbors, 2014). Although RCSE and romantic jealousy are theoretically linked, no research to date has examined how they might operate together in contributing to using alcohol to cope with negative emotions and alcohol-related problems.

#### 1.1. Alcohol use in relationships

Findings from existing literature have shown that relationship problems and drinking often co-occur, with robust positive associations between heavy drinking and marital discord (Bamford, Barrowclough, & Booth, 2007; Marshal, 2003; Orford, 1990; Rodriguez, Neighbors, & Knee, 2014). In addition to married couples, these associations have also been found among dating couples. For example, Levitt and Cooper

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(2010) found that among couples experiencing more negative feelings (e.g., feeling disconnected from one's partner, perceiving negative behaviors from one's partner) and fewer positive feelings (e.g., feeling connected to one's partner, higher levels of intimacy) women were found to have different rates of alcohol use. Specifically, when compared to men, the effects on women's drinking were large. Specifically, the odds of a woman drinking with her partner almost doubled as a function of more negative feelings, women had a higher likelihood of drinking, and drank more heavily as a result of negative relationship interactions compared to men. Thus, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship between increased alcohol consumption and relationship outcomes, and research has begun to explore determinants of this association. The current research evaluates a process model of relationship-contingent self-esteem and jealousy as predictors of drinking to cope and drinking problems.

### 1.2. Relationship-contingent self-esteem

Both positive and negative relationship events are bound to occur given the time, effort, investment, and interdependence involved in romantic partnerships. However, not all individuals are affected to the same extent by these relationship events. Relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE; Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008) is an individual difference variable reflecting an unhealthy form of self-esteem in which one's sense of self-worth is dependent upon events in one's romantic relationship. These events that may typically have little implication for the self or relationship (e.g., partners missing each other's phone calls or a comment made in jest) may have powerful implications for those high in RCSE, who are overly sensitive to indications of relational success and failure. This sensitivity results in everyday events becoming entrenched into the individual's self-concept, with positive events providing a boost in self-esteem and negative events having a particularly damaging effect. This not only affects the relationship, but also has implications for the self as it is so strongly tied to the relationship. Mediation analyses show that relationship events predict subsequent fluctuations in self-esteem through momentary changes in emotions among those higher in RCSE (Knee et al., 2008). When considered in isolation, RCSE does not predict negative outcomes per se; rather, it is when high RCSE is combined with negative relationship events or lower relationship satisfaction that detrimental patterns emerge. When one's self-esteem is strongly derived from validation within one's romantic relationship, events that may be perceived as trivial or minor by others are perceived as particularly helpful or harmful by those high in RCSE. It is important to note that while RCSE is a concept related to general self-esteem, the two constructs are distinct. Specifically, RCSE is a specific type of self-esteem rather than an overall assessment of one's self-esteem. To that end, research concerning self-esteem and RCSE has found that even when controlling for trait level self-esteem, RCSE significantly positively predicts drinking to cope and alcohol-related problems whereas the main effect for self-esteem was not significant (Rodriguez, Knee, et al., 2014).

To the authors' knowledge, only one study has previously examined associations between RCSE and drinking behaviors (Rodriguez, Knee, et al., 2014). Results from mediated moderation analyses showed that for men, RCSE and satisfaction interacted to predict drinking to cope, which then predicted alcohol-related negative consequences. Specifically, the results suggested that lower satisfaction was associated with higher coping motives (and subsequently, higher alcohol-related problems) among those higher in RCSE. That is, men who are higher in RCSE and lower in relationship satisfaction, were found to endorse a higher number of coping motives and also reported a greater number of drinking problems when compared to men higher in RCSE and higher in relationship satisfaction. When considered with other results suggesting that individuals with lower self-esteem separate themselves from their partner as a self-protection mechanism in possible conflict situations (Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003), it follows that those high in

RCSE may use alcohol as a way of coping with distress associated with negative relationship interactions.

It has been theorized that the reason RCSE is problematic when the relationship encounters difficulties is through implications of relationship events on the self. It seems likely that one of the primary reasons individuals high in RCSE display higher coping motives is based on their sensitivity to perceived threats to the relationship or that their partner might leave them. Thus, the current study evaluated whether the RCSE and satisfaction combination predicting unhealthy risk behavior (i.e., drinking to cope and alcohol-related problems) occurs because of jealousy.

### 1.3. Jealousy

Similar to RCSE, romantic jealousy is another factor which has been shown to be associated with a number of personal and interpersonal negative outcomes. Broadly speaking, romantic jealousy has been defined as a complex combination of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that results from a perceived threat to one's romantic relationship. This perceived loss or threat is derived by the perception of a real or potential romantic attraction between one's partner and a rival (White & Mullen, 1989).

Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) further refined the conceptualization of jealousy as a multidimensional construct with three different components (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral). Emotional jealousy refers to a person's feelings of distress in response to a jealousy-evoking situation (e.g., *I would be very upset if my partner became involved with someone else*). Cognitive jealousy represents a person's rational or irrational thoughts, worries, and suspicions concerning a partner's infidelity (e.g., *I believe my partner may be seeing someone else*). Alternatively, behavioral jealousy involves detective or protective measures a person takes when relationship rivals are perceived to be a threat (e.g., going through the partner's belongings).

Research examining these distinct types of jealousy as they relate to relationship satisfaction suggests that they are differentially associated with relationship satisfaction. Specifically, researchers have observed that relationship satisfaction was negatively related to cognitive jealousy (Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995; Aylor & Dainton, 2001; Bevan, 2008). Moreover, Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2007) found that relationship satisfaction was negatively related to cognitive jealousy but was unrelated to emotional jealousy. Finally, Elphinston, Feeney, Noller, Connor, and Fitzgerald (2013) found both behavioral and cognitive jealousy to be positively associated with relationship dissatisfaction. Overall, two paths to relationship dissatisfaction emerged. First, both cognitive and behavioral jealousies were associated with relationship dissatisfaction via rumination and cognitive jealousy was directly related to relationship dissatisfaction. Consistent with these findings, Bevan (2008) found that lower levels of commitment were positively associated with the experience of cognitive jealousy but were unrelated to emotional jealousy. Given this previous research showing that both cognitive and behavioral jealousy are positively associated with more negative relationship outcomes, we expected to find the same pattern of results when examining negative alcohol related outcomes including drinking to cope and alcohol-related problems.

### 1.4. Jealousy and alcohol use

Given the strong association between drinking to cope and alcohol-related problems, and research showing a connection between negative interpersonal events and heavy alcohol use, we expected to find empirical studies that examined jealousy, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related problems. However, only two studies have directly examined these two constructs together (DiBello et al., 2014; Knox, Breed, & Zusman, 2007). The findings from DiBello et al. (2014) suggested that more negative or maladaptive aspects of jealousy (e.g., "I always try to even the score") were related to drinking to cope and alcohol related

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