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The disengagement of attentive resources from task-irrelevant cues to sexual and emotional infidelity

Achim Schützwohl *

Department of Psychology, Brunel University West London, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, United Kingdom

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Abstract

The present study tests two predictions derived from the evolutionary view of jealousy. (1) For men the disengagement of attentive resources from task-irrelevant cues to sexual infidelity is more difficult than from neutral or emotional infidelity cues. Conversely, for women the disengagement of attentive resources from task-irrelevant cues to emotional infidelity is more difficult than from neutral or sexual infidelity cues. (2) These difficulties are especially pronounced in participants currently involved in a committed romantic relationship. In each trial either an affectively neutral, an emotional infidelity or sexual infidelity distractor was simultaneously presented with a target sentence. The last trial was followed by a recall test for the targets and distractors. The results confirmed both predictions. Implications and limitations of the present study are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

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Keywords: Jealousy; Evolved psychological mechanism; Sex differences; Cues to infidelity; Disengagement of attentive resources; Context sensitivity

Evolutionary psychologists view jealousy as a complex psychological mechanism that evolved because it recurrently solved an essential problem of individual reproduction in our evolutionary history: Infidelity in reproductive relationships (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Symons, 1979).

* Tel.: +44 1895266367.

E-mail address: achim.schuetzwohl@brunel.ac.uk

A distinctive feature of the evolutionary view is the assumption of sex-specific evolved jealousy mechanisms 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's jealousy mechanism presumably aims at the prevention of the (re-)occurrence of a mate's sexual infidelity; in women, it presumably aims at the prevention of the (re-)occurrence of a mate's emotional infidelity.

To achieve this goal, the cognitive aspect of men's and women's jealousy mechanisms needs to be geared to the detection and the preferential processing of cues signaling the adaptively primary infidelity type (i.e., female sexual and male emotional infidelity). Moreover, because most cues to infidelity do not unambiguously disclose whether emotional or sexual infidelity has already occurred or might occur and because these cues are frequently spread over time, decisions about the potential occurrence of sexual or emotional infidelity are typically based not on a single but rather on several infidelity cues. This, however, requires that these cues are preferentially attended to, processed, stored and available for retrieval from memory in order to be able to make such decisions.

The studies concerned with sex differences in the cognitive processing of infidelity cues consistently supported this assumption with respect to various cognitive processes (Schützwohl, 2004, 2005, 2006; Schützwohl & Koch, 2004). To illustrate, Schützwohl (2006, Study 1) found that men led to suspect a mate's infidelity actively requested more information about sexual aspects of the infidelity than women. Conversely, women requested more information concerning the emotional aspect of the suspected infidelity than men. Furthermore, men were significantly faster than women in deciding whether infidelity cues would elicit either a first pang of jealousy or intolerable jealousy if these cues were more diagnostic of sexual jealousy. For cues more diagnostic of emotional infidelity, women made this decision significantly more rapidly than men (Schützwohl, 2005).

Schützwohl and Koch (2004) reported that men preferentially recalled cues to sexual infidelity whereas women preferentially recalled cues to emotional infidelity. This preferential recall was significant for both men and women only if these cues were personally more relevant (i.e., if they referred to one's own partner) but not if they were personally less relevant (i.e., if they concerned an unknown member of the opposite sex). The finding that infidelity cues were preferentially recalled only if they (a) signaled the adaptively primary infidelity type and (b) were personally relevant suggests that the functioning of men's and women's jealousy mechanism is both input-specific (i.e., was not observed for neutral cues and cues signaling the adaptively secondary infidelity type) and person-specific (i.e., was not observed when the cues were personally irrelevant).

1. Objectives of the present the study

The main goal of the present study was to further explore the functioning of the jealousy mechanism with respect to a yet unexamined process. This process concerns men's and women's allocation of attentive resources to infidelity cues. The evolutionary view of jealousy and the evidence

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