
Jealousy Evocation, Partner Reassurance, and Relationship Stability: An Exploration of the Potential Benefits of Jealousy

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Three studies examined possible effects of jealousy evocation and jealous expression in romantic relationships. In Study 1, we used an indirect method to examine subjects' motivations for evoking jealousy in their romantic partners. Students' attributions for ambiguous interactions suggest that jealousy evocation is goal specific and that it is primarily used for mate retention. A majority of Study 1 participants also reported that they had previously attempted to evoke jealousy in a romantic partner to accomplish relationship goals. In Study 2, we examined the expected effect of jealousy evocation, from the perspective of the jealous partner. Here, results suggest that jealousy evocation is unlikely to produce immediate relationship benefits; in fact, it seems more likely to provoke fighting between romantic partners. Finally, in Study 3, we examined the longitudinal association of jealousy with relationship stability. Although there was a positive lagged correlation between participants' partners' jealousy and relationship stability, this association was not significant when participants' prior relationship commitment was controlled. This suggests that while jealousy itself is not causally related to relationship stability, a person's reactions to their jealous partner may be. © 1997 Elsevier Science Inc.

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Sexual jealousy may be defined as a complex psychological system whose functioning is activated by a perceived threat to one's place in a sexual relationship (Wilson and Daly 1992). Whether jealousy is justified (i.e., based on an accurately perceived threat to a relationship) or unjustified (i.e.,

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based on a nonexistent threat), it can have a powerful effect on romantic relationships. Jealous partners often exhibit behaviors aimed at protecting their proprietary privilege in the relationship, and although their tactics may include offering inducements that increase a partner's "rewards" in the relationship, they too often include violence or threats of violence (Daly et al. 1982).

Surprisingly, jealous aggression is most frequently directed at the jealousy-evoking partner rather than the romantic rival (Mathes and Verstraete 1993; Mullen and Maack 1985). In fact, sexual jealousy is a primary motive underlying spousal violence and homicide (Daly and Wilson 1988), but even when violence does not result, jealousy can destroy a loving relationship (White and Mullen 1989). The feelings of insecurity and possessiveness associated with jealousy (Salovey and Rodin 1984), for instance, have led most theorists to conclude that jealousy imposes a "cost" for both the jealous and jealousy-evoking partners. From a social exchange perspective, these "costs" reduce the "net pleasure" the partners obtain from their relationship and thus lead to its demise (Thibaut and Kelley 1959). In fact, this belief in the negativity of jealousy is so well established that Brehm (1992) has facetiously suggested the need for warning labels to help people respond rationally to their jealous passions.

Despite widespread agreement about the potential negative effects of jealousy, evolutionary theorists maintain that jealousy is (or at least once was) adaptive (Buss 1995). Specifically, jealousy is presumed to motivate action to retain exclusive access to one's sexual partners (Symons 1979). While these actions may include discarding partners when infidelities have already occurred, they should be focused toward defending one's sexual privilege before an infidelity occurs. When jealousy is anticipatory, thereby allowing the jealous partner to alleviate the relationship threat, it should tend to stabilize relationships, leading to greater relationship longevity (Wilson and Daly 1992).

Unfortunately, there has been very little research on the effects of jealousy that might validate either of these claims that jealousy strengthens or weakens bonds between romantic partners. We describe the results of three studies that compared the predictions of evolutionary and social exchange models of jealousy. In Study 1, we used an indirect method to examine subjects' motivations for evoking jealousy in their romantic partners. In Study 2, we examined the expected effect of jealousy evocation from the perspective of the jealous partner. Finally, in Study 3, we examined the longitudinal association of jealousy with relationship stability.

STUDY 1

Most research on jealousy has focused on the experience of the jealous partner. For instance, numerous studies have attempted to identify personality traits that characterize jealous individuals or situations that evoke their sexual jealousy. In contrast, almost nothing has been written of the persons whose actions may have evoked the jealous response, yet an examination of their experiences may shed light on the nature of jealousy. Of particular interest in the first study is the behavior of those

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