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## **Sex Differences in Romantic Jealousy: Evaluating Past and Present Relationship Experience**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Research on sex differences in jealousy has been controversial with contrasting results. Many have examined how factors such as relationship experience may play a role in men's and women's jealousy, yet most has investigated sexual and emotional jealousy. Past authors suggest that investigating jealousy as a multidimensional construct, i.e., cognitive, emotional, and behavioral forms, may provide better insight into an individual's jealousy and relationships to other constructs. Thus, the present study sought to examine differences in men's and women's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy dimensions and how past and present relationship experience may affect these dimensions. Of participants having at least one past romantic relationship, women reported higher overall levels of emotional and behavioral jealousy than men. When controlling for current relationship status, women's levels of cognitive and behavioral jealousy were positively related to the number of past relationships. Further, of individuals currently in a romantic relationship, behavioral jealousy was positively related to length of relationship but only for men. Results are discussed in terms of how different types of relationship experience may relate to men's and women's types of jealousy.*

*Keywords:* jealousy, sex differences, relationship experience, types of jealousy

## INTRODUCTION

Romantic jealousy has been defined as the reaction to a perceived threat to the exclusive romantic nature of the relationship (Bringle & Boebinger, 1990). Literature on sex differences in jealousy has largely focused on sexual and emotional forms of jealousy; sexual jealousy referring to an individual's upset over a partner's sexual infidelity, and emotional jealousy referring to an individual's upset over their partner's emotional infidelity (ex. Falling in love with someone else); however, this literature is largely controversial (e.g., Harris, 2003; Sagarin, 2005). While sexual versus emotional jealousy has been the topic of much research, jealousy has also been investigated as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral subtypes (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). In this respect cognitive and emotional jealousy represent jealousy as an experience and behavioral jealousy represents jealousy as an expression (Afifi & Reichert, 1996). It has been suggested that investigating jealousy as a multidimensional construct may be more beneficial in determining relationships between jealousy and other constructs, as well as conveying a more accurate representation of an individual's jealousy (Russell & Harton, 2005).

Evolutionary psychologists have long hypothesized that there are innate sex differences in jealousy mechanisms (e.g., Buss, 2000; Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). Some research has supported the theory that men tend to experience more jealousy resulting from a partner's sexual infidelity, due to the reproductive costs of investing time and resources in offspring that may belong to another man, and, in contrast, women tend to experience more jealousy as a result of a partner's emotional infidelity, due to the costs of losing resources and her partner's parental investment in offspring (e.g., Buss et al., 1992; Edlund & Sagarin, 2009; Sagarin, 2005). However, these findings have been largely controversial and many authors have debated whether or not sex differences in sexual and emotional jealousy are rooted in evolution, as well as whether or not sex differences even exist (DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman, & Salovey, 2002; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Green & Sabini, 2006; Harris, 2003; Russell & Harton, 2005; Sabini & Green, 2004).

Although literature regarding sex differences in jealousy has been largely controversial, research has also examined other possible factors that may influence men's and women's jealousy. Murphy, Vallacher, Shackelford, Bjorklund, and Yunger (2006) examined sex differences in the relationship between past and current relationship experience and jealousy. The authors investigated differences in upset over sexual versus emotional infidelity for individuals reporting having been in a serious committed relationship versus those who reported never having been in a serious committed romantic relationship; participants read four instances of sexual versus emotional infidelity and chose in each on the four scenarios which would be more distressing. The authors found no differences between sexual versus emotional infidelity for women on all four items; whether or not women reported ever being in a serious committed relationship, they were reported experiencing more upset over a partner's emotional infidelity. Similarly for men, only one of the four scenarios revealed a significant difference between men reporting having experienced a serious committed relationship versus those who had not, with men who had experienced a serious committed relationship reporting significantly more distress over the sexual scenario than those who had not. However, it is noteworthy that samples of individuals reporting having been in a serious committed relationship (men = 64, women = 170)

were quite a bit greater than samples who reported never having been in a serious committed relationship (men = 11, women = 18). Further, Murphy et al. (2006) found no differences in distress over sexual infidelity versus emotional infidelity between men and women currently in a romantic relationship versus men and women not currently in a relationship; however, the authors did find that men who had experienced a serious committed romantic relationship, as opposed to those who had not, responded more intensely to sexual infidelity, while no similar within sex differences were found in women. Murphy et al. (2006) suggest their findings may indicate that experiencing a romantic relationship may activate men's jealousy mechanism, while women's jealousy mechanism may be activated long before she enters into a romantic relationship.

While Murphy et al. (2006) evaluated sex differences in relationship experience as a predictor of distress over sexual and emotional infidelity, the authors did not examine participants' actual number of past relationships, actual length of participants' current relationship, or levels of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional jealousy separately. Aune and Comstock (1997) did examine relationship length related to jealousy experience and expression. The authors found a positive relationship between length of romantic relationship and levels of jealousy experience, expression, and perceived appropriateness of jealousy expression, with jealousy increasing as length of relationship increases; this finding is consistent with theories suggesting that jealousy increases with degree of investment. However, the authors did not evaluate differences between men and women or levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy separately in this study.

Sex differences in the three subfactors of jealousy have been examined in previous research. While Miller and Maner (2009) found no differences between men and women when combining levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy into an overall measure, Aylor and Dainton (2001) found sex differences in cognitive jealousy, such that men reported experiencing more cognitive jealousy than women. Guerrero, Eloy, Jorgensen, and Andersen (1993) found that women were more likely to experience behavioral jealousy than were men, while failing to find sex differences in the emotional and cognitive subfactors. Further, and somewhat in contrast to Aune and Comstock (1997), Guerrero and Jorgensen (as cited in Guerrero et al., 1993) found an inverse relationship between length of relationship and behavioral jealousy in married couples, with those in newer marriages displaying the most behavioral jealousy. Thus, research examining sex differences in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral subfactors has been somewhat inconsistent.

While previous research has examined sex differences in jealousy, most has focused on sexual versus emotional forms and gaps remain in the role of relationship experience, specifically, the number of past relationships an individual has experienced and length of current relationship, in men's and women's jealousy. Examining jealousy as a multidimensional construct, consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral subfactors, may better differentiate an individual's types of jealousy as well as more accurately determine relationships between types of jealousy and other constructs. Further, this study explores sex differences in jealousy with regard to relationship experience, in particular how number of past relationships and length of their current relationship, relates to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral types of jealousy in men and women.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 112 male ( $M = 19.19$  years,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and 115 female ( $M = 18.84$  years,  $SD = 1.12$ ) undergraduate students voluntarily recruited from introductory psychology classes at a southeastern regional university. These participants were selected from an initial 247 participants if they had experienced a past romantic relationship, were single, and heterosexual in orientation. The majority were first year students (65%) and Caucasian (88%).

### *Measures*

Participants completed a demographic form including questions related to their sex, age, and class status. This form also included several items related to number of past romantic relationships, current relationship status, and length in months of current relationship if applicable.

Jealousy was measured using the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (MJS; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). The MJS consists of three, eight-item subscales which measure cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of jealousy. These subscales have been found to represent dimensions underlying overall jealousy and to be only moderately correlated. The cognitive scale measures the frequency that an individual experiences suspicious thoughts or worries (1 = “never” and 5 = “all the time”). The emotional subscale measures the intensity and valence of jealousy feelings which could be experienced within a relationship (1 = “very pleasant feelings” and 5 = “very upset feelings”). The behavioral subscale measures the frequency with which an individual engages in jealous actions, such as looking through a partner’s purse or pockets or calling a partner unexpectedly at work to check up on him or her (1 = “never” and 5 = “all the time”). Internal reliabilities, indicated by Cronbach’s alpha, of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral subscales were originally reported to be .92, .85, and .89 respectively (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Subscale reliabilities obtained in this study were .86, .85, and .88 for cognitive, behavioral, and emotional scales respectively.

### *Procedure*

After signing an informed consent form and completing the demographic form, all participants completed the MJS. When completing the jealousy scale, they were told to answer the questions based on their current relationship or a significant past relationship if not currently involved in a romantic relationship. Based on their responses, participants were selected from the total sample if they had experienced at least one past romantic relationship, were single, and heterosexual in orientation. This sample was subsequently categorized based on whether they were currently in a romantic relationship (women = 77, men = 51) or not currently in a romantic relationship (women = 38, men = 61).

## RESULTS

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test for differences between men and women on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy based on whether or

not they were currently in a romantic relationship. There was no significant interaction between sex of participant and relationship status. Significant overall main effects were found for sex of participant,  $F(3, 218) = 4.58, p = .004, \eta^2 = .06$ , and current relationship status,  $F(3, 218) = 3.70, p = .013, \eta^2 = .05$ . Results, as shown in Table 1, revealed that women self-reported higher levels of emotional jealousy, ( $M = 41.72, SD = 5.37$ ) than men ( $M = 37.92, SD = 7.78$ ),  $F(1,220) = 13.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ ; women also reported slightly higher levels of behavioral jealousy, ( $M = 20.60, SD = 8.14$ ) than men ( $M = 18.29, SD = 7.06$ ),  $F(1,220) = 3.13, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$ . No differences in cognitive jealousy were found between men ( $M = 20.59, SD = 6.29$ ) and women ( $M = 21.66, SD = 10.35$ ),  $p = .29$ .

Those in a current romantic relationship reported significantly higher emotional jealousy, ( $M = 41.34, SD = 6.48$ ) than those not currently in a romantic relationship ( $M = 37.91, SD = 7.00$ ),  $F(1,220) = 9.39, p = .002, \eta^2 = .04$ . No significant differences for relationship status existed for behavioral jealousy,  $p = .14$ , or cognitive jealousy,  $p = .71$  (See Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Types of Jealousy in Men and Women*

	<u>Men</u>		<u>Women</u>	
	Currently in a Relationship	Not Currently in a Relationship	Currently in a Relationship	Not Currently in a Relationship
Cognitive Jealousy	20.82 (7.18)	20.38 (6.29)	21.22 (10.40)	22.58 (10.32)
Emotional Jealousy	39.43 (7.80)	36.59 (7.59)	42.61 (5.11)	39.92 (5.50)
Behavioral Jealousy	18.63 (7.11)	18.00 (7.01)	21.43 (8.39)	18.92 (7.44)

*Note.* Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

There were no significant main effects or interaction,  $p = .98$ , between sex of participant,  $p = .50$ , and relationship status,  $p = .88$ , in the number of past romantic relationships, ( $M = 2.82, SD = 2.76$ ). Partial correlations were conducted to examine relationships between number of past relationships and the three types of jealousy controlling for current relationship status for men and women separately. No significant relationships existed for men. For women, there were significant moderate correlations between number of past relationships and cognitive jealousy,  $r = .34, p < .001$ , and behavioral jealousy,  $r = .34, p < .001$ , and a significant but weaker correlation with emotional jealousy,  $r = .20, p = .04$  (See Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Partial Correlations between Types of Jealousy and Relationship Experience for Men and Women Controlling for Current Relationship Status.*

	1	2	3	4
1. Number of Past Relationships	--	.045	-.061	.010
2. Cognitive Jealousy	.335**	--	.131	.352**
3. Emotional Jealousy	.195*	.114	--	.140
4. Behavioral Jealousy	.335**	.483**	.424**	--

*Note.* Correlations for men ( $n = 112$ ) on upper diagonal; correlations for women ( $n = 115$ ) on lower diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

A subsample of participants ( $N = 128$ ) were selected who had previously been in at least one past relationship and were also currently in a relationship (men = 51, women = 77) to examine relationships between length of time in a current relationship and the types of jealousy separately for men and women. No significant difference existed between men and women in the length in months of current relationship,  $p = .62$ . The average length in months of the current relationship was  $M = 13.59$ ,  $SD = 14.60$ . As shown in Table 3, no significant relationships existed for women between types of jealousy and length in months of current romantic relationship. For men, only behavioral jealousy was moderately correlated with length in months of current relationship,  $r = .53$ ,  $p < .001$  (See Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Correlations between Types of Jealousy and Length of Current Relationship in Men and Women.*

	1	2	3	4
1. Length in Months of Current Relationship	--	.213	.213	.530**
2. Cognitive Jealousy	-.129	--	.035	.446**
3. Emotional Jealousy	-.848	.088	--	.205
4. Behavioral Jealousy	-.061	.374**	.396**	--

*Note.* Correlations for men ( $n = 50$ ) on upper diagonal; correlations for women ( $n = 77$ ) on lower diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study supports results consistent with those of Guerrero et al. (1993) and Aylor and Dainton (2001); overall, women reported significantly higher levels of emotional, as well as slightly higher behavioral jealousy than did men. However, in contrast to Aylor and Dainton (2001), no differences between men and women were found with regard to cognitive jealousy. Furthermore, both men and women currently in a romantic relationship reported significantly higher emotional jealousy than those who were not currently in a relationship with no differences in cognitive or behavioral jealousy.

The current study adds to the prior research of Aune and Comstock (1997) who found that increases in jealousy experience, expression, and perceived appropriateness of jealousy expression were associated with increasing length of relationship, and suggest their findings could indicate that expressions of jealousy may be viewed as less appropriate in the beginning states of relationship development as compared to subsequent stages. Results partially supported Aune and Comstock (1997); for men who had experienced a past relationship, the level of behavioral jealousy was associated with length in months of current relationship. Given evolutionary theories (e.g., Buss et al., 1992), the more a man invests in a mate, the more he stands to lose; thus, the current findings may indicate that men's increases in expressions of jealousy in the relationship may be attempts to make sure investment in a partner has not been wasted.

The current study finds that, for women, a greater number of past relationships relates to higher levels of cognitive and behavioral jealousy, regardless of whether or not she is currently in a relationship. Regarding relationship experience as a trigger of jealousy, Murphy et al. (2006) found no differences for distress over emotional versus sexual infidelity between women who reported ever having been in a serious committed relationship versus those who have not; however, a similar comparison for men revealed that men who had experienced a serious committed relationship responded with greater intensity to sexual infidelity as compared to those who had not. The authors suggest these findings may indicate that, while experiencing a romantic relationship may trigger jealousy mechanisms in men, these mechanisms in women may be activated very early in life, long before experiencing a romantic relationship. The current findings provide partial support for Murphy et al. (2006) in that, overall, women reported higher levels of emotional and behavioral jealousy regardless of whether or not they were currently in a relationship. However, the results of the current study also suggest that, while jealousy mechanisms in women may be activated long before experiencing a romantic relationship, relationship experiences, specifically experiencing numerous past relationships, may increase women's tendencies toward cognitive and emotional jealousy. Evolutionarily, women are at a higher risk for loss of resources due to loss of a mate; therefore, the findings of the present study may indicate that the number of times a woman has experienced the loss of a mate may increase her tendencies toward jealousy experience and expression in the future.

The current study is limited in that within-sex comparisons were not able to be made between men and women who reported having experienced a past relationship and those who had no prior relationship experience due to a small number of participants reporting no prior relationship experience. Also, information regarding reasons for ending past relationships was

not included, and comparisons were not made for individuals who reported being in their first romantic relationship. Further, this study only investigated jealousy in individuals in dating relationships and not long term marital relationships.

Future research may benefit from investigating sex differences in jealousy in individuals who are currently in their first romantic relationship, as compared to those with relationship experience. Future research may also benefit by investigating reasons why previous relationships ended; if an individual's previous relationships ended due to infidelity of their partner, the individual may be more likely to experience and express jealousy in subsequent relationships. Also, the current study found an association in women, but not men, between length of past relationships and length of current relationship. This finding could possibly indicate that women who tend to have longer relationships may constitute a separate group of interest, e.g., those who tend to more readily invest in a relationship than others. Further, future investigations should include samples of married individuals in addition to individuals involved in dating relationships, as well as those not involved in a relationship.

In sum, this study finds that women reported overall higher levels of emotional and behavioral jealousy than men. Also, individuals who reported currently in a relationship scored significantly higher on the emotional subscale than those not in a relationship regardless of sex. Positive relationships were also found for women between number of past relationships and all three components of jealousy, i.e., cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and yet no relationships existed for men. Finally, behavioral jealousy in men was associated with length in months of the current relationship, with no associations emerging for women. These findings may suggest that men, who have experienced the loss of a mate, may tend to express jealousy more readily the longer he invests in a relationship. Further, the current findings may indicate that, while jealousy mechanisms in men and women may be activated differently, mechanisms in women may be increasingly activated when experiencing several past romantic relationships.

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