



Articles

Don't Cheat Like I Did: Possessive Jealousy and Infidelity in Close Relationships

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Abstract

In a sample of 68 adult men and 70 adult women from Santiago, Chile, with a mean age of 29.40 years and a median age of 29, the effects of one's own infidelity and that of one's partner on different types of jealousy were examined. Of the respondents 47.1% had ever been unfaithful, and over half (56.5%) reported that their partner had been unfaithful. There were no effects of one's own infidelity and that of one's partner on reactive and anxious jealousy, but those who had been unfaithful, as well as those whose partner had been unfaithful, expressed the highest levels of possessive jealousy. These effects were not moderated by gender nor did age affect jealousy. Women were higher in all types of jealousy than men were.

Keywords: jealousy, infidelity, extramarital, sex

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Jealousy and Infidelity in Close Relationships

Jealousy in close relationships is aroused when individuals feel threatened in their relationship by a real, imagined or potential rival, and may involve feelings such as fear, suspicion, anxiety, anger, rejection, and threat (e.g., Zandbergen & Brown, 2015; for a recent extensive review of the jealousy literature, see Buunk, Dijkstra, & Massar, 2018). Beginning with the work of Freud (1950), in the clinical literature a distinction has been made between normal or rational jealousy stemming from a realistic threat to the relationship, and abnormal, pathological or morbid jealousy that is aroused in the absence of such a threat. In line with this, several types of jealousy were distinguished by Buunk (1997). *Reactive* jealousy refers to the emotional upset in response to the fact one's partner has actually engaged in sexual and erotic behaviors, including flirting or having sex with a third person. *Anxious* jealousy, refers to rumination and worrying about the possibility that one's partner might be unfaithful to an active cognitive process in which the individual generates images of his or her partner becoming sexually or emotionally involved with someone else and experiences various feelings such as worry, distrust, and upset, and *possessive* or *preventive* jealousy, that is similar to mate guarding and

refers to the considerable effort jealous individuals can go to in order to prevent contact of their partner with opposite-sex individuals.

A number of studies have provided evidence for the differential validity of these measures. For example, in three studies, [Barelds and Dijkstra \(2007\)](#) found that reactive jealousy was related positively to relationship satisfaction, whereas anxious jealousy was related negatively to relationship satisfaction. Preventive jealousy was not consistently related to relationship satisfaction (see also for similar results [Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2014](#)). According to [Barelds and Dijkstra \(2007\)](#), reactive jealousy is often perceived as a sign of love and commitment, showing that one is motivated to maintain the relationship, whereas anxious (or cognitive) jealousy is usually perceived as a sign of mistrust and uncertainty stemming from relationship problems. In this context, it may be noted that [van Brummen-Girigori, Buunk, Dijkstra, and Girigori \(2016\)](#) found that among women on Curaçao, a Caribbean island where relatively many children grow up without a father in the home, women who, during childhood, were abandoned by their father reported significantly more anxious and preventive jealousy, but not more reactive jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father.

In the present study, we examined in a sample of adult men and women how these three types of jealousy were related to one's own and one's partner infidelity. To the best of our knowledge there has been little research examining these issues. Although the term infidelity is not without its ambiguities, and despite the many studies that have examined jealousy in response to sexual versus emotional infidelity (for a review, see [Edlund & Sagarin, 2017](#)), there is clear evidence that infidelity is considered mostly as sexual acts *in vivo* ([Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016](#)). It was expected that individuals would show less *reactive* jealousy if they had been unfaithful themselves, because they would view their partners' infidelity as a reciprocal act which would generate more balance and equity in the relationship (e.g., [Buunk, 1982](#)). In contrast, classic psychoanalytic theorizing on projection suggests that individuals become jealous because they project their own inclination to be unfaithful on their partner ([Baumgart, 1990](#); [Freud, 1950](#)), and recent studies by [Neal and Lemay \(2019\)](#), and [Zandbergen and Brown \(2015\)](#) provide some evidence for this theoretical notion. Therefore, precisely because one has been unfaithful oneself, one might be concerned that the partner might consider it reciprocal to also be unfaithful, which would result in *anxious* and *possessive* jealousy. In addition, one's partner's infidelity in the past may also result in anxious and possessive jealousy, as one would be concerned that one's partner might become unfaithful again in the future. Because gender may be associated with both jealousy and infidelity, we examined gender differences in the variables included, as well as the potential role of gender as moderator.

Method

Participants

Individuals were invited to a brief study about jealousy and relationships through online social networks. The sample consisted of 68 men (49.3%) and 70 women (50.7%) from Santiago, Chile, with a medium age of $M = 29.40$, $SD = 9.17$, $Mdn = 29$. All respondents were students and professionals. 17.4% was married, 18.8% was cohabiting, 34.8% was in a serious relationship, and 29.0% was single. For the number of previous intimate relationships $M = 3.14$, $SD = 2.52$. Among those who had currently a relationship, the duration was $M = 54.39$ months, $SD = 58.53$.

Participants completed an informed consent, approved by the Ethics Committee of the second author's institution.

Measures

Jealousy was measured with the three 5-item scales developed by Buunk (1997). For the Reactive Jealousy scale, $\alpha = .75$, participants assessed on a 5-point scale how upsetting (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) one would find it if one's partner and someone else would have sexual contact, discuss personal things, flirt, dance intimately, and kiss. The Anxious Jealousy scale, $\alpha = .86$, contains items referring to how often (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) one worries over the potential intimate contact of the partner with someone of the opposite sex. The Possessive Jealousy scale, $\alpha = .83$, assesses the degree to which respondents try to prevent contact between the partner and members of the opposite sex (1 = *not applicable*, 5 = *extremely applicable*).

One's own and one's partner infidelity were assessed by asking the participants "have you ever cheated on an intimate partner?" (yes, no), and "have you ever been cheated by an intimate partner?" (yes, no, don't know). Informal interviews indicated that in Chile 'cheating' is understood as sexual infidelity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Of the respondents 47.1% had ever been unfaithful, and 52.9% had never done so. Over half of the respondents (56.5%) reported that their partner had been unfaithful, 18.1% reported that this had not happened, and 25.4% did not know. There were no significant gender differences for these variables $\chi^2_s < 1.5$, $ps > .23$, but women scored higher than men on all jealousy types, $F_s > 4.04$, $ps < .05$. There were no significant correlations between age and jealousy (r_s from $-.14$ to $.12$, $ps > .10$). Because there were no interaction effects between gender and one's own or one's partner infidelity on jealousy, the data were analyzed for the sample as a whole.

Main Effects

One's own infidelity had no significant effects on reactive and anxious jealousy, $F_s < 0.77$, $ps > .38$, but had a significant effect on possessive jealousy, $F(1, 136) = 5.64$, $p = .02$. Those who had cheated expressed more possessive jealousy, $M = 8.68$, $SD = 3.92$ than those who had not cheated $M = 7.37$, $SD = 2.45$. While one's partner's infidelity had no significant effects on reactive and anxious jealousy, $F_s < 1.04$, $ps > .36$, it also had a significant effect on possessive jealousy, $F(2, 135) = 5.45$, $p = .005$. Those who had been cheated expressed more possessive jealousy, $M = 8.73$, $SD = 3.69$, than those who had not been cheated $M = 6.52$, $SD = 2.00$, p of LSD = $.003$, and more than those who did not know, $M = 7.37$, $SD = 2.56$, p of LSD = $.038$.

Discussion

The finding that men and women had been equally often unfaithful is not in line with older studies but it is consistent with newer ones (e.g., Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007), and with various local popular media

studies that do report about half of the Chilean population being unfaithful, particularly women. However, unlike what study by Brand et al. (2007) reported, in the present research women reported more jealousy than men. In the past decades, following up on the pioneering research by Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992), virtually all research on sex differences in jealousy has focused on emotional versus sexual jealousy. Various meta-analyses have shown a consistent pattern with men, relative to women, reporting greater jealousy in response to sexual infidelity than in response to emotional infidelity (Edlund & Sagarin, 2017). The findings from this line of research cannot be compared to those obtained with the scales assessing the types of jealousy used in the present research. In general, the findings on overall sex differences in jealousy have not been very consistent (see for example, Buunk, 1997; Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2013), but if anything, on the present scales women have been found to be overall more jealous than men (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007), and with other continuous measures this has also been found in Norway (Bendixen, Kennair, & Buss, 2015), suggesting that the sex differences found here may not be particularly typical of the population studied.

As hypothesized, individuals who had been unfaithful themselves as well as individuals whose partner had been unfaithful showed more possessive jealousy, i.e., were more inclined to engage in attempts to prevent sexual contact of their partner with a third person (cf. Neal & Lemay, 2019; Zandbergen & Brown, 2015). However, unlike what one would expect on the basis of classic psychoanalytic theorizing on projection (e.g., Freud, 1950), no effects were found on anxious jealousy. In fact, if psychoanalytic theorizing is correct, one would especially expect an effect of one's own infidelity on anxious jealousy, which is the most clinical type of jealousy, particularly characteristic of individuals with mental health problems (e.g., Attridge, 2013) and neurotic individuals (Buunk, 1997). Neither was there an effect of one's own behavior on reactive jealousy, suggesting that considerations of reciprocity in this realm may not be as common as the research by Buunk (1982) would suggest.

There were a number of limitations of the present research. First, of course the meaning of the term 'cheating' is somewhat ambivalent, even though, unless explicitly specified, research shows that infidelity is considered mostly as actual sexual acts (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016). Future research may assess with more explicit measures of cheating how jealousy and infidelity are interrelated. Second, we did not examine personality characteristics that might moderate the effect of one's own infidelity on jealousy (cf. Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Finally, our sample size was relatively small and consisted of relatively well-adjusted, highly educated individuals in Chile, and it is therefore important to examine the present issues in the same and other populations, including individuals suffering from clinical forms of jealousy. Nevertheless, the present results may be considered as a modest contribution to the small empirical literature (e.g., Neal & Lemay, 2019; Zandbergen & Brown, 2015) on jealousy as a projection of one's own adulterous tendencies, showing that especially anxious jealousy may result from such projection.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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