

**The Experience of Jealousy and Coping in
Three Area of Life: Relationship, Family, and Work**

Ph.D. Thesis Summary

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Goals, theoretical framework, conceptual definitions, and issues to be addressed

This thesis seeks to explore the ways in which people experience and cope with jealousy. In discussing jealousy, I rely on the cognitive theory of emotions that originates in recent theories of stress; it posits that emotional reactions are outcomes of primary and secondary appraisal processes, which are also responsible for the dynamics of the subjective experience of stress. That is, emotions can be conceptualized as special manifestations of the experience of stress.

In the specific case of jealousy, the stress-provoking situation may be described as follows: according to a person's perceptions, one of his or her significant relationships (and as a consequence, his or her self-esteem) is threatened by the emergence of a rival. Jealousy is a complex emotion, which is to say that it is a label that describes the eliciting event itself, and explains changes that occur in psychological and physiological states. Jealousy is not an answer to the question of what it is that one feels; rather, it tells us *why* one feels what one does.

Conceptualizing jealousy as a complex emotion has important theoretical and practical consequences. One implication is that the feelings one experiences in jealousy situations can vary a great deal, depending upon the focus of attention. Affective responses include anger, fear, and sadness, among others.

Therefore, the first goal of my study was to shed light on how certain personality and relationship characteristics—as well as the degree of control experienced in the jealousy situation—predispose people to experience specific discrete emotional states when they are jealous. The second goal of the study was to discover how these emotional states contribute to coping efforts in their own right, over and above the effects of personality, relationship, and control variables. I addressed these questions in three different areas of life. In addition to studying traditional *romantic* jealousy, which served as a basis for understanding and analyzing the other two, I chose to investigate jealousy at *work* and so-called *parental* jealousy. This latter type deserves special attention,

because it is almost completely neglected by the literature, even when intergenerational coalitions within families are the focus of attention.

Parental jealousy may be defined as a complex of emotions, thoughts, and actions following from the sense that the other parent as a rival threatens the quality of one's own relationship with one's child. Parental jealousy can be conceived as one of the mundane, everyday stressors of family life, because most of the time it reflects only a temporary (real or imagined) disturbance of the parent-child relationship, and it by no means jeopardizes the further existence or maintenance of that relationship.

Work jealousy is also an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reaction, but it arises from a threat posed by a rival employee on one's self-esteem or on the sense of possessing advantages that are associated with valued social relationships at work. In order to categorize a situation as one that elicits jealousy, it has to meet certain requirements. One of these requirements is that the threat must reflect a potential *loss* of benefits, and not merely the possibility of the perceiver not obtaining a certain reward (as is the case with envy arising from classic rivalry). The potential loss might concern popularity or social acceptance, the perceiver's position of social status or power, his or her sense of professional competence, money, and so on. But whatever the loss consists in, it must have a specific feature: the capacity to influence a person's work-related self-esteem and involvement in social relationships.

Jealousy in parental and work contexts differs from jealousy in romantic relationships. One clear difference is that the relationship between the perceiver and the significant other is not exclusive in the case of parental and work jealousy, whereas the romantic relationship is typically exclusive (on the level of social norms, at least) with regard to sexual behavior. This exclusivity in the romantic situation means that potential rewards (in terms of sexual behavior) are generally zero-sum. That is, if the partner is attracted to a third person, there is often an automatic assumption that the partner will be less attracted to the person who experiences jealousy. Therefore, with regard to parental and work jealousy it becomes necessary to specify more clearly those circumstances under which the

rival relationship becomes threatening for the person, and which lead to the experience of jealousy.

One possibility is that the rival relationship becomes threatening when the person feels excluded by the intruder's gaining certain privileges that the person does not possess or share. These privileges must impair in some way the relationship between the person and the relevant other, and it must manifest itself in an area that plays an important role in the person's self-evaluation. A second possibility is that the rival endangers one of the person's own privileges by taking it over or just simply by sharing it. This type of parental or work jealousy reflects similar human needs as in the case of romantic jealousy, especially the desire to feel unique and irreplaceable in key social relationships. A third case is closely related to this second one, and it occurs when one's expectations for equity in terms of rewards that are proportionate to one's investments are not met.

In our society, parental jealousy is generally regarded as being highly inappropriate and socially unacceptable. This fact contributes to the difficulties people face when searching for efficient coping strategies. The altruistic norms that govern romantic relationships and the complementary nature of parental roles create obstacles to expressing, admitting, and finding justifications for jealous emotions. Work jealousy—like romantic jealousy and unlike parental jealousy—is not generically condemned by society. In some cases, it is not only tolerated, but it is even expected to occur and socially reinforced when it does occur. The trap of work jealousy consists in exactly this fact, that rivalry and competition are permitted and even encouraged in this context (as opposed to the family context), but only certain forms of jealousy at work can be communicated openly in accordance with rigorous norms and rules.

***The system of variables, hypothesized relations among variables,
and the methodological approach***

In this study, I aimed at measuring those aspects of personality that are most relevant to people's perceptions of relationships and their own interpersonal behavior and that are also related to sensitivity toward stress and coping

tendencies. In other words, it was decided to assess social coping potential at the level of personality, including (a) need and capacity for intimacy, (b) communication skills, (c) flexibility, and (d) problem-solving. These four features comprise the main dimensions of the MASH (Multi-system Assessment of Stress and Health) Model, which seeks to understand behavior by considering the individual as an intersection of multiple, interrelated systems that continuously affect one another. These systems are the personality, the couple, the family, and the work community. Closeness, communication, flexibility, and problem-solving on the level of personality express general capacities and needs, and in the differing contexts of romantic, family, and work relationships we can think of these variables as concrete manifestations of the same underlying capacities and needs.

I have conceptualized personality and relationship characteristics as factors that covary together, but I argue that each contributes independently to the experience of jealousy and to efforts at coping with jealousy. In addition to these two predictor variables, I have incorporated into the model the degree of control that one experiences in jealousy situations. Perceived controllability, as operationalized in the study, corresponds to the person's judgments about the changeability of the situation, that is, to the coping possibilities that are assumed.

In advancing hypotheses, I have formalized the assumption that the amount of perceived control is partly dependent on the nature of personality and relationship characteristics. In addition, I expected to reveal direct links among control, relationship, personality variables, and discrete emotional states experienced in the situation. Anger, for example, was hypothesized to be negatively associated with personal flexibility, and sadness was predicted to be negatively related to the intimacy level of the relationship.

These same variables were proposed to have a direct impact on coping strategies as well. When measuring coping activity, I integrated two divergent approaches that are apparent in the research literature on coping with jealousy. That is, I assessed four coping strategies that might be followed in any kind of stressful situation and three coping strategies that can be interpreted and applied

only in the specific context of jealousy. The four general strategies were problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, social support seeking and avoidance.

When determining which of the specific strategies to include in my study, I relied on the fact that jealousy entails threats to both the significant relationship and to self-esteem. The literature distinguishes between two types of coping strategies, both of which aim at the restoration of self-esteem but which differ with regard to efforts made to restore the jeopardized relationship. In one type of egocentric (self-esteem restoring) strategy, the person becomes hostile towards the partner and the relationship, thereby improving self-evaluation at the expense of the relationship (i.e., ego-defense). The other strategy is neutral in that it does not hurt the partner's or the relationship's interests (i.e., ego-bolstering), but it still aims at preserving self-esteem. In the study, I measured ego-defensive, ego-bolstering, and relationship-focused coping.

One of the basic theoretical assumptions—which has not received much prior attention—is that after controlling for situational, personality, and relationship variables, the discrete emotional states experienced in the situation contribute to subsequent behavioral coping efforts, mainly through action tendencies that became mobilized. The action tendency is a component of emotion, in addition to physiological arousal and the subjective experience of emotion, and it refers to a more or less conscious urge to execute certain types of behaviors. According to the arguments detailed in this thesis, although the main goals of the coping process are determined in the course of appraisal processes, in the end those coping strategies will be manifested in overt behavior that resonates with action tendencies induced by the emotions.

When we try to explore the ways in which people try to deal with jealousy, we cannot overlook the fact that romantic partners' behaviors are not independent from each other. One's partner's personality, relationship perceptions, emotions, and behaviors in jealousy situations influence the other partner's appraisal processes, emotions, and conduct. Thus, it is not only that one is influenced by what one thinks about what one's partner thinks, but also by what the partner

actually thinks and feels (according to his/her own judgment and description). I refer to these influences as cross-effects between partners.

To assess the hypotheses, I developed my own situation-based jealousy questionnaire that also measured coping activities and amount of perceived control in the three areas of life (couple, family, and work). I used the relevant subscales of the CSP (Coping and Stress Profile; Olson, 1989, 1997) to assess the remainder of the predictor variables.

The sample consisted of 80 cohabiting couples who had at least one child and possessed either current or previous work experience. Because the sample was comprised of dyads, to analyze the data I needed a procedure that would simultaneously take into account both individual and dyadic-level processes, that is to say, a modeling procedure that would represent and test intrapersonal associations among variables and cross-effects between those of the two partners at the same time. Following past precedent, path analysis was chosen. Path analysis, which belongs to the SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) family, is suitable for determining and testing structural models that reflect *a priori* expectations about the direct and indirect causal links among observed variables (Kline, 1998, MacCallum & Austin, 2000). Therefore, if we have a theory about the associations among observed variables, we are able to construct a model and effectively test the fit of the model to actual, observed data by using path analysis.

Results

Our most general conclusion is that the vast majority of hypotheses were upheld and that the study was successful in at least several respects. It was empirically confirmed that: (a) it is meaningful to expand the traditional concept of romantic jealousy and extend it to other interpersonal relationships; (b) each of the relationship, personality, and control variables uniquely contribute to the experience of jealousy and coping with it, and the discrete emotional states in jealousy situations helped in their own right to successfully predict behavioral reactions; and finally, (c) there are meaningful differences between men and women both in terms of emotional experiences and coping responses to jealousy.

The gender differences observed in this study reflect a new, unconventional approach in that they have to do with the differences in associations among variables and not with differences among the mean levels of variables. In other words, what I compared was the pattern of emotional functioning in men and women: I explored which emotional and behavioral reactions are associated with the same personality and relationship characteristics for the two genders. From a certain point of view, this comparison is more informative than showing which gender is more prone to certain emotions and coping strategies in any absolute sense. In interpreting the presence or absence of certain gender differences, I applied an explanatory principle that builds upon the gender role expectations and social norms that characterize our society.

When comparing the three types of jealousy, several associations among variables were identified that were significant in the case of more than one type of jealousy. These generally observed relations are described as central features of jealousy. It was true in multiple contexts, for example, that there was a strong positive association between sadness and social support seeking, that there was a strong positive association between personal problem-solving skills and ego-bolstering strategies, and that there was a strong negative relation between relationship flexibility and ego-defense.

On the other hand, some associations were observed for only one specific type of jealousy, and these may be characterized as more peripheral features of jealousy. These include the relation between need for intimacy and fear in the context of romantic jealousy (but not in other contexts), and the relation between sadness and avoidance in the context of work jealousy (but not in other contexts).

Central features therefore describe the qualities that belong to *jealousy in general*. Up to this point, our knowledge about jealousy in general has been inseparable from the knowledge gained about romantic jealousy, because previous research regarded romantic jealousy as the prototype and did not attempt to go beyond the arbitrary generalization of the attributes of this specific subtype of jealousy to other domains. The present study allows us to view romantic jealousy

as only one subtype of jealousy (like parental and work jealousy), which naturally carries the central features along with its own more specific or peripheral features.

The associations that characterize jealousy in general, that is, the central features, show an interesting pattern. It seems that both personality traits and experienced emotional states almost perfectly discriminate among coping strategies. In other words, with very few exceptions, each coping strategy was associated with just one specific personality variable and one specific emotion variable. Thus, knowing which stable dispositions characterize a person well and how that person experiences jealousy, it is possible to make good predictions about the person's preferred coping strategies.

There were also important differences to be found among different jealousy domains, especially with regard to emotional experiences. Different discrete emotions were predictable for men and women in romantic vs. parental situations. In the context of romantic jealousy, only anger showed significant associations with predictor variables for men, whereas for women, all of the emotions were related to personality and relationship characteristics and also to the amount of control they reported. In the context of parental jealousy, however, only sadness was predictable for men, whereas anger and fear were predictable for women. These gender differences can be understood by realizing that divergent expectations of emotional reactions exist for men and women in the private sphere, and these expectations are reflected in whether a certain emotional state appears randomly or follows a well-defined pattern. If a feeling or behavior is inconsistent with social rules and norms, then people try to minimize and suppress them or at least to avoid admitting or expressing them. This is not to say that we entirely ignore these feelings or that we never have to face them, but the efforts we make to prevent experiencing and communicating them can result in confusion and some degree of randomness.

Compared to the other two types, the smallest degree of gender difference was observed in the context of work jealousy. The explanation proposed is that in the sphere of work, professional expectations toward the two genders are not highly differentiated. In other words, the same things determine whether a

woman or a man is considered to be an expert or professionally accepted, and similar standards apply to evaluating professional performance (this is not to say that there is no gender discrimination in the workplace, but discrimination takes other forms). In contrast to marital or parental roles, work-related gender roles are not complementary; men and women fill the same positions and deal with similar tasks.

In analyzing the data, it became necessary to contract certain predictor variables that were so highly correlated with each other that it would not have made sense to keep them separate. In cases of romantic and parental jealousy, the “general (good) quality” of the relationship was a contracted variable that consisted of closeness, communication, and problem-solving. Findings supported the notion that in jealousy situations problem-solving and communication are tied together very closely. At the same time, relationship flexibility represented a substantive dimension that was separate from closeness, as predicted by the MASH model.

In the case of work jealousy, the “general (good) quality” of relationships contained closeness, communication, and flexibility, and problem-solving remained as a separate dimension. The independence of problem-solving can be understood by recognizing that in the workplace the capacity for handling problems and issues is a special and requisite skill and that high performance and efficiency are highly valued qualities.

Finally, there was another difference among life areas, and it was that for parental jealousy only there were no significant associations between personality variables and anger, fear, or sadness, and the mean levels of all three emotions were significantly lower than in romantic or work contexts. Thus, I concluded that even the “weak” forms of parental jealousy elicited by the questionnaire are “strong,” in that the individual is seriously pressured by society not to react emotionally at all. This interpretation is based on prior work demonstrating that behaviors exhibited in strong situations are less sensitive to the effects of personality traits because of the lack of individual variability expressed in such situations.

To summarize the results concerning cross-effects between partners, in most cases effects depended on respondent gender, jealousy type, and their interactions with predictor variables. Accordingly, relatively little consistency was observed across both genders and all three jealousy types. One generally true association, however, was that the partner's personal flexibility was negatively related to the perceiver's emotion-focused coping (attempts to regulate emotion). In addition, the degree of sadness experienced by the partner was negatively related to the perceiver's use of the ego-defensive strategy and positively related to emotion-focused coping.

The last section of the thesis provides a discussion of the limitations of the methods and data analytic approach. It also suggests directions for further research in order to build on the results obtained here, to ensure their validity and generalizability, and to help to put them into practice.

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