

The Effects of Jealousy in Relationships

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the effects of jealousy in relationships. Participants (N=42, 74% female) were collected through mass e-mail and asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions, a 5 point self-report jealousy scale, and hypothetical questions. We expected the participants who have been in a relationship longer to feel less jealous, than participants who have been in shorter relationships. There was not a significant difference found among the length of relationships and jealousy, $P > .75$.

Introduction

Over the course of intimate relationships, various feelings change or develop between the members of the relationship. Among these is a creeping feeling called jealousy. Jealousy can be defined as, "a fear and rage reaction fitted to protect, maintain and prolong the intimate association of love" (Davis, 1948). At the beginning of a relationship, jealousy can be normal and healthy because that means there is concern and a guarding of the relationship. However, if it becomes excessive overtime, it could damage a relationship. Jealousy can occur when a negative threat arises to a lifestyle. Jealousy often can hinder a relationship and if overlooked, can cause the demise of an otherwise healthy and loving relationship. An individual in a relationship might become jealous as the person suspects that their significant other might have interest in someone else (Salovey, 1991). A feeling of jealousy is sometimes

created in order to protect and maintain the length of the relationship. One effective way to measure how length of a relationship effects jealousy is to create hypothetical situations. Asking individuals about imagined instances of a type of scenario is one of the largely used methods today. As a relationship duration increases, the couple should feel more comfortable with each other and therefore, less jealousy should be shown.

Previous research has been conducted on the ability of jealousy to endanger relationships (Barker, 1987). These results help support our initial thought of less levels of jealousy occurring as the relationship duration increases. It was also shown that high levels of jealousy could lead to conflict between both partners. Jealousy can be considered a social emotion (Frijda, 2004). Emotions like this exist to serve some kind of purpose. Jealousy could be designed to increase the success of which a person meets specific challenges; for example, feeling fear and anxiety from a person flirting with your significant other during a first date. This raises awareness which causes jealousy. The longer a relationship lasts, the more the couple has been exposed to anxiety, fear or other emotions that have resulted from jealousy. Feeling these emotions overtime can help the couple overcome jealous situations that may occur and lessen the overall jealous feelings. An experiment of the effect of relationship length on perceived appropriateness of Jealousy was conducted by Aune and Comstock(1997) and found results that support our hypothesis. Their findings were that over time, relationship partners develop greater commitment and investment toward each other. Therefore, as the relationship progresses,

partners learn to typically tolerate a broader spectrum of situations that might occur. This topic has been studied previously; Knox, (1999) believed that the length of a relationship could affect jealousy in college students. He found that couples that had been dating for 12 months or less were significantly more likely to experience jealousy than couples dating 13 months or longer. This means that the less time couples have been dating, the more jealousy will be experienced.

One confounding variable in studies on the relation between relationship duration: older couples have been in their relationships longer but they are also older. Shackelford (2004), speculates that as couples grow older, the tendency to be jealous decreases. Sexual infidelity on the part of the female partner threatens paternity certainty, however as men increase in age they usually have children (Green, 2006). The need to be jealous then decreases, because it is not necessary to worry about a child not being the actual child of the husband since he already has children of his own. Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) claim that older women tend not to be jealous because they have their children to be dependent on for resources instead of their husband. Therefore, jealousy isn't as strong as it is in their younger years.

Another confounding variable is gender: females are more distressed by emotional infidelity than men who are more distressed by sexual infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). However, Harris (2000) explored other alternatives to Buss et al. (1992) study and both studies found distress, but Harris (2000) suggests that men may be more successful at imagining sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity. Men tend to create a more concrete image of sexual infidelity, whereas

emotional infidelity is not as clear and men have a harder time daydreaming of romantic fantasies than women (Byers, Purdon, & Clark, 1998). These daydreams may include romantic dates on the beach at sunset with a bottle of wine, or their wedding day. However, Cramer (2001) suggests women are more distressed by emotional infidelity because women also believe if their partner is emotional involved with someone else then they must be sexually involved too. Men view sex and love a bit differently. Men are more distressed by sexual infidelity because it infers that their partner may be emotionally involved (Cramer, 2001). The theories seem to stick to the same patterns, however the explanations to those theories are still varied.

Research has revealed in married couples an increased comfort with jealous feelings as a relationship goes on into decades rather than just years (Aune & Comstock, 1997). How do we then reconcile this with the prediction of Knox (1999). These feelings may not go away with more experience in relationships or as one ages, there is evidence that jealous feelings not only exist, but barely change from adolescence to seniority this suggests no change over time contrary to Knox's findings that over the course of a relationship jealousy decreases (Shackelford, 2004). However these articles focus on much older relationships and the hidden effect is more of a "U" shaped trend of jealousy. In our research we wonder what the effect of relationship length is on jealousy in the typical college relationship which is the sample Knox used for his findings. In this experiment we expect that as the length of a relationship increases feelings of jealousy will decrease.

The participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire was the informed consent and by clicking continue the participants agree to the consent form. Then, the participants were taken to the actual questionnaire and asked to fill out the demographic, 5 point self-report jealousy scale, and hypothetical questions. The questionnaire took an average of 7 minutes to complete, and then the participants were taken to a debriefing form.

Method

Participants

All of the participants in this experiment are enrolled at a small Midwestern college. Most of the participants are acquaintances of the experimenters. We obtained our participants through mass e-mail of the student body. Of the 42 individuals that participated in this questionnaire, 31 (74%) were women and 11 (25%) were men. Also, 100% of the participants were Caucasian. The age range of the participants was 18 to 22 years old and an average age of about 19 years old.

Materials

The material used in this study was an online questionnaire containing demographic questions, a 5 point self-report jealousy scale, and hypothetical questions about the participant. An example of a self-report question was: *On a scale of 1-5 (1=not bothered to 5= extremely upset) how would you feel if your significant other was dancing with someone of the opposite sex?* There were 10 self-report questions asked. An example of a hypothetical question is: *At a party*

both of you get separated. The next time you see each other, your significant other is chatting with someone of the opposite sex. How would you feel on a scale of 1-5 (1=not bothered to 5=extremely upset)? There were 5 hypothetical questions asked. These questions also consisted of hypothetical situations with a 5-point scale jealousy scale like the one described above, and 7 emotional words were listed underneath the scale. Participants were asked what emotional words describe how they would be feeling in the hypothetical situation. The words listed were; *betrayed, hurt, depressed, rejected, sad, upset and jealous*. The participants could pick multiple emotional words by clicking the checkboxes.

Procedure

The participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. The questionnaire included the informed consent on the first page of the questionnaire. After reading the informed consent, the participants clicked a button to continue onto the next page, which was the initial questionnaire page. The participants first answered the demographic section, then the 5 point self-report jealousy scale, and finally to the hypothetical questions with the 5 point jealousy scale and the emotional word check-boxes. After completing the questionnaire, the participants then clicked another button which took them to the debriefing form and were encouraged to print the form. The questionnaire took about 7 minutes for each subject to complete.

Results

To test our hypothesis that feelings of jealousy decrease as the length of a relationship increases we ran a two-tailed Pearson Correlation between

relationship length and “overall jealousy”. Overall jealousy is an average of each participant’s jealousy scale selections for the general jealousy questions and “upsetness” scale used in the hypothetical situations (Cronbach’s alpha = .788). The test failed to reach significance (n= 40, r=.002, p>.75 see fig. 1). We then ran a two-tailed t-Test to see if there were any significant differences in the averaged jealousy scales due to gender and again failed to reach significance (t= 1.306, df 40, p>.05). In the interest of knowledge gaining we ran two-tailed Person Correlations between the overall jealousy scores and averages of participants’ selected emotions after each hypothetical situations (Cronbach’s alpha: hurt .614, jealous .753, rejected .811, betrayed .722, sad .696, depressed .736) and again saw no significant correlations with any of the selected emotions aside from Jealousy (r=.421, n 41, p<.01) which supports the reliability of our overall jealousy score. This is important because half of the overall jealousy score didn’t measure jealousy but rather how upset participants were at a jealousy provoking situation.

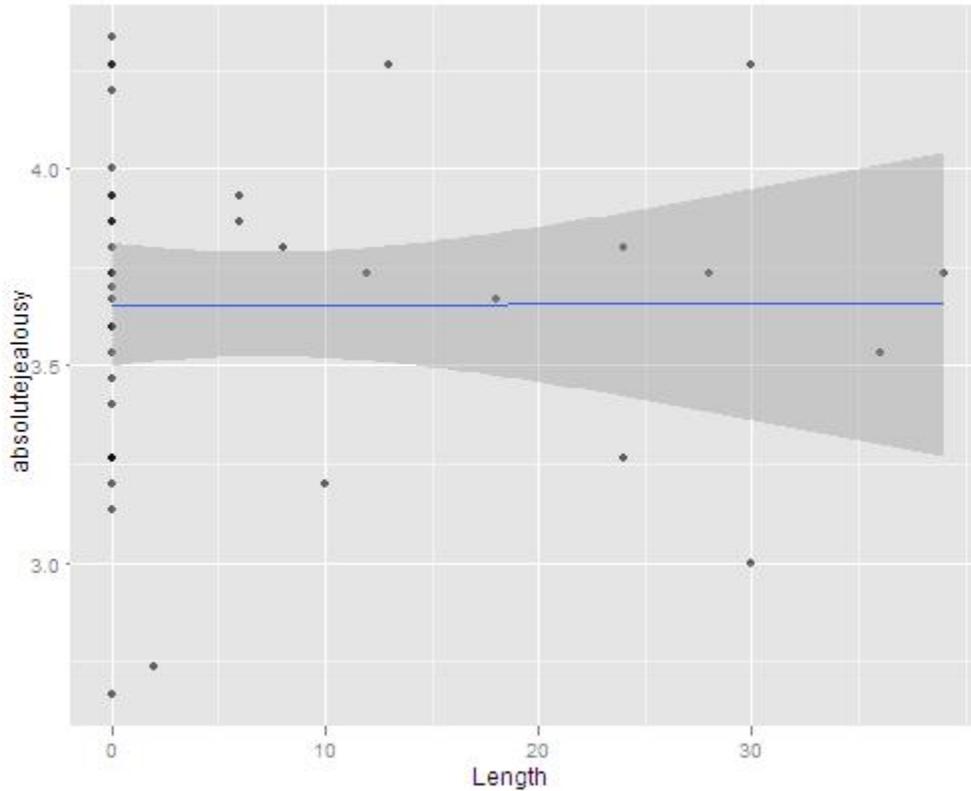


Figure 1 Overall jealousy and length of relationship

Discussion

Implication

Our hypothesis was that feelings of jealousy will decrease as the length of a relationship increases. Results show that our hypothesis was not supported and no link exists between the amount of jealousy and length of relationship. The possibility of a relation to gender was also ruled out when no significant difference was found between the average overall jealousy of women compared to men. Since we found no correlation between overall jealousy and any of the reported emotions other than jealousy there is some evidence that jealousy is a unique emotion that can be experienced without the presence of other emotions such as

sadness or depression.

Limitations

One area of concern for our study was the small sample size. We had a total of 42 participants. We would have been able to generalize more to the population if more people participated in the study. There is also a chance that our results would have been more significant if we had a larger sample size. One problem that occurred in the study was that not everyone was currently in a relationship. There were 14 people that indicated they were not in a relationship. Considering our study was about the effects of jealousy in relationships, we could not really use the people that were not in a relationship.

Another limitation reflecting the sample size was that we had 31 women and 11 males participate in the study. It would have useful to have more of a diverse prospective. In the hypothetical situations, the participant was asked to imagine them-self in a current situation. One example of a situation is, "At a party, both of you get separated. The next time you see each other, your significant other is chatting with someone of the opposite sex." After reading the situation, the participant was asked to check words that described how they felt. One implication about the hypothetical situations was that the questions were not very specific. With the above example of a situation, what does chatting with someone of the opposite sex mean? Is it a friend, a ex-boyfriend or random person? The participants could be imagining that the, "someone," could be any of those options. This could easily effect their feelings of jealousy, especially if they thought that person might have been an ex. Next time, it would be best to be

specific in the questions that we're ask so there was no second guessing.

Future Directions

In future research, a study should take diverse sexual orientation into account. Instead of focusing only on heterosexuals, a survey could be split into separate forms based on the participant's sexual orientation. This could add another dimension to our study, and sort out answers that may skew our results because the participant's sexual orientation does not match up with the hypothetical situations. Also, another future study may include priming of emotions. We found no significant correlations with emotions like betrayal or rejection. Before the participants read the hypothetical situations and respond to the jealousy scale, their emotions could be primed with betrayal by reading a story or watching a film clip portraying this emotion. We would expect to find if someone is primed with these strong emotions no correlation would be made between the primed emotion and jealousy. This would show jealousy to be a unique emotion not a state resulting from various other emotions' presence. Also, we found a lot of research debating if gender played a role with jealousy in relationships. Therefore, if a more gendered sample was gathered, we could test for a correlation between sex and jealousy.

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