

The Social Psychology of Jealousy

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jealous/'jel-əs/adj (ME *jelous*, fr. OF, fr. (assumed) VL *zelosus*, fr. LL *zelus* zeal—more at ZEAL) 1 a: intolerant of rivalry or unfaithfulness b: disposed to suspect rivalry or unfaithfulness: apprehensive of the loss of another's exclusive devotion 2: hostile toward a rival or one believed to enjoy an advantage 3: vigilant in guarding a possession 4: distrustfully watchful: SUSPICIOUS *syn* see ENVIOUS—

Webster (1963)

We begin the section on “Sexual Jealousy” in our Human Sexuality classes with a simple question: What would you most like to know about jealousy? Students’ answers are surprisingly redundant. They ask: “What

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is jealousy?" and—whatever it is—"How can you get rid of it?" A scattering of anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists—as well as a tidal wave of novelists—*have* addressed these two questions. Unfortunately, their answers are unnervingly inconsistent.

Jealousy is an enigma, the least known of all human emotions, the least spoken of human reactions.

Sokoloff (1947:14)

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED JEALOUSY?

Since Aristotle's time, theorists have been unable to agree as to what jealousy "really" is. They have insisted that jealousy should really be equated with "love/hate," "a perverse kind of pleasure," "shock," "uncertainty," "confusion," "suspicion," "fear of loss," "hurt pride," "rivalry," "sorrow," "shame," "humiliation," "anger," "despair," "depression," or "a desire for vengeance."

Probably most theorists can agree that jealousy possesses two basic components: (1) a feeling of bruised pride, and (2) a feeling that one's property rights have been violated.

Il y a dans la jalousie plus d'amour-propre que d'amour. (There is more self-love than love in jealousy.)

La Rochefoucauld (1665)

According to such analysts as Bohm (1967), Fenichel (1955), Freud (1922), Lagache (1947), Langfeldt (1961), Mairret (1908), or Mead (1960), jealousy is "really" little more than wounded pride. For example, Margaret Mead (this book:120) contends that the more shaky one's self-esteem, the more vulnerable one is to jealousy's pangs:

Jealousy is not a barometer by which ~~the~~ depth of love can be read. It merely records the degree of the lover's insecurity. . . . It is a negative, miserable state of feeling, having its origin in the sense of insecurity and inferiority.

Jealousy is . . . a kind of fear related to a desire to preserve a possession.

Descartes, quoted in Davis (1936)

According to such analysts as Davis (1936) and Gottschalk (1936), jealousy is “really” little more than one’s fear that he may lose his property. For example, Davis (this book: 129) claims:

... In every case it [jealousy] is apparently a fear . . . or rage reaction to a threatened appropriation of one’s own, or what is desired as one’s own, property.”

At this point, however, theorists’ descriptions of jealousy begin to diverge.

The man on the street shows similar confusion as to what jealousy “really” is. For example, Ankles (1939) asked university graduates:

What are the emotions and feelings involved in jealous behavior? (Cross out those which do not apply)

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) Anger | (8) Narcissism or self-love |
| (2) Fear | (9) Antagonism |
| (3) Ridicule | (10) Pleasure |
| (4) Joy | (11) Stupidity |
| (5) Cruelty | (12) Respect |
| (6) Hate | (13) Elation |
| (7) Self-feeling | (14) Shame |

To Ankles’ surprise, he found that at least a few of his respondents insisted that jealousy was associated with *all* of the preceding emotions. In a more recent study, Davitz (1969) interviewed 50 people and secured 50 different descriptions of jealousy.

CAN WE CONTROL JEALOUSY?

If we know what a social commentator thinks society should be like, we can pretty well predict whether s/he thinks jealousy is “bred in the bone” or can easily be stimulated—or extinguished.

JEALOUSY IS “BRED IN THE BONE”

Traditionalists insist that marriage should be both permanent and exclusive. Thus, *they* naturally prefer to believe that jealousy is a natural emotion.

Even insects express anger, terror, jealousy, and love.

Charles Darwin (1965)

Traditionalists generally begin their spirited defenses of jealousy by pointing out that even animals are jealous. They cite the “jealous” courtship battles of stags, antelopes, wild pigs, goats, seals, kangaroos, howler monkeys, and so on (See Bohm 1967). They go on to mention that even Kinsey and his associates (1948:411) believed that male jealousy had a mammalian basis:

While cultural traditions may account for some of the human male’s behavior, his jealousies so closely parallel those of the lower species that one is forced to conclude that his mammalian heritage may be partly responsible for his attitudes.

Generally they end their defense by reminding us that many societies simply take it for granted that jealousy is a basic emotion. (For example, in some societies, if a man catches his mate and his rival *in flagrante delicto*, he is allowed to kill them.)²

JEALOUSY SHOULD BE, AND CAN BE, EXTINGUISHED

Radical reformers such as Beecher and Beecher (1971) or O’Neill and O’Neill (1972) see things differently. They are convinced that people could evolve more loving personal lives, and more creative and productive professional lives, if they felt free to love all mankind—or at least a larger subset of it. Thus, *they* naturally prefer to believe that society has the power to arouse, or to temper, jealousy as it chooses.

Radical reformers generally begin their spirited attacks on jealousy by pointing out that not all men are jealous. They note that in most societies men are allowed to have more than one partner. Ford and Beach (1951) report that 84% of the 185 societies they studied allowed men to have more than one wife. Only 1% of the societies permitted women to have more than one husband. Most societies also look more tolerantly on “wife lending” or “mate swapping” and on extramarital sex than does our own. For example, Ford and Beach (1951) report that when Chukchee men (Siberia) travel to distant communities, they often engage in sexual liaisons

²East (1949) found that “jealousy” was the underlying motive in 23% of the 200 murders he investigated.

with their hosts' mates. They reciprocate in kind when their hosts visit their community.²

Radical reformers point out that, traditionally, our own society has strongly fostered marital permanence, exclusivity—and jealousy. Yet, in spite of the fact that our society tells men they *should* be jealous of their mates, many are not. For example, Kinsey and his associates (1953) found that if a husband learned about his wife's extramarital relations, his discovery caused "serious difficulty" only 42% of the time; 42% of the time it caused "no difficulty at all."

THE SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

What does social psychology have to say about these questions? Can we add to the existing confusion? Certainly.

Currently, Schachter's (1964) theory of emotion is probably the most popular social-psychological theory of human emotional response. Schachter argues that both one's mind and one's body must be engaged if s/he is to have a true emotional experience.

Mind: A person must feel that it is appropriate to interpret his/her feelings in emotional terms. A person learns—from society, parents, friends, and from his or her own experience—what emotions it is "appropriate" to feel in various settings. We know that we feel "joyous excitement" when a friend comes to visit, and "anxiety" when an enemy swaggers into town. The untutored may well experience the very same feeling on both occasions (a sort of anxious excitement). Schachter argues that a person will experience an emotion only if s/he interprets his or her "feelings" in emotional terms.

Body: A person must be physiologically aroused. Schachter argues that a person can experience an emotion only if s/he has some "feelings." Schachter argues that—*by themselves*—neither appropriate cognitions nor physiological arousal constitute a complete emotional experience.

Schachter tested his two-component theory in an ingenious series of experiments.

MANIPULATING PHYSIOLOGICAL AROUSAL

Schachter's first step was to manipulate the first component of emotion—physiological arousal. In one now classic experiment,

²See Bohm (1967), Forel (1931), Mead (1931), and Russell (1926) for other examples.

Schachter gave half of his participants (those in the *Unaroused* groups) a placebo. He gave the remaining participants (those in the *Aroused* groups) an arousing drug—epinephrine. Epinephrine is an ideal drug for producing a “high.” Its effects mimic the discharge of the sympathetic nervous system. Shortly after a person receives an epinephrine injection, s/he experiences palpitations, tremor, flushes, and accelerated breathing. In short, s/he experiences the same physiological reactions which accompany a variety of natural emotional states.³

MANIPULATING “APPROPRIATE” COGNITIONS

Schachter’s second step was to manipulate the second component of emotion—the participants’ cognitions. In the Non-Emotional Attribution Groups, Schachter wished to lead volunteers to attribute their feelings to a non-emotional cause—the injection. In the Emotional Attribution Groups, Schachter tried to lead volunteers to attribute their tranquil (or stirred up) feelings to an emotional cause.

Non-Emotional Attribution Groups. In these groups, Non-Aroused volunteers (who should have no reaction to the placebo shot) were given no information about how the shot would affect them. The Aroused volunteers were given a complete description of the shot’s effects; they were warned that in a very few minutes they would experience palpitations, tremors, flushing, and accelerated breathing.

Emotional Attribution Groups. In these groups, Schachter tried to lead volunteers to attribute their tranquil or aroused feelings to an emotional cause. For example, in some groups, Schachter arranged things so that, at the time the shot took effect, volunteers were caught up in a wild, abandoned, happy social interaction. In this setting, Schachter hoped that when the Aroused subjects felt the effects of the shot, and asked themselves, “What’s happening to me?” they would answer, “I’m having fun—that’s what.”

³As Lazarus *et al.* (1970) observe, theorists fall into one of two camps: the Generalists and the Specificists. The theorists agree on the evidence, i.e., that emotions, if sufficiently intense, have both general and specific physiological components. [See Averill (1969), Ax (1953), Funkenstein *et al.* (1957), Lacey (1967), and Lindsley (1950)]. What they disagree about is whether it is emotional similarities or differences that are important. The Generalists—such as Cannon (1929), Duffy (1962) and Schachter (1964)—insist that emotions’ physiological similarities are important. They attribute little theoretical significance to possible physiological differences.

Schachter is a Generalist. Thus, when Schachter says an emotional person must experience “physiological arousal,” he means merely that one must experience *general* physiological arousal. One need not experience some unique complex of physiological patterning.

In other groups, Schachter arranged things so that, at the time the shot took effect, volunteers were involved in a tense, explosive, angry interaction. In this setting, Schachter hoped that when Aroused subject felt the effects of the shot, and asked themselves, "What happening to me?" they would answer, "I'm mad . . . mad as hell—that's what."

Schachter found support for his hypothesis. He found that *both* appropriate cognitions and physiological arousal *are* indispensable components of a complete emotional experience.⁴ Additional support for the two-component theory of emotion comes from Schachter and Wheeler (1962) and Hohmann (1962).

This, then, in brief, is the Schachterian emotion paradigm. Can this social-psychological perspective give us some new insights into the complex and confusing nature of jealousy? Let us see how a Schachterian would answer the two questions with which we began.

WHAT IS JEALOUSY?

Interestingly enough, Schachter's "revolutionary" theory of emotion generates an equally revolutionary view as to the nature of jealousy.

From Aristotle to Schachter, almost all analysts simply assumed that emotions such as jealousy are somehow built into the organism.⁵ They took it for granted that all persons, at all times, "really" experience the same thing. It was *their* job to ferret out the essential elements of those emotions. The fact that individuals' emotional descriptions were unnervingly inconsistent—the fact that some "jealous" persons insisted they felt "joyous anticipation of revenge" while others insisted they felt "depressed" and "lethargic" *or* the fact that some claimed they were suffering unbearably, while others stoutly insisted they felt perfectly

'It is interesting that Davis (1936:402), writing long before Schachter formulated his theory, conceived of a distinctly "Schachterian" definition of jealousy. Davis argued that (1) one's social experiences determine how he labels his feelings, and (2) jealousy is akin (physiologically) to a variety of emotions.

... Doubtless the physiological mechanism is inherited. But the striking thing about this mechanism is that it is not specific for jealousy, but operates in precisely the same manner in fear and rage. The sympathetic nervous system plays, apparently, the usual role: increased adrenal activity speeding the heart, increasing the sugar content of the blood, toning up the striated and staying the smooth muscles.

If we are to differentiate jealousy from the other strong emotions we must speak not in terms of inherited physiology but in terms of the type of situation which provokes it.

'For example, Plutchik (1970) echoed the prevailing sentiment when he argued that since subjective emotional reports are "unreliable" and "biased," scientists must define emotions "functionally" and "behaviorally."

content—was simply chalked up to the fact that human beings possess poor powers of observation and often deceive themselves.

The Schachterians would insist that a person's confidences should be treated with more respect. For the Schachterians, one's mind, as well as one's body, contributes to emotional experiences. One's beliefs about what a jealous person *should* be feeling, and what s/he *must* be feeling, should have a potent impact on what s/he *does* feel. If society's sub-groups have radically different ideas about the essential nature of jealousy—and they do—our labeling will necessarily reflect these differences. Thus Schachterians would argue that jealousy is “really” a vastly different experience for different people.⁶

CAN JEALOUSY BE CONTROLLED?

According to Schachter's two-component theory, society has the ability to shape *all* of our emotional experiences. If society wanted to do so, it could suppress jealousy in either of two ways: (1) Society could try to persuade people to *label* their feelings in a somewhat different way; or (2) society could try to arrange things so that the realization that we must share our “possessions” with others would arouse a far less intense physiological reaction.

Altering Labeling. Societies vary from considering jealousy to be a natural human response to considering it to be an entirely illegitimate one. If our society wishes, it could change from one which encourages marital permanence and exclusivity—and jealousy—to one which insists that people should not, and must not, be jealous. Surely, the wily citizen would be clever enough to come up with a host of new, more acceptable, labels for his or her feelings. Social reformers would naturally hope that the once-jealous individual could be persuaded to re-label his or her feelings in positive, or at least neutral, terms (i.e., to label “jealous” feelings as “sexual curiosity,” “pride that others value one's mate,” etc.). Unfortunately for potential reformers, it is probably at least as likely that the persons would come up with alternative *negative* labels for their feelings (i.e., “chagrin at my mate's poor taste,” “anger,” or “depression at her neglect,” etc.). From the reformer's point of view, such changes would really constitute no change at all.

According to the Schachterians, there is a second way society can eliminate jealousy: It can reduce the “jealous” person's physiological arousal—and this is a distinctly harder task.

⁶Interestingly enough, after a scholarly review of all that has been written on the emotions, Arnold (1960) comes to the same conclusion.

Reducing Physiological Arousal. If society works at it, it should be able to affect *some* reduction in the intensity of people's jealous feelings.

Currently, it is believed that one's value depends on the faithfulness of one's spouse, and on his/her possession of people and things, which accounts for some of jealousy's sting. Society *could* teach its citizens that self-worth depends on what one is and does—not on how many people one can control. If the association between “pride” and “a partner's exclusive possession” were reduced, jealous feelings should be less intense.

Unfortunately, society would have a harder time eradicating many of the links between “a mate's loss” and “physiological arousal.” Currently the person who loses his or her mate is confronted with an enormity of practical problems. S/he loses the partner's love. S/he may have to endure the loss of friends—and worse yet, the loss of his or her children. One's daily life is disrupted in a thousand different ways. It is likely, then, that society might be able to make the jealous person's feelings somewhat less intense, but they are unlikely to be able to eliminate one's physiological arousal altogether.

“Jealousy”—by any other name, even at a reduced intensity—may still remain a painfully devastating experience.

The Walsters' article suggests that what we call the “basic emotion of jealousy” might be, in fact, a rather *neutral* impulse which is labeled and given direction by our feelings, beliefs, values, and expectations (which, in turn, are shaped by our associations with other people, with institutions, and with our culture). This interpretation would help account for the fact that circumstances which provoke jealousy in one person may not provoke it in another.

Of all those contextual factors which influence the processing of “jealous feelings,” surely prevailing ideas about and attitudes toward *romantic love* must be counted among the most important. Romantic love has been with us for a long time, but it has not been around forever. Here is an excerpt from Morton Hunt’s (1959:131) account of its advent and impact:

Toward the end of the eleventh century A.D., a handful of poets and noblemen in southern France concocted a set of love sentiments most of which had no precedent in Western civilization, and out of them constructed a new and quite original relationship between man and woman known as. . . courtly love. . . [It] began as a game and a literary conceit, but unexpectedly grew into a social philosophy that shaped the manners and morals of the West. It started as a playful exercise in flattery, but became a spiritual force guiding the flatterers; it was first a private sport of the feudal aristocracy, but became finally the ideal of the middle classes; and with wonderfully consistent inconsistency, it exalted at one and the same time adultery and chastity, duplicity and faithfulness, self-indulgence and austerity, suffering and delight. Although satirists have slain and buried it in the tinsel costume of all its follies a thousand times over, it has not stayed interred for one night, and men and women throughout the Western world still live by and take for granted a number of its principal concepts.

The next selection explores the relationship between sexual jealousy and romantic love. Berscheid and Fei conclude that the prime candidates for the aversive experience of sexual jealousy are those unfortunate lovers who are very *dependent* on their partners *and* who are *insecure* in their relationships. Our society, they suggest, puts us in a double bind by placing high value on both independence and romantic love (which involves dependency).