

Literature Review Investigating Historical Evolution, Psychological Mechanisms,  
Personality, Attachment and Socio-demographic Correlates of Delusional Jealousy

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### Abstract

Jealousy for one's spouse or partner is an old yet recurring theme in human relationships. Jealousy being the foremost reason for marital disharmony, marital breakdown, spousal violence, suicides and homicides is well documented. Delusional jealousy is rather an irrational, disproportionate and excessive response towards the unfaithfulness. This literature review aimed to review research studies that have investigated historical evolution, psychological mechanisms, personality and attachment styles and socio-demographical correlates involved in the expression of delusional jealousy. Research journals from 1950 to date were searched from PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus and Google Scholar search engines. Journal articles were selected and studied to find consistent and contrasting views. Themes were identified. Literature revealed that jealousy sets at a very young age. An irrational, disproportionate and excessive jealous response towards unfaithfulness is considered pathological. Delusion of infidelity of the spouse or the partner is the central denominating feature. In the present nosological systems (DSM-V, ICD-10), delusional jealousy does not stand as a separate nosological entity. Dependent, borderline, narcissistic, histrionic, passive-aggression and avoidant tendencies of personality, possessiveness and attachment styles have been linked to jealousy. Psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioural and socio-cultural theorists have attempted explain emergence and maintain factors of jealousy. Differences exist in the manifestation of jealousy across two genders. Differential reproductive challenges faced by men and women account for the sex differences in jealousy. While socioeconomic has shown a relationship with jealousy, age and ethnicity displayed no such relationship.

*Keywords:* delusional jealousy, personality, attachment styles, psychological mechanisms, sociodemographic

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Jealousy is a communal experience. Jealousy for one's spouse or partner is an old yet recurring theme in human relationships. Jealousy has been portrayed in literature, myth, drama, music, dance, painting, and sculpture. It has also been flamboyantly captured in media and popular press. Jealousy is also known as a source of marital disharmony, marital breakdown, spousal violence, suicides and homicides. It has been estimated that up to 20% of all homicides involve a jealous lover (White & Mullen, 1989).

### **Literature Review**

Gale encyclopedia of psychology defines jealousy as "An envious emotional attitude primarily directed by an individual toward someone perceived as a rival for the affections of a loved one or for something one desires, such as a job, promotion, or award" ("Jealousy," 2001). Nature of jealousy suggests that it is a complex emotion that encompasses number of emotional reactions including anger, sadness, fear, worry, anxiety, resentment, inadequacy, hate, regret, blame, disgust, hopelessness, bitterness etc (Draghi-Lorenz, 2000; S. Hart & Carrington, 2002; Maggini, Lundgren, & Leuci, 2006). It is also multidimensional where experience of jealousy involves cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioural manifestations (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989).

**The emergence of jealousy.** Jealousy sets at a very young age and has been observed in infants of five months and older (Draghi-Lorenz, 2000; S. Hart & Carrington, 2002). It has been found that jealous response of infants is a combination of affective, behavioural and neurophysiological responses (S. L. Hart, 2015). Social learning theory by Albert Bandura offers

a framework for understanding emergence of jealousy. Children learn from observing, modelling by an adult and social engagement. They learn to label their frame of mind or feelings to a perceived threat to their relationship as "jealousy". Further, they learn to react in ways consistent with their gender (Knox, Breed, & Zusman, 2007).

Sigmund Freud in his theory of psychosexual development stated about Oedipus and Electra complexes where a child forms jealousy about his or her same sex parent in the light of attraction to the opposite sex parent (Freud, 1922). He further created a dialogue about "Penis envy", the concept where the girl child experiences anxiety following the awareness that she does not have a penis. Another interpretation of penis envy is, it is an anxiety experienced by women in contemporary culture who wished they were men. Penis envy can be viewed as Freud's explanation of emergence of jealousy in females (Grossman & Stewart, 1990; Thompson, 1943).

**Conventional views.** The concept of jealousy has evolved with the shifting social and cultural milieu over the history. Erich Fromm (1941) suggested that the reality faced by the modern man is dual in nature for it offers him a large deal of freedom and individuality in one hand, and loneliness and insecurity in the other (Mathes & Severa, 1981). Jealousy was widely observed in monogamous societies where monogamy was both a moral and social imperative. Jealousy for one's spouse or partner is conventionally viewed as a necessary emotion to preserve social bonds. It rendered the function of preserving social esteem in societies. Therefore, both institution of marriage as well as the instinct of jealousy served fundamentally the same purpose.

A certain degree of jealousy in mature love is considered normal. A proportional and coherent jealous reaction for a real or possible unfaithfulness of a spouse or romantic partner is considered normal in the mature love. It enables a person to have control over a situation without

being overawed by the situation. Similarly, it prepares a person in advance to modify, adjust and revise his or her beliefs in view of the approaching new information (Ey, 1950).

**Jealousy in a spectrum: normal vs. pathological jealousy.** According to Pine (1992) jealousy particularly in reference to a spouse, partner or significant other is experienced when a valued romantic relationship or its quality is threatened by a real or imagined rival (Pines, 1992). It is a heterogeneous condition along a spectrum and ranges from normality to pathology with varying degrees of intensity, persistence, rationality and insight (Marazziti, Poletti, Dell'Osso, Baroni, & Bonuccelli, 2013; Vauhkonen, 1968). Sexual jealousy, erotic jealousy, delusional jealousy, psychotic jealousy, paranoid jealousy, Othello syndrome are few other terms that has also been used in the literature to refer delusional jealousy (Enoch, Trethowan, & Barker, 1967). Cobb (1979) also considered jealousy across a spectrum from normal to pathological jealousy. The pathological jealousy was further subdivided to psychotic and non-psychotic (neurotic) types (Cobb, 1979). In normal jealousy, the probability that one's spouse or romantic partner could choose someone else is recognized and understood in the face of the painful nature of the thought. The resulted loss and separation can be overcome after a period of adaptation (Batinic, Duisin, & Barisic, 2013; Ey, 1950). Pathological jealousy can also be observed in instances where the spouse or the romantic partner is being unfaithful in actual fact; however unfaithfulness is not a sanctioned reason for developing pathological jealousy, but rather an irrational, disproportionate and excessive response towards the unfaithfulness. In pathological jealousy, spouse or the romantic partner is accused of infidelity. Moreover, irrelevant cues are interpreted as conclusive evidence of unfaithfulness and beliefs are strongly held without a change in spite of being exposed to conflicting information (Vauhkonen, 1968).

**Psychopathology and issues related to assessment.** Delusion of infidelity of the spouse or the partner is the central denominating feature in delusional jealousy; for instance delusion of infidelity could be present in its pure form or as a component of an already established psychosis. To be diagnosed with delusional jealousy, the delusion has to be central, constant and dominate the symptomatology. Patients with psychotic forms of delusional jealousy, the central delusions of infidelity are held by one who is jealous with absolute conviction. However, in nonpsychotic forms, central delusions of infidelity are resembled by automatic thoughts and these automatic thoughts are accepted without challenging them (Nagy R Bishay, Petersen, & Tarrier, 1989).

Delusional jealousy exhibits characteristic behaviours. The sexual component is evident in the nature of delusion. Checking is the hallmark of jealousy. Checking, re-checking and cross-checking behaviours are profound in the behaviour (Enoch et al., 1967). The person exhibits characteristic behaviours for example accusation and interrogation of the partner, repetitive phone calls, checking phone records, emails, social networking accounts and postal correspondence, stalking behaviours (Kingham & Gordon, 2004; J. A. Silva, Derecho, Leong, & Ferrari, 2000), restricting the partner from meeting friends, surprise visits, restricting the partner from going out alone, prohibiting the partner from wearing certain cloths perceived by the person as means of seduction, examining the partner's clothes, bed linen for any stains, undergarments and genitalia for evidence of sexual activity or finding the confirmation and validation of unfaithfulness in innocent guests and events such as just looking at an opposite sex person (Kingham & Gordon, 2004). Consequently, the subject of delusional jealousy can become isolated from the outside world. Physical violence is imposed in some instances to extract a confession. In extreme circumstances, the subject of jealousy becomes home-bound and detain any movement out of sight from the jealous in order to circumvent the violence, ill-treatment and to shelter a peaceful home

environment. The subjects of jealousy may develop several symptoms including feelings of helplessness, passivity, isolation, anxiety and depression which in turn can lead to abuse of alcohol and anxiolytics (Batinic et al., 2013).

**Diagnosis and comorbidities.** In the present nosological systems (DSM-V, ICD-10), delusional jealousy does not stand as a distinct and separate nosological entity. Diagnosis is made mainly by two means; either as part of obsessive compulsive psychopathology for an obsessive-compulsive phenomenon or as the predominant delusional theme in Delusional Disorder-Jealous Type (Association, 2013). However, it can also be a manifestation of several other conditions such as Schizophrenia, Affective Disorders, Substance Related and Addictive Disorders for instance chronic alcoholism, drug addiction (e.g. amphetamines, morphine, cocaine), Neurotic Disorders, Personality Disorders, Organic Brain Disorders such as cerebral tumours, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, Huntington's chorea, endocrine disturbances and tertiary syphilis (Graff-Radford, Whitwell, Geda, & Josephs, 2012; Mullins, 2010). Delusional jealousy can also manifest as a side effect of pharmacological treatment for instance in dopamine agonists in the treatment of parkinsonism (Georgiev et al., 2010; Harmon-Jones, Peterson, & Harris, 2009). In a study conducted with 8134 psychiatric in-patients, the reported rate of prevalence was 1.1%. Delusional jealousy was most common in organic psychoses (7.0%). It was also reported in paranoid disorders (6.7%), alcohol induced psychosis (5.6%), schizophrenia (2.5%) and affective disorders (0.1%). However, as the most common diagnoses were schizophrenia and affective disorders, the highest number of delusional jealousy comorbidity was observed in schizophrenia. The prevalence of delusional jealousy was higher among female patients diagnosed with schizophrenia whilst in alcohol induced psychosis, the prevalence of delusional jealousy was higher among males (Soyka & Naber, 1991).

**Jealous reaction and maintaining factors.** Maggini (2006) established that a jealous reaction goes through the three consecutive steps of hypothesis, suspicion and an interpretation (Maggini et al., 2006). Jealousy begins with a “jealous flash” which is a result of an intense arousal in the autonomic nervous system (Clanton & Smith, 1998). A jealous flash is a result of a real or an imagined change in a loved one’s behaviour. This is followed by “Painful emotional paroxysms”(Batinic et al., 2013). Emotional paroxysms are often accompanied by erroneous or false interpretations of a cue and unfailing search for proofs to confirm one’s interpretations (Batinic et al., 2013).

There are two maintaining factors of jealousy; the notion of infidelity activated by the behaviour exhibited by the partner and the emotional disposition of the individual which is linked to certain personality traits for instance dependent, paranoid, borderline etc or a comorbid psychiatric condition (Maggini et al., 2006).

**Personality differences.** Personality traits said to have a close connotation with the nature and expression of jealousy. Previous line of research on jealousy suggest a relationship between jealousy and several trait dimensions of personality for instance; aggression, mistrust, dependency, self-harm, manipulateness, exhibitionism, enticement and impulsivity. These trait dimensions are further reflective of dependent, borderline, narcissistic, histrionic, passive-aggression and avoidant tendencies (Gehl, 2010). Gale (2010) further concluded that how an individual experiences jealousy and expresses jealousy depends on persistence of personality traits such as mistrust, dependency, aggression, manipulateness etc (Gehl, 2010).

Possessiveness is viewed as having a strong connection with jealousy. Possessiveness is believed to have its roots in the mate guarding by the primary partner. Mate guarding was frequently displayed by females. A woman who perceived her partner as low in sexual



attractiveness compared to his investment attractiveness, tend to display mate guarding behaviours. However, mate guarding behaviours increase around a woman's ovulation. The ovulation dependent mate guarding is abated by the physical attractiveness of females. Previous research suggests that females who were less physically attractive exhibited more mate guarding behaviours during the mid-cycle. On the other hand, females who were more attractive exhibited mate guarding behaviours throughout the menstrual cycle (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Although, possessiveness and jealousy are viewed as having a high affinity, previous research have merely observed a relationship between possessiveness and partner directed violence in relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Macgowan, 1997) yet there are no data to support a relationship between possessiveness and jealousy.

**Link to attachment styles.** Jealousy has been studied in view of attachment styles. Attachment styles provide an orientation to relationships and influence the experience of romantic love. The adult attachment styles are thought to be resolved by parent-child relationships in the childhood and a person's subsequent experiences with central and significant attachment figures. Significant associations have been identified between attachment dimensions and relationship satisfaction (Brennan & Shaver, 1995). Marazziti and colleagues (2010) studied the relationship between dimensions of jealousy and attachment styles in healthy subjects. Findings suggest that persons with insecure attachment styles (preoccupied and fearful-avoidant and dismissing styles) exhibit increased fears of losing a partner. This is considered as the central phenomenon behind the origin of jealousy and in activating both obsessive thinking and monitoring behaviours. They further identified five pathological dimensions of jealousy in the general population; paranoid, depressive, obsessive, interpersonal sensitivity type and separation-anxiety related jealousy (Marazziti, Consoli, et al., 2010; Marazziti, Sbrana, et al., 2010). Securely attached persons are

the least jealous (Buunk, 1997) and they feel comfortable with intimacy and are characterized by their ability to endure negative emotions. They further respect the needs and desires of the partner and also respect the possibility that the loved one can love someone else. In contrast, insecurely attached persons seek to compensate their needs via unity with another person and therefore, considers the partner as his/her possession (Marazziti, Consoli, et al., 2010; Marazziti, Sbrana, et al., 2010). Moreover, another study concluded that persons with pathological love show greater levels of "Impulsivity, novelty-seeking, harm avoidance and reward dependence, lower self-directedness and high self-transcendence". They report a higher incidence of anxious-ambivalent attachment style (Sophia et al., 2009). In females however, jealousy was also correlated with low self-esteem attributes (Buunk, 1997).

**Psychodynamic views.** Psychoanalytic view of delusional jealousy is conspicuous and continue to receive much criticism. On the word of Sigmund Freud, delusional jealousy is a manifestation of projected latent homosexuality. However, projection by definition is a fundamental defence mechanism that involves in projecting unacceptable impulses. It is further mentioned as a defence attempt against a robust homosexual impulse. Freud described the delusional jealousy experienced by men in terms of "I do not love him. She loves him". Further, in Oedipus and Electra complexes Freud elaborated the development of jealousy (Freud, 1922). Klein has also emphasized on the rivalry between a jealous son and father who is the supposed rival in the development of delusional jealousy (Klein, as cited in (Shepherd, 1961)). Early mother fixation and pathological castration complex has also been emphasized in psychoanalytic literature as etiology for delusional jealousy (Freud, 1922).

Nevertheless, recent research in the field of social psychology suggest that projection is evident in situations that threaten a person. However, it is further proposed that projection is

rather a by-product of defence than an element of the defence mechanisms (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998).

Paranoia is also believed to have a relationship with pathological jealousy. Early work of Freud elucidates that paranoia also operates in a more or less similar mechanism to projection.

“Sense of inadequacy, oversensitivity and insecurity” has been viewed as the major predisposing factors in the development of pathological jealousy (Bloom, 1980). Tarrier and colleges in 1990, formulated delusional jealousy using cognitive paradigm and proposed that there exist systematic distortions and errors in the perceptions of patients with delusional jealousy as well as their interpretation of both events and information. Therefore, a related precipitating event may give rise to faulty assumptions and hence provoke pathological jealous behaviours (Tarrier, Beckett, Harwood, & Bishay, 1990).

Meanwhile, behaviourists have observed a similar pattern in jealous thoughts and checking behaviour in pathological jealousy with the ruminations and rituals in obsessive compulsive disorder (Nagy Riad Bishay, 1996).

Culture and society as well as an individual's need for a love of a partner and the resultant pervasive feelings of inadequacy if and when that love is lost were considered by Ellis as performing a function in the development of jealousy (Giddens, 2013).

**Historical evolution and gender differences.** Previous research propose differences in the manifestation of jealousy across two genders. In an evolutionary perspective, differential reproductive challenges faced by men and women account for the sex differences in jealousy (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). It has been hypothesized by Harris (2003) that the unique challenge faced by men was paternal uncertainty.

In contrast, paternal investment in their children instead of the children of a competing rival was the key challenge for women. Differential challenges faced by men and women gave rise to differences in sensitivity to sexual and emotional infidelity. Accordingly, men were more sensitive and showed a stronger jealous response for the signs of sexual infidelity that made them more vulnerable to paternal uncertainty. On the other hand, women were more sensitive and showed a stronger jealous response towards signs of emotional infidelity that made them more vulnerable if men chose to invest on children of a competing rival. However, the hypothesis does not exclude men from being jealous for emotional infidelity and women from being jealous for sexual infidelity. It neither precludes men and women feeling jealous in face of other threats to a valued, desired relationship. The fundamental notion behind the hypothesis by Harris is sexual infidelity places men at a risk which is not faced by women and emotional infidelity places women at a risk not faced by men (Sagarin, 2005).

However, an opposing view by Green and Sabini (2006) propose that “jealousy is not sexually dimorphic” and encompasses emotional components that evolved independent of gender. They suggest despite the gender, both men and women become angrier in the face of sexual infidelity yet are more hurt by emotional infidelity [4]. According to Green and colleagues, sexual infidelity enflames anger as sexual behaviour is considered deliberate and a person can exert conscious control over one’s own behaviour. However, emotional infidelity is considered as a “relationship devaluation”. Often a relationship is devalued more by emotional duplicity than sexual betrayal (Leary & Springer, 2001).

Another view suggests that in spite being belonged to either gender, sexual infidelity was found more distressing and disturbing (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989).

**Sociodemographic aspects.** Socioeconomic status exhibited a relationship in terms of jealous response over sexual and emotional infidelity. People with higher SES were more hurt and angrier over emotional infidelity where as people with lower SES were marginally more hurt and angrier by sexual infidelity. However, no significant relationship was found in jealousy and socioeconomic status (Green & Sabini, 2006). Meanwhile previous research has not found any significant relationship between age and manifestation of jealousy (Green & Sabini, 2006). Similarly, no correlation was found between ethnicity and pathological jealousy (A. Silva, Ferrari, Leong, & Penny, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Even though previous research have established the development, psychopathology, diagnosis and historical evolution of delusional jealousy, they do not adequately arrive at an agreement with respect to gender differences in the manifestation. A culture influences gender related thoughts, feelings and behaviours in both males and females. Previous studies also suggest a possible role of culture in the expression and clinical presentation (De Silva, 1999), even though findings have been inconclusive.

Howbeit, jealousy has been a central focus in psychodynamic paradigm; literature is limited in relating psychodynamic personality dimensions which may have a possible association with delusional jealousy.

Further, despite renewed interest on jealousy as a social phenomenon in the current social milieu, relatively limited systematic work has been done to investigate it from an eastern perspective. Let alone, little work has been through in developing a comprehensive psychosocial perspective of delusional jealousy by integrating psychological, sociodemographic cultural and relationship related parameters.

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