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Dating Jealousy Among College Students

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In a study of dating jealousy, questionnaires were administered to 147 male and 189 female college students. Subjects were asked to rate how they would feel about their dating partner's behavior in five hypothetical situations designed to measure jealousy. Results indicate that females are more jealous than males over situations involving the partner spending time on a hobby or with family members, but other situations evoke no sex differences. Sex-role orientation is the variable most consistently related to dating jealousy, with sex-role traditional subjects being the most jealous. A significant proportion of subjects expect dating partners to give up close personal friendships with others of the opposite sex, and most subjects begin to expect sexual exclusiveness from the earliest stages of their relationships.

While marital jealousy has increasingly become the focus of empirical research in the social sciences, dating or courtship jealousy has not been as thoroughly examined. This would appear to be an important omission, since one function of dating is the socialization of young actors for later marital roles. The study of premarital jealousy is also important because jealousy over the real or perceived involvement of one's partner with another man or woman is a major spark for courtship violence (Makepeace, 1981). The purpose of this study was to examine (1) the nature of subjects' reactions to hypothetical jealousy-producing events in dating and (2) the relationship between subjects' responses and sex-role orientation, sex, and other variables believed to be related to dating jealousy.

Jealousy is a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship (Clanton, 1981). As such, it is conceptually distinct from envy, which is the negative feeling that arises when someone else has something we want (Foster, 1972). There is wide variation in the times and places that jealousy occurs, the situations that cause it, as well as about whom jealousy

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is felt (Bernard, 1977; Bohm, 1967; Clanton & Smith, 1977; Davis, 1936; Ellis, 1962; Mead, 1931). Jealousy is a social phenomenon and its manifestation can be seen as being in response to symbolic stimuli. These stimuli have meanings to the individual which result from the subjective interpretation of them.

Conceptualizing jealousy in this manner implies that two factors must be present before an individual will be jealous. First, the individual must define the partner's actual or imagined behavior as conflicting with his/her definition of their relationship. Second, the individual must view the relationship as valuable. The behavior of the partner referred to in the first factor need not be sexual. Jealousy can also arise from one's partner being involved with same-sex friends, colleagues at work, or solitary activities if such behavior is contrary to the person's definition of the relationship and the relationship is valued.

Gilmartin (1977) argues that a person's belief structure—the internalized system of norms and ideas which create meaning for the person—plays a large role in one's susceptibility to feelings of jealousy. Sex-role orientation is an important component of this belief structure and can vary from traditional to modern (nontraditional). Whitehurst (1977) believes that the division of labor associated with sex-role traditionalism fosters, in both men and women, a basic sense of inadequacy or fear of facing the world which contributes to jealousy. Similarly, McDonald (1982) contends that since the relationship of a sex-role modern couple is more likely to be based on mutual commitment and trust, rather than power/dependence, jealousy is less likely to be experienced by both partners and is a less crucial factor in their relationship. Tentative support for the theoretical link between sex-role orientation and jealousy comes from Hansen (1982), who found that sex-role traditionalism is positively related to jealous reactions to a number of jealousy-producing events in marriage, and from White (1981b), who found a positive relationship between sex-role traditionalism and jealousy for males, but not for females.

Examinations of sex differences in jealousy have produced mixed results. Buunk (1981, 1982) found women to be more jealous, while Mathes and Severa (1981) report that men are more jealous. Others (Hansen, 1982; White, 1981b) report no sex differences. Attempts to determine the effect of age on jealousy have also been inconclusive. Buunk (1981) found no relationship, while Pines and Aronson (1983) report a negative relationship between the two.

In addition to sex-role orientation, sex, and age, it seems reasonable to assume that a subject's personal dating situation would influence his/her definition of what is appropriate in a dating relationship. Therefore, the age the subject began to date, dating frequency, and dating commitment will also be examined in relation to dating jealousy.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

The data gathered for this study were part of a larger social psychological study of attributional processes in interpersonal relationships. Questionnaires were administered to 336 subjects (147 males and 189 females) enrolled in several undergraduate sociology courses at a medium-sized southern state university during the fall of 1982 and spring of 1983. The questionnaire was anonymous and took approximately 40 minutes to complete. The mean age of subjects was 20.19 years. Most (82.5%) of the subjects were white, and 87.6% had never been married.

Measures

Jealousy was measured by using the hypothetical jealousy-producing events developed by Hansen (1982) for measuring marital jealousy. Only five of Hansen's eight events were viewed as being applicable to dating. These events were reworded as follows, so that they apply to dating rather than marriage:

1. Your dating partner enjoys a personal hobby such as painting, photography, etc. and devotes a large portion of his/her leisure time (approximately 15 hours per week) to its pursuit. This hobby is one that you do not share with your partner so he/she engages in it alone. (This hobby does not impose a financial burden on your partner.)
2. Your dating partner regularly enjoys playing cards or other types of games with his/her same-sex friends. Your partner's "night with the boys/girls" occurs about once a week.
3. Your dating partner has become good friends with a co-worker/classmate of the opposite sex who you do not know very well. Your partner and his/her friend enjoy having lunch together, discussing their respective lives, and providing each other emotional support. (Their relationship does not have a sexual component.)
4. You and your dating partner live in the same town as his/her parents and siblings. Your partner has set aside Sunday afternoons for doing things (e.g., going fishing, playing golf, visiting) with his/her family members. You do not participate with your partner in these activities with his/her family.
5. Your dating partner returns from a weekend trip to a different city and informs you that he/she met a member of the opposite sex that

he/she found very physically attractive. They ended up engaging in sexual relations. Your partner informs you that their relationship was purely physical (not emotional) and that they will never be seeing each other again.

All subjects were exposed to the events in the order indicated above and were asked to indicate how they would feel about their dating partner's behavior in each event on a scale ranging from 1 (be extremely pleased) to 11 (be extremely disturbed or bothered). Subjects who were not currently dating one particular individual were asked to indicate how they would feel if they were dating one particular person. The use of "general" words such as *pleased*, *disturbed*, and *bothered* to measure jealousy was felt to be the best approach, since jealousy is often considered to be a combination of emotions, and each situation was described so that the subject's dating partner was freely choosing to engage in the behavior described, enjoying it, and not directly affecting the welfare of the subject. If the subject reports that he/she would be disturbed by the event, the assumption can be made that he/she views the dating partner's behavior as contrary to his/her definition of the dating relationship (threatening to the relationship) rather than as a case of being angry over the dating partner being forced to do something against his/her will, etc.

Hypothetical events were used to measure jealousy, since recent research indicates that the use of hypothetical situations produces results similar to asking about the actual behavior of a subject's partner (White, 1981a) and is a better measure than asking people how jealous they are (Mathes, Roter, & Joerger, 1982). Since the events used represent a wide variety of behaviors by the dating partner, the subject's reaction to each one was treated as a separate variable. It should be emphasized that this measure is only tapping one factor of our jealousy conceptualization. The factor of the individual viewing the relationship as valuable is simply assumed to exist. This assumption seems to be justified, since dating in general is viewed very positively by college-age populations such as the one studied here.

Sex-role orientation was measured by 10 items selected from Brogan and Kutner's (1976) 36-item scale. The items selected were those with the highest item/total correlations as reported by Brogan and Kutner. A 7-point Likert-type response format was used, with the most traditional response being scored 1 and the most modern response being scored 7. Each subject's sex-role orientation score was the total for the 10 items.

Age was measured using the subject's actual response to "please indicate your age."

Dating age was determined by asking, "At what age did you begin to date?"

Dating frequency was determined by asking subjects who were currently dating, "How often do you date?" The possible responses were less than once a month, once a month, twice a month, once a week, twice a week, and more than twice a week. These responses were scored from 1 to 6, respectively.

Dating commitment was measured by asking subjects who were currently dating to choose the one category that best characterizes their present situation. The possible categories were random dating (dating a wide variety of people); dating two or three people on a fairly regular basis; primarily dating only one person, but free to date others; and committed to dating only one person. These responses were scored from 1 to 4, respectively.

Data Analysis

Previous research on marital jealousy has found that the factors associated with jealous responses vary separately for males and females depending upon the particular event (Hansen, 1982). There is no reason to assume that this would not also be the case with dating. Therefore, data analysis was conducted for males and females separately as well as for the total sample.

RESULTS

Mean scores for the responses to each of the jealousy-producing events for the total sample, the male sample, and the female sample are presented in Table I. "A night with the boys/girls" (Event 2) evoked the smallest amount of jealousy from the subjects, while the "casual sexual relationship" (Event 5) evoked the most. Difference-of-means tests indicated that males and females differed significantly in their responses to

Table I. Mean Values of Reactions to Jealousy-Producing Events^a

Event	Total sample (<i>n</i> = 336)	Male sample (<i>n</i> = 147)	Female sample (<i>n</i> = 189)
1	4.11	3.80	4.36
2	3.68	3.61	3.72
3	6.45	6.38	6.50
4	4.98	4.53	5.32
5	9.91	10.03	9.82

^aResponses range from 1 (extremely pleased) to 11 (extremely disturbed).

Table II. Zero-Order Correlations Between All Variables and Reactions to Jealousy-Producing Events

Variable	Event				
	1	2	3	4	5
Total sample (<i>n</i> = 336)					
Sex-role orientation	-.09 ^a	-.06	-.19 ^c	-.07	-.14 ^a
Age	.01	.14 ^b	.04	.03	-.09 ^a
Age began to date	.05	.05	.08	.06	-.03
Dating frequency	-.07	.01	.00	-.05	.05
Dating commitment	-.04	.20 ^c	.01	.09	-.02
Male sample (<i>n</i> = 147)					
Sex-role orientation	-.09	-.01	-.13	-.04	-.16 ^a
Age	.08	-.03	.01	.08	-.11
Age began to date	.06	-.02	-.02	.05	.02
Dating frequency	-.11	-.08	-.04	-.08	.03
Dating commitment	-.14	.19 ^a	-.08	.04	-.06
Female sample (<i>n</i> = 189)					
Sex-role orientation	-.17 ^a	-.11	-.26 ^c	-.16 ^a	-.11
Age	-.04	.27 ^c	.06	.00	-.08
Age began to date	.01	.11	.18 ^b	.04	-.06
Dating frequency	-.05	.07	.04	-.04	.06
Dating commitment	.00	.21 ^a	.08	.09	.04

^a*p* < .05.^b*p* < .01.^c*p* < .001.

“involvement with a hobby” (Event 1) ($t = -1.96$, $df = 334$, $p < .05$) and “involvement with family members” (Event 4) ($t = -2.28$, $df = 334$, $p < .05$). In both cases, females reacted in a more jealous manner than males.

Correlation coefficients between interval level variables and responses to the jealousy-producing events are presented in Table II. For the total sample, sex-role orientation and jealousy were negatively related for “involvement with a hobby” (Event 1), “a cross-sex friendship” (Event 3) and “a casual sexual relationship” (Event 5). This relationship is significant only for Event 5 among males, while it is significant for Events 1, 3, and 4 (“involvement with family members”) among females.

Age is positively related to a jealous reaction to the partner’s “night with the boys/girls” (Event 2) and negatively related to a jealous reaction to the partner’s “casual sexual relationship” (Event 5) for the total sample. Age is not significantly related to any of the events for males. It is positively related to “a night with the boys/girls” (Event 2) for females.

The age at which subjects began to date is not significantly related to jealous reactions to any of the events for the total sample and for males. For females, however, it is positively related to “a cross-sex friendship” (Event 3).

Dating frequency is not significantly related to any of the jealousy-producing events.

Dating commitment is positively related to a jealous reaction to the partner's "night with the boys/girls" (Event 2) for all three samples.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have interesting implications for those concerned with the expectations people develop for their partners in intimate relationships. The results indicate that the expectation that a dating partner should give up close personal friendships with others of the opposite sex is accepted by many of our subjects. Hansen (1982) questioned a sample similar to the present one about how they would feel about their marriage partner developing a cross-sex friendship; the mean subject response for his total sample of 6.64 is only slightly higher than the mean response of 6.45 for this study of dating relationships. Therefore, it appears that the expectation that one's partner will give up close opposite-sex friendships develops in the early stages of an intimate relationship.

These results also suggest that females define dating relationships as involving the devotion of time to one's partner more than males do. This is indicated by the fact that females were more disturbed than males by the partner devoting time to a hobby and spending time with family members. This is interesting because Hansen (1982) found no sex differences on these events for marriage, and his total sample mean scores of 4.41 for involvement with a hobby and 6.84 for involvement with family members are higher than those reported in this study of dating jealousy. Therefore, it seems reasonable to speculate that people begin to define their relationships as involving the spending of spare time with one's partner as the relationships become more committed and permanent (move from dating to marriage). In addition, this definition apparently occurs earlier in relationships for females than for males. This finding is consistent with Teismann and Mosher's (1978) report that dating females experience more jealousy over issues of time than dating males do and indicate that time use may be a major source of conflict for dating couples.

While only some of the relationships between sex-role orientation and the various jealousy-producing events were significant, all were in the predicted direction. In addition, the strongest relationship between sex-role orientation and any event was the one with a cross-sex friendship which is the classic jealousy-producing event. Of particular interest is the fact that this relationship is highly significant for women, but not for men. Thus, we might see reductions in the jealousy experienced by women whose partners

maintain cross-sex friendships as sex roles continue to become less traditional. The age the subject began to date is positively related to this event for females but not for males. Perhaps dating at an early age is associated with more dating experience, which reduces the idealization associated with assuming that one's partner will not turn to friends outside the relationship.

The positive relationship between dating commitment and reactions to the partner's "night with the boys/girls" found in this study for both males and females appears to indicate that individuals begin to expect their partners to give up their same-sex friendships and activities as relationships become more committed and/or serious. Therefore, such a situation would not present as much of a problem with jealousy in the early stages of a relationship as in later stages. The positive relationship between age and reactions to this event among females also warrants comment. Women appears more likely to expect their dating partners to relinquish this type of same-sex activities as women themselves become older.

The high degree to which subjects said they would be disturbed by their partner's involvement in a casual sexual relationship suggests that sexual exclusiveness is expected by both men and women in dating relationships. The fact that the mean score of 9.91 from this study does not differ significantly from the mean of 9.95 reported by Hansen (1982) for this event in marriage indicates that most people begin to expect such exclusiveness from the earliest stages of their relationships.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the variables examined in this study were better predictors of female than male jealousy. Because of the role of jealousy in men's physical abuse of their partners, emphasis should be given in future work to studying jealousy among men. Such work might examine factors such as self-concept, trust, and the person's perceived ease of developing new (alternative) relationships.

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