



Sex differences in response to sexual versus emotional infidelity: The moderating role of individual differences

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies indicate that men (compared to women) tend to display relatively greater distress in response to sexual infidelity, whereas women (compared to men) tend to display relatively greater distress in response to emotional infidelity. The current research builds upon this literature by examining the role individual differences in chronic jealousy play in moderating these sex differences. Findings demonstrate that sex differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity are substantially greater among individuals high in chronic jealousy – individuals who frequently tend to worry about potential relationship threats – than among individuals low in chronic jealousy. This research highlights the importance of integrating a focus on individual differences with evolutionary theories of social cognition.

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1. Introduction

An all-too-common misconception about evolutionary psychological theories is that they pertain only to universals – behaviors and mental processes that are consistent across all individuals or members of a sex – without taking into account the role of individual differences. This belief may persist in part because, compared to the vast literature on human universals, relatively few evolutionarily inspired studies have focused on the important role individual differences play in shaping adaptive psychological processes. In the current research, we focus on the role individual differences in chronic jealousy play in shaping a phenomenon studied widely by evolutionary psychologists: sex differences in reactions to infidelity.

1.1. Sex differences in reactions to infidelity

An evolutionary perspective implies that men's and women's jealousy responses evolved to help them deal with the somewhat different reproductive challenges faced by the two sexes throughout evolutionary history. That is, men's and women's concerns tend to focus on somewhat different types of infidelity. In particular, men and women seem to differ in their reactions to sexual infidelity (having one's long-term partner engage in sexual relations with someone else) versus emotional infidelity (having one's partner fall in love with someone else).

From an adaptationist perspective, sexually differentiated reactions to infidelity reflect innate jealousy modules designed to deal with sex-specific challenges related to paternity uncertainty (for men) and paternal investment (for women) (Buss, 2002). Because fertilization occurs within women, men can never be certain that they are the father of their mate's offspring. As a result, the prospect of a woman's sexual infidelity may be particularly distressing for men because it can result in genetic cuckoldry, possibly leading to years of effort and resources devoted to raising another man's offspring. In contrast to men, women can be certain of their maternity; thus, sexual infidelity should be somewhat less disconcerting for women than for men. Women, however, have faced a different threat – having their long-term mate direct resources toward other women. As a consequence, a man's emotional infidelity may be particularly distressing for his long-term partner because it can signal a high likelihood of him diverting resources to other women and their offspring.

Consistent with this adaptationist logic, Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) demonstrated that men tend to display relatively greater distress over sexual infidelity, whereas women tend to display relatively greater distress over emotional infidelity. Since then, many other studies have reported similar findings across a number of different cultures and using different methodologies (Becker, Sagarin, Guadagno, Millevoi, & Nicastle, 2004; Buss et al., 1999; Easton, Schipper, & Shackelford, 2007; Murphy, Vallacher, Shackelford, Bjorklund, & Yunger, 2006; Pietrzak, Laird, Stevens, & Thompson, 2002; Sagarin, Becker, Guadagno, Nicastle, & Millevoi, 2003; Schützwohl, 2008; however, see Harris (2003) for a review of studies failing to replicate this pattern).

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Although a large literature provides evidence for sex differences in reactions to sexual versus emotional infidelity, relatively few studies have examined the role that individual differences may play in moderating this pattern. Jealousy in response to specific types of romantic infidelity might be grounded in innate sex differences (Buss, 2002), but those jealousy responses are also likely to be influenced by proximate situational and personality factors. Consistent with this notion, previous research demonstrates that men who have been in a sexually committed relationship (and who therefore may be particularly attuned to possible infidelity) report greater distress over a partner's sexual betrayal than do men who have never been in such a relationship (Buss et al., 1992; Murphy et al., 2006). With the exception of studies examining the impact of relationship history, however, there has been relatively little research investigating individual difference factors that might moderate responses to different types of infidelity. The present study helps fill this gap in the literature by examining the moderating role of individual differences in chronic jealousy.

1.2. Individual differences in chronic jealousy

Individuals vary considerably in their tendency to experience jealousy and to worry about relationship threats (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Although all people may share a general concern about protecting their long-term mate from potential romantic rivals, there is significant variability among individuals in the extent to which they think and worry about potential infidelity, experience heightened emotional reactions to possible infidelity, and perform behaviors associated with mate-guarding.

Social cognitive and evolutionary perspectives alike suggest that individual differences in chronic jealousy may moderate the activation of psychological processes aimed at dealing with relationship threats (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007). Psychological and behavioral responses aimed at dealing with infidelity may draw limited time and resources away from the pursuit of other important goals. Consequently, jealousy mechanisms may be most pronounced in individuals for whom infidelity is perceived to be a real and immediate threat. Because individuals low in chronic jealousy tend not to be particularly worried about relationship threats, they are perhaps less likely than those high in chronic jealousy to display psychological processes aimed at preventing specific types of relationship threat (sexual or emotional). Individuals high in chronic jealousy, however, tend to believe that their relationships are vulnerable to potential threats, and thus these individuals may be most likely to display psychological processes aimed at dealing with the most damaging of these threats (sexual infidelity for men and emotional infidelity for women). Thus, we hypothesize that sex differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity are greater among individuals high in chronic jealousy than among individuals low in chronic jealousy.

Consistent with this hypothesis, one recent study indicated that individuals on the extremely high end of the continuum – individuals who suffer from morbid jealousy – demonstrate strong sex differences in response to emotional versus sexual infidelity (Easton et al., 2007). However, participants in that study were restricted to individuals suffering from morbid jealousy; thus, it remains unclear whether the magnitude of these sex differences varies as a function of normal population variability in chronic jealousy.

To our knowledge, only one study has examined the role chronic jealousy plays in men's and women's responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity. In their study, Russell and Harton (2005) reported that chronic jealousy did not significantly moderate sex differences in responses to the two types of infidelity. A number of methodological issues, however, limit their findings. First, they noted that the situations used to elicit jealousy only sub-

tly implied a potential sexual or emotional infidelity. Evidence for sex differences tends to emerge primarily when men and women are faced with situations that are explicit and clear in their reference to sexual or emotional infidelity. Second, their dependent measure of jealousy and distress was a composite score of four responses – expected levels of being (1) upset, (2) insecure, and (3) jealous, as well as (4) the degree of intimacy that participants perceived in the situation. Although the first three responses appear to be face-valid measures of distress and jealousy, it is unclear why perceptions of intimacy would be considered a measure of jealousy. Third, Russell and Harton used a between-subjects design in which participants imagined and responded to only one type of infidelity. Previous research typically has used a within-subjects design in which participants are exposed to both sexual and emotional infidelities and must decide which type of romantic betrayal is more distressing. The within-subjects design has greater statistical power and allows for direct comparison between the two types of infidelity. These methodological issues are further compounded by the fact that Russell and Harton did not replicate the basic sex difference in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity. Given these issues, it remains unclear whether individual differences in chronic jealousy moderate sex differences in reactions to emotional versus sexual infidelity.

1.3. The current study

The aim of the current study was to provide a direct examination of the potential moderating role of chronic jealousy in men's and women's responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity. We used a previously established, well-validated measure of distress to different types of infidelity (Murphy et al., 2006). Consistent with previous research, we predicted that men would be more upset than women over sexual infidelity, and that women would be more upset than men over emotional infidelity. However, we hypothesized that these differences would be significantly greater among those high in chronic jealousy, who are generally more concerned about the occurrence of a potential romantic betrayal, than among individuals low in chronic jealousy.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two-hundred and ten introductory psychology students (93 men, 117 women) participated for course credit.

2.2. Materials and procedures

Participants were informed that they would answer questions on relationships and dating. When answering these questions, participants were instructed to reflect upon a past or present committed, long-term romantic relationship. If they had never been in such a relationship, participants were asked to answer the questions according to how they thought they would react if they were in a committed relationship.

Participants then answered four questions assessing whether they would be more distressed over a sexual infidelity or an emotional infidelity. These questions were identical to those used in previous research examining sex differences in responses to infidelity (Murphy et al., 2006). For each question, participants imagined their partner engaging in an act of infidelity, and were instructed to select whether the sexual aspect or the emotional aspect of the infidelity was more distressing. That is, for each of the following choices, participants indicated which would be more distressing: (1) envisioning their partner engaging in passionate

sexual intercourse with someone else or forming a deep emotional attachment with someone else; (2) imagining their partner trying different sexual positions with someone else or falling in love with someone else; (3) thinking about their partner getting involved sexually with someone else or getting involved emotionally with someone else; and (4) picturing their partner trying a new sexual position with someone else or confiding in someone else. All questions were presented on a computer screen, and all answers were indicated via a key press. Questions were presented in random order.

Consistent with previous research (Murphy et al., 2006), we computed a sexual jealousy score (SJS) from the responses to the four forced-choice questions. For each question, a value of “0” was given when an emotional infidelity was chosen as more distressing; a value of “1” was given when a sexual infidelity was chosen as more distressing. These values were then summed across the four questions to obtain a single SJS value ($\alpha = .79$). Thus, higher SJS values (minimum of 0; maximum of 4) represent more distress over sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity.

Participants then completed the 24-item multidimensional jealousy scale (MJS; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) to assess individual differences in chronic jealousy. Items on the MJS assessed the frequency of worry-related thoughts (e.g., I suspect that X may be attracted to someone else; 1 = never, 7 = all the time), behavioral acts of mate-guarding (e.g., I join in whenever I see X talking to a member of the opposite sex; 1 = never, 7 = all the time), and emotional reactivity in jealousy-evoking situations (e.g., X is flirting with someone of the opposite sex; 1 = very pleased, 7 = very upset). Consistent with previous research (Maner et al., 2007), scores were averaged to create a single measure of chronic jealousy, with higher scores indicating greater concern over potential relationship threats ($\alpha = .85$).

3. Results

3.1. Replication of sex differences

To assess whether the current study replicated previously found sex differences in distress to sexual versus emotional infidelity, responses to each of the four forced-choice infidelity questions were submitted to chi-square analyses. For each question, chi-square analyses revealed that a higher percentage of men than women reported greater distress over sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity (all p 's < .001; see Table 1 for percentages). Additionally, men's composite SJS scores ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.38$) were significantly higher than women's SJS scores ($M = .56$, $SD = 1.00$; $t(208) = 9.49$, $p < .001$), again indicating that, compared to women, men reported greater distress over sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity.

3.2. The role of individual differences

Scores of the MJS were consistent with previous research ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .76$). Furthermore, no sex differences were observed

Table 1

Percentage of men and women choosing sexual infidelity as more distressing than emotional infidelity for each of the four infidelity scenarios.

	Men	Women	$\chi^2(1 \text{ df})$
Passionate sex vs. deep emotional attachment	73.1	21.4	56.24*
			$\Phi^2 = .27$
Different sexual positions vs. falling in love	41.9	7.7	34.46*
			$\Phi^2 = .16$
Sexual involvement vs. emotional involvement	63.4	21.4	38.23*
			$\Phi^2 = .18$
New sexual position vs. confiding in other person	34.4	6.0	27.69*
			$\Phi^2 = .12$

* $p < .001$.

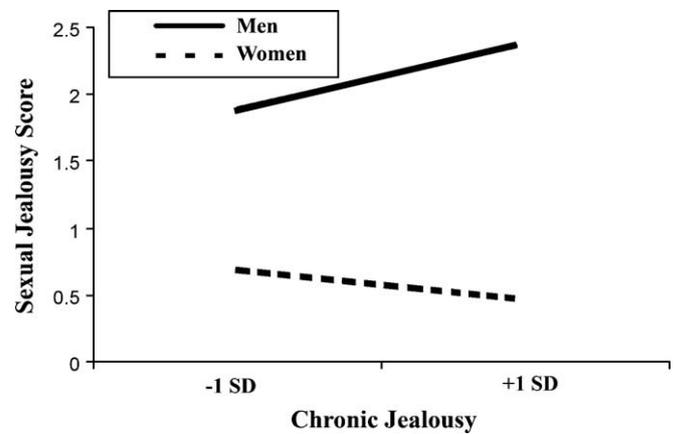


Fig. 1. Compared to women, men were more likely to choose a sexual infidelity as more distressing than an emotional infidelity. However, this sex difference was greater among individuals high in chronic jealousy than among individuals low in chronic jealousy.

on the MJS, $t(208) = .16$, $p = .87$. Multiple regression was used to evaluate the hypothesis that individual differences in chronic jealousy would moderate the previously reported sex difference in distress to infidelity. Composite SJS scores were regressed on MJS scores, participant sex, and their centered interaction. In addition to the expected main effect of participant sex ($\beta = -.55$, $p < .001$), results revealed the predicted interaction between participant sex and chronic jealousy ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .04$). To interpret this interaction, we assessed the presence of sex differences at high levels (1 SD above the mean) and low levels (1 SD below the mean) of chronic jealousy ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .76$). As can be seen in Fig. 1, sex differences in distress to sexual versus emotional infidelity were substantially greater among individuals high in chronic jealousy ($\beta = -.67$, $p < .001$) than among individuals low in chronic jealousy ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$). The effect size for the sex difference among individuals low in chronic jealousy (partial $r^2 = .12$) was approximately half the size of the effect among individuals high in chronic jealousy (partial $r^2 = .25$).

3.3. Comparisons with previous findings

In addition, we conducted a brief review of studies that were representative of the literature on sex differences in responses to infidelity. Three empirical articles were chosen because the studies reported within them examined self-reported responses of undergraduate students on forced-choice measures, and thus served as an appropriate comparison to the current study (Buss et al., 1992; Shackelford et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2006). For each study, we calculated the effect sizes (Φ^2) for sex differences in distress to sexual versus emotional infidelity based upon the chi-square values and sample sizes reported. The measure Φ^2 is an ideal measure of effect size for chi-square analyses as it can be interpreted in the same manner as Pearson's r^2 (i.e., the proportion of variance accounted for). Across the three articles, there were 12 reported sex differences on forced-choice comparisons of distress to sexual versus emotional infidelity among college-age samples. On average, approximately 15% of the variance in distress to sexual versus emotional infidelity was accounted for by differences between men and women (mean $\Phi^2 = .15$, $SD = .08$, range: .05 – .29). As can be seen in Table 1, this is commensurate with the effect sizes found in the current study (mean $\Phi^2 = .18$, $SD = .06$). Moreover, although the effect size among individuals low in chronic jealousy (partial $r^2 = .12$) is somewhat lower than the average across these studies, the effect size among individuals high in chronic jealousy

(partial $r^2 = .25$) appears to be quite a bit greater than the effect size typically observed in this literature.

4. Discussion

Results of the current study demonstrate that sex differences in distress responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity are greater among individuals with relatively high levels of chronic jealousy than among individuals low in chronic jealousy. This research supplements previous evidence for sex differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity (e.g., Becker et al., 2004; Buss et al., 1992; Sagarin et al., 2003), and indicates that the size of this sex difference depends upon the extent to which individuals perceive the threat of infidelity to be a very real and salient concern.

These findings may have implications for a number of relationship maintenance processes ranging from automatic, lower-order cognitive processes to explicit behaviors. For example, recent research indicates that sex differences in reactions to sexual versus emotional infidelity are present at relatively early stages of attention and perceptual processing (Schützwohl, 2008). Based on the current findings, one might hypothesize that chronic jealousy would moderate sex differences in responses to infidelity even at these lower-order stages of cognition, with greater sex differences in attention to sexual versus emotional infidelity being observed among individuals with relatively high levels of chronic jealousy than among individuals low in chronic jealousy. Likewise, one might predict that individual differences in chronic jealousy would moderate sex differences at the behavioral level of mate-guarding. Both men and women are likely to engage in mate-guarding behaviors in response to relationship threats (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005; Shackelford, Goetz, Guta, & Schmitt, 2006). Yet given the current findings, one might expect that men and women differ in the degree to which they engage in mate-guarding behaviors as a function of both the type of relationship threat they are exposed to (sexual versus emotional) and individual differences in their levels of chronic jealousy. Thus, incorporating individual differences into research on relationship maintenance processes may provide a more textured picture of the way in which men and women diverge in their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to different forms of relationship threat.

At a broader theoretical level, the current findings fit with a growing body of literature suggesting that evolved psychological mechanisms interact with functionally relevant individual differences to shape the expression of important psychological processes (e.g., Maner, Miller, Rouby, & Gailliot, *in press*; Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003). Although one hallmark of evolutionary theories has been a focus on psychological universals – cognitions and behaviors that tend to be the same across all men and women, evolutionary and social psychological theories alike also suggest an important place for individual differences (e.g., Buss & Greiling, 1999; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). The current findings suggest that individual differences in chronic schemas pertaining to infidelity may play an important part in regulating the degree to which adaptive jealousy mechanisms are displayed.

Aside from theoretical implications, the current findings may also have very important practical implications. Psychological and behavioral processes aimed at reducing the likelihood of infidelity can lead to very harmful outcomes. For example, sexual infidelity is often a precursor of male spousal abuse and relationship violence (Shackelford et al., 2005; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Given the current findings, one might expect greater violence in response to sexual infidelity among men high in chronic jealousy than among men low in chronic jealousy. Moreover, the generally functional role of psychological and behavioral processes aimed at pro-

tecting one's relationship may become dysfunctional in extreme cases. Instead of protecting one's relationship, exaggerated perceptions of threat and excessive suspicion of infidelity could destroy a relationship through incessant mistrust. Thus, ironically, individuals high in chronic jealousy, who may be the most likely to engage in behaviors intended to protect their relationship, may in fact be the ones most likely to harm their relationship through excessive insecurity and doubt. Attending to individual differences may reveal the specific types of individuals most likely to display these types of damaging patterns of cognition and behavior.

One set of questions that arises from the current research pertains to the source of individual differences in chronic jealousy. As with many individual differences, one's level of chronic jealousy likely stems from a variety of factors. Genes, previous experiences, and current situational factors are all likely to play an important role in molding one's current social schemas. A person's sexual attractiveness, relationship status, perceived relationship quality, and previous experience with a romantic betrayal, for example, may all influence the degree to which one is chronically concerned with potential relationship threats. Being in a committed, trusting relationship may decrease one's tendency to worry about infidelity, whereas feeling insecure and unsure about one's relationship may increase a chronic propensity for jealousy. Indeed, these types of factors have been shown to influence individuals' jealousy responses (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Berman & Frazier, 2005; Brown & Moore, 2003; Murphy et al., 2006; Sagarin et al., 2003). Thus, chronic jealousy (as measured in the current study) likely represents a combination of dispositional, situational, and relationship-specific variables.

It is worth noting that the origin of sex differences in jealousy has been hotly debated (Harris, 2003, 2005; Sagarin, 2005). Some have argued that sex differences in responses to infidelity stem primarily from methodological artifacts (e.g., the use of forced-choice measures) (DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman, & Salovey, 2002; however, see Edlund, Heider, Scherer, Farc, & Sagarin, 2006 for a rebuttal). Others have argued that, rather than representing innate sex differences, differences in jealousy responses represent cultural or individual variations in the degree to which sex and emotion reflect important aspects of individuals' self-concepts (Harris, 2000, 2003). The current research does not provide support for one side or the other in this debate (as this was not the purpose of the current research). Nevertheless, the current research does add a novel dimension to the debate by highlighting the benefits of integrating the two perspectives – proximate and evolutionary – that are usually debated.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the current research is its reliance on hypothetical scenarios. To be consistent with previous studies examining reactions to infidelity, we used a common method in which participants imagined their partner cheating on them. However, reactions to an imagined infidelity may not perfectly parallel responses to real infidelities (Harris, 2003). Future research is needed to address this issue by examining the role of individual differences in reactions to actual instances of infidelity.

A second limitation is the use of a forced-choice paradigm for assessing jealousy responses. We used a forced-choice paradigm because this has been the most commonly used technique for examining sex differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity. However, as previously mentioned, others have criticized the forced-choice paradigm and instead have recommended the use of continuous measures (e.g., DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Pietrzak et al., 2002; Sabini & Green, 2004). Using continuous measures of jealousy responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity in conjunction with measures of individual differences in chronic

jealousy may help shed further light on the role individual differences play in shaping men's and women's responses to infidelity.

5. Concluding remarks

Many scientists (and popular science outlets) portray evolutionary perspectives as implying a psychology based on inflexible, genetically determined processes that operate in identical fashion across all people and all situations. The current research highlights the fallacy of this portrayal, and illustrates the utility of integrating evolutionary approaches with a focus on individual differences. From an evolutionary perspective, individual differences play an important role in determining how and when adaptive psychological mechanisms are expressed. Indeed, findings from the current study suggest that individual differences in chronic jealousy moderate the expression of adaptive jealousy mechanisms. The continued integration of evolutionary approaches with theories of individual differences provides a fertile ground for future empirical work and will help researchers achieve a more complete picture of the human mind.

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