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## Sexual Jealousy

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### Synonyms

[Aggression](#); [Emotional jealousy](#); [Infidelity](#); [Mate guarding](#); [Mate poaching](#); [Sexual jealousy](#)

### Definition

Men's sexual jealousy is an evolved emotional response to a real or perceived threat of a partner's sexual infidelity. It is a functionally flexible response that serves to motivate men to engage in mate-guarding behavior designed to deter intrasexual rivals and to maintain valued relationships.

### Introduction

Over evolutionary history, human men have recurrently faced the challenge of finding and securing viable mating partners. Although humans evolved to form successive long-term relationships with one mate, infidelity has also

been a recurrent theme in our evolutionary history. In order to maintain their mateships, men would have had to fend off same-sex rivals, as well as signal to their partner their level of commitment to her. Likewise, it would have been crucial for men to ensure that their partners remained faithful to them. The fact that fertilization of the sperm and ovum takes place internally within the women's reproductive tract means that men, unlike women, can never be certain that the children they invest in are genetically theirs. The potential for a female partner to commit infidelity results in *paternity uncertainty* for men, which translates into a threat to men's reproductive success (Daly et al. 1982; Symons 1979). Thus, it would have been advantageous for men to have a means of identifying potential rivals, showing commitment to their mates, and remaining vigilant to suspected infidelity. Jealousy involves a constellation of emotions and behavior which have been argued to help in coordinating these interrelated efforts.

Jealousy has been defined as a distinct, yet complex, aversive emotional response to a real or imagined threat to a valued relationship (Buunk et al. 2008; Daly et al. 1982). Two basic types of jealousy have been identified which correspond with two kinds of betrayal one might experience in the context of a romantic relationship. *Sexual jealousy* is evoked in response to an actual or perceived threat of sexual infidelity, where a person may be having sexual relations with someone other than their primary partner (Buss 2013). In contrast, one may believe that

their primary partner is forming a deep emotional romantic bond with someone outside of the relationship and committing emotional infidelity, which in return can elicit *emotional jealousy*. Over evolutionary time, both ancestral men and women have had to maintain mating relationships; thus, in contemporary society, men and women do not differ in the overall frequency or intensity of their jealousy (Goetz et al. 2008). However, a sex difference does emerge in regard to the two types of jealousy (sexual and emotional) owing to the differential *adaptive problems* – challenges that impact an organism's ability to reproduce (e.g., gaining access to mates) – faced by ancestral men and women (Symons 1979).

Ancestral women, given their higher obligatory parental investment (e.g., gestation, child-bearing, lactation), have primarily faced the adaptive problem of securing paternal investment for their offspring (Buss 2012). As a consequence, women demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to cues of emotional infidelity, which may signal the loss of parental resources. In contrast, ancestral men have principally faced the problem of paternity uncertainty, resulting in a lower threshold for cues to sexual infidelity. The totality of evidence to date supports the hypothesis that men express a heightened response to sexual infidelity in comparison to women, whereas women are more distressed by emotional infidelity in comparison to men (Frederick and Fales 2016). Because men, unlike the males of most other mammalian species, invest relatively heavily in their offspring, we expect that they should be particularly sensitive to signals associated with the misdirection of resources toward genetically unrelated offspring (Buss 2012).

A meta-analysis of 50 studies indicated that 24 % of women reported engaging in extramarital sexual activities (Tafoya and Spitzberg 2007). Globally, between 1.7 and 29.8 % of men are unwittingly raising children that they are not the genetic fathers of as a result such infidelity (Anderson 2006). *Cuckoldry*, unknowingly raising a genetically unrelated offspring, remains an issue pertinent to men's reproductive success. For men, a partner's sexual infidelity would have

posed a major threat to their reproductive potential. For instance, unknowingly fathering a rival's child could have resulted in squandering parental investment resources, failing to benefit from a female partner's maternal effort, an opportunity cost of not being able to pursue other mateships, and becoming vulnerable to reputation damage, which could influence one's status and attractiveness as a mate (Goetz et al. 2008).

## Jealousy as an Adaptation

Evolutionary psychologists have hypothesized that jealousy is a functional emotional adaptation that evolved to solve recurrent problems related to reproduction (Buss 2013). From this perspective, it has been argued that jealousy can (1) alert an individual to threats to a valued relationship, (2) be evoked in the presence of same-sex competitors who may be interested in mating with one's romantic partner, and (3) motivate behavior meant to deter partner infidelity and relationship abandonment. As an adaptation, this means that jealousy has specific inputs, if/then decision rules, and behavioral outputs that collectively may benefit reproductive success.

Threats to a valued sexual or romantic relationship can derive from sources external to the dyad, such as a *mate poacher* who intrudes on an existing romantic relationship in an attempt to steal one's partner for either short-term copulation or to form a long-term romantic relationship. The presence of mate poachers is a common adaptive problem faced by men, because it may signal the potential loss of valued reproductive sources. In one study, it was found that approximately 60 % of men have admitted to having tried to entice another's mate into a committed relationship (Schmitt and Buss 2001), with 35 % of these men reporting that they had been successful in poaching the desired mate. Furthermore, despite expected cross-cultural variability, evidence of mate poaching has been discovered in 53 nations around the world (Schmitt 2004).

Cues to threatened stability of the romantic relationship can also derive from the dyad itself, such as when one's mate displays signs of

disinterest or cues to their potential infidelity (Buss 2012). Sexual jealousy resulting from any of the aforementioned inputs may promote specific behavioral outputs that serve to maintain access to a mate, deter intrusions of same-sex rivals, and prevent a female partner from defecting from the mateship. Collectively, these actions have been termed *mate-guarding* behavior, which can range from pointing out a competitor's flaws to physically attacking another man for flirting with one's partner (Buss 2012). Notably, men's sexual jealousy has been argued to constitute the focal psychological mechanism that coordinates various mate-guarding behavior following a perceived threat to the valued relationship (Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth, 1992. Daly et al. 1982; Symons 1979).

Amid a chaos of conflicting social signals and cues, however, deciphering when sexual infidelity may be afoot and which intrasexual rivals pose a threat to a valued relationship is a challenging endeavor, especially when considering that the perpetrators of sexual infidelity are frequently trying to conceal their deception. These signals are often intentionally muted, such as an unfamiliar scent or an unexplained absence, which may or may not be indicative of infidelity, thus resulting in a *signal detection problem* (Buss 2012). A critical function of men's sexual jealousy is to render him more sensitive to these signals. Consider also that jealousy can be quite costly for a mateship if misdirected or unrestrained. A woman may leave her partner who falsely accuses her of cheating for a more trusting companion. Likewise, if consistently the target of *delusional jealousy* – denoting irrational and unfounded accusations about a partner's fidelity – she may defect from a relationship in search of a more emotionally stable mate, a highly valued trait for women within the context of long-term romantic relationships (Buss 2012). Furthermore, jealousy and mate-guarding efforts necessarily involve the expenditure of resources that could be allocated elsewhere, such as acquiring food and parental investment (Graham-Kevan and Archer 2009). Thus, we would expect jealousy to be functionally flexible, to produce a behavioral response based

on the perceived seriousness and likelihood of losing a mate (Buunk et al. 2008).

## Men's Sexual Jealousy and Aggression

Sexual infidelity can be a particularly potent stimulus for the expression of rage and anger, which tend to be directed toward same-sex rivals and/or to the romantic partner. Studies show that men's sexual jealousy is a leading cause of intimate partner violence, such as battery and spousal homicide, which is argued to constitute a strategy used by men to limit a female partner's sexual behavior (see Goetz et al. 2008). As deplorable and damaging as this behavior is, violence and aggression might constitute evolved responses to several different but interrelated survival and reproductive problems that ancestral humans likely encountered with some consistency. For instance, aggression could have functioned to defend against an attack, to co-opt the resources of another, or to increase one's status within a social hierarchy (Buss 2012). Within the context of romantic relationships, aggression has been argued to serve three important functions: (1) to deter intrasexual rivals from pursuing one's partner, (2) to prevent long-term relationship partners from committing sexual infidelity, and (3) to reduce the probability that a partner may defect from a valued relationship (Buss 2012). In this way, aggression constitutes the context-specific behavioral output of jealousy that manifests as a range of different mate-guarding tactics designed to retain access to a desired mate, while deposing intrasexual rivals and deterring one's mate from defecting from the relationship.

**Deterring intrasexual rivals.** The costs inflicted on an intrasexual rival could range from derogating a competitor by pointing out their flaws to using physical force to hurt or damage them and perhaps even to kill the rival. Spreading gossip about a potential competitor's imperfections constitutes a form of *indirect aggression*, where the perpetrator seeks to harm the target while simultaneously trying to conceal their intent (Vaillancourt 2013). Indirect aggression can be a useful tactic because it tends to be obscure and

carries a lower probability of verbal or physical retaliation (Buss 2012). In contrast, *direct aggression*, such as punching another man who flirts with one's romantic partner or verbally threatening a rival, is conspicuous in its intent. Because men have evolved to compete with same-sex rivals for access to women, they are more often the perpetrators and the recipients of direct aggression (Archer 2004). Homicide data demonstrates that cross-culturally men kill other men at a much higher rate than women kill other women (see Goetz et al. 2008). Moreover, young boys tend to be the instigators and the victims of physical bullying (e.g., being hit) more often than girls (Swearer et al. 2010). In adult men, being unmarried and unemployed and thus lacking resources which would benefit procuring and maintaining a mate are characteristic of both the victims and the killers involved in intrasexual homicide (see Goetz et al. 2008).

**Preventing and anticipating a partner's sexual infidelity.** One troubling reaction to suspected or actual sexually infidelity is men's use of intimate partner violence, which can take several forms (Arnocky et al. 2015). For instance, men may use *psychological aggression* such as attempting to reduce their female partner's self-esteem, perhaps in order to decrease how attractive and desirable she feels to members of the opposite sex (Arnocky et al. 2015). Men may also forcibly initiate sex or emotionally manipulate a partner into having sex (i.e., *sexual coercion*) if they are suspicious or know of their partner's sexual infidelity. Forced in-pair copulation in nonhuman animals follows a similar pattern, occurring more frequently after female sexual infidelity in some species (see Goetz et al. 2008). It has been argued that because sperm can survive in a women's reproductive tract for up to 5 days, inseminating a female partner can allow for one's sperm to either compete with or through the act of sexual intercourse to displace, a rival's semen. Importantly, the behavioral manifestation of jealousy does not require or imply conscious deliberation (Symons 1979). Rather, jealousy seems to motivate behavior on an implicit, nonconscious level (Buss 2012).

Men may also engage in acts of violence to prevent their partner from defecting from the dyad. This may at first seem counterintuitive; however, research has shown that women who leave their husbands are at a higher risk of being pursued, threatened, and assaulted compared to those who remain in the mateship (see Goetz et al. 2008). Shields and Hanneke (1983) reported that women who had been sexually unfaithful to their husbands were at an increased risk of battery and physical and/or sexual abuse.

In conjunction with sexual jealousy, men's feelings of anxiety also share an important link with anticipated infidelity and intimate partner violence. In many mammalian species, including humans, anxiety has been associated with aggressive behavior, and men who exhibit higher levels of anxiety have been shown to engage in more relational aggression directed toward their intimate partners (see Arnocky et al. 2015). Interestingly, Arnocky and colleagues (2015) found that self-reported feelings of anxiety mediated a range of behavior constituting intimate partner violence such as physical, psychological, and sexual aggression in male undergraduate students. A mediating variable is one that explains the relation between two other associated variables. Men's sense of anxiety can be precipitated by feelings of uncertainty about their partner's faithfulness, and research has shown that men tend to overestimate the probability that their partner is going to or has committed sexual infidelity (Paul and Galloway 1994). This bias may however be functional, as it could serve to arouse men's suspicions, incite sexual jealousy, and motivate mate guarding and intrasexual competition, potentially allowing men to retain valued reproductive resources.

### **Factors that Influence the Intensity of Jealousy and Aggression**

The context specificity of sexual jealousy, owing in part to its costly expression, means that individual differences likely modulate the intensity of men's jealousy and mate-guarding efforts. One such individual difference lays in the mate-value

characteristics of an intrasexual rival, such that high-mate-value men represent a stronger threat to a valued relationship and should serve as a potent trigger for men's jealousy. Logically, these characteristics should also correlate with the traits that women find most desirable and attractive in a male partner. When asked to rank the qualities in a potential rival that would be most distressing, men from the Netherlands, Korea, and America consistently responded that it would be upsetting if a rival surpassed them in regard to financial prospects, occupation, and physical strength (Buss et al. 2000). Similarly, Dijkstra and Buunk (2002) found that when asked about a rival to whom one's partner might feel attracted, men, more than women, reported increased jealousy when the rival was high in social dominance, physical dominance, and social status. In a study of participants in Argentina and Spain, Buunk and colleagues (2011) found that men, relative to women, experienced more jealousy when their rival was more physically dominant.

This research suggests that strong, dominant, physically attractive, financially secure, and high-status rivals are of particular concern to men in committed relationships. Unsurprisingly, these are among the very same qualities that women tend to seek out in sexual partners (Buss 2012). Research on individual differences among successful versus unsuccessful mate poachers also corroborate these findings. Effective male poachers tend to be attractive, tall, and have higher levels of self-esteem (Schmitt and Buss 2001; Sunderani et al. 2013), characteristics that denote high mate value which concerns one's desirability to members of the opposite sex (Buss 2012). Thus, high-mate-value rivals pose a particularly salient threat to men's mating success, and jealousy is more often experienced in their presence, relative to lower-mate-value rivals.

Similarly, men are expected to guard more intensely women of higher reproductive value because they are more desirable to members of the opposite sex as a mate and will more frequently be the target of mate poaching efforts (Sunderani et al. 2013). For instance, a woman's reproductive value declines as she ages from young adulthood onward, and it has been shown

that men tend to engage in more mate-guarding behavior and more spousal violence (see Graham-Kevan and Archer 2009) toward younger partners than older partners. Flinn (1988) reported that men living in a Caribbean village, who were partnered with pregnant women (and thus unable to conceive at the time of study), spent less time with, and were less aggressive toward, their partners in comparison to men partnered with *fecund* (i.e., having higher reproductive potential) women. Men have also been shown to experience more jealousy and to guard partner's more fiercely around ovulation, the point of peak fertility across the female menstrual cycle (e.g., Gangestad et al. 2002). This demonstrates that, although ovulation is cryptic, men are able to detect the subtle cues that emerge around ovulation to gauge a women's fertility status. These signals may range from changes in body odor to differences in vocal pitch (Buss 2012).

Not all men, however, are equally concerned with or capable of establishing and maintaining long-term committed relationships, which results in differences in the expression of sexual jealousy and mate-guarding behavior. Some men effectively exploit short-term sexual relationships because they possess characteristics that connote genetic quality such as height, dominance, muscularity, and facial symmetry that are valued by women for their potential offspring (Buss 2012). These traits also reflect men's mate value (Symons 1995). High-mate-value men, in comparison to their lower-mate-value counterparts, are more sexually precocious, go on more dates, and have more sexual partners throughout their lifetime; however, they are also more likely to commit sexual infidelity (Buss 2012). Unsurprisingly, these men have been found to have a high *socio-sexual orientation*, which denotes more liberal sexual attitudes and behavior, requiring less love and commitment prior to entering into a sexual relationship (Clark 2006). Furthermore, taller men are, on average, less jealous than their shorter counterparts and experience less jealousy when confronted with socially influential, physically dominant, or physically attractive same-sex rivals (Brewer and Riley 2009; Buunk et al. 2008). Taller men have also been found to engage in

less mate retention behavior overall (Brewer and Riley 2009). These findings demonstrate that high-mate-value men express less jealousy and engage in less mate-guarding behavior because there is a lower probability that they will lose their mate to a rival. These men are also more successful at procuring and establishing relationships resulting in a lower cost of mate desertion.

Lower-mate-value men are “competitively disadvantaged” having lower attractiveness, social competence, and financial prospects, leaving them at a greater risk of cuckoldry and mate defection (Figueredo and McCloskey 1993). Because these men face a larger cost associated with a partner leaving the mateship, they are likely to employ more direct, violent, and damaging forms of mate-guarding behavior in their relationships. Indeed, men lower in mate value have been found to use more cost-inflicting mate retention tactics (Miner et al. 2009), as well as more controlling behavior and physical aggression directed toward their romantic partners (Graham-Kevan and Archer 2009). Men lower in mate value have been shown to experience more sexual jealousy at the prospect of sexual infidelity, and this jealousy has been shown to predict violence against intimate relationship partners (Cousins and Gangestad 2007). Also, men who are more invested in their relationships, as indicated by a higher degree of relationship satisfaction, have been found to exhibit more jealousy when subliminally primed with words relating to rival mate-value characteristics (especially with respect to social dominance; Massar et al. 2009).

## Conclusion

Mixed findings have been reported for the association between jealousy and relationship longevity (e.g., Sheets et al. 1997), which seems to weaken the evolutionary logic of jealousy’s adaptive benefits. However, it may not be the general tendency to become jealous that is important, but rather how this signal is interpreted by the recipient (i.e., the romantic partner), that determines its

efficacy in solving adaptive problems. It has been shown that a partner’s jealousy increases our confidence in their romantic commitment and provides reassurance of their in-pair attraction, which is positively associated with relationship stability (Sheets et al. 1997). Despite the fact that jealousy tends to produce an immediate negative response, its accompanying verbal and behavioral reassurances can help maintain long-term relational commitments. Men are particularly sensitive to cues of sexual infidelity in their romantic partners because, relative to other mammalian species, they invest heavily in their offspring and have recurrently faced the problem of paternity uncertainty over evolutionary time. Sexual jealousy is a specific emotional response to the threat of sexual infidelity, which serves to motivate mate-guarding behavior such as aggression directed toward one’s partner and/or an interested mate poacher. Despite the dangerous and damaging manifestations of excessive jealousy, contextually appropriate experiences and expressions of this emotion may have helped to solve a crucial reproductive dilemma for ancestral men: ensuring paternity by maintaining and defending valued relationships (Buss 2013). An evolutionary approach in no way justifies the deplorable manifestation of jealousy in society, such as men’s use of intimate partner violence. It does however address the ultimate, root causes of this emotion and provide insight into when and in whom the more damaging behavioral output of jealousy is more likely to emerge.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Female Sexual Jealousy, Sexual Jealousy and Violence](#)
- ▶ [Jealousy & Infidelity](#)
- ▶ [Male Sexual Jealousy to Deter Partner Infidelity](#)
- ▶ [Morbid Jealousy](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Jealousy](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Morbid Jealousy](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Jealousy in Long-Term Relationships](#)



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