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# An Exploratory Investigation of Jealousy in the Family

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Jealousy is a complicated, generally unpleasant emotional reaction to a perceived threat to an existing relationship (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Fear of loss or deterioration of an important relationship, worry, and anger characterize jealousy. Research on jealousy has typically focused on adult romantic or sexual relationships (e.g., Buunk, 1982). Recently, researchers have begun to investigate jealousy in other relationship contexts. For example, Aune and Comstock (1991, 1999) have examined jealousy in the contexts of same-sex friendship, cross-sex friendship, and coworker relationships.

According to Comstock and Aune (1995), role definitions and relational rules may underlie the differences in the experience and expression of jealousy reported across different relationship contexts. As in romantic relationships, relationships within the family can incite intense and diverse emotional reactions.

This study seeks to extend our relatively limited knowledge of emotions in the family by exploring the particularly aversive and socially constrained emotion of jealousy. At the outset, we explore the literatures on emotions and jealousy in the family more fully.

## EMOTIONS IN THE FAMILY

Averill's (1992) social constructivist theory situates the experience and expression of emotions within a variety of social roles. Emotional episodes are constructed and enacted through individuals' awareness of social rules and norms. Social norms and expectations provide the organizing principles of social systems, and families are the primary social system of society.

The family context is a system of interdependent relationships, where family members engage in fairly routine patterns of interaction (Larson & Almeida, 1999). As such, family members influence and are influenced by one another on a daily basis. Research by Gottman and Carrere (1994) found that everyday interactions, such as expressing and responding to complaints, affect the likelihood of divorce. They found that withdrawal and defensiveness on the part of husbands, and

contempt and disgust on the part of wives, were detrimental to long-term marital stability.

Beyond maintaining the marital dyad, one of the most fundamental tasks of the family system is to socialize children. The socialization process largely revolves around learning rules of appropriate emotional behavior. Learning about the causes and consequences emotions is essential for smooth family functioning as well as children's social success outside of the home (Dunn & Brown, 1994).

Talk about feelings and emotions is important to children's understanding of emotions and their relationships with peers (Dunn & Brown, 1994). However, there is concomitant dilemma of *emotional transmission* where one family members' events, emotions, or behaviors predict those of another family member. Emotional transmission of negative emotions, particularly tension, from one setting to another is referred to as *spillover* (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999). So, although emotional expressiveness is an important and perhaps, inevitable process within the family, there is the competing concern that negative emotions may produce detrimental effects. This dilemma is well illustrated by dialectical theory.

Baxter's (1988) dialectical approach describes three oppositions or tensions inherent in relationships: *autonomy–connection* (the dialectic of integration), *novelty–predictability* (the dialectic of change), and the *openness–closedness* dialectic. Autonomy-connection is the most central or superordinate dialectic (Baxter, 1988). Within families, the individual dyads must develop appropriate levels of intimacy and autonomy (e.g., husband–wife, father–child, sibling–sibling). More importantly, these levels of intimacy and autonomy must be continuously adapted as needs and life stages change. If expectations regarding desired levels of intimacy are unexpressed and/or violated within the family, negative emotions such as jealousy may result.

## JEALOUSY IN THE FAMILY

The stage during which adolescents leave home, usually after finishing high school and entering college, is described as the *launching family* (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995). As children enter adulthood, the autonomy–connection dialectic is most pronounced. The adolescent's life task is to establish an independent life and the parents must redefine their personal goals when the child leaves (Yerby et al., 1995). This period of time is often fraught with conflict in many families. Because of the intimacy, ties of loyalty, and sense of history and future present in most families, communication between family members may be even more intense and volatile than in other relationship contexts. During the launching stage, young adults may experience threats to relationship intimacy. Criticism, negativity, and hurt feelings may occur during this

period of family transition.

The relationship between siblings is also affected by the launching stage and the increasing independence of the children. Younger siblings may feel left behind (psychologically as well as physically) and neglected. On the other hand, siblings may feel a new sense of closeness due to lessened competition for family resources. The resident younger sibling may receive more attention from parents, however this may fuel feelings of alienation and jealousy on the part of the *launched* elder sibling (Pearson, 1989).

These feelings of jealousy and alienation are often intense and agonizing, not only because of the fear of loss of a valued relationship, but also because of the threat to one's self-esteem. Buunk and Bringle (1987) point out the paradoxical nature of jealousy—although jealousy is activated to protect one's precious relationship and self-esteem, both may be damaged as a result. As a result, many people are ashamed of jealousy and try to deny or disguise it (Clanton & Smith, 1977).

The shame and discomfort of jealousy predicaments as well as the degree to which one engages in impression management may be intensified when social support is lacking. Whereas jealousy may be validated, condoned, and even induced strategically in romantic or sexual relationships (Sheets, Fredendall, & Claypool, 1997), jealousy may be considered inappropriate in family relationships with the exception of the husband–wife relationship. The detrimental effects of jealousy may be compounded if there is no appropriate way for family members to express their negative affect.

Taken together, the research reviewed thus far suggests: (a) the experience, expression, and perceived appropriateness of jealousy vary across relational contexts; (b) family relationships typically involve such characteristics as interdependence and attachment, and they certainly have a great deal of relational history; (c) negatively valenced emotions may be quite common within a family; (d) the negotiation of the autonomy–connection dialectic may be especially salient among college students; and (e) jealousy may not be considered appropriate among family members. Prior research, however, has not yet directly explored the experience and expression of jealousy within the family context.

Thus, this study extends research on jealousy and emotions in families by exploring feeling and display rules surrounding a perceived threat to an existing relationship with a family member. Given the paucity of research in this arena and the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study, a series of research questions asked: (a) How typical are perceived threats to family relationships? (b) What are the reported reasons given for the incident? (c) What type of family relationship is related to jealousy incidents? (d) Is jealousy experience and expression related

to relationship satisfaction? (e) What are typical responses to jealousy threats among family members? and finally, (f) What is the effect of jealousy incidents in the family?

## METHOD

### Respondents

To explore the nature, experience, expression, perceived appropriateness, and effects of jealousy, a self-report instrument was distributed to undergraduate students. Participants included 100 people (34 men and 66 women) enrolled in Speech Communication undergraduate courses at a mid-sized university in the western United States. Ages ranged from 18 to 60, with a mean of 23.19,  $SD = 5.14$ . The pool of respondents was ethnically diverse, including Chinese-Americans ( $N = 28$ ), Japanese-Americans ( $N = 36$ ), Filipino-Americans ( $N = 10$ ), Euro-Americans ( $N = 9$ ), Hawaiians ( $N = 8$ ), and Korean-Americans ( $N = 5$ ), among others.

### Questionnaire

Respondents were asked to think about their relationship with a family member with whom they are close and whether they had “ever experienced an unpleasant reaction (like feeling threatened, unhappy, or upset, for example) when one of your family members became involved with someone else or something else that did not include you. It could have been a brief incident (e.g., your brother ‘dumping you’ because he had a date), or ongoing occurrence (e.g., your sister is so involved with her career that she doesn’t spend any time with you anymore) that created your reaction.” They were then asked to write a short description of the situation. If respondents could not think of a jealousy incident, they were asked to complete the last two sections of the instrument that assessed satisfaction of the relationship with the family member and demographic information.

Categorical items were created to assess five relevant variables. First, respondents were asked to check the category that best described the *type of jealousy* experienced. Categories, derived from prior research (Comstock & Aune, 1995), included “family member’s need for independence”, “family member left me out of an important experience or activity”, “insecurity—not wanting the relationship with the family member to deteriorate”, “not liking the relationship my family member had with another person”, and “my family member did not have enough time to spend with me.”

*Relationship status* with the family member included nine categories, ranging from sibling (sister, brother), parent (mother, father), aunt, uncle, grandparent,

child, and cousin. *Emotional reaction* contained a list of 15 emotions typically associated with jealousy. Respondents were asked to label their initial and secondary emotional responses to the incident. *Coping response* included 21 specific reactions to jealousy incidents, derived from past research on jealousy and adapted for the family context. Examples include “discussion with family member”, “increase own independence”, and “avoid family member.”

All other variables used in this analysis were measured in sets of 7-point semantic differential scales, anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*). *Perceived appropriateness of emotion experience* contained the following two items: “How appropriate was it for you to feel the emotion?” and “Do you feel justified in feeling the emotion?” ( $\alpha = .84$ ). *Perceived appropriateness of emotion expression* was assessed by: “How appropriate was it for you to express or show the emotion?” and “Do you feel justified in expressing the emotion?” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). *Intensity of the Emotion* was assessed by: “How intense was the emotion you felt?” and “To what degree did you feel the emotion?” ( $\alpha = .92$ ). *Degree of Emotion Expression* was calculated using: “To what degree did you express or show your emotion to your family member?,” and “How intense was your expression of emotion, overall?” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). *Positive Effect of Incident* was measured using: “To what degree did the incident positively affect the relationship?.” *Negative Effect of Incident* was measured using: “To what degree did the incident negatively affect the relationship?”. Perceptions of *Relationship Satisfaction* were assessed using Hendrick’s (1988) scale with 3 additional items tapping into closeness, from Metts (1989). Alpha reliability of the 10-item scale was .90. Additionally, one item assessed the degree of interdependence between the respondent and her/his family member. The frequency of interaction was also assessed. Finally, one item measured “How much of a *threat* to the relationship” respondents felt at the time of the jealousy incident.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Fifty-two percent of the respondents ( $N = 52$ ) reported that a jealousy incident happened to them recently. The family member involved was most frequently a sister ( $N = 15$ , 28.8%). Jealousy incidents involving mothers comprised 21.2% of the sample ( $N = 11$ ). Brothers comprised 19.2% of the sample ( $N = 10$ ). Five jealousy incidents occurred with a cousin (9.6%), four involved the respondent’s father (7.7%), three occurred with a child (5.8%), two occurred with a spouse (3.9%), and two people selected the “other” category (3.9% each).

## Relationship satisfaction

To explore whether jealousy instances were related to relationship satisfaction, a *t* test was computed between the two groups. Respondents who reported a jealousy incident had marginally lower relationship satisfaction scores ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than respondents who did not report a jealousy incident ( $M = 6.05$ ,  $SD = .81$ ),  $t(98) = -1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ .

## Type of Jealousy

The reason behind the jealousy incident was most often cited as “my family member did not have enough time to spend with me” ( $N = 14$ , 26.9%). The relationship between the family member and another person elicited 13 responses (25%). Insecurity about the relationship with the family member was the reason cited by 10 respondents (19.2%). Nine respondents reported feeling left out of an important experience or activity (17.3%). Six participants reported that the family member wanted more independence (10.5%).

## Emotional Response

The initial emotional response reported most frequently was hurt/upset ( $N = 27$ , 51.9%), followed by anger ( $N = 8$ , 15.4%). Shock/surprise was reported by five individuals (9.6%). Jealousy was the initial response reported by three people (5.8%). Envy was reported by three respondents (5.8%). Betrayal was reported as the initial response for two respondents (3.8%). Depression/sadness, exclusion, inadequacy, and empathy were each reported one respondent (1.9% each). The secondary emotional response was most frequently anger ( $N = 12$ , 23.1%), followed by jealousy ( $N = 7$ , 13.5%). Hurt/upset, excluded/rejected, and no secondary response were each reported by five respondents (9.6% each). Four respondents reported depression/sadness (7.7%). Happiness and inadequacy were each reported by three individuals (5.8% each). Envy and fear were each reported by two respondents (3.8% each). Betrayal, shock/surprise, possessiveness, and empathy were each reported by one respondent (1.9% each).

## Coping Response

The initial coping response of most participants was discussion with the family member ( $N=20$ , 38.5%). Acceptance was reported by 11 respondents (21.2%). Discussion with another person was reported by five respondents (9.6%). Five respondents also reported sarcasm as their initial response (9.6%). Avoiding the issue was the initial response reported by four participants (7.7%). Other responses reported included: joking (1.9%), seeking information about the threat (1.9%), and increasing independence (1.9%).



The secondary coping response reported by most participants was increasing independence ( $N = 11$ , 21.2%). No secondary response was indicated by 8 participants (15.4%). Discussion with another person was also reported by 8 participants (15.4%). Avoiding the issue, joking, avoiding the family member, and crying in front of the family member were each reported by 4 individuals (7.7% each). Discussion with the family member, “bad-mouthing” the threat, and “other” were each reported by two respondents (3.8% each). Denying feelings to the family member, confronting the threat, and crying alone were each reported by one respondent (1.9% each).

## Degree of Threat, Emotion Experience, Emotion

### Expression, and Perceived Appropriateness

The mean degree of threat experienced by respondents was rather low,  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ . Mean degree of emotion experience was 4.98,  $SD = 1.31$ . Mean degree of emotion expression was 3.91,  $SD = 1.79$ . The mean for perceived appropriateness of the emotion experience was higher ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) than for perceived appropriateness of the emotion expression ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ).

### Experience Versus Expression of Emotion and Effect of Jealousy

A paired sample  $t$  test revealed that the degree of emotion experience was significantly higher than the degree of emotion expression  $t(51) = -4.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Comparably, the perceived appropriateness of the emotion experience was significantly higher than the perceived appropriateness of the emotion expression,  $t(51) = -3.00$ ,  $p < .004$ . The reported effect of the jealousy incident was not particularly negative ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ) or positive ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ).

### Associations Between Variables

Given the exploratory nature of this study, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to explore the relationships between perceived threat, relationship satisfaction, intensity of emotion experience, degree of emotion expression, perceived appropriateness of emotion experience, perceived appropriateness of emotion expression, positivity of jealousy incident, and negativity of jealousy incident.

*Perceived threat to the relationship* was significantly correlated with the degree of emotion experience,  $r(52) = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ , degree of emotion expression,  $r(52) = .32$ ,  $p < .03$ , perceived appropriateness of emotion experience,  $r(52) = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ , perceived appropriateness of emotion expression,  $r(52) = .39$ ,  $p < .007$ , and the perceived negativity of the incident,  $r(52) = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Perceived threat to the relationship was also inversely correlated with the degree of relationship satisfaction,

$r(52) = -.38, p < .01$ . *Relationship satisfaction* was negatively correlated with the perceived appropriateness of the expression of emotion,  $r(52) = -.29, p < .05$  and the perceived negativity of the incident,  $r(52) = -.51, p < .001$ . *Degree of emotion experience* was significantly correlated with the perceived degree of emotion expression,  $r(52) = .53, p < .001$ , perceived appropriateness of emotion experience,  $r(52) = .28, p < .05$ , perceived appropriateness of emotion expression,  $r(52) = .44, p < .002$ , and perceived negativity of the incident,  $r(52) = .48, p < .001$ . Degree of emotion experience was negatively associated with the positivity of the jealousy incident,  $r(52) = -.35, p < .02$ . *Degree of emotion expression* was significantly correlated with the perceived appropriateness of the expression of emotion,  $r(52) = .53, p < .001$ . The *degree to which respondents perceived the incident to be negative* was significantly associated with the perceived appropriateness of the experience,  $r(52) = .35, p < .02$ , perceived appropriateness of the expression,  $r(52) = .45, p < .01$ , and the degree of experience of jealousy,  $r(52) = .48, p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of the experience and expression of jealousy in the family context. A self-report instrument assessed a recent jealousy incident experienced by individuals. The results showed that just over half of the respondents experienced a threat to their relationship with a family member. Not surprisingly, most instances revolved around immediate family members, especially with sisters, mothers, and brothers.

Respondents revealed that loss of time spent with the family member was the primary reason for the jealousy incident. The family member's relationship with another person also fueled many respondents' reports of jealousy. Respondents reported using mostly rational coping strategies, with talking with the family member as the primary response. Acceptance of the situation, discussion with others, and increasing independence were also prominent responses.

Participants reported minimal threat to the relationship with the family member. This is not surprising given the bond, longevity, and loyalty integral to most familial relationships. However respondents did report having rather intense emotional responses to the incident. Feelings of hurt, anger, and shock were common. It appears as though family or relationship rules were perceived to have been broken leading to the reported negative affect, but the strong ties prevalent among family members may have resulted in forgiveness or acceptance of the infraction.

The intensity of the experience of jealousy was greater than the intensity of the expression. Relatedly, the minimal effect of the incident on the family relationship may have been the result of the low perceptions of actual threat to the relationship and/or the minimal degree of reported expression of the emotions by the respondents.

The correlation data revealed that satisfaction with the relationship with the family member was inversely associated with perceived threat to the relationship, perceived appropriateness of the expression, and the negativity of the incident. The more affect the incident elicited, the more negative and the less positive the incident was perceived to be. Emotion expression and its perceived appropriateness also related to the perceived negativity of the incident. These results may indicate that emotional responses to a jealousy incident may not be good for family relationships. The expression of felt emotions also does not appear to be the preferred response reported by respondents. According to these data, expressing the elicited feelings such as hurt or anger over threats to relationship intimacy may not be advantageous. Rather, respondents reported using predominantly rational coping strategies such as discussing the situation with the family member or another person or accepting the situation. In comparison with romantic relationships, rules in family relationships may prescribe more autonomy and less interdependence during this launching period of time. Expressing negative affect over perceived threats in a family relationship may be against the rules. Future research could incorporate responses by both family members to compare perceptions of the incident, behavioral responses, and overall effects of the incident.

Future research should also explore the relationship between type of emotional responses, coping behaviors and short- and long-term outcomes for the individual as well as the family relationship. Such research will help illuminate effects of communicative responses to predicaments on family functioning.

In sum, this study offers initial insights and evidence of the experience, expression, and effects of jealousy in the family. Jealousy involves a blend of negative emotions, and social constraints preclude the full expression of the experience, even among family members. Real consequences of the expression or suppression of jealousy, in terms of the individual's and the family's well-being remain to be investigated.

Furthering our understanding of family relationships and their negotiation of the dialectic of autonomy and connection is fundamental. Family relationships are profoundly important and undoubtedly, managing emotions and interpersonal predicaments appropriately and effectively are key to healthy functioning for the individual, the family, and society as a whole.

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