

Morbid Jealousy and Sex Differences in Partner-Directed Violence

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Abstract Previous research suggests that individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy have jealousy mechanisms that are activated at lower thresholds than individuals with normal jealousy, but that these mechanisms produce behavior that is similar to individuals with normal jealousy. We extended previous research documenting these similarities by investigating sex differences in partner-directed violence committed by individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy. The results support some of our predictions. For example, a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy used physical violence, attempted to kill, and actually killed their partners, and used their hands rather than an object to kill their partners. These results replicate results generated for individuals with normal jealousy. Discussion addresses implications of the current research and highlights directions for future research on the psychology of morbid jealousy.

Keywords Morbid jealousy · Physical violence · Partner abuse · Sex differences

Jealousy is experienced with a perceived threat to a romantic relationship, and it produces behaviors designed to retain a romantic partner (Buss et al. 1992; Buss and Shackelford 1997; Daly et al. 1982; De Silva 2004). Although both men and women experience jealousy, research has documented consistent sex differences in the contexts that elicit jealousy and in the behaviors produced by jealousy. For example, men more than women are upset by a partner's sexual infidelity, whereas women more than men are upset by a partner's emotional infidelity (e.g., Buss et al. 1992).

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Sex Differences in Jealousy

Sex differences in jealousy can be explained by the different reproductive costs that ancestral men and women incurred with a long-term partner's infidelity. When a female partner is unfaithful to her regular male partner, she may conceive from the infidelity, exposing her partner to the risk of cuckoldry—unwittingly investing in offspring to whom he is genetically unrelated. In men, therefore, jealousy solves the adaptive problem of paternity uncertainty, because it alerts men to cues that their partner may have been sexually unfaithful (Daly et al. 1982; Symons 1979). Conversely, if a man is unfaithful to his regular female partner, he may divert resources to the new partner. This exposes his regular partner to the loss of resources important for raising offspring. In women, therefore, jealousy solves the adaptive problem of resource diversion, because it alerts women to cues that their partner may be emotionally involved with—and likely to invest resources in—another woman (Buss et al. 1992).

Because the costs of infidelity for men are associated with their partner's sexual intercourse with other men and the costs for women are associated with their partner's investment in other women, it is expected that the sexes will differ in jealousy. And this is what research documents: Men report greater upset when they perceive their partner has committed *sexual* infidelity, whereas women report greater upset when they perceive their partner has committed *emotional* infidelity. Researchers have replicated these findings using a variety of methods (see Sagarin 2005 for a summary). Furthermore, it is expected that men and women will differ in the behaviors produced by jealousy.

Behavioral Responses to Jealousy

For both sexes, behaviors motivated by jealousy are designed to prevent partner infidelity or to stop the partner from leaving the relationship. However, men and women differ in the behaviors they perform to accomplish these goals. Women are more likely than men to perform behaviors that enhance their own appearance. Men are more likely than women to conceal their partner from potential rivals and to use violence to deter partner infidelity (e.g., Buss 1988).

Partner-Directed Violence

If non-violent mate retention behaviors are ineffective at deterring partner infidelity, men may resort to using violence against their partner (Shackelford et al. 2005). Although this is a costly strategy, men engage in this behavior to limit their partner's freedom and, hence, their opportunities for infidelity. Women are less likely than men to use violence against partners, even when threatened with partner infidelity, but they do sometimes use violence in self-defense when attacked by their partners (Buss 2000; Cascardi and Vivian 1995; Daly and Wilson 1988; Dobash and Dobash 1977–1978; Saunders 1988).

If partner-directed violence does not deter partner infidelity or defection, a man may resort to homicide. Mate-killing may be a last resort to prevent other men from gaining

sexual access to their partner (Buss 2000, 2005). It also can repair a man's reputation; in some cultures cuckolded men are viewed as emasculated, and killing an unfaithful partner may be the only way a man can repair his reputation (Buss 2005; Daly and Wilson 1988). Previous research demonstrates that jealousy is a predictor of partner homicide, but only for men. Women are less likely to kill their partner and, when they do, it is usually in self-defense (e.g., Daly and Wilson 1988; Walker 1989).

Morbid Jealousy

Individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy experience delusional or irrational jealousy concerning the fidelity of their long-term romantic partner (i.e., the individual is convinced that their partner is or has been unfaithful, but without reasonable or objective evidence). They often make unwarranted or unverified accusations about their partner's infidelity (Kingham and Gordon 2004). These individuals may be "hyper-jealous," with jealousy activated at much lower thresholds than for normal individuals (Buss 2000; Easton et al. 2006). If these individuals do have normal jealousy mechanisms, then they are expected to exhibit behaviors that are similar to those performed by individuals with normal jealousy (Buss 2000; Daly and Wilson 1988). For example, research has documented that men diagnosed with morbid jealousy are especially upset about a partner's sexual infidelity, whereas women diagnosed with morbid jealousy are especially upset about a partner's emotional infidelity (Easton et al. 2007).

Individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy also may use costly mate retention tactics, including violence against their partner, and they may exhibit the same pattern of sex differences in the use of these tactics as seen in individuals with normal jealousy (Hypothesis 1). Specifically, we predicted that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy will use physical violence against their partners (Predictions 1.1). We also predicted that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy will have attempted to kill or actually have killed their partners (Predictions 1.2 and 1.3, respectively).

Methods of Violence

Men and women differ in the methods used to inflict violence on a romantic partner (e.g., Daly and Wilson 1988). Because it is directed towards a romantic partner, partner-directed violence is more "intimate" than other types of violence. The intimacy of the violence suggests it occurs at a closer range than other types of violence (Dobash et al. 2004). Therefore, partner-directed violence is expected to be delivered by hands or by blunt objects, both of which inflict violence at close range. Archival records indicate that men use their hands more often than women when inflicting partner-directed violence—for example, men more than women strangle, punch, and hit their partners (e.g., Dobash et al. 2004). When using violence in self-defense, women rely on nearby objects for support. When attacked by their partner, men are more likely to be attacked with a knife or blunt object than when the attack is by another man (Aldridge and Browne 2003; Block and Christakos 1995; Buss 2000).

Because we expect that men and women diagnosed with morbid jealousy will exhibit similar behaviors as individuals with normal jealousy, we hypothesized that they also will use similar methods for inflicting violence against their partners. Specifically, we predicted that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy will use their hands when inflicting violence, when attempting to kill, or when actually killing their partners. We further predicted that a greater percentage of women than men diagnosed with morbid jealousy will use objects when inflicting violence, when attempting to kill, or when actually killing their partner (Predictions 2.1–2.3).

Method

Participants

To investigate a large sample of individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy, we used the Morbid Jealousy Database (see Easton et al. 2007, 2008 for details). The database includes 398 case histories, of which 298 are men diagnosed with morbid jealousy and 100 are women diagnosed with morbid jealousy. Men's ages ranged from 18 to 98 years ($M=43.6$, $SD=11.8$) and women's ages ranged from 20 to 75 years ($M=42.8$, $SD=12.1$). Age was not reported for 27 cases (17 men, 10 women).

Materials and Procedure

The Morbid Jealousy Database contains all case histories of morbid jealousy published in English from 1940 to 2002 as indexed in the online databases PsycINFO and MEDLINE/PubMed, inclusive as of July 2005. The database contains coded demographic information about the individual, sexual history, perceived cues to partner infidelity, mate retention tactics used by the individual, and information about violence in the relationship. Where relevant, data were coded for frequency and method of violence, and which partner was the offender for physical violence, and attempts to kill partner, as well as information about the precipitating factor for the violence (e.g., partner infidelity). If the individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy killed his or her partner, that information also was coded, along with the method of killing, and the precipitating factor for the homicide.

Results

The Morbid Jealousy Database consists of data coded by trained coders who reliably coded data across cases and variables (see Easton et al. 2007, 2008). Chi-square analyses were used to test predictions at $\alpha=0.05$. If cell sizes were less than the recommended size of five for conducting chi-square analyses, we used Fisher's Exact Test because it is robust to small sample size (Parshall and Kromrey 1996). Table 1 presents a summary of the six predictions, the total number of male and

Table 1 Number of male and female case histories reporting a behavior (with associated percentages), by prediction

Prediction		Number of cases	
		Males	Females
1.1	More men use physical violence	83/90 (92.2%)	10/14 (71.4%)
1.2	More men attempted to kill partner	48/188 (25.5%)	1/52 (1.9%)
1.3	More men will have killed their partner	52/277 (18.8%)	8/91 (8.8%)
2.1	More men use hands to inflict violence;	40/45 (88.9%)	6/7 (85.7%)
	More women use objects	5/45 (11.1%)	1/7 (14.3%)
2.2	More men use hands when attempt to kill;	12/45 (26.7%)	0/1 (0.0%)
	More women use objects	33/45 (73.3%)	1/1 (100.0%)
2.3	More men use hands when killing;	13/48 (27.1%)	0/8 (0.0%)
	More women use objects	35/48 (72.9%)	8/8 (100.0%)

Number of cases varies by prediction because different sets of cases contain the relevant information for testing each prediction.

female cases used to test each prediction, and the associated percentages for each prediction.

We tested Prediction 1.1 using information about physical violence, and we excluded from analyses cases that provided no information about the history of physical violence ($n=294$), leaving 104 cases that noted whether a history of physical violence was present in the relationship. Of the 104 cases, 93 (83 men, 10 women) included a positive history of physical violence and 11 (7 men, 4 women) included no history of physical violence. A significant difference was found ($\chi^2_{2, n=104} = 5.54, p=0.04$), indicating that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy used physical violence against their partner (92.2% and 71.4%, respectively). Prediction 1.1 was supported.

To test prediction 1.2 we used information about attempts to kill the partner, and we excluded from analyses cases that provided no information on whether the individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy attempted to kill his or her partner ($n=158$). This left 240 cases, of which 49 (48 men, 1 woman) identified an attempt to kill the partner. A significant difference was found ($\chi^2_{2, n=240} = 13.97, p<0.001$), indicating that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy attempted to kill their partners (25.5% and 1.9%, respectively). Prediction 1.2 was supported.

We tested prediction 1.3 using information about when an individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy actually killed his or her partner, and we excluded from analyses cases that did not report whether homicide occurred ($n=30$). Sixty cases (52 men, 8 women) positively identified that the individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy killed his or her partner. A greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy killed their partners (18.8% and 8.8%, respectively; $\chi^2_{2, n=368} = 5.01, p=0.03$). Prediction 1.3 was supported.

We constructed variables for the method of inflicting violence to test the predictions of Hypothesis 2. For a method to be coded as “hands,” the case had to

note that the individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy struck, hit, strangled, or choked his or her partner or that violence was inflicted with the hands. To be coded as using an object other than hands to inflict violence, the case had to note that an object was used. If the case mentioned none of the above, we coded the method as not reported. A total of 52 cases identified the method used for inflicting violence. Of these cases, 46 (40 men, 6 women) identified that hands were used, and 6 (5 men, 1 woman) identified that an object was used. There was no significant difference in the percentages of men versus women diagnosed with morbid jealousy who used either method for inflicting violence (88.9% and 85.7% used hands and 11.1% and 14.3% used objects, respectively; $\chi^2_{2, n=52} = 0.06, p=1.00$). Prediction 2.1 was not supported.

Forty-six cases included the method used when attempting to kill a partner. Of these cases, 12 (12 men, 0 women) identified that hands were used and 34 (33 men, 1 woman) identified that an object was used. There was no significant difference in the percentage of men versus women diagnosed with morbid jealousy who used either method when attempting to kill their partners (26.7% and 0.0% used hands and 73.3% and 100% used objects, respectively; $\chi^2_{2, n=46} = .361, p=0.74$). Prediction 2.2 was not supported.

A total of 56 cases included the method used to kill the partner. Of these cases, 13 (13 men, 0 women) identified the individual used their hands and 43 (35 men, 8 women) identified the individual used an object. There was a marginally significant difference (27.1% and 0.0% used hands and 72.9% and 100% used objects, respectively; $\chi^2_{2, n=56} = 2.82, p=0.10$), such that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy used their hands to kill their partners and that a greater percentage of women than men diagnosed with morbid jealousy used an object to kill their partner. This lends marginal support to Prediction 2.3.

We conducted follow-up tests of all predictions, controlling for marital status, length of relationship, and the ages of the individual diagnosed with morbid jealousy and his or her partner. None of the results differed substantively from the results reported above (available from the first author upon request).

Discussion

Because previous research suggests that individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy have overly sensitive but otherwise normal jealousy mechanisms, we hypothesized that individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy would exhibit similar patterns of violence towards their romantic partners as individuals with normal jealousy. Specifically, we tested the predictions that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy would use physical violence against their partners, and that a greater percentage of men than women would have attempted to kill their partners, and would have actually killed their partners. We also predicted that men and women diagnosed with morbid jealousy would differ in the methods used to inflict partner-directed violence, such that men would be more likely to use their hands and women would be more likely to use an object.

We found support for Hypothesis 1. A greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy inflicted physical violence, attempted to kill, or actually killed their partners. These results support previous findings in samples of

people with normal jealousy. Previous research suggests men attempt to restrict their partner's freedom, but when that fails, they may resort to physical violence or homicide (e.g., Buss 1988; Daly et al. 1982; Daly and Wilson 1988).

Hypothesis 2 was generally not supported, although one prediction was marginally supported. There was no difference between the sexes in the method used to inflict violence or during attempts to kill a partner. We found marginal support for the prediction that a greater percentage of men than women diagnosed with morbid jealousy would use their hands to kill a partner and that a greater percentage of women than men diagnosed with morbid jealousy would use objects to kill a partner. As it was only marginally supported, we suggest caution when interpreting this result. The other two predictions of Hypothesis 2 also might have generated significant results with larger sample sizes, especially for women. Previous research indicates men are more likely than women to use their hands when inflicting partner-directed violence and women more than men rely on objects to inflict partner-directed violence, and the marginal result in the present research is consistent with these findings (e.g., Aldridge and Browne 2003; Dobash et al. 2004). However, some other research indicates no difference in the methods used by men and women to inflict partner-directed violence (e.g., Mullen and Martin 1994). Therefore, the non-significant sex differences in the present research may instead reflect these null findings. Because of the small sample sizes and inconsistencies in previous research, we suggest future research further investigate the methods that men and women use when inflicting violence on their partner.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several of the predictions tested in the current research required that many cases had to be excluded from analyses. Because the data in the Morbid Jealousy Database draw on archival case histories, we cannot determine if lack of reported information indicates that the individual did not perform the behavior or if the behavior was not considered relevant for publishing in the case history. It may be, therefore, that even though some of the current predictions were not supported, men and women diagnosed with morbid jealousy actually do engage in the predicted behaviors. It may also be that the database is not an accurate reflection of individuals with morbid jealousy, but instead may consist of anomalies. Case histories are sometimes published because they include thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that are different from what is normally expected from individuals with the disorder (Yin 2003). We suggest this is not the case with the Morbid Jealousy Database, as some of the present findings did support previous work with individuals with normal jealousy.

It is possible the predictions that were not supported are incorrect and that, for these behaviors, individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy behave differently than individuals with normal jealousy. Several scholars have speculated that individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy have normal mechanisms with increased sensitivity and, therefore, that these individuals are expected to behave similarly to normal individuals (Buss 2000; Daly and Wilson 1988; Easton et al. 2006; Easton et al. 2007). However, some clinical research indicates that these individuals may be different psychologically from normal individuals (e.g., Mullen 1996), and this may be motivated by something in the etiology of the disorder, such as delusions. As

suggested above, research that directly compares individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy with normal individuals is needed to better understand the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Implications and Conclusions

The present research tested hypotheses about evolutionarily derived sex differences in partner-directed violence. These hypotheses have been tested in individuals with normal jealousy, but never before in a sample of individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy. Previous research using the Morbid Jealousy Database replicated findings from normal jealousy research (Easton et al. 2007), which suggests that individuals diagnosed with morbid jealousy may behave similarly to individuals with normal jealousy. This led us to hypothesize that these individuals may use partner-directed violence in a manner similar to individuals with normal jealousy. The current research supports this hypothesis. The results of these two studies suggest that morbid jealousy may be at one end of a continuum of jealousy, with an absence of jealousy at the other end. Future research might profitably compare individuals along the continuum of jealousy to determine similarities and differences in behaviors of individuals with varying levels of jealousy. For example, it may be that individuals who experience an absence of jealousy may engage in more mate-sharing than other individuals along the continuum (e.g., Pinta 1978). The results of such research would provide further insight into the motivations and behaviors of individuals with jealousy disorders which could aid clinicians who treat them. It may also provide insight to researchers who study jealousy and partner-directed violence, regardless of the theoretical framework that guided the research, including, for example, feminist theory (e.g., Dobash and Dobash 1977–1978; Walker 1989) or family conflict theory (e.g., Dutton and Nicholls 2005; Straus and Gelles 1986).

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