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Understanding coping with romantic jealousy: Major theoretical approaches

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Summary. – Jealousy has a complex nature with its emotional, cognitive and behavioral components. The results of many of studies indicate that jealousy is associated with relational dissatisfaction, relational conflict, violence, depression and divorce. Partner’s responses to jealousy are one of the best indicators about the future of the relationship. Constructive coping styles could maintain the stability of the relationship by increasing the bond between the partners; however, destructive coping styles could create some damage or even end the relationship. Thus, the preferred style of coping with jealousy has an important effect both on the relational and the individual level. People show different coping responses when they face jealousy. Several researchers have proposed different models for explaining coping with jealousy. The main aim of this chapter is handling four major approaches of coping with jealousy and giving examples from research results of relations with some personal, situational and relational variables.

Jealousy is associated with many words, meanings, and images (Demirtas & Donmez, 2006). Pines (1998) defines jealousy as a “complicated reaction in response to a perceived threat, which would end or destroy a relationship that is considered important” (p. 2). According to Buunk & Bringle (1987), jealousy is an “unpleasant emotional reaction based on the relationship between an individual’s current or previous partner and a third person” (p. 124). White (1980) defined jealousy as “*a complex of thoughts, emotions and actions that follows loss or threat to self-esteem and/or the existence or quality of the romantic relationship*” (p. 222).

DeSteno & Salovey (1996) suggested that jealousy be viewed as a “deviant state of mood that is elevated when a relationship that is considered important is

actually destroyed or is at risk, and is characterized by feelings of anger, unhappiness, and fear” (p. 921).

As it can be understood from these definitions, jealousy is not a simple concept, but a combination of emotions and reactions. Therefore, jealousy must be evaluated as a multi-dimensional and multi-factorial experience (Mathes, 1992; Pines, 1992; White, 1981b).

Jealousy has often been referred to as “the green eyed-monster” or “the shadow of the love”. Several emotions like anger, fear and envy are connected to jealousy (White & Mullen, 1989). Jealousy is associated with relational dissatisfaction, relational conflict, violence and divorce (Guerrero & Eloy, 1992; Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004; Fleischmann, Spitzberg, Andersen, & Roesch, 2005). It’s rated among one of the most frequently experienced problems in close relationships (Zusman & Knox, 1998).

Because of the destructive nature of jealousy in the last two decades, research on coping with jealousy has burgeoned (e.g., Bevan, 2006; Fleischmann *et al.*, 2005; Pines, 1998; Sagarin & Guadagno, 2004). The coping style which is preferred by the partners could be an indicator about the future of a relationship (Lazarus, 2006). Constructive coping styles such as open discussion sustain the stability of the relationship and also strengthen the bond between partners. At times, however, destructive coping styles, such as emotional withdrawal or defensiveness lead to the damaging of or even to the ending of the relationship.

As described above, the preference of coping with jealousy style has an important effect both on the relational and on the individual level. There are many ways people can cope with and respond to jealousy (Fleischmann *et al.*, 2005). Several researchers have proposed different models for explaining coping with jealousy. There are many theoretical approaches for explaining coping with jealousy. Some are especially used by therapists for treating pathological jealousy (i.e., behavioral approach, psychoanalytic approach, system theory). Pathological jealousy can be defined as the “shifting of the related emotions, thoughts, and behaviors from the normal end of the spectrum to an exaggerated end, and includes behaviors such as violence or reactions towards an imagined threat” (Demirtas & Donmez, 2006, p. 189). The main aim of this chapter is not looking at the treatment strategies of abnormal jealousy, but handling approaches on the normal jealousy responses of people and summarizing the research results about its relations with some variables.

In this chapter, the four most-often cited models will be handled: White’s stress model, Buunk’s social-exchange perspective, Guerrero and Andersen’s componential model and Rusbult’s EVLN model.

WHITE'S STRESS MODEL OF JEALOUSY

White (1981b) perceives jealousy as a label given to a “complex of interrelated emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes” that is caused by a romantic threat (p. 295). White based his explanations of coping with jealousy and interrelations between emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components of jealousy on Lazarus’s cognitive-phenomenological theory of emotions (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Launier, 1979).

Lazarus is one of the most popular names in coping literature. Figure 10.1 provides a simple resume of Lazarus and Folkman’s basic model of stress and coping.

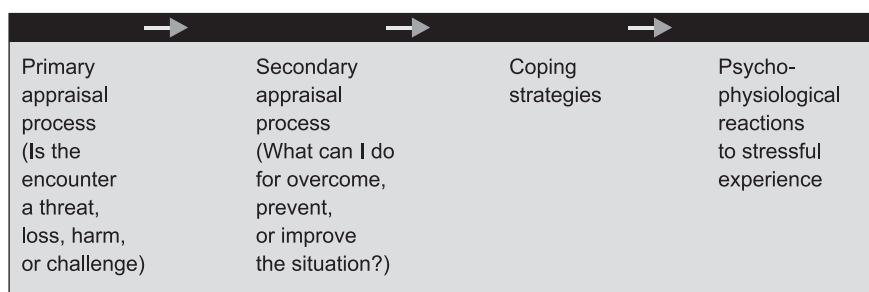


Figure 10.1 Lazarus & Folkman’s (1984) basic model for stress and coping process.

Consistent with Lazarus & Folkman’s (1984) classic formulations, Mullen & White (1989) identified that there are two important processes in coping with jealousy: cognitive appraisal and coping. White (1981a) applied Lazarus’s theory to jealousy and stated that a person engages in primary appraisal after encountering a person-current or previous partner-rival (P-B-R) triangle. In primary appraisal, one searches for the answers of five important issues: the “probability that R will take B”, “P’s love for B”, “P’s values”, “P’s psychological health”, and “P’s trait jealousy” (Mathes, 1991, p. 54). In his model, jealousy responses could be derived from two distinct motivational goals: maintain the relationship and maintain self-esteem. So, according to White (1981a), the primary appraisal of jealousy-evoking situations (loss of partner to rival) involves two different threats: the threat of losing relationship rewards and the threat of losing self esteem. The type of the threat could determine individual’s emotional and behavioral responses to jealousy. White (1981a) reported that there is a correlation between gender and these two motivations: women tend to maintain a relationship, whereas men tend to maintain self-esteem. Figure 10.2 shows this dual-motivation approach to jealousy responses.

If one's primary appraisal is that the P-B-R triangle is relevant with regard to his/her well-being they will engage in secondary appraisal. This appraisal will be oriented toward whether they have resources to improve their relationship with B. Now, P is in competition with R, and will compare themselves with the rival on several dimensions: physical/sexual attractiveness, personality, sensitivity to B, similarity to B, intelligence, career success, and willingness to make a commitment (Mathes, 1991). After this social comparison, one can evaluate whether they have more to offer to the partner than the rival.

On the other hand, in secondary appraisal, one may choose to punish their partner. They may engage in violence, divorce or withdraw financial support and sexual privileges. Another possibility in secondary appraisal is using moral and legal power over their partner (their legal and social rights to partner).

According to White & Mullen (1989), six sets of jealousy-related emotions accompany cognitive appraisals: 1) anger (includes hate, disgust, rage, and annoyance), 2) fear (includes anxiety, worry, and distress), 3) envy (involves begrudging and resentment), 4) sexual arousal (involves lust and desire), 5) sadness (includes hopelessness and depression), 6) guilt (includes regret and embarrassment).

White reported seven jealousy-coping strategies in his study from 1981 (Mathes, 1992) and categorized them as protective of the relationship, protective of the self-esteem, or both; (consistent with dual-motivation approach to jealousy response as mentioned before, see Figure 10.2).

Self-esteem Maintenance	Relationship Maintenance	
	Yes	No
Yes	Communication	Retribution
	Relationship improvement	Termination
No	Emphasizing dependency	Emotional withdrawal
	Impression management	Intropunitiveness

Figure 10.2 Dual-motivation approach to jealousy responses (Source: Bryson, 1991).

1. Protective of the relationship
 - a. Improving the relationship
 - b. Demanding commitment
 - c. Introspection
2. Protective self-esteem
 - a. Derogation
 - b. Developing alternatives
3. Both
 - a. Denial
 - b. Interference

White conducted a diary on his study of coping with jealousy in 1986 (Mathes, 1991), and gave another name, self-assessment, to the introspection strategy, as well as adding a new strategy named “support/catharsis”. Consistent with the dual-motivational approach to jealousy responses, he found that women more likely tended to use the strategies of demanding commitment, improving the relationship, and seeking support/catharsis. On the other hand, men tended to employ denial/avoidance and to develop alternatives.

BUUNK’S SOCIAL- EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE

Buunk (1991) applied Thibaut & Kelley’s (1959) social exchange theory to jealousy. In social exchange theory, individuals are characterized as “thoughtful and goal-directed, seeking to maximize interaction outcomes” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996, p. 551). According to this theory, the main determinant of relational satisfaction is the comparison level: one’s belief about the level of outcomes they deserve from the relationship. People evaluate their relationships as more satisfying and durable when their outcomes (rewards, punishments, and costs) are more or less equal (Buunk, 1991).

In close relationships, various rewards are valued if partners provide them only to each other and several activities gain value when partners engage in these activities solely to each other. On the other hand, from the social exchange perspective, relational satisfaction is positively correlated with each partner’s freedom for coordinating their degree of extra-dyadic involvement (whether occasionally dancing with a third party or having friends of the opposite sex) (Buss, 1991). But if an inequality occurs, jealousy reactions will start (for example if one partner refrains from certain extra-dyadic behaviors and his/her partner feels free in engaging in that behaviors).

According to Buunk (1991), it can be expected that “when the partner becomes involved with another, an individual will be more jealous to the extent that the

individual has not been involved in extra-marital relationships of his or her own” (p. 156). He conducted two studies in 1980 and 1983 (Buunk, 1991) to test this hypothesis, and found that one became more jealous when they didn’t have an extra-marital relationship of his or her own at the same time.

On the other hand, on the basis of interdependency theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) jealousy is handled as related to features of a relationship. The more dependent the individual is on the relationship, the more likely he or she will be jealous, since they have more to lose (Brehm, 1992; Buunk & Bringle, 1987). Jealousy is meaningfully correlated with relational satisfaction and relational rewards (Buunk, 1981; 1986; Hansen, 1983; Hansen 1985).

According to this theory, responses to relational problems such jealousy depend on the degree of each partner’s willingness to take the other’s outcomes into account. Buunk (1991, pp. 165-166) divided these responses into five styles:

1. Pushing/aggression (a style that stems from seeing one’s own interests as opposite of those of the spouse, and that is characterized by minimal respect for the spouse’s feelings)
2. Avoidance (consists of physical or emotional retreat from the situation and unwillingness to discuss the situation)
3. Compromise (an attempt to find a fair solution, involving consensus of both partners)
4. Soothing (involves trying to prevent an open conflict and the expression of negative feelings, and covering up the differences between both parties)
5. Problem solving (includes the open, direct, and cooperative expression of feelings, the clarification of misunderstandings, and the search for a solution that is satisfying for both partners).

Buunk (1991) conducted a study in 1986 and found that even in satisfactory relationships, jealousy-evoking situations cause a decrease in the tendency to choose cooperative coping styles (soothing and problem solving) and an increase in aggressive responses.

GUERRERO AND ANDERSEN’S COMPONENTIAL MODEL

Guerrero and colleagues have carried out several studies on the role of romantic jealousy in the relational development process, and focused on the relationships between the experience of jealousy, jealousy related goals, and communicative re-

sponses to jealousy (e.g., Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995; Guerrero & Afifi, 1998; 1999; Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995).

Guerrero & Andersen (1998) proposed the componential model of romantic jealousy. One of the important contributions of this model to literature is the emphasis on the distinction between the psychological experience and the communicative expression of jealousy. According to this model, antecedent factors (e. g., sex, cultural values, locus of control, attachment styles, emotional dependency, and situational factors) affect the perception of threat as a stimulus for experiencing jealousy, causing cognitive and emotional jealousy experience. The experience of jealousy effects partner's relational goals, and there are six specific jealousy-related goals identified in this model (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998): 1) maintaining the primary relationship, 2) maintaining self-esteem, 3) reducing uncertainty about the primary relationship, 4) reducing uncertainty about the rival relationship, 5) determining and evaluating one's own feelings about the relationship, and 6) equity restoration through retaliation.

According to Guerrero (1998), jealousy is "rarely experienced as a solely intrapersonal phenomenon" (p. 274). People express their jealousy also through actions and interpersonal communication. Guerrero & Andersen (1995, p. 272) defined jealousy expression as "a behavioral reaction to jealousy that carries communicative value and has the potential to fulfill individual and/or relational goals".

They criticized psychological studies for focusing on the destructive nature of jealousy responses, and, as being communication researchers, they argued that not only destructive responses such as violence or stalking exist, but pro-social responses such as compensatory restoration and integrative communication exist, as well (Andersen *et al.*, 1995).

Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy (1995) divided coping with jealousy behaviors into two broad categories of interactive and behavioral. In interactive responses, partners either engage in face-to-face interaction or focus on avoiding face-to-face interaction. This kind of interaction involves six different responses:

1. Negative affect expression: nonverbal emotion displays such as sadness, anger, or frustration
2. Integrative or solution-oriented communication: constructive, direct responses such as self disclosure or explanations
3. Distributive communication: aggressive/negative communication, includes tactics such as yelling at the partner
4. Active distancing: indirect, aggressive behaviors including ignoring the partner or giving cold looks
5. Avoidance or denial; indirect, nonaggressive behaviors including silence or denials

6. Violent communication/threats: encompasses threatening or physically hurting the partner

Behavioral responses are often aimed at the partner; they do not always include face-to face interaction. There are five different behavioral responses to jealousy (Guerrero *et al.*, 1995):

1. Surveillance restriction (i.e., keeping closer tabs or spying on the partner)
2. Rival contact (direct communication with the rival)
3. Manipulation (efforts to make the partner guilty or jealous)
4. Compensatory restoration (behaving to improve the relationship and trying to make oneself more attractive to the partner with using strategies such as sending gifts to him/her)
5. Violent behavior toward objects (i.e., breaking dishes, slamming doors, throwing objects).

Guerrero *et al.* (1995) developed the Communicative Responses to Jealousy Scale. The six communicative responses were represented by 27 items in the scale. Each item was anchored with the phrase: “When I feel jealous I tend to.”. Each response was assessed via a seven-point, Likert-type scale (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Each response subscale proved to be reliable (Guerrero *et al.*, 1995). This instrument was used in several studies in order to explore interactions between jealousy responses and some personal, relational and situational variables (e.g., Bevan & Samter, 2004; Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero, Trost, & Yoshimura, 2005).

RUSBULT’S EXIT/VOICE/LOYALTY/ NEGLECT (EVLN) MODEL

Rusbult’s (1987) model of Exit/Voice/Loyalty/Neglect (EVLN) is one of the most often cited approaches in coping literature, and has also been adapted to jealousy (e.g., Buyuksahin & Demirtas-Madran, 2008; Morry & Harasymchuk, 2005; Rusbult, 1987; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997; Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982; Sinclair & Fehr, 2005; Yum, 2004).

The EVLN model comprises four coping styles; exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Rusbult, 1987). These styles are described by two primary dimensions; active versus passive, constructive versus deconstructive (see Figure 10.3).

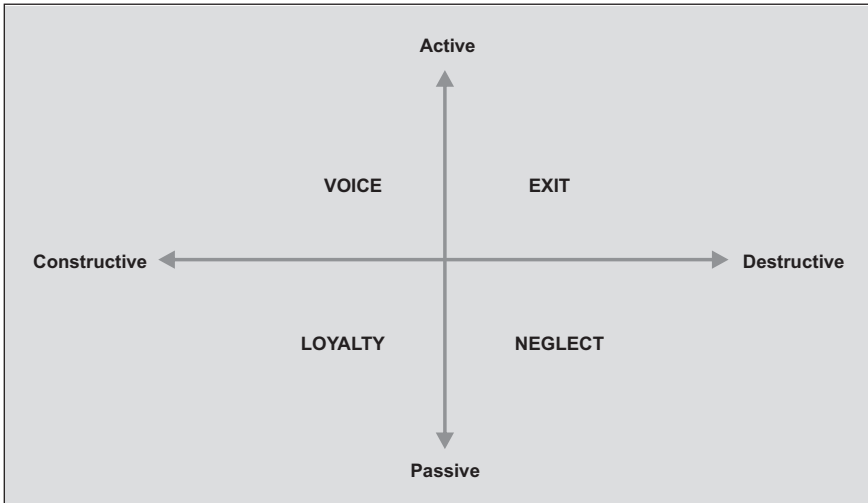


Figure 10.3 Rusbult's EVLN Model (Source: Rusbult, 1987).

According to this model, exit refers to active responses that are destructive to the relationship (e.g., ending the relationship, threatening to end it, or to divorce). Exit responses tend to be most damaging to relationships. Voice involves active-constructive responses that deal with the conflict, and includes expressing dissatisfaction with the aim of improving the relationship (e.g., discussing the problem, compromising). Voice responses often improve relationships. Loyalty responses represent a passive-constructive handling of the problem, characterized by waiting patiently for conditions to improve and change (one covers up the conflict and behaves in a manner emphasizing their loyalty to the relationship) (Yum, 2004). Loyalty includes waiting passively and hoping for problems to go away, and can improve relationships. Finally, neglect involves destructive and passive behaviors that allow the relationship to deteriorate. The individual allows for the deterioration of the relationship by neglecting the problems and by refusing discussion (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986).

This model begins with the interdependence theory. Rusbult (1980) adopted Kelley & Thibaut's (1978) explanations about relationships and developed an investment model. According to Rusbult (1980), the more a partner has invested, the more likely it is that he/she will continue to stay in that relationship so as not to lose their investments. Based on this investment model, she suggests that three factors called satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives are the main determinants of the degree of relationship dependence, and have significant influence on which coping style will be selected by the partner (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997).

Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow (1986) developed a scale for measuring people's coping responses to relational dissatisfaction. The exit, voice, loyalty, neglect (EVLN) scale is a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = never do this, 9 = always do this) and consists of 28 items. Each style is represented by seven items (i.e., When I'm unhappy with my partner, I consider breaking up; when my partner and I have problems, I discuss things with him/her; when we have problems in our relationship, I patiently wait for things to improve; when I'm upset with my partner, I ignore him/her for a while).

Rusbult *et al.* (1986) has conducted studies on the adequacy of the EVLN model and found support for their assumptions derived from Rusbult's investment model (1980). They found that higher prior satisfaction and greater investment promote the likelihood of constructive responses (voice and loyalty), a higher-quality of alternatives causes an increase of the likelihood of active responses (voice and exit), while a lower-quality alternative is associated with the tendency to select passive responses (loyalty and neglect).

COPING STYLES AND MAIN PERSONAL, SITUATIONAL AND RELATIONAL VARIABLES

Much empirical study is carried out using the abovementioned frameworks, exploring the relations between styles of coping with jealousy with several variables. Here, we give a brief review of this data.

Gender is one of the most researched variables in coping with jealousy literature. Despite of the lack of similarity in methodology, research findings about gender differences in coping with jealousy have been relatively consistent. There are important differences between male and female tendencies of coping with jealousy (Brehm, 1992; Buyuksahin & Demirtas-Madran, 2008; Carson & Cupach, 2000; Guerrero, Jones, & Boburka, 2006). Many studies have shown that women follow more constructive strategies when coping with jealousy in comparison to men (Brehm, 1992; Carson & Cupach, 2000; Demirtas & Donmez, 2006; Mathes, 1992; Shettel-Neuber, Bryson & Young, 1978; White, 1980). According to Bryson (1991) and Rusbult (1987; 1993), women choose constructive strategies as a result of their tendency of preserving the relationship, whereas men choose destructive strategies for maintaining self-esteem. Furthermore, these different motivations lead jealous women to experience emotions such as anxiety, envy, discomfort and sadness, whereas jealous men become angry at themselves and deny their jealous feelings (Buunk, 1982). Many studies have shown that women are more likely than men to focus on improving their physical attractiveness; men are more likely than women

to engage in dangerous, sexually aggressive and possessive behaviors (e.g., Guerrero & Reiter, 1998; Easton & Shackelford, 2009; White & Mullen, 1989).

In another study (Knox, Breed, & Zusman, 2007), women reported that they turned to food and to friends, whereas men reported that they turned to drugs and alcohol when they felt jealous. However, some significant cultural differences were found in these results (Bryson, 1991; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; De Weerth & Kalma, 1993; Erber & Erber, 2001) so they couldn't be generalized to all cultures.

On the other hand, low self-esteem is found positively associated with destructive coping strategies and negatively correlated with constructive strategies (Demirtas & Donmez, 2006). White (1981b) suggested that jealousy is associated with feelings of inadequacy rather than low self-esteem. Thus, the individual may be successful in many areas of life, but if they experience feelings of inadequacy in their intimate relationship, jealousy is most likely to arise. The tendency of choosing voice style for coping with jealousy decreases when the feeling of relationship inadequacy increases (Buyuksahin & Demirtas-Madran, 2008) and the feeling of inadequacy is a positive predictor of exit and loyalty (Buyuksahin & Demirtas-Madran, 2008; Erber & Erber, 2001; Pollina & Snell, 1999; White, 1981b).

Another variable closely associated with coping with jealousy is relationship satisfaction (Andersen *et al.*, 1995; Bryson, 1991; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). Many studies show that constructive coping strategies have been associated with relationship satisfaction and destructive coping strategies with relational dissatisfaction (Bryson, 1991; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Metts & Cupach, 1990; Morry, & Harasymchuk, 2005; Rusbult *et al.*, 1982).

Previous research has demonstrated that the length of the relationship is an important predictor of conflict resolution strategies (Buyuksahin & Demirtas-Madran, 2008; Rusbult *et al.*, 1982; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). According to Rusbult's investment model (1987), a partner's investment size automatically increases with the time spent together with the other, and high investment leads them to cope with jealousy with constructive, rather than destructive, strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter serves a brief overview of the main theoretical approaches of coping with jealousy, giving some examples from empirical studies conducted on the relation between coping styles and some personal, relational and situational variables. Although all of these approaches have several strengths, they also have some limitations. As noted before, jealousy has a complex, situation-based nature and has emotional, cognitive and behavioral components. There is no "ideal"

framework which fits to all empirical studies. All seek different aspects of coping with jealousy (i.e., relational, personal, situational, and pathologic aspects). A growing amount of research based on these approaches has been conducted on coping with jealousy, and it seems that this issue still has many different aspects to explore.

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