



Attachment, relationship communication style and the use of jealousy induction techniques in romantic relationships



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ABSTRACT

Insecurely attached individuals are more likely to try to induce jealousy in their partners than securely attached individuals. Research more consistently links anxious attachment styles with jealousy induction, compared to avoidant attachment. The current study extends this limited research by examining how four attachment styles are indirectly related to jealousy induction through relationship communication styles. College men and women ($N = 263$) completed an online survey on their dating experiences, and indicated their likelihood of using jealousy induction tactics and relationship communication styles with a hypothetical partner. Path analysis revealed that fearfully attached individuals are more likely to indicate an aggressive communication style and this is linked to greater jealousy induction; whereas, preoccupied individuals are more likely to use a non-assertive communication style and this is linked to greater jealousy induction. Secure and dismissing styles were unrelated to jealousy induction. Findings support the anxious attachment-jealousy induction link. Future research should examine whether motives behind jealousy induction diverge as function of attachment style.

There is a substantial body of research examining individuals' experiences with feeling jealous (see [Carpenter, 2012](#) for a meta-analysis); however, considerably less research examines individuals' attempts to make their partner jealous. Jealousy induction is “a strategic behavioral process designed to elicit reactive, romantic jealousy from a partner in order to achieve a specific goal,” ([Mattingly, Whitson, & Mattingly, 2012](#), p. 264). The majority (84%) of young adults in one study reported using jealousy induction tactics with a partner on at least one occasion ([Brainerd Jr, Hunter, Moore, & Thompson, 1996](#)). Common reasons for using jealousy induction include to: test the closeness or strength of the relationship, bolster one's own self-esteem, or punish a partner ([Brainerd Jr et al., 1996](#); [White, 1980](#)). Individuals who are more attentive to, concerned with, and invested in their relationship are more likely to induce jealousy in their partner ([Cyanus & Booth-Butterfield, 2004](#); [White, 1980](#)), as are individuals who report a high need for control in their romantic relationships ([Brainerd Jr et al., 1996](#)). Adult attachment styles represent individuals' general approach toward intimate relationships. Anxiously attached individuals, who are overdependent on their romantic relationships and hypervigilant to cues of potential rejection and abandonment, report a greater likelihood of using jealousy induction ([Barbaro, Pham, Shackelford, & Zeigler-Hill, 2016](#); [Mattingly et al., 2012](#); [Whitson & Mattingly, 2010](#)). The research linking avoidant attachment style to jealousy induction is

mixed, with some studies demonstrating a positive relationship ([Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011](#)) and others finding no relationship ([Barbaro et al., 2016](#)). The current study examines the attachment-jealousy induction link, providing further evidence of the nature of this relationship, and builds on this research by investigating indirect pathways through relationship communication style.

1. Jealousy induction

Men and women attempt to elicit jealousy in their partners by talking about past or current relationships, flirting with other people, lying about the existence of a rival, or engaging in dating or sexual behaviors with other people ([Mattingly et al., 2012](#)). The most commonly reported motives include desire to strengthen the relationship and enhance one's sense of security about the status of the relationship ([Mattingly et al., 2012](#)). Individuals who use jealousy induction tactics tend to view these as efficacious ways of achieving their relationship goals, which include relationship maintenance and retention, rather than dissolution ([Fleischmann, Spitzberg, Andersen, & Roesch, 2005](#)).

[Fleischmann et al. \(2005\)](#) suggest that individuals who are more likely to feel jealous and suspicious of infidelity in their own relationships are also more likely to use jealousy induction to boost their confidence and self-esteem. Individuals with insecure attachment

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styles, particularly those who are preoccupied with how much others value them, and fearful that others will not reciprocate their desired level of intimacy, are more likely to experience feelings of jealousy (Buunk, 1997; Guerrero, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Whereas, individuals with secure (i.e., comfortable with intimacy and autonomy) and dismissing (i.e., avoidant of intimacy and preference for independence) attachment styles are the least likely to report jealousy within their romantic relationships (Guerrero, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Levy & Kelly, 2010). Thus, research suggests that individuals with attachment styles that are high in dependence on others (i.e., preoccupied and fearful) are the most consistently linked to experiencing jealousy.

2. Attachment style and jealousy induction

While there is some evidence that anxiously attached individuals also report greater use of jealousy induction, there is also evidence to suggest avoidant individuals also engage in this behavior. Goodboy and Bolkan (2011) examined the links between relationship satisfaction, attachment style and jealousy induction in college undergraduates, currently in dating or committed romantic relationships. After taking into account relationship satisfaction (i.e., negatively related to jealousy induction), only dismissing and fearful attachment styles were significantly positively related to jealousy induction. Preoccupied and secure styles were unrelated to jealousy induction, when considering all 4 styles simultaneously. Using an older sample of heterosexual men and women mTurk users in a committed relationship (avg. > 5 years), Barbaro et al. (2016) found that anxious attachment, but not avoidant attachment in men, was significantly positively related to jealousy induction. For women, both attachment bonds were significantly positively related to jealousy induction. In these two studies, jealousy induction was assessed with a two-item scale, or as a sub-factor of individuals' mate retention strategies, which may contribute to their different findings. Mattingly et al. (2012) developed and validated an 18-item jealousy induction scale to more extensively assess this content area. They found that undergraduates in committed relationships reported greater use of jealousy induction with their partner when they were anxiously or avoidantly attached. Together, this research suggests anxious attachment styles (preoccupied and fearful) are more consistently linked to jealousy induction than avoidant styles, but that additional research is needed to explore why these links may or may not exist. Given most jealousy induction tactics focus on using verbal and nonverbal communication to inform one's partner that the relationship is in trouble, individual differences in approaches toward relational communication might help to explain these nuances in the attachment-jealousy induction link.

3. Relationship communication styles (CSs)

Individuals with a secure attachment style use more assertive CSs with their partners (Haggerty, Hilsenroth, & Vala-Stewart, 2009), which in turn, are associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Craddock, 2008). When at least one partner is insecurely attached, then the couple is more likely to engage in demand-withdraw communication patterns or topic avoidance, and less likely to use assertive, mutually constructive CSs (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). More specifically, avoidantly attached individuals are less assertive and more aggressive in their relationship CSs (Turner & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2011). Believing that disagreements in the relationship are destructive to the relationship in part explains why anxiously attached individuals also report more aggressive relationship CSs (Turner & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2011). Finally, individuals who are particularly sensitive to rejection are more likely to self-silence than individuals who are less sensitive to rejection (Harper, Dickson, & Welsh, 2006). Individuals who self-silence inhibit their self-expression and actions to avoid conflict in their relationships (Jack & Dill, 1992). So much so, that self-

silencers put the maintenance of their intimate relationship above their own relationship needs, which is often at the expense of their own mental health (Cramer, Gallant, & Langlois, 2005; Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995). Although previous research has examined how attachment styles are associated with various forms of relationship communication, CSs have not yet been considered as a potential factor linking attachment style to jealousy induction. Jealousy induction should be less likely among individuals with an assertive CS, because they have the skills to communicate directly and effectively with a partner about their relationship needs. According to Yesmont (1992), individuals with an assertive CS stand up for their own opinions, feelings and rights, while respecting the opinions, feelings and rights of others. Individuals with an aggressive CS are more openly hostile and domineering, and try to impose their needs on others. To the extent that jealousy induction can be both reactionary (e.g., experiencing jealousy or partner infidelity) and instigatory (e.g., to test the relationship), it seems likely that individuals with aggressive CSs would report using more jealousy induction. Individuals who self-silence, or who have a nonassertive style (i.e., allowing others to impose on one's rights) may use jealousy induction as an indirect method for communicating their relationship needs.

4. Similarities and Differences between Men and Women

There is now an accumulation of evidence suggesting that jealousy induction tactics do not differ between men and women (Brainerd Jr et al., 1996; Fleischmann et al., 2005; Massar, Winters, Lenz, & Jonason, 2017; Mattingly et al., 2012). According to Del Giudice's (2011) meta-analysis, for North American college students who complete online measures of attachment (similar to our sample), sex differences are small or do not significantly differ from zero. Compared to men, women report more assertive communication; whereas men report more nonassertive communication (Turner & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2011). Although both men and women self-silence, men do seem to score higher on self-silencing behavior (Gratch et al., 1995).

5. Current study

We examine the indirect effect of attachment style on jealousy induction through individual's relationship CSs. Recognizing that jealousy induction tactics are not only used in relationship maintenance, but as a method for reducing uncertainty in developing relationships (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), we decided not to limit our study to college men and women in committed relationships. We assess the direct and indirect effects of attachment styles on jealousy induction, via relationship CSs, using a path analysis model. Participants rated the extent to which all four attachment styles (i.e., secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing) and all four relationship CSs described them (i.e., self-silencing, aggressive, assertive, and nonassertive) on Likert scales. Thus, we hypothesized correlations among our exogenous variables and among our mediating variables. Given research has found consistent differences in CSs between men and women, but small to no differences in attachment style and jealousy induction, participant sex was included as an exogenous predictor of CSs, rather than conducting multigroup (separated by sex) analyses.

Individuals with fearful attachment styles are afraid others will not reciprocate their desired level of intimacy, which contributes to feelings of jealousy (Buunk, 1997; Guerrero, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Thus, consistent with previous research (Turner & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2011), we hypothesized that fearful attachment would be more strongly related to the aggressive CS, and that this would in turn be related to higher levels of jealousy induction. For preoccupied individuals, their sense of self is more closely tied to maintaining their relationship (Harper et al., 2006) and they experience greater fear of losing their relationship (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Thus, we expected the preoccupied style would be more strongly related to self-

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