



Father abandonment and jealousy: A study among women on Curaçao

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the present study was to examine whether women who were abandoned by their father experience more anxious, preventive and reactive jealousy than women who grew up in the presence of their father. The sample consisted of 186 female undergraduate students from Curaçao (age $M = 22.88$; $SD = 5.68$) who were categorized into two groups: women who grew up without their father and women who grew up in the presence of their father. We found that women who were abandoned by their father reported significantly more anxious and preventive jealousy than women who grew up in the presence of their father. There were no significant differences between these two groups in reactive jealousy. Possible explanations are discussed in light of the potential function of jealousy for females who grew up without a father.

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1. Introduction

Jealousy can be defined as a response to a threat or the actual loss of a valued close relationship with another individual because of an actual or imagined rival for one's partner's attention (e.g., Buunk, 1991; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2015; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996). More specifically, jealousy has been conceptualized as a coordinated system of cognitive, affective and behavioral responses with the aim of guarding one's partner from potential competitors (e.g., Maner & Shackelford, 2008). From an evolutionary perspective, jealousy in females is primarily designed to prevent a male partner from channeling investment and resources to other females (e.g., Buss et al., 1999), protecting a female and her children from the lowered survival chances that may result from a lack of resources.

The current study examined differences in female jealousy as a function of a father's presence during childhood in Curaçao. Studying the effect of father presence – or the opposite: father abandonment – is important. Previous studies have shown that the degree of father presence and involvement in a daughter's upbringing may have strong implications for daughter's physiological and psychological wellbeing. For instance, Ellis, McFayden-Ketchum, Dodge, Petit, and Bates (1999) found that a father's presence in the home, more time spent by fathers in child care and more father–daughter affection, as assessed prior to kindergarten, all predicted later pubertal timing by daughters in the 7th grade. With regard to psychological wellbeing, it has, for instance, been found that young women whose fathers were not present during childhood are more vulnerable for developing low self-esteem, low

life satisfaction and eating disorder symptoms later in life (e.g., Allgood, Beckert, & Peterson, 2012; Jones, Leung, & Harris, 2006). The presence of a father in the home when growing up also affects the sexual behaviors of young women, with daughters of absent fathers initiating sexual intercourse at a significant younger age (e.g., Ellis et al., 2003; van Brummen-Girigori & Buunk, 2015) and engaging in more risky and promiscuous sexual behaviors than daughters of fathers who were present during the time they grew up (e.g., Rostad, Silverman, & McDonalds, 2014). In addition, father absence may cause attachment problems, because one of the primary caregivers is not available during times of need, which may result in the development of an insecure attachment style (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) that may fuel feelings of insecurity and distrust in adult intimate relationships. Indeed, it has been found that girls and young women who are abandoned by their father often consider marriage as unstable and men as unreliable investors compared to girls and young women who grew up with their father (e.g., Draper & Harpending, 1982; Ellis & Essex, 2007; Ellis et al., 2003).

The importance of a father in the home may be best understood by life history theory (e.g., Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). According to this theory, because of limited resources, individuals make trade-offs between mating efforts and parenting efforts in order to reproduce (e.g., Chisholm, 1993; Figueredo et al., 2006). These trade-offs can be arranged on a continuum that is referred to as the fast–slow continuum of life history strategy. More specifically, depending in their place in this continuum, individuals may vary in the age they first engage in mating behavior, the age they have their first child and, among women, the age they have their first period. When environmental conditions are adverse or unstable (e.g., Chisholm, 1993) and when populations are still growing (e.g., Rushton, 2004), a faster life history strategy is considered

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to be the optimal reproductive strategy, resulting in a relatively young age of fertility and reproduction and a relatively high number of children in which relatively little is invested (e.g., Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). In contrast, a slow life history strategy is more common when population sizes stabilize and mortality rates are low. Individuals at the slower end of the continuum will show later fertility and mating behavior, and will produce fewer offspring but provide greater nurturing to this offspring (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006; Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). Stressful experiences in and around one's families of origin, of which father abandonment is a clear example, are relatively strong indicators of an unstable environment (e.g., Buunk, Pollet, Klavina, Figueredo, & Dijkstra, 2009). More specifically, in contrast to children in homes in which the father is present, children that grew up without a father may expect fewer investments of resources and little or no paternal protection, which may trigger the development towards a fast life strategy (e.g., Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009). The push towards the fast continuum of life history strategy caused by father abandonment may also cause women to become hyper vigilant to future male abandonment. Increased levels of jealousy may help these women prevent further instability and uncertainty in terms of male loyalty, and the costs in terms of reproduction and survival that come with it.

1.1. Types of jealousy

Although a father's abandonment during the early years of childhood may result in more jealousy in later life, we would like to argue that this also depends on the type of jealousy that is involved. Buunk (1997) made a distinction between three qualitatively different types of jealousy: reactive, anxious and preventive jealousy. Reactive jealousy is the degree of upset that individuals experience when their mate is emotionally or sexually unfaithful. Reactive jealousy can be considered relatively 'healthy' or 'rational' because it constitutes a direct response to an actual relationship threat, as is the case, for instance, when one's partner is flirting or having sex with someone else. Individuals may also experience preventive jealousy. Preventive jealousy refers to individuals' inclination to prevent contact of their partner with a third person (Buunk, 1991, 1997). For example, preventively jealous individuals may find it unacceptable that their mate has opposite-sex friends. As an extreme consequence, they may even resort to violence in an effort to limit the autonomy of their mate (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). Finally, anxious jealousy refers to a process in which the individual ruminates about the possibility of a mate's infidelity and experiences feelings of anxiety, suspicion, worry, distrust, and upset (Buunk, 1997). We expected both anxious and preventive jealousy, but not reactive jealousy, to be more common among females who were abandoned by their father during childhood. In contrast to reactive jealousy, both preventive and anxious jealousy may not only be triggered in response to a partner's actual extra-dyadic involvement but also in response to a potential relationship threat. They may even be aroused in the complete absence of objective signs of a partner's infidelity, including the delusion that the partner is involved with someone else when this is not the case at all. In particular, perceptions of potential relationship threats – rather than actual ones – seem to be fueled by irrational fears, for instance, of abandonment and feelings of distrust that may have their origins in early father abandonment. We therefore expected that women who grew up without a father would experience more preventive and anxious jealousy (Hypothesis 1), but not more reactive jealousy (Hypothesis 2).

The present study was conducted at the island of Curaçao, one of the islands in the Caribbean region. Curaçao has around 150,000 inhabitants and is biased towards women with a sex ratio of 84 men to 100 women (CBS, 2011). There is also a high degree of racial, economic and gender stratification, with considerable unemployment especially in the poorer levels in the population. Curaçao provides a unique setting to investigate the effects of father presence on female jealousy, since a substantial percentage of children (about 40%) grows up in homes where the father

is absent. Many young women that live on the island today are therefore raised without a father in the home.

2. Method and materials

2.1. Participants

One hundred and eighty-six female undergraduate students from the University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez participated in the study (age $M = 22.88$, $SD = 5.68$). Participants were asked to indicate if they were raised with or without a father, and if so, at what age their father left the home. This resulted in two groups of women: those who grew up without a father in the home ($n = 65$; Mean age of father abandonment = 23.13, $SD = 5.43$) and those who grew up in the presence of a father ($n = 121$). As shown in Table 1, the two groups did not differ significantly in age $t(176) = .68$, ns , hair type [$\chi^2(4, N = 186) = 9.03$, ns] or skin color [$\chi^2(3, N = 186) = 6.83$, ns]. This latter finding is important because race has often been related to the likelihood of growing up in a household in which the father is absent (with Black children in particular experiencing father absence; e.g., Owen, 2006).

2.2. Procedure

The present study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences at the University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez. Participants were recruited through postal mail after randomly selecting female students from the overview of Student Services of the University. Selected participants received a cover letter in which the purpose of the study was explained and which described that, in return for participating, credit points could be received. Because the present study was interested in participants' jealousy experiences, only participants who were involved in an intimate heterosexual relationship were asked to participate in the present study. Participants who were willing to participate could respond by sending an e-mail containing written consent to the administrator, after which they received an invitation to fill out a questionnaire in an especially arranged classroom of the university. Questionnaires were offered in Dutch, one of the official languages at the University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez.

2.3. Materials

Participants completed a paper and pencil questionnaire, which took approximately 15 min to fill out. The questionnaire started out with a demographic section in which questions were asked about age, place of birth, height, weight, hair type, the presence of a biological father and skin color. The skin color was assessed by asking the participant to indicate the category of their skin (white, light brown, middle brown and dark brown).

To assess jealousy, the *Scale for Three Types of Jealousy* (Buunk, 1997) was used, which is a scale consisting of 15 items: 5 items for each type of

Table 1
Descriptive statistics by father status.

	M (SD)	Father absent females	Father present females
1. Age		23.13 (5.43)	22.57 (5.44)
2. BMI		26.83 (5.70)	25.90 (6.49)
3. Skin color of the participant:			
- White	10.9%	11.7%	
- Light brown	18.8%	35.8%	
- Middle brown	46.9%	35.8%	
- Dark brown	23.4%	16.7%	
4. Hair type of the participant:			
- Cross	23.1%	24.0%	
- Regular	13.8%	11.6%	
- Straight	20.0%	23.1%	
- Curly	41.5%	28.1%	
- Fine	1.5%	13.2%	

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