



# Coping with jealousy: The association between maladaptive aspects of jealousy and drinking problems is mediated by drinking to cope<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Findings provide support for jealousy as a multi-dimensional construct.
- Maladaptive jealousy is associated with problematic drinking among college students.
- Drinking to cope mediates the link between maladaptive jealousy and alcohol problems.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Jealousy  
Drinking problems  
Drinking to cope  
Relationships

## ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that both alcohol use and jealousy are related to negative relationship outcomes. Little work, however, has examined direct associations between alcohol use and jealousy. The current study was aimed to build upon existing research examining alcohol use and jealousy. More specifically, findings from current jealousy literature indicate that jealousy is a multifaceted construct with both maladaptive and adaptive aspects. The current study examined the association between maladaptive and adaptive feelings of jealousy and alcohol-related problems in the context of drinking to cope. Given the relationship between coping motives and alcohol-related problems, our primary interest was in predicting alcohol-related problems, but alcohol consumption was also investigated. Undergraduate students at a large Northwestern university ( $N = 657$ ) in the US participated in the study. They completed measures of jealousy, drinking to cope, alcohol use, and alcohol-related problems. Analyses examined associations between jealousy subscales, alcohol use, drinking to cope, and drinking problems. Results indicated that drinking to cope mediated the association between some, but not all, aspects of jealousy and problems with alcohol use. In particular, the more negative or maladaptive aspects of jealousy were related to drinking to cope and drinking problems, while the more adaptive aspects were not, suggesting a more complex view of jealousy than previously understood.

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## 1. Introduction

The current study builds on previous research regarding alcohol use and relationship problems. More specifically, some research has shown jealousy to be associated with drinking problems (Foran & O'Leary, 2008). However, limited consideration has been given to potential mechanisms underlying this association. Moreover, previous research

has not examined different types of jealousy when considering this relationship. Thus, several questions arise that may have important theoretical and practical implications. Why is jealousy associated with alcohol-related problems? Might drinking to cope (with negative affect) mediate this relationship? Do the various dimensions of jealousy differentially predict problems associated with alcohol use and related problems? This research serves as an initial attempt to address these questions.

### 1.1. Alcohol use and relationships

Findings from the extant literature indicate that relationship problems and drinking often co-occur (Marshal, 2003). Research has established associations between problem drinking and a host

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute at the University of Washington. This research was supported in part by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Grant R01AA014576 and manuscript preparation was supported in part by R00AA017669.

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of marital problems (e.g., conflict, infidelity, violence; see Orford, 1990, for a review). These associations have not only been found with married couples, but have also been observed with dating couples. Levitt and Cooper (2010) examined patterns of specific relationship elements on subsequent alcohol use. Results revealed that the presence of negative elements (e.g., feeling disconnected from one's partner, feeling one's partner had behaved negatively toward her) and the absence of positive elements (e.g., feeling connected to one's partner, higher levels of intimacy) were related to increased alcohol use among women. Further, Fischer et al. (2005) found that heavy drinking episodes over a 10-day period were associated with lower positivity in interactions with romantic partners.

### 1.2. Jealousy in relationships

For people in relationships, romantic jealousy may be associated with alcohol use and problems due to its emotional influence in response to a perceived relationship threat. Feelings of romantic jealousy often stem from a threat (either real or imagined) to the quality or existence of a relationship (Ben-Ze'ev, 2010), and these feelings can further contribute to relationship problems and increased negative interactions with partners (Foran & O'Leary, 2008). For example, when negative interactions occur in a relationship, partners may seek support from others outside of the relationship, which may in turn elicit feelings of jealousy in the other partner and further negative interactions.

In considering how and why jealousy might be associated with alcohol use and related alcohol problems, it may be helpful to consider jealousy in the context of relationships more broadly. Generally speaking, romantic jealousy is defined as an emotional reaction to a threat to a relationship with one's partner (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Typically, romantic jealousy involves a social triangle and occurs when a relationship partner perceives that another person (real or imaginary) poses a potential threat to their romantic relationship (Mathes, 1991; Parrott & Smith, 1993; Salovey & Rothman, 1991; White & Mullen, 1989). Jealousy can, consequently, be conceptualized as an emotion that serves to motivate behaviors (e.g., somatic, cognitive, and behavioral responses) that protect an individual's relationship from alternative mates (Harris & Darby, 2010; Salovey, 1991). It is important to note that jealousy is sometimes interpreted as a sign of caring and concern for the partner, and has been positively associated with romantic love. Similar to feelings of love, jealousy is an emotion that assumes that there is a level of commitment within a relationship (i.e., jealous feelings would not be present if individuals had an indifferent attitude toward their partners or were not invested in their relationships; Pines, 1998). Thus, jealousy can be conceptualized as an emotional response that has both positive/adaptive elements (e.g., an implicit recognition of the importance/value of a relationship and/or partner) that can motivate behaviors to preserve a relationship. Conversely, jealousy also promotes negative/maladaptive actions (e.g., intrusive behaviors, harassment, domestic violence). For example, jealousy is frequently implicated as a factor in relationship dissolution and spousal abuse (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Harris, 2003).

Given the dynamic nature of romantic jealousy, several researchers have provided support for jealousy as a multidimensional construct. For example, research by Hupka, which included three factor-analytic studies involving 1072 students (Hupka & Bachelor, 1979), found support for six dimensions of jealousy. First, threat to exclusivity refers to emotions that arise when one perceives his or her partner may be interested in leaving the committed relationship. Second, dependency refers to one person's need for or reliance on his or her partner. Third, sexual possessiveness emphasizes the desire for one's partner to only engage in sexual behaviors with him or her. Fourth, distrust refers to a suspicion that one's partner may be intimately interested in another person. Fifth, envy or self-deprecation alludes to feelings of

void when one sees another successful relationship. Finally, competition/vindictiveness refers to a feeling of malicious, spite, or bitterness as a function of perceiving a potential threat to one's relationship. We suggest that these six aspects of jealousy could be conceptualized as falling into adaptive or maladaptive categories. Specifically, we suggest that the first three factors of jealousy (e.g., threats to exclusivity, dependency, sexual possessiveness) may not necessarily be unhealthy. For example, all relationships, including healthy ones, involve some degree of dependence on one's partner. We also suggest that the latter three factors of jealousy (e.g., distrust, self-deprecation, and competitiveness/vindictiveness) may represent a 'darker' side. It is possible that these three factors of jealousy may be associated with unhealthy coping mechanisms such as drinking to cope. The current study investigates these six factors and evaluates the degree to which these different adaptive versus maladaptive facets of jealousy are related to drinking to cope and problems with alcohol use.

### 1.3. Jealousy and drinking

There is some support for the idea that jealousy is associated with alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems (e.g., hangovers, alcohol-related physical sickness, and regret about one's behaviors). For example, Foran and O'Leary (2008) examined two potential moderators of the association between alcohol problems and intimate partner violence (IPV) within a community sample of males. Specifically, they evaluated the moderating role of aggression control and jealousy as they relate to alcohol problems and the perpetration of IPV. A three-way interaction was found between jealousy, anger control, and drinking problems in predicting aggression. Further, jealousy versus anger control accounted for the majority of the variance in predicting partner aggression. In addition, Knox, Breed, and Zusman (2007) found that a significant proportion of men and women reported drinking in response to feeling jealous. This suggests that alcohol may be used as a coping mechanism for feelings of jealousy and suggests that drinking to cope may therefore mediate the association between jealousy and problem drinking.

### 1.4. Drinking to cope

Given the strong association between drinking to cope and alcohol problems, and research showing a connection between feelings of jealousy and drinking problems, we expected to find empirical studies that examined drinking to cope and jealousy. However, we could not find any research to date that has examined the association between these constructs. While no previous research has specifically examined drinking to cope as a mediator of the association between jealousy and drinking problems, as noted, some research has shown jealousy to be associated with alcohol problems (Foran & O'Leary, 2008). Moreover, considerable research has demonstrated strong links between drinking to cope and drinking problems (e.g., Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Kuntsche, Stewart, & Cooper, 2008; Lewis et al., 2008). For example, Park and Levenson (2002) found that when college students were asked whether they used alcohol to cope, 42.3% said yes. Additionally, when asked if they used alcohol to cope with stressors, 37.6% reported doing so. Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, and Larimer (2007) found that coping motives were more strongly associated with drinking problems than other motives, expectancies, social norms, gender, or fraternity/sorority memberships. Furthermore, coping motives were strongly associated with alcohol problems beyond the amount of alcohol consumed. Thus, a simultaneous examination of these three constructs – i.e., drinking to cope, jealousy, and alcohol problems – would not only bridge a gap in the literature but would also be warranted from a theoretical standpoint.

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