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Brief Report

Gender, jealousy, and attachment: A (more) thorough examination across measures and samples

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ABSTRACT

We examined the role of attachment and gender on responses to hypothetical sexual and emotional infidelity. Unlike previous studies, both categorical and continuous attachment style and infidelity distress measures were administered to separate samples of college students and adults. Consistent with previous jealousy research, we found moderate gender differences on forced-choice measures of infidelity distress but smaller differences on continuous measures. However, across all analyses, attachment style was not a significant predictor. We discuss this failure to replicate Levy and Kelly (2010) and provide suggestions for future research.

1. Introduction

In a highly influential article, Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) tested the theory of evolved sex differences in jealousy by asking college students which scenario they find more distressing: Imagining their romantic partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person, or enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with that person. The majority of women selected emotional infidelity, whereas men were more likely to select sexual infidelity. These forced-choice between-gender results have been replicated many times, primarily with college student samples. In many studies, however, men exhibit considerable within-gender response variability. Whereas a clear majority of women usually select emotional infidelity as most distressing, men are typically more evenly split in their selection of the two types of infidelity (Harris (2003)). A rather vigorous debate has ensued regarding the critical comparisons and pattern of results needed to test evolutionary predictions of sex differences (e.g., Harris, 2005; Sagarin, 2005). Recent research by Levy and Kelly (2010), however, suggests that within-gender differences in infidelity distress can be accounted for by attachment style.

In their study of college students ($N = 317$ women; 99 men) published in a leading psychology journal, Levy and Kelly (2010) reported nearly 100% of men with a dismissing attachment style, and approximately 55% of dismissing women, selected sexual infidelity as most distressing. By comparison, the majority of participants (>60% of men, >70% of women) endorsing all other attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied) selected emotional infidelity. These results suggest that gender differences in jealousy are primarily due to the reaction of dismissing men to the threat of partner sexual infidelity. Levy and Kelly argue that their dramatic pattern of results are expected given that men are more likely to have a dismissing attachment style and that dismissing individuals are more sexually promiscuous (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

However, administering the same forced-choice infidelity distress and categorical attachment style measures to a much larger undergraduate sample ($N = 2500$ women; 1379 men), Treger and Sprecher (2010) found a different (and much less pronounced) pattern of results: Preoccupied men were relatively more likely to select emotional infidelity as most distressing, and avoidant women were somewhat more likely to select sexual infidelity. But across all attachment styles, men were more likely to select sexual infidelity, and women more likely to select emotional infidelity.

Given these conflicting results, we sought to further examine the attachment–jealousy relationship. Specifically, we expanded the methodology of previous studies by including non-forced-choice measures of infidelity distress, dimensional measures of attachment, and by recruiting a more diverse sample of participants. We briefly describe the rationale for these changes below.

2. The measurement of jealousy

Levy and Kelly (2010) followed the forced-choice Buss et al. (1992) procedure of assessing jealousy in which college-aged participants must choose *either* sexual or emotional infidelity as most distressing. As noted, reliable gender differences emerge when this question format and population are used. However,

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research with other question formats and populations has produced different results.

In regard to question format, studies employing continuous scales to separately measure distress to emotional and sexual infidelity tend to not find significant gender differences (Harris, 2003). Researchers favoring social-cognitive over evolutionary explanations for gender differences argue that socialized decision-making processes differently affect men and women's forced-choice responses (DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman, & Salovey, 2002; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996). In short, because men have been socialized to believe that women have sex only when in love, they may reasonably select sexual infidelity as more distressing because it implies the co-occurrence of emotional infidelity. On the other hand, men do not select emotional infidelity because it does not necessarily imply the co-occurrence of sexual infidelity. Women, in contrast, may select emotional infidelity as more distressing because of gender-role expectations concerning the sexual promiscuity of men. Because it is expected that men will readily have sex without love, evidence of sexual infidelity does not necessarily imply emotional infidelity. But, because it is further expected that men who have fallen in love are almost certainly also having sex, women select emotional infidelity as most distressing. Because this debate concerning the measurement of jealousy remains unresolved (e.g., see recent evolutionary rebuttals by Edlund (2011) and Edlund & Sagarin (2009)), we believe it is important to measure infidelity distress using both forced-choice and continuous response formats.

Another unresolved issue in this research area is the overreliance on college student samples. Although several studies have been conducted with older samples of adults, the results have been less consistent (see Tagler, 2010 for a review). Generally, the existing studies with non-college and older-aged samples find the effect is less robust (e.g., Green & Sabini, 2006; Harris, 2002; Tagler, 2010). Thus, we believe it is also important for researchers to go beyond college student samples when studying gender differences in jealousy.

3. The measurement of attachment

Levy and Kelly (2010) used the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) to categorize participants into secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment categories. Although the RQ represented an important advance in attachment theory (the addition of the dismissive attachment type), contemporary researchers have largely moved away from the categorical approach in favor of a dimensional model with separate, continuous anxiety (fear of rejection) and avoidance (discomfort with others) scores. While attachment categorization simplifies data collection and analysis, it limits the ability to detect important individual differences. In brief, Brennan et al. (1998) demonstrated that measuring attachment using multi-item anxiety and avoidance scales is more sensitive to degrees of insecurity and thus accounts for more variance in attachment-related emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Moreover, their factor analysis of attachment measures found clear evidence of the two global anxiety and avoidance dimensions. Likewise, Fraley and Waller's (1998) taxometric analysis clearly indicated that attachment exists as a latent dimensional rather than categorical construct. Thus, because of concerns regarding the reliability and validity of measuring attachment categorically, it is important to examine the attachment–infidelity distress relationship using dimensional measures.

4. The present study

The present study was designed as a more thorough examination of the attachment–infidelity distress relationship. To address the methodological limitations of previous studies, we conducted a study using both forced-choice and continuous measures of infidelity distress, both categorical and dimensional measures of attachment, and recruited both college students and older adults. Consistent with previous studies of college students, we expected significant gender differences on the forced-choice infidelity distress measure, but small to no gender differences on continuous scales. Moreover, we expected adults to show less pronounced gender differences on the distress measures. Given the very limited and conflicting previous attachment results, we made no hypotheses regarding the attachment–infidelity distress relationship.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

5.1.1. College students

Undergraduates (357 women, 132 men), ranging from 18 to 23 years old (M = 18.91, SD = 0.99) were recruited from a psychology participant pool website at a Midwestern (USA.) university. The majority was White (90.8%), heterosexual (96.1%), and approximately half (53.6%) were currently in a committed romantic relationship with a mean length of 1.49 years (SD = 1.21).

5.1.2. Adults

We simultaneously recruited a sample of middle-aged (M = 43.52 years, SD = 12.06) employees (124 women, 64 men) of the same university that the college study sample was collected. These participants were recruited via an e-mail sent to all employees (including administration, faculty, and staff). Similar to the student sample, they were predominately White (95.2%) and heterosexual (88.8%). Most were currently in a committed romantic relationship (78.2%) with a mean length of 15.01 years (SD = 12.02).[1]

5.2. Measures

Participants followed a hyperlink to complete the following infidelity distress and attachment measures, presented in counterbalanced order.

5.2.1. Infidelity distress

Participants were asked to think of a serious committed relationship they had in the past, are currently having, or would like to have, and then to imagine they discover their partner becomes interested in someone else. Following the Buss et al. (1992) forced-choice format, they selected which scenario would be most distressing: imagining their partner (a) has formed a deep emotional attachment with someone else, or (b) engaging in sexual intercourse with someone else. Separately, participants also rated their distress for each scenario on 5-point scales (1 = *not distressing*, 5 = *very distressing*).

5.2.2. Attachment

We used the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) to categorize participants into secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment styles and the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) to measure the attachment anxiety and avoidance dimensions. In the present study, the ECR demonstrated excellent reliability (α = .93 for both dimensions).

[1] When included as covariates in the regressions, neither age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or relationship status/length were significant predictors.