A Model of Romantic Jealousy

Gregory L. White
University of Maryland

A definition of romantic jealousy is offered and imbedded within a general coping framework. Published and unpublished research is reviewed and then ordered within this framework. It is suggested that viewing jealousy as a "thing" like an emotion (anger), a behavior (competitive rivalry), or thoughts (desires for exclusivity) is incomplete. Jealousy is viewed as a label given to a complex of interrelated emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes. New research is presented that suggests that jealousy is related to certain features of romantic relationships.

The empirical study of romantic jealousy is in its infancy, though recently a number of social psychologists have conducted laboratory and survey research in this area (Berscheid & Fei, 1977; Bringle, Roach, Andler, & Evenbeck, 1977, 1979; Buunk, 1980a, 1980b; Shettel-Neuber, Bryson, & Young, 1978; White, 1977a, 1977b, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b). On the other hand, there is a rich theoretical literature on jealousy contributed to by biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, developmental psychologists, and psychoanalytic writers (Bringle et al., 1979; Clanton & Smith, 1977; White, 1977a). This literature attests to the complexity of jealousy, a complexity that leaves the empirical researcher grasping for a conceptual framework to order previous theory and research as well as to guide future investigation. This article suggests a definition of romantic jealousy and a conceptual model of its causes and consequences that will, it is hoped, serve these functions. In addition, data replicating previous research on correlates

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2Address all correspondence to Dr. Gregory L. White, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.
of jealousy (White, 1980b) are presented. These data, as well as published and unpublished work by several authors, are embedded within the conceptual model outlined below.

**DEFINITION**

Romantic jealousy may be defined as a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions that follow threats to self-esteem and/or threats to the existence or quality of the relationship when those threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential romantic attraction between one's partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival.

The twin threats to self and relationship are conceptually distinct yet empirically difficult to untangle, as Freud (1922/1955) first suggested. A number of theorists have also suggested that either or both threats are the psychological roots of jealousy (Bohm, 1961; Fenichel, 1955; Jones, 1930; Mead, 1931; Simmel, 1950, pp. 406-407; Spielman, 1971). These threats may be rather narrow and situationally defined, as, for example, when partner flirts at a party or remarks on the good looks of another at a time when the person is feeling unattractive. Or the threats may seem all-encompassing and chronic to the relationship, as when partner repeatedly talks about attractions to potential rivals, or frequently complains of unhappiness with the relationship.

As this definition implies, it may be useful to think of jealousy as a label given to particular configurations of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. From this point of view, jealousy is not an emotion, whether considered as a basic or complex emotion. It is apparent that "jealous" emotions differ from person to person, situation to situation, and culture to culture. Likewise, jealousy should not be confused with actions like competitive rivalry or with cognitive activities like comparison of self to rival or derogation of one's partner.

The pattern of the interrelated feelings, thoughts, and actions of the jealous person are assumed to be somewhat stable and enduring at the individual, relationship, and cultural levels. For example, one person may characteristically react to the threat to self-esteem with anger coupled with sarcasm directed toward the romantic partner. At the relationship level, people whose partners are less attracted to the relationship than themselves may feel particularly depressed when jealous. At the cultural level, sexual involvement of one's spouse with a rival may be nonthreatening if it gains the person community esteem, while otherwise such involvements may be felt as devastating attacks upon the self (cf. Hupka, 1977). What is conceptually important here is that jealousy is the pattern of the person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in reaction to a romantic threat.