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The Use of Covert and Overt Jealousy Tactics in Romantic Relationships: The Moderating Role of Relationship Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluated the inconsistencies regarding the relation between relationship satisfaction and nonverbal expressions of jealousy by focusing on the expression and function of covert and overt jealous acts. After informing a romantic partner that their partner would possibly experience attraction to a 3rd person, experimenters videotaped for the presence of jealous behaviors toward the naïve relationship partner. Results revealed that those partners who experienced threat and who were low in relationship satisfaction increased their use of overt tactics (i.e., physical touch), while those participants high in satisfaction increased their use of covert tactics (i.e., expressions of affection) with their partner. We discuss the results relative to assessing intra-relationship dynamics to understand and predict the form and frequency of jealous behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Research has provided inconsistent evidence regarding the relation between relationship satisfaction and expressions of jealousy in romantic relationships. On the one hand, it may be that satisfied relationship partners act jealous to reduce the chance that their partner leaves or is poached (e.g., Buss, 1988; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). On the other hand, it may be that satisfied partners trust their partners to stay, eliminating the need to act jealously (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010). In this research, we propose that both perspectives may be right, and discuss how the form and function of expressed jealousy in romantic relationships may help clarify the inconsistency.

Research on Relationship Satisfaction and Jealousy

Satisfaction and *more* jealousy. Considerable evidence points to the conclusion that

more relationship satisfaction is associated with more jealousy. Barelds and Dijkstra (2006; 2007), for example, consistently noted a positive relation between reactive jealousy (the degree to which individuals are upset by their relationship partner's emotional or sexual infidelity; Buunk, 1997) and relationship satisfaction, proposing that relationship partners use jealous acts to show their partners they care about them. Similarly, de Miguel and Buss (2011) found a positive link between relationship commitment and the reported use of mate retention tactics, positing that such tactics were motivated by concerns regarding the loss of what has been invested in the relationship. Furthermore, Bringle (1991) proposed and found that the greater the commitment to the relationship, the greater the emotional jealousy (how often individuals feel emotions during jealousy-invoking situations). Such jealousy was hypothesized to result from the potential loss of outcomes if the relationship were to end.

Satisfaction and less jealousy. Research has also noted that more relationship satisfaction is associated with less jealousy. Barelds and Dijkstra (2006; 2007) found that anxious jealousy (rumination about the possibility of infidelity; Buunk, 1997) lowered relationship satisfaction because jealousy was a symptom of a lack of trust in the relationship. Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, and Spitsberg (1995) observed a negative relation between cognitive jealousy (one's appraisal of a potentially jealousy-invoking situation) and relationship satisfaction, positing that dwelling on threats to the relationship augmented relational problems, which then reduced satisfaction (see also White & Mullen, 1989). Finally, Buunk (1991) found that satisfaction was negatively correlated with reactive, preventive (fear that partner will cheat), and self-generated (thoughts about partner's possible cheating) jealousy.

Expressions of Jealousy

Understanding whether satisfaction results in more or fewer jealous acts may be determined by inspecting how jealousy is expressed. As described by an impressive corpus of research, there are countless ways for expressing jealousy in the context of a romantic relationship, including expressions of affection, physical possession signals, verbal possession signals, displaying resources, and enhancing one's appearance (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 1997). As might be expected, some jealousy behaviors were more frequent than others and some were more likely to occur in public setting than in private (e.g., Willis & Briggs, 1992).

Jealousy behaviors can be classified into one of two categories: covert tactics and overt tactics. Overt tactics are those in which the intent of the expressed behavior is to indicate--explicitly and consciously to both the target and audience--affiliation with the target (called "direct mate guarding" by Buss, 1988). Sample overt tactics include violence against rivals, verbal and physical possession signals, intrasexual threats, and commitment displays. Alternatively, covert tactics are those behaviors in which neither the target nor audience may be aware that a tactic is being implemented. Covert tactics include appearance enhancement, love and care, vigilance, and ornamentation. Important for the present study, research indicates that two of the most common and pervasive jealous acts include both covert and overt actions: *physical touch* (overt) and *expressions of affection* (covert) (Buss, 1988, Table 4; Buss & Shackelford, 1997, Table 2).

With respect to the initiation of physical contact, it is used as a means of expressing

information to other persons outside the relationship. Researchers conclude that touch is a method to indicate to potential competitors that one's relationship partner is "not available" for a romantic relationship. Physical touch is more prevalent in public settings (e.g., at a café, public park, or discotheque)--where competitors may be present--than in private settings. Henley (1973), for instance, observed 113 touch behaviors in 60 hours of observation and found that participants touched each other more in public settings than in more private settings. Similarly, Buss and Shackelford (1997), in an investigation of the tactics of married couples use to retain their mate, found that both husbands and wives reported that one of the most frequently used retention tactics was physically touching their mate when a competitor was in close proximity. In this way, touch was employed because it was an effective tactic for informing others of the relationship status. Thus, when initiated, the touch initiator and the recipient (as well as the audience) were aware of the strategic functional meaning of the touch.

Alternatively, smiling is the most common form of expressing affection (Rashotte, 2002). In the context of intrasexual competition, smiling can be used to express the desire to develop or maintain social relations (Cashdan, 1998; Centorrino, Djemai, Hopfensitz, Milinski, & Seabright, 2010; Krumhuber, Manstead, & Kappas, 2007), and thus can be found in both public and private settings (Willis & Briggs, 1992). Importantly, although research notes that smiles can be used to express such affiliative motives, it can also indicate dominance (Öhman, Lundqvist, & Esteves, 2001; Tipples, Atkinson, & Young, 2002) or submissiveness (Whalen & Kleck, 2008). Thus, given the ambiguity regarding the expression of a smile (Maringer, Krumhuber, Fischer, & Niedenthal, 2011), it is considered a less effective tactic to indicate to the audience that their relationship partner is not available for a relationship. Thus, relative to touch, smiling at one's partner is classified as a *covert* tactic.

Does Satisfaction Affect how Jealousy is Expressed?

Can relationship satisfaction predict when overt versus covert behaviors are expressed? Compared to unsatisfied partners, satisfied partners believe that their partners will be there for them and are willing to meet relational needs (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 1990), with the most prominent relational need being relationship security and fidelity (Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). In this way, more satisfied relationships have fewer concerns regarding mate retention and mate poaching. Wieselquist (2009), for example, proposed that relationship satisfaction should produce fewer expressions of jealousy because it should make perceptions of investing more in the relationship less risky. In fact, expressions of jealousy in high satisfaction relationships may even be viewed negatively. Those who expect trust from their partner experienced reduced affect and lowered their evaluation of their partner when treated as someone who could not be trusted (Lydon, Jamieson, & Holmes, 1997). These lowered evaluations resulted from the lack of perceived trust from their partner. In the context of jealousy, such findings suggest that acts of jealousy are evaluated negatively in high satisfaction relationships because it signals that their partner is seen as not trusted to not leave the relationship. Thus, although both high and low satisfaction partners may experience jealousy, high satisfaction partners may be less likely to use overt tactics because such a tactic indicates a lack of trust in the partner. Alternatively, low satisfaction partners feel no constraint and are able to use more effective (e.g., overt) expressions of jealousy.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the relation between relationship satisfaction and the expression of jealousy. We explored this relation under conditions of threat to the relationship. Research that has focused on the interplay of threat and jealousy has noted that relationship threat facilitates the expression of jealousy (Bush, Bush, & Jennings, 1988; Sharpsteen, 1995; White & Mullen, 1989). In the present study, relationship partners were placed into a situation in which there was a "threat" to their relationship by being told that their relationship partner would experience reciprocated attraction to a 3rd person. We then assessed whether relationship partners expressed jealous acts toward their partner.

We expected more relationally satisfied participants to reduce their use of overt tactics (e.g., touch) under threat, but expected an increase in covert tactics (e.g., smiling). In addition, we explored gender of the relationship partner as a possible moderator because research has noted that the effects may be stronger for men relative to women (e.g., Henley, 1977).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 53 heterosexual couples recruited from an introductory psychology course (M age = 19.54, SD = 1.20) currently in dating relationships who had been dating for an average of 11.37 months (SD = 13.27).

Procedure

The experimental room was set-up with two armless chairs facing two other armless chairs. On the relationship couple's arrival to a study entitled "Keeping Secrets," they were told that the study required at least three people, but that the study would begin immediately without any other participants due to the length of the study. At this point, we initiated the cover story by telling the relationship couple that past research has found that when two people keep a secret from a third person, attraction between those persons tends to increase. Participants were told that the current study was designed to investigate the phenomenon further. After describing the study, an attractive male or female confederate showed up "late" to the study. (Note that this sequence of events produced a situation in which participants believed that they know the purpose of the study, but that the confederate does not.

Next, the relationship members and the confederate were "randomly" assigned to be either a "secret keeper" or not. The assignment was rigged to create two experimental conditions. In the low-threat condition, the experimenter assigned the confederate to share a secret with the same-sex relationship partner. In the high-threat condition, the confederate was assigned to share a secret with the opposite-sex relationship partner. The experimenter then left for a few minutes to "set up some materials." The confederate was instructed not to initiate any interactions with the relationship couple and was instructed to be pleasant if (in the unlikely occasion) a conversation was to arise. A concealed video camera recorded the room for five minutes.

To assess relationship satisfaction and to avoid confounding the assessment of

satisfaction with the experimental procedure, several days after the completion of the study, participants were mailed a questionnaire packet that included multiple personality assessments unrelated to the current study and Rusbult's (1980) widely-used 3-item measure of relationship satisfaction (0-9 scale; $M = 7.63$; $SD = 1.28$; $\alpha = .94$, sample item, "To what degree are you satisfied with your relationship?").

Data Coding

Three undergraduate raters evaluated each video. They coded each video for the number of smiles and physical touches for each participant (i.e., only the person under threat [or not] per session was coded). We coded a smile as a smile directed at the relationship partner (as determined by head orientation and/or gaze direction), regardless of intensity or duration. We coded a touch as any physical contact initiated by one relationship partner to their partner, regardless of physical location, perceived intent, or intensity of the touch. The reliability for touch was acceptable, $\kappa = .67$; as was the reliability for number of smiles, $\kappa = .79$.

RESULTS

Touch Initiation

The correlations between the variables are presented in Appendix A, Table 1. The average number of touches is presented in Table 1. We began by exploring the relation of relationship satisfaction to the frequency of touch as a function of threat and gender, resulting in a Satisfaction x Threat x Participant Gender regression with touch as the dependent variable (see APPENDIX A, Table 2). Due to the positive skew, the touch variable was subjected to a square root transformation. None of the main effects or two-way interactions were significant. Importantly, the Satisfaction x Threat x Gender interaction was significant, $b = -.29$, $se = .13$, $t(43) = -2.23$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta = .01$. We explored the 3-way interaction by decomposing the interaction by gender.

Table 1
Means (and Standard Deviation) for Jealous Acts by Gender and Threat.

Condition	Number of touches		Number of smiles	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
High threat	0.23 (0.40)	0.19 (0.46)	1.83 (1.32)	1.65 (1.29)
Low threat	0.24 (0.48)	0.17 (0.42)	1.17 (1.66)	1.76 (2.29)

Note. The number of touches ranged between 0 and 2 and the number of smiles ranged between 0 and 10.

For women, the Satisfaction x Threat interaction was not significant, $b = -.18$, $t(43) = -1.01$, $p = .32$; but it was marginal for men, $b = .46$, $t(43) = 1.95$, $p = .06$. To explore the interaction for men, we conducted conditional regressions for participants one standard deviation above and below the mean on satisfaction (Aiken & West, 1991). As noted in Figure 1, men with high satisfaction did not change their touch behavior as a function of threat, $b = -.66$, $t(43) = 1.69$, $p = .10$, but men with low satisfaction increased their use marginally, $b = .57$, $t(43) = 1.82$, $p = .06$. These findings provide support that satisfaction increases touch for threatened men with

low satisfaction.

Number of Smiles

We next explored whether the frequency of smiles was affected by relationship satisfaction, gender, and threat. Due to the positive skew, the smiles variable was subjected to a square root transformation. None of the main effects or two-way interactions was significant (see APPENDIX A, Table 2). As with the touch analyses, Satisfaction x Threat interactions were explored separately for men and women.

For women, the Satisfaction x Threat interaction was not significant, $b = -.18$, $t(43) = -0.05$, $p = .96$; but it was for men, $b = .46$, $t(43) = 2.68$, $p < .05$. As illustrated in Figure 2, low satisfaction men did not change their smile behavior as a function of threat, $b = -.16$, $t(43) = -0.23$, $p = .51$, but high satisfaction men did, $b = .78$, $t(43) = 2.60$, $p < .05$. These findings indicate that it was high satisfaction men who increased smiling in the face of relationship threat. [1]

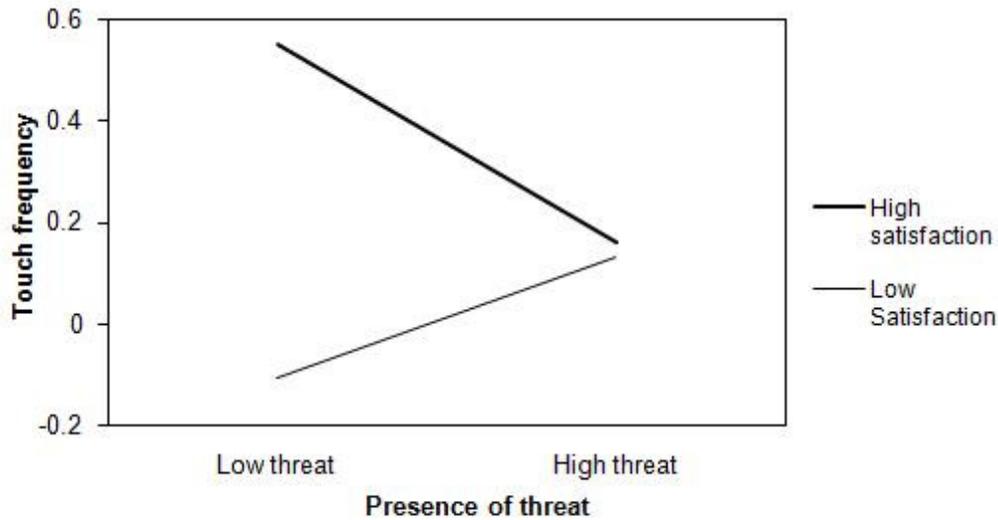


Figure 1. Frequency of touch behavior for men as a function of relationship satisfaction and presence of threat.

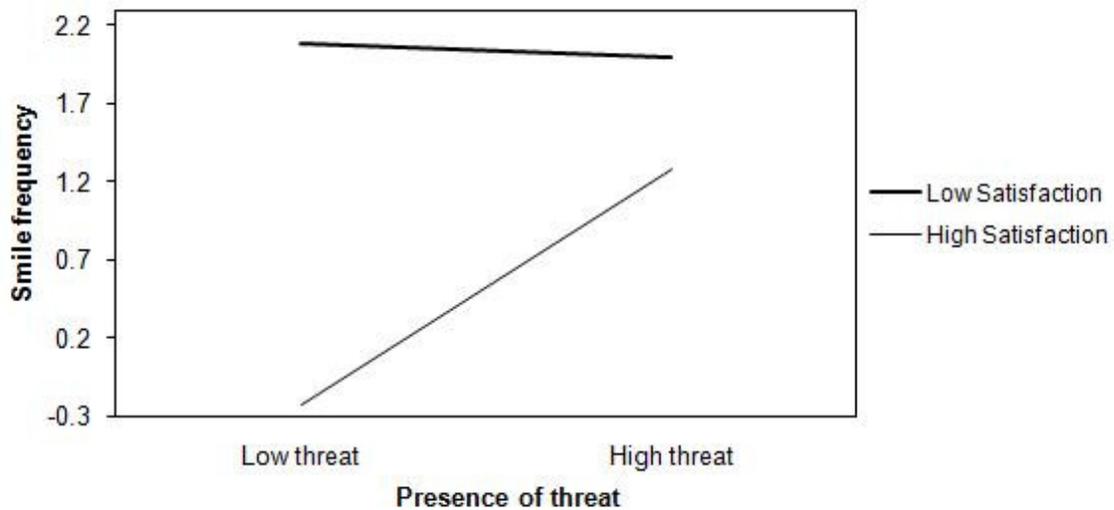


Figure 2. Smile frequency for men as a function of relationship satisfaction and presence of threat.

DISCUSSION

This research investigated whether overt and covert forms of jealousy rose or fell as a function of relationship satisfaction. Although not conclusive, our results provide evidence for the importance of evaluating multiple behaviors to understand when and how jealous tactics are employed. Specifically, we found a three-way interaction such that threatened unsatisfied men were more likely to touch their relationship partner, but it was the satisfied men who increased their smile frequency under threat. Whereas research on jealousy and satisfaction has not investigated the different behavioral forms jealous behaviors may take, this research provides

evidence that touch and smiling are used differently in high versus low satisfaction relationships. Specifically, this research found that the expression of covert acts were associated with satisfied couples, but that overt acts were more frequent in less satisfied couples.

We found that the relation between satisfaction and threat held only for men. This finding is consistent with past research: Henley (1977), for example, found that men engaged in more public touch than women. From a normative perspective, men in initial romantic relationships initiate touch more than women because men have been socialized to initiate sexual relations, with touch being a step toward that end (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). Alternatively, evolutionary psychologists posit that men increase touch early in relationships to ensure that he is the only one having sexual intercourse at, or near, the time of conception (Trivers, 1972; Schoder, 1993). Failure to do so may result in investing in offspring sired by a rival and incurring opportunity costs by forgoing other mating opportunities (Wilson & Daly, 1992). Given the findings of this study and the proposed evolutionary reasoning, future research may explore whether these patterns are more apparent early in relationships (as found in this study via undergraduate populations) versus longer-term, married, populations.

These findings point to the importance of distinguishing between the different forms jealousy can take. By differentiating between covert and overt tactics, it allows researchers to conclude that both high and low satisfaction partners express more jealousy under threat. However, the form that jealousy takes changes to match the context of the relationship. When touch might be taken as a lack of perceived trust in their partner to not leave the relationship, overt expressions of jealousy should decrease, and instances of covert jealousy should increase. Alternatively, when touch is needed to "claim" one's partner, instances of touch should increase. In this way, the different forms of jealousy provide further insight into the motivation for covert and overt tactics for expressing jealousy: On the one hand, the fact that high satisfaction men increased smiles indicates that they may continue to experience concerns developed from relationship threats. On the other hand, unsatisfied men may (and perhaps need to) be more overt in their expression of jealous acts to retain their relationship partner.

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Endnote

[1] All analyses were repeated with relationship length as a covariate. Relationship length was not a significant predictor of touch or smile frequency, and the inclusion of relationship length did not affect the overall results.

APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1

Correlation among variables

Variable	Correlation			
	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	--			
2. Threat	-.03	--		
3. Satisfaction	.20	.02	--	
4. Number of smiles	-.05	-.04	.11	--
5. Number of touches	.05	-.03	-.06	.00

Table 2

Regression estimates for the touch and smile analyses

Predictor	Touch			Smiles		
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	t-value	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	t-value
Gender	1.01	1.33	0.74	-1.44	2.41	-0.59
Threat	-2.69	2.15	-1.25	-4.25	3.71	-1.14
Satisfaction	0.18	0.26	0.51	-0.03	0.47	-0.06
Gender x Threat	2.44	1.33	1.83	3.87	2.41	1.60
Gender x Satisfaction	-0.13	0.13	-0.10	0.13	0.30	0.45
Threat x Satisfaction	0.37	0.26	1.28	0.45	0.47	0.94
Threat x Satisfaction x Gender	-0.29	0.13	-2.23*	-0.43	0.30	-1.40

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