Waking the Green-Eyed Monster: Attachment Styles and Jealousy Induction in Romantic Relationships

Many people can think of a friend or previous romantic partner who has purposely induced jealousy in a partner. Because jealousy can have negative outcomes on romantic relationships, it would be fruitful to understand why individuals would desire to deliberately make partners jealous. However, previous research on jealousy has focused on individuals who experience or express jealousy, linking it to both commitment and attachment style. Therefore, little is known about the factors associated with individuals who intentionally induce jealousy in their partners. In this study, we sought to identify some of the personal variables associated with such individuals.

According to White (1981), romantic jealousy is:

> a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions which follow threats to ... the existence or quality of the relationship, when those threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential attraction between one’s partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival. (p. 24)

In order for jealousy to occur, individuals must desire to protect their relationships with partners who they perceive as possessing (Fleischmann, Spitzberg, Anderson, & Roesch, 2005). Guerrero (1998) further described jealousy as the two interrelated processes of experience (i.e., cognitive assessments and emotional reactions) and expression (i.e., actions and interpersonal communication). Evolutionary psychology further posits that jealousy exists as a way of ensuring reproductive success (e.g., Buss, 2000). Because men have paternal uncertainty (i.e., they are never guaranteed that a woman’s child is truly their offspring), there is a risk that they might invest valuable resources in raising another man’s child. As such, they experience jealousy when their partner engages in sexual infidelity. However, women are certain of their maternal status. What is more important, then, is that they obtain and maintain the valued resources of the man so that their child has the greatest chance of surviving. If their partner were to fall in love with another woman, they would risk losing the partner’s resources. As such, women experience jealousy when their partner becomes emotionally involved with another woman (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992).

Previous research linked the experience and expression of jealousy to a variety of relational qualities. For example, jealous individuals tend to be more committed to their relationships (e.g., Rydell, McConnell, & Bringle, 2004), perceive themselves as possessing poor alternatives to the current relationship (Hansen, 1985), and are less satisfied with their relationships (e.g., Guerrero & Eloy, 1992). Additionally, research suggests that jealousy correlates with individual characteristics, specifically adult attachment styles (Guerrero, 1998).

Adult Attachment Styles

Individuals form emotional attachment bonds with others that influence relational behaviors throughout the course of their life. Attachment consists of two main

* Faculty mentor
dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety is influenced by viewing the self as worthy of love and support or not, and researchers have conceptualized it in terms of dependency or anxiety over abandonment. Individuals high in attachment anxiety require the external validation of others to maintain positive self-regard. Attachment avoidance is influenced by individuals’ view of others as trustworthy and available or unreliable and rejecting, and researchers have conceptualized it in terms of comfort or discomfort with intimacy. Individuals high in attachment avoidance avoid contact with others due to the expectation that others are untrustworthy and rejecting.

Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance can combine to result in a four-style model of attachment similar to that proposed by Bartholomew (1990) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Securely attached individuals (low in both anxiety and avoidance) possess a sense of worthiness and an expectation that others are accepting and responsive. Therefore, securely attached individuals are comfortable with intimacy, autonomy, and interdependence. Preoccupied individuals (high anxiety and low avoidance) have a sense of unworthiness yet strive for the acceptance of others. Therefore, preoccupied individuals are obsessed with relationships, are vigilant toward any threat to the relationship, experience higher levels of interpersonal distress, and reach out to others to fulfill dependency needs. Dismissing individuals (low anxiety and high avoidance) have a sense of worthiness but view others as untrustworthy; dismissing individuals are counter-dependent and uninterested in intimacy. Therefore, dismissing individuals report excessive coldness and, instead of a desire to develop attachments, they view themselves as self-sufficient. Fearful individuals (high in both anxiety and avoidance) have a sense of unworthiness and view others as untrustworthy and rejecting; fearful individuals are afraid of intimacy and socially avoidant of others. Therefore, fearful individuals experience higher levels of interpersonal distress and fear rejection.

Jealousy and Attachment Styles
Because jealousy arises from a distressing and threatening situation, it is likely to activate the attachment system in order to manage the feelings and behaviors that stem from relational threat and potential separation (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Research (e.g., Guerrero, 1998) suggests an association between jealousy and attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Individuals high in attachment anxiety experience more jealous worry and suspicion than individuals low in attachment anxiety. Individuals high in attachment avoidance experience less fear, use fewer relationship-maintaining behaviors, and are more likely to avoid expressing jealousy to their partner. Preoccupied individuals experience the greatest negative affect and engage in more surveillance behaviors of their partner, whereas dismissive individuals feel less fear and sadness than individuals low in attachment avoidance (Guerrero, 1998). Overall, these results indicate that high attachment anxiety, particularly when coupled with low attachment avoidance (i.e., preoccupied attachment style), is most strongly related to jealousy. Due to their dependency and strong need to maintain relationships, preoccupied individuals are more likely to engage in restorative behaviors.

Jealousy Induction
Although considerable research has focused on the characteristics of individuals experiencing jealousy, some individuals purposely evoke feelings of jealousy in their partners. Although relatively little research has examined jealousy induction, there is evidence that both women and men report purposely inducing jealousy, although women induce jealousy at higher rates than men (White, 1980). More recent research suggests that this behavior is more common than previously thought – more than 84% of participants in one study reported using a jealousy-inducing behavior on one or more occasion (Brainerd, Hunter, Moore, & Thompson, 1996). Individuals induce jealousy as a means of satisfying two broad goals: (a) to improve the relationship, boost self-esteem, and increase the positive outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) from a relationship and (b) to punish and control a partner and seek revenge (Fleischmann et al., 2005). Furthermore, White (1980) identified five more specific motives for inducing jealousy: increasing relational rewards, bolstering self-esteem, testing the relationship, seeking revenge, and punishing the partner. Although men and women most frequently reported inducing jealousy to test the relationship, seek revenge, and bolster their self-esteem (Fleischmann et al., 2005; White, 1980), additional research has identified other motives for inducing jealousy, including the desire to achieve positive relational outcomes (e.g., mate retention; Sheets, Fredendall, & Claypool, 1997), to enhance the perception of relationship security and quality (Barelks & Barelks-Dijkstra, 2007), to increase one’s sense of power and control in the relationship (e.g., Brainerd et al., 1996; Bringle, Renner, Terry, & Davis, 1983), and to behave aggressively (Brainerd et al., 1996).

In addition to the five motives identified, White (1980) also identified five techniques or behaviors of jealousy induction: talking about past relationships, talking about current relationships, flirting, dating/sexual contact with another, and lying about the existence of
a rival. The most popular jealousy-inducing behavior reported was to draw attention to the possibility of a rival by discussing or exaggerating current attractions to others (Fleischmann et al., 2005; White, 1980).

Present Study
Because previous research indicated that attachment is associated with jealousy (e.g., Guerrero, 1998), attachment is associated with aggression (e.g., Powers, 2000), and that aggression is associated with jealousy induction (Brainerd et al., 1996), we sought to examine the direct association between attachment and jealousy induction. Because individuals with high attachment anxiety (particularly preoccupied individuals) experience the most jealousy and engage in the most aggression (Guerrero, 1998; Powers, 2000), it is likely that an individual with high attachment anxiety would induce jealousy in a partner as a way of testing the partner’s commitment to the relationship and to increase relational quality and rewards. Thus, we first hypothesized that individuals high in attachment anxiety would report inducing jealousy in their partners more than individuals low in attachment anxiety.

As noted earlier, individuals high in attachment avoidance avoid expressing jealousy to their partner, experience less relational fear, and use fewer relationship-maintaining behaviors (Guerrero, 1998). Although insecurely attached individuals experience more jealousy (Guerrero, 1998), individuals high in attachment avoidance are uncomfortable with intimacy and tend to avoid committed relationships (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998). Thus, it was unclear whether attachment avoidance would be associated with jealousy induction. Therefore, we posed the following research question: Is attachment avoidance associated with tendencies to induce jealousy?

Preoccupied individuals exhibit higher levels of dependence on others (Bartholomew, 1990); thus, it is likely they have less power and control in their relationships. These individuals obsess over their relationships and depend on others’ acceptance to feel worthy. Therefore, they are likely to be more emotionally invested in their relationships than their partners. Because the partners of preoccupied individuals are less invested, preoccupied individuals are worried that their partners will leave the relationship. In turn, preoccupied individuals are likely to induce jealousy as a way of retaining their partner (Sheets et al., 1997). Therefore, we proposed a second hypothesis that individuals with preoccupied attachment would report engaging in the most jealousy-inducing behaviors. In other words, we expected that there would be a significant attachment anxiety by attachment avoidance interaction, such that individuals high in attachment anxiety and low in attachment avoidance would show the highest levels of jealousy-inducing behaviors.

Method
Participants
As part of a larger study, 100 undergraduates (79 women, 21 men) currently involved in a romantic relationship completed an online questionnaire. Eleven participants took a very short (i.e., less than 10 min) or very long (i.e., longer than 60 min) amount of time to complete the survey. Because there was reason to suspect these participants’ data may have been invalid (e.g., random responding, acquiescence, distracted while completing the task), we eliminated these cases. The final sample consisted of 89 participants (72 women, 17 men). Participants ranged from 18 to 27 years old ($M = 19.8, SD = 1.44$). The majority of participants were Caucasian (79.8%), dating exclusively (76.4%), not cohabitating (95.5%), and reported being in love (73.0%). Participants’ romantic involvement with their current partner ranged from 1 month to 7 years ($M = 18.1$ months, $SD = 19.3$).

Measures
Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships measure (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) is 36-item scale consisting of two 18-item subscales designed to measure the degree to which an individual exhibits attachment avoidance (i.e., avoidance of intimacy) and attachment anxiety (i.e., anxiety over abandonment). Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $7 = \text{strongly agree}$). Examples of items measuring attachment avoidance include “Just when my partner starts to get close to me, I find myself pulling away” and “I tell my partner just about everything.” Examples of items measuring attachment anxiety include “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them” and “I often wish that my partner’s feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him/ her.” Both subscales demonstrated good reliability in the current study (avoidance, $\alpha = .91$; anxiety, $\alpha = .92$).

Jealousy induction. Because no known measure of jealousy induction exists, we created 18 items for the purposes of this study. We based the instructions and structure of the items on Pfeiffer and Wong’s (1989) Multidimensional Jealousy Scale, whereas we used White’s (1980) five jealousy-inducing behaviors (i.e., talking about past relationships, talking about current relationships, flirting, dating or sexual contact with another, lying about the existence of a rival) as a guide for the content of the items. Participants responded to these items based on the following instructions: “In the following questions, your romantic partner will be
referred to as ‘X.’ Please respond to the following questions by circling the appropriate response.” Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sample items for the jealousy induction measure with the relevant content domain included in parentheses include: “I talk with X about my past romantic relationships in order to make X jealous” (talking about past relationships), “I talk with X about my opposite-sex friendships in order to make X jealous” (talking about current relationships), “I flirt with people in front of X in order to make X jealous” (flirting), “I tell X when others express romantic interest (e.g., being asked out on a date, being ‘hit on’) in me in order to make X jealous” (dating/sexual contact with another), and “I falsely tell X that others are romantically interested in me in order to make X jealous” (lying about the existence of a rival). The jealousy induction scale demonstrated good reliability, α = .96.

Results

We first calculated zero-order correlations to ensure that individuals’ tendency to induce jealousy in their partners was associated with both attachment anxiety and avoidance. Confirming our first hypothesis and providing support for our research question, jealousy induction was positively associated with attachment anxiety, r(89) = .36, p < .001, and attachment avoidance, r(89) = .34, p < .01. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were also significantly correlated, r(89) = .28, p < .01.

To assess our second hypothesis (i.e., individuals with a preoccupied attachment style would be most likely to induce jealousy in their partners), we conducted a hierarchical regression. In the first step, gender was entered as a control variable. In the second step, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were entered as predictor variables. In the third step, the centered interaction of attachment anxiety x attachment avoidance was entered as a predictor variable, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991). As shown in Table 1, attachment anxiety (β = .34) and attachment avoidance (β = .25) were both unique predictors of jealousy induction (Step 2), and the addition of these constructs significantly improved the predictive ability of the model beyond that of gender, ΔF(2, 85) = 12.65, p < .001, ΔadjR² = .21. Contrary to expectations, the attachment anxiety x attachment avoidance interaction term was not a significant predictor in Step 3 (β = .04), nor did it significantly improve the model, ΔF(1, 84) = 0.16, p = .69, ΔadjR² = -.01. In addition, gender was a significant predictor of jealousy induction after accounting for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (β = .25 in Steps 2 and 3), indicating that women induce jealousy in their partners more than men.²

Discussion

Although previous research has shown that experienced jealousy is associated with individuals’ attachment style (e.g., Guerrero, 1998), no known research has investigated how attachment styles might influence individuals’ tendencies to induce jealousy in their partners. Thus, the current study extends previous work on jealousy induction by demonstrating that there are attachment style differences in the frequency of jealousy induction from a partner.

Two major findings emerge from the present study. First, individuals with insecure attachments (i.e., high anxiety or avoidance) have an increased tendency to try to induce jealousy in a partner. However, specific attachment styles (i.e., secure, preoccupied, dismissing, fearful) are not related to the likelihood of inducing jealousy in a partner. Taken together, these findings further demonstrate the importance of examining attachment style dimensions instead of attachment categories.

Because individuals high in attachment anxiety require the external validation of others in order to maintain a positive self-regard and ease the anxiety elicited by a fear of abandonment by a partner (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998), it is likely that these individuals induce jealousy as a way of testing their relationship, bolstering their self-esteem, and obtaining a specific reward such as confirmation that the partner is committed. Together with past research showing that the most frequent motivation for inducing jealousy is testing the relationship (Fleischmann et al., 2005; White, 1980), it seems likely that individuals high in attachment anxiety engage in jealousy-inducing behaviors to confirm their partners’ commitment. On the other hand, because individuals high in attachment avoidance are uncomfortable with intimacy and avoid contact with others due to the expectation that others are untrustworthy and rejecting (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998), it is somewhat surprising that attachment avoidance was also a signifi-

1 At the recommendation of an anonymous reviewer, we reanalyzed the data and controlled for relationship length in the first step. Controlling for relationship length did not alter the pattern of results at any of the three steps. Furthermore, relationship length was a nonsignificant predictor of jealousy induction in the first step (β = -.16, p = .12), thus providing evidence that our obtained results were not an artifact of relationship duration.

2 We recognize that the imbalance in sample sizes of women (n = 72) and men (n = 17) is not ideal, and the results regarding gender should certainly be interpreted with caution. However, eliminating gender from the analysis or reanalyzing these data with only the sample of women would, in essence, provide less information about the intricacies of jealousy induction than we currently present (i.e., doing so would provide the illusion that jealousy induction is not a gendered behavior, when in fact, it appears that the genders differ in terms of their jealousy induction behaviors). Clearly, future research should obtain a more balanced sample to determine if this pattern of results holds for both women and men.
tant predictor of jealousy induction. However, these individuals avoid dependency and view themselves as self-sufficient. As such, individuals high in attachment avoidance may desire to gain power and control over their partner, as they wish to be less dependent on their partner.

A second main finding to emerge from this study is that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were both unique predictors of jealousy induction. Attachment anxiety was more strongly related to jealousy induction than attachment avoidance, suggesting that individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to engage in jealousy-inducing behaviors more often than individuals high in attachment avoidance. However, the fact that both forms of attachment were unique predictors of jealousy induction suggests that the two types of attachment operate differentially. As noted earlier, individuals high in attachment anxiety likely engage in jealousy-inducing behaviors as a way to confirm their partners’ commitment. On the other hand, individuals high in attachment avoidance may induce jealousy in a partner out of a desire to gain power and control. Although the current study did not explore motivations for inducing jealousy, it seems plausible that this finding may be explained by such motivations. Future research examining how attachment style is associated with individuals’ motivations for inducing jealousy may provide valuable insight into the nature of these relationships.

Replicating previous findings (i.e., White, 1980), the results of the current study indicated that women induce jealousy more frequently than men (see Step 3 in Table 1). However, these results should be taken with caution. In the current study, there were a limited number of male participants \( n = 17 \) in comparison to female participants \( n = 72 \). Therefore, future research should examine gender differences in jealousy induction in a more gender-balanced sample (also see Footnote 2).

In addition to the imbalance of gender, another limitation of the current study is that it consisted of only undergraduates. This convenience sampling resulted in participants who were relatively young and romantically inexperienced. Thus, the results of this study may not generalize to other populations, such as individuals who may have had more experiences with jealousy and jealousy induction. Because successes and failures with previous jealousy-induction strategies are likely to influence one’s current behavior, replicating this study with a larger and more diverse sample may provide a clearer understanding of how attachment style is related to jealousy induction.

Although the present study examined only one specific individual difference variable (i.e., attachment style), other individual characteristics may be associated with jealousy induction. For example, future research could examine how jealousy induction is associated with individuals’ conceptualizations of love. Because some individuals may view love and relationships as a game that needs to be played (e.g., Hendrick, Hendrick, & Dicke, 1998), it seems likely that individuals’ “love styles” could also affect the likelihood of an individual

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchical Regression Predicting Jealousy Induction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = \text{male}, 2 = \text{female})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = \text{male}, 2 = \text{female})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = \text{male}, 2 = \text{female})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety x Avoidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \).
engaging in jealousy-inducing behaviors.

Although insecurely attached individuals may engage in jealousy-inducing behaviors in order to achieve positive relational outcomes, the behavior is most likely counterproductive. Because jealousy is linked to relational dissatisfaction (e.g., Guerrero & Eloy, 1992), successfully inducing jealousy in a partner may also decrease the partner’s satisfaction with the relationship, in turn increasing the likelihood of the relationship ending. Therefore, individuals who feel as though their romantic partners tend to leave them may engage in jealousy-inducing behaviors that threaten relational satisfaction. Future research could examine how jealousy induction is associated with relational outcomes, such as satisfaction. Relationship therapists could apply these findings to recommend methods of achieving desired relational motives that are more productive than inducing jealousy in a romantic partner.

References


