

Disarming Jealousy in Couples Relationships: A Multidimensional Approach

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Jealousy is a powerful emotional force in couples' relationships. In just seconds it can turn love into rage and tenderness into acts of control, intimidation, and even suicide or murder. Yet it has been surprisingly neglected in the couples therapy field. In this paper we define jealousy broadly as a hub of contradictory feelings, thoughts, beliefs, actions, and reactions, and consider how it can range from a normative predicament to extreme obsessive manifestations. We ground jealousy in couples' basic relational tasks and utilize the construct of the vulnerability cycle to describe processes of derailment. We offer guidelines on how to contain the couple's escalation, disarm their ineffective strategies and power struggles, identify underlying vulnerabilities and yearnings, and distinguish meanings that belong to the present from those that belong to the past, or to other contexts. The goal is to facilitate relational and personal changes that can yield a better fit between the partners' expectations.

Keywords: Jealousy; Couples Therapy; Integrative Multidimensional Approach

Fam Proc 49:486–502, 2010

Born in love but propelled by rage, jealousy is a complex relational experience. It is a visceral fear of loss, a set of paradoxical feelings and thoughts, an action and a reaction. Milton referred to it as the “injured lover’s hell,” Shakespeare, as the “green eyed monster” that destroys love and annihilates the beloved person. The 19th century Brazilian writer Machado de Assis described it as a “doubt,” a twilight between fantasy and reality, that drives a person into madness. Recognized all over the world as a motivation for crimes of passion, jealousy is construed in some cultures as a destructive force that needs to be contained, while in others it is conceived as a companion of love and gatekeeper of monogamy, essential for the protection of a couple’s union.

Within the individual paradigm, jealousy has been described as an attribute and proneness of a person (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Hauck, 1981). It has been

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addressed within the psychoanalytic literature as an emotion that results from childhood conflicts (Fenichel, 1953; Freud, 1922; Klein & Riviere, 1964). In spite of its clear interpersonal nature and significance in couples relationships, there have been considerably few attempts to address it in the family therapy literature (see Cano & O'Leary, 1997; Crowe, 1995; Im, Wilner, & Breit, 1983; Pam & Pearson, 1994; Pines, 1998, and Teisman, 1979). To our surprise, the word "jealousy" is absent from the indices of major couples therapy textbooks.

The literature on infidelity deals with the impact of betrayals and affairs in terms of the trauma of revelation and discovery, confession, decisions about the third party, forgiveness, and repair—all matters related to a concrete situation of betrayal in the here and now (see Abrahms Spring & Spring, 1996; Lusterman, 1998). However, it does not deal with jealousy. The word is absent from the tables of content and indices in the most widely read infidelity books as well.

Jealousy is a complex reaction that occurs when a real or imagined rival threatens a valued romantic relationship (Pines, 1998). The emotional experience, mostly anticipatory, is based on a deep fear of losing the loved person to a competitor. It is usually maintained by uncertainties: the jealous person is confused about where he or she stands in comparison to a third person, what is actually going on in the life or mind of the beloved, and whether her reactions are purely subjective or based on an actual situation of betrayal.

Our multidimensional framework addresses these ambiguities. It deals with extreme reactions like the Othello syndrome in which the jealous person is mostly driven by fantasy and imagination. It also considers situations of jealousy where there has been a real and acknowledged betrayal, but the individual's traumatic reactions are further distorted by subjective meanings and emotions that belong to another time and/or another context. These added meanings render the jealousy experience doubly painful and equivocal. The approach presented here offers additional tools to those described in the infidelity literature where excessive jealousy after an affair or betrayal is interfering with processes of repair and forgiveness.

WHAT IS JEALOUSY?

A Reciprocal Pattern

When a couple presents jealousy as a persistent problem, we assume it is part of an interactional pattern being enacted by both partners. The experience of jealousy tends to arise without warning at a particular moment when one partner behaves in a way that stirs up a fear of betrayal in the other. To manage the anxieties engendered, the jealous partner may become sullen, inquisitive, or aggressive. These behaviors often boomerang as they activate withdrawal or defiance in the other. Withdrawal generates even more suspicion in the jealous person, whose inquisitive efforts in turn generate further evasiveness. A pursuer–distancer pattern is set in motion. In situations where the jealous partner becomes sullen and the other distances, their actions and reactions often lead to a pattern of mutual disengagement. No matter what the choreography is, over time the individuals become polarized: the jealous person settles into vigilance and mistrust, and the other, under surveillance, into secretiveness and resentment. The escalation promotes frustration, despair, and even violence. It is important to emphasize that these patterns can be initiated by behaviors of either partner (Crowe, 1995). Sometimes the jealous partner overreacts to an innocent behavior of the other

scanning for evidence to prove that someone else is preferred. In other situations it is the other partner who invites jealousy by acting flirtatious or distracted, or by betraying the partner's trust. From a therapeutic point of view, at least initially, it does not matter who initiates; the task is to understand and disarm the escalation pattern.

A Confusing Relational Experience

The phenomenology of jealousy is gripping for both partners, who are perplexed by dramatic oscillations between love and hate, helplessness and aggression, blaming the other and blaming the self.

The experience of the jealous person resembles a trance-like state characterized by intrusive fantasies and fears, compulsiveness, and irrational associations. A client described how he became immediately moody whenever he heard the word "Tribeca," the neighborhood in which his girlfriend lived with her previous boyfriend. The British sexologist Havelock Ellis writes about the fury: Jealousy is "that dragon which slays love under the pretence of keeping it alive" (Ellis, 1922, p. 120). The French philosopher Roland Barthes speaks of the contradictions involved: "As a jealous man, I suffer four times over: because I am jealous, because I blame myself for being so, because I fear that my jealousy will wound the other, because I allow myself to be subject to a banality: I suffer from being excluded, from being aggressive, from being crazy, and from being common" (Barthes, 1978, p. 146). The suspected partner is equally bewildered. On one hand he feels loved and important; on the other he feels controlled and smothered. One client explained: "I know she loves me more than anybody ever will, but I'm suffocating. I feel like I'm on trial for crimes I didn't commit. My only choices are to defend myself or to leave."

The jealous person tends to become increasingly obsessive and is continuously preoccupied with the "third" person in the love triangle. To deal with the ambiguities involved she becomes driven to construct a certainty that is not necessarily there. She believes more in her worst fears than in the partner's reassurances or the evidence that is put in front of her. The German word for jealousy alludes to its compulsive character. "Eifer-sucht" literally means "zealous addiction" (Baumgart, 1990). While obsessing, the jealous person is not aware of other underlying conflicts but only of a compelling mental tedium (Sheinberg, 1988). She focuses so much of her vital energy in trying to settle the ambiguity that there is little energy left for most other aspects of her personal life. Clinging so desperately to the other, she has difficulty exercising her own freedom and self-direction.

Jealousy is often confused with envy but, although related, these are different experiences. Envy is a dyadic experience in which the envious person wants something that the envied person has, such as success, beauty, or power. Jealousy is always triadic. It is about losing the loved person to a rival. Envy and jealousy are often entangled. When the jealous person sees the partner, or the rival, as having qualities he or she does not have, the experience of jealousy becomes doubly painful.

Qualified by Gender and Culture

Jealousy is a universal experience (Fisher, 2004; Freud, 1922; Pines, 1998). However, what is experienced as a "threat," and the ways it is manifested, vary according to gender, culture, and subcultures.

Social anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists describe gender differences in the meaning and expression of jealousy all over the world (Pines, 1998). Historically women have been considered the property of men. Even today, when a man fears being cuckolded, his fears may include the idea that someone is taking something that is rightfully his. As men fear loss of property and pride they express themselves aggressively: they batter, stalk, and kill. Women traditionally have been dependent and their jealousy is usually tainted by fears of losing safety and resources for themselves and their offspring. Afraid of men's power, it is common for women to resign themselves to their partner's infidelities and berate themselves for their own inadequacies (Fisher, 2004).

Depending on the culture, jealousy may be repressed or expressed. While Anglo Saxons often connote jealousy as a dangerous and distasteful emotion that should be contained, Latin cultures usually legitimize it as an expression of love.

The meaning of jealousy also varies according to social groups. Pines (1998) studied open marriages, polyamorous communes, and swingers, and concluded that these groups share beliefs that help them reduce jealousy. They believe jealousy is a learned response that can be unlearned, and that desire for sexual variety does not mean there is something wrong with the marriage. They also believe that explicit agreements about extra marital relationships are essential to create enough safety to keep jealousy in check. Pines found that although individuals in these non-monogamous groups displayed milder reactions jealousy remained a problem kept under control by rigid rules and time-consuming discussions. Polygamy is another situation in which jealousy is minimized by the ways in which polygamous groups construe it.

Always a Triangle

The third party in a jealous triangle is typically a romantic "other." When there is an actual "lover" in the picture, the influence of that relationship certainly plays a big role and maintains the couple's difficult dynamics. However, other people, such as a friend, a parent, an ex-spouse, a child from a previous marriage, or an old love, can all be experienced as competitors. Sometimes the rival is someone from the past who is viewed as preferred; the perception that someone else was once very special can stir up feelings of exclusion and betrayal. Oftentimes the object of jealousy is a situation that does not involve a person but creates a distance that is experienced as threatening to the exclusiveness or priority of the love bond. Work, graduate school, hobbies, pets, smart phones, the internet, pornography, or any other time consuming interest may trigger feelings of exclusion and stimulate reactivity between the partners. These situations usually involve a combination of reality and projections.

There is a Spectrum of Jealousies

Many authors have described jealousy as a continuum of reactions ranging from normative to pathological (Freud, 1922). The first degree, or so-called "normative jealousy," refers to feeling momentarily threatened by a publicly recognized outside relationship (Crowe, 1995). The second degree implies a previous sense of vulnerability that includes anticipatory fears and obsessiveness (Pasini, 2003). The third degree is what has been described as the "Othello syndrome" (Todd & Dewhurst, 1955), a malady based on distortion, delusion, paranoia, and even delirium. In these extreme forms, the person is certain of his perceptions of betrayal no matter what the

evidence is to the contrary. There may be neurobiological factors rendering the person's ruminations persistent. Marazziti (2003) found that people with excessive jealousy have considerable alterations in their serotonergic systems. Jealousy is at times related to psychotic processes, brain dysfunction, or senility (Pasini, 2003). When the problem is not amenable to psychotherapy, psychiatric evaluation and medication may be indicated.

There is also a spectrum of realities to be taken into account. Sometimes there is an actual betrayal and the jealous person feels threatened for a clear reason. In many situations the jealous person is vulnerable because of betrayals in previous relationships. Or there may be a legacy of perceived betrayals in the family of origin. Sometimes there is no evidence of an actual betrayal but the partner is distracted or forgetful and the jealous person senses that something is amiss. It may also be that the jealous person is the one betraying. Preoccupied with his own fantasies and guilt he projects his feelings, actions, and desires onto the partner and reacts to his projections as if they were real.

The Seesaw Phenomenon

An intriguing relational aspect of jealousy is the way in which the partners trade positions in the dance. The person who was initially jealous may at a different point in time be the one who betrays. The one who was repeatedly the object of jealousy may suddenly find herself under the spell of a strong mistrust never experienced before. For some couples, this shift happens within the same relationship; for others, it occurs in a different relationship with a new partner.

The insecurities and fears associated with jealousy may stay dormant until a particular situation or relationship awakens the individual's vulnerabilities. Dave, for example, had been the object of jealousy in his first marriage and with all his previous girlfriends. Yet when he turned 40 and his mother unexpectedly died, he was baffled by the jealousy he experienced with Lisa, whom he had just started dating. When she told him she wanted to take things slowly, he was suddenly overwhelmed by intense mistrust. He began to spy on her, desperately searching her drawers, emails, and cellular phone for evidence of other lovers. He even hid outside her apartment to see if she was coming home with other men. Talking about his jealousy in therapy, he sobbed as he remembered his father moving out when he was 10 years old.

CONCEPTUAL AND CLINICAL FRAMEWORK

In trying to help couples deal with jealousy, we consider:

- (a) Relational tasks involved in creating a "good enough fit" between the partners.
- (b) The construct of the vulnerability cycle as it describes processes of derailment (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).
- (c) A road map to orient the therapist on how to proceed, level by level, to revert the couple's derailment into more effective ways of handling insecurities and jealousy in the relationship.

Inherent Tasks of Being a Couple

We have identified three sets of relational tasks that are relevant to the experience of jealousy. They are: (a) the cocreation of mutually acceptable boundaries, (b) the

maintenance of balance between security and freedom, individually and conjointly, and (c) the development of effective strategies to manage personal insecurities and the uncertainties of love. When these tasks are mismanaged, it can lead to the arousal and escalation of jealousy.

Defining boundaries

To consider themselves “a couple” two people must establish boundaries around their union that will differentiate their relationship from all others (Perel, 2006). This task is accomplished by the adoption of social and cultural norms as well as by the definition of parameters that are unique to the couple. For instance, when Luke and Elizabeth got married in the church they presumed monogamy. However, the specifics of what monogamy would mean to them evolved through a series of transactions in which they defined how much separateness and togetherness they could tolerate, what is private and what can be shared, and what they consider acceptable social behavior. In this fluid way all couples define the meaning of fidelity in their particular relationship.

Couples must also define boundaries in terms of how much influence and interference they will tolerate from parents, in-laws, children, ex-spouses, friends, work, computers, and smart phones. Boundaries must also be renegotiated as they move through the life cycle and have to accommodate raising children, increasing professional demands, retirement, and health problems. Jealousy usually signals incongruous definitions of boundaries by the two partners.

Finding a balance between security and freedom

Mitchell (2002) suggests that we all crave the predictability of home, yet we also long for autonomy to explore the new. Individuals vary a great deal in terms of how much freedom they expect for themselves and for their partners. While some couples thrive in a commuter arrangement in which they are only together on the weekends, others suffer when separated for even one night. Some find flirting with others acceptable, while others can't tolerate the partner having close friends. Most couples need a balance of security and freedom to maintain vitality in their long-term relationship. However, couples struggling with jealousy end up in polar opposite positions with one partner feeling threatened by separateness and the other insisting on the right to freedom. Traditionally, men have been threatened by women's independence. The fact that she takes charge of her own desires, or has had many other lovers, or has resources of her own, can all implicitly mean that she does not need him. Even without any evidence of betrayal, this woman's independent way of being can inspire the jealous “doubt.”

Managing uncertainty and the fragilities of love

Whenever we love we must deal with feelings of vulnerability and risk in relation to the loved person. We must grapple with the possibility that our hearts can be broken and that we can lose the loved person to betrayal, rejection, divorce, or death. Ultimately we do not have control over his or her feelings and actions. At the same time, on a daily basis, we must trust that the beloved will be there for us. In order to sustain a relationship over time, we must handle these existential contradictions of adult love by managing our fears and vulnerabilities in ways that are not detrimental to the relationship.

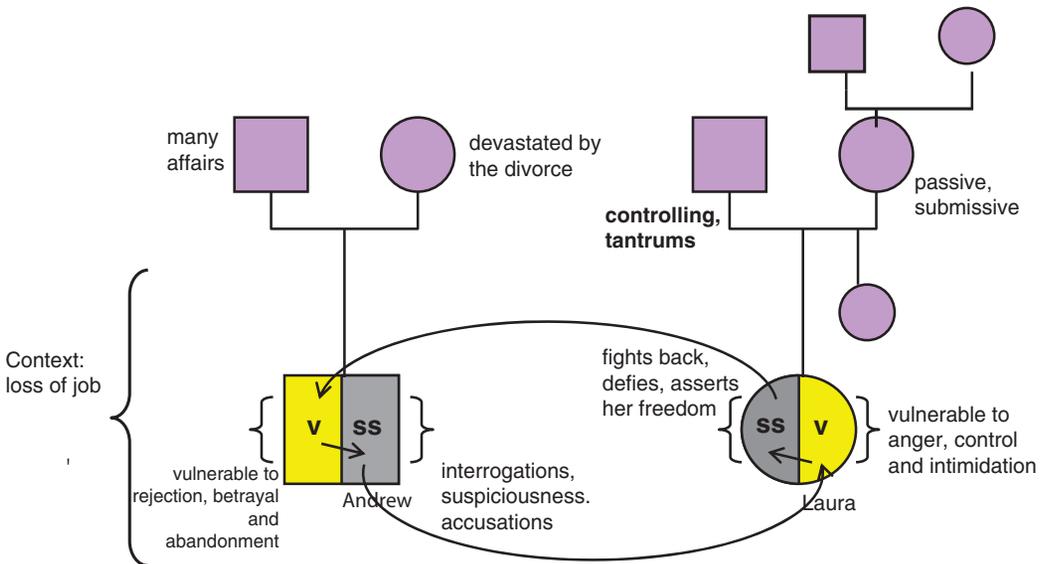
In dealing with the ebb and flow of insecurities that naturally arise in the course of a long term relationship, some couples evolve effective and creative ways to manage their vulnerabilities and fears while others do not. The more effective couples tend to view jealousy as a part of love, a warning sign that there is a loss of connection, sexuality, or affection, and that they need to reaffirm their importance to one another. Pasini (2003) talks about jealousy that is aphrodisiac. The individual strategically provokes jealousy to bring back the partner’s attention. In addition, these couples know how to be considerate and soothing. The jealous partner may apologize for having made a scene or may act in a sexually passionate way that reaffirms their bond. The partner under suspicion may readjust his or her behavior to alleviate the partner’s insecurities. When the partners are unable to manage their feelings from the perspective of what is good for the relationship, jealousy is quickly transformed from fears of losing the loved one to detrimental efforts to regain power and control.

The Vulnerability Cycle: Understanding Couple’s Derailment

In managing the tasks of being a couple, the partners can easily mishandle the challenges involved. The construct of the vulnerability cycle helps us understand how couples derail. It describes each partner’s vulnerabilities and survival strategies, as well as the interlocking dynamics between the partners that contribute to their stalemate. The construct also identifies cultural, gender, and intergenerational factors that may be fueling the couple’s impasses (see Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).

Vulnerabilities and survival strategies

Some of the vulnerabilities that typically underlie jealousy are: a need to be recognized as the most special person in the life of the partner, fears of abandonment and betrayal, and feelings of inadequacy in which the person feels unattractive or unworthy. Sometimes jealousy is intertwined with depression. The vulnerability cycle



also recognizes the vulnerabilities of the nonjealous partner who, over time, inevitably feels mistreated and constrained.

In addition, the vulnerability cycle identifies the interpersonal strategies each partner automatically puts in place to manage his or her vulnerabilities. Sometimes the jealous partner tries to influence the other through quiet resentment and withdrawal. More typically he or she tries to regain power and control through coercive tactics such as ongoing interrogations, vigilance, accusations, and forceful demands. Conversely, the other partner often protects the self by becoming increasingly evasive, lying, and defending his freedom. When in despair, he threatens to leave.

The vulnerability cycle highlights the disjuncture between each partner's suffering and the defensive positions they use to cope with that pain. It is these self-protective strategies that keep them in a cycle and lead them to derail. When a couple relates from survival strategy to survival strategy their more vulnerable feelings remain hidden and they become increasingly disconnected.

Andrew and Laura illustrate this framework. One year into their marriage, at a party, Andrew saw Laura laughing with Jim, a good-looking guy who worked in her office. He suddenly felt an acute fear: "She never laughs with me like this. She works with him every day. They may be having an affair!" At home a fight exploded. Andrew accused her of "inappropriate behavior," Laura justified her actions: "We are just friends, he has a girlfriend, and by the way you can't stop me from having a good time!" Threatened by her defensiveness, Andrew became more aggressive, blaming her for having been seductive in other situations. Becoming more angry, Laura called him "controlling" and "crazy." Two days later, in therapy, a context emerged. Laid-off from his job one month earlier, Andrew had been feeling demoralized. He also brought up his father's infidelities which led to his parents' divorce and to his mother's subsequent depression. Laura talked about watching her mother submit to her father's intimidations. As a teenager she vowed never to be passive like that. Being flirtatious was her way of maintaining independence. For his part Andrew felt he had legitimate reasons to stay vigilant. However, the combination of her flirtatiousness and his catastrophic fears of betrayal generated a difficult fault line in their relationship. Consumed by fears originated in the past, and disconnected by their survival strategies, they remained caught up in a vulnerability cycle from which they could not emerge (see Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).

Overlaps between present and past

As it is evident in this case, jealousy is usually multilayered. For both partners, there are aspects of the present situation that instigate the pattern. However, there are fears from the past, or other contexts, that also inform the meaning of what is happening. These "remote files" containing images, beliefs, sensations, and fears tend to qualify and distort the present situation. Andrew felt insecure after losing his job. The stimulation of feelings related to his parents' divorce intensified his anxiety about a potential betrayal. Laura might have disliked being subjected to accusations no matter what. However, "remote files" about her mother's submission reinforced her need to assert her freedom with vehemence.

Cultural and gender files

In addition to meanings arising from our personal histories, we also hold "files" related to gender and culture that reinforce the vulnerability cycle. For example, even though Mona was a prominent doctor who had lived in the United States for 20 years,

her Pakistani origins informed her obedient mind set. Whenever her husband blamed her with jealous accusations she placated him with apologies. When questioned by the therapist, she explained, “My mother, grandmother, cousins, and aunts all put up with this kind of behavior. What else can a woman do?”

Clinical Road Map

Couples struggling with jealousy usually come to therapy polarized. The jealous partner feels powerless and unable to trust; the other feels oppressed and under siege. The goal of therapy is not to eradicate jealousy; for many this may be impossible. Instead, the therapist works to calm down the couple’s reactivity in order to unpack unspoken meanings and dilemmas compressed in their rigidly choreographed interactions. Feelings and fantasies tend to lose their power once they are talked over and integrated into a narrative that includes multiple aspects of life, present and past (Baumgart, 1990). The therapy aims at transforming the couple’s gridlock by facilitating expressions of wishes and yearnings that can be first understood and then negotiated between the partners.

The role of the therapist

Unless the couple is coming to therapy to deal with an explicit affair or betrayal, the therapist usually enters a twilight zone about what is fantasy and what is reality, what are facts and what are projected fears. To establish an alliance with both, the therapist must tolerate these ambiguities and refrain from a search for the “truth.” At least initially, she must empathize with the doubts and affliction of the jealous person, and at the same time connect with the partner who is feeling under siege. Joining both is essential to the collaborative work that must follow.

Individuals vary a great deal about what they consider optimal boundaries for their relationship. While some expect strict borders regarding “outsiders,” others believe that openness to many people is essential to them and to their vitality as a couple. On the extreme side of the spectrum are individuals who aspire to have polyamorous relationships (Pines, 1998). In order to respect a diversity of preferences, the therapist must stay aware of her biases about boundaries and monogamy, being careful not to impose one standard for all. She must help the partners articulate their individual expectations and negotiate parameters by which both can live.

The therapist must also reflect on her cultural views about jealousy. If she has a priori ideas that jealousy is “negative” and must be abolished, she will be unable to help couples that regard it positively as an “alarm bell” or aphrodisiac. Alternately, if she colludes with the suffering of the jealous partner, considering the other a villain, this will alienate the partner who feels constrained.

Finally, the therapist must be able to maneuver flexibly utilizing individual and conjoint sessions. It is crucial to have a clear confidentiality policy about keeping secrets (Scheinkman, 2005, 2008). We explain to the couple that the content of individual sessions will be kept confidential. Even when we encourage disclosure it is ultimately up to the individual to decide if and what they want to reveal. Individual sessions can be helpful in terms of: (1) broadening the scope of therapy when the focus is too narrow; (2) finding out about actual infidelities; (3) discussing issues that the partners are afraid to bring out in joint sessions such as anger, money, or sex; (4) dealing with information found through snooping and spying; and (5) assessing

fantasies or plans one partner may have about leaving the relationship. Therapists must figure out how to use this private information constructively. Being able to talk to the therapist about matters considered “off limits” in the relationship tends to be helpful even when the individual chooses to keep the information private.

The therapeutic process

In working to disarm jealousy, we consider four levels of understanding and intervention: interactional, contextual/structural, intrapsychic, and intergenerational. On each level, using jealousy as a guide, the therapist explores one dimension of the relationship promoting understanding, changes, and negotiations between the partners. The relevance of each level, and how they will be woven together, will depend on each case.

Level 1: Tracking the interactional pattern. The therapist starts by asking the partners to describe their problems; when did the jealousy start? Under what circumstances does it appear? She then tries to understand the pattern in which the jealousy is embedded by tracking the sequences of actions and reactions related to a specific episode of jealousy. She recognizes the partners’ feelings, but remains focused on their behaviors. She labels their choreography—pursuer/dancer, mutual disengagement, or openly conflictual—challenging each partner to change his or her position in the dance (Scheinkman, 2008).

The case of Marcia and Thomas illustrates this process. Marcia, a 32-year-old retired dancer, and Thomas, an independently wealthy 38-year-old journalist, came to therapy 3 years after being married. Thomas complained that Marcia took any opportunity to get away from him: flying to Argentina to visit her family, going away to see dance performances, or leaving town to be with friends in other cities. He was particularly jealous of a dancer in her former company. He expressed the fear that Marcia only married him “because of his money.” Marcia complained about feeling smothered and being treated unfairly.

When the therapist tracked their interactions, she found that when Marcia was out with her friends, Thomas called her as many as 20 times during the evening. Frustrated by his intrusiveness, she was evasive, or did not answer the phone, making Thomas increasingly anxious. Back home their fights escalated with Marcia yelling that she was the only one among her friends “being imprisoned.” Her comments added fuel to Thomas’s fury—he believed some of her friends were married to “sugar daddies.” Week after week Thomas complained of Marcia’s dismissiveness; Marcia of his control and of being treated like a child.

The therapist recognized their feelings, but firmly challenged their pursuing-distancing pattern and encouraged them to change their parts. Rather than calling Marcia she invited Thomas to write down his feelings and thoughts and bring them to the next session. She also encouraged Marcia to be proactive and text him at least three times when she was out. The point of the task was to interrupt the pattern.

The therapist also focused on the beliefs that supported their respective reactive positions. Thomas believed that if he did not remain vigilant, Marcia would find someone better. Marcia believed that if she did not protect her freedom, she would be trapped. To expand their narratives, the therapist challenged Thomas: “Unfortunately, one doesn’t conquer love with control or intimidation.” To Marcia, she explained: “As long as you keep evading, Thomas will remain anxious.” Another useful

intervention is to externalize the pattern, deeming their jealousy dance “the villain to be defeated” and inviting the couple to explore it together with curiosity and distance (White & Epston, 1990; Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).

Level 2: Contextualizing the jealousy/addressing power dynamics. On level two the therapist helps the couple contextualize the jealousy, placing it within a particular situation or in terms of changes in their life cycle and social context. She asks: What was going on when the jealousy arose? Why now? The structure of the relationship is also investigated. Arrangements that pose too much distance—such as intense work hours, traveling for work, or commuting—can trigger insecurity and suspiciousness. In addition, discrepancies in health, beauty, age, and earnings, or in terms of one partner working and the other not, can lead to power struggles.

The therapist also tries to understand the context of the rival. Jealousy will be heightened in situations where the loved one is in ongoing contact with the rival such as in a work situation or with an ex-spouse. It will be especially intense if the rival is someone the jealous person envies (Pines, 1998).

After Marcia and Thomas realized the impact of their behaviors, they modified their strategies and the escalation diminished. The therapist proceeded exploring contextual and organizational factors that could be informing their dynamics. Before their wedding, Thomas’s family demanded a prenuptial agreement which Marcia refused to sign. Thomas acquiesced, however a sense of mistrust was established and he lost his sexual desire for her. In spite of this relevant information, session after session they belabored the jealousy incident of the week.

Hoping to enlarge the focus, the therapist invited Marcia and Thomas to respective individual sessions. Each revealed anxieties about their sexual relationship and their difficulties dealing with money. Marcia felt hurt that Thomas declined her invitations to have sex although he watched pornography every night. They had not been sexual for a whole year. She also complained about his unwillingness to talk about money with her. For his part Thomas complained about feeling rejected by her many absences. He mistrusted Marcia’s sexual advances and was sure she only married him for his money. The therapist suggested that their vulnerable feelings might be part of a larger pattern. She encouraged them to reveal their assumptions and concerns in the conjoint sessions, reassuring them that by doing so they would be able to move forward.

In the joint sessions the therapist was able to articulate an ongoing power struggle: When it came to jealousy, Marcia had the upper hand. She neglected Thomas’s feelings and left town whenever she pleased. Thomas maintained control in terms of sex and money. Whenever he was frustrated by Marcia’s escapades, he purchased expensive items. There was an escalation factor. After his irresponsible purchases Marcia went out even more. As they both realized this particular dynamic, Thomas declared he was willing to discuss their finances. He also suggested they should engage in sex once a week to see if their sexual bond could be revived. Marcia became more intentional about spending time with him. Following these negotiations the jealousy subsided.

Level 3: Transforming the vulnerability cycle/negotiating expectations and yearnings. As the couple feels calmer through the work done on levels one and two, the therapist proceeds to explore the subjective experience of each partner. The focus is to unpack feelings, vulnerabilities, and yearnings compressed in their positions in the

dance. While on levels one and two the partners negotiate mostly behavioral and structural changes, on level three the therapist slows down the process to allow reflection about their most sensitive feelings so they can also bring these to the negotiating table. This may include individual sessions to explore vulnerabilities with enough safety.

Working with the jealous partner

In exploring the vulnerabilities of the jealous partner the therapist usually encounters fears of rejection, betrayal, or abandonment. Often times there is a sense of unworthiness based on the perception that the partner, or the rival, is superior in some way. Sometimes the primary feeling is one of guilt for his own desire to betray. The experience of jealousy often encapsulates some or all of these feelings.

In order to contain the destructive potential of jealousy, the therapist must challenge survival strategies based on entitlement, coercion, or revenge, since these tactics—undemocratic and forceful—generate increasing outrage. She makes clear that desire and affection are not conquered through attempts to control the other. On the contrary, love tends to emerge in a context of generosity, autonomy, and freedom. The therapist may tell the story by John Fowles, *The Collector*, in which a man kidnaps his beloved hoping that in captivity she will reciprocate his love. Instead, she dreams about her freedom and about another man, increasingly despising her captor.

Sometimes, the jealous partner tries to influence the other through passive behaviors such as moodiness, victimization, depression, and in extreme cases suicidal threats. These equally ineffective strategies stimulate guilt and confusion in the partner. The therapist must highlight that although these strategies might have been adaptive in the past, in the present they lead to increasing disconnection.

The jealous partner may rely on a more global strategy of choosing a partner who is perceived as more vulnerable and sometimes more jealous than he is. In doing so he avoids dealing with his own insecurities. Thomas was attracted to Marcia's vulnerability as a recent immigrant because she relied on him for many practical matters. Having grown up feeling socially inadequate, he was intimidated by Marcia's outstanding beauty and charisma. Yet her dependency made him feel powerful and strong as a caretaker. Two years later, as she became acculturated and her sociability flourished, his long-standing insecurities surfaced as jealousy and envy.

An intriguing survival strategy is the one in which the jealous partner is feeling guilty for having an affair or fantasizing about having one. Rather than taking responsibility for his actions and desires, he projects them onto the partner and then reacts with insecurity and jealousy, as if the partner is the one being unfaithful. Knowing about the possibility of this kind of translocation, the therapist must inquire about the jealous person's fantasies and desires in individual sessions. Upon uncovering these convoluted processes, the therapist helps the individual take ownership of his or her feelings and actions, figure out the meaning of the fantasies or affair, and explore what he or she wants to do about it. By addressing these projective processes, the therapist is usually able to disarm the jealousy dynamics.

Working with the partner who is object of suspicion

In a parallel way the therapist helps the other partner identify vulnerabilities underlying his or her position in the dance. The suspected partner feels unfairly treated, intruded upon, and constrained. We have found that those individuals often

times felt micromanaged and limited in their freedom by a controlling or abusive person, typically a parent. We also found the opposite situation in which the individual felt neglected or abandoned growing up so that the intense attention of the jealous partner was initially welcomed. As the saying goes, “What initially attracts, later repels.” At some point the passion of the jealous partner becomes unbearable. Finally, there are also those who tolerate the surveillance of the jealous person to escape anxieties about their own personal freedom.

The therapist must label the specific survival strategies that are being utilized to deal with these vulnerabilities. To counteract feeling pressured, the suspected individual becomes secretive and evasive in attempts to define boundaries and avoid conflict. Intermittent outbreaks of defiance are also common ways of trying to maintain a sense of dignity and freedom. Sometimes the suspected partner has a long-term pattern of flirtatiousness and seductiveness devised to assert independence. Such behaviors inevitably provoke jealousy and backfire.

Working with both

In the joint sessions the therapist utilizes the vulnerability cycle diagram to demonstrate to the couple their interlocking dynamics. She points them in a new direction in which they must learn to relate to one another from vulnerability to vulnerability instead of from survival strategy to survival strategy. This is a crucial step in the emotional transformation of the couple’s reactive pattern.

As we described, the jealous partner often fears that the present situation is a replica of a betrayal or rejection that happened in the past, and these overlaps of meaning lead the individuals to overreact. The therapist must delineate distinctions between what is going on now and the past or other contexts. For example, Thomas said, in reference to Marcia’s independence: “She is just like my father who was a philanderer.” Marcia said of Thomas: “I thought he was my savior, but instead he is a jailer, just like my mother who resented me for having fun.”

In addition, on this level the therapist helps the partners negotiate their yearnings. The therapist encourages articulation of their emotional needs in a manner that can be empathically understood and responded to by the other. In cases where the jealousy is related to a particular affair the therapist may encourage the person who had the affair to be particularly open to being checked on for some time in terms of cellular phone records, emails, and/or reporting on his or her whereabouts (Abrahms Spring & Spring, 1996)—any reassurance that may diminish the the jealous doubt. However, demands and expectations must be reasonably consonant with the possibilities and desires of that partner; what he is willing and interested in giving. Couples vary and different scenarios may follow. Some partners engage in stretching in the direction of the other. Others are unwilling to give up aspects of their privacy. Sometimes the jealous partner ends up realizing that his or her expectations will not be met. He either must accept the parameters of the relationship as the other is defining them or consider separation.

Marcia and Thomas felt somewhat closer through the steps they took related to their conversations about money and sex. As the therapist focused on the vulnerabilities, Thomas talked about long-standing feelings of inadequacy, of having been the “ugly duckling” in his family. Although he was initially fascinated by Marcia’s sociability and beauty, as she became increasingly independent his insecurities grew. He would say: “I am not good enough for her,” or “I know she is too beautiful to stay with me.” These feelings were accompanied by irritation about her materialism and

pursuit of pleasures. In his family, love was expressed through money and gifts and he had initially pampered her in grand style. However, soon after they got married and he became doubtful that Marcia loved him for “who he was,” he became critical whenever she spent money on herself.

Marcia shared that growing up she was treated like a housemaid. Being the only child of a strict poor single mother she was pressured to help and allowed minimal time to play with her friends. As a teenager she felt she had to lie whenever she went out to have fun, or else she had terrible fights with her mother in which she often fought for her “right to be free.” When she turned 18 she took the first opportunity to leave by coming to the United States with her dance company. Fifteen years later, the fancy lifestyle Thomas offered indeed delighted her. She was, however, profoundly disappointed 1 year later when he “turned into my mother,” and began trying to control her behavior constantly. Now, under his siege, she was back being the “bad little girl who had to sneak out to have fun.” “Bad little girl” and “ugly duckling” became slogans for core vulnerabilities in their jealousy dynamics. Whenever they got reactive, the therapist reminded Marcia: “You are not the ‘bad little girl’ who needs to run away, you have choices.” To Thomas, she reinforced: “I understand this is how you feel, but Marcia does not see you as the ‘ugly duckling.’”

Separating the present from the past

A few months into the therapy, Thomas described a moment when he suddenly “snapped out of” his jealousy spell. In touch with his longstanding yearning to feel appreciated, he went out with an ex-girlfriend. Somehow, after that he realized that his jealous attempts to control Marcia would not give him the love he wanted, he told her: “I no longer want to be the ‘killer of joy.’ If you want to travel months in a row, or be with your friends every night, I am not going to stop you.” He said he was going to expand his life and become more social and independent. It was up to Marcia to show him that she loved him. If she continued to “escape” he might accept his role as “peripheral husband” or he might conclude that they did not belong together. Marcia was shocked by his shift. She also understood that Thomas was not her mother and that her compulsion to constantly explore pleasurable experiences away from home was a problem in this marriage. Thomas made clear that to feel loved he wanted a lot more togetherness. The therapist posed their impasse: they yearned for ways of connecting that were difficult to reconcile. Marcia kept feeling that joining Thomas meant submission. Thomas kept feeling that Marcia’s independence meant he was not appreciated. They needed to decide if they were willing to compromise.

Level 4: Development of self and multigenerational work. As the therapist helps the couple negotiate their emotional expectations she often encounters stubborn kinds of suffering, such as feelings of inadequacy, regrets, and envy, that persist in spite of self-reflection and new agreements with the partner. On this level, using jealousy as a focal point, the therapist may utilize a period of individual sessions to explore these stubborn feelings within the context of one’s individual history and family of origin. The goal is to help that partner develop a stronger sense of self, which is eventually brought back to the relationship through joint sessions. In this individual piece of work the therapist helps the partner to move away from positions of deficiency and victimization in his or her family and assume more empowered ways of handling feelings. Bleviss explains how often times jealousy remains entrenched because it is bound

up with developmental issues: “It reverts to a time in childhood or adolescence when the person was left wanting the kind of erotic and loving responses that would have made him feel strong, autonomous, and desirable” (Blévis, 2008, p. 4). Jealousy is a kind of delayed reaction to a situation where the person felt helpless and humiliated. Having watched one’s parents suffer with infidelities is another reason for persistent anticipatory fears. In therapy, when these early painful experiences are uncovered, the therapist helps the client integrate them by locating them in their original context. When individuals understand that their anxieties belong to another time and context, they typically stop overreacting with their partners. This helps dissipate re-enactments of the individual’s vulnerable feelings in the couple’s dynamics.

Jealousy may also persist when it is covering up feelings that the person doesn’t want to face. The person may have wished to have had a career, children, be thin, be athletic, or have had more lovers in the past. These disappointments and regrets are usually mixed with envy of the partner who might have developed these aspects of the self, or of the rival who possesses qualities about which the person feels inadequate. In therapy, envy is addressed through encouragement of personal competences and development of other meaningful relationships and interests. One example is the case of a 46-year-old housewife who confessed that her predominant feelings toward her successful husband were anger and envy. Although in his presence she mostly expressed jealousy toward the women he looked at, in individual sessions she talked about her intense envy of his freedom and accomplishments. Her regret at not having developed a career was more painful than her ostensive fears of betrayal. Identifying this underlying layer helped her decide to finish a nursing degree she had never finished. Feeling empowered, her jealousy dissipated.

When the jealous person finally takes stock of the intensity of her jealousy—the crazy things she feels, thinks, and does (Pines, 1998)—individual therapy can also help her snap out of these trance-like states by redirecting the energy involved in obsessing into other forms of relating such as playfulness, eroticism, or romantic overtures. The therapist helps the jealous person move away from feeling helpless and excluded toward proactively inviting the partner into connection. Pines (1998) refers to this process as “turning a jealousy scene into a sexual turn on.” The therapist stays aware of how these individual changes impact the relationship by periodically inviting the partner to conjoint sessions.

In terms of techniques on this level, we utilize deliberate questions about individual history and family of origin. The genogram serves as a map for hypothesizing about family patterns, secrets, and legacies. We reframe individual assumptions and beliefs to enlarge personal narratives. We utilize coaching to help the individual approach the family in novel ways. Family of origin sessions are usually the most effective way to help partners change their positions in their families. The differentiation and growth that happens through these means are usually essential to the transformation of the couple’s jealousy dynamics.

While Thomas and Marcia were negotiating their emotional expectations it became clear that Thomas’s jealousy contained underlying insecurities that persisted no matter what Marcia proposed to do differently. He felt powerless and inadequate. In spite of being 40 years old, his parents maintained control of the family wealth, leaving him infantilized and weak. Through coaching and rehearsing, he became more assertive about managing his own finances. He also worked to enlarge his social circle and addressed his awkwardness with his body by taking up swimming. In her individual

sessions, Marcia addressed her need to find more balance between work and pleasure. She discussed career possibilities and began to schedule job interviews.

CONCLUSION

Jealousy is a recalcitrant problem in couples' relationships. We have found that to address it effectively it is crucial to embrace a broad definition of jealousy and to consider its many facets. The clinical model presented here integrates systemic and intrapersonal dimensions and offers the therapist a comprehensive conceptual framework for dealing with different potential underlying dynamics of jealousy. In most cases the therapist works to interrupt the couple's reactive processes by challenging power struggles, highlighting underlying vulnerabilities, and disarming ineffective survival strategies. It is usually also necessary to distinguish the couple's current situation from emotions and perceptions arising from the past and/or other contexts. The therapist may also work on an individual level to strengthen aspects of the self that are pertinent to the jealousy dynamics. This multidimensional approach opens up new avenues for disarming jealousy. It also includes new tools to address elements beyond the here and now in the difficult repair work involved in cases of infidelity.

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