

Jealousy: Study finds we understand our own sex best

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We may not always fully understand why our partners get jealous, and women and men often get jealous for completely different reasons.

Two NTNU researchers decided to investigate whether people also know about these distinct differences between the sexes. [Their study](#) is published in *Evolutionary Psychological Science*.

"What do people think triggers women's and men's [jealousy](#)? How well do women understand men's jealousy, and men women's jealousy? We wanted to find out," says Mons Bendixen, a professor at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

Men are more jealous of sexual infidelity than women, and women are more jealous of [emotional infidelity](#) than men, but do people know about this?

First study of its kind

Bendixen and Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair, also a professor at the Department of Psychology, have been studying emotions associated with relationships for a long time. However, this is the first study to look at what people think makes other people jealous, broken down by sex.

The researchers also wanted to investigate factors that might influence our perceptions of jealousy responses. What knowledge do we use, where have we learned it, and are our perceptions based on our own jealousy response?

The findings are pretty clear.

Best at understanding our own sex

"We understand our own sex best. Generally speaking, men are good at understanding other men's jealousy responses, and women are good at understanding other women's jealousy responses. At the same time, we

are surprisingly good at understanding the opposite sex at the group level," says Kennair.

"However, when trying to understand what others get jealous about, individuals often base these perceptions on their own jealousy responses," says Bendixen.

Both sexes largely believe that their own gender becomes jealous for the same reasons as themselves, but they use themselves to a much lesser extent as a template for what they think makes people of the opposite sex jealous.

Can't understand why partners get jealous

"Several of our studies have shown that men are more jealous of sexual infidelity than women," says Kennair.

In [heterosexual relationships](#), men are more often worried about whether their partner is having sex with other people. Women are more often most worried about their partner falling in love with someone else.

For example, a man who talks a lot with and confides in a female friend runs the risk of his partner becoming jealous, and he may not fully understand why.

"Men don't fully appreciate how much this affects their partner," says Bendixen.

Therefore, interpreting why our partner is jealous based only on our own emotions will often be the wrong way to go about things.

Stereotypical perceptions

The researchers analyzed responses from 1,213 people where the majority were heterosexual (86.2%). They also conducted analyses on [sexual minorities](#) (bisexuals and homosexuals).

There was no major difference between how heterosexuals and sexual minorities interpret jealousy in others, meaning that sexual preference doesn't really play a role.

"Homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual men reported that other men would be more jealous of sexual infidelity than they would admit," says Bendixen.

In other words, they have a somewhat stereotypical [perception](#) of what makes men jealous.

The same was true for heterosexual women; they thought other women would be more jealous of emotional infidelity than they would admit.

Social influence means nothing

After establishing these stereotypical perceptions, the researchers wanted to find out more, so they looked at why we think the way we do when it comes to jealousy. Does social influence have any effect on our perceptions of jealousy?

The researchers asked the participants how much they knew about typical reactions to jealousy and what could be signs of infidelity from various sources such as friends, family, teaching, the media and their own experiences of infidelity.

Again, the numbers are very clear.

"Social influence has no impact on what we think about other people's

jealousy responses. Popular culture typically describes infidelity as [sexual infidelity](#), but this does not seem to affect what most people get upset about, namely emotional infidelity," says Kennair.

But if friends, family, and the media don't affect us at all, where do our perceptions of jealousy come from?

Innate ability to interpret jealousy

"We believe that this is largely evolved, something innate that is programmed in us," says Bendixen.

It has simply been an advantage for our ancestors to be able to interpret jealousy. Jealousy and infidelity are among the most common reasons why couples break up.

"It is therefore useful to know something about jealousy. In our study on forgiveness of infidelity, men were perhaps a little naïve about both their partners' and their own emotional infidelity, as this is something that can threaten a relationship," says Kennair.

Evolution has given people who can understand jealousy an advantage in procreating and maintaining a relationship with a [partner](#) who can help raise their children. While this isn't as crucial in our current culture as it used to be, since a single parent can raise children more easily than before, our emotions and ability to interpret signals are still a part of us.

More information: Mons Bendixen et al, Factors that Influence People's Beliefs About Men's and Women's Jealousy Responses, *Evolutionary Psychological Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s40806-023-00379-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-023-00379-8)

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