
6-17-2018

Bringing up the Green-Eyed Monster: Conceptualizing and Communicating Jealousy with a Partner Who Has Other Partners

Valerie Rubinsky

Ohio University - Main Campus, vr225514@ohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Rubinsky, V. (2018). Bringing up the Green-Eyed Monster: Conceptualizing and Communicating Jealousy with a Partner Who Has Other Partners. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(6), 1441-1455. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3297>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Bringing up the Green-Eyed Monster: Conceptualizing and Communicating Jealousy with a Partner Who Has Other Partners

Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of 423 open-ended survey responses from 141 individuals involved in polyamorous intimate partnerships. Grounded in literature on jealousy and polyamory, this analysis offers a reinforcement and extension of romantic jealousy. Participants described how jealousy is conceptualized and discussed within polyamorous relationships. Conceptualizations of jealousy primarily involved jealousy as an umbrella term for insecurity, possessiveness, or needs not being met. Participants discuss jealousy within the context of partner agreements to add or remove another partner, to explicitly seek validation and acknowledgment, and less frequently meeting negative reactions. Importantly, results indicate that within polyamorous relationships, feelings of jealousy are usually communicated, and for the purpose of seeing affirmation and validation, not with the goal of behavior change.

Keywords

Romantic Jealousy, Polyamory, Relationship Communication, Non-Monogamy

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Angela Hosek for advice and support in preparing this manuscript.

Bringing up the Green-Eyed Monster: Conceptualizing and Communicating Jealousy with a Partner Who Has Other Partners

Valerie Rubinsky
Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of 423 open-ended survey responses from 141 individuals involved in polyamorous intimate partnerships. Grounded in literature on jealousy and polyamory, this analysis offers a reinforcement and extension of romantic jealousy. Participants described how jealousy is conceptualized and discussed within polyamorous relationships. Conceptualizations of jealousy primarily involved jealousy as an umbrella term for insecurity, possessiveness, or needs not being met. Participants discuss jealousy within the context of partner agreements to add or remove another partner, to explicitly seek validation and acknowledgment, and less frequently meeting negative reactions. Importantly, results indicate that within polyamorous relationships, feelings of jealousy are usually communicated, and for the purpose of seeing affirmation and validation, not with the goal of behavior change. Keywords: Romantic Jealousy, Polyamory, Relationship Communication, Non-Monogamy

Polyamory refers to the ability or desire to engage in multiple intimate relationships at the same time. A common response polyamorous individuals receive from monogamous peers to their identity and relationships involves, “Don’t you get jealous?” (Deri, 2015; Mint, 2010). In response to the negative norm of jealousy perpetuated by monogamous discourse (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), polyamorous communities develop responses and teach their members how to approach jealousy within their relationship(s) (Wolfe, 2003). How polyamorous individuals conceptualize and communicate jealousy to their partners may reflect polyamorous cultural norms, or the larger discourses of monogamy, but will illuminate relational practices within an understudied relational identity. As the polyamorous community teaches prosocial relational management strategies (Conley & Moors, 2014), how polyamorous individuals conceptualize and communicate jealousy may also reveal productive methods for managing jealous feelings across relational contexts. The current study qualitatively investigates how individuals in polyamorous intimate relationships conceptualize jealousy and how they communicate jealousy to their partner(s). The next section will review the literature on polyamory and jealousy communication, specifically situating jealousy communication in polyamorous relationships within a discussion of compersion, or happiness for a partner’s happiness with another partner.

Polyamory and Jealousy Communication

Polyamorous people define their identity and describe their relational practices in opposition to mainstream discourses of compulsory monogamy (Barker, 2005; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Polyamory is a type of consensually or ethically non-monogamous relational orientation in which it is acceptable to love or engage in intimate relationships with more than one person, and which emphasizes openness and honesty within all relationships (Barker, 2005). Polyamorous communities and practitioners of polyamory consistently define open and honest communication as not only a core communal practice (Barker, 2005), but as a part of the identity of polyamory (Wosick-Correa, 2010), situating communication at the center of polyamorous

identity. One communicative phenomenon especially relevant to polyamorous individuals is jealousy.

Jealousy is important to study because the emotional experience and communicative expression of romantic jealousy typically impact relational quality. Within monogamous heterosexual and gay and lesbian relationships, cognitive and affective jealousies are negatively associated with relational quality (Bevan & Lannutti, 2002). As polyamorous relationships emphasize communication (Barker, 2005), how polyamorous individuals express jealousy may positively or negatively affect their relationships. Integrative communication in expressing romantic jealousy is positively correlated with satisfaction with the relationship in monogamous relationships (Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995; Bevan & Lannutti, 2002). However, it may be necessary to problematize the scholarly definition of romantic jealousy for polyamorous relationships. In romantic relationships, jealousy is a perceived threat to the exclusive romantic nature of the relationship (Bringle & Boebinger, 1990). For polyamorous individuals in which the nature of their relationship is often non-exclusive, and the third-party other may or may not constitute a threat, further research may be needed to understand their conceptualization of romantic jealousy. Specifically, for people who are polyamorous, understandings of romantic jealousy may need to be contextualized through understandings of compersion.

Both scholarly (Deri, 2015; Mint, 2010) and popular (Easton et al., 1997) writers emphasize that jealousy is described through a monogamous model that impacts the way it is conceptualized and expressed (Deri, 2015). Wolfe's (2003) mixed methods and international observations of polyamorous and swinging culture produced insights on how polyamory complicates traditional Western approaches to jealousy. *Compersion*, a term that emerged in the polyamorous community to describe positive feelings as a result of a partner's happiness from another partner, as well as enculturation into other polyamorous community values, may impact the extent to which polyamorous individuals experience the sensation of anxiety typically associated with jealousy (Wolfe, 2003). In her work on queer, polyamorous women's experiences of jealousy, Deri (2015) argues that while the polyamorous community has oriented around enabling feelings of compersion, not all individuals within that community are able to realize that goal, or at least not realize it through the same methods. As a result, polyamorous individuals experience jealousy in ways that may be unique from monogamous individuals and manage unique challenges in conceptualizing and communicating jealousy with their partners and their communities.

Compersion may also impact relationship quality (Duma, 2009). Some research on compersion explores comparisons between monogamous (or monoamorous) and polyamorous individuals. For individuals in monogamous relationships, compersion seems to have little effect on relationship satisfaction, but for those in non-traditional (like polyamorous) relationships, compersion positively affects relationship satisfaction (Aumer, Bellew, Ito, Hatfield, & Heck, 2014). Aumer and colleagues (2014) argue that relational goals (such as monogamous intention) may be important in making sense of how emotions like jealousy will positively or negatively impact a relationship.

Intimacy and fidelity also contextualize how individuals understand jealousy, and may operate differently in polyamorous relationships, which may in turn influence conceptualization and communication of romantic jealousy. Wosick-Correa (2010)'s survey and interview data suggests that polyamorous individuals often reject sexual and emotional fidelity and may also emphasize emotional rather than sexual intimacy. Additionally, Wosick-Correa (2010) argues that *agentive fidelity*, a certain form of commitment among people who identify as polyamorous, might characterize how polyamorous individuals express needs and boundaries. Compared to monoamorous men and women, polyamorous individuals seem to exhibit greater levels of intimacy (Morrison, Beaulieu, Brockman, & Beaglaich, 2013). Jealousy and compersion may

influence the experience and expression of intimacy for this relational type, making a thorough understanding of how polyamorous individuals conceptualize and communicate jealousy essential to discerning factors underlying relational success. The typically negative connotation of jealousy results in the construction of jealousy from a monogamous ideal (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Some polyamorous, bisexual individuals in an organized polyamorous community in the United Kingdom found other words to describe experiences of jealousy, as they felt the typical word “jealousy” did not reflect their own experience (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Issues of power and gender may also influence the experience and expression of romantic jealousy for polyamorous individuals (Deri, 2015; Easton, 2010; Mint, 2015).

Polyamorous relationships are considered healthy and may offer prosocial relational maintenance strategies. Conley and Moors (2014), in an assessment of problems with contemporary long-term romantic relationships and marriages, recommend that practices established by people who are polyamorous are not only quite healthy but could provide benefits to monogamous marriages as well. Specifically, Conley and Moors (2014) address the role of communication in polyamory, the negotiation-nature of needs-meeting, and increased social capital. They call for people to evaluate if one partner can meet all of their needs, and to consider the potential for increased social networks afforded by multiple intimate partners. Although not synonymous with polyamory, relational partners who swing, a consensually extradyadic romantic practice, also manage experiences of jealousy. Qualitative research on four swinging couples in England found that they did not seek to eliminate the experience of jealousy, but instead emphasized managing the feelings of jealousy to encourage satisfying sexual relationships (Visser & McDonald, 2007). This demonstrates that people with multiple consensual sexual partners may also need to discursively manage the emotional experience of jealousy in ways they consider constructive for their relationship(s). The literature on jealousy, compersion, and polyamorous intimacy situates jealousy as a potentially identity-laden emotional experience that may exist in a tension with the ideal of compersion. The polyamorous identity is rooted in the notion of communication and openness. Attending to identity within relational communication strategies in polyamorous relationships may illuminate how polyamorous individuals negotiate and/or reframe typically negative feelings like jealousy while managing communal and relational identity expectations. For the polyamorous community, jealousy is presented as difficult and challenging, but manageable (Deri, 2015; Mint, 2010), but how the polyamorous community conceptualizes jealousy still warrants descriptive work. Additionally, because jealousy is a communicative phenomenon, how jealousy is conceptualized and communicated within polyamorous relationships may generate productive insights about both the experience and expression of romantic jealousy, and about this understudied relational type. Jealousy communication within polyamorous relationships may reveal discursive strategies at work in negotiating and managing identity and relational challenges. Therefore, I pose the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1: How do individuals in polyamorous relationships conceptualize jealousy?

RQ2: How do individuals in polyamorous relationships communicate jealousy with their partners?

In an effort to contextualize my relationship to this work, it may be worth noting that my research explores how individuals engage difficult conversations (e.g., sex, identity, jealousy) with close others, especially in and about what would broadly be considered “non-normative” relationships (e.g., LGBTQ, polyamorous). I am a queer woman, presently in a monogamous relationship, although I have been in consensually non-monogamous relationships in the past. My interest in polyamorous relational communication and identity negotiation emerged in reflecting on the intimacy of my close friendships and questioning the limits often

placed on other forms of intimacy within a traditional model of monogamy. Close friendships with polyamorous queer women and observing their relational communication and practices sparked an interest in how their relational discourse complicated concepts in traditional interpersonal scholarship. Relationship research tends to describe trends in normative relationships, and thus neglects the experiences of many whose relationships are less common or less accepted. Although I am not polyamorous, I identify with the experience of an understudied relational identity and am committed to exploring the many ways of relating and living intimate lives outside of normative relational models, about, with, and from I believe we can learn a lot.

Methods

Design

This paper presents one part of a larger, multi-method study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative measures to address a variety of elements of relational communication and jealousy for polyamorous-identified individuals. The data presented in this paper is a qualitative, iterative analysis (Tracy, 2013) of open-ended questionnaire responses. A qualitative approach allowed me to assess how polyamorous individuals construct and communicate jealousy, without presuming they adhere to the experience and expression of jealousy embedded in quantitative scales that were developed and tested within monogamous relationships.

Participants

In this study, I analyzed 423 open-ended questionnaire responses from 141 participants. Participants primarily included cisgender women (53.3%, $n=73$) and cisgender men (23.4%, $n=32$), but also included transgender men ($n=1$), transgender women, ($n=2$), genderqueer individuals, ($n=11$), genderfluid individuals, ($n=7$), non-binary individuals ($n=6$), and five gender minority individuals who did not identify with that classification. Sexual orientation was relatively diverse, with 32.6% ($n=46$) identifying as heterosexual, 2.1% ($n=3$) identifying as gay or lesbian, 26.2% ($n=37$) identifying as bisexual, 19.9% ($n=28$) identifying as pansexual, and 1.4% ($n=2$) identifying as asexual; 17.7% ($n=25$) participants identified as LGBTQ but not with the categories described above. Most participants (90.9%, $n=130$) identified as white or Caucasian, but several (7.7%, $n=11$) identified as two or more races. Ages ranged from 18 to 81 ($M=38.84$, $SD=13.31$). Participants identified that either they or one of their partners identified as polyamorous, and therefore their current relationship involved polyamory at the time they participated in this research. I recruited participants from my personal social media pages, international polyamorous email listservs, international polyamorous organizations, as well as targeted social media polyamorous groups (e.g., polyamory subreddit).

Procedures

The questionnaire was accessible via Web-link from Qualtrics.com, following approval from my university's Institutional Review Board. I distributed the questionnaire online, and it was primarily anonymous. At the end of the questionnaire, participants had the option to provide contact information for further study, but it was not required for participation, leaving anonymity as an option. Participants responded to open-ended survey questions, which asked how they define jealousy or what jealousy means to them within their relationship(s), in what circumstances they feel jealous, and how they discuss jealousy with a partner.

Data Analysis

To analyze the open-ended responses to address the research questions, I employed Tracy's (2013) iterative analysis to qualitatively code the open-ended survey data. I analyzed a total of 423 open-ended survey responses from 141 participants who responded to those questions. Iterative analysis is similar to other constant-comparative methods of data analysis but does not go the full-extent of theory development that other grounded theories would (Tracy, 2013). It begins with in-vivo coding to preserve participant's language and identify initial codes primarily as descriptive categories (e.g., "insecurity," "threat," "fear of loss"). Further iterations involve hierarchical and axial-coding to produce more sophisticated themes. For example, the in-vivo codes of "insecurity," "threat," "fear of loss" describe an understanding of jealousy as an umbrella description of other emotional experiences. Because participation was anonymous and most names are gendered, I did not assign participants pseudonyms, as to not incorrectly assign diverse participants a gendered descriptor with which they do not actually identify. Similarly, I use the singular "they" to refer to participants.

Results Conceptualizing Romantic Jealousy in Polyamorous Relationships

Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions about how they conceptualize and discuss jealousy within their polyamorous relationships. Based on participants' conceptualization of jealousy, I produced two interrelated themes: *Jealousy as an umbrella term* for other feelings, usually insecurity, and *possessiveness*, sometimes in response to needs not being met. Although the conceptualization of what jealousy is and how it should be dealt with revealed patterns described below, valence of jealousy in terms of how participants framed their answers was not consistent. Some participants emphasized that jealousy was acceptable, healthy, and normal as long as it was managed in a positive or constructive way. Others suggested that jealousy was unhealthy, negative, and problematic regardless of the circumstance. In addition to how individuals conceptualized jealousy, participants described circumstances in which they identified experiencing jealousy, which include themes of *missing out*, *intimacy*, *lack of transparent communication*, and *competition*. Lastly, I describe how participants communicate jealousy to their partners, which include themes of adding or removing partners, validation, and negative reactions. In this section, I describe the themes I drew from these responses.

Jealousy as an Umbrella Term

This theme, jealousy as an umbrella term, offers both reinforcements and complications to current understandings of romantic jealousy as a perceived threat to the exclusive nature of a relationship. Some polyamorous participants describe a sophisticated awareness that jealousy is a complex emotion, comprised of several other emotional experiences. Other participants describe jealousy as a catchall term that refers to something specific they are less able to readily identify in the moment (e.g., fear of loss or fear of replacement, insecurity, anger, etc.). For example, this participant writes:

A wise friend once told me that "jealousy" is a label that covers a wide range of emotions. When feeling "jealousy," it's important to identify the actual emotion (anger, resentment, hurt, sorrow, loss, etc.) and where it's coming from (what event triggered the emotion and why).

This exemplar demonstrates that jealousy may be considered a broad umbrella term concealing the “real” emotion.

Insecurity arose most frequently as the “real” emotion behind jealousy. In this way, participants still describe jealousy as the feeling of insecurity associated with a threat to the relationship, even though the relational nature is not exclusive. For example, this participant writes that they consider the word “jealousy” to describe:

If I'm insecure or feel unsure about my relationship or the feelings my partner has for me./ If something triggered past hurts in some way and I fall into this hole, momentarily forgetting what really is. / If I'm in pain or fear to be abandoned, don't feel secure in myself or worthy of love. / If my needs aren't being met, although I clearly stated them and I get the feeling to not matter that much. Especially when it seems like another person gets exactly what I asked for from my partner, but it's too much to give to me or simply state "I don't feel like this with you." / If I'm unsure about my position in my partner's life, and my worth for them.

Thus, polyamorous-identified individuals in multiple intimate partnerships may not find challenges to exclusivity as inducing jealousy, but something that threatens the general nature of a given dyadic relationship within their multiple relationships may still trigger insecurity, such as needs not being met, or internal feelings of self-worth. They recognize this insecurity is often colloquially conceptualized as “jealousy.” Fear of abandonment or insecurity associated with their place in a given relationship may more precisely describe what they and others refer to as jealousy.

In addition, jealousy occurs as an umbrella term for other emotions by concealing a focus on the self. Articulating that jealousy is a similar but not quite identical occurrence between monogamous and polyamorous relationships, participants describe what makes the emotional experience of jealousy unique within multiple-partner arrangements. While several participants attribute jealousy to specific people and situations (e.g., a partner’s partner “vetoing” them, or a partner spending more time with another partner than the participant), other participants indicate that jealousy is something we might make about another person, but really reflects how we feel about ourselves. For example, this participant writes:

Jealousy is a byproduct of an insecurity or past trauma inside of yourself. It is not a genuine emotion. If you feel jealous, that's not something to blame on your partner - it's an opportunity for introspection, to figure out why you are feeling that way. Is there something you need you aren't getting? Did you experience some past trauma that this reminds you of? Are you just having a period of low self esteem? None of those are external.

In addition to understanding jealousy as an umbrella term for other emotional experiences, polyamorous individuals in the present study describe these feelings of insecurity as both internally and externally evoked. Sometimes individuals attribute jealousy to a partner’s or metamour’s behavior, but others associate it with their own feelings of self-esteem or self-worth, such as the above participant. Jealousy may then be used to describe emotions like insecurity or anger, as well as to conceal the target of the emotional response.

Possessiveness: People are Not Possessions

While many of these responses also echo the notion of jealousy as an umbrella term, participants also emphasize that “people aren’t possessions.” Essentially, participants indicate that jealousy in a romantic relationship might represent possessiveness if those underlying emotional experiences are not honestly and accurately communicated. Participants referenced what they describe as the monogamous concept of “not wanting to share,” and argue that it reduces people to possessions or to something that “belongs” to a person. For example, this participant writes:

Jealousy is a common emotion in our society that I believe stems from our insecurities. In our society if you're jealous about something you'll just have to move past it...unless it's in a romantic relationship. Jealousy in a relationship becomes this huge deal! When I ask people why they're monogamous a common answer I get is "I'm too jealous to be non- monogamous and I don't like to share." Since when did people become possessions?

Similar to other participants, this participant begins by identifying that jealousy is problematic and grounded in insecurity. However, they also attribute external conversations about jealousy as indicative of jealousy’s origin in possessiveness.

In addition to the connection between monogamy and jealousy, jealousy can be grounded in the idea of possession. Possession emphasizes notions of ownership. For example, this participant writes, “Jealousy, as most people do it, is an outgrowth of a feeling of possession. The idea that one can “own” another (“my boyfriend”) creates a feeling of possession and a desire to keep said possession to oneself.” This response conceptualizes jealousy as a problematic experience associated with feelings of ownership and possession.

Elaborating on jealousy as an umbrella term for insecurity, which leads to possessiveness, participants suggest that the root cause of this experience often concerns having needs met (or unmet). Need-meeting describes whether or not a partner fulfills some relational need (e.g., attention, someone to spend time with, sex, etc.) to the desired extent. For example, this participant writes:

Jealousy is the feeling of "I want to be there/do that instead of [person I'm reacting to]." It's not the same as envy, which is "I want to be there/do that TOO," or spite, which is "I can't have [that thing], so I don't want [person] to have it either." // Jealousy is an indicator of something inside me that needs to be addressed - a need that's not getting met, for example.

Thus, this response extends the notions of jealousy as an umbrella term for insecurity and jealousy to a term that also indicates possessiveness by emphasizing that the root cause for these instances is whether or not one’s needs are being addressed. These responses suggest that jealousy is unrelated to feelings of threat to a relationship, but instead an experience of insecurity rooted in not having one’s needs met by a particular partner or by multiple partners. Only one participant mentioned jealousy in reference to trusting a partner, indicating that polyamorous participants largely do not associate the experience of romantic jealousy with trust.

I Feel Jealous When...

Participants were also asked in what circumstances they experienced feelings of jealousy. Frequently, participants refer to the cause of jealousy as the “trigger.” Individuals in polyamorous relationships felt “jealousy” per their conceptualization described above, primarily as insecurity, in their relationships when (1) they felt they were missing out, experiencing unequal treatment, or when there were scheduling conflicts. Missing out comprised the most frequently cited experience of jealousy. However, other participants note they experience jealousy when (2) thinking about a partner’s intimacy with another partner, (3) when a partner is not communicating transparently, and (4) when feeling in competition with the “other.”

Missing out. Although three participants attributed this to more benign scheduling incompatibilities or conflicts, others emphasized that feeling like a partner is spending a disproportionate amount of time or doing more fun activities with a *metamour*, a partner’s partner, rather than the participant, triggered feelings of jealousy. For example, this participant shares:

When I feel jealous, it is usually because one of my partners is engaging in an activity that I would like to be engaging in, but was not included in to begin with. For example, if one of my other partners is out with someone else, and they are doing something that I would have loved to have done, but was not told beforehand that that was going to be a thing, that would make me feel jealous.

Thus, this participant describes feeling left out or excluded from a particular activity as prompting feelings of jealousy.

Similarly, participants note that jealousy related to feeling like they were “missing out” on an experience they wanted to have, rather than feeling loss or uncertainty about the relationship itself. For example, this participant writes, “I feel most jealous when I feel i'm missing out on activities that I want to be a part of and are available for but can't attend because of someone else's feelings or schedule.” Thus, respondents experience jealousy when they feel intentionally or unintentionally excluded from activities or experiences with a partner. Fear of missing out emphasizes an underlying insecurity within experiences of jealousy.

Intimacy. A partner’s intimacy with other partners also triggered experiences of jealousy for some participants. Participants sometimes distinguished between feeling jealous about a partner being intimate with another rather than being jealous *of* the other person. That is, respondents who cited intimacy as evoking feelings of jealousy often clarify that the experience of jealousy is about the partner’s *actions* with another, not the other’s presence in and of itself. Participants often said that they over-thought about the intimacy or did not like when their partner discussed it. Typically, individuals who report feeling jealous as a result of a partner’s intimacy with others do not overly problematize those feelings. For example, this participant states, “Though not usual, sometimes when my partner talks about intimacy with her other partner I get jealous. In those instances, we discuss why I feel that way and work through it.” This participant noted that while their partner’s intimacy with another instigated feelings of jealousy, it was not overly problematic and was discursively managed within the relationship.

Lack of transparent communication. Polyamorous communities heavily emphasize open and honest communication between partners to such an extent that it’s an aspect of that romantic identity for many (Barker, 2005). It is unsurprising then that some attribute jealousy directly to lack of transparent communication from a partner. For example, this participant writes, “Rarely, but times when I feel most insecure is if/when my partners aren't

communicating with me in a very transparent way (i.e., radical honesty).” Lack of open communication was perceived as indicative of a problem, and may result in insecurity (thus, in jealousy).

Competition with the “other.” In line with more traditional views of romantic jealousy as a perceived threat, several participants identified that they were in fact jealous in situations that involved their partner expressing interest or spending time with another person, even when that is a part of their relationship agreement. Although the competitive feeling as associated with jealousy is certainly not unique to polyamorous individuals, the allowance for multiple partners within this relational type may offer unique consequences to these feelings. For example, this participant discussed jealousy around a longer-term partner’s *new relationship energy* (NRE) with a new partner:

I tend to feel fear and some jealousy when my partner first begins a new relationship with someone I do not know and have not met. Or, when he feels intense NRE for the new person, I sometimes feel jealous, based on fear that I am second choice (like an old shoe.) Or, when my partner is in intense NRE and speaks too much or too highly of the new relationship, or takes time from me to spend with the new partner. In those instances, negotiation and communication is in order. The earlier examples were things we may talk through but which I'm aware are my issues to address and deal with.

Although this participant articulates that they are ready to deal with this feeling and confront it with communication and building a relationship with the partner’s partner, they still emphasize that NRE may ignite jealousy. NRE is a concept in polyamorous communities that describes the excitement that frequently occurs at the start of a relationship (Weitzman, 2006; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

Other participants feared that a newer partner’s partners may replace them. For example, this participant writes:

Sometimes I feel jealous when I think about my newer partner with others, and worry that they may take my place in his life. I also feel jealous worrying that he might want someone else more than me, or that I'm not good enough.

This participant attributes their feelings of jealousy to fear that a partner may replace them, or that they are not “enough” for their partner, reflecting a more traditional view of romantic jealousy.

Finally, four participants referenced disliking a partner’s partner as causing feelings of jealousy. For example, this participant writes:

I feel jealous when I have a metamour that I do not like. I don't want someone that I don't like to go off with my partner(s). It makes me feel like they don't take my opinion of the person and their behavior seriously. I recognize this is irrational and that people aren't required to like the same people that I like so I try to work on this internal when it happens. Luckily enough, this is very rare.

Thus, although less common, some participants like this one note that jealousy may stem from their partner spending time with someone they do not like, which could indicate their partner not valuing their opinion. Typically, polyamorous communities emphasize the importance of relationships between metamours (Wolfe, 2003), so this tension may be a source of discomfort other than or in addition to jealousy as well.

Bringing up the Green Eyed Monster: Discussing Jealousy

Participants also responded to a prompt asking them to describe how they discuss jealousy, if at all, with any of their partners. Here, participants also frequently use the language of “trigger” to describe what prompted the feeling of jealousy. Often, they did not refer to the trigger as a specific person, but rather as one of the following themes: (1) Adding/removing partners, (2) validation, and (3) negative reactions. Participants frequently suggest that they shared their feelings with their partner(s) so that they would be aware and offer support or validation, but not with the goal of the partner changing the behavior that may have led to jealous feelings. Several participants said that they rarely or never discussed jealousy because neither they nor their partner(s) experience jealousy, but most participants identified that they did discuss jealousy at least once with a partner. Only four participants said that they experience jealousy but did not discuss it with a partner.

Adding and removing partners. Participants said discussions of jealousy sometimes arose within specific dyadic relationships when they spoke about adding or removing a partner. For example, this participant shares, “We have discussed the potential for feeling jealous when we have added or removed partners from our relationship.” This exemplar demonstrates how the addition or removal of partners from a particular dynamic relationship may prompt discussions of jealousy.

Similarly, jealousy discussions occur within the context of balancing commitments when joining another relationship. Several participants also reference that they usually enjoy compersion, and jealousy only occurred in specific instances. For example, this participant notes, “We mostly talk about good times with other partners and enjoy compersion. we have a little jealousy, maybe not even the right word, when there are disagreements about balancing time commitments.” This response emphasizes both balancing commitments as sparking disagreement sometimes interpreted as jealousy, and the contextualization of jealousy in compersion. The standard of compersion offers an additional language through which to talk about jealousy.

Discussions of jealousy also occur in the context of *vetoing* a partner. For polyamorous relationships, this means that an existing partner of someone the participant may wish to engage in a relationship with could prevent the desired partner from becoming involved with the participant. For example, this participant writes:

We discuss it as a concept, and discuss times we've felt it or feel it. We generally don't get worked up. We only got worked up about it that time when my boyfriend's wife tried to veto us. (Shed tried to veto my gf as well.) We discussed how intensely painful our fear and jealousy was, and supported each other.

Thus, the idea of vetoing a partner may prompt jealousy because it results in fear and relational uncertainty.

Validation and being heard. The most frequent theme to emerge in how participants discuss jealousy with a partner occurred within context of seeking validation or support, or avoiding rumination by expressing their feelings. Participants articulated that often they just wanted their partner to “hear them out” and acknowledge their feelings, and often that need was met. Additionally, participants articulated a desire to avoid letting those feelings fester by verbalizing them. The language of “openness and honesty” also frequently occurred. For instance, this participant writes:

I find it helpful to discuss these feelings with my partners, because communication is important. It doesn't mean they have to act on it or do anything different, but I find it immensely helpful to feel heard and validated. A lot of bad jealousy feelings are just not feeling listened to or understood.

Thus, this participant emphasizes that being heard and validated is what makes jealousy communication constructive.

Furthermore, participants often explicitly seek validation as an aspect of jealousy discussion. For instance, this participant notes, "I do [discuss jealousy], mostly from a place of insecurity. I say, 'I feel insecure about this/ Can you reassure me that I am still important and loved?'" As this exemplar demonstrates, explicitly seeking of validation, by directly acknowledging feelings of insecurity and asking for reassurance, may occur as a dimension of jealousy discussion.

Participants also identify validation and support as goals of jealousy communication that supersede partner behavioral change. For example, this participant writes, "If either of us are experiencing jealousy we talk through it. Neither of us change our actions but we validate each other's emotions and emotionally support one another." Participants described that verbalizing their experiences of jealousy to their partner(s) facilitates the support and validation they desire, even if they do not change their partner's jealousy-inducing behavior.

To facilitate their partner(s)' ability to validate and support them, several participants also said that they think through their jealous feelings, or talk to themselves about it, before addressing a partner. For example, this participant writes:

I wait until the feeling settles, discuss it with myself if you like, so that when I go to my partners I can be sure I know what I am feeling and why, that I'm not reacting to cover some other feeling up. Then I can go to my partners and say exactly what I need.

Self-reflection and self-talk, as described by the above exemplar, allow participants to consider their emotional experience in more detail (i.e., for what emotion(s) jealousy is being used as an umbrella term), and to communicate their needs to their partner(s).

Somewhat interestingly, because far more participants emphasize acknowledging their feelings, a few participants do articulate a "logic over emotions" approach to discussing jealousy within their relationships. Sometimes, this occurred as "cooling down" before "rationally" talking about it with a partner. Other times it was more direct, for example, this participant writes, "It [jealousy] is the hardest part of being poly. It is so easy for the emotional part of the brain to over-ride logic. // Try to convey that they are loved deeply" Thus, although this framing is less common, some participants such as this perceive emotional experiences like jealousy as irrational. However, even those who frame the emotional experience as irrational and praise a logical approach still note the importance of communicating love and validation to a partner, as the above exemplar emphasizes, "Convey that they are loved deeply."

Negative reactions. Although the smallest number of participants fell into this category, still several participants said they do not feel comfortable articulating their jealousy to a partner, that their partner dismisses it or reacts negatively, or they themselves experience a lot of anger and rage and may take it out on a partner over feelings of jealousy. For example, this participant writes:

I find it very difficult to discuss jealousy, because it usually involves feeling that someone important to my partner is bad for them. Partner A is the kind of

magical poly human who does not experience jealousy, but is the only partner with whom I experience jealousy.

This participant experiences discomfort discussing jealousy because they feel bad telling a partner that they do not like someone important to them.

Other participants discuss a partner's negative reaction rather than their own. Partners reacting dismissively constitute one negative reaction. For example, this participant writes, "I try to bring it up with her and the reasons and she dismisses them." Dismissal of jealous feelings were considered a negative reaction. Other negative reactions include anger. For example, this participant shares, "We discuss it when it pops up due to a conflict of dates and times. He usually gets angry and that will make me afraid to say what is truly on my mind." Angry responses pose a challenge to jealousy discussions by inhibiting emotional expression, as evidenced by the above exemplar.

Discussion

Polyamory, a relationship orientation that involves consensual non-monogamy and the desire for multiple romantic and/or sexual partnerships, both reinforces and complicates traditional understandings of romantic jealousy as perceived threat to the exclusive nature of a relationship. Individuals who participated in this study either identified as polyamorous, or one of their partners identified as polyamorous. In this section, I will review the significant findings of this study and discuss their implications. Additionally, I will acknowledge the limitations of the present study and make suggestions for future research. I suggest that the primary contributions from the present study include: (1) an expanded conceptualization of romantic jealousy within polyamorous intimate relationships; (2) an extension of the communicative dimension of jealousy into polyamorous relationships; and (3) a reinforcement and extension of the identity-laden nature of jealousy within polyamorous relationships.

Participants conceptualized jealousy often as insecurity or otherwise as an umbrella term for a range of complex emotions. However, they identified areas where they felt insecure as a result of a threat to the relationship other than as a threat to exclusivity. Instead, they articulated that they felt "jealous" when their needs were not being met, they felt they may be replaced in some way, or something internal and unrelated to their partner(s)' behavior (i.e., self-esteem).

Generally, participants reported discussing jealousy with their partner(s) when these feelings occurred. Specifically, participants usually discussed jealousy in terms of seeking validation or acknowledgement of their feelings, but not with the goal of changing their partner's behavior. This conceptualization of jealousy reinforces past scholarship on jealousy in polyamory that describes the manageable nature of jealousy and goal of compersion (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Wolfe, 2003). However, the present study also builds on these findings to include more specific thematic patterns for both individuals who subscribe to the common polyamorous guidance in managing multiple relationships (e.g., emphasize open communication, aim for compersion) and those who adhere to more traditional understandings of jealousy influenced by monogamous norms (e.g., threat from others). Feelings of jealousy exist across relational types, and polyamorous relationships may offer productive insights into how jealousy can be reframed and communicated.

Reinforcing the extensive research that emphasizes the communicative dimension of jealousy in addition to the cognitive and emotional dimensions of jealousy (Andersen et al., 1995; Bevan & Lannuti, 2002), the findings of this study extend this conclusion to polyamorous relationships that communicate jealousy. Specifically, communicating jealousy for polyamorous people may take the form of explicitly seeking validation and support, reinforcing an aspect of polyamorous identity (e.g., communication, radical honesty), or occur within the

context of relational agreement negotiation (i.e., adding or removing partners). This is significant, because while we acknowledge jealousy is not inherently negative (Andersen et al., 1995; Bevan & Lannutti, 2002; Noland, 2010), this study suggests it may at times be quite positive if it prompts conversations that build the relationship. Participants discussed jealousy with their partners, but often by explicitly asking for validation rather than desiring behavioral change. That is, participants wanted a communicative resolution that affirms the relationship and validates their feelings, rather than wanting their partner to cease engaging in the jealousy-inducing behavior.

Jealousy is inherently identity-laden within polyamorous relationships, which exist in opposition to mainstream monogamous discourses about jealousy and infidelity (Klesse, 2005, 2006). The polyamorous community orients toward compersion in an effort to manage jealousy (Deri, 2015; Wolfe, 2003). Experiencing happiness for a partner's happiness, for some participants in the present study, was a realized goal. Several participants even qualified their discussion of jealousy with partners as "rare" because compersion characterizes the norm in their relationship(s). However, other participants describe feeling intentionally or unintentionally excluded or like they were "missing out" as triggering feelings of jealousy, supporting Deri's (2015) conclusion that compersion may not be realized for all polyamorous people.

Perceiving needs not being met prompted feelings of jealousy for participants in the present study. Quantitative research finds that polyamorous relationships are relatively independent of each other; needs-fulfillment in one relationship predicts a negligible amount of variation in concurrent relationships, suggesting that they do not heavily impact each other (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). However, participants in the present study attribute experiences of jealousy to how their own needs are being met, which they often describe as related to a partner's concurrent relationship. It is possible that how needs-meeting is quantitatively measured does not always reflect how polyamorous individuals personally conceptualize their needs. These conflicting findings may suggest a need for further research into perceptions of need-meeting in polyamorous relationships.

How jealousy relates to uncertainty within polyamorous relationships may also warrant further research. Several participants articulated that their feelings of insecurity arose from feeling unsure where they stood in the relationship, and many more described explicitly asking their partner(s) for validation or acknowledgment. Jealousy often negatively impacts relationships due to increased uncertainty (Kennedy-Lightsey, & Booth-Butterfield, 2011). The present study suggests that communicating jealousy as a response to feelings of uncertainty may lead to decreased uncertainty for some polyamorous relationships.

Taken together, these findings suggest that more research that attends to relational dynamics like polyamory may complicate traditional approaches to jealousy experience and expression. In addition, these findings have implications for future research on both jealousy and polyamorous relationships. In sum, this paper supports and extends the existing research on jealousy and communicative jealousy by incorporating the conceptualization and conversations of and about jealousy for polyamorous relationships. Jealousy exists across relational types. Polyamorous people both experience and communicate jealousy within their intimate relationships. However, for polyamorous individuals, jealousy may be more identity-laden with a cultural language of compersion emerging to contextualize jealous feelings. This study finds that polyamorous individuals' conceptualization of jealousy more overtly acknowledges the feeling of insecurity than that of extradyadic threat. Further, the findings presented in this paper suggest that jealousy may play a role in prosocial relationship maintenance for this relationship type.

Limitations and Further Research

Although this paper presents a useful start to an elaboration of jealousy in light of non-normative relationship types, the study design poses several limitations worth acknowledging. While a survey design allows for anonymity, a higher number of responses, and geographic diversity, it also prevents asking follow-up questions at several places they would be warranted. Survey research also tends to attract a more educated demographic, and, as was the case in this paper, tends to limit racial/ethnic diversity. Future research may intentionally seek out polyamorous people of color who may reinforce or challenge the findings presented in this paper. In addition, interview methods can allow future research to ask follow-up questions.

References

- Andersen, P. A., Eloy, S. V., Guerrero, L. K., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1995). Romantic jealousy and relational satisfaction: A look at the impact of jealousy experience and expression. *Communication Reports*, 8(2), 77-85. doi:10.1080/08934219509367613
- Aumer, K., Bellew, W., Ito, B., Hatfield, E., & Heck, R. (2014). The happy green eyed monogamist: Role of jealousy and compersion in monogamous and non-traditional relationships. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 17(1), 77-88. Retrieved from <http://www.ejhs.org/volume17/happy.html>
- Barker, M. (2005). This is my partner, and this is my... partner's partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 8(1), 75-88. doi:10.1080/10720530590523107
- Bevan, J. L., & Lannutti, P. J. (2002). The experience and expression of romantic jealousy in same-sex and opposite-sex romantic relationships. *Communication Research Reports*, 19(3), 258-268. doi:10.1080/08824090209384854
- Bringle, R. G., & Boebinger, K. L. (1990). Jealousy and the "third" person in the love triangle. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 7, 119-133.
- Conley, T. D., & Moors, A. C. (2014). More oxygen please! How polyamorous relationship strategies might oxygenate marriage. *Psychological Inquiry*, 25(1), 56-63. doi:10.1080/1047840X.2014.876908
- Deri, J. (2015). *Love's refraction: Jealousy and compersion in queer women's polyamorous relationships*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Duma, U. (2009). *Jealousy and compersion in close relationships: Coping styles by relationship types*. Mainz, Germany: GRIN Verlag.
- Easton, D. (2010). Making friends with jealousy. In M. Barker & D. Langdrige (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp. 207-211). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Easton, D., Liszt, C. A., Dodson, B., Nearing, R., Magazine, L. M., Anapol, D., & Stan Dale, D. H. S. (1997). The ethical slut. *A practical guide to polyamory, open relationships and other adventures*. San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Andersen, P. A. (1995). Coping with the green-eyed monster: Conceptualizing and measuring communicative responses to jealousy. *Western Journal of Communication*, 59(4), 270-304. doi:10.1080/10570319509374523
- Kennedy-Lightsey, C., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2011). Responses to jealousy situations that evoke uncertainty in married and dating relationships. *Communication Quarterly*, 59(2), 255-275. doi:10.1080/01463373.2011.563443
- Klesse, C. (2005). Bisexual women, non-monogamy and differentialist anti-promiscuity discourses. *Sexualities*, 8(4), 445-464. doi:10.1177/1363460705056620
- Klesse, C. (2006). Polyamory and its "others": Contesting the terms of non-monogamy. *Sexualities*, 9(5), 565-583. doi:10.1177/1363460706069986

- Mint, P. (2010). The power mechanisms of jealousy. In M. Barker & D. Langdrige (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp. 201-206). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mitchell, M. E., Bartholomew, K., & Cobb, R. J. (2014). Need fulfillment in polyamorous relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 51(3), 329-339. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.742998
- Morrison, T. G., Beaulieu, D., Brockman, M., & Beaglaioich, C. Ó. (2013). A comparison of polyamorous and monoamorous persons: Are there differences in indices of relationship well-being and sociosexuality? *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4(1), 75-91. doi: 10.1080/19419899.2011.631571
- Noland, C. M. (2010). *Sex talk: The role of communication in intimate relationships*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Ritchie, A., & Barker, M. (2006). "There aren't words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up": Constructing polyamorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy. *Sexualities*, 9(5), 584-601. doi:10.1177/1363460706069987
- Sheff, E. A. (May 9, 2014). How many polyamorists are there in the U.S.? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-polyamorists-next-door/201405/how-many-polyamorists-are-there-in-the-us>
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods*. London, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Visser, R., & McDonald, D. (2007). Swings and roundabouts: Management of jealousy in heterosexual "swinging" couples. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 459-476. doi:10.1348/014466606X143153
- Weitzman, G. (2006). Therapy with clients who are bisexual and polyamorous. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 6(1-2), 137-164. doi:10.1300/J159v06n01_08
- Wolfe, L. (2003). Jealousy and transformation in polyamorous relationships (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). *Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, San Francisco, California*.
- Wosick-Correa, K. (2010). Agreements, rules and agentic fidelity in polyamorous relationships. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 1, 44-61. doi:10.1080/19419891003634471

Author Note

Valerie Rubinsky is a doctoral candidate at Ohio University. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: vr225514@ohio.edu.

Thank you to Dr. Angela Hosek for advice and support in preparing this manuscript.

Copyright 2018: Valerie Rubinsky and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Rubinsky, V. (2018). Bringing up the green-eyed monster: Conceptualizing and communicating jealousy with a partner who has other partners. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(6), 1441-1455. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss6/11>
