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Jealousy in Western History

From Past toward Present

Peter N. Stearns

Jealousy has a past—that is, it has been subject to significant change over time, which means it's a proper topic for historical study. Amid change, it also displays some interesting continuities within particular cultures—a common complexity which again means it's a proper topic for historical study.

Some stark contrasts are involved. Several of the most famous American trials of the later 19th century involved men who had killed either a wife or a wife's lover, and who argued (in several cases successfully, when they also could afford a high-priced attorney) that they suffered from a legitimate jealousy that simply overcame their will. Just a half-century later (we move to the 1930s), while a number of spousal murderers may have wanted to mount this argument (think of the possibilities, even later on, for O. J. Simpson), they got nowhere with it. Jealousy—in its legitimate power to overwhelm rational controls—had been reassessed, and effective law changed accordingly. We need emotions history to understand this kind of change and, through this in turn, to assess contemporary emotional formulations in terms of a trajectory from past to present. Jealous rage is not the only facet of this particular emotion to warrant historical analysis—it's not even the most significant element in point of fact; but it does demonstrate the kind of dramatic shifts that invite entry to a historical project.

Emotions history, still a fairly new and somewhat tentative entrant, fills several needs. It helps explain why former behaviors often differed from contemporary expectations—when people defined grief, or anger, or jealousy by standards different from those of the present, it is hardly surprising that their patterns of action, even some of their basic institutions, differed as well. Emotions history, in other words, helps historians do their job of exploring the past. Emotions history can generate some good stories, providing some of the wonder that good emotions anthropology offers as to the amazing range of human responses in what might seem to be basic characteristics of the species. Above all, however, emotions history, particularly but not exclusively applied to the past century or so, illuminates current emotional responses and issues directly. By showing the

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immediate antecedents of a contemporary emotional pattern, there is a chance to seek causal explanations that purely presentist evidence would not permit; where significant recent change is involved, complexities may also be identified that might be difficult to discern, or certainly to account for, by using current data alone. Seeing certain emotional formulations in movement, from a prior point in time, adds a vital ingredient to emotions analysis, whether or not there is explicit interest in the past per se.¹

At its best, emotions history also helps relate emotional standards and experience to wider developments in society. Examination of recent shifts in jealousy certainly requires attention to broader changes in family patterns and gender relationships. Emotional change responds to more general social currents, and adds new components to social patterns in turn. Contemporary jealousy is a revealing case in point.

Obviously, historical analysis faces some limitations, particularly around a topic as elusive as emotion. Evidence is much stronger for cultural standards than for actual emotions experiences or internal perceptions. But the standards themselves matter. They normally shape public translations of emotional expectations, as in matters of law. History here helps explore the wider consequences of emotional criteria, in social and even political areas, beyond the more individualized preoccupations of many more conventional emotions researchers. And the standards do influence personal evaluations and responses, for which there is often a certain amount of independent evidence as well.

Emotions history has value even for emotions commonly regarded as basic—that is, to some degree innate. Changes in anger standards, including concerted efforts to reduce anger at work in the United States for the past several decades, have real impact on work itself but also on personal perceptions and expressions even off the job. A history of fear, including changes in childhood socialization toward the emotion that began to take hold in the 1920s, helps explain why elements of the American public have become increasingly manipulable through political scare tactics. And the list can be expanded.²

A more composite emotion such as jealousy, however, is if anything even more open to historical conditioning. Comparative contemporary studies have already shown how jealousy-inducing situations can generate very different amalgams of anger or sadness or embarrassment, depending on particular national cultures.³ Amalgams can vary at least as much over time, which is where the opportunity to use history to explore the emotion more fully comes into play. Jealousy also has a complex, sometimes confusing relationship with envy, and history sheds light on this relationship, at least in contemporary society, as well.

The target, again, is not primarily the past for its own sake, though going back to jealousy from several centuries ago actually generates a few useful findings. The key goal involves improving contemporary self-understanding (personal and social alike), and in the process convincing other practitioners in disciplines associated with emotions study that adding a significant historical component

to the interdisciplinary mix is more than a diversion, but potentially a key element in thorough analysis.

Two related comparative findings can help orient this kind of historical exploration of jealousy. Both suggest that many Americans are unusually uncomfortable with jealousy, not able always to shake it off but often forced to confront an emotion that they reprove. One response, suggested in a rich if brief comparative effort some years ago comparing polled American responses to those of Chinese, Greeks, Jamaicans, and others, is simply to conceal: Americans were more likely than many other cultures to believe that jealous feelings had to be kept secret. The other, perfectly compatible but from a slightly more recent and certainly richer comparative study, shows Americans (in contrast to the French and Dutch) particularly eager, when assailed with jealousy, to check with other people to find out if they had revealed the emotion or behaved unacceptably under its sway. These conclusions suggest an interesting jealousy issue in the United States that recent historical analysis will also highlight.⁴ But the historical analysis, beyond confirming, expands the field to probe the causes of this contemporary discomfort, among other things by identifying approximately when and in what circumstances it began; and it facilitates as well a wider discussion of consequences, beyond what may be revealed to zealous pollsters.

We will begin the historical discussion a bit more diffusely, toward identifying some interesting earlier ingredients and issues; but the target, ultimately, is contemporary American discomfort, and how history helps illuminate and explain it.

Etymology, even a basic English dictionary, quickly reveals one important aspect of jealousy: that it long had at least two basic meanings in Western culture, only one of which survives very clearly in the present day. Jealousy, in the Middle Ages or in early modern Europe, could of course mean an emotion attached to love and (implicitly at least) sex, but it could also mean an emotion spurred in defense of power or honor, a powerful motivator that could win strong approval. Jealousy, in this second sense, was directly connected with the kindred word zeal (both words derive from the same Greek stem), spurring vigor to safeguard legitimate, though not always completely tangible, assets, a goad to honorable behavior. Jealousy in this sense could support behaviors, such as dueling, seen as essential to manliness or defense of family broadly construed. Intriguingly, though not surprisingly given a more recent history in which notions of honor have yielded to other goals, from commercial success (with which too much fussing about honor might interfere) to fuller definition of individual personality, jealousy as legitimate zeal has tended to fade from view.⁵

For Western society, including the United States, began to pull back from privileging codes of honor by the 18th and 19th centuries. Dueling came under direct attack, and more generally public discussion began to focus on the need to restrain the kinds of emotions that would promote affronts to honor.⁶ A few

European and, by the early 20th century, Latin American countries even established committees to regulate affronts to honor, seeking to acknowledge jealous response but quickly smother it with compromise; but this was a transitional measure that soon yielded to the assumption that any balanced individual could keep the emotions associated with honor under control on his own. Only a trickle of commentary kept alive the notion that jealousy could do any good in male–male relations. Thus one aberrant note in the American child advice literature of the 1940s argued that jealousy could have “character-building and creative uses,” the idea being not that it supported honor—now hopelessly out of date—but that it could be transformed into competitive motivation that did still fit the needs of a contemporary society. But this interesting argument was decidedly atypical in what had become, as we will shortly see, a pattern of blanket disapproval.

Traditionally, of course, ideas about jealous defense of honor could closely link to more precise discussions of the role of jealousy in love, and in male–female relationships. Here, however, the Western cultural tradition, at least by the later Middle Ages when troubadours began to heap praise on the idea of courtly love, surfaced considerable disagreement and, though inconsistently with ideals of honor, some interesting gender disparities as well. Romantic jealousy could easily be attacked because it produced cruel behaviors, adulterated real love with baser passion, and led jealous individuals to a tragic loss of control. Classically, of course, Shakespeare thus represented jealousy in *Othello*, describing the “venom” and “misery” of the emotion. Seventeenth-century Jesuits blasted jealousy as a “monstrous” passion, the antithesis of real, spiritual love; a jealous husband might incite his wife to sin simply in retaliation for his rantings, and the emotion could lead directly to crime.⁷ La Rochefoucauld saw no relationship between jealousy and real love, though he implicitly recognized that the linkage was common: “If (jealous) love is judged by its effects, it resembles hate more than friendship.”⁸

There was, however, another view, that jealousy was not only inevitable but actually desirable, in enhancing love. A French courtly love writer of the 12th century argued that “He who is not jealous cannot love . . . Real jealousy always increases the feelings of love . . . Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.” Jealous men could be literary heroes, defending the honor of their faithful wives. Theater fare of the 17th and 18th centuries often urged the importance of a certain amount of jealousy in flirtation, so long as it did not get out of control. Marriage advice might try, similarly, to distinguish between useful, moderate jealousy and an emotion that could drive couples apart through unfair accusations or obsession: “There is a just and an unjust jealousy. Just, is with married partners who mutually love each other; there is with them a just and prudent zeal lest their conjugal love be violated and therefore just grief if it is violated . . . That zeal is a just protection against adultery is plain. Hence it is as a fire flaming against violation, and defending against it.”⁹

All of this chatter operated as part of European high culture, sending out mixed signals of warning and acknowledgment. The mixed legacy has some significance. It shows that more contemporary concerns about jealousy as a distortion of valid emotion and a potential hazard are by no means entirely new, though this is unsurprising. The legacy also shows, however, that ideas of honor could get wrapped up in some masculine definitions of love; though this association would later encounter more uniform disapproval, it certainly could survive at least for certain personalities and in certain subcultures (some historians have pointed to a particular Southern attachment to ideas of honor, for example) even against the mainstream. Most interesting, however, before modern times, was an apparent tendency to try to resolve the contradictory signals through gender distinctions, however inconsistently with broader ideas about honor and a disproportionate emphasis on women's responsibility for sexual fidelity. An intriguing investigation into French court records in the 17th century, by historian Natalie Davis, shows that men rarely used a jealousy argument when trying to explain why they committed a disruptive act, preferring instead to claim that they were motivated by righteous anger. Women, however, though obviously less commonly involved in accusations of crime, frequently claimed that they were spurred by jealousy to attack or insult other women or assault their own husbands. Jealousy, in this rendering, was a legitimate but baser emotion, acceptable for the gender widely regarded as less capable of living up to high standards. This rendering at the popular level would also emerge in later formulas, with all its incompatibilities with residual beliefs in legitimate male defense of sexual honor.¹⁰

There is ample room for additional work on cultural traditions involving jealousy, and how they worked into popular calculations, and a pressing need for more comparative works; but a few points are already clear. Jealousy was a frequent and rather complex subject of discussion, with some deeply held but also inconsistent beliefs. The idea of jealousy as motivational, for men—an idea that would not travel well into the more modern period—struggled against the notion that this was a petty emotion more suited to women, and all within a framework in which some purists disapproved of jealousy altogether, either because it sullied the purity of love or because it could generate obsession or violence.

Against this backdrop, discussions of jealousy in the 19th century, at least in the United States, were surprisingly muted. This was a strange preamble to what became an unprecedentedly ardent concern in the early 20th century. Apparently—and one speculates largely in terms of what is meant by absence of evidence, rather than on the basis of elaborate data—Victorian standard-setters implicitly agreed that jealousy-fueled honor was not worth much attention because of general recognition that the goals were inappropriate; while at the same time a new and

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decidedly ethereal praise for true love involved far too much purity for jealousy to intrude—again, a reason for lack of much attention. Love was a frequently explored topic, but jealous entanglements did not figure into the 19th-century standards, as transmitted in family advice literature. Only on the margins did the older idea of petty female jealousy crop up in much formal discussion. Marital advice literature contained a few cautionary tales about wives who unjustifiably burdened their husbands with jealousy, though interestingly now directed at intense work interests outside the home more than against female rivals. One protagonist's happy home life was thus briefly "clouded" by jealousy, because her lawyer husband sometimes brought work home, until she realized, like a good wife, that she could share his professional ambitions so that his intensity would no longer seem to exclude her emotionally. A few stories and personal diaries evoked jealousies among adult sisters, for example when one found a match yet the other was still nervously single, confirming the femaleness but also the minor inconvenience of the emotion.¹¹

The huge exception to this substantial neglect involved the throwback appeals to a jealousy of honor when husbands were directly confronted with wives' indiscretion and responded violently in the heat of the moment. "For jealousy is the rage of a man; therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance . . . Those who dishonor husbands are here warned of their doom . . . Jealousy, which defies and tears down all restraint, whether it be what we technically call insanity or not, is akin to it. It enslaves the injured husband, and vents itself in one result, which seems to be inevitable and unavoidable." So argued the successful attorney for one Daniel McFarland in 1870, winning acquittal for his wealthy defendant (who had killed his wife's lover in flagrante delicto) amid the open adulation of hundreds of public well-wishers. The McFarland defense built on the pioneering argument in the Daniel Sikles trial of 1859 (another lover-killer) which had also successfully cited the "deep, ineffaceable consuming fire of jealousy." Overall, between 1859 and the early 20th century, about 30 high-profile trials, all involving well-heeled male defendants, had invoked this defense. Intriguingly, an effort to do the same for a woman (who had killed her husband's lover) failed before a court which insisted that women could not possibly be stirred by such a deep and righteous form of jealousy.¹²

The argument for a few men, however, and its apparent resonance both with legal experts and a wider public, was fascinating, a seeming exception to the general disdain for, and feminization of, jealousy in the 19th century. The shift was considerable, though there was an obvious link to older anger arguments that men had used, in Western culture, to justify defense of honor or of spousal fidelity. Changes in the legal niceties of claiming insanity played a role in the change, but so did the increased currency of ideas about romantic love, which allowed new emphasis to be placed on jealousy in relationship to this emotion, rather than to more abstract concepts of honor. The link between jealousy and heightened expectation of love set the stage for ongoing discussions, spilling into the 20th

century. But the association of jealousy and loss of control, even temporary insanity, also suggested drawbacks to jealousy that would soon feed a very different kind of evaluation, in which jealousy had to be seen as a deep flaw in character.

Traditional elements were obvious: the new, 19th-century courtroom use of jealousy harked back directly, though not explicitly, to older ideas about emotions legitimate in the defense of male honor. This was not, again implicitly, a petty, female type of jealousy, but an overriding emotion befitting the seriousness of the offense. Double standards, another patriarchal tradition, were fully deployed, for men had a right to emotional responses to infidelity that women did not; and in fact, for many in the middle and upper classes, the later 19th century was a double-standard heyday. But the novel note was vital as well, even aside from the heightened linkage with romantic love: jealousy's surge was equivalent to insanity in its temporary but blinding qualities. The legal reasons for the addition to standard defenses of male honor were obvious: only brief insanity would get the defendant off the hook. Yet while this was a temporarily successful line of argument, it conceded a huge amount to jealousy's downside, to the essential illegitimacy of the emotion in a reasonable society. The very success of the ploy may have contributed to a larger reassessment of jealousy which prepared, in fact, the more contemporary lines of response.

One final feature of 19th-century American society warrants attention, in explaining why comments about jealousy were so infrequent aside from the fascinating but atypical show trials. Men and women, particularly in the standard-setting middle classes, operated in rather separate spheres during the century as a whole, with respectable women confined in or around the home while men were increasingly away at work. Inter-gender contact, of the sort that might provoke adult jealousy, was fairly limited. Courtship could of course provoke conflicting emotion, but even this was a rather private, home-based activity, not springing from an abundance of public socializing among young people. And again, the fashionable statements concerning love, emphasizing pure and ethereal passion, would have been spoiled by too much admission of jealousy in any event.

The 20th century would differ from this pattern, among other things because social interactions between the genders began to change considerably. More respectable women worked outside the home, at least for a period before marriage. Co-education increasingly extended to high school and even college. Dating practices replaced home-based courtship. Even among married couples, social activities expanded and involved both spouses—the older pattern of men heading off to clubs and lodges faded in the middle class. Opportunities for jealousy arguably expanded, which is why new and more explicit commentary and cautionary advice emerged so strongly.

For new battle lines against jealousy were drawn in the early 20th century, far from courtrooms and nearer the cribs of young children, who had never before

figured significantly in jealousy discussions of any sort. The issue, a crucial 20th-century invention, was of course sibling rivalry. From as early as 1893 (interestingly, in a revised edition of what was then the best-selling childrearing manual), advisors began to warn about the dangers of intense jealousy among young children. Parents should be aware, Felix Adler trumpeted, of the “incipient hatred” that could develop among brothers, at a very early age, which could poison the loving affection that should serve as the core of family life.¹³ This early salvo turned into a veritable flood of concern by the 1920s, with Children’s Bureau manuals and virtually every commercial handbook addressing systematic attention to sibling rivalry. Research, at centers like Smith College, seemed to confirm the virtually inevitable onset of sibling rivalry when a toddler had to confront a newborn brother or sister. The dangers were twofold: first, an immediate physical threat to the baby, from a jealousy-wracked 3-year-old, something that parents should guard against with great vigilance. But second, the possible emotional perversion of the toddler him- or herself (gender was not a factor in this new campaign) from the poison of sibling jealousy. The verb insistently used was “festering”: if parents did not actively intervene to set the toddler on the right track, jealousy might take over permanently, distorting adult opportunities both for successful marriage and for healthy relationships at work. Parental intervention was vital, and at the same time the ubiquity of children’s jealousy made this essentially a standard obligation. The message might be stated in various ways: “Children who quarrel because of jealousy are in a serious state . . . This type of quarreling should be treated at once by getting at and doing away with the cause of it.” Parents who let their children rival each other “may be wrecking their chance of present and future happiness.” “Unless parents recognize that jealousy will normally appear, and are prepared for it, strong feelings of hostility often develop which continue to make life miserable for both children over many years.” Even worse, according to this new and dire expertise, jealousy incompletely expressed might be worse than overt emotion: “The child whose jealousy is not as easy to recognize suffers more and has greater need for help.”¹⁴

And on it went. Popularizers in the childrearing field were at least dimly aware that they were identifying something that had not previously been highlighted, on which they could therefore assume parental ignorance and the need for external guidance. Even Dr. Spock, later on, widely and inaccurately known for his laidback reassurances to parents, would insist that “a lot of effort” was essential in curbing children’s jealous emotion.¹⁵

The messages, including of course the new term itself (sibling rivalry as a formal concept dates from the 1920s), were systematically disseminated, not only in widely purchased handbooks but also from the pages of new family publications like *Parents’ Magazine*. By the 1940s and 1950s, in turn (it takes a while for even a systematic campaign of this sort to take full hold), many parents had clearly internalized the concern, writing frequent letters about manifestations of

jealousy among their own children and what they had done, or whom they had consulted, to deal with the problem. A poll in the late 1940s, focused on middle-class parents, found 53% claiming significant problems with sibling rivalry, and overall listing this as the third most pressing parental concern, and at the top of the list in terms of emotional and personality issues. We will turn momentarily to some of the wider consequences of the whole sibling rivalry scare, but it is clear that its proponents reached their immediate goal: to make the concept and the concern part of the standard arsenal of responsible parents.¹⁶

The result, correspondingly, was a major shift in the status of jealousy in American culture. The key innovations involved were obvious, even while admitting that concerns about jealousy can be found in earlier periods as well. First, jealousy was hauled out for a degree of attention it had certainly never before received in American discussions of emotion, more attention than it had usually received in any prior context. Second, it was now treated with a degree of hostility that was at least unusual if not unprecedented. This was an emotion with no merit whatsoever, indeed an emotion that carried great danger, high on the list of things to be worried about. And third, of course—and this was the most striking feature of all—it had to be encountered and handled in dealing with very young children. The attack on sibling rivalry was a key element in a new sense of parental responsibility for the explicit emotional socialization of the young, for the kind of guidance that would allow them to grow into emotionally healthy, functional adults, in turn a huge expansion of expectations attached to responsible parenthood.

The obvious question, important both historically and in terms of understanding more about the contemporary dynamics of jealousy, focuses on causation. Why did sibling rivalry become such a concern in the second quarter of the 20th century, when siblings had been around as long as the species itself with few indications of significant anxiety? Tensions between adult siblings have a historical record, from Cain and Abel onward. Diary evidence from the 19th century shows how parents occasionally grew a bit annoyed at childish bickering among siblings, but with no sense of a systematic problem and with it a focus on early childhood. The idea that jealousy among young children merited great attention was an innovation, and it begs for explanation.

Explanation, in turn, comes in three parts, granting that there is always a partially speculative element in this aspect of historical analysis, when developments that coexist in time are assigned weight in causation.

First, and most directly, a variety of psychologists began to turn more attention to children's emotions, including jealousy; the results were new at least to the extent that this kind of psychology had not existed before. Already in the later 19th century G. Stanley Hall and colleagues were conducting observations of children, and Hall was already commenting on the role of extreme adult jealousy in motivating crimes. New types of experts thought they knew things about children that had not been adequately explored before,

and on this basis they thought they had an obligation to guide parents toward new responsibilities, responsibilities that had not been part of traditional parenting. The sense that scientific expertise was superior to conventional wisdom ran very strong by the early 20th century. It also turned out, of course, that persuading parents that they needed expert help was a great way to sell books and magazines and even therapy visits, which added to the motivation. The new experts (who replaced older popularizers who had relied primarily on their qualifications as moralists) obviously believed they had discovered new problems with jealousy, including its wide and early intrusion into childhood, and this became part of what they sold to the general public. The formal research into sibling rivalry, which extended initial concerns, only added to the sense of scientific discovery.

But why did parents—whose own parents had managed to do their job without knowing that sibling rivalry was a formal concept—buy into the new expertise, however fervently advocated? Clearly, something of a general pattern began to emerge in the 1920s, in which growing numbers of parents thought they needed new kinds of advice. This was a decade, not coincidentally, in which three-generational households began to decline, with grandparents maintaining separate residences more commonly than in the past; so intergenerational advice may have become either less available or seemingly less relevant. More broadly, the sense that modern life required new socialization goals may also have played a role; it was at this point, after all, that government agencies began to get into the parental guidance game, through the publications of the Children's Bureau, steadily branching out from an initial focus on purely physical health to a wider array of psychological criteria. But while factors of this sort explain a general receptivity to new and more detailed advice literature, they hardly explain the special concern about jealousy.¹⁷

This then moves us to phase two of the explanation: some very real changes in parent-child dynamics that had been emerging gradually since the later 19th century but now became inescapable. Several factors were converging for middle-class families. Use of live-in domestic servants was declining rapidly, which reduced non-parental help in dealing with young children within the household; in some cases, the new trend for older relatives to live separately added to a situation where parent-child interaction was less commonly mediated by other adults, until school age intervened. Most important, the rapid decline in birth rate reduced the availability of assistance from older children and, perhaps ironically, enhanced children's rivalry for adult affection. We know that larger clusters of siblings tend to diffuse jealousy, but this was now the pattern that was becoming exceptional.¹⁸ Siblings grouped together less (a trend also encouraged by growing emphasis on same-age contacts among children), and competed for interaction with parents more. Here is a factor impossible to prove definitively (though more historical work on the neglected topic of changes in sibling relations over time would help), but plausible and perhaps even probable nevertheless, as it builds on

a number of concomitant developments of real importance. Jealousy among young children may have been singled out for new attention because in fact it was cropping up more commonly, or at the least because parents were likely to perceive it more acutely. Again, the new attention occurred within a framework where parental responsibility for emotional intervention in general was gaining new emphasis, where beliefs in the necessity of monitoring young children's emotional lives acquired new urgency because of concerns about the relationship between early impulses and later adult personalities. But there were good reasons for the role of jealousy in centering this sense of concern.¹⁹

Finally—the third layer—the focus on sibling rivalry occurred in a situation where adult jealousy itself was being reevaluated. It is possible that adult tensions encouraged some displacement onto the childish emotional arena, definite that new beliefs in the inappropriateness and danger of adult emotion in this area fostered much of the urgency about trying to create children who would grow up jealousy-free. The result was a causal circuit, in which larger warnings promoted the new signals in children's socialization, which in turn helped publicize and internalize the constraints on adults.

Changes in setting were gradual but cumulative, focusing on new public roles for women and new levels of gender contact in various settings. By the 1920s a majority of Americans could count on going to coeducational institutions for primary and secondary schooling, and a growing number also went on to coeducational colleges. The new practice of dating was gaining ground in these same schools, with considerable emphasis on the importance of “playing the field” for a while rather than forming intense attachments that might legitimately be informed by jealousy. For middle-class adolescents, for whom dating did emphasize multiple or sequential relationships rather than explicit courtship, these recommendations had real influence. At work, in the white collar sector, growing numbers of women shared office space (if often in subordinate roles). To be sure, most middle-class women did end their careers after marriage, but far more gender mixing was beginning to develop in public, as opposed to household-based, work space than had ever previously occurred. Finally, more and more middle-class couples participated in new kinds of entertainment and socializing outside the home. Observers, including perceptive social scientists like the Lynds in “Middletown” (Muncie, Indiana), noted that parties included not only mixed-company card games, and often smoking and drinking, but also frequently flirtatious exchanges of partners for part of an evening. While the new norms did not condone non-marital sex, and there is no indication that this became a more common part of middle-class marriage, the Lynds noted that by the 1930s even extramarital liaisons did not draw the heated condemnation that had once been the case in small-town America.²⁰ Admittedly at an extreme, a spate of “modernist” marital advice began to emerge as well, that explicitly attacked jealousy for its constraints on freedom. The literature set a tone for a wider, if more moderate, commentary.²¹

All of these changes in middle-class circles, which brought males and females into far more relatively unsupervised contact than had been widely permitted in the 19th century, depended on more explicit constraints on jealousy than had been necessary previously. Whether this contributed to the forces promoting more rigorous emotional socialization of children, or simply built on the changes encouraged by new expertise and new parent-child dynamics within the family, cannot be definitively determined. Certainly, however, a relationship was reflected in the frequent comments, in popularized manuals, on the results of unchecked childish jealousy on adult interactions. It was no surprise, as well, that recommendations similar to those directed toward children began to show up, by the 1930s, in marital and dating advice as well, pruned of course of the specific references to sibling tensions. The new genre of magazines for teenagers (teenaged girls, particularly) repeated warnings about how the green-eyed monster could poison both reputations and relationships. By the 1950s, advice literature offered extensive warnings about the dangers of jealousy in romance. One exception, the widely hailed authority Paul Popenoe who thought the emotion was fundamental to family stability and therefore to civilization, actually proved the rule, for his efforts at insistence so clearly swam against the tide.²² For most popularizers, the standards were clear and stark. Jealousy revealed personal disorientation: "We may even blight and blacken our happiness by jealousy, which is really an admission of our own inferiority, of our own cowardice and conceit." Implicit connections with childhood socialization were common as well: "The jealous lover is a child hugging his toy so closely that no one else can see it. Jealousy is almost always a mark of immaturity and insecurity. As we grow confident of love and of our loved one, we are not jealous . . . we need not cling in desperation." The attack on sibling rivalry, in fact, made it increasingly logical to associate adult jealousy with uncorrected childishness, an indictment of the jealous individual and his or her upbringing alike.²³

The transformation showed clearly in the legal arena, where modernist thinking about the unacceptability of jealous constraints on individual freedom, even within marriage, clearly gained ground. As early as the 1890s, state supreme courts were beginning to find the contention that jealousy could legitimately excuse loss of control and resultant violence unacceptable. There were intriguing hesitations. Some states remained willing to reduce jealousy-based killings to manslaughter, even when rejecting exoneration outright. A Texas statute, reconfirmed in 1925, legitimized killing by a husband confronting adultery directly providing it occurred before formal separation (and always with the insistence that wives did not have similar rights). Georgia similarly referred to "righteous and justifiable indignation," but extended the same thinking to wives with specific reference to sauce for the gander being sauce for the goose. But these Southern holdouts were unusual and also ultimately transient. By the 1970s all the Southern states had specifically withdrawn the justifiable homicide defense,

with the Georgia Supreme Court explicitly noting that in these changing times uncontrolled jealousy had become “uncivilized.” Other legal shifts, beginning in the 1920s and reaching completion by the 1970s, showed similar thinking: the movement toward no-fault divorce reduced the need to invoke jealousy as part of the termination of marriage (and the widespread decriminalization of adultery moved in the same direction). Opportunities to sue for breach of promise or alienation of affections, a notorious avenue for jealous as well as mercenary actions in the early 20th century, also ended.²⁴

In sum: a significant new level of hostility was directed against jealousy in the United States, from early in the 20th century through the 1970s. Reasons for this shift, beyond obvious and influential new expertise, are not entirely clear, but they combined a variety of family concerns with important new settings for heterosexual contact. Of course, the hostility built on more traditional antipathies to jealousy, but in largely eliminating any positive evaluation, any ambiguity, it marked a new chapter in approaches to this emotion. Not surprisingly, the resulting shift in standards was not only widely publicized, but affected various public forums including that provided by the legal system.

Actual impacts of the new standards, again not surprisingly, were more complicated than the uncompromising standards themselves. First, given the vigor and insistence of the explicit attacks on jealousy, it was hardly surprising that the message was picked up and internalized at several levels. From the 1930s onward, various studies and polls suggested a widespread desire to seem free from jealousy. Arnold Gesell’s evaluation of teenagers revealed a general desire to claim lack of jealousy and an interesting effort to point to the emotion as part of a discarded childhood. Teenagers, in other words, were reflecting the sibling campaign as a source of knowledge of the standards and an association between lack of jealousy and growing up—exactly the terms of the larger campaign.²⁵ Both boys and girls were eager to claim that jealousy was something they had experienced as young children but had now—by age 13 or so—definitively outgrown. It is vital to note, as a qualification to this claim, that American teenagers were also busily creating procedures that would help them minimize jealousy in fact, working against adult recommendations in the process. Dating was approved by parents and adults alike as a chance for young people to get to know a variety of partners of the opposite sex, in order to gain experiences that would ultimately, much later, help in selecting an appropriate mate. It was supposed to be casual, with neither deep passion nor sex involved. In fact, however, and particularly by the 1930s, many teenagers subverted this process by introducing “steady” dating, an exclusive arrangement that could involve considerable emotion and at least sexual overtones, but in which possible rivals were supposed to play by the rules and not poach on the reserved partner. It was easier to live up to the jealousy-free or at least reduced-jealousy claim when teenage culture fenced the couple off. Adults bemoaned this perversion—hoping obviously that teenagers could manage a more open environment free from

jealousy—but teenagers insisted, continuing to seek steady arrangements until the decline of the whole institution of private dating in the 1960s.

For adults themselves, normally aided of course by the more clearly recognized institution of marriage, similar efforts were devoted to claiming, at least, mastery of the jealous emotion. Marriage surveys indicated similar awareness that jealousy was not an appropriate emotion, that it could be subject to legitimate complaint. One California study showed that men's resentment of their wives' jealous nagging ranked quite high in the list of complaints (a sign as well, of course, that jealousy, real or perceived, was still around), far above worries about infidelity.²⁶ This kind of resentment was not new, of course, but it now received more systematic sanction, which could elevate it as a marital issue and make both partners more eager to claim, at least, that they had risen above the emotion. A classic, though admittedly fleeting and atypical, example of how far the new standards could penetrate came with the open marriage movement of the 1960s, where couples involved were virtually compelled to exhibit no signs of jealousy when one partner openly engaged in a sexual liaison with someone else. The new code encouraged admissions of shame or guilt when jealousy intruded amid open infidelity: as one not-quite-up-to-date spouse admitted, "I think (my reaction) came from possessiveness and I'm trying to get over that." This bled into a jealousy workshop movement, particularly on some college campuses, during the 1970s, where gurus like Larry Constantine helped jealous partners overcome their emotion, for example by watching a stranger massage their mate.²⁷ On a less extreme level, polls of college students revealed a growing percentage eager to disclose or claim freedom from jealousy. The standards counted, certainly in self-presentation, probably also for many in accepted personal criteria.²⁸

The shift of adolescents and college students away from more formal dating and toward more group-based socializing, with brief rather than committed sexual forays, may also have reflected, or at least coincided with, a further internalization of the anti-jealousy standards. Group dynamics were not meant to be disturbed by one-night stands or prior sexual involvements.

Of course, jealousy did not in fact go away. Indeed, though this is a huge claim that requires careful assessment, it seems likely that sexual habits changed more rapidly than the jealousy standards could accommodate. Older traditions (including the longstanding belief that women were more likely than men to suffer from the emotion, despite considerable evidence to the contrary) and the vagaries of individual personalities both played a role in gaps between standards and emotional realities. There are many indications—including, of course, the claim about nagging wives in California—that many people continued to harbor jealousy, even if they often strove to conceal the fact. Another mid-century poll, for example, showed that almost a third of all spouses, though men slightly more commonly than women, experienced jealousy over a partner's previous relationships (whether sexual or not). Aside from a minority of open-marriage adepts, sensitivities to infidelity did not clearly cool. The attacks on jealousy did promote

a situation in which disparities in emotional reactions placed a special burden on the more jealous individual, now often called to apologize or even face threats of retaliation along lines of “I’ll give you something to be jealous about.” But disparities between aspirations and emotional experience did not disappear even with this probable shift in the emotional balance of power.²⁹

Another anomaly is harder to interpret. Emotions researchers have noted for some time common popular confusions between jealousy and envy in American culture. The new attacks on jealousy, and particularly their influence on childhood socialization, help explain the intermixing. Even in the 1930s, teenagers commented on being jealous of a schoolmate’s beautiful hair or (probably more rarely) academic achievements, when in fact they meant feeling envious. The desire not to seem jealous might spill over into this kind of personal envy, creating a common sense that emotions about someone else’s gains or attributes were signs of childishness and should be reprovved along with jealousy itself. At the same time, however, envy about material possessions gained new legitimacy, as historian Susan Matt has shown. Long criticized as revealing a distorted sense of values, as contradicting Christian priorities and virtues, consumer envy began to be praised by the 1920s as a legitimate spur to acquisitions and material improvements. To be sure, the idea of motivation in terms of “keeping up with the Joneses” still sometimes seemed shallow, but there was no fundamental flaw implied.³⁰ Many people used the new legitimization to become fairly open in their desire to keep pace with the consumer gains of a neighbor or colleague. Clearly, this kind of envy had nothing to do with jealousy or with the reproof it now commanded. Indeed—though here we are on speculative ground; the different versions of envy in recent history warrant more attention—it is possible that consumer adjustments might provide a legitimate outlet for emotions about others that might otherwise veer toward jealousy. Many Americans were trained to think of shopping as an emotional outlet and balm.³¹

The main point is, however, the new level of tension between the widely accepted standards and the emotions many people might still encounter in the realm of jealousy. It became harder to admit jealousy to oneself, certainly riskier to manifest it in any public way, even in front of a spouse. Here was the context in which the temptation to conceal jealousy became particularly strong in the United States, as comparison with other emotional cultures suggested. Here was the context in which Americans became unusually interested in checking with other people to make sure their jealousy had not shown through in any blatant fashion. It was the intensity of the new hostility to jealousy juxtaposed with some ongoing impulses that created new divisions in emotional reactions, with those who could claim relative immunity clearly carving an easier path than their more afflicted peers. But it was the intensity, plus the new divisions, plus the fact that some people could not shake jealousy off amid significant changes in gender relations and sexuality in the United States that created the desire to mask and then to make sure that the real emotion had not somehow slipped out from behind the mask.

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Tensions may have eased somewhat after the 1970s. Certainly the most explicit campaign against jealousy operated in the half-century after the 1920s. By the 1980s, greater internalization of the new standards made explicit references less necessary. At the same time, however, reactions against the apparent sexual license of the 1960s made jealousy somewhat more acceptable in certain quarters. A few comments now openly admitted the experience of jealousy without self-recrimination. It was also discovered that the worst fears about sibling rivalry had been exaggerated, that the fabled research of the 1920s had been off the mark: certainly the vivid focus on the dangers and ubiquity of sibling jealousies eased. Other changes may have helped, though they often reflected the applicability of jealousy concerns. The decline of dating among teenagers, in favor of group activities, reduced some of the invitations to jealousy during adolescence. At the same time, as we have seen, harmony in the group, along with often temporary sexual pairings, assumed substantial jealousy control, so the standards may in fact have been confirmed even as intense adolescent romance was downplayed.³²

On balance, the most important developments suggested not a reversal of the campaign against jealousy, but an assumption that the main points were well established and fairly familiar, from childhood socialization onward. This permitted a slight relaxation of anxiety levels, but no massive shift toward greater approval, either in laws, or public reactions, or—insofar as we can determine—personal evaluations. It was precisely because of an assumption that the standards were set and widely understood that the level of discussion and preaching could drop in volume. What had been pages about sibling jealousies in a child guidance handbook thus could become a paragraph or two, because the problem seemed contained and because parents, veterans of sibling controls in their own childhoods, already knew the rules. This only slightly modified framework, then, continues to explain dominant American approaches to jealousy in comparative context. The same framework, the product of a powerful if unfamiliar recent history, invites the linkage between historical analysis and other disciplines concerned with jealousy manifestations and jealousy problems in contemporary life.

Jealousy has never been a comfortable emotion, and both history and contemporary evaluation demonstrate this fact readily enough. The stripping away of any positive components was nevertheless an important development in American emotions history, as was the elevation of the emotion to a position of unusual attention and concern. The new focus on jealousy was almost inevitable given broader changes in gender relationships, for this was an emotion at the center of some sweeping shifts in social patterns.

And this point moves us to a larger, potentially even global setting. Far less is known about the history of jealousy in other societies, particularly non-Western societies, than is desirable. As indicated earlier, we do know that some other societies are more candid than American society is in admitting that jealousy exists or even in finding it constructive in helping to promote or cement a relationship. The French, more open to expressing anger when they experience

jealousy, clearly have experienced a different kind of historical evolution from Americans, making them less eager to conceal. Societies closer to traditions of honor, like Greece or Jamaica, are more willing to admit and act upon jealousy as a motivation, for better or worse. It is clear, even absent adequately detailed history, that different cultural traditions produce different expressions of jealousy even in the modern context.

But the American experience, while not providing a global model save insofar as Hollywood film and television fare projects the validity of emotionally casual relationships, may be instructive in one respect. A wide range of societies, in recent decades, have been undergoing some of the same kinds of change that the United States experienced earlier in the 20th century, in moving away from gender seclusion toward more varied and public heterosexual interactions. Growing levels of employment of women outside the home, in China for example, or even the Middle East, or growing rates of involvement in higher education (with 55% of Iranian university students now women), clearly create new opportunities for romantic jealousies or needs for emotional control or both. Obviously, some societies try to counter by insisting on gender segregation even at the university level, or by requiring concealing costumes for women; and some of the counter-attacks on gender change in certain societies might well reflect jealousy outright, along with more purely religious concerns. But the modern era does see the progressive breakdown of some of the devices that many societies long employed to maintain control over women and over female sexuality, and the emotional challenge here, with jealousy on the center stage, may be considerable. Here is an area where historically sensitive comparative analysis will be both exciting and fruitful. Pending ongoing study, jealousy could turn out to be a pivotal emotion at a time of global transitions in gender relations.

In the United States, where at least some of the contemporary history is already clear, the campaign against jealousy has not been entirely successful, though it certainly has changed evaluations and prompted new efforts to measure up, to apologize, or to conceal. Even as anxiety about jealousy has diminished in the past three decades, the emotion and its new associations with childish selfishness and immaturity still carry the possibility of adverse impact in romantic relationships, when one partner cannot adequately control or conceal, and a sense of personal inadequacy when one's own reactions do not measure up to widely known, and rather demanding, standards.

Notes

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