Chapter 4

Father abandonment and jealousy. A study among women on Curaçao

Abstract

The goal of the present study was to examine whether females who were abandoned by their father experience more anxious, preventive and reactive jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father. The sample consisted of 186 female undergraduate students from Curaçao (age $M = 22.88; SD = 5.68$) who were categorized into four groups: early father abandonment (0-5 years), late father abandonment (6-13 years), very late father abandonment (14-18 years) and father presence. The results showed that females who were abandoned by their father before the age of 5 reported significantly more anxious jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father. In addition, females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 reported more preventive jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father. There were no significant differences between the four groups in reactive jealousy. Possible explanations are discussed in light of the potential function of jealousy for females who grow up without a father.

Keywords: Father abandonment, Jealousy, Curaçao
Introduction

Jealousy can be defined as a response to a threat to or the actual loss of a valued close relationship with another individual because of an actual or imagined rival for one’s partner’s attention (e.g., Buunk, 1991; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2015; De Steno & Salovey, 1996). More specifically, jealousy has been conceptualized as a coordinated system of cognitive, affective and behavioral responses with the aim of guarding one’s partner from potential competitors (e.g., Maner & Shakelford, 2008). From an evolutionary perspective, jealousy in females is primarily designed to prevent a male partner from channeling investment and resources to other females (e.g., Buss et al., 1999), protecting a female and her children from the lowered survival chances that may result from a lack of resources.

The current study examined differences in female jealousy as a function of a father’s presence during childhood. Studying the effect of father presence – or the opposite: father abandonment – is important. Previous studies have shown that the degree of father presence and involvement in a daughter’s upbringing may have strong implications for daughters’ physiological and psychological wellbeing. For instance, Ellis et al. (1999) found that a father’s presence in the home, more time spent by fathers in child care and more father–daughter affection, as assessed prior to kindergarten, all predicted later pubertal timing by daughters in 7th grade. With regard to psychological wellbeing, it has, for instance, been found that young women whose fathers were not present during childhood are more vulnerable to the development of low self-esteem, low life satisfaction and eating disorder symptoms later in life (e.g., Allgood, Beckert & Peterson, 2012; Jones, Leung & Harris, 2006). The presence of a father in the home when growing up also affects the sexual behaviors of young women, with, in general, daughters of absent fathers engaging in more risky and promiscuous sexual behaviors than daughters of fathers who were present during the time that they grew up (e.g., Rostad, Silverman, & McDonald, 2014). More generally, father absence may cause attachment problems because
one of the primary caregivers is not available during times of need, which may result in the development of an insecure attachment style (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) that may fuel feelings of insecurity and distrust in adult intimate relationships. Indeed, it has been found that girls and young women who are abandoned by their father often consider marriage as unstable and men as unreliable investors compared to girls and young women who grow up with their father (e.g., Draper & Harpending, 1982; Ellis & Essex, 2007; Ellis et al., 2003).

Despite its potential importance, no studies have yet examined the effect of father presence on female jealousy. Given the evidence outlined above, it may be predicted that females who, during their childhood, were abandoned by their father may, in general, experience more jealousy in their relationships with men than females who grew up with a father in the home. However, this prediction should be somewhat qualified. According to Belsky, Steinberg and Draper (1991), there is a sensitive period from birth to between 5 and 7 years during which family experiences shape a child’s attitudes towards pair bonding and child rearing. In particular, children who, during this early age, grow up without a father will expect that paternal investment will not be forthcoming and that pair relationships will not endure (Draper & Harpending, 1982). Consistent with this line of reasoning, a recent study on the Caribbean island of Curaçao showed that girls whose fathers abandoned them before the age of 5 were less interested in getting married and having grandchildren than girls who were older when their father left them or whose fathers were present during their entire childhood (Van Brummelen-Girigori & Buunk, 2015). We therefore expected that young women whose fathers left in the early years of their lives would be more jealous than other women. In addition, although a father’s abandonment during the early years of childhood may result in more jealousy in later life, we would like to argue that this also depends on the type of jealousy that is involved. Buunk (1997) made a distinction between three qualitatively different types of jealousy: reactive, anxious and preventive jealousy. Reactive jealousy is the degree of upset that individuals experience when their mate is emotionally
or sexually unfaithful. Reactive jealousy can be considered relatively 'healthy' or 'rational' because it constitutes a direct response to an actual relationship threat, as is the case, for instance, when one's partner is flirting or having sex with someone else. Individuals may also experience possessive jealousy. Possessive jealousy refers to individuals' inclination to prevent contact of their partner with a third person (Buunk, 1991; 1997). For example, possessively jealous individuals may find it unacceptable that their mate has opposite-sex friends. As an extreme consequence, they may even resort to violence in an effort to limit the autonomy of their mate (Daly, Weghorst & Wilson, 1982). Finally, anxious jealousy refers to a process in which the individual ruminates about the possibility of a mate's infidelity and experiences feelings of anxiety, suspicion, worry, distrust, and upset (Buunk, 1997). We expected both anxious and preventive jealousy, but not reactive jealousy, to be more common among females who were abandoned by their father at a young age. In contrast to reactive jealousy, both possessive and anxious jealousy may not only be triggered in response to a partner's actual extra-dyadic involvement but also in response to a potential relationship threat. They may even be aroused in the complete absence of objective signs of a partner's infidelity, including, for instance, the delusion that the partner is involved with someone else when, in fact, this is not the case at all. In particular, perceptions of potential relationship threats – rather than actual ones – seem to be fueled by irrational fears, for instance, of abandonment and feelings of distrust that may have their origins in early father abandonment.

The present study was conducted on the island of Curaçao, an island in the Caribbean region and an independent country within the Kingdom of The Netherlands. Curaçao has approximately 150,000 inhabitants and is biased towards women, with a sex ratio of 84 men to 100 women (CBS, 2011). There is also a high degree of racial, economic and gender stratification, with considerable unemployment, particularly in the poorer levels in the population. Curaçao provides a unique setting to investigate the effects of father presence on female jealousy because a substantial percentage of children (approximately 40%) grow up in homes were the father is absent.
Many young women who live on the island today are therefore raised without a father at home.

**Method and Materials**

**Participants**

One hundred and eighty-six female under graduated students of the University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez participated in the study (age $M = 22.88$, $SD = 5.68$). Participants were asked to indicate if they were raised with or without a father, and if so, at what age their father left the home. In line with previous studies on early father absence (e.g., Bereczkei & Csanaky, 1996; Blain & Barkow, 1988; Hetherington, 1972; Van Brummen-Girigori & Buunk, 2015), the age of 5 was used as the cut-off for the sensitive period of father absence. Therefore, participants were classified as experiencing *early father abandonment* when they were either born into a single mother family or into an intact two-parent family but subsequently experienced father absence at or before the age of 5. *Late father abandonment* was defined as growing up without the biological father at home beginning in the period between ages 6 to 13. Contrary to previous studies, the present study also distinguished a group of females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 14 and 18 instead of classifying this group as having the father present, as earlier studies did (e.g., Ellis et al., 2003; Van Brummen- Girigori & Buunk, 2015). We defined this latter group of females as experiencing *very late father abandonment*. *Father presence* was defined as being born with a biological father at home who co-resided with the girl until age 18 or later. Girls who grew up with a stepfather were also classified as experiencing early father absence, late father absence or very late father absence on the basis of the age of the abandonment of the biological father. Therefore, the sample was split into four groups: females who were abandoned by their father before the age of 5 ($n = 20$; early father abandoned), females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 ($n = 24$; late father abandoned), females who were abandoned
by their father between the ages of 14 and 18 years (n = 21; very late father abandoned) and females who grew up with their father (n = 121; father present). The analyses showed that the four groups did not differ significantly in age [$F(3,176) = .58$, ns] or skin color [$\chi^2(9, N = 184) = 8.40$, ns]. This latter finding is important because race has often been related to the likelihood of growing up in a household in which the father is absent (with Black children in particular experiencing father absence; e.g., Owen, 2006).

**Procedure**

The present study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences at the University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez. Participants were recruited through postal mail after randomly selecting female students from the overview of Student Services. Selected participants received a cover letter in which the purpose of the study was explained and which described that, in return for participating, credit points could be received. Because the present study was interested in participants’ jealousy experiences, only participants who were involved in an intimate heterosexual relationship were asked to participate in the present study. Participants who were willing to participate could respond by sending an email containing written consent to the administrator, after which they received an invitation to fill out a questionnaire in an especially arranged classroom of the university. Questionnaires were offered in Dutch, one of the official languages at University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez.

**Materials**

Participants completed a paper and pencil questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to fill out. The questionnaire started out with a demographic section in which questions were asked about age, place of birth, height, weight and the presence of a biological father. To assess jealousy, the *Scale for Three Types of Jealousy* (Buunk, 1997) was used, which is a scale consisting of 15 items: 5 items for each type of jealousy—reactive, anxious and preventive. The items of the reactive jealousy
scale asked participants how upset they would feel if their partner engaged in various extra-dyadic intimate and sexual behaviors, such as having sexual contact with someone else or flirting with someone else. These five items were assessed on a five-point scale, ranging from 1, ‘not at all upset’, to 5, ‘extremely upset’. Preventive jealousy was assessed by items such as ‘I don’t want my partner to meet too many people of the opposite sex’ and ‘It is not acceptable for me if my partner sees people of the opposite sex on a friendly basis’. For each item, the five possible answers ranged from 1, ‘not applicable’, to 5, ‘very much applicable’. Anxious jealousy was assessed by items such as ‘I am concerned about my partner finding someone else more attractive than me’ and ‘I worry about the idea that my partner could have a sexual relationship with someone else’. Items could be scored on five-point scales, ranging from 1, ‘never’, to 5, ‘very often’. Cronbach’s alpha’s for these scales were .84 (reactive jealousy), .87 (anxious jealousy) and .81 (preventive jealousy). Table 1 shows the correlations between the three types of jealousy.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reactive jealousy</td>
<td>22.32 (3.75)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Preventive jealousy</td>
<td>10.82 (4.62)</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Anxious jealousy</td>
<td>13.15 (5.20)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note. **p < .01 level (2-tailed).
Results

We examined whether females who were abandoned by their father, especially before the age of 5, reported more jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father. We therefore executed a series of ANOVAs to examine whether reactive jealousy, anxious jealousy and preventive jealousy differed significantly between the four groups (early father abandonment, late father abandonment, very late father abandonment and father presence).

**Reactive jealousy.** The results showed that there was no overall significant difference between the four groups in reactive jealousy \( F(3,180) = .01, \text{ ns} \); early father abandoned females \( M = 22.53, \text{ SD} = 4.04 \); late father abandoned females \( M = 21.92, \text{ SD} = 5.73 \); very late father abandoned females \( M = 22.14, \text{ SD} = 2.76 \); father present females \( M = 22.34, \text{ SD} = 3.49 \).

**Preventive jealousy.** The results showed no overall significant difference between the four groups in preventive jealousy \( F(3,173) = 2.04, \text{ ns} \); early father abandoned females \( M = 11.57, \text{ SD} = 4.31 \); late father abandoned females \( M = 12.91, \text{ SD} = 5.93 \); very late father abandoned females \( M = 11.00, \text{ SD} = 5.21 \); father present females \( M = 10.42, \text{ SD} = 4.34 \). However, the post hoc LSD-test showed a significant difference between females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 and females who grew up in the presence of their father, \( p = .02 \). Females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 reported more preventive jealousy than females who grew up with their father. The post hoc LSD-test showed no other significant differences (see also Figure 1).
Anxious jealousy. The results revealed an overall significant difference between the groups \( F(3,178) = 4.93, p = .03 \); early father abandoned females \( M = 15.4, SD = 6.64 \); late father abandoned females \( M = 14.41, SD = 5.47 \); very late father abandoned females \( M = 13.47, SD = 5.70 \); father present females \( M = 12.65, SD = 4.84 \). As illustrated in Figure 2, the earlier the age of father abandonment, the greater the anxious jealousy. The overall difference could be attributed in particular to the finding that females who were abandoned by their father before the age of 5 reported significantly more anxious jealousy than females who grew up in the presence of their father, \( p = .03 \). The post hoc LSD-test showed no significant differences between the other groups.
Discussion

The present study examined the association between father absence and three types of jealousy in young women on Curaçao. It was expected that women who, during their childhood, were abandoned by their father would be more anxiously and preventively jealous than women who grew up with a father in the home, especially when their father left before they were 5 years of age. As expected, females who were abandoned by their father before the age of 5 reported more anxious jealousy than females whose father left when they were older than 6 years or who grew up in the presence of their father. Thus, especially females who were abandoned in the sensitive period in which attitudes towards pair-bonding are shaped experienced worries about their partner finding someone else more attractive, their partner having sexual interest in or sexual contact with another female and their partner abandoning them. According to Blissett et al. (2006), father abandonment deeply affects young children’s core beliefs, especially fundamental beliefs about the worth of the self. These authors also found core beliefs about the self to predict the quality of attachment to important attachment figures in later life and to have the tendency to maintain themselves: information that contradicts these beliefs is processed in a way that maintains the belief. Core beliefs may help explain why and how insecure attachment styles, due to a father’s abandonment, may perpetuate into adulthood and affect women’s adult relationships with men.

The present study also showed that females who were abandoned by their father between the ages of 6 and 13 reported significantly more preventive jealousy than females who grew up with their father in the home. In particular, these females were inclined to prevent contact between their partner and other women, even if this contact was intended as merely platonic. In contrast to women whose father left at a younger age, women whose father left when they were between 6 and 13 years may have consciously witnessed and still remembered the moment when their father left. As a result, in their minds, preventive actions that might have stopped their
father may have become salient and, later on in life, may be projected onto a partner the moment that these women perceive a threat to their intimate relationship. As expected, no differences between the four groups of females were found with regard to reactive jealousy. This seems plausible because reactive jealousy reflects a response to an actual relationship threat, a situation that may be about equally stressful for all women, regardless of their childhood circumstances. In particular, perceptions of potential relationship threats – rather than actual ones – may become biased by negative childhood experiences, such as a father leaving the home and, as a consequence, being perceived differently by women as a function of their father’s presence in the home during childhood. The finding that anxious and preventive jealousy were especially affected by the experience of father abandonment suggests that father abandonment makes women hyper-vigilant in their relationships with men, making them respond relatively strongly to even small indications of potential infidelity and abandonment. These jealousy experiences may be aimed at preventing another abandonment by a male figure and help women create a sense of security in their relationships with men. Although heightened levels of anxious and preventive jealousy may provide women, in the short term, with a sense of security in their relationship with their partner, in the long term, increased levels of anxious and preventive jealousy may backfire. Barelds and Dijkstra (2007), for instance, showed that anxious jealousy – but not the other types of jealousy – was related negatively to the quality of the relationship with the partner.

The present research has a number of strengths. First, the present study was performed in a unique setting (the island of Curaçao) where father abandonment is a very common experience. Second, the present study showed that it is important to differentiate between different ages at which women are abandoned and that women who are abandoned after the age of 5 may differ in their jealousy responses from women whose father remained present in the home. Future studies may further investigate the intimate relationships of women as a function of a father’s presence during childhood. It is plausible that a father’s presence in childhood not only affects
feelings of jealousy in women’s adult relationships but may also affect the level of intimacy, trust and the relationship quality. Future studies may investigate whether this is indeed the case.

The present research also suffers from a number of limitations. The most important limitation is that the present study did not assess potential mediating variables such as core beliefs or attachment styles. We therefore cannot be sure about the mechanism that leads experiences with father abandonment to result in increased levels of jealousy in young adulthood. In addition, our sample consisted of only females following a higher education, and it is possible that among females with a lower educational level, father absence is related differently to jealousy in adulthood. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of studying the role of the father and the timing of father abandonment in the relationship experiences of young women.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to our interviewers for their cooperation and dedication. We want also to thank the participants of University of Curaçao, dr. Moises da Costa Gomez for their cooperation. Without their help, we could not have conducted this study.