

Original Research

Ex and Whys: An Inquiry of Female Narratives Navigating through Retroactive Jealousy

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ABSTRACT

Over the recent years, there has been an emerging scholarly interest in a particular type of jealousy—one that bears negativity toward their lover’s past romantic relationships. Known as retroactive jealousy (RJ), this present study aimed to discover how such emotion can impact various romantic relationships, particularly the experiences of women. Using the core concepts of Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) and the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) perspective, the research analyzed the interconnectedness of retroactive jealousy within one’s external environment, the shifts it induces in women and how it affects their relationships, and the ploys that are implemented to aid in alleviating its detrimental effects. Utilizing narrative inquiry, the study gathered stories from the lived experiences of eleven (11) women having feelings of retroactive jealousy. Three main themes have emerged from the stories: (1) reasons for retroactive jealousy; (2) impact of retroactive jealousy; and (3) strategies to overcome retroactive jealousy. The findings offer social and psychological perspectives to examine the ups and downs of interpersonal interactions and a road map for negotiating the turbulence that happens within relationships.

KEYWORDS

retroactive jealousy, female narratives, romantic relationship, narrative inquiry, maintenance strategies

Individuals often find themselves grappling with different emotions in the arsenal of romantic relationships. This can come in the form of a deeply ingrained feeling of deprivation for their partner’s attention, otherwise known as jealousy (Ninivaggi, 2020). In another definition, this is referred to as a complex feeling tied to the involvement of a third party outside the confines of the existing relationship. Jealousy occurs when an individual perceives a lack of romantic fulfillment in a specific aspect; a gap that they fear their partner might satisfy with someone else (Attridge, 2013). This sense of unease and insecurity underscores

the connection of emotions within the context of love-filled entanglements.

Its common manifestation lies in constant suspicion and doubt over a partner's level of loyalty which may lead to a toxic environment where individuals in a romantic relationship can be drained. Moreover, this feeling can trigger emotional distress in the form of anxiety and depression (Attridge, 2013). If left unresolved, jealousy may lead to manipulative tactics, and in extreme cases, abuse, to alleviate insecurities. Chung and Harris (2018) pointed out that the feeling of jealousy can be triggered by various situations, giving attention to the multiple forms of jealousy that have been discovered in recent years. For instance, a significant other may experience a sense of threat when confronted with the presence of another individual who actively pursues a person already committed to a relationship.

The dynamic landscape of romantic jealousy reveals an intriguing side of human affections, particularly highlighting the distinct responses observed among women (Frampton, 2024; Frampton & Fox, 2018). Using Relational Turbulence Theory (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004) and Meaning Maintenance Model (Heine et al., 2006), the study has chosen to look into retroactive jealousy (RJ), a contemporary dimension of jealousy. In definition, this is perceiving a partner's ex-partner to be a threat in the relationship, even without him or her actively intruding on the relationship (Frampton & Fox, 2018). Through this study, it unearths RJ as a significant point of inquiry that may affect interpersonal relationships of women. The present study extends the analysis of female narratives as an important knowledge contributor to the emerging scholarly interest in this phenomenon.

Research Objectives

This study burrows into the depths of retroactive jealousy within women in committed relationships.

Thus, the research aims:

1. to identify the factors that contribute to women experiencing RJ;
2. to examine the impact of RJ among women in managing their romantic relationships; and
3. to analyze the maintenance strategies that help women manage RJ in their romantic relationships.

Literature Review

Manifestation of Jealousy in Women

Romance is an intense experience that encompasses a different range of emotions, ultimately affecting numerous areas of one's life (Amesbury, 2021). Chaplin (2018) posited that women have lower emotional tolerance to jealousy in comparison to their male counterparts. This gendered disparity in emotional tolerance not only emphasizes the interplay of emotions within the realm of relationships but also raises intriguing questions about the societal and psychological factors that contribute to these differences. It is imperative to recognize that the lower tolerance of jealousy in women does not suggest a deficit in emotional regulation but has rather highlighted the deep emotional investment and vulnerability that women may experience within relationships (Chaplin, 2018). Understanding these gendered patterns in emotional responses is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms that cater to the unique emotional needs of individuals within romantic relationships.

As females tend to get actively involved in romantic affairs, it is important to note how relationships may face various conflicts and transitions. Transitions are perceived to be a person's reactive process to shift in normalcy, in which the adaptation process is accompanied by variable degrees of instability (Shove & Walker, 2010). It also entails rearranging some pertinent areas in life such as identities, roles, relationships, or behavior (Solomon & Brisini, 2017). Solomon

and Brisini (2017) highlighted how people may be required to modify their present behaviors, as well as how they identify themselves and their relationships, during these times. Simply put, when individuals transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar, the social environment in which they live also conforms. Depending on how women adapt to their social environment, it can either go negatively or positively.

On self-preservation, some women identify several self-destructive patterns in their relationship (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). One destructive strategy is being withdrawn from a relationship emotionally or physically. Apart from that, they may also develop defensiveness or righteous indignation. In some cases, an insecure partner can deceive oneself or their partner about their feelings. In effect, women may opt to stay in the relationship to avoid being hurt or abandoned. Or worse, they can choose to attack their partner through criticism, complaint, or judging as an attempt to protect themselves. On the other hand, females who seek to reduce relational uncertainty use relational maintenance behaviors to reinforce commitment and promote a more positive relationship climate. Some of these strategies are the use of assurance, openness, and positivity making their interpersonal interactions pleasant and enjoyable (Denes et al., 2017). Furthermore, Peel and Caltabiano (2020) posits that there are other relationship maintenance strategies that could foster a healthy, long-term relationship like trust, communication, commitment, safety, and acceptance.

With this study centering on jealousy, Utz (2022) viewed jealousy as an ongoing process that can stretch over a longer period, and which contains surveillance behavior. While jealousy has been normalized as a regular experience among lovers, it urges a change within a partner's romantic union. Interdependence, in this sense, is shaken as an external stimulus to the relational environment which compels romantic partners to navigate transitions by reorganizing

and reintegrating identities, roles, and routines, resulting to feelings of uncertainty and unstable perceptions of the relationship (Goodboy et al., 2021).

Experiences of jealousy may operate differently in other interpersonal contexts such as parasocial relationships (PSRs) or online media. The quantitative study of Frampton et al. (2025) revealed that experience of jealousy in parasocial romantic relationships is influenced by the perceived threat to the relationship, with the effect being shaped by how similar or different the rival is perceived to be. Similarly, in another quantitative study, Yana and Melinda (2023) found that women feel more jealous in dealing with emotional affairs than sexual affairs. Although such recent findings about the women's experiences of jealousy have been insufficiently quantitatively studied, it can be inferred that there is a growing research interest in this aspect, more particularly of retroactive jealousy.

Retroactive Jealousy as a Relational Threat

In recent interpersonal relationship studies, various forms of jealousy have been defined, with retroactive jealousy subtly attracting attention on social media while slowly piquing the interest of relationship psychology scholars. Drawing from the meaning maintenance model (MMM; Heine et al., 2006), Frampton (2019) explored lived experiences of RJ through identifying the perceived threats in cases of RJ, and communicative responses to it. Her findings revealed how the involvement of the individual's partner to their ex-lover may evoke feelings of RJ, causing negative affect to one's relationship. Such negative affect can greatly manifest with people with anxious attachment that can lead to low self-esteem. Moreover, people with high avoidant attachment tend to assume that their partner would most likely end the relationship because of RJ as the information of a partner's past romantic relationship may have construed the specialness and relational benefits of their existing

relationship. In another study, Frampton and Fox (2018) discussed how individuals habitually stalk their partner's exes to uncover any information that could feed their curiosity. While lurking may temporarily satisfy the inquiries they fail to ask their partners, it hinders healing as it repeatedly pours salt into the wound. To further elaborate on the matter, the reality of people who suffer from RJ can be likened to fighting off a ghost; being upset about an ex-partner that no longer appears relevant in their relationship. Frampton and Fox described this phenomenon as a disturbing emotion towards a partner's ex partner, even if the perceived threat does not actively interfere in the relationship. To cite an example, an individual might have unexpectedly uncovered photos of their partner and their past lover. This could then be a source of RJ, even if the partner has closed all lines of communication with their ex-partner.

Despite the absence of active threat from an external source, RJ results from an obsessive interest in a partner's romantic history, mainly to compare and prove that they are better than their partner's previous relationship (Frampton, 2019). Andersen et al. (1995) were one of the few empirical researchers who delved into the reasons couples have an aversion toward discussing sexual and romantic archives. Researchers discovered that individuals steered clear of this subject matter as it provoked overthinking mechanisms, caused them to feel less connected to their current partner, and prompted comparisons with previous romantic partners. Recent studies (i.e., Frampton, 2019; Frampton & Fox, 2018) even posited that feelings of RJ could have been prompted by conversations that positively describe their ex-partners, and scanning through past memorabilia (i.e., a letter, a gift, a message, a photo), which may propel a feeling of threat and disturbance.

Individuals who experience RJ might experience frustrations as they recognize the fact that their jealousy is not rooted in solid evidence. Such experiences may have resulted in having feelings of distress and anxiety that keep them in this

toxic loop of overthinking, with uncontrollable thoughts that revolve around the fact that someone else had once claimed a special place in their current partner's heart (Frampton, 2019). As a result, people who experience RJ not only fall into the hole of comparison but also preserve their pride by berating or belittling the external party to gather reassurance (Blayney & Burgess, 2024). Billings (2016) also pointed out that people induced with RJ question whether or not they are out of their minds. This becomes ultimately true when they realize that they grapple with such a negative emotion over a situation they have no control over.

Additionally, people who experience RJ tend to feel very insecure and hopeless about their relationship. Frampton (2019, 2024) even pointed out that these individuals may constantly self-assess and compare themselves to their partner's previous relationships negatively, which essentially leads to the feeling of inferiority. This inferiority complex, according to Blayney and Burgess (2024), leads to the questioning of one's value in and of the relationship. This mindset leads people who experience RJ to believe that if their partner has had several previous relationships, their current relationship loses its value. Along with the loss of rationality, they tend to feel angered about their partner's previous relationships albeit knowing that it is unjustified and hurtful. Because of the fear of not knowing the entire information of their partner's romantic history, individuals who experience RJ tend to create scenarios that are from the truth, and in effect, constantly ask for assurance in a way that is already intrusive (Frampton, 2019).

As females traverse through the journey of romantic relationships, the relational turbulence theory and meaning maintenance model forward the importance of proper communication behaviors in managing such upturns amongst lovers (Solomon et al., 2016; Theiss, 2023). Knobloch et al. (2022) have suggested that applying maintenance strategies contains the

power to either shorten or lengthen the duration of relational turbulence. This is due to the influence of a relational transition's dynamic nature— which can then strengthen the romantic bond among females. One such way to practically apply maintenance strategies includes having affectionate communication (Knobloch et al., 2022). Cultivating loving relationships is commonly rooted in loving communication (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008), which unfortunately decreases over time, especially within married couples (Lavner et al., 2016). Communication, as described by Floyd and Riforgiate (2008), is not limited to words, but can also be expressed nonverbally. Studies have also interestingly shed light on the numerous health benefits associated with affectionate communication. These include a decrease in stress levels and physical pain, and improved overall mental wellness and sleep quality (Hesse et al., 2020). It must be taken to mind how exhibiting love toward one's significant other promises relational benefits rather than just merely being on the receiving end of a partner's affection (Hesse et al., 2020).

All in all, there has been an emerging interest that tackled retroactive jealousy. These studies have posited that jealousy stems from a sense of peril to their relationship from an outside party, and comes with changes to their romantic bond.

Theoretical Framework

Relational Turbulence Theory

Proposed by Knobloch and Solomon (2004), the relational turbulence theory (RTT) suggests that people who are constantly exposed to the negative effects of relational uncertainty and partner disruptions tend to describe their relationships as chaotic overall (Solomon & Brisini, 2017). This facet of the theory is parallel to Conville's (1988) study in which the qualitative changes in a romantic relationship as it progresses through significant shifts. Otherwise known as a relational transition, this notion captures

the evolving dynamics, expectations, and patterns of communication that occur during pivotal moments, ultimately shaping the overall trajectory of the relationship. Expounding on these definitions, it can be inferred that situational episodes that cause a relationship to be turbulent forge change in the couple's union. Stemming from uncertainty, relational transition constitutes a global relationship judgment (Solomon, 2001), one that operates on bias and polarization that is seen to spark tension. The relational turbulence model pinpoints uncertainty to be a stimulus for relationships to be in a state of constant change, with its three forms centering on self-uncertainty (queries about one's participation in the relationship), partner uncertainty (queries about the partner's involvement in the relationship), and relational uncertainty (questions about the current status of the relationship) (Knobloch, 2015; Knobloch & Solomon, 2004).

With these assumptions, this study examines RJ as a form of relational transition in examining how women's experience of RJ shapes and alters the dynamics of their romantic relationships. Using this perspective, the study has connected this relational transition to emotional and cognitive indicators of instability. This aligns with Theiss et al.'s (2009) study that discovered how such experiences of relationship interferences were perceived as negative events that were deliberate and detrimental in how one views their current relationships in comparison with the conditions of one's relationship in the past (Knobloch, 2015). Therefore, this supports the study's position on how experiences of any forms of RJ could be a source of instability during transitional periods in a romantic relationship.

As relationships enter an emotional battle going through changes, openness and honesty are greatly taken into account as they foster a sense of clarity during these moments of uncertainty (Theiss, 2023). RTT bestows solutions that romantic partners utilize as they go through the journey of change caused by this relational

transition. A component of the theory zeroes in on maintenance strategies. For example, there is a need for partners to cope with the relational shifts by emphasizing the essentiality of more developed and mature communication behaviors in managing conflicts during times of change within the romantic relationships (Solomon et al., 2010). In effect, this research paper also analyzed these various forms of communication, be it verbally or nonverbally, conducted by women who experience such transitions in their relationships.

Meaning Maintenance Model

As people innately long for meaning, Heine et al. (2006) have intellectualized this observation by proposing the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM). This states that people's views of the world are dictated by their need for meaning, or the desire to view events through what their primary belief systems are. This is manifested when threats arise which may target one's sense of worth, emphasize one's apprehensions, and doubt one's moral obligations (Heine et al., 2006). According to these scholars, the MMM has three core tenets. The first one is named as "meaning is relation" which states that meaning is what binds individuals to the objects, people, and surroundings that exist outside of themselves. In other words, meaning can exist in as many variations as there are methods to connect these components of comprehension and perception. Such meanings are shaped by three spheres in which individuals want to attain relations: a) the external world, b) the self, and c) the self with the external world (Heine et al., 2006). The second concept is referred to as the "humans as meaning makers" which emphasizes that humans are a species molded by culture. This demonstrates how humans can flourish as a cultural species if they do not only pay attention to but also absorb the direct relationships between the items in their environment. They must relate themselves to relationships between complex connections, such as other people and external

occurrences, relationships between other people's opinions of such relationships, and the like. Thus, individuals inhabit more than simply physical settings; they inhabit settings that are socially built as well. Activities in different surroundings can have relevance that extends well beyond their immediate bodily effects (Heine et al., 2006). Finally, the last claim that comprises the MMM is the "fluid compensation model" which explains that when people face situations that challenge their beliefs, they tend to strengthen other beliefs that they still hold onto. They look for meaning in areas that are familiar and easy to understand, rather than just focusing on what is being questioned. The scholars believed that many psychological motivations come from the ability to find new connections and beliefs when something important is threatened (Heine et al., 2006).

With the MMM's assumption that meaning frameworks are construed when people received contradicting information, this results to people having experiences of adverse feelings such as anxiety and potentially, jealousy (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Deriving from such assumptions of MMM, the current study made use of the analytical perspective of Frampton's (2019, 2024) 'specialness meaning framework' which particularly explained and tested whether one's meaning framework would be threatened in RJ experiences. Frampton's framework extended MMM's constructs to interpersonal relationship studies where relational meaning frameworks are susceptible when information about a partner's past romantic relationship is appraised as a threat to one's specialness meaning framework. Conceptually, this specialness meaning framework constitutes "a network of expectations and beliefs concerning whether current romantic partners or relationships are unique and different from other partners or relationships and whether certain things, such as sexual activity, are part of the current relationship's exclusive domain" (Frampton, 2024, p. 194).

Focusing on female experiences of RJ, this study utilized this perspective in order to further analyze how women make sense of a peculiar type of jealousy—one that battles a bond that cannot be undone. In line with Frampton's insights, this application underscores how MMM provides a useful lens to interpret retroactive jealousy within communication studies.

METHOD

Research Design

Narrative inquiry design is utilized to accomplish the objectives of this study. Clandinin and Caine (2020) described this method as an approach in effectively understanding lived experiences. When examining experiences through stories, scholars acknowledge the links between participants and researchers, the importance of partnerships, and the connections between experiences examined throughout time, in particular locations, and complex settings (Clandinin & Caine, 2020). Taking this into account, the reality of RJ within women was enriched with data in the form of storytelling. The narratives were composed of common meanings and experiences developed through the disruption of a perceived threat and the romantic interaction between the participants

and their partners. Additionally, the study was exploratory as its findings can offer new perspectives in looking into RJ as a construct that may impact a dynamic shift in understanding interpersonal communication.

Participants

For the selection criteria, participants must be women in a romantic relationship at the time of the study, and reside in Metro Manila. The decision to focus on these specific criteria were rooted in the recognition of females' tendency to be more emotionally vulnerable to RJ, with specificity on their area of residence to avoid any discrepancies in regional culture differences. Before the data collection, informed consent forms were completed and secured. The participants who have voluntarily given their time and effort in the completion of data collection mostly comprise undergraduate college students hailing from various universities with an exception of two who are already a part of the workforce. A majority of these women have heterosexual male partners, with only one participant disclosing that she has a girlfriend. Moreover, only one participant is reported to be married, with all the other females in the early phases of their relationship. For the demographic profiles of the participants, see Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Participants*

Pseudonym	Occupation	Length of Relationship	Age
Grace	College student	1-3 years	25
Len	College student	Less than a year	19
Ana	Teacher	3-5 years	24
Brie	Housewife	More than 5 years	39
Van	College student	1-3 years	23
Tala	College student	Less than a year	22
Cece	College student	More than 5 years	22
Nica	College student	Less than a year	23
Trixie	College student	3-5 years	22
Chin	College student	Less than a year	21
Evan	College student	Less than a year	21

Research Instrument

Barkhuizen (2014) stated the importance of storytelling gives those who have experienced varied scenarios the chance to “make sense” and process these series of events. To efficiently collect data, the study used Barkhuizen’s narrative frames. This will allow for in-depth and analyzable insights from the participants’ given responses. To expound, this research instrument consists of sentence prompts that envision getting coherent stories as the participants respond according to their varied experiences (Barkhuizen, 2014). Its creation has drawn inspiration from the interview questions in Frampton and Fox’s (2018) study, and was revised accordingly to align with the research objectives of this paper. This study’s instrument has been approved and validated by a communication scholar that has extensive experience in conducting narrative research.

Data Analysis

In the context of RJ as a relational transition, the study has opted for a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) applied to narrative data. RTA was selected for this inquiry for its theoretical flexibility and previous use in research into lived experiences of people of retroactive jealousy (Blayney & Burgess, 2024). The analysis was developed through the in-depth understanding of the detailed knowledge of participants’ narratives and accounts. Responses were analyzed to identify both semantic (explicit), and latent (implicit) meanings in the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Code labels were generated for each participant and collated to identify broader patterns of meaning across participants. Both researchers, then, discussed initial themes with focal organizing constructs that best represented female experiences of RJ. Themes were refined and interrogated further through the use of the theoretical constructs and assumptions of Relational Turbulence Theory and the Meaning Maintenance Model.

RESULTS

Reasons for Retroactive Jealousy

In an effort to gain a holistic understanding of the existence of RJ within women, it is imperative to examine various factors such as introspection behind one’s negative feelings at present about their partner’s ex-partner, their familial situation, their previous romantic experiences, and some factors influenced by friendship. In essence, the first objective aimed to shed light on the women’s personal background so as to fully comprehend their stance regarding RJ in the present.

Low Self-Esteem Of Females

Insecurity is a complex feeling deemed common among women. This feeling may be felt among a vast majority of females, yet there are a numerous set of triggers that can stimulate insecurity across different aspects of life. One of which stems from experiences from their own family dynamics and interactions. This aligns with other studies Buunk (1997) that indicated how much of a person’s understanding of jealousy has been heavily influenced by their personal experiences with their family members. Findings have shown that the participants’ jealousy stemmed within their individualistic upbringing since childhood. For example, Brie recalled how she always felt financial insecurity because of her experience with her family’s lack of transparency when it comes to their financial conditions. As a result, this translated to her jealousy of other people’s capacity to afford luxurious items, and ability to travel around the world, given that she was schooled in an academy that housed some of the richest families in the country. Similarly, Tala’s experiences of rivalry with her sister only propagated an individualist culture in her family. She stated,

“Being a certified daddy’s girl, competing with my sister for my dad’s attention has definitely influenced how I

feel jealous, especially when I'm ignored. For example, if my dad buys something for my sister, it triggers anxiety about not feeling worthy of similar treatment."

Their familial-related observations are in parallel with a study from Kaufman-Parks et al. (2019) which argued that an individual's attitude and behavior toward others are shaped by their relationship with their parents. Moreover, studies (e.g., T. P. Murphy et al., 2019) have posited that jealousy behaviors usually stem from familial ties which can be associated with early childhood upbringing.

On the other hand, most participants have had their fair share of relational trauma from their past relationships that transpired either through cheating, excessive friendliness of their ex-partner towards the opposite gender, or the lack of transparency about emotions. Sharing such experiences, Grace opened up by stating that her RJ was a by-product of her ex-partner replacing her for his past romantic partner. She narrated,

"My own exes had a habit of still talking to their exes or being friendly with them, and one of my exes actually broke up with me to get back together with someone that he had previously dated. I think those experiences, especially during my first relationships, really influenced how I feel towards the exes of my partner and former partners."

According to S. M. Murphy et al. (2006), being in speaking terms with a past lover may only create momentary relapses, and may even lead to emotional cheating if done while being in another committed relationship. Such experiences showed that inhibitions regarding opposite-gender friendships cause a rise in tension among couples. Southard and Abel (2010) claimed how conflicts were to be expected when there is knowledge that an outside party has feelings for an individual that has already committed to a monogamous romantic relationship.

While insecurity has its linkages to external

factors, one's intrapersonal condition also bear weight as a cause for this negative emotion. When asked to contemplate on their thoughts about their apprehension against their current partner's past lover/s, there is a common emergence of inferiority due to the bond formed and the lack of transparency from their partner. Such findings were similar with Frampton's (2019) where the thought of other women being with their current partners induces adverse feelings such as annoyance, anxiety, and even anger. In addition, these findings exemplify an important assumption of RTT that positioned relational uncertainty as a significant contributor that triggers turbulence in a relationship. This may evoke biased cognitions of the relationships, intensified emotions, and even polarized communication that may lead to unwarranted reactions (Solomon et al., 2016). Relational uncertainty, or the questions about the nature of one's participation in a relationship, can manifest internally through the self as its source of doubts and questions. Having low esteem may lead to greater insecurity; hence, clouding one's judgment of their involvement in their romantic relationships. On the other hand, such consequences of knowing too much can also lead to difficult conversations that may emanate from the subject matter regarding past relationships.

The Fear of Inadequacy in Meeting Others' Expectations

Another sub-theme that has materialized under the reasons for RJ was identified as women's apprehension in being at par with standards that have been set by other women that have gone before them. This can be rooted in the notion that there is a feeling of inadequacy at the thought of walking in someone else's shadow. Familial experiences, as mentioned previously, constitute a major part of one's identity and behavioral patterns (Kaufman-Parks et al., 2019). Particularly, Asian households placed significant pressure on their children to perform well academically, and have varied treatment of their children based on their order of birth (Yim,

2022). This has been apparent in Evan's narrative, in which she shared that:

"My experiences with my family influenced the way I feel jealous, especially when it comes to seeking gentle attention. As the eldest daughter in the family, I always get most of my parents' attention with lots of pressure and expectations that I should do good. I feel like this affected the way I feel jealous because I tend to compete with other people and calculate time or instances that I should get more attention from him."

In addition, a common facet that intersects both familial and friendship-related factors concerning jealousy is the occurrence of gossip or pessimistic conversations. Repeatedly hearing these types of discourses about other people increases anxiety, particularly if seen during formative years (Marazziti et al., 2010). Len shared her experience both in familial and friendship settings parallel to such notions,

"My experiences with my family influenced the way I feel jealous, like how my parents would gossip about other people's (usually celebrities or public figures) relationships. Topics such as infidelity (especially by men) would be brought up in our family conversations. With that, this whole concept of illicit affairs usually comes to mind whenever I feel jealous and would sometimes be reflected on how I perceive men and romantic relationships."

Impact of Retroactive Jealousy to Women and Their Relationship

Due to RJ becoming a form of turbulence in a romantic relationship, changes are prompted to transpire. The second objective aimed to examine the effects RJ poses unto women and how they let it externalize into their relationships. Under this section, two responses have been observed among participants—one that dwells obsessively on the past, and the other half deflects on the concern through distractions.

Development of Fixation on the Past

Women experiencing RJ have been observed to create preoccupation on what has transpired in their current partner's romantic past. Such compulsion sprouts from their desire to learn about the details that can no longer be changed, but has had a tremendous impact on their partner's identity to this day. This reflects RTT's assumption of uncertainty as a condition of change within interpersonal relationships where one can feel both self- and partner uncertainty (Knobloch, 2015; Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). Examining this finding closely, the participants were asked to share what modifications they have monitored within themselves. Showing an inclination to know more of their partner's historical details in terms of romantic past has been linked to excessive contemplations, anxiety, and a desire to uncover more (Frampton, 2019, 2024). Grace's narrative corresponded to these claims as she tells that,

"I feel more irritable when I stalk my partner's exes or spend too much time thinking about them. Other times, I feel overly motivated to change things about myself or start new hobbies, as I explained earlier that I have an intense need to prove myself. Generally, I feel cool and unaffected... but when anxiety strikes, I sometimes fall into a pattern of these extreme thoughts."

A dip in one's confidence also becomes apparent as comparisons ensue, with participant Evan harboring feelings of distress when coming across the topic of their partner's past lover/s. Evan shared a similar account by stating that,

"Because of my feeling of jealousy, I observe changes in myself like I tend to constantly ask for reassurance. I find it annoying on my end but my boyfriend always tells me that those feelings are valid but I should never worry about anything about his ex/es. Another change I can say is I now have this habit of creating fake scenarios in my head that I know never and will never happen."

In effect, self-sabotaging becomes a pattern and unending cycle with people who are unable to maintain a healthy, long-term relationship (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). Grace then disclosed what she does after having high levels of emotion. In her narrative she recounted that she spends time stalking. She elaborated,

“I think my most toxic behavior and unfortunately the most consistent thing I do is stalking my partner’s exes. When I feel a bout of jealousy, or sometimes just feel bored, I use anonymous Instagram searchers to view their stories undetected. I feel like I need the reassurance that his exes are happy in their current relationships and have no cause to create chaos in my relationship with my partner. If they’re single, it causes more anxiety for me, because I hate the thought of them missing my partner or wanting to home wreck us.”

Aversion to the Issues of Jealousy

While other women prefer to explicitly express their jealousy towards their partner, some females opt for aversion in the face of jealousy. People who disassociate with their problems and decide to put the issues on the back burner are more likely to harbor negative self-beliefs (Thomas et al., 2013). As the participants were tasked to look for the changes apparent in themselves, half of the women noticed how they utilized escapism in order to deal with the said negative emotion. Cece talked about it in detail by sharing that,

“Because of my feeling of jealousy, I observe changes in myself like being quieter and more emotional. For instance, there was a time when I ended up crying myself to sleep because I can’t bring myself to talk to him about what I’m feeling. I also noticed how my thoughts about myself during times like those are harsher and sometimes irrational.”

This goes to show that while retroactive jealousy may seem to influence irrational decisions for some women, other females choose to take a step back and assess the situation before reacting

impulsively. According to Southard and Abel (2010), women generally tend to process feelings longer as opposed to men. As an example, Cece continued sharing her experiences in avoiding the issue by adding,

“... my actions towards my partner include me giving him the quiet treatment at first before expressing how I really feel because I want to formulate and collect my thoughts first before I talk to him about my feelings. There are also times when I resort to teasing him about his exes, which I think is me being passive aggressive about the situation.”

Considering the two sub-themes that comprise of RJ’s impact in women’s relationships, it can be interpreted that clinging on to the negative emotions that stem from conversations about their partner’s ex-lover/s result in opposite demonstrations of jealousy (Frampton, 2019; Frampton & Fox, 2018). These preferences are relics of the external factors which women have been exposed to in the past along with what their current circumstances look like. Moreover, both ends of the spectrum have borne the reality that RJ as an ordeal puts a strain on a woman’s romantic relationship, resulting in increased chances of showing passive aggression, resentment, and other communication mishaps which are deemed unhealthy for couples. These findings aligned with the assumptions of RTT that emphasized how cognitive appraisals and emotions can causally impact the communication of both individuals in the relationship. Based on the accounts of the participants, fixation on the past relationships of their partners, and the aversion of the issue were results of RJ that caused biased cognitive appraisals which can be defined as the flawed processing or distorted assessment of a situation (Solomon et al., 2016). In conflict studies, such results can indicate perceived severity of relational irritations that generate negative tendencies to avoid or withhold complaints (Solomon & Samp, 1998). Therefore,

these biased cognitive appraisals can impact the communicative engagement of individuals, women in particular.

Maintenance Strategies Against Retroactive Jealousy

As retroactive jealousy engenders fluctuations to a relationship's stability, couples would then resort to ways that would anchor their bond to a better state. This objective explores the schemes the couples utilize in order to attain stabilization that has been disrupted. An overview of the accumulated information proposes two main strategies: a) reassurance and b) reflection. A healthy and loving relationship, as described by Denes et al. (2017), reverts to reassurance, open communication, and positivity as its bedrock in standing strong against adversity. This section emphasizes the significance of integrating and constructing maintenance strategies to alleviate uncertainties from RJ, similar with the assumptions of RTT. These strategies entail change of verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors within the relationship (Solomon et al., 2010).

Provision of Reassurance

Trust is a trait entrenched in a partner's ability to constantly give emotional support to his/her partner (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). A majority of the females that have contributed to this study expressed how their current partners convey statements or actions to relieve their doubt without them having to force them for it. This willingness can be seen in Len's anecdote in which she shared,

"To manage my jealousy over my partner's ex/es, he makes sure that I am heard and that what I am feeling is valid. He also avoids any topic relating to both of our previous relationships because he doesn't find the need to look back to the past. Whenever I do feel some sort of jealousy, he does his best to understand my side and console me with words of affirmation. I also feel like it

helps that he keeps me updated on the things he does without me asking for it."

Like the anecdote above, participant Ana also informed that aside from the assurance aspect, she and her partner prevents topics that cover her boyfriend's past romantic experiences. Ana shared,

"It really starts with minimizing the source of jealousy, like being able to compromise with the triggers of your partner."

Preventive measures that counter issues from recurring should be implemented to turn away from a toxic cycle. Having one's non-verbal cues aligned with their words offer genuine sincerity in motives (Wilson, 2021). Such accounts are a demonstration that open communication and reassurance can help mitigate any jealous circumstances.

Having an Open and Reflective Discussion

Another way of processing emotions that pertain to retroactive jealousy in women is done through an in-depth self-reflection. Having different yet deliberate conversations regarding one's state of mind and feelings lead to higher chances of restoration of relationships (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). The participants' narratives are considered complementary to this finding, one of which is Grace's recollection of the things they do to reconnect in which she explained,

"We first apologize to each other for the things we might have said or done that made the other feel negatively. We give each other the space to explain, and do our best to find the root of the feeling, like "what made you hyperfocus on this? Are you feeling a certain way? Or did you see something that hurt you?" Things like that. The conversation is not always structured or easy to deal with emotionally, and is often quite draining, but we keep trying so that we understand each other well."

Despite confrontation having a tiresome aftermath on the couple's cognitive and emotional condition, it is an indispensable part of dealing with conflict in a romantic rapport. In participant Len's relationship, there is an initiative on her end to be intentional about what the topics she talks about and consumes online given that she has the tendency to be paranoid "when it comes to posts that intend to make its audience 'overthink' their own relationships." Moreover, she makes it a point to open up straight to her partner before talking to other trusted people about the situation so as to make him comprehend why she feels that way and the manner in which it affects her self-esteem.

Aside from a two-way discussion about the negative emotions obtained from focusing on their current partner's ex-lover/s, reflection can also take effect with oneself. Paying attention to one's emotional well-being through journaling, meditation, and other forms of self-reflection can be associated with feelings of happiness, calmness, and focus, which can influence one's motivation for their relationship (Sharma, 2008). Additionally, becoming cognizant of one's retroactive jealousy is a practice some of the participants never fail to exercise. The realizations that stem from self-awareness is the basis of the next steps they would take with their partner to face the problem head on. RJ and its ramifications may seem difficult to surmount in a relationship, but participants' responses emphasized two affirmative actions: 1) the importance of conducting difficult conversations, and 2) the motivation to pursue steps towards restoration and improvement. As a result, it is vital to be vigilant of the elements compassing communication—the subject matter, the content proper, delivery, actions backing up the discussion, among all the others.

Such findings contribute to how individuals maintain meaning in their relationships, especially having experienced RJ and relation turbulence that comes with it. In the lens of MMM, people have this desire or drive to pursue stability

whenever they feel uncertainties or hesitations (Heine et al., 2006). This desire is defined by having internal consistencies that fit one's perceptions, and satisfies the need to predict and control one's life. Through efforts of external and internal dialogues, as underscored by the RTT, the participants were able to formulate feelings of subjective certainty in how they create meaning in their relationships, which in turn, provided them confidence with how they behave and what they should expect from their partners and their overall relationships. This construction of meaning frameworks allowed them to understand their place within their environment, and are subsequently able to form a sense of certainty from their relationships.

DISCUSSION

In this study, experiences of RJ by women have been framed as the main factor that serve as an agency for shifts to befall in one's romantic relationships. Starting with differences women have observed within themselves, RJ has left a significant impact in aggravating low self-esteem that elicit comparison and overthinking. Such information proved how females have increased degrees of sensitivity when dealing with dilemmas (Regan, 2004). Given that females are emotionally-inclined individuals, it can also be inferred in how the topic of their partner's ex-lovers drives women into a cycle of constant comparison, whether it is about social status or even physical attractiveness (Laker & Waller, 2022). As a result, when women perceive their partner's ex as physically or socially appealing, they may feel a heightened sense of threat, which can intensify feelings of jealousy compared to situations where the ex is perceived as unattractive or unremarkable (Frampton, 2019; Frampton & Fox, 2018).

Another factor that instills insecurity within women is the memories their partner's ex have

imprinted in their previous bond. Time and experiences are one of the most prominent building blocks in strengthening the foundation of self-concept and romantic relationships alike (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Hence, comparisons were not just made towards the ex-partner as a person, but to the previous relationship holistically (Frampton, 2019; Frampton & Fox, 2018). The participants of this study found it peculiar that there may have been an overlap of experiences or may have had better bonding moments than they had at present. This made some women feel a sense of inferiority as it depicted a notion of walking in someone else's shadow.

To mitigate the experiences of RJ in the relationship, the participants highlighted how their partners have become more attentive to their feelings. Based on the accounts, women experiencing RJ have admitted to demonstrating passive aggressiveness in the past. Fortunately, most of their partners exhibit affirmative actions to understand and alleviate such emotions. Various forms of reassurance are provided by their partners in order to ease feelings of RJ which agrees with other studies that jealousy can be avoided by thoughtful and romantic behaviors (e.g., Dijkstra et al., 2013). This allows for a positive perception of jealousy as an adaptive emotion (Attridge, 2013). Hence, this discovery links to the strategies that help overcome RJ and its overall effect towards the relationship. The study revealed how proper communication levels the playing field for both parties, allowing them to see eye-to-eye regarding RJ. A recurring narrative from the participants included having reflexive discussion that looks into causes of one's experiences of RJ. As such, tactics that constitute communication during conflicts support romantic partners' endeavors to persuade each other to monitor and manage the feelings of RJ within their relational dynamics.

Anchoring the analysis on MMM (Heine et al., 2006), the idea that individuals devise meaning has aided in expounding the analysis,

as it presented that participants frequently linked their RJ to personal and cultural narratives. The responses posited how women's thoughts and actions align with their need to make sense of their experiences of RJ. For example, interpreting events through their internalized notions of what a relationship is that can be attributed to their family experiences or past romantic relationships. This recognizes the influence of familial experiences to be able to nurture romantic relationships. As a result, people who grow up in families with nurturing parenting tend to have better romantic relationships as adults than people who grow up with cold or distant parenting (Rauer & Volling, 2007). To cite an illustration from the gathered data, females with individualistic familial backgrounds reported that their culture at home has prevented them from opening about negative emotions and has given them a hard time engaging in immediate open communication, which has led to prolonged feelings of jealousy. Experiences of infidelity from previous romantic relationships also immensely constitute to most participants' feelings of RJ. Hence, these experiences define and influence women's perceptions of jealousy and how they should handle it within their relationships.

While the present study offered insights into women's experiences of RJ, a few limitations of the inquiry must be acknowledged. The use of RTT and MMM provided critical lenses for understanding such lived experiences of women; however, both frameworks might not fully account for the internalized insecurities, and negative experiences that have characterized one's retroactive jealousy. Although the study was not aiming for generalizability, the participants' profile which is composed of predominantly college students might also have narrowed the scope of the results, as experiences of RJ may vary across different age groups, relationship lengths, and sociocultural backgrounds. Future research would benefit from a more diverse and broader sampling. Despite these limitations, the study

significantly contributes to the underexplored area of retroactive jealousy by centering women's experiences from a narrative and theory-informed perspective.

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