

## Jealousy as a defence mechanism of low self-esteem

Ruxandra Rășcanu

*Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania*

### **Abstract**

*It is often accepted that being jealous means to protect something that is yours: Jealousy is maintaining the status of „owner” of a certain „trophy”, which also involves competition.*

*In our society, competition has a noble status; it is considered to be a quality that arises very early. According to psychoanalysts, competition occurs in the same period as the manifestation of the Oedipus complex, the first competition being that between the child and the parent of the same gender, in order to win exclusive love from the other parent. Or, it may appear after the birth of siblings; the older child feeling forced to compete for the attention of parents. The result of losing the competition, in this case the loss of parental attention, is manifested by the appearance of the feeling of jealousy in direct proportion to the degree of emotional involvement of the subject and translates into bursts of emotions (Gerard, 2003). Something similar to this triangle of infant jealousy also occurs in adults' conflicts of love.*

**Keywords:** *Jealousy, projection, Self-esteem, abandonment, egocentric, defence mechanism*

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**Corresponding author:** Ruxandra Rășcanu

**Phone number:** -

**E-mail address:** ruxipsiho@yahoo.com

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

It is often accepted that being jealous means to protect something that is yours: Jealousy is maintaining the status of „owner” of a certain „trophy”, which also involves competition.

In our society, competition has a noble status; it is considered to be a quality that arises very early. According to psychoanalysts, competition occurs in the same period as the manifestation of the Oedipus complex, the first competition being that between the child and the parent of the same gender, in order to win exclusive love from the other parent. Or, it may appear after the birth of siblings; the older child feeling forced to compete for the attention of parents. The result of losing the competition, in this case the loss of parental attention, is manifested by the appearance of the feeling of jealousy in direct proportion to the degree of emotional involvement of the subject and translates into bursts of emotions (Lazarus, 2011). Something similar to this triangle of infant jealousy also occurs in adults' conflicts of love.

The phylogenetic trend is to head aggression towards a third, rival party, to compete with it and to remove it (Lorenz, 2002). But it may also turn on the object that caused jealousy. In such a case, we are dealing with dimension present in excessive jealousies or pathologies.

We can also talk about a projected jealousy, which is based on personal infidelity or on the repressed impulses of unfaithfulness.

By projection, we mean that the rejected feeling, traits, desires are transferred to another person. As shown by Freud, it is easier to assign our infidelity to the other and to feel hurt by it than to face up to it and process it (Freud, 1912).

## **II. ABOUT JEALOUSY**

The central theme of jealousy refers to the feeling of hatred towards a third person, blamed for the loss of someone's affection. This implies a weakening or damage to the Ego identity that the person who stirs up jealousy is able to repair, so that the individual will feel more irritated. The accusation is directed either towards the rival, or on the beloved. Although jealousy is found in most people, it is considered that, at its basis, there are certain narcissistic needs that can never be satisfied (Baumgart, 2006).

Jealousy is passion, being the reverse of love passion. However, it is the kind of passion that causes destruction: our destruction on the one hand, caused by obsessive thoughts, and on the other hand the destruction of the other, manifested in aggressive behaviour. Sometimes, the suffering is doubled by the fascination with the rival, an attitude that applies especially to women (Schmitt, Alcalay, Allensworth, Allik, Ault, Austers,... & Braeckman, 2004). Jealous people may feel that they are in danger of being replaced by the intruder and that the relationship may be

entirely lost. However, even when they understand that the relationship can continue, jealousy can affect the quality of the relationship and of the feelings involved.

The roots of jealousy are found in childhood. The first evidence of jealousy occurs when the child feels betrayed, abandoned, and realizes that there are other people besides him, as his mother leaves him to approach the father or to go in the parental room. The second important manifestation of jealousy comes when the mother ceases to breastfeed the child, and the third, when siblings are born (Gerard, 2003).

In the end jealousy can be best described as a combination of different emotions such as pain, anxiety, and anger, which poses a threat to self-esteem.

### **III. ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM AND DEFENCE MECHANISMS**

Self-esteem develops as a result of the interactions with our official environment, or as a result of assessments and perceptions of others. The interest of the partner for someone else endangers the relationship, at the same time having major effects on self-esteem. Studies have shown that self-esteem influences romantic jealousy, so that low self-esteem is associated with increased jealousy (Stieger, Preyss, & Voracek, 2012).

Love suffering is unconsciously related to the sufferings of the past, the last strengthening the first one (Ferro, 2004). So the current situation reminds us of a situation experienced in childhood or during another couple relationship, so that the sufferings of that moment reappear and mix with the current suffering. After a careful analysis, we recognize its component parts, those experienced by the child we once were: the feeling of abandonment, dispossession and devaluation (Baumgart, 2006).

The feeling of abandonment is felt when the partner meets someone else. The child within us has preserved traces of anguish and wounds of panic, because the mother was forced to leave him/her sometimes. This sense of abandonment is the big problem of people and it is discussed in the chapter of „love”. We feel that the third person is stealing our affection, situation that reminds us of the time of oedipal love. It occurs when jealousy or infidelity is experienced as an act that questions our value. Thus, suffering also originates in a narcissistic plague, that of an egocentric and selfish child. It is accepted that people with low self-esteem are most vulnerable, because their own underestimation makes them doubt themselves.

This attitude stems from the lack of love and appreciation from parents for the child „we once were”. The less our parents loved us, logically, the less confidence we have in ourselves.

Observed from the outside, jealousy is not a good feeling. At a personal level, people do actually judge the situations that stir up jealousy, but they focus exclusively on the act. Rather than focus on the reasons behind it. Usually, people will split jealousy reactions into reasonable

and unreasonable reactions. In the case in which the reasons behind jealousy are acceptable to the social group of observers, then there are some judgments as to what form of behaviour the jealous person should adopt. Actions which are usually considered unreasonable suddenly become reasonable (Lazarus, 2011).

Given that the attention received from the partner is taken, the interest of the jealous person towards the rival is based on the unconscious ground that the rival is somehow superior, and therefore the integrity of the current relationship can be threatened. Consequently, jealousy arises not only when relations are in the dissolving stage, but also in the eventuality of such a situation. Therefore, protection of self-esteem serves as an effective mechanism for maintaining the relationship and wellbeing (Baumgart, 2006).

It is assumed that, in normal doses, jealousy is a feeling of positive, stimulating connotation. In high doses, however, it becomes an unsatisfied desire of possession and control, an infantile attitude as it unmasks the egocentric child. Also its strength is much greater in adulthood. If an unconscious fear always represses jealousy, it can happen to burst in the form of psychosis.

The more fragile and vulnerable the human being is, the more it tends to use defense mechanisms to protect its self-esteem. Although they serve to avoid reality these mechanisms amplify fragility.

People tend to filter information in order to retain the details offering them security and requiring no adaptation efforts. Everyone resorts to defense mechanisms. But what are they, really?

There is no universally accepted definition of defense mechanisms. Most authors give their own input on the matter. For Laplanche and Pontalis defense mechanisms represent „different types of operations where protection can be realized”. Also, the defense has a compulsion appearance and operates partially or completely unconsciously (Ionescu, Jacquet, & Lhote, 2002). For Sillamy, defense is an unconscious psychological mechanism used to relieve anxiety generated by internal conflicts between instinctual demands and social and moral laws (Ionescu, Jacquet, & Lhote, 2002).

The concept of „defense mechanism” is a theoretical abstraction used to describe a thing, a way of working, a mental functionality (Suppes, & Warren, 1975). Due to the fact that the defense mechanism does not occur at conscious level, it may have the following meanings: the subject is not aware of the behaviour through which the defense is manifested. He is not aware that the behaviour is a defensive one. Nor is he aware of the compulsion that triggered the defense. Moreover, the manifestation of defense behaviours is a summation of specific behaviours, emotions and ideas in the service of some defensive purposes (Wangh, 1962).

Anna Freud described and analyzed Ego defense mechanisms. These can be defined as defensive forms of the Ego against instinctual impulses and emotions related to these impulses. They also are unconscious activities of the Ego, and their activation occurs unintentionally. They are directed against drives and representations, but also against the emotions attached to those representations.

The purpose of defense mechanisms aimed at reducing or suppressing the changes that could affect the integrity, consistency and coherence of personality, masking or mitigating the conflicts or stress factors generating anxiety (Wallerstein, 1983). Defensive finality also refers to reducing intrapsychic conflicts or decreasing anxiety generated by internal conflicts caused by instinctual demands, social and moral laws (Enăchescu, 2007).

Studies have shown that there are gender differences in the use of defense mechanisms. Thus, men resort to projection more than women, and the latter to reversal and negation. Women also use more mechanisms for the defense of the neurotic impulses as compared to men (Tudose, 2012).

Social perception is the starting point by which the individual strives to form self-esteem, simultaneously with the way in which he shapes his impressions and findings of others about him.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

In people with low self-esteem, we find defense mechanisms such as denial or avoidance and withdrawal. They give greater importance to preventing failures than to risk management, preferring to invest energy in protecting self-esteem than in developing it (André, & Lelord, 2000). Their fear of failure will manifest through a cautious and reserved social attitude, even retraction and isolation and sometimes all of these features can lead to depressive disorders (Rizeanu, 2016).

The concept of self-esteem represents the self-evaluative component of the self that relates to the emotional experiences that the individual experiences when referring to himself (Lyubomirsky, & Ross, 1997). It is an assessment that we make about ourselves and that can take different forms (global or multidimensional, dispositional, personal or collective). Self-esteem is often seen as a mechanism for the protection of the self or of one's identity. In this case, self-esteem binds with defense mechanisms that protect the Ego or the self from unpleasant thoughts and emotions (Stieger, Preyss, & Voracek, 2012).

In psychoanalysis, self-esteem is associated with the feeling of guilt by internalizing parental images and identifying with them. In this case, defenses aim at avoiding the loss or the decrease of self-esteem and the occurrence of traumatic panic. Self-esteem acts on the psyche through the processes of identification, introspection and adaptation (Ionescu, Jacquet, & Lhote,

2002). Studies have shown that the use of defense mechanisms increases when self-esteem is threatened (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). One explanation could be that stress or threats towards self-esteem increase anxiety, and that generates the use of defense mechanisms that protect self-esteem by removing disruptive emotions or thoughts (Bushman, & Baumeister, 1998).

From the sociological point of view, self-esteem is a social construct, sometimes confused with the development of moral conscience. Self-evaluation is conducted by language and social interactions with the others, starting from childhood. Thus, the others serve as a “social mirror” in which the individual observes oneself so as to form an idea of him or she based on the opinions of the persons in his social circle.

Once learnt, this view will be quickly incorporated into his self-perception. Our self-esteem is directly proportional to the views of those around us, including friends and lovers. Thus, the better others think of us, the more our self-esteem grows. Conversely, negative opinions of others will be also integrated, leading to a low self-esteem (Ferro, 2004). A person with a balanced self-esteem will not risk destabilization and would not consider the criticism or approval of others as an attack to his or her self-identity; this helps individuals facing difficulties to obtain good and very good performance in activities and to maintain good relations with others (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007).

Irrespective of the perspective on jealousy, both psychologically and socially, it remains a concept often linked to love, referring to „special” manifestations of love; it is opposed by radicals, accepted by those who experience it as human behavior, with reasons found which can justify it. We could even say that the “universe” of passionate love would be poorer without any proof of jealousy, even if sometimes it tends to reach pathological psychological developments.

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