# Child Behaviour: Jealousy in middle-aged children and the Practice of Personification

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#### **Abstract**

Jealousy in children proposes hostility, which, depending on the social setting, can manifest in complex ways, and affect social dynamics between and within families. The current practice of regulating emotions through typical psychological procedures can be unseemly in the case of children. This paper aims to find the origin of jealousy in middle-aged children, use illustrative skills in emotion regulation, and explore other operative options. Jealousy's negative impact on a child's personality includes aggression, children turning into bullies, isolation, low self-esteem, etc. By using the "personification method" in psychology, the study attempts to personalize jealousy as a corporeal being rather than just an invisible evil- a 'substance' to overcome. My findings indicate that by using personification (also called anthropomorphism), the enemy (jealousy) becomes known and hence easier to tackle, if not conquer entirely.

Keywords: child behaviour, child psychology, personification, jealousy

#### Introduction

Jealousy refers to a negative emotion that symbolizes some form of interpersonal rivalry. Specifically, jealousy, as opposed to envy, has been defined as a complex emotion with its foundation being the threat of loss of an important relationship with another individual (Smith, Kim, & Parrott, 1988). The threat of losing a relationship with another person is what makes jealousy different from envy which does not involve a threat of loss (Jones, 1994). Given the social nature of this emotion and its pervasiveness in everyday life, many researchers have

investigated individual differences in the affective experiences and effects of this emotion from as young as six months old (Hart, 2002), and progressing into older ages: preschool (Bauminger, Chomsky-Smolkin, Orbach-Caspi, Zachor, & LevyShiff, 2008), early adolescence (Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005), and adulthood (Shackelford et al., 2004).

Jealousy in children can develop as early as six months of infancy. Most researchers point to its empirical origin instead of its genetic background. While the phenomenon as a whole, interests me, I was eager to engage with it. As a bystander, I attempted to mediate the situation by actively engaging these children to address their differences. Getting these children to understand what was happening between them was challenging. A five-year-old is probably unable to understand what jealousy is, they might even be hearing the word itself for the first time.

What remains to be understood, away from the literature that focuses on the outward manifestations and individual experiences of jealousy, is how children come to understand the concept itself. More precisely, at a young age when evidence suggests they are beginning to develop an awareness of other people's mentalities. It is against this context that it is important to understand, what skills, children are equipped with to, identify particular aspects of jealousy, such as the existence of a rival or the threat to a relationship. The current study aimed to theorize how children in middle childhood understood jealousy in relation to their immediate attachments and to determine how personification contributed to this growth.

### **Case Study**

Last month, my aunt and her children came over to our house for my brother's wedding. She has two children, ages eight and five. Their arrival was welcomed warmly by everyone. Hugs and kisses were exchanged among the children. In the meantime, my niece, also five, starts acting strangely. It seemed the two children were not getting along with her, despite their attempts to connect with her. It made me wonder what might have caused the reaction. The fact that she appeared irritated at their arrival convinced me she did not like my aunt's children.

Her conduct became increasingly aberrant as more children arrived at our home. I figured she was bothered by other children, not specific individuals. She 'had it all' as the only lone child in

the family. Once the attention got divided, she shrugged to secure her emotional requirements. Consequentially, she ran around instigating brawls with every child she encountered. Sullivan describes this behaviour (termed Malevolence) as the disjunctive dynamism of evil and hatred, characterized by the feeling of living among one's enemies (Sullivan, 1953b). It originates around the age of two or three years when children's actions that earlier had brought about maternal tenderness are rebuffed, ignored or met with anxiety and pain. Malevolent actions often take the form of timidity, mischievousness, cruelty, or other kinds of asocial or antisocial behaviour. Sullivan expressed the malevolent attitude with this colourful statement: "Once upon a time everything was lovely, but that was before I had to deal with people" (p. 216).

I recall watching this movie called 'Inside Out', which was developed under the guidance of psychologist Dacher Keltner of the University of California, Berkeley, in which Riley, eleven, relocates to San Francisco, leaving her life in Minnesota behind. She and her five core emotions, Fear, Anger, Joy, Disgust, and Sadness, are struggling to adjust to their new circumstances. Each is displayed with a corresponding colour (Anger is a fiery red, for example). The emotions take turns ensuring that Riley reacts appropriately to everything that occurs in her life. This is where the viewer can begin to see how this film might resonate with those in the counselling profession—and their clients. For instance, there is this scene where Riley feels sad and Sadness, as a character, states simply, "I don't know what's wrong with me—I can't help it." This translates to Riley crying on her first day in her new school. Now, this scene may be especially useful when working with young children because it provides a tangible, visual representation of something they may not be able to verbalize—being able to see Sadness in all of her gloomy, blue splendour will most likely allow a child to better understand that specific feeling. With this established background to the idea, let us try to understand how personification works in psychology.

#### **Personification in Psychology:** Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory

American Psychological Association defines personification(n) as a figure of speech in which personal or human characteristics are attributed to an object or abstraction, as in saying 'fortune smiled on her'.

"A person viewed as representing or embodying some quality, thing, or idea". (APA Dictionary of Psychology)

In the approach of Harry Stack Sullivan, "the pattern of feelings and attitudes toward another person that arises out of interpersonal relations with him or her".

People form specific perceptions of themselves and others starting in infancy which continues throughout the various developmental stages. These metaphorical representations, known as personifications, may be very realistic or, because they are influenced by people's needs and concerns, they may be wildly exaggerated. The bad-mother, the good-mother, and the me are three fundamental personifications that emerge during infancy, according to Sullivan (1953b). Additionally, during childhood, some kids develop an imaginary playmate known as an eidetic personification.

Eidetic Personifications, coined by Sullivan, are the unrealistic traits or imaginary friends that many children invent to protect their self-esteem. Sullivan (1964) believed that these imaginary friends may be as significant to a child's development as real playmates.

"Eidetic imagery is an unusually vivid subjective visual phenomenon. An eidetic person claims to continue to 'see' an object that is no longer objectively present. Eidetic persons behave as if they are actually seeing an item, either with their eyes closed or while looking at some surface that serves as a convenient background for the image. Furthermore, eidetic persons describe the image as if it is still present and not as if they are recalling a past event. The incidence of eidetic imagery is very low in children (2-10%) and almost non-existent in adults" (Britannica, 2022).

#### **Materializing Jealousy into Substance**

Othello, in which jealousy is depicted as a green-eyed monster by Shakespeare, gives the audience a chance to see the hero's resentment as a distinct emotion from the hero himself. The audience was persuaded that a 'monster' had misled their hero and that it was not the hero who was evil. Children's minds can be hard to change when presented with ideas they have likely never heard of and to which they can make no personal connection. Relevance is key essential

here. We may stand a good chance of managing countless encounters if we can translate this novel concept of jealousy into something children can relate to (a picture, a cartoon, an animal, etc.) and give these inanimate objects human characteristics rather than an alien, unknown form.

Lucy Nichol, a mental health author writes: The advice I was given by a friend many years ago proved invaluable:

"If you see a spider, imagine it in a disco dress - it won't seem so scary anymore"

Of course, it is not bulletproof. Sometimes, no matter how elaborate the sequinned ra-ra skirt and disco lights I conjure up in my mind, the arachnid fiend still gets the better of me. But it helps a little.

Personifying Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a popular treatment method for OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) sufferers. Children, in particular, are frequently encouraged to name their OCD as a specific means of emphasizing that they are distinct from it. They have OCD, not that it is something they are. Pick up any book for children with OCD, and the OCD will almost certainly be named.

The expressiveness of children's drawings has received considerable research attention in recent years (Bonoti & Misailidi, 2006; Brechet, 2013; Brechet, Baldy & Picard, 2009; Brechet, Picard & Baldy, 2007; Jolley, Fenn & Jones, 2004; Picard, Brechet & Baldy, 2007). Earlier studies have established that children use three types of expressive graphic cues to convey basic emotions in their drawings of a human: facial, bodily/posture, and contextual cues (Brechet et al., 2007, 2009). Facial cues refer to alterations in the facial features of the human figure (e.g., a downwardly curving mouth for sadness). Bodily/posture cues correspond to alterations of the arms, limbs, and body posture of the human figure (e.g., crossed arms express anger). Contextual cues refer to graphic elements – exterior to the human figure – that are drawn in the context of the drawing (e.g., shining sun in a blue sky to convey happiness) and convey emotion indirectly and subtly.

The ability of children to employ graphic signals in their drawings to convey emotion is a complex process that takes time to develop (Bonoti & Misailidi, 2006; Brechet et al., 2007, 2009; Ives, 1984; Jolley et al., 2004; Picard et al., 2007). According to research, young children aged four to eight years rely only on facial movements to convey emotion (Cox, 2005; Sayil, 2001; Zagorska, 1996). Children begin to introduce alterations in the figure's body/posture around the age of eight (Brechet et al., 2009; Golomb, 1992; Picard et al., 2007). Children between the ages of eight and fourteen begin to use contextual indices of emotion, such as painting an object or an event in the background of a human figure that is related to or could create the intended mood (Jolley, 2010).

In general, older children employ more and a wider range of graphic clues to convey emotion in a drawing than their younger counterparts (Brechet et al., 2009; Picard et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the age-related rise in the utilization of graphic cues does not appear to be consistent across emotions. According to studies, young children are fairly skilled at using facial clues to express happiness and sadness; however, they are less adept at using similar cues to convey fear, rage, or surprise (Golomb, 1992; Picard et al., 2007; Zagorska, 1996). Other evidence suggests that eight-year-olds utilize context cues frequently to convey anger, fear, and surprise, but far less frequently to convey happiness or sadness (Brechet et al., 2009).

Despite the growing availability of data on the graphic signals used by children to portray various fundamental emotions in their human figure drawings, no study has yet explored how children depict nonbasic or social emotions. It is unknown, in particular, what types of graphic cues they employ to transmit emotions such as pride, shame, and jealousy.

A significant amount of study has been conducted over the last two decades on children's knowledge of other people's ideas, feelings, and desires. While many studies have focused on the development of socio-cognitive awareness in children aged three to four years (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001), research has shown that this capacity is further developed throughout middle childhood (de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006; Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1993).

The ability to see things from another person's point of view is imperative for understanding their thoughts and feelings. Selman (1980, 1981) advocated a hierarchical organization for children's perspective-taking skill development. According to his concept, younger children (ages three to six) frequently confuse the thoughts and feelings of others with their own thoughts and feelings, but during the middle childhood years, children are able to contemplate the views of others and recognize that others can do the same. Children first understand that perspectives differ because people have access to varied information; later, children employ this understanding more fully in considering the distinct viewpoints of others.

Rather than explaining jealousy as a negative emotion, we could allow the child to personify jealousy and respond appropriately. If we do not understand the opposition, we cannot defeat it. For this, I gathered seven children aged four to eight and provided them with coloured pencils, and drawing papers. I asked them to draw a panda getting jealous. The children were able to draw a panda in all the different shades available to them. Three out of seven used the colour red around the head and under the eyes of the figure, depicting 'jealousy' when asked about it. The colour green was used by one child, shaded on and around the ears and face of the panda. Other children used different colours normally. Subsequently, the children were asked to draw a figure out of their respective *pandas* representing jealousy using those particular colours. The children drew a varied number of shapes and figures with physical human attributes. I asked the children to name their "jealous figures" in order to remember and recall when referring to the same in the future. In fact, the names they chose were intimately related to their immediate environment, usually the things or people that negatively contributed to their lives. For instance, a sibling, uncles and aunts, classmates, a particular food they don't like, and so on.

A child doesn't choose to be jealous of other children, but we might have a better chance of explaining it by staging an encounter between the child (here my niece) and "Jane the Jealousy." Without explicitly labelling her jealousy, understanding a variety of negative emotions, cognitions, and behaviours related to jealousy, and referring to the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that occur when a person believes an important relationship is being threatened by a rival, she was beginning to grasp the idea. Over the next few weeks, after repeated instances of calling out her personified jealousy, she stopped being a direct target, allowing her to get to know the 'enemy' in a

form she could recognize and thus understand its motivations. In her own way, she started to believe herself to be distinct from her jealousy and that it was just some cartoon character she didn't want to be like. Now, instead of calling her jealous whenever she starts to act a little stiff due to it, I say, "Oh look, Jane, the jealousy is back", which cracks her up every time.

Introduction to emotion is thus the first step in this process. Children will need a way to communicate with the emotion once they have learned about it, which entails personifying or substantiating (as I would call it) the emotion in a way that the child relates to, for instance, the emotion's name and getting comfortable with it. After some consideration, the child chooses to apply this strategy of identifying emotions in a variety of scenarios. It can develop as an early coping mechanism for the complex emotions they shall experience once they grow older. Hence, the application of a literary device like personification in psychology when dealing with jealousy in children becomes an effective technique.

#### **Appendix**

#### **Envy and Jealousy**

Envy occurs when a person is dissatisfied with something that another person possesses and feels inferior because they do not. This could be an object, a person, or both, or a trait such as success, reputation, or happiness. Envy may also involve adoration for the envied item or person, covetousness toward the envied thing, hatred or resentment of the person having the envied thing, a desire to harm the envied person, and, sometimes, a desire to rob the envied person. The fact that the interpersonal configuration is a two-person one in which the other person has possession of what is envy is critical to the definition. (1)

Derivation: The Latin root of envy is invidia from the verb 'invidere', meaning 'to look maliciously upon' (2), 'to look askance at' or 'to look with enmity' (3), and, according to Elliot Jacques, 'to cast an evil eye upon ...' (4). A translation of invidia from Cicero is 'to produce misfortune by his evil eye'. Yet another translation of the Latin verb is 'not looking at, or looking at in a contrary direction' (5). Envy first appeared in modern English usage in the fourteenth century. The Oxford dictionary definition of envy is 'the feeling of mortification and ill-will

occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages possessed by another' (2). Webster defines envy as the 'chagrin, mortification, discontent, or uneasiness at the sight of another's excellence or good fortune, accompanied by some degree of hatred, and desire to possess equal advantages; malicious grudging' (3). There are two important aspects of these definitions of envy: first, lacking something and being mortified by that gap/absence/void; second, the difference in aggression. Webster speaks of 'hatred'; Oxford only of 'ill-will'. To Oxford's earliest, and now obsolete, usage of 'malignant or hostile feeling, ill-will, malice, enmity and "active evil, harm, mischief"', Webster adds 'spite'.

In jealousy, one feels fear, anxiety, suspicion, or mistrust about the loss of a highly valued object or the diversion of care and devotion to another, a third person. It is sometimes related to vigilant guarding against imminent loss and an effort to retain the status quo, to protect ownership. In sexual love, this could mean attempting to extract complete devotion from the love object. In jealousy, the possession, or prized 'good,' is usually a person or the affection of a person rather than an inanimate thing or quality. But this is not always the case. Rivalry with a third person is common and emphasizes an important component of jealousy; it arises in a three-person context when the jealous individual believes that a third person will intrude on a two-person relationship and take ownership (1).

Derivation: The word 'jealous' is derived from the Greek word 'zelos' which signifies emulation, zeal, and jealousy, and denotes the intensity of feeling, as in ardour, fervour, and intense or earnest devotion to a person, cause, or thing. Only much later in Middle English and Old French (twelfth century) were the words 'jealous' and 'zealous' distinguished so that jealousy appeared for the first time as 'gelos'. The close connection of jealousy and zeal was still evident in the early definitions of 'jealous' (obsolete by the seventeenth century) which stood for 'vehemence in feeling, as in wrath, desire, devotion ... ardently amorous; covetous of the love of another, fond, lustful' (2). Modern usage emphasizes first the attitudes toward one's possessions, and second a suspicious attitude toward rivals.

Let's examine the distinctions and parallels between envy and jealousy. Both jealousy and envy are negative feelings but jealousy is usually considered to be more negative. "Envy is a mix of admiration and discontent but the word doesn't usually imply hostility" ("Jealousy" vs. "Envy":

Can You Feel the Difference?- Dictionary.Com, 2022). On the other hand, to feel jealous means "to feel threatened, insecure, or protective of something you already have. For example, you might feel jealous of your friend's new friend because you feel as if you might get replaced. While envy is closely related to resentment, jealousy involves resentment and the attribution of responsibility. Brene Brown, an emotions researcher and academic, differentiates jealousy and envy as she thinks envy is usually between two people and is wanting something that someone else has and jealousy is normally between three people and is the fear of losing something that you already have to someone else. "One listens for the specific dynamic content when patients refer to envious and jealous feelings. Patients often shift from one to the other in their descriptions. For example, a young, divorced and childless woman was annoyed with a pregnant friend. She acknowledged her envy but then spontaneously spoke of her jealousy. Her envy referred to the wish to have a baby like her friend; her jealousy, was her wish that the friend would not have the baby. Jealousy for this patient was the stronger and more objectionable effect since it was connected with hate and aggression" (1)

#### How does jealousy develop in children?

Numerous factors can lead to attention-seeking behaviour. Jealousy frequently relates to a notion of lost love or attention, which suggests that a young person may be going through some form of loss. They may act out to achieve what they want since they find it very difficult to comprehend what they feel and have no control over the situation.

According to studies on toddlers' reactions to the birth of a sibling, unevenly distributed mother attention or jealousy-inducing behaviour is upsetting to toddlers. These investigations revealed a wide range of harmful child behaviours, such as aggression, withdrawal, anxiety, regression, reliance, and physical function problems like sleep and elimination difficulties (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Gottlieb & Mendelson, 1990; Howe & Ross, 1990; Stewart, Mobley, Van Tuyl, & Salvador, 1987; Taylor & Kogan, 1973). These studies also found that mothers' parenting behaviours had deteriorated, as seen by mothers' decreased warmth and playfulness, lower sensitivity, and increasingly hostile interactions with their toddlers. This is in addition to the observation of deteriorated conduct in children. These discoveries led to the theory that jealousy

is a result of children receiving less attention from their mothers during interactions with them, in addition to direct experiences of dethronement and competition with siblings (Adler, 1931). (Dunn, 1992). Additionally, because toddlers made up the majority of the participants in these naturalistic investigations, the results supported theories that jealousy is only present in children in this age range and is amplified by their higher representational abilities (Dunn, 1994).

A child is frequently unwilling to disclose and express jealousy and prefers to repress it. Because the parents fail to deal with these sentiments appropriately and in a timely manner, the child expresses them through unusual and unwanted behaviours such as anger, sabotage, being troublesome, disobedience, and lying. Therefore, to a child, seeking unfavourable attention is still preferable to receiving none at all. It can sometimes progress to the point of producing involuntary urination, nail biting, lip biting, or feigning illness. Though jealousy doesn't follow a logical path it is triggered by an individual combination of psychological factors which coincide to create the emotion of resentment, a feeling of threat and isolation, and a fear of reduced self-importance.

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