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Who's chasing whom? The impact of gender and relationship status on mate poaching

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ABSTRACT

Are women more interested in men who are already in a relationship? Female and male participants who were single or in a relationship viewed information about an opposite-sex other and indicated their interest in pursuing this target. Half of the participants were told that the target was single and half read that the target was currently in a relationship. The results showed that only single women were more interested in pursuing an attached target rather than a single target. We discuss how these results add to what is already known about mate poaching.

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A commonly heard complaint among women is that “all the good men are taken,” but is it possible that this perception is really based on the fact that taken men are perceived as good? This belief that women are attracted to men who are currently attached is commonly depicted in movies, television and the tabloids, but few have investigated it empirically. The purpose of this experiment was to investigate (1) if women are more likely than men to prefer an already taken individual and (2) if this gender difference depends on the relationship status of the participant.

This tendency to pursue someone who is already in a romantic relationship is often referred to as mate poaching (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Mate poaching appears to be a relatively common practice that occurs across a wide range of cultures. For example, Schmitt (2004) found that across ten world regions, 57% of men and 35% of women indicated they had engaged in an attempt at mate poaching, suggesting that this behavior is a universal mating practice.

Researchers have not only identified the frequency of mate poaching but have also examined the characteristics that make someone more or less likely to poach. For example, people who mate poach are more likely to be low in agreeableness and conscientiousness than those who do not (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). However, the mate poaching characteristic that has received the most attention is gender.

Gender differences in mate poaching

Several studies have investigated whether men or women are more likely to engage in mate poaching; however, the results have been inconclusive. Some argue that men would be more likely to mate poach because men cheat more in general (e.g., Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999). The work by Schmitt and colleagues seems to support this assertion by showing that male respondents are more likely to report engaging in mate poaching tactics (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

Conversely, some argue that mate poaching is different from other forms of cheating and as such, women may be more likely to practice it. Research on animal mating (e.g., fish, birds) has shown that female animals are more likely to choose a male that has already been chosen by other females (e.g., Dugatkin, 1992; Galeg & White, 1998). The assumption is that chosen men signal they have desirable qualities that non-chosen men do not have and as a result, women perceive them as more viable mates. Research on human preferences does show that women rate men as more desirable when they are surrounded by other women, compared to being alone or surrounded by other men (Hill & Buss, 2008). Conversely, men rate women as less desirable when they are surrounded by other men, compared to being alone or surrounded by other women. Although this work did not examine mate poaching per se (i.e., the target was not described as being in a relationship with any of the surrounding individuals), it does suggest that women may be more likely to copy the mate preferences of their peers, a pattern that closely mirrors the animal research previously described.

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In an attempt to more directly examine gender differences in mate poaching, Uller and Johansson (2002) had female participants interact with two men, one who wore a wedding ring. The women then rated both men on a variety of dimensions, including physical attractiveness and interest in dating and having sex with each man. The results showed that women rated both men equally across all the dimensions. A more recent study, however, did find evidence that women are more attracted to attached men, but this effect was influenced by the women's ovulation cycle. Bressan and Stranieri (2008) showed women several photos of men along with descriptions that the men were either single or attached. Results indicated that women who were currently in a relationship themselves were more attracted to attached men, but this was only the case when their fertility level was low. Conversely, when the women's fertility level was high, they were more attracted to single men. For single women, there was no difference in attractiveness ratings across the various conditions. This work therefore suggests that women are more attracted to taken men, but only when they are in a relationship themselves and are not fertile.

Thus, research on gender differences in mate poaching seems inconclusive. Work by Schmitt and colleagues suggest that men are more likely to mate poach. However, because this work relies solely on self-report data, it is possible that women are just less likely to admit that they have mate poached. Research using experimental designs instead suggests that women are more likely to mate poach, but only when they are in a relationship themselves and are not fertile.

In addition to the differences in research methods, these studies also differ on exactly what they are measuring. The work by Schmitt asked people to report on their own poaching proclivities; whereas, the experimental research focused exclusively on attractiveness ratings. Attraction, however, is just one aspect of mating decisions. As such, it is likely that studies focusing solely on attraction ratings do not capture all the aspects of mate poaching and this may also explain the inconsistency in findings. For instance, Dugatkin (2000) suggests that women's preference for attached mates will be much more pronounced when asked to indicate their interest in marrying the target rather than just rating the attractiveness of the target.

Present study

The purpose of the present study is to provide a more complete picture of the gender differences in mate poaching. Our first goal was to utilize dependent measures that capture a wider range of mate poaching experiences, rather than focusing exclusively on attraction ratings as other studies have done. This study therefore included a variety of questions that assessed participants' interests in pursuing a relationship with the target. Our second goal was to incorporate a factor that we believed would interact with gender to influence mate poaching: The relationship status of the participant. As Schmitt and Buss (2001) pointed out, "poaching attraction may vary depending on whether the mate poacher is single or already in a relationship (p. 913)." Yet, to date, only one study has examined relationship status in mate poaching (Bressan & Stranieri, 2008), but since this study focused exclusively on women, it is unknown if relationship status effects men and women equally.

The present study is the first to examine both men and women's evaluations of single and attached targets, and it is also the first to do so with both single and attached participants. It was predicted that women would be more interested in an attached target compared to a single target but that men would not show this preference. However, this female preference for an attached target was only expected to occur for single women. If attached men signal desirable resources and a willingness to commit to family life as

some have suggested (Dugatkin, 2000; Uller & Johansson, 2002), then this signal should be more appealing to single women who are lacking such resources. Women who are in a relationship themselves have already found a mate who is willing to commit and so it is unlikely that they will be enticed by such prospects.

Method

Participants and design

The sample consisted of 184 undergraduates (97 women) from Oklahoma State University, with 46% of the sample identified as single (35 women, 49 men) and 54% as attached (62 women, 38 men). Participation was for partial course credit. The study involved a 2 (gender: women versus men) \times 2 (relationship status: single versus attached) \times 2 (target: single versus attached) factorial design.

Materials and procedure

Participants were seated in an individual computer cubicle and were told the study was examining similarity effects on attraction. Next, participants completed a survey on their personal preferences, including qualities that would describe their ideal romantic partner (questions were similar to those used on match.com or eharmony.com). Participants were told the computer would use this information to match them with a fellow student in the database that responded similarly.

Next, the computer supposedly generated a match and participants were shown a photograph and descriptive information regarding an opposite-sex target. All men viewed the same photo of a woman and all women viewed the same photo of a man. These photos were selected during pre-testing because they were both rated as being moderately attractive. Above the photograph, participants read that the target shared similar interests with the participant (based on previous survey responses). Therefore, all participants likely identified the target as physically attractive and perceived the target as similar in interests. In addition to this information, participants were randomly assigned to read that the target was either single or in a current romantic relationship.

Next, participants indicated how interested they were in pursuing the target. These questions were created using modified items from other infidelity and mate poaching studies (Clark et al., 1999; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Specifically, participants responded to the following questions: How appealing is this person; How likely would you show interest (make eye contact, smile, etc.) in this person; How compatible do you think you are with this person; How likely would you initiate a conversation with this person; How likely would you initiate a relationship with this person; How direct would you be in initiating a romantic relationship with this person. Responses were made on a -3 (e.g., very unlikely) to $+3$ (e.g., very likely) scale. The items demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .81$) and were combined into a single composite score, with higher scores indicating a greater interest in pursuing the target. Participants also rated how physically attractive the target was on a -3 (very unattractive) to $+3$ (very attractive) scale.¹

¹ Although the ratings of attraction and interest were positively correlated ($r = .57$, $p < .01$), we expected them to result in different patterns (e.g., Dugatkin, 2000) and therefore treated them as separate theoretical constructs this separation is also consistent with other attraction research (e.g., study five of Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Uller & Johansson, 2002).

Results

Interest in pursuing the target

Participants' interest in pursuing the target was analyzed using a 2 (gender: women versus men) \times 2 (relationship status: single versus attached) \times 2 (target: single versus attached) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The only significant main effect was gender, $F(1, 176) = 21.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$, such that men ($M = .98, SD = .71$) were more interested than women ($M = .47, SD = .85$) in pursuing the target. As predicted, this main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 176) = 7.77, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$.

To reveal the pattern of data underlying the three-way interaction, simple main effects were analyzed separately for single and attached participants. For single participants (see top of Fig. 1), there was a significant effect of gender, $F(1, 80) = 8.21, p = .01, \eta^2 = .09$, such that single men ($M = .91, SD = .71$) were more interested than single women ($M = .47, SD = .82$) in pursuing the target. Importantly, this effect was qualified by a significant gender \times target interaction, $F(1, 80) = 6.23, p = .02, \eta^2 = .07$. As predicted, single women were more interested in pursuing an attached target ($M = .75, SD = .73$) than a single target ($M = .17, SD = .83$), $F(1, 80) = 5.46, p = .02$. However, single men showed no difference in interest between the attached ($M = .81, SD = .73$) and single target ($M = 1.05, SD = .69$), $F(1, 80) = 1.23, p = .27$. As expected, single women were more interested in poaching an attached target rather than pursuing a single target, whereas single men were not.

For participants in a relationship (see bottom of Fig. 1), there was also an effect of gender, $F(1, 96) = 13.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$, such that attached men ($M = 1.15, SD = .71$) were more interested than attached women ($M = .46, SD = .86$) in pursuing the target. As predicted, this factor did not interact with condition, $F(1, 96) = 2.19, p = .14$. Unlike single women, attached women were not more interested in pursuing the attached target compared to the single target.

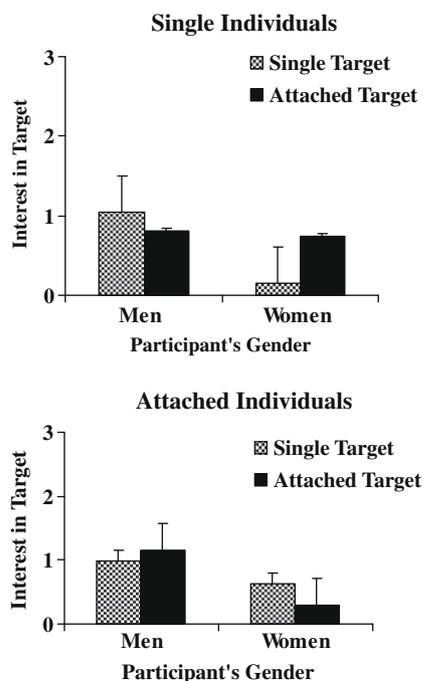


Fig. 1. Single participants' (top) and attached participants' (bottom) interest in pursuing the target.

Attractiveness ratings

Participants' attractiveness ratings of the target were analyzed using a 2 (gender: women versus men) \times 2 (relationship status: single versus attached) \times 2 (target: single versus attached) ANOVA. The only effect that was significant was a main effect of gender, $F(1, 176) = 6.39, p = .01$, such that men rated the female target ($M = 1.29, SD = 0.78$) as more physically attractive than the women rated the male target ($M = .92, SD = 1.10$). None of the other main effects or interactions was significant.

Discussion

Our results showed an interesting mate poaching pattern. Although men were more interested in the target than women, this was because men were more interested in the target in general, regardless of whether she was attached or single. However, as predicted, single women were more interested in poaching an attached man rather than pursuing a single man. Interestingly, this indicates that single women are more interested in pursuing a man that is less available to them. As predicted, this gender difference in interest was not evident when the participants were in a committed relationship themselves.

The attractiveness ratings did not show this same pattern, suggesting that attraction ratings do not capture the same dynamic as our interest in pursuit questions. This suggests that research investigating mate poaching should avoid only relying on attraction questions and should include items that tap into the broader range of mate poaching experiences.

One limitation of the present study was that it used a single male and female target photo and although our pretest indicated both photos were perceived as moderately attractive, our study showed men's attractiveness ratings for the female photo were higher than women's ratings for the male photo. To address this issue, future studies on this topic should incorporate multiple female and male photos to increase the generalizability of the results. Another limitation was that participants did not actually interact with the romantic target; they simply indicated their interest in future interactions. Future studies on mate poaching could try to capture the mate poaching process as it unfolds during a dyadic interaction.

According to a recent poll, most women who engage in mate poaching do not think the attached status of the target played a role in their poaching decision (Knadler, 2008), but our study shows this belief to be false. Single women in this study were significantly more interested in the target when he was attached. This may be because an attached man has demonstrated his ability to commit and in some ways his qualities have already been "pre-screened" by another woman. These findings elucidate the way that gender and relationship status interact to influence mate poaching tendencies.

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