



Sex differences in perceptions of benefits and costs of mate poaching

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ABSTRACT

Mate poaching occurs when an individual is aware that the person with whom he or she has sexual relations is already in a nominally exclusive relationship with someone else. The current study extends the results of the only previous study (Davies et al., 2007) to investigate the motivations of mate poachers by investigating a comprehensive list of benefits and costs exclusively associated with poaching. Ratings provided by 125 men and 90 women indicated hypothesized sex differences in the likelihood that benefits and costs would motivate them to attract an attached individual (i.e. to poach) versus an unattached individual (i.e. to avoid poaching). Additional results suggested that both sexes avoid poaching if equally attracted to the attached and unattached individuals. This led us to formulate the novel hypothesis that poaching lies between attracting unattached individuals and coercion in a hierarchy of conditional mating strategies.

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1. Introduction

Mate poaching occurs when an individual is aware that the person with whom he or she has sexual relations is already in a nominally exclusive relationship with someone else (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2007). Mate poaching is prevalent across numerous world regions (Davies et al., 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2004). Several researchers have noted that there may be benefits and costs associated with poaching (e.g. Bleske & Shackelford, 2001; Parker & Burkley, 2009). However, the only study that has empirically investigated such benefits and costs is Schmitt and Buss's (2001) *Study 2*. The goals of *Study 2* were to "uncover the major costs and benefits that people consider when attempting a mate poach and to assess the relative importance of each feature of poaching attraction for men and women" (p. 899). The current study assumes these goals but differs from *Study 2* methodologically.

First, three of the four hypotheses tested in Schmitt and Buss's (2001) *Study 2* concerned benefits and costs of non-poaching forms of attraction, including "gain partner with physical beauty", "gain partner with resource ability", "suffer resource depletion", and "enjoy sexual variety". We investigated only benefits and costs exclusive to poaching, i.e. ones not pertaining to other forms of attraction. We, therefore, sought to gain insight into motivations specific to poaching.

Second, Schmitt and Buss (2001) survey presented participants with "features of romantic attraction" and asked them to rate the degree to which each would be a cost or benefit of attracting someone already in a relationship. We asked participants to assume that they were equally attracted to an attached and unattached potential mate and to rate the extent to which benefits would motivate them to attract the attached individual (i.e. to poach) and costs would motivate them to attract the unattached individual (i.e. to avoid poaching). We, thereby, aimed to ensure participants' ratings of each benefit and cost would be based solely on the targeted individuals' relationship status.

Finally, Schmitt and Buss (2001) considered poaching across three temporal contexts for which the poacher pursues the poached, namely "short-term" poaches, including "brief affairs", and "long-term" poaches or "permanent relationship defection [by the poached] and the formation of a new long-term mating alliance" (Schmitt & Buss, 2001, pp. 894–895). In the current study, these two contexts were respectively considered as poaches for "short-term sexual partners" and "new exclusive relationships". We also investigated poaches for "long-term sexual affairs", in which poachers maintain long-lasting sexual relationships with the poached but the poached remain in their initial relationships.

We attempted to compile a comprehensive list of benefits and costs exclusive to poaching. First, we included benefits and costs exclusive to poaching considered by Schmitt and Buss (2001) *Study 2*. Second, we scanned benefits and costs identified in the preliminary study of *Study 2* and included those exclusive to poaching but not considered in *Study 2* proper. Third, we formulated previously unidentified benefits and costs exclusive to poaching.

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Through the aforementioned methodology, we aimed to secure findings relating to issues investigated by Schmitt and Buss (2001) that were comparable to those of the earlier study, as well as those that were novel. In addition, we aimed to secure findings relating to previously uninvestigated aspects of mate poaching.

We derived hypotheses regarding benefits and costs for which evolutionary psychological principles (e.g. Tooby & Cosmides, 1992) suggested there would be sex differences in the degree to which they would, respectively, motivate individuals to poach or deter them from poaching. First, women's investment in gestation and lactation means that, with each additional mate secured, men experience smaller reproductive costs and greater reproductive benefits than do women. Men more than women, therefore, may have evolved a willingness to undertake challenges associated with attracting mates for non-exclusive relationships and to gain more of a thrill from doing so (e.g. Holinger, 1987). This leads to the following hypotheses: men will give a higher rating than women for the benefit, "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner", as a short-term sexual partner (Hypothesis 1) and for a long-term sexual affair (Hypothesis 2). Men will give a higher rating than women for the benefit of gaining an "ego boost" from successfully poaching someone as a short-term sexual partner (Hypothesis 3) and for a long-term sexual affair (Hypothesis 4).

Men face paternity uncertainty, such that they cannot be certain that the children to whom their mates give birth are their own. Men, therefore, may have evolved a motivation to avoid long-term commitments with women having a sexually promiscuous reputation (Buss, 1989). In turn, women may have evolved a motivation to avoid gaining such a reputation. This leads to the following hypotheses: women will give a higher rating than men for the cost "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" if one becomes known to have poached someone as a short-term sexual partner (Hypothesis 5) or for a long-term sexual affair (Hypothesis 6).

To produce viable offspring, women are obliged to make a larger physiological investment than are men. So that this investment is not squandered, women more than men may have evolved to ensure that their children survive to reproductive age. Women more than men, therefore, are expected to prefer to mate with individuals able and willing to provide economic parental investment. Consequently, men more than women may be able to attract mates by displaying such an ability and willingness to invest resources (Buss, 1989). It follows that men may have evolved to exploit the opportunity provided by poaching to avoid depleting their resources by causing other men to unknowingly invest in their offspring. This leads to Hypothesis 7: men will rate the benefit of being "less likely to have to help raise or financially support the child", as a probable incentive to poach.

The forgoing also suggests that women more than men may have evolved a wariness of mating with individuals unable or unwilling to provide economic parental investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women may be especially likely to mate with such men when poaching because a poached man is more likely to be already investing in children. This led us to formulate Hypothesis 8: women will rate the cost "greater risk that they will have to raise on their own, any baby that results through their poaching of an attached man" as a probable disincentive to poach.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 215 undergraduates in psychology courses at a university in the southeastern United States (125 men, M age = 19.9 years, SD = 3.2; 90 women, M age = 19.8, SD = 4.2). Participants self-recruited by signing-up for an appointment on a

sheet posted on a university-building notice-board. The sheet stated that participants must be heterosexual. Participants received one credit towards a three-credit research participation course requirement.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants rated the likelihood that benefits would motivate them to attract an attached instead of an unattached individual (i.e. to poach) and costs would motivate them to attract an unattached instead of an attached individual (i.e. to not poach). They were asked to assume that they were equally sexually attracted to the attached and unattached individuals.

Participants provided ratings on a 10-point scale with the following anchors: 0 = *Definitely No*; 4 = *Probably No*; 5 = *Probably Yes*; and 9 = *Definitely Yes*. A rating of "5" or greater for a benefit indicated the benefit would "probably" motivate the participant to attract the attached individual (i.e. would "probably" motivate the participant to poach). A rating of "5" or greater for a cost indicated the cost would "probably" motivate the participant to attract the unattached individual (i.e. would "probably" deter the participant from poaching).

Where appropriate, participants were asked to consider each benefit and cost along three temporal contexts, namely "short-term sexual partner"; "long-term sexual affair"; and "new exclusive relationship". The foregoing is illustrated by Question 4a: "Suppose that there are two individuals to whom you are equally sexually attracted, and you know that one of them is in an exclusive relationship and the other is single. Would the suggested benefit of the "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner" motivate you personally to attempt to attract the attached individual, instead of attempting to attract the unattached individual, as a short-term sexual partner?"

3. Results

3.1. Results relating to hypotheses

Hypotheses 1–6 were tested using a MANOVA with sex as the fixed factor (Table 1). Because multiple tests were conducted and because the Bonferroni correction may be overly conservative (e.g. Nakagawa, 2004), we reduced alpha from .05 to .01. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men gave a higher rating than women for the benefit "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner" as a short-term sexual partner [$F(1, 208) = 11.886$, $p = .001$]. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, men did not give a higher rating than women for the benefit "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner" for a long-term sexual affair [$F(1, 208) = 4.664$, $p = .032$]. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, men gave a higher rating than women for the benefit of gaining an "ego boost" from successfully poaching someone as a short-term sexual partner [$F(1, 208) = 8.650$, $p = .004$]. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, men did not give a higher rating than women for the benefit of gaining an "ego boost" from successfully poaching someone for a long-term sexual affair [$F(1, 208) = 2.377$, $p = .125$]. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, women gave a higher rating than men for the cost "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" if one becomes known to have poached someone as a short-term sexual partner [$F(1, 208) = 10.585$, $p = .001$]. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, women gave a higher rating than men for the cost "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" if one becomes known to have poached someone for a long-term sexual affair [$F(1, 208) = 12.143$, $p = .001$].

A two-tailed Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test, however, indicated that men were more likely to *not* be in a relationship than were women ($z = -3.897$, $p = .000$). To investigate whether rela-

Table 1

F-ratios, p-values and partial η^2 values generated by a MANOVA for tests of Hypotheses 1–6 with "Sex" and "Relationship Status" as fixed factors.

Benefit/cost (poaching context)	Factor					
	Sex			Relationship status		
	F	p	Partial η^2	F	p	Partial η^2
Challenge of attracting someone (ST)	11.886	.001	.054	5.985	.015	.028
Challenge of attracting someone (LT)	4.664	.032	.022	8.807	.003	.041
Ego is boosted (ST)	8.650	.004	.040	4.436	.036	.021
Ego is boosted (LT)	2.377	.125	.011	2.989	.085	.014
Shame and bad reputation (ST)	10.585	.001	.048	.036	.850	.000
Shame and bad reputation (LT)	12.143	.001	.055	.279	.598	.001

Note. ST: short-term sexual partner. LT: long-term sexual affair. ns = 125 Men, 90 women.

tionship status, not sex, explained variance in the aforementioned benefits and costs, we conducted a MANOVA with relationship status as the fixed factor with alpha set to .01 (Table 1). This indicated a difference by relationship status only for the "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner" for a long-term sexual affair [$F(1, 208) = 8.807, p = .003$].

We conducted one sample t-tests with alpha set to .01 to determine whether mean ratings given by men and women for all benefits and costs differed from 4.5 (i.e. the midpoint between "4 = Probably No" and "5 = Probably Yes") (Table 2). Contrary to Hypothesis 7, men gave a mean rating less than 4.5 for the benefit "less likely to have to help raise or financially support the child" ($t(90) = -7.421, p = .000$). This indicates that the benefit would

"probably" not motivate men to poach. Consistent with Hypothesis 8, women gave a mean rating greater than 4.5 for the cost "greater risk that they will have to raise on their own, any baby that results through their poaching of an attached man" ($t(87) = 5.794, p = .000$). This indicates that the cost would "probably" deter women from poaching.

3.2. Results for which no hypotheses were generated

A MANOVA, with sex as the fixed factor with alpha set to .01, generated the following results for which no hypotheses were provided. Women provided a higher rating than men for the cost "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" if one becomes

Table 2

Mean ratings of benefits and costs by sex of poaches for short-term sexual partners (ST), long-term sexual affairs (LT), and new exclusive relationships (NE), and one sample t-tests of whether mean ratings of benefits and costs are, respectively, below or above 4.5.

Benefit (poaching context)	Sex of rater			
	Male		Female	
	M (SD)	t	df	p
Challenge of attracting someone (ST)	3.6 (3.0)	-3.28	124	.001
Challenge of attracting someone (LT)	2.7 (2.7)	-7.77	124	.000
Challenge of attracting someone (NE)	2.1 (2.4)	-11.37	123	.000
Ego is boosted (ST)	4.4 (3.1)	-0.424	124	.672
Ego is boosted (LT)	4.2 (3.1)	-1.25	122	.213
Ego is boosted (NE)	4.0 (3.1)	-1.96	124	.053
Less likely to raise or support the child	2.4 (2.6)	-7.42	80	.000
Freedom from the need to fully commit	2.8 (2.5)	-7.48	121	.000
Person has been pre-approved (ST)	2.9 (2.7)	-6.78	124	.000
Person has been pre-approved (LT)	2.6 (2.5)	-8.74	124	.000
Person has been pre-approved (NE)	2.8 (2.6)	-7.30	124	.000
Excitement of an illicit affair	2.9 (2.8)	-6.24	124	.000
Gaining revenge (ST)	3.9 (3.0)	-2.18	123	.031
Gaining revenge (LT)	2.9 (2.8)	-6.44	124	.000
Gaining revenge (NE)	2.3 (2.5)	-9.88	124	.000
Cost (poaching context)				
Shame and bad reputation (ST)	4.8 (2.9)	1.07	122	.287
Shame and bad reputation (LT)	4.8 (3.0)	1.29	121	.201
Shame and bad reputation (NE)	5.0 (3.1)	1.83	120	.070
Risk of raising a baby on your own	N/A (N/A)	N/A	N/A	N/A
More bother and less success (ST)	5.3 (2.9)	3.06	123	.003
More bother and less success (LT)	5.3 (2.9)	3.16	124	.002
More bother and less success (NE)	5.6 (3.0)	4.26	124	.000
Being physically harmed (ST)	3.9 (3.1)	-2.10	124	.038
Being physically harmed (LT)	4.0 (3.1)	-1.70	124	.092
Being physically harmed (NE)	4.1 (3.2)	-1.29	124	.200
Stress of concealment/deception (ST)	5.1 (3.0)	2.09	124	.038
Stress of concealment/deception (LT)	5.3 (3.0)	3.09	123	.002
Stress of concealment/deception (NE)	5.9 (8.0)	2.01	124	.047
Guilt and ethical concerns (ST)	5.8 (2.8)	5.08	124	.000
Guilt and ethical concerns (LT)	5.9 (2.7)	5.84	124	.000
Guilt and ethical concerns (NE)	6.1 (2.9)	5.94	123	.000
Sexually unfaithful to previous (NE)	6.0 (2.8)	4.44	75	.000
Emotionally unfaithful to previous (NE)	4.8 (2.7)	0.81	75	.422

Note. M: mean. SD: standard deviation. N/A: not applicable (no ratings given). ns = 125 Men, 90 women.

known to have poached someone for a new exclusive relationship [$F(1, 153) = 9.411, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .058$]. Women rated the cost "danger of being physically harmed by the partner of the poached" a greater disincentive to poach than did men when poaching for a new exclusive relationship [$F(1, 153) = 8.679, p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .054$].

Men and women gave all benefits a mean rating less than 5.0. One sample t -tests indicated that men and women gave none of the benefits a mean rating greater than 4.5 (Table 2). This indicates that no benefits would motivate men or women to poach.

A mean rating of 5.0 or greater was given by men to 11 of the 17 costs presented to them and by women to 16 of the 18 costs presented to them. One sample t -tests indicated that a mean rating greater than 4.5 was given by men to eight costs and by women to 13 costs (Table 2). This indicates that these costs would "probably" deter men and women from poaching. One sample t -tests also indicated that men and women gave a mean of less than 4.5 to none of the costs (Table 2), indicating that no costs would "probably" fail to deter men or women from poaching.

4. Discussion

4.1. Hypotheses

Guided heuristically by evolutionary psychological metatheory, we identified several sex differences in the perceived costs and benefits of mate poaching. The current study was the first to investigate whether individuals are motivated to poach by the "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner". Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men gave a higher rating than women for this benefit when poaching for a short-term sexual partner. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, men gave a higher rating than women for the benefit gaining an "ego boost" from successfully poaching someone as a short-term sexual partner. The latter finding corroborates Schmitt and Buss's (2001) finding of "Take Pride in Conquest" being rated as a greater benefit to men than women when poaching for short-term mates. The current study was the first to investigate whether individuals are deterred from poaching by the perception that they might "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" if they became known to have poached someone. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, women gave a higher rating than men for this cost when poaching for a short-term sexual partner. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, women gave a higher rating than men for this cost when poaching for a long-term sexual affair.

Although men were more likely to not be in a relationship than were women, we found a difference by relationship status along none of the aforementioned benefits and costs. There would, however, be value in future research investigating the degree to which variance in these benefits are accounted for by variables other than sex, such as the Big Five, self-esteem, and sociosexuality (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991).

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, men did not give a higher rating than women for the benefit "challenge of trying to attract someone away from their partner" for a long-term sexual affair. As a difference by relationship status was found along this benefit, relationship status has a greater effect than sex on this benefit.

Contrary to Hypothesis 4, men did not give a higher rating than women for the benefit "ego boost" from successfully poaching someone for a long-term sexual affair. As neither sex nor relationship status were found to have an effect on this benefit, there is a need for future research to investigate the degree to which variance in this benefit is accounted for by variables not considered here.

The current study was the first to investigate whether men are motivated to poach by the benefit of being "less likely to have to

help raise or financially support a child" produced through poaching. Contrary to Hypothesis 7, men reported that they did not view it a "probable" incentive to poach. A possible reason for this is that male participants' awareness of contemporary paternity testing and child support laws made them believe it unlikely that they could avoid financially supporting their children. Another possible reason for the unexpected finding is the current survey's failure to specify whether the poach would be for a short-term sexual partner, a long-term sexual affair, or a new exclusive relationship. Future research should address this oversight because only for the first two temporal contexts are men likely to perceive that they would secure the aforementioned benefit.

The current study was also the first to investigate whether women are deterred from poaching by the perception that they are at a "greater risk of raising on their own" any baby produced through their poaching of an attached man". Consistent with Hypothesis 8, women reported that they perceived this cost as a "probable" disincentive to poach.

4.2. Results for which no hypotheses were generated

When poaching for a new exclusive relationship, women perceived "suffer shame and gain a bad reputation" and "danger of being physically harmed by the partner of the poached" as greater costs of poaching than did men. The latter finding contradicts Schmitt and Buss's (2001) finding that men were perceived as incurring a greater cost than women from the feature "Fear Physical Danger".

The only sex differences found were that men perceived certain benefits as greater incentives to poach than did women and women perceived certain costs as greater deterrents against poaching than did men. These findings are in line with the results of previous research investigating the frequency of poaching which indicate that men more frequently poach than do women (Davies et al., 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2004).

As well as finding that the overwhelming majority of costs would "probably" deter men and women from poaching (and that none of the costs would "probably" not deter men or women from poaching), we found that none of the benefits would "probably" motivate either sex to poach. These results indicate that, for both sexes, the costs of poaching outweigh the benefits. They suggest that if given the choice between a potential attached versus unattached mate to whom they are equally attracted (as presented in the current survey), both men and women prefer to mate with the unattached individual. This further suggests that people will avoid poaching if there is a sufficiently attractive unattached individual attainable. It follows that for men and women to be motivated to poach, any attached individual must be perceived as being more attractive than any unattached individual or there must be no unattached individual of sufficient attractiveness attainable.

As previous research indicates that individuals employ conditional mating strategies by which they adjust their mating behavior in accordance with their ability to attract mates (e.g. Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995), we speculate that men and women may pursue the following hierarchy of conditional mating strategies: individuals first try to attract an unattached individual of their preferred attractiveness. If none of acceptable attractiveness is attainable, some men and women may try to poach a sufficiently attractive attached individual. If none is attainable, some men and women may resort to coercive mating strategies (e.g. rape). Poaching may, therefore, be a conditional mating strategy by which individuals who are unable to attain an unattached mate of acceptable attractiveness can attain a mate of acceptable attractiveness without resorting to coercion. This hierarchy of conditional mating strategies hypothesis is supported by evidence that rape is disproportionately

committed by men of low socioeconomic status and who, therefore, are less able to secure mates through non-coercive strategies (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). It is also supported by the relative degrees of opprobrium that many societies attach to the strategies in the hierarchy. Thus, due to the fact that as individuals move down the hierarchy the costs they incur in terms of lowered social standing and criminal penalties increase, they may only choose to do so when unsuccessful with the strategy immediately higher in the hierarchy.

This *hierarchy of conditional mating strategies hypothesis* lends itself to empirical testing. For example, a study might ask participants how successful they have been attracting unattached and attached individuals and investigate their sexually coercive behavior by, for instance, having them complete the Sexual Acts and Perceptions Inventory (SAPI) (Sisco & Figueiredo, 2008). The hypothesis would be supported if individuals who report less success with attracting unattached individuals, also report having engaged in more poaching attempts and if individuals who report less success both with attracting unattached individuals and with poaching score high on the SAPI.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

As with any study using self-report methodology to investigate behavior discouraged by social norms, participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias. It might be argued that this accounts for the failure of participants to give any benefit a mean rating of at least "5 = Probably Yes". However, participants were assured verbally and in written form of the confidentiality of their responses. Social desirability concerns may still have made some participants reluctant to report any benefits as "probably" motivating them to poach. Nevertheless, around 50% of men and 30% of women in this sample reported having attempted to poach someone at some time (Davies et al., 2007). As it does not seem reasonable that self-presentation concerns would have prevented participants from reporting any benefits as motivating them to poach, while failing to prevent them from reporting actually having attempted to poach, it is unlikely that such concerns greatly influenced participants' ratings.

The current study is limited in that the sample consisted of American undergraduates with an average age of less than 20 years. As with all studies using non-random samples, it cannot be assumed that the current findings reflect those that might be secured from individuals outside of the current sample category. Notwithstanding these limitations, the current research extends

the results of the single previous study into the motivations of poachers and provides a basis for further investigations.

As a form of infidelity, mate poaching results in psychological suffering through the rupturing of relationships and gives rise to sexual jealousy – a leading cause of partner-killing across cultures (Daly & Wilson, 1988). The current study considered a comprehensive list of benefits and costs exclusively associated with poaching, the majority of which had not been previously investigated. By extending investigations of sex differences into those exclusively associated with poaching and offering the novel hypothesis that poaching may lie between attracting unattached individuals and coercion in a hierarchy of conditional mating strategies, the current study increases our understanding of this phenomenon.

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