



## Short Communication

# Don't you wish your partner was hot like me?: The effectiveness of mate poaching across relationship types considering the relative mate-values of the poacher and the partner of the poached

Alastair P.C. Davies<sup>a,\*</sup>, Todd K. Shackelford<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Regent's University London, United Kingdom<sup>b</sup> Oakland University, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 8 July 2016

Received in revised form 16 October 2016

Accepted 17 October 2016

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Mate poaching

Mate-value

Wealth

Physical attractiveness

## ABSTRACT

"Mate poaching" occurs when individuals knowingly attract someone who is already in a relationship with someone else. The current study was the first to investigate whether, to successfully attract an attached individual, the greater the degree of commitment in the individual's relationship, the greater the extent to which a poacher would need to embody desired attributes more than they are embodied by the targeted individual's partner. As predicted, 125 men and 90 women, reported that if they were to be successfully poached, the amount of wealth and attractiveness more than their current partner that a poacher would require was greater the greater the degree of commitment in their relationship. Discussion argues that relationships in which partners are of differing mate-values may be susceptible to the partner with the higher mate-value being poached by individuals who are of a higher matevalue than the other partner. Also discussed, is how the current findings might inform relationship counsellors.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

"Mate poaching" occurs when individuals are aware that the person whom they are attempting to attract is already in a nominally exclusive relationship with someone else (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2007). The likelihood of a poacher successfully attracting an individual may be affected by the degree of commitment in the targeted individual's relationship. Davies and Shackelford's (2015) investigated this by asking participants to imagine they were in the increasingly committed relationships of dating, long-term relationship, cohabiting, and marriage. They were then asked to report the minimum extent to which a poacher would need to embody the attributes "wealth" and "physical attractiveness" if they were to be successfully poached. As hypothesized, participants reported that a poacher would need to embody both attributes to a greater extent if they were married compared to cohabiting or dating and cohabiting compared to dating. This led Davies et al. to argue that the greater the degree of commitment in an individual's current relationship, the greater the extent to which a poacher would need to embody desired attributes to successfully poach the individual.

A limitation of Davies and Shackelford's (2015), however, is the reliance on participants' reports of the *minimum* extent to which an

individual would need to embody wealth and physical attractiveness to successfully poach them. This is because whether poachers are successful may depend not on the absolute extent to which they embody attributes but on the extent to which they embody attributes relative to the extent to which the targeted individual's partner embodies them. This notion is supported by findings that men and women evaluate their current relationships less favourably after being exposed to opposite-sex individuals especially high in traits desired by the respective sexes (e.g., Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994).

The current study, therefore, hypothesized that, for a poacher to be successful, the greater the level of commitment in the targeted individual's relationship, the greater the extent to which a poacher needs to embody wealth and physical attractiveness more than they are embodied by the targeted individual's partner. The relationships considered and the reasoning regarding their relative levels of commitment were as in Davies and Shackelford's (2015), namely the increasingly committed relationships of dating, long-term relationship, living with but not married (cohabiting), and married. The poaches considered were for the temporal contexts of short-term sexual partner, long-term sexual affair, and monogamous relationship. It was predicted that, for all temporal contexts, to successfully poach an individual, the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than the individual's partner that a poacher requires will be greater if the individual is (1) married rather than cohabiting, (2) married rather than in a long-term relationship, (3) married rather than dating, (4) cohabiting rather

\* Corresponding author at: School of Psychotherapy and Psychology, Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, United Kingdom.  
E-mail address: [daviesal@regents.ac.uk](mailto:daviesal@regents.ac.uk) (A.P.C. Davies).

than in a long-term relationship, (5) cohabiting rather than dating, and (6) in a long-term relationship rather than dating.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 215 heterosexual undergraduates at a university in the United States (125 men,  $M$  age = 19.9 years,  $SD$  = 3.2; 90 women,  $M$  age = 19.8 years,  $SD$  = 4.2). Participants self-recruited for a larger project (e.g., Davies & Shackelford, 2015) but the current study presents new data and tests novel hypotheses.

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire asking them to imagine being in the following relationships: dating; long-term relationship; living with a partner but not married (cohabiting); and married. It asked participants how much more than their partner would an individual need to embody wealth and physical attractiveness to successfully poach them for the temporal contexts of short-term sexual partner, long-term sexual affair, and monogamous relationship. For instance, Question 1 asked, "If you were *married* to your partner, how much more income or wealth than your partner would an individual have to have to *successfully* attract you as a *short-term sexual partner*?" [emphases in original]. Ratings were recorded on a 7-point scale, with 1 = "very slightly more" and 7 = "vastly more".

## 3. Results

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than a targeted individual's partner that poachers would require to successfully poach the individual. Figs. 1 and 2, respectively, show means for wealth and physical attractiveness. Due to an oversight in the questionnaire, data were not collected for poaches of individuals in a long-term relationship for a long-term sexual affair.

Paired-samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to compare mean ratings of wealth and physical attractiveness across relationships type and temporal context. Because multiple tests were conducted,  $\alpha$  was reduced from 0.05 to 0.01. As predicted, for all temporal contexts (short-term sexual partner, long-term sexual affair, and monogamous relationship),

participants reported that, to successfully poach them, the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than their partner that a poacher would require was significantly greater if they were (1) married rather than cohabiting ( $ps < 0.001$ , except poaches for a long-term sexual affair,  $p = 0.017$ ), (2) married rather than in a long-term relationship ( $ps < 0.01$ ), (3) married rather than dating ( $ps < 0.001$ ), (5) cohabiting rather than dating ( $ps < 0.001$ ), and (6) in a long-term relationship rather than dating ( $ps < 0.001$ ). Contrary to predictions, however, for all temporal contexts, participants reported that, to successfully poach them, the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than their partner that a poacher would require was not significantly different if they were (4) cohabiting compared to being in a long-term relationship ( $ps > 0.01$ ). Table 2 shows  $p$ -values and  $t$ -statistics for all comparisons. As data were not collected for poaches of individuals in a long-term relationship for a long-term sexual affair, comparisons involving that combination of relationship type and temporal context were not conducted.

## 4. Discussion

As predicted, the current participants reported that if they were to be successfully poached for a short-term sexual partner, long-term sexual affair, and monogamous relationship, the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than their partner that a poacher would require would be greater if they were (1) married rather than cohabiting, (2) married rather than in a long-term relationship, (3) married rather than dating, (5) cohabiting rather than dating, and (6) in a long-term relationship rather than dating.

First, these results support Davies and Shackelford's (2015) finding that a poacher is less likely to be successful in attracting an attached individual the greater is the degree of commitment in the individual's relationship. Second, they indicate the novel finding that, to successfully poach an attached individual, the greater the degree of commitment in the individual's relationship, the greater the extent to which the mate value of the poacher must be greater than that of the individual's partner.

These two implications are, however, contradicted by the current findings that, contrary to predictions, participants reported that, to successfully poach them, for all temporal contexts the amount of wealth and physical attractiveness more than their partner that a poacher would require was not different if (4) the individual was cohabiting compared to being in a long-term relationship. These findings may reflect people today perceiving little difference between cohabiting and being in a long-term relationship. This may be due to the greater social acceptance of pre-marital sex today than in previous decades (Singh, 1980). Today, therefore, as people in long-term relationships may be having pre-marital sex and spending nights together, they may not view cohabiting as a substantial change in their relationships. In contrast, the current study's comparisons between marriage and cohabitation showed significant differences because the two remain ideologically distinct despite marriage no longer typically signifying the initiation of a sexual relationship (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000). As Trask and Koivunen (2007) note, "Cohabitation is a shared union between two individuals based on private feelings. Marriage is a public institution governed by overt rules and laws about the rights and responsibilities of its members" (p. 86).

Nevertheless, a restriction on the current findings is suggested by Conroy-Beam, Goetz, and Buss (2016). They investigated how individuals' relationship satisfaction is affected by the following: their own mate-value relative to that of their partners; and their partner's mate-value relative to that of obtainable alternative partners. Conroy-Beam et al. found that individuals whose partners were of a mate-value lower than their own became increasingly dissatisfied with their relationships the greater the extent to which the mate value of obtainable alternative partners was higher than that of their partners. However, they also found that individuals whose partners were of a mate-value

**Table 1**  
Means and standard deviations for wealth and physical attractiveness across relationship type and temporal.

Context Wealth			
Temporal context			
Relationship type	Short-term sexual partner $M$ ( $SD$ )	Long-term sexual affair $M$ ( $SD$ )	Monogamous relationship $M$ ( $SD$ )
Married	5.6 (2.1)	6.0 (1.7)	6.4 (1.3)
Cohabiting	5.1 (2.1)	5.7 (1.8)	5.8 (1.6)
Long-term relationship	5.2 (2.1)	N/A (N/A)	5.9 (1.4)
Dating	4.5 (2.2)	5.1 (1.9)	5.0 (2.0)
Physical attractiveness			
Temporal context			
Relationship type	Short-term sexual partner $M$ ( $SD$ )	Long-term sexual affair $M$ ( $SD$ )	Monogamous relationship $M$ ( $SD$ )
Married	6.5 (1.0)	6.6 (0.9)	6.8 (0.7)
Cohabiting	5.8 (1.4)	6.0 (1.3)	6.1 (1.1)
Long-term relationship	5.9 (1.4)	N/A (N/A)	6.3 (1.1)
Dating	4.9 (1.9)	5.2 (1.7)	5.2 (1.7)

Note. N/A: not available.

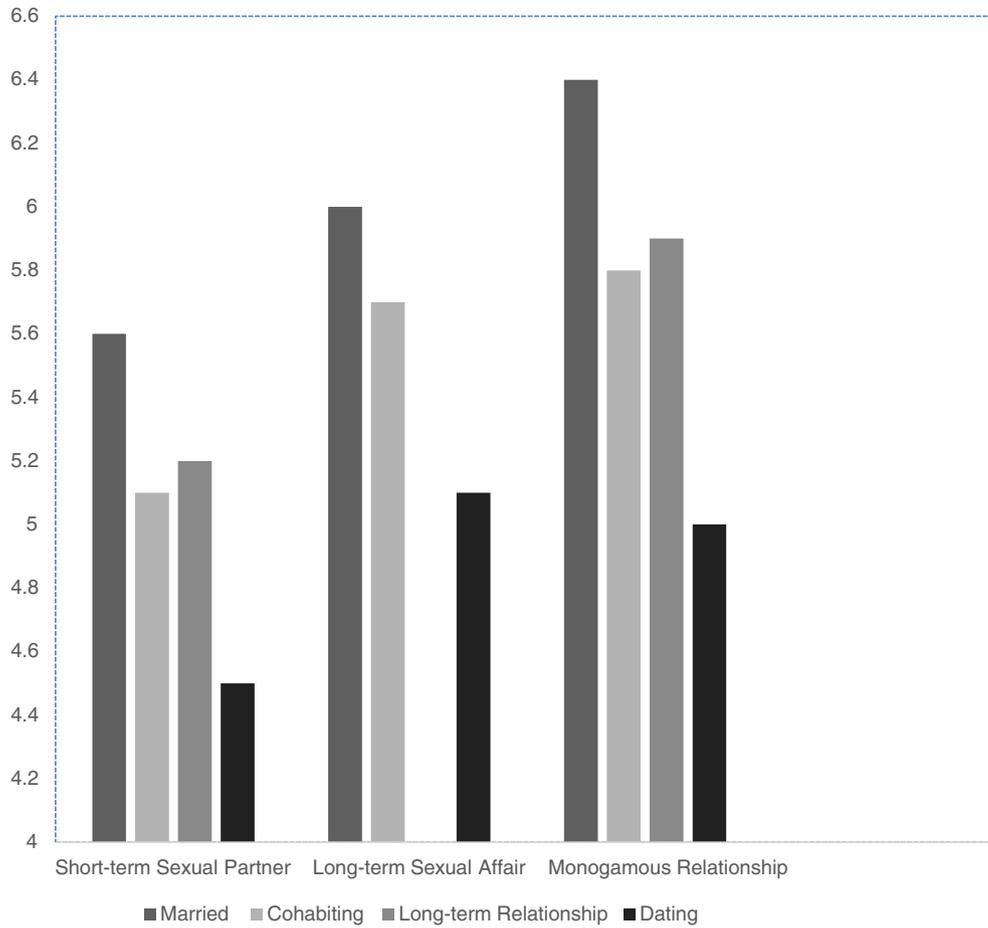


Fig. 1. Means for wealth across relationship type and temporal context.

higher than their own were satisfied with their relationships regardless of the relative mate-values of their partners and obtainable alternative partners. These findings suggest that the current finding that poachers are more likely to be successful the greater is their mate-value relative to that of the targeted individuals' partners may be true only when

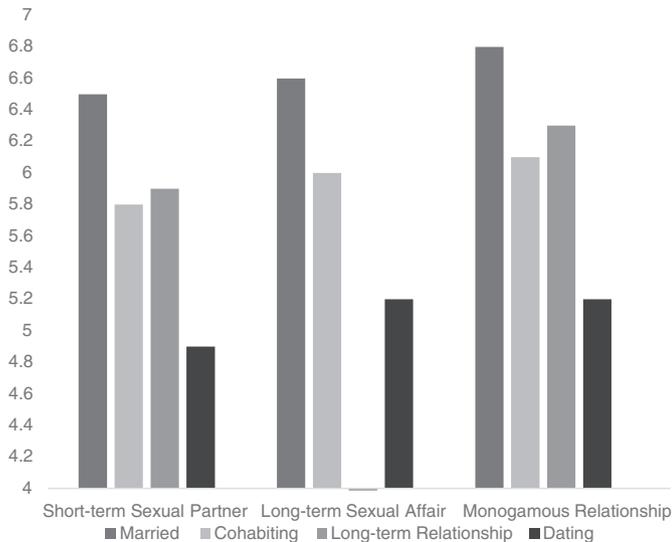


Fig. 2. Means for physical attractiveness across relationship type and temporal context.

Table 2

p-Values and t-statistics for comparisons of differences between poachers and current partners along wealth and physical attractiveness across relationship type and temporal context.

Wealth						
Temporal context						
	Short-term sexual partner		Long-term sexual affair		Monogamous relationship	
Relationship type	p-Value	t-Statistic	p-Value	t-Statistic	p-Value	t-Statistic
M vs. CH	$p < 0.001$	4.27	$p > 0.01$	2.16	$p < 0.001$	4.36
M vs. LT	$p < 0.01$	2.82	N/A	N/A	$p < 0.001$	3.84
M vs. D	$p < 0.001$	6.30	$p < 0.001$	4.83	$p < 0.001$	6.69
CH vs. LT	$p > 0.01$	-0.85	N/A	N/A	$p > 0.01$	-1.39
CH vs. D	$p < 0.001$	4.30	$p < 0.001$	4.16	$p < 0.001$	4.88
LT vs. D	$p < 0.001$	5.59	N/A	N/A	$p < 0.001$	5.94
Physical attractiveness						
Temporal context						
	Short-term sexual partner		Long-term sexual affair		Monogamous relationship	
Relationship type	p-Value	t-Statistic	p-Value	t-Statistic	p-Value	t-Statistic
M vs. CH	$p < 0.001$	5.34	$p < 0.001$	4.77	$p < 0.001$	6.65
M vs. LT	$p < 0.001$	5.38	N/A	N/A	$p < 0.001$	6.14
M vs. D	$p < 0.001$	8.90	$p < 0.001$	7.36	$p < 0.001$	8.48
CH vs. LT	$p > 0.01$	-1.00	N/A	N/A	$p > 0.01$	-1.93
CH vs. D	$p < 0.001$	5.91	$p < 0.001$	5.14	$p < 0.001$	5.40
LT vs. D	$p < 0.001$	6.63	N/A	N/A	$p < 0.001$	6.24

Note. M: married. CH: cohabiting. LT: long-term relationship. D: dating. N/A: not available.

the targeted individuals' mate-value is higher than that of their partners.

Taken together, the current findings and those of Conroy-Beam et al. (2016) indicate that relationships in which partners are of differing mate-values may be susceptible to the partner with the higher mate-value being poached by individuals of a higher mate-value than the other partner. First, individuals with the higher mate-value are less likely to be satisfied with their relationships and, therefore, more likely to succumb to the advances of poachers whose mate-value is higher than that of their partners. Second, individuals with the higher mate-value may be especially likely to be targeted by poachers whose mate-value is higher than that of their partners. In contrast, relationships in which partners are of a similar mate-value may be unlikely to be successfully infiltrated by poachers. First, both partners are more likely to be satisfied with their current relationships and, therefore, less likely to be tempted even by poachers of a higher mate-value than their own. Second, partners of a similar mate-value may be less likely to be targeted by poachers of a higher mate-value than their own because such higher-quality poachers may be more likely to target relationships containing at least one higher-quality individual.

A limitation of the current study is that it considered only the attributes wealth and physical attractiveness. Future studies should consider additional attributes desired by mates, including intelligence, kindness, and sense of humour (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). The current study is also limited in that not all participants who reported that they would succumb to poachers of higher mate-values than their partners may be willing to do so in real life. Research indicates that individuals who have been poached possess particular traits, namely low agreeableness and conscientiousness, high neuroticism and erotophilia (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), and a relatively great desire for sex outside of committed relationships (Foster et al., 2014).

The current study adds to a growing literature concerning the infiltration of relationships by poachers and suggests an approach that might be adopted by relationship counsellors. First, as relationships in which partners are of differing mate-values may be especially susceptible to being infiltrated by poachers (Conroy-Beam et al., 2016), a particular couple's susceptibility might be assessed by comparing the mate values of the partners through the *Mate Value Scale* (Edlund & Sagarin, 2014). Then, if partners in a couple are of differing mate values, as partners with the higher mate value are more likely to be poached (Schmitt et al., 2004), the current questionnaire, but comprising a broader range of attributes, might be given to those individuals to determine the

degree to which, to successfully poach them, a poacher would need to embody each attribute more than they are embodied by the individuals' partners. Then, attributes for which the difference between the degree of embodiment by the poachers and the individuals' partners are smallest might be identified as those for which partners with the higher mate value in a couple are most likely to abandon their relationships for poachers. Finally, to determine the likelihood of partners with the higher mate value actually succumbing to a poacher, the personalities of those partners might be assessed to determine whether they exhibit the aforementioned traits typically possessed by individuals who succumb to poachers.

## References

- Conroy-Beam, D., Goetz, C. D., & Buss, D. M. (2016). What predicts romantic relationship satisfaction and mate retention intensity: Mate preference fulfillment or mate value discrepancies? *Evolution and Human Behavior*.
- Crowder, K. D., & Tolnay, S. E. (2000). A new marriage squeeze for black women: The role of racial intermarriage by Black men. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 792–807.
- Davies, A. P. C., Shackelford, T. K., & Hass, G. R. (2007). When a "poach" is not a poach: Redefining human mate poaching and re-estimating its frequency. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 36, 702–716.
- Davies, A. P. C., & Shackelford, T. K. (2015). Comparisons of the effectiveness of mate attraction tactics across mate poaching and general attraction and across types of romantic relationships. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 85, 140–144.
- Edlund, J. E., & Sagarin, B. J. (2014). The Mate Value Scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 64(1), 72–77.
- Foster, J. D., Jonason, P. K., Shira, I., Campbell, W. K., Shiverdecker, L. K., & Varner, S. C. (2014). What do you get when you make somebody else's partner your own? An analysis of relationships formed via mate poaching. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 52, 78–90.
- Kenrick, D. T., Neuberg, S. L., Zierk, K. L., & Krones, J. M. (1994). Evolution and social cognition: Contrast effects as a function of sex, dominance, and physical attractiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(2), 210–217.
- Li, N. P., Bailey, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Linsenmeier, J. A. W. (2002). The necessities and luxuries of mate preferences: Testing the tradeoffs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), 947–955.
- Schmitt, D. P., Alcalay, L., Allik, J., Angleitner, A., Ault, L., Austers, I., et al. (2004). Patterns and universals of mate poaching across 53 nations: The effects of sex, culture, and personality on romantically attracting another person's partner. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86, 560–584.
- Schmitt, D. P., & Buss, D. M. (2001). Human mate poaching: Tactics and temptations for infiltrating existing relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 894–917.
- Singh, B. K. (1980). Trends in attitudes toward premarital sexual relations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42, 387–393.
- Trask, B. S., & Koivunen, J. M. (2007). Trends in marriage and cohabitation. In B. S. Trask, & R. R. Hamon (Eds.), *Cultural diversity and families: Expanding perspectives* (pp. 80–99). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.