



## Short Communication

## Not clearly defined, not reliably measured, and not replicable: Revisiting the definition and measurement of human mate poaching

Alastair P.C. Davies<sup>a,\*</sup>, Adam E. Tratner<sup>b</sup>, Todd K. Shackelford<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Psychotherapy and Psychology, Regent's University, London, UK<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, United States of America

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Mate poaching  
Measurement  
Frequency  
Definition  
Reliability  
Attraction  
Mating  
Evolutionary Psychology

## ABSTRACT

Schmitt and Buss' (2001) seminal definition of poaching labelled it as “behavior intended to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship.” Davies, Shackelford, and Hass' (2007) definition stated that to be considered a poach, the targeted individual's relationship must be exclusive and the pursuer must be aware of this at the time. Davies et al. found percentages reporting experience with poaching among their participants were lower than percentages found by Schmitt and Buss among their participants. To investigate whether these differences in percentages were due to differences between the two samples, the current study was the first to compare percentages reporting experience with poaching secured through the different definitions in a single sample. Findings indicated no differences in percentages secured through the different definitions. Discussion argues, however, that as Schmitt and Buss' definition may be perceived as denoting the form of attraction denoted by Davies et al.'s definition as well as two other forms of attraction, findings may be reliable only if researchers secure individual findings for each form of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' definition. In addition, researchers should reach a consensus regarding which of the forms of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' definition constitutes poaching.

Schmitt and Buss (2001) conducted the seminal studies of mate poaching. They defined poaching as “behavior intended to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship” (p. 894). This definition informed Schmitt and Buss' construction of questions presented to participants in their investigation of the frequency of poaching, such as, “Have you ever tried to attract someone who was already in a relationship with someone else for a short-term sexual relationship with you?”

Davies, Shackelford, and Hass (2007) argued that Schmitt and Buss (2001) may have secured reports that overestimated the frequency of poaching because Schmitt and Buss' definition of poaching did not state explicitly two criteria that distinguish poaching from other forms of attraction. First, the relationship being infiltrated must be exclusive, such that having sex outside of the relationship is a violation of the relationship. Second, the pursuer must be aware at the time of the attraction that the targeted individual's relationship is exclusive. Without both these criteria being stated explicitly, argued Davies et al., the pursuer will have the psychology of someone attempting to attract an unattached individual.

Davies et al. (2007), therefore, devised the following definition of poaching: “Mate poaching occurs when an individual has, or attempts

to have, sexual relations with a person that the former individual knows is already in an exclusive relationship with someone else” (p. 703). This stricter definition informed Davies et al.'s construction of questions presented to their participants, such as “Knowing, from the start, that a person was already in an exclusive relationship, have you ever attempted to attract this person as a short-term sexual partner?”

As Davies et al. (2007) predicted, percentages of participants reporting experience with poaching were generally lower than those in Schmitt and Buss (2001). Davies et al. argued, therefore, that Schmitt and Buss' participants not only reported experience with poaches in which the poached's relationship was exclusive and the poacher was aware of this at the time of the attraction, but also reported as poaches instances of attraction in which either or both of these criteria were not met. This supported Davies et al.'s claim that participants perceived their own and Schmitt and Buss' definitions as denoting different forms of attraction.

As a result of Davies et al. (2007), the literature on poaching is now comprised of findings secured by studies based on both definitions. A number of studies are based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition (e.g., Schachner & Shaver, 2002) and a number are based on Davies et al.'s definition (e.g., Mogilski & Wade, 2013).

\* Corresponding author at: School of Psychotherapy and Psychology, Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, UK.

E-mail address: [daviesal@regents.ac.uk](mailto:daviesal@regents.ac.uk) (A.P.C. Davies).

Apart from Davies et al. (2007), none of these studies considered the possibility that the particular definition of poaching on which the questions presented to its participants were based determined the responses of its participants. If, however, Schmitt and Buss' (2001) and Davies et al.'s definitions are perceived as denoting different forms of attraction, findings in the literature on poaching would not be reliable because findings secured by studies based on Schmitt and Buss' definition would not be for the same form of attraction as the form for which findings secured by studies based on Davies et al.'s definition would be.

Davies et al. (2007) noted, however, that a limitation of their study was that they compared percentages among their participants with percentages among Schmitt and Buss' (2001) participants. They acknowledged, therefore, that the lower percentages reported by their participants may have been due, not to the samples of the two studies perceiving the two definitions differently, but to sampling differences across the studies. For instance, Schmitt and Buss found that individuals low on sexual exclusivity and with a high erotophilic disposition were especially likely to have attempted to poach someone. As, however, Davies et al. did not assess the personalities of their participants, they were not able to determine whether the percentages they secured differed from those secured by Schmitt and Buss because of individual differences in participants across the studies.

The current study addresses this limitation of Davies et al. (2007) by being the first study to compare percentages secured through Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition with percentages secured through Davies et al.'s definition among a single sample. It does so by randomly assigning participants to questions based on Schmitt and Buss' definition or to questions based on Davies et al.'s definition. Any individual differences among participants are, therefore, unlikely to be systematic across the definitions.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

Participants were 225 men ranging from 19 to 68 years old ( $M = 35.7$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) and 166 women ranging from 23 to 75 years old ( $M = 40.6$  years,  $SD = 11.0$ ). They were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk), a crowdsourcing website through which the current participants received a monetary remuneration of US\$1.50. Participants self-reported as being heterosexual.

### 1.2. Materials and Procedure

Participants were presented with an online survey asking them to report the frequency of their experience with poaches for the following contexts: poaches they had made on others; poaches others had made on them; and poaches others had made on their partners. Poaches were indicated as being attempted or successful and for an exclusive relationship or a casual relationship. The survey instructed participants that an *exclusive relationship* was a "long-term relationship in which both partners agree that their relationship is sexually monogamous such that having sex with people other than each other is cheating" and that a *casual relationship* was a "short-term or long-term relationship in which both partners agree that having sex with people other than each other is not cheating."

Participants were randomly assigned to questions based on Davies et al.'s (2007) or Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition. Questions based on Davies et al.'s definition stated explicitly that the poached relationship was exclusive and that the poacher was aware of this at the time of the poach, i.e., "While **knowing at the time** that a person was **already** in an **exclusive** relationship..." (emphases in original). Questions based on Schmitt and Buss' definition did not state these two criteria explicitly, i.e., "While someone was **already** in a relationship..." (emphases in original). Participants reported the frequency of

**Table 1**

Comparisons of percentages of participants reporting some experience with poaching in response to questions based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) versus Davies et al.'s (2007) definition.

Poaching context	Definition		<i>p</i>
	Schmitt and Buss ( <i>n</i> )	Davies et al. ( <i>n</i> )	
You attempted to poach someone:			
Casual relationship	50.3 (197)	56.7 (194)	.21
Exclusive relationship	29.4 (197)	33.5 (194)	.38
You successfully poached someone:			
Casual relationship	80.8 (99)	74.3 (109)	.26
Exclusive relationship	58.6 (58)	63.5 (63)	.58
Someone attempted to poach you:			
Casual relationship	72.6 (197)	78.0 (191)	.22
Exclusive relationship	44.7 (197)	46.6 (191)	.71
Someone successfully poached you:			
Casual relationship	53.1 (143)	46.3 (149)	.25
Exclusive relationship	34.1 (88)	33.7 (89)	.96
Someone attempted to poach your partner:			
Casual relationship	67.5 (197)	71.7 (191)	.37
Exclusive relationship	44.7 (197)	51.3 (191)	.19
Someone successfully poached your partner:			
Casual relationship	54.9 (133)	49.6 (137)	.38
Casual relationship	55.7 (88)	43.9 (98)	.11

their experience along the following scale: 1 = *Never*; 2 = *Rarely*; 3 = *Sometimes*; 4 = *Frequently*; 5 = *Very Frequently*.

## 2. Results

Chi-square tests were conducted to compare percentages of participants reporting some experience with poaching in response to questions based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) versus Davies et al.'s (2007) definition. "Some" experience was indicated by ratings other than "1 = *Never*." As indicated in Table 1, no significant differences in percentages were identified for any context of poaching (all  $ps > .05$ ).

In addition, two-tailed independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to assess whether mean ratings of experience with poaching differed across participants responding to questions based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) versus Davies et al.'s (2007) definition. As indicated in Table 2, no significant differences in mean ratings were identified for any context of poaching (all  $ps > .05$ ).

## 3. Discussion

The current study was the first to compare percentages reporting experiences with poaching secured through questions based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) versus Davies et al.'s (2007) definitions among a single sample. Contrary to Davies et al., the current study found no differences in percentages reporting some experience with poaching secured through questions based on the different definitions. In addition, mean ratings of the frequency of experience with poaching did not differ significantly across participants responding to questions based on the different definitions.

The current findings may be interpreted as indicating that the current participants perceived Schmitt and Buss' (2001) and Davies et al.'s (2007) definitions as denoting the same form of attraction and that percentages secured by Davies et al. (2007) among their participants were lower than those found by Schmitt and Buss (2001) among their participants due to sampling differences across the two studies, not to the two samples perceiving the definitions as denoting different forms of attraction. There must, however, remain uncertainty regarding this. This is because, as Schmitt and Buss' definition does not state explicitly that the targeted individual's relationship must be exclusive and the

**Table 2**

Comparisons of mean ratings of experience with poaching in response to questions based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) versus Davies et al.'s (2007) definition.

Poaching context	Definition		p
	Schmitt and Buss	Davies et al.	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
You attempted to poach someone:			
Casual relationship	1.69 (0.81)	1.86 (0.93)	.06
Exclusive relationship	1.41 (0.74)	1.46 (0.74)	.53
You successfully poached someone:			
Casual relationship	2.48 (1.06)	2.33 (1.02)	.29
Exclusive relationship	1.83 (0.96)	2.03 (1.06)	.27
Someone attempted to poach you:			
Casual relationship	2.35 (1.08)	2.38 (0.97)	.80
Exclusive relationship	1.73 (1.00)	1.72 (0.91)	.89
Someone successfully poached you:			
Casual relationship	1.82 (0.92)	1.68 (0.87)	.20
Exclusive relationship	1.48 (0.77)	1.47 (0.74)	.96
Someone attempted to poach your partner:			
Casual relationship	2.28 (1.12)	2.34 (1.07)	.65
Exclusive relationship	1.76 (1.01)	1.80 (0.90)	.68
Someone successfully poached your partner:			
Casual relationship	1.87 (0.96)	1.73 (0.85)	.20
Exclusive relationship	1.84 (0.90)	1.61 (0.78)	.07

pursuer must be aware of this at the time, it may be perceived as denoting three forms of attraction. One form consists of attractions in which the targeted individual's relationship is exclusive and the pursuer is aware of this at the time. This is the sole form denoted by Davies et al.'s definition. The second form consists of attractions in which the targeted individual's relationship is exclusive but the pursuer is not aware of this at the time. The third form consists of attractions in which the targeted individual's relationship is not exclusive.

Studies based on Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition do not, however, secure individual percentages of participants reporting experience with the form of attraction denoted by Davies et al.'s (2007) definition and the two other forms denoted by Schmitt and Buss' definition. Rather, percentages secured by studies based on Schmitt and Buss' definition represent the *average* of percentages for the three forms of attraction denoted by it. This means that percentages secured by studies based on Schmitt and Buss' definition may differ from percentages secured by studies based on Davies et al.'s definition. So, as the literature on poaching is comprised of findings secured by studies based on both

definitions, it may not be reliable.

The forgoing suggests that findings in the literature may be reliable only if studies secure individual findings for the form of attraction denoted by Davies et al.'s (2007) definition and each of the two other forms of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition. As, to date, no study has secured individual findings for the latter two forms of attraction, there would be value in future studies presenting a single sample with Schmitt and Buss' definition, Davies et al.'s definition, and definitions for each of the two other forms of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' definition and comparing percentages secured in response to each. There would also be value in such studies investigating individual differences across participants reporting experience with each of these forms of attraction.

In addition, there is concern regarding whether the two forms of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' (2001) definition other than the form denoted by Davies et al.'s (2007) definition are forms of attraction that constitute poaching. This is because, as only for the form of attraction denoted by Davies et al.'s definition is the targeted individual's relationship exclusive and the pursuer aware of this at the time of the attraction, there is a question as to whether the pursuer should be considered as having the psychology of a poacher in the two other forms of attraction denoted by Schmitt and Buss' definition.

In conclusion, inconsistency in the literature regarding what constitutes poaching means that there is concern regarding the reliability of findings relating to it. This is especially pertinent given concerns in recent years regarding the rate of replicability of findings in the psychological literature in what some researchers have labelled a "replication crisis" (e.g., Open Science Collaboration, 2015). It is important, therefore, that researchers reach agreement on how poaching is defined and are clear regarding the form of attraction that they are investigating.

## References

- 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.
- Mogilski, J. K., & Wade, T. J. (2013). Friendship as a relationship infiltration tactic during human mate poaching. *Evolutionary Psychology, 11*, 926–943.
- Open Science Collaboration. (2015). Estimating the reproducibility of psychological science. *Science, 349*, aac4716.
- Schachner, D. A., & Shaver, P. R. (2002). Attachment style and human mate poaching. *New Review of Social Psychology, 1*, 122–129.
- 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.