

1-3-2014

## A Review of Literature on Mate Poaching

Amanda Kohler  
*UWO*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wupj>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kohler, Amanda (2013) "A Review of Literature on Mate Poaching," *Western Undergraduate Psychology Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wupj/vol1/iss1/12>

## A Review of Literature on Mate Poaching

Amanda Kohler\*

Mate poaching is the phenomenon in which an individual expresses an interest in another individual already in an exclusive sexual relationship for the purpose of having a short or long-term sexual relationship with them. This article reviews research on the evolutionary significance of mate poaching, mate retention, and mate guarding, which leads to a discussion on the motivations, costs, and benefits present when engaging in mate poaching behavior. Tactics for those who partake in mate poaching, when it is most successful, and the characteristics of those involved in mate poaching are also reviewed. Recent studies seem to suggest that there are personality differences in the individuals who are successful at mate poaching and the individual that is targeted by the poacher. Not surprisingly, type of relationship is a significant factor that influences how successful mate poaching will be. Furthermore, discussion suggests that emotional and psychological pain can result from mate poaching behavior, therefore coping techniques for those seeking therapy should be developed. Similarly, the danger of contracting and spreading sexually transmitted infections (STI) is an important consideration that is addressed.

Betsy and John have been dating for 3 months. They go to the same large university but have different classes. Both individuals are good looking and sociable. On the first day of a new class, Billy sits beside Betsy and they begin talking about their program. Every Monday and Wednesday Billy and Betsy sit beside each other while they take notes from the professor. After a midterm exam, Billy invites Betsy to grab a drink with him at the campus pub. They talk about school, family, and Betsy's relationship. Betsy discloses to Billy that recently things have not been good with John (her boyfriend). Betsy thinks John isn't paying enough attention to her. Billy assures Betsy that he would always have her on his mind if they were dating. Betsy thinks about this and determines Billy is a nice guy whom with every drink he buys her is becoming more appealing. When the night is over and Billy and Betsy find their ways home, Betsy still has Billy and his kind, caring words in her mind. The next day Betsy hangs out with John and they get into an argument. Betsy eventually tells Billy about this argument. Again, Billy informs Betsy he would never make her angry if they dated. Billy is attempting to mate poach Betsy from John.

### Defining Mate Poaching

Mate poaching is behavior used to lure someone into a short or long term sexual relationship who is already in a romantic relationship (Buss, 2006). There are two individuals needed for this behavior to occur. There is the poacher, who seeks out a mate already involved in a romantic relationship for a sexual encounter, and there is the poached, who is in a romantic relationship and is sought out by another person for a sexual encounter. Experimental research on this topic is relatively new but the phenomenon of mate poaching has been prevalent. In terms of having attempted to poach someone, in a mature sample of adults, 60% of men and 53% of women reported having attempted to poach someone for a long-term relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Similarly, 60% of men and 38% of women attempted to poach other individuals for a short-term relationship. In terms of poaching for a long-term relationship, 93% of men and 82% of women reported having received poaching attempts. Although mate poaching seems to be a common occurrence, no known culture promotes mate poaching or infidelity (Schmitt, 2004), suggesting it to be a universal taboo. It is

---

\*Initially submitted for Psychology 4791F at the University of Western Ontario. For inquiries regarding the article, please email the author at [akohler@alumni.uwo.ca](mailto:akohler@alumni.uwo.ca).

## MATE POACHING

of interest to determine how this deceitful behavior came about and what makes it flourish as a life choice for so many individuals today.

### **An Evolutionary Perspective**

During the evolution of mammals there were probably those who had mates and those who did not (Davies, Shackelford, & Goetz, 2006). Mammals who were motivated to reproduce with only unmated mammals were at a disadvantage because many male and females were probably already successfully reproducing together. In order to reproduce, the only other option would have been mating with an already mated individual. Thus, the response to mate with attached others would have been selected for and passed on to kin in order to more efficiently reproduce (Davies et al., 2006). Those who solely chose to mate with unmated individuals may not have had the chance to ever reproduce and therefore the genes of these mammals would slowly wither away, as they did not promote successful reproduction. This may have been how mate poaching as a mating strategy came about. There is an abundance of evidence showing nonhuman animals use deceptive tactics to gain access to desirable mates (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). For example, de Waal (1986) found that subordinate male chimpanzees hide their erection from other males while letting females in close proximity see it in order to entice them to mate. Among some fish species, males will sometimes pretend to be female to gain entry to another male's home in attempt to fertilize the female (Gross, 1982). These studies show how mate poaching tactics are not just among humans, but may also be a common occurrence among nonhuman species.

### **Motivation for Mate Poaching**

It has been shown that humans place a great deal of emphasis on the attractiveness of a potential suitor when searching for a short term sexual interaction, and to a lesser extent when looking for a long term sexual relationship (Buss, 2006). It comes as no surprise then that good-looking individuals seem to attract many suitors. It may also be apparent that single

individuals are generally less attractive than attached individuals. Therefore, in the case of single individuals, there might be a larger amount of unattractive single individuals than attractive ones. Sometimes in order to obtain a desirable and attractive mate, one has to seek out those who are already taken. Attractive people may symbolize good genetics, high reproductive potential, and access to resources. It might be adaptive to obtain an already attached mate in order to have a better chance of reproducing. This would be the quantity over quality argument and it applies mainly to men because the more women they inseminate, the better chance they have of reproducing. It might also be argued that an already attached attractive female is of superior quality, as she is desired by others and has experience in relationships. Men poaching attractive women might be a 'win-win' situation for the men, such that men are able to mate with many desirable females of good quality already tested by other men and can attempt to mate with as many as possible to pass on his genes without restriction.

Women do not share the same reproductive benefit in the sense that passing on their genes does come with restrictions. For example, a woman must carry a child for nine months before birth, and then pass through a lactation period before becoming pregnant again. It is also the case that after a certain age, women are unable to have children due to menopause and therefore have limited time to reproduce. Women may be more likely to seek quality over quantity in a reproduction situation. In order to mate with the healthiest, most desirable and attractive man to produce the best possible child, it may be in the best interest of the women to obtain this man from an already existent relationship. The logic being, firstly, an already attached man is assumed to be able to provide his mate with resources. Secondly, the attached man is most likely more attractive than men not in relationships, and thirdly, carries good genes desirable by another woman (as seen in the fact that the attached man is in a relationship).

Mate poaching involves deception, secrecy, and thrill. A poacher must form a

## MATE POACHING

connection with the ideal mate in the form of befriending the individual, or finding them alone somewhere. The potential mate must keep this and further interactions secret from his or her partner. The poacher and the potential mate might feel some sort of thrill while participating in these situations. It may be thrilling to have a relationship behind someone's back, or it may be curiosity on where the relationship might go that could also be thrilling. In a way, mate poaching is a forbidden pleasure (Josephs, 2010). There is pleasure in finding another mate who takes an interest in you, and who makes an individual feel lust and desire that maybe the individual has not felt in a while within their long-term relationship.

### **Risk as a Cost of Mate Poaching**

Mate poaching is taking a risk in that the poacher is trying to attract a mate that is already taken and could reject the poacher. The poached is taking a risk by starting a relationship during or directly after another relationship that could cause a lot of pain in their significant other. Paternity of any resulting children is threatened for the men involved, such that they cannot be sure a given child belongs to them. However, women are always certain a child they give birth to is theirs (Buss, 2006). Women run the risk of forfeiting reliable access to resources. If they are the poacher and are rejected, no resources will be provided. Alternatively, if they are the poached but the poacher has lied about providing for her (in order to entice her into a sexual relationship and to pass on genes), then the woman loses out on assured resources from her current partner as well as the supposed resources from the poacher (Buss, 2006). Several hypothesized responses to mate poaching will be discussed below. Namely, jealousy, mate retention and mate guarding.

### **The Development of Jealousy**

Jealousy might be a universal defense against the dangers stemming from mate poaching such that it acts as an automatic response to clues about possible infidelity (Josephs, 2010). If mate poaching has been a mating strategy in evolutionary history then it

poses a problem for the victims, or the mate of the poached (Buss, 2006). A strategy to defend against this behavior may have also evolved. This strategy might have been the development of jealousy that would be activated whenever a relationship threat was present. For example, Buss et al., (1999) asked participants to imagine that their partner was sexually and emotionally involved with another person (relationship threat) and then to report which part of the betrayal was the most upsetting. It was found that men reported the sexual aspect to be more upsetting whereas women reported the emotional aspect to be more upsetting. This shows that men and women differ in the specific threats that evoke jealousy. If jealousy is an evolved emotion, then there must also be a behavioral aspect individuals engage in after feeling this jealousy, used in order to keep a mate from straying (Buss, 2006).

### **Mate Retention**

Mate retention tactics are behaviors used to ward off rival mates or to keep a mate from leaving the relationship. The behaviors could be something like calling a partner unexpectedly to ask what they are doing (vigilance) or punching someone who is flirting with their significant other (violence). Buss (2000) has found that men and women differ in the mate retention tactics used; men flaunt their resources to their mate and threaten to use violence against any rivals, whereas women enhance their physical appearance to seem more desirable and flirt with other men to elicit jealousy in their mate.

### **Mate Guarding**

Mate guarding is a type of behavior designed to preserve an existing relationship by holding on to the mate, preventing rivals from entering the relationship, and maintaining access to the mate. Mate guarding tactics are seen in several nonhuman animals and insects. For example, when male and female butterflies encounter each other, the male flies the female away in order to remove her from other male butterflies (Buss, 2002). Other ways to conceal a mate and avoid mate poaching are to mask the attractiveness of the mate, or to pretend to not

## MATE POACHING

actually be in a relationship with the mate. Another mate guarding strategy might be to remain physically present with a mate in order to ward off potential threats. In the specific case of humans, mate guarding strategies have been spending all free time with a mate in order to ensure they do not meet anyone else, verbalizing threats of ending the relationship if one were to cheat, using possessive ornamentation such as asking a mate to wear an article of clothing of theirs (or wedding ring), or pointing out another potential mate's flaws (derogation). The mate guarding behaviors seen in nonhuman animals are also seen in humans, suggesting these behaviors have adapted over time through all species. There are many mate guarding and mate retention behaviors used to preserve a relationship but there are also many behaviors mate poachers use in order to break up a relationship.

### **How to Engage in Mate Poaching**

In many instances, mated individuals are often kept protected from other potential mates which makes it hard for mate poachers to gain an audience with the targeted mate while remaining unnoticed and avoiding costs inflicted by the regular partner (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). In order to poach a potential mate, the mate poacher must be able to demonstrate an ability to give more than what the targeted mate already receives from his or her regular partner, and be able to protect the targeted mate from any abuse from the regular partner stemming from ending the relationship. Mate poachers can do this successfully by using tactics to display an ability to fulfill the desires of the targeted mate more than the regular mate (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). An example might be taking a targeted mate on a trip that the regular mate could never afford or make time for. Mate poachers can also derogate a regular mate's qualities and behaviors in order to make him or her appear less desirable to the targeted mate. An example of this might be commenting on how unattractive the regular mate is or suggesting he or she has been cheating on the targeted mate. An often-used tactic to gain an audience with the targeted mate in order to then

use the tactics discussed above is befriending the couple or the targeted mate, as in the opening scenario. This strategy avoids costs to the mate poacher of violence from the regular mate or rejection from others for poaching another's mate. After befriending the couple or targeted mate, the mate poacher is then involved in the couple's lives and can wait for an opportunity to poach (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

Schmitt and Buss (2001) asked participants in a preliminary experiment to simply write down any specific acts or tactics individuals use to attract a mate who is already involved in another relationship. Examples of what participants wrote were: being generous and showing they care for the targeted mate, developing social ties with the targeted mate's peer groups, getting the potential mate drunk to take advantage of them, waiting around for the couple to break up, arranging easy sexual access such as showing up in a potential mate's room or car naked, and developing an emotional connection by confiding in the potential mate to get closer to them. A specific type of individual is needed to have the will to wait around for a couple to break up, or to show up naked in a potential mate's room. It might also be the case that an individual who transfers in and out of relationships due to being poached might also have personality characteristics different from individuals who have never been poached.

### **Characteristics of the Mate Poacher and the Poached**

#### **Characteristics of the Mate Poacher**

The characteristics of a mate poacher and the poached have been studied by Schmitt and Buss (2001). Participants were asked to complete scales indicating their frequency of past poaching and being poached. These results were compared with participants' self-reported personal characteristics. Schmitt and Buss (2001) found personality differences between individuals who make mate poaching attempts (as opposed to those who do not) and those who are successful at mate poaching (versus those who are unsuccessful). The authors also found differences in the characteristics of the

## MATE POACHING

individual who receives mate poaching attempts (as opposed to those who do not) and those who are successfully poached away from their regular relationship (versus those who cannot be poached away from a relationship). Individuals who were less likely to be mate poachers rated themselves as high in agreeableness and conscientious, suggesting that more kind and reliable people are not likely to be mate poachers. Individuals who attempt to mate poach rated themselves as low on relationship exclusivity and as having an erotophilic disposition, meaning they do not have great loyalty to their partners and are emotionally positively disposed to sexuality. Individuals who have the most success at mate poaching are rated high on sexual attractiveness and also low in sexual exclusivity.

### **Characteristics of the Poached**

Individuals who receive mate poaching attempts have labeled themselves as extraverts, high on openness to experience, sexually attractive and emotionally investing. These individuals appear to others as outgoing, adventurous, and attractive. This further show how attractive individuals are usually already in relationships and single individuals seek out these attractive individuals for relationships of their own. Compared to those who rejected poaching attempts, individuals who went along with attempts were rated as more disagreeable, neurotic, unconscientious, mean, and unloving. They were also rated as having a more masculine gender orientation - lower on relationship exclusivity and emotional investment, and as having an erotophilic disposition. Therefore, the people who enter into relationships due to being poached away from an old one do not seem to be dependent with their partner, do not care for them deeply, are open about sex, and also unreliable. Although attractive individuals receive more mate poaching attempts than unattractive individuals, it might be that unattractive individuals are more likely to go along with mate poaching potentially because they do not have as many offers as attractive individuals. Aside from these personality profiles, there must be other external

costs and benefits associated with engaging in mate poaching, and allowing oneself to be poached away from an existing relationship.

### **Costs and Benefits of Mate Poaching**

Studies have traditionally focused on reasons why individuals engage in infidelity while already in an existing relationship (Treas & Giesen, 2000). These individuals are labeled here as the poached, and there are reasons they allow themselves to be poached. These include a need for sexual variety, excitement, a partner's permission to have affairs, seeking revenge on a partner who has engaged in extra-relationship sexual contact (Bringle & Buunk, 1991) to dissatisfaction in one's current relationship (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia (1999) found that low levels of commitment toward one's current partner strongly predicted relationship infidelity. However, research has only recently considered costs and benefits of the mate poacher's behavior.

### **Benefits**

Buss and Schmitt (2001) again asked participants in a preliminary study to record any costs and benefits a mate poacher might experience when poaching for a long or short term mating relationship. Then another group of participants was asked to rate each potential cost and benefit to the degree that they personally believed it to be a cost or benefit of attracting someone who is already in a relationship. Examples of benefits of mate poaching found in the preliminary study were having sexuality variety, developing a special friendship, gaining a partner with physical beauty or resource ability, having a "pre-approved" mate, taking pride in the conquest and enjoying the lack of responsibility. In the second study where participants were asked to rate how good a benefit these outcomes are, gaining sexual access to others, resource devotion, and acquiring a physically beautiful partner were all rated as significantly more beneficial to mate poachers than other potential benefits.

## MATE POACHING

### Costs

Costs of mate poaching found in the preliminary study were: having to hide when on dates with a targeted mate, having to lie constantly, fear of the current mate hurting the mate poacher, the targeted mate's family disliking the mate poacher if they begin a public relationship, and the risk of future unfaithfulness. When participants rated how good or costly these outcomes were, losing resources and having future commitment concerns were seen as significantly more costly for a mate poacher than other potential costs.

There is literature on gender differences in the costs and benefits of mate poaching such that male mate poachers are more concerned with losing resources, and female mate poachers are concerned about gaining a bad reputation or having to raise a resulting child alone (Buss & Schmitt, 2001). A full discussion about this is beyond the scope of this paper. Although certain benefits may encourage individuals to engage in mate poaching, more than just the costs may deter them from attempting to attract a targeted mate away from an existing relationship. The type of relationship a targeted mate is involved in could influence a poacher's decision to poach.

### When is Mate Poaching the Most Successful?

Mate poaching attempts might be more successful when the targeted mate is involved in a dating relationship rather than a marriage, or if the relationship is long distance as opposed to living together. Buss and Schmitt (2001) asked participants to rate the effectiveness of different mate poaching tactics in different relationship and temporal contexts. For example, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of mate poaching tactics when attempting to poach someone in a long term dating relationship, in a long distance relationship, an uncommitted relationship, a committed relationship, a relationship that seemed to be ending soon, a marriage, a relationship where the two individuals lived together, or a new relationship. Mate poaching tactics were seen as more likely to work when the relationship was long distance, the individuals were not committed,

the individuals were dating as opposed to being married, and if the relationship was ending soon. There is easier access to the targeted mate if they are in a long distance relationship and it has already been shown that individuals with low levels of commitment are more likely to commit infidelity. Mate poachers may feel less guilty about poaching someone who is unmarried, as well as if it was known the relationship was on the rocks and about to end.

Poaching was rated to be less effective when individuals were married, if they were living together, highly committed or if the relationship was new. Mate poachers would most likely have less access to a targeted mate if he or she was living with their significant other, or married and highly committed. A mate poacher might also not have the opportunity to break up a new relationship as usually they are exciting enough already, blissful and time consuming. A mate poacher might attempt to attract mates who are married, or involved in a new relationship, but will most likely not be successful.

### Implications of Mate Poaching

Mate poaching can have painful consequences for all parties involved. The risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI) rises with the amount of partners one has (Buss & Schmitt, 2001). It is also a worry for the mate of the poached such that he or she is usually unaware their partner is engaging in sexual behavior with another person who may potentially have an STI. STIs can be extremely painful and irritating to have. They can have short-term effects, or long-term permanent effects as in the case of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Having an STI can make it challenging to engage in sexual activity with other partners if one is concerned about spreading the infection. Other than the physical symptoms, there may be psychological pain felt by all parties involved if any have experienced previous attachment problems or emotional injuries from past infidelity. Individuals might seek out counseling to cope with their psychological pain. Individuals involved in mate poaching may find a negative

## MATE POACHING

poaching experience to be challenging to recover from such that it might really damage their self-confidence. However, it is a mating strategy human and other nonhuman animals employ in order to find the most attractive and resourceful mate.

### Conclusion

Many classic tactics mate poachers use to attract a mate have been recorded by several researchers (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997), and were reviewed in this paper. Studies have found there are differences in the personality dispositions of successful mate poachers and the targeted mate. These dispositions are most likely a combination of biology, genetics and the environment. There are also costs and benefits associated with mate poaching and allowing oneself to be poached, and it has been shown that the type of relationship also influences the successfulness of mate poaching. Different individuals may view the benefits associated with mate poaching as more appealing than others. For example, an individual who scores high on openness to experience might in fact be more likely to engage in mate poaching because it appears to be thrilling and something the individual has not experienced. That same individual might not seek to engage in mate poaching for the potential benefit of securing good genes for reproduction. No matter the reason, mate poaching often occurs and successful prevention behaviors may be out of the hands of a single individual. It would be helpful to create coping techniques in order to aid those seeking counseling and therapy after such a painful event occurs.

First Received: 1/10/2013

Final Revision Received: 3/12/2013

ISBN: 978-0-7714-3056-5

### References

- Bringle, R. G., & Buunk, B. P. (1991). Extradysadic relationships and sexual jealousy. (pp. 135-153). Hillsdale, NJ, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Buss, D. M. (2000). Human mate guarding. *Neuroendocrinology Letters Special Issue, 23(Suppl.4)*, 23-29.
- Buss, D. M. (2006). Strategies of human mating. *Psihologijske Teme, 15(2)*, 239-260.
- Buss, D. M., & Shackelford, T. K. (1997). From vigilance to violence: Mate retention tactics in married couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 346-361.
- Buss, D. M., Shackelford, T. K., Kirkpatrick, L. A., Choe, J. C., Lim, H. K., Hasegawa, M., . . . Bennett, K. (1999). Jealousy and the nature of beliefs about infidelity: Tests of competing hypotheses about sex differences in the united states, korea, and japan. *Personal Relationships, 6(1)*, 125-150.
- Davies, A. P. C., Shackelford, T. K., & Goetz, A. T. (2006). "Attached" or "unattached": With whom do men and women prefer to mate, and why? *Psihologijske Teme, 15(2)*, 297-314.
- de Waal, F. B. (1986). The brutal elimination of a rival among captive male chimpanzees. *Ethology & Sociobiology, 7(3-4)*, 237-251.
- Drigotas, S. M., Safstorm, A. C., & Gentilia, T. (1999). An investment model prediction of dating infidelity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 509-524.
- Gross, M. R. (1982). Sneakers, satellites and parentals: Polymorphic mating strategies in North American sunfishes. *Zeitschrift fur Tierpsychologie, 60*, 1-26.
- Josephs, Lawrence. 2010. The evolved function of the oedipal conflict. *The International journal of psychoanalysis 91(4)*: 937-958.
- Schmitt, D. P. (2004). Patterns and universals of mate poaching across 53 nations: The

## MATE POACHING

- effects of sex, culture, and personality on romantically attracting another person's partner. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(4), 560-584.
- Schmitt, D. P., & Buss, D. M. (1996). Strategic self-promotion and competitor derogation: Sex and context effects on perceived effectiveness of mate attraction tactics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 1185-1204.
- Schmitt, D. P., & Buss, D. M. (2001). Human mate poaching: Tactics and temptations for infiltrating existing mateships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(6), 894-917.
- Schmitt, D. P., & Shackelford, T. K. (2003). Nifty ways to leave you lover: The tactics people use to entice and disguise the process of human mate poaching. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(8), 1018-1035.
- Treas, J., & Giesen, D. (2000). Sexual infidelity among married and cohabiting americans. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62(1), 48-60.