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Mate Poaching: Strategies For



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Synonyms

[Mate poaching](#); [Mate stealing](#)

Definition

Mate poaching strategies are specific behavioral tactics designed to attract someone away from their current romantic relationship.

Introduction

Human mate poaching is a unique and complex form of mate attraction in which an individual knowingly attempts to lure a mate from an existing exclusive relationship (Davies et al., 2007). In some instances, mate poaching is designed to establish a short-term, non-committal sexual relationship, whereas in other instances, a mate poacher may desire a long-term relationship with an already-mated partner (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Regardless of temporal context, mate poaching involves premeditated behavior designed to infiltrate an existing relationship

with the explicit goal of stealing another person's mate (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

Acts of mate poaching involve at least three "actors": the poacher – the person trying to lure the already-mated partner; the poached – the desired mate who is the target of the poaching; and the poachee – the partner who fails to prevent the poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). For each of these actors, mate poaching evokes a different set of adaptive challenges and evolved solutions. For poachers, the primary challenge is persuading a person to leave their current partner without raising the partner's suspicion or incurring the partner's wrath. Targets of poaching, meanwhile, must carefully weigh the anticipated benefits and costs of defecting, while potential poachees must remain vigilant and successfully fend off would-be poachers (i.e., mate guarding). Given this complex interplay of motives, researchers have explored the behavioral strategies used to successfully navigate these relationship dynamics, with particular emphasis on poaching strategies.

How Common Is Mate Poaching?

Available data suggest that mate poaching is a fairly common form of mate attraction. For instance, in one survey of American college students (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), 64% of men reported experience with short-term poaching, whereas 52% reported experience with long-term poaching. Women reported comparably high rates

of short-term (49%) and long-term poaching (63%). Cross-cultural studies have documented similar frequencies of short- and long-term poaching attempts across a variety of nations and cultures (Schmitt & ISDP, 2004). Not only does mate poaching occur relatively frequently across the world, but it also appears to be successful when attempted. In North America, for example, 84% of men and 85% of women who have attempted short-term poaching reported success, with comparable success rates among those attempting long-term poaching (77% vs. 80% for men and women, respectively; Schmitt & ISDP, 2004).

Despite the relatively common occurrence of mate poaching and its potential reproductive benefits, repeated (serial) mate poaching does not appear to be a heavily relied upon strategy (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Indeed, the potential costs of mate poaching can be substantial; poaching may cause reputational damage, inject jealousy and other negative emotionality into an existing relationship, or lead to physical retribution by the poachee (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Given these risks, mate poachers are expected to be selectively attuned to environmental cues indicating a high likelihood of poaching success (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

What Strategies Do Mate Poachers Use?

The varied strategies mate poachers use to effectively attract people away from their existing relationships can be broadly categorized into distinct forms of mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

Some tactics of mate poaching are targeted toward a desired mate and include acts such as flaunting one's resources to impress the mate, complimenting the mate, or investing emotionally in the new relationship. In addition, a poacher may establish strong social bonds with the desired mate and their peer group, for example, by inviting the desired mate to social gatherings or ingratiating themselves with friends or family (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Indeed, forming a friendship with a desired mate is deemed to be a

successful poaching tactic (Mogilski & Wade, 2013). These kinds of mate enhancement strategies benefit the desired mate while signaling a poacher's warmth, kindness, and attentiveness – qualities desired in long-term romantic partners (Regan et al., 2000). Such strategies are akin to benefit-provisioning mate retention strategies (Miner et al., 2009), which accentuate the positive aspects of one's relationship and increase relationship commitment.

Other mate poaching strategies attempt to draw a clear contrast between the poacher and the desired mate's current partner. For instance, poachers may derogate a rival's personality or physical appearance, question a rival's compatibility with the desired mate, or actively encourage the dissolution of the present relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). By drawing attention to a rival's flaws, poachers can market themselves as a better (available) alternative. Poachers may also strategically make themselves available, for example, by rearranging their schedule to be more accessible to the mate or waiting around for the couple to break up. In a similar vein, poachers can make themselves sexually available, enticing a potential mate into a sexual encounter by seducing them or by offering sex (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Collectively, these tactics help poachers differentiate themselves from their rivals, create opportunities for successful poaching, and capitalize when an opportunity arises.

An additional strategy of mate poaching is to increase one's perceived or actual mate value. Broadly, mate value refers to characteristics possessed by an individual that contribute to mating success (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Waynforth, 2001). Historically, men and women who possessed qualities desired by the opposite sex were better equipped to solve adaptive problems of short-term and long-term mating (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Thus, one way for mate poachers to effectively attract an already-mated partner is to display characteristics highly sought after by the desired mate. For this approach to be successful, a poacher's mate value must not only be sufficiently high enough to attract the desired mate's interest but must also be sufficiently higher than the

current partner's mate value. Some examples of mate value-enhancing poaching strategies include being generous and caring, improving one's physical appearance, and displaying a good sense of humor (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

From an evolutionary perspective, the specific mate poaching tactics men and women use may be linked to evolved preferences for solving sex-specific adaptive mating problems (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Similar to other mating behaviors, men and women may differentially use mate poaching strategies depending on differences in temporal context (i.e., friend vs. dating vs. married, short-term vs. long-term, etc.). For instance, men tend to place a greater emphasis than women on indicators of reproductive fitness such as physical attractiveness, especially in short-term mating (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women, on the other hand, tend to prioritize indicators of dominance and resource provision (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

These evolved preferences may drive the selection of specific poaching tactics. In fact, men and women tend to rate the perceived effectiveness of different poaching tactics consistent with evolutionary predictions (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). For example, given men's preference for physical attractiveness, beautifying one's physical appearance and derogating a rival's looks are deemed especially effective strategies for female poachers (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Given women's preference for men willing to invest resources, resource display is judged to be a more effective strategy for male poachers than female poachers (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). These sex differences emerge across both short-term and long-term mating contexts.

The perceived effectiveness of other poaching tactics, however, appears to depend on temporal context. In short-term mating, men tend to show preferences for cues signaling a woman's sexual willingness (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women desiring a short-term liaison who signal sexual openness may be able to effectively entice a male partner to leave their present mate. Women pursuing a temporary sexual encounter may increase their eye contact, flirt, appear sexually receptive, or even initiate sex (Schmitt &

Shackelford, 2003). Consistent with evolutionary hypotheses, these kinds of sexual receptivity tactics are judged as most effective for female poachers pursuing a short-term sexual relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

How Do Mate Poachers Disguise Their Poaching?

As mentioned earlier, a major challenge for mate poachers is luring a mate from an existing relationship without getting caught. Although mate poaching is designed to access reproductively valuable mates, particularly in environments with too few available mates (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), mate poaching is an inherently dangerous endeavor. In addition to potential social costs such as reputational damage, there is potential for physical injury, such as when a poachee threatens to harm or kill the poacher or poached individual (Buss, 2000). For these reasons, mate poachers usually disguise their poaching attempts (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

How do mate poachers disguise their poaching attempts? Poaching concealment tactics, like mate poaching strategies, are varied and depend on the target of the deception (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Some concealment strategies are designed to uphold the relationship status quo and signal that nothing is out of the ordinary. For example, a poacher may be having an extramarital affair but return home around the same time each day, creating the illusion of fidelity. If the current partner suspects cheating, the poacher can seemingly invest more in the relationship by spending more time with the partner, buying the partner expensive gifts, or having more sex with the partner (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

Whereas some individuals superficially lean into their current relationship to disguise their poaching, others intentionally lean out by distancing themselves from their partner and friends. For instance, a poacher may spend less time with their partner, avoid telling friends about the new partner, or travel to another location to see the new mate (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Of course, poachers may also lie or intentionally mislead

their partners, for example, by pretending to go out with friends or downplaying the significance of the new mate (i.e., they are “just friends”). Alternatively, poachers can lie about themselves to a desired mate, sharing minimal personal information or implying that the relationship with their current partner has ended (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Whether distancing oneself from a current partner or manipulating a new mate, these tactics enable mate poachers to conceal their poaching by controlling the relationship narrative.

The mate poaching concealment tactics discussed above highlight the social competence required for effective mate poaching. Indeed, attracting a desired mate without raising the suspicion or ire of the current or mated partner – all the while navigating a complex network of lies, manipulation, and deceptive behaviors – requires an astute social savvy. An additional way socially skilled poachers mask their poaching is through the use of everyday items such as clothing, cell phones, and bank accounts. For example, a mate poacher may wear romantic garments only around the desired mate, temporarily remove their wedding ring, or shower frequently to remove another’s body scent. In addition, poachers may buy the desired mate a “burner phone” designed for temporary use or block calls from the desired mate on their primary phone. To hide their financial investment in another mate, poachers may secretly open a separate bank account or credit card (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). As these examples illustrate, poachers enlist a variety of resources and tools to conceal their poaching attempts.

As with mate poaching strategies, differences in the perceived effectiveness of mate poaching concealment tactics conform to sex-based evolutionary predictions. Recall the earlier discussion of how sharing one’s resources is perceived to be a more effective poaching strategy for men than women (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Women tend to show preferences for a man’s ability and willingness to invest resources (Buss, 1989), and for men, providing resources to a female partner increases relationship satisfaction (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). To disguise their poaching, men may provide additional resources as an outward

sign of fidelity and continued future investment in the relationship (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Women, in contrast, might be expected to disguise their poaching by increasing behaviors to which their male partners are highly attuned, such as sexual access (Buss, 1989; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Indeed, increasing sexual access is judged to be a more effective concealment strategy for female poachers than male poachers (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

Which Mate Poaching Strategies Are Most Effective?

Revisiting the question of mate poaching effectiveness, although some studies suggest that mate poaching can be effective (e.g., Lemay & Wolf, 2016), the relative success of any particular mate poaching strategy is likely to depend on a confluence of factors. For poaching to be successful, poachers need to first identify a desired mate, accurately assess the mate’s interest in being poached, and then, if poaching seems probable, choose specific poaching tactics from among a large set of available strategies. The desired mate, in turn, must be aware of and receptive to the selected strategies. Simultaneously, poachers must not be too brazen while pursuing a desired mate, lest they be discovered by the mate’s partner or community members.

In balancing these motives, the most effective poaching strategies are likely to be “high engagement, high concealment” tactics – behaviors that appeal to a desired mate but are easily hidden from the mate’s partner. The selection of such strategies, and their ultimate success, depends on the social competence of the poacher, the dispositional openness of the poached individual, and the situational awareness of the poachee. In short, there is no simple answer to the question, “Which mate poaching strategies are most effective?” Poaching effectiveness depends on the interplay of environmental cues and constraints (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

Although research on mate poaching effectiveness is limited compared to research on the effectiveness of other mating behaviors, available

studies provide insight into the perceived effectiveness of certain poaching strategies. Many of these studies ask participants to judge the effectiveness of specific poaching strategies as applied to hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Mogilski & Wade, 2013). Broadly, showing generosity and enhancing a potential mate's ego are perceived to be the most effective mate poaching strategies (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Enhancing a potential mate's ego is considered highly effective for both men and women seeking a short-term relationship. When seeking a long-term relationship, being generous is deemed highly effective for both men and women (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

As previously discussed, the perceived effectiveness of mate poaching tactics and concealment tactics largely confirms evolutionary hypotheses related to sex and temporal context (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). These variables interact to drive the selection of specific mate poaching tactics and concealment strategies. Only a few tactics (e.g., using humor, expressing boredom) do not appear to differ in perceived effectiveness across short-term or long-term poaching contexts (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). As for disguising poaching from a current partner, the tactic judged most effective for men involves discussing future plans. For women, the most effective tactic involves keeping the same daily routine (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

Beyond hypothetical scenarios, few studies have assessed the actual effectiveness of mate poaching attempts, and those that have tend to focus on poaching-related outcomes such as partner commitment or relationship satisfaction. For instance, Lemay and Wolf (2016) found that being poached can increase perceptions of a poacher's mate value and increase romantic interest in a poacher. However, positive perceptions of poaching may not ultimately lead to satisfying relationships. Individuals in romantic relationships with their poachers report lower commitment, satisfaction, and investment in their relationships, as well as higher rates of jealousy and infidelity than non-poached individuals (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2018; Foster et al., 2014). Although poaching

may lead to successful courtship, it may not predict long-term relationship quality and stability.

Conclusion

This entry has outlined the varied strategies people use to steal a currently mated romantic partner and to disguise their poaching attempts. These strategies are complex, diverse, and depend on relational dynamics shared by the poacher, the poached individual, and the poachee.

Mate poaching strategies can range from investing in a desired mate to enhancing one's own mate value to derogating the mate's partner. Poachers also deploy a wide array of concealment tactics to disguise their poaching attempts. These can range from upholding the relationship status quo to distancing oneself to using outright lies and manipulation. The effectiveness of the mate poaching tactics selected may depend on evolutionarily relevant moderating variables (i.e., sex, temporal context). Whether designed for a short-term sexual liaison or long-term relationship, mate poaching may enhance one's reproductive prospects.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Infidelity](#)
- ▶ [Mate Guarding](#)
- ▶ [Mate Poaching](#)
- ▶ [Mate Retention](#)
- ▶ [Mating Strategies](#)

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