



What do you get when you make somebody else's partner your own? An analysis of relationships formed via mate poaching



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ABSTRACT

It is well documented that many relationships form via mate poaching (i.e., stealing someone's partner), but almost nothing is known about how these relationships function. Across three studies, we observed reliable evidence that individuals who were poached by their current romantic partners were less committed, less satisfied, and less invested in their relationships. They also paid more attention to romantic alternatives, perceived their alternatives to be of higher quality, and engaged in higher rates of infidelity compared to non-poached participants. Two longitudinal studies offered conflicting evidence regarding whether relationship dysfunction associated with mate poaching develops over time or is a stable quality. Evidence from a cross-sectional study suggests that individual differences in sociosexual-orientation help to explain link between mate poaching and relationship dysfunction.

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that human mating patterns are more complex than simple lifelong monogamy (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2011). One manifestation of this complexity is that men and women sometimes “poach” mates from others. Mate poaching describes attempts by individuals to romantically attract persons already involved in relationships (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). About 75% of North American men and women report that someone has at some point attempted to poach them from a relationship; about half of these individuals reported that they were at some point *successfully* poached from a romantic partner (Schmitt & International Sexuality Description Project, 2004).

Given these statistics, it is reasonable to assume that a nontrivial proportion of ongoing romantic relationships are the product of successful mate poaching. Some of these relationships are short-lived (e.g., one-night stands); however, others last significantly longer, with estimates suggesting that 63% of men and 54% of women have been successfully poached for a *long-term relationship*

(Schmitt & International Sexuality Description Project, 2004). Mate poaching appears to be a fairly common way that individuals establish long-term relationships with one another. A useful question to ask then is whether these relationships function better or worse than relationships formed between two romantically unattached individuals? More specifically, is simply knowing whether an individual was mate poached by their current romantic partner predictive of how well they will function in their current relationship?

Until now, the vast majority of research on mate poaching has focused on (1) providing evidence of the evolutionary functions of mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt & International Sexuality Description Project, 2004; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003), (2) the measurement of mate poaching (Davies et al., 2007), and (3) the interpersonal (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Schmitt & Buss, 2001) and intrapersonal (Foster, Shrira, Campbell, & Stone, 2002; Schachner & Shaver, 2002) predictors of mate poaching. Surprisingly little if any research has been conducted that has examined relationships formed via mate poaching. The present research aimed to close this gap in the literature by examining aspects of basic functioning (e.g., commitment, infidelity) of relationships that are the product of mate poaching. In general, we expected to find that relationships formed as a result of mate poaching would function less well compared to relationships not formed via mate poaching. Like most studies of romantic relationships, our study focused

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on a single partner in the relationship rather than both partners and/or the relationship as a whole. Thus, to be more precise, we hypothesized that romantic partners who were mate poached by their current partners would report thoughts, and behaviors associated with poor relationship functioning (e.g., low commitment, high rates of infidelity).

There are numerous reasons why successfully mate poached individuals might be vulnerable to relationship dysfunction in their subsequent relationships. High on this list of possible theoretical mechanisms are individual differences in personality and cognitive/behavioral proclivities. Individuals who are successfully mate poached possess a variety of traits (e.g., disagreeableness, narcissism, avoidant attachment, unrestricted sociosexual orientation; Foster et al., 2002; Jonason et al., 2010; Schachner & Shaver, 2002; Schmitt, 2005; Schmitt & Buss, 2001) that are also predictive of relationship dysfunction (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Kurdek, 1993; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). It is possible that one or more of the traits that make individuals susceptible to being poached also make them prone to thinking and behaving in ways that cause dysfunction within their relationships. For example, unrestricted sociosexual orientation (i.e., desiring and engaging in sexual activity outside of the confines of committed relationships) is seemingly antithetic to long-term (monogamous) relationship functioning and has been identified in prior research as a mechanism of relationship dysfunction (Foster et al., 2006). If individuals who are successfully mate poached possess less restricted sociosexual orientations, then this trait may create further dysfunction in their subsequent relationships.

We tested the primary hypothesis, that mate poached status (i.e., whether one was poached by their current romantic partner or not) would predict greater relationship dysfunction, in three studies. Studies 1 and 2 were both longitudinal and allowed us to test whether mate poached status predicts (1) differences in relationship functioning at the beginning of the study (i.e., intercept differences) and/or (2) widening differences in relationship functioning as the study progresses (i.e., slope differences). Study 3 was cross-sectional by design and permitted further testing of possible functioning differences associated with mate poached status. Studies 2 and 3 also included a selection of individual difference variables (e.g., big five personality traits, sociosexual orientation) that served as possible explanatory variables of the link between mate poaching and relationship functioning.

2. Study 1

Given the above facts and conjectures, it was reasonable to predict that romantic partners who were mate poached by their current partners would think and act in ways that undermine the functioning of their current relationships. In the present study, we tested this hypothesis in a longitudinal study that tracked a sample of romantically attached participants for nine weeks. Participants reported whether they were mate poached by the current partner or not and we used this mate poached status variable to predict starting values (i.e., intercepts) and changes (i.e., slopes) in variables relevant to relationship functioning.

Specifically, we focused on commitment (i.e., the extent to which one desires to maintain their relationship; Miller, Perlman, & Brehm, 2007) as the primary indicator of relationship functioning. Research suggests that commitment is one of the strongest predictors of whether relationships endure or terminate (Le & Agnew, 2003), and thus it is a reasonable proxy of relationship functioning. Additionally, we assessed a selection of variables that have been identified in the literature as mechanisms that regulate commitment (Miller, 1997; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Agnew,

& Arriaga, 2012; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2004). These variables were satisfaction (how happy one is with their relationship), investment (how much one has put into their relationship that they would lose if the relationship was to end), perceived quality of alternatives (the extent to which alternatives to one's relationship, such as forming a new relationship, are appealing), and attention to alternatives (the extent to which one notices attractive alternatives to one's relationship). Finally, we assessed the extent to which participants committed various acts of romantic infidelity during the course of the study. We predicted that participants who were mate poached would exhibit poorer functioning at the beginning of the study relative to non-mate poached participants and that these differences would grow as the study progressed.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A sample of 96 heterosexual participants in romantic relationships lasting from 0 to 36 months was recruited for this study. This study was longitudinal and consisted of four data collection sessions (i.e., waves) each separated by a three-week interval. Twelve participants completed the first wave of the study, but failed to attend later sessions. As will be discussed later, mate poached status was not assessed until the second session; thus these participants were excluded from the study. This resulted in a final sample of 84 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.08$ years, $SD = 1.06$; 64% women; 83% white; $M_{\text{relationship length}} = 15.29$ months, $SD = 8.92$; 95% dating relationships).

Only two participants failed to complete all four study sessions. These two participants reported that they broke up with their partners, one in between the first and second sessions and another in between the second and third sessions. At the session immediately following breakup, these participants were instructed to respond to questions about their relationships "reflecting upon the time directly before you and your partner ended the relationship." Neither of these participants attended later study sessions, which resulted in one participant with missing data for sessions three and four and another with missing data for session four. A final group of participants ($N = 5$) broke up with their partners in between the third and fourth study sessions. These participants were also instructed (i.e., during the fourth session) to respond to questions while reflecting on the time just prior to breakup. Because these participants completed all four study sessions, they did not have any missing data.

3.2. Materials and procedure

Participants reported to a lab once every three weeks for a nine-week period and completed a battery of questionnaires that included measures of mate poached status, commitment, relationship satisfaction, investment, perceived quality of alternatives, attention to alternatives, and infidelity.

Mate poached status was not an initial focus of the study and was not assessed at session one. It was assessed during sessions two through four with a single item taken from Schmitt and Buss (2001): "Are you in a relationship right now with someone who attracted you away from someone else?" Participants responded either Yes (1) or No (0). This item occurred following a series of questions that participants were permitted to skip if they were not applicable. This caused some participants to mistakenly skip the question that assessed mate poached status. No participants skipped the question at all three study sessions (i.e., every participant answered the question at least once), but 12 participants

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