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## SHORT REPORT

## Perceptions of a Mismatched Couple: The Role of Attractiveness on Mate Poaching and Copying

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This research investigated how a couple's discrepancy in attractiveness influences men's decision to mate poach or mate copy. The participants ( $N = 97$  heterosexual men) were presented with 3 photos of a quasi couple in which the woman was consistent, and the 3 men were unattractive, equally, or more attractive than her. This study used ranking questions to assess heterosexual men's perception of a couple. Participants were asked to drag and drop the 3 randomized photos in order of preference for 8 randomized questions regarding mate poaching and mate copying. Eight Friedman tests were conducted and revealed a significant difference between the rankings of the photos for each situation. These findings suggest that there are clear differences between the conditional mating strategies men use. Results revealed that when a woman is more attractive than her mate, men desire to mate poach, and if a woman is less attractive than her partner, men desire to mate copy.

**Public Significance Statement**

This study suggests that straight men base their decision to steal a woman away from their partner for a short-term affair if the man with whom the woman is mated is unattractive. However, men will want to hook up with a woman if she is in a relationship with a more attractive man.

*Keywords:* mate copying, mate poaching, discrepancy in attractiveness, couple perception

In the 2010 romantic comedy, *She's Out of My League*, Kirk, an unattractive nobody, ends up dating Molly, an attractive socialite. Their mismatch is the central theme of the movie, and it leads to other men in the film to try to steal Molly away (Eber, 2010). The behaviors exhibited in the film reflect a hierarchy of conditional

mating strategies, which suggests that when an attractive potential mate is in a relationship, certain behaviors are used to attract that mate or other attractive mates (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2010). Specifically, individuals may try to shift their mating strategies to either pursue the potential mate (mate poach) or find a mate that is similar (mate copy).

**Mate Poaching**

Mate poaching is a suite of behaviors used to mate with someone who is already in a relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Individuals who mate poach may do so by increasing their attractiveness, derogating the individual's current partner, and using emotional support (Moran &

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Wade, 2017; Schmitt et al., 2001). However, there are specific factors that the mate poacher must consider when deciding to poach. Such factors include the discrepancy in attractiveness between the couple. Research illustrates that when a woman is more attractive than her male mate, male participants report a greater likelihood of infiltrating that couple and that men would be more likely to infiltrate that couple (Moran, Kuhle, Wade, & Seid, 2017). Furthermore, men tend to report they believe they would be successful at poaching a woman when the woman is more attractive than her mate or when she is equal in attractiveness to her mate (Moran & Wade, 2019). Deciding to mate poach involves a complex set of decisions; thus, individuals should adjust their mating strategies. Mate poaching may help individuals attain a mate; however, mate poachers engage in greater costs that can outweigh the benefits (Davies et al., 2010). If the risks outweigh the benefits, the individual may adjust their mating strategy, depending on the environmental conditions. Another conditional mating strategy is mate copying, which relies on the decisions of other individuals in one's environment (Pruett-Jones, 1992).

### Mate Copying

Mate copying involves inferring whether a potential mate is a suitable mate by gathering information through the social transmission of other couples in the environment. Mate copying proposes that if a man is accepted by another woman, that suggests to an observing woman that he has qualities that are beneficial as a mate. Thus, the observing female should copy the model woman's behavior and find a mate similar to that acceptable man (Pruett-Jones, 1992). Mate copying is a complex form of domain-general learning (Street et al., 2018). When a man is paired with a woman, other women tend to rate that man higher in attractiveness (i.e., desirability enhancement effect) (Rodeheffer, Leyva, & Hill, 2016). However, men rated women less desirable when they are shown surrounded by men, compared with when women are alone which is a desirability diminution effect (Hill & Buss, 2008). According to mate copying, individuals (the observers) tend to look at potential mates (targets) and gather information based on their partners (the

model) (Place, Todd, Penke, & Asendorpf, 2010). Attractiveness is an important factor for both men and women to assess whether someone could be a potential long-term mate rather than a short-term mate (Little, Caldwell, Jones, & DeBruine, 2011).

The aforementioned research regarding mate poaching and mate copying suggests that poaching and copying are related mating strategies in which individuals must assess the individuals in their environment and make certain decisions regarding whether or not that individual is a potential mate (i.e., attractive or not). However, mate poaching can be more difficult to complete because one must infiltrate a relationship to be successful, which can be costly. Yet mate copying permits an individual to look for potential mates without having to infiltrate a relationship.

Therefore, this current project was designed to further understand these differences in men's conditional mating strategies by presenting men with three couples and asking the men for their perception of the relationship to further elucidate the differences between the strategies and to further see whether men do mate copy. This was conducted to see whether poaching may be a successful strategy in certain contexts, compared with copying. Men were of interest in this study because of recent research indicating that men do rely on the characteristic of a woman's partner in making mate poaching decisions (Moran et al., 2019). Specifically, Moran et al. (2019) found that men report success in poaching from a couple discrepant in attractiveness. This focus could also operate under a mate copying mechanism. Therefore, including men in this study facilitates the ability to further differentiate mate poaching from mate copying.

### Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that men would rate the couple in which the man is less attractive than the woman in the photo as the easiest couple to infiltrate and steal the woman away from her mate (i.e., a mate poach). Conversely, it was hypothesized that men would rate the couple in which the man is more attractive than the woman as the couple that men would most likely want to hook up with (i.e., mate copy). We also proposed secondary hypotheses that the partners who are equal in attractiveness

would be rated as the most romantically and sexually compatible based on the matching hypothesis (Watson et al., 2004) and when the man in the couple is less attractive as most likely to be cheated on emotionally and sexually by the woman (Oltmanns, Markey, & French, 2017) and that the woman paired with the unattractive man would be more likely to suffer from abuse (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

## Method

### Participants

A power analysis using a medium effect size ( $f = .25$ ) suggested that 63 men would suffice. Thus, 112 individuals were recruited from a northeastern university in the United States via an online survey. Of those individuals, 20 individuals did not complete the survey, and three asked for their data to be excluded. After those individuals were omitted, the sample consisted of 97 heterosexual men ( $M_{age} = 20.24$ ,  $SD_{age} = 1.51$ ) with an average self-reported attractiveness,  $M = 6.75$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ , range = 2–10). The participants were 81.4% White, and 80.4% had sexual experience. Over half of the sample (56.7%) reported being single. A small group (10.3%) reported that they tried to have sex with a woman they knew was already in a committed relationship with another man (i.e., mate poached).

### Materials and Procedures

This study was carried out in accordance with the university's institutional review board in which all participants were given an informed consent statement, and they could end the experiment at any time. First, participants received an e-mail with a Qualtrics link. Participants who participated in Moran et al. (2019) were not sent the survey because the stimuli were the same. After accessing the link, they received the informed consent statement. Next, a short demographic questionnaire, which asked men to report their age, sex, sexual orientation, and current relationship status. Men were asked to report how physically attractive they perceived themselves from 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 10 (*very attractive*) and whether they had ever tried to have sex with a woman whom they knew was in a relationship using a forced-

choice yes or no question. They were then asked to rank three photos across eight different situations. They were then debriefed and were allowed to enter their e-mails for an opportunity to possibly win a \$25 Amazon gift card.

**Stimuli.** Participants were randomly presented with three photos of three different men sitting on a bench with the same woman for eight randomized questions. The attractiveness of the members in the photographs had been rated previously (see Moran et al., 2019). The men in the photo had their arms around the woman (see Figure 1). All three of the photos included the same woman whose attractiveness was 4.46. One photo consisted of the woman and an unattractive man ( $M_{Attractiveness} = 3.31$ ). Another photo portrayed the woman with a man of equal attractiveness ( $M_{Attractiveness} = 4.46$ ), and the last photo consisted of the woman and a man

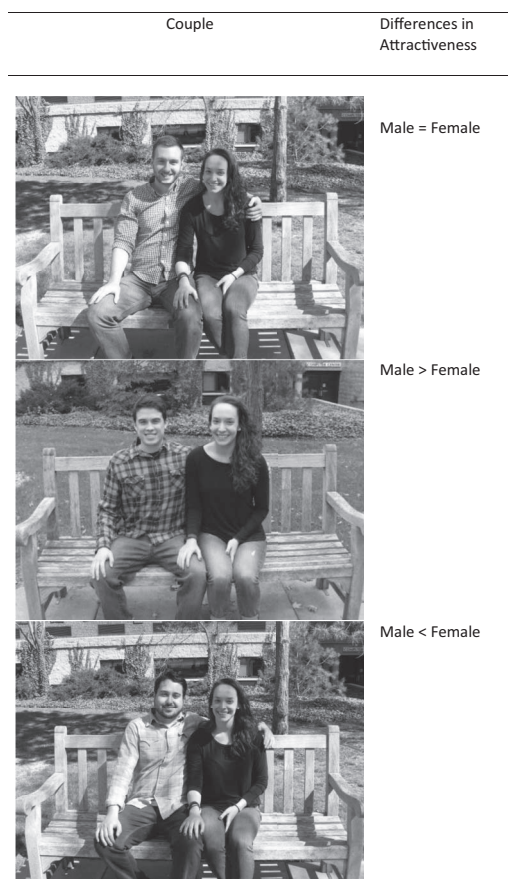


Figure 1. Photos of the quasi couples.

who was more attractive than the woman ( $M_{Attractiveness} = 6.08$ ). The photos were rated as significantly different from one another (unattractive man and moderate man,  $t[58] = 2.78, p = .007$ , unattractive man and attractive man,  $t[558] = 5.8, p = .0001$ , and moderate man and attractive man,  $t[558] = 3.48, p = .0001$ ).

**Eight scenarios.** The participants were instructed to drag and drop the three randomized photos in order, 1 (*most likely*) to 3 (*least likely*), for eight randomized questions. Specifically, they were asked to “please rank the photos below in terms of which couple: (a) you think would be the easiest target to steal the girl away from her boyfriend for a short-term sexual hookup; (b) seems to you to be the most sexually compatible; (c) seems to you to be the most romantically compatible, (d) seems to you to be a couple in which the woman is most likely to be abused; (e) seems to you to be the couple in which the woman is most likely to emotionally cheat on the man (that is, confide in other men rather than her partner for advice and support); (f) seems to be the couple in which the woman is most likely to sexually cheat on the man (that is, have sexual intercourse with another man); (g) is the couple containing the woman you most want to hook up with; and (h) contains the man most similar to you.”

## Results

Eight Friedman tests with alpha corrections based on the number of tests ( $p = .05/8 = .00625$ ) were conducted comparing the mean rankings of the photos across the eight items. A significant difference between the rankings of the photos occurred across all items: easiest target,  $\chi^2(2) = 7.60, p = .0001$ ; sexually compatible,  $\chi^2(2) = 33.06, p = .0001$ ; romantically compatible,  $\chi^2(2) = 34.30, p = .0001$ ; abuse,  $\chi^2(2) = 12.22, p = .0001$ ; emotional cheating,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.70, p = .005$ ; sexual cheating,  $\chi^2(2) = 11.08, p = .004$ ; has the hookup target,  $\chi^2(2) = 20.18, p = .0001$ ; and most similar man,  $\chi^2(2) = 17.66, p = .0001$ . See Table 1 for the mean rankings and for the Dunn-Bonferroni pairwise comparisons. Our primary findings revealed that the couple with the man who was less attractive than his partner was perceived as significantly easier to poach from and the couple with the man that was more attractive than his partner was perceived as more likely to be copied.

Table 1  
Mean Ranking of the Photo in Each Scenario

Scenario	M < F	M = F	M > F
Easiest to hook up with	1.60 <sup>a</sup>	2.26 <sup>a</sup>	2.14 <sup>a</sup>
Sexually compatible	2.43 <sup>a</sup>	1.54 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.02 <sup>a,b</sup>
Romantically compatible	2.25 <sup>a</sup>	1.47 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.28 <sup>b</sup>
Abuse	2.31 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.79 <sup>b</sup>	1.90 <sup>a</sup>
Emotionally cheat	2.09 <sup>a</sup>	2.21 <sup>b</sup>	1.71 <sup>a,b</sup>
Sexually cheat	1.68 <sup>a</sup>	2.14 <sup>a</sup>	2.18 <sup>a</sup>
You want to hook up with	2.30 <sup>a</sup>	2.10 <sup>b</sup>	1.60 <sup>a,b</sup>
Most similar to you	2.35 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.74 <sup>b</sup>	1.91 <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* Lower numbers mean closest to number 1 ranking. All Friedman test were significant ( $p < .00625$ ). Ranking scores across the scenarios that share the same superscript differ. Comparisons were Bonferroni corrected.

<sup>a</sup> M < F. <sup>b</sup> M = F.

## Discussion

This current project was designed to examine the differences between mate poaching and mate copying. It was hypothesized that individuals would rate the couple photo in which the man is less attractive than the woman as the easiest couple to infiltrate to steal the woman away from her mate (i.e., mate poach). This hypothesis was supported. These results align with previous research on the effects of similarity and dissimilarity in partners' attractiveness and evaluations. Second, it was hypothesized that men would want to hook up with the woman who was partnered with an attractive mate because this pairing suggests that she is a high-quality mate (i.e., mate copy), which was supported. Because the woman was the same in all three conditions, the participants focused on the male with whom she was paired to make their decisions. This decision process is similar to the transmission of knowledge that individuals gain when they engage in mate choice copying. Because the participants chose the attractive man's partner and attractive people are seen as smarter and as possessing better qualities (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), participants may trust their judgment. This suggests that mate poaching and mate choice copying are strategies in which different contextual information allows individuals to decide which conditional mating strategy is the best option to use. The couple's characteristics influence a man's decision to mate poach or copy.

The second set of hypotheses focused on the matching hypothesis. It was hypothesized that

the participants would rate the couple in which the man and woman are equal in attractiveness as more sexually compatible and more romantically compatible. This hypothesis was supported. These findings align with prior research suggesting that individuals tend to choose long-term mates who have a similar level of physical attractiveness and similar personalities (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971). Thus, participants must have perceived the couple based on this assortative mating mechanism, which indicated that partners who were equal in attractiveness are matching and therefore may not be fraught with mate guarding, mate retention, or infidelity problems.

It was also hypothesized that when participants were asked which couple is most likely to involve abuse, participants will indicate that the woman in the couple in which she is more attractive than her partner will be more likely to suffer from abuse. This was not supported. Instead, the couple in which the man and the woman were equal in attractiveness and the couple in which the man was more attractive were rated significantly higher for wife abuse victimization than the couple in which the man was less attractive than the woman. This perception could be due to mate retention concerns. Specifically because an unattractive man obtains a partner who is more attractive than he, participants may believe abuse would be a maladaptive mate retention strategy because this behavior could drive the mate away. Therefore, he may not be able to find another mate who is as attractive, and future work should investigate the connection between couple similarity and sexual violence.

Research also suggests that when a woman is more physically attractive than her partner, they have higher regard toward infidelity (Fugère, Cousins, & MacLaren, 2015). Therefore, participants would be expected to rate the couple in which the man is less attractive than his partner to be more likely to involve emotional and sexual cheating by the woman. This was partially supported. Participants rated the couple in which the man is more attractive than the woman as most likely to involve female emotional cheating, and the couple in which the woman is more attractive than the man as most likely to involve female sexual cheating. This could be due to perceptions that based on their differences in attractiveness he may not be an

emotionally supportive partner. However, participants may believe she should not cheat on him sexually because she can acquire good genes from this current attractive partner and would not need to secure them elsewhere.

The current research implies that romantic partners' attractiveness provides information to men that promotes mate poaching or copying. In the future, to further understand the hierarchy of conditional mating strategies, researchers should interactively examine, with dynamic simulation studies, when men alter their mating strategies. Also, because mate poaching is much costlier than mate copying, future projects should investigate how a couple's characteristics differentially affect the costs associated with using these strategies.

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