

To Poach or Not to Poach? Men are more Willing to Short-term Poach Mated Women who are more Attractive than their Mates

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ABSTRACT

Short-term poaching allows men to gain reproductive benefits with a mated woman without the costs of commitment (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). The current research explores whether men ($N = 38$) target mated women for short-term poaches as a function of their and their partners' relative physical attractiveness. By manipulating a hypothetical couple's attractiveness discrepancy, we found that men were more willing to strategically short-term poach mated women who were significantly more attractive than their mates compared to mated women who were equally or less attractive than their mates.

KEYWORDS

Short-term Mate Poaching, Infidelity, Dissimilarity, Attraction

Throughout evolutionary history, ancestral humans faced the adaptive problems of finding and securing a mate. There are several critical differences in the anatomy of men and women that impact mating preferences. Due to the fact that women are born with a fixed number of ova, it would make sense not to waste an ovum on a poorly suited mate. Men, however, can waste as many sperm cells as they want because men can produce viable sperm everyday resulting in greater variation in their number of partners (Bateman, 1948). This difference in human reproductive biology has caused an asymmetry in parental investment (Trivers, 1972). Concealed ovulation is another aspect of reproduction that causes problems in the human mating world, causing paternal uncertainty in men (Burley, 1979). On the other hand, women always have paternal certainty. This is due to the fact that fertilization occurs in the woman reproductive tract while men cannot see the fertilization take place. Cuckoldry has evolved as a response to this uncertainty.

Cuckoldry occurs when a woman mates with a man who is not her long-term mate, is impregnated, and falsely informs her long-term mate that the child is his.

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Researchers have argued that 10-30% of children are being raised by a man that is not their biological father (Baker & Bellis, 1995). Due to the reproductive costs of being cuckolded, men have developed anti-cuckoldry tactics.

Research on anti-cuckoldry tactics encompasses a series of physiological and psychological behaviors. Physiologically, men have evolved to displace competing sperm from the women's reproductive tract via the morphology of the penis (Gallup & Burch, 2004). Men have even evolved to compete at the cellular level via sperm competition. Sperm competition occurs when women mate with two or more men and the man's sperm compete for fertilization (Pham & Shackelford, 2014). When men spend time apart from their mates, their likelihood of being cuckolded is higher. Men have evolved to adjust the quantity of sperm and will ejaculate more sperm if they are at a higher risk of sperm competition (Baker & Bellis, 1993), i.e., they are away from their mates for a long period of time since their last copulation. Besides physiological adaptations, men will also find their partner more attractive when they have spent time apart (Shackelford et al., 2002). Finding your partner more attractive when apart increases your chances of mating when reuniting, which will ultimately lead to the use of anti-cuckoldry tactics. An example of anti-cuckoldry tactics is mate retention tactics. These tactics are important because it could lead to a man raising another man's offspring.

The mate retention behaviors of men have been researched extensively using married couples and undergraduate students (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Findings suggest that men evolved to protect their status and reputation through mate retention tactics. Mate retention encompasses a broad area of behaviors, such as mate guarding, sexual jealousy, and derogation of competitors. Men guard their mates in order to ensure they do not cheat on them, especially during ovulation (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver, 2002).

Mate retention tactics are exemplified when men believe they are at a higher chance of being cheated on. They will behave using more mate retentive tactics and will perform more semen displacement behaviors (Goetz et al., 2005). These findings suggest that when men are separated from their partner they will behave in a way that is more likely to stop future cuckoldry tactics. Building upon mate retention tactics, men use mate retentive tactics when their partner is similar in their quality; however, when their mate is better than they are they seem to give up on mate retentive tactics (Salkicevic, Stanic, & Grabovac, 2014). These results suggest that mate retention occurs due to mate value of both the man and the women in the relationship. Mate retention tactics of men who are lower in mate value than their partners seem to be done in higher frequency and more direct mate guarding.

As mentioned above, one way men retain their mates is by mate guarding. Men mate guard their partners in different ways. One extreme way is by sequestering the mate and not allowing her to go to events where other men will be present, or spending all of their free time together. Less extreme ways of mate guarding included using tie signs such as handholding and wedding rings. Portraying closeness and giving off cues to others that your partner is not single are ways men can protect themselves from interlopers (Buss, 2002). Ultimately, mate guarding allows a man to keep his partner away from other men, minimizing the risk that she may meet someone and engage in infidelity; however, there is evidence that states if a woman is more attractive than her mate, they are more likely to resist

mate guarding tactics and report being less committed (Fugère, Cousins, & MacLaren, 2015).

Men will also derogate their competitors to prevent their mates from leaving them. Explaining to their partner that other men are not as intelligent, or do not hold power at their jobs, will leave an imprint in their partner's mind (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Men will derogate competitors in ways that coincide with their behaviors used to retain a mate. For example, men will state that their competitors are poor, or weak (Buss & Dedden, 1990). Men will also augment their own characteristics while decreasing the reputation of their competitors.

There has been a plethora of research aimed at investigating behaviors that men who are in a long-term relationship will engage in to ensure fidelity from a mate. Presently, little research has been conducted to investigate the behavior of the mate poacher – the man who is interested in infiltrating a couple.

Understanding the psychology of attracting someone who is in a committed relationship is a behavior seen as mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Schmitt and Buss (2001) argue that mate poaching is a form of sexual strategy. There are two types of mate poachers: short-term and long-term. Short-term poaching has been seen as beneficial for men (Schmitt & Buss, 2001) because it allows men to gain the benefits of mating with a woman who is in a committed relationship without giving up resources. Since men do tend to prefer sexual variety, short-term poaching can be seen as an evolutionary advantage (Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss, 2001).

Mate poachers have certain characteristics and personality traits such as agreeableness, emotional stability and even the Dark Triad (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; McKibbin, Miner, Shackelford, Ehrke, & Weekes-Shackelford, 2014). A recent study looking at both the Big-Five and Dark Triad concluded that the Dark Triad was a better indicator of mate poaching experiences than the Big-Five was. Psychopathy was singled out as the most predictive trait of mate poaching experiences (Kardum, Hudek-Knezevic, Schmitt, & Grundler, 2015). Mate poaching, however, does not rely on simple personality traits, rather it is integration from the environment and cues from the couple the mate poacher is interested in interloping. This can be seen when observing opposite-sex friends. In these cases, mate poaching behaviors predicted a decrease in their friend's commitment to their romantic partner and an increase in the friend's mate value and desire as a partner over time (Lemy & Wolf, 2016).

There is evidence indicating that ovulating women are more interested in short-term affairs – even if they are in a long-term committed relationship (Cantú et al., 2013). When looking for a short-term mate, women will prioritize physical attractiveness and avoid finding a mate whose physical attractiveness is not below their own physical attractiveness (Li & Kenrick, 2006).

Taking into consideration the evidence indicating that men have evolved anti-cuckoldry tactics and women have preferences for short-term affairs when ovulating, researchers should begin to investigate the third-party man who cheats with the woman. Investigating how men perceive the relationship of a couple they are interested in poaching – and understanding cues that the couple is portraying – is important because in order for a man to be successful at poaching, he needs to not form a commitment. Therefore, he needs to 1). Pick a woman that is not

interested in leaving her mate and 2). Pick a woman that is willing to cheat on her mate. Finding a couple that one can infiltrate must be considered carefully. While a man may believe that a woman is interested in a short-term affair, the consequences of this error could be severe or life threatening if he is incorrect. The third-party man must then look for accurate cues or discrepancies in attraction. For example, a man should look to assortative mating as a guide. Assortative mating is nonrandom mating that is the driving factor that allows humans to find a suitable mate by looking at similar characteristics of an individual (Buss, & Schmitt, 1993). An aspect of assortative mating is character-specific assortment, or the matching of two individuals based on similar characteristics and traits (Buss & Barnes, 1986). By analyzing married couples, we see they hold many of the same features, characteristics and attributes. This leads to psychological similarity and these couples are seen as more facially similar when compared to fake or generated couples (Vandenberg, 1972; Feingold, 1988; Hinsz, 1989).

Research done by Little, Burt, and Perrett (2006) examined facial characteristics and found a positive correlation regarding perceived age, attractiveness and personalities were similar between partners. Further support shows that women who are in long-term committed relationships viewed themselves and their partners similar in physical attractiveness. When they perceived themselves as more attractive, they were less interested in their romantic partner (Fugère et al., 2015). These findings suggest that when choosing a partner, one usually decides to be committed with someone that is psychologically and physically similar to themselves.

Taking into consideration research regarding mate poaching and assortative mating, the present research seeks to add to the literature on mate poaching examining how the physical characteristics of a couple affect decisions to cuckold.

METHODS

Participants

Thirty-eight heterosexual men, aged 18-23 ($X = 19$ $SD = 1.16$) participated from two northeastern universities. Participants received a partial introductory psychology course credit for participation.

Materials and Procedure

After participants received an informed consent statement and gave their consent, they received a survey with demographic questions including age, and sexual orientation. Each participant then saw PowerPoint slides of three sets of different couples. The faces used as stimuli were derived from the Dallas Face Database. The three couples consisted of the same woman who was attractive, moderately attractive or unattractive and a man who was low, moderate, or highly attractive (Figure 1). A pilot study ($N = 20$) composed of a different group of

participants rated the attractiveness of each face using a 1 = not physically attractive to 10 = very physically attractive scale.

Figure 1. Stimuli

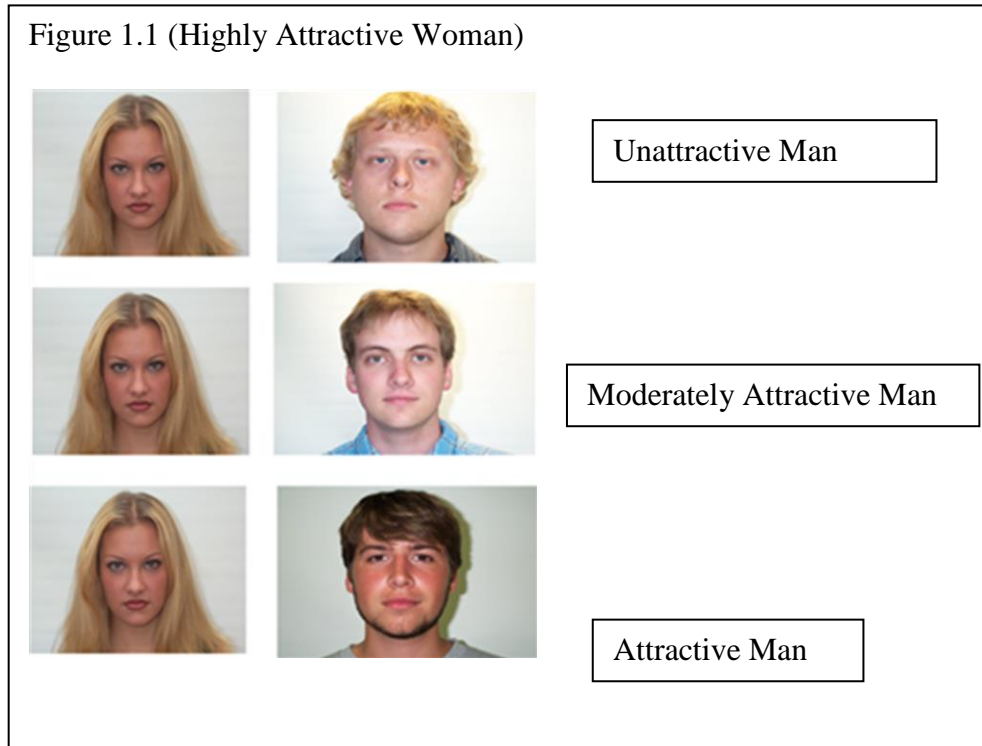


Figure 1.2 (Moderately Attractive Woman)

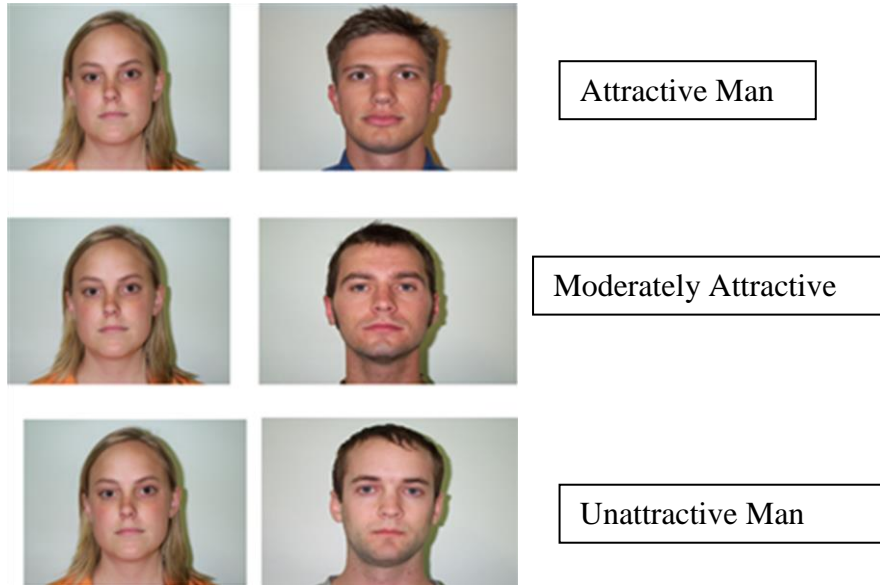
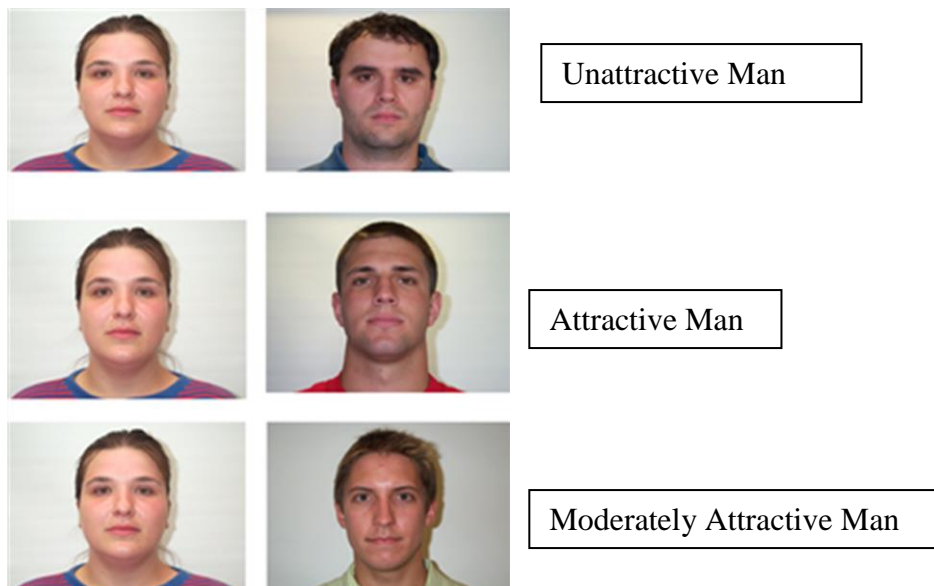


Figure 1.3 (Unattractive Woman)



Each participant in the current study also received the following scenarios after seeing the PowerPoint slides of the couples:

“Hypothetically speaking, let’s say a man is interested in “*hooking-up*” with a woman who happens to already be in a romantic relationship. Please assume that he is only interested in sex with her and is not interested in a relationship. Given the three couples on the projected PowerPoint slide, from which relationship do you think this hypothetical man would be most likely to pursue the woman for a commitment-free hook-up?”

and

“Hypothetically speaking, let’s say that YOU are interested in “*hooking-up*” with a woman who happens to already be in a romantic relationship. Please assume that you are only interested in sex with her and are not interested in a relationship. Given the three couples on the projected PowerPoint slide, from which relationship do you think YOU would be most likely to pursue the woman for a commitment-free hookup?”

After these scenarios and questions, participants responded to a manipulation check to see if their prior answers would be consistent. Researchers asked:

“Of the three couples displayed on the PowerPoint slide, in which relationship would the woman be most likely to cheat on her boyfriend by having sex with another guy?”

RESULTS

A series of Chi-squares were computed. Significant effects were found for seven of the nine questions. No significant results were obtained for the highly attractive woman scenario, indicating that the participants were not choosing the woman who was mated with the least attractive man both for the hypothetical man and the question regarding which woman he would hookup with. When asked which woman would cheat on her partner, the men did support our hypothesis by choosing the most unattractive man ($\chi^2(38) = 10.94, p < .004$) (See Table 1) indicating that the participants think the highly attractive woman is more likely to cheat on her mate when her mate is low in attractiveness.

For the moderately attractive woman scenario, participants chose the low attractiveness man, ($\chi^2(38) = 21.68, p < .001$) (See Table 1) for the hypothetical question. When asked which woman they would hookup with participants also picked the woman mated with the least attractive man ($\chi^2(38) = 8.57, p < .014$) (See Table 1). When asked in which couple is the woman most likely to cheat on her mate, participants chose the couple with the least attractive man, ($\chi^2(38) = 17.73, p < .0001$) (See Table 1).

Table1. Frequencies

Woman in Stimuli	“Hypothetical Man” Response	“Hypothetically You” Response	Manipulation Check
Attractive Woman	UM: 17 MM: 11 AM: 10	UM: 15 MM: 13 AM: 10	UM 22** MM 10 AM 6
Moderately Attractive Woman	AM 8 MM 4 UM 26***	AM 10 MM 7 UM 21*	AM 3 MM 11 UM 24 ***
Unattractive Woman	UM 24*** AM 5 MM 9	UM 20*** AM 5 MM 12	UM 28*** AM 3 MM 7

Table 1 contains frequency counts of the heterosexual man choices.

Key:

- **UM:** Unattractive Man
- **MM:** Moderately Attractive Man
- **AM:** Attractive Man

***: $p < .001$

**: $p < .005$

*: $p < .05$

For the least attractive woman scenario participants chose the couple with the least attractive man ($\chi^2 (38) = 15.85, p < .001$) (See Table 1). When the participants were asked which woman they would hookup with they also chose the woman who was mated with a man of low attractiveness, ($\chi^2 (38) = 9.13, p < .01$) (See Table 1). The manipulation also revealed that participants thought the woman would cheat on her mate if her mate was low attractiveness man ($\chi^2 (38) = 28.47, p < .0001$) (See Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether heterosexual men base their short-term poaching on the dissimilarities in the attractiveness of a couple. Men are more likely to pursue a woman who is in a relationship with someone who is less attractive than she is. The present research suggests that that if a man is unattractive compared to his woman partner, other men seem to question why this man is mated to a woman who is so much more attractive than he is. For Figure 1.1., men did not choose the couple with the most unattractive man; instead they chose the moderately attractive man as the infiltration target. We speculate that the participants chose the moderate man as a target because the unattractive man seemed more threatening and was perceived as dangerous (See Figure 1.1). It would behoove men to avoid infiltrating a couple where the man looks threatening because it could lead to a fight or death. Yet, men did choose the couple with the unattractive man when asked which couple the woman would be most likely to cheat

on her boyfriend. This may have occurred because the unattractive man looks more intimidating than the moderately attractive man. This postulate is discussed further in future research

These findings correspond with woman mate preferences varying over the course of their menstrual cycle. Women prefer men characterized as “dads” (high commitment, low testosterone) during anovulatory phases and men characterized as “cads” (low commitment, high testosterone, attractive men) during the ovulatory phase (Larson, Haselton, Pillsworth, & Gildersleeve, 2013). Based on the supposition that women mated to “dads” will be especially likely to pursue “cads” during ovulation, men have evolved psychological mechanisms to identify mated women who are open to cuckolding their mates. Research has shown that women prefer to mate with men who have strong genetic features in their prime fertile phase. Women also find men who seem to be better long-term mates less attractive during her ovulatory phase (Cantú et al., 2013). These findings correspond with our findings because they show that women are interested in extra-pair copulations and men are able to detect this change in woman mate preference.

This short-term poaching system is activated when short-term oriented men encounter romantic couples in which the man partner is significantly less physically attractive than himself or the man’s mate. Among other things, the mechanism is also expected to gauge the woman’s need for commitment from the interloper. Ultimately, the interloper is expected to be especially likely to pursue mated women who have a low-testosterone, high-commitment mate for a potential short-term affair. The findings from the present research are also consistent with the “sexy-sons” hypothesis (Fisher, 1958) which states that women, when ovulating, may want to cheat on their partner in order to get better genes for future offspring. Since men choose the couple that is the largest physical attractiveness discrepancy, they may be aware of the advantage the woman will obtain by cheating on her partner.

Conclusion

Overall, this study furthered research regarding mate poaching behavior. These results suggest that men do strategize their short-term poaching that allows them to pick out women in relationships with other men to easily cheat with. The focal cue to identify this couple appears to be the facial attractiveness of the woman's partner in comparison to her facial attractiveness. This adaptation may have developed since it benefited ancestral men to choose a couple where the man is not as attractive, i.e., less physically dominant, because the interloper gains an advantage by being more dominant and aggressive than the unattractive man partner.

Limitations & Future Research

Although these findings were significant, there were several limitations. First, the stimuli presented to the participants were white men and women. This study did not have a diverse group of participants. Future research should explore using other cultures besides white individuals. Second, participants were college-aged men.

Future research should look at older men to understand how this strategy changes or stays consistent throughout an individual's lifetime.

This study looked at the evolved psychological mechanism of interloping. It would benefit researchers to further their understandings of this mechanism. First, an act nomination should be done in order for researchers to have an inventory of the steps, techniques, and phrases that men who infiltrate a relationship perform.

Since the findings suggest that men chose a couple that has the biggest discrepancy in their physical attractiveness, it would benefit researchers to determine whether or not there is a “perfect number discrepancy.” That is, for example, if the woman is ranked as an eight on a scale of attractiveness and the man is ranked as a six, does that discrepancy have the effect to suggest that woman may be more likely to cheat?

Future research should also look at femininity and masculinity of the men in the photo. This investigation will allow researchers to further understand the different variables that may come into play when deciding whether or not they should infiltrate.

Providing different traits and characteristics to the man or woman in pictures of the couple would be beneficial in investigating tradeoffs men use to determine which woman to infiltrate. Explaining to the participants that the woman is a bad mother, is not fully supported by her mate, or is using contraception may hinder the interloper's pursuit because his future offspring may have a harder chance at survival. Adding different description to men will also be beneficial. Researchers could explain that the man is a bad father, has family nearby, or is an abusive mate. Additionally, providing more positive characteristics to the man or woman in a couple would be interesting. For example, researchers could suggest that the woman is a good mom, a good spouse, and that the man is a good father, wealthy, and is healthy. Giving characteristics and attributes to the man and woman in the relationship that a man is interested in infiltrating will open up a checks-and-balance system in this short-term mate poaching mechanism. Regardless, understanding the mind of the interloper can lead to more in-depth studies on human mating and will further the field of evolutionary psychology.

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