

Do the Dark Triad and Self-Perceived Mate Value Predict Intention to Mate Poach?

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Although much research has been conducted on the psychology of mate poaching, little research has been conducted on the factors that predict intention to mate poach, particularly from the perspective of the poacher. Although some research has paid attention to the role of the dark triad in mate poaching, no research, to our knowledge, has explored the relationship between self-perceived mate value and intention to mate poach. We explored the role of the dark triad (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy), self-perceived mate value, and sex on one's intention to mate poach, in 82 participants from Coventry University. We find that psychopathy was the only trait to significantly predict intention to mate poach, suggesting those who scored higher on psychopathy were more likely to mate poach. Furthermore, we find that self-perceived mate value significantly predicted intention to mate poach, suggesting those who perceive themselves as having a high mate value are likely to engage in mate poaching, which is a novel finding.

Keywords

mate poaching, dark triad, mate value

Introduction

Mate poaching refers to an act, or a series of acts, where one attempts to attract, or sexually pursue another person who is in a committed romantic relationship (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Schmitt et al. (2004) explored mate poaching amongst a diverse sample, finding men and women had attempted to poach someone else's partner at some point during their lives. Although research has been conducted on determining personality traits in those who are more likely to mate poach (see Schmitt & Buss, 2001), there is limited literature investigating the determinants of mate poaching, resulting in the need to determine the factors that contribute to an individual engaging in mate poaching behavior. As a result, we explored the role of the dark triad personality traits in intention to mate poach.

The dark triad (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy) are associated with low levels of empathy,

guilt, and a reduced likelihood of cementing long-term romantic relationships (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992). Those with Machiavellian traits are described as manipulative, calculated and arrogant. Machiavellian individuals often use deception to achieve their desired outcome, including attracting mates (Christie & Geis, 1970). In addition, Machiavellianism is related to sexual promiscuity (McHoskey, 2001), suggesting those with Machiavellian traits may be involved in mate poaching behavior, especially as the act of mate poaching requires some form of deception and manipulation (see Christie & Geis, 1970).

Narcissists are prone to attention seeking, feelings of superiority, and authority (House & Howell 1992). Narcissists are socio-sexually orientated, and prone to adultery (Campbell & Foster 2002), often attempting to secure additional mates, despite already being committed to a romantic partner. Psychopathy refers to a lack of emotions, particularly empathy towards others (Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, in press). Those with psychopathic traits are charming, persuasive, do not feel guilt, or take responsibility for their actions (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Recent research by Jonason, Li, & Buss (2010) investigated the relationship between the dark triad, mate retention and mate poaching, establishing a strong relationship between the dark triad and mate poaching behavior (see also Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). One of the evolutionary benefits of mate poaching, proposed by the sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) relates to increased reproductive success, through attracting multiple sexual partners. Furthermore, as mate poaching involves derogation of rival mate competitors (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), it is plausible to argue that the dark triad may be involved in the process of trying to lure someone away from a committed relationship, through derogation, manipulation, and a lack of empathy.

A further determinant of mate poaching is self-perceived mate value. Mate value is defined as the total value of traits possessed by an individual that contribute to one's successes in mate attraction, retention, and reproductive success, such as financial resources and physical attractiveness (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Waynforth, 2001). As a result, if self-perceived mate value accurately reflects actual mate value, and influences one's mate attraction strategy, then it could predict intention to mate poach, thus providing a rationale for investigating the link between self-perceived mate value and intention to mate poach, which to our knowledge has not been previously explored. As a consequence of their desirability to the opposite sex, those who have higher mate value have more confidence in attracting mates, and may be more successful in luring a committed partner from their current relationship. In support, Rhodes, Simmons, & Peters (2005) found a relationship between self-esteem, attractiveness and mate poaching.

This study aimed to investigate the influence of the dark triad, self-perceived mate value and sex on one's

intention to mate poach. The primary focus of this study was to pay attention to the role of the mate poacher, differentiating from current research that has concentrated on the individual who has been poached. We hypothesized that the dark triad, self-perceived mate value and sex would significantly predict intention to mate poach.

Method

(a) Participants and Design

Eighty-two students took part from Coventry University, recruited via opportunity sampling (40 males, 42 females, mean age = 21, *SD* = 1.8). A multiple regression model was adopted to analyse the relationship between Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy (dark triad personality traits), self-perceived mate value, and the participant’s sex, on the intention to mate poach.

(b) Materials and Procedure

Participants completed the 27-item Short Triad Scale, SD3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) measuring Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .77$), narcissism ($\alpha = .70$) and psychopathy ($\alpha = .72$). Each sub-scale consists of 9 items. An example of an item measuring Machiavellianism is; ‘there are things you should hide from other people, because they don’t need to know’ measured on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert scale. We calculated a total score for each dark triad by totaling the 9 items within each sub-scale.

Mate value was measured using the 4-item Mate Value Scale (Edlund & Sagarin, 2014), designed to assess an individual’s self-perceived mate value ($\alpha = .87$). An example of an item from the scale is; ‘how would you rate your level of desirability as a partner’ on a 1 (low) to 7 (high) Likert scale. Mate value was calculated by totaling the scores from all four items.

Intention to mate poach was measured using the 10-item HMP Attraction Survey (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), measuring an individual’s intention to attract another person’s partner ($\alpha = .70$). An example from the scale is; ‘Have you ever attempted to attract someone who was already in a romantic relationship with someone else?’ measured on a 1 (rarely) to 7 (always) Likert scale. We modified the scale, removing some items that were not relevant to our hypotheses. As a result, intention to mate poach was calculated by totaling items that were relevant to our hypotheses. This study was approved by the Coventry University research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part, and all data were collected online using the departmental research participation scheme.

Results

Multiple regression was conducted to measure the influence of the dark triad traits (entered individually), self-perceived mate value and sex on intention to mate poach. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity and independent errors.

The total variance (r^2) explained by the model was 28%, $F(5, 76) = 5.96, p < .001$, Cohen’s $f^2 = 0.39$, suggesting a moderate to large effect size according to Cohen’s guidelines on calculating effect size for regression models. The model significantly predicted intention to mate poach (adjusted $r^2 = .23$). See Table 1 for beta values for each predictor variable, alongside p values. Beta values suggest that self-perceived mate value and psychopathy were the strongest significant predictors of intention to mate poach, whereas all other predictors were non-significant. Correlations between all key variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and regression coefficients for key variables

Predictor variables	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	β	p
Intention to mate poach	12.4 (7.0)	-----	----
Self-perceived mate value	19.3 (4.5)	0.23	.04
Narcissism	3.0 (0.6)	-0.04	.78
Machiavellianism	3.4 (0.6)	0.18	.12
Psychopathy	2.5 (0.7)	0.25	.05
Sex (male = 1, female = 2)	1.5 (0.5)	-0.13	.25

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, self-perceived mate value and sex predicted one’s intention to mate poach. We found that self-perceived mate value and psychopathy significantly predicted intention to mate poach, partially supporting our hypothesis. Contrary to previous literature (Parker & Burkley, 2009), we found that sex did not predict intention to mate poach. This may be because our sample was not necessarily as large as we would have hoped. However, we did aim to recruit an equal number of males and females. Our primary findings were; those who have higher self-perceived mate value, and higher psychopathy, were more likely to steal another person’s mate. The fact that self-perceived mate value was a significant predictor,

Table 2. Correlational matrix for key variables

	1. Intention to mate poach	2. Self-perceived mate value	3. Narcissism	4. Machiavellianism	5. Psychopathy	6. Sex
1	-----					
2	$r = .36^{**}$	-----				
3	$r = .34^{**}$	$r = .47^{**}$	-----			
4	$r = .37^{**}$	$r = .26^*$	$r = .49^{**}$	-----		
5	$r = .42^{**}$	$r = .34^{**}$	$r = .55^{**}$	$r = .39^{**}$	-----	
6	$r = -.31^{**}$	$r = -.14$	$r = -.31^{**}$	$r = -.39^{**}$	$r = -.36^{**}$	-----

Note: $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$

is a novel finding.

A reason why psychopathy was a significant predictor of intention to mate poach may be because those who consider themselves as highly desirable feel they have a greater pool of mating partners to choose from, thus offering a reproductive advantage (Buston & Emlen, 2003). Perhaps those with higher mate value have higher self-esteem, supported by evidence suggesting intention to mate poach is influenced by how one sees oneself as a potential mate (Rhodes et al., 2005; Sunderani, Arnocky, & Vaillancourt, 2013). Our findings are partially inconsistent with previous literature suggesting those who score high on Machiavellianism, and the dark triad in general, are more likely to engage in mate poaching (Jonason et al., 2010). We find that psychopathy predicted intention to mate poach, which may be due to the fact that psychopathic individuals have characteristics such as a lack of empathy, persuasiveness and charisma, which assist them in successfully poaching someone in a committed romantic relationship (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

This study has some notable limitations. Firstly, we did not measure the role of the dark triad and mate value when poachers are seeking to establish a short-term or long-term relationship (see Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Secondly, we are unable to establish cause and effect, due to the design of the study. Thirdly, we rely on self-report data, which can be highly artificial, eliciting ideal, as opposed to actual behaviour (Baldwin, 1992). Fourthly, we did not investigate whether mate poaching translated into successful relationship formation. Perhaps future research could explore whether mate poachers of high mate value, successfully form a long-term relationship, as a result of mate poaching.

This study further supports existing literature on the determinants of mate poaching. We provide support for the relationship between psychopathy and intention to mate poach. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this is the first study to measure the relationship between self-perceived mate value and intention to mate poach.

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