



Mate-Value Moderates the Relationship between Intrasexual Competitiveness and Successful Mate Poaching

Steven Arnocky¹

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Abstract

Mate poaching has long been described as an intrasexually competitive tactic for acquiring new mating opportunities (Buss, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(4), 616–628, 1988); one that confers increased risk or rejection, retaliation, or reputational damage, and thus should be most successful when implemented by those who are most desirable to members of the opposite sex. From this perspective, mate poaching should be predicted by trait differences in intrasexual competitiveness, and this link should be moderated by one's own mate value as an index of the ability to succeed in poaching efforts and to bear the burden of the associated risks. Undergraduate men and women ($N = 292$) completed measures of intrasexual competitiveness, mate value, and mate poaching (successful and unsuccessful). Results showed that intrasexual competitiveness predicted a greater number of both successful and unsuccessful poaching attempts. Mate value moderated this relationship for successful, but not unsuccessful, mate poaching, such that individuals who were both intrasexually competitive and high in mate value reported the greatest success. Results suggest that mate poaching is an intrasexually competitive mating tactic; the success of which depends in part upon the mate value of the perpetrator.

Keywords Intrasexual competition · Mate value · Mate poaching · Mating success

Introduction

Mate poaching involves an individual attempting to mate with a person who is known to already be in an exclusive romantic relationship (Davies et al. 2007; Schmitt and Buss 2001), with the objective of creating a new sexual or romantic relationship with that person (Davies et al. 2007; Davies et al. 2019; see Fisher and Wade 2020 for review). Mate poaching occurs across short-term and longer-term mating contexts (Moran and Wade 2019a), whereby individuals may implement different poaching tactics in order to satisfy their specific mating goals (Moran and Wade 2017). Successfully implemented, mate poaching can result in a new short- or long-term mating opportunity, and has been linked to increased total mating success in young adults (Arnocky et al. 2013). Mate poaching has previously been characterized as a form of intrasexual competition (Buss 1988). Whereas the victorious mate

poacher obtains a new mate, the unsuccessful intrasexual rival, who has temporarily or permanently lost exclusive mating access to their partner, suffers meaningful consequences relevant to their reproductive fitness. A short-term poach such as an affair can lead to cuckoldry for men (Davies et al. 2006a) or the unanticipated diversion of resources for women (see Arnocky et al. 2012). A longer-term poach involving a partner's outright defection and formation of a new dyad with the poacher can result in the loss of substantial invested time, energy, and resources that were allocated to the mateship or shared offspring, and perhaps a tarnished reputation as a less-desirable mate which may, in turn, negatively impact future mating efforts (see Arnocky et al. 2013 for review).

Mate poaching can also impose costs upon the perpetrator. Poaching attempts confer lower odds of successful attraction relative to pursuing unpaired individuals (Schmitt and Buss 2001), as well as risk of shame and guilt, loss of status, and retaliation from the person whose partner is being targeted (Davies et al. 2010). Unsurprisingly then, individuals vary widely in their willingness to engage in mate poaching, and researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding individual differences in this behavior. In the present study, the role of trait intrasexual competitiveness was

✉ Steven Arnocky
stevena@nipissingu.ca

¹ Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada

examined as one potentially important predictor of mate poaching effort. Simply put, if one holds a more competitive attitude toward members of the same sex, then one should be more willing to invoke costs upon them in the pursuit of mating opportunity. Yet intrasexual competitiveness alone will not ensure success in poaching. Therefore, a second goal of this study was to determine whether poacher mate-value moderated the relationship between intrasexual competitiveness and poaching success.

Intrasexual Competitiveness

Intrasexual competition involves rivalry with members of the same sex over access to mates (Buss 1988; Buunk and Fisher 2009). Owing to differential reproductive potential and variance among the sexes (Trivers 1972), intrasexual competition is often more intense and vicious among males relative to females (Darwin 1871). Nevertheless, recent theoretical reconceptualization of intrasexual competition has highlighted the important role of competition among women for desirable mates and mating-relevant resources (Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017). Engaging in intrasexual competition may be particularly beneficial in certain contexts (e.g., when desirable mates are difficult come by), yet less necessary in others (e.g., when desirable mates are abundant; Arnocky et al. 2014). Accordingly, it has been suggested that individuals should vary from one another in their orientation toward intrasexual competition (Buunk and Fisher 2009).

Although many intrasexually competitive tactics diverge across the sexes (see Buunk and Fisher 2009), mate poaching is one competitive tactic that can benefit the mating success of both men and women. For example, Arnocky et al. (2013) found that mate-poaching predicted various indices of mating success, including having more lifetime sex partners, more casual sex partners, and more dating partners among both men and women. Not surprisingly then, both sexes have been found to engage in mate poaching effort for both short- and long-term purposes, with males typically scoring higher on reported poaching attempts relative to females (Schmitt et al. 2004).

Buss (1988) proposed that mate poaching is a clear example of intrasexual competition, yet to date, no research has examined its perpetration in relation with individual differences in intrasexual competitiveness. There is, however, some circumstantial evidence to support a potential link. First, mate poaching has previously been linked to personality traits that are themselves related to intrasexual competitiveness. Sunderani et al. (2013) found that men with criminal tendencies and cold affect from a measure of psychopathy were more likely to have mate poached. Similarly, in samples of both men and women, “Dark Triad” traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy together characterized by disagreeableness, duplicitousness, and aggressiveness

(Paulhus and Williams 2002) have been shown to correlate with both mate poaching (Jonason et al. 2010) and intrasexual competitiveness (Machiavellianism and psychopathy; Lyons et al. 2019). Both mate poaching and intrasexual competitiveness have been found to also correlate positively with a less-restricted sociosexual orientation in samples containing male and female respondents (Belu and O’Sullivan 2019; Buunk and Fisher 2009). Nevertheless, to date no research has directly examined potential links between individual differences in intrasexual competitiveness and mate poaching behavior, nor has research explored whether poacher desirability moderates the success of this putative form of intrasexual competition.

Mate-Value

Sexual selection operates on the premise that some individuals will be more successful than others in the realm of intrasexual competition for mating opportunity (Darwin 1871). Some evidence exists to support the hypothesis that higher mate-value poachers should have more successful (but not unsuccessful) poaching attempts relative to individuals lower in mate-value. First, participants who are exposed to high mate-value members of the opposite sex tend to rate their current romantic relationships as less desirable. For instance, Kenrick et al. (1994) found that women rated their relationships less favorably when exposed to high dominance men, whereas men rated their relationships less favorably when exposed to attractive women. Moreover, individuals who are low on important mate-value traits, such as health, appear more attuned to preventing the loss of their current partner (e.g., Arnocky et al. 2015; Davis et al. 2019).

Second, evidence from hypothetical mating decision-making research suggests that poacher mate-value can benefit the odds that a target would leave their current relationship for the poacher. Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that raters perceived that displays of dominance (for short-term mating), wealth, and generosity would be more effective for male poachers, whereas displays of physical attractiveness would be more effective for female poachers. Davies and Shackelford (2017) asked men and women about factors that would make them more or less likely to be successfully poached away from an existing partner. Participants reported that poachers would be more successful if their mate-value was greater than the mate-value of the target’s partner (i.e., the intrasexual rival). Similarly, poachers were reported to be more likely to find success if the target’s mate-value was greater than the mate-value of the target’s partner. If the target was more committed to their current partner, the participants reported that the poacher would need to be higher in mate-value characteristics like wealth and attractiveness in order for them to leave the current partner, compared with the requirements held by those less committed to their current partners. Moran and Wade (2019b) examined attractiveness

discrepancies and relationship duration effects experimentally by presenting raters with images of couples where the male partner varied in his relative attractiveness to his female partner (whose attractiveness was held constant), alongside either a short or long-term reported duration of their relationship. Results showed that when the woman was equally attractive or more attractive than her partner, participants indicate they would have more success poaching her. A similar trend has been observed whereby individuals reported that a mate poacher would have to be of a higher mate value to successfully induce them away from a more committed relationship (e.g., marriage) relative to a less-committed relationship (e.g., dating) (Davies and Shackelford 2015).

The third and most direct line of evidence comes from studies that have reported on individual differences in mate poaching frequency. In a large cross-cultural study of 53 nations, Schmitt et al. (2004) found that attractive men and women reported more success in mate poaching. Yet some traits that were also associated with mate poaching success, such as perversion, could be considered detrimental to mate-value (especially as a long-term mate). Similarly, Sunderani et al. (2013) found that women who perceived themselves to be physically attractive reported more success in mate poaching, whereas men who reported themselves to be taller and as having higher self-esteem (a putative marker of mate-value, Brase and Guy 2004), also reported more success in mate poaching. Nevertheless, other traits such as cold affect, criminal tendencies, high stress hormone levels (cortisol), and low testosterone, all of which may be unrelated or perhaps negatively related to men's mate-value, present some ambiguity as to whether mate-value is indeed predictive of mate poaching success. Moreover, Davies et al. (2006b) have postulated that mate poaching may be pursued by individuals who are otherwise unable to attract a desirable mate. Taken together, the incongruence in findings from self-report and experimental studies of mate-value among romantic partners and their real or perceived vulnerability to poaching (Moran and Wade 2019b) coupled with the lack of direct evidence supporting a role of poacher mate-value in relation to poaching efficacy highlights the need to examine whether those who are higher in mate-value report more overt success in their poaching attempts.

The Present Study

Given the intrasexual competitive nature of mate poaching, individual differences in trait intrasexual competitiveness should predict more frequent poaching attempts, whether they be successful or unsuccessful (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, given the potential role of poacher mate-value in determining success of a poaching attempt, it is further hypothesized that links between intrasexual competitiveness and *successful* (but not unsuccessful) mate poaching should be moderated by the

poacher's mate-value. Specifically, intrasexual competitiveness should best predict successful mate poaching when the poacher is simultaneously high in mate-value (hypothesis 2). Conversely, there is no predicted role of mate-value in moderating links between intrasexual competitiveness and unsuccessful attempts (hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

Participants were 292 heterosexual undergraduate students (female = 159, 55%) aged 17–30 from Nipissing University located in North Bay, Ontario, Canada ($M_{age} = 20.21$, $SD = 2.06$). The ethnic distribution of participants was predominantly Caucasian (93%). Participants were remunerated with partial course credit via the University's online research participation system.

Procedure and Measures

As part of a larger protocol, participants first completed a survey assessing basic demographic information as well as the following self-report measures:

The Scale for Intrasexual Competition (SIC) The SIC (Buunk and Fisher 2009) consists of 12 items, such as “I can't stand it when I meet another woman who is more attractive than I am” and “When I got out, I can't stand it when men pay more attention to a friend of mine than to me”. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all applicable*, and 7 = *completely applicable*). This measure has shown good construct validity, relating to other mating tactics including competitive beautification (Arnocky and Piché 2014) and interpersonal aggression (Arnocky et al. 2019). In the present study, the SIC showed good internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.88$.

Mate-Value Self-perceived mate-value was assessed using the Components of Mate-Value Survey (CMVS; Fisher et al. 2008). The measure consists of 22 items with response options ranging along a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 7 = “strongly agree”). The CMVS incorporates items from a diverse set of mate-value dimensions including sociality (e.g., “I run into friends wherever I go”), how the respondent is viewed by members of the opposite sex (e.g., “Members of the opposite sex are attracted to me”), parenting (e.g., “I would make a good parent”), wealth (e.g., “I want people to think that I am wealthy”), physical attractiveness (e.g., “I would like members of the opposite sex to consider me sexy”), relationship history (e.g., “After I date someone they often want to date me again”), and fear of romantic

failure (“I often worry about not having a date”). The measure is often used as a composite average of perceived mate-value across important dimensions of mating (e.g., Arnocky et al. 2014). In the present study, the measure showed good internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.82$.

Mate Poaching Participants were first provided with a brief narrative explaining the concept of mate poaching as knowingly behaving in a manner meant to lure an already mated individual away from their current partner for some romantic or sexual purpose (see also Davies et al. 2007). The description provided in the current study, based on Arnocky et al. (2013) and Sunderani et al. (2013), was presented as follows:

Sometimes people try to romantically attract one another. On occasion, people try to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship. For example, a woman may try to attract a man even though he is already dating, in a relationship with, or married to another woman. She might do this for a short-term sexual affair with him or to try and obtain him for long-term relationship. Mate poaching then is attracting (or trying to attract) someone away from their current partner (originally adapted from Schmitt and Buss 2001).

Participants then reported on a 9-point Likert-scale (0 = never to 8 = eight or more times) their total number of lifetime mate-poaching attempts using the following two items: “How often have you *successfully* poached someone away from a past partner?” and “How often have you attempted to try to poach someone away from their relationship with someone else *unsuccessfully*?” (see Arnocky et al. 2013; Sunderani et al. 2013).

Data Analysis Plan

Given some previous research showing sex differences in the frequency of poaching attempts (Schmitt et al. 2004), including among university samples (Arnocky et al. 2013), as well as in the individual differences associated with successful poaching (Sunderani et al. 2013), sex was statistically controlled for in the models. Similarly, because older age in young adulthood ostensibly affords more time in the mating market to have engaged in various sexual activities (see Arnocky et al. 2013; Arnocky et al., 2017), age was also entered as a control variable in the tested models. To test the moderation models, intrasexual competitiveness was entered as the predictor variable, mate-value as the moderator variable, and mate poaching as the dependent variable (Model 1 in PROCESS) (Hayes 2013). The Johnson-Neyman technique (Aiken et al. 1991) assessed the ranges within which the moderation was significant. The model was run twice; once for successful mate poaching, and then

again for unsuccessful mate poaching. A-priori power-analyses were performed to determine the sample size needed for detecting significant effects. It was determined that a sample size of $n > 134$ participants would provide sufficient power (80% power, $\alpha = .05$, 2-tailed) for detecting a small-size effect ($f^2 = .15$). There were no anticipated sex differences in the model; however, oversampling was conducted in order to obtain more than the minimum number of responses for each sex independently. Both sex and age were then included as covariates in the model, given some evidence that males appear to report more mate poaching effort in some studies, and because older age would afford more time and thus opportunity to have poached.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1.

First, for successful mate poaching, neither age ($B = -0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = -1.36$, $p < 0.18$) nor sex ($B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = -1.69$, $p < .09$) were statistically significant predictors of mate poaching success. Consistent with the proposed model, intrasexual competitiveness ($B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 1.80$, $p < 0.07$), and mate-value ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 2.92$, $p < 0.004$) related to successful mate poaching, such that individuals who were more intrasexually competitive and of higher mate-value reported more success in mate poaching. There was a statistically significant moderation effect of mate-value, ($B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 2.21$, $p < 0.03$). Specifically, intrasexual competitiveness predicted mate poaching success for men and women scoring either average ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 2.05$, $p < 0.04$) or (especially) high (+1 *SD*) in mate-value ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 3.02$, $p < 0.003$), but not for men and women scoring low (−1 *SD*) on mate-value ($B = 0.0001$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 0.02$, $p < 0.99$) (Fig. 1, left panel). Deconstruction of the interaction showed that the moderation effect was significant for mate-value scores above 4.50 (Fig. 1, right panel), which, given the seven-point Likert-type scaling of the mate-value measure, suggests a significant effect of intrasexual competitiveness upon successful poaching when mate-value is greater than just above average (i.e., 0.5 points above the midpoint of the scale). When the same model was run with unsuccessful mate poaching entered as the dependent variable, results showed main effect of intrasexual competitiveness ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.99$, $p < 0.0001$). Neither age, sex, mate-value, nor the intrasexual competitiveness x mate-value interaction predicted unsuccessful mate poaching.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all study variables

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	20.21	2.06	17.00	30.00	----				
2. Sex	----	----	----	----	-0.24***	–			
3. Intrasexual competitive	2.73	0.96	1.00	6.17	0.05	-0.10	----		
4. Mate-value	4.44	0.71	2.38	5.86	0.07	-0.08	0.31***	----	
5. Successful poaching	0.60	1.10	0.00	8.00	0.03	-0.09	0.28***	0.18**	----
6. Unsuccessful poaching	0.60	1.11	0.00	8.00	-0.02	-0.10	0.18**	0.22***	0.52***

Note: ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Recent research has extended beyond characterizing mate poaching and the rate at which it occurs, toward gaining a better understanding of individual difference factors that might make one (a) more likely to adopt the tactic of mate poaching, and (b) more likely to succeed in its implementation. Mate poaching is a highly intrasexually competitive tactic that has a more direct impact on the mating success of same-sex rivals, relative to the intersexual attraction of available partners in the mating pool. This is because in the latter, the potential mate is merely made unavailable to intrasexual rivals, whereas in the former, the poacher necessarily takes that partner away from a same-sex rival, introducing the risk of cuckoldry if the original partner remains with the target, and renders any resources invested in that relationship wasted if the original dyad dissolves. Therefore, as men and women vary in intrasexual competitiveness, this leads to the hypothesis that mate poaching attempts (either successful or unsuccessful) should be most frequently perpetrated by those higher in this trait. The results of this study supported this prediction. Heterosexual men and women who were higher in intrasexual competitiveness reported more successful and unsuccessful mate poaching attempts.

Previous research suggests that individuals rate displays of high mate-value as being more likely to be effective at ensuring the success of a poach (Schmitt and Buss 2001), and individuals report being more likely to be successfully lured away from an existing relationship by a poacher if the poacher was high in mate-value (Davies and Shackelford 2017). Moreover, some putative indices of mate-value, such as physical attractiveness, have been linked to mate poaching success (e.g., Sunderani et al. 2013). Therefore, it was further hypothesized that the poacher's mate-value would moderate the relationship between intrasexual competitiveness and poaching frequency for successful, but not unsuccessful, poaching attempts. Results of the present study supported this prediction. Individuals who were high in intrasexual competitiveness were more frequently successful mate poachers only when they were simultaneously high in mate-value. Among low mate-value individuals, there was no relationship between intrasexual competitiveness and successful mate poaching. This is interesting given that recent research suggested that individuals state that they would engage in more mate-retention effort when an intrasexual rival is attempting to poach one's mate (Nascimento and Little 2020). This suggests that high mate-value poachers appear to reap greater poaching success even in the face of increased opposition from their same-sex rivals. Conversely, neither mate-value nor its interaction with intrasexual competitiveness mattered in predicting

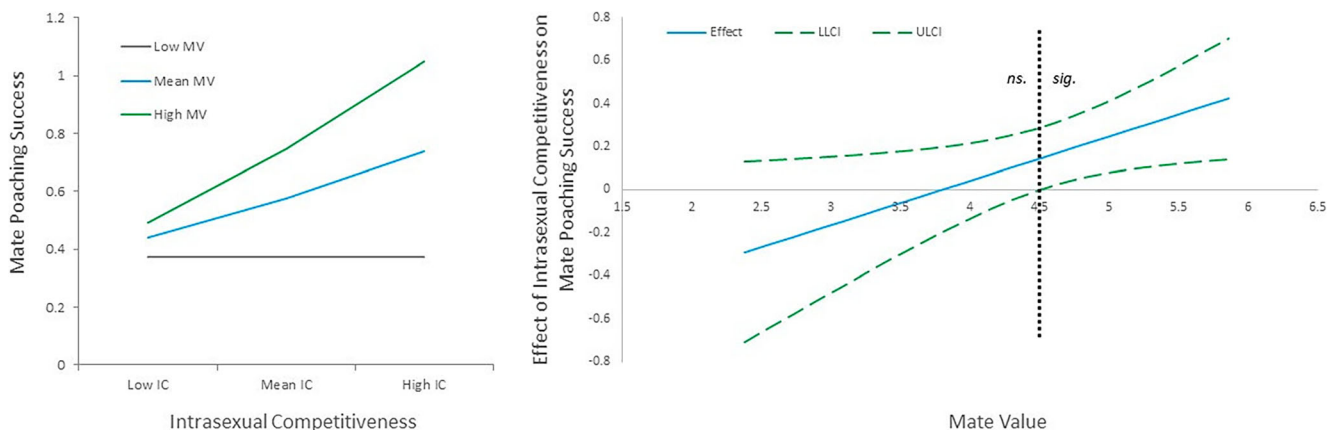


Fig. 1 Standardized conditional moderation effect of mate value scores on the relationship between intrasexual competitiveness and successful mate poaching (left) and Johnson-Neyman confidence limits (right)

unsuccessful mate poaching attempts. Davies et al. (2006b) have postulated that perhaps mate poaching may be pursued by individuals who are otherwise unable to attract a desirable mate. Equally as important, then, might be the finding that mate-value was unrelated to unsuccessful poaching attempts, suggesting that mate-value did not appear to factor into predicting unsuccessful attempts. Moreover, at the bivariate level, higher mate-value was associated with both successful and unsuccessful attempts, suggesting that low mate-value may not be the main determining factor for a lack of success. Perhaps current partner mate-value and relationship satisfaction or traits of the target (loyalty, kindness) may be more important. Nevertheless, future research should attempt to further determine under what circumstances low mate-value individuals attempt to poach, and what might lead to their success.

Although this study focused on the success of poaching based upon characteristics of the poacher, it is clear that traits associated with the target of the poach and their current partner both play a role in the outcome of the poaching attempt. Here also, mate-value can be expected to play a role. For example, Moran and Wade (2019a) recently found that participants reported perceiving a woman as being easier to poach when she is more attractive than her current partner. Future research might consider how the poacher's mate-value interacts with that of the current partner in predicting poaching success. For instance, it might be expected that if the current partner is also high in mate-value, then the poacher's own mate-value might be less influential than if the intrasexual rival's mate-value were lower.

Another area of future research should include the contextual sensitivity of intrasexual competitiveness and poaching effort. For example, research has demonstrated that men's sociosexual orientation becomes more unrestricted and their intrasexual competitiveness increases (as does women's) when primed with mate scarcity versus abundance (Arnocky et al. 2014; Arnocky et al. 2016). It can be hypothesized that willingness to poach might increase under conditions where mates are perceived as harder to come by and more likely to already be taken, and that shifts in intrasexual competitiveness might mediate this relationship.

Recent research has also highlighted some discrepancies in the respective roles of target mate-value, their current partner's mate-value, and relationship duration in affecting individuals' decisions to poach (Moran and Wade 2019b). For instance, Parker and Burkley (2009) suggest mate-choice copying may be complicit in mate poaching, given that single women (but not men) are more interested in pursuing men who are currently in a relationship with another woman. From this perspective, men mated to high mate-value women might be particularly desirable as targets of a poach. Similarly, Moran and Wade (2019a) suggest that men might also poach as a function of mate-choice copying, given their reported links between interest in poaching a female when her male

partner is of high mate-value relative to his partner. The poacher might identify the target as possessing valuable qualities that ostensibly allowed them to attract a high mate-value partner in the first place (see Fisher and Wade 2020 for review). Future research might consider measuring individuals own self-perceived mate-value in conjunction with their responses to experimentally-controlled mate poaching decision-making scenarios where the mate-value of the members of the dyad are varied. Perhaps poachers of higher self-perceived mate-value are more willing to attempt a poach even when the relationship is well-established and whereby the intrasexual rival is also of high mate-value. In other words, high mate-value poachers may be more willing to attempt high-risk poaches with lower odds of success. From this perspective, poacher mate-value might help to explain incongruent findings related to mate-choice copying and the pursuit of target mates whose current partner is of high mate-value.

Mate poaching is but one of many diverse tactics that individuals employ during intrasexual competition for mating opportunity. Other more common tactics, such as general mate attraction (i.e., intersexual selection), still negatively impact rivals by removing a mate from the broader pool. Previous research has linked mate attraction efforts, such as those aimed at enhancing one's own physical appearance, to individual differences in intrasexual competitiveness (e.g., Arnocky and Piché 2014; Locke and Arnocky 2020), and with sociosexual orientation (Buunk and Fisher 2009). Of course, intrasexual competition does not end upon mere acquisition of a mate, and so it is not surprising that mate-retention efforts also correlate with intrasexual competitiveness (Arnocky et al. 2014). Interestingly, mate-value has also independently been linked to more effective mate attraction/acquisition (Guéguen and Lamy 2012), mate-retention (Salkicevic et al. 2014), and sociosexual behavior (e.g., Penke and Asendorpf 2008). Thus, future research might consider more broadly how mate-value interacts with trait intrasexual competitiveness in predicting a broader range of intrasexually competitive attitudes and actions, with a focus on how successfully they are implemented in real interpersonal contexts.

Relative to intersexual courtship of unattached individuals, mate poaching confers greater risk to the poacher (Davies et al. 2010; Schmitt and Buss 2001) and worse functioning in relationships established by an act of poaching, characterized by lower relationship satisfaction and commitment, more attention to alternative mates, and infidelity (Foster et al. 2014). Therefore, the continued study of the factors that predict mate poaching will be important to understanding healthy and less-healthy relationship dynamics.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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