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# Friendship As A Relationship Infiltration Tactic During Human Mate Poaching: An Experimental Investigation

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FRIENDSHIP AS A RELATIONSHIP INFILTRATION TACTIC DURING HUMAN  
MATE POACHING: AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION

By

Justin Mogilski

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## **Abstract**

Previous research has characterized human mate poaching as a prevalent alternative mating strategy that entails risks and costs typically not present during general romantic courtship and attraction. This study is the first to experimentally investigate friendship between a poacher and poachee as a risk mitigation tactic. Participants (N = 382) read a vignette that differed by whether the poacher was male/female and whether the poacher and poachee were friends/acquaintances. Participants assessed the likelihood of the poacher being successful and incurring costs. They also rated the poacher and poachee on several personality and mate characteristics. Results revealed that friendship increased the perceived likelihood of success of a mate poaching attempt and decreased the perceived likelihood of several risks typically associated with mate poaching. However, friend-poachers were rated less favorably than acquaintance-poachers across measures of warmth, nurturance, and friendliness. These findings are interpreted using an evolutionary perspective. This study complements and builds upon previous findings and is the first experimental investigation of tactics mate poachers may use to mitigate risks inherent in mate poaching.

## Friendship as a Relationship Infiltration Tactic during Human Mate Poaching: An Experimental Investigation

Evolutionary psychology posits that manifest thought and behavior are guided in part by evolved information processing mechanisms that depend on internal and environmental input for their activation and expression. Research studying humans has used an evolutionary perspective to generate and test hypotheses for a number of phenomena (Confer, Easton, Fleischman, Goetz, Lewis, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010); however, in recent years it has been particularly useful in studying beauty, attraction, and romantic relationships. Sexual Strategies Theory is an evolutionarily derived theoretical framework that predicts that sex differences in mate preference and mating strategies have arisen due to asymmetrical parental investment requirements between the sexes, with women having a much greater minimal investment than males (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). From investigating sex differences in mating strategies and preferences, researchers have also been able to identify tactics that each sex might employ to embody the evolved preferences of the opposite sex and increase their odds of successfully attracting a mate (Tooke & Camire, 1991; Walters & Crawford, 1994). Most research in this area has focused on the use of these tactics to attract potential mates that are single and unattached. By contrast, very little research has looked at the tactics men and women use to mate poach, or attract individuals who are known to already be mated and in a relationship; nor has much research examined others' perceptions of those who choose to engage in this type of mating strategy.

The purpose of the current research is to examine friendship as a tactic for infiltrating a relationship during mate poaching using hypotheses informed by evolutionary theory.

Previous literature suggests that insertion of the self into the social context of an existing relationship may allow for deployment of more direct mate poaching tactics later on (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). To this end, the focus of this research includes investigating 1) whether friendship between a mate poacher and the person s/he is attempting to attract (poachee) influences others' perceptions of the likely success of the mate poacher, 2) the role that friendship may play in mitigating risks and costs associated with the mate poaching strategy, and 3) whether the friendship modulates perceived personality and evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics of the poacher and poachee.

### **Previous Research**

Schmitt & Buss (2001) define mate poaching as behavior intended to attract someone who is known to already be in a relationship. In their study, roughly 50% of males and females in North America reported having engaged, at least once, in mate poaching with the goal of starting a short-term relationship (i.e., one-night stands, brief affairs), or a long-term relationship (i.e., potential marital relationships). Approximately 85% of men and women also reported that someone else had tried to poach them from a past mating partner. Schmitt (2004) replicated these findings in a sample consisting of college-aged participants across 53 nations from 10 world areas, finding that about 50% of males and females reported having engaged in mating poaching and 70% of males and females reported that someone else had tried to poach them. By contrast, Davies, Shackelford, and Hass (2007) defined mate poaching for their participants as “an individual attempting to have sexual relationships with a person that the former individual knows is already in an exclusive relationship with someone else”. Using this definition, fewer women (about 30%) reported having attempted a

mate poach and both men and women reported fewer experiences with having been poached for a new long-term relationship. These investigations demonstrate that the frequency at which mate poaching is reported seems to depend on whether it is defined more conservatively by its ultimate functional outcome, such as sexual access to the person being poached (Davies et al., 2007) or more generally defined by its proximate function to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship (Schmitt and Buss, 2001). Regardless, all previous literature reveals that mate poaching occurs at a considerable frequency cross-culturally.

The prevalence of mate poaching suggests that this mating strategy may confer adaptive advantages to those who engage in it as well as to those targeted by it. Those who engage in mate poaching may benefit from attempting to attract an individual who has proven to be a viable mating partner. Humans partly use others' experiences and mate choices to determine their own mate choice decisions (Grammar, Fink, Møller, & Thornhill, 2003; Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, Place, & Bowers, 2012), a process referred to as non-independent mate choice (Pruett-Jones, S., 1992). In non-humans, non-independent mate choice tends to occur most often during female mate choice copying (Dugatkin, 1992; 2000). Recently, studies have demonstrated that male and female humans also practice mate choice copying (Bowers, Place, Todd, Penke & Asendorpf, 2011; Waynforth, 2007; Vakirtzis & Craig, 2012). For example, after observing real speed-date video recordings, both males and females show greater short-term and long-term relationship interest towards individuals in dates they perceive as successful (Place, Todd, Penke, & Asendorpf, 2010). This effect also occurs when assessing individuals who are currently in a relationship. When presented

opposite-sex targets who are either currently in a relationship or single, women report being more interested in pursuing attached versus unattached targets (Eva & Wood, 2006; Parker & Burkley, 2009). This evidence suggests that others' mate-choice decisions help an individual decide which characteristics are desirable in a potential mate for both unattached and attached targets.

Similarly, someone already in a relationship may benefit from being the target of mate poaching. Though the reasons to break-up with one's current mate are numerous and can vary across context and individual factors (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), quality of and access to alternative romantic partners can influence mate expulsion decisions (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Some individuals may require a realistic mate replacement before leaving their current relationship for a different long-term relationship (Rusbult, & Buunk, 1993), in the case of a long-term poach. Men and women can also benefit from choosing to go along with a short-term poaching attempt. In accordance with Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), having access to a greater variety of sexual partners can afford a male the opportunity to have more offspring whereas a female could cuckold her current partner and have children by other, potentially higher quality and genetically diverse men.

If mate poaching or becoming the target of mate poaching were evolutionarily preserved strategies, we would expect to find specific tactics for performing and/or enticing mate poaching attempts that would have helped men and women overcome the adaptive problem each sex faced in their evolutionary past. Sexual Strategies Theory predicts that females have evolved a stronger preference than men for potential long-term mates who are

able and willing to devote resources to themselves and their offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Ellis, 1992). By contrast, men possess adaptive preferences for physically attractive mating partners, low-cost sexual access, and sexual fidelity of a mate (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). When attempting to attract an unattached mate, individuals will tend to use strategies that appeal to the target sex's preferences (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Ratings of the perceived effectiveness for several mate poaching tactics revealed results that coincided with strategies. Tactics that increased attractiveness of the poacher, decreased attractiveness of the rival, inferred low-cost sexual access, and derogated rival sexual fidelity were rated as most effective when enacted by women whereas tactics such as resource display, generosity, willingness to invest, manipulation of emotional commitment of a rival, and development of an emotional connection were rated as most effective for men (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Schmitt and Shackelford (2003) asked participants to identify and then rate the effectiveness of tactics used by someone who wants to invite a mate poaching attempt. They found that these tactics followed evolutionarily predicted patterns as well, with strategies such as enhance physical appearance and suggest/provide easy sexual access as more effective for females and demonstrate resources as more effective for males. This evidence suggests that mate poaching seems to operate on the same mechanisms of sex differentiated attraction and mate preference as general romantic attraction. Furthermore, the tactics each sex uses during mate poaching appeal to the preferences of the opposite sex.

Although mate poaching acts on the same mechanisms of attraction as courtship between two unattached individuals, the goals of a mate poacher must include not only acquisition of a mate, but also subversion of that mate's current partner. To protect against

this subversion, humans not only have the ability to identify potential mate poachers, but also to prevent their partner from being poached (Buss, 2002; Shackelford & Buss, 1997).

Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that over 70% of their sample reported that someone had tried to attract a romantic partner away from them in the past, in contrast to 50% of participants who report having attempted to poach, showing that people may have a tendency to over-perceive threats to their relationship. However, only 30% reported that their partner was successfully attracted away from them, which suggests this sensitivity to potential infidelity may not be without benefit. Types of mate retention behavior and their frequencies were studied in an undergraduate (Buss, 1986) and in a married couples sample (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Men's mate retention positively covaried with their partner's youth and physical attractiveness and women's mate retention positively covaried with their partner's income and status striving. Also, men reported using resource display, submission and debasement, and intrasexual threats to retain their mates more often than women whereas women reported using appearance enhancement and verbal signals of possession more than men. Therefore, to be successful a mate poacher must be able to successfully avoid or subvert the retention tactics of the current partner. Failure to do this can have costly consequences. For males, resource depletion, concerns for a mate's future infidelity, increased risk for disease, and physical retribution from the female's mate have all been identified and judged as greater potential costs associated with mate poaching (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). For females, future infidelity of the man, self-degradation, worries of unwanted pregnancy, risk of disease, acquisition of a bad reputation, and physical harm by the partner of the poachee are judged as greater potential costs (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2010; Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). Some

violent mate retention behaviors can involve particularly serious costs to both the poacher and poachee (Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). It would appear, then, that while mate poaching may help an individual acquire a mate, there are more and greater risks than those involved in general romantic courtship.

This raises the question of why mate poaching continues to be used as a mating strategy despite greater potential costs. Davies, et al. (2010) propose a hierarchy of conditional mating strategies, whereby individuals will first attempt to attract unattached individuals and will only proceed to engage in mate poaching if they have been unsuccessful in attaining an acceptable, unattached individual. This is supported by their evidence that suggests that neither sex perceives the potential costs of mate poaching as outweighing the benefits. Mate poaching is also viewed as less effective than general romantic attraction (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Furthermore, individuals tend to adjust their mating strategies depending on their perceived ability to attract mates (Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). Perhaps one set of variables that influence employment of mate poaching as a strategy are individual characteristics of the poacher such as personality and worth as a mate.

Several patterns of personality have been identified in individuals who tend to engage in mate poaching and in those who receive and act upon a poaching attempt (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Based on measures of the Big-Five personality inventory (Goldberg, 1992), those who engaged in mate poaching were found to be lower in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Those who were more likely to receive poaching attempts tended to be high in Extraversion and Openness to Experience. Furthermore, those who were low in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and high in Neuroticism tended to go along with

poaching attempts made upon them. Measures from the "Sexy Seven" sexuality attributes inventory (Schmitt & Buss, 2000) indicated that those who engage in mate poaching rate themselves as low in relationship exclusivity, having an erotophilic disposition (the tendency to react positively to sexual cues), being sexually attractive and lacking sexual exclusivity. Those who were more likely to receive poaching attempts rated themselves as more sexually attractive and lower in relationship exclusivity whereas those who were more likely to go along with a mate poaching attempt rated themselves low on relationship exclusivity, had a masculine gender orientation, were low on emotional investment, and high on erotophilic disposition. This evidence further suggests that mate poaching is a psychologically distinct form of romantic attraction utilized more often by individuals with certain personality attributes.

Another set of variables that may influence the decision to engage in mate poaching may be aptitude in employing tactics that reduce the costs associated with mate poaching. As mentioned previously, mate poaching tends to entail greater and more numerous costs than general romantic attraction. As such, it would be adaptive for individuals who engage in mate poaching to develop strategies that decrease the potential for these risks. One such tactic implicated in previous literature is the insertion of the poacher into the social context of the poachee's current relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). The poacher may accomplish this by becoming friends with the poachee.

Friendship between a male and female can sometimes act as a precursor to the formation of a romantic relationship. Previous friendship is often a very important stage in the development of a long-term romantic relationship (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick

& Hendrick, 2000) Bleske-Rechek, and Buss (2001) found that single men and women report a more frequent desire to form a committed romantic relationship with their friends than do those already in a relationship. Furthermore, both sexes report a desire for companionship and emotional support from friends; however, men are more likely to report potential sexual access as an important reason to start a friendship than are women whereas women report social and physical protection from others as more important than do men. These preferences are consistent with Sexual Strategies Theory, suggesting that opposite-sex friendship formation may, in some cases, be motivated by factors that can subsequently lead to romantic interest and facilitate the formation of a romantic relationship. Not only does friendship help foster the initiation of a romantic relationship, but it seems to play a major role in relationship maintenance. The degree of friendship between individuals in a romantic relationship is positively related to both relationship satisfaction and length (Graham, 2011). Furthermore, valuing friendship in a relationship is a strong positive predictor of feelings of love, sexual gratification, and romantic commitment over time (Vanderdrift, Wilson, & Agnew, 2012).

In all, this evidence suggests that friendship between a mate poacher and poachee may be an effective tactic for dealing with the unique challenges present in mate poaching. This strategic friendship might not only increase the likelihood that a poaching attempt is successful by appealing to between-sex and across-sex preferences in mate choice but may also simultaneously mitigate risks that are unique to mate poaching.

## **Present Study**

The current research investigated the role of friendship as a potential mate poaching tactic employed to infiltrate a target relationship. Whereas previous research has characterized the effectiveness of mate poaching tactics using quasi-experimental methodology, a true experimental design was employed for this study. Mate poaching is a clandestine mating strategy, which makes it difficult to study experimentally. However, important information can be acquired from examining individuals' perceptions of others. A wealth of research has demonstrated that how humans' navigate a social situation and make evaluation of others is heavily influenced by comparison with the self (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Individuals give quicker responses about their own behaviors and characteristics after evaluating them in others (Dunning & Hayes, 1996), suggesting that they access information about themselves when judging others. People also tend to assume a "false consensus" that others would act similarly to them in a given situation (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). In addition to accessing personal information, people also tend to use mental representations of romantic partners during social evaluation. Andersen and Cole (1990) found that descriptions of romantic partners are richer, more distinctive, and more cognitively accessible than those possessed for non-romantic partners, group stereotypes, and trait categories. Furthermore, when asked to recall attributes about fictional persons, participants recalled more false-positives for those who more resembled their romantic partner than they did for any other fictional person, suggesting that transference can heavily influence our social perception of others. Therefore, studying those observing a mate

poaching attempt might reveal important information about how others perceive mate poaching as well as how the observer may personally navigate a similar situation.

This methodology relies on the assumption that participants have personal experience with mate poaching, have knowledge about navigating these social situations, or generalize similar knowledge about navigating general romantic attraction to mate poaching. A majority of individuals report having had at least some experience, successful or not, mate poaching someone else, being poached, or having their partner poached from them (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Also, men and women possess psychological adaptations for detecting cues to partner infidelity (Shackelford & Buss, 1997) and protecting against partner infidelity (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). This suggests that even if an individual does not have personal experience with mate poaching, humans seem to have evolved and/or socially acquired mechanisms for recognizing mate poachers and protecting their partners from them.

Additionally, humans are good at using perspective-taking to recognize romantic strategies. During romantic attraction men and women will strategically use self-enhancement and competitor-derogation tactics that appeal to the opposite sex's mate selection criteria (Tooke & Camire, 1991), and can explicitly identify which tactics would be most effective for men and women to use in attracting the opposite sex (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Humans possess a "mating intelligence" for a wide variety of tactics used during human mating and romantic attraction (Geher & Kaufman, 2013). Given these tendencies, measuring the perceptions of those observing an act of mate poaching gives an indirect

insight into how others might mentally navigate and think about the social atmosphere surrounding mate poaching behavior.

To experimentally test how friendship between a poacher and poachee affects perceptions of mate poaching outcomes and perceptions of the poacher and poachee's personality traits, participants read one of four fictional accounts of a mate poaching attempt. Vignettes and imagined or fictional scenarios have been used in studies looking at impression formation (Sherman & Klein, 1994), infidelity and jealousy (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Wade, Kelley, & Church, 2012) and have been shown to induce physiological responses similar to experiencing the imagined scenario (Buss et al., 1992; Malta, Blanchard, Freidenberg, Galvoski, Karl, & Holzapfel, 2001). Each vignette varied by whether the poacher was a male or female and whether the poacher and poachee were close friends or acquaintances. Participants then rated the likelihood of several outcomes including: success of the poaching attempt, physical retaliation and suspicion from the poachee's partner, future poachee infidelity, shortened relationship duration, peer and familial disapproval of the relationship, and poachee resentment. Each of these outcomes are risks/costs associated with mate poaching implicated by Buss and Schmitt (2001), Davies et al. (2010), and Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

### **Hypotheses**

It was hypothesized that the poacher would be rated as more likely to be successful in the poaching attempt when the poacher and poachee were close friends. In accordance with Sexual Strategies Theory, it was predicted that there would be sex differences in how

effective friendship is as a tactic for increasing success and/or reducing costs, as males and females face different challenges when attempting to mate poach (Buss and Schmitt, 2001). Friendship may be a tactic better employed to appeal to those seeking a long-term partner, as it may signal attributes important for continued investment in the relationship and future offspring. Due to asymmetry in the minimum amount of resources men and women are required to invest in offspring (Trivers, 1972), women should be more sensitive to cues of investment from a partner and desire those qualities more in a potential mate than do men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, friendship between a poacher and poachee may more effectively alter the perceived likelihood of success of mate poaching when a male is poaching a female.

It was also hypothesized that when participants observed a mate poaching scenario in which the poacher and poachee were close friends, they would evaluate costly outcomes as less likely to occur. Insertion of the self into the temporal context of the poachee's current relationship has already been implicated as an effective tactic during mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Therefore, any risks or costs typically associated with mate poaching may be perceived as less likely to occur if the poacher and poachee are friends. However, if friendship is indicative of desirable long-term mate qualities, then costly outcomes such as decreased longevity of the resulting relationship or the likelihood of future infidelity should be more strongly mitigated.

It was also predicted that individuals would judge the mate value characteristics of the poacher and poachee differently depending on whether they were close friends or acquaintances. Those who mate poach tend to rate themselves low in relationship/sexual

exclusivity, having an erotophilic disposition, and low in agreeableness and conscientiousness (Buss & Schmitt, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008). Because friendship may signal qualities associated with a good long-term mate (Guerrero, & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Vanderdrift et al., 2012), friendship between a poacher and poachee may suggest that a poacher is more interested in pursuing a long-term relationship, leading observers to perceive the mate poacher as having qualities that are desirable in a long-term mate. Following this same line of reasoning, it was predicted that observers will perceive the mate poacher as being more motivated by starting a long-term relationship when the poacher and poachee are friends. It was not predicted that friendship would alter perceptions of the poachee's personality or mate attributes.

### **Summary of Hypotheses**

- 1) Friend-poachers will be rated as more likely to succeed in their mate poaching attempt than will acquaintance-poachers.
- 2) Male friend-poachers will be rated as more likely to be succeed than female friend-poachers
- 3) Costly poaching outcomes will be rated as less likely to occur if the poacher and poachee are friends as opposed to acquaintances.
  - a. Friend-poachers are less likely to be suspected by the poachee's mate than acquaintance poachers.
  - b. The poachee's mate is less likely to physically retaliate against a friend-poacher than an acquaintance-poacher.

- c. Physical retaliation from the poachee's current mate is more likely to occur if the poacher is male rather than female.
  - d. A new long-term relationship is more likely to last longer than a year for friend-poachers than for acquaintance-poachers.
  - e. In the new long-term relationship, the poachee is rated as less likely to cheat on a friend-poacher than an acquaintance poacher in the future.
  - f. Family and friends are more likely to approve of the new relationship if the poacher and poachee are friends as opposed to acquaintances.
  - g. The poachee is rated as less likely to resent a friend-poacher than an acquaintance-poacher.
- 4) Friend-poachers will be rated higher for attributes indicative of investment in the poachee and their future relationship.
- a. Friend-poachers will be rated as more warm, friendly, nurturant, and as being a better parent and mate.
- 5) A greater proportion of observers will predict that a friend-poacher is motivated to start a long-term relationship than is an acquaintance-poacher.
- 6) A greater proportion of observers will predict that an acquaintance-poacher is motivated to start a one-night stand or short-term affair than is a friend-poacher.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 382 individuals (47.5% male, 52.5% female) recruited from two populations: 282 Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users and 100 Bucknell University

undergraduate students. MTurk is a crowd-sourcing service hosted by Amazon through which participants were paid \$0.25 for completion of the experiment. MTurk has been gaining popularity in recent psychological research and has been shown to be a high quality source of data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Undergraduate students were recruited from the Bucknell University psychology department research participant pool. These students received credit in their introductory psychology classes for participation. These two samples were combined to create a diverse population for analysis that may be more representative of how the general population responds to mate poaching.

The mean age of the sample was 29.13 (SD = 9.23, range = 18-67). The racial composition self-identified as 63.3% Asian, 29.2% White, 3.9% Black, and 3.6% other. A majority of the sample was heterosexual (81.1%) with some identifying as homosexual (9.7%) and other (9.25%). About three-fourths of the sample reported having ever been in a sexual relationship (74.1%). More than half of the sample reported currently being in a relationship (56.8%) whereas 39% reported being currently single and 3.3% were unsure. A majority of the sample (83.95%) reported that they were not currently on birth control medication of any type.

## **Materials and Procedures**

Previous studies investigating poacher/poachee characteristics and the tactics used during mate poaching have relied on self-report measures and a quasi-experimental design to gather data. To examine the role of friendship as a poaching tactic, a true experimental

design was utilized. After signing the informed consent, participants were presented with the following instructions:

*For the following experiment, you will be asked to read **one** short paragraph detailing the relationship between three individuals. Please take your time to fully read the paragraph and form some initial impressions about the individuals described. To do this, you will be asked to imagine that you know these individuals and that you are a friend, acquaintance, or bystander who happens to observe what is happening between them. After hearing their story, you will be asked to make several ratings pertaining to the likelihood of certain events happening between these individuals. You will also be asked to rate the individuals on several measures of their personality and sexuality. While we realize that you cannot learn everything about a person or group of people from one, short story, we ask that you please make these ratings based on your initial impression of the individuals described.*

Participants were then presented with one of four short vignettes depicting a mate poaching situation involving three individuals. These individuals were the poacher, the person doing the poaching, the poachee, the target of the poaching attempt, and the poached, the person currently in a relationship with the poachee . These four vignettes varied across two variables: sex of the poacher/poachee and whether the poacher and poachee were friends. The following two vignette examples demonstrate how the friendship variable was manipulated (See bolded text):

#### Friendship Condition

*Imagine the following:*

*You happened to hear an interesting story the other day about three people, John, Sarah, and Chris. Through your own experiences and a few rumors, you piece together the following information about them.*

*John and Sarah have been in an exclusive relationship for about a year. Recently, John and Sarah have been having problems in their relationship and their relationship has been uneasy. **Sarah often talks about the problems in her relationship with Chris, a close friend she goes to for advice and comfort, and with whom she enjoys spending time.** Chris is attracted to Sarah. He realizes that she is*

*in an exclusive relationship, yet he still flirts with her in hopes that something may happen between Sarah and him.*

### Friendship Absent Condition

*Imagine the following:*

*You happened to hear an interesting story the other day about three people, John, Sarah, and Chris. Through your own experiences and a few rumors, you piece together the following information about them.*

*John and Sarah have been in an exclusive relationship for about a year. Recently, John and Sarah have been having problems in their relationship and their relationship has been uneasy. **Chris is an acquaintance of Sarah's and they know very little about each other.** Chris is attracted to Sarah. He realizes that she is in an exclusive relationship, yet he still flirts with her in hopes that something may happen between Sarah and him.*

To manipulate the sex of the poacher, the vignettes remained the same except that Chris' name was replaced with "Rachel", and Sarah and John switched roles as poachee and poached.

Once participants read their vignette and confirmed that they understood the relationship between each individual, they were asked to make several ratings about the poacher's likelihood of 1) being successful and 2) incurring future costs/risks. On a 1 to 7 scale from "Highly unlikely" to "Highly likely", participants were asked:

- 1) *How likely is it that Chris will succeed in attracting Sarah away from John?*
- 2) *How likely is it that John will suspect that Chris is trying to attract Sarah away from him?*
- 3) *How likely is it that John will inflict physical harm on Chris for trying to attract Sarah?*
- 4) *If Chris and Sarah formed a new long-term relationship, how likely is it that the relationship would last for more than a year?*
- 5) *If Chris and Sarah start a new long-term relationship, how likely is it that Sarah would cheat on him in the future?*
- 6) *How likely is it that their friends will not approve of how Chris and Sarah started their relationship?*

- 7) *How likely is it that either of their families will not approve of how Chris and Sarah started their relationship?*
- 8) *How likely is it that Sarah will later resent Chris for the way they started their relationship?*

In order to collect novel descriptive information not examined in previous literature, participants were also asked to indicate the following:

- 1) *In your opinion, is it OK that Chris is trying to attract Sarah away from John?    Yes  
No*
- 2) *What is most likely the type of relationship that Chris intends to start with Sarah by attracting her away from John?*

*A one-night stand.    A short term affair.    A new long-term relationship.*

Participants were then asked to indicate their impressions of the poacher and poachee across several evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics. Using measures from Wade, Auer, and Roth (2009), participants rated them on a 1 (Not Very) to 7 (Very) scale for 1) intelligence, 2) physical attractiveness, 3) sexual attractiveness, 4) warmth, 5) dominance, 6) friendliness, 7) masculinity, 8) nurturance, and whether they would be a 9) good parent or a 10) good mate.

They finished by filling out a demographic questionnaire indicating age, sex, race, current relationship status, sexual relationship experience, and birth control usage.

## **Results**

### **Mate Poaching Outcomes**

Participants were asked to report the likelihood of eight outcomes after reading a vignette depicting a mate poaching scenario. These ratings included how likely: 1) the poacher would be successful, 2) the poachee's partner would suspect the poacher's attempts,

3) the poachee's partner would physically retaliate against the poacher, 4) the new relationship between the poacher and poachee would last longer than a year, 5) the poachee would cheat on the poacher in the future, 6) friends and 7) family would approve of the new relationship, and 8) the poachee would resent the poacher for how they started the relationship. Participants read one of four vignettes that differed by whether the poacher and poachee were close friends or acquaintances as well as whether the poacher was male or female.

A 2(Friendship) X 2(Sex of Poacher) between subjects MANOVA was performed to examine whether participants' mean ratings of the likelihood of these eight outcomes differed between conditions. This analysis revealed a main effect for friendship,  $F(8, 371) = 3.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .076$ . As shown in Figure 1, poachers who were close friends ( $M = 4.59, SD = 1.41$ ) with the poachee were rated as more likely to successfully mate poach than when the poacher was an acquaintance ( $M = 4.27, SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.42, p = .017, \eta^2 = .015$ . Similarly, the resulting relationship between the poacher and poachee was rated as more likely to last beyond a year when they were friends ( $M = 3.88, SD = 1.51$ ) than if they were acquaintances ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.59$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 31.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .034$ . The poachee was also rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future if they were friends ( $M = 4.11, SD = 1.50$ ) as opposed to acquaintances ( $M = 4.45, SD = 1.5$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.97, p = .028, \eta^2 = .013$ .

There was also a main effect for poacher sex,  $F(8, 371) = 6.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .115$ . As shown in Figure 2, female poachers ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.51$ ) were rated as more likely to be suspect of poaching than were male poachers ( $M = 4.36, SD = 1.72$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 12.98, p$

$<.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .033$ . However, male poachers ( $M = 3.752$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) were rated as more likely to suffer physical retaliation from the poachee's partner than were female poachers ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.65$   $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .027$ . Participants also reported that family members were more likely to approve of the resulting relationship if the poacher were a female ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) rather than a male ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.51$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . The same was true of friends, with the relationship more likely to be approved if the poacher were female ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) rather than male ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ . There was no significant interaction,  $F(8, 371) = 0.61$ ,  $p = .766$ .

Participants were asked to indicate what type of relationship they thought the poacher wanted to initiate with the poachee: a one-night stand, a short-term affair, or a new long-term relationship. A Chi-square Test for Independence indicated that participants' predictions significantly differed across the friendship status of the poacher and poachee,  $\chi^2(2, N = 382) = 16.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . Three Chi-square Goodness of Fit analyses were used to assess pairwise comparisons. There was no significant difference between the number of participants that predicted a one-night stand when the poacher was a friend versus acquaintance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = .947$ ,  $p = .330$ . However, significantly more individuals predicted that acquaintance poachers were more interested in a short-term affair than were friend poachers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 8.91$ ,  $p = .003$ , whereas friend poachers were more interested in a new long-term relationship than were acquaintance poachers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 182) = 7.12$ ,  $p = .008$ . Observed and expected frequencies are reported in Table 1. Participants also indicated whether they personally thought it was OK for the poacher to attract the poachee away from their current

mate. A Chi-square goodness of fit test indicated that these perceptions were not significantly associated with whether the poacher and poachee were friends or acquaintances,  $\chi^2(1, N = 382) = .106, p = .745$ .

### **Mate Attributes**

Participants also rated the poacher and poachee on several important mate attributes based on the initial impressions they formed from the vignette. These ratings included how intelligent, physically attractive, sexually attractive, warm, dominant, friendly, masculine, nurturant, and socially competent each were. Additionally, they rated how good of a parent and mate each person would be.

A second 2(Friendship) X 2(Sex of Poacher) between subjects MANOVA was performed to examine whether participants' mean ratings of these characteristics differed between the four vignettes. There was a main effect for friendship,  $F(22, 357) = 2.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .149$ . As shown in Figure 3, ratings of the poacher's intelligence were higher when the poacher and poachee were portrayed as acquaintances ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.49$ ) than when they were friends ( $M = 2.87, SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.10, p = .044, \eta^2 = .011$ . The poacher was also rated as more warm when they were acquaintances ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.66$ ) as opposed to friends ( $M = 3.24, SD = 1.57$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 8.76, p = .003, \eta^2 = .023$ , more friendly as acquaintances ( $M = 3.33, SD = 1.67$ ) than as friends ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.89, p = .001, \eta^2 = .028$ , and more nurturant as acquaintances ( $M = 3.91, SD = 1.66$ )

than friends ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 32.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .079$ . There were no significant differences for ratings of the poachee (See Figure 4)

There was also a main effect for sex of the poacher,  $F(22, 357) = 11.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .421$  (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). When the poacher was male ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), he was rated as more sexually attractive than when the poacher was female ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 12.37$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta^2 = .016$ . The poachee was also rated as more intelligent when the poacher was a male ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) rather than a female poacher ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .030$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . Interestingly, male poachers ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) were rated as less masculine than female poachers ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 118.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .240$ . Poachees were rated as more masculine when the poacher was male ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than when the poacher was female ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 133.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .262$ . There was no significant interaction,  $F(22, 357) = 1.184$ ,  $p = .259$ .

## Discussion

The role of friendship as a relationship infiltration tactic for mate poaching was investigated by asking participants to read one of four vignettes depicting a mate poaching scenario in which the mate poacher and the poachee were friends or acquaintances as well as whether the poacher was a male or female. Participants then rated the likelihood of several outcomes as well as their impressions of the poacher and poachee across several evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics. The primary hypothesis was supported. Friendship between the poacher and poachee increased the perceived likelihood that the mate

poacher would be successful. The hypothesis that friendship would mitigate the likelihood of costly mate poaching outcomes was partially supported. When the poacher and poachee were friends, their new long-term relationship was rated as more likely to last longer than a year. Furthermore, within this long-term relationship, the poachee was rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future. Together, these results suggest an interpretation whereby friendship may be a useful tactic for signaling future investment in a long-term relationship to a potential mate. This is consistent with literature showing that friendship is an important factor in long-term relationship formation and maintenance (Graham, 2011; Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Vanderdrift, Wilson, & Agnew, 2012). Bleske-Rechek & Buss (2001) found that even during general romantic attraction, men and women may initiate opposite-sex friendships to acquire potential mates.

Interestingly, there were no sex differences in how effective friendship was for a mate poacher. One possible explanation is that friendship serves to signal romantic compatibility across important mate characteristics that are not necessarily sex-specific. In a potential long-term mate, both sexes tend to value traits such as being kind, understanding, exciting, intelligent, and creative (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These complex personality traits may arguably be more difficult and take more time to assess than other signals of mate quality such as physical attractiveness, social standing, or wealth. Friendship may afford males and females information about a potential mate that can be used to more accurately assess how compatible they may be as romantic partners. In their review, Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner (2008) found that both actual and perceived similarity between individuals strongly predicted interpersonal attraction in both existing and potential

romantic relationships. Therefore, participants may have believed that poachers and poachees who were close friends had already acquired information about one another and were more likely to be compatible and attracted to one another than not.

The hypothesis that friendship would mitigate the likelihood of costly mate poaching outcomes was partially supported. When the poacher and poachee were friends, their new long-term relationship was rated as more likely to last longer than a year. The poachee was also rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future. However, the data did not support other hypotheses predicting that friendship would mitigate other mate poaching outcomes. The likelihood of being suspected by the poachee's current mate and suffering physical retaliation from that mate was the same for friend and acquaintances. Furthermore, friends and family were perceived as just as likely to approve of the new relationship whether the poacher and poachee were friends or not, and the poachee was just as likely to resent the poacher afterwards. Buss and Schmitt (2001) found that participants rated future infidelity concerns and an uncertain future as more costly for long-term than short-term mate poaching. This pattern seems to indicate that friendship is perceived to be most effective for reducing long-term relational instability between the poacher and poachee and less effective for mitigating risks associated with third-parties such as the poachee's current mate and family/friends. It would appear that participants recognize that friendship between partners can play an important role in relationship maintenance and that friendship may signal traits desired in a long-term mate.

Interestingly, the hypothesis that friend-poachers would be rated higher on attributes indicative of investment in the poachee and their future relationship was not supported. In

fact, the opposite effect was found. Acquaintance-poachers were rated as more warm, friendly, and nurturant than were friend-poachers. A possible explanation for this pattern is that as observers, participants may have greater doubts about whether the poacher's friendship is an intentional strategy rather than genuine friendship. To the poacher and poachee, their friendship may appear to serve no functional purpose related to mate poaching. In this way, the benefits of friendship in signaling investment, compatibility, and traits desired in a long-term mate is maintained as genuine, honest signals for those directly involved. However, observers may be more knowledgeable of the mate poacher's intentions. Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that agreeable and conscientious people are less likely to be poachers. Perhaps raters associate poachers with those traits and thus view friend-poachers more negatively because friends should be kind and reliable, not attempting to dissolve a friend's relationship for their own benefit. Bleske and Shackelford (2001) found that people experience more upset in response to imagined mate rivalry from a friend than from a stranger.

Alternatively, observers may judge others' mate poaching behaviors with a double standard. It would be adaptive for individuals to disprove of another's tactical use of friendship to mate poach while also understanding its effectiveness and endorsing the strategy for one's own use. Humans possess a wide variety of tactics for engaging in self-promotion as well as competitor derogation (Schmitt & Buss, 1996; Tooke & Camire, 1991). Bleske and Shackelford (2001) found that people report being deceived by friends about mating rivalry more often than they themselves report engaging in deceit. Therefore, perhaps

the disparity between observers' view of friendship as effective and their negative evaluation of friend-poachers is a manifestation of strategic deception.

Participants were also asked to indicate what type of relationship they thought the poacher was attempting to pursue: a one-night stand, a short-term affair, or a long-term relationship. It was predicted that participants would think that friend-poachers were more interesting in starting a long-term relationship than either a one-night stand or a short-term affair. It was also predicted that they would think acquaintance-poachers would be more interested in a one-night stand or short-term affair than a long-term relationship. Both of these predictions were supported. This evidence is further support that participants think friendship signals long-term goals for a mate poacher.

There were several findings for which no hypotheses were generated. Independent of the friendship manipulation, female poachers were more likely to be suspected of poaching than male poachers. Male poachers were also more likely to suffer physical retaliation from the poachee's partner. This finding is consistent with previous literature. Males are more likely to use physical relations and violence against a competitor as a mate guarding tactic (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). Family and friends were more likely to approve of the resulting relationship if the poacher was female as opposed to male. Male poachers were rated as more sexually attractive and intelligent than female poachers. Male poachers were rated as less masculine when the poacher were rated as less masculine than female poachers. Similarly, the poachee was rated as more masculine when the poacher was male. These findings do not appear to be well

explained by Sexual Strategies Theory; however, several of these trends may provide direction for future research.

### **Conclusions & Future Directions**

Several characteristics of this study demand that the results be interpreted with care. Previous research from which hypotheses were generated used largely college-aged samples (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt 2004). The current study sampled participants from both an exclusively college-aged population as well as from a more diverse MTurk population (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). As such, this sample may represent a population that is different from previous studies; however, it is arguably more representative of the general population. Also, a majority of the population reported not currently using hormone-based birth control, which has been shown to affect long-term and short-term mate preference, perceptions of masculinity, and attraction (Cornwell et al., 2004; Feinberg, DeBruine, Jones, Little, Feinberg, & Law Smith, 2008; Jones et al., 2005; Little, Jones, Penton-Voak, Burt, Perrett, 2002; Penton-Voak, Little, Jones, Burt, & Perrett, 2003; Smith, Jones, Little, DeBruine, & Welling, 2009). Most importantly, these results measure perceptions of those observing fictional scenarios and may not generalize beyond the perceptions of an unrelated or uninvolved observer. Perceptions of observers are important for measuring costly behavior largely in part because mate poaching entails risks closely associated with social stigma and the reactions of others. However, it is also important in that observers may see themselves in the mate poaching scenarios, referencing their own romantic relationships (Andersen and Cole, 1990), experiences with mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), and personal beliefs (Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), which may

have been shaped in part by evolved mechanisms for engaging in and combatting mate poaching behavior (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003; Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Nevertheless, it would be important for future studies to use other, more direct measures to verify whether friendship is effective beyond altering observer perceptions of success and risk.

There are several design changes that could be useful for future investigations. Firstly, rather than participants rating “how likely” each cost would be to occur, it may be helpful to have participants indicate “how costly” each outcome would be. An investigation of likelihood is conceptually similar to a forced-choice paradigm where participants are lead to believe something can either occur or not occur (e.g., how likely is physical retaliation to occur (or not occur)?). If participants were to indicate “how costly” an outcome would be, they would instead indicate the severity of the cost on a continuous scale (e.g., how severe/costly would the physical retaliation be?). Also, no previous study has looked at what observers predicted were the poacher’s motivations. Participants seemed to view friend-poachers as more likely to be motivated by long-term goals and acquaintance-poachers motivated by short-term goals. It would be important for future studies to test whether having these predictions or being primed to have these predictions alters observers’ perceptions of mate poaching. Also, if the observer had a personal connection to the mate poacher, poachee, or poached (such as a friend, family member, or other associate), it may influence the observers evaluation of mate poaching.

Aside from participants’ ratings of the poachee’s mate characteristics, this study focused almost exclusively on the benefits of friendship for the poacher. However, the

poachee has as much to benefit and lose from being poached (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Friendship with the poacher may also function to mitigate risks face by the poachee. Though some of the risks investigated in this study are the same for poachers and poachees (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), some questions were not framed to evaluate poachee risks. For example, participants were asked “the likelihood that the poachee would cheat on the poacher”, but were not asked the likelihood of whether the poacher would cheat on the poachee. Furthermore, the current study did not look at risks that may be unique to the poachee, such as loss of resources, dissolution of the current relationship, and retaliation from the poachee’s partner against the poachee or restrictive/violent mate guarding behavior. It would also be interesting to see what participants thought was the motivation of the poachee during a mate poaching encounter and whether the poachee was more interested in a long-term or short-term relationship.

This study contributes experimental evidence to a body of work that has largely been descriptive or quasi-experimental. It also introduces a methodology by which mate poaching may be experimentally studied indirectly through the perceptions of others. Overall, these data support the claim that, by increasing the likelihood of success and decreasing several costs unique to poaching, friendship is seen as an effective tactic for infiltrating an existing relationship. These findings support hypotheses formulated from previous data on mate poaching and provide several novel findings from which new, testable predictions can be generated.

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Table 1

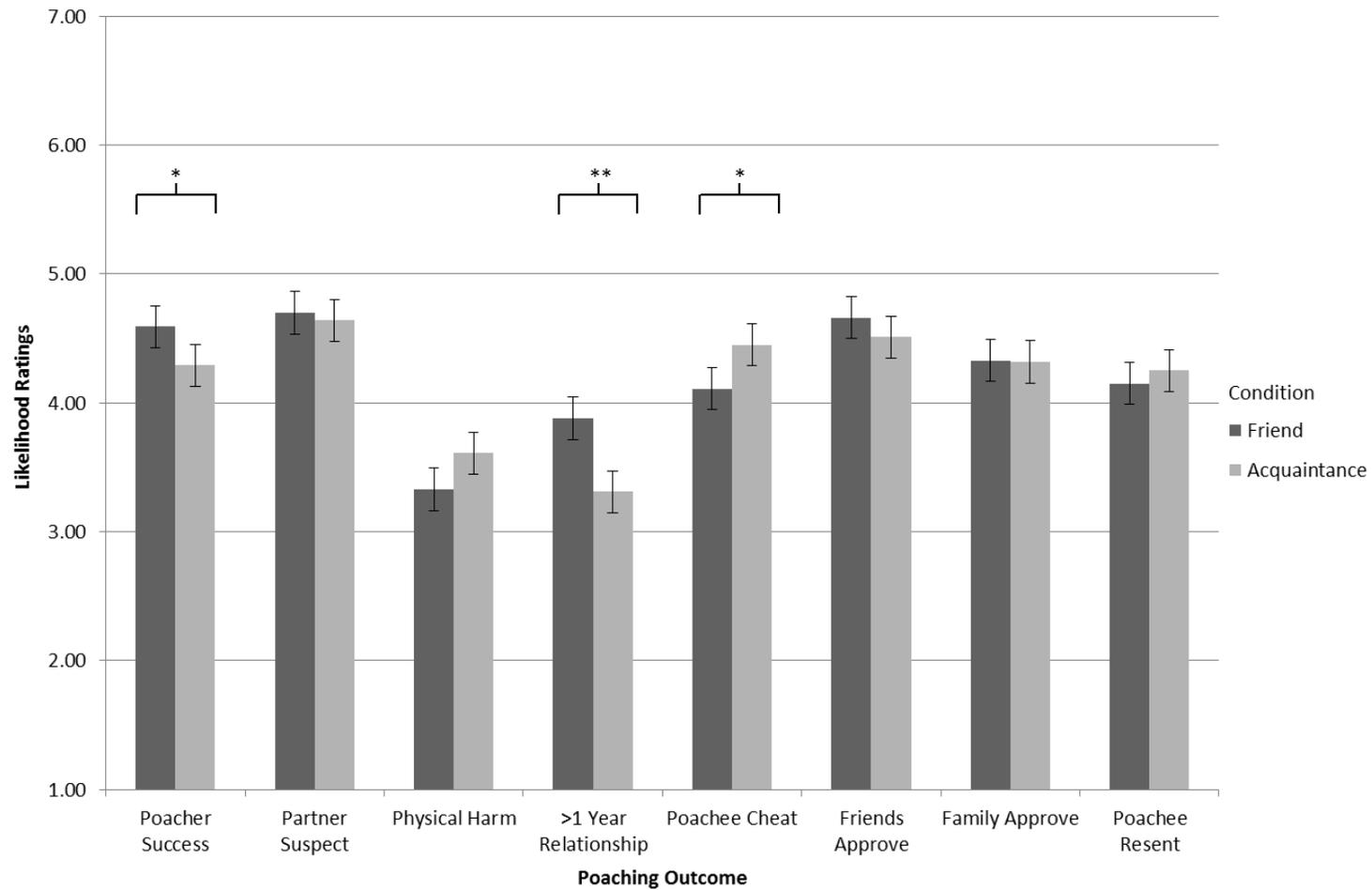
*Observed frequencies for predicted motivation of mate poacher across friendship conditions.*

<b>Predicted Motivation</b>	One-night stand	Short-term affair*	Long-term relationship*
<b>Friendship Condition</b>			
Friend	16	62	109
Acquaintance	22	100	73
<b>Total</b>	38	162	182

\* Difference in frequencies for friendship condition is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 1

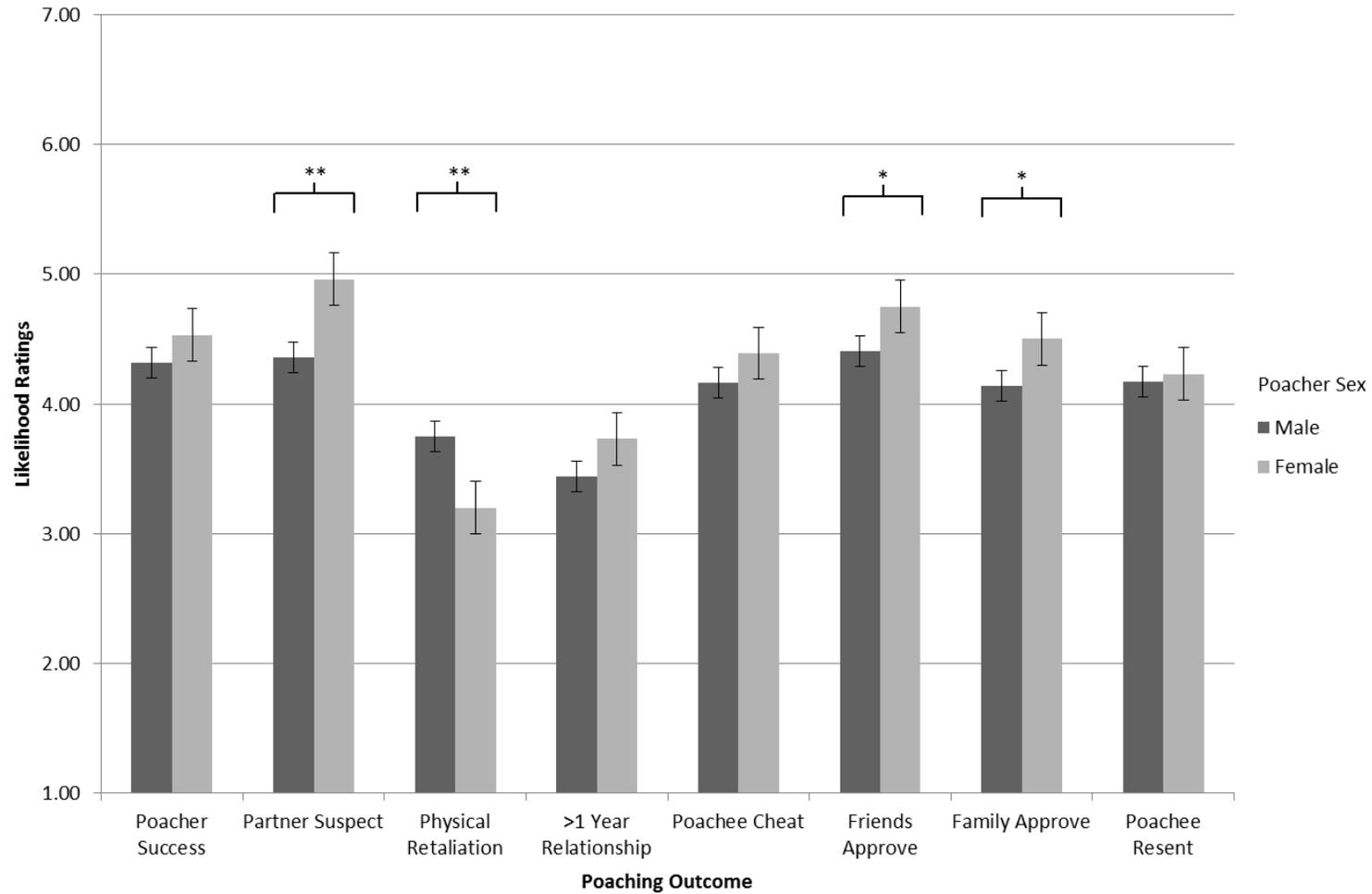
*Mate poaching outcome likelihood ratings when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

Figure 2

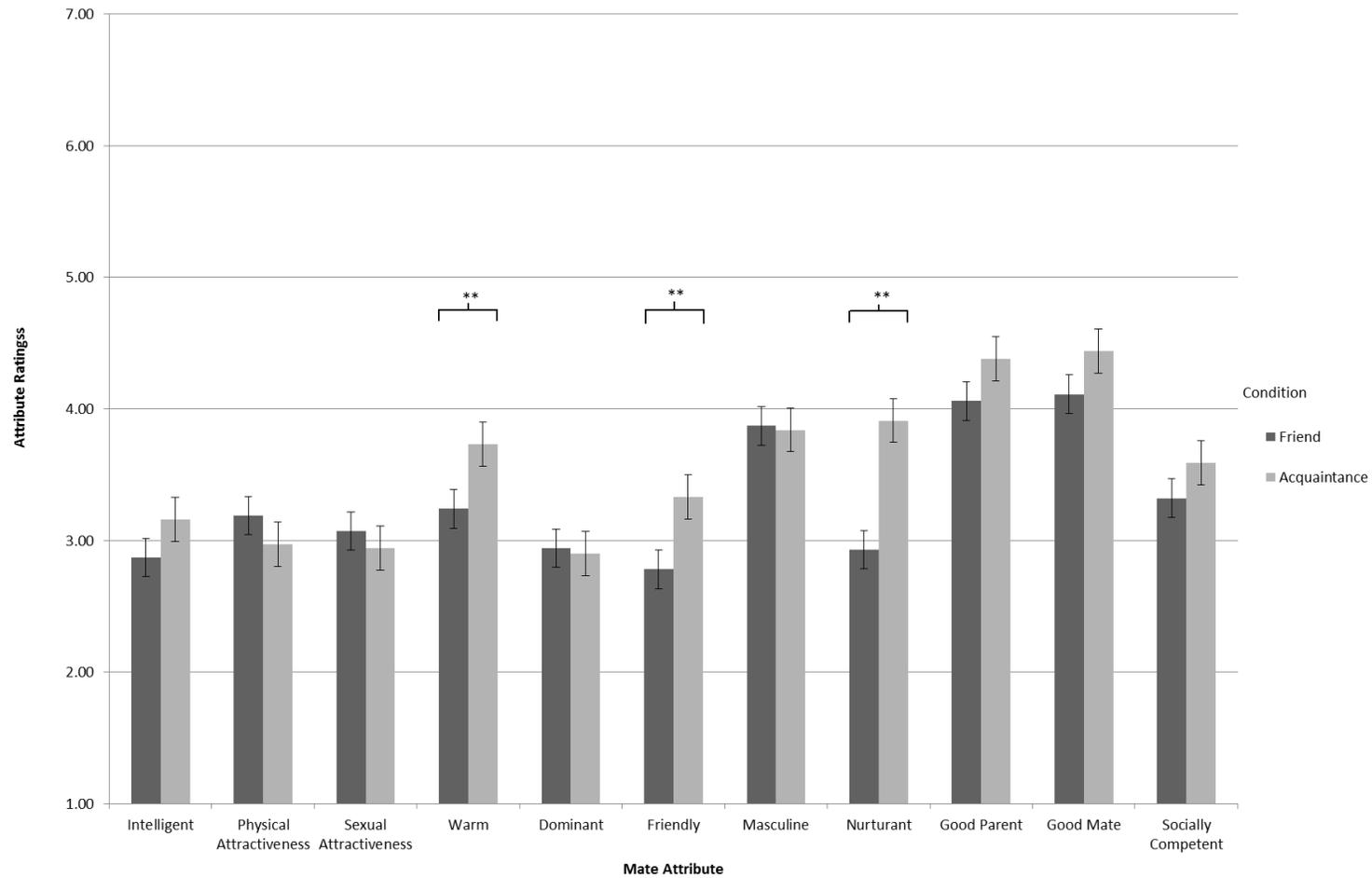
*Mate poaching outcome likelihood ratings for male versus female poachers*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 3

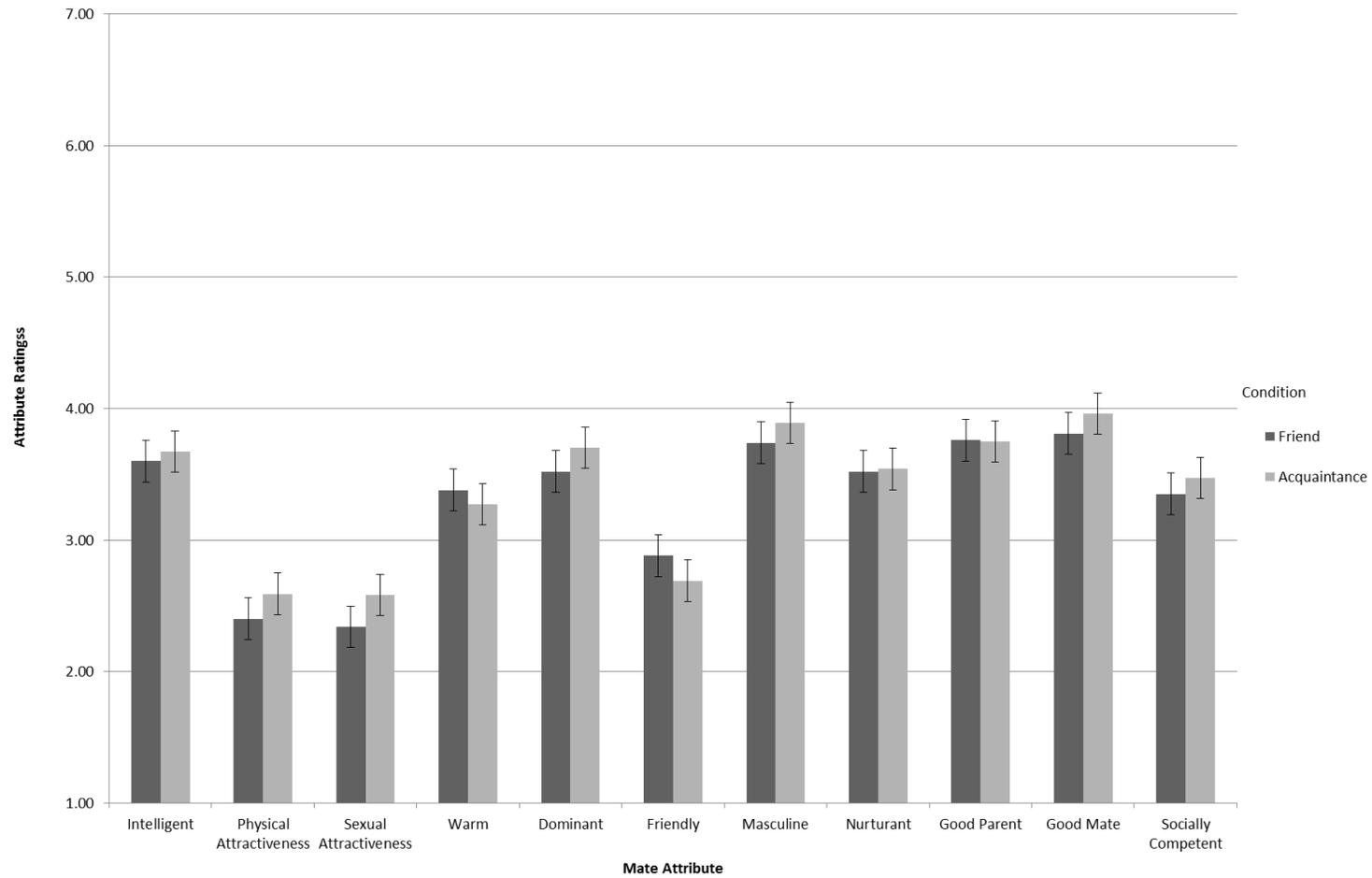
*Mate attribute ratings of the poacher when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



\*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 4

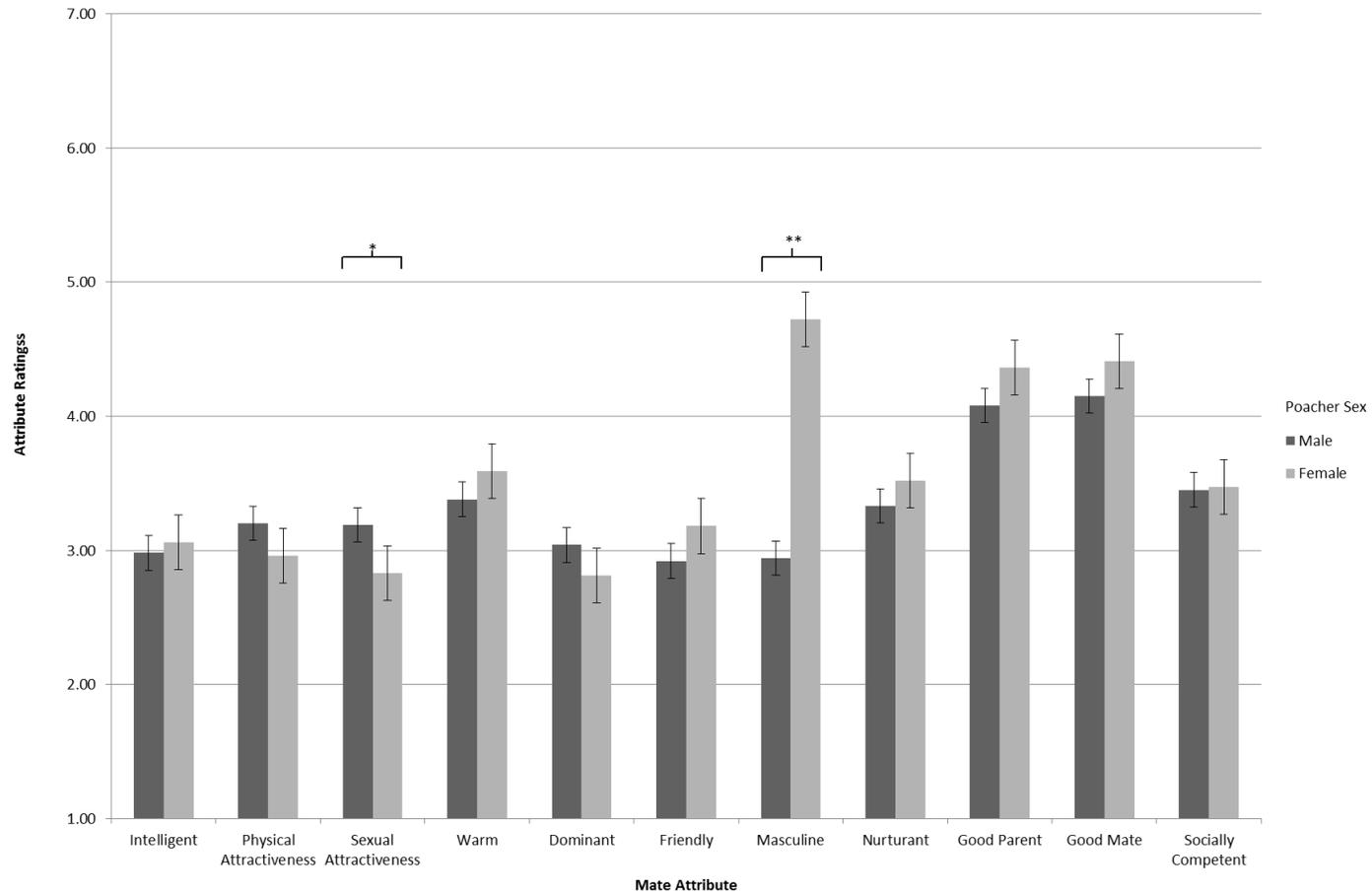
*Mate attribute ratings of the poachee when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



There were no significant differences.

Figure 5

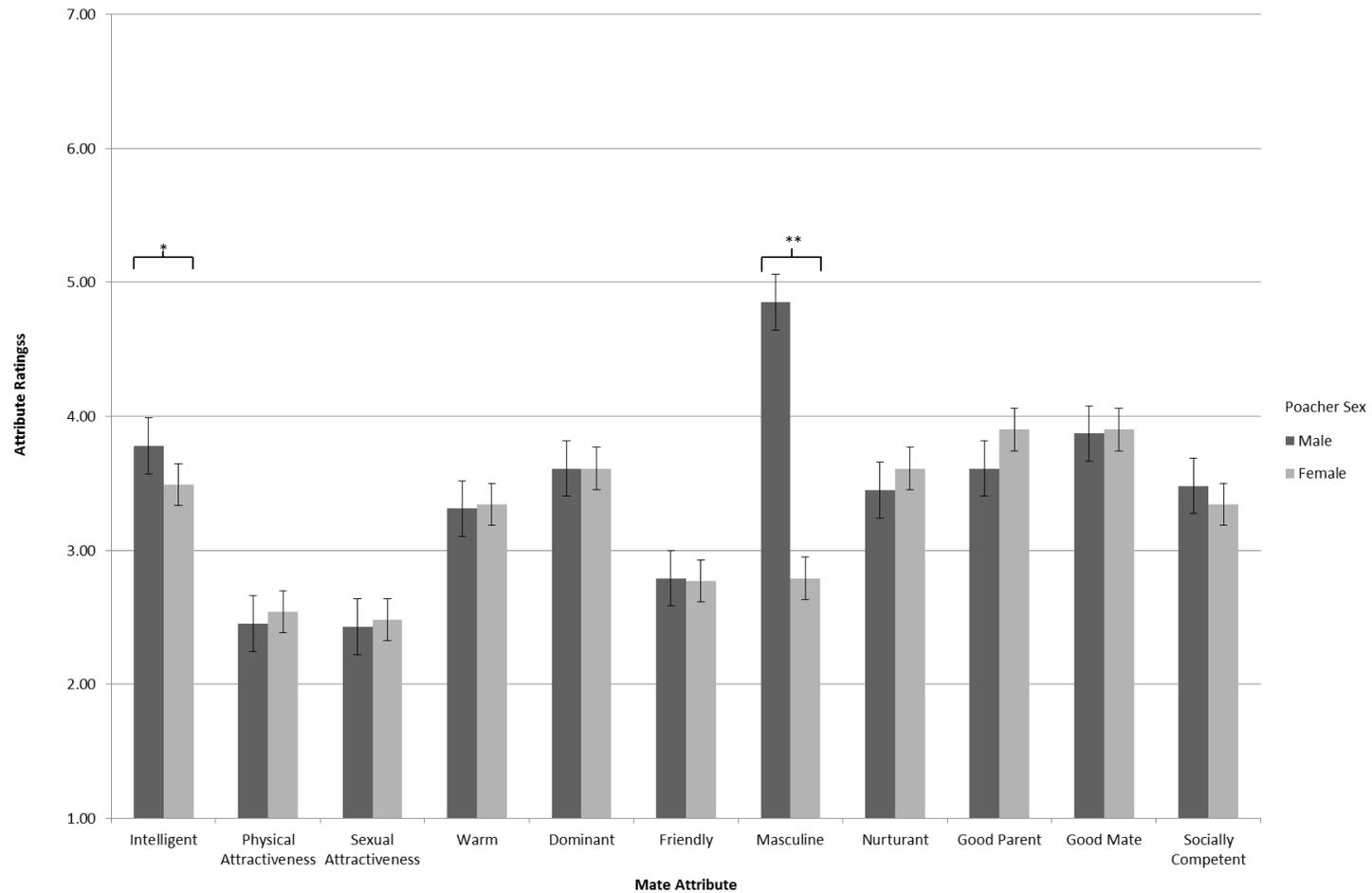
*Mate attribute ratings of poacher for male versus female poachers.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

Figure 6.

*Mate attribute ratings of poachee for male versus female poachers.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

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FRIENDSHIP AS A RELATIONSHIP INFILTRATION TACTIC DURING HUMAN  
MATE POACHING: AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION

By

Justin Mogilski

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Bucknell University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Degree of  
Master of Science in Psychology

Approved:

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Adviser

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Department Chairperson

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Date

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## **Abstract**

Previous research has characterized human mate poaching as a prevalent alternative mating strategy that entails risks and costs typically not present during general romantic courtship and attraction. This study is the first to experimentally investigate friendship between a poacher and poachee as a risk mitigation tactic. Participants (N = 382) read a vignette that differed by whether the poacher was male/female and whether the poacher and poachee were friends/acquaintances. Participants assessed the likelihood of the poacher being successful and incurring costs. They also rated the poacher and poachee on several personality and mate characteristics. Results revealed that friendship increased the perceived likelihood of success of a mate poaching attempt and decreased the perceived likelihood of several risks typically associated with mate poaching. However, friend-poachers were rated less favorably than acquaintance-poachers across measures of warmth, nurturance, and friendliness. These findings are interpreted using an evolutionary perspective. This study complements and builds upon previous findings and is the first experimental investigation of tactics mate poachers may use to mitigate risks inherent in mate poaching.

## Friendship as a Relationship Infiltration Tactic during Human Mate Poaching: An Experimental Investigation

Evolutionary psychology posits that manifest thought and behavior are guided in part by evolved information processing mechanisms that depend on internal and environmental input for their activation and expression. Research studying humans has used an evolutionary perspective to generate and test hypotheses for a number of phenomena (Confer, Easton, Fleischman, Goetz, Lewis, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010); however, in recent years it has been particularly useful in studying beauty, attraction, and romantic relationships. Sexual Strategies Theory is an evolutionarily derived theoretical framework that predicts that sex differences in mate preference and mating strategies have arisen due to asymmetrical parental investment requirements between the sexes, with women having a much greater minimal investment than males (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). From investigating sex differences in mating strategies and preferences, researchers have also been able to identify tactics that each sex might employ to embody the evolved preferences of the opposite sex and increase their odds of successfully attracting a mate (Tooke & Camire, 1991; Walters & Crawford, 1994). Most research in this area has focused on the use of these tactics to attract potential mates that are single and unattached. By contrast, very little research has looked at the tactics men and women use to mate poach, or attract individuals who are known to already be mated and in a relationship; nor has much research examined others' perceptions of those who choose to engage in this type of mating strategy.

The purpose of the current research is to examine friendship as a tactic for infiltrating a relationship during mate poaching using hypotheses informed by evolutionary theory.

Previous literature suggests that insertion of the self into the social context of an existing relationship may allow for deployment of more direct mate poaching tactics later on (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). To this end, the focus of this research includes investigating 1) whether friendship between a mate poacher and the person s/he is attempting to attract (poachee) influences others' perceptions of the likely success of the mate poacher, 2) the role that friendship may play in mitigating risks and costs associated with the mate poaching strategy, and 3) whether the friendship modulates perceived personality and evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics of the poacher and poachee.

### **Previous Research**

Schmitt & Buss (2001) define mate poaching as behavior intended to attract someone who is known to already be in a relationship. In their study, roughly 50% of males and females in North America reported having engaged, at least once, in mate poaching with the goal of starting a short-term relationship (i.e., one-night stands, brief affairs), or a long-term relationship (i.e., potential marital relationships). Approximately 85% of men and women also reported that someone else had tried to poach them from a past mating partner. Schmitt (2004) replicated these findings in a sample consisting of college-aged participants across 53 nations from 10 world areas, finding that about 50% of males and females reported having engaged in mating poaching and 70% of males and females reported that someone else had tried to poach them. By contrast, Davies, Shackelford, and Hass (2007) defined mate poaching for their participants as “an individual attempting to have sexual relationships with a person that the former individual knows is already in an exclusive relationship with someone else”. Using this definition, fewer women (about 30%) reported having attempted a

mate poach and both men and women reported fewer experiences with having been poached for a new long-term relationship. These investigations demonstrate that the frequency at which mate poaching is reported seems to depend on whether it is defined more conservatively by its ultimate functional outcome, such as sexual access to the person being poached (Davies et al., 2007) or more generally defined by its proximate function to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship (Schmitt and Buss, 2001). Regardless, all previous literature reveals that mate poaching occurs at a considerable frequency cross-culturally.

The prevalence of mate poaching suggests that this mating strategy may confer adaptive advantages to those who engage in it as well as to those targeted by it. Those who engage in mate poaching may benefit from attempting to attract an individual who has proven to be a viable mating partner. Humans partly use others' experiences and mate choices to determine their own mate choice decisions (Grammar, Fink, Møller, & Thornhill, 2003; Miller & Todd, 1998; Todd, Place, & Bowers, 2012), a process referred to as non-independent mate choice (Pruett-Jones, S., 1992). In non-humans, non-independent mate choice tends to occur most often during female mate choice copying (Dugatkin, 1992; 2000). Recently, studies have demonstrated that male and female humans also practice mate choice copying (Bowers, Place, Todd, Penke & Asendorpf, 2011; Waynforth, 2007; Vakirtzis & Craig, 2012). For example, after observing real speed-date video recordings, both males and females show greater short-term and long-term relationship interest towards individuals in dates they perceive as successful (Place, Todd, Penke, & Asendorpf, 2010). This effect also occurs when assessing individuals who are currently in a relationship. When presented

opposite-sex targets who are either currently in a relationship or single, women report being more interested in pursuing attached versus unattached targets (Eva & Wood, 2006; Parker & Burkley, 2009). This evidence suggests that others' mate-choice decisions help an individual decide which characteristics are desirable in a potential mate for both unattached and attached targets.

Similarly, someone already in a relationship may benefit from being the target of mate poaching. Though the reasons to break-up with one's current mate are numerous and can vary across context and individual factors (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), quality of and access to alternative romantic partners can influence mate expulsion decisions (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Some individuals may require a realistic mate replacement before leaving their current relationship for a different long-term relationship (Rusbult, & Buunk, 1993), in the case of a long-term poach. Men and women can also benefit from choosing to go along with a short-term poaching attempt. In accordance with Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), having access to a greater variety of sexual partners can afford a male the opportunity to have more offspring whereas a female could cuckold her current partner and have children by other, potentially higher quality and genetically diverse men.

If mate poaching or becoming the target of mate poaching were evolutionarily preserved strategies, we would expect to find specific tactics for performing and/or enticing mate poaching attempts that would have helped men and women overcome the adaptive problem each sex faced in their evolutionary past. Sexual Strategies Theory predicts that females have evolved a stronger preference than men for potential long-term mates who are

able and willing to devote resources to themselves and their offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Ellis, 1992). By contrast, men possess adaptive preferences for physically attractive mating partners, low-cost sexual access, and sexual fidelity of a mate (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). When attempting to attract an unattached mate, individuals will tend to use strategies that appeal to the target sex's preferences (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Ratings of the perceived effectiveness for several mate poaching tactics revealed results that coincided with strategies. Tactics that increased attractiveness of the poacher, decreased attractiveness of the rival, inferred low-cost sexual access, and derogated rival sexual fidelity were rated as most effective when enacted by women whereas tactics such as resource display, generosity, willingness to invest, manipulation of emotional commitment of a rival, and development of an emotional connection were rated as most effective for men (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Schmitt and Shackelford (2003) asked participants to identify and then rate the effectiveness of tactics used by someone who wants to invite a mate poaching attempt. They found that these tactics followed evolutionarily predicted patterns as well, with strategies such as enhance physical appearance and suggest/provide easy sexual access as more effective for females and demonstrate resources as more effective for males. This evidence suggests that mate poaching seems to operate on the same mechanisms of sex differentiated attraction and mate preference as general romantic attraction. Furthermore, the tactics each sex uses during mate poaching appeal to the preferences of the opposite sex.

Although mate poaching acts on the same mechanisms of attraction as courtship between two unattached individuals, the goals of a mate poacher must include not only acquisition of a mate, but also subversion of that mate's current partner. To protect against

this subversion, humans not only have the ability to identify potential mate poachers, but also to prevent their partner from being poached (Buss, 2002; Shackelford & Buss, 1997).

Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that over 70% of their sample reported that someone had tried to attract a romantic partner away from them in the past, in contrast to 50% of participants who report having attempted to poach, showing that people may have a tendency to over-perceive threats to their relationship. However, only 30% reported that their partner was successfully attracted away from them, which suggests this sensitivity to potential infidelity may not be without benefit. Types of mate retention behavior and their frequencies were studied in an undergraduate (Buss, 1986) and in a married couples sample (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Men's mate retention positively covaried with their partner's youth and physical attractiveness and women's mate retention positively covaried with their partner's income and status striving. Also, men reported using resource display, submission and debasement, and intrasexual threats to retain their mates more often than women whereas women reported using appearance enhancement and verbal signals of possession more than men. Therefore, to be successful a mate poacher must be able to successfully avoid or subvert the retention tactics of the current partner. Failure to do this can have costly consequences. For males, resource depletion, concerns for a mate's future infidelity, increased risk for disease, and physical retribution from the female's mate have all been identified and judged as greater potential costs associated with mate poaching (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). For females, future infidelity of the man, self-degradation, worries of unwanted pregnancy, risk of disease, acquisition of a bad reputation, and physical harm by the partner of the poachee are judged as greater potential costs (Davies, Shackelford, & Hass, 2010; Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). Some

violent mate retention behaviors can involve particularly serious costs to both the poacher and poachee (Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). It would appear, then, that while mate poaching may help an individual acquire a mate, there are more and greater risks than those involved in general romantic courtship.

This raises the question of why mate poaching continues to be used as a mating strategy despite greater potential costs. Davies, et al. (2010) propose a hierarchy of conditional mating strategies, whereby individuals will first attempt to attract unattached individuals and will only proceed to engage in mate poaching if they have been unsuccessful in attaining an acceptable, unattached individual. This is supported by their evidence that suggests that neither sex perceives the potential costs of mate poaching as outweighing the benefits. Mate poaching is also viewed as less effective than general romantic attraction (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Furthermore, individuals tend to adjust their mating strategies depending on their perceived ability to attract mates (Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). Perhaps one set of variables that influence employment of mate poaching as a strategy are individual characteristics of the poacher such as personality and worth as a mate.

Several patterns of personality have been identified in individuals who tend to engage in mate poaching and in those who receive and act upon a poaching attempt (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Based on measures of the Big-Five personality inventory (Goldberg, 1992), those who engaged in mate poaching were found to be lower in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Those who were more likely to receive poaching attempts tended to be high in Extraversion and Openness to Experience. Furthermore, those who were low in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and high in Neuroticism tended to go along with

poaching attempts made upon them. Measures from the "Sexy Seven" sexuality attributes inventory (Schmitt & Buss, 2000) indicated that those who engage in mate poaching rate themselves as low in relationship exclusivity, having an erotophilic disposition (the tendency to react positively to sexual cues), being sexually attractive and lacking sexual exclusivity. Those who were more likely to receive poaching attempts rated themselves as more sexually attractive and lower in relationship exclusivity whereas those who were more likely to go along with a mate poaching attempt rated themselves low on relationship exclusivity, had a masculine gender orientation, were low on emotional investment, and high on erotophilic disposition. This evidence further suggests that mate poaching is a psychologically distinct form of romantic attraction utilized more often by individuals with certain personality attributes.

Another set of variables that may influence the decision to engage in mate poaching may be aptitude in employing tactics that reduce the costs associated with mate poaching. As mentioned previously, mate poaching tends to entail greater and more numerous costs than general romantic attraction. As such, it would be adaptive for individuals who engage in mate poaching to develop strategies that decrease the potential for these risks. One such tactic implicated in previous literature is the insertion of the poacher into the social context of the poachee's current relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). The poacher may accomplish this by becoming friends with the poachee.

Friendship between a male and female can sometimes act as a precursor to the formation of a romantic relationship. Previous friendship is often a very important stage in the development of a long-term romantic relationship (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick

& Hendrick, 2000) Bleske-Rechek, and Buss (2001) found that single men and women report a more frequent desire to form a committed romantic relationship with their friends than do those already in a relationship. Furthermore, both sexes report a desire for companionship and emotional support from friends; however, men are more likely to report potential sexual access as an important reason to start a friendship than are women whereas women report social and physical protection from others as more important than do men. These preferences are consistent with Sexual Strategies Theory, suggesting that opposite-sex friendship formation may, in some cases, be motivated by factors that can subsequently lead to romantic interest and facilitate the formation of a romantic relationship. Not only does friendship help foster the initiation of a romantic relationship, but it seems to play a major role in relationship maintenance. The degree of friendship between individuals in a romantic relationship is positively related to both relationship satisfaction and length (Graham, 2011). Furthermore, valuing friendship in a relationship is a strong positive predictor of feelings of love, sexual gratification, and romantic commitment over time (Vanderdrift, Wilson, & Agnew, 2012).

In all, this evidence suggests that friendship between a mate poacher and poachee may be an effective tactic for dealing with the unique challenges present in mate poaching. This strategic friendship might not only increase the likelihood that a poaching attempt is successful by appealing to between-sex and across-sex preferences in mate choice but may also simultaneously mitigate risks that are unique to mate poaching.

## **Present Study**

The current research investigated the role of friendship as a potential mate poaching tactic employed to infiltrate a target relationship. Whereas previous research has characterized the effectiveness of mate poaching tactics using quasi-experimental methodology, a true experimental design was employed for this study. Mate poaching is a clandestine mating strategy, which makes it difficult to study experimentally. However, important information can be acquired from examining individuals' perceptions of others. A wealth of research has demonstrated that how humans' navigate a social situation and make evaluation of others is heavily influenced by comparison with the self (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Individuals give quicker responses about their own behaviors and characteristics after evaluating them in others (Dunning & Hayes, 1996), suggesting that they access information about themselves when judging others. People also tend to assume a "false consensus" that others would act similarly to them in a given situation (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). In addition to accessing personal information, people also tend to use mental representations of romantic partners during social evaluation. Andersen and Cole (1990) found that descriptions of romantic partners are richer, more distinctive, and more cognitively accessible than those possessed for non-romantic partners, group stereotypes, and trait categories. Furthermore, when asked to recall attributes about fictional persons, participants recalled more false-positives for those who more resembled their romantic partner than they did for any other fictional person, suggesting that transference can heavily influence our social perception of others. Therefore, studying those observing a mate

poaching attempt might reveal important information about how others perceive mate poaching as well as how the observer may personally navigate a similar situation.

This methodology relies on the assumption that participants have personal experience with mate poaching, have knowledge about navigating these social situations, or generalize similar knowledge about navigating general romantic attraction to mate poaching. A majority of individuals report having had at least some experience, successful or not, mate poaching someone else, being poached, or having their partner poached from them (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Also, men and women possess psychological adaptations for detecting cues to partner infidelity (Shackelford & Buss, 1997) and protecting against partner infidelity (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). This suggests that even if an individual does not have personal experience with mate poaching, humans seem to have evolved and/or socially acquired mechanisms for recognizing mate poachers and protecting their partners from them.

Additionally, humans are good at using perspective-taking to recognize romantic strategies. During romantic attraction men and women will strategically use self-enhancement and competitor-derogation tactics that appeal to the opposite sex's mate selection criteria (Tooke & Camire, 1991), and can explicitly identify which tactics would be most effective for men and women to use in attracting the opposite sex (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Humans possess a "mating intelligence" for a wide variety of tactics used during human mating and romantic attraction (Geher & Kaufman, 2013). Given these tendencies, measuring the perceptions of those observing an act of mate poaching gives an indirect

insight into how others might mentally navigate and think about the social atmosphere surrounding mate poaching behavior.

To experimentally test how friendship between a poacher and poachee affects perceptions of mate poaching outcomes and perceptions of the poacher and poachee's personality traits, participants read one of four fictional accounts of a mate poaching attempt. Vignettes and imagined or fictional scenarios have been used in studies looking at impression formation (Sherman & Klein, 1994), infidelity and jealousy (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Wade, Kelley, & Church, 2012) and have been shown to induce physiological responses similar to experiencing the imagined scenario (Buss et al., 1992; Malta, Blanchard, Freidenberg, Galvoski, Karl, & Holzapfel, 2001). Each vignette varied by whether the poacher was a male or female and whether the poacher and poachee were close friends or acquaintances. Participants then rated the likelihood of several outcomes including: success of the poaching attempt, physical retaliation and suspicion from the poachee's partner, future poachee infidelity, shortened relationship duration, peer and familial disapproval of the relationship, and poachee resentment. Each of these outcomes are risks/costs associated with mate poaching implicated by Buss and Schmitt (2001), Davies et al. (2010), and Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

### **Hypotheses**

It was hypothesized that the poacher would be rated as more likely to be successful in the poaching attempt when the poacher and poachee were close friends. In accordance with Sexual Strategies Theory, it was predicted that there would be sex differences in how

effective friendship is as a tactic for increasing success and/or reducing costs, as males and females face different challenges when attempting to mate poach (Buss and Schmitt, 2001). Friendship may be a tactic better employed to appeal to those seeking a long-term partner, as it may signal attributes important for continued investment in the relationship and future offspring. Due to asymmetry in the minimum amount of resources men and women are required to invest in offspring (Trivers, 1972), women should be more sensitive to cues of investment from a partner and desire those qualities more in a potential mate than do men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, friendship between a poacher and poachee may more effectively alter the perceived likelihood of success of mate poaching when a male is poaching a female.

It was also hypothesized that when participants observed a mate poaching scenario in which the poacher and poachee were close friends, they would evaluate costly outcomes as less likely to occur. Insertion of the self into the temporal context of the poachee's current relationship has already been implicated as an effective tactic during mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Therefore, any risks or costs typically associated with mate poaching may be perceived as less likely to occur if the poacher and poachee are friends. However, if friendship is indicative of desirable long-term mate qualities, then costly outcomes such as decreased longevity of the resulting relationship or the likelihood of future infidelity should be more strongly mitigated.

It was also predicted that individuals would judge the mate value characteristics of the poacher and poachee differently depending on whether they were close friends or acquaintances. Those who mate poach tend to rate themselves low in relationship/sexual

exclusivity, having an erotophilic disposition, and low in agreeableness and conscientiousness (Buss & Schmitt, 2001; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008). Because friendship may signal qualities associated with a good long-term mate (Guerrero, & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Vanderdrift et al., 2012), friendship between a poacher and poachee may suggest that a poacher is more interested in pursuing a long-term relationship, leading observers to perceive the mate poacher as having qualities that are desirable in a long-term mate. Following this same line of reasoning, it was predicted that observers will perceive the mate poacher as being more motivated by starting a long-term relationship when the poacher and poachee are friends. It was not predicted that friendship would alter perceptions of the poachee's personality or mate attributes.

### **Summary of Hypotheses**

- 1) Friend-poachers will be rated as more likely to succeed in their mate poaching attempt than will acquaintance-poachers.
- 2) Male friend-poachers will be rated as more likely to be succeed than female friend-poachers
- 3) Costly poaching outcomes will be rated as less likely to occur if the poacher and poachee are friends as opposed to acquaintances.
  - a. Friend-poachers are less likely to be suspected by the poachee's mate than acquaintance poachers.
  - b. The poachee's mate is less likely to physically retaliate against a friend-poacher than an acquaintance-poacher.

- c. Physical retaliation from the poachee's current mate is more likely to occur if the poacher is male rather than female.
  - d. A new long-term relationship is more likely to last longer than a year for friend-poachers than for acquaintance-poachers.
  - e. In the new long-term relationship, the poachee is rated as less likely to cheat on a friend-poacher than an acquaintance poacher in the future.
  - f. Family and friends are more likely to approve of the new relationship if the poacher and poachee are friends as opposed to acquaintances.
  - g. The poachee is rated as less likely to resent a friend-poacher than an acquaintance-poacher.
- 4) Friend-poachers will be rated higher for attributes indicative of investment in the poachee and their future relationship.
- a. Friend-poachers will be rated as more warm, friendly, nurturant, and as being a better parent and mate.
- 5) A greater proportion of observers will predict that a friend-poacher is motivated to start a long-term relationship than is an acquaintance-poacher.
- 6) A greater proportion of observers will predict that an acquaintance-poacher is motivated to start a one-night stand or short-term affair than is a friend-poacher.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 382 individuals (47.5% male, 52.5% female) recruited from two populations: 282 Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users and 100 Bucknell University

undergraduate students. MTurk is a crowd-sourcing service hosted by Amazon through which participants were paid \$0.25 for completion of the experiment. MTurk has been gaining popularity in recent psychological research and has been shown to be a high quality source of data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Undergraduate students were recruited from the Bucknell University psychology department research participant pool. These students received credit in their introductory psychology classes for participation. These two samples were combined to create a diverse population for analysis that may be more representative of how the general population responds to mate poaching.

The mean age of the sample was 29.13 (SD = 9.23, range = 18-67). The racial composition self-identified as 63.3% Asian, 29.2% White, 3.9% Black, and 3.6% other. A majority of the sample was heterosexual (81.1%) with some identifying as homosexual (9.7%) and other (9.25%). About three-fourths of the sample reported having ever been in a sexual relationship (74.1%). More than half of the sample reported currently being in a relationship (56.8%) whereas 39% reported being currently single and 3.3% were unsure. A majority of the sample (83.95%) reported that they were not currently on birth control medication of any type.

## **Materials and Procedures**

Previous studies investigating poacher/poachee characteristics and the tactics used during mate poaching have relied on self-report measures and a quasi-experimental design to gather data. To examine the role of friendship as a poaching tactic, a true experimental

design was utilized. After signing the informed consent, participants were presented with the following instructions:

*For the following experiment, you will be asked to read **one** short paragraph detailing the relationship between three individuals. Please take your time to fully read the paragraph and form some initial impressions about the individuals described. To do this, you will be asked to imagine that you know these individuals and that you are a friend, acquaintance, or bystander who happens to observe what is happening between them. After hearing their story, you will be asked to make several ratings pertaining to the likelihood of certain events happening between these individuals. You will also be asked to rate the individuals on several measures of their personality and sexuality. While we realize that you cannot learn everything about a person or group of people from one, short story, we ask that you please make these ratings based on your initial impression of the individuals described.*

Participants were then presented with one of four short vignettes depicting a mate poaching situation involving three individuals. These individuals were the poacher, the person doing the poaching, the poachee, the target of the poaching attempt, and the poached, the person currently in a relationship with the poachee . These four vignettes varied across two variables: sex of the poacher/poachee and whether the poacher and poachee were friends. The following two vignette examples demonstrate how the friendship variable was manipulated (See bolded text):

#### Friendship Condition

*Imagine the following:*

*You happened to hear an interesting story the other day about three people, John, Sarah, and Chris. Through your own experiences and a few rumors, you piece together the following information about them.*

*John and Sarah have been in an exclusive relationship for about a year. Recently, John and Sarah have been having problems in their relationship and their relationship has been uneasy. **Sarah often talks about the problems in her relationship with Chris, a close friend she goes to for advice and comfort, and with whom she enjoys spending time.** Chris is attracted to Sarah. He realizes that she is*

*in an exclusive relationship, yet he still flirts with her in hopes that something may happen between Sarah and him.*

### Friendship Absent Condition

*Imagine the following:*

*You happened to hear an interesting story the other day about three people, John, Sarah, and Chris. Through your own experiences and a few rumors, you piece together the following information about them.*

*John and Sarah have been in an exclusive relationship for about a year. Recently, John and Sarah have been having problems in their relationship and their relationship has been uneasy. **Chris is an acquaintance of Sarah's and they know very little about each other.** Chris is attracted to Sarah. He realizes that she is in an exclusive relationship, yet he still flirts with her in hopes that something may happen between Sarah and him.*

To manipulate the sex of the poacher, the vignettes remained the same except that Chris' name was replaced with "Rachel", and Sarah and John switched roles as poachee and poached.

Once participants read their vignette and confirmed that they understood the relationship between each individual, they were asked to make several ratings about the poacher's likelihood of 1) being successful and 2) incurring future costs/risks. On a 1 to 7 scale from "Highly unlikely" to "Highly likely", participants were asked:

- 1) *How likely is it that Chris will succeed in attracting Sarah away from John?*
- 2) *How likely is it that John will suspect that Chris is trying to attract Sarah away from him?*
- 3) *How likely is it that John will inflict physical harm on Chris for trying to attract Sarah?*
- 4) *If Chris and Sarah formed a new long-term relationship, how likely is it that the relationship would last for more than a year?*
- 5) *If Chris and Sarah start a new long-term relationship, how likely is it that Sarah would cheat on him in the future?*
- 6) *How likely is it that their friends will not approve of how Chris and Sarah started their relationship?*

- 7) *How likely is it that either of their families will not approve of how Chris and Sarah started their relationship?*
- 8) *How likely is it that Sarah will later resent Chris for the way they started their relationship?*

In order to collect novel descriptive information not examined in previous literature, participants were also asked to indicate the following:

- 1) *In your opinion, is it OK that Chris is trying to attract Sarah away from John?    Yes  
No*
- 2) *What is most likely the type of relationship that Chris intends to start with Sarah by attracting her away from John?*

*A one-night stand.    A short term affair.    A new long-term relationship.*

Participants were then asked to indicate their impressions of the poacher and poachee across several evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics. Using measures from Wade, Auer, and Roth (2009), participants rated them on a 1 (Not Very) to 7 (Very) scale for 1) intelligence, 2) physical attractiveness, 3) sexual attractiveness, 4) warmth, 5) dominance, 6) friendliness, 7) masculinity, 8) nurturance, and whether they would be a 9) good parent or a 10) good mate.

They finished by filling out a demographic questionnaire indicating age, sex, race, current relationship status, sexual relationship experience, and birth control usage.

## **Results**

### **Mate Poaching Outcomes**

Participants were asked to report the likelihood of eight outcomes after reading a vignette depicting a mate poaching scenario. These ratings included how likely: 1) the poacher would be successful, 2) the poachee's partner would suspect the poacher's attempts,

3) the poachee's partner would physically retaliate against the poacher, 4) the new relationship between the poacher and poachee would last longer than a year, 5) the poachee would cheat on the poacher in the future, 6) friends and 7) family would approve of the new relationship, and 8) the poachee would resent the poacher for how they started the relationship. Participants read one of four vignettes that differed by whether the poacher and poachee were close friends or acquaintances as well as whether the poacher was male or female.

A 2(Friendship) X 2(Sex of Poacher) between subjects MANOVA was performed to examine whether participants' mean ratings of the likelihood of these eight outcomes differed between conditions. This analysis revealed a main effect for friendship,  $F(8, 371) = 3.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .076$ . As shown in Figure 1, poachers who were close friends ( $M = 4.59, SD = 1.41$ ) with the poachee were rated as more likely to successfully mate poach than when the poacher was an acquaintance ( $M = 4.27, SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.42, p = .017, \eta^2 = .015$ . Similarly, the resulting relationship between the poacher and poachee was rated as more likely to last beyond a year when they were friends ( $M = 3.88, SD = 1.51$ ) than if they were acquaintances ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.59$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 31.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .034$ . The poachee was also rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future if they were friends ( $M = 4.11, SD = 1.50$ ) as opposed to acquaintances ( $M = 4.45, SD = 1.5$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.97, p = .028, \eta^2 = .013$ .

There was also a main effect for poacher sex,  $F(8, 371) = 6.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .115$ . As shown in Figure 2, female poachers ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.51$ ) were rated as more likely to be suspect of poaching than were male poachers ( $M = 4.36, SD = 1.72$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 12.98, p$

$<.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .033$ . However, male poachers ( $M = 3.752$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) were rated as more likely to suffer physical retaliation from the poachee's partner than were female poachers ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.65$   $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .027$ . Participants also reported that family members were more likely to approve of the resulting relationship if the poacher were a female ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) rather than a male ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.51$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . The same was true of friends, with the relationship more likely to be approved if the poacher were female ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) rather than male ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ . There was no significant interaction,  $F(8, 371) = 0.61$ ,  $p = .766$ .

Participants were asked to indicate what type of relationship they thought the poacher wanted to initiate with the poachee: a one-night stand, a short-term affair, or a new long-term relationship. A Chi-square Test for Independence indicated that participants' predictions significantly differed across the friendship status of the poacher and poachee,  $\chi^2(2, N = 382) = 16.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . Three Chi-square Goodness of Fit analyses were used to assess pairwise comparisons. There was no significant difference between the number of participants that predicted a one-night stand when the poacher was a friend versus acquaintance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = .947$ ,  $p = .330$ . However, significantly more individuals predicted that acquaintance poachers were more interested in a short-term affair than were friend poachers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 8.91$ ,  $p = .003$ , whereas friend poachers were more interested in a new long-term relationship than were acquaintance poachers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 182) = 7.12$ ,  $p = .008$ . Observed and expected frequencies are reported in Table 1. Participants also indicated whether they personally thought it was OK for the poacher to attract the poachee away from their current

mate. A Chi-square goodness of fit test indicated that these perceptions were not significantly associated with whether the poacher and poachee were friends or acquaintances,  $\chi^2(1, N = 382) = .106, p = .745$ .

### **Mate Attributes**

Participants also rated the poacher and poachee on several important mate attributes based on the initial impressions they formed from the vignette. These ratings included how intelligent, physically attractive, sexually attractive, warm, dominant, friendly, masculine, nurturant, and socially competent each were. Additionally, they rated how good of a parent and mate each person would be.

A second 2(Friendship) X 2(Sex of Poacher) between subjects MANOVA was performed to examine whether participants' mean ratings of these characteristics differed between the four vignettes. There was a main effect for friendship,  $F(22, 357) = 2.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .149$ . As shown in Figure 3, ratings of the poacher's intelligence were higher when the poacher and poachee were portrayed as acquaintances ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.49$ ) than when they were friends ( $M = 2.87, SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.10, p = .044, \eta^2 = .011$ . The poacher was also rated as more warm when they were acquaintances ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.66$ ) as opposed to friends ( $M = 3.24, SD = 1.57$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 8.76, p = .003, \eta^2 = .023$ , more friendly as acquaintances ( $M = 3.33, SD = 1.67$ ) than as friends ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 10.89, p = .001, \eta^2 = .028$ , and more nurturant as acquaintances ( $M = 3.91, SD = 1.66$ )

than friends ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 32.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .079$ . There were no significant differences for ratings of the poachee (See Figure 4)

There was also a main effect for sex of the poacher,  $F(22, 357) = 11.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .421$  (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). When the poacher was male ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), he was rated as more sexually attractive than when the poacher was female ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 12.37$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta^2 = .016$ . The poachee was also rated as more intelligent when the poacher was a male ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) rather than a female poacher ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .030$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . Interestingly, male poachers ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) were rated as less masculine than female poachers ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 118.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .240$ . Poachees were rated as more masculine when the poacher was male ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than when the poacher was female ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $F(1, 378) = 133.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .262$ . There was no significant interaction,  $F(22, 357) = 1.184$ ,  $p = .259$ .

## Discussion

The role of friendship as a relationship infiltration tactic for mate poaching was investigated by asking participants to read one of four vignettes depicting a mate poaching scenario in which the mate poacher and the poachee were friends or acquaintances as well as whether the poacher was a male or female. Participants then rated the likelihood of several outcomes as well as their impressions of the poacher and poachee across several evolutionarily relevant mate characteristics. The primary hypothesis was supported.

Friendship between the poacher and poachee increased the perceived likelihood that the mate

poacher would be successful. The hypothesis that friendship would mitigate the likelihood of costly mate poaching outcomes was partially supported. When the poacher and poachee were friends, their new long-term relationship was rated as more likely to last longer than a year. Furthermore, within this long-term relationship, the poachee was rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future. Together, these results suggest an interpretation whereby friendship may be a useful tactic for signaling future investment in a long-term relationship to a potential mate. This is consistent with literature showing that friendship is an important factor in long-term relationship formation and maintenance (Graham, 2011; Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Vanderdrift, Wilson, & Agnew, 2012). Bleske-Rechek & Buss (2001) found that even during general romantic attraction, men and women may initiate opposite-sex friendships to acquire potential mates.

Interestingly, there were no sex differences in how effective friendship was for a mate poacher. One possible explanation is that friendship serves to signal romantic compatibility across important mate characteristics that are not necessarily sex-specific. In a potential long-term mate, both sexes tend to value traits such as being kind, understanding, exciting, intelligent, and creative (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These complex personality traits may arguably be more difficult and take more time to assess than other signals of mate quality such as physical attractiveness, social standing, or wealth. Friendship may afford males and females information about a potential mate that can be used to more accurately assess how compatible they may be as romantic partners. In their review, Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner (2008) found that both actual and perceived similarity between individuals strongly predicted interpersonal attraction in both existing and potential

romantic relationships. Therefore, participants may have believed that poachers and poachees who were close friends had already acquired information about one another and were more likely to be compatible and attracted to one another than not.

The hypothesis that friendship would mitigate the likelihood of costly mate poaching outcomes was partially supported. When the poacher and poachee were friends, their new long-term relationship was rated as more likely to last longer than a year. The poachee was also rated as less likely to cheat on the poacher in the future. However, the data did not support other hypotheses predicting that friendship would mitigate other mate poaching outcomes. The likelihood of being suspected by the poachee's current mate and suffering physical retaliation from that mate was the same for friend and acquaintances. Furthermore, friends and family were perceived as just as likely to approve of the new relationship whether the poacher and poachee were friends or not, and the poachee was just as likely to resent the poacher afterwards. Buss and Schmitt (2001) found that participants rated future infidelity concerns and an uncertain future as more costly for long-term than short-term mate poaching. This pattern seems to indicate that friendship is perceived to be most effective for reducing long-term relational instability between the poacher and poachee and less effective for mitigating risks associated with third-parties such as the poachee's current mate and family/friends. It would appear that participants recognize that friendship between partners can play an important role in relationship maintenance and that friendship may signal traits desired in a long-term mate.

Interestingly, the hypothesis that friend-poachers would be rated higher on attributes indicative of investment in the poachee and their future relationship was not supported. In

fact, the opposite effect was found. Acquaintance-poachers were rated as more warm, friendly, and nurturant than were friend-poachers. A possible explanation for this pattern is that as observers, participants may have greater doubts about whether the poacher's friendship is an intentional strategy rather than genuine friendship. To the poacher and poachee, their friendship may appear to serve no functional purpose related to mate poaching. In this way, the benefits of friendship in signaling investment, compatibility, and traits desired in a long-term mate is maintained as genuine, honest signals for those directly involved. However, observers may be more knowledgeable of the mate poacher's intentions. Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that agreeable and conscientious people are less likely to be poachers. Perhaps raters associate poachers with those traits and thus view friend-poachers more negatively because friends should be kind and reliable, not attempting to dissolve a friend's relationship for their own benefit. Bleske and Shackelford (2001) found that people experience more upset in response to imagined mate rivalry from a friend than from a stranger.

Alternatively, observers may judge others' mate poaching behaviors with a double standard. It would be adaptive for individuals to disprove of another's tactical use of friendship to mate poach while also understanding its effectiveness and endorsing the strategy for one's own use. Humans possess a wide variety of tactics for engaging in self-promotion as well as competitor derogation (Schmitt & Buss, 1996; Tooke & Camire, 1991). Bleske and Shackelford (2001) found that people report being deceived by friends about mating rivalry more often than they themselves report engaging in deceit. Therefore, perhaps

the disparity between observers' view of friendship as effective and their negative evaluation of friend-poachers is a manifestation of strategic deception.

Participants were also asked to indicate what type of relationship they thought the poacher was attempting to pursue: a one-night stand, a short-term affair, or a long-term relationship. It was predicted that participants would think that friend-poachers were more interesting in starting a long-term relationship than either a one-night stand or a short-term affair. It was also predicted that they would think acquaintance-poachers would be more interested in a one-night stand or short-term affair than a long-term relationship. Both of these predictions were supported. This evidence is further support that participants think friendship signals long-term goals for a mate poacher.

There were several findings for which no hypotheses were generated. Independent of the friendship manipulation, female poachers were more likely to be suspected of poaching than male poachers. Male poachers were also more likely to suffer physical retaliation from the poachee's partner. This finding is consistent with previous literature. Males are more likely to use physical relations and violence against a competitor as a mate guarding tactic (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). Family and friends were more likely to approve of the resulting relationship if the poacher was female as opposed to male. Male poachers were rated as more sexually attractive and intelligent than female poachers. Male poachers were rated as less masculine when the poacher were rated as less masculine than female poachers. Similarly, the poachee was rated as more masculine when the poacher was male. These findings do not appear to be well

explained by Sexual Strategies Theory; however, several of these trends may provide direction for future research.

### **Conclusions & Future Directions**

Several characteristics of this study demand that the results be interpreted with care. Previous research from which hypotheses were generated used largely college-aged samples (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt 2004). The current study sampled participants from both an exclusively college-aged population as well as from a more diverse MTurk population (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). As such, this sample may represent a population that is different from previous studies; however, it is arguably more representative of the general population. Also, a majority of the population reported not currently using hormone-based birth control, which has been shown to affect long-term and short-term mate preference, perceptions of masculinity, and attraction (Cornwell et al., 2004; Feinberg, DeBruine, Jones, Little, Feinberg, & Law Smith, 2008; Jones et al., 2005; Little, Jones, Penton-Voak, Burt, Perrett, 2002; Penton-Voak, Little, Jones, Burt, & Perrett, 2003; Smith, Jones, Little, DeBruine, & Welling, 2009). Most importantly, these results measure perceptions of those observing fictional scenarios and may not generalize beyond the perceptions of an unrelated or uninvolved observer. Perceptions of observers are important for measuring costly behavior largely in part because mate poaching entails risks closely associated with social stigma and the reactions of others. However, it is also important in that observers may see themselves in the mate poaching scenarios, referencing their own romantic relationships (Andersen and Cole, 1990), experiences with mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), and personal beliefs (Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), which may

have been shaped in part by evolved mechanisms for engaging in and combatting mate poaching behavior (Buss, 1986; Buss, 2002; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003; Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Nevertheless, it would be important for future studies to use other, more direct measures to verify whether friendship is effective beyond altering observer perceptions of success and risk.

There are several design changes that could be useful for future investigations. Firstly, rather than participants rating “how likely” each cost would be to occur, it may be helpful to have participants indicate “how costly” each outcome would be. An investigation of likelihood is conceptually similar to a forced-choice paradigm where participants are lead to believe something can either occur or not occur (e.g., how likely is physical retaliation to occur (or not occur)?). If participants were to indicate “how costly” an outcome would be, they would instead indicate the severity of the cost on a continuous scale (e.g., how severe/costly would the physical retaliation be?). Also, no previous study has looked at what observers predicted were the poacher’s motivations. Participants seemed to view friend-poachers as more likely to be motivated by long-term goals and acquaintance-poachers motivated by short-term goals. It would be important for future studies to test whether having these predictions or being primed to have these predictions alters observers’ perceptions of mate poaching. Also, if the observer had a personal connection to the mate poacher, poachee, or poached (such as a friend, family member, or other associate), it may influence the observers evaluation of mate poaching.

Aside from participants’ ratings of the poachee’s mate characteristics, this study focused almost exclusively on the benefits of friendship for the poacher. However, the

poachee has as much to benefit and lose from being poached (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Friendship with the poacher may also function to mitigate risks face by the poachee. Though some of the risks investigated in this study are the same for poachers and poachees (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), some questions were not framed to evaluate poachee risks. For example, participants were asked “the likelihood that the poachee would cheat on the poacher”, but were not asked the likelihood of whether the poacher would cheat on the poachee. Furthermore, the current study did not look at risks that may be unique to the poachee, such as loss of resources, dissolution of the current relationship, and retaliation from the poachee’s partner against the poachee or restrictive/violent mate guarding behavior. It would also be interesting to see what participants thought was the motivation of the poachee during a mate poaching encounter and whether the poachee was more interested in a long-term or short-term relationship.

This study contributes experimental evidence to a body of work that has largely been descriptive or quasi-experimental. It also introduces a methodology by which mate poaching may be experimentally studied indirectly through the perceptions of others. Overall, these data support the claim that, by increasing the likelihood of success and decreasing several costs unique to poaching, friendship is seen as an effective tactic for infiltrating an existing relationship. These findings support hypotheses formulated from previous data on mate poaching and provide several novel findings from which new, testable predictions can be generated.

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Table 1

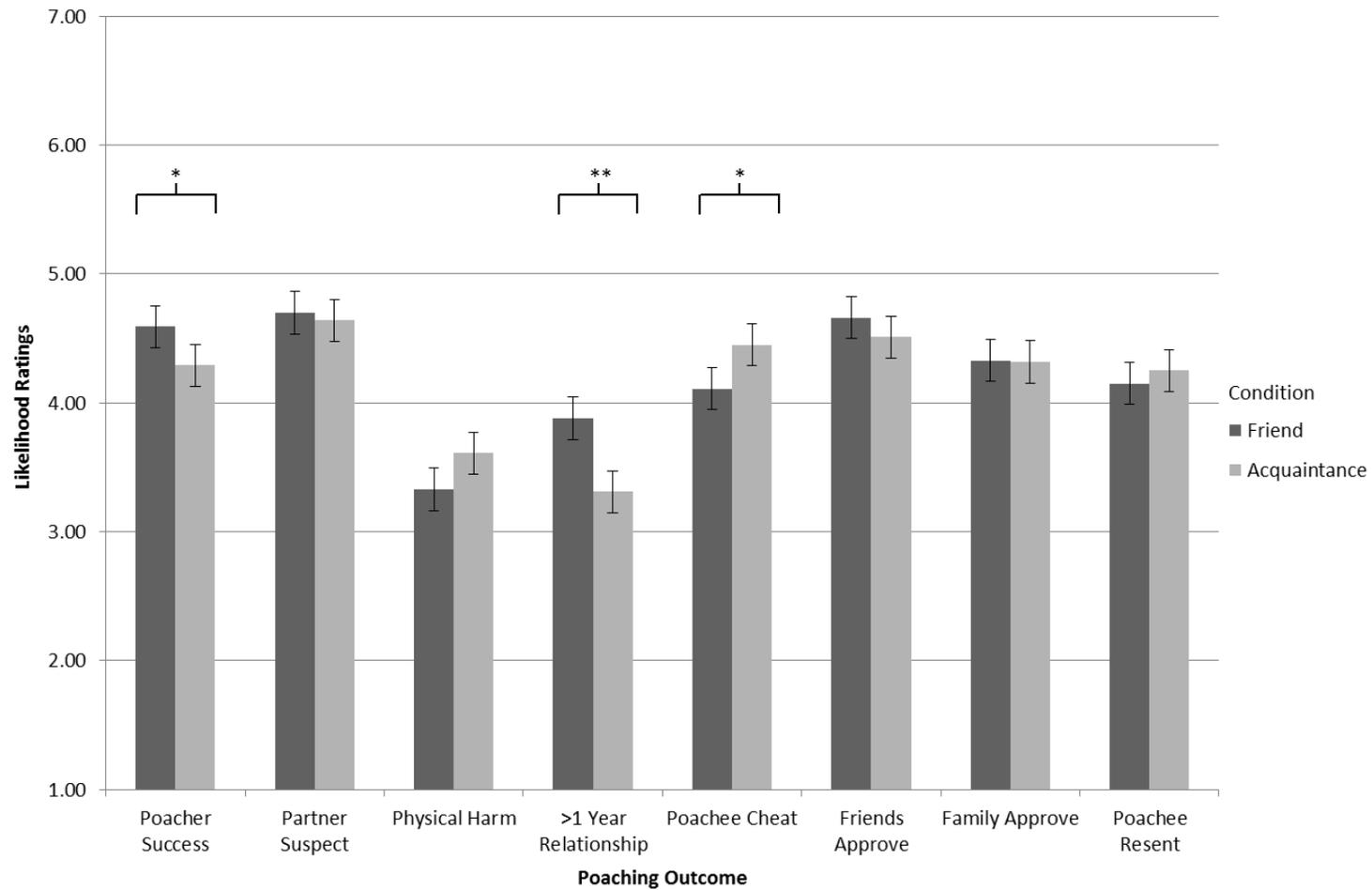
*Observed frequencies for predicted motivation of mate poacher across friendship conditions.*

<b>Predicted Motivation</b>	One-night stand	Short-term affair*	Long-term relationship*
<b>Friendship Condition</b>			
Friend	16	62	109
Acquaintance	22	100	73
<b>Total</b>	38	162	182

\* Difference in frequencies for friendship condition is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 1

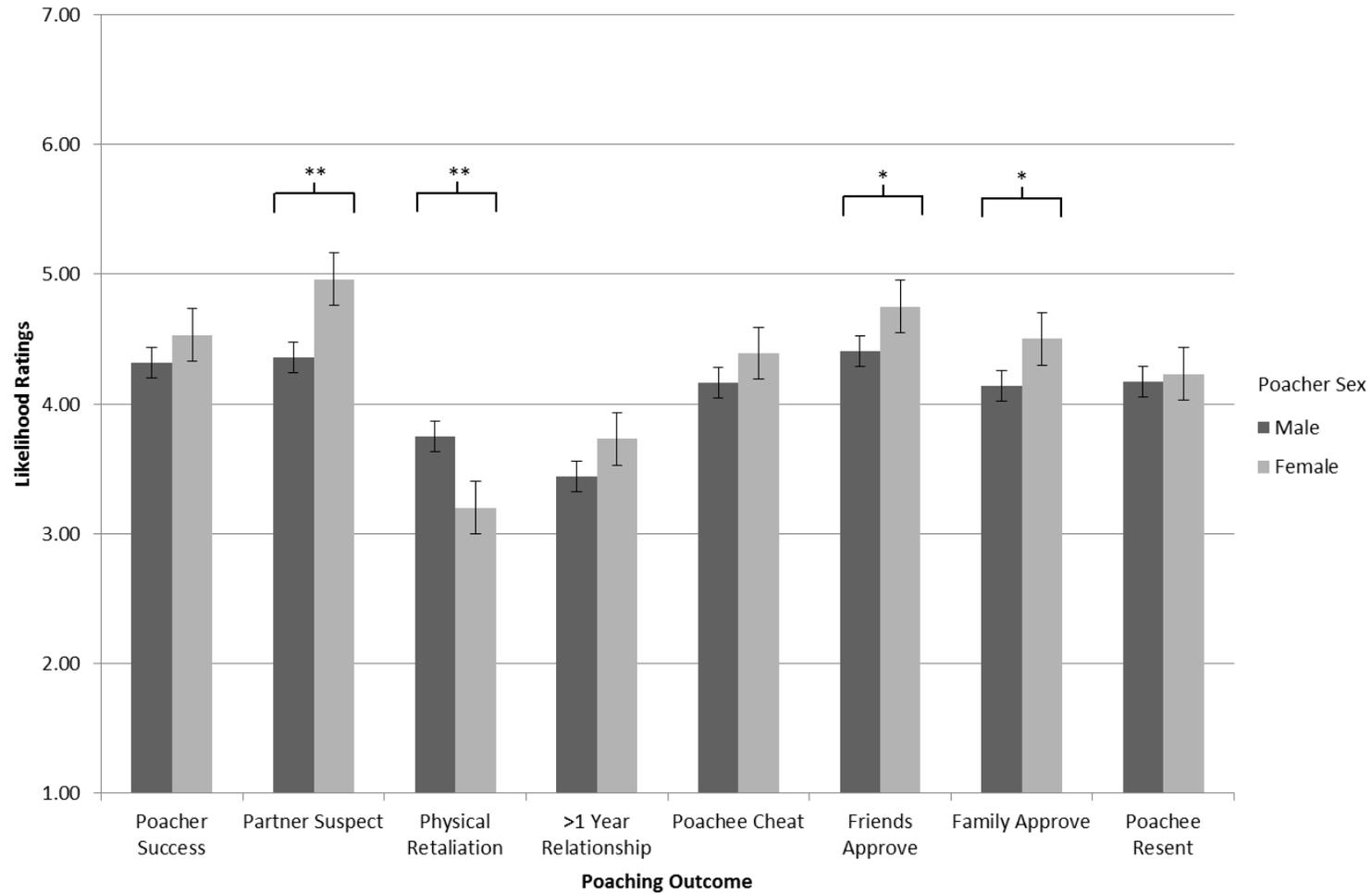
*Mate poaching outcome likelihood ratings when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

Figure 2

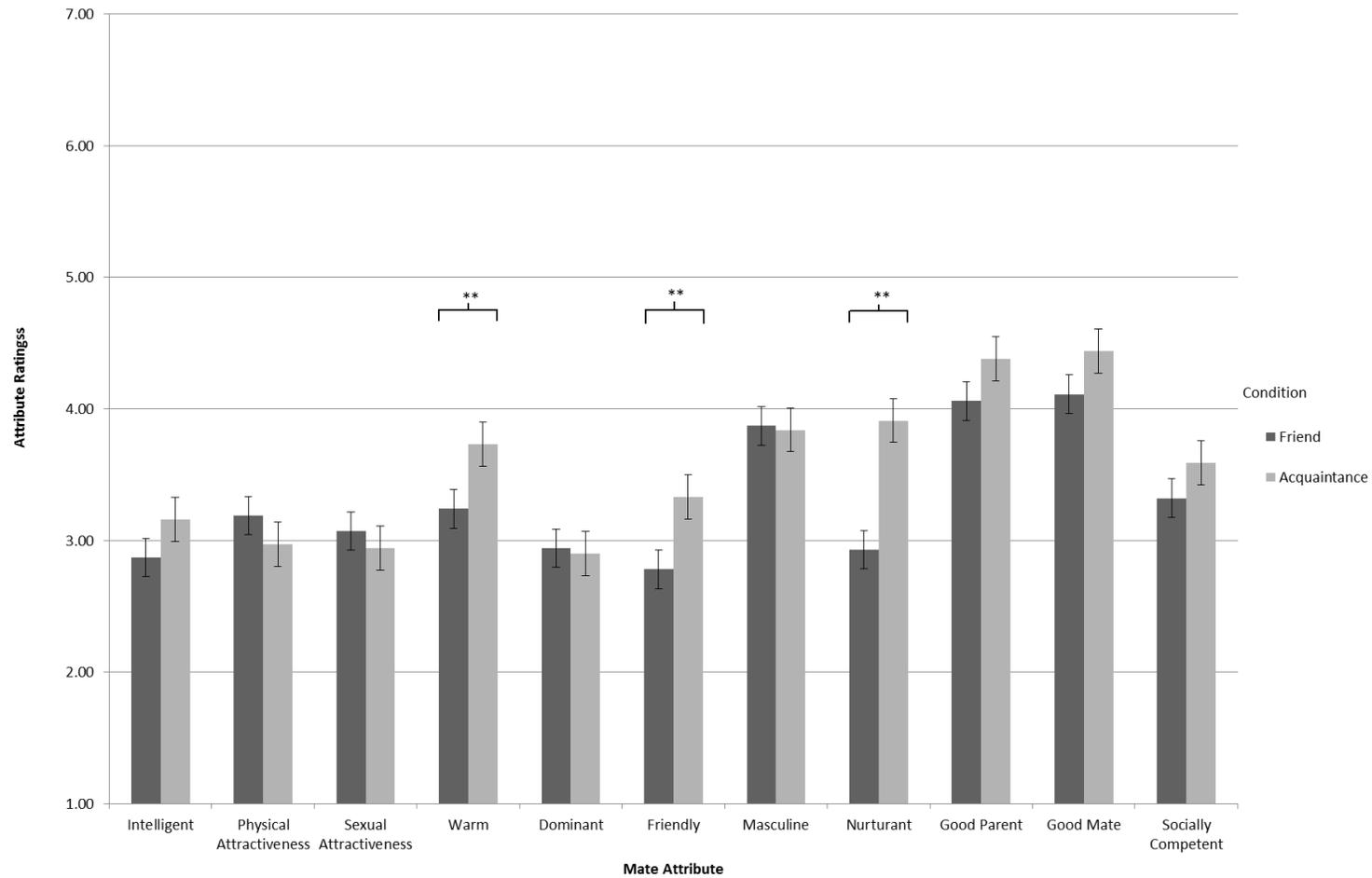
*Mate poaching outcome likelihood ratings for male versus female poachers*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 3

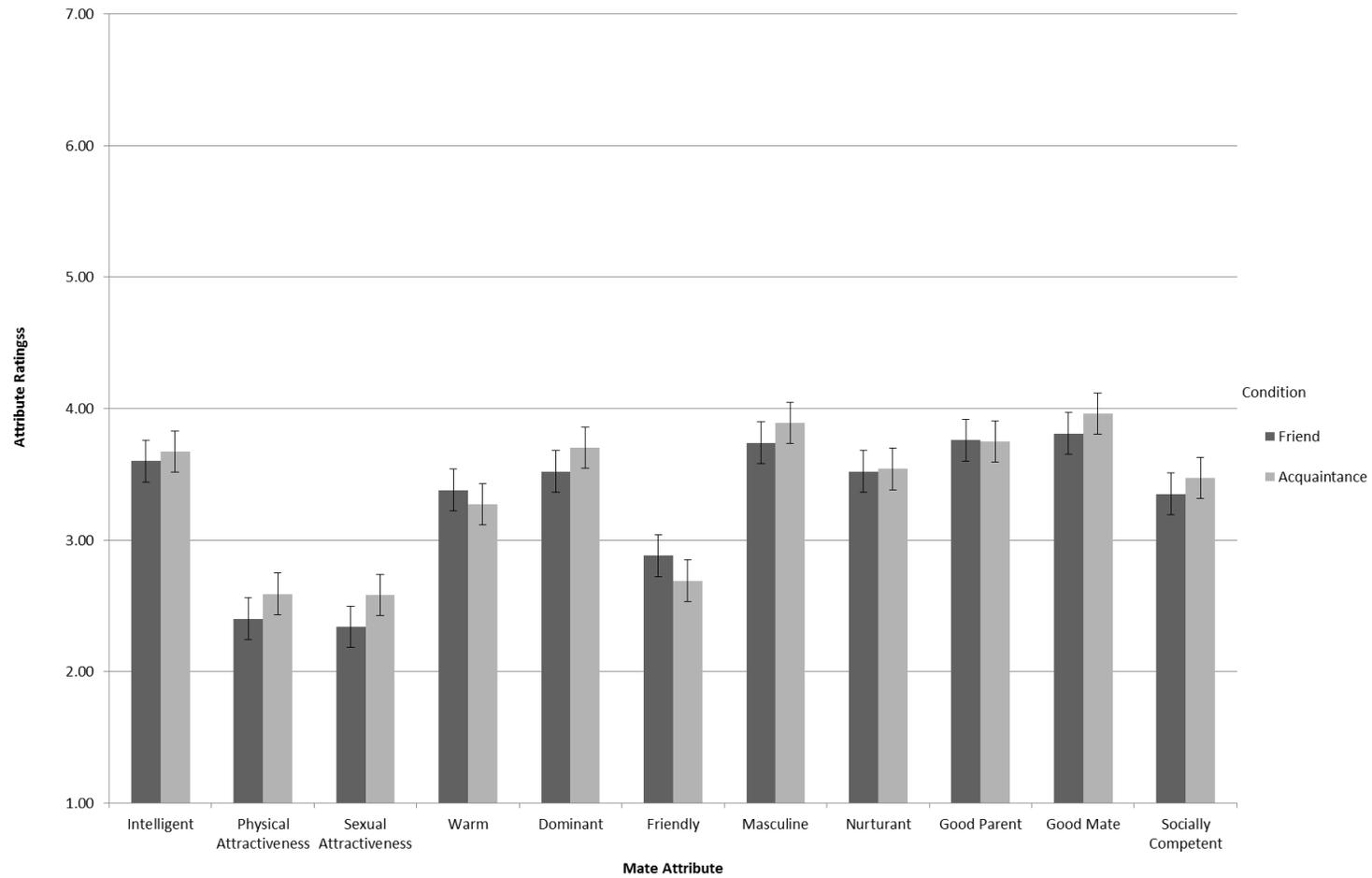
*Mate attribute ratings of the poacher when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



\*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Figure 4

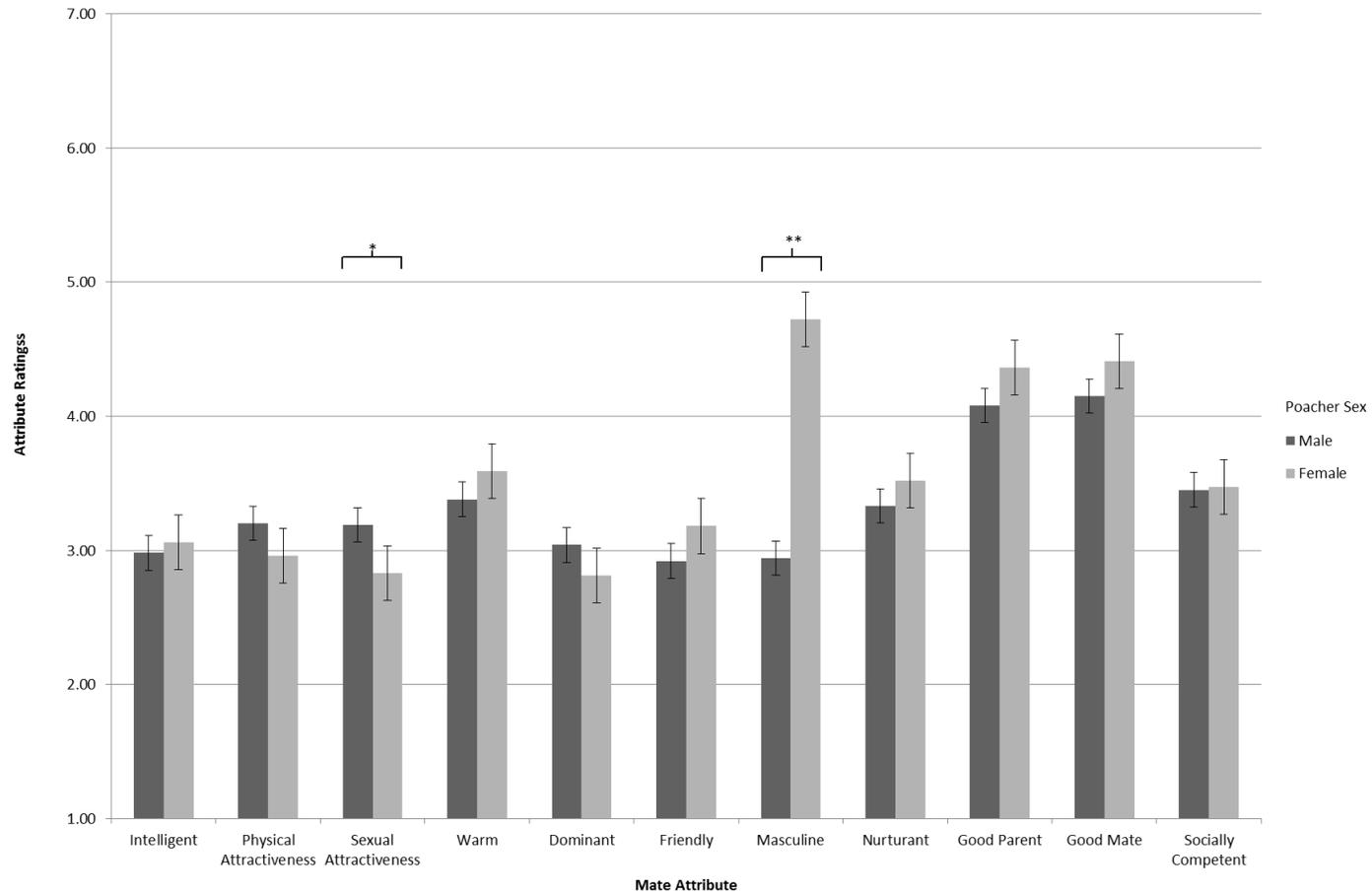
*Mate attribute ratings of the poachee when the poacher and poachee are friends versus acquaintances.*



There were no significant differences.

Figure 5

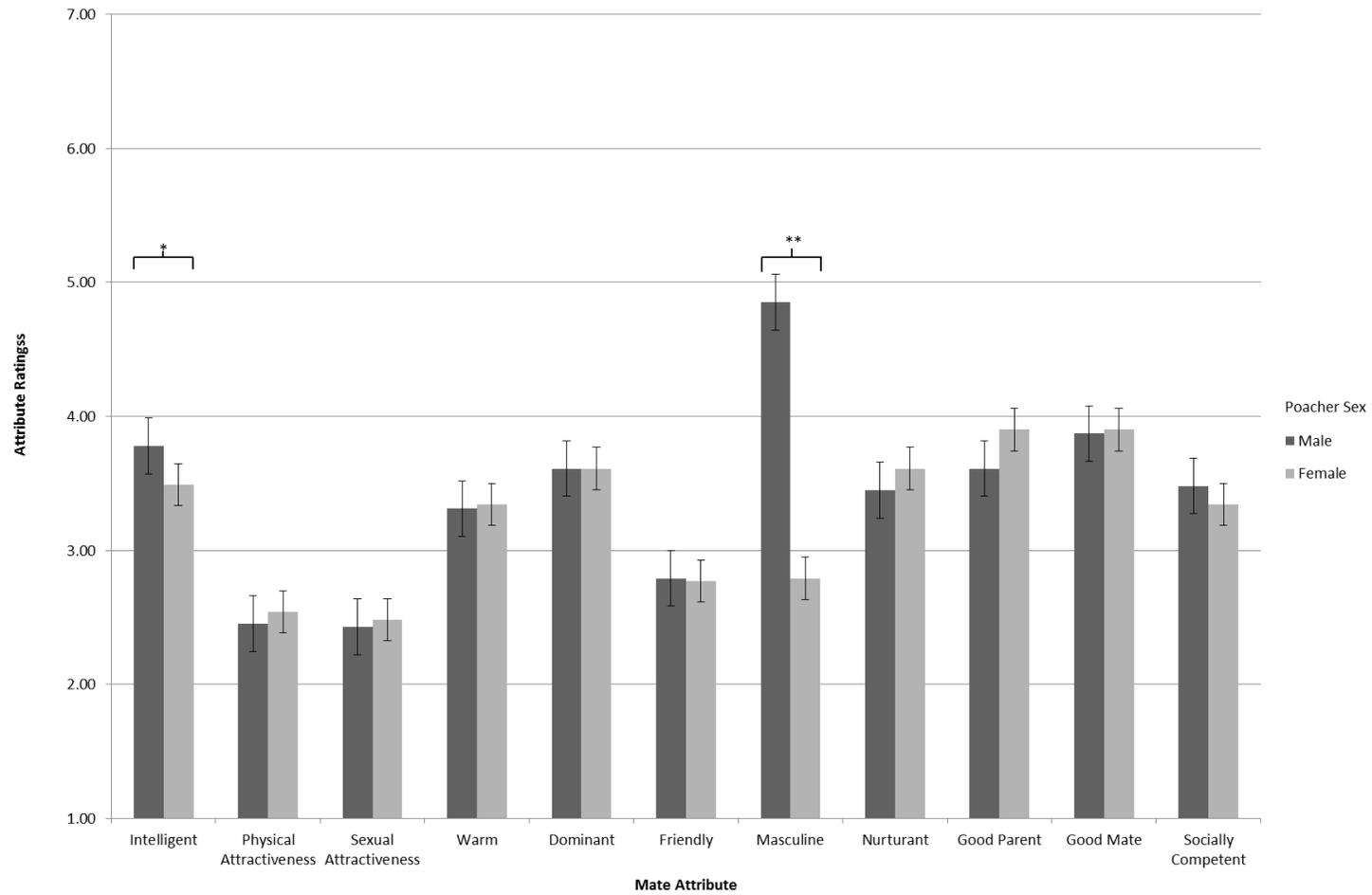
*Mate attribute ratings of poacher for male versus female poachers.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

Figure 6.

*Mate attribute ratings of poachee for male versus female poachers.*



\* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). \*\* Mean difference is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)