

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIP  
STATUS IN INFIDELITY: WHO'S CHASING WHOM?

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2008

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
May, 2008

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STATUS IN INFIDELITY: WHO'S CHASING WHOM?

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a woman approaches a man at a bar on a Friday night. She strikes up a conversation with him and in an attempt to show her interest, begins to flirtatiously touch his back. In response, the man leans away and politely informs the woman that he is happily married. Instead of walking away, the woman continues to pursue him and asks to see him again. In this case, the man is trying to display his commitment to his wife and his marriage; whereas the woman is obviously disregarding this man's marital status. The woman's behavior in this example demonstrates the phenomenon of mate poaching – using tactics in an attempt to attract committed individuals away from their current partners. This example describes only one of many forms of cheating patterns involved in infidelity. As will be explained below, an individual's willingness to engage in cheating behaviors is complex and dependent upon various interacting factors.

Although a great deal of research has been done on the topic of infidelity, this work is problematic because it has been too narrowly focused to explain the complex patterns and factors involved. For example, the majority of cheating research has emphasized topics such as sexual permissiveness (Oliver & Sedikides, 1992), sexual responsiveness (Clark & Hatfield, 1989), and the willingness to engage in these behaviors (Greitemeyer, 2005). As a result, researchers have focused on the cheating behaviors of

men and have largely neglected the cheating behaviors of women. Research on cheating has also failed to take into account the relationship status of the cheater and/or the target being pursued. It seems highly likely that such factors would moderate the typical patterns of infidelity already shown in the literature.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of three variables on cheating behavior: relationship status of the target, relationship status of the individual, and gender of the individual. Although a few studies have examined the impact of each of these variables in isolation, none have looked at them collectively. As a result, the research on infidelity has been too narrow in scope. It was my assertion that when these three variables were examined in unison, unique cheating patterns would emerge.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### *Relationship Status of Target: Mate Poaching Hypothesis*

By definition, cheating occurs when people in a committed relationship engage in sexual or emotional behaviors with someone other than their partner (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Thus, cheating behaviors depend upon whether the individual is single or committed. However, it is also likely that the relationship status of the target is an important factor in infidelity. One area of research that has at least examined issues regarding the relationship status of the target is mate poaching. Mate poaching can be defined as behavior that is initially intended to attract an individual who is currently in a committed relationship (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Most mate poaching behaviors include premeditated attempts of an individual (*poacher*) to attract committed individuals (those who are *poached*) away from their current partner (*poachee*). However, others suggest that some mate poaching behaviors can also occur at an unconscious level (e.g., evolutionary perspective). Whether these behaviors are premeditated or unconscious, both men and women engage in mate poaching tactics, either as a poacher or poachee. In order to understand why some individuals engage in mate poaching behaviors, while others do not, differences in general mate attraction and mate poaching attraction must be identified.

General mate attraction is defined as an attraction between two single individuals, whereas mate poaching attraction is an attempt of a single individual to attract a committed target (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). While the individual's behavior and intentions are apparently different in general mate attraction than in mate poaching attraction, other differences are less obvious. For example, researchers have identified differences in personality characteristics between individuals who engage in these two forms of attraction (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Individuals who possess negative personality characteristics, such as being unreliable, mean, and adulterous, are more likely to engage in mate poaching attraction. Interestingly, successful mate poachers tend to describe themselves as adulterous and sexy, while committed individuals who are successfully poached describe themselves as erotophilic, mean, unloving, and neurotic. Conversely, individuals who are less likely to engage in mate poaching attraction possess positive personality characteristics, such as being agreeable and conscientious. These findings generate a personality profile describing individuals who are potentially at risk to cheat or to be cheated on. While studying these personality characteristics is necessary to understand mate poaching, additional research has examined the importance of sex differences.

In order to thoroughly understand the importance of these sex differences, researchers have identified two different intentions for mate poaching attempts: short-term sex and long-term sex. Individuals who engage in mate poaching behaviors for short-term sex are attempting to attract a committed individual for brief sexual experiences, such as a one-night stand; whereas individuals who engage in mate poaching behaviors for long-term sex engage in the same behaviors, except for longer and more

meaningful sexual experiences. It is important to understand the difference between poaching for short-term sex and poaching for long-term sex because individuals can engage in the same mate poaching behavior, but can have two different intentions underlying the behavior. Additionally, sex differences in mate poaching intentions have been identified not only in young adult populations, but also in older, more mature populations (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). When asked whether participants engaged more frequently in short-term or long-term mate poaching attempts, 30% of participants reported long-term mate poaching attempts, whereas only 10% reported short-term attempts. However, few participants reported frequent mate poaching behavior for either short-term or long-term attempts. Not a single college-aged or mature man reported frequent mate poaching attempts to attract women away from their committed relationship for short-term sex, and not a single man reported frequent mate poaching attempts for long-term sex.

Since mate poaching has primarily been studied through an evolutionary context, sex differences in mate poaching are viewed as adaptive. Specifically, this perspective suggests that sex differences in sexual experiences are due to genes, anatomy, and hormones which lead to various sex differences in mate poaching (Symons, 1979). Men and women differ in their preferences and benefits of engaging in mate poaching behaviors. Attempting to attract a physically attractive individual is more beneficial to men than women, whereas attempting to attract an able and willing individual to invest resources is more beneficial to women than men. Therefore, characteristics that are beneficial to men include devotion and displays of their resources, while displays of physical attractiveness are more beneficial to women (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003).

This suggests that in order to ensure resources, women should be more willing to pursue men in high-commitment relationships than low-commitment relationships; whereas the opposite is true for men. Because men invest their own resources in high-commitment relationships, but not in low-commitment relationships, men in committed relationships should be less likely to pursue a target. Although researchers have identified these sex differences in mate poaching through an evolutionary perspective, approximately half of their hypotheses were supported through this perspective (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). These results suggest that the characteristics and functions underlying mate poaching behaviors are both complex and unique. In order to thoroughly understand mate poaching, researchers should explain the behavior of mate poaching and infidelity through additional contexts. The present research is unique because it attempts to explain this phenomenon from a social psychological perspective of romantic relationships. According to this perspective, an important variable when studying any romantic relationship is the relationship status of the individual.

#### *Relationship Status of Individual: Investment Model and Commitment*

One of the most common reasons why a committed individual engages in cheating behaviors or mate poaching is because of dissatisfaction with the current relationship (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). It makes sense then to suggest that dissatisfaction with a relationship should lead to decreases in relationship commitment. Individuals who are more committed to both their relationship and partner should be less likely to respond to other sexual offers, and should be less likely to pursue attractive alternatives. Rusbult and colleagues addressed these factors using the Investment Model developed in accordance with Interdependence Theory (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Interdependence Theory (Rusbult, et al., 1998) focuses on the factors that determine relationship dependency. This theory suggests that in order for a romantic relationship to persist, individuals must form a dependency and reliance upon the relationship and their partner. Dependence develops through two main processes: satisfaction level and quality of alternatives. Individuals become dependent upon a relationship when their experiences within the relationship lead to high satisfaction. For example, when David fulfills Sarah's emotional and sexual needs, Sarah is likely to feel more satisfied than if David did not fulfill these needs. In addition to satisfaction, dependence also develops through decreases in perceived quality of alternatives. Individuals become more dependent upon a relationship when their needs can only be fulfilled by the current partner. For example, if Sarah feels that her emotional and sexual needs could be more fulfilled elsewhere, her quality of alternatives is higher and her dependence upon David is low. Although Interdependence Theory explains two processes involved in relationship commitment, Rusbult and colleagues expanded upon the theory to develop the Investment Model.

In addition to using satisfaction level and quality of alternatives to predict dependency, the Investment Model adds a third variable: Investment size. An individual becomes more dependent upon a relationship not only when resources are invested, but more importantly when the importance and magnitude of the resources are both directly and indirectly attached to the relationship. If the relationship were to end, the value of these resources would be lost. For example, if Sarah continuously discloses personal information to David, Sarah has become dependent upon both her relationship and her partner. If the relationship ended, Sarah would lose David as a resource for

companionship. Therefore, the Investment Model suggests that relationship persistence relies on the formation of dependency, through increased satisfaction levels, decreased perceived quality of alternatives, and increased investment size. Additionally, Rusbult and colleagues suggested that after dependence is formed, feelings of commitment develop. As individuals in a relationship become increasingly dependent, commitment levels also increase. Therefore, the characteristics underlying high-commitment (HC) relationships should be different than those of low-commitment (LC) relationships.

The Investment Model suggests that in HC relationships, both partners should report high relationship satisfaction, low quality of attractive alternatives, and high internal and external investments in the relationship. In relationships that fail, one or both partners do not possess one or more of these characteristics. For example, individuals tend to be less committed when they are attracted to alternative mates or are not satisfied with their relationship (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Therefore, individuals in HC relationships should be less likely to pursue attractive alternatives than individuals in LC relationships. Individuals in LC relationships and single individuals may be equally likely to pursue attractive alternatives because those in LC relationships are less satisfied, less invested, and more attracted to alternatives. Thus, the relationship characteristics of LC individuals are similar to the investments and relationship characteristics of single individuals.

The Investment Model suggests that individuals who are more satisfied with their relationship are more committed to that relationship than individuals who are less satisfied (Rusbult, 1980; Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003). Individuals in HC relationships who are more satisfied are less likely to pursue alternatives and therefore should be less

likely to cheat. However, cheating patterns are not this simple. Previous research on infidelity, relationship satisfaction, and commitment suggests that there are gender differences in sexual behavior (Baumeister, 2000; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). Although the relationship status of the individual and target are also likely to impact cheating behavior, there is reason to believe that the influences of these variables will differ for men and women.

### *Gender Differences*

Many variations of cheating behaviors occur among all people; however this is particularly the case between men and women. Not only do men and women differ in their willingness to accept sexual offers, but their level of sexual permissiveness differs as well (Gladue & Delaney, 1990; Oliver & Sedikides, 1992). Men consistently report high willingness to accept and initiate short-term sexual offers, especially when the potential partner is physically attractive; while women consistently report low willingness to accept and initiate short-term sexual offers (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; Greitemeyer, 2005; Nevid, 1984; Schmitt, Couden, & Baker, 2001). However, these findings are only relevant for single individuals because researchers did not account for relationship status or commitment. Consequently, these studies only suggest that single men are more responsive to short-term sexual offers than single women. Given this, a pragmatic next step is to examine gender differences of single and committed men in their sexual responsiveness and permissiveness to single or committed potential partners.

Although 90% of the American public agrees that sexual infidelity is “always” or “almost always” wrong, approximately 28% of men and 26% of women engage in extra-

pair mating, with a steady increase among women (Drigotas & Barta, 2001; Maykovich, 1976; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Two types of mating are included in extra-pair mating: Short-term extra-pair mating (STM) and long-term extra pair mating (LTM). Short-term extra pair mating includes cheating behavior that occurs only once and is relatively meaningless, such as one-night stands; whereas, LTM includes cheating behavior that endures over longer periods of time, likely involving feelings of emotional attachment. Infidelity research suggests that individuals use extra-pair mating to obtain a better partner (i.e., Mate Switching Hypothesis; Greiling & Buss, 2000). The Mate Switching Hypothesis describes the benefits obtained from short-term extra pair mating rather than long-term extra pair mating. The Mate Switching Hypothesis applies to both men and women; however the benefits and reasons for STM are different depending upon one's gender. Specifically, committed women are more likely than men to engage in STM to enhance their self-esteem. In addition to using STM to increase self-esteem, women use it to find a back-up partner if the relationship with their current partner is failing. Men, however primarily use STM to increase their status and reputation. These results suggest that in a high-commitment relationship, women may be more likely than men to engage in STM because women and men use STM for different purposes. The positive experience of increasing one's reputation among friends and colleagues is associated only with those specific people; whereas the positive experience of increasing one's self esteem can be associated with a number of individuals and in various contexts.

A major limitation with the past research on infidelity and romantic relationships is that most of this work did not consider the changes that occurred during the sexual revolution. Prior to the sexual revolution, the majority of literature suggests that men

were more sexual than women and were more likely to engage in extra-pair mating (McCormick, 1979). Thus, it appears that men were in fact “the cheaters.” However, this research failed to address women as “the cheaters,” because women had a unique sexual characteristic that men did not - a hidden sexual strategy. During the beginning of the sexual revolution, women followed a sexual double standard which identified acceptable or appropriate sexual behaviors for both men and women (Oliver & Sedikides, 1992; Schmitt, Shackelford, & Buss, 2001; Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, & Abrams, 1996). Men were encouraged to engage in pre-marital sexual behaviors and were also encouraged to consider women who engage in the same sexual behaviors as “bad” or “wrong.” However, the sexual revolution changed these attitudes. In fact, throughout the mid 1960’s to 1980’s, researchers consistently found that the sexual desires and attitudes changed more in women than in men (Bauman & Wilson, 1974; Croake & James, 1973; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970). Through changes in sociocultural factors underlying this revolution, such as an increasing number of women in higher education, women working outside the home, and the ease of obtaining contraception, the sexual double standard had a reverse effect on both men and women (Baumeister, 2000) - women began to endorse the double standard more than men (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

As a result, the female sex drive has become socially flexible and responsive, whereas the male sex drive has remained relatively constant and unchanging. Women change their sexual selectivity across locations more than men, which leads to sexual responsiveness in women that is more rapid and sensitive to locations (Montoya, 2005). These results suggest that because the sexual revolution had a stronger influence on female sexuality than on male sexuality, sexual behaviors of women, in both long-term

and short-term relationships, should be difficult to predict and understand. However, the sexual behaviors of men, in both long-term and short-term relationships have been thoroughly studied; and should be relatively constant and predictable. Differences in sexual behavior among men should remain unchanged; whereas differences in sexual behavior among women are relatively unknown. With increases of infidelity among women and decreases in relationship satisfaction during marriage, women seem to have not reversed the double standard but have taken a “what goes around comes around” attitude towards men. It is possible that we could be seeing a second sexual revolution occurring through the 2000’s.

#### *Present Study*

The literature on infidelity suggests that this behavior is complex and likely driven by a variety of factors. The purpose of the present study was to examine the interactive effects of three variables on cheating behavior: Relationship status of the target, relationship status of the individual, and sex of the individual. It was predicted that these factors would combine to create different cheating patterns. For single individuals, it was predicted that men would be more willing to pursue a single target rather than a committed target, compared to women; whereas women would be more willing to pursue a committed target rather than a single target, compared to men. For individuals in a committed relationship, it was predicted that men would be less likely to pursue both committed and single targets compared to women, but would pursue equally so. Additionally, women in a committed relationship would be more likely to pursue both committed and single targets compared to men, but would pursue equally so.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants and Design*

A total of 184 undergraduate students from Oklahoma State University participated in this study for partial course credit (97 women, 87 men). The sample included 84 single individuals (35 women, 49 men) and 100 committed individuals (62 women, 38 men). Just over 78% were Caucasian ( $n = 144$ ), 6% were African-American ( $n = 11$ ), 4% were Native American ( $n = 8$ ), 5% were Hispanic ( $n = 10$ ), 1% were Asian-American ( $n = 2$ ), and 5% were other ( $n = 9$ ).

The study consisted of a 2 (gender of participant)  $\times$  2 (participant relationship status)  $\times$  2 (target relationship status) between-subjects design. The primary dependent variable was the individual's willingness to pursue the target.

#### *Materials and Procedure*

The current study took place in a computer lab room and was conducted in groups of up to eight participants. After reading and signing the consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions – single target or committed target. In all conditions, participants completed a survey describing an ideal romantic partner and viewed a photograph of an opposite-gendered target.

*Target's relationship status manipulation.* All participants were asked to complete a survey containing questions similar to those found on *www.match.com*. These questions asked participants about their personal preferences on a variety of topics, including qualities that would describe their ideal romantic partner. Participants were told that the purpose of this task was to gain information that the computer would later use to match them up with a similar partner in the database.

Next, participants were told that the computer had generated a match and they were shown a photograph and descriptive information regarding this individual. All participants were shown a photograph of an attractive individual of the opposite gender. To ensure the target stimuli were perceived as attractive, the photographs were pre-tested. A total of ten (5 male, 5 female) photographs were obtained from a website on attraction research ([www.uniregensburg.edu](http://www.uniregensburg.edu)). To pre-test these photos, 29 undergraduate students rated the attractiveness of both the male and female photographs, on a bipolar scale ranging from -3 (very unattractive) to +3 (very attractive). The male photograph ( $M = 1.07$ ) and female photograph ( $M = 1.76$ ) that were rated as slightly above average in attractiveness were selected for the study (see Appendix A).

Above the photograph, participants read a statement describing the individual as possessing similar characteristics and interests as the participant. Therefore, participants likely identified the target as physically attractive and perceived the target as similar in personality and interests. In addition to this statement, the participants read an additional characteristic describing the target individual as being either single or in a committed

relationship. This last piece of information established the critical experimental manipulation for this study.

*Willingness to pursue target.* After viewing the photograph and description, participants completed the Willingness to Pursue Questionnaire (WPQ, see Appendix B). The WPQ was created as a measure of participants' level of willingness to pursue the target. The WPQ contains a total of 10 statements regarding participants' attentiveness and attraction toward the target and their propensity to pursue the target. Responses were assessed on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from -3 (*very unlikely*) to +3 (*very likely*). The thirteen items demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The ratings were averaged in order to create a composite score of one's willingness to pursue the target, with higher scores on this measure indicating a greater likelihood of pursuing the potential mate.

*Physical attractiveness.* One statement in the WPQ assessed the target's perceived physical attractiveness (e.g., "How physically attractive is this person?"). Responses were assessed on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from -3 (*very unattractive*) to +3 (*very attractive*).

*Relationship commitment.* Next, participants completed a measure of relationship commitment. This measure was used to determine if individual differences in commitment level among participants in a current relationship would moderate the predicted effects.

In order to measure commitment level, seven items were taken from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, see Appendix C). The

Investment Model Scale measures commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size; however, only the commitment level items were used in the present study (e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.”). Responses were made on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from -3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*). The seven items demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The ratings were averaged in order to create a composite score of overall commitment level score, with higher scores indicating feelings of higher commitment in the relationship, long-term orientations, and feelings of emotional attachment.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Manipulation Check for Relationship Status*

A manipulation check for relationship status of the target photograph was presented to participants as a single question in the willingness to pursue scale. The final question of the scale asked whether the individual in the photograph was single or in a committed relationship. This preliminary analysis revealed that relationship status of the target photograph was correctly identified.

#### *Willingness to Pursue*

Participants' willingness to pursue the target was analyzed using a 2 (gender of the participants: women vs. men)  $\times$  2 (participant relationship status: single vs. committed)  $\times$  2 (target relationship status: single vs. committed) analysis of variance (ANOVA). A preliminary analysis of the manipulation- target's relationship status- was conducted to ensure that participants correctly recalled the relationship status of the target. In terms of main effects, only the effect of gender was significant,  $F(1, 176) = 21.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , such that men ( $M = .98, SD = .71$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = .47, SD = .85$ ) to pursue the target. However, as predicted, this main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 176) = 7.77, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ .

In order to reveal the pattern of data underlying the three-way interaction, simple main effects were analyzed separately for single and committed participants (i.e.,

separately by relationship status). For single participants, there was a significant effect of gender,  $F(1, 80) = 8.21, p = .01, \eta^2 = .09$  such that single men ( $M = .91, SD = .71$ ) were more likely than single women ( $M = .47, SD = .82$ ) to pursue the target. Importantly, this effect was qualified by a significant gender  $\times$  condition interaction,  $F(1, 80) = 6.23, p = .02, \eta^2 = .07$ . As predicted, single women were more likely to pursue a committed target ( $M = .75, SD = .73$ ) rather than a single target ( $M = .17, SD = .83$ ),  $F(1, 80) = 5.46, p = .02$  (see top of figure 1). However, single men showed no difference between pursuing a committed ( $M = .81, SD = .73$ ) or single ( $M = .105, SD = .69$ ) target,  $F(1, 80) = 1.23, p = .27$ . Importantly, single women were more likely to pursue a committed target rather than a single target, whereas single men were not.

For individuals in a committed relationship, there was also an effect of gender,  $F(1, 96) = 13.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , such that committed men ( $M = 1.15, SD = .71$ ) were more likely than committed women ( $M = .46, SD = .86$ ) to pursue the target (see bottom of figure 1). As predicted, this factor did not interact with condition,  $F(1, 96) = 2.19, p = .14$ . Unlike single women, committed women are not more likely to pursue a committed target compared to a single target.

*Commitment level as a moderator.* A multiple regression analysis was used to determine if the effects seen among the participants in a committed relationship were moderated by the participants' level of commitment to their relationship partner. As such, this analysis was only conducted on the participants who stated they were in a committed relationship (i.e., analysis excluded single participants,  $n = 100$ ). The results indicated that there was no main effect of commitment level and this variable did not interact with

gender or condition. Therefore, individual differences in commitment level did not influence committed individuals' willingness to pursue the target.

#### *Attractiveness Ratings*

Participants' perceived physical attractiveness of the target was analyzed using a 2 (gender of the participants: women vs. men)  $\times$  2 (participant relationship status: single vs. committed)  $\times$  2 (target relationship status: single vs. committed) ANOVA. In terms of main effects, only the effect of gender was significant,  $F(1, 176) = 6.39, p = .01$ , such that men rated the female target ( $M = 1.29, SD = 0.78$ ) as more physically attractive than the women rated the male target ( $M = .92, SD = 1.10$ ). This main effect was not qualified by any interactions.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Infidelity is not always a result of committed individuals pursuing other people; sometimes it is the case that other people are more willing to pursue committed individuals. The present study examined when people will or will not engage in cheating behavior by pursuing an individual who is currently in a relationship. The results revealed three factors that were important in predicting this type of cheating behavior: If the individual is single or committed, the gender of the individual, and if the target is single or committed. Consistent with previous research (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999), the results showed that in general, men are more willing than women to pursue an opposite-gendered target. However, this pattern changes when one considers the relationship status of the participant and the target. Interestingly, the results showed that single women were more willing to pursue a committed target rather than a single target. That is, single women were more interested in pursuing a man that was unavailable to them. Single men did not show this preference. However, this difference between men and women's preferences was not evident when the participant was in a committed relationship themselves. Thus, only single women were more interested in pursuing a committed target rather than a single target. This effect is a novel finding in the mate poaching

literature and is thus important, however, the small effect size ( $\eta^2 = .04$ ) should be considered in interpreting the results. The results offer new insights into understanding gender differences in cheating behaviors by highlighting the circumstances that lead women to pursue an already committed individual. Previous work on infidelity has primarily focused on the cheating behaviors of men. However, the present findings suggest that men and women may engage in different forms of cheating. For women, it appears that they may be more likely than men to steal people away from their relationship partner.

The present study is also important because it adopted a methodological approach that is not typically seen in infidelity research. Although the mate poaching literature has examined some of the same factors in infidelity, the results of those studies are limited due to the use of correlational designs that rely on retrospective memory. Previous mate poaching research simply asked participants to recall their own and others' instances of pursuing committed individuals. Those results showed that men recalled more instances of mate poaching behaviors in women. Although these researchers interpreted their results as evidence that women poach more than men, they merely show that men *perceived* women to poach more. Since this study relied on participants' retrospective memory, and a great deal of research shows that retrospective memory can be biased due to the availability heuristic (Jacoby & Whitehouse, 1989; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), it is unclear what the cause for this pattern was. For example, it could be that men merely report being pursued by women more in an attempt to enhance their reputation. The current study addresses these methodological issues by using an experiment to manipulate the target's relationship status before measuring pursuit levels. To my

knowledge, this study is the first to measure if an individual would pursue a committed target in the moment, rather than relying on participants' memory of previous events. By using an experimental design, the current study not only demonstrates a gender difference in mate poaching but it also identifies the factors that lead women to increase or decrease in this behavior.

#### *Why Do Women Pursue Men who are Already in a Relationship?*

The findings of the current study reveal that under certain circumstances, women engage in certain cheating behaviors that men do not. Specifically, this study showed that single women were more willing to pursue a committed man rather than a single man whereas single men did not show this difference. There are several reasons why this behavioral pattern- preference for an already committed partner- may emerge in women and not men. First, it may be that changes in women's attitudes affect their perception of commitment and relationships. Second, it may be that women are more likely to compete with other women through mate poaching tactics whereas men compete with other men in different ways (e.g., career, sports). If this is the case, women may engage in this behavioral pattern in order to increase their self-esteem. And finally, women may engage in mate poaching in order to gain valuable resources that committed men are more likely to display and give.

*Changes in women's attitudes.* One reason why this cheating pattern has emerged in single women may be due to recent changes in women's attitudes toward their own sexual behavior. Past literature suggests that men are more sexual than women and more likely to engage in cheating behaviors (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Many of these previous researchers studied these sex-role stereotypes, and suggested that women have less

interest in sex than men and that women should preserve their reputation by restraint from sexual behaviors (Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). However, a look at today's popular television shows suggests how outdated this assertion is. Shows such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Sex and the City*, and *Cashmere Mafia* depict modern women as sexually permissive rather than sexually submissive. These changes in the way that female sexuality is represented in the media likely reflect the changes that are occurring in women more generally.

Given the results of the present study, it may be that single women possess a different attitude toward relationships than committed women and single or committed men. These aforementioned television shows may have an impact on the relationships of women, primarily single women, such that increased exposure to female sexual permissiveness may lead these women to devalue the meaning of commitment in a relationship. This change in female attitudes toward what is viewed as acceptable sexual behavior may influence women's cheating behaviors. Women's attitude seems widely accepting of expressing one's sexuality, including promiscuity and permissiveness. This attitude change may make it harder for people, especially single women, to view commitment in a relationship as being faithful and monogamous. If single women do hold this attitude which devalues commitment of relationships, one may conclude that these women project this attitude onto other relationships. This may explain why single women do not stop pursuing men who are in a committed relationship.

*Competition and self-esteem.* Another reason why single women may engage in mate poaching is because these women may be competing with other women in an attempt to increase self-esteem. If a woman is able to use her personal attributes, such as

attractiveness or sexuality, to poach a committed man away from his partner, the woman may view herself as a better “catch,” resulting in increased self-esteem. If a single woman is successful in poaching a man away from his partner, essentially the woman may feel as if she has “won.”

*Desire for resources.* It may be that single women are interested in committed men because such men are more likely to possess valuable resources. According to evolutionary theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), women are motivated to gain and ensure resources from a partner, therefore women view committed men as more capable of providing these resources. Consistent with this notion, Schmitt and Shackelford (2003) demonstrated that men are more effective at attracting committed women away from their current partner when they demonstrate resource ability. An evolutionary approach could explain the results under the specific context that committed men demonstrate their resources. However, the current study did not provide this demonstration which suggests that other variables are involved in single women pursuing committed men.

### *Boundaries*

These present findings suggest that mate poaching only occurs under a set of specific circumstances. Only single women appear to show a preference for a committed target rather than a single target. This is not to say that women are more likely to cheat than men are; it just appears that women are more likely to engage in this specific form of cheating. This is also not to say that single people are more likely to cheat; just that they are more likely to mate poach compared to committed individuals. Committed individuals merely engage in different forms of cheating that are often more complex and therefore harder to identify than mate poaching. Given these boundaries, it is likely that

there are additional individual and situational factors that affect mate poaching tendencies.

Previous research has shown that individuals who view themselves as unreliable, adulterous, and erotophilic are more likely to pursue committed individuals (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). This research did not identify gender differences among these personality factors; however, when combined with the present findings, it suggests that single women who possess these characteristics are more likely to engage in this cheating behavior. Furthermore, if mate poaching is driven by self-esteem needs, women who have lower self-esteem or threatened self-esteem may be more willing to pursue committed men as a way to compete against other women.

It is also likely that features of the target's relationship may attenuate mate poaching behaviors. In the present study, participants were merely told that the target individual was "in a relationship." However, participants were not given additional information, such as the length of this supposed relationship or the level of commitment of this relationship. Perhaps the present cheating pattern only occurs when the committed man is dating. Single women may be less likely to pursue committed men who are engaged, married, or have kids with their partner. Future research should identify the qualities of the relationship that may limit mate poaching behaviors among single women.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

The present research identified three important factors in infidelity, but as a result, other relevant factors were not examined. For example, considerable research has shown that feelings of romantic desire differ across people and contexts and play an important

role in romantic relationships (Marcus & Miller, 2003; Schmitt, Couden, & Baker, 2001; Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971). Romantic desire (i.e., interpersonal attraction) depends on factors such as perceived physical attractiveness, similarities, and gender of an individual. Developing feelings of romantic desire and attraction are complex and multi-faceted, thereby making it difficult for researchers to measure. In the present study, these issues were addressed by pre-testing the attractiveness level of the photograph to ensure the target was at least moderately desirable. However, the majority of participants rated the target as being only somewhat attractive. Perhaps the lack of perceived attractiveness limited the participants desire to pursue the target individual.

A second limitation of this study was that it examined feelings of desire within a brief time period. Although some feelings of desire and attraction can occur quickly over a brief amount of time, other feelings of desire are more complex and take time to develop. In order to thoroughly understand how desire and attraction influence unique cheating patterns of infidelity, both forms of romantic desire and attraction must be examined. In the present study, I attempted to identify and measure brief feelings of romantic desire, while ignoring feelings that develop over time. Future researchers should examine whether individuals are more likely to engage in cheating behaviors as feelings of desire and attraction develop over longer periods of time.

Finally, the study focused solely on undergraduate students and it is possible that this limits the generalizability of the results. Although this is a possibility, research comparing relationships of undergraduate students and adults suggests otherwise. For example, research that examined infidelity and commitment in undergraduates obtained similar results to other research using married adults (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy,

1988). Thus, it is likely that the results can still provide a framework for researchers studying infidelity and commitment in different populations. Additionally, the study included mainly Caucasian students, with only a limited sample from other ethnicities. These results may be limited to single Caucasian women rather than all single women.

### *Conclusion*

The current study showed that infidelity depends on three main factors: If the individual is single or committed, if the target is single or committed, and the gender of the individual. The present study takes a unique perspective by examining these factors together rather than in isolation. The interplay among these would be missed when studied separately. A wealth of literature suggests that social behaviors are largely a function of interacting variables rather than any single factor. Surprisingly, this perspective has not yet been adopted in the infidelity literature. The hope is that by examining how factors interact to influence cheating behaviors we will gain a greater understanding of not only successful relationships, but of failed relationships as well.

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APPENDIX A



## APPENDIX B

Directions: While viewing the target photograph and description, we would like you to form an impression of the person based on what you read and saw.

Below are a number of statements. Please rate the extent to which the following statements explain your feelings of the target person.

1. How physically attractive is this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unattractive	Somewhat Unattractive	Quite Unattractive	Neutral	Quite Attractive	Somewhat Attractive	Very Attractive

2. How appealing is this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unappealing	Somewhat Unappealing	Quite Unappealing	Neutral	Quite Appealing	Somewhat Appealing	Very Appealing

3. How likely would you would show interest (i.e., make eye contact, smile) in this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Quite Unlikely	Neutral	Quite Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely

4. How compatible are you and this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Uncompatible	Somewhat Uncompatible	Quite Uncompatible	Neutral	Quite Attractive	Somewhat Attractive	Very Attractive

5. How likely would you initiate a relationship with this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Quite Unlikely	Neutral	Quite Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely

6. How likely would you initiate a conversation with this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Quite Unlikely	Neutral	Quite Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely

7. How direct would you be in initiating a romantic relationship with this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Indirect	Somewhat Indirect	Quite Indirect	Neutral	Quite Direct	Somewhat Direct	Very Direct

8. Typically, how successful are you at initiating romantic relationships?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unsuccessful	Somewhat Unsuccessful	Quite Unsuccessful	Neutral	Quite Successful	Somewhat Successful	Very Successful

9. In general, how likely are you to pursue individuals of the opposite gender?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Quite Unlikely	Neutral	Quite Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely

10. How confident would you be in initiating a conversation with this person?

<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Very Unconfident	Somewhat Unconfident	Quite Unconfident	Neutral	Quite Confident	Somewhat Confident	Very Confident

## APPENDIX C

Directions: Below are a number of statements. Please rate the extent to which the following statements explain your feelings of your current partner/relationship

1. I want our relationship to last for a very long time (please circle a number).

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

2. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

3. I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

4. It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

5. I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked to my partner.

--3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

6. I want our relationship to last forever.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

7. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now).

--3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree Quite a bit	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Agree Quite a bit	Strongly Agree

### Single Individuals

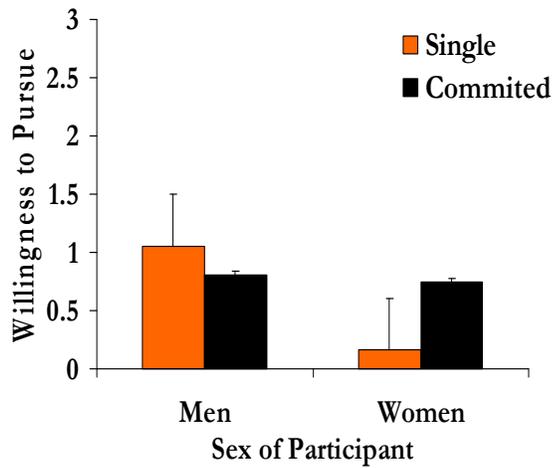


Figure 1. Mean scores of single participants' willingness to pursue the target as a function of gender and target's relationship status.

### Committed Individuals

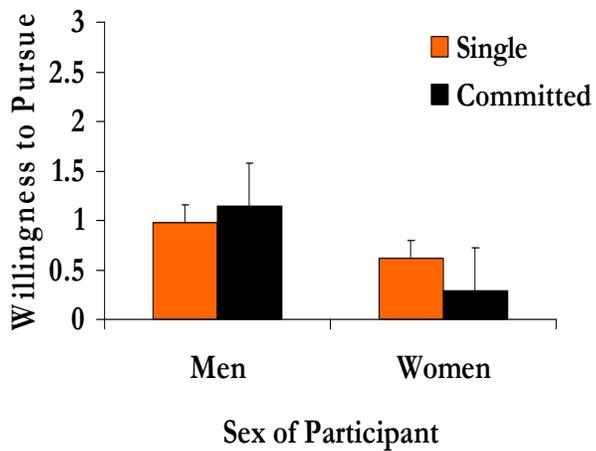


Figure 2. Mean scores of committed participants' willingness to pursue the target as a function of gender and target's relationship status.

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**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

Date: Tuesday, June 12, 2007  
IRB Application No AS0734  
Proposal Title: Perceptions of Relationships

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 6/11/2008**

Principal Investigator(s)

Jessica S. Parker 215 North Murray Stillwater, OK 74078	Melissa Burkley 215 North Murray Stillwater, OK 74078
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

## VITA

Jessica Suzanne Parker

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: GENDER DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS IN INFIDELITY:  
WHO'S CHASING WHOM?

Major Field: Psychology

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Wachapreague, VA, the daughter of Sam and Susie Parker.

Education: Graduated from Broadwater Academy, Nassawadox, VA in May, 2002; received Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA in May, 2006. Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Psychology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2008.

Experience: Research coordinator for Cognitive Development lab at Christopher Newport University; graduate research coordinator for Social Cognitive lab at Oklahoma State University, 2007 to present.

Professional Memberships: Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Sigma Xi

Name: Jessica Parker

Date of Degree: May, 2008

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: GENDER DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS IN  
INFIDELITY: WHO'S CHASING WHOM?

Pages in Study: 39

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science

Major Field: Psychology

**Scope and Method of Study:** The present study examined when people will or will not engage in cheating behavior by pursuing an individual who is currently in a relationship. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of three variables on cheating behavior: relationship status of the target, relationship status of the individual, and gender of the individual. Participants included both single and committed individuals. All participants were shown a photograph of an attractive individual of the opposite gender and a description of the target, which indicated the relationship status of the target. After viewing the photograph and description, participants completed the Willingness to Pursue Questionnaire (WPQ). The ratings were averaged in order to create a composite score of one's willingness to pursue the target, with higher scores on this measure indicating a greater likelihood of pursuing the potential mate.

**Findings and Conclusions:** The results revealed three factors that were important in predicting mate poaching behavior: If the individual is single or committed, the gender of the individual, and if the target is single or committed. Consistent with previous research (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999), the results showed that in general, men are more willing than women to pursue an opposite-gendered target. However, this pattern changes when one considers the relationship status of the participant and the target. Interestingly, the results showed that single women were more willing to pursue a committed target rather than a single target. That is, single women were more interested in pursuing a man that was unavailable to them. Single men did not show this preference. The results offer new insights into understanding gender differences in cheating behaviors by highlighting the circumstances that lead women to pursue an already committed individual. Previous work on infidelity has primarily focused on the cheating behaviors of men. However, the present findings suggest that men and women may engage in different forms of cheating. For women, it appears that they may be more likely than men to steal people away from their relationship partner.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Melissa Burkley

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