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Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women

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Short Abstract

Recent research challenges the common belief that romantic relationships matter more to women than men. Using insights from the interdisciplinary literature on mixed-gender relationships, we propose that relative to women, men (a) expect more benefits from relationships and strive for a partner more strongly, (b) gain more mental and physical health benefits from romantic involvement, (c) are less likely to initiate breakups, and (d) suffer more from relationship dissolution. We argue that these differences largely stem from differences between men and women in available intimacy and emotional support. We discuss implications for friendships, emphasizing the importance of cross-gender friendships.

Long Abstract

Women are often viewed as more romantic than men, and romantic relationships are assumed to be more central to the lives of women than to those of men. Despite the prevalence of these beliefs, some recent research paints a different picture. Using principles and insights based on the interdisciplinary literature on mixed-gender relationships, we advance a set of four propositions relevant to differences between men and women and their romantic relationships. We propose that relative to women: (a) men expect to obtain greater benefits from relationship formation and thus strive more strongly for a romantic partner, (b) men benefit more from romantic relationship involvement in terms of their mental and physical health, (c) men are less likely to initiate breakups, and (d) men suffer more from relationship dissolution. We offer theoretical explanations based on differences between men and women in the availability of social networks that provide intimacy and emotional support. We discuss implications for friendships in general and friendships between men and women in particular.

1. Introduction

Across the lifespan, people tend to view having a happy romantic relationship as one of their most important life goals, surpassing goals such as career success or personal fulfillment (Buchinger et al., 2022). It is, therefore, no surprise that many singles look for a romantic relationship, many people want to maintain their relationships, and most experience a sense of loss when a relationship ends. But are there systematic differences between men and women? For example, do women more than men need a partner to be truly happy? According to popular media, being involved in a romantic relationship seems to contribute more to happiness among women than among men. As a case in point, many commercials aimed at teenage girls focus on romance, but the topic is virtually absent in commercials aimed at teenage boys (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002). Similarly, in romantic comedies, single women, unlike single men, are displayed as unhappy about their singlehood and in search of true love (Igrec, 2022). In women's magazines, a focus on romantic relationships is far more common than in men's magazines (Coffey-Glover, 2019). The gender differences conveyed by various media also mirror popular beliefs: People typically assume that romantic relationships are more central to women's than to men's lives (Hyde, Delamater, & Byers, 2009). Accordingly, both men and women widely believe that women are the ones who fall in love faster, think about saying "I love you" sooner, and confess their love first (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Harrison & Shortall, 2011; Watkins et al., 2022).

However, when examining men's and women's responses to anonymous surveys, a very different picture emerges, revealing that romantic relationships may be more consequential to men than to women. Single men, for example, typically strive harder to initiate romantic relationships than single women do. Once in a relationship, men tend to experience greater

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benefits from having a romantic partner and are less likely to end the relationship. Following relationship breakups, men suffer more from relationship dissolution. As we will see, these broad findings suggest that psychologically-based dependence might outweigh resource-based dependence (e.g., income differences between men and women), making romantic relationships more consequential on average for men relative to women.

Numerous findings support these gender differences. For example, in contrast to portrayals in media, adolescent girls, as compared to boys, are less likely to believe that a romantic partner is required to be truly happy (Scheling & Richter, 2021). Moreover, adult men, as compared to women, are more likely to think that life without a partner is empty and makes one incomplete as a person (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007). These gendered beliefs match the actual effects that relationship status has on both men's and women's well-being: Compared to women, men derive greater mental and physical health benefits from having a romantic partner (Chipperfield & Havens, 2001; Ramezankhani, Azizi, & Hadaegh, 2019; Stronge, Overall, & Sibley, 2019). Both divorce and nonmarital dissolutions are typically initiated by women, not men (Brinig & Allen, 2000; Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Morris, Reiber, & Roman, 2015; Wahring, Neyer, Hoppmann, Ram, & Gerstorf, 2025). After a breakup of a mixed-gender relationship, men more so than women tend to hold favorable feelings and attitudes toward their ex-partners (Athenstaedt et al., 2020). Men also report feeling less well during singlehood (Leopold, 2018; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), up to the point that men are more prone to have a reduced life expectancy and an increased risk of suicide relative to women (Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011; Shaw et al., 2021).

When comparing men and women in this article, we focus on differences between cisgender men and women (i.e., men and women whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth) involved in mixed-gender romantic relationships. We do so because (a) our primary focus is on differences between men and women in particular, and (b) there currently is an insufficient amount of research on people who have other gender identities and different sexual orientations. Moreover, due to the limited research on non-Western samples, most of the findings in this review are based on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic samples (WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). However, we discuss the potential impact that sexual orientation and culture may have on the reviewed effects in the future directions section near the end of the article.

The major goal of the present article is to evaluate the evidence relevant to men's stronger need for relationship partners and present process models that explain these differences. In doing so, we address basic differences between men and women in their dependence on romantic relationships, advancing a model that proposes that men depend more on their romantic partners for intimacy and emotional support than women do – a model that conflicts with widely held assumptions and beliefs that romantic relationships matter more to women than to men. We provide a comprehensive analysis by evaluating our model for four distinct stages of romantic involvement: relationship formation, romantic involvement, relationship dissolution, and relationship aftermath. The findings are evaluated and discussed concerning various lines of theory and research that focus on psychological outcomes, specifically the need for intimacy and emotional support, which may be a critical need that affects men's comparatively greater dependence on their partners in romantic relationships. The key findings about differences between men and women in relationship initiation, benefits of involvement, dissolution initiation, and costs of dissolution are presented in Table 1. Table 1 also presents evidence for the basic mechanism that men perceive less intimacy and less emotional support from their social ties beyond romantic partners which, according to our model, helps to explain why men, relative to women, strive more to establish relationships, benefit more from relationship involvement, are less likely to initiate breakups, and suffer more from relationship dissolution.

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2. The Need for Intimacy and Emotional Support

Across many different social contexts, a major determinant of the quality of social interaction outcomes is the needs of the people who are engaging in them (Van Lange & Balliet, 2015). When important needs of a particular person are fulfilled in a given situation, the person's outcomes tend to be more satisfying. People, therefore, have a strong need for intimacy, which includes the desire to disclose to others and feel close to them (Kirby, Baucom, & Peterman, 2005; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Receiving and providing emotional support increases the fulfillment of the need for intimacy, whereas not receiving and not providing emotional support tends to decrease it. The need for intimacy is also associated with communal caregiving, in which partners are concerned about each other's well-being, which results in feelings of safety and security (Reis, 2021). This includes providing not only explicit forms of support, such as paying attention to and devoting time to one's partner but also more subtle forms of support and understanding, such as disclosing to one's partner and being a responsive listener (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Simpson, 2007; Simpson & Overall, 2014). The need for intimacy, in other words, is strongly linked to feeling understood, validated, and cared for (Reis, 2021).

From a complementary perspective, the fulfillment of the need for intimacy also depends on seeking and receiving emotional support. This is a major facet of social support, which is defined as

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Table 1. Key Findings and Effect Sizes Across Findings and Propositions

Proposition	Finding	Studies	Mean η^2 per finding	Mean η^2 per proposition
Men (perceive to) have less intimacy and emotional support in their social ties beyond romantic partners than women do	Men tend to perceive less support from their social ties	Carr, 2004; Colarossi et al., 2001; Galambos et al., 2018; Kalmijn, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 1986; Rueger et al., 2008	.0534	.0344
	Men are more likely to receive no or little emotional support	Matthews et al., 1999; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Shaw et al., 2021; Sonnenberg et al., 2013	.0297	
	Men are more likely to lack people they can confide in	Adamczyk, 2016; Barreto et al., 2021; Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; von Soest, Luhmann, & Gerstorf, 2020	.0202	
Men depend more strongly on romantic partners for emotional support	Men's global perceptions of support depend more on their relationship status	Kafetsios, 2007; Stronge et al., 2019	.0119	.0721
	Men tend to view their partners as their primary support resource	Umberson et al., 1996; Liao et al., 2018	.1243	
Men strive more to establish relationships	Men tend to view romantic involvement as more central to their well-being	Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Scheling & Richter, 2021	.0305	.0461
	Men are more likely to display romantic beliefs	Knox & Sporakowski, 1968; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002	.0290	
	Men are more interested in dating and finding a new partner	Brown, 2021; Carr, 2004; Frazier et al., 1996; Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Wahring et al., 2025	.0454	
	Men fall in love faster	Harrison & Shortall, 2011	.0544	
	Men are more likely to experience love at first sight	Galperin & Haselton, 2010; Northrup, C., Schwartz, P., & Witte, 2013	.0369	
	Men fall in love more often	Cruces et al., 2015; Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Montgomery, 2005	.0394	
	Men are more likely to experience unreciprocated love	Cruces et al., 2015; Galperin & Haselton, 2010	.0603	
	Men are more likely to confess their love first	Brantley et al., 2002; Ackerman et al., 2011; Watkins et al., 2022	.0729	
Men benefit more from relationship involvement	Men's relationship status is more strongly associated with their well-being	Stronge et al., 2019; Grundström et al., 2021	.0043	.0161
	Men's relationship status is more strongly associated with their mental health	Grundström et al., 2021; Wright & Brown, 2017; Sonnenberg et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2021	.0307	
	Men's relationship status is more strongly associated with their physical health	Davidsen et al., 2022; Ramezankhani et al., 2019	.0244	
	Men's relationship status is more strongly associated with their all-cause mortality	Sbarra et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020	.0053	
Men are less likely to initiate relationship dissolution	Men are less likely to initiate divorce	Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Amato & Previti, 2004; Brinig & Allen, 2000; Rosenfeld, 2018	.2232	.1675
	Men are less likely to initiate nonmarital dissolutions	Brüning, 2022; Helgeson, 1994; Morris et al., 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018	.1118	
Men suffer more when experiencing relationship dissolution	Men are less likely to see positive sides in a break-up	Helgeson, 1994; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003	.0572	.0407
	Men tend to view their ex-partner more positively	Athenstaedt et al., 2020; Grüning et al., 2023	.0412	

(*Continued*)

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Table 1. (*Continued*)

Proposition	Finding	Studies	Mean η^2 per finding	Mean η^2 per proposition
	Men tend to remain emotionally attached to their ex-partner longer	Shimek & Bello, 2014	.04	
	Men are less likely to experience positive emotions after a break-up	Carter et al., 2018; Choo et al., 1996	.0241	
	Men are more likely to feel lonely following divorce	Leopold, 2018	.0654	
	Men's life satisfaction decreases more sharply following divorce or a partner's death	Chipperfield & Havens, 2001; Preetz, 2022; Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020	.0518	
	Men are more likely to commit suicide following divorce	Kposowa, 2000; Kposowa et al., 2020	.0353	
	Men's mortality risk increases more sharply following a spouse's death	Shor et al., 2012b	.0007	
	Men tend to enact less healthy and more unhealthy break-up coping	Athenstaedt et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2003; Gehl et al., 2024; Shimek & Bello, 2014	.0508	

including "intimacy and attachment, reassurance, and being able to confide in and rely on another – all of which contribute to the feeling that one is loved or cared about" (Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981). When feeling supported, a person perceives that the support provider (their partner) "gets the facts right" about oneself (understanding), provides respect and appreciation (validation), and focuses on one's well-being (caring) (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017; Reis, 2021; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017). Over time, repeated experiences of emotional support create a sense of connection that facilitates attachment to one's partner, which is critical to fulfilling intimacy needs. It also is important to receive emotional support from partners, especially when one experiences negative emotions or challenging situations that call for forms of support provided in unconditional ways (Clark & Aragón, 2013; Clark & Mills, 1979; Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Reis, Maniaci, & Rogge, 2017).

Emotional support is often provided by romantic partners in ongoing relationships (Clark & Reis, 1988; Finkel et al., 2017; Reis, 2021; Reis et al., 2017b; Reis & Itzchakov, 2023). At the same time, romantic partners are not the only close persons who can provide such support. Frequently, siblings, longstanding friends, close colleagues, and others also provide some level of intimacy and some degree of emotional support (Ermer & Proulx, 2020; Galambos, Fang, Horne, Johnson, & Krahn, 2018; Gordillo et al., 2009; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Reis & Itzchakov, 2023). In what follows, we first outline theoretical explanations for gender differences in social behavior, including differences in emotional support. We then propose that, relative to men, women, on average, have closer social ties outside of their romantic relationships that often serve their needs for intimacy and, when needed, emotional support. This, in turn, creates stronger dependence in men on their romantic partners, which at least partially explains why men are more strongly focused on initiating new relationships, benefit more from their maintenance, are less likely to initiate dissolution and have greater difficulty when coping with dissolution.

2.1 Theoretical Explanations of Differences between Men and Women in Social Behavior

Several theoretical models have been developed to explain the average differences in social behavior between men and women. In the present review, we primarily follow the perspective of Wood and Eagly's biosocial framework, including social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Wood & Eagly, 2002). However, we also consider two complementary perspectives that are highly relevant to this topic. All three theoretical models address evolved biological differences between men and women. Viewed together, these models help to explain gender differences in social behavior, including why they exist in many people across most cultures. After outlining the three theoretical perspectives on differences between men and women in historical order, we delve into the relevance of interdependence theory to our work (Kelley et al., 2003).

A central perspective developed to explain some of the differences between men and women discussed in this paper is parental investment and sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972). According to parental investment theory, different amounts of parental investment devoted to children account for why females and males in many species differ in certain physical attributes (e.g., relative body size) as well as certain psychological and behavioral characteristics (e.g., kin care). Trivers (1972) proposed that in species in which one sex initially invests more time, effort, and resources into producing and raising offspring (usually women, in the case of humans), the other sex (usually men) must compete to mate with the higher-investing sex.

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The intrasexual competition that occurs between men, therefore, could have produced some of the average gender differences described in this paper. Indeed, in most if not all studied cultures, men (relative to women) are more motivated to find dating partners (Neel, Kenrick, White, & Neuberg, 2016; Pick et al., 2022) and are more interested in casual, short-term sexual relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt, 2005). Conversely, women (relative to men) in virtually all cultures are more motivated to provide kin care (Neel et al., 2016; Pick et al., 2022), prefer long-term, committed sexual relationships to short-term ones (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt, 2005), and place greater emphasis on relationship maintenance and parenting goals (Kenrick, Neuberg, Griskevicius, Becker, & Schaller, 2010). There is, of course, variation within each gender as well as within and between cultures on each of these outcomes, but the average differences between men and women are robust. Women's greater tendency to value and engage in relationship maintenance and parenting goals might be linked to their stronger emphasis on intimacy and exchanging emotions with others, whereas men's greater interest in short-term mating may explain why they are more motivated to initiate romantic relationships. As we argue in our section on complementary contributors to differences between men and women, the greater sexual motivation of men could explain one of the major gender differences discussed in this paper.

A second perspective is derived from tend-and-befriend theory (Taylor et al., 2000), which focuses mainly on differences between men and women in caring and parenting. According to this theory, women (relative to men) are more inclined to turn to others when distressed in a tending and befriending manner – that is, banding together with others for mutual support, resources, and protection. This response, which involves the release of oxytocin known to facilitate affiliation and emotional bonding with other people (Carter, Lederhendler, & Kirkpatrick, 1999), should have increased their children's survival in evolutionary environments, thereby increasing women's inclusive fitness. The stronger tendency of women to engage in tend-and-befriend responses might also explain average differences between women and men regarding the nature of their friendships and social networks. For example, beginning early in life, girls tend to form more intimate "face-to-face" relationships with peers characterized by higher levels of self-disclosure and greater emotional intimacy, whereas boys tend to form more "transactional" relationships with peers that are activity-centered and are usually characterized by less emotional sharing and intimacy (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; David-Barrett et al., 2015; Fehr, 1995; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). These differences are likely to affect the size and quality of women's relative to men's social networks in adulthood, with most women developing somewhat larger social networks containing more close friends on whom they can depend on when support, resources, or comfort are needed.

A third major perspective is Wood and Eagly's biosocial framework, with special emphasis on social role theory, which integrates biological and cultural processes to explain and understand average gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Wood & Eagly, 2002). According to this perspective, average gender differences stem primarily from the interaction between the specialized physical and reproductive attributes of each gender, particularly men's greater size and physical strength and women's reproduction tied to gestation and lactation/breast-feeding children, along with the economic and social structural features of the culture in which women and men live. The biosocial model, therefore, views the different psychological and behavioral attributes of women and men as emergent characteristics based on their evolved features, their different developmental and social experiences, and the roles and activities they assume within their culture. Furthermore, the specific norms, expectations, rules, and roles that define their culture typically reward, sustain, and sometimes magnify the psychological and behavioral gender differences discussed below, effectively perpetuating them. For example, gender roles and expectations in combination with the social roles that women and men typically have within their culture (e.g., men as income providers, women as homemakers who provide care to others) guide their social behavior (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This process, in turn, is mediated by socialization processes (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) that are further reinforced by expectancy confirmation (Deaux & Major, 1987) and self-regulation (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997) processes. As we elaborate later in the paper, these socialization processes can also include gender-specific learning about the disclosure of personal matters that promote gender differences in relationship initiation, involvement, and dissolution, which are reviewed later in the paper.

Each of the three perspectives provides valuable insights and a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the possible origins of gender differences in social relationships. In combination, they highlight the roles of both biology and culture in understanding differences between men and women, with a prominent focus on evolved differences in the social learning of norms associated with differences between men and women. In addition to these three theories, our perspective incorporates key assumptions of interdependence theory, an influential theory of social interaction and relationships (Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Our model, for example, assumes that dependence is a key driver of relationship initiation, involvement, and dissolution. Moreover, our model shares with interdependence theory the notion that need gratification occurs not only in one's current intimate relationship but also in alternative relationships, which affects the level of dependence on the current partner/relationship. Accordingly, current relationship outcomes are determined not only by the comparison of the quality of alternative relationships a person perceives to be available but also by the degree to which important psychological outcomes such as sharing intimacy and emotional support can be obtained in alternative relationships.

In addition, our perspective extends interdependence theory in two major ways. First, we focus on a novel set of outcomes (sexual, psychological, and practical outcomes) and explain the tight interconnections between psychological and sexual outcomes in particular. Across its long history, interdependence theory has not sufficiently addressed gender differences between these and other important outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). This was a deliberate choice made by early interdependence theorists because the theory focuses on different structures of interdependence with no conceptual focus on the specific type of outcomes or differences between men and women. However, given the robust average differences between men and women reviewed below, including different gender norms, it is important from a theoretical standpoint to distinguish between the sexual, psychological, and practical outcomes that women and men can obtain in their relationships.

2.2 Men Depend on Romantic Partners More for Intimacy and Emotional Support

Intimacy and emotional support provide psychological outcomes that help to explain why romantic relationships benefit both men

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and women, given that social ties are crucial for mental and physical health (Umberson & Montez, 2010). According to a meta-analysis (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), social support is a strong predictor of mortality, exceeding risk factors such as alcohol consumption, obesity, and physical inactivity, and this appears to be equally true for men and women. Emotional support is a key component of the association between social support and health outcomes because it facilitates better coping in distressing situations (Burleson, 2003; Gordillo et al., 2009; Horstman, Holman, & Johnsen, 2021; Morelli, Lee, Arnn, & Zaki, J., 2015; Poon, Zeman, Miller-Slough, Sanders, & Crespo, 2017; Yang, Wang, & Yao, 2022).

Men's global perceptions of social support depend more on their relationship status than is true for women (Kafetsios, 2007; Stronge et al., 2019). Men also tend to view their romantic partners as their primary resource of emotional support much more often than women do. For example, 49% of men in a US study claimed that their romantic partner was their primary confidant, whereas only 20% of women did (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). Likewise, 80% of men, but only approximately 50% of women, viewed their partner as their closest person in a UK study (Liao, McMunn, Mejía, & Brunner, 2018). Women, therefore, tend to be the central source of emotional connection for most men, a key difference that may explain why men tend to report greater emotional attachment to their partners than women do

Why do men rely more strongly on their partners to receive emotional support than women do? We suggest that men, compared to women, perceive fewer opportunities for fulfillment of their intimacy needs and reception of emotional support outside of romantic relationships. Most research in this area relies heavily on self-reports, which focus on subjective perceptions. It is plausible, however, that these perceptions to a large degree reflect an underlying reality – one in which men actually have fewer sources of intimacy and emotional support than women (even at a young age). This combination of subjective perceptions and objective reality may help explain why men are less likely than women to seek or find intimacy and emotional support in their networks (see Figure 1).

What is the evidence? When it comes to emotional matters, young men in particular tend to rely less on their friends and family than women do (although this effect is not evident in some non-Western cultures; Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005). Indeed, findings involving adolescents as well as young, middle-aged, and older adults from countries such as the Netherlands, the UK, and the US all indicate that men tend to receive less emotional support from friends and family than women do (Carr, 2004; Colarossi, Blumenfeld, Havold, & Wigfield, 2001; Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Galambos et al., 2018; Kalmijn, 2007; Matthews, Stansfeld, & Power, 1999; Rosenthal, Gesten, & Shiffman, 1986; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008). Consistent with this, adolescent girls, relative to adolescent boys, report that their friends care for them or listen carefully to their point of view more frequently (Colarossi et al., 2001).

This difference is also present beyond adolescence. For example, middle-aged women are more likely than middle-aged men to agree with statements such as "There is always someone close by who I can confide in" or "I can always fall back on my friends if I have to" (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007). Moreover, elderly women, relative to elderly men, indicate that they feel more cared for by relatives and friends and that their friends and relatives are more willing to listen to them when they want to discuss worries or problems (Carr, 2004). Given men's typically lower levels of intimacy need fulfillment in interactions with family and friends, men report less satisfaction with friend and family relationships than women and this dissatisfaction is associated with men's perceptions of less global social support from family and friends (Schmitt & Kurdek, 1985).

Men's lower levels of friend and family emotional support are also associated with their lower levels of perceived emotional support. In a study of more than half a million men and women from the UK, participants were asked how often they were able to confide in someone close to them (Shaw et al., 2021). While most men and women received some emotional support, nineteen percent of men stated that they never had any emotional support, whereas only eleven percent of women stated this (Shaw et al., 2021). Accordingly, men are more likely than women to report lacking close others in whom they can confide

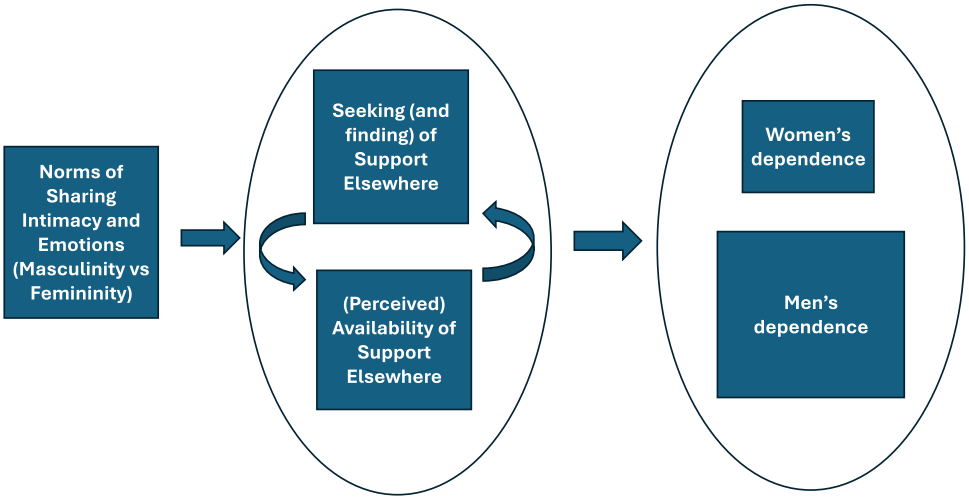


Figure 1. The Development of Men's and Women's Dependence on Romantic Relationships.
Note: The greater dependence of men than women on their romantic relationships is indicated by the relative size of the boxes.

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and on whom they can depend (Adamczyk, 2016; Barreto et al., 2021; Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; von Soest, Luhmann, & Gerstorf, 2020).

2.3 Men Learn Not to Disclose to Others

Why do men receive less emotional support from friends and family than women? The outcome of most social interactions depends not only on the needs of the interacting persons but also on the behaviors that each person engages in to fulfill their needs (Van Lange & Balliet, 2015). During interactions with people besides their romantic partners, men are less likely than women to disclose personal matters to others. Also, men tend to have less knowledge about their male friends' attitudes and feelings than women have about their female friends, which may limit the degree of emotional support that men typically exchange in their interactions with friends (Milardo, 1987). Even when adult participants are asked to report a personal emotional event in narrative form, women tend to express more sadness than men (Hess et al., 2000). The gender difference in disclosing one's personal experiences and emotions is already evident well before adulthood: Boys in middle childhood and adolescence, as compared to girls of the same age, are already less inclined to disclose to friends (Borowski & Rose, 2022; Rose et al., 2012) and, in some studies, their families (Pasqualini & De Rose, 2020).

So why do men and boys disclose fewer emotional experiences than women and girls? The literature provides some clues. In line with social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Wood & Eagly, 2002), one likely reason is that social norms favor self-disclosure more for women than men. For example, primary and middle-school boys are less likely than girls to agree that people should openly show their feelings and boys tend to report fewer positive feelings following emotional expression than girls do (Zeman & Shipman, 1996). Middle childhood to mid-adolescent boys, relative to girls, also expect that talking about their problems with friends will result in fewer positive outcomes and they also expect feeling weird or that it will 'waste time' (Rose et al., 2012).

Gendered beliefs regarding whether people in general (or participants themselves) should or should not disclose personal issues to others match the social norms that persist in many Western societies. Men, for example, evaluate other men who express emotional intimacy more negatively than men who do not express intimacy, which is linked to the stereotype that men should not appear vulnerable (Gaia, 2013). Both men and women also tend to perceive emotionality as an undesirable trait for men, but a desirable trait for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Moreover, both implicitly and explicitly, men expect to experience and express emotions like sadness and fear significantly less often and less intensely than they expect women to do (Hess et al., 2000; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). As pointed out by a meta-analysis including studies dating from the 1940s until the 2010s, people have ascribed communal traits, such as being emotional and nurturing, more to women than to men (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny, 2020). However, experience-sampling research reveals that men and women experience an equal amount of negative emotions in their daily lives (Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco, & Eyssell, 1998; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Rusu, Apostu, Turliuc, & Hilpert, 2023).

Differential expectations and norms for sharing emotional information are already evident at young ages in both boys and girls. For example, US adults consider 3-year-old boys who are described as more caring and emotional as possessing less desirable and atypical traits compared to girls described by the same words. Conversely, adults perceive boys described by feminine traits such as "sensitive" as less likable than boys described by masculine traits (Sullivan, Moss-Racusin, Lopez, & Williams, 2018). More generally, the exchange of emotional experience and intimacy can be viewed as part of different gender roles that describe and often prescribe different behaviors for women than men. Feminine gender roles emphasize communion such as expressing warmth and niceness, whereas masculine gender roles emphasize agency such as expressing dominance and assertiveness (Wood & Eagly, 2002; for differences in communication and topics, see Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Haas, 1979). Such gender roles are strongly linked to expectations held by others, especially in situations where other specific norms are less salient – such as informal situations with friends rather than in formal ones where specific employment roles may be quite powerful (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Many situations in which men and women at a young age experience such differential roles, as observers and actors, tend to be quite informal (e.g., observing parents at home, or interacting with other children at the playground).

From early childhood onward, men and women implicitly and explicitly learn about these social norms. For example, when talking to their preschool daughters versus their sons, parents tend to place greater emphasis on language related to sadness and emotional aspects of events in general (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Mascaro, Rentscher, Hackett, Mehl, & Rilling, 2017). When talking to their children about pictures displaying gender-ambiguous sad or happy children, parents tend to use the label girl more often than boy (van der Pol et al., 2015). When children express sadness, their parents tend to reward their daughters more than their sons, while they are more likely to punish their sons than their daughters for the same behavior (Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002; Shortt et al., 2016). The notion that it is appropriate for girls/women (but not boys/men) to display these emotions may be further evoked or strengthened by peer groups (Lindsey, 2016) and other social contacts, including mass media. For instance, female politicians are more often displayed expressing strong emotions in the news than male politicians are (Renner & Masch, 2019).

In sum, compared to women, men tend to learn from an early age that they should not express vulnerability to others. As a result, men disclose less to others, which leads them to receive less emotional support from their friends and family and, accordingly, depend more on their romantic partners for emotional support and the fulfillment of their intimacy needs.

2.4 Complementary Contributors to Differences Between Men and Women

Our focus is on intimacy and emotional support as the important sources of dependence of men more so than women in most cross-gender relationships. At the same time, our theoretical analysis (i.e., parental investment/sexual strategies, biological and cultural processes, tend-and-befriend) extends psychological outcomes deriving from intimacy and emotional support. As shown in Figure 2, we suggest the importance of two complementary sources of dependence: practical and sexual outcomes. Beyond the issue of dependence, we propose that intimate partner violence may also affect gender-specific experiences in romantic relationships.

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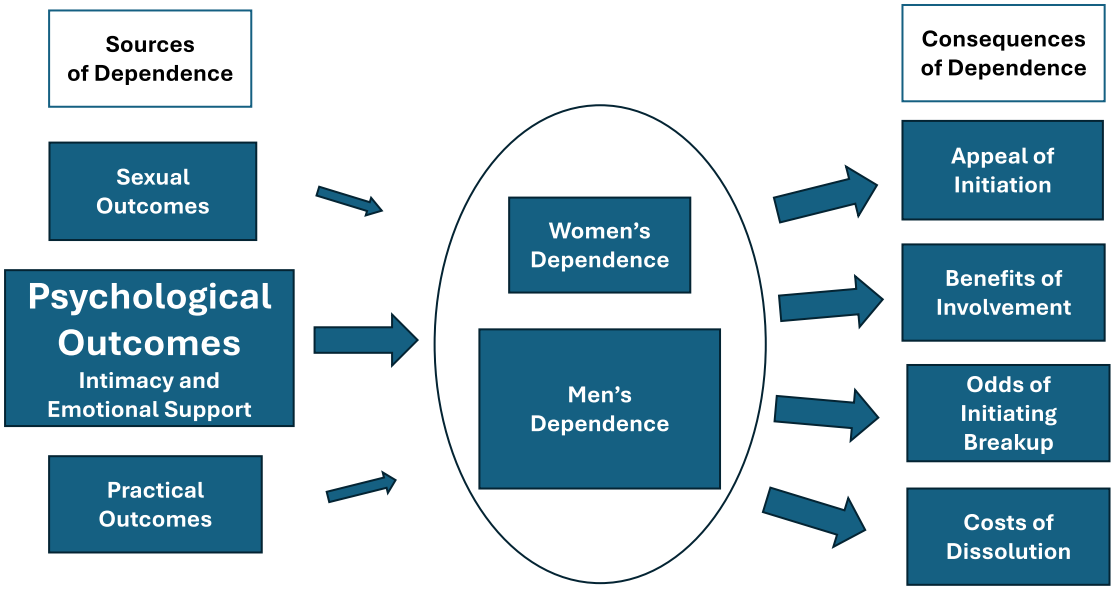


Figure 2. Sources and Consequences of Men's and Women's Dependence.
Note: The greater importance of psychological outcomes as a source of greater dependence by men than by women is indicated by the relative size of the boxes and arrows.

One important practical contributor to gender differences in the psychological impact of romantic relationships may be the unequal distribution of household chores and care at home. The higher level of support generally provided by women may not only entail intimacy and emotional support, but also the provision of practical support (see practical outcomes, Figure 2). This is consistent with women's greater tendency to engage in greater parental and relationship investment, the gender-based social roles that are reinforced in most cultures, and women's stronger inclination to tend-and-befriend. The empirical evidence behind these claims is strong. For example, relative to men, women spend substantially more time and effort doing unpaid care work, including both the execution and planning of tasks as part of home organization (Ervin, Taouk, Alfonzo, Hewitt, & King, 2022; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich, & Voltmer, 2023). The unequal distribution of household duties between romantic partners is not without costs and is associated with lower levels of mental and physical health in women (Eek & Axmon, 2015; Meyer, Zill, Dilba, Gerlach, & Schumann, 2021; Zamberlan, Gioachin, & Gritti, 2021). Men, therefore, may benefit more from having a romantic partner because their partner typically does most of the daily chores and activities at home, leaving men with fewer chores and more time for other, more enjoyable activities than when they are single. Cast another way, many men who shift from living with a partner to living on their own may suddenly need to spend significantly more time on household chores, resulting in both a greater burden of household activities and less time for pleasant activities. In contrast, most women who become single may encounter comparatively fewer household activities (by no longer having a partner in the home) and discover greater time to spend on other, more enjoyable activities.

Another practical factor that could contribute to the relatively stronger effect of relationship status on men's versus women's health may be the impact of female romantic partners on men's health behavior. A US panel study indicated that women are more likely than men to remind their partners to protect their health in mixed-gender relationships (Umberson, 1992). Further research indicates that relationship status has a stronger effect on men's than women's frequency of visiting a doctor (Neimann & Schmitz, 2010), and the association between more frequent spousal reminders for medical help-seeking and fewer physical health problems is stronger among men (Markey et al., 2007). However, multiple studies also find that romantic involvement is not associated with gender-specific effects on other health behaviors such as eating behavior, physical activity, drinking, and smoking behaviors (Markey et al., 2007; Neimann & Schmitz, 2010; Young et al., 2019), whereas other research finds that women and men benefit from engaging in different health behaviors depending on the quality of their health and health behaviors before their partners influenced them (Skoyen, Blank, Corkery, & Butler, 2013). Moreover, joint health behaviors, such as exercising or eating together as a couple, are equally associated with both men's and women's health satisfaction, medication use, and concordance with their partners' health outcomes (Wilson & Novak, 2022).

Consistent with parental investment theory and sexual strategies theory, men also differ from women in their interest in short-term mating, a tendency related to a stronger sex drive. According to a meta-analysis involving more than 200 studies, men, compared to women, tend to have a higher sex drive as indexed by their reports of sexual cognitions, affect, and behavior (Frankenbach, Weber, Loschelder, Kilger, & Friese, 2022). The stronger sex drive among men could explain the relatively greater tendency for men to pursue and initiate sex with romantic partners, and it might also help to explain why men are prone to fall in love faster than women. For example, differences in sex drive might, to some degree, account for men being more likely to experience love at first sight and to fall in love more quickly than women (Zsok et al., 2017). Likewise, women who have a higher sex drive also report falling in love more frequently than women with an average or low sex drive (Galperin & Haselton, 2010). Later in relationship formation, men may then confess their love first to secure regular sex in the future. Sexual outcomes, therefore, are likely to be a stronger source of dependence for men than for women, which may motivate men to more strongly initiate new

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relationships, to less strongly initiate breakups, and to experience greater pain following breakups (see Figure 2). However, it is important to note that men's and women's reports of sexual issues are also affected by stigma such as the sexual double standard – the more negative evaluation of women's as compared to men's sexual behaviors (Conley & Klein, 2022). Thus, differences between men and women in reports of sex drive and their associations with striving for a romantic partner may not be free from self-report, selective recall, or other biases.

Another aspect that may contribute to the gender differences described in this paper is prior experiences of intimate partner violence. As revealed by a systematic review, the experience of intimate partner violence is associated with lower mental health among both men and women (Lagdon et al., 2014). US research finds that women and men are equally likely to experience psychological and physical violence by an intimate partner, but women are more likely to experience stalking and severe forms of physical violence, putting them at greater risk of suffering injuries from intimate partner violence. Most strikingly, women are more than twice as likely as men to experience sexual violence from an intimate partner (Leemis et al., 2022). Since women are more likely to encounter dreadful experiences in relationships, they may, on average, not only benefit less from relationship involvement in terms of their well-being and health, but also experience more positive emotions and fewer adverse well-being consequences following a breakup.

Even though practical outcomes, sexual outcomes, and intimate partner violence are all important, we focus a little more strongly on psychological outcomes for four reasons. First, intimacy and emotional support are likely to be intertwined with sexual outcomes. Indeed, experience sampling research demonstrates that emotional intimacy predicts sexual desire, which in turn is associated with sexual interactions with romantic partners (van Lankveld et al., 2018). Second, our empirical review reveals pronounced gender differences in the (perceived) availability of intimacy and emotional support beyond romantic relationships (see Figure 1). Third, intimacy and emotional support yield psychological outcomes that are less easy to obtain from others if such social interaction patterns have not been obtained in the past. For example, it is often easier to find some forms of practical support elsewhere, such as house cleaning, tax administration, or health support when it is needed. Fourth, the need for intimacy and emotional support is pivotal in all four phases of relationships, including initiation, involvement, dissolution, and aftermath as we discuss in more detail below.

It t is important to elaborate briefly on sexual, psychological, and practical outcomes as sources of dependence. First, we are not claiming that these are the only sources of dependence. There are other sources, with one compelling example being financial dependence. In some relationships, certain partners (e.g., those in traditional relationships, especially women) are less likely to initiate breakups for financial reasons because they have partners who provide the resources (e.g., wealth, income) needed to have a decent standard of living for themselves or their children (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Also, psychological outcomes are broader than only the sharing of intimacy and emotional support. A compelling example is companionship, with a focus on enjoyable shared activities. This form of connection has been shown to also provide other important psychological and health benefits in many ongoing romantic relationships (e.g., Stadler et al., 2023). Thus, the model presented in Figure 2 is not comprehensive; instead, it focuses on those sources of dependence that are most central to addressing our main question: whether romantic relationships are more important to men than to women.

3. Gendered Stages of Relationships

Based on disclosing less and, in turn, receiving less emotional support from friends and family, men typically come to depend more on their romantic partners (most often women) to fulfill their need for intimacy than is true for women, on average. As we articulate below, men may, therefore, want a partner more than women because they, to a greater extent than women, expect that their emotional and intimacy needs will be met in a romantic relationship. Specifically, men may benefit more from having a romantic partner than women on average because their emotional exchanges, particularly in terms of receiving emotional support, and the fulfillment of their intimacy needs will be greater if they are in a relationship. Additionally, men may suffer more from relationship dissolution because they experience a steeper decrease in emotional exchanges and, therefore, need fulfillment compared to women, on average.

3.1 Relationship Formation: Men Strive More to Establish Relationships

In most romantic relationship formation scenarios before a romantic relationship has begun, prospective romantic partners are mutually independent: At this point, neither partner has any impact on the other, either positively or negatively (Kelley et al., 2003). This mutual independence comes with some advantages, such as the possibility to make decisions independently of another person's needs, goals, or concerns. However, it also has some disadvantages, such as not being able to profit from the various benefits, such as emotional support, which a romantic partner and relationship can provide. When faced with a romantic opportunity, people consciously and subconsciously evaluate the costs and benefits that a potential romantic partner holds, and they should be more willing to transition from singlehood into a romantic relationship the more that potential positive impacts outweigh potential negative impacts (Kelley et al., 2003). As discussed earlier, men, relative to women, tend to receive less emotional support from friends and family (Kalmijn, 2007; Liao et al., 2018; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002), meaning that romantic partners should be in a position to provide relatively larger increases in intimacy need fulfillment for men. Given the strong link between emotional support and general well-being (Burleson, 2003; Gordillo et al., 2009; Horstman et al., 2021; Morelli et al., 2015; Poon et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2022), men should, therefore, typically expect and reap more benefits upon entering a romantic relationship than is true of women.

Consistent with this premise, men evaluate having a romantic partner/relationship as providing a more favorable overall balance of benefits relative to costs: Not only do men, compared to women, tend to believe a romantic relationship is more central to their well-being (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Scheling & Richter, 2021); they also are more likely to believe in love at first sight, idealize their partners, and believe that no barrier is too strong to get in the way of love (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). Both their romantic beliefs and the stronger anticipated benefits for well-being should make men, on average, more likely than women to evaluate a romantic opportunity as more positive in general. Accordingly, other things being equal, men should be more

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strongly motivated than women to transition from singlehood to a romantic relationship. Several findings are consistent with this claim. For example, 61% of single men, but only 38% of single women, reported they were looking for a romantic relationship or dates in a recent US study (Brown, 2021). Recent studies on young and middle-aged adults find that, on average, men tend to wish for a new partner more than women do (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Wahring et al., 2025). Strikingly, widowed older men, compared to widowed older women, report about twice as much willingness to date and remarry (Carr, 2004). This finding is associated with men's lower levels of perceived emotional support: Among men, who mostly received less support than the average woman, one standard deviation increase in emotional support from friends was associated with a 70% decrease in the desire to remarry. Among women, the same increase in emotional support from friends was associated with only a 30% decrease in the desire to remarry (Carr, 2004). Similarly, cross-sectional research on never-married adults suggests that men desire marriage more and this greater desire is associated with their lower levels of received social support (Frazier et al., 1996).

Given men's relatively greater willingness to relinquish their independence and enter beneficial romantic relationships, based at least in part on their need for intimacy, men should also be more motivated to take the first big step from singlehood to relationship formation: falling in love. As expected, men do, on average, report having fallen in love faster in their most recent relationship than women, and they also anticipate that they will fall in love faster in the future than women do (Harrison & Shortall, 2011). Men also report a higher number of love-at-first-sight experiences (Galperin & Haselton, 2010; Northrup, C., Schwartz, P., & Witte, 2013; Zsok, Haucke, De Wit, & Barelds, 2017), with one study of 100,000 US adults finding that 48% of men, but only 28% of women, had ever fallen in love at first sight (Northrup et al., 2013). As a result, men tend to fall in love more often than women do (Montgomery, 2005). Young women, for instance, report on average two previous instances of falling in love, whereas men report around three (Cruces, Hawrylak, & Delegido, 2015). Men also tend to report a higher incidence of unreciprocated love (Cruces et al., 2015; Galperin & Haselton, 2010). In line with the findings for adults, adolescent boys are consistently more likely than girls of the same age to report that they have already been in love and that they are currently in love (Montgomery, 2005; Montgomery & Sorell, 1998).

Given that men, in line with their more meaningful increase of intimacy need fulfillment, anticipate more benefits from a romantic relationship than women do, men should also, on average, be more motivated and happier about increasing their level of commitment to their romantic partners. In fact, men are more likely than women to be the first partners to confess their love (Brantley, Knox, & Zusman, 2002). In a multi-study project, young men reported saying "I love you" on average 42 days earlier than young women did (Ackerman et al., 2011). Moreover, 70% of couples in a second study agreed that the male partner said "I love you" first (Ackerman et al., 2011). The finding that men tend to confess their love first has recently been replicated in a cross-national study: In Australia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Poland, and the UK, both female and male heterosexual participants tended to report that the male partner confessed their love first in their last or current romantic relationship (Watkins et al., 2022).

In sum, given the comparatively higher levels of emotional support provided by romantic partners to men in particular, men typically anticipate greater benefits from a romantic relationship, want a romantic partner more, tend to fall in love faster and more often, and commit to a new partner faster than women do. Men's stronger concern with relationship formation matches the effect that gender has on what follows: relationship involvement and its assorted benefits.

3.2 Relationship Involvement: Men Benefit More

Social interactions that result in good outcomes usually generate positive emotions (Kelley et al., 2003). Although romantic relationships come with both costs and benefits (Kelley et al., 2003), good relationships tend to have more positive than negative outcomes in general, due in part to the positive effects of emotional support (Clark & Reis, 1988; Finkel et al., 2017; Reis, 2021; Reis, Maniaci, et al., 2017; Reis & Itzchakov, 2023) and enhanced well-being (Stronge et al., 2019). However, men, on average, not only anticipate more positive outcomes from being in a romantic relationship than women do (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Scheling & Richter, 2021); they also experience more positive outcomes once in a romantic relationship, which translates into better health outcomes than remaining single. Indeed, compared to women, relationship status tends to impact men's mental and physical health more positively.

Transitioning from singlehood to a romantic relationship appears to have direct benefits on men´s mental health. The positive effect of having a romantic relationship on specific aspects of well-being, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction, tends to be slightly stronger for men than women (Stronge et al., 2019). One key variable that helps explain this difference between men and women is the overall level of perceived support, indicating that men benefit more from romantic relationships due to their lower support they receive from friends and family but do receive from romantic partners (Stronge et al., 2019). The positive impact of relationship status also protects men from developing mental health problems. For example, a study on young and middle-aged adults found that while singlehood was associated with more depressive symptoms among both men and women, this association was significantly stronger among men (Grundström, Konttinen, Berg, & Kiviruusu, 2021). A different study found that cohabitation with a partner and marital status were negatively linked to men's, but not women's, levels of depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and loneliness (Wright & Brown, 2017). In contrast, not being involved in a romantic relationship has negative effects on the mental health of men. The lack of a romantic partner in the household, for instance, predicts the onset of depression in men, but not in women (Sonnenberg et al., 2013). Moreover, a large UK study discovered that living alone, as compared to living with a close partner, doubled the suicide risk among men, whereas living arrangements were not associated with women's suicide risk (Shaw et al., 2021).

As alluded to earlier, being in a romantic relationship also has stronger effects on men's relative to women's physical health. Middle-aged men, for example, have higher levels of inflammatory markers with an increasing number of romantic breakups and a longer period of living alone; however, none of these associations are found for women (Davidsen, Carstensen, Kriegbaum, Bruunsgaard, & Lund, 2022). Moreover, the risk of developing hypertension is twice as high for men who never married than it is for married men, but marital status is not associated with women's hypertension risk (Ramezankhani et al., 2019). According to large-scale meta-analyses, while all-cause mortality is higher among never-married, divorced, and separated men and women than among their married counterparts, the effect of marital status is

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slightly stronger for men than women (Sbarra et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020). Importantly, women's stronger support network outside of their romantic relationship appears to be a key factor in explaining the relatively higher rates of mortality among unmarried and widowed men (Monin & Clark, 2011). Thus, compared to women, men tend to experience more positive mental and physical health outcomes from having a spouse or partner, but also more negative outcomes from *not* having one.

3.3 Relationship Dissolution: Men Are Less Likely to Initiate Breakups

Who is most likely to initiate a breakup? Considering that men both anticipate and realistically receive greater emotional benefits from being involved in romantic relationships, they should also be less likely to initiate most breakups. Indeed, women are listed twice as often as men in terms of which partner initiates a divorce (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006). Both divorced men and, to a greater extent, women state that it was the woman who first talked about divorce, filed for it, and wanted it more (Amato & Previti, 2004). Overall, women initiate most divorces (around 70%), with the remaining divorce cases being equally split into mutual initiation and initiation by the husband (Brinig & Allen, 2000; Rosenfeld, 2018). Likewise, regardless of age, women also initiate breakups more often than men in non-marital romantic relationships, as revealed by reports by both them and their partners (Brüning, 2022; Helgeson, 1994; Morris et al., 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018; Wahring et al., 2025). Once separation is initiated and romantic involvement ends, further gender differences emerge, especially concerning how individuals mentally and physically cope with breakups and the loss of a romantic partner.

3.4 Relationship Aftermath: Men Suffer More

When a romantic relationship dissolves, one partner often experiences greater costs following the dissolution than the other partner. This asymmetry implies that one partner was more dependent on the relationship, which, in turn, implies that, other things being equal, one partner should be more vulnerable following a breakup than the other partner (Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Simpson, 1987).

As previously illustrated, men tend to gain a greater and more meaningful expansion of support by entering a romantic relationship than women typically do (Stronge et al., 2019) and, accordingly, men both anticipate and receive greater psychological benefits from their romantic relationships (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Scheling & Richter, 2021; Sonnenberg et al., 2013; Stronge et al., 2019; Wright & Brown, 2017). A breakup should, therefore, affect men to a greater extent than it typically affects women, resulting in different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. Consistent with the notion that men expect and benefit more from romantic relationships, men envision fewer benefits from a breakup than women do (Helgeson, 1994). Moreover, men typically experience less growth than women following relationship dissolution, and they are less likely to report positive changes such as having learned what they want in a partner and relationship (Bevvino & Sharkin, 2003; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). But even feelings and beliefs regarding ex-partners differ between men and women. Research across samples in in Austria, Germany, and the US finds that men tend to view their ex-partners more positively than women do (Athenstaedt et al., 2020; Grüning, Loose, & Krueger, 2023). Moreover, compared to women, men's more positive evaluations of their ex-partners are associated with the relatively higher level of social support they reported receiving from their ex-partners (Athenstaedt et al., 2020).

Driven by their relatively greater dependence on their romantic partners for emotional support and their resulting greater vulnerability to separations, men typically remain emotionally attached longer to their ex-partners than women do (Shimek & Bello, 2014). In addition, breakups tend to impact men's emotions more negatively. A lower proportion of men than women say they have experienced positive emotions such as relief or joy after a breakup (Carter, Knox, & Hall, 2018; Choo, Levine, & Hatfield, 1996). Although men and women tend to report having experienced equally strong post-relationship grief, which refers to negative emotional and physical responses to breakups, almost twice as many men than women describe that they continue to struggle with post-relationship grief symptoms such as sadness or insomnia when reporting how past breakups have affected them (Morris & Reiber, 2011). Moreover, a higher proportion of men than women say that their recovery from post-relationship grief took longer than a year (Morris & Reiber, 2011).

More negative emotional reactions to breakups are associated with stronger detrimental effects on the mental health outcomes of men. For example, 40% of men, but only 20% of women, report frequent feelings of loneliness during the year of their divorce (Leopold, 2018). Moreover, when losing a spouse due to either divorce or a partner's death, life satisfaction decreases more sharply for men than women (Chipperfield & Havens, 2001; Preetz, 2022; van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020). The stronger effect that separation has on men's mental health may ultimately lead to premature death for some men. Divorce, for example, predicts suicide in men, but not in women (Kposowa, 2000; Kposowa et al., 2020). Furthermore, men's life expectancy drastically declines when their partner dies, whereas partner death is less detrimental for women. In a large meta-analysis involving more than 500 million people, men's mortality risk increased by 27% following their spouse's death, whereas women's mortality risk increased by only 15%, a meaningful effect even if statistically very small in size (Shor, Roelfs, Bugyi, & Schwartz, 2012).

Given their more negative evaluations and emotional reactions regarding romantic breakups, relationship dissolution should, on average, be harder for men than women to respond to and cope with adequately. Indeed, women tend to engage in more active coping following a breakup than men do (Athenstaedt et al., 2020). More specifically, men, on average, are more likely to enact unhealthy coping styles, such as increasing consumption of drugs and alcohol, whereas women are more likely to engage in healthier coping styles, such as seeking emotional support from their family and friends (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Gehl et al., 2024; Shimek & Bello, 2014).

Finally, given their relatively greater dependence on their romantic partners and relationships for emotional support, men are both more willing and more likely than women to form new romantic relationships sooner after a relationship has ended. One important reason is that a new relationship helps men cope with recent breakups and find intimacy and emotional support from new romantic partners (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Supporting this, a recent review indicates that men are more likely to remarry than women (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). More strikingly, in a sample of middle-aged and older widowed and divorced people, men were six times more likely than women to report beginning a new romantic

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relationship (de Jong Gierveld, 2004), a finding that can be partially, but not fully, explained by the increasing ratio of women to men over the life course (Goodkind & Rosenblum, 2023).

3.5 Evidence for the Roles of Intimacy and Emotional Support

Four empirical studies so far directly support the idea that emotional support explains the documented gender differences in relationship formation, involvement, dissolution, and aftermath: A study on never-married adults found an association between men's greater desire to marry and their lower levels of received social support (Frazier et al., 1996). Research on widowed older adults reveals a strong effect of receiving emotional support from friends on men's greater desire a romantic partner: Men, on average, receive significantly less emotional support from their friends than women do (Carr, 2004). As noted earlier, a striking finding is that one standard deviation increase in emotional support from friends is associated with a decrease in the desire to remarry by more than two-thirds among men (Carr, 2004). Relevant to the higher benefits that men receive from being in romantic relationships, a panel study found that perceived social support was associated with differences between men and women in the strength of the associations between relationship status and both life satisfaction and self-esteem (Stronge et al., 2019). Finally, concerning men's higher suffering in response to relationship dissolution, compared to women, men's more positive evaluation of their ex-partner was associated with the relatively higher level of social support they received from their ex-partner (Athenstaedt et al., 2020).

Multiple other recent studies have documented clear links between social support and the health and well-being benefits of relationship involvement (see Girme, Park, & MacDonald, 2022, for a review). However, to our knowledge, no research article to date has connected these findings to gender differences across the four relationship stages. That said, some scholars have suggested that specific gender differences may be associated with women's stronger support network beyond their romantic relationships. For example, this mechanism has been construed as a key variable in explaining the stronger effects of divorce on men's health (Helgeson & Mascatelli, 2018) and men's well-being (Marshall, 2010), as well as the relatively higher mortality rates among unmarried and widowed men (Monin & Clark, 2011).

In sum, we propose a model that helps explain the gender differences at the four relationship stages in terms of norms that inhibit or support sharing intimacy and emotional support, which derive from broader norms of masculinity and femininity (see Figure 1). Relative to women, men learn to not express vulnerability to others. In turn, men are less likely to seek and receive emotional support from their friends and family and become more dependent on their romantic partners for intimacy and emotional support. Because romantic partners primarily fulfill men's need for intimacy and emotional support, men tend to strive for a partner more, benefit more from relationship involvement, are less likely to initiate breakups, and suffer more from relationship dissolution. On the other hand, based on traditional norms of femininity, women learn to express vulnerability to others. In turn, women are more likely to seek and receive emotional support from their friends and family and become less dependent on their romantic partners for intimacy and support needs. Accordingly, women tend to strive for a partner less, benefit less from relationship involvement, are more likely to initiate breakups, and suffer less from relationship dissolution (see Figure 2).

As alluded to earlier, practical and sexual dependence as well as intimate partner violence may contribute to gender differences at all four relationship stages. It is important to note that our model's focus on intimacy and emotional support can explain the differences between men and women across all four stages, ranging from relationship formation to involvement, to breakup initiation, to aftermath. The complementary explanations, however, seem primarily relevant to one or two of the relationship stages. For instance, the unequal distribution of household chores and care at home between women and men may contribute to differences in the benefits (and costs) of relationship involvement and the costs (and benefits) of breakups on health and well-being. However, it may not directly explain gender differences in relationship formation. Additionally, the gendered effect of relationship status on medical help-seeking may contribute to the health benefits of relationship involvement, but it does not directly explain why men suffer more psychologically following dissolution, or why they strive more strongly to forge relationships.

Are there other sources of dependence that could impact behavior at all four stages of relationships? It is possible that differences in sex drive, with men typically having a stronger sex drive than women, could also partially explain gender differences across all four relationship phases. Indeed, romantic relationships may provide many men with "an assurance" of some gratification of their sexual needs. But as noted earlier, the gratification of intimacy and sex are often intertwined. The experience of severe forms of partner violence in past or current relationships, which tend to be more prevalent among women than men and thus put women at greater risk of suffering from injuries inflicted by a partner, may also shape differences in behavior in all four phases of relationships. Of note, even though intimate partner violence is a major societal problem, most women (and men) do not experience severe forms of it (Leemis et al., 2022), whereas the need for intimacy impacts virtually all people.

3.6 Contradictory Evidence

We acknowledge that some prior studies have found no or occasionally reverse gender differences in the experiences and behaviors discussed above. For example, contrary to the prevailing finding that men, on average, report stronger romantic beliefs than women do, one study found more romantic beliefs such as the belief in love at first sight and the belief in the existence of an ideal mate among young women than young men from India, the US, and Turkey (Medora, Larson, Hortačsu, & Dave, 2002). One possible explanation might be that gender effects vary depending on the specific beliefs asked about, or that there may be gendered generational shifts in some romantic beliefs (Medora et al., 2002), but not others (Weaver & Ganong, 2004). Another study found that the effect of divorce on suicide risk was equally high in both Norwegian men and women (Øien-Ødegaard, Hauge, & Reneflot, 2021), suggesting that the gender difference in this regard is not universal. Finally, a Swedish study found that only men who divorced at least 5 years ago report a decline in health compared to married men, but that divorce is not associated with subsequent declines in women's health (Gähler, 2006). Similarly, a recent study on mostly unmarried young and middle-aged German adults found no gender differences in changes in life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, and loneliness following relationship dissolution (Wahring et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the gendered effects of relationship dissolution on health and well-being may partly depend on factors such as the duration of

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singlehood, marital status, or be subject to cross-societal differences.

There are also some findings suggesting that men are not always more strongly oriented to relationship maintenance, or at least exhibiting behaviors that seem oriented to maintenance. For example, once in a relationship, women, relative to men, often devote more effort to maintaining their relationships by offering more emotional support and disclosing more to their partners (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Liao et al., 2018; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Umberson et al., 1996). When considering longitudinal actor and partner effects, women's emotional support, in turn, is associated more strongly than men's with both their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction one year later (Horne & Johnson, 2019), suggesting that women tend to assume a larger role in maintaining good, high-quality relationships than men do. Why do women typically invest more than men into sustaining relationship quality, particularly if romantic relationships may be less consequential for them (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Scheling & Richter, 2021) and women appear to benefit less from being in romantic relationships (Davidsen et al., 2022; Stronge et al., 2019)? Importantly, women not only tend to provide more support to their male partners than vice versa; they also tend to provide more support to others compared to men in general (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). We propose that the most likely explanation is that women's greater provision of support stems primarily from traditional social norms that attribute nurturing and supportive behaviors to femininity, which results in women becoming those who primarily mind and manage romantic relationships (Horne & Johnson, 2019). This account is consistent with the broader theoretical perspectives we outlined earlier, including tend-and-befriend theory.

Moreover, although men tend to benefit more from being in a relationship than women do, this may not always be reflected in all perceptions of benefits. One study found that women perceive to receive more health benefits from their partners than vice versa, even though men typically receive more health benefits from their partners than women do (Markey et al., 2007). Another study found that men and women report experiencing similar amounts of momentary love for each other in their relationship, and both report elevated levels of well-being in the presence of their partner (Bhargava, 2023). Indeed, a meta-analysis reveals that women and men of the same age, in relationships of comparable duration, do not exhibit significant differences in their average levels of romantic relationship satisfaction (Bühler et al., 2021). Thus, even though men on average expect that having a romantic partner will be more beneficial and benefit more from involvement in romantic relationships, the emotional attachment in ongoing relationships may often be equally strong for both men and women. Nevertheless, women still tend to provide more emotional support to romantic partners than men do. Extending this line of reasoning, it seems plausible that women, more than men, may translate relationship maintenance needs into activities like providing emotional and practical support. This, in turn, offers men greater benefits from the relationship and makes them less likely to initiate a breakup, but makes them more likely to suffer seriously if the relationship ends (see Figure 2).

Finally, there is a strong line of research that does not directly find evidence of gender differences is women's and men's general desire for ongoing relationships to persist over time. Specifically, research in the tradition of the investment model has not consistently revealed evidence for clear differences between men and women in their level of commitment to ongoing relationships (Agnew, Rusbult, Van Lange, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Van Lange et al., 1997). Thus, it is possible that women and men do not differ in their overall appraisals of their long-term attachment and dependence in romantic relationships, at least as captured by the concept of commitment. While commitment is a robust predictor of voluntary breakups (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), the primary reason(s) for voluntary breakups that are *not* predicted by commitment may be those where gender differences exist. For example, one might speculate that even though men and women, on average, report equal levels of commitment when their relationships are going well, when things are not going well, women have a stronger tendency than men to initiate breakups. As noted earlier, women generally are more "prepared" to end relationships than men are (Amato & Previti, 2004; Brinig & Allen, 2000; Brüning, 2022; Helgeson, 1994; Rosenfeld, 2018), whereas men typically want to remain in ongoing relationships because they are more dependent on their partners to meet their basic intimacy needs.

4 Broader Implications

The gender differences in the psychological importance of romantic relationships and the assumed role of emotional support outlined above have several implications for friendships, including the role of friendships with women for men. Moreover, the gender differences in breakup initiation challenge important theoretical perspectives on differences between men and women in romantic relationships.

4.1 Enhancing Friendships

The findings reviewed above suggest that relative to women, men have significantly fewer emotionally supportive interactions with their friends and family members. Indeed, when it comes to friendships, men report that they prefer group settings, whereas women favor dyadic, face-to-face interactions more (David-Barrett et al., 2015). Dyadic situations are often better suited for receiving and giving emotional support because they involve disclosing to just one person, usually someone with whom a person has close ties. Both men and women can benefit from opening up in these dyadic settings, and men, in particular, could especially benefit from communicating in dyadic settings more often with non-romantic relationship partners (Peperkoorn et al., 2020).

Women also tend to provide more support to each other than men typically do with their male interaction partners, reflecting the fact that receiving and providing support typically are reciprocal processes. Research in the US has shown that almost half of all women, but only around 20% of men, are characterized as "emotional support exchangers" in terms of both providing *and* receiving emotional support (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). Mutually giving and receiving relationships, however, tend to be the healthiest (Chen et al., 2021). Thus, the gender stereotype that men should not express vulnerability (Fivush, 1989; Fivush et al., 2000; Gaia, 2013; Hess et al., 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; van der Pol et al., 2015; Zaman & Fivush, 2013) may pose barriers for men to developing mutually supportive relationships. All people, regardless of their gender, can benefit from jointly seeking and offering emotional support during interactions with significant others. To make interaction partners feel better understood, for example, individuals can engage in active listening techniques such as paraphrasing their interaction partner's message, asking

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questions building on their message, and displaying nonverbal cues such as responsive nodding (Weger, Cole, & Akbulut, 2019). Individuals can also ask others to engage in more active listening and reflection while interacting with them.

4.2 The Role of Cross-Gender Friendships

If men, in particular, do not succeed in making their friendships with other men more intimate, building friendships with women may be a valuable alternative option. Cross-gender friendships have become more common and are more widely accepted nowadays, with more than 80% of people of any gender and age agreeing that men and women can "just be friends" (Dinic, 2021; Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012; Gardiner, 2019). Having a high-quality cross-gender friendship is associated with more happiness for both men and women (Procsal, Demir, Doğan, Özen, & Sümer, 2015). Cross-gender friendships may especially benefit men who lack supportive same-gender friendships. Regardless of a friend's gender, women tend to be more supportive listeners and engage in less distancing or unsupportive responses to a friend's disclosure than is true of men (Leaper, 2000). Accordingly, men typically experience greater emotional support, intimacy, and closeness in cross-gender than in same-gender friendships (Werking, 1997).

On the downside, in many mixed-gender romantic relationships, an individual's cross-gender friendships may, at times, evoke jealousy in their romantic partners (Gilchrist-Petty & Bennett, 2019). Jealousy may sometimes be grounded on actual sexual or romantic interests by one or both of the cross-gender friends. Indeed, some people are sexually attracted to their cross-gender friends and become interested in dating them, even if they (or their cross-gender friend) are involved in a romantic relationship with someone else (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012). Single men tend to experience a higher degree of attraction to their cross-gender friends than single women do, and men tend to overestimate their female friends' attraction to them, whereas women tend to estimate their male friend's attraction more accurately (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012). Thus, for individuals who have cross-gender friendships, but especially for men, it may help to reflect on whether attraction and romantic interest in a friend are mutual and significant enough to undermine one or both friends' current romantic relationship. Moreover, respectful, open, and honest communication with a friend may be beneficial in terms of clarifying the kind of relationship that exists between friends (Gardiner, 2019).

4.3. Explaining Differences between Men and Women in Long-Term Mating

We have incorporated various theoretical perspectives in this paper, including parental investment and sexual strategies theory, tend-and-befriend theory, and the biosocial model, placing special emphasis on social role theory. The evidence we have reviewed indicates that men tend to be more likely to initiate relationships, a finding that all three theoretical perspectives explain. However, we have also reviewed evidence that women are more likely than men to initiate breakups in romantic relationships. This finding poses challenges to parental investment and sexual strategies theory, which proposes that women should typically be inclined to adopt a long-term perspective toward romantic relationships. How can this finding be understood?

One potential answer comes from another major evolutionary model of human mating and parenting. According to Strategic Pluralism Theory (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), women should have evolved to enact different mating strategies depending on the quality of their local environment, the prevalence of local pathogens, and the need for biparental care to raise their children successfully to reproductive age. When the local environment was harsh (difficult/dangerous), pathogens were prevalent, and/or biparental care was not needed (due to kin alloparenting), women in evolutionary history would have been more likely to engage in short-term relationships with men who possessed certain characteristics (e.g., pathogen-resistance as evidenced by certain men's health/vigor). Moreover, men in evolutionary history who did not possess these attributes would have been more successful reproductively by providing greater paternal care and investing in long-term, more exclusive mating relationships. A complementary answer is that, through recent changes in the distribution of labor, women have become less dependent on men. Because of this, many women now have more freedom to initiate breakups because they can afford it financially (Rusbult & Martz, 1995) or they are less dependent on men from a psychological perspective, as we have argued in this paper. Of course, there may be other plausible theoretical explanations, but we regard cultural evolutionary processes as a critical part of the broader explanation.

5. Future Directions

According to our model, the proposed differences between men and women center primarily on the sharing of intimacy and emotional support. Although our review is based on a good deal of empirical evidence, only a few studies provide direct evidence of the gender difference in dependence impacting intimacy and emotional support and how this process unfolds in women and men in the context of their romantic relationships (see Athenstaedt et al., 2020; Carr, 2004; Stronge et al., 2019). We therefore recommend research that addresses these mechanisms more directly. In particular, we suggest the need for research that follows single people who are currently dating someone. For example, experience sampling and diary methods could illuminate the reasons underlying the well-established gender differences associated with falling in love and love confessions, as well as how both relate to baseline scores and day-to-day shifts in emotional support received from friends and family.

Longitudinal panel data could be analyzed to track how differences in the provision and receipt of emotional support contribute to differences in men and women who are coping with separation, divorce, or bereavement. Such longitudinal research is also important to illuminate the direction of the effects discussed in this paper. For instance, the health advantage of relationship involvement is likely to be bidirectional, such that poorer health hinders people from entering or remaining in relationships, but health is also typically enhanced by relationship involvement. Current studies differ in their conclusions about the actual direction of these effects (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Kohn & Averett, 2014; Kulu, Mikolai, & Franke, 2024; Rapp & Stauder, 2020). In addition, future longitudinal research should include control groups. When studying changes in well-being following a breakup, for example, one needs to compare participants who have experienced a breakup to those who have continued their relationship. This type of design will allow researchers to disentangle general trends and changes specific to the breakup experience. To create control groups, we recommend propensity-score matching (van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020), as this method assures that baseline differences between the groups are minimized.

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Another agenda for future research involves providing more direct evidence that socialization patterns beginning early in life shape people's dependence on romantic partners concerning their need for intimacy and emotional support later in life. Some evidence already shows that adolescent girls and boys engage in similar levels of disclosure to their parents and receive similar levels of emotional support from them, but girls tend to disclose more to their friends and receive more emotional support from them than boys typically do (Borowski & Rose, 2022; Colarossi et al., 2001; Rose et al., 2012). Moreover, boys tend to have more intimate friendships in early and middle adolescence, but they often lose them by late adolescence, despite wanting to keep these friendships (Way, 2013). Future studies should examine whether such experiences (or lack of them) generate differences between men and women in opportunities for the exchange of emotional support outside of romantic relationships.

It is important to note that some key findings reviewed above are based on samples of mostly young adults. Cases in point are studies on who falls in love and who confesses their love first in relationships (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Cruces et al., 2015; Galperin & Haselton, 2010; Harrison & Shortall, 2011; Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Watkins et al., 2022; Zsok et al., 2017). Moreover, most studies focus on specific age groups, making comparisons across age groups difficult. Nevertheless, older adults, both women, and men, tend to report greater happiness and receiving more support from interacting with their close social contacts (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Carstensen, Mikels, & Mather, 2006; Charles & Piazza, 2007; Schnittker, 2007). This may result from older adults optimizing their social relationships by reducing their total number of social contacts and focusing more on closer, more rewarding ties (Carstensen et al., 2006). Accordingly, gender differences in the exchange of emotional support, desire for a new partner, benefits of romantic involvement, and dissatisfaction following separation and divorce may be less pronounced among older adults. Indeed, although meta-analyses on the effect of marital dissolution and bereavement on mortality generally find that this effect is stronger for men, they also report that these differences are smaller for older adults (Shor, Roelfs, Bugyi, & Schwartz, 2012; Shor, Roelfs, Curreli, et al., 2012).

Next to the possible age effect, it is also plausible that there are historical changes in the gender effects. As revealed by a recent meta-analysis (Eagly et al., 2020), the ascription of communal traits such as emotionality and sensitivity to women versus men has increased since the 1940s. This implies that gender differences in the exchange of emotional support and many of the relationship variables discussed in this paper may have increased over time. At the same time, some gender differences could have become smaller, at least in many WEIRD countries. For example, several decades ago, divorces were associated with more adverse psychological and monetary consequences for women, as their participation in the labor market was limited and they were more financially dependent on their husbands (McKeever & Wolfinger, 2001; Tach & Eads, 2015). Thus, while men may suffer more from relationship dissolution today, women may have suffered more from it in earlier times. Long-running panel studies spanning decades are a promising tool for disentangling possible age and cohort effects.

Another point related to the generalizability of the findings reviewed here is our primary focus on different-gender couples. In future work, it will be important to examine how bisexual, homosexual, and heterosexual men and women differ in the importance they place on finding and maintaining a romantic partner/relationship and how they deal with breakups. Some initial evidence suggests that, in terms of well-being, individuals benefit just as much from same-gender as from mixed-gender romantic relationships, and that differences between men and women are less pronounced (Chen & van Ours, 2018; Solazzo, Gorman, & Denney, 2020). There may be various reasons for this outcome. Homosexuality and bisexuality, for example, are associated with a higher likelihood of gender-non-conforming behaviors and attitudes (Kahn & Halpern, 2019). Moreover, homosexual and bisexual men, relative to heterosexual men, tend to be more strongly attached to their best friends and have relatively more cross-gender friends (Baiocco et al., 2014; Diamond & Dubé, 2002). Young men tend to report opening up more about their personal experiences and emotions in cross-gender than in same-gender interactions (Borowski & Rose, 2022). Thus, compared to heterosexual men and women, gay and bisexual men may differ less in relation to bisexual and lesbian women in terms of emotional self-disclosure and the exchange of emotional support received from social ties outside of their romantic partners/relationships.

Finally, the research reviewed here relies strongly on Northern American and Western European samples. However, the association between gender and the psychological importance of romantic relationships may be even stronger in some other cultures. For example, emotional support has a stronger association with well-being in more interdependent cultures – such as the Philippines and Japan – compared to more independent cultures – such as the European Americans (Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008). Thus, in line with our reviewed findings and model, it is plausible that differences between men and women may be even stronger in some interdependent cultures. As a further case in point, in China life satisfaction among men is more strongly associated with relationship status than life satisfaction is among women (Liu, Li, & Feldman, 2013). Also, our findings may be more pronounced in masculine cultures where men are even less prone to share their vulnerabilities outside their romantic relationships (Ryan et al., 2005). Thus, the differences between men and women in dependence on emotional support stemming from romantic partners/relationships reviewed here might also be found in different cultures.

6. Concluding Remarks

Based on the broad literature on heterosexual relationships, we found evidence for four propositions. Relative to women, (a) men tend to be more strongly focused on romantic relationship formation, (b) men tend to benefit more from romantic relationship involvement, (c) men are less likely to initiate breakups, and (d) men tend to suffer more following relationship dissolution. We proposed that these differences are primarily rooted in the broader notion that men, compared to women, depend more strongly on their romantic partners for emotional support and intimacy needs (see also Finkel, 2017). We also suggest that this is principally because men are less likely to seek and find intimacy and exchange of emotional support with their social ties outside of their romantic relationships, most likely because social norms to share vulnerability are less favorable for men than for women. It is important to emphasize that no other theory or model to our knowledge is capable of accounting for all of these gender differences across all four relationship stages.

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It is also important to acknowledge that these conclusions may not be equally valid for all groups of people or for different cultures. The emotional dependence of men in romantic relationships may be less pronounced among older people and for romantic involvements other than heterosexual ones. The findings, however, may generalize to other cultures than simply WEIRD ones, including, for example, more masculine cultures where the norms against sharing vulnerabilities among men tend to be even stronger. These are important research agendas for the future.

This review is deeply rooted in the assumption that interdependence has several components. Although economic or material forms of interdependence, such as differences in wealth and income, are often emphasized, our model highlights the need for intimacy and emotional support, which can only be fulfilled socially. Norms and socialization that operate in many societies typically discourage the communication and sharing of vulnerabilities more strongly among men than among women. Such gender roles are likely to be pivotal to understanding why men are more strongly dependent on their intimate partners, and why they have more to lose when a romantic relationship ends (Clark & Reis, 1988; Marshall, 2010; Reis, 1998). Indeed, the health-related consequences can be substantial for men in particular, as indicated by the fact that relationship involvement clearly increases and relationship dissolution clearly decreases men's more than women's mental and physical health, including men's rate of mortality (Kposowa, 2000; Kposowa et al., 2020; Monin & Clark, 2011; Ramezankhani et al., 2019; Stronge et al., 2019). We know that the fulfillment of social needs is fundamental to well-being and health because close others routinely help people cope with daily hassles and chronic stressors in life (Clark & Aragón, 2013; Clark & Mills, 1979; Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Reis et al., 2017). For all people, the sharing of intimacy and emotional support is essential to positive personal and interpersonal outcomes. If societies develop and evolve so that roles in social life become less gender-specific, we hope that men will be able to more openly express their emotions and show their vulnerabilities. If so, their needs for intimacy and support will more likely be fulfilled.

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Open Peer Commentary

Reassessing romantic dependency: Gendered vulnerabilities and cultural realities beyond the Western lens

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Abstract

Through placing emotional dependency within the framework of gendered social roles, structural injustices, and disparities in mental health, this commentary critically examines the assertion that romantic relationships are more significant to men than to women. In order to improve the psychological and cultural depth of the findings, it questions the target article's Western-centric orientation and promotes the inclusion of non-Western and socioeconomically diverse perspectives.

By claiming that romantic relationships benefit men more psychologically and health-wise than they do women, Wahring et al. challenge prevalent stereotypes. The authors make a strong case that men are more distressed when relationships end, have greater desires for a partnership, and find greater happiness in romantic relationships (Oliffe et al., 2022; Momeñe et al., 2022). These results, however, require a more thorough interpretation using an intersectional perspective that takes into account economic variance, structural inequality, and cultural specificity (Atewologun, 2018; Kelly et al., 2021).

Emotional dependency and gendered conditioning

According to the authors, men's emotional insensitivity is a result of social conditioning rather than just psychology. While girls are encouraged to be emotionally articulate, boys are frequently discouraged from displaying vulnerability from an early age (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; DeSantis, Eshelman, & Messman, 2024). This leads to an emotional imbalance where men rely on romantic partners to express their emotions, which is reinforced by media, education, and family norms (Momeñe et al., 2024).

Instead of being viewed as a personal shortcoming, this emotional dependence should be reframed as a socially produced result. Structural responses are required: Men's mental health strategies should prioritize non-romantic emotional scaffolds, such as family openness, peer bonds, and therapeutic channels that destigmatize male emotional expression (Oliffe et al., 2024; McKenzie et al., 2018; Ceatha et al., 2021; Harries et al., 2023).

Structural vulnerability and breakup distress

Although the article acknowledges men's pain after a breakup, it ignores how systemic injustice exacerbates this suffering. The experience and management of emotional pain are influenced by socioeconomic status, rural isolation, and limited access to healthcare (Achdut & Sarid, 2020; Scanlon & Adlam, 2022; Thodukayil et al., 2024). Male relationship trauma frequently presents as psychosomatic distress, substance abuse, and even self-harm, conditions that are frequently misdiagnosed or ignored by medical professionals, according to our fieldwork in rural South India (Hosny et al., 2023; Kaptein, 2023).

These realizations call for interventions that are sensitive to cultural differences. Policies pertaining to mental health must promote emotional literacy and normalize men seeking help. To change masculinity norms and eliminate stigma, implementation must focus on local communities, schools, and places of worship (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2024).

Gender roles in diverse cultural settings

If not critically analyzed, the article's theoretical framework, which is based on evolutionary and social role theory, could result in cultural reductionism (Carter, 2021). Extended kinship, religious authority, and collectivist values all have a significant influence on relationship dynamics in non-Western societies (Cross & Joo, 2023; Furstenberg et al., 2020). Extended families frequently offer emotional support in South Asia, reducing romantic reliance (Jahangir et al., 2025; Weaver & Karasz, 2022).

On the other hand, a lot of women lack the autonomy to start divorces because they are afraid of being socially stigmatized, having unstable finances, or having a disadvantage when it comes to child custody (Villiger & de Vries, 2025; Ottakkam Thodukayil et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to interpret the claim that women break up more frequently with caution and consideration for the context.

Cultural overgeneralization is a risk associated with findings derived from WEIRD populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic). Global comparative research is crucial for expanding the epistemic base (Krys et al., 2024; Burger et al., 2023).

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Closer cultural bonds and wider emotional circles

The article reflects individualist Western norms by defining intimacy as emotional disclosure. However, shared responsibility and nonverbal behaviors that have deep emotional meaning, such as cooking, caring for others, and participating in religious activities, are common ways that intimacy is expressed in collectivist cultures (Arahman, Chai, & Lima, 2024; Azizah, Anggraini, & Ulfa, 2023).

The notion of romantic exclusivity is challenged by the emotional ties that men develop with their siblings, elders, and cousins in joint family systems, which are prevalent in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Furstenberg et al., 2020). To prevent pathologizing non-Western forms of connection, researchers and clinicians need to be aware of these cultural scripts (Ramkissoon, 2024; Atherton et al., 2023).

A comprehensive model of romantic dependency

Wahring et al. provide a model with psychological underpinnings, but structural integration is necessary for an inclusive strategy. It is necessary to theorize romantic dependency using interrelated lenses:

1. Value systems that are individualist versus collective
2. Relationship mobility and financial independence
3. Structural obstacles and stigma around mental health
4. Emotional repression and standards of caregiving

More inclusive, culturally valid, and policy-relevant insights into the dynamics of gendered relationships would be produced by such a model.

Conclusion

An important conversation about men's romantic dependence has been started by Wahring et al. By situating romantic dependency within larger sociocultural and structural frameworks, we expand on their analysis. Gender, culture, and inequality must be incorporated into psychological science's models in order for it to reflect lived realities. Then and only then will we be able to develop a truly global understanding of intimate relationship emotional health.

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A matter of context: Gender differences vary across life stage, historical context, and individual characteristics

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Abstract

Romantic relationships may matter more to men on average, but such gender differences are far from static. We commend Wahring et al. for their integrative framework and urge future research to consider age-graded, history-graded, and individually graded factors. Taking these contextual factors into account will improve our understanding of how romantic relationships matter across diverse life courses.

We congratulate Wahring et al. on publishing this thorough literature review on how romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. Drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary research, the authors make a compelling case that romantic relationships tend to play a more central role in men's psychological and physical well-being than in women's. They attribute this pattern to gender differences in access to intimacy and emotional support.

While we agree with this overall conclusion, we argue that gender differences in the centrality of romantic relationships are a complex, context-dependent phenomenon that requires particular care in interpretation. As the authors already acknowledge, their conclusions may not hold equally across all groups but vary as a function of life stage and sociocultural context. Therefore, we would like to extend this line of thinking and focus on the broader developmental context in which gender differences emerge. Specifically, in accordance with life-span theorists (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Levinson, 1986; Mayer, 2003; Schaie, 1965), we argue that three types of contextual influences – age-graded, history-graded, and individually graded – shape both the overall centrality of romantic relationships for the well-being of men and women, and the extent to which gender differences emerge.

As Wahring et al. note, the majority of studies they reviewed focus on young adults. We argue that gender differences in the centrality of romantic relationships are likely to be particularly pronounced during this life stage, as it is marked by key relationship-related transitions such as marriage and parenthood (Mehta et al., 2020). These transitions often come with gendered expectations about roles and responsibilities. For instance, men may be expected to be providers, while women may feel more pressure to balance childcare and career demands (Fillo et al., 2015). These role expectations can influence how important romantic relationships are to the identity and well-being of men and women.

But what about earlier and later stages of life? During adolescence, even though it reflects a time of first romantic relationship experiences (Gonzalez Avilés, Finn, & Neyer, 2021), many adolescents primarily focus on other developmental tasks, such as building peer relationships, forming a sense of identity, and gaining independence from their parents (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Thus, romantic relationships tend to be more exploratory, and gender roles may be less defined. Similarly, in middle adulthood and onwards, romantic relationships may become less of a priority. This is because romantic relationships often compete with other major life demands such as parenting, employment, or caregiving responsibilities (Infurna, Gerstorf, & Lachman, 2020). Thus, the differences between men and women in how important they view romantic relationships may also begin to narrow, as both start experiencing reduced reliance on their romantic partners.

Over the last decades, romantic relationships have become less central in the lives of younger generations: adolescents today place

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less emphasis on romantic relationships as a source of happiness (Scheling & Richter, 2021), are more frequently single, and express higher satisfaction with being single (Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2024). Since the 1970s, marriage and commitment rates have steadily decreased across Western societies, while divorce and singlehood have become more common and accepted (OECD, 2022).

We argue that the greater centrality of romantic relationships for men than women represents a more recent phenomenon, which was not necessarily the case in earlier generations. Historically, women were financially and socially dependent on their male partners, which made romantic relationships more significant for them (Tillman, Brewster, & Holway, 2019). Over time, however, women's increased education and labor force participation have reduced their structural dependence on romantic partners, thus reducing and even reversing the direction of gender differences. Regarding future changes, we anticipate that gender differences will become smaller or disappear entirely in the future. This is due to increasingly flexible gender roles, especially in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. For instance, women have become less likely to identify with traditionally feminine traits and more likely to endorse masculine ones such as assertiveness and confidence (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). At the same time, men have shown a steady rise in communal traits like warmth and emotional sensitivity (Hsu et al., 2021). These shifts suggest that men and women are becoming more alike in how they value emotional support from romantic partners.

Beyond age and historical context, individual personality traits and life circumstances play a critical role in how men and women experience romantic relationships. We believe that characteristics beyond gender can explain why romantic relationships are more important for some individuals than for others. For example, individuals who are anxiously attached tend to place greater importance on romantic relationships and are less satisfied when they are single (MacDonald & Park, 2022). Similarly, physical and mental health challenges can heighten the reliance on romantic partners, especially when other sources of support are lacking (Gallant, 2003). Individuals with fewer social connections outside their romantic relationships tend to depend more heavily on their romantic relationships for emotional support (Walen & Lachman, 2000). In addition, life transitions such as job loss or financial hardship could make people more financially dependent on their romantic partners. These individual characteristics may also interact with gender, resulting in different experiences for men and women. For example, women facing health challenges may, on average, cope more effectively than men because they tend to draw on broader social networks for support.

While romantic relationships may, on average, matter more to men than to women, these gender differences are far from static. Rather, they are shaped by the dynamic interplay of age-graded, history-graded, and individually graded forces. We commend Wahring et al. for their ambitious and insightful synthesis, and we encourage further research to further broaden the lens by attending to the contextual factors that shape the meaning of romantic relationships in people's lives.

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The asymmetric structure of male-female bonding explains gender differences in relationship dependence

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Abstract

Wahring et al. demonstrate that men depend more on romantic relationships than women, contradicting conventional wisdom. The Tie-Up Theory explains this through fundamental asymmetries in bonding systems: men's receptive emotional area channels emotional needs primarily toward romantic partners, while women's active emotional area enables spontaneous emotional connections across multiple relationships. This biobehavioral architecture, not mere socialization, explains men's greater relationship striving, health benefits from partnership, reluctance to initiate breakups, and severe post-dissolution suffering.

Wahring et al.'s compelling synthesis highlights an intriguing paradox in human romantic relationships: despite cultural narratives positioning women as the stereotypically focused romantic partner, men demonstrate systematically greater dependence on romantic partnerships across multiple domains. This evidence questions established conventional wisdom in both popular culture and academic discourse. We propose that the Tie-Up Theory (Lucchi Basili & Sacco, 2016, 2017, 2020a) provides a mechanistic explanation for this counterintuitive pattern through its identification of fundamental asymmetries in male and female bonding systems.

The Tie-Up Theory's central insight concerns the differential organization of what we term "active" and "receptive" areas in relationship formation and maintenance. For men, the active area operates through sexual orientation, while the receptive area processes emotional content. This configuration is reversed in women, whose active area has an emotional orientation, whereas their receptive area has a sexual orientation. This asymmetry, rooted in the evolutionary logic of effective co-parental investment, creates fundamentally different relationship dynamics that explain why men's greater relationship dependence represents not a cultural anomaly but a predictable outcome of the biobehavioral architecture of human heterosexual mating.

Women's active emotional area enables them to spontaneously initiate and maintain emotional connections across their social networks. Their emotional expression occurs in an active mode, facilitating the creation of multiple channels of intimacy and support. This active capacity for emotional engagement manifests early in development (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013) and persists throughout life (Kring & Gordon, 1998; Fischer, Kret, & Broekens, 2018), enabling women to cultivate what Wahring et al. document as more extensive and emotionally supportive social networks. The active nature of women's emotional processing means they can deliberately deploy emotional resources across various relationships, creating a distributed system of support that reduces dependence on any single connection.

Men's receptive emotional configuration shapes a starkly different relational landscape. Their passive emotional processing requires external activation to function effectively, making it difficult to initiate and maintain emotional connections unless specifically stimulated by others. This receptive structure explains why men typically report fewer close friendships and receive less emotional support outside romantic relationships. The passive nature of men's emotional area means they cannot simply "turn on" emotional intimacy at will; they require partners who actively engage their emotional receptivity. This fundamental constraint channels men's emotional needs primarily toward romantic relationships, where partners provide the consistent activation necessary for emotional processing.

This structural asymmetry parsimoniously explains Wahring et al.'s key findings. Men's greater striving for relationships reflects not merely cultural conditioning but the recognition that romantic partnerships offer a unique access to emotional activation, less available in other social contexts. The striking statistic that 49% of men versus 20% of women identify romantic partners as primary confidants emerges naturally from such asymmetric architecture. Men's receptive emotional structure creates a bottleneck effect, concentrating emotional processing within relationships that provide sustained activation.

The health implications documented by Wahring et al. follow logically from this framework. Men's greater mental and physical health benefits from romantic involvement reflect the activation of otherwise dormant emotional processing capabilities. When men lose romantic partners, they lose not just a relationship but their primary mechanism for emotional regulation. Women, with their active emotional capacity, can redirect emotional expression to other relationships, maintaining emotional balance through alternative channels. This explains why men suffer more acutely from relationship dissolution and tend to rush more quickly into new partnerships.

The social norms discouraging male emotional expression, which Wahring et al. identify as crucial factors, represent both a cause and a consequence of these structural differences. Because men's emotional area operates receptively rather than actively, they naturally tend toward lower emotional expressiveness. Cultural norms restricting the expression of male vulnerability (Wong, Pituch, & Rochlen, 2006; Levant & Richmond, 2007) amplify this biological predisposition, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that further constrains men's emotional options outside romantic relationships. The Tie-Up Theory thus provides a possible explanation of how biological factors and cultural evolution interact to produce the patterns documented by Wahring et al.

Interestingly, fictional accounts of such asymmetric patterns of emotional fluency are widely found across many narrative forms, from fairy tales to contemporary media (Lucchi Basili & Sacco, 2018, 2019, 2020b, 2025). These narratives consistently portray men's emotional activation through romantic connection and women's distributed emotional engagement, stressing how certain fictions may carry valuable social cognition content. Cultural productions might

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therefore play a role in further amplifying this gender difference by both reflecting and reinforcing its biobehavioral salience.

This mechanistic understanding challenges more simplistic socialization explanations while incorporating their insights. The asymmetric structure provides the substrate upon which cultural norms operate, explaining why certain gender patterns persist across diverse societies despite variation in cultural contexts. Recent findings on experienced love (Bhargava, 2024) show that women's higher frequency of love experiences outside of the couple aligns with their active emotional orientation, while men's concentrated romantic focus reflects their receptive configuration, calling for specific activation conditions and showing greater emotional dependency on the couple relationship across the lifespan.

Understanding romantic relationships through this lens of structural asymmetry rather than simple cultural conditioning might open new therapeutic possibilities. Rather than proactively exhorting men to become more emotionally expressive, creating contexts that activate men's receptive emotional systems in safe social conditions might be more effective, e.g., through direct involvement in artistic expression (Lea, Malorni, & Jones, 2019). Similarly, recognizing women's active emotional capacity as a biological rather than purely cultural phenomenon may help counter the stereotypical social stigmatization of their emotional expression (DePretis et al., 2021), which is still often leveraged as a means of gender discrimination.

The Tie-Up Theory thus provides a first step toward a comprehensive framework explaining gender differences across all relationship stages. By identifying the mechanistic basis of these differences in asymmetric bonding structures, we can substantially improve our understanding of men's higher psychological susceptibility to the dissolution of the couple bonding and design more effective and targeted interventions to address this critically overlooked issue.

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Considering error management theory can provide a more comprehensive model as to why romantic relationships matter more to men than women

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Abstract

Wahring et al. argue relationships matter more to men than women due to cultural and biological evolutionary pressures, though the latter may benefit from incorporating Error Management Theory. This predicts (i) men evolved to over-perceive female sexual interest and (ii) women evolved to be skeptical of male commitment; potentially explaining why men likely form relationships and women likely terminate them.

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model in *"Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women,"* represents a promising start to synthesizing both biological and cultural evolutionary processes to explain the greater importance of

relationships to men than women. While this model is laudable in scope, it could be strengthened by including Error Management Theory (Haselton et al., 2015). This theory outlines the sex-specific cognitive biases that differential reproductive costs, already outlined by the target authors in relation to Trivers' (1972) Parental Investment Theory, could lead to.

Wahring et al. outline that, as men face fewer reproductive costs than women, they will seek more short-term relationships (sect. 2.4, para. 4). This desire for sexual relationships could also be driven by *sexual overperception bias* (Haselton & Buss, 2000). According to Error Management Theory, approaching an uninterested woman and wasting time is less costly for a man than missing sexual interest, as the latter implies missing an opportunity to pass on his genes. Haselton and Buss (2000), therefore, predict that men have evolved a *sexual overperception bias* to intuit that women are sexually interested whenever uncertain about female desire. Seeing heightened initial sexual interest can lead men to form romantic attachments, too. Men typically say "I love you" first in relationships (Wahring et al., sect. 3.1, para. 3). This may be due to reciprocation; we like those who we are sure like us back (Birnbaum et al., 2020). When men overperceive sexual interest in women, they may also presume romantic interest due to stereotypes around female sexuality (Allen, 2003). Perhaps, men form romantic attachments as they "reciprocate" based on their overperception. Sexual overperception may also explain why men are more likely than women to initiate romantic relationships from existing cross-sex friendships (sect. 4.2, para. 2.). Men frequently express regret over the "one that got away" on social media (Webster et al., 2021); which suggests that missing a potential relationship is more costly to men than maintaining a friendship that could have been more.

Error Management Theorists predict a converse cognitive bias in women. When deciding whether to enter a relationship, it is theoretically less costly for a woman to miss out on a committed man than it is for her to have a child with a man who would abandon her after conception. Of course, women can raise children without male support, but this could incur reputational costs in countries with two-parent family norms (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2014). Haselton and Buss (2000) therefore predict that women have evolved to under-infer male commitment, known as *commitment-skepticism bias*. This could, perhaps, explain why women are more likely than men to terminate relationships over commitment issues in Wahring et al.'s model (sect. 3.6, para. 4). Brown and Olkhov (2015) show that men and women agree on the amount of commitment signaled by dating behaviors, such as handholding; but women desire more of these behaviors than men do to feel secure. If women feel that men are not signaling commitment as often as they need, they may end the relationship. Commitment-skepticism may also somewhat explain why men say "I love you" first – perhaps women wait to hear this as a signal of commitment before saying it.

Sexual overperception has been supported by surveys of naturally occurring events where women report more instances that their friendliness was mistaken for flirtatiousness by men than vice-versa (Haselton, 2003); in men's reactions to fictional cases of dating behaviors (Bendixen et al., 2019; Ruckel, 2022) and in studies mimicking speed-dating (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2010; Perilloux et al., 2012; Samara et al., 2021). Commitment-skepticism is studied less often but has been documented in American (Haselton & Buss, 2000) and German samples (Cyrus et al., 2011). However, some researchers question why men should have a fixed bias to overperceive sexual interest. In McKay and Efferson's (2010) model, men over-approach uninterested women without deviating from Bayesian reasoning. That is, a man may be perfectly aware that a woman is unlikely to be interested, but as he knows he will never succeed in securing a mating opportunity unless he tries, he approaches anyway. This challenges the predictions of Error Management Theory; perhaps, men and women behave in ways that appear consistent with this theory, but this behavior is not necessarily driven by evolved biases. Social norms could also affect dating behaviors (Goh et al., 2018), especially due to the disparate way men and women are socialized regarding sexual and romantic relationships (Allen, 2003).

Indeed, this concept hints at the most glaring methodological issue with Error Management Theory and the romantic relationship research reviewed by Wahring et al.; societal norms around dating are clearly important, and yet most research only utilizes Western samples. For example, gifting expensive jewelry is an uncommon gesture of romantic interest in France and Chile, and so men from these countries struggle to judge the sexual intent implied by this behavior (Perilloux et al., 2015). While overperception has been documented in other cultures (Bendixen, 2014; Hiraishi et al., 2016); these studies have employed university students, who are likely more Western and Democratic than their nonstudent counterparts (Henrich et al., 2010). I, therefore, echo Wahring et al.'s call to include non-WEIRD perspectives in relationship research and support their claim that cultural evolution is likely just as influential in shaping dating behaviors as biological. Supporting the importance of culture, Brandner et al. (2021) find that men are unlikely to overperceive women since the changing awareness of consent post #MeToo.

In sum, incorporating Error Management Theory into Wahring et al.'s model could elaborate their explanation of the biological evolutionary influences driving the importance of relationships to men. Sexual overperception may in part explain why men are likely to form relationships; while commitment-skepticism may in part explain why women are likely to terminate relationships. Finally, I agree with Wahring et al.'s claim that cultural evolutionary processes are influential, and we must move beyond WEIRD perspectives to understand whether the increased importance of relationships to men is a universal phenomenon, or a product of Western dating norms.

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Competing interests. Bellamy has investigated sexual overperception and commitment-skepticism under a PhD student funding award from Evolution and Human Behavior European Association (EHBEA). Bellamy is also writing a textbook chapter on this topic as an upcoming open resource for undergraduate students studying evolutionary topics for the same EHBEA charity.

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Profound romantic relationships matter more to women than to men

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Abstract

The important empirical claims provided by the authors do not support their conclusion that men are more romantic than women. Contrarily, these features make men's attitude toward love more superficial and less romantic than the female approach. Being romantic does not involve merely intense sexual desire, but more so, calmness and the ability to act slowly and profoundly.

> *"My God, these folks don't know how to love—that's why they love so easily."* D. H. Lawrence
>
> *"We (men) are expected to be superficial"*—Jerry Seinfeld

Romantic love is complex and difficult to define. I believe that the authors' important empirical claims are sound, but their conceptual interpretation of these claims is problematic. I first present the authors' three major empirical claims (shown as "a") and my brief responses (shown as "b") indicating why their empirical claims do not support their conclusion that men are more romantic than women.

(1a) Relative to women, men expect and gain more benefits; hence, men are less likely to initiate breakups and suffer after breakups more than women.

(1b) Receiving more benefits (romantically or otherwise) does not imply becoming more romantic, as the essence of romantic love is not receiving, but rather giving.

(2a) Men develop more dependency on women than vice-versa.

(2b) The value of dependency is significant in parental love, but less so in romantic relationships that flourish when mutual, equal shared interactions are present.

(3a) Men say "I love you" faster and experience love-at-first-sight more frequently, while women initiate most divorces.

(3b) Falling in love faster may indicate the presence of a superficial attitude that lacks romantic profundity. More than men, women aim for romantic profundity, and hence consider achieving genuine enduring romantic love as more difficult, and accordingly initiate divorces when relationships lack such profundity.

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A central romantic phenomenon, which seems contrary to the authors' major conclusion (that men are more romantic than women) and was not discussed by them, is infidelity, which is the leading cause of divorce, and is more common among men – although, as in other matters, this gender gap is currently narrowing (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Related to the above differences is the distinction between *romantic intensity*, which is a snapshot of a momentary peak of passionate, often sexual, desire, and *romantic profundity*, which takes time to develop and refers to the lover's broader and enduring attitude. External changes are highly significant in generating romantic intensity. When experiencing romantic depth, familiarity, stability, and development, all of which require time, are more important. Novelty, which underlies romantic intensity, is useful in *preventing* boredom; romantic familiarity, which is central in romantic profundity, is valuable in *promoting* flourishing (Ben-Ze'ev, 2019, 2022).

I claim that for women (in comparison to men), profundity and time are more important in romantic relationships. One evolutionary reason for this is that women bear children. Men are also more easily satisfied with brief, superficial romantic intensity. Accordingly, men achieve sexual satisfaction much faster than women. This is one reason, as the authors rightly claim, that men are more interested in casual, short-term sexual relationships, and women prefer long-term, committed sexual relationships over short-term ones.

In moving from mere romantic intensity to romantic profundity, it is not only time spent together that matters but also time spent on shared activities. Indeed, an influential approach to romantic love, the Dialogue Approach, considers the shared connection between partners as the bedrock of love and views shared emotional states and joint activities as the foundational features of the connection. Flourishing romantic connections do not merely require time, but also compatibility, which enables shared activities. In such activities, both partners contribute (though not necessarily in the same way or to the same extent), and their contributions fit together to actualize the common good (Krebs, 2015).

The Dialogue Approach emphasizes the importance of autonomy and equal status for both partners. If one partner is dependent and receives more than they give, as the authors claim men do, then this partner's ability to enhance romantic profundity is limited. Moreover, in such inequitable romantic relationships, both partners consider themselves to be in an undeserved situation, which encourages extramarital affairs. This is the case for both the "superior" partner, who feels that they could do better, and for the "inferior" one, who feels indignant at being unappreciated by the partner (Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993).

The lesser significance that men give to time, profundity, efforts, and other types of investment explains why men (relative to women) fall in love and express their love faster, expect and gain more benefits, and are more dependent on women than vice-versa. This may explain the tension between men and women; women prefer profound enduring romantic relationships, whereas men often prefer superficial, brief, intense romantic encounters.

In summary, the important empirical claims provided by the authors do not support their conclusion that men are more romantic than women. Contrarily, these features make men's attitude toward love more superficial and less romantic than the female approach. Being romantic does not involve merely intense sexual desire, but more so, calmness and the ability to act slowly and profoundly. If you know you are already in paradise, there is no need to rush, and in doing so, sacrifice romantic endurance and quality.

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Partner-serving moral cognition helps men to maintain romantic relationships from which they benefit more than women

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Abstract

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model is well-argued but underspecifies the psychological processes contributing to men's relationship maintenance behaviors. Extending their model to the realm of moral cognition, we propose that men utilize partner-serving moral double standards to excuse their female partners' everyday relationship transgressions. Such hypercrisy helps men to sustain romantic relationships from which they benefit more than women do.

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange propose a novel and comprehensive model to explain why men (compared to women) benefit more from romantic relationships across all stages, from initiating a relationship to after it has ended. We generally agree with this analysis and the argument relating to men's greater dependence on their female romantic partner for intimacy and emotional support. However, the model remains relatively silent

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on the social-cognitive mechanisms that contribute to men's relationship maintenance behaviors, which in turn help them sustain romantic relationships.

Drawing on recent work highlighting how moral cognition is shaped by relationships (e.g., Earp et al., 2021; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Weidman et al., 2020), we propose an important extension of Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model to the realm of moral cognition in romantic relationships. We argue that it is crucial for psychological research to examine which psychological outcomes contribute to men's efforts to maintain romantic relationships – especially if both gender stereotypes and empirical findings link the female, rather than the male, gender more strongly to communion (Horne & Johnson, 2019; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). Specifically, we argue that men can utilize *partner-serving* moral cognition when it comes to everyday transgressions, such that they should be more inclined to accept their female partners' mundane norm violations in the relationship. Extending Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model, this kind of flexible moral cognition ultimately can help men to sustain romantic relationships from which they benefit more.

Previous work in moral psychology has often focused on the self-serving function of moral cognition and behavior (Monin & Merritt, 2012). Moral double standards (i.e., hypocrisy) are a prototypical example of such self-serving morality (e.g., Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). According to this work, people judge others' moral transgressions more harshly than their own, potentially signaling high moral standards while reaping the benefits of transgressing themselves (e.g., Lammers et al., 2010; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007; Weiss, Burgmer, & Mussweiler, 2018). This kind of hypocritical false signaling is precisely what observers dislike about hypocrites (Jordan et al., 2017), so moral double standards are a dangerous game to play. Because of the social risks involved, people should be sensitive toward whom they show hypocritical judgment and behavior. Whereas one-time or even hypothetical interactions with strangers might pose low social risks – and therefore render self-serving hypocrisy more likely – hypocrites might run a greater risk of being detected as such within romantic and close relationships.

In line with the above argument, our own and other emerging work shows that instead of showing a self-serving bias (i.e., hypocrisy), people indeed exhibit *other-serving* moral double standards (i.e., hypercrisy) when judging those with whom they typically interact day-to-day – close others whom they trust (Weiss, Burgmer, & Hofmann, 2021, 2022). This hypercrisy effect is robust across different methodologies and relationships (i.e., romantic partners, friendships, family relations) and meaningfully moderated by beliefs that people hold about their relationships, such as whether or not the relationship works like a zero-sum game wherein one partner's gain is the other partner's loss (Weiss & Burgmer, 2021). We have argued that such partner-serving moral cognition underlies a functional upward spiral that serves to sustain close and meaningful relationships. If hypercrisy helps with maintaining romantic relationships, and if such relationships matter more for men than women, men should be more inclined to show hypercrisy in their romantic relationships.

Extending Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model, we therefore propose that men should show stronger partner-serving moral double standards within their heterosexual romantic relationships. Men should be more likely than women to give their partner the benefit of the doubt when they transgress (i.e., commit everyday-life norm violations), and they should also be more likely to condemn their own moral transgressions toward their partner in the relationship. Such hypercrisy may contribute to a self-sustaining "virtuous cycle" of responsive, trustworthy, cooperative, and trusting and forgiving behaviors (Crocker & Canevello, 2015). Therefore, stronger partner-serving moral double standards among men should ultimately be relationship-serving, making it more likely that men can maintain their romantic relationships and keep benefiting from them even in the face of asymmetrical investment and benefits.

To substantiate our claim, we have re-analyzed our own previous data (Weiss & Burgmer, 2021) and collected additional data (Burgmer & Weiss, 2025) that collectively suggests that men (compared to women) indeed show a significantly stronger hypercrisy effect toward their female romantic partners. This effect seems to be selective to romantic relationships (vs. close friendships), and it seems to be mainly driven by how men evaluate their partner's moral transgressions: compared to women, men are more likely to give their partner the benefit of the doubt when they transgress within the relationship.

Taken together, these preliminary findings support our contention that men attune their moral judgments more strongly to their female partners' standards and expectations with respect to typical and everyday moral transgressions in their relationship. More research is needed to examine when and how this motivated partner-serving moral cognition may clash with more problematic relationship behaviors shown by men (e.g., benevolent sexism, relationship conflicts, or even intimate partner violence; Costa et al., 2024). Nevertheless, such a selective hypercrisy effect is theoretically in line with both the proposed stronger dependence of men on their female partners and with the important social-functional role of moral cognition in maintaining relationships. Moral cognition in the service of the relationship is therefore an important extension of Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange's model that helps shed light on *how* men can successfully pursue and manage to stay involved in their romantic relationships, from which they benefit more than women do.

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Testing sex differences in the relationship context needs the inclusion of gay and lesbian couples

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Abstract

The target article suggests that romantic relationships matter more to men than women. I discuss the work of West, Popp, and Kenny (2008), suggesting that properly testing for hypothesized sex differences requires gay and lesbian couples to serve as reference groups. A modified actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) can then test if relationships matter more to men in relationships (i.e., straight and gay) or matter more to people in relationships with women (i.e., straight men or lesbians).

In the target article, the authors present results of existing published research to support their broad theoretical claim that romantic relationships matter more to men than women. The rationale for including in their review only research with cisgender men and women in opposite sex romantic relationships was that (1) they were interested in the comparison between the outcomes of men and women, and (2) not enough research currently exists with participants of other sexual identities and relationship configurations. In this commentary, I suggest that a methodological innovation introduced by West, Popp, and Kenny (2008) stresses the need for the inclusion of people in gay and lesbian romantic relationships (point 2 above) to properly test for sex differences in romantic relationships (point 1 above).

West et al. (2008) demonstrated that when the goal of research is to test sex differences in the romantic relationship context, data should be obtained from both partners in opposite-sex as well as same-sex (gay and lesbian) relationships. Using one of their examples for illustration, research with romantic couples with partners of the opposite sex has shown that women tend to idealize their partners to a greater degree than their male partners idealize them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). At first glance, there seems to be a sex difference with respect to partner idealization. However, it is not known if the difference reported by Murray et al. (1996) stems from women idealizing romantic partners more (i.e., something inherent to women) or that men tend to be the target of idealization to a greater degree (i.e., something inherent about being in relationships with men). With data from only opposite-sex couples, it is not possible to tease apart these possibilities, as there are no proper reference groups.

More specifically, when testing sex differences, West et al. (2008) pointed out that there are actually three effects to consider: (1) the effect of the sex of respondent – do men report, for example, higher scores relative to women?, (2) the effect of the sex of the respondent's partner – do people with women as partners report, for example, higher scores relative to people with men as partners?, and (3) an interaction effect – do men report, for example, higher scores only when they have a woman as a partner? To tease apart these possibilities, with respect to study design, researchers need to go beyond collecting dyadic data and collect dyadic data from partners in gay and lesbian relationships as well. With respect to statistical models to tease apart these three effects, researchers need to go beyond comparing mean differences across opposite-sex, gay, and lesbian couples (the *three-group* method according to West et al., 2008) and adopt what they termed a *factorial method*. The factorial method is an extension of the traditional Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) and can be easily estimated via Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM; West et al., 2008). Data from each partner from all dyads is structured such that predictor variables are linked with one's own (actor) as well as the partner's (partner effect) outcome variables. Analyses of the data are organized such that, for

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example, the effects of the respondent's sex, partner's sex, and the interaction between the two can be estimated.

With respect to the notion that romantic relationships matter more to men than women, imagine a study focusing on a particular benefit from being in a relationship (e.g., generic well-being). The sample for this hypothetical study includes responses from both partners of straight/opposite-sex, gay, and lesbian couples. A main effect of respondent sex may show that men report higher well-being scores compared to women. A main effect of partner sex may show that people in relationships with women report higher well-being scores compared to people in relationships with men. The conclusions of the target article suggest that an interaction should also emerge, but there are a few possible outcomes that could be consistent with the theorizing of the target article. First, the interaction effect could focus more on the sex of the respondent, with men reporting higher well-being regardless of the sex of their partner (i.e., straight and gay men in relationships benefitting the most). Second, the interaction effect could focus more on the sex of the partner, with people in relationships with women reporting higher well-being scores regardless of the sex of the respondent (i.e., straight men and lesbian women in relationships with women benefit the most). Third, the interaction effect may suggest that only men in relationships with women benefit the most. Analytically, these three possibilities represent different patterns of statistical significance and direction of model coefficients. But theoretically, these three possibilities differ in important ways.

Given this line of reasoning, I therefore view the conclusion of the target article, supported by existing research that admittedly has not included gay and lesbian couples for the purpose of teasing apart the sex differences in how relationships matter more to men than women, as preliminary and suggestive. That said, the strength of the arguments in the target article warrants a program of future research that is tailored to evaluate the notion that romantic relationships differentially benefit men relative to women.

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Competing interests. The second author of the target article was my graduate school supervisor at Texas A&M University from 1996 to 2001.

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Do romantic relationships matter more to men than to women? An evolutionary psychology perspective

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Abstract

In their target article, Wahring et al. present compelling evidence that romantic relationships may matter more to men than women, but their explanations remain largely proximate. We offer alternative evolutionary interpretations of the observed sex differences in falling in love, breakup initiation, remarriage, and mortality outside of relationships. We argue that these patterns better reflect sex-differentiated mating strategies, social alliance formation, vulnerabilities to singlehood, and the greater importance of female survival for offspring survival and hence for their reproductive success.

Wahring et al. triangulate an impressive body of evidence suggesting romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. They cite evidence that men have fewer alternatives for support, are less likely to dissolve relationships, are more likely to remarry, fall in love faster, and suffer more following relationship dissolution. Despite promising an evolutionary perspective, however, their explanations are predominantly proximate. Here, we propose more parsimonious evolutionary explanations for these patterns that need not lead to the interpretation that romantic relationships are more valuable to men.

Sex differences in romantic love, relationship dissolution, and remarriage

Cross-cultural evidence shows that men "fall in love" faster than women (Bode, Luoto, & Kavanagh, 2025), which Wahring et al. attribute to their greater dependence on romantic relationships. We offer two alternative explanations. First, a key component of women's mate value is physical attractiveness, which men can evaluate rapidly, whereas women require more time to assess qualities relevant to men's mate value like emotional stability and long-term commitment (Buss & Schmitt, 2019).

Second, because women more than men typically require emotional investment from a mate, men have evolved a propensity to experience romantic love more readily (Bode et al., 2025). Men also evolved deceptive male strategies (e.g., feigning or exaggerating love) to overcome women's commitment skepticism (Haselton et al., 2005). Roughly 71% of men admit to doing so (Buss, 2017). These incentives might lead men to experience genuine feelings of romantic love through self-deception to better convince potential mates (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011).

The mate-switching hypothesis proposes that women evolved strategies to exit unsatisfying pair-bonds to pursue higher-quality or less costly relationships compared to their current mateship (Buss et al., 2017). Because women's reproductive capacity is biologically constrained due to heavy obligatory parental investment, prioritizing mate quality over quantity has historically yielded greater reproductive payoffs (Symons, 1979). In contrast, men historically enhanced their reproductive success by mating with multiple fertile partners (Dawkins, 1976), making them more likely to favor infidelity over dissolution (Fincham & May, 2017). These divergent mating strategies partially explain why women are more likely than men to dissolve relationships and suffer less post-dissolution distress.

That men are more likely to remarry is also predictable from evolutionary logic. Women's fecundity declines steeply with age, reducing their mate value, whereas men can retain or increase mate value over time by accruing status or resources (Buss, 2017; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2019). As men age, their preference for younger partners expands their mating pool, while women's shrinks due to their own declining reproductive value, men's age preferences, and women's lack of interest in younger men as long-term mates (Buss & Schmitt, 2019). The presence of offspring also constitutes a greater *relationship load* (Buss, 2006) for women than men, partly due to disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, but also because children indicate lower residual reproductive value. Men are generally disinclined to invest in genetically unrelated offspring and thus may be deterred from selecting mates with children. These converging factors make remarriage more likely for men.

Sex differences in survival, social support, and vulnerability to singlehood

Cross-culturally, women provide the preponderance of childcare (Wood & Eagly, 2002), and their survival is more critical to offspring survival than men's (Sear & Mace, 2008). This selection pressure led to the evolution of a suite of adaptations in women to ensure their safety. Relative to men, women possess stronger immune systems, greater fear responses, lower risk-taking propensities, and lower pain thresholds (Benenson, Webb, & Wrangham, 2022; Campbell, 1999). As a result, men are more likely to die from a variety of stressors than women (e.g., pathogens, risky activities), rather than being especially vulnerable to romantic dissolution *per se* (Dattani & Rodés-Guirao, 2023).

Because their survival was so critical to women's reproductive success, and given our ancestral history of patrilocality, women evolved stronger motivations and greater skills in cultivating social support (Hrdy, 2009). One proximate mechanism for recruiting such support may be that women hold all social partners to heightened standards. Compared to men, women express higher standards for friends (Hall, 2011), are more bothered by friends' transgressions (Reynolds & Palmer-Hague, 2022; Vigil, 2007), and are more likely to end friendships (Benenson & Christakos, 2003). Women's greater dissatisfaction and willingness to dissolve romantic relationships (Whisman, Randall, & Sorokowski, 2025) may therefore reflect their elevated standards for interpersonal treatment more broadly.

Wahring et al. attribute sex differences in social support seeking and receipt to "social roles," giving little attention to their evolutionary origins. Throughout ancestral history, emotional expressiveness likely harmed men's social appeal and capacity, because their social networks consisted of coalitional alliances for hunting and warfare, where formidability, stoicism, and bravery were prioritized (Buss et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the *Greater Protectiveness of Females* theory (Stewart-Williams et al., 2022) hypothesizes that humans show greater protectiveness (and control) of women due to their greater physical vulnerability and reproductive value. Women receive more social support than men, not because society arbitrarily deems it appropriate, but because evolved tendencies guide such provision. Men's ability to "find" social support depends not only on their own motivation and capacity to seek it but also on others' (un)willingness to provide it (Reynolds et al., 2020).

Wahring et al. make a compelling case for social support as a mediator of sex differences in well-being outside of romantic relationships, but there are other reasons to expect a sex-differentiated experience of singlehood. Every human who has ever lived represented the end of a chain of ancestors who successfully reproduced. Those who did not add to their ancestral chain were disproportionately men (Betzig, 2012). Singlehood is therefore a more reliable cue of impending reproductive failure for men than women, resulting in greater risk-taking (Wilson & Daly, 1985) and distress in response to failed mating efforts (Apostolou et al., 2023; Costello et al., 2022; Costello, Whittaker, & Thomas, 2025).

This evolutionary logic suggests another mediator: one's perceived ability to find a relationship. Individuals who are *voluntarily* single tend to report similar life satisfaction to those in relationships (Apostolou et al., 2024). Perceptions of mate availability are themselves, however, sex-differentiated. Because men are less selective, reproductive-aged women, especially those without children, can typically find a partner more easily than comparably aged men (at least for short-term relationships). This evolutionary perspective, which Wahring et al. do not invoke, may help explain why men are more averse to singlehood (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024), but does not require their interpretation that romantic relationships *matter more* to men because they gain more proximate benefits from them.

Conclusion

The sex differences outlined by Wahring et al. can be more fully understood with evolutionary logic, which clarifies *why* men fall in love faster, are less likely to dissolve relationships, remarry more often, and suffer more following breakups. At the proximate level, romantic relationships might appear more valuable to men. However, these patterns result from sex-differentiated mating strategies, risks of never reproducing, involvement in coalitionary activities, and the importance of survival for reproductive success.

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Parenthood as an inflection point for men and women's patterns of interdependence

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Abstract

We argue that early parenthood temporarily reverses the relationship interdependence patterns described by Wahring et al. Western mothers typically rely on partner support as new caregiving demands restrict their access to external support networks. What begins as heightened maternal dependence sets

in motion gendered role divisions that crystallize over time, ultimately allowing men to derive greater benefits from romantic relationships.

A central proposal in Wahring et al.'s article is that men have a "greater dependence on their partners in romantic relationships" than women. While this characterization may hold broadly, we contend that parenthood, a common outcome of the heterosexual marriages examined by the authors, fundamentally alters patterns of interdependence between partners. The transition to parenthood creates unique circumstances: mothers may temporarily experience heightened reliance on partner support as new caregiving demands simultaneously restrict their access to external support networks. This reconfiguration during the postnatal period is both temporary and consequential. The interdependence patterns that emerge in early postpartum arrangements often crystallize into persistent, gendered divisions of household labor, ultimately reinforcing the relationship dynamics Wahring et al. identify as benefiting men.

Several converging lines of evidence point to a transient reversal of relationship interdependence in the early postpartum period. First, Western mothers often experience social isolation postpartum as early caregiving demands confine them to the home (Humenick, 2003), increasing their dependence on partner support. This confinement reduces mothers' access to social networks (Taylor et al., 2021), the very social networks that Wahring et al. theorize support women's greater independence from their romantic partners. Indeed, the most frequently reported challenge among new mothers is their need for social support, with many finding time at home with a newborn isolating (Kanotra et al., 2007).

Second, mothers in the postpartum period typically show greater emotional vulnerability than fathers as evidenced by their higher rates of postpartum mood disturbances (Glasser & Lerner-Geva, 2019; Khadka et al., 2024). Epidemiological data further demonstrate that new mothers are at raised risk for outpatient contact for mental health treatment relative to nonmothers, whereas new fathers do not show an increased risk relative to nonfathers (Munk-Olsen et al., 2006). Maternal emotional vulnerability may be caused, and compounded, by their greater hormonal fluctuations, sleep loss, and need for physical recovery. The asymmetrical impact of parenthood therefore increases women's reliance on partner support, potentially altering the balance of who provides versus receives emotional support in the relationship.

Third, mothers' mental health outcomes are significantly dependent on partner support (Stapleton et al., 2012), with many mothers identifying partners as their primary source of emotional support (Negron et al., 2013; Razurel et al., 2011). Partner support decreases maternal stress and anxiety in the perinatal period, but friend support does not, a pattern attributed to partners' closer proximity and direct involvement in childcare responsibilities (Racine et al., 2019). Concretely, fathers are often the only adults present during nighttime caregiving or for medical appointments, making them the default source for both instrumental and emotional support.

However, as families adapt to parenthood, persistent inequalities in household labor and childcare responsibilities emerge (Moberg & van der Vleuten, 2023; Pinho & Gaunt, 2021), with women typically assuming disproportionate burdens. Economic analyses demonstrate that the arrival of a child sets women on fundamentally different salary and employment trajectories than men, creating long-run gender gaps in earnings of around 20 percent in Denmark (Kleven, Landais, & Søgaard, 2019). Conversely, fathers consistently exhibit higher incomes than childless men (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009), suggesting that parenthood confers systematic advantages to men beyond the immediate household context. Part of the gap in earnings stems from changes in how couples allocate their time, as children increase the need for routine household labor. Mothers, on average, markedly increase their household labor but decrease their labor market participation. Such household specialization occurs, regardless of whether couples exhibited more egalitarian or traditional divisions before childbirth (Roman & Rodríguez, 2023).

Within-couple inequalities in household tasks and care are potential contributors to the benefits that men receive in relationships, as discussed by Wahring et al. We note that inequalities are far more pronounced in households with children. For example, one US study using diaries to record time allocations found that both men and women reported circa 14.5 hours of housework per week before childbirth. After childbirth, women reported 13.5 hours of housework, but 22 hours of childcare, compared to 9.5 and 14 hours for men, respectively (Yavorsky, Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). A German panel study similarly reported that the birth of a first child led to a unidirectional shift towards gendered divisions of household labor, a shift not observed for couples without children (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016).

In conclusion, parenthood represents a crucial factor in models of partner dependence and discussions of the greater benefits men receive in relationships. The social isolation, emotional vulnerability, and practical constraints characterizing early Western motherhood create circumstances where mothers necessarily rely on their partners for support. The transition to parenthood, therefore, is a juncture where temporary reversals in interdependence patterns occur. This period of heightened maternal dependence creates a transient window during which household arrangements are negotiated and solidified, often establishing divisions of labor that persist long after childbirth. What begins as temporary maternal dependence sets in motion role specialization patterns that become entrenched over time, ultimately allowing men to derive greater benefits from romantic relationships. Men without children, we expect, receive fewer benefits from romantic relationships than those with children.

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Who benefits most from romantic relationships and who bears the burdens?

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Abstract

Heterogeneity in romantic relationship research highlights the need for research exploring how factors such as cultural contexts and socialized norms influence benefits differentially experienced by people of any gender: Both benefits and costs should be assessed. Understanding the burdens of roles generally assumed by women can promote social change to decrease gendered disparities and to improve romantic relationships.

It is a provocative thesis that romantic relationships are valued more – perhaps unknowingly – by men than by women. Men may well be more likely than women to view their partners as their primary social support source and to be less likely to initiate divorce, but a full analysis of this situation suggests another story. A theoretical analysis takes advantage of broad variability in the magnitude of study outcomes and posits that the social milieu matters a great deal to dynamics between genders. Hence, the focus should be not only on the benefits of romantic relationships but also their costs.

Heterogeneity across studies of any psychological phenomenon is very nearly universal, even in well-conducted meta-analyses (e.g., Stanley, Carter, & Doucouliagos & Doucouliagos, 2018). With romantic relationships, heterogeneity is formally confirmed in meta-analyses focused on gender differences (cf., e.g., Frankenbach et al., 2022; Sbarra, Law, & Portley & Portley, 2011; Whisman & Balzert, 2024). Similarly, there are exceptions to a universal statement that males always value romantic relationships more than females, or M>F, such as equivalent suicide rates in men and women in certain nations (Øien-Ødegaard, Hauge, & Reneflot & Reneflot, 2021). Moreover, confounds, such as sex differences in disclosing negative information (Carbone et al., 2024), may contribute to skewed assessments of life satisfaction

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and relationship problems. Such results speak to the potentially strong cultural boundaries that may well regulate M>W effects and make them less than universal. The strong implication is that gender differences in how much romantic relationships matter vary widely across studies.

Given the heterogeneity in the romantic relationship literature, future meta-analyses of study outcomes should advance *a priori* moderation hypotheses about why study results differ. Drawing on ecological theory (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2010), we hypothesize that (a) M>W especially when the culture is dominated by long-term couplings (e.g., marriage is the norm and divorce is not; Diener et al., 2000); (b) M>W especially in tight versus loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011); (c) M>W in more culturally sexist cultures (Johnson & Curley, 2021); and (d) M>W to the extent that the research derives from WEIRD cultures (where WEIRD = Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). A plausible mechanism that underlies such patterns is unequal gender-related distribution of labor and financial dependence (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This analysis also suggests that to understand when one gender values romantic relationships more than another needs a richer assessment. Namely, one must consider emotional and cognitive, as well as tangible, labor necessary to maintaining households and romantic relationships, burdens that usually fall disproportionately on women (Ferrara & Vergara, 2024).

At least three roles within relationships are assumed disproportionately by women: (a) the burden of maintaining romantic relationships; (b) the burden of maintaining the household and its related duties; and (c) navigating lower sexual drive. Numerous studies support the conclusion that women undertake a larger role in maintaining romantic relationships (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Liao et al., 2018; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Umberson et al., 1996). Similarly, research consistently finds that women are expected to assume responsibilities over household chores and child-rearing (Ervin et al., 2022; Haupt & Gelbgiser, 2024; Reich-Stieber, Froehlich, & Voltmer, 2023). This disparity holds even when women work outside of the home as a dual earner, as the cognitive labor of scheduling, keeping track of homework, and the emotional labor of family stability and cohesion generally falls on women (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Curran et al., 2015; Friedman, 2015; Robertson et al., 2019). In the context of sexual intimacy, women often calibrate their sexual activities to match their partner's desires (Herbenick Mullinax, & Mark, 2014). Moreover, these emotional, cognitive, and sexual burdens are demonstrably related to psychological costs to women, which may contribute to the greater benefits in psychological and mental health experienced by men (Aviv et al., 2025; Eek & Axmon, 2015; Meyer et al., 2021; Zamberlan, Gioachin, & Gritti, 2021).

Indeed, in the West, expectations that women are expected to undertake such costs are *increasing*, not decreasing, even as their need for the tangible resources traditionally provided through marriage are *decreasing* (Eagly et al., 2020). Relationship maintenance competencies such as communication, knowledge of one's partner, and self-management generally are more developed and sophisticated for women (Epstein et al., 2013). The fact that men in romantic relationships often do not rely on other social network members, therefore, has the ironic implication that they may pose an unequal burden on their partners to be their sole source of emotional comfort. In contrast, if women are putting in effort not because they necessarily choose to do so, but rather due to social norms that instill guilt and shame for women who do not assume these roles – effort may not be undertaken by men so long as women continue to enact their expected roles in romantic relationships.

Finally, perhaps because of the costs we have documented, many women report that they are happier in singlehood than men (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). This tendency suggests that women may feel they have more to lose and less to gain from entering a romantic relationship that does not meet their needs and expectations – a logical explanation for why women are not more likely to seek a new partner (p. 23). In short, contemporary women may be wary of romantic relationships and their potential costs. Given this pretext, it is only natural that they should be slower to fall in love and express commitment (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li & Li, 2011; Harrison & Shortall, 2011).

In the end, men may experience greater benefits than women in romantic relationships. An accurate model of whether one gender has more of a need, desire, or value for romantic relationships than another should give credence to the ecological needs of individuals and their networks along with a consideration of resources at their disposal. Women arguably are a more dominant and singular resource for men in romantic relationships, whereas for women, many relationships offer emotional support and other resources, not just romantic relationships (Ferrara & Vergara, 2024; Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). No matter whether one gender or another generally values romantic relationships more, one should not lose sight of a basic truth: Relationships most benefit all concerned when they are reciprocal, equitable, trusting, and mutually emotionally supportive.

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The support-deficit perspective is now the parsimonious explanation for gender differences in human mating

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Abstract

Men's support deficits explain gender differences classically associated with parental investment theory. That is, men may have sex on their minds not because the costs are low, but because sex is a primary route for constructing something profound that they lack: an emotionally fulfilling relationship. The breadth of findings consistent with the support-deficit explanation has made it the parsimonious one.

Since the 1970s, scholars have invoked parental investment theory to explain why men appear to be more interested in sexual pursuits than women (Trivers, 1972). The explanation has been: Men have less to lose from a poor mating choice, and so they

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make mating decisions more capriciously, they seek out sexual opportunities with greater fervor, and they have lower standards. The influence of the parental investment perspective and its descendants is hard to overstate.

In this light, the theoretical implications of the contribution offered by Wahring et al. are potentially massive. Their explanation for gender differences flips the parental-investment logic on its head: What if these differences flow not from the fact that men have less to lose from sexual pursuits than women do, but rather that they have more to gain? Perhaps single men are operating from a *support deficit* because they are lonelier than single women, they have fewer intimate partners in other corners of their lives, and they suffer more in the absence of a partner. Therefore, men may be more likely to experience attraction in first encounters, to initiate sex, and to profess their love not because they are incautious but because they are desperate.

This new support-deficit perspective shifts the scientific playing field as dramatically as any single paper can. Yes, men initiate sex with greater ardor than women do. But men are also more likely than women to believe that they need a romantic partner to be happy, to resist breakups/divorces, and to remain emotionally attached to their exes. In other words, Wahring et al. deftly illustrate how the gender difference extends beyond sex; it spans relationship initiation, maintenance, breakup, and the aftermath. And whereas a support-deficit perspective accounts for all these gendered phenomena, parental investment perspectives can credibly accommodate only a fraction of them.

One classic argument could perhaps maintain an essential role for the parental investment perspective: If short-term, casual sex were governed by one type of mating system, but long-term relationships were governed by another, then parental investment perspectives might explain the former and social-deficit perspectives might explain the latter. Indeed, some perspectives suggest that casual sex and long-term commitments derive from independent mental systems (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Li & Meltzer, 2015). According to this view, Wahring et al.'s link between men's greater pursuit of sex and their greater reluctance to end committed relationships is akin to mixing apples and oranges.

Nevertheless, this attempt to bolster the parental-investment perspective fails to contend with the fact that the short-term vs. long-term distinction is not what it used to be. Of course, people imagine different things when they think about short-term, casual trysts or long-term committed relationships. The problem is that the independent-mechanisms argument mischaracterizes how humans initiate relationships in real life. In most cases, relationships are not obviously "about" short-term sex or long-term bonding until they are well underway (Eastwick et al., 2018). That is, people commonly have no idea whether they want a relationship with a given partner to be short-term or long-term until they have had a sexual experience with them. On average, the uninspiring sexual experiences are more likely to become short-term relationships – bland hookups fizzle – whereas the inspiring ones beget full-fledged, long-term relationships (Eastwick, Finkel, & Simpson, 2019).

The primary reason humans mate this way is that we are creatures with *remating* preferences (Prum, 2018). We seek compatibility, but assessing it takes time, and so we have to test the waters repeatedly with prospective mates until things start (or fail) to click (Eastwick, Finkel, & Joel, 2023). Sex is a key component of this testing and retesting process; after all, cultivating "love and commitment" is one of the most popular reasons that both men and women have sex (Meston & Buss, 2007). Taken together, the support-deficit framework predicts that men would be a little more eager than women to have sex, yes, but also more eager to have a second date, to fall in love, and to stroll hand-in-hand through Ikea.

Is my "a little more eager" characterization fair when it comes to gender differences in the sex drive? Mostly, yes. When people are describing how they feel about a real-life partner that they actually know, gender differences in sexual desire are meta-analytically small in initial attraction settings ($d = .28$; Fletcher et al., 2014) and ongoing relationships ($d = .27$ Frankenbach et al., 2022). These effect sizes fit squarely within the range of the gender differences that Wahring et al. have documented, so they plausibly share the same support-deficit source.

Gender differences are larger under some circumstances, like when people are approached for casual sex by a stranger ($d = 1.11$; Hald & Høgh-Olesen, 2010), or when people say "yes" to dates on Tinder ($d = 1.25$; Gerrard, 2021). Perhaps parental investment perspectives can best explain these larger differences. The trouble, however, is that propositioning strangers and swiping on apps are uniquely contemporary experiences. The evaluation of romantic partners in ancestral contexts would primarily have taken place in small groups and extended networks of known others (Eastwick, 2026). The relevance of evolved parental-investment mechanisms to these very large gender differences is, therefore, questionable. Other explanations – like women's pessimistic views of male strangers' sexual skills and propensity for violence (Conley & Klein, 2022) – will likely be needed to explain why gender differences become so large in the anonymous contexts that were rare in hunter-gatherer settings.

Wahring et al. do not push their thesis as far as I have. But in my view, it is both warranted and transformative. Surely, there exist some mating-domain gender differences where parental investment perspectives will prove necessary. But given that social deficits appear to play a role across the full time-scale of human relationships – from before they begin until well after they end – a parental-investment perspective should be invoked when the gender difference is both (a) larger than what can be explained by social deficits alone, and (b) unambiguously relevant to ancestral contexts. Otherwise, social deficits offer the parsimonious explanation.

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A memory lens on gender differences in romantic relationships

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Abstract

Wahring et al. highlight gender differences in romantic relationships, attributing them to disparities in social support. We propose that cognitive mechanisms – particularly autobiographical memory – also contribute. Superior emotional memory in women may not only foster relational insight but also facilitate emotional detachment, whereas weaker emotional memory in men may hinder processing, exacerbating distress post-breakup. Integrating memory research offers a complementary lens on romantic attachment and dissolution.

The target article by Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange offers a compelling and well-argued synthesis of literature suggesting that men, relative to women, derive more emotional and health-related benefits from romantic relationships, are less likely to initiate breakups, and experience greater distress following dissolution. Wahring et al. attribute these asymmetries primarily to gender differences in access to emotional support via social networks. While this sociorelational perspective is highly valuable, we argue that it underemphasizes cognitive mechanisms – particularly differences in autobiographical memory – that may also shape gendered experiences of romantic bonding and loss.

Our aim in this commentary is to expand Wahring et al.'s thesis by proposing that differences in autobiographical and emotional memory between men and women offer a complementary cognitive lens. Specifically, we suggest that gendered memory processes may influence not only the lived experience of romantic relationships but also the regulation of emotions during and after breakups. Drawing on findings from memory research, we argue that memory plays an underappreciated role in shaping relationship trajectories and post-dissolution adjustment.

Gender differences in emotional and autobiographical memory

A consistent finding in the literature is that women outperform men in episodic and autobiographical memory tasks, especially when retrieval involves emotional processing (El Haj et al., 2022; El Haj, Boutoleau-Bretonnière, & Gallouj, 2020; El Haj et al., 2021; Fivush, 2011; Grysman, 2017; Grysman et al., 2016; Nahari & Pazuelo, 2015; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Women tend to recall past experiences with greater detail, vividness, and emotional granularity (Grysman et al., 2016). This cognitive advantage is particularly salient in the domain of romantic relationships, where emotional nuance and relational history can be key components of memory encoding and retrieval. Moreover, research has shown that women are more likely to spontaneously retrieve emotionally significant autobiographical memories, a phenomenon linked to both higher emotional awareness and a more ruminative cognitive style (Grysman et al., 2016). While such retrieval can be adaptive – enhancing relational insight and emotional communication – it may also help explain why women are more capable of initiating relationship dissolution: greater memory richness and nuance may foster clearer appraisals of relational dissatisfaction, facilitating disengagement.

By contrast, men tend to demonstrate reduced capacity for encoding and retrieving emotional details (Grysman, Merrill, & Fivush, 2016). This may result in a less nuanced appraisal of a relationship's evolution and fewer emotional cues to draw upon during decision-making. After breakups, this memory limitation may hinder effective emotional processing and coping, contributing to the elevated distress observed in men. Reduced autobiographical recall may impair their ability to contextualize the breakup within a broader personal narrative, leading to prolonged or unresolved grief.

Memory as a contributor to gendered attachment behaviors

Memory differences may also interact with attachment styles and emotion regulation. Attachment theory, as originally developed by

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Bowlby (1979), identifies four main styles: secure (comfortable with intimacy), avoidant (discomfort with closeness and emphasis on independence), anxious/preoccupied (high fear of abandonment), and disorganized (simultaneous fear of intimacy and abandonment). Higher emotional recall in women could thus support more reflective and adaptive coping strategies – such as cognitive reappraisal or meaning-making – which are commonly associated with secure or preoccupied attachment styles. Conversely, men may rely more on suppression or avoidance, behaviors often linked to avoidant or disorganized attachment patterns, both of which can be associated with poorer psychological outcomes.

As we tend to suggest, the higher emotional recall in women could support more reflective and adaptive coping strategies – such as cognitive reappraisal or meaning-making – while men may rely more on suppression or avoidance, contributing to less effective emotional adjustment. Additionally, autobiographical memory contributes to self-continuity and identity formation (Conway, 2005), processes that are often disrupted after the loss of a close relationship. Stronger memory coherence in women may thus buffer identity threats associated with breakups, whereas men may experience greater disruption due to less integrated self-representations.

Implications and future directions

By incorporating memory mechanisms into the analysis of gender differences in romantic relationships, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of why and how these differences emerge and persist. Future research might explore the interaction between memory functions, emotion regulation strategies, and social network structures in shaping gender-specific outcomes. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how memory development over the lifespan affects relationship behaviors and transitions. Also, daily diary methods (using new technology) may offer fine-grained, real-time insights into emotional experiences and memory-related strategies, capturing the dynamic interplay between memory, affect, and behavior in everyday romantic contexts.

Conclusion

Wahring et al.'s thesis that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women is both timely and well-supported. Yet, we believe that a fuller account of this phenomenon must consider not only external resources (e.g., social support) but also internal cognitive structures – particularly autobiographical and emotional memory. These processes play a central role in how romantic experiences are encoded, interpreted, and emotionally processed. As such, memory may be a hidden but powerful mediator of gendered relational behavior, offering new avenues for research, theory, and clinical intervention.

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Concluding that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women is too simple

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Abstract

Wahring et al. do an impressive job of documenting existing evidence for concluding that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. Yet, their conclusion seems too simple to us. A consideration of more motivations for forming romantic relationships, use of more operational indices of mattering, and consideration of additional populations of people will paint a more complex picture of how, why, and for whom romantic relationships matter.

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"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." (a quote attributed to Albert Einstein)

We admire Wahring et al.'s compilation of evidence consistent with their claim that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. It serves as a needed counterweight to widespread stereotypes that women value romantic relationships more than do men. Yet, we believe the claim the authors make in their title is too simple.

Additional motives for romantic relationships and additional operational measures of romantic relationships "mattering" to men and to women should be considered.

The authors focus primarily on a single reason why romantic relationships matter to people: that is, that romantic relationships are a source of intimacy and emotional support. Intimacy and emotional support may well be the primary reason romantic relationships matter to both men and perhaps to women as well and attaining intimacy and support from romantic relationships per se does seem to be more important to men than to women. Yet, it is important to consider additional benefits that romantic relationships can provide to people, including financial benefits; having a partner whose attributes (e.g., beauty, accomplishments, power) reflect positively on them - (Sigall & Landy, 1973); companionship (Kwang et al., 2013); social standing (Kwang et al., 2013); self-expansion (Aron et al., 2022); increases in self-concept clarity (Emery & Hughes, 2023); having a partner with whom to have regular sex and/or with whom conceive or adopt and raise a child, and deriving satisfaction, self-esteem, positive emotion, and meaning in life from *providing* a partner with support (e.g., Aknin et al., 2011; Williamson & Clark, 1989). Romantic relationships may matter to men *and/or* to women for any one or any combination of these reasons. Considering these additional reasons why relationships may matter to men and to women will add nuance to our understanding of how, when, and why romantic relationships matter to men *and* to women.

Relatedly, the authors also emphasize just a few operational measures of mattering to support their claims, such as expecting greater benefits from relationships, physical and mental health benefits from relationships, the likelihood of initiating break-ups, and the amount of suffering occurring after break-ups. Yet, many additional and plausible operational measures of mattering exist. For instance, who is the highest in fear of being single (Spielmann et al., 2013)? A recent study suggests it is women (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021). Who contributes more financial support in romantic relationships? The current answer is men, although the extent to which this is true has been declining over time (Fry et al., 2023). Who is most willing to provide emotional support to a partner? The authors themselves cite work suggesting that it is women who provide more care to partners than do men (e.g., Liao et al., 2004; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Taylor et al., 2000) and providing support to a romantic partner may be more meaningful and matter more to women more than to men. Using additional operational indices of mattering also will yield a more nuanced view of how, when, and why romantic relationships matter to men *and* to women and suggest that in some ways these relationships matter more to women.

Additional caution is needed when only considering results emerging from studies of mixed-gender relationships.

The authors start their review by cautioning us that it is based on studies of mixed-gender and straight relationships. The necessity of relying on such studies is understandable because published relationship science studies are overwhelmingly studies of mixed-gender relationships (McGorray et al., 2023; Williamson et al., 2022). Toward the end of their review, the authors also state that in future work, researchers should examine how bisexual, gay/lesbian, and straight men and women differ in the importance they place on romantic relationships as well as how they deal with breakups. We agree.

Yet, despite their cautionary notes, throughout the paper including in its title, statements are made about what is true for men versus what is true for women. For instance, one such sentence reads, "... men are both more willing and more likely than women to form new romantic relationships sooner after a relationship has ended." Note, though, that this statement would be equally true if it were restated as "once a relationship has ended, *people who were in a relationship with a woman* are more likely to form new romantic relationships sooner than are people who were in a relationship with a man." Efforts to disentangle possible effects associated with being male relative to being female from possible effects of having a male or female partner (and their interaction) are important.

In this regard, including considerations of studies of same-gender relationships (be they relationships of gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals) and comparing their results with those from studies of mixed-gender relationships (be they heterosexual or bisexual individuals) may be helpful. For example, if men (generally) seek new relationships more quickly after break-ups than do women, this should be true for straight, gay, and bisexual men (relative to their female counterparts) regardless of the gender of their ex-partners; but if this is true for people who had been paired with a woman (generally), this should be true for straight men, lesbians, and bisexuals of both genders whose ex-partner was a woman.

We do acknowledge that incorporating studies of romantic relationships among people with minority sexualities and making sense of the resulting findings will not be easy. First, not many studies with adequate samples of straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people exist to help in this process. Second, even though currently available literature suggests that the quality of romantic relationships among people with minority sexualities is equivalent to that of romantic relationships among straight individuals (e.g., Elizabeth et al., 2025; Graham & Barnow, 2013; Kurdek, 2004), there also exists literature documenting average differences between people who have minority sexualities and straight people in experiences of discrimination and in depression. This will complicate using studies with sexual minorities to disentangle questions about how much and why men and women value romantic relationships.

It is also of note, as the authors do explicitly mention that the effects they report only account for the experiences of cisgender men and women and that we should worry about the generalizability of their findings. We agree but, as just mentioned we should include people of varying sexualities in reviews of how much relationships matter to men and women, not just to ensure generalizability of findings obtained with cis-gender individuals to other people, but also, to disentangle links between a person's own gender and relationships mattering from links between the gender of their partner and relationships mattering.

Finally, the authors note, their review is also based almost entirely on studies of WEIRD samples (that is, samples from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies) and that other types of samples should be examined. We agree that including populations from other cultures will be important and

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suspect that doing so will add yet more nuance to answering the questions of why, how, and for whom romantic relationships matter to men and to women.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships matter to men *and* women. Wahring et al. do an excellent job documenting some ways in which romantic relationships matter more to heterosexual men than to heterosexual women in WEIRD cultures. A broadened consideration of why, how, and for whom romantic relationships matter will add complexity to the picture they paint and will, almost certainly, provide evidence of some ways in which romantic relationships matter more to women than to men.

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Why does the belief that women are more romantic persist despite empirical evidence?

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Abstract

This paper reflects on why the belief that romantic love holds greater significance for women than for men persists despite empirical evidence to the contrary. It suggests this assumption is shaped by media portrayals of romantic love and argues its persistence across gender lines is sustained by the entrenchment of a male perspective that media representations help normalize.

The authors Wahring, Simpson, & Van Lange identify a tension between the widely held assumption that romantic love holds greater significance for women than for men and recent empirical findings that suggest precisely the opposite. To account for men's greater real-life need for romantic relationships, they draw on process models that demonstrate the unequal distribution of opportunities for emotional intimacy and support between men and women from an early age. Yet, this leaves one key question unanswered: What sustains the persistence of this distorted belief ?

As Wahring, Simpson, & Van Lange observe, popular media consistently portray women as more romantic than men – an image that aligns with the stereotypical ways women are depicted in mainstream media (Ward & Grower, 2020). They, thus, implicitly link the widely held assumption that women are more emotionally invested in love to the media's stereotypical portrayals of romantic relationships. This is consistent with a long-standing view in media studies that mass media significantly shape our beliefs, often in ways that overshadow or contradict viewers' real-life circumstances (Gerbner, 1979). Yet, it has also often been taken for granted that such beliefs directly inform our attitudes and social

behavior. Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange demonstrate that media influence is not so straightforward; the deeper forces shaping our emotional lives lie in the gendered norms of emotional expression and intimacy that are learned early and reinforced through socialization.

Romantic love offers a particularly telling example. Media research frequently characterizes portrayals of romantic love as unrealistic, often citing recurring clichés as "love at a first sight," "happily ever after," and "love conquers all" (Rios, Smith, & Locke, 2024). These idealized representations are widely argued to encourage viewers to internalize and pursue a vision of love that rarely exists in real life, leading to disillusionment and frustration (Galician, 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Although some research indicates that the influence of such portrayals may vary depending on social context and aesthetic framing (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014) – and can, in certain cases, be interpreted as uplifting or instructive rather than simply a source of frustration – the consensus holds that media representations exert a significant effect on viewers' romantic attitudes and expectations.

Some studies indicate that the effect of romantic media portrayals on viewers' attitudes may be relatively short-lived (Driesmans, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2016); however, longitudinal research on this topic remains limited. By drawing attention to the reversal between how male and female attitudes toward romantic love are depicted in media and how they manifest in empirical findings, Wahring, Simpson, & Van Lange implicitly challenge the assumption of a direct impact of media on real-life attitudes. This disconnection becomes all the more significant when we consider that women are both widely perceived and empirically shown to consume more romantic films and television content than men (Wühr, Lange, & Schwarz, 2017).

The gender-based disjunction between psychological research and media representations of romantic relationships raises the question of whether the impact of mass media on beliefs and social behavior is itself shaped by the viewer's gender. In particular, why do repeated portrayals of women as more romantic not result in women being more romantic in reality? Since the early development of feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975, 1981), it has been argued – though not uncontroversially (e.g., hooks, 1992) – that the spectatorial position offered by Hollywood cinema is not determined by the viewer's gender: both female and male audiences are invited to adopt male-oriented perspectives, which dominate mainstream cinematic narratives. Empirical research on spectatorship and character identification supports this view, indicating that character's agency – their narrative centrality and capacity to act – plays a more significant role in fostering identification than gender similarity alone (Cohen, 2001; Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2018).

The persistence of the widely held assumption about the inherently romantic nature of women – despite empirical evidence indicating that men, rather than women, are more in need of romance and emotional intimacy – suggests that our society continues to adopt the male perspective as the normative one. The idea that women are naturally more romantic reflects not an empirical truth but an idealized projection shaped by male desire, one that is adopted and internalized across gender lines. While feminist film theory has traditionally focused on the objectifying sexualization of women, its framework can be extended to address portrayals of women's alleged romantic nature (Devereaux, 1990).

From a feminist standpoint, this is not a neutral misrepresentation but a mechanism of social power. Against the backdrop of theories positing a conceptual or evolutionary linkage between love and care (Bode, 2023), portraying women as emotionally predisposed to romance serves to naturalize their association with caregiving. This, in turn, contributes to the disproportionate burden women bear in unpaid emotional labor and their overrepresentation in undervalued caregiving professions – roles that, paradoxically, may give them greater access to emotional intimacy.

The contrast between empirical findings – suggesting that romantic love holds greater significance for men in cisgender relationships – and the way love is portrayed in popular media does not mean that such portrayals are without influence. Rather, it draws attention to the ways in which media help normalize a particular narrative perspective, one that shapes the cultural vocabulary through which love is imagined, evaluated, and discussed. The women depicted as seeking, embracing, or mourning love are not psychologically realistic characters, but narrative constructs that express a dominant point of view. It is not the reality depicted that informs our beliefs and behavior, but the perspective through which it is shown.

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Evolutionary reasons why men are more likely to engage in romantic behavior than women

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Abstract

When it comes to true romance, the relationship between a man and a woman surpasses anything comparable in the animal kingdom. This is due to our evolutionary past, in which solitary, tree-dwelling ape men were transformed by the rigors of life on the African savannah into loyal and caring human fathers. But everything in evolution comes at a price, both for men and women.

Given the wealth of data presented in the target article on the attractiveness, formation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships between men and women, it is reasonable to expect the study's results to reflect evolutionary adaptation mechanisms between the sexes. This is also readily possible if one understands "romantic relationships" primarily as those in which intimacy and thus sexuality play a special role. With the latter, biological reproduction comes into play and thus automatically natural selection, which has influenced human behavior for millennia (Wilson, 1978). In this way, the most important results of the analysis can be explained quite "naturally," without having to refer to specific cultural influences:

1. Men have a greater desire for "romance": Human males should show a keen interest in maintaining the closest possible relationship with a woman for a longer period of time in order to increase their reproductive success. Women, on the other hand, due to their strong commitment to their offspring in the form of long pregnancy, lactation, and maternal care, can afford the "luxury" of being selective in their choice of partner and not always accepting the very first person they meet (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008).
2. Men benefit more from a romantic relationship: since – in keeping with Schiller's famous saying: "Who a lovely wife attaineth, join us in his jubilee!" – the successful establishment of a romantic relationship with a woman eliminates the stress for the man of having to establish one in the first place, this clearly results in a significantly improved physical and mental condition of the "victorious" man, with long-term positive consequences even for his mortality (Ben-Shlomo et al., 1993).
3. Men are more interested in maintaining a romantic relationship: since the probability of producing offspring increases with the duration of a relationship, men should be more interested in continuing it than women, whose reproductive chances are generally higher in the first place (Wilder, Mobasher, & Hammer, 2004).
4. Men suffer more from the dissolution of a romantic relationship: since a man is exposed to increased competition with other men after the dissolution of a relationship, he suffers more than a woman who – at least while she is still young – can expect with greater probability to find a new partner or at least emotional support in her circle of close friends and relatives (Burleson, 2003).

However, to better understand the special nature of human pair bonding, one must distance oneself somewhat from the widespread sociobiological cliché that – as given in most mammalian species (e.g., ungulates) – in humans too, only the female sex is the investing sex, and the male, due to its low propensity to invest, is thus the selected sex subject to "female choice" (Trivers, 1972). This may be true to a certain extent, because otherwise "quickies" would not be so popular with men, but it does not affect the fundamental desire of the vast majority of men to establish a family based on a lasting romantic relationship. Furthermore, human males like to "fraternize" with other males to gain greater control over their female partners – similar to what male lions (Packer & Pusey, 1982) and chimpanzees (de Waal, 1982) do. In this way, what were once grumpy loners, such as the tree-dwelling male orangutan still is today, evolved into highly sociable group creatures who, over time, not only succeeded in compensating for the comparatively high investment of women in their offspring by allocating appropriate resources (food, shelter, protection), but increasingly even surpassed them, with particularly "heroic" men willing to sacrifice their lives for the survival of clan and family (e.g. in battles against enemies).

In the long term, this has led to the fact that, until recently, in most human cultures, almost everything women had to do or not do was determined by rules established by men. Human men have achieved this evolutionary coup over the last 6–7 million years, that is, since their split from the common ancestor with the chimpanzee, by making women more dependent on their benevolence precisely through their increased commitment to their well-being. One can even assume that without men's pronounced "protective instinct," human evolution would probably never have occurred, because the transition from life in the secure forest to the bipedal settlement of the open savannah was – as we now know – anything but an evolutionary walk in the park (Hart & Sussman, 2009).

Whatever the ultimate concrete reason may have been, be it the need for increased cooperation (Bromhall, 2003) or the invention of effective weapons for defense against large predators (e.g., sticks,

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wooden clubs; Hrncir, 2023), or a combination of both, the permanent union of men to protect "their" women worked and gradually began to replace the original biological dominance of the female. This even went so far that, until recently, in many cultures, women's sexual lives were meticulously regulated (Shrock, 1984; Barkan, 2014), from strict assignment to a specific man to the safeguarding of paternity through sometimes rigorous codes of conduct (e.g., the death penalty for infidelity) and health-endangering interventions (e.g., female circumcision).

All of this only changed with the beginning of the modern era, when a kind of abstract and, for the first time, non-religious overprotector called "the State" emerged, which increasingly assisted women with existential problems, independent of their partners. This, however, made it increasingly difficult for caring men to be seen as reliable partners in the eyes of their wives, as the community as a whole now appeared as an overpowering competitor to men. As a consequence, the divorce rate in Western countries rose, and with it the number of men who suddenly found themselves on their own because, unlike women, they could not rely on a comparably solid, socio-emotional safety net of close friends and relatives. The fact that men, due to their stronger tendency to romanticize relationships while simultaneously facing the risk of social isolation and the resulting potential for harm to themselves and others, now also need institutional support through special "men's support groups" is therefore a relatively recent development.

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Impaired emotional regulation in the elderly men following female partner loss

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Abstract

Increased vulnerability in elderly men to their partner's loss by death, and also due to dementia, is discussed through the lens of attachment theory. This vulnerability stems from compromised emotional regulation, reward processing, and limited social support. For this reason, dementia-related ambiguous loss is particularly challenging for them because it requires complex emotional adjustment, adding to caregiving and household duties.

Gender differences in processing grief may condition men's poorer coping with the end of a relationship following partner loss. As indicated by Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange, men tend to rely much more than women on their romantic partners and are likely to suffer more after the relationship dissolution. We argue that this also applies to the experience of losing a partner either by death or due to dementia, occurring most often in the middle or old age.

Widowed men are relatively more vulnerable to health risks than women (Fitzpatrick, 1998), including higher mortality risk in the period of acute grief (Mineau, Smith & Bean, 2002). These results indicate that men's adaptation to a partner loss might not be effective enough not only to manage their grief but also for their general well-being.

Ratcliffe and Byrne (2021) distinguish between emotions that are regulated by life structure (e.g., staying in a long-term relationship) and emotions that involve responding to disturbances of this life structure. We argue that the loss of a partner ends the long-term life-structure that previously regulated partners' emotions. Importantly, the men not only lose their long-term pattern of dyadic emotional regulation but also experience the emergence of new emotions triggered by the loss. The disturbance of the previous life structure refers to the disruption of rituals and habits that used to involve the deceased or cognitively impaired partner, as well as the wider social cycle, which are considered to be

critical regulatory processes (Ratcliffe, 2019; Ratcliffe & Byrne, 2021).

Wahring et al. refer to three theoretical models accounting for gender differences in the weight of the relationship with a romantic partner. In our opinion, the psychological vulnerability of men following the loss of their partner may also be explained by the fourth model – attachment theory. The profound attachment bonds are deeply encoded in the brain. Both grief and addiction activate overlapping neural circuits involved in reward and motivation (Burkett & Young, 2012). For men who rely on romantic relationships as their primary source of emotional regulation, their emotional lives revolve around a singular dyadic bond. Therefore, losing a partner can trigger a sense of reward deprivation. This loss often signifies the end of emotional reciprocity and the breakdown of the shared daily routines that helped many men maintain emotional stability (Ratcliffe & Byrne, 2021). Under stress, men are more likely to employ regulatory strategies such as suppressing their emotions, blaming themselves, and blaming others, rather than seeking emotional support (García-Fernández et al., 2025). The absence of a life structure that once helped regulate emotions may result in dysphoria and symptoms resembling withdrawal. In such states, men may turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance use (Burkett & Young, 2012). As in addiction, familiar routines can activate attachment-linked reward pathways, briefly bringing back the sense of the lost partner's presence and intensifying grief (Burkett & Young, 2012). These effects are particularly pronounced in the elderly men, whose social networks often tend to be smaller and in whom the relationship between low social support and depressive symptoms is stronger than in women (Hed et al., 2020).

The mechanisms described above explain why regulating emotions in men might be more profoundly compromised after the death or non-death loss of their partner. This may also be explained by their exclusive reliance on female partners as confidants, the higher levels of social support received by widows compared to widowers (Eisma & Stroebe, 2021), and also by the fact that emotion regulation strategies are more diverse and flexible in women (Goubet & Chrysikou, 2019). Overall, men tend to suppress or repress their grief-related emotions, and as a result, they are more prone to experience loneliness.

Disruption of life structure and emotional regulation becomes especially evident in ambiguous loss due to dementia; men whose wives or partners are affected often experience this loss due to progressive changes in cognition, behaviour, and communication. These changes have a profound impact on the relationship, which evolves from a partnership to a caregiving role. This change may be evident very early (even at pre-dementia stage) in the course of a neurodegenerative disease when prefrontal cortex and/or frontos-triatal loops are primarily affected, e.g. in frontotemporal dementia (Johannessen et al., 2017) or Huntington's disease (Exuzides et al., 2022). However, the role changes become overwhelming at the stage of mild/moderate dementia in all cases (Colloby, Whiting, & Warren, 2022). According to the ambiguous loss theory, the affected partner is still physically present but mentally absent (Boss & Couden, 2002), which implies the loss of partnership and the emergence of new duties. Although literature on gender-related differences in different dementia syndromes is limited, men may suffer more when confronted with unfamiliar caregiving roles and their changed identity that requires reshaping their masculinity. This change in the relationship may be more challenging for men, as the intimate relationship is a more primary and core relationship for them than it is for females. Additionally, when a woman used to lead the couple's social life and/or was independent or dominant, the male partner, who becomes a caregiver, may struggle in particular to adjust to a new role. From a practical perspective, as noted by Wahring et al., in most couples, women tend to perform a greater share of household chores. This imbalance is often greater in elderly couples. Thus, when the elderly male, who is not accustomed to various household chores, faces the loss of his partnership, caregiving duties, and all household chores, the real burden is actually tripled.

In summary, we support the idea proposed by Pena-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña, and Castro-Figueroa (2021), which suggests that the capacity for emotional regulation enhances mental health in the context of grief. Rigid emotional regulation strategies in men may substantially hinder grief adaptation. In the context of both partner's death and the ambiguous loss of a partner due to dementia, men are particularly vulnerable, and a gender-specific approach to interventions is needed.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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The cultural plasticity of intimacy behavior: A socioecological attachment perspective

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Abstract

Gender imbalances in intimacy behavior reflect culturally contingent expressions of attachment organization rather than fixed gender differences. Building on Wahring et al.'s model, we apply the Biobehavioral Cultural Model of Attachment to show how affiliative behaviors vary with socioecological conditions, early reinforcement patterns, and cultural norms, offering a dynamic, context-sensitive account of intimacy across diverse settings.

Wahring et al. argue that men's psychological dependence on women for emotional intimacy may outweigh women's dependence on men for material resources. They identify this asymmetry in heterosexual romantic relationships, where men tend to rely more heavily on their female partners for emotional closeness, while women also meet affiliative and support needs through broader social networks. However, as the authors note, the empirical basis of their model is largely drawn from WEIRD cultural contexts (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), raising important questions about its generalizability across diverse socioecological settings.

We expand on and qualify the model's main claim by applying a socioecological attachment perspective – specifically the Biobehavioral Cultural Model of Attachment (BCMA; Strand, 2020) – to explain culturally variable gender differences in affiliative tendencies and intimacy-seeking behaviors towards kin and nonkin.

Wahring et al.'s thesis draws heavily from the tend-and-befriend theory (Taylor et al., 2000), which posits that when under stress, and in order to fulfill main caregiving roles, women also engage in affiliative behaviors towards non-kin. Tend-and-befriend theory acknowledges the role of attachment in stress regulation, yet it does not fully articulate the implications of attachment organization for the suggested gendered affiliation patterns, nor does it consider broader socio-ecologic correlates of threat regulation. Emerging evidence suggests that *attachment organization may be a more proximal determinant of stress responses than sex alone* (Hlay, Johnson, & Levy, 2023). For example, individuals higher in attachment avoidance are more likely to display fight-or-flight responses (Levy et al., 2019), whereas secure individuals, regardless of sex, are more inclined toward prosocial and affiliative responses, including tend-and-befriend behaviors (Hlay et al., 2023).

Wahring et al.'s model downplays the role of culture in shaping affiliative patterns towards kin and non-kin. In collectivistic cultures, affiliative behaviors tend to focus on kin, while in individualistic or high social class contexts, greater emotional investment occurs in couple relationships. For instance, in more collectivistic cultures, where emphasis is put on strong-tie relationships with kin, less support seeking is observed with non-kin (Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2012; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008), with both women and men tending more and men befriending more than in WEIRD cultures. Conversely, in the more relationally mobile individualistic cultures (or higher social class environs within cultures), there is more investing in more emotional "give and take" in couples (Selcuk & Gunyadin, 2023; Yuki & Schug, 2012).

We propose that the cultural plasticity of gendered affiliation strategies towards kin and non-kin can be better understood through the lens of socioecological variation in attachment organization. The BCMA frames attachment not as a biologically fixed system but as one that adapts to early experiences of caregiver responsiveness for the regulation of threat (Strand, Vossen, & Savage, 2019; Strand, 2020). These experiences, which operate through reinforcement patterns – continuous (secure), intermittent (anxious), or absent (avoidant) – shape later affiliative orientations and are embedded within a nested hierarchy of influences – neurobiological (Beckes, Medina-Devilliers, & Coan, 2021), behavioral, familial, and cultural. These schedules shape relational orientations that extend into adult social networks: anxious individuals tend to favor strong-tie affiliations with kin, whereas avoidant individuals orient toward weak-tie networks with non-kin. Evidence for these socioecological patterns has recently emerged in the context of behavioral patterns of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kafetsios, 2022a) and in a cross-temporal examination of attachment and cultural patterns after a severe economic crisis (Kafetsios, 2022b).

Socioecological factors such as environmental harshness and unpredictability can tip the balance toward different attachment schedules (Strand, 2022). For instance, high-threat or low-resource environments are more likely to induce avoidant strategies, particularly in males. Conversely, cultural contexts that emphasize social cohesion may foster anxious or secure attachment, especially among females.

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This socioecological model aligns with cross-cultural evidence that sex differences in adult attachment – typically with men scoring higher in avoidance and women in anxiety – are most pronounced in low-threat (often WEIRD) societies (Del Giudice, 2019); and this is in line with Wahring et al.'s model. However, under conditions of ecological stress, these differences attenuate, primarily due to increased avoidance among women. This convergence reflects adaptive recalibration in mating and affiliative strategies under threat. Avoidance in men is linked to strategies favoring low investment and short-term mating; in women, anxiety promotes partner investment but may shift toward avoidance in severely adverse environments (Del Giudice, 2019; Schmitt et al., 2004).

Thus, observed gender imbalances in intimacy behavior may not reflect fixed socio-biological tendencies but instead represent culturally contingent expressions of underlying attachment organization. The attachment system is responsive to both early reinforcement contingencies and broader ecological affordances, offering a more dynamic and integrative account than either sex/gender-based or trait-based models alone.

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Do romantic relationships matter less to women than to men because men provide lower-quality emotional support?

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Abstract

We propose a more parsimonious and, arguably, more plausible interpretation of the gender differences described by the authors. Specifically, the central issue may not lie in men's lower propensity to express their emotions, but rather in the generally lower quality of support that men tend to provide compared to women. This alternative interpretation calls for a different solution.

We appreciate that the authors are challenging the common belief that romantic relationships matter more to women than to men. Indeed, a substantial body of literature from across disciplines documents that all humans, regardless of gender, benefit from close connection with others, and investigations of key intimacy-generating interpersonal processes within ongoing romantic relationships, like receiving well-provided social support or having a partner express gratitude, regularly reveal no gender differences in short-term boosts to felt intimacy, relational wellbeing, and even mood (e.g. Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Mosanenzadeh et al., 2025).

No surprise to us, but perhaps against gender stereotypes, such data suggest that men are human, too. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that intra-sex differences often exceed between-sex differences (Hyde, 2014), a crucial nuance that the authors do not address. Nevertheless, the authors do point to a few areas of average differences between men and women that merit attention.

Their central argument is that men are more dependent on their romantic relationships than women, because men are less capable of expressing their emotions and vulnerabilities, and therefore receive less emotional support from their broader social network. As a result, the argument goes, men must rely more heavily on their romantic relationship to fulfill their support and intimacy needs. We believe that there are at least two potential problems with this interpretation of the data. First, their central line of reasoning raises a critical question that the authors do not address: if the main problem is that men are less likely than women to express their emotions, shouldn't they also receive less support within their heterosexual romantic relationships than women? And thus, should men as compared to women not be *less* rather than more dependent on their romantic relationship to fulfill their support needs? Second, while the authors argue that men depend more on their romantic relationship *because* they receive less emotional support from their social network, as far as we can tell, this causal relationship has not been established. It might just as well be the other way around: women seek more support outside of their romantic relationship *because* men are less capable of fulfilling their emotional and intimacy needs.

Indeed, in contrast to the authors' focus on men's lower capacity to express their emotions as the prime mechanism, we propose a more parsimonious – and arguably more plausible – explanation for why heterosexual men are more dependent on a romantic partner – or perhaps more accurately, why women are less dependent on a male romantic partner: men, as compared to women, on average may be less skilled at providing high-quality social support. This could explain many of the empirical findings discussed by the authors. For example, men receive less support from their social network not because they fail to express their needs, but because their networks are often composed of other men, who may also lack strong support-provision skills. Women are less likely to initiate a relationship, perhaps because during early interactions, they may realize a man lacks responsiveness and emotional support skills. Women are more likely to break up than men, because over time, they become increasingly disappointed by their partner's inability to meet their emotional needs. And finally, along the same reasoning, women suffer less from break up than men because they lose less in terms of emotional support, while men lose a key source of support.

Do men, on average, indeed provide lower quality social support? There is some research among heterosexual couples indicating that, especially when problems become more severe, men tend to provide lower quality emotional support than women (Neff & Karney, 2005). Also relevant, there appear to be robust (but small) gender differences in empathy – a precondition for providing sensitive support – with men on average scoring lower than women (Baez et al., 2017; Christov-Moore et al., 2014). Yet, these gender differences may largely stem from biased expectations and stereotypes related to traditional gender roles, rather than from biological differences (Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2021). Similarly, research on emphatic accuracy – the ability to correctly infer the interaction partner's emotions and thoughts – has revealed similar gender differences, favoring women (e.g. Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Notably, research has demonstrated that these observed sex differences are attributable to differences in motivation rather than inherent ability. When situational factors such as encouragement and salient gender role expectations are present, men perform comparably to women on tasks involving the inference of others' mental states (Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000), suggesting that men may, in principle, be equally capable of providing effective support.

Although the authors briefly acknowledge the possibility that men, on average, may be worse support providers, throughout the article, they emphasize that men as compared to women are less skilled at expressing their emotions. Indeed, they conclude their article by expressing the hope that, in an evolving society in which social life is less gender-specific, "men will be able to more openly express and show their vulnerabilities" – thus increasing the likelihood that their needs for intimacy and support will be met. We want to add a complementary perspective: we hope that in such a society, men will be more strongly encouraged and become better at providing emotional support – so that women's needs for intimacy and support in heterosexual relationships are more likely to be fulfilled as well.

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Why do romantic relationships matter more to men than to women? The commitment problem and market competition for useful men

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Abstract

While this commentary concurs with Wahring et al., their explanation of the asymmetry begs the question: Why are men less successful in forming brotherhood social networks than women? This commentary offers an answer: Given their difference in investment/child, men are incentivized to renege on commitment more than women. Hence, women choose, *ceteris paribus*, to marry *the most romantic man* available.

This commentary concurs with the thesis of Wahring et al.: romantic relationships matter more for men than women. However, it questions the reason that the authors marshal, namely, that women have more supportive social networks than men do. The authors blame "gender roles" as the ultimate reason. Still, why do cultural and social norms discourage, relative to women, men's bonding with extra-marital networks?

Let us commence with another paper appearing in this journal (Kruglanski et al., 2026): romantic love is based on the actor's quest for significance. If men have greater quest for significance than women, this explains why men demand romantic attachments more than women. However, concurring with Wahring et al., women equally demand romantic attachments but are able to satisfy them via social networks. Thus, we cannot suppose an asymmetric demand for significance to explain the puzzle.

To solve the puzzle, this commentary employs two assumptions. First, men and women equally desire to have offspring. Second, men and women equally prefer to raise their own biological offspring over fostering the offspring of other people. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, a man prefers to marry a woman without children over a woman with children, and *vice versa*. The difference in behavior, hence, cannot arise from preferences, complying with Stigler and Becker (1977). The only option left is finding an asymmetry in the budget constraint. Women are constrained by 9 + x months of pregnancy and lactation, while men are constrained by zero months.

Let the man and woman meet and make a contract to have their own biological child – fully motivated by symmetrical preferences. However, once the woman is pregnant, the man can renege and vanish, looking for another prospect of propagating his own selfish genes. The woman can also renege. Thus, we have the classical "commitment problem" facing both cisgenders (Khalil, 2010). However, the woman suffers from a more severe form of the commitment problem than the man – given the difference in the budget constraint. That is, if the man reneges, the woman cannot as easily compensate for the loss as the case if the woman reneges.

Different cultures devise different institutions to solve the commitment problem. One institution is dowery payment – an upfront payment of money by man to the woman or to the woman's family. Another institution is the scolding of women who lure and snatch a married men. In modern societies, neither institution is effective for reasons that cannot be discussed here. However, briefly, regarding the dowery institution, it is easy for the man, relative to the woman, to borrow money for another dowery – i.e., given the already established fact of asymmetry of the budget constraint. Furthermore, the scolding of women who lure men away from marriage to the point of carrying out "honor killing" can no longer be exercised in open societies, such as our modern societies, where the entry and exit are easily available to all.

In this light, modern societies have to erect a new viable and efficient institution to rectify the perennial gestation-commitment asymmetry. The institution is the grounding of marriage on romantic love. Romantic love promises to discourage the man from reneging on the marriage contract. This should not mean that cisgender romantic attachments are absent in pre-modern societies. However, they are usually neither celebrated, ubiquitous, nor generally the ground of the marriage contract.

Put differently, what is the institution that assures the woman that the chosen man will find it difficult to renege in an open society such as our modern society? She will select, *ceteris paribus*, the man who is more dependent on her for his intimacy needs than she is dependent on him. This appears in popular culture in films and songs "as if" women are more romantic – as Wahring et al. mention – when in fact women are in the competitive market for the most romantic men, *ceteris paribus*.

Jane Austin's novels have ushered in this new institution – viz., romantic relationships as the basis of marriage – with a big bang. As Chwe (2013) astutely shows, Austen is a game theorist *par excellence*. Her novels are populated with characters that interact with each other strategically – i.e., they choose actions on the basis of their expectations of the reaction of others. While Austen shows the benefits and pitfalls of strategic actions of her characters, what is remarkable is her ability to weave together romantic attachments and strategic thinking.

As Austen's novels of romance astutely demonstrate, romantic attachments cannot be separated from everyday problems, including the commitment problem. Romantic attachment is an invaluable institution in modern societies. The woman would prefer, *ceteris paribus*, to marry a man who is romantically attached to her than another man who is less romantically attached.

The proposed gestation-commitment asymmetry model needs greater development, which cannot be undertaken here (see Khalil,

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2025). However, it is legitimate even at this preliminary stage to raise one objection. The proposed model can explain why women demand men more intensely who are romantically attached to them, *ceteris paribus*, than *vice versa*. However, why would men harbor romantic and intimacy needs more intensely than women? That is, why are men less successful than women in forming extra-marital networks?

The answer is already implied in the proposed model. Namely, one way men compete with each other is to signal to women that they are ready to forego/ditch their extra-marital social networks. Indeed, the proposed model has a clear prediction: Women are more ready, in the initial formation stage, to cease a romantic relationship with a man if he is strongly attached to his buddy-friends, not to mention his mother and sister, than *vice versa*.

In short, romantic relationships matter more to men than to women for a simple reason: Women have a more intense demand for men who are ready to maintain very minimal outside options for intimate support than *vice versa*. The pre-commitment of men for such very minimal outside options performs the same function as dowery, i.e., to rectify the perennial gestation-commitment asymmetry.

Thus, this commentary offers an *endogenous* theory of the rise and change of gender roles with regard to romantic attachments.

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Fear of relationship dissolution: The influence of gendered post-breakup life course expectations

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Abstract

Differences in well-being in the life trajectories following the end of a relationship can be co-determinants of gender-specific differences in the fear of losing a relationship. Social norms, conventions, and institutional arrangements can lead to gender-specific consequences for economic well-being when a relationship ends. If these are anticipated, they can cause differences in this fear of loss.

In the modern world, periods in which individuals actively search for romantic partners often alternate with phases spent in relationships. What explains the fear of losing a relationship? How do men and women differ in terms of this fear, and why? The study "A Formula for Love: Partner Merit and Appreciation Beget Actor Significance" emphasizes the role of differences in the need for intimacy and emotional support within romantic partnerships as an important explanation for variations in the fear of a breakup. This commentary highlights the role of institutional and economic reasons for gender differences and focuses on the life trajectories that follow the end of a relationship.

Searching for a new relationship after a breakup is costly. Frictions play a crucial role in romantic partner search markets. Individuals encounter potential partners only intermittently and must manage life as singles in the meantime. They need to get to know potential partners, evaluate compatibility, and potentially even "test" cohabitation. A relationship only forms when both parties agree. Institutions and social conventions shaping romantic partner searches are not necessarily gender-neutral and may have gender-specific consequences for search behavior and quality thresholds for accepting a new relationship. Research on search and matching markets suggests several relevant factors: How quickly do individuals meet attractive new prospects? How desirable are they themselves in the dating market? What is the "quality" of the potential partners encountered? How supportive is one's social environment in facilitating connections? How time-consuming, costly, and frustrating is the process of getting to know someone? What social norms govern these interactions? This is especially important when relationship quality is driven not by objectively ranked traits (as in Burdett & Coles, 1997), but by subjective factors such as love and affection, which can be unequally felt when assessing a new relationship (Konrad & Lommerud, 2010; Hofmann & Qari, 2011). If, for instance, social or economic reasons cause one gender to have systematically lower thresholds, the other may effectively have all the choice. Furthermore, the rise of speed dating and dating apps (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2010; Konrad, 2015) has undoubtedly reshaped the search market (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2016). Acceptance thresholds for a new partner and gender differences can therefore vary widely in history.

Conventions and institutional factors may explain gender asymmetries in well-being if a relationship ends. A key example is the traditional gender role assigning men the breadwinner role. This leads to unequal incentives for human capital investment during a relationship, often leaving women at a disadvantage following divorce (James, 1996). This holds true even when specialization decisions are made while accounting for divorce risk (Cremer, Pestieau, & Roeder, 2015). Leopold (2018) finds that while men often suffer stronger short-term consequences after divorce, women face more significant medium-term hardships. Avellar and Smock (2005) similarly report adverse outcomes for women following the dissolution of cohabiting unions.

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Premarital customs and social norms on courtship efforts can also influence the cost to end a relationship. Male courtship behaviors often involve one-sided investments that foster commitment. For example, Ng (1987) discusses engagement rings as tools for solidifying emerging bonds. Courtship rituals date back millennia and generate complex incentive structures regarding asset transfers (Bronsert, Glazer, & Konrad, 2017). These past investments may create asymmetries when considering separation. Conversely, leaving a relationship may be less attractive to women if a dowry is expected in future partnerships (see Ottakkam Thodukayil, Palaniswamy, & Kunjumon, 2025, on dowry's role in Indian marriage dissolution). Legal frameworks (Oldham, 2008) may also contribute to gender differences – alimony payments being an example. For a comprehensive discussion on the legal and economic dimensions of marriage contracts, see Smith (2003).

In summary, it can be stated that institutional and economic factors can contribute to gender differences in well-being after the end of a relationship. These disparities likely influence differences in how men and women fear a breakup. Institutional differences across societies could provide a basis for testable hypotheses regarding gendered breakup fears and encourage cross-cultural comparisons on this topic.

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Scant evidence, sweeping claim: Do romantic relationships matter more to men?

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Abstract

The target article attributes four gendered patterns to men's relative scarcity of non-partner intimacy. I argue that two patterns are robust, two are not, and in none does the evidence substantiate an intimacy deficit as the primary driver. The sweeping title claim is therefore unsupported, yet it may still spark productive debate.

"Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women" is a single answer to a question too broad to admit one. Romantic partnerships serve many functions – affection, emotional support, companionship, social identity, economic pooling, sexual intimacy, reproduction, joint child-rearing, and caregiving. The salience of each function shifts across formation, maintenance, dissolution, and aftermath – and hence, complexity increases further when romantic relationships are framed, in turn, as something pursued, preserved, ended, or mourned. The target article compresses this complexity into one overarching conclusion, attributing four gendered patterns to one main driver: men's relative scarcity of non-partner intimacy and emotional support. The review's scope is impressive, but the evidence on which it rests is uneven. Two patterns are robust (men's greater courtship effort and lower breakup initiation); two are not (men's larger benefits while partnered and greater losses after separation); and in none does the evidence substantiate an intimacy deficit as the primary driver. In this commentary, I outline these concerns and end with a note on why, despite its overreach, the target article can still advance the field.

Pattern 1 – men's stronger desire to form relationships – is supported by multiple data sources converging on this conclusion. Where the case weakens is the leap from fact to mechanism. Do men chase relationships harder because securing a partner fills a wider gap in intimacy and emotional support? That bridge rests on small and dated correlational studies in which men lower in support expressed a stronger wish to (re)marry (Frazier et al., 1996; Carr, 2004). Meanwhile, at least three alternative explanations

loom. First, mating-market selectivity at younger ages: Women are choosier (Trivers, 1972; Fisman et al., 2006) – especially at the initial encounter – so, the average man faces steeper odds, and his extra effort is a rational response to this asymmetry. Second, male-surplus sex ratios amplify that pressure. In Western populations, the imbalance is modest but widespread in younger age bands; among 30- to 34-year-olds in the United States, the ratio is about 120 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women (Walker et al., 2023). Third, masculinity norms frame manhood as a status to be earned, in part by "landing" a romantic partner (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Any of these forces could produce the observed courting asymmetry without invoking an intimacy deficit. Whether they operate in concert or one predominates remains an open question.

Pattern 2 – men's higher returns to involvement – appears compelling at first glance, yet almost all the evidence cited is correlational. If women place more emphasis than men on selecting a partner who is healthy and affluent (Walter et al., 2020), the male benefit seen in correlational studies may simply reflect who gets partnered, not what the partnership does. In studies that model selection, the male benefit shrinks or disappears (DeMaris & Oates, 2022; Rapp & Stauder, 2020; Kendler et al., 2016). A genuine male benefit could still exist, but the present evidence is too selection-prone to say, let alone attribute it to a support-gap mechanism.

Pattern 3 – women's greater breakup initiation – is firmly established, yet again, the leap to "relationships matter less to women" is tenuous. The pattern pertains only to the moment a relationship snaps. Set against the long slide that typically precedes dissolution, the real question is why women reach the breaking point first. Is their threshold lower because they can draw intimacy and emotional support elsewhere, as the target article implies? Or is their threshold as high as, or higher than, men's, but reached sooner because women sense the decline earlier and feel it more acutely? Some evidence suggests that women initiate repair efforts more often and are more likely to seek couple counseling (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Whitton et al., 2018). As problems accumulate, the very benefits cited by the support-gap model – affection, acceptance, daily encouragement – may be where the decline is felt first, and most sharply, by women. Hence, when they end a union, they may not abandon intact support to replace it elsewhere but react to its erosion despite repeated repair attempts. In short, women's higher breakup rates may simply tell us who reaches "enough is enough" first, not whose enduring need for the intimacy benefits provided by a partnership is smaller.

Pattern 4 – men's greater suffering after dissolution – rests on a selective reading of the evidence. Several studies, including my own cited, do report steeper *initial* drops for men in life satisfaction, mental health, and loneliness – stronger reactions that may mirror the fact that women initiate more breakups. Yet these gaps close quickly. The one gender gap that endures points the other way: women incur far larger economic losses. Thus, with a slightly broader lens – tracking outcomes beyond the psychological domain and extending past the first year – we could just as easily headline the evidence: "women suffer more." One drag on women's financial recovery is that re-partnering – the fastest rebound route (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2024) – is less prevalent for women than for men. The target article treats this as further proof of a deeper male intimacy deficit. Likewise, men's warmer memories of their ex-partners are folded into "longing for lost support" rather than simple closure. With evidence framed so flexibly, almost any narrative – including the title claim – can be made to fit, while countervailing patterns and explanations, such as women's enduring economic losses and declining partner-market leverage with age (Skopek, 2023), are set aside.

Taken together with the authors' own, commendable "contradictory-evidence" section, these concerns further undermine their case. The title claim is still not without merit. It may hold in certain phases, for specific outcomes, and in some of those instances, the support-gap mechanism could be the primary driver. Yet any sweeping verdict oversimplifies the real-world complexity of romantic relationships – multiple stages, diverse outcomes, and many intertwined mechanisms. Still, bold claims can serve the field: like the once-influential infidelity thesis (Buss et al., 1992), they can spark debate, sharpen theory, and improve methods – even when they do not survive. That, I believe, is the target article's most valuable contribution.

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Well-being and resilience against oppressive narratives after romantic dissolution

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Abstract

The negative effects of oppressive societal narratives on well-being, as illustrated by research on fear of being single, provide contradictory evidence to the claim that men suffer more after romantic dissolutions. We propose that well-being after romantic dissolution is not dependent on gender, but on whether the individual belongs to a marginalised group and their capacity for social resilience.

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange argue that romantic (mono-heterosexual) relationships are of greater importance for men due to diverging gender socialisation, which means that men depend on dyadic romantic partnerships for emotional support more than women. We argue that the proposal does not sufficiently account for contradictory evidence from research on fear of being single (FOBS) and the role of oppressive narratives in romantic dissolutions. Once those are factored in, the stark gender division proposed by the authors seems less significant than social resilience for post-romantic dissolution well-being.

Spielmann et al. (2013) describe FOBS as concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner. FOBS has been identified as a mediator in the relation between relationship status and loneliness (Adamczyk, 2018), as a moderator in the relation between singlehood and mental health outcomes (Wongsomboon et al., 2024), and as a unique predictor of maladaptive relationship behaviours beyond what anxious attachment predicts (Spielmann et al., 2013, 2016). In romantic dissolutions, greater FOBS has been associated with greater dependency on unsatisfying relationships and lower likelihood of initiating their dissolution (Spielmann et al., 2013), as well as preservation of interest in former partners (Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020).

As for gender differences, there is suggestive evidence that women experience greater FOBS than men (Adamczyk, 2018; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021). Even though both men and women have similar experiences of stereotyping or discrimination for being single (Dupuis & Girme, 2024; Greitemeyer, 2009; DePaulo & Morris, 2005), women's greater FOBS has been related to greater societal pressures to enter romantic relationships. These societal pressures might come from the close social environment (Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021) and from media culture (Timmermans, Coenen & Van den Bulck, 2019).

This leaves us with two contradictory interpretations regarding women's well-being in romantic dissolutions. On one hand, the target paper argues that women fare better than men when single after romantic dissolutions, due to their greater access to emotional support. On the other hand, popular beliefs and other societal pressures might lead women to experience greater FOBS, which could diminish their well-being in the case of romantic dissolution.

Moreover, from an intersectional approach, gender differences become less significant with regard to the negative social perceptions of singlehood that motivate FOBS. For example, gay men can be doubly stereotyped because of their sexual orientation and their single status (Javaid, 2021). Being single is connected to increased negative evaluations as people age – again, with older women being more harshly perceived than older men for being single (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Further, it has been suggested that Black women suffer less singlehood stereotyping than Black men and *both* White men and women (Pudrovska, Schieman & Carr, 2006). All these variables are expected to influence well-being after romantic dissolutions.

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange acknowledge the relevance of stereotyping in popular media and societal assumptions (see introduction), and recognise that gender norms shape relational behaviour, yet they invoke contextual factors (3.3) to dispel contradictory evidence to their position. Namely, they recast this evidence as culturally or situationally contingent, without reassessing how such evidence might destabilise their central claim that love matters more to men than to women. We suggest that differences in well-being after romantic dissolution depend, instead, on social resilience to negative social perceptions and hence to FOBS.

FOBS is directly motivated by socially shared narratives such as "being single is a failure," or "the best life is the life shared with a romantic partner." This sort of narrative has been qualified by philosophers as "oppressive" (Lindemann, 2001). Oppressive narratives – such as racist or misogynistic ones – can contribute to maladaptive cognitive practices (Fabry 2025), as well as disrupting sense of self and social recognition of moral agency (Lindemann, 2001). These capture the potential for harm of singlehood stereotyping: FOBS is not merely a psychological attitude, but a threat to individuals' self-conception, cognition, and behaviour.

Relevantly, the philosophical study of socially shared narratives can resolve the contradiction noted above between empirical findings that women fare better after breakups, and societal narratives and research on FOBS that predict a less clear picture, beyond simply alluding to contextual factors. Lindemann (2020) explains that marginalised groups who are targets of oppressive narratives often engage in the creation and dissemination of *counterstories* that subvert oppressive narratives, contributing to the repair of their sense of self and moral agency. Sáenz Benavides (2025) has argued that this is a form of *narrative resistance* that can counteract not only self-demeaning beliefs but also transform the

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emotional experiences that come with oppression – such as shame or fear. They then acknowledge the possibility of *social resilience* to oppressive narratives for some individuals who are already in marginalised groups.

Women, gay men, or older people who suffer more single stereotyping are already in marginalised groups. We hypothesise that members of already marginalised groups are better equipped to engage in narrative resistance, which in turn can counteract the effects of oppressive narratives on well-being. This happens even if individuals belonging to these groups are under more social scrutiny about their singlehood status and even experiencing higher FOBS.

Our resilience hypothesis has two advantages over the gender divide proposed by the authors in the target article. First, contradictory evidence need not be explained away by more or less generic contextual factors. Indeed, context influences post-dissolution well-being, but the specific contributing factors are a) belonging to marginalised groups, and b) social resilience. Re-interpreting their results through this lens reveals that women do indeed prove more socially resilient than men in general, but not universally, as shown by the contradictory evidence. For that reason, although the divergence in post-romantic-dissolution well-being may show across a binary gender divide, it is not itself dependent on gender. Hence, the importance placed on romantic relationships is not itself dependent on gender either. Second, our approach opens a route for future research that overcomes an unnecessary restriction to binary gender and heterosexuality. If our hypothesis is correct, the gender divide will have lesser or no relevance in comparison studies among queer or racialised people.

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Parsimony and basic principles in human "romantic" relationships

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Abstract

Compared to women, men seek romantic relationships more, benefit more from said relationships, are less likely to initiate breakups, and suffer more afterwards.

Explanations based on the availability of emotional support are unnecessary. The four patterns can be explained more parsimoniously by sexual selection, which is applicable to all life forms, including humans, and by family law in WEIRD societies.

The paper evokes images of a generic courtroom drama in which the prosecutor asks a witness whether he had a romantic relationship with the defendant. He vehemently denies it. The prosecutor insists: "but you went on vacations together, had weekend getaways, and had overnight visits twice weekly for several months." The witness agrees. The prosecutor continues: "Yet you testify that you did not have a romantic relationship with

the defendant. Would you care to explain this inconsistency?" The witness replies: "No inconsistency, sir. She often told me, even while in bed, that I was the least romantic man she had ever met."

From the first line of the paper to the last paragraph, the authors use the term "romantic," but do not define it. Sometimes it seems the term is being used euphemistically instead of "sex," but at other times, it seems that authors rely on a more strict definition. In any case, each of the 4 premises about romance can be explained more parsimoniously by the most basic principles of sexual selection and by peculiarities of family law in WEIRD societies (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic).

Men seek romance more than women do

The desire for sex is a more parsimonious explanation. In all species, not just humans, fitness is maximized in females by increasing the quality of their partners and in males by increasing the quantity of partners. This difference is a basic consequence of anisogamy, which defines the sexes and hence has been around since the two sexes first evolved (Bell, 1982).

Also, the words "sex" and "gender" are not interchangeable. Sex refers to gamete size, and there are only two: large (eggs) and small (sperm). Often there is no functional difference, but sometimes, two or more genders can occur within a sex (Lozano & Ros, 2022).

Men benefit more than women from romantic relationships

Two separate issues are addressed: emotional support and unequal division of labor at home.

Men do have fewer extra-pair friends and confidants, and hence rely on their sexual partners for emotional support. However, maybe men just do not need as much emotional support as women do. Without delving here in the nature/nurture debate, it is well known that men are less emotional than women, both in terms of feeling those emotions and expressing them. Actually, selection can only act upon external manifestations of emotions, their expression (Darwin, 1872).

Subsequently, the authors address household contributions, a discussion that is completely backwards. Actually, men benefit extensively by just cleaning up after themselves, a fact well supported by personal experience, anecdotal accounts, and historical literature. I will leave the first two up to the readers' individual experiences and discussion with their spouses. More poignantly, ancient writings from a variety of cultures depict women as agents of chaos (Vajskop, 2005). Today, a common reason women have for breakups is that the man was "too controlling." Finally, the entire discussion about household chores ignores men's financial contributions; if they become single and manage to keep all their resources, they could easily afford to hire a maid.

Men are less likely than women to initiate breakups

This is clearly true, but more parsimonious explanations exist.

First, for most of our existence, we have lived among small groups of people whom we have known our entire lives. Life was short and women had few choices in partners. Any woman who spent decades seeking the right partner left no descendants.

Our lifespans have increased steadily over the millennia and, due to medicine, sharply over the past 75 years. Our social circles have also increased over the millennia and, due to the internet, sharply over the past 40 years. The actual number of men suitable for marriage for women might not have changed much, but to women, it seems like they now have thousands of options and decades to choose and change their choices.

Second, married women in WEIRD societies receive financial rewards for leaving a marriage. Upon divorce, men can end up losing half of all their worldly possessions, and are usually required to keep paying their former spouses for many years thereafter, sometimes for life. In essence, Trivers' "cruel bind" (Trivers, 1972) is not retrospective but rather prospective and applies almost exclusively to men. Laws in WEIRD societies discourage men from leaving a marriage and encourage women to do so.

Third, in WEIRD societies, the provisioning of children is not the sole responsibility of custodial parent. A woman knows that if a man, married or divorced, is unable to provide for his children, society will help. Why should a woman put all her eggs in one basket, one man?

Men suffer more after a breakup

Well, yes, but maybe it is because upon divorce in WEIRD societies, men lose half their wealth to the spouse, lose custody of and sometimes access to their children, and continue supporting their spouse long after the marriage has ended, sometimes for life. For men, prosperity after divorce is a luxury reserved for wealthy men.

Conclusion

The paper paints women as being unromantic, but readers ought not to arrive at that conclusion. Living organisms react and adapt to their environment. WEIRD societies are vastly different from the conditions in which humans evolved. In ancient times, the four premises would have been more applicable to women. Using the strict meaning of the word "romance", women were more likely to seek actual romance, benefit more from it, be faithful to their romantic partners, and suffer more if the romantic relationship ended.

Much of this discussion hinges on the lack of a distinction by the authors between a "romantic" and a "sexual" relationship. The terms are not interchangeable. Euphemisms are great in love songs, but are perhaps not as useful in formal studies of sexual relationships that include long-term pairings and opportunistic copulations. The first verse of the 1986 song "Lady in Red," written and performed by Chris de Burgh, explains it very well:

> "*I've never seen so many men ask you if you wanted to dance, looking for a little romance, given half a chance.*"

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If men benefit more, should women demand more? A commentary on relationship dependence and mate selectivity

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Abstract

Wahring et al. argue that men are more dependent than women on romantic relationships for emotional support and intimacy. We propose a testable implication of this asymmetry: if women benefit less from relationships, they should be choosier about entering them. Evidence from personality and dyadic studies supports this prediction and suggests productive extensions of the authors' framework.

The authors convincingly argue that romantic relationships are more desired by men than by women. A testable implication of their account is that women should be more demanding than men when specifying the minimal characteristics of a satisfactory mate: if men benefit more than women from a relationship, then men would reasonably be quicker than women to accept a mate with fewer desirable features.

Results from existing studies support this possibility. For example, a classic 37-culture study of more than 9,000 individuals found that women were more prone than men to characterize elements of the 18-item list of features of a mate as "indispensable" (Buss et al., 1990). One potential interpretation of this result is that, because females derive less benefit from heterosexual relationships than males do, they may be more inclined to seek aspirational matches – what we refer to as "female pickiness." An alternative explanation is that females are, on average, simply better romantic partners than are males. Here, females insisting on higher standards than males may reflect instead that, for example, the median female is a better relationship partner than is the median male, and thus that females seeking partners of equal quality will need to reject a disproportionately high proportion of the male population.

We see both of these possibilities as equally consistent with the target article: Wahring and colleagues compellingly argue that males derive more benefit from romantic relationships than females, but this could plausibly reflect extra-relationship circumstances of males (e.g., fewer close friends), within-relationship dynamics (superior average female performance as a relationship partner), or some combination of the two.

To the best of our knowledge, thorough explorations of the "female superiority" possibility remain to be performed. Existing research suggests that any plausible version of this account is unlikely to be simple. For example, while the elevated average female scores on agreeableness points to them being comparatively desirable as romantic partners relative to men, the elevated female scores on neuroticism point in the opposite direction (Weisberg et al., 2011). Future work might attempt a comprehensive integration across the various characteristics that make one a desirable partner alongside studies of existing gender differences in those characteristics to evaluate how average gender differences across various traits do or do not help to explain the general observations of the target article. Barring this, however, studies of existing couples may be informative: previous research has found that whereas men and women showed similar standards in their relationships, women were better at meeting the man's standards than men were at meeting the woman's (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). This points to "female superiority" as a live possibility accounting for elevated female standards.

However, "female pickiness" has its own line of support from studies of ideal partner personality. Heterosexual singles of both genders seek partners with superior traits – that is, higher scores in socially desirable directions – relative to their own self-reported personality traits. But a recent four-culture study found this tendency to be roughly twice as pronounced in females as in males (Liu et al., 2018).

One interpretive challenge is that genders plausibly differ in their degree of overstating their own positive qualities. Such differences appear unlikely to be large and are likely nuanced by features of the traits in question (such as their reflection of agentic or communal themes; Paulhus & John, 1998). Nevertheless, men and women engaging in the same degree of aspirational mating with respect to personality will still plausibly differ, due to gender differences in self-enhancement, in the size of the discrepancy between their self-rating and their characterization of their ideal partner's characteristics. Specifically, this discrepancy may appear smaller in men if they are more prone than women to overstate their levels of the characteristics in question.

However, studies whose methods escape this particular concern still point to elevated female pickiness: women have been observed to engage in comparatively more aspirational mating with respect to personality than men even when the participant's own personality is indicated not by self-report but by ratings provided by their partner or by independent observers (Botwin et al., 1997).

In sum, studies of existing couples and of ideal partner preferences suggest that women may impose higher thresholds for partner acceptability due to both of the channels suggested above: females are, on average, plausibly superior relationship partners to males, and the lesser benefits females derive from heterosexual relationships mean females are, beyond their superiority as partners, plausibly pickier than males. This dual-path account aligns with the core claim of the target article: that men are more motivated to enter and maintain romantic relationships. If women

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require more from a relationship to justify their investment, then the observed gender gap in relationship motivation discussed by the target article may stem in part from these heightened thresholds.

These themes also point the way to promising extensions of the target article's framework. Wahring and colleagues note that their theory may not fully generalize beyond heterosexual relationships. Indeed, a large international study including participants of diverse sexual orientations found that while heterosexual women had higher expectations for their ideal partner's personality than heterosexual men did, this pattern did not hold across all groups: non-heterosexual women were not as uniformly demanding, and in some domains, non-heterosexual men had higher standards than heterosexual men (Valentova et al., 2016). These results suggest that gendered patterns of relationship motivation may interact with sexual orientation – and that ideal partner preferences may serve as a productive lens for both testing and refining the explanatory power of the target article's thesis across relational subtypes.

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The obsolete male and the mismatch in sexual desire

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Abstract

This commentary challenges the target article's sociocultural explanations for men's greater relationship investment, proposing instead that evolved sex differences in sexual desire, combined with societal changes in industrialized welfare states, better account for observed patterns. As traditional male contributions lose value and sex differences in sexual desire increase with age, men face diminishing relational prospects and greater costs from breakups.

The authors of the target article suggest that men typically want relationships more and end them less. They also argue that men benefit more from relationships and suffer more from breakups. We agree with the observations, but question the ultimate causes they propose. For example, it is stated that men "benefit more from having a romantic partner because their partner typically does most of the daily chores and activities at home, leaving men with fewer chores and more time for other, more enjoyable activities than when they are single". It is also suggested that positive influences on "men's mental and physical health … at least partially explain why men are less likely to end romantic relationships." We find it implausible that possible health benefits or relief from household chores affect present motivations for a relationship. For example, Raz-Yurovich, Okun, and Ben-Avi (2024) found that while housework may correspond to three hours per day for a family with children, the division of that time was unrelated to breakup probability. Moreover, the role of emotional support remains obscure because studies typically use items that ask about the amount received, not if it is too little, partnership status has very little effect, and the causal direction is indeterminable. Traits that cause subjective experiences of low support may also cause experiences and behaviors associated with poor health and relationships, for example.

Rather, we propose that the causes are likely to be found in the interaction between evolved sex differences and environmental conditions that have changed rapidly due to industrialization. This is based on an evolutionary perspective that is mentioned but not pursued in the target article, as well as on societal changes that were neither considered.

As predicted by parental investment theory and broader evolutionary selection pressures (Archer, 2019) substantial sex differences exist in personality traits, including interests and preferences (Lippa, 2010), which contribute to large outcome differences, in, for example, occupational choice (Stern & Madison, 2022; Stoet & Geary, 2022) and child care (Bleske-Rechek & Gunseor, 2021). Males are more able and willing to perform dangerous, unpleasant, and physically demanding tasks, even to the point of defending their spouse and family through aggression and deadly violence (Archer, 2019). Tasks that might be more palatable or feasible for men than for women include heavy and dangerous work (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015). Those types of skills are now less needed within families, as technological and regulatory changes have rerouted them to experts.

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Females typically desire a partner with a higher social status than themselves (Geary, Vigil, & Byrd-Craven, 2017). Social status is a reliable indicator of providing resources in competition, as well as genes that confer the same advantageous traits to offspring. For example, college women rated their minimum acceptance level of income for a husband at the 70th percentile, leaving only 30% of men eligible (Kenrick et al., 1990). This preference is reflected in the real-world pattern of males earning more than their female partners, while high-earning females are less likely to be partnered at all (Almås et al., 2020). The proportion of men who can match women in terms of education and income is dwindling (Stoet & Geary, 2020). This inevitably plays out in income, such that women earn at least as much as men per worked hour (Erosa, Fuster, & Restuccia, 2016).

Males typically have stronger and more frequent sexual desire across the lifespan, while females' sexual desire peaks around 30 and a steep decreasing trend starts at around 45 years of age (Santtila et al., 2008; Wieczorek et al., 2022). A longitudinal study showed that a decline in female sexual function with age was concurrent with menopausal stages and negatively correlated with both sex drive, sexual activity, and positive feelings for the partner (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Burger, 2001). Across 211 studies and more than half a million participants, the meta-analytical effect size of sex upon sex drive was 0.69 (Frankenbach et al., 2022), a pattern consistent across 53 nations (Lippa, 2009).

Romantic relationships are voluntary and shaped by perceived costs and benefits. These costs and benefits have always been asymmetrical across the sexes, especially in regard to sexuality and reproduction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). The contributions to a long-term relationship that males are typically better at providing are in very small demand in industrialized welfare states. With society's increasing provision of resources, leisure, safety, and security, and the average male's wealth, status, and other resources being comparable to those of the average woman's, the net benefit of a relationship might be limited or even negative to her. Sex differences in the speed of decline in sexual interest diminish males' potential contributions to their spouses' sexual fulfillment, while males' higher but unfulfilled desire may be an obstacle for partnership harmony and satisfaction (Santtila et al., 2008).

In summary, men risk losing something they find essential from a breakup, consistent with 59% of women but only 37% of men feeling that they could have a fully satisfying life as singles (Kaufman & Goldscheider, 2007), and perhaps related to men's higher propensity to experience a lack of meaning, depression, and even risk of suicide (Shaw et al., 2021). We propose this to be the main reason for the behavioral patterns that the target article attempts to explain. Indeed, men living with a partner have much more sexual activity than those who do not (Beutel, Stöbel-Richter, & Brähler, 2007, Fig. 2). A single male has statistically a small chance to find a partner, which decreases further with age. Middle age is also when parents become relieved of daily care for their children, reducing the demand in that domain as well. Hence, a much larger proportion of women seek divorce in middle age (Parker et al., 2022), leading to the high so-called gray divorce rate (Brown & Lin, 2022). Historical comparisons of trends in the variables discussed above would be useful to further evaluate our proposed pattern of causal relationships (cf. Larsen, 2024).

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Using self-determination theory to consider gender differences in the importance of romantic relationships

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Abstract

The target article points to evidence that romantic relationships fulfill men's intimacy needs more strongly than women's, concluding that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. In contrast, we use self-determination theory to highlight ways in which romantic relationships differentially affect women's and men's *non*-intimacy needs, arguing that this gender difference is more ambiguous.

According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), individual differences and contexts predict well-being by either supporting or thwarting people's ability to meet three core psychological needs – relatedness, autonomy, and competence. From this perspective, romantic relationships are particularly important for well-being because their interdependent nature makes partners especially dependent on one another to fulfill all three (Knee et al., 2013). In their target article, Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange focus almost exclusively on the extent to which romantic relationships are linked to men's versus women's needs for intimacy, i.e., relatedness needs. Although we largely agree with these arguments, we argue that relationships are more strongly linked to women's (versus men's) ability to meet their *autonomy* and *competence* needs, making the ultimate importance of such relationships to men versus women more ambiguous.

For example, several pieces of evidence suggest that men are more likely than women to offer support that *undermines* partner autonomy and competence. Using a daily diary study of different-sex couples, Neff and Karney (2005) demonstrated that, on days in which they experienced more (versus less) stress than usual, both men and women were equally likely to provide their partners with support; however, unlike women, men coupled such support with oppositional behaviors, like criticism, that likely undermine not only women's relatedness needs, but also their autonomy and competence needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Likewise, Hammond and Overall (2015) used a sample of different-sex couples engaging in discussions of personal goals to demonstrate that women who endorsed benevolent sexism were more likely to provide their male partners with relationship-oriented support, fulfilling their relatedness needs; in contrast, men who endorsed benevolent sexism were more likely to provide their female partners with dependency-oriented support, thwarting their competence.

As another, and more extreme, example, women are more likely than men to experience negative outcomes due to psychological and physical aggression. Although men and women perpetrate such aggression at similar rates (Straus, 2011; Straus & Michel-Smith, 2014; but see Archer, 2000), women's smaller physical stature and lower relative power make them susceptible to severe emotional and physical consequences (Hamby, 2016; Johnson, 2008). Indeed, such aggression is negatively associated with women's autonomy needs (Bengesai & Khan, 2021; Tenkorang, 2018). Although most literature focuses on women's autonomy serving as a protective factor against intimate partner violence, some scholars have argued that the association is likely bidirectional, leading to a feedback loop (Nikrouy, Mohammadi, & Samavi, 2025).

Perhaps most critically, partnered women spend more time on domestic work relevant to the relationship than their male partners. For instance, women play a larger role in raising the offspring that so commonly result from romantic relationships (Negraia, Augustine, & Prickett, 2018; Trivers, 1972), a difference that remains and may even strengthen following dissolution (Leopold, 2018). Furthermore, mothers spend significantly more time on housework per week ($M = 31.1$) than do fathers ($M = 21.0$), which can have lasting physiological impacts (Saxbe, Repetti, & Graesch, 2011). Although such increased responsibility may offer boosts to women's (versus men's) competence, time is a finite resource, and thus, such increased domesticity comes at the cost of autonomy and competence in other domains of life (e.g., non-romantic social relationships, work; Gray, Ozer, & Rosenthal, 2017).

Yet, despite these potential costs of intact relationships, there is also evidence that women may suffer more from relationship dissolution than do men. Wahring et al. highlight that men are more likely than women to suffer psychologically from dissolution due to the loss of intimacy. Nevertheless, this observed gender difference in psychological well-being is relatively short-lived; men often adapt quickly, experiencing levels of well-being, life satisfaction, and loneliness that are similar to women within 2–3 years of dissolution (Leopold, 2018). In contrast, women are more likely than men to suffer from financial challenges following dissolution (e.g., significant loss in household income, increased risk of poverty) that are more chronic, and thus, have negative impacts on their autonomy and competence needs for years to come (Leopold, 2018).

Wahring et al. argue with their title that "romantic relationships matter more to men than to women." If by "matter" they mean in a positive way, we might agree; they make a compelling case that romantic relationships better help men meet their relatedness needs. Nevertheless, relationships also have important implications for people's autonomy and competence needs, and as our few examples suggest, relationships can be a bigger threat to women's well-being than to men's. Given that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister et al., 2001), one might argue that romantic relationships matter more to women than to men.

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That said, it is important to clarify that the implications of romantic relationships for women's need fulfillment are not necessarily negative. Although some men are more likely to couple support with opposition, many do not; although some men engage in physical aggression, many others do not; and although women are burdened with more parenting and household responsibilities on average, there is tremendous variability in these differences. As others have argued, women's comparatively lower social and financial standing in society (see Eagly & Wood, 1999) makes them more dependent on their romantic partners for power and status compared to men (Budgeon, 2016). In other words, women may have more to lose *and* more to gain from romantic relationships.

Regardless of whether relationships matter more to men versus women, one thing is likely certain: the extent of their impact likely depends strongly on the quality of the relationship. Whereas a high-quality relationship enhances relatedness (perhaps more so for men) as well as competence and autonomy (perhaps more so for women), low-quality relationships undermine well-being for both. Given the highly contextual nature of relationship processes (McNulty, Meltzer, Neff, & Karney, 2021), future research may benefit from considering the ways in which gender, psychological fulfillment (relatedness, competence, and autonomy), and relationship quality interact to predict well-being.

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Sex and romance are close evolutionary bedfellows

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Abstract

Evolutionary theory supports the claim that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. Humans follow the general pattern of ardent males and coy females, but our mostly monogamous mating system means that sexual relationships generally are romantic. The decoupling of sex and romance may be a modern development that does not represent most of human evolutionary history.

We agree with the claim that romantic relationships are more important to men than to women, but we do not think this claim should be surprising to those familiar with evolutionary theory.

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Wahring et al. acknowledge the relevance of such ideas to their argument, specifically parental investment and sexual strategies theories, and we think the clearest support comes from considering humans in their comparative context.

If we replace the word "romantic" with "sexual," then common intuition would suggest that men are more sexual than women, and the cross-cultural evidence would support this view, as Wahring et al. explain. Indeed, across the majority of species, males are more sexual. As Darwin himself noted, "males of almost all animals [have] stronger passions than the females" and "the female . . . is less eager than the male" (Darwin, 2008). But humans are different from many mammals in their mating systems, in that we are relatively monogamous, and most sex occurs within the context of a pair-bonded relationship. Thus, human relationships tend to be simultaneously romantic *and* sexual. It is a mistake to separate these components or think of them as independent.

Nevertheless, human mating systems are not perfectly monogamous. As with most species, there is greater variance in male versus female reproductive success. A striking illustration of this is the fact that humans have twice as many female as male ancestors, as indicated by genetic variation in mtDNA and the Y chromosome (Wilder, Mobasher, & Hammer, 2004). This means that a given woman is more likely to leave descendants than a given man. Losing a partner could mean losing a man's only reproductive opportunity, as well as emotional support and social integration. We can now appreciate the dramatic repercussions if a man fails to form a romantic relationship, or if he loses one he is already in – genetic extinction.

In the modern world, a deeper asymmetry may have developed in how the relationship contributions of each sex are treated. Many things that men have traditionally provided, say safety and financial resources, have been externalised and are provided by the state or the market (think police, legal systems, and female labour participation). By contrast, the traditionally female emotional labour and caregiving have not been similarly commodified. As a result, after a breakup, women may still be able to access many of the tangible benefits a male partner provided, whereas what men lose is largely irreplaceable. This helps explain why the end of a romantic relationship may feel more like a total loss for men: it deprives them not only of intimacy and support but of something they cannot simply "buy back."

So if sex and romance are not independent, where then does the intuition that romance is feminine and sex is masculine come from? Probably it is from the distinction between "short-term" and "long-term" mating often used in evolutionary psychology under the framework of strategic pluralism mentioned in the target article. This distinction may be historically anomalous and evolutionarily misleading and be rather artificially derived from modern, Western populations where sex and romance have become somewhat decoupled. Across much of the world, and arguably for most of human evolution, they were closely linked: a sexual relationship *was* a romantic one. Supporting evidence comes from cross-cultural surveys of human mating, which show that high sociosexuality, such as interest in short-term relationships, is higher in economically developed countries (Schmitt, 2005; Lippa, 2009), which may be the most different from our ancestral past. The evidence that Wahring et al. review is all drawn from long-term relationships. Indeed, short-term relationships don't involve much romance, almost by definition.

What then of the commercials, magazines, or romantic comedies targeted towards women that emphasise romance that Wahring et al. present? These may have developed in modern societies where the link between romance and sex has loosened. Media solely focused on the sexual side (e.g., pornography) are overwhelmingly consumed by men, while media that focus on the romance are favoured by women. If, however, we survey the wider range of literature across cultures and history, we see that many men are the authors of the great works of literature about love: William Shakespeare, Vātsyāyana, Rabbie Burns, Leonard Cohen, Omar Kayyám, and so on. Yes, there are also many great female writers on love, but it should come as no surprise that men write deeply, profusely, and passionately about romantic love.

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Are men more dependent or more powerful than women?

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Abstract

Dependence varies with the balance of power between romantic partners, such that the partner who invests less holds greater power than the partner who invests more. Women's tendency to invest more emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in romantic relationships puts men in a position of greater power. Men's over-benefited or advantaged status makes them less dependent on romantic partners, not more.

What does it mean to be dependent? According to the target article, men are more dependent on romantic relationships than women because men need women to satisfy needs for intimacy/emotional connection more than women need men to satisfy those same needs. However, dependence is not solely determined by need satisfaction. It is also determined by the balance of power between

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partners – which is governed by the *comparative* investments each partner puts into meeting the other's needs.

Investments refer to physical, emotional, and psychological resources partners expend strengthening their relationship (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). For instance, Amelia increases her investment in her marriage each time she sets work aside to listen to Aiden's problems, discloses personal failings, forgives Aiden's chronic forgetfulness around household chores, and prioritizes alone time with Aiden over time with her family and friends (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Once expended, such investments cannot be recouped. They essentially function as sunk costs that psychologically attach Amelia to Aiden (Murray et al., 2009).

When partners are equally invested, romantic relationships benefit both men *and* women (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). However, through the socialization practices the target article reviews, women are conditioned to invest *more* in romantic relationships than men (Yang & Girgus, 2019). Women provide more emotional support to men than men provide to women (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013); women spend more time on household chores and childcare than men (Horne et al., 2018; Koster et al., 2022); women devote more cognitive resources to organizing family life than men (Daminger, 2019); women are more forgiving of men than men are of women (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008); women are more likely to acquiesce to men than men are to women (Impett & Peplau, 2003), and women are more willing than men to sacrifice career to better marital and family relationships (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2015; Villanueva-Moya & Expósito, 2023). Women also report feeling more invested in and being more committed to their current romantic relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003).

According to interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and the principle of least interest (Waller, 1938), dependence in a relationship reflects the balance of power between partners. The partner who is *less* invested in the relationship possesses *more* power in the relationship than the partner who is *more* invested (Vanderdrift, loerger, & Arriaga, 2019). Why? Because the *less* invested partner has less to lose, and therefore, the *more* invested partner needs to work harder to keep the *less* invested partner committed to the relationship (Righetti & Impett, 2017). In other words, to the extent that Amelia invests more in maintaining her marriage to Aiden than he invests, she traps herself in a position where she needs to keep investing in Aiden to try to leverage or increase his investment in her (Murray et al., 2009). Put in the language of dependence, as the more invested partner, Amelia is essentially more dependent on Aiden to keep up his end of the relationship bargain than he is dependent on her.

Therefore, women's greater emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investments in their romantic relationships relative to men put women in a less powerful, and thus more dependent, position relative to men (Felmlee, 1994). Women's greater dependence on men rather than vise versa is illustrated by four aspects of romantic relationship life.

First, men are more likely than women to behave as though their partner is expendable, suggesting that men actually feel less dependent than women in romantic relationships. For instance, relative to women, men perceive themselves as having more alternatives to their current relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003). In addition, when romantic partners are *less* physically attractive and potentially more expendable, men are less likely than women to stay sexually faithful (McNulty et al., 2018) and satisfied (Meltzer et al., 2014).

Second, women work harder than men to preserve their relationships when they are in jeopardy – labors that are more characteristic of those who feel less powerful/more dependent (Righetti & Impett, 2017). For instance, in romantic relationships, women more so than men continue to provide responsive support when it gets more difficult or costly to provide – as is the case when men are more stressed (Neff & Karney, 2005) or women themselves are more stressed (Bodenmann et al., 2015).

Third, as the more invested/less powerful partner, women are more dependent on men to change to better their own status than men are dependent on women to change. Illustrating men's advantaged status, men are more likely to see their partner as living up to their standards, whereas women are more likely to see men as falling short (Heyman et al., 2009; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Men are also more likely than women to see women's greater time spent on family/household maintenance as fair (Koster et al., 2022). In fact, men even use women's greater domestic labors as an opportunity to prioritize their own leisure (Kamp Dush, Yavorsky, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2018). Thus, in ongoing romantic relationships, men typically benefit from the status quo and seek to preserve their advantaged status (Christensen & Heavey, 1990) – making women the disadvantaged/dependent sex.

Finally, men are more likely than women to endorse beliefs about men and women in relationships that strengthen women's dependence on men. For instance, men score higher than women on benevolent sexism (Glick et al., 2004; Zhu & Chang, 2020), attesting to men's perception of themselves as the more powerful/less dependent partner. And men are more likely than women to become aggressive and hostile in situations that challenge their advantaged status, such as their partner trying to assert some semblance of power over them (Cross & Overall, 2019; Overall et al., 2016).

In conclusion, the target article is largely correct. Because men benefit so much from women's greater investments, men need romantic partners (women) more than women need romantic partners (men). However, men's greater "neediness" is more likely to make women more dependent on men than vise versa because tending to men's greater needs tips the relative balance of relationship power against women.

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Romantic relationships matter more to men than to women: Based on Darwinian gender differences of fitness-enhancing effects in having sexual partners

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Abstract

This commentary argues that the explanations for some important gender differences in romantic relationships offered in the target article are proximate instead of ultimate *à la* Mayr (1961). Combined with the ultimate ones based on Darwinian evolution, it offers a deeper understanding of the relevant factors. Other relevant factors include the higher availability of female prostitutes, cultural differences between the East and the West, and that women have menopause around the age of mid-40s.

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The target article (Wahring et al., abstract) proposes that, contrary to some prevailing beliefs, "relative to women: (a) men expect to obtain greater benefits from relationship formation and thus strive more strongly for a romantic partner, (b) men benefit more from romantic relationship involvement in terms of their mental and physical health, (c) men are less likely to initiate breakups, and (d) men suffer more from relationship dissolution." This commentary has no issues with these propositions, nor with its "theoretical explanations based on differences between men and women in the availability of social networks that provide intimacy and emotional support." Rather, it emphasizes the point that these explanations are "proximate" rather than "ultimate" explanations *à la* Mayr (1961). That they are proximate does not mean that it is not useful to discuss them in detail. However, the combination with the ultimate explanations will likely provide a deeper understanding of the relevant factors (see, e.g., Lira et al., 2024; Majorova, 2022; Zietsch et al., 2021).

The ultimate explanation this note emphasizes is the very big gender difference in cost/benefit ratios between men and women in reproductive fitness-enhancing effects of having sexual partners. This big gender difference is due to the fact that, while a man only needs a short time to pass on his genes through sexual interaction, a woman needs 9 months of gestation plus some years of nursing and caring to ensure the survival of the child. A surviving child carries 50% of genetic information each from its mother and father, but the father typically spends much less time and effort than the mother. Hence, there is big gender difference in the cost/benefit ratio. This big gender difference makes men and women, through natural selection, have big differences in their preferences and behaviors. These, in turn, have relevance to the major propositions of this target article. For example, this big gender difference directly makes "men benefit more from romantic relationship involvement," hence "men are less likely to initiate breakups," and "suffer more from relationship dissolution." In addition, it also helps to promote the evolution of factors, such as having a stronger sex drive, that make men "strive more strongly for a romantic partner," avoid breakups, etc., that enhance their fitness. Thus, the present commentary suggests that more emphasis should be placed on this ultimate explanation. However, a full examination is beyond the scope of this short commentary.

The target article does mention "parental investment and sexual strategies theory" (Wahring et al., sect. 2.1, para. 2; see also sect. 2.4), which is related to the big gender difference mentioned above. However, the target article treats this as a "perspective" explaining the propositions, but not at the level of an "ultimate" explanation *à la* Mayr (1961).

In addition to the emphasis on this ultimate explanation in terms of the big gender difference, this note also wishes to draw attention to several points below.

First, the target article proposes that the four important differences (a) to (d) (as outlined at the beginning of this commentary), "are primarily rooted in the broader notion that men, compared to women, depend more strongly on their romantic partners for emotional support and intimacy needs" (Wahring et al., sect. 6, para. 1). While this may be true for other forms of intimacy needs, for the intimacy need of sexual intercourse, the reverse may be true as female prostitutes are generally more available to satisfy men's needs here than male prostitutes for women's needs. The higher availability of female prostitutes is at least partly due to the higher sex drive of men in comparison to women.

Second, while the point that "Single men, for example, typically strive harder to initiate romantic relationships than single women do" (Wahring et al., sect. 1, para. 2) may be due to factors as explained in the target article and the ultimate explanation of this commentary, it could also be due to the social conditioning requiring men to be more active and women more passive, especially in countries with Eastern cultures. (See, e.g., Björkqvist, 2018; Cheong, 2020; Hyde, 1984; Qunying, 2007; Singh, 2024).

Third, does the fact that women have menopause around the age of their mid-40s, after which they are no longer reproductively active, while men can reproduce (with the help of women, of course) until a very old age, make important differences? This gender difference is due to the fact that babies need their mother to nurse and care for them for many years. Even if women have babies after their mid-40s, they may not have sufficiently long living years to care for them until reproductive ages. This was especially so during our long history of evolution, when life expectancy was much shorter than it is currently. On the other hand, while fathers' contributions are also useful to the survival of the children, they are not as essential as those of mothers. Thus, Darwinian evolution results in early menopause for women to allow them to concentrate on caring for their young children born earlier, instead of wasting resources on having more babies who are unlikely to survive long. Again, further studies are needed.

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Men's dependence in intimate relationships has broader harm beyond men's wellbeing

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Abstract;

We challenge the conclusion that "romantic relationships matter more to men than women" using ambivalent sexism theory and research. Men's dependence on women for intimacy and support has harmful consequences beyond men's wellbeing, including producing ideologies that sustain gender inequality and promote aggression toward women. Ignoring these broader consequences risks perpetuating gender roles that harm people regardless of their gender.

The target article argues that men's dependence on women for intimacy and support means "romantic relationships matter more to men than women." We draw attention to key literature missed by the target article to emphasize that men's dependence in intimate relationships also has broader harm by producing ideologies that sustain gender inequality and promote aggression toward women. Overlooking these wider gender-based processes will perpetuate rather than inspire change in gender roles that harm both men and women.

The target article ignores the most comprehensive theory of how gender shapes man-woman relationships, including why intimate relationships are central to men's wellbeing. Ambivalent sexism theory (AST; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001) details why men's dependence on women creates challenges for men. Men's dependence on women for intimacy and support conflicts with structural gender inequalities in which men hold greater economic and political power than women. The conflict between men's dependence in intimate relationships and structural power asymmetries produces two gender ideologies – benevolent and hostile sexism – that are present across the world (Zawisza et al., 2025). Critically, these ideologies represent distinct ways of managing dependence within intimate relationships, and thus are directly related to the wellbeing consequences of men's dependence on women, but have far broader consequences for men and women within and outside intimate relationships.

Gender ideologies that justify traditional gender roles are central to why intimate relationships are consequential for men's wellbeing. Benevolent sexism resolves the tension between dependence in intimate relationships and men's advantaged structural power by valuing differences between men and women and romanticizing traditional gender roles. Benevolent sexism emphasizes that women are warm, supportive caregivers whom men need for happy and complete lives, and so men, as competent, legitimate power holders, should protect and provide for women (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Benevolent sexism is central to Wharing et al.'s argument because these commonly-held beliefs explain why men often expect and receive more benefits from relationships (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Hammond & Overall, 2017; Overall & Hammond, 2026). For example, men higher in benevolent sexism experience greater wellbeing differences when partnered versus single (Waddell et al., 2019), and their goal to maintain satisfying relationships often reduces relationship conflict and enhances wellbeing for men and their women partners (Waddell et al., 2024, 2025).

Gender ideologies that emphasize "men need women's emotional support" have costs for women. An AST perspective is crucial because it elucidates that emphasizing men's dependence on women in intimate relationships contributes to the maintenance of gender inequalities. By prescribing different roles for men and women, benevolent sexism reinforces women's dependence on men as providers and protectors. For example, benevolent sexism promotes an imbalanced division of labor (Bareket et al., 2021; Zawisza et al., 2025), patronizing and restrictive support of women's personal and career goals (Hammond & Overall, 2015; Hideg & Shen, 2019), and opposition to women's reproductive rights (Osborne et al., 2022). Wharing et al.'s sole focus on men's dependence and well-being overlooks these broader costs – limits to women's personal success and freedom that harm women's wellbeing, maintain gender inequalities, and heighten women's dependence on men's structural power within relationships (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Zawisza et al., 2025).

Men's dependence on women also promotes hostile gender ideologies and aggression toward women. AST also highlights that men's dependence on women for love and support generates hostility when structural power asymmetries produce beliefs that women are competing for men's power. Hostile sexism involves fears that women will exploit men's dependence to control and manipulate men (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Men high in hostile sexism believe women cannot be trusted to provide genuine love and support (Fisher & Hammond, 2019), producing feelings of powerlessness that promote aggression toward women (Cross et al., 2019; Overall & Hammond, 2026). Men's hostile attitudes and gender-based aggression increase when men cannot form intimate relationships with women (Bosson et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2022). Men's hostile sexism also reliably predicts domestic violence (Agadullina et al., 2022; Gutierrez & Leaper, 2024) and aggression toward women in dating and marital relationships (Cross et al., 2017, 2019; Overall et al., 2011, 2021), especially when men feel they lack power to get their needs met in their relationship (Cross et al., 2019; Loveland & Raghavan, 2017; Overall et al., 2021; Whitaker, 2013).

Hostile gender ideologies and aggression harm men and especially women. Wharing et al. acknowledge that intimate partner violence contributes to why women may benefit less from relationships. However, they miss that gender-based violence stems from men's hostile reactions to dependence on women, which also contributes to their focus on men's wellbeing. By generating conflict and aggression in intimate relationships, hostile sexism erodes men's relationship and personal wellbeing (Cross & Overall, 2019; Waddell et al., 2024, 2025). More alarmingly, Wharing et al.'s presentation implies that the wellbeing consequences of men's dependence "matters more" than the consequences of violence for women, which causes obvious substantial physical and psychological harm to women. By downplaying the costs of intimate partner violence, the target article prioritizes men's outcomes while failing to appreciate

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that hostile reactions to men's dependence justify gender-based aggression and defend men's societal dominance (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Zawisza et al., 2025)

Solutions that focus only on men's dependence and wellbeing risk perpetuating gender roles. Wharing et al. recognize that challenging gender roles is necessary to reduce men's dependence on women by enabling men to seek support from more diverse support networks. But, beyond this claim, challenging gender roles is critical to reduce men's hostile reactions to dependence on women (e.g., hostile sexism, aggression) and address relationship processes that perpetuate gender inequality (e.g., restrictive roles for women and men). Overlooking these wider gender-based processes led Wharing et al. to propose fostering cross-gender friendships to enhance men's access to support. This proposed solution rehashes benevolent views of gender roles by continuing to place the burden of support on women. We emphasize the need for interventions to assist all people – regardless of gender – to mutually provide and benefit from support within intimate and non-intimate relationships.

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Sexual relationships matter more to men than to women

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Abstract

The authors argue that romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. They attribute this sex difference to men's greater dependence on their relationships for emotional intimacy and support. Although we resonate with their hypothesis and recognize the veracity of the evidence presented, we suggest that their model understates the role of sex differences in sexual motivation.

Why do men and women seek to form and maintain romantic relationships? Although men and women desire committed romantic partnerships to a similar degree, men have a stronger desire for sex than women do (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Peters, Maner, & Meltzer, 2025). Compared to women, men think about sex more, have more sexual fantasies, experience greater sexual desire, initiate sex more often, and are less willing to forgo sex (Baumeister, Catanese & Vohs, 2001). Given that most sex occurs in the context of long-term relationships (Wellings et al., 2006), relationships provide consistent access to a sexual partner. We propose that men's desire for consistent sex plays a substantial role in their initiation of, desire to maintain, and lower likelihood of dissolving romantic relationships, as well as their greater distress following dissolution.

Compared to partnered individuals, single individuals report less satisfaction with their sex lives and lower sexual frequency (Kislev, 2020). Moreover, single individuals who report less sexual satisfaction also report a stronger desire for a partner, a stronger desire to marry, and are less satisfied with singlehood (Park, Impett, & MacDonald, 2021). Thus, the desire for sex is one key reason that people enter relationships. Given men's high sexual motivation, men likely strive harder than women to find a relationship partner to fulfill their sexual needs.

Supporting this perspective, men tend to overperceive women's sexual interest (Haselton & Buss, 2000), which motivates approach behaviors during initial encounters such as speed dates (Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012). Men also report experiencing "love" at first sight more often than women do. Feelings of romantic love are unlikely to develop so quickly; thus, men's tendency to experience love at first sight likely reflects sexual attraction (Zsok et al., 2017). Men also typically confess love, commitment, and affection earlier than women do (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011), but those confessions may represent attempts to secure sexual access. In one study, 71% of men (versus 39% of women) reported intentionally deceiving a partner about their romantic feelings to secure sex (Buss, 2016). Thus, men may strive more strongly to initiate relationships, in part, to gain sexual access.

Once in a romantic relationship, men can benefit further from maintaining that relationship, ensuring consistent sexual access over time. Indeed, people rate faithfulness and a strong sex life as the two most important factors for a successful marriage, surpassing factors such as adequate income and shared interests (Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007). Given men's stronger sexual motivation, men may experience greater relational benefits than women from the consistent sexual need fulfillment a relationship provides. Supporting this, the association between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction is stronger for men than women (Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014), and changes in sexual frequency are associated with changes in relationship satisfaction for men but not for women (McNulty & Fisher, 2008).

Men's lower likelihood of initiating relationship dissolution may partly reflect anticipated loss of sexual access, as well as the benefits (e.g., psychological, health) of engaging in regular sex. This implies that if the relationship lacks regular or satisfying sexual activity, men may be more rather than less willing to terminate the relationship. Indeed, lower sexual frequency, more sexual problems, and the belief that one's sex life will not suffer or improve following breakup are associated with dissolution risk for men and women (Sprecher, 1994; Yabiku & Gager, 2009).

Relationship dissolution signifies the loss of sexual access, and for that reason, may be especially distressing for men. Indeed, men report more sexual frustration post-breakup than women do (DeLecce & Weisfeld, 2016). To restore sexual access, men may rekindle sexual relationships with ex-partners. In one study, approximately 27% of participants reported recent sex with an ex-partner (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Compared to women, men report greater receptivity to sex with an ex-partner regardless of who initiated the breakup (Moran, Wade, & Murray, 2020). Men also view their ex-partners more favorably than women do, and this is explained not only by social support from the ex-partner but *also* by men's more permissive sexual attitudes (Athenstaedt et al., 2020). Moreover, men report that staying friends with an ex-partner is more motivated by maintaining sexual access than women do. Of note, no sex differences emerged in emotional or support reasons for ex-partner friendship (Mogilski & Welling, 2017). Finally, men are more likely to report having sex with an ex-partner to satisfy their sexual needs than women are; no sex differences emerged in emotional reasons for sex with an ex-partner (Moran et al., 2020). Thus, men may be more distressed post-breakup than women due to a loss of sexual contact and thus engage in behaviors to restore that contact.

If sex differences in sexual motivation help explain why romantic relationships matter more to men than to women, individual differences should moderate this pattern. For instance, because those with more (versus less) unrestricted sociosexual orientations tend to pursue sex without emotional commitment (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), sexual motivation may drive pursuit and maintenance of relationships more strongly for unrestricted men than restricted men. Supporting this, high sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction buffer unrestricted individuals from relationship dissatisfaction (French, Altgelt, & Meltzer, 2019), and they report more desire for and actual sex with an ex-partner (Moran et al., 2024).

Sexual motivation should also be a stronger mechanism underlying relationship formation and maintenance among younger men (i.e., when sex is most strongly tied to reproductive success), while emotional support may be the primary mechanism operating among older men. Indeed, men and women report less sexual desire as they age (DeLamater & Sill, 2005), while reporting increases in support from close relationships (Schnittker, 2007). Moreover, ageing involves a motivational shift away from mate-

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seeking and toward mate-retention, positive emotional experiences, and close support networks (Carstensen, Mikels, & Mather, 2006; Neel et al., 2016).

Future research would benefit from systematically teasing apart the relative contributions of emotional support and sexual motivation mechanisms that underlie sex differences in relationship importance.

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Morality in romantic relationships

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Abstract

The beauty of the romantic relationship between men and women is not a matter of comparison. The aftermath is a natural and compassionate expression of agape. Friendship may be the gateway to romance. Theories of liking and courtship address the psychological paradigm of commitment to living together. Above all, the romance flourishes through culture, lifestyles, and the philosophy of life.

A romantic relationship is not just a mental construct based on a single factor but rather the outcome of multiple elements. It starts with physical attraction and peaks with emotional connection, with cognition acting as a catalyst, alongside sociocultural influences (reinforcement). In this study, three factors—romantic relationships, friendships, and long-term outcomes—were highlighted. Romance involves gestures and activities. Is a romantic relationship synonymous with love? No. Its primary purpose is sexual attraction. Sex is a biological drive that influences human motivation (Tollman & Diamond, 2001). Females are more susceptible to fluctuations at different life stages (Levine, 2003). Romance evolving into love, compared to a Gandharva marriage (a union based solely on mutual love and consent). A legally recognized live-in relationship, if the couple cohabitates as if married, is a form of Gandharva marriage. Parental and societal approval are merely social constructs. The hypothesis here is only a perceived truth. The models (Figures 1 & 2) developed by the authors may support a hypothesis without multicultural samples. Given the evolving lifestyle trends, all four conclusions of this research require a revisit for broader applicability.

Indians who experience love, engage in romance, and are committed to marriage (if possible) need to be guided by the principles of the soul that ignite love, shaping a life path known as marriage. Romantic life has limited space in reality. The quality of relationships has been explained Stervoa et al. (2021). The Indian philosophy of married life begins with emotions, feelings, and love. Divorce rates tend to be lower in this context. The divorce rate in India is approximately 1% while in Portugal 94 % (World Statistics 2020). The soul plays a vital role in life, even though it is invisible. Researchers and thinkers have validated this concept (Pride and Prejudice (Jane Austen, 1813), Romeo and Juliet (William Shakespeare, 1597), Abhigyan Shakuntalam (Kalidas, 5 CE), Collins, Welsh, and Furman (2009) on romantic relationships and erotic sexual encounters, Shulman, Davila, and Shachar-Shapira (2011), and Furman and Buhrmester (1992) on how age influences romantic relationships). The negative impacts of romantic relationships, such as violence (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Callahan et al., 2003; Fernandez & Fuertes, 2010; Viejo, 2014), are also noted. These are a few examples showing mixed findings about romantic life and reality. Further mixed outcomes are discussed in this research (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017b; Reis, 2021; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017a; Clark & Aragon, 2013) and many.

The Bhagwat Geeta advocated that love is life and romance is a reality. Why romance? Is it only conjugation or anything else? Maharishi Vatsayayan [thinker and author on *Kama* (*a sensual desire),* wrote *Kamasutra,* defined *in terms of purushurarth (*the power of humans). Romance is a gateway to Kama (sensual enjoyment). The other *purushurarths* are *Dharm* (religion), *Artha* (wealth), and *Moksha* (salvation). A complete human being means a balance between all four. This is a universal law of philosophy.

Romantic relationships are a universal truth that can be determined within the limits of value, culture, and ethics. The similar central issues addressed by researchers Roakach (2024) and Yamin (2023). The title of this research, "Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women," needed a revisit. Desire, appreciation, commitment, and trust are the key notions of romantic relationships. Realizations of honor should be between men and women when they recognize romance in their hearts. Calculation of benefits may come at the point of breakup or silent detachment. Heartbreaking events are not possible in terms of mathematics, but the degree of emotional trauma in either one or both depends on the involvement visualized in life. Can it be a mathematics of benefit? All psychological variables are scaled by nominal, ordinal, and interval scales. Aftermath depends on the only ratio scale. We may assume that stress is equivalent to benefit or loss, which is ignored in the ratio scale. Pareto equilibrium may help quantify a romantic relationship, where harm to others would be either minimal or zero, but either one may trigger severe. Clarissa Perry (2024)'s book "The Benefit of Taking a Romantic Relationship Assessment" has pointed out the positive reinforcement in the companionships. Positive reinforcement is only a feeling in this regard, not in material terms.

General adaptation syndrome (GAS) of Hans Selye's law may be suitable to generalize the impacts of romantic life and comparison. The action process is similar between a physical instrument and the elasticity of mental adaptation. The phases of mind sparking are generalized into three vertical stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Meditation and Yoga may heal mental damage. The subconscious mind of individuals is the power of all shortcuts to negative things, such as jealousy, anger, and hatred. High dominance is a high-stress load that leads to mental pressure. Loading of mental pressure and failure to manage may assume a degree of benefit/ loss, but not in terms of quantity.

Universal statements are not feasible. One assumption that required re-examination is the devotion of time during the transition from friendship to romance, the mental investment in trust, and the feeling of love, all of which should be free of selfish motives. The aftermath is impossible without this. Three factors would negate this condition: time, money, and emotional attachment to a life settlement during the romantic relationship period. Social desirability factors can sometimes serve as a distorted reflection, but as social scenarios change, youth are disregarding them while forging their paths in life. Live-in relationships exemplify this, where the meaning of life is a commercial product, engaged solely in the concepts of usage and disposal, with parenting being of little concern. Sharing and caring dominate without any future security or objectives. Such forms of romance are legally recognized worldwide; however, personal and social losses can be significant in the end. Vigilance and awareness are essential for such relationships.

In conclusion, friendships and romantic relationships are always good conditions for commitment, and trust must be high. The aftermath is like "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," a comment on the reality of life, thinks Shakespeare in Hamlet.

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The costs and rewards of men's romantic dependence: A gendered perspective

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Abstract

This commentary applies a structural, gender-informed lens to interpret men's romantic dependence. Gendered arrangements reward masculine conformity and discourage vulnerability, thereby limiting men's emotional reciprocity and increasing their reliance on women for intimacy. This perspective reframes romantic dependence as a product of broader social conditions, broadening the focus from individual limitations to systemic dynamics shaping relationships.

Wahring et al. argue that men are more dependent on romantic relationships than women due to limited alternative sources of intimacy and support. Although their analysis advances relationship science by attending to how relational processes shape individual well-being (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017), it remains incomplete without an intergroup perspective – one that considers how gendered arrangements shape relational patterns (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Bosson, Buckner, & Vandello, 2022; Rudman & Glick, 2021) and implicate men within broader systems of gender (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Graso & Reynolds, 2024).

This commentary builds on their account by offering a cost-benefit analysis of men's relational dependence, focusing on how masculine norms and associated gendered prejudices spill over into relationships, often at men's detriment. In tandem, social motivational rewards for conforming to traditional masculinity help sustain these dynamics, despite their relational costs.

Gender as an intergroup construct

The target article frames men's dependence as a product of socialization and biology but underplays its roots in gendered power structures (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ridgeway & Correll, 2016). Men's reliance on women is not just about access to intimacy or social support; it reflects broader structural arrangements that organize gendered life (Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Schmader & Nater, 2025). Unlike other intergroup contexts (e.g., race, ethnicity), gender relations uniquely combine unequal power with mutual dependence (Rudman & Glick, 2021). Patriarchy positions men as dominant

(Buss, 1996; Sidanius et al., 2018), yet men and women remain interdependent for reproduction, intimacy, and culturally prescribed roles (Wood & Eagly, 2002).

Gendered expectations are embedded across domains (Bareket & Fiske, 2023), from workplace interactions to romantic relationships. These structures persist not only through oppression but also via cooperation that rewards conformity and penalizes deviation (Jackman, 1994; Rudman et al., 2012). Because many gendered arrangements feel cooperative, familiar, or rewarding, they can appear natural or desirable (Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013; Jost & Kay, 2005; Kray et al., 2017), reinforcing the status quo amid cultural shifts toward equality (England, Levine & Mishel, 2020).

The costs of men's romantic dependence

The authors (partially) attribute men's vulnerability to relationship dissolution to their heavy reliance on romantic partners for emotional support. However, emotional support presumes emotional sharing, which many men are socially discouraged from engaging in (Eagly et al., 2020), even with close family (Cherry & Gerstein, 2021). Masculine norms that valorize self-sufficiency, stoicism, and control constrain men's willingness and ability to express vulnerability – key to emotional reciprocity – and are linked to avoidant coping, reluctance to seek help, and poor relationship outcomes (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Levant, 2017; for a meta-analysis, see Wong et al., 2017). When masculinity is threatened, men often respond with stress and defensiveness, further distancing themselves emotionally and undermining intimacy (for reviews, see Vandello, Bosson, & Lawler, 2019; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). The result is a relational paradox: men rely on partners for emotional support while being constrained from fully engaging in the mutuality such support requires. This mismatch creates intimacy asymmetries and communication barriers, increasing dependence while eroding relationship quality (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2018; Nielson et al., 2022).

Societal expectations also shape men's attitudes toward romantic partners and women more broadly, often with harmful consequences. Gendered prejudice, in both hostile and benevolent forms (Glick & Fiske, 2001), undermines relational dynamics (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Hammond & Overall, 2017). Hostile sexism, marked by antagonism toward women who challenge traditional roles, is destructive for men in intimate relationships – fostering mistrust, conflict, and emotional withdrawal. Benevolent sexism, which idealizes women as pure and nurturing, deepens men's emotional dependence on women while discouraging egalitarian partnerships. Although benevolent sexism may foster relational harmony within traditional frameworks ("getting along to go along"), it also imposes rigid expectations (e.g., men must protect or provide) and legitimizes unequal emotional labor (e.g., women should support their men partners; Ferrara & Vergara, 2024).

Men's emotional support deficits reflect a broader disengagement from communal roles such as caregiving and cooperation, contributing to isolation and undermining well-being (for reviews, Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015). Yet when men do engage communally (e.g., by expressing vulnerability, providing caregiving), they often face social penalties, such as being seen as weak, less competent, or unmasculine (e.g., Neuenswander, Haines, & Stroessner, 2023; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; for reviews, see Moss-Racusin, 2014; Rudman et al., 2012).

The benefits of romantic dependence and gendered expectations

Men's dependence on relationships represents more than a stable snapshot of socialization processes; it is actively and dynamically reinforced by gender norms. Traditional masculinity discourages emotional expression while granting men social status for conforming to conventional roles, even when these roles limit emotional intimacy (Levant, 2017). Although displaying behaviors that challenge such norms can trigger social backlash (Moss-Racusin, 2014), role-consistent behaviors activate motivational and neuronal systems associated with reward learning (Mokady & Reggev, 2022; Reggev, Chowdhary, & Mitchell, 2021). When traditional interactions are experienced as more rewarding, they are remembered, repeated, and reinforced over time, creating a self-sustaining cycle of dependence (Kadwe et al., 2022; Reggev, 2024; Saguy, Reifen-Tagar, & Joel, 2021).

The target article also frames men's dependence as largely self-serving, emphasizing the benefits they derive from romantic partners such as improved health and domestic support. However, research shows egalitarian partnerships yield greater satisfaction for both partners (Carlson, Hanson, & Fitzroy, 2016; Rudman & Phelan, 2007). Dependence is not just about what men gain; it also constrains heterosexual men's capacity to support their women partners and build mutual intimacy (Clark & Mils, 1993; Muise & Impett, 2015). Responsive listening and mutual support facilitate dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kuhn et al., 2018). One-sided dependence thus weakens the relationship itself, depriving both partners of the intrinsic rewards of giving (Crocker, Canevello, & Brown, 2017; Le et al., 2012).

To conclude, Wahring et al. rightly highlight men's romantic dependence but understate the social-psychological forces that sustain this dependence and its associated costs and benefits. Integrating a perspective that accounts for gendered power structures and stereotype reinforcement offers a fuller understanding of why these dynamics persist.

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Inconsistent use of evolutionary frameworks in accounts of romantic relationships

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Abstract

Wahring et al. describe that romantic relationships are more important for men than for women, drawing also on evolutionary theory. We suggest that (1) the proposed link between short-term mating motivation and relationship initiation requires clarification, and (2) the use of sexual strategies theory and strategic pluralism theory is inconsistent. Addressing these issues could improve evolutionary models of romantic relationships.

In their target article, Wahring et al. provide interesting lines of argumentation to show that long-term romantic relationships are more important for men than for women across different stages of a relationship. As part of their framework, they also apply evolutionary perspectives, namely the sexual strategies theory (SST: Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and strategic pluralism theory (SPT: Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). While we do not object to evolutionary analyses of human behavior, we argue that Wahring et al. apply these approaches in a selective and contradictory way.

First, Wahring et al. discuss the explanatory value of SST for their framework. SST predicts a stronger urge towards short-term mating and multiple sexual partners for men compared to women. This prediction follows from parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972). Because women invest more energy in offspring through pregnancy and nursing and have only limited and large gametes, they are also expected to be choosier than males when selecting a partner (Trivers, 1972). As such, women are expected to be more reluctant to engage in short-term matings compared to men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Interestingly, Wahring et al. embrace this notion to explain why men are more likely to initiate romantic relationships. According to the authors, "a stronger sex drive among men could explain the relatively greater tendency [. . .] to pursue and initiate sex with romantic partners." Here, they refer to the fact that men are more likely to initiate short-term matings. However, short-term matings are defined by their absence of emotional commitment and their short timeframe (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and are driven by lust and attraction (Fisher, 1998). Moreover, SST predicts that men with short-term mating motivation will avoid women that extract commitment and investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This seems to be in stark contrast with the application of SST by Wahring et al., where the authors propose short-term mating proclivity in men as a driver to engage in long-term romantic relationships characterized by emotional attachments. Thus, the authors apply SST in such a way that men's motivation to engage in casual sexual relationships ends up as the causative reason for the formation of long-term, emotionally committed romantic relationships. This raises the question of why the authors invoke an explanation that explicitly distinguishes between short- and long-term mating motivations and how they define these concepts in the first place.

We propose an alternative explanation, which to some extent aligns with sexual strategies theory but places more emphasis on the risk of relationship initiation for women, regardless of a short-term or long-term mating context. As mentioned before, because of their greater parental investment in offspring, women are expected to be choosier than men (Trivers, 1972). To avoid premature investment in partners unlikely to provide support for offspring, women may rely on cognitive mechanisms that serve as safeguards (Haselton, 2003; Trivers, 1972). An example is the sexual underperception bias that has been observed in women. Women often underperceive romantic interest from men (Bendixen, 2014; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012), while men often overperceive romantic interest from women (Haselton, 2003; Samara, Roth, & Kret, 2021). As a result of this underperception bias, women may keep a greater emotional or physical distance from men expressing interest. Conversely, their overperception bias could be a proximate explanation for the fact that men are more likely to initiate relationships, without necessarily attributing this to distinct short-term or long-term mating strategies. And again, conversely, at an ultimate level, women are expected to be more careful to initiate relationships in general, given that relationships (both short- and long-term) are associated with lust and attraction (Fisher, 1998) and thus risk of pregnancy.

Turning to relationship dissolution, Wahring et al. highlight a contradiction between SST and the literature on romantic relationships: while SST suggests that women are motivated to adopt long-term mating strategies, empirical evidence shows that women are more likely than men to initiate breakups. To resolve this contradiction, the authors turn to SPT. This framework emphasizes the context-dependence of mating strategies and proposes that individuals flexibly adjust their behavior based on social, environmental, and biological factors (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). In this light, they argue that modern women, due to increased financial autonomy, are now more able to end unsatisfying relationships without depending on men for economic support. However, this shift in framing is problematic, as SST and SPT are not easily reconcilable; they generate different predictions about the flexibility and origins of sex differences

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(Bleske & Buss, 2000). By using SST to explain why men are more likely to initiate relationships and SPT to explain why women are more likely to end them, the authors present an inconsistent evolutionary account. For example, if women's financial independence nowadays enables greater freedom in ending relationships, then similar shifts, such as access to contraception, should also reduce the costs associated with short-term mating. This, in turn, would diminish sex differences in mating motivation. Yet, the authors frame short-term mating as the key difference underlying male relationship initiation, without explicitly considering context-dependence. In sum, their evolutionary account remains inconclusive: do they believe sex differences in mating are biologically hard-wired, or are they contextually flexible as SPT would suggest?

To conclude, even though Wahring et al. report an interesting sex difference in the importance of romantic relationships, we believe that inconsistencies remain in their application of evolutionary explanations for this difference. If clarified, this would strengthen their framework by also providing more convincing ultimate explanations underlying sex differences in relationship formation and maintenance. In our opinion, crucial additions to strengthen the evolutionary component of the present framework would be (1) to differentiate more clearly between short-term and long-term relationships, (2) to differentiate between motivations to initiate romantic relationships (or just matings) and those to maintain these relationships, (3) to specify under which conditions SST and SPT would apply, (4) to consider whether both theories are reconcilable at all, and (5) to demonstrate whether the observed empirical patterns align with predictions following from SST and SPT.

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Synthetic love in the digital age: AI-mediated emotional investment and gendered romantic dependence

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Abstract

Digital technology has transformed romantic relationships, influencing men's and women's emotional investment differently. Drawing on "Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women," this commentary examines how artificial intelligence (AI)-driven dating, social and virtual platforms reshape partner search and mourning. It analyses synthetic love-from digital mediation to AI companions-arguing that these technologies may reinforce male emotional dependency and heighten post-breakup vulnerability.

In the study by Wahring, Simpson, & Van Lange, this challenges the widespread belief in Britain that romantic relationships are more central to men's lives than women's, and that women are more romantic. Although this perception is widely shared, the authors propose that men expect greater enjoyment from a relationship; (b) benefit more emotionally and physically from relationships; (c) are less likely to initiate breakups; and (d) experience greater distress upon breaking up. To explain these discrepancies, Wahring et al. suggest that men seek more emotional support through their romantic relationships rather than through extensive social networks for this purpose. These differences affect relationship dynamics and negatively impact the stability of friendships, particularly for women. The study then analyses the implications

of these observations to better understand the dynamics of relationships, including those between men.

In an era when technology increasingly permeates every aspect of our lives, the concept of **Synthetic Love** emerges as a groundbreaking exploration of emotional connections with artificial intelligence (AI) systems. This idea challenges traditional notions of love and relationships, inviting us to consider the potential benefits and risks of forming emotional bonds with virtual companions.

Aspect	Traditional Love	Synthetic Love
Definition	An affective bond grounded in human interactions, emotions, and reciprocity.	An emotional connection with AI entities designed to provide emotional support and simulate romantic feelings.
Nature of the connection	Physical and emotional interactions between two people, with a biological and psychological basis.	Technology-mediated relationships in which AI adapts its behavior to meet user's needs.
Impact on human relationships	Encourages social connection and long-term relationship building, but also entails interpersonal challenges.	It could diminish human interaction and foster isolation, thereby redefining the nature of love.
Gender differences	Gender norms influence how men and women perceive and engage in love.	Men may prefer AI that offers stimulation or adventure, while women may seek relationships grounded in emotional connection.
Emotional investment and psychological effects	It requires time, commitment, and emotional vulnerability. It can generate well-being, but also anxiety and suffering.	It may alleviate loneliness and emotional stress, but also create dependency and disconnection from the real world.
Technological capabilities and ethical considerations	It does not rely on technology; instead, it relies on communication, empathy, and coexistence.	AI can learn emotional patterns and respond in a personalized way, but this raises ethical dilemmas about the authenticity of love.
Practical applications and risks	It offers emotional stability and companionship, but can also lead to conflict, breakups, and emotional suffering.	It can be an alternative to loneliness and provide emotional support, but it raises concerns about privacy, dependency, and the erosion of human relationships.

Digitalization has significantly transformed the dynamics of romantic relationships, introducing new challenges and opportunities in matchmaking, emotional management, and the breakup process. Dating apps employ AI algorithms to optimize matches, while AI platforms offer emotional support in times of crisis. However, hyperconnectivity can also lead to emotional dependency and make recovering from breakups difficult. The following table summarizes the main impacts of digitalization on romantic relationships.

Aspect	Description
Matchmaking and compatibility algorithms	Apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge employ AI-based compatibility algorithms to analyze user data and suggest matches, thereby influencing gender dynamics in contemporary relationships.
AI platforms and emotional support	AI platforms and chatbots such as Replika provide companionship and emotional support, reshaping relationship, and breakup management, particularly for men, who exhibit greater emotional reliance on romantic partnerships.
Hyperconnectivity and romantic relationships	Social media intensify partner exposure, reinforcing bonds but also provoking jealousy, emotional dependence, and overexposure, especially in emotionally insecure relationships.
Difficulty in emotional disconnection	The ease of digital communication with an ex-partner can prolong mourning. In relationships with insecure attachment, technology makes it difficult to breakup for good, keeping the connection open across multiple platforms.

Dating algorithms can amplify gender differences by prioritizing the visibility of profiles with greater engagement, favoring the most popular and marginalizing other users. Since men tend to be more active in matchmaking, algorithms reinforce their tendency toward greater investment, while women may be more selective. Moreover, platforms such as Bumble, on which only women initiate conversations, accentuate this dynamic. As a result, AI not only redefines matchmaking but also influences gendered interactions, raising questions about whether it balances or amplifies differences in emotional investment.

Technology has evolved from a communication tool within romantic relationships to a source of emotional support. AI platforms and chatbots, such as Replika, offer companionship and aid in emotional regulation, particularly after breakups. Men, who tend to be more emotionally dependent on their partners, may increasingly turn to these tools or online therapy services such as BetterHelp and Talkspace. However, reliance on digital support can risk fostering emotional dependency.

Social media intensifies hyperconnectivity, reinforcing bonds but also generating jealousy, dependence, and overexposure. Post-breakup, the persistent digital presence of an ex-partner – through photographs, memories, and updates – can complicate mourning. Digital stalking and algorithm-driven content exacerbate emotional distress and hinder recovery. Men may experience greater difficulty detaching due to limited support networks and increased emotional reliance.

Applications such as Breakup Boss and features such as Facebook's "Unfollow" aim to reduce digital exposure and aid emotional recovery. Nevertheless, technology may prolong distress in individuals heavily dependent on their past relationships for emotional well-being.

While digitalization enables broader emotional support access, it may also intensify existing gender dynamics, such as men's dependence and women's selectivity, through compatibility algorithms and constant connectivity. AI relationships, lacking reciprocity, may distort expectations of human emotional support and reduce capacity for genuine interpersonal bonding.

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The rise of synthetic love could disrupt traditional relationship formation and impact family and social structures. For insecure attachments, digital tools may reinforce unhealthy emotional cycles and obstruct closure.

This context raises legal and ethical concerns. AI-mediated relationships lack regulatory frameworks governing emotional boundaries, privacy, and data ownership. Emotional manipulation and exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities by advanced AI systems necessitate transparent and ethical regulation. Future research must address the implications of AI on intimacy, while legal standards must ensure a balance between innovation and emotional well-being.

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Gender differences in partner and ex-partner dreams

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Abstract

The dream studies support the notion that partner dreams are more negatively toned in women compared to men, indicating that women do not profit as much from partnerships as men. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the consequences of break-ups might be more stressful for women than men on an emotional level, contrary to the claim in the target article.

The authors of the target article pointed out that using self-reports, subjective perceptions of attitudes regarding romantic or sexual topics might not be free from biases, for example, shaped by gender stereotypes or cultural background. Hence, the question arises whether there are other approaches for investigating the question of whether romantic relationships matter more to men than to women. As dream content reflects waking life, the so-called continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2018), especially issues close to the heart (Malinowski & Horton, 2014), one would expect that romantic topics and even relationship break-ups show up in dreams. Indeed, a variety of studies (Schredl et al., 2020; Schredl & Reinhard, 2012; Selterman & Drigotas, 2009) showed that romantic partners are present in 20% to 30% of the dreams remembered by the dreamer. The empirical evidence for the continuity hypothesis was also provided for other topics such as music (Schredl et al., 2015), media consumption (Moverley, Schredl, & Göritz, 2018), or sports (Erlacher & Schredl, 2010). Another example is the "parental investment theory" mentioned in the target article; mothers tend to dream significantly more often about their children than fathers: About 20% of the remembered dreams of mothers included their own children compared to about 13% in the dreams of fathers (Schredl et al., 2021). In the following, dream studies investigating the research questions addressed in the target article will be reviewed.

If romantic relationships matter more to men compared to women, one would expect that men dream more often about their partners compared to women. Indeed, one study (Schredl et al., 2020) found a small but significant difference (effect size = 0.144) regarding partner dream percentage (see Table 1). The mean differences in partner dream frequency were different after controlling for age as the men were significantly older than women (58.85 ± 13.70 yrs. vs. 50.48 ± 12.75 yrs.) and the partner dream frequency decreased with age ($r = -.207$, $p < .0001$). Whereas one study in young students (Schredl et al., 2009) showed an even larger effect size ($d = 1.158$) with men reporting more partner dreams compared to women, two other studies in adolescents (Schredl, 2024) and young adults (Schredl, 2001) did not find gender differences. Given the large sample size and the broad age range of the Schredl et al. (2020) study, the dream studies seem to support the notion that romantic relationships do matter more to men than to women.

The stronger striving of men for a partnership should reflect in a higher percentage of partner dreams in singles, that is, dreaming of having a partnership. However, the studies (Schredl, 2001, 2024; Schredl et al., 2020) looking at the gender difference in partner dream frequency in persons without a partnership did not find any gender difference (see also Table 1). On the other hand, single men reported more often erotic dreams compared to single women, whereas there was no gender difference in erotic dream frequency in persons with stable partnerships (Schredl, 2001), indicating that one motivation for starting a relationship mentioned in the target article (higher sexual motivation in men) is reflected in dreams. The gender difference in emotional tone of partner dreams in singles (see Table 1) supports the notion that men expect the relationship to have more benefits for them compared to women.

The benefits of a romantic relationship should – according to the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2018) – be reflected by more positive partner dreams. Men reported on average more positively toned partner dreams compared to women (see Table 1). This finding supports the hypothesis formulated in the target article that men gain more mental and physical health benefits from romantic relationships than women. Negative emotions related to interactions with the partner in the dream, on the other hand, were more prominent in women compared to men (see Table 2). In a similar way, Selterman, Apetroaia, and Waters (2012) reported that the attachment toward the partner in the dream was less secure in women compared to men. This might reflect the findings reported in the target article that women experience emotional support in romantic relationships less often than men. Dream studies corroborate that romantic relationships might provide more benefits for men compared to women on a subjective level.

One feature that might be related to the emotional quality of the relationship dissolution might be emotional tone of ex-partner dreams. In both studies (Schredl et al., 2020; Schredl &

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Table 1 (Schredl). Frequency and emotions of partner dreams

Group	Variable	Women	Men	Statistical test[1]
Participants in partnership	Partner dream frequency	24.25% ± 23.01% ($N = 639$)	23.62% ± 21.26% ($N = 532$)	♂ > ♀ ($\chi^2 = 6.0$, $p = .0142$)
	Dream emotions	0.61 ± 0.93 ($N = 540$)	0.90 ± 0.83 ($N = 438$)	♂ > ♀ ($\chi^2 = 25.9$, $p < .0001$)
Singles	Partner dream frequency	16.01% ± 23.02% ($N = 321$)	15.09% ± 22.45% ($N = 203$)	♂ = ♀ ($\chi^2 = 0.2$, $p = .6727$)
	Dream emotions	0.32 ± 1.03 ($N = 164$)	0.64 ± 1.05 ($N = 101$)	♂ > ♀ ($\chi^2 = 6.8$, $p = .0092$)

Note: Data from Schredl et al. (2020), five-point emotional scale ranging from −2 to +2, [1]Ordinal regression with age and gender, gender effect depicted (for the frequency data the categorized variable was used).

Table 2 (Schredl). Emotions of interactions with partners and ex-partners in dreams

Interaction with	Variable	Women	Men	Statistical test[1]
Partner	Negative emotions	71/274 ≙ 25.91%	1/22 ≙ 4.55%	♀ > ♂ ($t = 1.9$, $p = .0893$)
	Positive emotions	39/274 ≙ 14.23%	2/22 ≙ 9.09%	♀ = ♂ (not converging)
Ex-Partner	Negative emotions	39/74 ≙ 52.70%	1/9 ≙ 11.11%	♀ > ♂ ($t = 2.0$, $p = .0552$)
	Positive emotions	19/74 ≙ 25.91%	3/9 ≙ 33.33%	♀ = ♂ ($t = 0.5$, $p = .6556$)

Note: Data from Schredl and Wood (2021), [1]Mixed model analysis.

Wood, 2021), women tend to report more negatively toned ex-partner dreams than men – indicating that the psychological suffering might be more pronounced for women. Even in single case studies, the ex-partner's dreams of a female dreamer were mainly negatively toned (Schredl & Neuhäusler, 2019), whereas a male dreamer reported positive and negative emotions equally often in relationship to the ex-partner in his dreams (Schredl, 2011). These findings would support the hypothesis that women, on a psychological level, suffer more after relationship break-ups compared to men – even though they receive more emotional support in their social network (see target article).

To summarize, the findings regarding partner and ex-partner dreams provide a window into the emotional aspects of romantic partnerships and their break-ups and, thus, can complement the studies using self-reports and subjective perceptions of the waking state. One could argue that possible biases due to gender stereotypes and cultural backgrounds in regard to romantic relationships are not that pronounced as the task at hand is simply reporting a dream (or the frequency of a specific topic regarding all remembered dreams). The dream studies support the notion that partner dreams are more negatively toned in women compared to men, indicating that women do not profit as much from partnerships as men, especially in the emotion domain. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the consequences of break-ups might be more stressful for women than men on an emotional level, contrary to the claim in the target article. Researching partner and ex-partner dreams might help to understand the gender differences in relation to romantic relationships.

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Broader gender inequities shape why romantic relationships matter more to men than to women

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Abstract

Romantic relationships matter more for men's well-being than women's, a disparity rooted in broader gender inequity. Gender socialization and benevolent sexist ideologies set up romantic relationships to benefit men – socially, emotionally, and practically – while overburdening women. Recognizing the structural forces and broader attitudes sustaining these inequalities is essential to understanding – and ultimately addressing – gendered relationship dynamics.

Romantic relationships matter more for men's well-being than women's, partly because men rely more on their romantic partners for social and emotional support (Wahring, Simpson, & Van Lange). We agree with these central claims but argue that broader gender inequities inherent in patriarchal societies explain gender differences in the importance of romantic relationships for well-being. Man-woman romantic relationships offer men unique advantages, including access to women's domestic labor and emotional support. In contrast, women are socialized to invest more in relationships, often carrying the bulk of emotional and household responsibilities while receiving fewer benefits (e.g., sexual fulfillment) and greater risks (e.g., intimate partner violence) compared to men. We argue that highlighting broader gender dynamics offers critical insight into why romantic relationships matter more to men than women.

As the target article notes, men are socialized to have fewer outlets for social and emotional support, contributing to their greater emotional dependence on romantic partners. Social roles that discourage men from expressing emotion also encourage emotional support provision in women, reinforced by benevolent sexism that idealizes women as nurturing caregivers (Barreto & Doyle, 2023). Cross-cultural research supports these claims; men in patriarchal societies are worse at identifying and expressing emotions than men in feminine societies (Remondi et al., 2020). In contrast, media aimed at women portrays romantic love as essential to fulfillment (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002), socializing women to see relational investment as central to their identity. The same gendered structures that set up men's over-reliance on women for emotional support also underlie additional disparities in relationships that lead to greater benefits for men.

In man-woman romantic relationships, women often contribute more household labor than men (Dean, Churchill, & Ruppanner, 2022; Krstić et al., 2025; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich, & Voltmer, 2023; Robertson et al., 2019), a disparity that often intensifies following the transition to parenthood (Kamp Dush et al., 2018; Heffernan et al., 2025). By framing women's labor as an expression of love, benevolent sexism helps sustain structural inequalities in which women are expected to prioritize their relationships while men retain greater autonomy and status (Overall & Hammond, 2018). As a result, men often benefit from relationships without assuming the same costs, especially men higher in benevolent sexism (Hammond & Overall, 2015). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, women disproportionately took on household labor and childcare, while men spent more time on paid work and personal leisure (Del Boca et al., 2020; Waddell et al., 2021). In man-woman relationships, men, on average, have more leisure time than women, and there are gender differences in the *quality* of that leisure. Women are more likely to experience leisure that is fragmented by multitasking, interruptions, and feelings of guilt – a pattern that is particularly salient in countries with more traditional gender roles (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003). This gap narrows or even reverses in more egalitarian societies, where women report leisure that is at least as restorative as men's (Yerkes, Roeters, & Baxter, 2018). This reversal underscores that these inequalities are not inevitable but are shaped by gendered social structures. Disparities in both the quantity and quality of leisure may help explain gender differences in well-being, as higher-quality leisure is associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, and mortality (Fancourt et al., 2021). These patterns shift in singlehood – following the dissolution of a relationship, men spend more time on household chores and women spend less (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Gupta, 1999; Hewitt, Haynes, & Baxter, 2013). Having to take on responsibilities previously outsourced to their partner and having less leisure time could partially explain why men are less happy when they are single (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024; Kim, Park, & Kim, 2022) and therefore re-enter relationships more quickly than women (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). Together, these patterns suggest that structural gender inequities may help explain why men tend to (Kamp Dush et al., 2018) benefit more from romantic relationships, while women often bear greater responsibility, which can negatively impact their well-being.

The flip side of men benefiting more from romantic relationships is that women benefit less. Consider the domain of sexuality. The target article highlights sex as a key factor in men's dependence on

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romantic relationships; a dynamic that also reflects broader gender inequities. Sexual scripts frame men as assertive and entitled to express their sexual needs (Hanna-Walker et al., 2024; Wiederman, 2015), while framing women as sexually submissive and responsible for accommodating their partner's desires (Conroy, Krishnakumar, & Leone, 2015; Impett & Peplau, 2003). The heteronormativity theory of low sexual desire argues that women's lower desire in man-woman relationships reflects a structural response to gender inequities that prioritize men's pleasure and reinforce women's nurturant roles, domestic labor, and sexual objectification (van Anders et al., 2021). The same systems that position women in caregiving roles and responsible for the emotional and domestic labor, also inhibit women's sexual agency in relationships, contributing to gender differences in relationship benefits.

Women also face greater risks in romantic relationships than men. As the target article acknowledges, women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence, with one in three women globally experiencing it in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2024). Violence against women functions as a tool of patriarchal control, reinforcing gender hierarchies by punishing women who challenge men's dominance or deviate from traditional roles (Hearn & Whitehead, 2006). These gendered risks are another example of how broader gender inequities underlie why women and men differ in relationship well-being.

In closing, we argue that men's greater well-being from romantic relationships can be understood through the lens of structural gender inequities that shape emotional labor, domestic responsibilities, sexual dynamics, and safety. Recognizing the broader inequities underlying these differences is important given that gender-based attitudes, such as benevolent sexism, are often viewed positively (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2018), despite evidence of the costs (Alba, Cross, & Hammond, 2024). Viewing gender differences in the well-being benefits of romantic relationships through this lens highlights strategies for increasing gender parity in romantic relationships, including challenging restrictive gender roles, promoting equitable emotional and domestic labor, and expanding men's emotional networks beyond their romantic partners.

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Culture, not nature: How traditional masculinity shapes male attitudes toward relationships

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Abstract

Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange attribute men's increased involvement in romantic relationships to biological, evolutionary, and social mechanisms. We argue, however, that the effects they describe are not inherent but culturally constructed – emerging from socially reinforced manhood ideals and evolving gender norms. To support this position, we draw on recent empirical research on traditional masculinity, the manosphere, and incel subcultures.

The concept presented in the article is compelling, well-articulated, and thought-provoking. However, in our view – contrary to the authors' suggestions – it does not describe universal mechanisms of human behavior but rather reflects a specific socio-cultural and historical context. We believe that the behavioral patterns identified by the authors can be fully explained by cultural influences rather than biological or evolutionary factors.

A central premise of the article is that seeking emotional support constitutes a fundamental and self-evident motivation for forming close relationships. The authors claim that women, fulfilling this need through diverse social connections, are less dependent on romantic partnerships than men, who often struggle to express vulnerability outside of intimate relationships. While persuasive, this argument presupposes a universal emotional template that does not withstand historical or cross-cultural scrutiny. The expectation that romantic partnerships should serve as primary sources of emotional support is a relatively recent cultural development. For centuries, marriage primarily served economic, political, or social purposes, and emotional attachment was rarely regarded as a sufficient basis for creating romantic bonds (Coontz, 2006). It was not until the 17th century in Europe that cultural shifts began to elevate love as a legitimate foundation for marriage – and only in the 20th century did emotional closeness and mutual involvement become widely seen as essential to romantic relationships (Finkel, 2019; Giddens, 1992). As such, forming relationships primarily for emotional support and intimacy is a relatively new phenomenon, historically no older than approximately 150 years.

The dynamics described in the article are not only historically situated but also deeply embedded in cultural frameworks. To understand the motivations and behaviors of both genders as described, it is crucial to consider the influence of patriarchal culture and its definition of masculinity. Traditional masculinity emphasizes emotional restraint, dominance, and aversion to traits perceived as feminine (Gerdes et al., 2018). In romantic and sexual contexts, it expects men to initiate contact, show confidence, and achieve sexual success. Internalizing rigid masculine norms centered on emotional suppression and self-reliance often leads to underdeveloped emotional competencies, limiting men's ability to engage in a range of social relationships (Karakis & Levant, 2012).

In societies governed by patriarchal values, traditional gender norms often afford men structural advantages, especially when women are economically or socially dependent. In such contexts, women may remain in unsatisfying or unfulfilling relationships due to limited alternatives, social stigma, or material constraints. Men, meanwhile, may successfully form partnerships without necessarily offering emotional intimacy or stability. However, as societies progress toward gender equality and women gain greater

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social and economic autonomy, these dynamics begin to shift (Rudman & Phelan, 2007). Increasingly, women expect emotional reciprocity and personal fulfillment from their partners, and when these expectations go unmet, many choose singlehood over compromised relationships (Finkel, 2019). Notably, many single women report high levels of life satisfaction (DePaulo, 2023), reflecting early socialization that encourages building and maintaining a variety of emotionally supportive connections – a point acknowledged by the authors themselves.

In contrast, many men raised within patriarchal cultures may find singlehood more challenging. Socialized to embody strength, independence, and emotional stoicism, they often lack the emotional competencies and interpersonal skills required to foster deep, supportive relationships outside of romantic contexts (Nordin, Degerstedt, & Valmari, 2024). When these traditional gender norms encounter the realities of increasingly egalitarian relationship expectations, men may find themselves caught in a double bind: unprepared to meet the emotional demands of modern partnerships and simultaneously lacking alternative sources of emotional support. This dissonance can result in social isolation and emotional frustration, prompting some men to seek solace and validation in online spaces such as the "manosphere."

There, young, single men – who view romantic and sexual success as the ultimate markers of male worth – form radicalized communities. Some, such as involuntary celibates (incels), promote relational fatalism and hostility toward women in the form of "blackpill" ideology (Stijelja & Mishara, 2023). Others adopt the "redpill" ideology, which treats romantic success as a metric of masculine value and encourages manipulative tactics to "win" women (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). In both narratives, male worth is defined primarily by romantic and sexual achievement, placing immense pressure on men and intensifying feelings of inadequacy among those who fail to meet these standards (Smith, Butler-Warke, & Stevens, 2025; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Consequently, beliefs that equate masculine value with romantic and sexual success – reinforced by manosphere communities – may discourage men from building broader support networks. This narrow focus can be counterproductive: strong social ties not only reduce loneliness but also increase the likelihood of forming romantic relationships (Marabel-Whitburn et al., 2023). An over-emphasis on romantic achievement may therefore trap men in a vicious cycle, undermining the development of other ties crucial for emotional well-being.

In sum, we contend that the emotional dependence and relational struggles faced by contemporary men are not rooted in biology or evolutionary imperatives, but rather in a clash between traditional gender norms and growing female emancipation. The inability to form close friendships and family ties is not biologically determined but results from masculine stereotypes ingrained from early childhood – stereotypes increasingly misaligned with the gender-equal norms of modern Western culture societies (Bareket & Fiske, 2024). Emotional needs are fundamentally the same for all genders, and the capacity to feel, understand, and express emotions is not governed by biology but shaped by cultural norms and socialization, as the notion of Normative Male Alexithymia suggests (Karakis & Levant, 2012).

For these reasons, we argue that attributing the issues described in the target article to biology or evolution is both misleading and unjustified. The relational difficulties faced by men today are not products of natural law but of cultural legacy. Recognizing this distinction is essential if we hope to move beyond outdated frameworks and promote healthier, more adaptive models of masculinity and emotional well-being.

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Competing interests

The authors declare none.

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Beyond social structures: An evolutionary network perspective on gendered romantic dependency

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Abstract

We argue that male romantic dependency reflects a strategic response to structurally constrained emotional encounters, shaped by both evolutionary network dynamics and media-driven gender norms. Building on Wahring et al., we incorporate theories of population viscosity, reciprocal altruism, and media analysis to show how men's intimacy is centralized, women's is distributed, and emotional asymmetries are sustained.

Wahring et al. advance a compelling thesis: men derive disproportionate emotional and health-related benefits from romantic relationships and suffer more from their loss, partly due to fewer alternative sources of intimacy. Their argument draws on social role theory and evolutionary perspectives to explain gendered asymmetries in romantic reliance. We extend this analysis by introducing a complementary framework grounded in strategic interdependence, media studies, and cultural psychology. Together, these perspectives clarify why male romantic dependency is not only persistent but often structurally rational and culturally obscured.

Although the target article does not explicitly invoke game theory, its underlying logic aligns with models of strategic interactions under asymmetric constraints (Myerson, Pollock, & Swinkels, 1991). These models demonstrate that agents act not only based on direct payoffs but also on anticipated reciprocity, opportunity costs, and the structure of interdependence. Romantic dependence, in this light, is not merely an emotional disposition; it is an adaptation to environments where alternative sources of intimacy are limited. In evolutionary terms, this reflects a form of viscous population dynamics (Myerson et al., 1991), where differential dispersal increases cooperative encounters. As men are more emotionally reliant on female-centered networks without being deeply embedded in them, they interact more with men than women, while women interact more often with each other. This asymmetry reinforces positive assortativity (Bergstrom, 2003), enabling altruistic behavior to persist even in non-cooperative dynamics such as the prisoner's dilemma.

Research shows that women tend to build and sustain stable, emotionally rich, and interconnected social networks (Belle, 1991; Taylor et al., 2000; Vassilev et al., 2023). These networks sustain the social fabric underpinning community-level intimacy, creating an ambient emotional surplus from which others indirectly benefit. When men access emotional support, it is frequently through a romantic partner embedded in those networks – networks they neither construct nor reinforce. From an evolutionary perspective, this asymmetry serves a stabilizing function: if men are more likely to act as emotional free riders, their limited integration into highly reciprocal networks preserves cooperation. As Bergstrom (2003) argues, assortative matching allows altruism to persist by clustering cooperators with one another, protecting them from exploitation and increasing the payoff of mutual support. Thus, men's exclusion from female-dense emotional systems may unintentionally sustain their cooperative function by minimizing disruptive encounters with less reciprocating participants.

Evolutionary psychology conjectures that long-term romantic commitment has historically benefited men in terms of reproductive certainty and resource consolidation (Trivers, 1972; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Empirical studies confirm that men experience heightened emotional and physiological distress after romantic dissolution (Geary, 2017), suggesting that emotional investment may serve an evolved function. This evolutionary tendency is intensified by gender norms that constrain male emotional expression to the romantic domain, limiting access to alternative sources of support. Social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012) demonstrates how emotional vulnerability is feminized, rendering it off-limits for many men except within the protective container of romance.

Cultural narratives reinforce and aestheticize this emotional asymmetry. Take Mad Men, where Don Draper performs emotional detachment while relying compulsively on romantic and sexual partners to manage psychological instability. His emotional dependency is stylized – rendered tragic, enigmatic, and compelling. Media permits male vulnerability, but only when cloaked in charisma or melancholia. Don's suffering is palatable because it confirms the mythology of the tortured male genius.

A telling moment unfolds between Peggy and Freddy, where the emotional double standard comes into focus. Freddy insists, "All women want is to get married." Peggy calmly challenges the claim, rejecting a cultural reflex: attributing emotional dependency to women, regardless of evidence. This scene reveals a broader pattern the target article critiques: men's emotional reliance on romantic partners is routinely misread as women's neediness. The assumption that women are the more dependent gender serves as a protective fiction, allowing male vulnerability to remain unspoken and unexamined. Peggy punctures that fiction. She exposes how such projections stabilize gender hierarchies by offloading emotional need onto women, rendering men's dependency invisible. What looks like emotional asymmetry is often a misattribution, built into the narrative structures that tell us who feels more and who is allowed to.

The emotional double standard is starker in the treatment of Betty Draper, whose visible distress is dismissed as hysteria, while Don's interior anguish is romanticized. Betty expresses emotional need openly and is dismissed. Don suppresses it and is revered. This narrative logic displaces dependency: men are allowed to feel deeply, but only if those feelings are stylized and strategically

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withheld; women's feelings, even when valid, are discredited by their visibility. The emotional system rewards male dependence while refusing to name it, relying instead on female labor that is kept invisible by design.

Contemporary shifts further expose the fragility of gendered emotional encounters. Many women now cultivate emotionally pluralistic lives, sustained by friendships, chosen families, and therapeutic networks. These trends are evident in both rising rates of non-partnered women and cultural spaces like TikTok, where movements such as #platonicfriendship celebrate intimacy beyond romance. In contrast, reactionary currents, from the "tradwife" revival to incel subcultures, reflect a nostalgic attempt to re-center male emotional needs through the re-domestication of women. These tensions mark not just a shift in who is allowed to need but a deeper contest over whose needs are socially validated.

Wahring et al. rightly highlight the asymmetry in romantic dependency. We extend this by showing it is not just emotional; it is adaptive, structured, and culturally maintained. Male dependency not only reflects limited access to intimacy but also has adaptive significance: assortative matching preserves altruism by sorting emotional encounters such that female actors interact with each other to generate highly cooperative networks, while male actors compete for access to these female-centered networks. Thus, we argue that dispersal patterns in male and female romantic dependency reflect a co-evolutionary adaptation, with cultural narratives and genetic predispositions mutually reinforcing altruistic social structures. Cultural narratives that obscure male dependency may amplify this adaptive feedback loop by stabilizing social norms that frame emotional reliance as feminine, thereby perpetuating underlying cooperative dynamics.

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Only genderless society can solve the problem of emotional support for men

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Abstract

The regularity that romantic relationships mean more to men than to women is an apparent paradox in a sexist and patriarchal culture that suggests the exact opposite. Here we show that this phenomenon is the result of a deeply gender-specific approach to psychological and emotional issues in particular, and that the only way to nullify this is a genderless society.

Iris V. Wahring and co-authors show that differences between men and women due to cultural evolution and different social roles lead to significant differences in the value attributed to romantic relationships. Romantic relationships are much more important for men than for women due to a deficit in intimacy and emotional support. This regularity, however counterintuitive the image held in a patriarchal and sexist culture based on gender stereotypes and shaped by literary content and film motifs linking being romantic to women rather than men, is quite well recognized by feminists. In our paper, we draw attention to the feminist critique of this phenomenon. Feminism, especially of the second wave, has exposed the subservient role of women consisting precisely in providing all kinds of support for men. The essay "I Want a Wife" published by Judy Brady Syfers exposes – from a feminist point of view – why marriage and, more broadly, romantic relationships are more in the interest of men than women (Syfers, 1972). Traditionally, in the vision of marriage understood as a partnership between a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman, it was the woman who was understood as the party who should guarantee full service to the man. Even though today, in some parts of the world, some of the tasks traditionally associated with women, such as childcare and housework, are also performed by men, emotional and interpersonal development is one of the areas that has undergone minimal, if any, evolution. This psychological and emotional area remains strongly linked to gender.

Both men and women suffer the negative consequences of a patriarchal and sexist system in which social roles established from childhood regulate even the ways in which emotions are experienced and shared. Since it is difficult to imagine the actual establishment of global gender equality, we assume that a genderless society should be the development goal of humanity. Accordingly, role models who exhibit patriarchal masculinity should be marginalized and then eliminated. The expected effects of such a change would be equality also introduced on emotional and behavioral grounds, a reduction in violence against women,

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the development of pacifism, and an improvement in the well-being of men themselves, who are also victims of patriarchy.

The phenomenon described by Wahring and colleagues reveals an emotional asymmetry between men and women that, in an emotional sense, is more harmful to men, while in an institutional and social sense it significantly burdens women. The harmfulness of this situation for both genders provides an argument for abolishing the social category of gender as harmful in emotional, social, and political terms. A genderless future is difficult to realize if we look at how important a role is played by reproduction, which is usually based on the sexual difference between females and males. Perhaps this biological, sexual reproduction will always significantly limit the possibilities of developing a genderless society, unless reproduction through technology alone is established (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).

Social categories such as gender are always context-dependent, and there is no single essentialist characteristic that determines whether someone should always be perceived as a woman or a man (Sveinsdóttir, 2018). In a sexist society, gender is always associated with expected roles and responsibilities. From this perspective, it is not a neutral category. The inevitable classification by others into a particular gender creates expectations and demands for certain types of behavior that are beyond our control. This is also the case with emotional support, which is assigned to the gender "woman."

On the other hand, in many contexts where men are evaluated as gender-neutral, women are usually viewed through the lens of their gender (Mikkola, 2024). This is one of the reasons why men "want wives" more than women want husbands, and why men find it harder to cope with breakups and other setbacks in romantic relationships, because despite many changes in customs, at least in the Western world, the emotional sphere has remained essentially unchanged.

Gender understood essentialistically determines how we are perceived in society (Dembroff, 2018a). This determination takes the form of ontological oppression, in which social kind, in the case we are interested in, is gender, limits and completely determines how we behave, how we are perceived, what our place in society is, as well as what rights we have or do not have (Dembroff, 2018b). Language that is gender-specific not only expresses but also contributes to the reinforcement and continuation of sexist divisions that emphasize the subordinate, secondary role of women. The nonsensical and discriminatory nature of gender-specific expressions is highlighted by imagining race-specific language that would be full of expressions indicating the race of the person in question (Dembroff & Wodak, 2021). It seems that a necessary first step toward building a genderless society is to adopt a nomenclature that will describe those willing to go beyond the binary classification. The genderqueer category should not only describe people who disagree with the binary understanding of gender (Dembroff, 2020) but should also completely replace the binary classification.

Oppression affects more than just women and is not solely due to sexism. Oppression affects everyone, both binary and gender-queer people. This oppression is caused by the existence of the gender system, which, despite the fairly recent distinction between sex and gender, in practice determines our lives because of our sexuality (Rubin, 1975). Abandoning the binary gender system in favor of a genderless system would have many positive effects. Genderless society is a necessary and indispensable condition for the introduction of true emotional and behavioral equality. Women around the world are associated with and therefore raised in a gender-specific manner, with the aim of preparing them for their future role as psychological persons of service, even in societies where gender equality has been achieved in many other areas. Focusing on tasks, functions, and skills without linking them to a specific gender will also benefit men, who in the emotional and relational sphere could already receive as boys the same interpersonal and emotional preparation that girls and women usually receive from an early age.

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A cultural lens on romantic dependence

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Abstract

Wahring et al. offer a compelling argument that men depend more on romantic partners than women. Our commentary highlights the importance of integrating cultural frameworks – such as relational mobility, support norms, and masculinity ideals

– into their model. We argue that sociocultural contexts shape not only the degree of relational dependence but also the nature of close relationships and support behaviors.

We commend Wahring, Simpson, and Van Lange for their insightful article, "Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women." The article proposes that romantic relationships take on a more important role for men than for women, and that men depend more heavily on their romantic partners for intimacy and emotional support since they often perceive fewer opportunities for such support from other social ties. The authors summarize an extensive amount of literature, and we applaud their effort to synthesize previous research into an innovative perspective on gender and close relationships.

As cultural psychologists, we are particularly drawn to the authors' call for future cross-cultural work and their engagement with social role theory. While the article draws on multiple frameworks, we indeed believe that its emphasis on evolutionary explanations could benefit from greater integration with cultural theories in order to move beyond a reliance on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) samples, as the authors acknowledge.

Firstly, relational concerns, self-disclosure, and support behaviors can be deeply shaped by socio-cultural contexts. For example, the authors cite evidence that emotional support predicts well-being more strongly in more interdependent societies (Uchida et al., 2008) and propose that gender disparities in relationship dependence may be even stronger in these contexts. While we agree that interdependent cultures place a high value on close relationships, the role and shape of support and self-disclosure likely differ as well: For example, while cross-cultural similarities in self-disclosure seem to exist (e.g., higher disclosure to romantic partners than friends, to same-sex than cross-sex friends in both American and Japanese; Kito, 2005), social support in Western cultures appears to be relatively explicit, emotion-focused, and centered around individual needs (e.g., self-esteem), whereas interdependent cultures show a greater tendency towards implicit, problem-focused, and primarily relationally motivated support (Ishii et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2012; Schouten et al., 2023).

Relational mobility (Yuki & Schug, 2012), or the degree to which individuals in a society have the opportunity to choose and replace their relationships, may be another promising dimension for expanding the theory cross-culturally. Reflecting its reliance on mostly WEIRD samples, the article's assumptions often fit high relational mobility contexts, where people are relatively free to choose partners and dissolve relationships. In contrast, however, in low relational mobility societies (e.g., East Asia), relationships are generally more deeply ingrained in wider social structures, less freely chosen, and more difficult to exit. Consequently, high relational mobility contexts tend to foster proactive engagement in close relationships (e.g., self-disclosure, social support, intimacy) to acquire and retain partners, whereas low relational mobility contexts tend to prioritize relational harmony and the avoidance of conflict in existing, stable ties (Kito, Yuki, & Thompson, 2017). Fittingly, Western couples were found to value intimacy and demonstrations of love and caring more than Chinese couples, who prioritized relations with extended family, harmony, face maintenance, and traditional gender roles (Hiew et al., 2015). Similarly, Japanese romantic relationships, while initially intimate, often evolve into prioritizing "smooth functioning" rather than ongoing emotional disclosure (Rothbaum et al., 2000). In contexts where relationships are less fragile and intimacy is less emphasized, the gendered dependence in romantic relationships may be somewhat attenuated.

Furthermore, other cultural values – such as honor and masculinity values – may shape how emotional dependence in romantic relationships may differ across societies. Cultures emphasizing honor values (e.g., Mediterranean, Middle Eastern societies; Vignoles et al., 2025) promote highly gendered codes of behavior (Rodriguez-Mosquera, 2016) that may exacerbate gender differences in vulnerability and self-disclosure, as men are supposed to uphold an image as tough and strong (Uskul et al., 2012). Similarly, norms that discourage emotional openness and valorize assertiveness and stoicism among men may be stronger in cultures with traditional masculinity values (e.g., Hofstede, 2011), thus intensifying a gendered reliance on romantic relationships.

The post-retirement context in Japan exemplifies this issue: In Japan, men traditionally form strong ties within the workplace, which often serve as primary social support networks. Upon retirement, these ties may dissolve, leaving men with limited alternatives and increasing the risk of loneliness and distress. Some Japanese men cannot share these concerns even with family members, reflecting deeply internalized norms of emotional restraint and self-reliance (Ito, 2018). This isolation is alarming given higher suicide rates among middle-aged and older Japanese men compared to women (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021) and substantially higher mortality risk for men experiencing marital disruption (e.g., divorce, widowhood) than their married counterparts, with no similar effects among women (Ikeda et al., 2007). Yet, in more gender-egalitarian countries – e.g., Northern Europe, where some contradictory evidence in the manuscript originates – this restrictive effect of gender roles on network formation and emotional expression may be less severe: for example, greater societal gender equality predicted stronger general perceived social support (Łyś & Adamczyk, 2024) and more frequent cross-gender friendships (Bailey et al., 2025). These patterns underscore the need to understand how cultural norms around masculinity and emotional expression contribute to men's vulnerability in later life and relational dependence.

Beyond masculinity norms, community social bonds, or relational fluidity – the ease of shifting across support networks – also merit attention. In rigid and concentrated networks (e.g., workplace), loss of a single tie can have severe psychological consequences. However, communities with strong civic and neighborhood engagement (e.g., Japanese local communities) may offer alternative sources of support, and such communities tend to show higher well-being and lower loneliness, particularly in older adults (Uchida et al., 2024). A future research agenda might investigate whether characteristics of and engagement in tight-knit, non-romantic communities may buffer the psychological impact of relationship dissolution or retirement on men in low-mobility, masculine cultures.

In conclusion, Wahring and colleagues' article offers an important new perspective on gendered relational dependence. Our commentary aimed to highlight that this dependence is likely embedded in and shaped by characteristics of our sociocultural contexts. By integrating cultural theories into the model, future research can explore not only if men and women differ in romantic partner dependence cross-culturally, but also *how* cultural norms shape the meaning, expression, and experience of emotional reliance.

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Desperate to connect: Men's dependence on romantic relationship in a competitive mating landscape

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Abstract

This commentary builds on Wahring et al.'s model of male emotional dependency by integrating mating market dynamics. It argues that men's reliance on romantic partners, combined with competitive pressures and limited emotional networks, creates a volatile psychological landscape. Romantic failure, in this context, can deeply threaten self-worth – fueling distress, behavioral issues, and, in extreme cases, ideological radicalization.

Wahring et al. offer a valuable and empirically grounded model of men's heightened dependence on romantic relationships. Drawing from diverse theoretical frameworks, they illustrate how men, more than women, often rely on romantic partners for emotional intimacy, validation, and social support. Their model effectively situates this dependency in terms of various "inputs" (e.g., sexual concerns) and "outputs" (e.g., the appeal of initiating a relationship).

One of the most compelling aspects of their analysis is the attention given to men's weaker non-romantic emotional networks – such as fewer, less intimate friendships and less robust familial or community ties. Although women often cultivate emotionally rich support systems, men frequently centralize their emotional and psychological well-being within their romantic relationships. In the absence of such a relationship, men are particularly vulnerable to loneliness, isolation, and mental health challenges (Barreto et al., 2021; Umberson, Lin, & Cha, 2022).

The missing context: mating market competition

To deepen the framework offered by Wahring et al., I think it may be helpful to integrate the role of mating market dynamics, particularly how competitive pressures interact with men's relational dependency to amplify their psychological vulnerability. Men are not only seeking connections – they are doing so in an

environment that is intensely competitive, selective, and socially consequential.

This combination of emotional dependency and mating market competition may create a unique and volatile psychological landscape. Men are under pressure to secure and maintain romantic partnerships, not just for intimacy, but for social validation, self-worth, and in evolutionary terms, reproductive viability. When romantic success is elusive or threatened, the resulting emotional fallout may be often more intense than for those with broader sources of support.

Evolutionary pressures and modern risk

From an evolutionary perspective, reproductive success has historically been more variable for men than for women. Although most women throughout evolutionary history have reproduced, only a subset of men passed on their genes (Betzig, 2012), intensifying male intrasexual competition and embedding deep psychological patterns around status, mate access, and identity.

In modern mating markets, these evolutionary pressures are viewed through the lens of social exchange (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Variables like local sex ratios, income inequality, and education disparities shape perceived mate value and exacerbate competitive stress (Brooks, Russo-Batterham, & Blake, 2022). In such a landscape, failure to form or sustain a romantic relationship may carry social and psychological consequences.

Intersexual selection and the experience of rejection

Women's greater selectivity in partner choice (Trivers, 1972) further sharpens this competition. Traits like ambition, emotional intelligence, physical fitness, and financial stability are highly valued. As a result, romantic success becomes not just fulfilling, but symbolic – proof of being chosen, a deeply validating experience for many men.

For men with lower perceived mate value, the mating market may feel like a zero-sum game. On dating platforms, a small percentage of men receive the majority of attention (Neyt, Vandenbulcke, & Baert, 2019), creating the perception of chronic romantic scarcity. In these contexts, rejection is not merely disappointing – it often signals deep social inadequacy and may trigger emotional responses such as shame, anger, anxiety, and hopelessness (e.g., Andrighetto, Riva, & Gabbiadini, 2019).

Intrasexual competition and emotional isolation

Men's socialization patterns compound these issues. Whereas women often enjoy emotionally supportive peer relationships, men tend to form hierarchical, status-driven social groups that discourage vulnerability. This makes romantic partners not just important – but often their sole source of emotional intimacy. When a relationship ends or remains out of reach, many men may be left without a meaningful outlet for emotional expression, intensifying their distress.

Modern forms of intrasexual competition – ranging from social media comparison to hypergamy and cultural emphasis on status – further erode men's emotional resilience. The result is a feedback loop where emotional dependency increases the emotional cost of romantic failure, and the emotional cost of failure, in turn, reinforces dependency.

The feedback loop of romantic vulnerability

Wahring et al. correctly highlight that men often suffer disproportionately from relationship loss. By integrating mating market dynamics into their model, we can better understand why: romantic failure may not simply be a personal disappointment – it may represent a perceived collapse of identity, worth, and reproductive viability. The more competitive the environment, the more tightly men may tether their sense of self to romantic success. This dependency raises the stakes – and ironically, may increase the risk of romantic failure due to anxious, avoidant, clingy, or possessive behavior.

This has the potential to create a self-perpetuating cycle: heightened dependency increases the psychological impact of failure, which reinforces the desperation for connection. This feedback loop is both emotionally taxing and socially consequential and warrants deeper empirical attention.

The incel phenomenon as an extreme outcome

One extreme manifestation of this cycle may be the emergence of the modern "incel" (involuntarily celibate) phenomenon. Although only a very small percentage of unpartnered men identify as incels, the subculture illustrates how romantic marginalization can lead to ideological radicalization. Incel forums provide a distorted form of social connection and emotional expression often at the cost of reinforcing bitterness, misogyny, and fatalism (Costello & Buss, 2023; Glace, Dover, & Zatkin, 2021).

In these subcultures, romantic exclusion is reinterpreted not just as misfortune, but as proof of a rigged system. Romantic rejection becomes a collective identity crisis, and the search for intimacy gives way to nihilism, blame, or withdrawal into parasocial alternatives like pornography.

Conclusion

Wahring et al. make a significant contribution by highlighting male emotional dependence on romantic relationships. To enhance our understanding of this phenomenon, we should consider how competitive mating markets may amplify its effects. When emotional dependency intersects with fierce competition for partners, men who struggle to form and maintain relationships may experience heightened psychological volatility.

Future research would benefit from examining both intersexual selection and intrasexual competition to better illuminate the emotional vulnerability, behavioral responses, and social implications that emerge when romantic relationships become the linchpin of male psychological well-being.

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Unveiling gender dynamics in romantic relationships: A comprehensive analysis

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Abstract

This article challenges the notion that women are more emotionally invested in romantic relationships, arguing that men derive greater psychological benefits and suffer more from their dissolution. However, the study's reliance on WEIRD samples limits its generalizability. Future research should incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and explore power dynamics and social support networks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender differences in romantic relationships.

The article "Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women" by Iris V. Wahring, Jeffry A. Simpson, and Paul A. M. Van Lange presents a provocative thesis that challenges conventional wisdom regarding gender dynamics in romantic relationships. The authors argue that men, rather than women, derive greater psychological benefits from romantic relationships and suffer more from their dissolution. This counter-narrative to the widely held belief that women are more emotionally invested in romantic relationships is both intriguing and contentious, warranting critical examination.

One significant academic flaw in the studies reviewed by Wahring et al. is the potential for selection bias. The majority of their findings are based on WEIRD samples, which refer to Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. This overrepresentation in psychological research can lead to biased conclusions that do not accurately reflect the experiences of individuals from other cultural backgrounds. For instance, research on cross-cultural differences has shown that the importance of emotional support and intimacy in romantic relationships can vary significantly across cultures. In some collectivist cultures, such as those found in many Asian and African countries, the emphasis on communal relationships and extended family networks can significantly influence the psychological impact of romantic relationship dissolution. In these cultures, the support from family and community members can buffer the negative effects of a romantic breakup, potentially altering the perceived importance of romantic relationships for emotional well-being (Hofstede, 2001). The reliance on WEIRD samples is particularly problematic because it limits the generalizability of the study's conclusions. Cultural variations in gender roles and relationship dynamics are well-documented, and extending the study to non-Western contexts could yield different results. For example, in collectivist cultures, where family and community ties are stronger, the dependency on romantic partners for emotional support might differ significantly. This cultural context can influence how individuals perceive and value romantic relationships, as well as how they cope with their dissolution. Future research should include more diverse samples and consider cultural factors in shaping gender differences in romantic relationships. By doing so, researchers can develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence gender differences in romantic relationships, leading to more universally applicable conclusions. To enhance the robustness of their argument, the authors should consider incorporating a broader range of cultural perspectives. Comparative studies across different cultural settings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics in romantic relationships. Additionally, future research should explore the role of individual differences, such as personality traits and attachment styles, in shaping the need for emotional support and intimacy within relationships. Cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping gender roles and relationship dynamics. For example, in individualistic cultures, romantic relationships may be seen as a primary source of emotional support and intimacy, whereas in collectivist cultures, these needs may be met through extended family networks and communal relationships. By incorporating a wider range of cultural contexts, researchers can identify commonalities and differences in how gender dynamics operate within romantic relationships. This approach can lead to more nuanced theories and models that account for cultural variability, enhancing the applicability of research findings across diverse populations.

Another area that requires further exploration is the discussion of power dynamics within relationships. While Wahring et al. touch on the unequal distribution of household chores and care, they do not delve deeply into how power imbalances may influence

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men's and women's experiences in romantic relationships. Power dynamics can significantly affect relationship satisfaction and stability, as they influence the balance of control and decision-making within the relationship. For example, when one partner holds more power, the other partner may experience increased emotional distress and dissatisfaction (Felmlee & Muraco, 2012).

Empirical research has shown that power dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping relationship outcomes. Studies have found that relationships with more equitable power distributions tend to be more satisfying and stable (Felmlee & Muraco, 2012). In contrast, relationships where one partner holds significantly more power can lead to feelings of inequality and dissatisfaction, particularly for the partner with less power. This power imbalance can manifest in various ways, such as financial dependence, social status differences, or traditional gender roles that dictate the distribution of power within the relationship. Future studies should explore how power dynamics intersect with gender differences to affect relationship outcomes. This could involve examining how traditional gender roles influence power dynamics and how these dynamics change over time as gender roles evolve. Additionally, researchers could investigate the impact of power imbalances on emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between power, gender, and relationship dynamics.

The article could also benefit from a deeper discussion of social support networks beyond romantic relationships. While the authors emphasize the importance of emotional support from romantic partners, they could explore how social support from friends and family can mitigate the psychological impact of relationship dissolution. Research has shown that individuals with strong social support networks cope better with relationship challenges and are less likely to experience negative mental health outcomes (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Social support networks can provide emotional, practical, and informational support, helping individuals navigate the challenges of romantic relationships and cope with the stress of relationship dissolution.

Future research should investigate how the quality and availability of social support networks influence psychological dependence on romantic partners. This could involve examining the role of social support in buffering the negative effects of relationship stress and how social support networks can provide alternative sources of emotional support and intimacy. Additionally, researchers could explore how social support networks interact with gender differences in emotional well-being, potentially revealing how social support can mitigate the psychological impact of relationship dissolution for both men and women. By considering the broader context of social support, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence emotional dependence in romantic relationships.

In conclusion, the article "Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women" offers a thought-provoking perspective on gender differences in romantic relationships. While the authors' interdisciplinary approach and extensive literature review are strengths, the limitations of their sample and methodology necessitate a more nuanced and culturally diverse investigation. By incorporating a wider range of cultural contexts and employing a mixed-methods approach, future research can build on the authors' foundational work to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between gender, romance, and emotional support. Additionally, future research should explore the role of power dynamics and social support networks in shaping relationship outcomes, providing a more holistic understanding of the factors that influence gender differences in romantic relationships.

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Authors' Response

Understanding gender differences across relationship stages requires integrating evolutionary, ontological, and proximate mechanisms

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Abstract

Many commentaries subscribe to the main conclusions of the target article. Here, we primarily address the need for greater theorizing and empirical findings that seem contradictory to

Table R1. Overview of commentaries per response section

	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8
Ahmed & John	x				x		
Bellamy	x	x					
Ben-Ze'ev		x					
Burgmer & Weiss	x						
Campbell						x	
Costello, Thomas, Reynolds, & Buss	x						
Cox & Parsons						x	
Curley, Johnson, & Rokos	x			x	x		
Eastwick	x						
El Haj, Sarda, Le Floch, & Ndobo	x						
Elizabeth & Clark	x					x	x
Gonzalez Avilés & Bühler						x	
Hadravová			x				
Heschl	x						
Janusz, Sikorski, & Sitek	x					x	
Kafetsios & Strand	x				x		
Karremans, Kluwer & Algoe	x			x			
Khalil				x			
Konrad					x		x
Leopold		x					
Lopez-Cantero & Isern-Mas		x					x
Lozano	x	x			x		
Ludeke & Weisberg	x		x				
Madison & Stoet	x						
Meltzer & McNulty	x						
Morrison & Kader	x					x	
Murray & Pascuzzi		x					
Ng		x			x		
Overall & Hammond	x	x		x			x
Peeters & Maner	x						
Prasad					x		
Reggev & Bareket	x			x			
Roth, Massen, & Samara	x		x				
Ruiz-Vanoye, Díaz-Parra, Trejo-Macotela, Barrera-Cámara, & Fuentes-Penna							x
Sacco	x						
Schredl		x					
Shoemaker, DeBlaere, & Muise	x	x		x			x
Smieja, Olesky, Waczak, & Wojciech	x						
Solouki & Knudsen	x						
Szocik		x				x	x
Uchida & Kirchner-Hausler	x				x		
Zeigler-Hill	x			x			
Zhang, Qi, & Jin	x				x		

parts of our conclusions. We highlight the importance of integrating evolutionary, ontological, and proximate mechanisms in order to understand differences more comprehensively between men and women in heterosexual relationships in most Western societies.

R1. Introduction

In the target article, we proposed a model of gender differences across four major relationship stages – relationship initiation, involvement, dissolution, and aftermath – arguing that across all four stages, romantic relationships typically matter more to men than to women. Guided by a consideration of major theories on gender differences in social relationships, we proposed that a main driving factor behind these differences is men's lower levels of emotional support from friends and family, which results in greater dependence on their romantic partners for intimacy and emotional support.

Writing the target article was a true challenge – and pleasure. The subject matter is not only an intellectual journey but also one that speaks to many people's minds and hearts, including those not working in academia. We have faced fascinating questions from reporters in many countries around the world, which helped us prepare for some of the issues addressed by the commentaries. It was also a real challenge, and again a genuine pleasure, to address 43 (!) commentaries. Collectively, they raise an immense number of important themes and issues, large and small, empirical, theoretical, and sometimes a combination of both. Occasionally, themes or issues are mentioned in passing as part of a bigger point that the author(s) sought to address. We managed to summarize most of the central issues, as well as many specific ones, under the umbrella of seven major themes.

We begin our response by discussing the proximate and ultimate mechanisms behind the typical differences between men and women in detail (R2), which was the most often mentioned theme across the commentaries. Following this, we address the validity and relevance of our claims (R3), the paradox of women's seemingly more "romantic" behavior (R4), and the importance of equality in relationships (R5). We then proceed by elaborating on cultural (R6) and contextual (R7) factors that shape the extent to which couple relationships typically matter to men and women. We close with a discussion of broader implications (R8). An overview of the commentaries addressed in each section is provided in Table R1. We conclude the response by highlighting that, in the final analysis, we need to understand better why men are more prone than women to "Bowling Alone" (Putnam, 2000) and relying heavily on their partners within "All or Nothing" marriages (Finkel, 2017), at least in heterosexual relationships within most Western countries.

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R2. Proximate and ultimate mechanisms

Our target article incorporated evolutionary, developmental, and proximal psychological explanations because we believe it is important to understand and attempt to integrate ***multiple*** possible sources of the differences between men and women that we review in the target article. Figure 1 in our target article proposes how differential dependence might develop in romantic relationships, while Figure 2 shows both the sources and consequences of men's greater dependence. In our article, we focus on expectations and beliefs as well as some of the norms that support and sustain these gender-differentiated outcomes. It is important to note that some of the norms that define traditional gender roles, especially those associated with masculinity and femininity, could partially be a product of biological (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Wood & Eagly, 2012) and/or cultural evolution (Richerson & Boyd, 2004).

Several commentators, however, felt we did not provide a sufficient account of how additional evolutionary theories, models, and psychological mechanisms can also explain most or all of the gender differences we review. For example, **Lozano** claims that sexual selection principles can explain all of the sex-differentiated outcomes. **Peeters & Maner** contend that differences in the strength of sexual motivation between men and women (with men's sexual motivation typically being stronger) can explain most of the sex differences. **Madison & Stoet** expand on this point, proposing that evolved sex differences in sexual desire, in combination with societal changes in industrial welfare states, primarily explain the sex differences due in part to the fact that men have lost some of their once valuable evolutionary roles. **Eastwick** also discusses how evolutionary-relevant tasks and roles that were once fulfilled primarily by men are no longer because of industrialization, leaving them marginalized. **Zeigler-Hill** makes a similar point but discusses how the intense mating market dynamics many men face have exacerbated their social and emotional isolation, leading them to rely more heavily on their romantic partners to meet many of their interpersonal and emotional needs. **Ludeke & Weisberg** point out that if women benefit less from relationships than men on average, they should be more selective when choosing mates, consistent with female choice principles of parental investment theory, which appears to be true. Moreover, in one of the few commentaries focusing on the social network differences directly, **Solouki & Knudsen** discuss how population viscosity theory, reciprocal altruism, and the media work together to sustain social network differences in women and men.

Other commentators discuss psychological models, processes, or mechanisms that we did not cover in our article that might also partially account for the gender differences we review. **Bellamy**, for instance, shows how the operation of Error Management Theory – which leads men to overperceive women's sexual interest and leads women to underperceive men's commitment – might serve as one of the evolved proximate cognitive mechanisms that generate and sustain some (but not necessarily all) of the gender differences. **Sacco** applies the Tie-Up Theory to explain gender differences in emotional bonding and suggests that differences in the biobehavioral architecture of men and women can explain most of the gender-differentiated outcomes we report. **Kafetsios & Strand** claim that most of the gender differences can be explained better by attachment processes rather than gender per se, suggesting that the Biobehavioral Cultural Model of Attachment provides a good alternate explanation. **Janusz, Sikorski, & Sitek** argue that the greater dependency of men stems from more basic gender differences in patterns of emotion regulation, reward processing, and social support, all of which are associated with attachment processes. **El Haj, Sarda, Le Floch, & Ndobo** claim that differences in autobiographical memory may also contribute to how men and women typically react to breakups and post-relationship outcomes. **Burgmer & Weiss** highlight gender differences in partner-serving moral cognition. If men expect and gain more from relationships with women, they may be more tolerant of female partners' norm violations. Their research demonstrates that men tend to judge their partners less harshly for moral transgressions – a helpful cognitive mechanism to sustain relationships from which they benefit more.

Roth, Massen, & Samara focus on a distinction commonly made in the mating literature between short-term and long-term mating. However, as **Eastwick**, and **Morrison & Kader**, and others note, the distinction between sex/short-term mating and romantic/long-term mating is conflated in humans, both ancestrally and currently, given the serially monogamous mating pattern that defines our species. Roth et al. also claim that some of our evolutionary explanations are contradictory (e.g., that Sexual Strategies Theory is used to account for sex differences in sex drive and relationship initiation patterns, and that Strategic Pluralism Theory is used to explain why women are more likely to leave men). Each theory, however, can explain how and why sex-differentiated outcomes exist at different relationship stages, depending in part on how successful men are at mating. If men are unsuccessful when not providing higher levels of investment, it is most adaptive for them to shift in ecologically contingent ways and offer greater paternal investment to women and their children to enhance their fitness, especially in environments that demand biparental care.

Costello, Thomas, Reynolds, & Buss offer the most comprehensive set of novel evolutionary explanations, addressing each specific sex-differentiated outcome. They claim that the entire pattern of outcomes is the result of sex-differentiated mating strategies, social alliance formation, the vulnerabilities of remaining single, and the greater importance of female survival for offspring survival and, therefore, women's own reproductive success (see also **Heschl's** commentary linking these patterns to the evolution of other primates). These authors first explain how evolved sex differences associated with the prototypic mating strategies most commonly enacted by women and men account for differences in the experience and expression of romantic love, in who tends to initiate relationship dissolution, and in who is most motivated to remarry. They then explain how and why these differences can also explain sex differences in survival rates, levels of social support, and vulnerability to singlehood. For each outcome, they provide additional theoretical and empirical evidence consistent with their claims, covering literature we did not cover in our article.

These additional evolutionary accounts are helpful, and we appreciate the scientific goal of parsimony in theorizing in focusing on the explanatory power of a specific ultimate, ontological, or proximate account. Nevertheless, a complete understanding of what underlies all of the differences between women and men we reviewed requires the broader, more integrated theoretical models that span biological as well as cultural evolution, ontogeny, and proximal factors. Indeed, one of the most important directions for the future is to **connect and integrate** the core ideas and principles of distal models with the core ideas and principles of ontogenetic and proximal models. One of our goals was to begin this process by showing how the Tend-and-Befriend model can bridge parental

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investment theory (distal), gender socialization theories (ontogenetic), and models of relationship functioning in adulthood (proximate). Our attempt, however, needs to be refined and expanded, as various commentaries begin to do.

Stepping back, several higher-level themes emerge from the cross-talk between our target article and the commentaries relevant to these issues.

First, our multilevel explanations for why these gender differences exist represent an initial attempt to bring attention to and better understand a major paradox in the literature – the questionable premise that romantic relationships typically matter more to women than men, on average (see R4) – and to motivate further work on this important topic in the social, behavioral, and biological sciences. The commentaries offer many good alternative and/or extended explanations, often primarily at one level of analysis – either ultimate (biological or cultural evolution), ontogenetic (social development), or proximate – each of which may help to identify the multiple causes underlying the gender differences we review. Most of the proposed models, however, remain fairly "silo" in that they do not sufficiently address and incorporate theories, ideas, and principles that are central to different levels of analysis, which could lead to the development of broader models capable of providing more complete accounts of the reviewed differences between men and women, at least in WEIRD, mainly heterosexual samples. There are likely to be multiple theoretically based reasons why women and men experience different personal and relational outcomes at different stages of relationships and life (see R6 and R7 for our discussion of the role of culture and context).

Second, we focused on the Tend-and-Befriend model as a possible theoretical bridge because it directly addresses why men tend to be more dependent on, and in certain ways more "vulnerable" than, most women in relationships, particularly in modern Western societies (**Eastwick; Morrison & Kader; Zeigler-Hill**). Given the comparatively smaller and less emotionally connected and supportive nature of their social networks, men, on average, need to rely more heavily on women in their romantic relationships than the reverse to meet several core social and emotional needs, which tends to place added pressure on women. Thus, we were surprised that intimacy and emotional support did not receive greater attention in many of the commentaries. They are two of the strongest predictors of health outcomes, including life expectancy, which are relevant to both psychological outcomes and evolutionary ones (Dunbar, 2018; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Reblin & Uchino, 2008). Relatedly, we were also surprised that only a few of the commentaries focused on the distinctly different social networks that women and men usually inhabit. We continue to believe that this is one major reason why men tend to be more dependent on their female partners than vice versa. Collectively, we suspect that the current commentators may underestimate the powerful role that social networks assume in producing and sustaining the gender differences reported in our article. There may also be an underappreciation of the many theoretical reasons why women and men tend to interact differently in their social networks, which is bound to be shaped and at times amplified by gender-specific norms, roles, expectations, and societal practices that vary across different cultures. However, as a beginning, the Tend-and-Befriend model goes a long way toward explaining all of the reviewed differences between women and men, acting as a "connector" between distal evolutionary theories (e.g., parental investment theory) and both ontogenetic and proximal theories, which are also needed to provide a complete account of the gender-differentiated outcomes we review.

Third, from an ontogenetic perspective, we were surprised that so few commentaries attempted to shed further light on the different ways in which boys and girls tend to be socialized, particularly with regard to expressing (or suppressing) emotions, seeking and developing emotional intimacy with others, and providing high-quality emotional support to others. This insufficient attention to the impact of social development early in life is a limitation of many of the commentaries and represents another important avenue for future theory and research. This is especially true of several current proximal models, most of which focus on life stages after gender-differentiated socialization has started to occur. More generally, we conclude that our scientific understanding of gender role differences in heterosexual relationships can be enhanced by recognizing and incorporating more life history thinking into their theorizing (Del Giudice Gangestad, & Kaplan, 2016; Simpson & Gangestad, 2025).

Fourth, several commentaries seem to ignore or brush aside the possibility that certain current sociocultural practices could have been shaped to some degree by distal factors. As Tooby and Cosmides (1992) and others have convincingly argued, various cultural norms, rules, and practices exist (and may continue to evolve) because they tend to enhance the fitness of individuals within a group or society. No one, of course, should fall prey to the Naturalistic Fallacy – the logical error that what is deemed as "good" or "ought to be" is justified based on what appears to be "natural." However, one also should not fall prey to what might be called the Sociocultural Fallacy – the belief that all current cultural norms, practices, socialization processes, etc., are totally independent of any ultimate-level factors, be they biologically based (Wood & Eagly, 2012) or the result of cultural co-evolutionary processes (Richerson et al., 2004).

Fifth, it is important to incorporate multilevel thinking into new theories and models not only because this might provide a more accurate and complete understanding of the different causal sources that underlie men's relative greater dependency on their partners and relationships, but also because interventions might be more effective if the unique sources of men's dependency are identified, discussed, and translated into more targeted interventions. One general example is evolutionary-inspired work on effective bullying interventions in schools (Ellis et al., 2023). The best interventions do not simply teach better interpersonal skills or how to regulate one's emotions more effectively; they also acknowledge that one root cause of bullying in both boys and girls involves concerns about gaining and maintaining social status among peers. Thus, effective interventions also need to give bullies more constructive roles to help them achieve and maintain some degree of social status within their most valued peer groups. Parallel intervention examples could be developed within the domain of romantic relationships. For example, interventions could be designed to decrease men's emotional and instrumental dependency on their partners while also enhancing their emotional expression, support-giving, emotion regulation, and coping skills. We return to this topic later when we discuss societal implications (R8).

R3. Do romantic relationships really matter more to men than women?

We note that the vast majority of commentaries agree with our four key points on gender differences across the four relationship stages.

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While many commend further exploration of underlying mechanisms, they concur that these differences exist. Both evolutionary accounts, such as those by **Lozano**, **Bellamy**, and **Ng**, and sociocultural views, including **Overall & Hammond**, **Szocik**, and **Shoemaker, DeBlaere, & Muise**, generally align with our outlined differences. Notably, recent large-scale studies (Stern et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024) replicate the cross-sectional gender-specific associations of relationship involvement and well-being, showing their robustness. However, a small number of commentaries partly or fully dispute the existence of gender differences across the four stages in the proposed direction

Schredl discusses dream research, suggesting that men report dreaming about their (female) partners more often and with more positive emotions, aligning with men's stronger anticipated and experienced relationship benefits. Yet, he notes that women's dreams about ex-partners tend to be more negatively toned, interpreting this as evidence of greater psychological suffering among women. In our view, however, negatively toned dreams do not necessarily equate to more breakup suffering. For example, men have less negative thoughts and attitudes toward their female ex-partners than women do toward their male ex-partners (Athenstaedt et al., 2020). But even though women have relatively more negative thoughts and attitudes that come to mind more often, they may do so to distance themselves from their ex-partners to ease breakup adjustments (Fagundes, 2011).

Lopez-Cantero & Isern-Mas present evidence of greater fear of being single among women, challenging our claim that men expect more benefits from relationships. However, the themes of the "fear-of-being-single" scale originated from collecting open-ended narratives in a strongly female-biased sample (Spielmann et al., 2013), which may have resulted in biased items. For example, the statement "I feel anxious when I think about being single forever" likely conflicts with masculinity norms discouraging men from admitting anxiety, leading to underreporting by men. Conversely, "I need to find a partner before I'm too old to have and raise children" reflects women's shorter reproductive phase of life relative to men, prompting stronger agreement among women who desire children compared to men, whose biological and social timelines for becoming a father are less constrained.

Leopold argues that our title and rationale oversimplify the complexity of relationship functions and questions the consistency of gender differences in two of the four relationship stages. In the target article, we acknowledge other sources of dependence, such as financial or material dependence, but justify our focus on psychological dependence given its significant consequences for health, mortality, and suicide risk. Leopold points out that the research cited on men benefiting more from relationships is cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies of relationship transitions show no gender differences in well-being. While we agree that transition effects appear absent, there is also scarce evidence indicating that higher well-being selectively increases men's chances of entering relationships. The field still needs to determine whether a gender-specific selection effect exists. For example, some gender differences in the benefits of relationship involvement may develop gradually over years, as partner emotional support accumulates through ongoing relationships. Future research could examine well-being trajectories in continuously partnered versus single men and women over longer periods (e.g., 5–10 years) and consider possible gender-specific selection effects on relationship formation. Leopold also challenges our assertion that men suffer more after breakups because well-being gaps between the genders close within a year. However, short-term suffering remains critical: divorce is associated with increased suicide risk in men, especially during separation before divorce is formalized, as a recent meta-analysis shows (Wilson et al., 2025). While many men recover, for some, the immediate decline in well-being is life-threatening.

Murray & Pascuzzi emphasize women's greater dependence because of their higher relationship investment compared to men. They argue that women tend to invest more and become more dependent on men in terms of power, which keeps them investing more as a way of maintaining commitment from their less-invested partners and protecting their prior investments. Even if women's investments during relationships are more sizeable, research suggests that men and women do not differ much in their willingness to sacrifice or in the actual sacrifices they make (Van Lange et al., 1997; Visserman et al., 2019). Moreover, several recent studies have not found significant gender differences in power within romantic relationships (Farrell, Simpson, & Rothman, 2015; Körner & Schütz, 2024), and some compelling evidence has revealed that women tend to have more relational power than their male partners in most relationships (see Baumeister et al., 2001; Kim, Visserman, & Impett, 2019, for reviews). Indeed, as outlined in the target article, many studies indicate that women are more likely to initiate breakups *despite* their greater investment (e.g., Brinig & Allen, 2000; Morris, Reiber, & Roman, 2015).

Connected to women's greater investment, **Ben-Ze'ev** suggests women tend to be seen as more romantic than men. This relates to **Lozano**'s critique of our unclear "romantic relationships" definition. We agree that this term may have caused some confusion; it commonly refers to committed couple relationships – including well-established dating relationships, marriage, cohabitation, and living apart versus together arrangements – but we did not define it explicitly in the target article. To clarify, we do not claim men are more romantic in gestures or relationship maintenance behaviors; rather, "romantic relationships" in the context of our review denotes committed couple relationships.

R4. Why do women seem more "romantic"?

Relationships seem to be a more central part of women's lives than those of men. Women spent more time talking about relationships, reading about relationships, and watching movies about relationships. Most people can probably relate to these observations, not only because they reflect reality but also because they tend to be consistent with standard gender stereotypes – which also helps explain why women are portrayed in media as more romantic than men (see **Hadravová** and **Schredl**). This raises two broad questions. If romantic relationships matter more to men than to women, as we argue in the target article, why then do relationships appear to be more central in the lives of women than men, and why do we have these stereotypes? What can account for this *relationship paradox*? Hadravová explicitly addresses this paradox asking, "Why does the belief that women are more romantic persist despite empirical evidence?"

As discussed in the target article, men's weaker support networks are rooted in social role expectations that ascribe communal traits less strongly to men than women (Eagly et al., 2020). The very same social roles that make romantic relationships matter more to men may also help explain why women talk more about relationships and why relationship themes are more prominent in their media consumption (Reich, 2019). For example, women not only prefer romantic movies more than men, but also like emotionally toned, friendship-focused movies more than men do; and, similarly, men who endorse more

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communal traits tend to show comparable preferences (Oliver, Weaver, & Sargent, 2000).

Another central explanation is that the stakes (risks and opportunities) are greater for women and, therefore, women are more deliberative and selective in partner selection, especially for longer-term relationships (see **Ludeke & Weisberg**). It therefore makes sense for women to attend more frequently (and perhaps more intensely) to relationship issues in the form of talking, reading, and watching about relationships. The stakes are higher for women than for men for at least three reasons. One is an evolutionary account that argues that women tend to have a stronger reliance on their partners both during and after pregnancy (see Trivers, 1972; **Roth et al.**). A second reason is that the risks of abuse in heterosexual relationships are higher for women than for men. Although both men and women experience intimate partner violence (IPV), large-scale surveys and other research show that women are more likely to experience more severe physical, sexual, and psychological abuse from male partners (Fanslow et al., 2023; Leemis et al., 2022; Stöckl et al., 2013). Ludeke & Weisberg discuss a third reason. They raise the plausible possibility that if women are less needy in most relationships than men, as research discussed in our target article suggests, women become choosier. Such "female pickiness," as they call it, can be expressed in being both more deliberative and more selective in partner selection. Both tendencies may go hand in hand, considering that women tend to characterize more partner characteristics of the 18-item list of features of a mate as "indispensable," as shown in a 37-nation study of more than 9,000 individuals (Buss et al., 1990).

We regard all three reasons as plausible and highly complementary. Apart from the classic study by Buss et al. (1990), there is additional evidence that women tend to be more selective in partner selection. For example, women are more selective in partner choice in that women (42%) were more likely than men (24%) to reject potential mates (Saad, Eba, & Sejean, 2009). Further supportive evidence is described in some commentaries (e.g., **Costello et al.**; **Morrison & Abdul Kade**; **Leopold**).

Can this paradox be resolved? The short answer is that romantic *relationships* matter more to men than to women, but that relationship *partners* matter more to women. It is especially the concrete information about a partner's ideal qualities (and less ideal qualities) that matter more to women than to men. It is not only status or resources, but also attributes such as kindness, intelligence, and health that women, on average, tend to seek more in a partner than men do (see also Buss et al., 1990; Walter et al., 2020). Novels and films embody a broad array of ideals that men should fulfill. And as another more general aspect of the impact of culture, gender differences in partner selection are embedded in language and folklore as well. Across many different languages and cultures in Western societies, it is a prince riding on a white horse rather than a princess.

R5. Equality in relationships

Several commentaries focus on central aspects of inequality that contribute to the gender differences across relationship stages, considering costs and benefits on the sides of both women and men.

Khalil argues that, due to pregnancy and lactation, it is particularly important for women to choose partners who will be highly committed. Women may, therefore, seek partners who depend more on them for intimacy, which suggests that single men should have closer social ties than men in relationships. A related perspective is offered by **Karremans, Kluwer, & Algoe**, who suggest that women's greater reliance on support outside of their romantic relationships is explained by men being less effective support providers. As a result, women are more likely than men to turn to external sources of support (see the middle circle of Figure 1 in the target article for an illustration of this mechanism). While these mechanisms may contribute to some of the observed differences, we noted that gender differences in received support emerge early in life and appear largely independent of relationship status. In one study of young adults, for example, no significant differences in support received from friends between single versus partnered women were found, and partnered men actually reported somewhat higher levels of friend support than did single men (Adamczyk, 2016). Thus, we propose that men's limited close social networks and weaker support skills are mutually reinforcing and are, at least in part, rooted in social role expectations that associate emotionality and affection with femininity (see the left part of Figure 1 in the target article for an illustration of this mechanism). Reduced disclosure to others leads to receiving less support and less emotional intimacy, which in turn constrains interaction partners' opportunities for disclosure and, therefore, men's ability to provide better support, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. However, we do believe that future research should explore the willingness and ability of relationship partners (both men and women) to provide social support, its contextual influences, and how support provision might be shaped by differences in biological makeup, along with changing norms across different societies.

Curley, Johnson, & Rokos, **Overall & Hammond**, **Reggev & Bareket**, and **Shoemaker et al.** highlight the disproportionately high investment of women in relationships, both in household chores and emotional labor, and the role of benevolent sexism in sustaining this pattern. Benevolent sexism refers to the idealization of women as nurturing (Glick & Fiske, 1996) – a seemingly positive attribution that nonetheless justifies women's unequal investment in relationships and may discourage men from seeking or providing support. Although benevolent sexism has declined historically, it remains prevalent (Hammond, Singh, & Karl, 2025). We concur with these commentators that gender roles assigning nurturance primarily to women should be strongly challenged, and that egalitarian partnerships with mutual support are the most beneficial for both men and women. Nevertheless, as we discuss in the target article, men are in certain ways more dependent on their romantic partners than many prior theories, models, and empirical research have acknowledged, and these gender differences need to be addressed. As discussed above, this information could be leveraged to create novel interventions designed to mitigate some of the costs of inequality for women.

Conversely, **Zeigler-Hill** highlights the high costs of unequal relationship dynamics for men by outlining how romantic rejection or breakups can threaten men's identity, self-worth, and perceived reproductive viability. This, in turn, may trigger anxious, avoidant, clingy, or possessive behaviors, fueling a self-perpetuating cycle of greater dependency, repeated romantic failure, and growing desperation for social and emotional connection. Zeigler-Hill also links this cycle to potential radicalization, with a focus on the incel culture. Consistent with this view, recent research shows that men identifying as incels report substantially greater loneliness and lower social support than non-incel men, with very large effect sizes (Sparks, Zidenberg, & Olver, 2024). Of note, there is no comparable large group of women who despise men due to frustration over not having a partner. This imbalance further supports our argument

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that romantic relationships tend to matter more to men than to women.

There is evidence that both women and men benefit most from involvement in egalitarian partnerships (Carlson, Miller, & Sassler, 2018; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Sprecher, Regan, & Orbuch, 2016). Thus, on a societal level, it is very important for men to be more involved in household chores, to disclose more to close others, and to provide more and better emotional support to their partners – not only to reduce men's dependence on their romantic partners, but also to balance the disproportionately high amount of work and relational demands that most women typically carry in relationships in many societies.

R6. Do romantic relationships matter more to men than to women across the world?

As we note in our target article, our review drew from the current empirical evidence, which is primarily based on Western samples, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Several commentaries highlighted cultural factors that may influence whether the gender differences we review extend beyond Western societies. We welcome these contributions and view them as valuable directions for future research with non-Western samples, especially as they pertain to the following themes.

Curley et al. point out that gender differences across the four relationship stages may be more pronounced in cultures that emphasize norm conformity and in more sexist cultures. **Uchida & Kirchner-Häusler** suggest that in cultures emphasizing honor values, such as strength and toughness, gender differences may be amplified, as these norms conflict with vulnerability and emotional disclosure. They also point to cultures with traditional masculinity norms – emphasizing resolute assertiveness and stoicism in men – that strongly discourage emotional openness. In line with their reasoning and as noted in our section on contradictory evidence, in contrast to a recent meta-analysis based on Western and Asian countries (Wilson et al., 2025), research from Norway, one of the most gender-egalitarian countries in the world, finds the gender difference in the association between divorce and suicide risk to be relatively small (Næss, Blekesaune, & Jakobsson, 2015) or even nonexistent (Øien-Ødegaard, Hauge, & Reneflot, 2021). Conversely, **Ahmed & John** illustrate how strong masculinity norms in India negatively affect men who are coping with relationship trauma, underscoring the importance of normalizing help-seeking – particularly in cultures with rigid masculine ideals.

Ahmed & John, and **Uchida & Kirchner-Häusler** discuss how intimacy and support differ between independent and interdependent cultures. Independent cultures tend to favor explicit, individual-focused support (e.g., bolstering self-esteem), while interdependent/collectivistic cultures more often rely on implicit, problem-focused support, including nonverbal behaviors. **Kafetsios & Strand**, Uchida & Kirchner-Häusler, and **Zhang, Qi, & Jinzhan** all note that in collectivistic cultures, strong social and emotional ties often center on kin with whom there is less relational mobility, whereas in individualistic cultures, couple relationships and friendships play a larger role. We agree that in cultures characterized by collectivism and low relational mobility, gender differences in emotional support are likely to be attenuated due to more stable ties beyond the couple, along with the reduced emphasis on engaging in direct emotional disclosure.

Ng observes that gender differences in early relationship stages, such as love confessions, may be more prevalent in Eastern cultures where men are expected to be more active and women more passive. **Ahmed & John** and **Prasad** point out that divorce remains less common in many Eastern cultures. Related to this, it is important to note that there is still high stigma against men and especially women filing for divorce in Eastern cultures such as India (Thadathil & Sriram, 2020). **Lozano** argues that in Western contexts, women may initiate divorce more often because they can benefit financially, whereas men lose both financially and in terms of custody. Connected to these points, **Konrad** highlights men's higher courtship investments (e.g., needing to purchase expensive engagement rings) and suggests that in some Eastern cultures, women may also be discouraged from initiating divorce because dowries are expected upon remarriage. However, evidence suggests that across the world, divorces come with stronger financial disadvantages to women than men, with women experiencing substantially greater financial losses following divorce than is true for men (de Vaus et al., 2017; Mortelmans, 2020; Thadathil & Sriram, 2020). This suggests that women's divorce initiation in Western countries is not driven by financial gain but occurs despite the greater financial costs they typically incur. Accordingly, in countries without adequate social security systems and more stigma, women may be less likely to initiate divorce than men.

R7. Do romantic relationships matter more to men than to women in different relationship contexts?

Several commentaries discuss how gender roles across the four relationship stages may be shaped by interaction partners and situational contexts. We agree with this important observation and consider these factors central for future research.

Gonzalez Avilés & Bühler note that gender differences may vary with age. For instance, they may be less pronounced in adolescence, midlife, and older adulthood, where other life domains – such as peer-relationships and identity formation in adolescence and employment in midlife – may be more salient than partnerships. In contrast, gender roles in couple relationships may be more pronounced in young adulthood, a life stage often shaped by key relationship transitions such as marriage and parenthood. A recent study also supports the relevance of life stage for the gender differences across the four relationship stages, showing that young women are far more likely than young men to have a best friend, whereas this gender difference is much smaller in middle adulthood (Dunbar et al., 2024). Conversely, **Janusz et al.** highlight the importance of gender differences specifically in older age and the experience of bereavement, a more extreme loss than romantic breakups, showing that men are more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies following bereavement, consistent with the gender differences in breakup coping discussed in the target article (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Gehl et al., 2024). Janusz et al. also note that men may struggle more than women when their partner develops dementia, signaling a loss of partnership upon which men tend to depend more. We agree that considering age is important. It still remains unclear whether or not the gender differences vary with age since the research that we reviewed focuses primarily on one (often young adulthood) or two of the major life stages relevant to romantic relationships (i.e., adolescence, young adulthood, midlife, and older adulthood).

Regarding the transition to parenthood, **Cox & Parsons** suggest that dependence patterns may reverse when children arrive. We concur that equitable caregiving during the transition to parenthood is vital to maternal well-being and that these life changes may be more salient than the gender-specific effects of

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partner emotional support on men's well-being discussed in the target article.

Gonzalez Avilés & Bühler and **Morrison & Kader** both highlight historical context: traditionally, women were more structurally dependent on their male partners due to social norms and strong financial inequality. Consequently, the phenomenon that romantic relationships matter more to men has unfolded in more recent historical time. Consistent with this premise, US data show an increase in divorces filed by women from ~60% in the nineteenth century to ~70% in the mid-20th century (Brinig & Allen, 2000).

Of note, **Szocik** points out that the attribution that the interpersonal and emotional domain belongs mainly to women as opposed to men has undergone minimal historical changes. Indeed, a meta-analysis suggests that while women's roles have substantially changed in the past five decades, with decreasing levels of communal (e.g., nurturing) traits in women, little has changed among men concerning these characteristics (Hsu et al., 2021). Men's greater psychological dependence on female partners (see Figure 2) may, therefore, have been somewhat stable, especially in comparison to the independence that women have gained in the past decades. How gender norms and resulting differences will continue to change remains an open question.

Campbell, and **Elizabeth & Clark** highlight the value of studying bisexual, gay, and lesbian samples in the context of the four relationship stages, arguing that this approach is essential to determine whether one's own gender or the partner's gender is principally responsible for generating the relationship processes we review. As argued in the target article, we expect gender differences to be less pronounced – or even absent – among bisexual, gay, and lesbian individuals, as their sexual orientations are associated with less gender-typical behavior (Kahn & Halpern, 2019) and more cross-gender friendships (Baiocco et al., 2014). This may result in both greater disclosure and greater support provision and reception among gay and bisexual men, compared to heterosexual men.

Differences in gender-typical behavior across relationship types complicate comparisons of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay couples. For example, greater reliance on partner support among heterosexual compared to gay men could reflect the fact that gay men have a better support network than heterosexual men, that female partners are better support providers, or both. By contrast, comparing bisexual men and women in same-gender versus different-gender relationships allows for a cleaner test of actor and partner effects. For example, if among bisexual individuals, actor well-being or breakup coping varies more with partner gender, this would suggest that partner gender drives average differences. If, however, bisexual men, regardless of partner gender, show greater relationship benefits or breakup suffering than bisexual women, this would indicate that individual male gender plays the central role.

Elizabeth & Clark also stress the importance of studying transgender people. Research shows that transgender men tend to display masculine (e.g., self-reliance) and feminine (e.g., compassion) traits similar to cisgender men, and transgender women also resemble cisgender women in these traits (Factor & Rothblum, 2017). Thus, gender differences across the four relationship stages may extend to transgender individuals, but this needs to be examined in future studies.

R8. Broader implications

Several commentaries inquire about our views of ethics and policy about gender differences in romantic relationships, sometimes making concrete recommendations for institutional and media influences (see **Elizabeth & Clark; Overall & Hammond; Konrad; Lopez-Cantero & Isern-Mas; Szocik, Curley et al.**). At the outset, we should note that it is often easier to describe and seek to explain particular regularities in relationships than it is to provide concrete recommendations for change and improvement. The general reason is that there are many steps, which are not merely psychological in nature, between explanatory mechanisms (be they evolutionary, ontological, or proximate, and assuming they are accurate) and intervention-based societal change. Also, we cannot address all of the specific questions that were raised, as this complex step toward application demands a truly in-depth inquiry worthy of another target article.

Many societies are evolving and changing in major ways. One key transition is inspired by social media and artificial intelligence (see **Ruiz-Vanoye, Díaz-Parra, Trejo-Macotela, Barrera-Cámara, & Fuentes-Penna**), which poses both enormous risks and opportunities for social life (Capraro et al., 2024; Krueger et al., 2025). One threat is that social media and AI often offer people additional possibilities to find information about a potential partner (or ex-partner) while seeking contact. Both may occur in the absence of any appreciation or reciprocity by a potential partner, which may result in stalking or worse (e.g., increased aggression after repeated nonresponses). One opportunity, therefore, is to build an infrastructure that makes it easier for people to date as well as to meet and connect with people in their community or elsewhere. While social media and artificial intelligence can be helpful in this regard, people can also find sources of social support and emotion sharing in a variety of alternative ways and should continue to do so.

Although social media or AI may facilitate initial partner contact (or re-contact), we expect and hope that face-to-face contact will remain the most common form of interaction for the development of romantic relationships *and* friendships, as both can provide good social support (for limitations of AI companionship, Smith, Bradbury, & Karney, 2025). In the target article, we outline that perhaps men could explore women as friends rather than romantic partners. While Overall & Hammond raise the concern that such relationships might impose a burden of support on women, some recent evidence suggests otherwise: women report comparable levels of received support and emotional closeness from both male and female close friends, and men, in turn, tend to evaluate their close female friends more positively than their close male friends (Dunbar et al., 2024). But equally important, we agree with **Shoemaker et al**. that these male friends could also provide high emotional closeness to men, so long as one creates the necessary circumstances that are required to realize good social support. What circumstances are necessary? For example, should men meet one-on-one or in groups? As noted in the target article, there is some evidence that women prefer to interact on a one-to-one basis, whereas men prefer to interact more often in groups and engage in activities (David-Barrett et al., 2015).

Dyadic (one-on-one) interaction has several benefits over interactions in groups of three or more (Peperkoorn et al., 2020;

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Van Lange, 2025). In dyads, people can benefit from reciprocity, which may generate increases in self-disclosure and the exchange and sharing of emotions. Also, dyads are psychologically "safer" in that one partner cannot marginalize or exclude the other without excluding themselves from the relationship. It is also clear with whom personal information is being shared, making partners accountable for not sharing with people outside the dyad. Finally, one-on-one interactions are critical for providing support, which is often an ideal context for perspective-taking and empathy. Thus, it is important for men to find a context in which they can experience mutual exchange, trust, and sharing. Dyads usually provide some of the best conditions for both social support and emotion exchange. If successful, men should become less dependent on their female partners for social support, which is likely to be a relief to many of their romantic partners, resulting in a clear case of win-win.

R9. Coda

In sum, there is consistent evidence that, at a psychological level, couple relationships typically matter more to men than to women, at least in Western, predominantly heterosexual samples. However, gender differences across the four relationship stages are likely to vary – being larger, smaller, absent, or even reversed – depending on culture, life stage, historical time, sexual orientation, and specific contextual factors. Importantly, there is far greater variation within each gender than the average differences between them when it comes to the importance of romantic relationships. Gender is, therefore, only one among many factors shaping how people experience relationships. Nevertheless, highlighting average gender differences remains important because they reveal persistent inequalities that place burdens on both men's and women's lives.

Relative to women, many men in Western societies are truly "Bowling Alone" (Putnam, 2000) and relying heavily on their partners within "All or Nothing" marriages (Finkel, 2017). The myriad sources responsible for producing the fairly clear and unequivocal gender differences we review (and some we do not review) are not sufficiently recognized, are poorly understood, and have not been modeled in proper multilevel ways in the current scientific literature. This needs to change. We hope our target article facilitates this process by enhancing and beginning to integrate our understanding of evolutionary, ontological, and proximate mechanisms.

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