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

Published online by Cambridge University Press: **01 June 2026**In response to: **Romantic Relationships Matter More to Men than to Women**[Related commentaries \(23\)](#) [Author response](#)William Costello , Andrew G. Thomas, Tania Reynolds and David M. Buss
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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.

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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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Competing interests















None.

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