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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.

Keywords: breakup, emotional support, gender, health, romantic relationships

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 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, 2024). 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 intimacy and emotional support, and their role in affecting initiation, benefits of involvement, 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.

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 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., 2017; 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, 2009; Gordillo et al., 2009; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Reis & Itzchakov, 2023). In what follows, we first outline theoretical explanations for gender differences in social behavior that may underlie 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, and have greater difficulty in general when coping with relationship 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. 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 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 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, 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 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.

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). 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 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, however, 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 more likely 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 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., 2024). 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: When comparing men, who mostly received less support than the average

woman, with each other, one standard deviation increase in emotional support from friends was associated with a decrease in the desire to remarry by around 70%. In contrast, when comparing women with each other, one standard deviation increase in emotional support from friends was associated with a decrease in the desire to remarry by only 30% (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. This may also at least partially explain why men are less likely to end romantic relationships compared to women (Brinig & Allen, 2000; Morris, et al., 2015).

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 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., 2024). 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 of, and their more negative emotional reactions to, 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 old-aged widowed and divorced people, men were six times more likely than women to report beginning a new romantic 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 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., 2024). 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 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.

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 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 evidence 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 people. 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.

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, and receive more emotional support from, their friends 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.

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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Figure Captions

Table 1

Key Findings and Effect Sizes Across Findings and Propositions

[Insert Table 1 here]

Figure 1

The Development of Men's and Women's Dependence on Romantic Relationships

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Note: The greater dependence of men than women on their romantic relationships is indicated by the relative size of the boxes.

Figure 2

Sources and Consequences of Men`s and Women`s Dependence

[Insert Figure 2 here]

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.

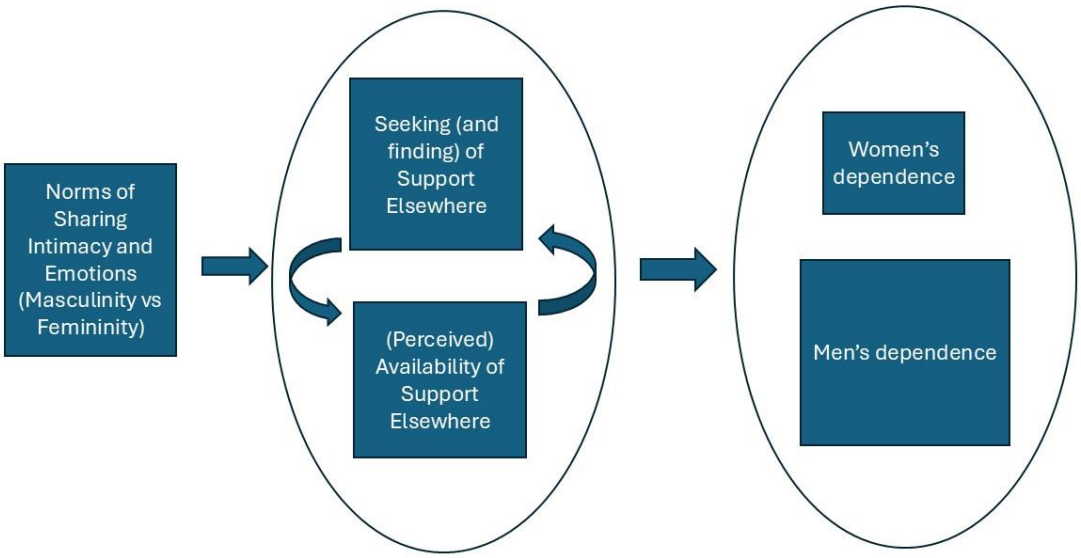
Norms of Sharing Intimacy and Emotions (Masculinity vs Femininity)
Seeking (and finding) of Support Elsewhere
(Perceived) Availability of Support Elsewhere
Women's dependence
Men's dependence

Figure 1

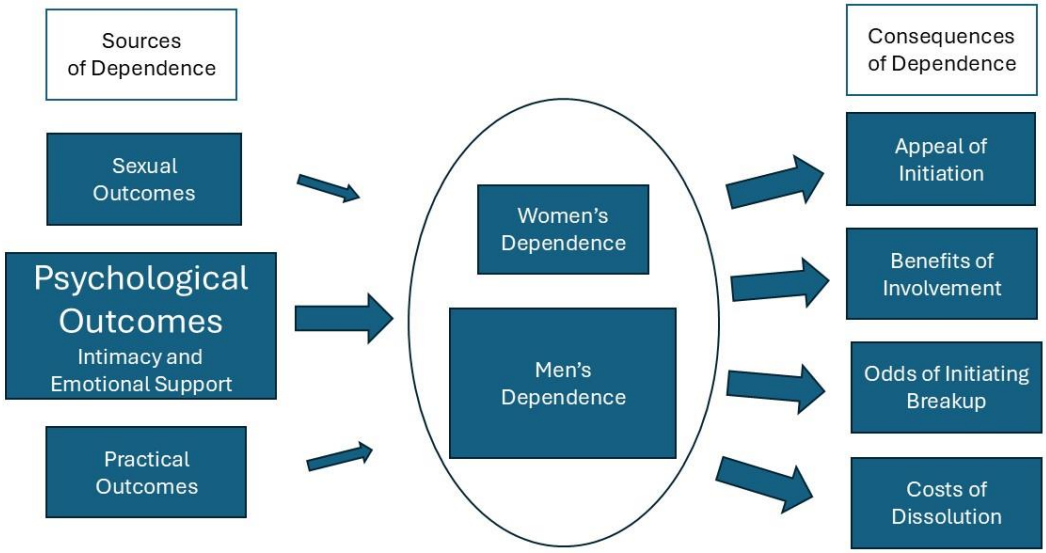
Sources of Dependence
Sexual Outcomes
Psychological Outcomes
Intimacy and Emotional Support
Practical Outcomes
Women's Dependence
Men's Dependence
Consequences of Dependence
Appeal of Initiation
Benefits of Involvement
Odds of Initiating Breakup
Costs of Dissolution

Figure 2