

Single Men

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Abstract

This chapter examines male singlehood through evolutionary and social frameworks, arguing that sex differences in parental investment and mating psychology shape distinct patterns of voluntary and involuntary singlehood. It first analyzes voluntarily single men, explaining how greater male preferences for independence, status striving, and sexual variety—rooted in evolved dispositions and amplified by modern environments characterized by social media, career prioritization, skewed sex ratios, and choice overload—make singlehood strategically appealing. The chapter evaluates short-term mating strategies, demonstrating how higher male sociosexuality interacts with contemporary anonymity and online dating to expand opportunities for some men while distorting expectations for others. It investigates why more men report involuntary singlehood, emphasizing women's mate preferences for status and education, mating market imbalances, and men's stronger reliance on romantic partners for emotional support. Finally, the chapter assesses dysphoric singlehood, the incel subculture, and emerging interventions, highlighting evolutionary-informed strategies to reduce misogyny, improve social competence, and strengthen men's relational well-being.

single men, singlehood, parental investment, mating market, independence, sexual variety, online dating, misogyny, short-term mating, involuntary singlehood

Introduction

The human motivation for sexual and romantic relationships is best understood as an expression of a subconscious drive to reproduce. The evolutionary logic for this is that those who have a genetically underpinned drive to mate would be more likely to have more offspring, and the successive generations of their descendants would inherit the same reproductive drive. The obligatory investment required by each sex to raise these offspring is considerably different (Trivers, 1972). In humans, reproduction for men could be achieved with the effort of a single sexual encounter and, at minimum, no further investment. The consequences for women are different; a single sexual encounter could result in a nine-month gestation period followed by a lactation period lasting up to four years, and caregiving for many more years to follow (Sear & Mace, 2008). The imbalance in parental investment requirement has been used to explain why women are commonly observed to be the “choosier” sex, resulting in greater competition for sexual partners between men (Trivers, 1972). Modern mDNA evidence suggests that, across each generation, a significantly smaller proportion of men have passed on their genes compared to women (Lippold et al., 2014). This variance in men’s reproductive success can be explained, in part, by the prevalence of polygynous mating systems in ancestral environments, where one male can have multiple female partners simultaneously. Approximately 83% of Indigenous human societies prior to Western imperialism were preferentially polygynous (Barash, 2016).

The move toward monogamous mating systems reduced the number of men excluded from relationships (Henrich et al., 2012). However, recent studies have suggested the facilitation of singlehood in modern mating environments is having a more pronounced effect on men. For example, in the United States, 63% of men under the age of 30, compared to only 34% of women under the age of 30, identify as single (Gelles-Watnick, 2023). It is the

purpose of this chapter to explore why some men are choosing to opt out of relationships and why a large number view their singlehood as involuntary. We will focus specifically on factors that may uniquely influence male choices and experiences of singlehood. To achieve this, the chapter first examines men who are voluntarily single, considering how sex differences in the desire for independence and sexual variety make singlehood an appealing option for some. The second half of the chapter focuses on involuntarily single men, addressing why more men than women report being single against their wishes, and why this group appears especially vulnerable to negative psychological consequences. The chapter concludes by considering future research and intervention possibilities, including strategies that could improve well-being and relationship outcomes for men who struggle with singlehood.

Voluntarily Single Men

There are numerous reasons men and women may choose and prefer singlehood (Girme et al., 2023). As the purpose of this chapter is to understand how the experience of singlehood may be different for men, this section focuses on factors that specifically motivate men to opt out of committed relationships. Sex differences have been found in the importance of “freedom” as a reason for being single (Apostolou, 2017; Apostolou et al., 2020). Freedom in singlehood can mean the freedom to pursue interests, career aspirations, and personal goals. It can also mean the freedom to pursue a variety of sexual partners and engage in uncommitted sexual encounters. This section will first acknowledge the evidence from a variety of branches in psychology that recognize a sex difference in the desire for independence that may make both aspects of freedom in singlehood more appealing to men. Looking at the evolved psychology specific to both types of freedom, this section will go on to explore how modern environments may be contributing to increased rates of male voluntary singlehood.

Men's Greater Preference for Independence

Sex differences in independence are explained using social, developmental, and feminist psychology perspectives. These perspectives put a particular emphasis on the role of environmental influences in shaping people's behavior. The sex difference in preference for independence is thus accounted for by different learning experiences or the internalization of gendered roles (Bandura, 1971; Eagly & Wood, 1999). For example, feminist perspectives suggest a sex difference in societal pressure to get married, with men having greater freedom to prioritize careers, hobbies, and self-development (DePaulo, 2017). This sex difference persists even when social pressure to partner is found to be low in both male and female single individuals (Sprecher & Femlee, 2021). Media representations are particularly effective in reinforcing such gender stereotypes (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Depictions of the "bachelor" lifestyle glorifying singlehood could encourage men to develop a positive perception of being single, making it a desirable option.

Social, developmental, and feminist psychological theories prioritize evidence that men are encouraged to adopt an independence preference by cultural norms and the media (Kite et al., 2008). There are also dispositional perspectives that explain sex differences, which are not necessarily linked to social roles. Reluctance to commit to a romantic relationship has been linked to having an avoidant attachment style (Pepping et al., 2025). A meta-analysis of sex differences in avoidant and anxious romantic attachment found males showed consistently higher avoidance scores, with sex differences increasing with age (Del Giudice, 2011). Studies into sex differences in cognitive styles suggest men are more prone to cognitive styles (e.g., systemizing) that develop in autonomy-supportive environments, potentially making men more likely to perceive the independence of singlehood as rewarding (Baron-Cohen, 2003).

The sex difference in preference for independence is cross-culturally consistent, suggesting a degree of canalization worthy of understanding (Thomas et al., 2020). Such understanding requires considering both the proximate (“how”) and ultimate (“why”) explanations (Tinbergen, 1963). The approaches introduced thus far mainly account for the former and not the latter. For that, we need approaches grounded in evolutionary theory. Evolutionary psychology argues that the mind and its psychological adaptations have developed gradually over time to cope with reoccurring elements in the environment (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). From this perspective, all humans have an evolved psychology and the propensity for independence is one aspect of men’s evolved psychology.

Evolutionary Mismatch and Social Status

Another aspect of men’s evolved psychology relates to social status (i.e., an individual’s relative standing in the eyes of others). As social status would have had important survival and reproductive implications throughout human history, humans have evolved mechanisms that are sensitive to indicators and opportunities for improving social status (Buss et al., 2020; Durkee et al., 2020). The interaction between the evolved mechanisms relating to social status and men’s inclination toward independence may explain why some men choose singlehood so as to have the freedom to pursue these aspirations. The growing number of men in this category can be attributed, in part, to a mismatch with modern environments where floods of status cues, such as curated displays of luxury and success on social media platforms, are exaggerating the effect of these mechanisms.

When the environment in which psychological adaptations operate experiences rapid change, the mechanism the adaptation evolved to perform may no longer suit the new conditions. This is referred to as *evolutionary mismatch* (Goetz et al., 2019). Yong et al. (2023) argue that the psychological mechanisms that were originally designed to process opportunities for improving social status are overstimulated in modern environments.

Modern, economically advanced societies are full of intentionally designed cues (e.g., advertisements and social media) that heighten the desire to acquire social status, contributing to the decision to delay marriage and reproduction (Lim, 2021; Yong et al., 2023). The evidence of younger people placing an emphasis on career goals and social status ahead of finding a committed relationship supports this explanation for the growing numbers of voluntary single people. For example, a US survey asked 18- to 34-year-olds to rate the importance of different factors for “living a fulfilling life,” while having an enjoyable career was considered “extremely” or “very” important by 68% of participants, only 20% rated marriage as highly (Pew Research Center, 2024). The decision to delay marriage and reproduction may be especially feasible for men because, unlike women, their fertility does not decline as sharply with age (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2019). Moreover, because men preferentially desire younger partners, and women themselves tend to prefer somewhat older partners who are more likely to have accrued status and resources, postponing long-term commitment does not penalize men to the same extent it does women. Men may delay relationships not despite the mating market, but precisely to improve their standing within it (e.g., von Rueden et al., 2011). Considering men’s evolved preference for independence, opting out of the obligations involved in a relationship to advance one’s career may be a particularly attractive option. Evidence for this sex difference has been found when comparing possible reasons for singlehood, with men rating “avoiding the responsibilities of a relationship” significantly higher than women (Apostolou et al., 2020).

Evolutionary and social perspectives offer complimentary reasons for men’s preference for independence. The interaction between this preference and modern environments that encourage men to put off long-term commitment to improve their career, education, or mate prospects is one explanation for the apparent increase in singlehood. The single men discussed in this section are those that value the independence singlehood allows

and they choose to be unattached because it grants them the freedom to invest their time and energy however they wish. The single men discussed in the following section may choose to be unattached because it allows them the freedom to pursue short-term, uncommitted sex with a greater variety of partners.

Short-Term Strategists

Evolutionary psychology predicts that sex differences will emerge in domains where men and women have faced consistently different adaptive challenges over time (Buss, 1995). Investigations in the mating domain have yielded some of the strongest and most replicable results in all of psychology, including the greater desire for sexual variety in men (Buss & Schmitt, 2019; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) suggests that sex differences in desire for casual sex evolved due to asymmetries in the costs and benefits of reproduction in short-term mating. Specifically, because of differences in reproductive biology (internal gestation, pregnancy, and lactation), the minimal levels of parental investment for women are much higher than those of men (Trivers, 1972). This allows the possibility for men to invest little in offspring beyond intercourse, opting out of bi-parental investment entirely. This also makes the potential costs of short-term mating much higher for women compared to long-term mating which is marked by much higher levels of male parental investment. At the same time, the reproductive benefits of casual sex are also smaller for women compared to men. Women might be able to secure high quality genes, protection, or other social benefits from casual sex (Greiling & Buss, 2000), but only men can increase their offspring number through the pursuit of seeking sexual variety (Symons, 1979). The result is a mating psychology that has evolved to be more (but not perfectly) similar between the sexes in long-term contexts, where both men and women engage in mutual mate choice and commitment (Stewart-Williams & Thomas, 2013),

and dissimilar when it comes to short-term mating, where men have more to gain and less to lose.

There is extensive empirical evidence to support the large sex difference in desire for sexual variety. Studies consistently report men wanting more sexual partners (e.g., Baca et al., 2026), having less stringent standards for short-term mates, and having a greater willingness to engage in casual sex (Buss & Schmitt, 2019). For example, the classic work of Clark and Hatfield (1989) found that between 69% and 75% of male US college students agreed to “go to bed” following an invitation from an attractive stranger, compared to 0% of women—a sex difference that has been replicated several times (e.g., Hald & Høgh-Olesen, 2010). The sex difference in desired number of sexual partners has even been found to be consistent across countries with higher levels of gender equality, such as Norway, where movements toward female sexual liberation could be expected to reduce such a difference based on sociocultural theories (Kennair et al., 2009).

Further supporting an evolved inclination toward short-term sex in men, sex differences have been found in the desire for sex without long-term commitment. The underlying personality construct of sociosexuality—the desire for sex in the absence of commitment—has consistently shown sex differences across time (Edlund et al., 2021) and cultures (Guéguen, 2011), with men scoring higher every time. The highly replicated finding that sex differences exist in sociosexual attitudes and desire supports the existence of sex differences in preference for a short-term sexual strategy. Men may choose to be single because of this preference for short-term relationships, with singlehood allowing them more freedom to pursue a greater variety of partners. The results of Apostolou et al.’s (2020) study into the reasons single people give for being single provides evidence of exactly this, with single men giving higher scores than single women to the following statements:

“Commitment scares me,” “I am not the family type,” and “I want to be free to flirt around.”

The Modern Mating Environment

The choice to be single to pursue a short-term sexual strategy will, to some extent, depend on the availability of short-term sex partners. Although the preference for short-term sexual relationships is stronger in men than women, humans will adaptively shift mating strategy depending on the context and environment (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Thomas & Stewart-Williams, 2018). Research in evolutionary psychology suggests that local sex ratios (i.e., whether there are more men or more women) can shift mating strategies in predictable ways (Schmitt, 2005; Walter et al., 2021). When there is a surplus of men (i.e., a male-skewed sex ratio), men face greater competition for mates. In this context, men are more likely to adopt long-term mating strategies, such as signaling commitment and investment, to increase their attractiveness as partners and to improve their chances of securing a mate. Conversely, when there is a surplus of women (i.e., a female-skewed sex ratio), men face less competition and women must compete more intensely for access to desirable men. This can lead to a rise in short-term mating behavior, especially among women who may become more open to casual relationships as a way of attracting or retaining high mate-value men. In such environments, men are better able to pursue their evolved preference for sexual variety, and women may strategically adjust their own behavior in response to the mating market dynamics. Evidence for the sex ratio phenomenon comes predominantly from university environments, where a connection is being drawn between the prevalence of short-term mating behavior, or “hookup culture,” and the surplus of women in the university mating pool (Adkins et al., 2015). In these contexts, where access to short-term relationships is genuinely increased, men’s higher sociosexuality may result in a decision to be single and pursue short-term sexual success.

Men pursuing a short-term mating strategy often exhibit behaviors designed to facilitate short-term sexual success (Jonason & Buss, 2012). For example, they may deceive

potential female partners about the depth of their commitment to gain short-term sexual access (Haselton et al., 2005). Throughout most of human history, when people lived in smaller communities, the deployment of this tactic would have been limited by the risk of reputational damage. Now, people live in far larger societies with unprecedented anonymity and potential options; therefore, sexual encounters can easily occur with virtual strangers who choose to never meet again (Goetz et al., 2019). Anonymity and the increased availability of temporary relationships are two cues that pursuing a short-term sexual strategy could be successful. These cues are exacerbated by novel features of the modern mating environment, including social media and online dating platforms.

Social media interactions can provide people with a larger number of perceived mate options and dating apps can skew expectations of both the quantity and quality of potential mates available (Goetz et al., 2019; Toma et al., 2008). For a few particularly desirable men, the wider dating pool does translate to more sexual opportunities. However, this wider dating pool can give some men the false impression that there are more options available to them, making a decision to remain single and pursue a short-term strategy misinformed.

The availability of potential partners has also been linked to satisfaction with mate choice decisions. An online dating study found that a group who chose from a set of 24 dating options, as opposed to six, were less satisfied with their choice (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017). The least satisfied participants were found to belong to the group who chose from the larger set and had the option to reverse their decision a week later. Some dating apps provide users with significantly more options than this and the ability to cut communication with other users at any time. It has been suggested that "choice overload" effect may apply to the modern dating environment, with overly extensive choices having demotivating consequences (Goetz et al., 2019). In a recent study, choice overload was listed as one of the potential reasons people who meet their partners online report less satisfaction (Kowal et al.,

2025). Single men, particularly those perceived as having a higher mate value, who are exposed to large numbers of potential partners may not feel motivated to pursue anything beyond a short-term relationship because of the impression that there are consistently many long-term options available.

An important component in the success of male short-term strategists is the willingness of women to participate in short-term sexual relationships. Throughout evolutionary history short-term mating would have been less appealing to women because of the risk of unwanted pregnancy. However, in contexts where contraception can mitigate the risk of unwanted pregnancy and female sexual liberation is reducing stigma around short-term sexual relationships, women have greater freedom to pursue the benefits of a short-term strategy (Buss et al., 2017; Meston & Buss, 2009). More women being open to less committed sexual relationships makes it easier for some single men to find a short-term sex partner. Equally, the appearance that more women are having casual sex may encourage more men to switch to a short-term strategy to capitalize on these changes in women's sexual behavior. It is worth acknowledging that while women may have greater freedom to engage in casual sex, men continue to express significantly greater interest in short-term sex than women (Gale et al., 2024). Therefore, for a significant proportion of men who choose singlehood hoping to pursue a short-term mating strategy, the reality can be disappointing because expectations built up by social media and dating apps frequently fail to be met. It is often at this point that singlehood begins to feel less voluntary.

Involuntarily Single Men

Not all men who are single wish to be. In a large, cross-cultural study (N = 7,181) 13% of participants across 14 different countries identified as being involuntarily single (Apostolou et al., 2023). Some evidence suggests that there are currently more involuntarily single men than women, with data from the United States suggesting 61% of single men are

currently looking for a relationship or dates compared to 38% of women (Pew Research Center, 2020). Although both men and women suffer poorer mental health consequences when singlehood is recognized to be involuntary (Apostolou et al., 2024), these consequences are often more severely expressed in involuntarily single men.

This section will first seek to answer the question of why there appears to be more involuntarily single men than women. One hypothesized reason is that women's evolved mate preferences and improved socioeconomic success may lead to more involuntarily single men in environments in which women are less dependent on settling for men out of economic necessity. Another reason is that singlehood may be a higher quality option for women, particularly considering their stronger social networks. This section will then discuss why involuntarily single men appear to have worse mental health consequences than women. Following this, it will examine a burgeoning area of research within the topic of single men; the study of the online subculture of involuntary celibate (incel) men and the link between poor male mating performance and misogyny (for an overview, see Costello, 2025).

Why Are There More Involuntarily Single Men Than Women?

Extensive evidence shows that women prioritize resource acquisition, status, and ambition in their mate preferences more than men do (Buss, 1989; Walter et al., 2020). Ancestral women who chose mates with the ability and willingness to provide them with resources would be more likely to have successful pregnancies and offspring who survived to reproduce (Buss, 1989). There is a wealth of support for the existence of sex differences in the valuing of these traits, with women consistently prioritizing financial prospects, industriousness, earning capacity, and ambition more than men (for an extensive review, see Buss & Schmitt, 2019). The cross-cultural nature of this evidence speaks to the argument that these preferences are a sex typical feature of our evolved psychology rather than socially constructed through gender norms. Furthermore, sex differences in the importance placed on

a mate's resource value are consistent across societies with relative gender equality. Not only do women continue to prefer wealthier, higher educated mates, but studies actually suggest these preferences are particularly strong in highly educated women (Fales et al., 2016). Instead of settling for a less educated mate, many of these women choose to delay finding a partner (Durante et al., 2012).

Women's increasing educational attainment means growing numbers of highly educated women are struggling to find the similarly highly educated men they desire, leading to a mismatch in the mating market (Lichter et al., 2020). There are approximately 1.4 million more US college-educated women in their 20s than men (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). In a poll of university-educated single women in the United States, 45% said their relationship status was largely due to an "inability to find someone who meets their expectations" and 54% of the women said they would be much less likely to date someone without a college education (Cox, 2023). Surveys indicate that an inability to find the right partner is a primary reason for women remaining childless in the United Kingdom (Berrington, 2017). Similarly, a comprehensive study of 150 American women found the "mating gap"—a shortage of suitable, educated men willing to commit to long-term relationships—was also given as the primary driver for egg freezing in the United States (Inhorn, 2023). The evidence suggests an imbalance in the mating market, where a shortage of eligible men is leading to more women choosing singlehood.

One result of more women choosing singlehood is more men being excluded from dating. While a small number of men, with the education, status, and resource level to be considered eligible, accrue a significant proportion of female attention, most receive none (Brooks et al., 2022). The existence of this inequality is demonstrated by sexual activity data collected between 2002 and 2013 (Harper et al., 2017). During this time, the top 20% of men (with the most sexual partners) reported a 25% surge in their number of sexual partners, with

the top 5% reporting an even more notable 38% increase. However, as the average number of partners for men remained consistent, these data suggest that the majority of men saw a decline in their number of sexual partners. This perspective is supported by online dating app research, which highlights the imbalance in men's mating success. Using data from 1.8 million online profiles across 24 countries, Jonason and Thomas (2022) created a measure of how much attention or "Indicators of Interest" (IOI) each profile received. The results of the study revealed extreme inequality in the distribution of IOIs, with most users having few IOIs, or none at all, but others receiving hundreds. This finding was particularly pronounced in men. The sexual activity data and attraction inequality in online dating contexts does indicate that currently single men may find it hard to meet a partner, at least online. Considering an increasing push toward online dating as the primary way for people to find a relationship (Rosenfeld et al., 2019), levels of involuntary singlehood among men may continue to grow.

It has also been argued that more women may be choosing singlehood because single life is a more enjoyable prospect for women than men (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). Contraceptive technologies, like hormonal birth control, mean women are able to control their reproduction and have ambitious careers (Cunningham & Hill, 2023). Single women have their own money and are no longer dependent on male partners to provide for them financially. Women also tend to have broader social networks that make singlehood more enjoyable (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). Research has found that while women seek emotional support from a variety of social relationships, men's emotional support tends to predominantly come from their romantic partners (Wahring et al., 2024). Men, more than women, name their romantic partners as their primary confidants (Liao et al., 2018; Umberson et al., 1996). Sex differences in social support seeking and receptiveness have been attributed to "social roles" and the way children are socialized (Wahring et al., 2024).

However, it is also worth acknowledging evolutionary perspectives on this topic (Costello et al., in press). For example, our ancestral history of patrilocality (i.e., where women typically moved to live with their husband's kin after marriage) may have left women especially dependent on cultivating new alliances for survival (Hrdy, 2009). Because women's survival was more critical to offspring survival than men's (Sear & Mace, 2008), selection likely favored women who were skilled at building and maintaining supportive social bonds. By contrast, men's ancestral coalitional networks prioritized stoicism and formidability over emotional expressiveness (Buss et al., 2020). Men's greater dependence on romantic relationships for emotional support may explain the finding that single men report feeling emptier and less complete than single women (Taylor et al., 2000). It may also shed light on why there are more involuntarily single men than women and, as will be addressed in the next section, why involuntarily single men appear to have worse mental health consequences.

Why Do Involuntarily Single Men Have Worse Mental Health Consequences Than Women?

Romantic partnership serves as both a source of emotional support and a signal of mate value. Disruptions or failures in mating can take a substantial psychological toll. Importantly, men appear to suffer more than women from failures to form or maintain romantic relationships. This section reviews the evidence of the toll that singlehood takes on men's mental health and explains why men suffer more adverse consequences of singlehood than women.

Individuals who report "poor mating performance" are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as sadness or loneliness (Apostolou et al., 2023, 2024). Evolutionary perspectives offer an ultimate level of explanation for these negative emotions. The term "dysphoric singlehood" has recently been introduced to describe the intense negative emotions that can be experienced by individuals who feel excluded from relationships and/or

sex (Thomas, 2023). In the same way that physical pain evolved to motivate us to stop using injured parts of our body, this psychological pain may have evolved as a mechanism to motivate individuals to find a partner (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). However, in the same way chronic pain can be maladaptive, so might negative feelings around singlehood. Involuntary single people, who feel their singlehood is helpless, can end up experiencing recurring negative emotions and depressive symptomology from an expected lack of pay-off (Thomas, 2023). Sociocultural perspectives suggest these emotions may disproportionately affect single men because of the sex differences in social support networks previously outlined, as well as their developmental experiences encouraging them not to disclose their emotions (Wahring et al., 2024). Furthermore, sex differences in risk-taking, impulsivity, and resistance to seeking emotional support could all contribute to a more severe reaction to involuntary singlehood in men. UK national statistics relating to suicide risk and victims consistently find that men (14.4 per 100,000) are at more risk of committing suicide than women (5.0 per 100,000) (UK Health Security Agency, 2025). One of the two strongest correlates of male suicidal ideation is feelings of “failure in mating” (de Catanzaro, 1995).

Losing a mate, such as through a divorce or breakup, also disproportionately impacts men’s psychological well-being. Men initiate fewer breakups and divorces (Rosenfeld, 2018); report longer, more intense periods of grief following the end of a romantic relationship (Morris et al., 2015); struggle more in the initial stages of separation (Leopold, 2018); and generally have more trouble coping with relationship breakdown and dissolution. One reason for this is that women are more likely to choose a mate-switching strategy to exit an unsatisfying relationship, looking for alternative partners while still in a relationship (Buss et al., 2017). Men are more likely to favor infidelity over dissolution, and so they are less likely to initiate a separation (Fincham & May, 2017). The difference in these mating strategies can also explain why men often suffer more post-dissolution distress.

The similarity in life satisfaction between voluntary single people and people in relationships (Apostolou et al., 2024) suggests an important factor in determining well-being is one's perceived ability to find a relationship (Costello et al., in press). The subjective belief that one is unable to attract a mate can undermine mental health, particularly in men. As men are generally more open to sex without commitment and express a desire to have a greater number of sexual partners than women, men tend to be less selective for short-term relationships. Most reproductive-aged women can therefore fairly accurately perceive that they are able to attract a sexual partner. As outlined in the chapter, women have been found to be more selective about their sexual partners. For men, more so than women, singlehood means greater uncertainty around their sexual success. Poor well-being associated with one's perceived ability to attract a mate may be the result of an evolutionary alarm bell, warning men that their reproductive success is at risk. Considering this, it is unsurprising that single men who feel they are not just involuntarily single but also involuntarily celibate report particularly poor mental health outcomes.

Involuntary Celibacy

Involuntary celibacy is particularly associated with maladaptive coping strategies, including the build-up of online forums that can lead to the adoption and spread of misogynistic ideology. "Incels" are an online subculture of involuntarily celibate men who have built an identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships (Speckhard et al., 2021). A common incel belief is that feminism has allowed women to have standards that are too high; that is, women are now only interested in a minority of particularly good-looking men (referred to in the online community as "Chads") because they do not need to settle for men out of economic necessity. While there is a grain of truth to this, considering the aforementioned mismatch in the mating market and the fact incels are often less educated and not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Costello et al., 2022,

2025), research has shown incels often massively underestimate the importance women place on factors such as kindness, intelligence, and humor (Costello et al., 2024).

The shift to online dating, where physical attractiveness is over-indexed (Witmer et al., 2025), may exacerbate incels' feelings of exclusion from the dating market, particularly as data shows incels struggle specifically in online dating (Sparks et al., 2024). Excessive swiping on dating apps has been shown to decrease self-esteem and increase "fear of being single" (Thomas et al., 2022). There is accumulating evidence for the link between low self-perceived mate value and misogyny. Men who doubt their desirability to women have a greater inclination toward misogyny (Bosson et al., 2022; Grunau et al., 2022). The relationship between misogyny and involuntary singlehood is likely to be bidirectional, as women are unlikely to find hostile sexism appealing in a partner. This creates a cycle of rejection that contributes to incels' low sense of mate value and self-esteem, significantly predicting poor mental health outcomes for these single men (for an overview of incels' poor mental health, see Costello et al., 2024).

It is understandable that society, and women in particular, may not have a lot of sympathy for incels. It is also understandable that women would feel degraded and threatened by some of the views shared by this community, particularly in light of the high-profile nature of the rare acts of violence associated with incel culture (Costello & Buss, 2023). However, the anger that incels express through their hostile sexism is also directed at themselves. Incels report high levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (e.g., Costello et al., 2025). A large study of incels (N = 561), found a fifth of the sample reported experiencing daily suicidal thoughts (Costello et al., 2025). Attempts to understand the prevalence of suicidality within the incel community have suggested it may be a response to perceived social ostracism and an attempt to bargain for better social treatment (Costello & Thomas, 2025). The prevalence of poor mental health and suicidal thinking among incels

illustrates the significance of the psychological consequences associated with poor mating performance in men.

Future Research Directions

Considering the evidence covered in this section on the potential mental health consequences attached to involuntary singlehood, future research would benefit from a focus on planning appropriate interventions for incels and involuntarily single men in general. Some potentially fruitful avenues for interventions have been proposed. These include interventions to reduce hostile sexist attitudes, focusing on cross-sex mindreading, designed to help incels adjust their ability to ascertain which traits members of the opposite sex value and to overcome their belief in female sexual deceptiveness (Costello et al., 2024). As involuntary celibacy has been found to be associated with misogynistic attitudes, correcting cognitive distortions around female mate preferences may also benefit women by reducing harmful instances of misogyny. Another recent study has identified incels' overestimation of societal blame and underestimation of sympathy as a form of cognitive distortion that interventions should seek to correct (Costello & Thomas, 2025). Other interventions include online forums that focus on the deradicalization of incels who want to leave the community. For example, IncelExit forums, where past members of the incel community act as credible role models for current incels (Gheorge & Clement, 2023). Finally, there has been some progress in interventions to improve relationship prospects. Incels often report high levels of dating anxiety and "lack of flirting skills" as a common reason for their singlehood (Costello et al., 2024). It is therefore particularly promising that an intervention to improve social confidence was found to have a genuinely positive impact on men's prospects in speed-dating scenarios (Li et al., 2020). Future research must continue the development of interventions targeted not just at the incel community but other involuntarily single men who are struggling with the impact their singlehood is having on their mental health.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how the experience of singlehood may differ for men compared to women. It focused first on why some men may voluntarily choose singlehood, and then on the experiences of men who perceive their singlehood as involuntary. While individual differences play a significant role in the personal experience of singlehood, the relevance of an ultimate level of explanation was demonstrated in both sections. Sex differences found in evolved mating psychology can be used alongside social theories to explain men's independence preference. The evidence for men's inclination toward short-term mating and sexual variety is particularly robust and has strong evolutionary psychology foundations. The acknowledgment of an imbalance in the current sexual marketplace stems from the theoretical and empirical support for the existence of female-specific evolved mate preferences for a highly educated, ambitious, and financially successful partner. An evolutionary perspective helps rationalize not only the intense negative emotions that can be associated with unwanted singlehood, but also why this may disproportionately affect men and, in some cases, lead to the development and proliferation of misogynistic attitudes. To gain a holistic view of human behavior, both proximate ("how") and ultimate ("why") levels of explanation are necessary (Tinbergen, 1963). Insights from an evolutionary perspective are critical for interventions aimed at improving men's singlehood experience. Future research in this area needs to acknowledge the sex differences discussed in this chapter to more accurately understand the experience of single men in the modern mating market.

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