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Jacob Scheuerman
San Jose State University

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Abstract

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Keywords

incel, gender, hegemonic masculinity, violence, mental health

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Introduction

In 2014, Elliot Rodger went on a rampage through Isla Vista, California, killing seven and injuring 14 people before taking his own life. In the wake of this massacre, Rodger left a manifesto in addition to numerous videos on YouTube detailing his reasoning. Rodger explained that his motive was not getting a girlfriend and not being given the respect he perceived the world owed him. In particular, he mentioned his intense hatred towards women and wishing them all into concentration camps (Rodger, 2014). Rodger would go on to influence many other manifestos of mass murders who cited him as inspiration. Rodger's attack would find a strange reverence towards him from a community that would share many of his beliefs and grievances; this group became known as Incels. In recent years, the phenomena of Incels have gripped the nation with their ideology. Incel stands for Involuntarily Celibate. Those who identify as Incels believe that despite wanting to enter into a romantic relationship, they do not find successful partnership due to social ineptitude, physical deformities, and any combination of those traits or others. Amongst other beliefs, intense misogyny, sexism, and a defeatist attitude about the world characterize Incels. Inceldom encompasses the behaviors and beliefs associated with being an Incel. Few understand the origins of Incels or what truly drives them. A way to understand Incels is to view them through their inability to fulfill masculine ideals that dichotomize their choices into violence or give up on their lives entirely.

Literature Review

This section discusses gender roles, norms, and expectations and focuses on hegemonic masculinity, forms of sexism, and gender role conflict. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of

Inceldom will be analyzed by discussing the history of the men's rights activist movement, the archetypes and beliefs of Incels, and aggrieved entitlement.

Gender Roles, Norms, and Expectations

Gender is a complex issue standing as one of the most critical aspects that control people's identities. Gender has many implications for people and holds power subordination. Specifically, gender acts as a tool that reifies the ideal masculine archetype while restricting those that do not fit into subordinate roles. Gender as a tool for power is not necessarily one conducted consciously—many who uphold this dynamic will act subconsciously in maintaining this dynamic—this dynamic can be characterized as hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is the practice of domination of men over women in culture and society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity goes beyond patriarchy—although derived from it—by justifying why men dominate women and apply itself to wider culture and society. Hegemonic masculinity defines what the norm is for masculinity; even though those that define hegemonic masculinity will be few, the norms that men establish place them in society's dominant role (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The men who established this hegemony defined the rules for women and defined how men should behave. The norms and ideals that hegemonic masculinity instill have had serious and pervasive effects.

One of the adverse effects derived from hegemonic masculinity is ambivalent sexism. Ambivalent sexism is defined by its contradictory feelings rather than just its aversion or outright hatred towards women (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). Ambivalent sexism takes on two different forms, hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism is when those who wish to maintain gender

roles in society go about doing so by taking an adversarial position against women, often in a derogatory or aggressive way. Benevolent sexism is defined by its portrayal of women as weak or incompetent and needing men's support and protection.

Inherently, while both are forms of sexism have adverse effects, they differ. Within romantic relationships, distinct forms of sexism appear, showing the negative aspects. The larger hegemony puts forth that men are dependent on women in terms of a relationship, and women offer men something they need that they cannot get on their own (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). Hostile sexism has men view themselves as the superior sex, trying to dominate and control women while seeking to restrict and extract value from them. Benevolent sexism views women as a completion to man, viewing women as the inherently nurturing sex and would seek to become complete by entering into a relationship with them. While both might view and interact with women in different ways, both acknowledge that they are dependent on women. In the context of sexist beliefs, men are incapable or at least deficient at intimacy and require women to fulfill that inadequacy (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). In this sense, despite men's societal placement of superiority, they suffer from a deficiency by relying on women for certain functions.

After examining these forms of sexism, it was found that benevolent sexism rates equivalently between men and women, while hostile sexism rates significantly higher among men (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). Hostile sexism is more gendered based on how female subtypes play out. Female subtypes are a way for people to categorize women with desirable and undesirable traits to resolve the internal problems they may have towards women. Generally speaking, sexism categorizes women two ways, those that conform to the gender hierarchy and those that do not; society

views those that conform more favorably while those that do not less favorably (Fowers & Fowers, 2010).

The introduction of sexual openness further complicates the categorization of women. Often referred to as the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, society classifies based on their openness to sex. Those viewed as more reserved are virtuous, while those that are more open with their sexuality are promiscuous and undesirable (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). In general, women viewed as promiscuous receive harsher treatment in society because they are not conforming to the gender hierarchy (Fowers & Fowers, 2010).

The effects of hegemonic masculinity expand far beyond just women. In addition to its detrimental impact on women, hegemonic masculinity affects other men who may not fit into the hegemony in harmful ways. When thinking about sexual objectification—that is, viewing a person as an object to be treated for one’s sexual pleasure—most people think of it occurring with women. Women are objectified in numerous ways due to historically being judged based on their appearance. The objectification of women severely impacts them, including an increased risk of experiencing eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Davids, Watson, & Gere, 2018). However, men also experience objectification. As women face expectations to have an hourglass figure, men are idealized in having a muscular body. They internalize messaging from the media regarding muscularity and compare their body to other men’s (Davids et al., 2018). Just as objectification has led to significant problems for women, so too has it for men. Muscularity is an extension of gender, specifically masculinity, and pertains to issues related to gender and the expectations that come in tandem.

Gender role conflict (GRC) is a psychological state in which socialized gender roles negatively affect individuals and others (O'Neil, 2013). GRC stems from an individual being unable to fulfill or being at odds with their societal gender role and, despite attempts to, enduring internal and external conflict. Since muscularity is an aspect of masculinity, those unable to reach that gendered ideal experience reduced self-worth because they cannot match their appearance to the perceived ideal (Davids et al., 2018).

Central to GRC is the fear of presenting traits thought of as portraying feminine values, behaviors, and attitudes (O'Neil, 2013). Men learn the fear of femininity in their early years of development, usually influenced by peers, family, media, and community. This fear takes the form of men being paranoid and afraid to present anything feminine, rejecting anything they associate with femininity, and doubling down on those they associate with masculinity (O'Neil, 2013). For instance, if a man believes expressing their emotions is feminine, they will do whatever they can to repress their feelings. The expectation will spread to other men into doing the same, which causes serious consequences. GRC positively correlates with depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and self-esteem issues in men (O'Neil, 2013). This correlation suggests that men who cannot express their feelings in the ways perceived as feminine and experience negative feelings and behaviors as a direct consequence. Additionally, GRC positively correlates with greater coping issues and feelings of shame among men (O'Neil, 2013).

In part due to the repression of emotions, GRC has been linked with problems with interpersonal relationships. GRC significantly correlates with lower rates of intimacy and closeness with others and increases shyness, hostility, rigid interpersonal interactions, and emotional inexpressiveness (O'Neil, 2013). These issues

mean that men are less capable and confident in their interactions with others, but especially women, which leads them to reaffirm previous beliefs that men are socially maladaptive and need women to feel complete. These issues go further, as GRC significantly links to discriminatory behavior such as thoughts, attitudes, and violent and abusive views towards women (O'Neil, 2013). These serious issues have serious implications towards women and anyone else that would be a potential target.

Understanding Inceldom

To understand the Incel community, it is crucial to discern the movements that spawned them. The men's rights movement (MRM) was founded in opposition to second-wave feminism in the 1970s, which focused on the reflection of sexism in women's personal lives. The MRM has gone through many reinventions, changing its tactics, structure, goals, and presentation (Gling, 2019). Despite these changes, the men's rights movement is symbolic of the broader movement of antifeminism and masculinity. Antifeminist movements—such as the MRMs—take steps to change their behavior by becoming more inclusive to marginalized men—such as gay men—and embracing more nontraditional forms of masculinity such as geek culture, while not changing their core message (Gling, 2019). The changes that these movements went through accept hegemonic masculinity. These adaptations of masculinity would be termed as dialectical pragmatism or the strategic assimilation of different aspects of masculinity to form a heterogeneous form of hegemonic masculinity (Gling, 2019).

An important aspect of the MRM is its presence online, as the movement primarily centers on online communities. As a movement, they operate on and are concerned with the activities and trends online. The decentralized nature of the internet has

allowed for greater anonymity online, allowing individuals to engage in more radical ways they otherwise inaccessible. Men's rights activists (MRAs) participate in highly volatile online campaigns, including targeted harassment events (Gling, 2019). MRAs have embraced effective politics, which is an ideology unconcerned with actual policy but with its individuals' emotional state. Affective politics is less concerned with taking effective political action as a collective but instead more interested in airing the personal grievances men have against women, promoting the growth of misogynistic environments (Gling, 2019).

Another key aspect of the MRAs movement online is the co-opting of evolutionary psychology. MRAs manipulate evolutionary psychology to essentialize women as irrational and submissive beings that go after the highest valued man (Gling, 2019). The co-opting of evolutionary psychology was an act of "geekification," or the assimilation of it into the form of masculinity often associated with geek culture. It took the idea and coined masculinized terms that suited the subgroup. For instance, many of the terms that MRAs use, such as "cuck"—short for cuckold, or the husband of an adulterous wife—are masculinized coinages of these terms to suit their agenda (Gling, 2019). The geekification of these ideas was only a sign of things to come. Incels are in many ways derived from the MRA movement, even down to the lexicon with them borrowing or adapting terms from them. An important term in understanding the Incel is Chad, an archetypal alpha man who can have sex whenever he wants. Incels are in direct opposition to Chad and associate Chad with the MRA movement at large. Incels view the MRAs as successful alpha men who share little in common with the Incel and revel in their defeatist attitude (Gling, 2019).

The defeatist attitude that Incels have is not without cause. Incels believe they are incapable of being loved or finding success in a romantic relationship for various reasons. Those who are socially maladaptive tend to be more socially isolated, which worsens mental health and their chance of developing meaningful relationships (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams & Keaton. 2020). Due to their isolation, they adopt a defeatist attitude and turn to the internet for a support group. However, instead of finding encouragement from those in a similar situation, the Incel community only reaffirms their perception that all is hopeless (Maxwell et al., 2020). The community created by Incels continues the cycle of isolation.

Incels hold certain themes and archetypes that define how they view the world. Incels view the world through gendered archetypes, such as the feminine archetype of the ‘Stacy,’ an attractive and unattainable, sexually free woman, only interested in the masculine archetype of ‘Chad.’ These archetypes act as standards for understanding the respected genders which influence how they conduct themselves and how they interact with those of the opposite sex (Maxwell et al., 2020). These archetypes only highlight the inadequacies of those that would wish to live up to them. When viewing the behavior of ‘Chad,’ Incels become infuriated with what they can get away with solely due to their good looks. For instance, Incels believe ‘Chad’ could look at a woman without reprimand for doing so, while an Incel would be called a creep for doing so (Maxwell et al. 2020). The idea being that Incels, due to their inherent failings, are incapable of being ‘Chad.’ So, no matter how they model themselves after him, they will be unable to achieve his level of success and thus be met with romantic failure every time.

Incels channel their failure to sexually or romantically succeed into aggression and violence. Not all forms of violence are the same, and not all aggression necessarily results in violence. The failures of Incels to achieve romantic success ultimately leads them down the road of violent ideation and fantasy, demonstrated through acceptance and status threat. Acceptance threat is the sense of rejection and exclusion from the group you feel you do not belong to anymore (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Acceptance threat has to do with one's feelings of their inadequacies to live up to the group's ideals; they often feel threatened in their standing by not living up to some standard.

On the other hand, status threat is the sense of undermining the group's values by some outside force (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Status threat has to do with someone's identity with a group and perceiving that group as being attacked or undermined by another. For instance, women in leadership positions go against typical gender roles; the masculine ingroup perceives female success as a threat. Acceptance threat more strongly correlates positively with violent ideation than status threat (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). This sense of failure could result in inferiority and simultaneous entitled nature, leading to violent fantasies seen with other mass murderers (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Status threat does not have the same issue with violent fantasies; instead, it overcompensates for these shortcomings and doubles down on the more overtly aggressive and toxic aspects of masculinity. Status threat deals with attitudes, specifically attitudes regarding the group and the perceived threat to it. If there is a perceived threat to the group, that person can act on it. On the other hand, the acceptance threat does not and will turn inwards to fantasies about positions in which the Incel is on top (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019).

At some point, however, fantasy and thought are not enough. To Incels, violence is inevitable when left with few options. The discourse for Incels comes down to whether they take that violent action or if they commit suicide. Aggrieved entitlement is the feeling that an ingroup is entitled to something due to their status and that that thing is under threat of being taken away; it is a gendered emotion that compensates for feelings of humiliation (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Aggrieved entitlement is a product of hegemonic masculinity. In particular, the culture of violence associated with aggrieved entitlement is the way it is—at least in the United States—because violence is viewed as a valid way for men to assert their masculinity (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Within this view, violence becomes restorative and compensatory for the loss of manhood. Ultimately what brings on this violence is the conformity to a gender ideal that socializes men to believe that this violence is the way to prove their manhood (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). The violence thus purported by Incels can be understood through the lens of aggrieved entitlement, and therefore gender.

Discussion

The conditions that bring about Incels are strongly tied to gender norms, roles, and expectations. Incels need to be understood through hegemonic masculinity. While hegemonic masculinity practices putting men in a dominant position over women, this does not mean that all men benefit from this arrangement. Hegemonic masculinity is based on the idealized man; not every man can decide what is ideal or is going to be able to live up to that ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). So, while Incels might be in the dominant group by being men, they do not fit into that idealized role and will, to some extent, be marginalized.

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Incels are driven largely by a belief in biological determinism—that being the belief that people’s biology is the primary driver of people’s behavior and condition (Ging, 2019). The belief in biological determinism, compounded with their perceptions of a poor appearance, leads many Incels to conclude their physical appearance is a result of faulty genetics and is hopeless. However, another way to view the issue of appearance when it comes to Incels is by their engagement in a self-objectification and the unrealistic beauty standards they hold themselves to in addition to that by society at large (Davids et al., 2018). The issue Incels face is one of gender role conflict as they are expected to have a certain appearance to be attractive to women. Yet, they are unable to meet those standards and experience dissatisfaction with their body. Biological determinism only cements those gender roles and expectations, despite them upholding hegemonic masculinity, which hurts men unable to meet those standards.

There are significant connections between the intrapersonal and interpersonal issues associated with GRC and Incels. Exploring intrapersonal issues, GRC is associated with a multitude of mental dysfunctions and maladaptation’s (O’Neil, 2013). The intrapersonal issues Incels face are a result of gender role conflict rather than an innate trait. Furthermore, intrapersonal issues are similar to interpersonal issues. The correlation of GRC with lower rates of intimacy and higher rates of violent thoughts towards women provide us a clear connection to Incels (O’Neil, 2013).

The violence and potential for violence derived from aggrieved entitlement share much in common with hostile sexism. Hostile sexism tends to be targeted more often against women they perceive as promiscuous (Fowers & Fowers, 2010). The

aggressiveness in which men respond to women's sexual openness is present in Incels. Incels view most women as promiscuous but single out the archetypically promiscuous woman—Stacy—as the ire of their hatred and vitriol (Maxwell et al., 2020). It is also a sense of aggrieved entitlement in that they feel threatened by women being able to be sexually open, which is seen as a confrontation to the hierarchy that they believe they hold.

Conclusion

Understanding gender roles, norms, and expectations encompass hegemonic masculinity, forms of sexism, and gender roles conflict is necessary to understand Inceldom. Exploring the history of the men's rights movement, the archetypes, and beliefs of Incels, and aggrieved entitlement allows understanding that Incels are derived from hegemonic masculinity and suffer severely from gender role conflict.

It is important to keep in mind that research on Incels is still a relatively new area; there is not much research on the topic, so the data available is very limited. Understanding of Incels could change substantially given new research revealing ideas and concepts not considered before. The literature on gender theory utilized in this article is highly applicable to Incels. Even if further research comes out on Incels, the current research of gender stands as valid.

Potential policy implications consist of addressing Incels in a therapeutic setting. Incels suffer from psychological issues and seeking professional help will allow them to alleviate their symptoms. A potentially effective method is for counselors to go by gender role conflict, assess where they are, and meet them there (O'Neil, 2013). Assessing Incels based on this criterion would be helpful, considering much of their distress comes from GRC. For

example, men being unable to express their emotions due to an expectation and repulsion of it being feminine would result from GRC. Men fear engaging in a certain behavior due to a perception of it being oppositely gendered and socially taboo, especially for Incels.

For this policy implication to be successful appropriate training for mental health professionals should be required. However, therapists and other mental health professions need training in dealing with Incels. In addition, increasing the access and affordability to mental health clinics and community health centers would be beneficial. Much of the toxicity that creates Incels comes from online spaces; therefore, it might be pertinent to closely monitor and police these areas. Watchdog groups can monitor these spaces and private entities to self-regulate and police that such toxicity does not propagate into hate. Lastly, it is crucial going forward to have more responsible and informed discussions on this topic. Despite their role as part of an ingroup, Incels are still a marginalized group and subjected to many of the same social factors that shape them in the same way. Incels are the way they are because of complex social structures and personal reasons; they are driven to be the way they are because of many factors. While they are not absolved of responsibility or even problematic, it is important to remember that they are people and should receive humanity and decency. It is important to treat them well, not allow them to get away with saying or even doing horrific things, but rather to treat them reasonably as not to radicalize them further.

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Jacob Scheuerman is a senior at San Jose State University majoring in justice studies with a concentration in criminology. As well as studying criminology, he also has an interest in psychology with a particular interest in understanding how crime can be understood through psychological pathologies. An area of research he would like to look into more would be the phenomena of mass shooters, specifically trying to contextualize them within their respected period in association to their historical and political frameworks that would lead them to engage in their acts.