
Buying the Blackpill

Perceived Exclusion and the Psychology of Incels

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5.1 Introduction

Incels – short for “involuntary celibates” – have two grievances against women. First, women reject them. Second, it is women’s shallow preoccupation with physical appearance that prompts this rejection. Incensed by what they perceive as a wrongful exclusion from the dating market, incels withdraw to an online world where sympathetic ears offer support for their frustration and loneliness. Occasionally, incels are spurred to lash out against their perceived oppressors, with the most egregious instances including mass murder. Our goal in this chapter is to illuminate the mechanisms that underlie the psychology of incels. After reviewing empirical research designed to explore the role of several potential contributors to the incel phenomenon, we explore strategies for extricating incels from the toxic online environments in which they immerse themselves. We begin with a brief history of the incel movement.

5.1.1 *The Blackpill and the Injunction to “Lie Down and Rot”*

Incels are part of the “manosphere,” a loose typology of misogynistic groups united by feelings of exclusion and disempowerment (Ging, 2019). Most manosphere groups, such as Men’s Rights Activists and Men Going Their Own Way, subscribe to the *redpill* ideology – a broadly antifeminist worldview that posits that men are disadvantaged in society. The incel worldview, known as the *blackpill* (Glance et al., 2021), takes this a step further by embracing nihilism befitting Nietzsche. The blackpill holds that women, and particularly feminists, have usurped men’s dominant position in the gender hierarchy. Due to their unjust control over status, power, and resources, women can be highly selective when it comes to romantic partners. Shamefully, women purportedly focus almost exclusively on attractiveness while eschewing personality, occupation, and socioeconomic status. This bias gives rise to the “80–20 rule” wherein 20 percent of the men (“Chads” or good-looking men) have 80 percent of the sex (Moonshot, 2020).

Incels' lack of success within the realm of romantic and sexual relationships can poison their other relationships as well. For example, one online forum user complained that "people in the social groups I've chosen to join have bullied me for the way I fail at getting lady's [sic]." He went on to describe several instances of bullying by people he thought were friends and ends with imagining shooting one of them with a gun (incels.is, 2023). But the problem is not limited to sexual relationships, for the larger society is "lookist": biased against unattractive people, particularly unattractive men (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). Combined with their lack of romantic success, their mediocre looks make unattractive men less popular with peers, friends, and even family members. Some incels even assert that their incel status compromises their careers, as witnessed by evidence that many incels are NEET (not in education, employment, or training; Costello et al., 2022). Convinced that their plight is due to the lack of a relatively immutable characteristic – physical attractiveness – incels conclude that their lot in life is hopeless and that the only logical reaction is to "lie down and rot" (LDAR).

The mandate to LDAR has predictable consequences. Most incels report feeling loathed by the broader society (Daly & Reed, 2022) and high levels of depression and anxiety (Moskalenko et al., 2022). In this sea of hopelessness, fellow incels provide islands of shared despair. Given this, it is understandable that they respond harshly when fellow incels attempt to improve their life situation: online incel discussion forums are rife with ridicule for men who go to the gym ("gym maxxng") or attempt to obtain a highly lucrative job ("wealth maxxng"). Moreover, some forums are specifically devoted to incels who lack employment prospects, have concerns regarding body image, or are contemplating suicide (CCDH Quant Lab, 2022; Twohey & Dance, 2021). Such incel forums often promote anger and hopelessness, with only 5.8 percent of discussion threads being positive in nature (CCDH Quant Lab, 2022). Rather than offering conventional forms of support, members provide each other with tips regarding optimal strategies for dying by suicide. Researchers have confirmed that incels have taken their own lives at least forty-five times but believe that the actual number is substantially higher (Twohey & Dance, 2021).

The reported self-loathing of incels cannot be uncoupled from the virulent misogyny and dehumanizing rhetoric of their worldview. Overweight women are "landwhales." All women are "foids" (short for "female androids"), at best indifferent to, and at worst active participants in, depriving incels of a fulfilling life (Gothard et al., 2021). Attractive, yet unobtainable women are "Stacys," and their male counterparts are "Chads" (Cottee, 2020). Both Chads and Stacys are demonized for their presumed successful romantic and sexual lives. Men who are in romantic relationships but are not Chads are referred to as "Cucks" because their partners will inevitably cheat on them with a (better-looking) Chad if given the opportunity. A staggering percentage of discussions include

some positive mention of sexual assault, with a recent report estimating that 89 percent of forum users have posted approvingly of rape (CCDH Quant Lab, 2022). Some forum members have gone so far as to propose chattel slavery for women so incels no longer suffer the indignity of sexless lives (incels.is, 2018).

The sexism of incels may be attributable, in part, to inappropriately negative self-views. In a study examining the roots of “curvilinear sexism,” Bosson et al. (2022) found that blatant misogynists possessed low *subjective* mate value (i.e., self-ratings of one’s value as a romantic partner) but not low *objective* mate value (i.e., number of short- and long-term relationships, number of sexual partners). That is, only men who *perceived* themselves as low in the romantic hierarchy evinced high levels of hostile sexism without the mollifying chivalry and paternalism characteristic of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Unfortunately, incels’ perception of themselves as unlovable misanthropes appears to be a major contributor to their misogyny.

Another disturbing theme on incel forums is the veneration of incels who have committed violent acts (O’Donnell & Shor, 2022). Elliot Rodger is the prototypic incel hero. In 2014 Rodger murdered six people in Isla Vista, California, after posting a manifesto decrying his exclusion from a happy romantic life. Today, incel forums refer to Rodger as “Saint ER” (in reference to his initials). Forum members goad each other to “go ER” by committing mass murder. There have been takers. Toronto resident Alek Minassian explicitly referenced Elliot Rodger before going on his 2018 rampage, in which he murdered eleven people. When forum users first identified Nikolas Cruz, the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooter, they argued among themselves as to whether he was an incel and if they should “claim” him. More recently, in 2021 an active incel forum member was arrested in Ohio in possession of a modified AR-15 rifle and a plan to “slaughter” women at a nearby university (CCDH Quant Lab, 2022).

Although the misogyny of incels is obviously unwarranted and indefensible, the movement may represent, at least partially, a response to cultural shifts in the economic and interpersonal spheres. Incels correctly diagnose a cultural trend of alienating economic inequality (Piketty, 2014, 2020). As noted earlier, the injunction to LDAR often extends to the workplace, wherein incels decry “wage-slavery” as meek acquiescence to inherently unfair social structures. The wealthy accrue capital and political power while the underclass is left holding the bag. Consider, for example, the recent debt ceiling negotiations in the United States. Just as Congress added onerous work requirements for welfare benefits, it left the ballooning military budget intact. Rather than participate in what they perceive to be a rigged system, incels purportedly remain aloof by being NEET, refusing to engage in the labor market.

Furthermore, to a degree the incel movement may represent a reaction to real cultural shifts in mate preferences (Eagly & Wood, 1999; but see Walter et al., 2020). In the West, more egalitarian gender roles have diminished the

extent to which women are financially dependent on men. Their newfound independence has freed women to shift from a heavy emphasis on traditional markers of male attractiveness (e.g., financial security) to physical attractiveness (although women still value financial security in their romantic partners more than men do; Walter et al., 2020). From this vantage point, incels may be bristling against an emerging trend for women to embrace one of the shallow priorities that men have championed for centuries.

To be sure, there may be a basis for some of incels' beliefs. Nevertheless, many of their convictions are groundless and ill conceived. Consider their penchant for singling out women for valuing physical attractiveness and men as their unwitting victims. In reality, both men and women are stereotyped according to the "what is beautiful is good" heuristic (Dion et al., 1972), wherein attractive people are ascribed more positive traits than less attractive people. Moreover, attractive people – men and women alike – are favored in nearly every type of interaction throughout the lifespan (for a meta-analytic review, see Langlois et al., 2000). Even schoolteachers expect physically attractive children to outperform less attractive ones (Dusek & Joseph, 1983). Clearly, women are not the only connoisseurs of physical attractiveness nor are unattractive men the only victims of attractiveness-based discrimination.

Whatever the sources of incels' grievances may be, the foregoing discussion fails to explore the question of why some men become incels while others do not. To address this issue, we turn to two social-psychological formulations, self-verification and identity fusion.

5.1.2 Compensating for Social Exclusion: Incels, Self-Verification, and Identity Fusion

Humans have a fundamental need for social connectedness and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When this need is frustrated, negative effects abound, from the physical (e.g., higher levels of stress, heart disease) to the psychological (e.g., lower well-being). Social exclusion also engenders compensatory mechanisms, including a desire to seek self-esteem and belongingness from other sources. Experiencing consistent social exclusion can encourage openness to radicalism that would otherwise be absent (Pfundmair et al., 2022). Thus, for incels, exclusion from meaningful relationships in the offline world may cause them to seek solace from a group of like-minded individuals who purportedly understand them.

Another key priority that people experience is a desire to be known and understood or "self-verified" (Swann, 1983, 2012). Dozens of studies indicate that people prefer and seek evaluations that confirm both negative and positive self-views (Bosson & Swann, 1999; Swann et al., 1990). Moreover, people desire verification of their global characteristics ("I am a worthwhile person") as well as their specific characteristics ("I am athletic"; Swann et al., 1989; for

reviews see Kwang & Swann, 2010; Swann, 2012). Furthermore, people are not only more committed to, and productive within, work groups and settings in which they receive self-verification (Swann et al., 2000, 2003; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007) but also more inclined to remain in relationships in which partners verify their self-views (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Neff & Karney, 2005; Swann et al., 1992).

Potential incels may be especially interested in self-verification from incel communities. As noted previously, self-identified incels typically feel excluded from and loathed by the wider society (Daly & Reed, 2022) – feelings that are decidedly non-verifying for most people. Starved for self-verification and suffused with anxiety and depression (Moskalenko et al., 2022), incels may eagerly align themselves with any group that shows signs of understanding them. Groups that embrace the blackpill ideology will be alluring because such groups offer a face-saving explanation for the perceived plight of incels. That is, by buying the blackpill, incels can convince themselves that they are the unfortunate victims of the shallow mate preferences of women. Budding incels may therefore seek and find verification from online incel communities.

Once potential incels ally themselves with an incel group, the self-verification they receive will likely encourage them to develop strong, family-like ties to other group members. Over time, these ties may morph into a powerful form of alignment with the incel group called identity fusion (e.g., Swann et al., 2009). When identity fusion occurs, the boundaries between the individual's personal and group identities become porous. These porous boundaries allow the individual to maintain a sense of personal agency while simultaneously experiencing a deep, familial connection to the group. A sense of oneness with other group members – *and* the defining beliefs and values of the group – will result.

Fusion with the group can have important consequences. Strongly fused individuals will evince an intense sense of group-based agency that motivates them to enact behaviors compatible with the group's goals and values (Swann et al., 2009; Swann et al., 2012; Whitehouse et al., 2014). This may even include violence and retribution against outgroup members (Fredman et al., 2017; Swann et al., 2014). In fact, identity fusion is an exceptionally strong predictor of violent pro-group behavior, consistently out-predicting rival variables such as group identification (for reviews, see Gómez et al., 2020; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015; Varmann et al., 2023; Wolfowicz et al., 2021), sacred values, and moral convictions (Martel et al., 2021). This suggests that fusion with an incel group may motivate acceptance of the blackpill ideology and the violent misogyny that it supports.

To test the foregoing ideas, we (Rousis et al., 2023) conducted several studies. In all studies, participants were considered incels only if they (1) self-identified as incels and (2) were knowledgeable regarding key beliefs of incels (e.g., the meaning of LDAR). We began with a preliminary study in which we

asked if active members of incel communities exhibited stronger identity fusion than active members of other male-dominated online communities, including other gender-based groups (Men's Rights Activist [MRA] communities; Hodapp, 2017) and an apolitical control group comprising only male members (New England Patriots fans). We found that incels did in fact report significantly higher identity fusion than members of other male-centric groups, even when controlling for variables such as exposure to, and agreement with, the group's worldviews. This is important as it demonstrates that, even relative to an adjoining group in the manosphere, incels attain a unique sense of alignment with the group that cannot be explained by more frequent website visitation and exposure to the group's worldview.

The remaining studies tested three related hypotheses. First, members of incel communities would seek self-verification that adherents of the blackpill ideology are uniquely able to provide. Second, once embedded in incel groups, the self-verification that participants received should encourage them to fuse to the group. Third, identity fusion would, in turn, predict endorsement of violence against, and actual online harassment of, women.

To test these hypotheses we focused on global, rather than specific, self-verification. Global self-verification is a broad, felt sense of being understood by others. Whereas specific self-verification focuses on a series of traits (e.g., social skills, athleticism), global self-verification assesses the degree to which respondents believe that others see them as they see themselves. Our data indicated that global self-verification was indeed related to identity fusion with the group. For incels, then, it appears that receiving verification from other incels contributed to their relatively higher levels of identity fusion.

We then asked whether the self-verification to identity fusion link would help explain endorsement of group-based violence against women. To do so, we focused on support for past and future incel-inspired violence. To assess support for past violence, we briefly described Elliot Rodger's shooting spree and manifesto and then asked a series of questions to determine support for his actions (e.g., "Elliot Rodger did the right thing." "If there were more people like Elliot Rodger, the world would be a better place."). To assess support for future violence against women, we asked incels whether they supported various statements about incel-inspired violence against women (e.g., "Incels can only take so much abuse from women – then it is psychologically impossible not to retaliate." "The only way for incels to regain our pride is to avenge the injustices we have suffered from women.").

Across two independent samples with 396 self-identified incels, incels who felt globally verified by other incels were more fused to the group, and fusion, in turn, predicted support for past and future violence. In our final study, we extended this to include an outcome of online harassment of women (e.g., "In the last month, how often have you shared, liked, upvoted, or retweeted a post that promoted aggression toward a woman (or toward women in general)?")

“In the last month, how often have you sent provocative messages to a woman online with the intention of making her uncomfortable?”). We found the same pattern: Global self-verification predicted identity fusion, which in turn predicted online harassment of women.

Together, these results point to two conclusions. First, the global verification that incels receive from other group members seems to be a crucial aspect of becoming a fused incel. Second, among incels, identity fusion translates to endorsement of extreme acts and real-world harassing behavior that can have dire consequences for the women they target. These conclusions are bolstered by the results of a series of eight studies by Gómez et al. (in press).

The goal of this research was to replicate the correlational connection between self-verification and identity fusion described earlier and to establish a causal link between the two. Three correlational studies replicated Rousis et al.'s (2023) finding that increased self-verification was associated with higher identity fusion and willingness to engage in extreme acts for a group. Two experiments, one cross-sectional and one longitudinal, demonstrated that manipulating perceived verification increased participants' fusion with the group, which in turn predicted their willingness to fight and die on its behalf. Finally, in interviews with incarcerated Spanish gang members, Gómez et al. (in press) found that feelings of being known and understood by other gang members predicted their fusion with the gang, which in turn predicted their willingness to engage in costly sacrifices for the gang (also see Chinchilla & Gómez, this volume).

The results of the Gómez et al., (in press) studies offer strong support for Rousis et al.'s (2023) contention that self-verification leads to extreme behavior through identity fusion. Nevertheless, Rousis et al. (2023) report one additional finding that took us by surprise: the link between self-verification and support for violence against women was especially strong among narcissistic incels – that is, incels who possess exalted but fragile self-views (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). But it was not just that some incels scored high on our index of narcissism. In two studies, Rousis et al. asked participants to rate their self-views on ten different traits, including physical attractiveness and social skills. Self-identified incels rated themselves between the 68th and 79th percentiles, in keeping with the “better-than-average” effect (Zell et al., 2020). Even more surprising were our relationship and sexual history findings. Only 18 percent of our participants reported never having had sex and only 11 percent reported never having had a casual dating or serious romantic relationship partner. Instead, 75 percent reported having had sex ten or more times and 76 percent reported having had ten or more casual or serious romantic relationship partners. In our second study, we also asked participants to report their current relationship status. To our surprise, only 27 percent of our self-identified incels reported being single, whereas nearly half (47 percent) reported being married or in a civil union.

Additional findings emerged that contradict incels' self-descriptions. In our samples, we found that fully 87 percent of incels indicated having completed a college education (other researchers reported that 64 percent (Costello et al., 2022) and 37 percent (Moskalenko et al., 2022) of their incel samples finished college). Belying incels' self-descriptions as mainly NEET, our studies found that only 6 percent reported not being in education, employment, or training. Independently, other researchers found that only 17 percent were NEET (Costello et al., 2022).

Clearly, the most counterintuitive finding was the high rates of involvement in relationships and sexual activity reported by our participants relative to those recruited from incel forums (e.g., Costello et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Speckhard et al., 2022). This discrepancy could reflect a tendency for incels on forums to exaggerate their lack of sexual and romantic success to come across as "good," that is, prototypical (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Turner et al., 1987) group members. Note that in contrast to most groups, which revel in believing that their members possess socially valued qualities (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), incels do just the opposite. To be a card-carrying incel, men must profess that they are unattractive, romantically unsuccessful, and preferably socially awkward. Whereas these qualities would be ignored or criticized in most groups, among incels they are celebrated. Like a funhouse mirror, incels' supposedly negative attributes are reflected back to them as desirable and necessary for group membership.

A second potential explanation for the discrepant findings is that there was a fundamental difference between our MTurk participants and the visitors to incel forums (Costello et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022). Consider, for example, that MTurk participants were noticeably older ($M_{\text{age}} = 33$, $SD = 7.55$) than forum participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.94$, $SD = 6.95$). This raises the disturbing possibility that at least some incels "grow up" and get married but still cling to the dangerously toxic views of the blackpill. In this scenario, the incel identity may be quite sticky, persisting long after believers no longer meet the group's membership criteria. Such "resilient identities" are characteristic of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012).

A third explanation is that older incels may feel doubly alienated from society at large and from other incels because of their age. As a result, they may use compensatory mechanisms to protect their self-worth. Relative to younger men, men in their thirties may feel that society is less tolerant of both their inability to attract a romantic partner and the extreme beliefs they harbor. Furthermore, their age may alienate them from other incels: as people in their age cohort who previously identified as incels have shorn their incel identity, these men are left as the elder statesmen among a much larger pool of perpetual twenty-somethings. They may accordingly resort to motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to protect their feelings of self-worth. For such individuals, the act of asserting that they have many sexual partners may say less about

their actual experiences and more about what they *want* to believe about themselves. From this vantage point, the positive self-views of incels in the MTurk studies may reflect a motivated ideal self – a statement of who they want to be rather than who they truly believe they are.

Although it is premature to select one of these explanations as the most appropriate (we suspect that they all have merit), each of them suggests the need to ask some very basic questions regarding the nature of incels. We begin with the most basic question of all.

5.1.3 *Who Are Incels Anyway?*

In young adulthood, Abe (who would later become an incel) developed a crush on his female best friend. When he finally got the nerve to ask her out, she said yes, and they dated for a month. But during that time, she cheated on Abe with her ex and eventually got engaged to him . . . It was a crushing blow, and Abe turned to the internet for support. He found incel communities on Reddit, ones that helped reaffirm his belief that his looks were responsible for his terrible dating experience.

(Beauchamp, 2019)

Although lovers have been having experiences like Abe's for centuries, his ability to turn to the blackpill is a relatively recent development. The incel movement as we know it today began in the early 2000s. Most of the early incel user base came from 4chan and 8chan (Beauchamp, 2019), image boards notorious for a laissez-faire approach to racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism (Rieger et al., 2021). The pipeline was rather straightforward: internet-savvy, romantically frustrated young men flocked to online spaces rife with shocking content. There, they found common cause with others who shared their interests, experiences, and worldviews. Their interactions in these spaces alerted them to incel-specific forums on Reddit or independent websites dedicated to men's sexual and romantic frustration.

To the best of our knowledge, most, if not all, interactions between incels occur online. For this reason, the reputed characteristics of group members are drawn almost entirely from online discussion forums. This introduces a degree of uncertainty to claims made on forums, as assertions made there are notoriously susceptible to misrepresentation (Donath, 2002; Huang & Yang, 2013). This uncertainty is manifest even among incel forum members, where internecine arguments about who is and who is not a "true incel" are commonplace. Some forum members are derided as "volcel" or voluntarily celibate: men who are "too attractive" to be incels, but who are nonetheless sexually and romantically unsuccessful (or at least, represent themselves as such online). Incels accused of being "volcels" by other incels may feel ostracized, which is a particularly worrying proposition if their identities are deeply aligned with the group: ostracized

individuals who are deeply aligned with a group are likely to endorse extreme acts to prove themselves worthy group members (Gómez et al., 2011).

Given that incels themselves disagree about the criterial attributes of incels, it is not surprising that outsiders are similarly confused. From a cultural and scientific standpoint, knee-jerk assumptions of incels as self-hating, sexless, right-wing Americans (ADL, 2023; Cottee, 2020) may not reflect the true nature of people who identify as incels. Consider that in the research we reviewed in preparing this chapter there was considerable heterogeneity in incels' self-views and their sexual and relationship experiences (e.g., they were politically left-leaning and sexually active).

As diverse as the psychological profile of incels may be, one theme emerges consistently: All incels embrace extremely negative attitudes toward women. At first blush, it may seem counterintuitive that a group that embraces such toxic attitudes toward half of the planet's population might attract so much loyalty from its followers. This loyalty becomes even more puzzling when one recognizes that the incel movement lacks a coherent leadership structure and cogent political ideology. That is, although some researchers have argued that incels see themselves as part of a political movement (e.g., O'Donnell & Shor, 2022), there is no "head incel" who directs other incels' activities in a strategic manner. In contrast, men's rights groups do have influential figures who guide their members' instrumental behavior (Mountford, 2018; O'Donnell, 2019). Despite this, Rousis et al. (2023) discovered that the rates of fusion were much higher in incel groups than men's rights groups. Why?

We suggest that incels enjoy high levels of fusion due to a combination of offline exclusion and online verification. Rebuffed by women in their daily lives, incels retreat to online worlds, seeking to share their pain with a group of like-minded others. Online, they discover kindred spirits who encourage them to blame others for their perceived romantic and sexual failures and reassure them that they deserve more romantic success than they currently enjoy. Furthermore, just as conspiracy theories satisfy the need for uniqueness (Imhoff, this volume; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) and provide adherents with a sense of meaning (Schöpfer et al., 2023), the blackpill might boost incels' self-views as the privileged holders of unique, esoteric knowledge. Only incels, the argument goes, see the world for what it truly is: a harsh landscape of biological determinism that offers little hope to unattractive men. Having these views verified by other incels may boost their wavering sense of self-worth. As they move between their offline and online worlds, the resulting emotional ups and downs fuel volatility that has been shown to promote fusion to the group (Newson et al., 2021; Whitehouse et al., 2017). Consistent with this reasoning, incels who received verification from other group members were more fused to the group, and fusion, in turn, predicted endorsement of past and future violence on incels' behalf (Rousis et al., 2023). Moreover, incels whose current level of sexual or romantic involvement fell short of what their

narcissistic self-views led them to expect were especially inclined to support incel-inspired violence. Insofar as they frequent websites that marinate them in narratives that promise meaning through violence (Ellenberg & Kruglanski, this volume; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Webber & Kruglanski, 2017), they may be tempted to translate their concerns into violence.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the base rate of violence is exceedingly low among extremists in general (Sageman, 2021). This generalization surely applies to incels. The vast majority of incels will not attack others, no matter how abhorrent their beliefs about women and society in general. Instead, a more common response may be to direct their anger and frustration inwards. Incels report significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety than demographically similar non-incels (Costello et al., 2022) and online posts about considering or attempting suicide are common (CCDH, 2022). Sadly, these mental health struggles may be compounded by other conditions as well, including autism spectrum disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder, both of which are more common in incel samples than the general population (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022). For incels committed to LDAR, the presence of comorbid mental health issues is worrying. This lifestyle opposes the very things that make life worth living: social relationships, pleasurable activities, and meaningful work. By depriving themselves of what humans most value, incels, and particularly those with preexisting mental health concerns, may enter a spiral of self-imposed isolation and meaninglessness.

5.1.4 Solving the Incel Problem: Understanding and Disrupting the Radicalization Process

The conclusion emerging from the foregoing remarks is clear: Incels are miserable and at least some of them are poised to bring misery to the people around them. Unfortunately, the movement itself is gaining momentum. Originally confined largely to the United States and Canada, incel forums have now spread to Europe and India. For example, one recent report (Speckhard et al., 2021) indicated that only 30.9 percent of their sample of incels resided in North America, whereas 32.4 percent resided in Western Europe. These findings suggest that the blackpill is now a cross-cultural phenomenon that appeals even to men who are not its traditional targets. Given this, it is important to take a close look at the process through which incels are radicalized in the hope of identifying ways of disrupting that process. The first step involves finding the group.

5.1.4.1 Finding the Group

How do disaffected young men find the blackpill in the first place? Research on the manosphere has often treated these groups as silos, failing to address the extent to which cross-pollination occurs between, for example, Men's Rights

Activists and incels (Ging & Murphy, 2021). This raises multiple questions: Is there a straightforward path from antifeminist groups to incels? Are lonely, sexually frustrated Men's Right Activists primed to become incels or do incels represent a unique population within the manosphere?

Recent research may offer tentative answers to the foregoing questions. A social network analysis of YouTube videos discovered a potential radicalization pathway for incel-related content. In particular, incel-adjacent videos with many views are often connected to more extreme content. This could lead viewers down a rabbit hole of radicalization (Champion, 2021). Other forms of internet-based research, such as the "scroll-back" method (Ging & Murphy, 2021; Robards & Lincoln, 2017), show promise in illuminating the journey that ends with incel membership. Nonetheless, a broad, internet-literate approach is needed to track the pathways that lead men down the road to membership in incel groups.

When soon-to-be incels become acquainted with an incel group, they will evaluate the degree to which its properties fit with their own characteristics, sentiments, and goals. If there is a good match, they will experience affinity for the group. If contact with the group fulfills expectation, they will form collective ties to that group – that is, an allegiance based on the similarity between their own characteristics and the groups' characteristics. Some will also develop relational ties – that is, an allegiance based on interpersonal liking for individual group members. The presence of strong collective and relational ties will foster fusion with the group (Gómez et al., in press). With fusion will come a modicum of group-related agency and a conviction that they can, and should, enact behaviors befitting an incel.

5.1.4.2 Joining the Group

Offline, incels feel misunderstood and lament putative rejection both in romance and more generally. Convinced that the levers of power in society are aligned against them, they are drawn to a group of like-minded others. Once they become members of an incel group, they are rewarded with a cogent worldview – the blackpill – that supplies a rationale for their feelings of frustration and victimization. Most important, the blackpill encourages them to make an external attribution for their own shortcomings: the negative events in men's lives are simply the result of large, external power structures that govern society. This is a compelling idea. Perhaps the only surprise here is that the blackpill has not won over an even larger audience of disaffected young men.

According to the blackpill, the physical appearance of incels is so appalling that others have absolutely no desire to interact with them. Incels who endorse the blackpill may consequentially be sensitized to possible exclusion, a state version of the rejection sensitivity trait (Downey et al., 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Rejection-sensitive people expect rejection in intimate

relationships, misinterpret insensitivity for intentional rejection, and overreact to any slight, real or imagined (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Such concerns lead to less successful and fulfilling intimate relationships. Thus, for incels, a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies may be at play. Internalizing the tenets of the blackpill causes them to expect rejection. This expectation fosters overreactions to any perceived slight, which will, in turn, jeopardize the relationship. And when a social relationship ends, incels can refer to the blackpill and assign blame to a “lookist” society that overvalues attractiveness.

Of course, our findings suggest that not all incels hold negative self-views. In fact, some hold quite positive self-views and enjoy long-term intimate relationships. For these incels, stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999) rather than rejection sensitivity may be key. Consider that the majority of incels’ offline relationships are likely with non-incels. Whether or not their incel status is known, incels likely feel acutely aware of being a member of a small and, in their eyes, unfairly stigmatized group. So convinced, the stigma consciousness formulation suggests that they will attribute negative social interactions to their group membership. This could serve as an ego-defense mechanism that enables them to preserve their positive self-views and attribute difficult social interactions to their status as an incel (e.g., Crocker et al., 1991).

Although the precise nature of the psychological benefits associated with identity fusion have not yet been documented, our findings point to several potential rewards. Being a member of a self-verifying group not only aligns incels with a group of like-minded others (thereby verifying a group identity), it also provides verification of a host of personal self-views (e.g., unattractiveness, social ineptitude, and unjust victimization). By simultaneously validating both personal and collective self-views (Gómez et al., 2009), membership in an incel group may provide men who otherwise feel excluded with a sense of being known and understood. This double whammy of verification of group and personal identity should make fusion with the group enormously attractive.

5.1.4.3 Abandoning the Group and the Unfortunate Sentiments It May Inspire

As attractive as membership in an incel group may be in the short term, the long-term consequences of membership are dire: Whereas some incels lash out in violence, others sink into depression and despair. Given this, researchers should engineer strategies designed to extricate incels from the pernicious online worlds in which they sometimes embed themselves.

Research by Gómez et al. (in press) outlines a general scheme for inducing incels to break away from the group and cease pro-group behavior. Their findings point to a series of four steps that induce people to join groups and enact pro-group behaviors. That is, people find that group membership is self-verifying; perceived self-verification fosters relational ties; relational ties, in

turn, foment fusion; and fusion, in turn, encourages group-related agency and behavior. Given that each step in this chain of events foments the next step, it should be possible to break the chain by disrupting any of the four processes: self-verification; relational ties; fusion with the group; and pro-group-related agency. We consider each of these processes in turn.

5.1.4.3.1 Self-verification Interrupting the verification incels receive from other incels and pointing them to alternative, healthier sources of verification could be an effective strategy for redirecting the self-verification strivings of incels. Although there are surely many avenues for self-verification redirection, one promising route is targeting the veracity of other incels' online identities. Most incels are likely savvy internet users familiar with all manner of identity misrepresentation and online trolling. However, they appear to hold earnest beliefs about other incels. It is here that verification redirection can take place. Presenting incels with evidence that other incels have generally positive self-views and are likely more sexually active than they admit on incel forums could undermine the credibility of these other incels. This may make incels more open to alternative sources of self-verification and weaken their relational and collective ties to the group.

Another possibility, informed by militant *jihadist* deradicalization efforts (Ashour, 2010), might be to use the insights of previous members into why they left the group to counteract the faith incels have in the group. A former incel is a reliable messenger, one who has been through similar experiences and may produce more "buy-in" from current incels (Hart & Huber, 2023). Using the narratives of loneliness, mental health issues, and substance use issues that undergirded their incel identity (Hintz & Baker, 2021) may sap some of the appeal of the verification incels receive from the group.

For effective verification redirection, change agents should examine the content of verification that incels receive from other incels. Rousis et al. (2023) focused on verification of general self-views, looks, and personality, but there could be other dimensions of self-concept that are important to incels. Some research has suggested that incels represent a "hybrid masculinity" wherein their romantic failures place them squarely in stereotypically non-masculine territory, but their attitudes toward male hegemony and male–female sexual relations are stereotypically masculine (Ging, 2019). Thus, for incels, the appeal of the group may be rooted in verifying specific negative and positive self-views key to the incel identity. Delineating these self-views will be crucial to steering incels to healthier sources of verification that can replace verification from fellow incels.

Finally, although self-verification redirection could take many forms, one of the most effective may be to simply encourage incels to try new things. Indeed, previous qualitative work suggests that some incels leave the group because they had new experiences, such as going to college or moving to a new city

(Hintz & Baker, 2021). These incels were able to replace their relational and collective ties to incels with healthier sources of psychological support.

5.1.4.3.2 Relational Ties In a series of six experiments, Gómez et al. (2019) found that experimentally degrading relational ties resulted in a significant reduction of state (vs. trait) fusion to nations and gender groups. Lowered fusion, in turn, predicted less willingness to fight and die for the group. To target relational ties, participants thought of two actions a fellow group member (e.g., a Spaniard) undertook that made them question their commitment to the group. These are powerful findings because the manipulation consisted of a one-shot, rather perfunctory set of instructions. Although the intervention developed by Gómez et al. (2019) was not powerful enough to lower trait fusion, administering similar instructions repeatedly might accomplish that goal.

For example, the change agent could encourage incels to consider negative interpersonal and group-based interactions. These could include difficulties they are encountering with fellow incels or recounting episodes that made their support for the group waver. Rather than seeing the group as consisting of close-knit family members, this may lead incels to see discord and rancor among the group members. The result may be weakened alignment with the group. Through repetition, incels may slowly begin to question their deep commitment to other incels and the group. For fused incels, repeated interventions would likely be necessary to decouple their personal identity from the group identity.

5.1.4.3.3 Fusion There is compelling evidence that degrading collective ties reduces state fusion. Gómez et al. (2019) targeted collective ties by simply asking participants to consider two actions their group (e.g., the nation) engaged in that made them question their commitment to it. This strategy could be applied to incels. A qualitative analysis of former incels' testimonials found that many left the group after Elliot Rodger's acts of violence (Hintz & Baker, 2021). These former incels could not countenance being tied to a group associated with such abhorrent acts. Although discussions on their forums suggest incels sometimes venerate acts that most other people would find deplorable, it is conceivable that emphasizing the negative consequences of such acts (e.g., the devastation experienced by relatives of victims) could undermine sympathy for the perpetrators and, in the process, the incel movement itself. This may lead to deradicalization for some (or most) incels, whereas others may be energized by these events and increase their commitment to the group. Known as "condensation" (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), this process weeds out members who cannot stomach extreme acts, while increasing the radicalism of those who remain. Thus, although

individual members may leave the group, those who remain may become increasingly radicalized.

Note also that Gómez et al. (2019) used participant-driven (rather than researcher-driven) narratives. Rather than telling participants what actions they *should* feel bad about, they allowed participants to generate these scenarios. Such an intervention among incels may encourage a degree of introspection and thoughtful reflection that is simply not possible on incel message boards. As with relational ties, for this sort of intervention to be effective, repeated administrations would likely be necessary.

5.1.4.3.4 Group-Related Agency If one is concerned with the potential that incels might engage in extreme acts, targeting group-based agency may be the most appropriate target of interventions. The good news is that because the “incel movement” is amorphous and leaderless, being an incel may be less about achieving instrumental goals, such as political change, and more about finding a support network. Insofar as incels join the group primarily for companionship, interventions designed to thwart group-based agency may be unnecessary. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the cases of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, some incels do lash out at perceived oppressors.

Because group-related agency theoretically grows out of fusion, the extent to which an individual is fused determines, at least in part, the strength of their belief that they can and should act on behalf of the group. This means that an intervention designed to address the lack of agency for individual incels to effect change in the group may weaken the willingness of fused individuals to commit extreme acts. Indeed, simply telling participants that they had little ability to exercise control over their group was enough to weaken the association between fusion and willingness to engage in extreme acts (Gómez et al., 2019; Study 5). Such interventions designed to reduce group-related agency could be complemented by interventions designed to reduce personal agency. There is evidence, for example, that personal agency (feelings of self-confidence and competence) is related to identity fusion (Besta et. al., 2016). Conceivably, diminishing incels’ feelings of personal and group-related agency could reduce both identity fusion and pro-group behavior.

5.2 Conclusion

From a cultural perspective, incels’ feelings of exclusion from “normie” society may be symptomatic of yet another yawning divide between the “haves” and “have-nots.” To be sure, incels’ main focus is on the shallow, insensitive “Stacys” who putatively deprive them of sex and the facile, indifferent “Chads” who unfairly monopolize the pool of eligible female partners. Although these antagonists inhabit center stage in the dilemmas that incels face, the true villains may be off stage in the political and economic power

structures that deprive them of a decent shot at achieving financial viability. The federal minimum wage plateaued in 2009 and salaries for college graduates remain too low to repay the loans they took out to earn the credentials needed to land decent jobs. Failing banks are bailed out by the government, while SNAP benefits for individuals are slashed; the military budget balloons, while housing subsidies wither. At some level, then, the frustration of incels may be based on a realistic despair stemming from the precarity of their situation. Of course, their frustration should not be displaced onto women and embracing the hopelessness of their situation by LDAR is not a solution to their problem.

To be sure, addressing the root causes of the incel phenomena would require sweeping societal changes that are unlikely to occur. Instead, we propose more modest goals that focus on directly altering the psychology of incels. Specifically, we suggest that future research on incels should take a multifaceted approach. For example, one might use internet-based methods to track migration to incel websites, the sources and content of verification provided by the incel group, and the factors that motivate withdrawal from the group. By gaining a clearer understanding of the psychology of incels, researchers will hopefully triangulate ways to extricate incels from their pernicious online worlds.

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