

Intervening in Problematic Research Approaches to Incel Violence

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Abstract

Recent violent attacks by misogynist incels have catalyzed a flurry of research. In this essay, we critique scholarly approaches that attribute incel violence perpetrated by cisgender heterosexual men to poor mental health and loneliness. We argue that such approaches lack explanatory power and methodological rigor, validate misogynist incels' claims to victimhood, reflect undue sympathy for violent perpetrators, and obscure and legitimize incel violence. To address the limitations of research that focuses on poor mental health and loneliness as the primary causes of incel violence, we recommend researchers incorporate feminist structural and intersectional approaches in their work and conceptualize misogynist incel ideology and violence as products of male supremacist culture and structure.

Keywords

male supremacism, misogyny, violence, misogynist incels, preventing/countering violent extremism

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In April 2018, a man drove a rented van into a crowded sidewalk in Toronto, killing 10 people and injuring many more (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). In November of that same year, a man entered a yoga studio in Tallahassee and shot six people, killing two women. Social media posts uncovered after the attacks revealed both men had ties to the so-called incel community. “Incels,” a portmanteau of “involuntarily celibate,” claim they are unable to find heterosexual romantic partners and blame women for not having sex with them and thus for their “incel” status. Both attacks were motivated by deep-seated misogyny—to exact revenge on women.

While the incel movement had begun to form a cohesive ideology years before and had been linked to violence as early as 2014, these two attacks catalyzed a flurry of media and scholarly attention (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). Since then, researchers from various disciplines have assessed the global misogynist incel movement to understand its role in motivating mass violence (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020; Sugiura 2021). Scholars from the fields of terrorism studies and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) have identified both psychological and social factors—like poor mental health and loneliness—to explain cisgender heterosexual men’s involvement in the misogynist incel community, as well as these men’s violent behaviors. In this essay, we critique scholarly approaches that attribute incel violence to poor mental health and loneliness. We propose that researchers and practitioners incorporate feminist frameworks that understand misogynist ideology and violence as embedded in social structure and cultural norms rather than as caused by aberrance, mental health issues, or loneliness, and that encourage reflexivity in research design and analysis. These frameworks can help us reveal faulty assumptions and researcher bias in empirical work on misogynist incels, which will ultimately allow us to better identify and challenge male supremacism both in and outside of the incel community.

Researchers and practitioners commonly attribute incel ideology and violence to poor mental health and loneliness. For example, Moonshot, a think tank that has received nearly \$5 million from the governmental organization Public Safety Canada to study and intervene in online extremist subcultures, including incels, focuses on these as the best explanations for why men join the incel movement. They aim to “creat[e] a network of mental health practitioners” that can identify incels and treat their mental health issues (Charlebois 2022). Referring to incels’ experiences of seclusion, alienation, and anger, Moonshot researcher Alex Amend told *The Canadian Press*, “The main issue is [incels] are not getting the support they need, so they’re seeking support in these toxic communities” (Charlebois 2022). Amend attributes cisgender men’s participation in a violent misogynist movement to their loneliness and lack of mental health support.

However, the causal link between poor mental health and incel ideology and violence falls apart when we consider that cisgender heterosexual men are not the most vulnerable population with respect to mental health. Cis women are approximately twice as likely than cis men to have mood disorders; trans women, trans men, and non-binary people experience clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety at more than two times the rate of cis men (Reisner et al. 2016). Yet, cisgender white men are

disproportionately the perpetrators of mass violence in the United States (Anon n.d.). Arguments that rely on poor mental health as the root cause of incel ideology and violence lack explanatory power. As we describe in this essay, this explanation also tends to validate incels' claims to victimhood, conjuring undue sympathy toward misogynist men and simultaneously obscures and legitimizes incels' violence.

To address the explanatory limitations of research that focuses on poor mental health and loneliness as the primary causes of incel violence, we propose that terrorism studies, P/CVE, and other researchers conceptualize gender as a social structure shaped by the intersection of race, sexuality, and other axes of power. We argue that incel ideology and violence emerges from a male supremacist culture and structure that (re) produces cis gender men's disproportionate status, power, and resources (Carian, DiBranco, and Ebin 2022). Feminist structuralist scholars argue that gender exists in the organizations, cultures, and institutions in which individuals operate, rather than within individuals themselves (Martin 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 1998). Gender also intersects with other axes of oppression, which bolster one another (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). This approach to gender suggests that misogynist ideology and violence is not the result of individual mental illness, loneliness, or sexual frustration, but rather the product of a cisheteropatriarchal and white supremacist society.¹ In the rest of this essay, we delve into the limitations of current approaches to studying incel violence and propose correctives that will allow researchers to better identify and challenge the threat posed by the incel movement.

Problems in Current Approaches to Studying Misogynist Incels

We raise serious theoretical and methodological concerns about recent research on incels from terrorism studies and P/CVE organizations. The approach of this research risks validating incels' claims to victimhood, extending inappropriate sympathy to violently misogynist men, obscuring and legitimizing incel violence, and identifying ineffective solutions to incel radicalization.

These problems begin with the term researchers use to describe the population. While researchers often refer to "incel" violence, they are more accurately studying the *misogynist* incel men's movement rather than incels writ large. The first "incel" community was created online in the 1990s by a bisexual woman for all "involuntarily celibate" people. Participants on these early forums described being an incel as a temporary situation that could be experienced by anyone regardless of gender, and gathered virtually to extend support to one another. While these spaces were not free of negativity, forum participants provided advice for men *and* women and moderators banned men who expressed violent or hateful content. Some of these men went on to form their own forums where hate speech and expressions of violence were permissible (Kelly 2021).

These separate, new communities purposefully excluded women, asserting that all women have access to—and control incel men's access to—sex and thus cannot identify as incels. An ideology of male supremacist entitlement to and dehumanization

of women coalesced in these new communities. Misogynist incels continue to blame women, whom they believe are naturally inferior to men, for withholding sex from them. When researchers simply use the term “incels” to describe misogynist incels, they overlook both the historical and current exclusion of women from these online spaces and the male supremacism that defines them, and they reinforce the misogynist incel men’s perspective that they are the only ones who truly suffer from loneliness.

The issue of terminology is one manifestation of a broader issue within research on misogynist incels: researchers’ failure to critically evaluate claims made by misogynist incels. For example, some researchers mistakenly define misogynist incels as an identity group being unfairly targeted for an ascribed, rather than chosen, identity. In a March 2021 panel on misogynist incels, Michael King, of the Organization for the Prevention of Violence, claimed that the incel community is not a violent extremist group that people join “by choice,” because “by and large their identity [as incels] is forced upon them” ([Radicalisation Awareness Network 2021](#)). King’s statement validates misogynist incels’ claims that women are indeed responsible for their suffering because they withhold access to sex. In other words, King’s position reinforces the male entitlement that produces the misogynist incel movement in the first place. Instead of studying misogynist incels as an identity, researchers should study them as a *movement*. White supremacists often claim they—as white people—are persecuted for an immutable identity, but researchers studying white supremacist groups do not validate these claims of victimhood; rather, they analyze how such claims advance their political agenda and movement (e.g., [Berbrier 2000](#)). We propose the same approach for studying misogynist incels. Misogynist incels advocate for political goals like taking away women’s suffrage, legalizing rape, and legalizing torture and physical harm of women ([DeCook and Kelly, 2021](#)) to reinforce heterosexual cisgender men’s dominance of and entitlement to women, and like white supremacists groups, constitute a movement.

Researchers’ failure to critically evaluate misogynist incels’ claims reflects what [Manne \(2017\)](#) calls “himpathy,” or inappropriate sympathy for cisgender men perpetrating violence and harm, which is embedded in institutions, interactions, and individual psychology. A feminist structural perspective on gender can intervene in the tendency toward himpathy by helping researchers to recognize that they too are fixed firmly in male supremacist structures and culture and so must purposefully work to avoid reproducing them. For heterosexual cisgender men² who dominate the terrorism studies and P/CVE fields, their particular subjectivity may make it easy to identify with misogynist incels and more difficult to recognize the entitlement embedded in misogynist incels’ claims. By virtue of their gender and sexuality, these researchers may share some ontological and epistemological assumptions with misogynist incels ([Holmes 2020](#)). As we describe below, intentionally drawing on feminist perspectives, like feminist standpoint theory that encourages researchers to recognize how their positionality shapes their research can prevent this problem.

Several studies (i.e., [Moskalenko, Fernández-Garayzábal González, and Kates 2022](#); [Speckhard et al. 2021](#)) look to mental illness or autism spectrum disorder as an

explanatory factor for participation in misogynist incel spaces, but these theoretical approaches reflect more empathy than empirical fact. Instead of recognizing the harm misogynist incels cause through violence, these studies focus on the costs misogynist incels bear (e.g., loneliness). This kind of approach obscures the privileged position misogynist incels hold in the social order and, in doing so, reinforces the complex structural forces and cultural norms that sustain inequalities. Mental illness—in and of itself—cannot explain heterosexual cisgender men’s mobilization into the misogynist incel movement. Mental health treatment alone will not solve misogynist incel mobilization because mental illness is not its primary cause—misogyny is. Indeed, the 2014 Isla Vista shooter (who perpetrated the earliest known misogynist incel attack) received mental health treatment throughout his life (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021). Moreover, research that medicalizes misogyny as an illness (or as caused by mental illness) (e.g., Moskalenko, Fernández-Garayzábal González, and Kates 2022; Speckhard et al. 2021) incorrectly conceptualizes misogyny as primarily “a matter of cognition and perception,” rather than “about practices, hierarchy, domination, or exclusion” (Wellman 2000, 29). Incel misogyny is not an illness in the sense that it is not aberrant; it is a reflection, if a more extreme manifestation, of a misogynist society that emphasizes cis men’s entitlement to heterosexual and women’s bodies, as well as their supposed biological propensity for violence (Manne 2017). Instead of offering mental health treatment as a silver bullet for misogynist incel violence, practitioners should follow the lead of the Intimate Partner Violence field in recognizing that mental illness and violence perpetration are distinct and require distinct interventions (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

There is another issue in studying mental illness as a cause of misogynist incel mobilization: self-reporting bias. Misogynist incels can benefit from deploying claims to poor mental health and loneliness because it allows them to justify their symbolic and physical violence (Zimmerman 2022). Consider this quote from a misogynist incel collected via survey by terrorism researchers and P/CVE organizations: “Designating incels as terrorists is horrible. Yes [the Isla Vista shooter] killed some people six (6) years ago and [the Toronto van attacker] like 2 years ago. Willfully concentrating on these strikes instead of loneliness, depression, desperation and numerous other issues is evil” (Morton et al. 2021). This misogynist incel minimizes the deaths of victims of mass violence and instead asserts his own and other misogynist incels’ victimhood. In prioritizing his and fellow misogynist incels’ personal struggles over the harm caused by misogynist incel violence, he excuses said violence. Rather than recognizing how his claim to loneliness and mental illness serves the movement’s political goals, the researchers offer this quote as an example of the alienation of “incels” by government responses that designate misogynist incels as terrorist groups.

Because of misogynist incels’ tendency to emphasize their sense of victimhood, engaging with men deeply involved in misogynist incel communities requires researchers to not take participants’ claims at face value. Some researchers, though, have accepted misogynist incel claims uncritically as a reflection of reality rather than evaluating how they support the movement’s political goals. Even more egregious,

some researchers have chosen to collaborate with misogynist incels as expert insiders on their population of study. The [Morton et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Speckhard et al. \(2021\)](#) articles are co-authored by Alexander Ash, the founder and, at the time the articles were published, administrator of the largest misogynist incel forum. These articles provide platforms for misogynist incels themselves to shape knowledge production in a way that is not usually afforded other extreme groups ([Kelly 2021](#)). Their involvement undoubtedly shapes the questions these studies ask and the claims they make, including their focus on poor mental health instead of misogyny, their expression of empathy, and their uncritical evaluation of misogynist incels' claims. For example, [Moskalenko and colleagues \(2022, 1\)](#) imply that misogynist incels join the movement because of "mental health problems and psychological trauma of bullying or persecution" based on misogynist incels' self-reported experiences of depression, anxiety, and autism-spectrum traits. Their argument and methodology lends support to misogynist incels' claims of victimhood.

In contrast, research that uses forum (not self-reported) data reports strikingly different findings ([Tomkinson, Harper, and Attwell 2020](#); [Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021](#); [DeCook 2019](#); [Ging 2017](#); [Pruden, forthcoming](#)). [O'Donnell and Shor \(2022\)](#), for instance, analyze 3658 comments on a misogynist incel forum related to the 2018 Toronto van attack. They find "overwhelming support [...] for the attack and violence more generally" (p. 336). They also refute the claim that misogynist incel men are not political or ideological, finding that misogynist incels perceived violence as "instrumental" (p. 342) to their cause. Even research that relies on interview data concludes that misogynist incels endorse misogyny when it attends to the dynamics we identify in this essay (e.g., [Sugiura 2021](#)). When researchers avoid taking misogynist incels' claims at face value and instead examine for themselves misogynist incel rhetoric, they find that misogynist incels are a political movement that encourages mass violence.

Correctives to Approaches to Studying Misogynist Incels

The studies we critique in this essay fail to incorporate feminist structural approaches³ that would make them far more rigorous. In terms of their theoretical frameworks, research on incels must recognize that male supremacist groups do not act outside our social structures and culture, but rather within them, and have their own interests as a group. Exposure to and agreement generally with misogynist and antifeminist beliefs facilitates individuals' mobilization into male supremacist groups ([Carian 2022b](#)). Such beliefs are prevalent in the culture and the general population ([Carian 2022a](#)). Male supremacist groups also reflect and contribute to white supremacist, antisemitic, xenophobic, and antitrans ideologies that are likewise systemic and common in the larger culture ([Carian, DiBranco, and Ebin 2022](#)). Work that presents men's engagement in supremacist violence as isolated, radical, or abnormal obscures the linkages between it and other systems of oppression, as well as the gendered nature of violence more generally. In contrast, exposing the connections between misogynist incel violence,

mainstream misogyny and antifeminism, and other systems of oppression allows researchers to identify the structural and cultural roots of such violence. Only then can we develop effective, macro-level solutions for countering misogynist incel violence. Research that uses the approach we recommend identifies broad-based programs that educate teachers, healthcare workers, community workers, and families to recognize and intervene in early signs of misogyny, comprehensive sexual education programs, and programs that combine lessons learned from deradicalization initiatives and domestic abuse perpetrator intervention programs (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021).

Methodologically, researchers studying misogynist incels have the responsibility to approach their work reflexively, particularly when they share characteristics with the individuals they study (Berger 2015). Feminist standpoint theory describes the risks of funneling resources almost exclusively to cisgender men researchers. The theory explains that knowledge produced by the dominant class is limited in its ability to recognize and interrogate power structures (Hartsock 1983). Those on the margins are better positioned to interrogate social relations because they have experiential knowledge of structural disadvantage and often see privilege where members of the dominant class might not (Collins 1986; Hekman 1997). The overwhelming representation of dominant group members in the field means that the limitations we describe are common, and that more liberatory standpoints (e.g., from trans and non-binary people or women of color) are ignored. The field must earmark resources (e.g., grants) for marginalized scholars and other researchers using feminist structural approaches so they may provide the critical analysis necessary for intervening in misogynist incel violence.

The dominant approach that attributes misogynist incel violence to poor mental health and loneliness does not target it at its root cause, which is the male supremacist structure and culture. Understanding the misogynist incel movement as a manifestation of structural and cultural male supremacy can allow researchers to recognize the inefficacy of individual solutions like mental health treatment, avoid legitimizing misogynist incels' claims and violence, and instead develop more innovative and impactful interventions to misogynist incel violence.

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Notes

1. Likewise, some of the issues misogynist incels identify are products of the social structure rather than personal afflictions. For example, researchers note that men's high rate of suicide is shaped by hegemonic masculinity scripts, and thus may be understood as a cost of privilege (Canetto 2017).
2. Certainly heterosexual cisgender men researchers are not the only ones to express himpathy toward misogynist incels. This speaks to the fact that himpathy is embedded in a male supremacist system.
3. While explicitly feminist structural research on misogynist incels predates the recent surge of literature from terrorism studies, many terrorism researchers fail to engage with it.

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