

Incel Mass Murderers: Masculinity, Narrative, and Identity

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Since 2009, at least 10 men have committed mass murder because they self-identified as incels (involuntary celibate) and the number of incel mass murderers continues to grow. The purpose of this article is to examine incel mass murderers and incelhood through their perceptions of their masculinity and identity as detailed in the narrative artifacts that six of them left behind. The narrative manifesto of Elliot Rodger, the most famous of the incel mass murderers, spread across the internet in 2014, when Rodger went on his killing spree. Other men in the incel community—of which Rodger was a member—canonized him and shared their own experiences with incelhood using Rodger's narrative as a blueprint to articulate their experiences with their masculinity and identity. In this work, I utilize textual analysis to demonstrate how the social construction of masculinity influences these mass murders. In this case study, I use these narratives to explicate how these men grapple with the idea that they have failed at masculinity and have scapegoated women in order to find redemption through the act of mass murder. My findings reveal that these narratives, especially those by Elliot Rodger, have real-world implications as these men did not just revere Rodger, but followed in his footsteps by committing mass murder.

Introduction

The term incel or involuntary celibate, emerged in online spaces known as the Manosphere, a “place” on the internet where men from all over the country and the world congregate in forums or comment on blogs where they trade in misogynistic rhetoric that varies in intensity (Manosphere glossary, n.d.). Much of the Manosphere is dedicated to painting women as evil while simultaneously teaching men how to sleep with them as objects to be had or won through the techniques of “game.” The typical user on incel forums utilizes these spaces to vent their anger and frustration at what they deem is an unfair world that has left them without sex through no fault of their own. The Manosphere tends to be filled with young white heterosexual men, or men who identify as white, and the stench of privilege seeps through the screen as one reads their posts and comments. Incel communities direct their hate primarily toward women, but also toward men who are either “Chads,” good looking men who are able to “get” lots of women, or at men they see as less deserving of sex than they are, yet are able to have sex, nonetheless.

On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger went on a killing spree that left six people dead and twelve others injured before he turned his gun on himself (Yan et al., 2014). Rodger left behind a 137-page manifesto/narrative of his entire life detailing every slight by every person he could remember—both men and women—from childhood to the day he died (Rodger, 2014). His narrative is organized chronologically as a chronotope “where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” and “ma[de] narrative events more concrete, ma[de] them take on flesh” and “provide[d] the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250). In other words, by showing the increasing futility of his pursuit to attain the things he needed to feel complete, i.e. a girlfriend, prestige, and “true” masculinity in the eyes of his father and other men, Rodger's narrative paints a picture for the reader that renders them a part of the narrative through their commensurability with him. Fluck (2013) agreed, stating that while reading does not allow the reader to interact with the author socially, the act of reading provides readers with “recognition” which she argued is “inextricably linked with questions of identity formation” (p. 46). There have been many other men who not only followed in Rodger's footsteps by committing mass murder because they were incels, but did so after paying some sort of homage to Rodger via the various artifacts that they left behind.

Narratives are a way of defining one's self and constructing the reality that one needs to feel that they are a recognized part of society (Taylor, 1994). Many incels found recognition in Elliot Rodger's narrative. Incel boards are filled with narratives of self-hate or hate for the status-quo, but none of the

millions of posts on incel boards tapped into a narrative of recognition the way that Rodger was able to accomplish. Taylor (1994) argued that “the demand for recognition...is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being” (p. 25). The very definition of an incel is imbedded in a lack of masculinity because to be masculine is, among other things, to have the ability to complete manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) such as having a heterosexual relationship with a woman that culminates in sex. As indicated by discussions on incel boards these men feel that they are not a part of society because their problems are ignored or scorned. Rodger’s (2014) narrative manifesto details the ways in which he was wronged throughout his life because he did not live up to what he perceived as society’s definition of what a man “should” look like, be like, and act like, in other words, the ideal masculine male. In the sections that follow, I describe several of the men who found recognition in Rodger’s narrative and also carried out mass murder. It is impossible to answer the question of why these men in particular committed mass murder as Rodger’s manifesto is widely available on the internet, but we can presume that the allure of the logic behind the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1941) played a part in these men’s actions, as well as finding recognition in these acts (Taylor, 1994).

Sunstein’s (2009) theory about group polarization suggests that men first identify with one another and communicate in an echo chamber which causes them to act in increasingly extreme ways. Group polarization cannot fully account for these acts of extreme violence, however. In this study, I examine the narratives, however short they may be, that these men left behind and how Rodger’s (2014) narrative inspired them to follow in his footsteps. I utilize a range of concepts and theories to discuss how Rodger’s narrative operated to recognize (Fluck, 2013; Horlacher, 2019; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 1994) these men, their masculinity or lack thereof, and the precariousness of masculinity (Allan, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Kimmel, 2013; Mindy, 2006; Munsch & Gruys, 2018; Myketiak, 2016; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). The first section of this study explains incel culture, who Elliot Rodger is to the incel community, and the details of the five other mass murderers who were, I argue, directly inspired by Rodger’s narrative. The second section is a review of literature. The narratives these men left behind range in length and depth, but all point to a connection to Rodger. Interspersed within the literature are excerpts from the narratives these men left behind to illustrate the generative aspects of his efforts which connect to his followers after his death.

In this essay, I examine how the need for recognition played a part in the mass murders perpetrated by the five incels who were inspired by Rodger’s narrative. Throughout this study I address how the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1941) was used as a tool to justify the actions of these men which was articulated by Rodger’s (2014) reasoning in his manifesto. I utilize a close textual analysis of Elliot Rodger’s (2014) 137-page narrative manifesto and the videos he left behind in addition to the artifacts left behind by the other five incels: Chris Harper-Mercer in 2015, William Edward Atchison in 2017, Nikolas Cruz in 2018, Alek Minassian in 2018, and Scott Beierle in 2018. I then pulled together the commonalities I found between Rodger’s artifacts and those left behind by the other mass murderers I examined. I did not examine every incel mass murderer to date as their numbers have grown at an alarming rate but chose these five for their close ties to Rodger’s beliefs and their direct link to his narrative as will be shown below.

Incels, Incel Mass Murderers, and Elliot Rodger

Incels are typically young white heterosexual men (Weill, 2019). They are not a homogenous group, although heterosexuality and virginity are the two threads of identification that holds them together. Anger and hate are prevalent on incel forum posts, and posts are often misogynistic, racist, or churlish and seem to be an outlet for their overdetermined affective energies rather than a place to find a solution to their perceived lack. While these online spaces sometimes espouse racist views, racism is not a core tenet of inceldom therefore, I do not address the racism explicitly, except in the case of Chris Harper-Mercer who was part Black as well as racist, a point that is explored below. Reddit has banned several incel boards (Bell, 2017) in an attempt to slow the radicalization and advocacy of violence that have been attributed to these boards. To view the boards that are still active, Reddit gives users a warning about the offensive

content before allowing users to view the content. On Braincells, one of the few incel boards left on Reddit, a user posted a meme that stated, “interesting detail about the uterus—makes sense” as the caption to a scientific image of the uterus next to the Satanic ram’s head, which have a similar shape, suggesting that women are evil (OpenSVideoEditor, 2019). Posts like this are common, most are far more graphic in their textual and/or visual content. Though this post seems benign on the surface, it scapegoats women and other posts go further, advocating for a society where sex is a right, a sentiment advocated in Rodger’s manifesto (2014).

Incels congregate in online forums to assure themselves that they are not at fault for being virgins. “Virgin status among men is generally looked down upon by both the virgins themselves and other men, socially disempowering them” (Fleming & Davis, 2018). Rodger’s narrative is a story of disempowerment, but also one of self-hate. Burke (1937) argues that the genre of the grotesque in literary forms “comes to the forefront when confusion in the forensic pattern gives more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery than to the objective, or public, elements” (p. 76-77). Essentially, Burke’s (1937) grotesque and Fleming and Davis’ (2018) study of virgin shaming are concomitant in that they speak to the subjective perception of what Burke (1941) terms guilt or embarrassment. Thus, they both are symbolically created assumptions about one’s status as a virgin, which places them lower on the hierarchy of men. This will be discussed further in the section on masculinity, but it is crucial to note here in the description of incels because they are far more concerned with their virginity than other men are.

Many incels were disillusioned by the Pick-up Artist (PUA) community. PUAs promised men that they could have sex if they learned misogynistic tactics called “game.” These tactics do not work for every man and rely on belittling women and other tactics that border on rape (Roosh, 2015). Elliot Rodger (2014) did not mention trying to learn game in his manifesto but spent time on a site called PUAhate.com that has since been taken down. Rodger’s posts covered a range of topics, but of the 46 archived posts attributed to Rodger on PUAhate.com that I was able to locate, 11 advocated for finding a way to fix society through violent means, rid the world of women or sex through decree, or for incels to band together to end their suffering (Poobear, n.d.). In one archived post, Rodger stated:

The problem is women, they are primitive in nature and incapable of thinking rationally. If they are allowed to choose who to breed with, humanity will never advance. Look at civilizations over 100 years ago. In a way, they were much more civilized, simply because women were restricted and controlled (Poobear, n.d.).

Rodger (2014) repeated this sentiment in his manifesto. The connection between incels’ rhetoric and Rodger’s rhetoric shows that this type of reasoning typifies incel thinking and is regurgitated by users to maintain a consistency in their victimage and its cause i.e. women as the scapegoat (Burke, 1941).

Burke’s (1941) first explanation of the guilt-redemption cycle detailed four aspects or steps: “in-born dignity” which is ascribed to us through our place in the hierarchy, a “projection device” also known as scapegoating, “symbolic rebirth” or re-attaining one’s dignity through the scapegoat process, and “commercial use” or convincing others of the righteousness of the scapegoating process (Burke, 1941, pp. 301-303). Burkean scholar William Rueckert (1982), utilized all of Burke’s works which mention these aspects, and compiled them into seven phases of the guilt redemption cycle: “the Negative, Hierarchy, Guilt, Mortification, Victimage, Catharsis, and Redemption” (p. 131). For incels the negative is expressed by their perceived lack of “real” masculinity which places them lower, in their opinion, on the social hierarchy. Rueckert (1982) explained that for Burke, men can experience guilt inwardly or outwardly as embarrassment. They experience mortification because of this embarrassment and argue that they are victimized by some group, in this case, women whom they scapegoat. To achieve catharsis, they seek to find a way to get rid of the scapegoat so that they can be cleansed and redeemed (Rueckert, 1982). The narrative in Rodger’s (2014) manifesto details this process ending with Rodger’s version of redemption which entails him committing mass murder to be freed from the cyclical nature of the guilt-redemption cycle. The cycle continues, as there is always another reason to feel guilty or embarrassed, another scapegoat to blame and so on (Burke, 1941).

Incel Mass Murderers

There are no concrete numbers on how many incels visit incel forums yet reports suggest that they are in the tens of thousands. They are not centralized and many of the forums incels use allow them to make multiple accounts with different usernames that cannot be traced back to their email addresses. It is important that both the media and academics look seriously at these men because of the real-life implications of their actions. Since Elliot Rodger went on his killing spree in 2014, the number of men who are committing crimes because of their status as incels is growing which has serious implications for women everywhere.

A little over a year after Rodger committed his mass killing, Chris Harper-Mercer went on his killing spree. Harper-Mercer went to Umpqua Community College in Oregon on October 1, 2015 and killed nine people, himself, and injured another eight people (Griffin, 2015). The night before Harper-Mercer went on his killing spree he posted on a message board on 4chan: "Some of you guys are alright. Don't go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest," a cryptic warning foreshadowing what he was about to do (Griffin, 2015). Harper-Mercer (2015) left behind a manifesto that mentions Elliot Rodger 4 times, stating that Rodger "stand[s] with the gods" (p.1), that he is committing this crime for Elliot Rodger, he modeled his manifesto after Rodger's, and that "Elliot is a god" (p. 5). Harper-Mercer (2015) was "40% black" (p. 2) according to his short manifesto, yet the largest section of his narrative is concerned with why "the black man is the most vile creature on the planet" (p. 2). On incel forums racism abounds, but Harper-Mercer (2015) seemed to identify with his white heritage as he "passed" as white. Despite his racism, he focused on killing women during his killing spree (Griffin, 2015) illustrating that while race is an issue for many of these men, misogyny more accurately defines their belief system.

William Edward Atchison killed two people and then himself at Aztec High School on December 7, 2017 (Luperon, 2017). Encyclopedia Dramatica (n.d.) has a collection of screenshots of posts that they attributed to Atchison which reflect the kind of language used in Rodger's manifesto about women and ending his suffering. From media reports it is unclear whether he was actually an incel, but in online forums he was known to go by names of other mass murderers, including Elliot Rodger (Luperon, 2017).

Nikolas Cruz was hailed as an incel hero because he committed mass murder on Valentine's Day in 2018, killing 17 people and injuring another 17 (Murphy, 2018). He did not commit suicide like those before him, and as of this writing, he is in the middle of his trial. Cruz was white but had been adopted by a Hispanic family when he was born and has a Black brother (Contrera, 2019), but is a virulent racist and anti-Semite (Murphy, 2018). Incels claim him as one of their own dubbing him "St. Nikolas." It is not clear if Cruz self-identified as an incel, but in the police search of his phone and his browsing history there are several indications that he was an incel. For example, five days before he went on his killing spree, Cruz searched "how to get into a relationship," "how to get a girlfriend," and "how not to be afraid of the girls you like" (Camp et al., 2018, slide 14). These are sentiments that pervade incel forums. Those who knew him described him as lonely and obsessed with mass murderers, including Elliot Rodger (Futrelle, 2018a).

On April 23, 2018, Alek Minassian drove a rented van down a crowded street in Toronto, killing 10 and injuring another 13 (Kassam & Cecco, 2018). Before he committed this atrocity, he posted an update on Facebook that mentioned the 'incel rebellion' and Elliot Rodger (Ma, 2018). The incel rebellion is also referred to as the beta rebellion or beta uprising which is a call to arms that the denizens of incel forums use to try to unite incels (or betas: men lacking confidence, physically weak, and submissive to women) to overthrow the alphas (good looking men who are confident, domineering, athletic, and successful with women) with violence. Minassian did not commit suicide like several of the others and is awaiting the verdict of his trial in Toronto.

Scott Beierle, on November 2, 2018, went into a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida and killed two women, himself, and injured six others (Zaveri et al., 2018). He had been arrested for grabbing women or harassing them prior to the shooting (Zaveri et al., 2018). He left behind a number of artifacts, however most of them are not available to the general public. He wrote a "revenge fantasy" when he was in high school that ended with the main character, Scott Bradley, brutally murdering his classmates (Hendrix, 2019,

para. 38). He also wrote songs and essays about his animosity toward women (Hendrix, 2019). His series of YouTube videos are highly misogynistic, particularly one in which he praises Elliot Rodger.

Elliot Rodger

Elliot Rodger has reached thousands of men through the artifacts that he left behind. The media abounds with stories of the canonization of Elliot Rodger after he died (for example, see Edwards, 2018). May 23rd was dubbed “St. Elliot Rodger Day” by incels and is celebrated with memes, posts on social media, and even the changing of one’s profile photo on that day to memorialize and honor Rodger’s (2014) “Day of Retribution” (p. 101), the name he gave to his plan to kill as many women as possible (Edwards, 2018). A Google search of YouTube videos using the search terms “Elliot Rodger tribute” produced thousands of hits with thousands of views and likes on a sample of 20 videos. Futrelle (2018b) is a freelance writer who runs an anti-misogyny blog called *We Hunted the Mammouth* and reports frequently on what he terms the cult of “Saint Elliot.” He noted that incel mass murderer Nikolas Cruz was also heralded as a saint by the incel community after the shooting at Margory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL on Valentine’s Day in 2018 (Futrelle, 2018a). The symbolism of the date he chose is on the nose and on Incels.Me (before it was shut down) featured numerous postings about Cruz, applauding him for his actions, “A hERo rises on this day of incel exclusion (Florida Valentine’s Day School Shooting)” (OTaKu_Warrior, n.d.). The capitalization of the “ER” in hero is a homage to Elliot Rodger.

Rodger (2014) continually lamented his inability to have sex or even have a romantic relationship with a woman and became obsessed with this idea to the point that it defined his view on life. As Taylor (1994) pointed out, those who “have internalized a picture of their own inferiority...are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem” (p. 25-26). Through the course of his narrative Rodger moves from desire and anxiety to anger and rage, a movement that is explored by scholars of masculinity (Fleming & Davis, 2018; Johnson, 2017a; Kimmel, 2013; Vandello et al., 2018). He thought that by enacting a socially accepted form of masculinity he could acquire the object of his desire and would be freed from his anger and rage (Rodger, 2014). Less than a year before he went on his killing spree Rodger (2014) detailed his experience at a party he went to in an effort to meet women, which would right all the past wrongs he felt he had endured as an incel and put himself on the path to a good life.

I walked around in my drunken confidence for a few moments...and tried to act like a normal party-goer. I soon became frustrated that no one was paying any attention to me, particularly the girls...As my frustration grew, so did my anger. I came across this Asian guy who was talking to a white girl. The sight of that filled me with rage. I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. I never had that kind of attention from a white girl! And white girls are the only girls I’m attracted to, especially the blondes...I angrily walked toward them and bumped the Asian guy aside, trying to act cocky and arrogant to both the boy and the girl...Rage fumed inside me as I realized that I just walked away from that confrontation, so I rushed back into the house and spitefully insulted the Asian. (Rodger, 2014, p. 121)

Vito et al. (2018) and Myketiak’s (2016) assessments of Rodger’s manifesto agree that moments like the one described above are related to his inability to enact his vision of idealized masculinity which is white masculinity. “He privileges whiteness” as “that is what he believes has the most power and status” (Myketiak, 2016, p. 298). He refers to himself as “Eurasian” to emphasize his whiteness, and while I agree with Vito et al (2018) and Myketiak’s (2016) emphasis on how race features in his manifesto/narrative, it does not give the full picture of *why* he killed seven people (including himself). It is his “own self-deprecation” that “becomes one of the most potent instruments of [his] own oppression” (Taylor, 1994, p. 26). Rodger (2014) was angry with himself because he let someone else have the object of his desire, which could have been any good-looking white woman, without putting up a fight. For Rodger, putting up a fight would have secured at least part of his masculinity, but as he continually saw himself as weak, he continued to suffer.

Masculinity, Narrative, and Identity Formation

Incels subscribe to a form of masculinity that is predicated on a hierarchy between the genders and between men. The contention that women are lesser humans than men pervade incel forums. In these spaces, men judge one another in order to assert their superiority or argue they deserve to be higher on the hierarchy of men due to their intelligence or simple entitlement. Messerschmidt (2019) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity “has become ubiquitous, serving as the principal touchstone for most research on masculinities” (p. 85). However, the concept has often been misused in that scholars have seen the concept as a fixed set of characteristics rather than focusing on gender relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019). Messerschmidt (2019) clarifies this point by arguing that hegemonic masculinity is about the reification of gender hierarchies that subordinate women. However, the attributes that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) used to define hegemonic masculinity define the social construction of what “true” masculinity is, i.e., “the most honored way of being a man” (p. 832). These characteristics include resistance to domination by others, sexual conquest, physical strength, violence, “compliance to patriarchy” (p. 848), “and the subordination of women to men” (p. 832). The fact that men benefit from the maintenance of the domination of patriarchy in the social order, though, is not necessarily “based on force,” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846) but shows that at minimum they are “complicit” in hegemonic masculinity (p. 832) as “one’s place in the social hierarchy also expresses one’s value” (Johnson, 2017b, p. 16). In other words, “real” power is not necessary for a man to be a part of the system that reifies patriarchal privilege as it functionally operates as a form of power through its circulation in society as defining the reality of what constitutes masculinity, hegemonic or otherwise (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Ironically, scholars of masculinity studies have noted the constraining force of the existence of hegemonic masculinity, which has indeed led to the dominion of what I will instead call “idealized masculinity,” in that it forces men to adhere to its tenets (Allan, 2018; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Johnson, 2017a).

Hegemonic masculinity or idealized masculinity was not created by academics in the 1980s, but rather through a social construction, the embodiment of which has continued to evolve over time (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Kimmel, 2013, 2018; Messerschmidt, 2019). This construction of ideal masculinity is unintelligible as it has different meanings for different men. It, however, retains its core: patriarchy and power. But that is the idealized form. Allan (2018) argues that “masculinity has become a site of perpetual desire, but also, and importantly failure. To strive for masculinity is manly; to fail is not” (p. 182). Incels must also decode and decide upon the kind of masculinity they are striving for and its relative worth in comparison with other men. As noted above, the idea of worthiness is inherent to defining masculinity (idealized or otherwise) and produces anxiety on multiple levels, an idea that will be further explored in the next section. An important takeaway is that whether men embody idealized masculinity or not, the idea remains embedded in the social constructions that dictate how men perceive themselves and other men.

For incels, the socially constructed version of idealized masculinity is “felt as a burden in a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of differences and the symbolic currency of identity politics” (Robinson, 2000, p. 3). Robinson (2000) did not have incels in mind when she wrote this, but incels view themselves as a marginalized group in comparison with the “alphas” or “Chads” who they perceive as embodying idealized forms of masculinity. Myketiak (2016) argues that this is because “the ways they situate themselves in stories, link[s] to their understanding of and relationship to social and cultural contexts” (p. 293). Allan (2018) adds that “we need to think about the homosociality not only of masculinity, but also the affects that are felt, lived, and performed in being (of trying to be) masculine, which is to say, the homosociality of shame” (p. 182). This shame is what drives the embarrassment felt by men in the guilt-redemption cycle that feeds the vitriol seen in posts on incel forums.

Robinson (2000) stated that there are competing forces between men and “society” that are used to define men and masculinity—nature and social construction—which effectively reifies the “‘truth’ of a primal masculinity” (p.156). She continued, that if we socially construct gender to fit within “society” then there must be a naturalistic or biological quality of masculinity (and femininity) that is innate and that these competing forces illustrate the emptiness of social construction, which for some men is a clear indication that the qualities or attributes of masculinity are suppressed by social constructionism (Robinson, 2000).

Robinson's (2000) appraisal of a natural masculinity is descriptive rather than argumentative and is echoed throughout the Manosphere and in the incel community but for different reasons. Incels feel that there is a problem with masculinity because no matter which way they approach it they can neither fulfill the natural expectations associated with it nor can they embody and enact the socially constructed idealized form or any form of masculinity that is socially acceptable. It is their "marginalization and disempowerment [that] serves as technologies for them to understand who they are" (Johnson, 2017a, p. 239). This is the case because if they are powerless, they can transform that feeling into a mechanism to not only understand who they are but also to legitimize or excuse their praise of mass murderers who seek to restore balance between natural masculinity, idealized masculinity, and where they stand on the social hierarchy by incorporating their embodiment into the social construction of manhood through violence.

The desire and anxiety that Allan (2018) explores are these competing forces which create a situation for incels that perpetuates these feelings as their community is defined by their inability to receive the benefits that are promised by masculinity, which Kimmel (2013) dubbed aggrieved entitlement. Aggrieved entitlement suggests that these men's anger results from their desires being denied by outside forces over which they have no control (Kimmel, 2013). For incels, the "things" are women, which they simultaneously desire and hate. Part of the hate they feel comes from their perception that they do not and cannot embody anything resembling idealized masculinity. They view heterosexual sex with women as not just a rite of passage, but the defining characteristic of becoming a man which can produce anxiety (Mundy, 2006). "Attached to shame is a deep fear of the possibility of being shamed" i.e., anxiety "for not living up to the standards which have been imposed on us [men]" (Allan, 2018, p. 183). These men feel they are entitled to sex because they possess the biological need or imperative to be sexually active which feeds their understanding of completing the transformation into manhood by completing these kinds of 'manhood acts' (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Incels both attribute their lack in masculine embodiment as innate in their physicality which fails to adhere to idealized masculine norms and their inability to complete manhood acts that causes other men to judge them as lacking in masculinity (Allan, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Munsch & Gruys, 2018; Myketiak, 2016; Robinson, 2000; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Vandello et al., 2008).

Elliot Rodger (2014) believed that once he entered college, he would be able to change his life and live like "everyone else." Throughout his narrative, his feelings vacillated between despair and anger at his situation, often comparing himself to other men and seeing his lack, and then at other times he compared himself to other men and viewed himself as superior to them (Rodger, 2014). However, despite his anger at other men for "having" what he did not have, he continued to focus on how women were preventing him from completing the manhood acts that would make him whole and he therefore decided that because his masculinity was threatened by what he viewed as rejection, he would be a man by enacting revenge on these women by killing them. He describes his aggrieved entitlement in the following excerpt from his manifesto:

Flocks of hot, young girls go out in their shorts and bikini's, further tantalizing my sex-starved body every time I look at them...I had nothing left to live for but revenge. Women must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as myself...These are crimes that cannot go unpunished. The more I thought about these injustices that were dealt to me, the more eager I became for revenge (Rodger, 2014, p. 118).

Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that through narrating one's story they "frame an event as problematic by drawing upon listeners' commonsense knowledge of what is expected in particular circumstances" (p. 27). Rodger's manifesto does not appear to have one particular audience in mind, but his manifesto appeals to other incels' "commonsense knowledge" that to be a man one must have sex and failure to engage in that act is a breakdown in the natural order of things. Horlacher (2019) concurs, arguing that the socially constructed definition of what a man *is* or *should be* is conveyed through the internalization of the subject position created by an incel's knowledge that he is not a man. Rodger's sheer incredulity that he occupied this subject position is what turned his despair into anger and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2013).

In the quote above, Rodger referred to himself as a “magnificent gentleman,” he restated this identity multiple times in his manifesto and his YouTube videos, settling on “the supreme gentleman” as the true descriptor of his being. Fluck (2013) argued that “identity is created by images of the self” which are “all driven to establish a sense of distinction or moral superiority over others” (p. 49). Chris Harper-Mercer (2015) wrote from a similar perspective in his manifesto, “I have always been the most hated person in the world. Ever since I arrived in this world, I have been under siege from it” (p. 1). He admitted that he was a 26-year-old virgin, but that “long ago [he] realized that society likes to deny people like [him] these things. People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. People like Elliot Rodger” (Harper-Mercer, 2015, p. 1). As stated above, Harper-Mercer (2015) was inspired by Rodger who he viewed as “a god” (p. 5), a man, who, like him, was *denied* access to manhood or true masculinity. Both Rodger and Harper-Mercer felt they were denied homosociality (friends), girlfriends, sex, money, power, and prestige by some outside force, and that force in turn denied them access to ideal masculinity which in turn denied them the things they wanted. The circular logic they used betrays them as it shines the light on their perceived lack rather than actual lack, which lies on the epistemological battlegrounds of socially constructed visions of ideal masculinity. Burke (1937) terms this a frame of acceptance which he defines as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (p. 3). Rodger and Harper-Mercer adopted the role of victims of the socially constructed technologies which both define their lack and their superiority by placing ideal masculinity at odds with an ideal masculinity that values their perceived intellect thus placing them in the precarious situation of both being and not being. Their confusion about the definition of masculinity created by the evolution of masculinity made them believe they were both inside and outside of ideal masculinity as other “lesser” beings perpetuated one version while overlooking theirs.

Before going on his killing spree in Toronto, Alek Minassian posted the following on his Facebook page: “Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” (Ma, 2018). “Chads” and “Stacys” are Manosphere terms for alpha men and women (Manosphere glossary, n.d.). An archived post from PUAhate.com attributed the following post to Rodger, who wrote: “Having the will to fight against those who would cause us misery is what separates the strong from the weak. The world is this way because you allow it to be” (Poobear, n.d.). The archived posts that have been attributed to Rodger show that he supported the effort to overthrow the status quo as he and other militant incels saw it and routinely urged violence to achieve these ends. As described above, part of hegemonic masculinity is asserting one’s self in front of other men and preventing themselves from being subjugated by other men. Military service is often connected to hegemonic masculinity in that war serves to protect the weak, women and children, and “our way of life.” Minassian’s attempt to align his killing spree with a military style post calling himself a member of the infantry, for example, is an illustration of the type of language which likens the incel struggle with an unjust war that threatens their existence.

Incels and Social Construction of Masculinity

Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that “at any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world...Personal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial evocations of the world as we know it” (p. 21). Rodger (2014), Harper-Mercer (2015), and Minassian (2018) all shared a similar telos in their narrative built on the supposition that they were lacking in some way and that others were responsible for this lack and its attendant pain. Inceldom is not a sickness or caused by others, it is a label that these men put on themselves which is shaped by the socially constructed characteristics of manhood that incels feel mark their lack of manhood. Bakhtin (1981) recognized that people “go through something” but that this something “affirm[s] what they, and precisely they, were as individuals, something that did verify and establish their identity” (p. 106-107). The narratives that these men left behind, however short or cryptic, show that they never experienced the

evolution of masculinity and held onto one aspect that affirmed their brokenness and/or oppression, i.e., their virginity.

Incels use their narratives to “discursively reinforce the status quo” (Munsch & Gruys, 2018, p. 376), but not necessarily the status quo of hegemonic masculinity, but rather idealized masculinity as constructed by incels which is overtly misogynistic, violent, and vitriolic. Fluck (2013) explained this point by stating:

Systems of recognition are replaced by new status orders and recognition regimes that are more open but also more volatile, constant struggle must be an essential element of the search for recognition. This struggle produces winners and losers, manipulators and victims, betrayers and betrayed, insiders and outsiders, all driven to establish a sense of distinction or moral superiority over others. (p. 49)

The new status orders that Fluck (2013) described are, for incels, experienced both inside and outside of the world they create for themselves and the larger societal structures within which incelism exists. Incel forums are filled with caustic exchanges between men who are supposedly oppressed in the same ways. They post pictures of themselves and ask the others to rate them, no matter how good-looking a man might be he will be ridiculed for even asking to be rated, teased for small imperfections, attacked for his height or weight, and racism abounds. The struggle that these men experience in their day to day lives spills over into their online lives where a new hierarchy has been created that reinforces the very status quo they claim to abhor and rail against, creating a community built on self-hate and contempt. These men are attempting to be recognized for their exceptionality as simultaneously the most oppressed group and the highest of the low.

Elliot Rodger’s YouTube videos were filled with self-deprecation and long diatribes about his sophistication and gentlemanly qualities (R.A.W.W., 2014). Nussbaum (2001) suggests that “emotions are appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person’s own control great importance for that person’s own flourishing” (p. 4). Rodger’s videos and manifesto suggest that he *felt* that his superiority was not seen by others and as a result he suffered and was unable to flourish as a man or even as a person. Men like Rodger, Harper-Mercer, and Minassian wanted to start a movement among incels to right the world. Rodger (2014) occasionally suggested that society needed to “go back” to a better time, a time when marriages were arranged, and he was guaranteed sex at some point in his life. The frustration that incels express in the form of anger at one another suggests that they are their own worst enemy because they cannot organize and force a new world order into existence. “Insofar as they involve acknowledgment of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency, emotions reveal us as vulnerable to events that we do not control; and one might hold that including a large measure of uncontrol in one’s conception of a good life compromises too deeply the dignity of one’s own agency” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 10). Their identities are tied to manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) that will affirm their masculinity and general worth as human beings, but they attribute success and failure to forces outside of their control (Somers, 1994), i.e. “the cruelty of women” (R.A.W.W., 2014).

After Nikolas Cruz committed his mass murder on Valentine’s Day in 2018, a user on Incels.Me stated, “I’m not even incel anymore and actually have it better than many normies yet I still can’t help but feel ‘good’ every time this happens” (Zyros, 2018). Cruz was heralded by incels online as St. Nikolas. Rodger (2014) had considered carrying out his mass murder on Valentine’s Day stating that it “would have been very fitting, since it was the holiday that made me feel the most miserable and insulted, the holiday which young couples celebrated their happy lives together” (p. 131). TheVman (n.d.), an Incels.Me user posted “holy shit its on valentine’s day! what a fucking hero! we have a new model! PLZ BE UGLY PLZ BE UGLY. WE NEED INCEL AWARENESS.” This comment suggests that incels who frequent these types of forums need to constantly have their positionality reaffirmed through the addition to their annals with more mass murders that illustrate how precarious their manhood is to the point that it drives members of their community to commit these acts of violence.

The incel mass murderers discussed here tied their identities to Elliot Rodger’s in an attempt to alleviate their anxiety over their inability to enact the social roles that conceptions of idealized masculinity

stipulate (Salecl, 2004). The ultraviolent acts they each perpetrated were connected to a “desire to change their identities,” (Salecl, 2004, p. 5) which they found impossible due to their self-identification as incels. This desire then informed their inability to make the types of meaningful connections with women that would have resulted, ideally, in their enacting the manhood act of sexual intercourse. “The cultural script for manhood implicitly and explicitly sanctions physical aggression as a way of demonstrating masculine status to the self and others, particularly when that status has been threatened” (Vandello et al., 2008, p. 1327). They resorted to mass murder to find release from their anxiety and embarrassment to assert themselves as men. By associating themselves with Rodger they were able to gain notoriety, even postmortem, that as noted above, canonized them among other incels.

Chris Harper-Mercer (2015) argued that people like himself and Elliot Rodger were “denied everything they deserved” and that “society left us no recourse” (p. 1). Harper-Mercer (2015) went on to acknowledge that after he committed his mass murder, people would think they could have done something to prevent him from carrying it out, but that they would have failed because he had “no job, no life, no successes,” (p. 1) suggesting that only men who succeed have something to live for. “My advice to others like me is to buy a gun and start killing people...It is my hope that others will hear my call and act it out. I was once like you, a loser, rejected by society” (p. 1-2). For these men violence is the only way to reassert their manhood.

Conclusion

This essay explored the incel community which has turned from a group of disaffected men into a group that praises mass murderers that come from their ranks. Elliot Rodger was not the first incel mass murderer, but he has inspired other men to follow in his footsteps as evidenced by the artifacts these men have left behind. The number of incel mass murderers continues to increase and the thread that holds them together is Elliot Rodger. The men in this study left behind artifacts that are easily accessible on the internet and when a site takes something down it pops up again somewhere else. Rodger's (2014) narrative spells out exactly what he thought was wrong with himself and what he thought was wrong with the people who were preventing him from becoming a man, i.e., having sex with a woman. These men used their narratives to define their masculinity or lack thereof and sought out a telos that would rectify their embarrassment, i.e., mass murder. Essentially, they followed the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1937) to attempt to achieve some kind of redemption, but many of these men killed themselves and so their redemption came in the form of the artifacts they left behind.

The research that has been done on incels and Elliot Rodger in particular has not addressed ways to intervene in the spread of these narratives and the hate that defines them. Incel boards and websites are frequently taken down due to the hate that they espouse. Incel forums are a bit of a Pandora's box in that once they got onto the internet, it is impossible to truly erase their messages from the internet. There are websites out there for men who feel that their status as an incel is ruining their lives and they provide group support to help these men manage their embarrassment and shame. However, until society stops putting pressure on men to enact their masculinity in idealized ways it is unlikely that the killings and hate will stop. That is not to say that there is no hope, society is always changing, but it is important to note that it changes at a snail's pace and sociological and psychological research is needed to pinpoint how to fix these problems on that kind of scale.

The contributions in this project to existing communication scholarship are essential to understanding how identity and masculinity are influential to our knowledge about society and masculinity. While these case studies impact the discipline, there is much more work to be done regarding masculinity and incels. This work has promise influencing future scholarship regarding men, power, influence, and behavior in incel research.

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