Extreme Sex-Negativity: An Examination of Helplessness, Hopelessness, and Misattribution of Blame Among "Incel" Multiple Homicide Offenders

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Abstract

Self-identified involuntary celibates, or "incels," have congregated online in recent years as a way to discuss and promote a particular patriarchal and blatantly misogynist ideology that blames women, specifically, and feminist society, broadly, for the unmet sexual desires of men who feel entitled, based on gender, to sexual experiences. Thus, incel ideology is an obvious example of severe sex-negativity. While incel ideology is commonly filled with hate speech and threats of violence, there are very few, fortunately, who go on to commit extreme violence. The present study examines feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among seven incel offenders who committed or clearly attempted to commit multiple murder. Although these offenders invariably felt hopelessness and helplessness across major areas of life functioning, they grossly misattributed blame to women for their overall misery. Findings provide valuable insights into the psychology of an extreme form of sex-negativity that extends a mindset of revenge rape to pseudocommando-style mass murder.

Introduction

Positive sexuality recently has been promoted as an approach to sexuality research and practice that explicitly emphasizes strengths and wellbeing, sexual diversity, complexity of sexuality, ethics, open communication, compassion, and promoting peace (see Williams, Christensen, & Capous-Desyllas, 2016). In contrast, the Western history of sexuality research and practice reflects unrecognized sex-negative biases, where sexual behavior is viewed as inherently risky, dangerous, and problematic in various ways. In this article, we focus on an extreme form of contemporary sex-negativity, namely the recent "involuntary celibate," or "incel," online movement. Incel ideology, while apparently a new phenomenon born out of the internet where this movement is known to have originated and still exists almost exclusively (they are not known to have meetings or rallies in public or other offline spaces like other hate groups), represents an alloy of existing extremist ideologies. These include but are not limited to White superiority, monolithic patriarchy, antifeminism, and—most notably—the advocacy of gender-based violence in order to reestablish male power (Ging, 2019; Zimmerman, Ryan, &

Duriesmith, 2018). Thus, core incel beliefs run directly counter to key features of positive sexuality, including diversity, ethics, compassion, and peacemaking.

Incel Beliefs and Terminology

Although a basic architecture of incel psychological characteristics has existed for some time in earlier iterations among other extant (and largely White, male-dominated) extremist groups, there has been very little research on what it is about the incel subculture and accompanying narrative that has become so recently appealing to the self-perceived disenfranchised; this includes what other deviant computing activities (the compulsive viewership of violent pornography, child pornography, online gambling, or gaming, etc.) may shape the prospective incel's disordered view of intimacy, eroticism, and females in general.

Incel ideology is steeped in misogyny and is based on the belief that feminism marks a visceral ruination of what incels perceive to be an ideal (and largely class and caste-based) patriarchal Western society; it is predicated on the basis that the chief role of females is to be the sexual property of males, and that women who rebuff even the most incompetent or inadequate of suitors, or who otherwise fail to acquiesce to this reality are involved in some kind of maladaptive confederacy and must be punished—even exterminated in some cases. The calls for an ensuing incel "revolution," as has been published to the internet by two of the more recent and notable incel mass murderers, now forms part of a larger genocidal agenda among self-proclaimed "blackpilled" incels, or those who have adopted nihilism and fatalism, have resigned themselves to a certain virgin identity, and who have rationalized a violent gender revolt to re-establish male and White superiority (Ging, 2019; Zimmerman, Ryan, & Duriesmith, 2018).

This same blackpill narrative holds that attractive women, whom incels customarily refer to within their abstruse and coded language system as "Stacys," have erred, both biologically and morally, in their attempts to have sexual relations with equally desirable men, known in the incel parlance as "Chads." This sexual freedom—as a necessary corollary of modern feminism—is in turn perceived by incels as an act of heresy and disruption of the natural order, one in which (usually White and privileged) males have exclusive authority of sexual decision making. By depriving less desirable men of sexual experiences, the new order has resulted in, based on the incel mythos, segments of the male population being unable to procure the sexual partners of their choosing (Zimmerman, et al., 2018). However, there is no evidence in any of the incel mass murders committed to date that the offenders committing these vengeful atrocities had actually been rejected in their attempts at intimacy. Rather, they appear to suffer from various courtship disorders and have had highly disturbed—and very juvenile and fantastical—preconceptions about how to pursue relationships, consensual sex, and the tenets of socially acceptable forms of courtship generally (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017).

As part of a collective *ex post facto* logical fallacy that defines their groupthink, incels believe—many without having made *bona fide* attempts at courtship—that the game is somehow rigged and that they have been unfairly deprived of sexual experiences. This movement largely blames Stacys and Chads, and to some degree society at large (collectively known as "Normies") that support increased sexual and relationship freedom and gender equality for their plight. Incels believe they are entitled to the sexual experiences they desire—often outlandish fantasies of

sexual conquest at least anecdotally appearing to be blueprinted through pornographic vignettes—but that contemporary liberal culture, impacted by feminism, has thwarted their true calling and left them instead with an involuntary celibate status—and stigma.

An early study on inceldom, published nearly two decades ago, further suggested that involuntary celibacy is likely a combination of timing and both the sequencing and duration of sexual behavior (or lack thereof), and that there are three types of incels, segmented according to different relationship status (Donnelly, et al., 2001). *Virgin* incels tend to be younger (41% were between ages 18 to 24 and an additional 44% between ages 25 to 34) than the other two incel relationship types; they have also never or rarely dated as teenagers and lack social interaction skills (Donnelly, et al., 2001). *Single* incels also lack any formative relationship experience over the life course, while *partnered* incels were involved in current relationships or partnerships, but with the majority of those relationships devoid of sexual activity due to various reasons (Donnelly, et al., 2001). This latter group, for this reason, is often dismissed by other incels as false flag "volcels," (or, voluntary celibates) in that they may be languishing in asexual relationships of convenience but are not true (typically virgin) incels.

From Hate Speech to Violent Action

What is clear from the admittedly limited data gathered at this writing is that, incels, despite their various points of overlap with other extremist mass murderers who congregate and radicalize principally in online environs, appear to have more in common with the documented typologies of rapists that have existed in the clinical and forensic literature for decades. As first postulated by Williams, Arntfield, Schaal, and Vincent (in review), recognizing the blackpill incel ideology as being more accurately paired with that of the violent sex offender versus some amorphous definition of radical or terrorist will significantly assist in not only consolidating the various and often wildly divergent tracks of scholarship on the topic but also, in a more practical sense, assist in identifying, interdicting, and perhaps even correcting incels. This is because, in large part, these rapist typologies, compared to the dearth of original research on incels, have extremely large offender samples and existing datasets for comparative analysis and the identification of common characteristics among offenders.

Further, the rise of inceldom as a discernible movement naturally also raises the prospect of the sexually-motivated mass murderer (see also Murray, 2017). Of course, Holmes and Holmes (2000) previously postulated the rare category of the sexual mass murderer as part of their foundational classification system of perpetrators who target four or more victims in a single incident. They described such an individual as an offender who will murder multiple victims as part of a protracted series of sexual assaults, or incidental to those sexual assaults— such as has been documented in war crime-scenarios in the Balkans, Vietnam, the Middle East, and elsewhere in recent history amid various civil wars and insurgencies with large numbers of civilian victims. However, incel attacks are clearly motivated by not only a nexus of anger and revenge motivations as their own propaganda asserts, but also by a stated sexual motivation in all cases. In fact, the core belief of the incel movement and the tenet central to its narrative is the *deprivation* of sex, or purportedly unworthy males (Chads) controlling or otherwise having perceptively exclusive access to attractive females (Stacys)—the same females to whom incels believe they should have preferred access for sexual relations. The chief difference from the

Holmes and Holmes typology is, therefore, that there is no traditional sex act performed concomitant with the multiple murders committed by incel attackers. Yet, there is little question that sexual motive remains intact once their violent intentions (and fantasies) become operationalized.

Further, and as has been well-documented (Aggrawal, 2009; Beauregard & DeLisi, 2018; Hickey, 2016) in other cases of sexual homicide, these crimes need not be overtly sexual in their *modus operandi* to be considered sexual homicides so long as there is a sexual or paraphilic objective pursued by the offender(s) through the commission and completion of the act. If nothing else, a renewed understanding of the incel offender as sexual mass murderer marks an effective starting point for understanding incels as being foremost sex offenders, their having more points in common with extant rapist typologies than any of the four distinct "waves" of terrorism tabulated during the industrial and post-industrial ages (Rapoport, 2012).

Methods

The present investigation complements a larger study (Williams, et al., in review) that examined demographic, forensic, and cognitive features of self-described incels who had attempted or committed homicide. Findings from that study show that violent incel offenders are likely to be virginal; show characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); use a variety of attack weapons; exhibit a strong cluster of cognitive distortions, including overgeneralizations, all-or-nothing thinking, victim stance, entitlement, power thrust, and lack of empathy. The Williams, et al. study also found that murderous incels experienced intense feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, which is the direct focus of the present study.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to identify any areas in violent incel offenders' lives that are linked to their feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. In other words, while incel violent offenders seem to focus exclusively on their lack of desired sexual activity (and mistakenly blame others, especially attractive women) for their unhappiness, there would seem to be other issues that differentiate them from incels who do not commit homicide. While there appears to be a large number of incels in the online community, only a very tiny fraction, fortunately, follow through with common incel hate speech by committing violent action in the form of homicide. This difference likely is related to incel homicide offenders' pervasive feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (see Williams et al., in review). Thus, research questions examined here include: Do incel offenders who attempt or commit multiple murder feel hopelessness and helplessness in multiple areas of their lives? If so, which areas? How do they perceive and address, or not, such sources of hopelessness and helplessness? It is one thing to feel hopeless and helpless in a single area of life functioning, but quite another to feel hopelessness and helplessness across all or most aspects of basic living.

Sample

A thorough search was conducted to identify self-identified incels who were clearly motivated to commit multiple homicide based on their incel beliefs. This search yielded seven

offenders (all male). Five offenders were American, one was Canadian, and one was British. Five offenders committed or attempted mass murder, one was apprehended prior to committing a well-planned crime, and one offender attempted to kill multiple women (one at a time via stabbing) consistent with attempted serial, rather than mass, murder. Offender ages at the time of offense ranged from 17 to 48 years, and four were in their 20s at the time of offense. About half the sample likely showed signs of ASD. Four offenders suicided at the time of their offense (murder-suicide). Regarding weapons used during offenses, four offenders killed victims with guns, two used knives in attacks, and two utilized vehicles as weapons (one offender used each type of weapon).

Data Sources and Analysis Procedure

The qualitative dataset for the Williams, et al. (in review) study was also utilized for the present investigation. Data include offenders' personal writings, videos, and social media postings; forensic documents, such as law enforcement reports and custodial interview videos; and numerous news and media reports. Materials were thoroughly reviewed, and content clearly displaying offender hopelessness and helplessness was identified and coded, based on a particular relevant area of life functioning (i.e., sex, relationship, family, friends, employment, school, etc.). Identifying the area(s) of life functioning was conducted in a flexible, emergent process, rather than *a priori.*

Results

Clear evidence of offenders experiencing strong feelings of being hopeless and helpless in multiple areas of their lives were observed across the sample. These identified areas are: (a) sexual and romantic relationships, (b) employment issues, (c) lack of friends and social interactions, and (d) family issues. However, there was no strong evidence of hopelessness or helplessness in one case. Consistent with broader incel ideology, offenders' attention was focused primarily on their lack of desired sexual activity. Offenders blamed females, generally, for a lack of sex but also for offenders' overall life misery, despite the fact that there are numerous internal and external factors that shape deficits in multiple areas of life functioning.

Sexual and Romantic Relationships

Predictably, severe emotional frustration was targeted at offenders' lack of sexual and romantic relationships. Violent incels seemed to focus on their lack of sexual experiences with much less attention devoted to frustration in other areas of their life functioning. However, although offenders commonly viewed sexual and romantic relationships as being the same based on common mononormative assumptions, clearly such relationships are not the same. Not surprisingly, offenders blatantly objectified women when discussing both lack of desired romance and lack of sex, focusing substantially on attractive physical characteristics. A particularly violent offender who survived his murderous "mission" told police that he "wanted to convert the life status of certain individuals to death status," while later explaining that the incel phenomenon is "basically a movement of angry incels such as myself who are unable to get laid." While offenders blame females specifically, the movement also puts some blame on society more broadly for the "virginity burden" that is supposedly placed on incel men. Just as

positive sexuality applies across all levels of social structure, so too, does the impact of extreme sex-negativity across micro, mezzo, and macro societal levels (see Williams, et al., 2016).

When offenders acknowledged severe frustration in other areas of life functioning, they blamed women (via frustration from not having desired sexual and relationships) for these problems. One offender left a note at the time of his massacre, part of which read, "If I cannot find one decent female to live with, I will find many indecent females to die with. If they are intent on denying me life, I will have no choice, but to deny them life." Diarizing from another offender illustrates the common shifting of blame toward women for broader problems that men without a female partner experience. He wrote, "A man needs a woman for confidence. He gets a boost on the job, career, with other men, and everywhere else when he knows inside he has someone to spend the night with who is also a friend." In other words, he believes a female partner is largely responsible for any success, or perhaps lack thereof, in other areas of his life. A few months later, this offender shot and killed three women while injuring nine more. In angrily blaming women for the sum of his problems, another violent offender who had carefully planned a mass murder at a women's march admitted:

> I have never had a girlfriend before and I'm still a virgin, this is why I am planning on shooting up a public place soon and being the next mass shooter… I'm ready to die and all the girls that turned me down is going to make it right by killing as many girls as I see.

A younger offender in the sample reported, "I think every girl is a type of shit; they are fussy with men nowadays and do not give boys like us a chance. I am still a virgin; everyone is losing it (virginity) before me, that's why you (females) are my chosen target." Across the sample, violent offenders blamed women for not having sex with them, not choosing them as romantic partners, and subsequently for overall lack of success in other areas of the offenders' lives.

Employment Issues

The inability to find and maintain employment was common in the majority of offender cases. One offender admitted frustration "when jobs turn you down," yet he blamed women for his overall unhappiness. Another offender lost multiple jobs early in his adult life due to inappropriately touching women, which resulted in denial of employment applications 55 times prior to his shooting and killing two women and injuring four others. His writings declared, "If I cannot make a living, I will make a killing." Before killing 10 people (excluding himself) and injuring 8 more, one offender wrote that he "had no job, no life, no successes," but had very little to say about these areas in comparison to his frustration and blame toward women. One offender apparently had a good job and liked his coworkers, but anticipated he would be let go in the near future based on budget cuts and company downsizing.

A recent study examining characteristics of mass public shootings, which is applicable to six of the seven offenders in this sample (albeit one of the six used a vehicle as the sole weapon in his public massacre), identified specific features of different types of mass public shooting offenders—disgruntled employees, school shooters, ideologically motivated, and rampage shooters (do not fit one of the other types) (Capellan, Johnson, Porter, & Martin, 2019). While

incel mass murderers are motived by a unique ideology rooted in sex-negativity, which is different than other ideological motivated mass shooters (i.e., political and religious-based), several offenders in the current sample experienced such severe employment problems that perhaps it is a little surprising that they did not seriously consider bifurcation at a workplace setting as part of their attacks. The reason they did not do so seems to be that they focused blame on females for all of their problems, employment issues included.

Lack of Friends / Social Relationships

Across the sample, violent incel offenders expressed hopelessness and helplessness linked to multiple reports that they had very few, if any, friends and meaningful social relationships. From a positive sexuality approach, a chronic pattern of severe lack of open and honest communication and humanization were noted both toward and from incel homicide offenders in their social interactions. Such unfulfilling or disturbing interactions may eventually contribute to finding and accepting violent incel ideology. The youngest offender in the sample reported he "has a hard time making friends and is often lonely," then added, "I am always being bullied for being unintelligent." In a state of reflection, another offender wrote, "I had no friends, no girlfriend, was all alone." Forensic records indicate that one offender had very few, if any, close contacts and valuable social interactions. This offender had telephoned a rare "friend," who had moved thousands of miles away, 831 times in a relatively short time span, and the individual eventually had to block the offender's phone number.

Previous research found that violent incel murderers are either self-deprecating or grandiose regarding their self-perceptions (Williams, et al., in review). An extremely grandiose and narcissistic offender, while generally blaming women and lack of sex for his unhappiness, alienated potential friends and eroded his social relationships based on his expectations of having unlimited power and social capital. At one point he lamented that he had "No friends, no girls, no life," and later wrote:

> As time progressed, I realized how hopeless everything in my life was. The chances that I will ever rise to power and right the wrongs of the world are extremely slim. I had absolutely no idea or plan of how to acquire any sort of power. It was naïve of me to think that someday I could be a dictator. The only thing I could do was fantasize about it. My whole world twisted even deeper into darkness and despair as my depressing life continued on. My hatred for people who have sex festered inside me like a plague.

This grandiose offender fully believed that he was better than other people; that he was entitled to the sex and power that he desired; and a large part of his hopelessness and helplessness stemmed from his intense jealousy (and eventual hatred) of others that subsequently led to his own social isolation and loneliness.

Family Problems

Although rarely mentioning family specifically, several offenders in the sample expressed feeling severely lonely overall, using terms such as "all alone" and "alone and unknown." One offender summarized, "My whole life has been one lonely enterprise." Based on

the available data, it appears almost none of the offenders experienced particularly close emotional relationships with their families, while some briefly spoke of, or alluded to, particular problems. One offender wrote, "My dad never (not once) talked to me or asked about life's details and tell me what he knew. He was just a useless sperm donor." Data pertaining to another offender showed his lack of connection to family, but also broader family conflict and lack of open family communication as a whole.

A grandiose offender in the sample, somewhat of an anomaly, did turn to his parents when feeling hopeless and helpless but also felt like he let them down by not being good enough compared to others:

> Feeling the need to talk to someone, I called the only people I had in my life: my parents. I called them both, first my mother and then my father, and told them how much I was suffering from my loneliness, and my utter realization that that I had no hope of ever living a happy life. I told them they must be ashamed of me, that I was a 21 year old virgin who is unable to get a girlfriend or making friends whatsoever. I was not the son any parent would want. My tantrum on the phone deeply disturbed them, and they arranged for me to see my psychiatrist.

In the end, this particular offender's insatiable need for power, sex, and attention led to murder-suicide where several innocent people lost their lives. Overall, while various family issues were noted in connection with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, this area of functioning was least salient from the available data, compared to romantic and sexual relationships, employment issues, and lack of friends and meaningful social relationships.

Discussion and Conclusion

Incel multiple homicide offenders clearly display an extreme form of sex-negativity, wherein they seem to believe that as White males, they are entitled to the sexual and romantic relationships that they desire. Although their diatribes are directed at females and a lack of sexual and romantic experiences, this study illustrates that their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are connected, consciously or not, to other areas in their lives, specifically employment issues, lack of friends and broader social relationships, and in some cases family issues. Previous research has found that incel homicide offenders display a particular cluster of various cognitive distortions and neutralizations, including overgeneralization, entitlement, all-or-nothing thinking, victim stance, lack of empathy (and denial of victim), and power thrust (Williams, et al., in review).

It appears that homicidal incels' intense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in multiple areas of functioning, continually fueled by rigid patterns of cognitive distortions, may drive subsequent thoughts and plans for homicidal expressions of power and revenge. Thus, motivations of power and revenge are the progressive link from a psychology of anger-retaliatory rapist or vindictive rapist to sexualized mass murder. Indeed, two of the primary motivators of different types of mass murder are power and revenge (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). In other words, incel homicide offenders, seeking ultimate power and revenge, simply bypass rape, committing sexualized mass murder instead (also see Murray, 2017). Although mass murder

motivated by incel ideology seems to be its own unique type of crime, it is consistent with the pseudocommando style mass murderer (Knoll, 2010), while also reflecting some, though not all, elements of ideologically motivated mass public shootings (Capellan, et al., 2019). Incels feeling extreme helplessness and hopelessness in multiple areas of life functioning crave ultimate power and revenge via mass murder, not rape. Consistent with various forms of mass public violence, incel violent offenders seem to struggle with body perception issues, psychological distress, and significant losses, while then seeking to overcompensate via hypermasculinity based on their perceptions of a damaged self (Langman, 2020).

It should be obvious that incel ideology, let alone incels motivated to commit multiple murder, is an extreme and blatant form of sex-negativity and anti-feminism. A positive sexuality approach emphasizes personal strengths, wellbeing, and happiness; embraces sexual diversity; welcomes multiple perspectives; applies core ethical principles to sexuality; incorporates compassion through humanizing and peaceful solutions; and applies across multiple levels of social structure (Williams, et al., 2016). Overall, these dimensions of positive sexuality seem to be notably absent in incel ideology generally and among incel homicide offenders specifically. Incel homicide offenders seem to share common features at the micro (individual) level (severely distorted cognitive patterns; rigid thinking; potential ASD; inaccurate self-perceptions), mezzo level (few friends and social relationships), and macro level (employment problems; sexual and relationship illiteracy; online interactions that support sex-negativity and violence). As an incel's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness increase, it would seem that the risk for committing extreme violence also increases. While more research on understanding and preventing incel violence is needed, the widespread education and promotion of positive sexuality principles would seem to help, over time, in mitigating multiple risk factors for such extreme violence fueled by sex-negativity.

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