Analyzing Incels through the lens of evolutionary psychology

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ABSTRACT

Incels, also known as “involuntary celibates,” are an online subculture comprised of mostly heterosexual men who describe themselves as unable to obtain a sexual partner despite their desire and effort to do so. The group often externalizes the reasons for this failure, blaming societal structures and ideals as well as feminist movements. In recent years, some within this subculture have become radicalized. The violent ideologies of Incels have been linked to several mass shootings, including those committed by Elliot Rodger and Jake Davison. Although some Incels have attempted to use evolutionary psychology to justify their anger and ideology, this paper aims to turn the evolutionary lens back on Incels to explore Incels’ core features of misogyny, group identity, suicidality and violence. Incels attempt to establish and maintain a social “in-group,” strive to eliminate sexual competition, and attempt to bypass female mate choice. The paper explores how Incels use of evolutionary psychology principles and highlights the benefits that studying Incels, both in general and through an evolutionary lens, can yield.

KEYWORDS

Incels, evolution, involuntary celibate, violence, suicide, evolutionary psychology, groups, mating

INTRODUCTION TO INCELS

Involuntary celibates or "Incels" refer to an online subculture, composed predominantly of young heterosexual men who, due to a perceived lifelong history of romantic rejection and marginalization, express rage towards women and society at large (Hoffman, Ware, & Shapiro, 2020; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Jaki et al., 2019; Speckhard, Ellenberg, Morton, & Ash, 2021; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). Incels believe that their incessant rejection is due to physical appearance (e.g., facial structure, height, ethnicity, and musculature) and other factors beyond their control (e.g., mental illness and personality characteristics such as shyness). Incels see themselves as victims of unfair social hierarchies driven by these factors, which Incels claim are genetic and mostly not amenable to improvement. These hierarchies, in turn, drive female mate choice, leaving the Incel without sexual prospects.

Incels congregate on Internet platforms and message boards, where most of the content includes frustration over the unfair nature of society, studies confirming their world view, and hopelessness about their future. Concerningly, a few on these platforms share angry and violent rhetoric, sometimes expressing fantasies about using violence to seek revenge and obtain their goals of sexual access.

Incels adopt misogynistic beliefs and blame women and the women’s liberation movement for their sexual frustration and rejection (Hoffman et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; O’Malley, Holt, & Holt, 2020). They believe that women mindlessly and wantonly flock to “genetically superior” men atop the social hierarchy, who unfairly monopolize the women. They often adopt derogatory and dehumanizing terms for women such as “it,” “femoid” (a term for women that that highlights Incels’ perception of women as mindless and inhuman, similar to...
an “android” or robot) and “roasties” (a term for women that references the appearance of the female labia, particularly the alleged relaxed appearance of the labia of a promiscuous woman). They often blame women’s liberation and female mate choice for their sexual frustration and offer misogynistic views about the roles of women. Some within this group go so far as to state they are being denied sexual access to women, who are monopolized by more attractive and masculine men (e.g., O’Malley et al., 2020) or offer beliefs that women are subhuman or objects that men are entitled to access (Tranchese & Sugiyama, 2021). Some within the group propose that society change to accommodate their needs (e.g., return to a social structure in which women have less rights than men, remain in the home, and do not have free choice in the dating market; for instance, see Pražmo, 2020). Some more extreme Incels call for the rape of women, and their beliefs have been tied to some rapes on college campuses (Ging, 2019).

Incels hate attractive, dominant men, who they see as possessing better physical characteristics, higher status, and wealth. Incels have christened these men as “Chads” and believe they unfairly monopolize all women. Those on Internet platforms often idolize mass shooters such as Elliot Rodger and Seung-Hui Cho. At their extremes, Incels encourage violence towards the monopolizing males, women, and those outside the Incel sphere (Ging, 2019; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020).

The differences within this group are reflected by the “pill” terminology used by many online. To “take the red pill” or “to be redpilled” is a concept adopted from the movie, The Matrix, in which the character Morpheus gives Neo a choice: take the blue pill and return to the Matrix, oblivious to the wider world around him or take the red pill and see the world as it truly is, outside the façade the Matrix provides. This phrase is used by various groups including QAnon and other Men’s Rights groups. Within the Incel community, to “take the red pill” is to see society, with its preference for physically attractive and socially dominant individuals, as unfairly structured against the Incel, as they see themselves as ugly, unwanted and low on the social hierarchy. Some with this view may maintain some hope of sexual conquest, either with less desirable women (Jaki et al., 2019) or through advancement on the social hierarchy by altering one’s physical appearance by way physical fitness, steroids or, in extreme cases, plastic surgery (Hines, 2019). While these individuals still maintain their misogynistic views of women, their worldview is not as bleak as their “black pill” adopting brethren.

By contrast, those who “take the black pill” have a nihilistic view of the world. They believe that women only pursue sex with men who have superior genes (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020) and thus Incels’ only means of improving their life trajectory is to reverse the feminist movements of the past, to subjugate women, and to enforce monogamy (Jones, 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020). A very small subset calls for an attempted revolution through mass violence and laud the attacks of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian as something to aspire to. Others express hopelessness and suicidalism, which is, at times, echoed and encouraged by other members of the Incel group (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021; Jones, 2020). This suicidalism is sometimes tied to desires to commit a mass murder event prior to ending one’s own life, to obtain infamy (Jones, 2020; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). Greater than 90% of Incels surveyed reported adopting black-pill ideology (Daly & Reed, 2022; Speckhard et al., 2021).

Incels have a complex view of themselves. On the one hand, they see themselves as disenfranchised victims (Ging, 2019) and feel that they are treated as subhuman (Daly & Reed, 2022), both by women they would like to bed and by society in general. On the other hand, many refer to themselves as “losers,” thus seeming to agree with that disenfranchisement. The significant string that ties these two views together is their belief in their lowly place on the social hierarchy, a place that is inevitable due to genetics that lead to unattractive physical features, lack of social dominance, poor employment/financial prospects, and shy or awkward demeanor. It is not hard to see that, in addition to anger and violence, many in this group often refer to mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Speckhard et al., 2021).

Incels are part of a larger and often contradictory group of ideologies known as the “Manosphere,” a cluster of men’s groups congregating on online forums, blogs and chat rooms (Jones, 2020) The topics discussed by these groups largely focus on men’s issues and misogynistic thinking, and purport to be informed about women’s abuses of men, men’s loss of power at the hands of women, and the brainwashing of men by women (Jones, 2020). The groups include Pick Up Artists (PUAs), Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and geek/gamer culture (Ging, 2019; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Jones, 2020), to name a few. Incel culture and the Manosphere often cherry-pick and adopt evolutionary psychology concepts to reinforce ideas about female subjugation and the need to reinforce male dominance (Ging, 2019).

Of the subgroups of the Manosphere, Incels are a newer and more toxic subcategory, with their greatest expansion in popularity occurring between 2016 and 2018 (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021). The group itself has gone
through an evolution, with a more militant, violence-oriented iteration emerging (Hoffman et al., 2020). Interested readers who wish to explore the topic before proceeding may wish to explore the Incel Wiki (https://incels.wiki) or view the documentary “TFW No GF,” to get a better understanding of the Incel subculture.

THE STATE OF THE LITERATURE

Most of what we know about the “Manosphere,” and of Incels in particular, is garnered from spending significant time immersed on the online platforms on which they communicate (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021) or through linguistic analysis of forum posts (Speckhard et al., 2021). Consequently, our understanding of Incels, their evolution, and any risk they pose to the community is still in its infancy. The reason for this is multifactorial. On the one hand, many Incels express anger at society and consider themselves to be outcasts; they are thus unlikely to purposely draw attention to themselves in the community or participate in studies of their beliefs. The second reason is that Incels are an Internet subculture, creating a barrier of anonymity that makes it hard to access members. Their Internet platforms and forums are often shut down due to inflammatory content (Praźmo, 2020), and many likely spend time on websites and forums that are password protected or inhabit the “Dark Web” (beyond the reach of basic search engines, which requires specific software and expertise to access). This bedevils efforts to study Incels and their ideology and content in its entirety. Indeed, members of public platforms request that members message them directly to get invites and passwords to groups on other social media sites such as Discord.

Researchers who have undertaken the study of Incels have done so through a variety of methods. For instance, many researchers have analyzed the content of Incels posts (Jaki et al., 2019; O’Malley et al., 2020; Praźmo, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021) or the migration of users between Incel forums and forums devoted to other, overlapping ideologies (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021). Fewer researchers have surveyed Incels (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Speckhard et al., 2021) or interviewed them directly (Daly & Reed, 2022). Some, such as Williams, Arntfield, Schaal, and Vincent (2021) analyzed characteristics of offender and victims in cases of Incel-perpetrated violence or attempted violence. Hintz and Baker (2021) coded responses to a question posed on the website Reddit.com (“People who had considered themselves ‘Incels’ (involuntary celibates) but have since had sex, how do you feel looking back at your previous self?”).

As one can see from this collection of methodologies, the study of Incels to this point has employed indirect methods; this of course lends some caution to the results, as it is unclear how many posts may be from fake accounts or “trolls” (users who pretend to be part of a group to mock or create controversy). The direct methods noted above have relied on small numbers of willing Incel participants, thus posing the risk for skewed or biased data. This is not to say the data gathered thus far is not useful, as it clarifies general themes and tendencies of the group.

The demographic of Incels has sparked some curiosity. As many within the media portray Incels as overlapping with right-wing extremist groups and white supremist groups (for instance, see Romano, 2016), there is generally an assumption that Incels are entirely Caucasian. However, Speckhard et al. (2021) found that Caucasians made up about fifty-four percent of the group followed by those who identified as African American or Black (10%), Middle Eastern (7%), Hispanic (7%), Indian (5%), Asian Non-Indian (5%) and those who did not identify (13%). The same study found that most hailed from Europe (47%), followed by North American (30%), Asia (10%), Central America (8%) and Africa (2%). This evidence provides early evidence that Incel ideology is not restricted to America or to Caucasians.

Many Incels identify as having mental health symptoms. Almost two out of three Incels reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. One in four endorsed symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (Speckhard et al., 2021). In fact, there is a subgroup within the Incel community that refers to themselves as “mentalcels,” or persons who perceive their Incel status is due to a mental illness (Incels.wiki).

The media tends to focus on violence perpetrated by some like Jake Davidson or Elliot Rodger who either express Incel ideology (as in the case of Davidson), or express ideology that overlaps with Incels (as in the case of Rodger). It is estimated that a mere fifty or so cases of mortal violence are attributable to Incels since Elliot Rodger’s 2014 Isla Vista rampage (Hoffman et al., 2020). Compare this to the popular Incel forum queried by Speckhard et al. (2021) which boasts 20,000 registered and 1,000 active daily users. Further, these numbers should be compared to other extremist groups. For instance, when considering United States-based terrorism between 1994 and 2020, left-wing extremists accounted for 22 deaths and ethnonationalists accounted for five deaths. Right-wing extremists (of which Incels were included) accounted for 335 fatalities (Jones, Doxsee, & Harrington, 2020).

According to Speckhard et al’s survey, only a quarter of Incels surveyed endorsed violent ideation, and one in ten endorsed that they would rape if they could evade consequence. In the same study, most disagreed that Incels were violent. However, this sampling came from a public and easily accessible forum and surveyed only those willing to engage with such a survey. It is impossible, at this stage, to know the percentage of self-identified Incels on more covert messaging platforms who might answer otherwise. Further, there are cases of Incel plans thwarted by authorities prior to any violent acts (e.g., Tres Genco). While it is clear that the vast majority of self-described Incels do not engage in violence, it would be a mistake to discount this group’s violence risk.

The violence risk is not just for others, but for the Incel themselves. Speckhard et al. (2021) found that nearly half of Incels reported suicidal ideations, and a third engaged in self-harming behaviors. Further, two thirds identified as having depressive symptoms, and half endorsed hopelessness (Speckhard et al., 2021). In an evaluation of writings by
individuals linked to Incel ideology who committed mass violence, hopelessness and helplessness were prevalent themes in their communications (Williams et al., 2021). Many of these individuals went on to take their own lives. Daly and Laskovtsov (2021) analyzed the content of eighty suicide posts on an Incel forum, which often identified attempted and failed coping strategies (e.g., such as employment or going to the gym) and appreciation for the Incel community. However, because of the anonymity of posters, it is impossible to know how many of these individuals went on to commit suicide. Thus, our understanding of how many Incels attempt or commit suicide is lacking.

Although the average Incel appears exceedingly unlikely to engage in more extreme violent behaviors such as murder or suicide, there are additional reasons why this group should be of interest to researchers and academics. The first is that any further understanding of this group will assist treatment professionals and others within society to interact with and assist Incels more effectively. Speckhard et al. (2021) found that half of their survey participants reported having tried therapy, but only 15 of their 272 participants (~6%) found therapy to be helpful. Despite reporting mental health issues and struggles, Incels expressed a reluctance to seek mental health treatment, feeling as though providers did not understand their situation or needs (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021; Speckhard et al., 2021). This includes appreciating the sense of belonging and understanding that Incels find when joining this group (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021; Speckhard et al., 2021), which is important to grasp prior to constructing any intervention strategy. Any effort to understand Incel culture, what drives individuals towards this form of misogyny, and the risks and benefits of group membership will be critical to not only devising risk management interventions, but in constructing effect therapeutic frameworks and tactics.

Part of improving mental health may be to encourage Incels away from these platforms. In their interviews with Incels, Daly and Reed (2022) noted that their subjects reported pervasive feelings of sadness, anger and isolation. The authors noted that it was unclear whether these emotional states were the catalyst or the result of participants’ Inceldom. It appears that factors such as insular friend groups and solitary activities contributed to the drive towards joining the Incel group (Hintz & Baker, 2021). In spending time on message boards and with an online community, however, one might expect that Incels exacerbate these underlying feelings. Indeed, Hintz and Baker (2021) found that new experiences and self-reflection led some Incels to abandon the ideology.

Understanding Incels will have broader benefits for understanding other forms of misogynistic groups that may be increasingly radicalized. This includes groups of militant and radicalized jihadists. Many of those whom ISIS seeks to recruit are young, marginalized individuals who are unsuccessful in their own societies, and who might be attracted to camaraderie and belonging within their ranks (Chassman, 2016; Nacev & Bogatinov, 2018). Finding the threads of similarity between Incels and similar groups across cultures will allow us more thorough understanding on the general human nature that drives the formation of these groups, regardless of political or cultural factors. For instance, the Ilbe are a South Korean Internet-based group of men espousing misogynistic and sometimes violent messaging (Kasulis, 2017), with many overlapping elements to Incels.

The aim of this paper is to further our understanding of Incels by examining the ideology and its participants through the lens of evolutionary psychology. While further understanding of this group is beneficial in the ways cited above, applying evolutionary psychology to Internet phenomena is important for the field. With the Internet’s central prominence in everyday life, much of human interaction occurs online, a vastly different landscape from our evolutionary past. Seeing how evolutionary theory fits within Internet-based phenomena will allow evolutionary psychologists to fine-tune theories and apply them to a broader array of situations. Further, given the limitations in current research available, it is imperative that investigators and researchers from various fields employ new and creative strategies to study this group and other online Internet subgroups whose members may pose a risk to themselves and to society.

Throughout the paper, I have included text examples from Incel Internet platforms to highlight the more inflammatory content of seemingly more radicalized members (at least those that can be viewed on publicly accessed forums). I have included usernames to credit the author of the post while attempting to maintain their anonymity. I offer these quotes with the caveat that I know nothing about the poster or their life circumstances. The same caveats as discussed above with studies analyzing content of Incel forums apply to these posts; however, it is telling that many users appear to agree with the content when posting their own responses. The reader should note that the majority of these message boards are merely posts involving stories of rejection, expressing hopelessness, sharing memes, and posting academic articles and news stories involving dating. The more inflammatory content on sites such as 8kun (8chan) and Reddit was previously removed and was inaccessible at the time this paper was written. The content on these platforms and on platforms across more inaccessible parts of the Internet (“Dark Web” and on online application sites that require an invite or password to access) may possess more virulent content.

INCELS THROUGH AN EVOLUTIONARY LENS

Misogyny and the bypass of female mate choice

Of course we’re not “entitled” to sex, but we want it. And when we don’t get it, based largely on genetic factors determined from conception, and when we’re even hated for those factors our whole lives, why wouldn’t some of us feel the need to resort to violence or misogyny?

- Username: mikepence (2018)
Most Incels identify as heterosexual (Jaki et al., 2019; Speckhard et al., 2021), and their rage hinges on sexual frustration with women. This discussion will therefore focus on the evolutionary psychology of heterosexual relationships.

In the race for reproductive success, men and women desire different things. This difference is driven by parental investment, a concept first described by Robert Trivers in 1972. Trivers defines parental investment as, “any investment by the parent in an individual offspring that increases the offspring’s chance of surviving (and hence reproductive success) at the cost of the parent’s ability to invest in other offspring” (p. 55). These include the metabolic costs of creating a child, the costs of time, energy and risks associated with protection and raising children, and the resources invested in those children. The parent with the greater parental investment incurs the most cost and will therefore be the choosier of the sexes when it comes to reproducing (Trivers, 1972). When it comes to reproduction in humans, women incur the most metabolic costs and time, including about nine months gestation per child and a limited reproductive window. Women are therefore the choosier sex. This paradigm is supported by cross-cultural empirical data (for instance, see Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995). While men can physically bring more children into the world given the minimal metabolic time and costs to conceive, they are constrained by the preferences and choices of women.

Men and women, on average, prefer different characteristics in their respective mates. For men, who require less investment to produce an offspring, an ideal partner would be one with more reproductive capacity—younger women with cues of youth, fertility, and good genetics. For women, choosing a partner who could provide more resources for her and for her children is preferable. This includes both current resources and potential future resources, reflected in a man’s ability to navigate social structure, his ambition, his intellect, and his dominance. A woman also prefers a man with the capacity and willingness to help co-parent, to offer protection, and who possesses strong and attractive genes that will then be passed on to a woman’s children. This general pattern is born out in the literature, manifesting across cultural boarders (Buss, 1988, 1989; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005; Walter et al., 2020).

Both sexes have developed psychological mechanisms that seek out and make decisions regarding preferred partners. Further, men and women’s unconscious mating goals are often at odds, with women benefiting from long-term commitment and men benefiting most from multiple partners in short, uncommitted liaisons. Adaptations have evolved within each sex to ensure that their preferred relational goal is realized (Haselton, Buss, Oubaid, & Angleitner, 2005). For instance, men have developed intense sexual jealousy to physical betrayal and women have developed more intense jealousy to emotional betrayal (Buss, 2017). Emotional betrayal would mean less resources for the woman, and physical betrayal may mean a female partner is impregnated with another man’s child, cuckoldry the current partner, or delaying him from having his own offspring with the woman.

This evolutionary mismatch is observed in Incel discord. Incels often discuss wanting to bed “Stacy’s,” which is a term that refers to a girl who is the pinnacle of physical attractiveness. Incels display disgust and rejection of women whom they perceive as less fertile or older (although well within reproductive age) and a tendency to express preference for younger women and girls, even those below the age of consent (O’Malley et al., 2020). These preferences are not unique to Incels. Men, on average, prefer nulliparous, fertile, young but post-pubescent women, an adaption that would have allowed our male ancestors to maximize the number of offspring he had with his sexual partner across the length of her reproductive life (Symons, 1995).

Celibacy and lack of sexual partners poses the ultimate evolutionary challenge for Incels. The strongest driver of Incel rage is their rejection by women and their anger primarily focuses on women (Hoffman et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2020). Incels believe that women unfairly select attractive and dominant men, and this selection is a particular focus of their anger (Jaki et al., 2019).

Incels focus on general appearance as a reason behind their misfortune with women (Jones, 2020). They highlight the masculine features of “Chads” including strong jawlines, large build, and height (Jones, 2020) and say women unfairly and mindlessly choose men with these characteristics. The focus of much of their rage, therefore, is women themselves whose preferences towards selecting the most genetically advantageous mates mean that Incels lack reproductive opportunities. While some engage in behaviors to improve their status or their financial situation or by going to the gym, many engage in rhetoric expressing desires and fantasies that, seen through an evolutionary lens, attempt to thwart female mate choice.

Unfortunately, Incel evaluation of female mate preferences tends to be hyperbolic. For instance, Incels often lament about short stature attributing to their inability to attract a mate, citing articles such as Whitbourne’s (2013), “Why Many Women Want to Be With Tall Men.” While it may be true that many women prefer taller partners, there is a hyperfocus on this characteristic at the expense of others leads (including female preferences for kindness and other personality features as described in the studies cited above). Thus, it often is the case that Incels are not necessarily wrong in the data that they post, they just have a myopic view of its consequences.

In our evolutionary past, men who placed a premium on cues of chastity and faithfulness would have been faced with fewer chances of uncertain paternity, a mistake that is potentially reproductively costly. Men thus have psychological mechanisms that allow them to seek out and avoid cues of female promiscuity in long-term partners (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). “Slut shaming” is a tactic often employed by women in an effort to divert male attention away from other women and to themselves. This signals to the ‘slut shamed’ woman’s potential partner that they are at high risk for cuckoldry, which would be evolutionarily costly.

Incels are no stranger to this tactic. They do this by calling women “sluts” and discuss their prolific sexual experiences.
 ability to choose her own mate can lead to the ultimate in woman in these circumstances to stray or to re-establish her adultery laws in some parts of the world, attempts by a selection inclinations entirely. And as we have seen with eliminate a woman

Incel community. In treating women like property, men

ness that is encountered on message boards throughout the system. This enforced social contract would have the

Right would have diverted attention of discerning higher-status men away from a potential partner, following their own evolutionary drives away from a potential cuckolder. Although it is unlikely this rhetoric will reach the eyes or ears of their sexual competition, the motive towards such posts and discussions has evolutionary roots none-the-less.

"[Women] are sluts and unfaithful bitches. They should be sent to breeding grounds to be impregnated by their looks-match in designated zones and periods and then locked up in their house."

-Username: Appetite4Destruction (2020)

Looks-match: someone of equal physical attractiveness

Another expressed desire of some Incels is to attempt to thwart female mate choice by subjugating women. The most extreme of the Incels call for suppression of women, removing their rights, and treating them as property (Jaki et al., 2019; Jones, 2020). Incels often support their claim of women as property not just in the call for society to redistribute them, but by referring to them as "it" or "femoids," words that dehumanize the women (Prazmo, 2020). This proprietariness allows for a social contract among males, whereby there is an enforced reproductive cost instilled when a male infringes on another male's mate (Wilson & Daly, 1992). This enforced social contract would have the added benefit of preventing an Incel from having to defend his claim to a partner against a more dominant "alpha male." Further, proprietariness often stirs a sense of grievance or injustice when it is felt that the presumed "owner" does not get what he is entitled to (Wilson & Daly, 1992); this would hint at the frequently discussed sense of unfairness that is encountered on message boards throughout the Incel community. In treating women like property, men eliminate a woman's ability to choose a mate and bypass her selection inclinations entirely. And as we have seen with adultery laws in some parts of the world, attempts by a woman in these circumstances to stay or to re-establish her ability to choose her own mate can lead to the ultimate in fitness costs, death (Wilson & Daly, 1992).

"It's in a woman's nature to seek out dominant men. It's only natural they do that, for only the strongest survive in nature. And there is nothing more dominant than a man taking full control over the situation, pushing her arms down the ground, and fucking her hard. That's why rape is women's number one fantasy. That's why so many women report having an orgasm when raped. They love it."

-Username: DepravedAndDeprived (2020)

Among Incels, violence against women (including rape) is often discussed as a positive or desirable action (Jaki et al., 2019). In Speckhard et al.'s (2021) survey, one in ten Incels endorsed the statement, "I would rape if I could get away with it." Another study found that Incel traits positively correlated with self-reported tendency to fantasize about rape (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). The forums also include posts that posit women desire to be raped and have included advice on how to get away with rape (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021).

Rape as a means of sexual access is an incredibly fraught and emotionally charged subject that garners much debate among evolutionary psychologists. In general, there are several hypotheses proposed by evolutionary psychologists for rape behavior. Thornhill first proposed the hypothesis that rape may be an adaptive evolutionary strategy for reproduction (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). There is some limited evidence for this within other animals. Forced copulation is found among insects such as the scorpion fly (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000) and primates such as orangutangs (Mitani, 1985). In humans, most victims of rape are women and most perpetrators of rape are men (Thompson, 2009). Further, the majority of female victims of rape are younger than 30 years of age (Miller, 2014; Stiernströmer, VäforsFritz, Mellgren, & Khoshnood, 2020), within a viable reproductive window. Thompson (2009) argues, however, that a high proportion of women in their late adolescence and early twenties are particularly vulnerable to many forms of victimization, as they are often unmarried, living alone and away from protective kin.

The Mate Deprivation Hypothesis model suggests that men are more likely to use aggressive tactics to obtain sex if they would otherwise be deprived sexual access entirely (McKibbin, Shackelford, Goetz, & Starratt, 2008). In a model proposed by Smith, Mulder, and Hill (2001), it was found that only men with less than one tenth the reproductive value of the average 25-year-old male (of which Incels at least perceive themselves to have) might benefit from using rape as an alternative mating strategy when considering the potential fitness costs. This is supported by evidence that rapists tend to have lower education and lower socioeconomic status (Miller, 2014; Stiernströmer et al., 2020), and thus are less viable reproductive partners. To the contrary, however, rape is more common in societies where there are proportionately more women than men (Thompson, 2009), which presumably would allow a greater number of men sexual access.

An alternative strategy is that rape is not an adaptation, but an evolutionary byproduct of a man's general tendency towards dominance and physical aggression (Buss, 2021; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). For instance, in a sample of 156 college students, those who endorsed more coercive mating strategies also reported higher self-perceived mating success and did not exhibit lower earning potential (Lalumière, Chalmers, Quinsey, & Seto, 1996). Further, in his recent book When Men Behave Badly, David Buss offers evidence that it is men with greater social cache, dominance and reproductive success that appear to exact more sexual
coercion and aggression. In one study out of South Africa, results indicate that men who had twenty or more partners were twice as likely to rape as those who had fewer partners (Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle, 2011). Finally, men in fraternities (considered a socially dominant group on college campuses) endorsed more rape-supportive attitudes than men who were not in fraternities (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005).

A final proposed hypothesis may be that of relationship coercion, a hypothesis that suggests that men use rape and sexual coercion as a means of maintain access to women, either by ensuring likely reproductive access in the future or limiting a woman’s likelihood to stray to another mate. For instance, violence among non-human primates is often used as a means of sexual coercion to improve access to females; this includes not just rape, but also employs violence against females so that she will be more likely to acquiesce to the potential mate partner in the future (Smuts & Smuts, 1993). Coercive strategies show evidence of increased number of sired children among non-human primates (Feldblum et al., 2014). Among humans, sexual victimization may lead to negative effects on the victim’s self-perceived attractiveness, self-perceived value as a mate, and sexual reputation (Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2012), making a woman who is raped more likely to turn her future attention to less reproductively beneficial partners or, in the case that she is already partnered, less likely to stray from her current partner. The theory is also supported by evidence that most sexual assault is perpetrated by a known assailant and, in most of these cases, the victim does not incur significant physical injury (Thompson, 2009). Further, in the case of acquaintance rape, many victims continue to have ongoing relationships with their attackers (Thompson, 2009). Finally, female victims of domestic violence by an intimate partner tend to be victimized between the ages of 18 and 24 (Truman & Morgan, 2014) during prime reproductive years.

While the debate continues among evolutionary psychologists, each hypothesis (if true) may lend some light on the Incels attitudes and discussion around rape. If rape is indeed a reproductive strategy, especially in a mate deprived circumstance, then the drive and focus on rape by this group of sexually disenfranchised men otherwise facing reproductive annihilation is obvious. Seen through the lens of the dominance by-product hypothesis, Incels’ expression of pro-rape attitudes and any behavior consistent with sexual coercion may not reflect a reproductive strategy but may be an attempt to demonstrate power and masculinity, thus improving one’s place on the social hierarchy and indirectly improving one’s chance at reproductive success. And finally, seen through the lens of the relationship coercion hypothesis, rape may be a way to lower the self-perceived value of desired mates, thus making them more obtainable to the Incel. The presence of Incel rhetoric about rape and female-directed violence need not result in tangible actions or benefits to reflect underlying psychological drives shaped by evolutionary pressures.

Although Incels desire sexual encounters with women, there are also rare calls for the murder of women on Incel forums. In fact, many Incels who perpetrated violent attacks sought exclusively female victims (Williams et al., 2021). This tendency is somewhat perplexing. On the one hand, killing women that are not intimate partners eliminates potential future competition for the killer’s children. This hypothesis is echoed by the increased risk of murder at the hands of a step-father (Buss, 2006; Daly & Wilson, 1988) as well as the increase in intimate partner homicide among women when there is a child unrelated to the male offender in the home (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Goetz, 2009).

An alternative evolutionary explanation may be that Incels’ ingrained sexual jealousy, typically triggered in the context of relationships, may be triggered none-the-less in the setting of general reproductive jealousy. It cannot be overstated that a large portion of women who are murdered are slain by their intimate partners (Buss, 2006; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson, Daly, & Scheib, 1997), and are particularly vulnerable when they are leaving and thus no longer sexually accessible (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

There are two explanations for the homicide of women by men, motivated by sexual interests. The first is the by-product hypothesis, whereby homicide develops out of other mechanisms such as violence as a coercive strategy to obtain reproductive access (Kaighobadi et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 1997). Another explanation is an evolved homicide module, to avoid cuckoldry and partner desertion and thus fitness loss to the male (Buss, 2004; Kaighobadi et al., 2009).

As Wilson and Daly (1992) note, sexual jealousy that leads to intimate partner homicide may be driven by a male sense of ingrained proprietariness whereby it’s better to maintain control over a partner than allow a partner to desert, even if that control is violent and results in murder. This same drive may be induced in the case of Incels who also experience extreme sexual jealousy and longing, but feel otherwise helpless. Although not definitive, these explanations may give us a starting point by which to understand Incel drive towardsintersexual violence, whether it manifests in fantasy, in rhetoric or, in very rare cases, in reality.

SUICIDALITY AND THE DEATH OF SELF-PRESERVATION

A discussion of Incels and their risk for violence is not complete without a discussion of suicide. Incels frequently
discuss and encourage suicide (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021) a natural sequela of the depression and nihilism that runs rampant on their platforms. As mentioned previously, nearly half of Incels reported suicidal ideations and a third engaged in self-harming behaviors (Speckhard et al., 2021). Incels have also posted suicide notes on forums, identifying methodology and thought about an afterlife and their death’s impact on others (Daly & Laskovtsov, 2021). While we do not have data on the number of completed suicides among Incels, the available data suggests that it is a problem among this community.

Suicide through an evolutionary lens seems counter-intuitive. After all, what could be less promoting of one’s fitness than ending one’s life? However, there is some evidence that suicide itself may be advantageous in certain circumstances.

As pointed out by de Cantanzaro (1986), reproduction of the genes and not survival of the individual is the governing force of biological evolution. He notes that while some species perish after their reproductive window, humans live long after they cease the ability to reproduce. This survival may impact kin, whom the individual may devote effort and resources to ensuring their survival and reproductive success. De Cantanzaro (1986) proposes a mathematical model for self-preservation whereby there are certain circumstances in which it would be beneficial to overall fitness of kin if the individual were to part with the self-preservation instinct. His model, simplified, is as follows:

\[
\text{Self Preservation} = R - \left( \frac{\sum (R \text{ Remaining Reproductive Potential of Individual's Kin} \times \text{Benefit or Cost to the Kin from the Individual} \times \text{Genetic Relatedness})}{\text{Remaining Reproductive Potential of the Individual}} \right)
\]

For instance, in cases where the individual is an excessive burden on family, it may benefit family and thus genetically related kin for the individual to perish to preserve resources for those genetically related kin. According to this formula, the self-preservation instinct will diminish in cases where reproductive opportunities are limited (de Cantanzaro, 1986).

If we apply de Cantanzaro’s model to Incels, we can better understand their tendency towards suicidality. In the case of the Incel, who sees no reproductive opportunities available to him, the first term in the equation drops to zero. Any further sense of burdensomeness towards family would tip the scale further towards self-annihilation. In many cases, the Incel views himself as a “loser,” and laments not only a lack of relationship, but also a lack of job prospects or directions. These sentiments can be viewed by spending time on the Incel forum. Thus, the Incel tendency towards self-annihilation becomes clearer as, in this case, the unconscious evolutionary drive to reduce burdensomeness on kin prevail. This of course brings up interesting hypotheses relating to these evolutionary pressures—for instance, does the tendency to have siblings (genetic relatives with reproductive potential) increase the rate of Incels expression of suicidality and risk of suicidal actions? Does a lack of income or living with kin increase an Incel’s risk of suicide, independent of these factors’ contribution to depression? The state of the literature, currently, does not provide us with the necessary data to answer these questions but may be fertile ground for future study.

The pieces of de Cantanzaro’s model are reflected in the literature. For instance, researchers have found a strong association between suicidal ideation or attempt and living alone (including being unmarried), having no friends and feeling lonely; these results were especially true for men compared to women (Strayvynski & Boyer, 2001). Family support has been shown to mediate the risk of loneliness on suicidal ideation (Chang et al., 2017). Hopelessness and depression were higher in individuals who are single or have low relationship satisfaction. Single relationship status and low relationship satisfaction also portended to higher suicidal ideation (Till, Tran & Niederkröthenhaler, 2016). Suicidal ideation is correlated with low family connectedness, perceived burdensomeness, and low interpersonal connectedness (Opperman, Czyz, Gipson, & King, 2015). Further, perceived burdensomeness is correlated with higher likelihood of successful suicide and more lethal suicide method (Joiner et al., 2002). In fact, the presence of both burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (and a belief that neither states will improve) are proposed to be the most dangerous antecedents leading to desire for suicide (van Orden, 2010).

"I too hate waking up everyday [sic] just to repeat all the activities without any sense of gratification or progress. I am in the process of making arrangements for suicide. I’ve done some research and the next step is to test out my method. My dad has already accepted that I will rope. The only things standing in the way are the time, the place, my last shred psychological inertia and fear of something going wrong. I don’t want to rope where I live right now. I will hopefully move soon and that’s where I will rope. Regarding my inertia and fear, I’m making progress in those fronts. I also have some mild regret about not accomplishing anything in life, but that feeling of regret subsides quickly when I remind myself of my failures, my subhumanity, and the terrible state of the world."

- Username: wereqryan (2020)
  Rope: commit suicide

Lines have blurred between the suicide bomber and the lone wolf mass shooter (Lankford, 2018). According to Joiner (2014), murder-suicide is, at its core, a suicide. This has been echoed among the literature on mass murder, which often finds suicidality as central to the act (Lankford, 2018; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). In addition, Joiner (2014) notes that with the decision to commit suicide, some individuals unconsciously choose to kill others first due to a perversion of the virtues justice, duty, mercy or glory.
An Incel’s wish to mass murder is often experienced as a means of suicide (such as suicide by cop, see Jones, 2020). Based on Joiner’s definition, an Incel’s act of murder-suicide may indeed be a perversion of justice (enacting revenge on a world that passed him by) or perversion of glory (attempting to extract infamy in the final moments). As noted by Lankford (2018), acts of public mass shooting are typified by acts of premeditation that are well-planned in advance of the attack. In addition, they have several factors in common including indifference to self-preservation, perceived victimization and desire for fame.

Similarly, in their analysis of school shooters, Kalish and Kimmel (2010) found that they tend to be perpetrated by young men aggrieved by a system that appeared to demean them and a world that had disregarded and wronged them. Shooters’ suicides were inextricably linked to their violence and were planned from the beginning. “What transforms the aggrieved into mass murderers is also a sense of entitlement, a sense of using violence against others, making others hurt as you, yourself, might hurt.” (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010, p. 454). There is much overlap in the demographics and ideologies of school rampage shooters and that of the Incel community, and thus a lot to learn by studying and comparing both groups.

This desire to not only end one’s own life but to enact revenge on those he felt unjustly hurt him is seen in the rants of Elliot Rodger. Prior to his violent actions, which left six people dead and fourteen injured, he said the following:

“endure existence of loneliness and rejection…tortured…rot in loneliness…not fair…I will punish all of you…I am superior one, true alpha male…will be a god compared to you exacting my retribution…deny you a life, only fair you never showed me any mercy…”

-Elliot Rodger, Prior to the Isla Vista Murders/His Suicide

After enacting violence on his victims, Elliot Rodger then took his own life.

Group mentality that binds and ignites

Throughout human history, we have been the beneficiaries of group living. Group living provided many advantages for our ancestors including resource sharing and protection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss, 2004; McDonald, Nava-roste, & Van Vugt, 2012). Evolutionary psychologists have long accepted the premise that most of our social capacities and many of our psychological adaptations have evolved to serve the formation, maintenance, and navigation of groups.

Because of the importance of groups in our evolutionary past, psychological adaptations evolved and were passed down to maintain group cohesion and avoid threats, most often posed by outside groups. These psychological mechanisms include a tendency to derogate and dehumanize out-group members, highlight the morality of the in-group, and be perceptive of threats to reproductive success posed from outside the group, either through violence or through loss of resources (Buss, 2004; Haidt, 2012; McDonald et al., 2012). The tendency to act in the best interest of the group appears to be greatest when the group as a whole is under threat (McDonald et al., 2012). Group members may put aside selfish motives in order to win victories for the group (McDonald et al., 2012).

The drive for belongingness is fundamental to the human condition (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While our modern groups vary in size and communication method compared to our ancestors (see Dunbar, 1993) the drive to belong as a member of a group remains. FMRI data suggests that the brain has evolved neural correlates to pick up on cues of exclusion with resulting experiences of pain and distress by the excluded party (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Affective distress naturally results from individuals feeling as though they do not belong, and is countered by positive feelings with increased social contact and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

For many Incels, the online community and forums represent acceptance and a reprieve from loneliness. Indeed, per Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 500), "... one might imagine a young fellow without any family or intimate relationships who is nonetheless satisfied by being heavily involved in an ideologically radical political movement." This group and its ideals hold a strong importance for the Incels. The narrative of victimization and disenfranchisement separates the Incel in-group and the larger society outgroup (Jones, 2020; Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020).

Studies have shown that stereotypic behavior and attitudes of the ingroup are positively valued, while outgroup behavior and attitudes are negatively valued (Fiske, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Incel group members highlight their morality and righteousness and demonize the external world, their out-group. They see their violent actions as right and fair (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2021). As pointed out by Jonathon Haidt, morality binds group members together and often blinds them to the humanity and moral reasoning of outgroup members. This moral underpinning allows ingroup members to justify violent and extreme actions towards outgroup members who they view as less worthy of humanity.

“…you wrongly assume that we operate in the same plane of one, generic, human morality, while the truth is that we and the normies (and the rest) are different species. It’s like wondering why chimpanzee does x while baboon does y, and whether what one does is moral compared to what the other one does [sic], and concluding that they should act according to some shared moral code.”

-Username: Adrian Shephard (2020)

Normies: normal people

The labeling of others outside the Incel sphere help to reinforce the ideas of an ingroup and an outgroup (Jaki et al., 2019). Language dehumanizing women (calling them “it,”
“femoids” or “roasties”) is a tactic used by those of an ingroup to dehumanize the outgroup and further divide them from the ingroup (Baele et al., 2021). Even the labeling of men as “Chad” or women as “Stacy” turns these men and women into faceless figures, without the individual characteristics that make one human and therefore sympathetic. This dehumanizing stance frames outgroup members as subhuman and not worthy of empathy or respect.

"The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!"
- Alek Minassian, prior to the Toronto Van Attack

The actions of group members such as Alek Minassian, the perpetrator of the Toronto van attacks that killed ten people and injured 16, are predictable as certain members of the group develop more extremist views. Notably, Minassian later claimed he over-embellished his connection to the Incel group for notoriety but added that he also experienced romantic rejection and loneliness none-the-less (see, for instance, Hasham, 2020). For those who believe that one must act out against an outgroup to preserve the ingroup, extremism, and sometimes violent extremism, will arise (Berger, 2017). "In sum, an extremist worldview is characterized by a narrative offering a simplistic explanation of the positive ingroup suffering from the negative outgroups’ nefarious actions, thereby pointing to violent solutions to restore the initial condition of the ingroup." (Baele et al., 2021, p 4). Incels fit this mold.

"Since most of these people cannot imagine living the incel life, we have low status and poor rap, they feel absolutely no empathy for our suffering at all. As such ideas such as exterminating us, bullying us, ridiculing us or driving us to suicide seem appealing to the majority of people. This is especially seen through SJW types such as IT, who seek to destroy and humiliate us. We are the new boogeyman whom everyone wants to eliminate."
- Username: universallyabhorred (2019)

SJW: social justice warrior, referring to someone with leftist-leaning ideology who is involved in progressive movements or actions.
IT: IncelTears, a subreddit dedicated to posting screen shorts of Incel rhetoric and ideas for the purpose of mocking them.

Incels who adopt “black pill” mentality believe that their place on the current social hierarchy is impossible to escape even with efforts to improve appearance and status (Baele et al., 2021). They embrace a nihilistic understanding of the current structure of society, with Incels lowest on the hierarchy. They believe that they will never be accepted, intensifying hatred towards and severing all remaining ties, to the outgroup of the larger society.

The more extremist members may direct their hatred and aggression towards the belief that, to survive as an individual and as a group, one must take up the mantle of violence against the outgroup. While acts of violence may mean reproductive consequences for the actor, harm to outgroup members (women and more dominant men) would reflect strength and bring advantage to the ingroup, such as inspiring others to take up violence and demonstrating strength in the face of outgroup opposition.

The attacks on the outgroup need not be as dramatic as those of Elliott Rodger or Alek Minassian. Consider actions taken against gamer Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian was known for feminist commentary on video games, which incited a backlash of misogynistic vitriol. The targeting escalated to threats of rape, of physical harm and of murder. Her address and other personal information were published online by harassers, ultimately forcing Sarkeesian from her home and causing her to live in daily fear. While her harassers may or may not have been Incels (and their extreme misogynistic rhetoric certainly overlaps with Incel rhetoric towards women), members of Incels and other overlapping groups participate in this form of “brigading” or collectively turning attention towards an individual for the sake of harassment (Jones, 2020).

"Tonight’s doxxing will have names, phone numbers, emails, career histories, and such, but more importantly, we shall get behind the more interesting details as to why the New York Times decided to take upon itself the ambitions of doxxing incel and depression suicide forums as we get acquainted with the much larger scheming in the backdrop…”
- Username: MarquisDeSade (2021)
After posting several pictures and information of persons affiliated with the New York Times…
“so is this just a biography or are u gonna get the good stuff like home address and family info”
- Username: kanyepilled (2021)

Doxxing: To release personal information about someone to incite harassment and threats against them. This may include such information as home address and phone number.

Such actions cause incredible intimidation and fear, reinforcing ideas of dominance and success among the group enacting the brigading. Finally, other Incels collectively advocate for “rape parties” (Jones, 2020), reminiscent of the roaming chimpanzee troupes or a renegade group of military personnel looking for the spoils of war. All these actions have their roots in evolutionary drive towards group formation, cohesion, and maintenance.

Intrasexual competition

While Incels focus most of their ire on women, they spend a lot of time and energy lamenting over how they compare to other men. The most desirable men gained a distinguished name among Incels, Chads. Chads are envied for their physical
attractiveness and cues of physical dominance: the shape of their chin, their eyes, their nose, and height. These are indicators of masculinity and therefore more desirable to women.

As discussed previously, evolution has shaped human psychology to be attracted to very different features in a romantic partner. Ironically, while women do place importance on mate attractiveness, men consistently put a higher premium on physical attractiveness than do their female counterparts (Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1992). In women, physical features are correlated with fertility and youth, which are less important in a male partner whose fertility window is not as limited. Women cite many other traits as important for a partner including altruism (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, Todd, & Finch, 1997), agreeableness (Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & West, 1995), determination, focus, sense of humor, motivation and intelligence (Gallup, Ampel, Wedberg, & Pogosjan, 2014). These features would have indicated that a man was a good partner, parent and provider, a desirable feature that would have had reproductive benefits to the woman and her offspring.

While Incels also focus somewhat on their lack of status and money (Jones, 2020), they cite “looksism” (discrimination against them due to their physical appearance) as a primary reason that they are rejected by women and why some men routinely monopolize the majority of women (Hoffman et al., 2020; Jones, 2020). Other men, therefore, pose a reproductive quandary for the Incel.

“Eye area is the single most important feature, but everything matters. If you have hunter eyes, but have a narrow deformed skull, are noticeably balding, have a recessed chin, suffer from manletism, or any other disgusting [physically ugly feature], it’s still over”
- Username: NoCopeOnlyRope (2020)

Manletism: A term to describe a male of short stature.

One way that Incels attempt to thwart this is by “looksmaxing” or attempting to improve one’s physical appearance through various means (Jones, 2020). As pointed out by Alice Hines (2019) in an article on The Cut, this can include going to the gym or taking steroids to obtain a more masculine body or even opting for cosmetic surgeries to become more desirable.

Murder is the ultimate tool to eliminate competition (Daly & Wilson, 1988). It is not an accident that the most prolific type of homicide is a male killing another male (Buss & Duntley, 2001; Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1990; Duntley & Buss, 2011) In our evolutionary past elimination of genetic competition could have meant more reproductive success for the killer—more access to mates and less competition for status and resources. Further, in addition to eliminating immediate competition, killing one’s genetic rivals also ensured that that rival does not have offspring to compete with the murderer or the murderer’s kin for resources.

As is the case with rape adaptation theory, the theory that homicide may be an evolutionary adaptation is controversial.

In Buss and Duntley’s Homicidal Adaption Theory (2001, 2008), murder of conspecifics is viewed as an evolutionary strategy to allow the murderer more reproductive success. The authors note that murder is a phenomenon experienced by humans and animals across the globe and has been throughout our history.

The benefit of male/male homicide is the elimination of the rival, including that rival’s monopolization of resources and any direct threat or competition the rival posed to the killer. There are, however, substantial costs to murder including ostracism, potential retaliation, and being harmed in the process, to name a few. The social and physical cost of murder generally outweighed the benefits. At the crux of Homicidal Adaption Theory lays the belief that there are specific circumstances where the cost and benefit ratio would favor murder. For instance, in circumstances where fitness differentials are strikingly different, some men may employ murder and suffer the potential cost for the reproductive benefit (Wilson & Daly, 1992). Buss and Duntley (2001) and, Duntley and Buss (2008) further propose that evolution has given us an innate ability to weigh the costs, risks, and potential benefits of actions. Murder to obtain access to potential partners is supported by the use of violence across human and non-human animals to inflict cost on rivals and gain access to scarce resources, such as food and female reproductive partners (Duntley & Buss, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 1992).

To be sure, murder is an extreme behavior. While some Incels post murderous fantasies on forums, very few actually carry out fantasies. But fantasies themselves may be adaptive. Fantasizing plays an important role in allowing the would-be-killer to build the scenario and thus allow for weighing of such considerations of cost and benefits on actions (Buss & Duntley, 2001; Duntley & Buss, 2008). Further, posting fantasies may also be important to allowing an Incel to weigh these determinations within the safety of the ingroup. Incel traits are indeed associated with violent fantasies, using weapons against others and raping women (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Alternatively, the communication of fantasies may be a signaling mechanism by which Incels exhibit ingroup membership by participating in the rhetoric of the group. These fantasies may also be a way to signal dominance through displays of bluster and bravado, or could merely be a way to vent or express frustration.

“Finding a gun. preferably [sic] an automatic. I walk into the campus i [sic] work in with it. First place I walk into is the library because i [sic] don’t want everyone to run away from the campus at first. I shoot a bunch of people from the door so no one can run away. The rest who hid i [sic] walk up to and find them. I shoot them in the leg and watch them beg for me (hopefully they are girls) i want to watch them beg me like i [sic] begged for them. I want to watch them cry out while they are bleeding out. And then maybe ill [sic] kiss their sweet lips with my ugly mouth before i [sic] shoot them. I then proceed to the female dorms and shoot up the entire fucking place.”
- Username: TheVman (2018)
In Durrant’s (2009) discussion on the shortcomings of Homicide Adaption Theory, he notes that killing a conspecific would also be killing a fellow group member, and thus would be an ultimate cost to the perpetrator in consideration of protection and assets for resource gathering. But this fails to consider co-occurring mechanisms of group dynamics. When examining homicide at the hands of an Incel, the victim or victims would likely be outgroup members, which changes the perspective on risk, benefit, and cost.

By the nature of their plight, Incels face genetic annihilation due to their perceived reproductive potential. Such unconscious considerations likely weigh heavily, even considering the dire consequences of murder, such as jail or death. One may argue that elimination of genetic rivals may confer some benefit to the aggressor’s genetic relatives, and therefore the aggressors’ genes that live on in them. However, I argue that it is merely the tendency of our evolved mechanisms to seek out alternative strategies, even drastic ones, when facing genetic oblivion. This may be just one reason that Incels often fantasize about, and sometimes carry out, mass murder—eliminating not just the women that refuse to pick them but the men they chose instead. Murder of “Chads” or genetically superior males would give Incels more access to sexually available females. Murder of people outside of the Incel group strengthens the group itself, as discussed previously. While violence against women is more routinely called for, it should be noted that men such as Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian did not discriminate their targets based on sex, and Minassian noted himself that he meant to additionally target “Chads” (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Another theory behind male/male homicide is that it is a byproduct. According to Daly and Wilson (1990), men have higher variance in fitness than women, as explored previously in Trivers’ Parental Investment theory. Men are more likely to enact risks to obtain more fitness. Men consistently demonstrate higher rates of homicide through late adolescence to early adulthood; afterwards there is generally a significant decline (Daly & Wilson, 1988). They note that this corresponds to the age where differential performances on competition would have meant more reproductive success. Thus, homicide may represent a byproduct of men’s psychological mechanisms to engage in risky competitive and confrontational activities (Daly & Wilson, 1990). An act of aggression in the face of risk can demonstrate dominance of the aggressor and provide the aggressor elevated status. Most importantly, it would have led to more access to scarce resources, potential mates, and more reproductive success.

Risk taking, including violent and dangerous behavior, is admired (Daly & Wilson, 1990). In our evolutionary past, such behavior likely manifested in bravery in intergroup conflict or in big game hunting. Displays of dominance over enemies and large game would have lent credence that one was a worthy mate and reputation would have been easily transmitted between the small groups of our evolutionary past. Given our large social world, the modern equivalent may be that of infamy, which often results from violent actions. The benefits of infamy on reproductive success are seen in the fan mail and offers of sexual engagements women send to imprisoned serial killers (Buss, 2006). The fact that Incels often cite wanting to have high body counts or gain recognition for their actions suggests that, on some level, this underlying biological drive to demonstrate dominance through successful violent action has been cued.

The drive towards infamy and its associated demonstrations of dominance and superiority through acts of violence, would certainly fall in line with intrasexual competition for reproductive success in ancestral times. Its modern manifestation, unfortunately, leads to devastating consequences for the victims and their families in the rare circumstance that violence is actually carried out.

MISUSE OF EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY BY INCELS

Incels often cite evolutionary principles and studies as evidence of their inevitable misery. While some of the literature that they cite may be dubious, the Incel Wiki (a site maintained by Incels to document their culture and theory) include articles on Fisherian Runaway and Bateman’s Principle. The site also features articles from David Buss, Anthony Volk, and Todd Shackelford and from journals and books such as Evolutionary Psychology, The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology and the Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science. Within the Incel forum, I have also observed posters cite Tooby & Cosmides’ Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer and David Buss’s Evolution of Desire.

It would be a mistake to say that all Incels’ claims are false. Indeed, in a large-scale survey looking at trends in sexual relationships from 2010 to 2018, authors found the number of persons between the ages of 18 and 24 who claimed to be virgins increased for men but not for women (Ueda, Mercer, Ghaznavi, & Herbenick, 2020). Women, on average, do prefer men with socioeconomic success, socially dominant and who are physically attractive (Buss, 1988, 1989; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Li et al., 2011; Shackelford et al., 2005; Walter et al., 2020). Polygynous societies better approximate our modern online dating world in which people are often dating more than one person at a time, at least casually (see Kunst, 2019). Polygynous societies tend to demonstrate greater mating success variance for men than women (Brown, Leland, & Mulder, 2009). Thus, the Incels calls for a more traditional, monogamist society would, in theory, improve their chances of finding a mate. The problem is not that Incels’ are wrong in their observations (at least for those pursuing the scientific literature), they are inflexible or superficial in how they apply evolutionary principles. They fail to consider alternative explanations or the complexity of human behavior.

Incels also demonstrate an overly myopic view of the literature. For instance, one poster summarized the findings from Buss’s Evolution of Desire by listing female preference for dependability, intelligence, industriousness, and financial prospects. But the author of the post goes on to state,
“…we still have a substantial foundation for asserting that
dating in the digital age is incredibly difficult for those
among us who are, as I’ve said numerous times, unattractive,
ugly, ethnic, poor, too old, too young, or any combination of
these undesirable qualities” (Username: Blickpall, 2018).
This, of course, ignores cues important to female mate
choice cited earlier in their own post, and focuses more on
short-term female mate-strategies that may preferentially
weigh physical attractiveness or other evidence of good
genes.

When posters do cite respected literature, they do so
without considering alternative explanations (for instance,
whether the information on romantic preferences represent
long versus short term mating strategies). Despite Blickpall
(above) highlighting some relevant information from the
evolutionary psychology literature, commenters still posted
the following responses, highlighting some misconceptions
within this community:

“Civilization is going to have to change. The bottom 80–50% of
men having no chance at all with reproduction is not
sustainable. Eventually something is going to have to be
done. Whether a beta uprising or something that makes
males artificially scarcer then [sic] females by killing males
off by the billions (if that would even work, females would
probably just share the surviving [sic] top 20% of males).”
-Detro (2018)

“Mhm of all the categories I’m not sure it’s over due to
“being poor.” It puts you at a disadvantage, but if you have
looks it really doesn’t matter and this has been shown time
and time again.”
-z2020 (2018)

Incels often demonstrate the same misconceptions about
evolutionary psychology that spurs debate against the field.
For instance, Incels’ discussions invoking evolutionary
psychology often focus on genetic determinism (Baele, Brace &
Coan, 2021; Ging 2019), without appreciating the degree to
which humans can enact change on their social situation
(e.g., by obtaining education to obtain better employment and
financial success). Genetic determinism does not
consider the complexity of human social systems or the
human brain, nor does it account for the interaction be-
tween genes and their environment (Thompson, 2009).

Incels’ views of human mating are overly reductionistic.
They offer caricatures of men and women whereby a woman
only weighs a potential partner’s physical and social attributes
before accepting sexual contact. This ignores the complex
personal, social, and cultural pressures that also go into her
decision, not to mention her potential mate’s decisions to
pursue a relationship. One can certainly make general observa-
tions about human behavior and tendency based on the
 evolutionary data, but to base the entirety of your life pros-
pects or to use it to fuel a narrative of disenfranchisement does
not align with the goals of the field of evolutionary psychology.

Incels often overlook that female hypergamy is driven by
factors beyond physical attraction or dominance cues, and
these factors have implications for patterns seen in our
modern dating world. For instance, women typically look for
men who demonstrate greater earning potential than
themselves and thus tend to match with potential partners
based on parameters of education level and earning income
(Harinam, 2021). More women are eclipsing men in higher
education and taking on jobs with higher earning potential
(Hess, 2019). This means that a larger number of women
will tend to look to a smaller and smaller proportion of men
based on socioeconomic status and earning potential.
Furthermore, one study found that women find men two
points more attractive on a 10-point Likert scale for every
ten-fold increase in salary (Wang et al., 2018).

In general, Incels appear to have a particular blind spot
when it comes to the evolutionary pressures of female mate
choice. Although it is true that women prefer physical cues
of dominance and strength, the reasons for these preferences
go beyond a preference for superior genes. These preferences
also were forged out of necessity to avoid the threats of
predation and needing to access resources in our evolu-
tionary past. These pressures shaped underlying psycho-
logical mechanism that drove women to prefer strong men
capable of protecting them and their children, and who
possessed resources or the ability to obtain them. Incels tend
to treat female choice as wanton and coldhearted instead of
driven by the same evolutionary pressures that drive their
preferences to have sex with a “Stacy.”

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Throughout this paper, I have applied concepts of evolu-
tional psychology to a relatively new and increasingly
radicalized group, Incels. Incels are a group that has sparked
much media attention. The few academic pieces that analyze
Incel critically often do so from a cultural or feminist
perspective. This piece adds another tool with which to
understand Incels, which will allow for a more nuanced
understanding of their rhetoric, behavior, and the risk they
pose. This understanding, in turn, will improve our ability to
interact with Incels, whether it is as a society or in a treat-
ment setting. Understanding Incels will also help us un-
derstand the drive to join other misogynistic groups, such as
jihadists or the Ilbe.

Exploring novel ways to apply evolutionary psychology
is important for the field and for our understanding of
human behavior. Human interactions increasingly occur
over the Internet, a quite novel invention in our evolu-
tionary history. The degree to which we see the same
patterns of evolutionary psychology within evolutionarily
novel environments (such as the Internet), will allow us to
ascertain how engrained certain aspects of human nature
are. The anonymity of the Internet also removes relative
risks of behavior, which provides unique behavioral situa-
tions and pressures. Evolutionary psychologists can thus
learn much by applying evolutionary concepts to Internet-
based phenomena.
Finally, it is important to note that there is much work to be done in our understanding of Incels. The collection of primary data on this group is in its infancy and, thus far, the study of Incels is often restricted to linguistic analysis of online posts and of manifestos by mass shooters, with only a handful querying Incels directly. It will require the creative effort of multiple disciplines to discern how best to access more direct data, collecting it not just from the visible public social platforms, but from less accessible areas of the Internet. It includes finding ways to reach out to a broad range of self-identified Incels to better understand this group and the many nuances within. In addition, there is more work to be done in analyzing Incels through an evolutionary psychology lens. Evolutionary psychologists should examine specific subgroups within the Incel community, such as those who identify as having a mental illness. They should explore the impact on Inceldom on an Incel’s family and close relatives. And finally, there is much work still to do to refine our understanding of the specific antecedents that drive violence in the few Incels who engage in it. Knowledge is power, and in the fields of suicide risk and violence risk assessment, knowledge is essential.

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