Why Incels are Worth Talking About

BRANDON SPARKS
SENIOR LECTURER IN FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY
KINGSTON UNIVERSITY
Outline

- Incel Ideology
- Incel Forums
- Incel Characteristics
- Therapeutic Considerations
History of Involuntary Celibacy

- Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project
  - Online forum for those struggling to form romantic or sexual relationships
  - Open to all genders, well-moderated
- No research on involuntary celibacy at time
- First “incel” study:
  - Incels had little experience with teen dating
  - Issues with shyness, ability to relate to others
  - Body image issues
  - Feel that life has passed them by; are different from peers
Modern Inceldom

- Remains an online collection of individuals who struggle to form romantic or sexual bonds
- Predominantly male
  - Existence of femcels disputed (by incels, not femcels)
- Achieved notoriety for controversial forum content, carrying out deadly attacks
  - Promotion of Pill ideologies
Pill Ideologies

- Pill ideologies based on *The Matrix*
  - BluePill = continue through life, blissfully unaware of issues
  - RedPill = awaken to life’s cruel realities

- Incels claimed to be RedPilled; those that argued with them were BluePilled
Social Hierarchies

- Society is based on looks-based hierarchy
  - Alphas, betas, and incels

- Chads and Stacys are caricatures of highly attractive, resourceful men and women
  - Women *only* want Chads, but will settle for beta men with resources
  - Positions women as shallow, manipulative
Climbing

- Incels (and normies) could move up in the hierarchy by enhancing appearance
  - Looksmmaxxing = enhancing one’s physical appearance, often facial appearance
    - Plastic surgery, jaw exercises, bonemashing
  - Gymmaxxing = enhancing one’s physical appearance through exercise, weightlifting
    - Lose weight, develop muscular physique
BlackPill

- Self-improvement cannot help an incel ascend
  - Once an incel, always an incel; it is a fixed status
  - Nihilistic version of RedPill

- Yet, still lots of discussion of looksmaxxing and gymmaxxing on incel forums
Scientific BlackPill

- Many incel claims supported by (some) evolutionary psychology studies
- Incels Wiki collates these on Scientific BlackPill page
  - Personality, mental health, race, looks, face, money, height, body, penis, voice, age, etc.
  - E.g., women attracted to Dark Triad traits
  - E.g., women experience sexual disgust when envisioning talking to unattractive man
  - E.g., women prefer dominant, aggressive, wide faces (high fWHR)
Societal Views

- Women as sex objects
- Hostile and benevolent sexism
  - Women as incompetent, emotional, manipulative
  - Women as delicate, pure, in need of protection
- Traditional gender roles
- Sexual/dating scripts
- Hegemonic masculinity
  - Emphasizes Alpha/Chad ideal
Incel Forums

- Notorious for hosting misogynistic, xenophobic, hateful, and violent content
  - 10% of users responsible for majority of hate speech
  - Violence makes up ~1% of content
- There is a lot of content; more inflammatory posts more likely to get picked up
- Only 10% of incels endorse (incel) perpetrators of violent acts
Forum Impact

- Do forums impact attitudes, or are they pre-existing?
- Engagement with hateful or controversial subreddits predates engagement with incel forums
  - Early activity in r/relationships, r/sex, r/amiugly, r/AskWomen, r/depression
- 12-week analysis of incels.is users
  - Express anger, sadness, and incel vocabulary upon joining forum
Incel Demographics

- Characterized as White, right-wing
- Mid 20’s (late teens to mid-30s)
- Overwhelmingly heterosexual
- 36-42% of incels identify as BIPOC
- Politically diverse
  - Slight skew to left
- Higher rates of NEET
Autism Spectrum Disorder

- High prevalence among incel population
- “Aspie”
- Belief ASD linked to their inceldom
  - RESEARCH ON ASD AND DATING
- ASD could explain BlackPill appeal/adherence
  - ASD associated with dichotomous thinking
  - ASD associated with cognitive inflexibility
  - ASD associated with fixated thinking
Mental Health

- High prevalence of depressive and anxious symptoms
  - 73% severely or moderately depressed
  - 67% severely or moderately anxious
- Over one quarter have PTSD symptoms
- Roughly half report suicidal ideations
  - Hopelessness major discussion topic
Relational Health

- Low levels of secure attachment
- Elevated levels of anxious and avoidant attachment
- Feelings of loneliness and exclusion
  - Incels report feeling detached from society
  - Incels report history of exclusion by peers
- Incels report less social support
  - Missing key buffer against elevated rates of rejection they experience
Coping with Rejection

- Incels more sensitive to rejection
- Solitary coping strategies
- Greater use of problematic coping strategies (self-distraction, behavioural disengagement, self-blame)
- Less use of adaptive strategies (seeking emotional support, positive reframing)
- Engage in more self-critical rumination, less externalization of blame
Therapy

- Incels present with higher levels of mental health symptomology
- Incels also have fewer social supports
- Incels report poor therapeutic experiences
  - 6% said therapy helped
  - 15% said therapy made them feel worse
  - Treatment approach, modality, duration, etc. not specified
BlackPill Exposure

- Adoption of BlackPill ideology mixed
  - Ranging from very low to 90%
- Inflammatory posts generate traffic
- What impact does the BlackPill have...
  - On incels who adopt this belief?
  - On incels who are exposed to this belief?
Therapeutic Issues

- Roughly half of incels have tried therapy
  - Some consider therapy a BluePill concept
  - Small minority of incels report therapy was beneficial

- Most incels exposed to misogynistic, sexist content on forums

- Most mental health providers are women
  - Does BlackPill influence therapeutic alliance?
  - Does Blackpill influence therapeutic expectations?
Therapeutic Recommendations

- Empathy and validation of experience
  - Incels report feeling like society doesn’t care about them
  - Incels view advice as insulting, minimizing

- Suggested therapeutic approaches include existential therapy, narrative therapy, person-centred therapy, & reality therapy

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) recommended
  - Helps incels find alternative ways of understanding the world
Thank You

QUESTIONS?