

An introduction to involuntary celibates: Identity, risk, psychology, and intervention

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30/01/2026

Who are incels (involuntary celibates)?

- Online subculture of men who forge a sense of identity around a perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships
- Term developed in 1997 by a woman from Toronto, Canada
- Socialize online, via anonymous and pseudonymous forums as well as discord servers
- Incel.co has 35,800 members with over 20 million posts

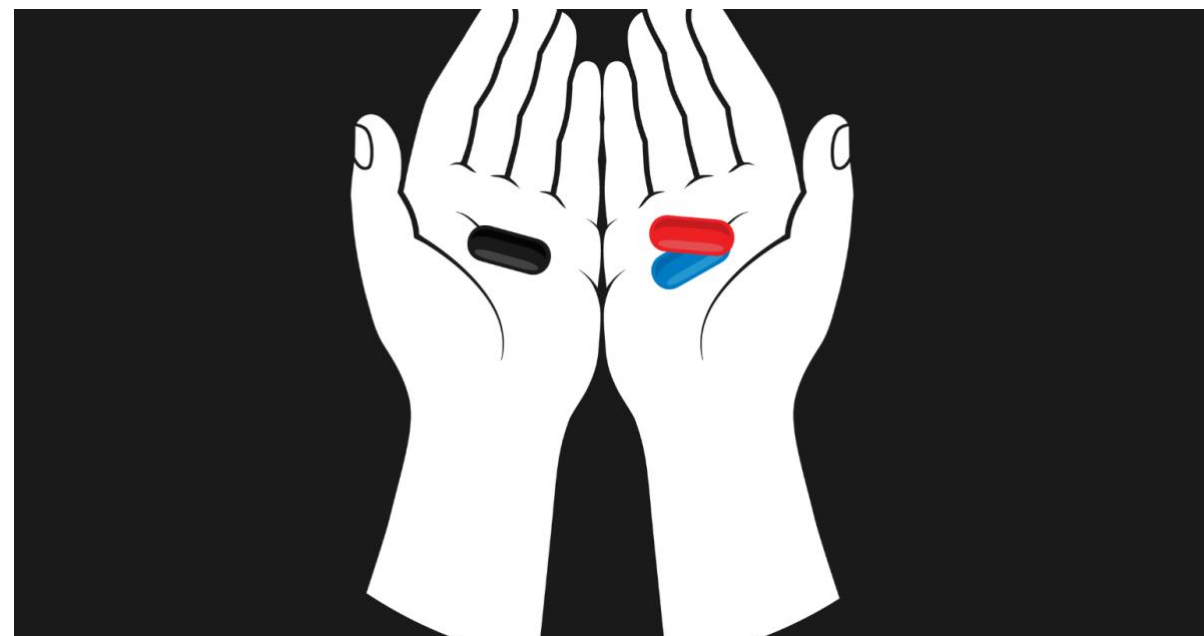
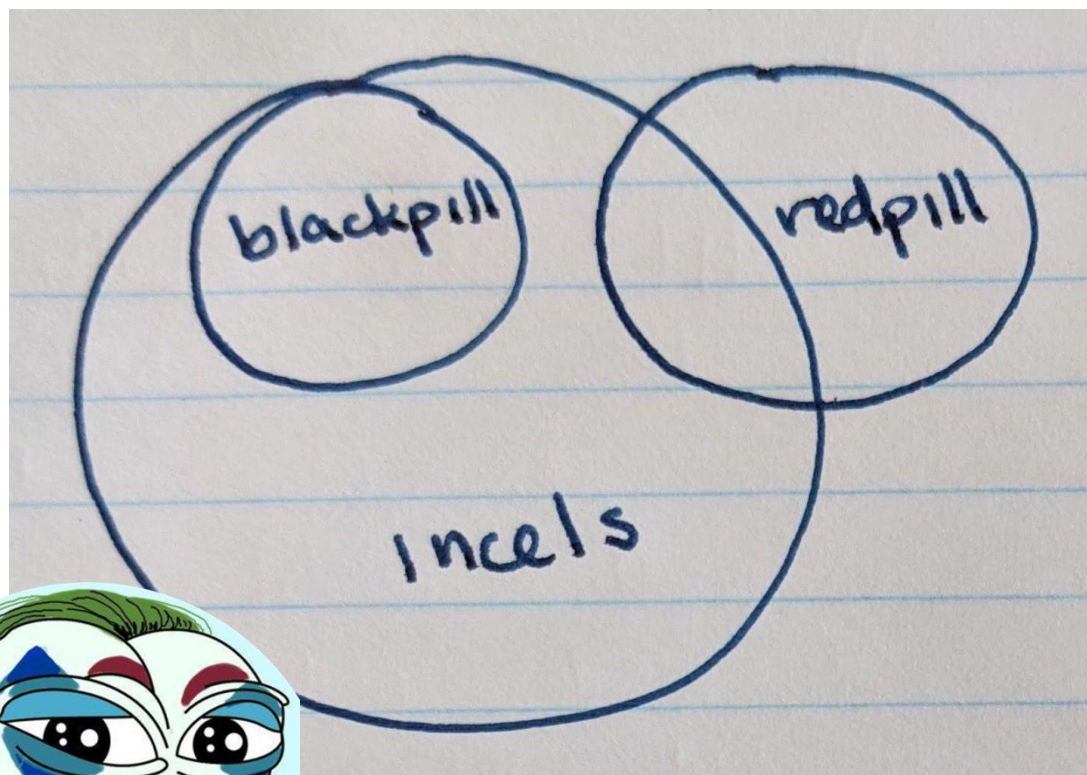


Who are incels (involuntary celibates)?

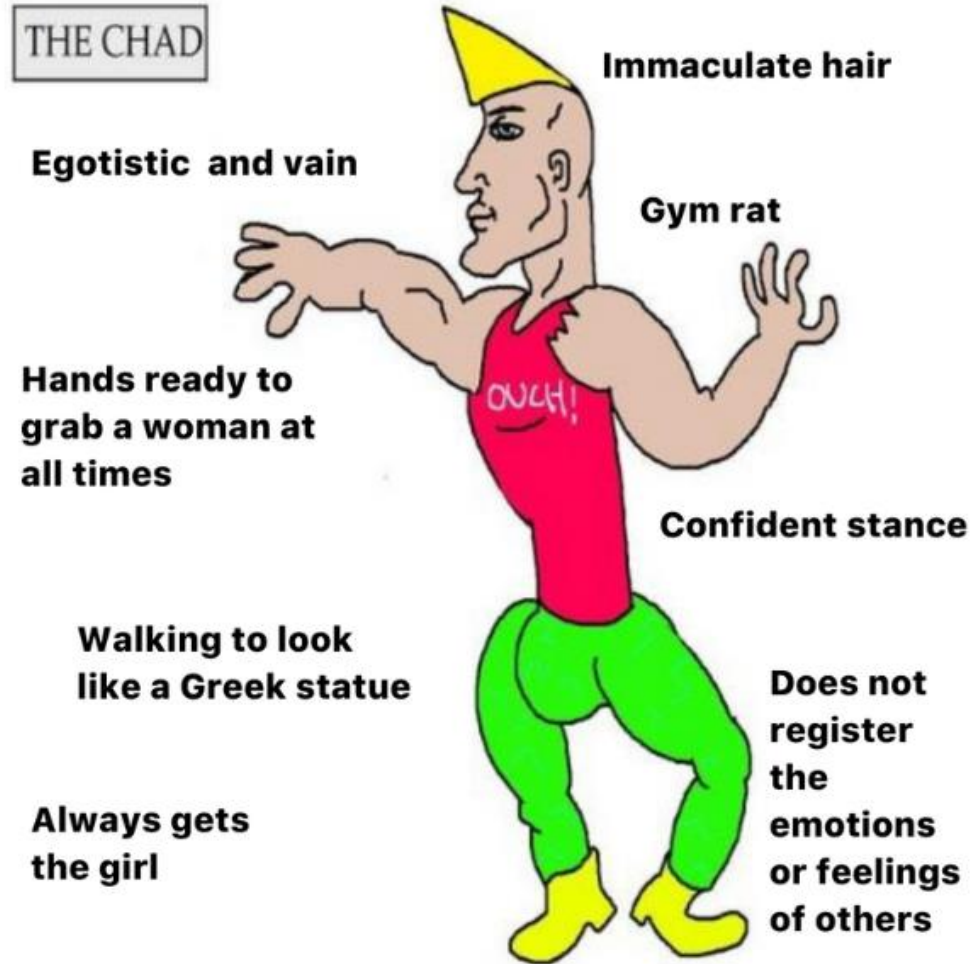
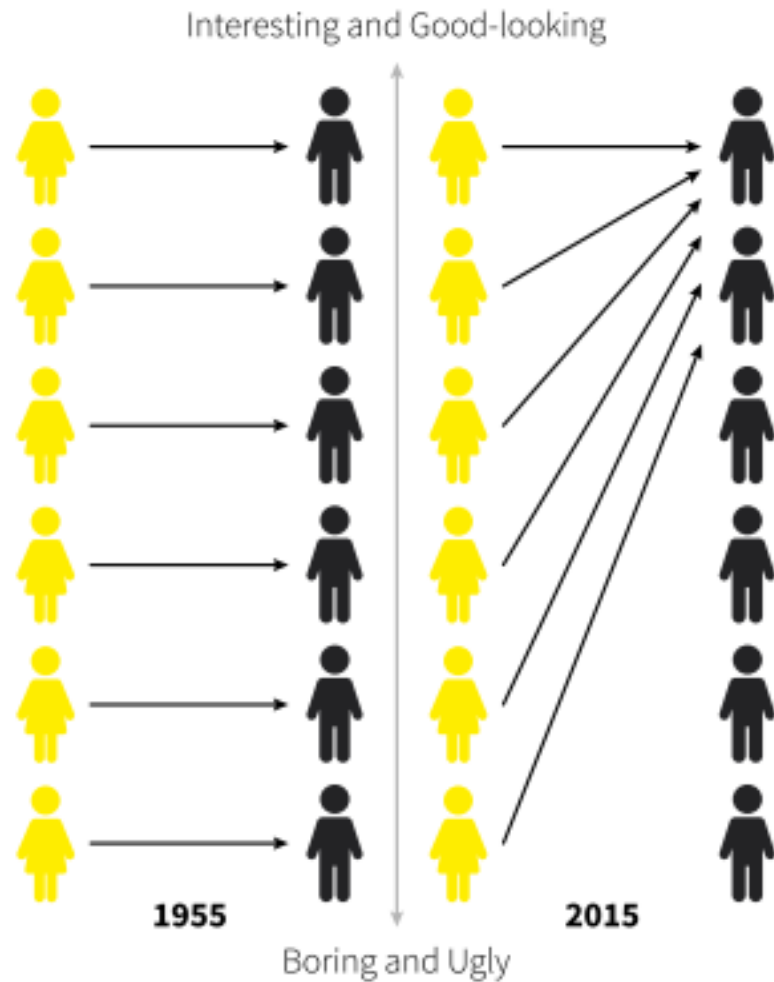
- "You take the blue pill... the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill... you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."
- Growth of the "manosphere" early 2010
- MGTOW, PUA, Incels, MRA, Fathers' rights groups



Who are incels (involuntary celibates)?



At the heart of the movement



Incel harm

- Estimated incel-related deaths worldwide: ~59 people (Hoffman et al., 2020).
- Incel forum size: ~36,000 active users
- Comparison: Boko Haram (~15,000 members) killed ~350,000 people.
- Only 1.39% of incel posts legitimize violence (Perliger et al., 2022).
- 80% of incels reject violence outright (Moskalenko et al., 2022)

Incel harm

- Approximately 30% of posts are misogynistic, produced from around 10% users (Jaki et al., 2019)
- Online trolling in Twitter/X
- Also includes racist views, often when talking about coping strategies (JBW, SEAmass)
- Other coping strategies are more generic (looksmax, surgery, noFAP)
 - “incels.co user itsOVER claims he had sex with 10 girls on a 22 day stay in Thailand, most of them through Tinder. He failed to get sex using Tinder in the the [sic] UK.” – incels.wiki



50cent 
@50cent

Im a get me one of them bitches from a third world country. At least she won't have high expectations. Heres a clean glass a water baby lol

9/10/10, 5:32 PM

66.8K Retweets 64.4K Likes



But then again...

Samson, 26, virgin

- Same university as an incel killer, concerned about thoughts
- BIPOC
- Raised six-figures to repair recreational centre for minorities and engaged with left wing politics
- Lots of female friends – “you’re great, you’ll find someone” sentiment also echoed by female therapist
- Concentrated on studies during HS; no sexual or relationship experience
- Feeling sad, broken, and hopeless – familiar with incel forum content but not engaging

But then again...

Lazarus, 32, ex-offender

- Currently restarting his life at university
- Spent years in prison for drug dealing
- Drug dealing was to fund facial cosmetic procedures
- Hasn't engaged in therapy
- Regularly uses prostitutes, and uses a "video game" levelling up analogy
- Not conventionally unattractive, well spoken, intelligent
- Banned from different discord servers for discussing strategies and sleeping with women

But then again...

George, 22, forum user

- Very engaged with the community
- Uses radical words “revenge” (corrected to “redemption”) when discussing hurt and rejection in high school
- Sees a romantic relationship as a pathway to redemption
- Has tried 10 different therapists
- Will no longer see a therapist unless they are clearly from a marginalized background (LGBT, not women)
- Angry words expressed with sadness
- Longs for high school days

Who are incels?

- Male
- Young
- White
- Right-wing
- Unattractive
- NEET
- Low education



Who are incels?

- Most incel research:
 - Is theoretical
 - Uses secondary data analysis
 - Applies specific theoretical / ideological lenses
 - Confuses “shitposting” with mainstream views

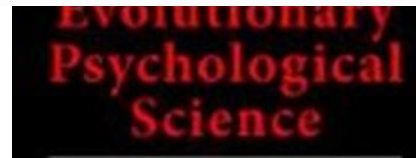
RESEARCH ARTICLE | [Published: 12 September 2022](#)

Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel (Involuntarily Celibate)

[William Costello](#) , [Vania Rolon](#), [Andrew G. Thomas](#) & [David Schmitt](#)

[Evolutionary Psychological Science](#) (2022) | [Cite this article](#)

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Research Article

The Mating Psychology of Incels (Involuntary Celibates): Misfortunes, Misperceptions, and Misrepresentations

[William Costello](#)  , [Vania Rolon](#) , [Andrew G. Thomas](#)  & [David P. Schmitt](#) 

Published online: 07 Sep 2023

 [Cite this article](#)

 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2248096>



SISNET Study (Funded by UK GOV)



Swansea University Research on the Incel Community



Dr Andrew G. Thomas



William Costello



Dr Joe Whittaker



The largest incel study in the world

- Funded by the UK Government Commission for Countering Extremism.
- Largest study of incels to date (n = ~600 UK/US incels)
- Incel mental health, social networking, and ideology – examining links between
- The first study of its kind to pay incel participants (\$/£20) to participate
- Incels also had the opportunity to have their participation fee donated to men's mental health charity Movember (~20% did this)



Intuitive and Counter Intuitive Findings

Previous Findings (Costello et al., 2022)	Our new findings (n = 561) (Costello et al., 2023)
Ethnic/Political Diversity BIPOC: 36% Slightly left leaning politically	Ethnic Diversity BIPOC: 42% Slightly left leaning politically
PHQ-9 75% Moderate to Severe depression	PHQ-9 68% Moderate to Severe depression
Not in Education Employment or Training 18%	Not in Education Employment or Training 24.5%
Autism Spectrum Disorder ~18% self-reported a diagnosis. (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022)	Autism Spectrum Disorder ~30% using the AQ-10 Scale

Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood

Need for recognition

Moral elitism

Lack of empathy

Rumination

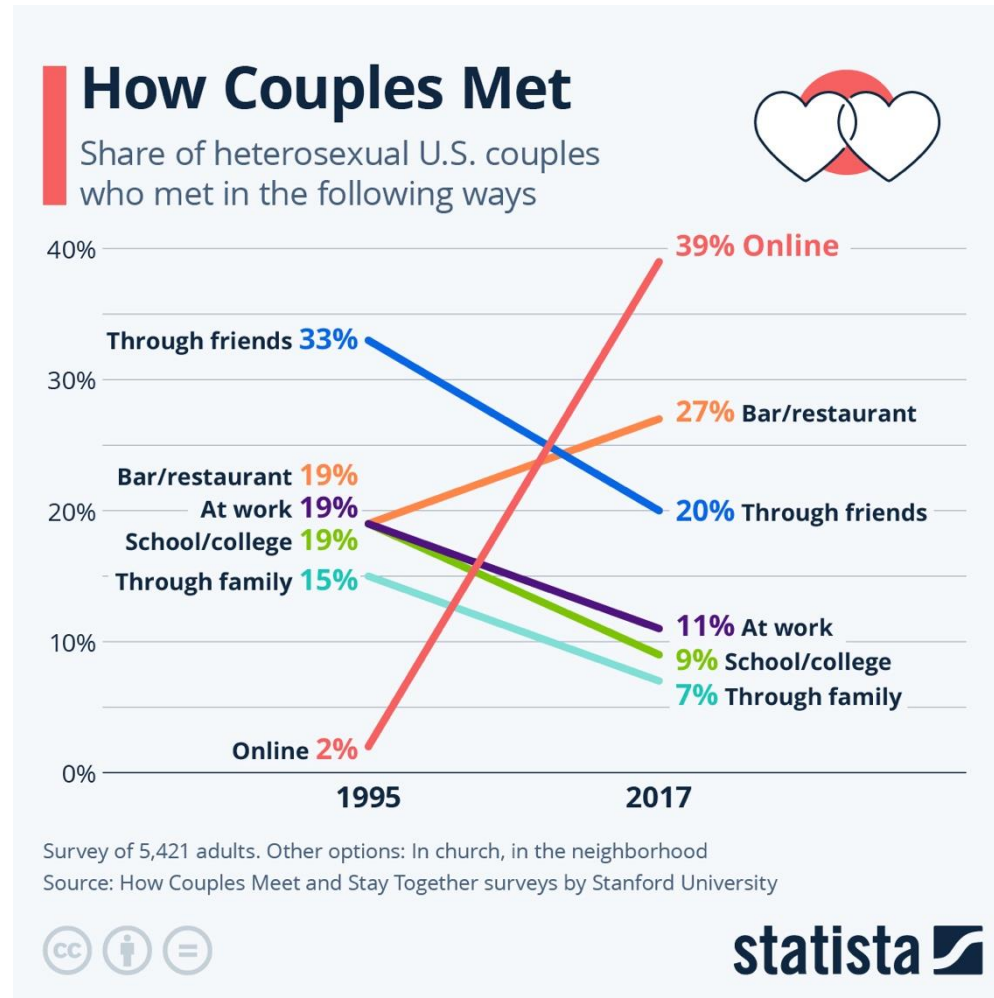
Victimhood-mindset leads to *external locus of control*

Autism Spectrum disorder

- ~18% incels self reported an ASD diagnosis.
- A further 24.6 percent report the "presence of ASD symptoms (Speckhard et al., 2022)
- Our study is the first to use a clinical scale: The AQ-10.
- 80% of those who score 6/10 on this measure go on to get a diagnosis.
- 30% of incels score 6/10 or above.



The rise of online dating



Low self-esteem and insecure attachment

“Entered on its own, perceived mate value correctly classified 86% of participants, a high level of accuracy that did not meaningfully differ from the full model, which had a classification rate of 90%.”

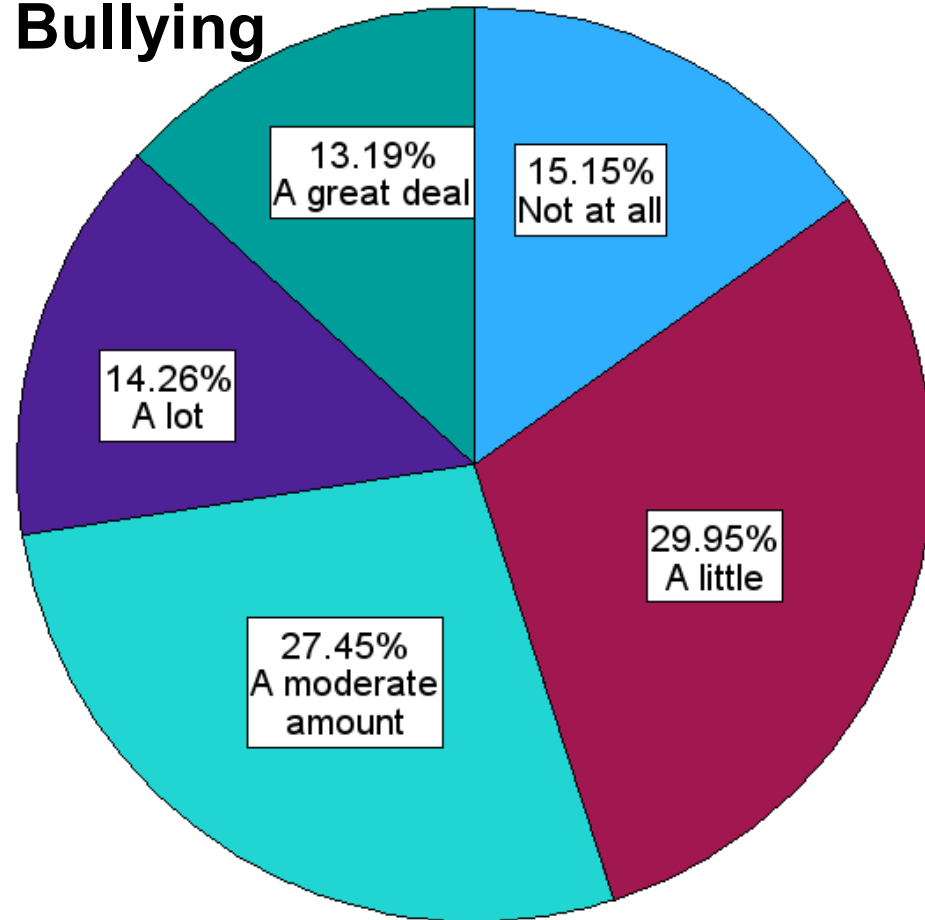
Table 7 Predictors of incel membership

	B	SE	aOR	95% CI for aOR	
Fear of being single	0.12	0.07	1.12	0.97	1.30
Depression	-0.02	0.10	0.98	0.80	1.19
Anxiety	-0.03	0.10	0.97	0.81	1.18
Self-esteem	0.55	0.30	1.73	0.96	3.12
Secure attachment	-0.17	0.11	0.84	0.68	1.04
Anxious attachment	0.16	0.10	1.17	0.97	1.4
Avoidant attachment	0.17	0.08	1.18	1.01	1.39
Mate value	-0.37	0.10	0.69	0.57	0.85
Self-critical rumination	0.03	0.07	1.03	0.91	1.17
Perceived social support	-0.06	0.04	0.94	0.87	1.02
Loneliness	-0.03	0.14	0.97	0.74	1.26
Model summary					
Cox & Snell R^2	0.564				
Nagelkerke R^2	0.774				
Avoidant attachment	0.08	0.05	1.08	0.98	1.19
Mate value	-0.37	0.06	0.69	0.62	0.78
Model summary					
Cox & Snell R^2	0.466				
Nagelkerke R^2	0.634				
Mate value	-0.38	0.06	0.68	0.61	0.76
Model summary					
Cox & Snell R^2	0.458				
Nagelkerke R^2	0.623				

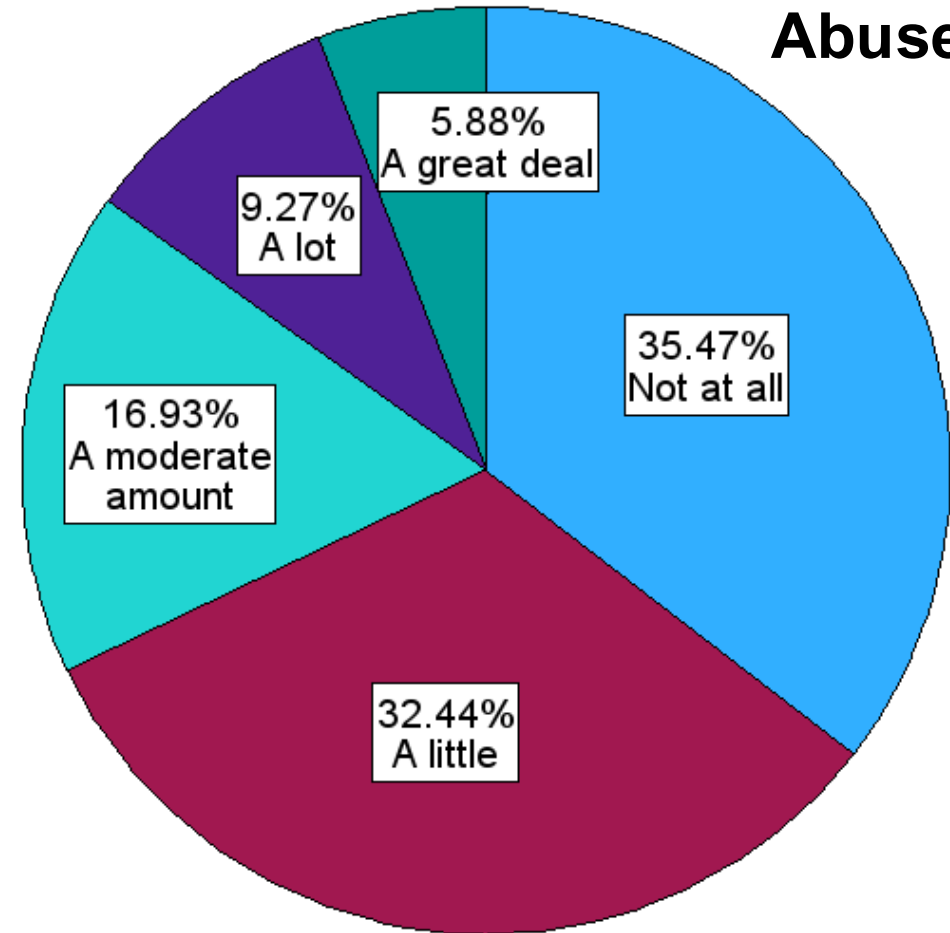
Significant results are in bold

Bullying Experience

Bullying



Abuse



Incel characteristics and psychology

Scored highly for measures on:

- Angry rumination: 4.21 (1.66)
- Revenge planning: 3.41 (1.55)
- Hostile sexism: 3.17 (1.03)
- Rape myth acceptance: 2.81 (1.20)
- But NOT Displaced Aggression 2.39 (1.18)



Political orientation

- Score of 1 = Extreme right, score of 2 = Extreme left
- Average score 1.54 – significantly passed mid-point ($d = .17$)

Political belief (abridged)	Total sample ($N = 561$)
1. Government wasteful/inefficient	341 (60.8%)
2. Government regulation of business harmful	210 (37.4%)
3. Poor people have it easy because of benefits	224 (39.9%)
4. Government can't do more for needy	283 (50.4%)
5. Ethnic minorities responsible for their outcomes	343 (61.1%)
6. Immigrants today are a burden	256 (45.6%)
7. Military strength brings peace	228 (40.6%)
8. Corporations profits are fair	208 (37.1%)
9. Environmental regulations hurt economy	243 (43.3%)
10. Homosexuality should be discouraged	227 (40.5%)
Mean score (SD)	1.54 (0.25)

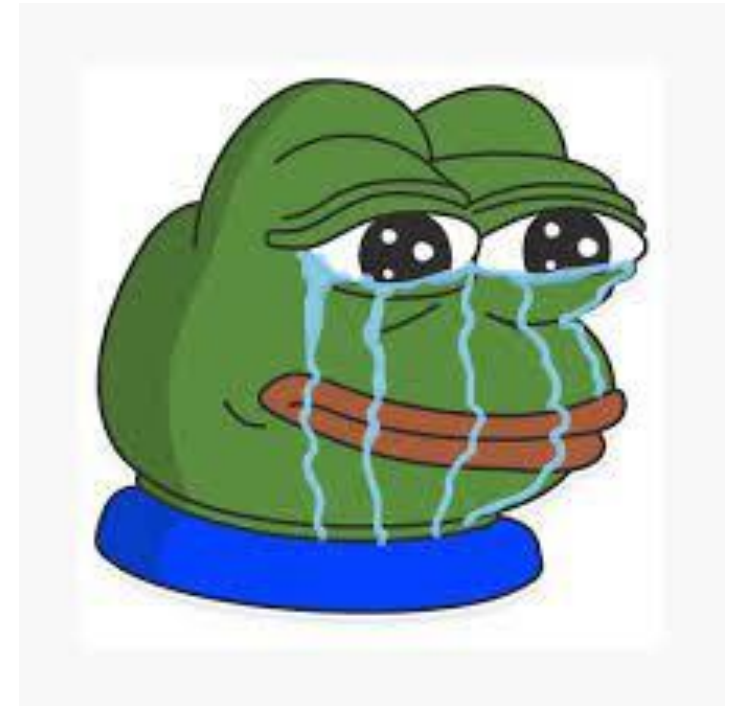
Current Mental Health

Depression

- PHQ-9, mean: 13.03 (Moderate severity)
- Treatment: Review treatment plan. If no improvement after 4 weeks, consider pharmacotherapy.
- PHQ-9, % over 15 points: 218 (38.9%)
- Severity: Moderately Severe - Severe
- Treatment: Immediate initiation of pharmacotherapy. Safety plan.

Anxiety

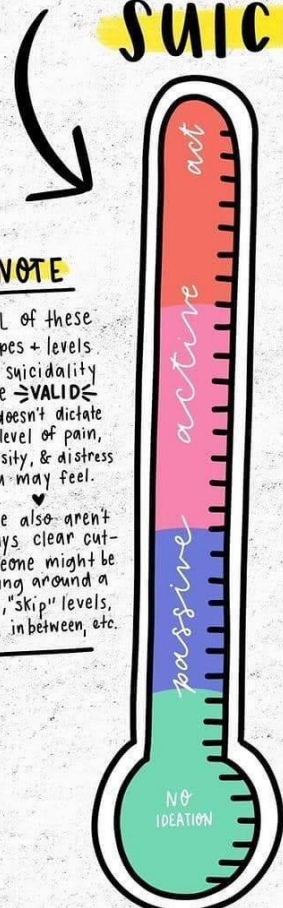
- GAD-7, mean: 8.99 (Mild severity)
- GAD-7, % over 10 points: 241 (43%)
- Severity: Moderate - Severe
- Treatment: Immediate initiation of pharmacotherapy. Safety plan.



Risk of self-harm

- Two strongest correlates of male suicidal ideation:
- Failure in heterosexual mating
- Burdensomeness to kin
- Both are salient for incels.
- About 1-in-5 incels have daily thoughts of suicide

THERE ARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SUICIDAL IDEATION



NOTE
ALL of these types + levels of suicidality are **VALID** & doesn't dictate the level of pain, intensity, & distress you may feel.
These also aren't always clear cut - someone might be moving around a few, "skip" levels, fall in between, etc.

SUICIDE ATTEMPT
attempts to kill self, either initiating made plan or impulsively

SUICIDAL with PLAN & INTENT
has a specific plan (how, when, where) and intends to carry it out → Ex. "I am going to overdose tomorrow at home."

SUICIDAL INTENT (no plan)
intends to kill self but doesn't have a specific plan → Ex. "I think I'm going to kill myself, but not sure when."

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS (method, no plan, or intent)
has an idea of how they would do it, but no specific plan or intent → Ex. "I've thought about overdosing, but I'm not going to."

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS (no intent/plan)
thinking about killing self, but no details & no intention to act → Ex. "I should just kill myself." "I wish I could just kill myself."

THOUGHTS OF MORBIDITY
thinking about own death & dying, but not specifically by self → Ex. "I wish I wouldn't wake up" "I wish I were dead."

RANDOM INTRUSIVE THOUGHT*
passing thought, curiosity → Ex. "What if I just jumped?" when waiting for train *different if person has chronic suicidality

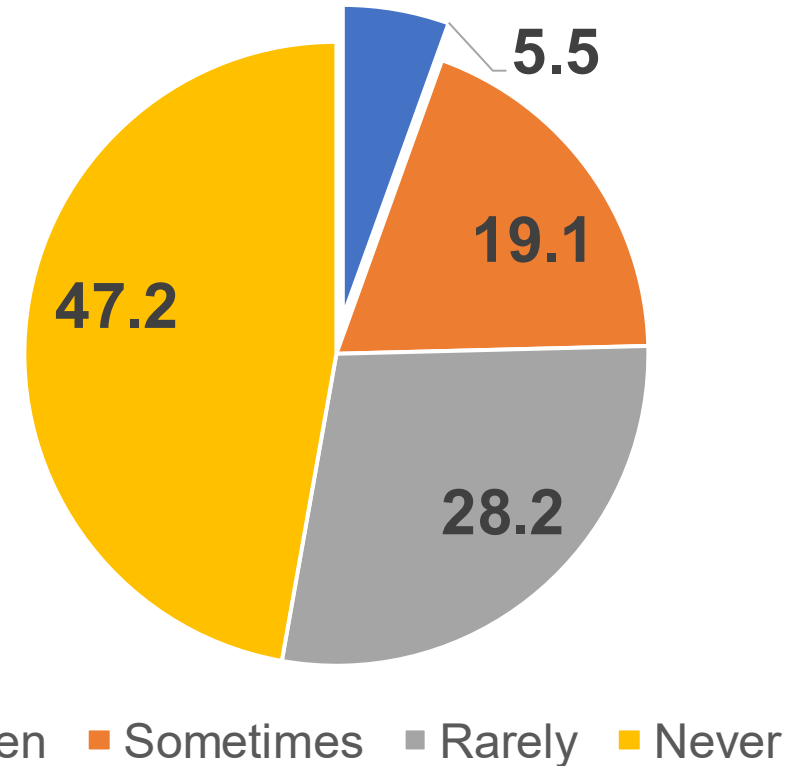
NO THOUGHTS

SOURCED FROM *David Rapaport & Columbia-suicide severity rating scale*

@ALYSERURIANI

Approval of violence

- Some people think that violence against other people is justified if they are causing harm to incels.
- Other people believe that no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified.
- Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is ever justified?
- 1.39% of posts legitimize violence (Perliger et al., 2023)



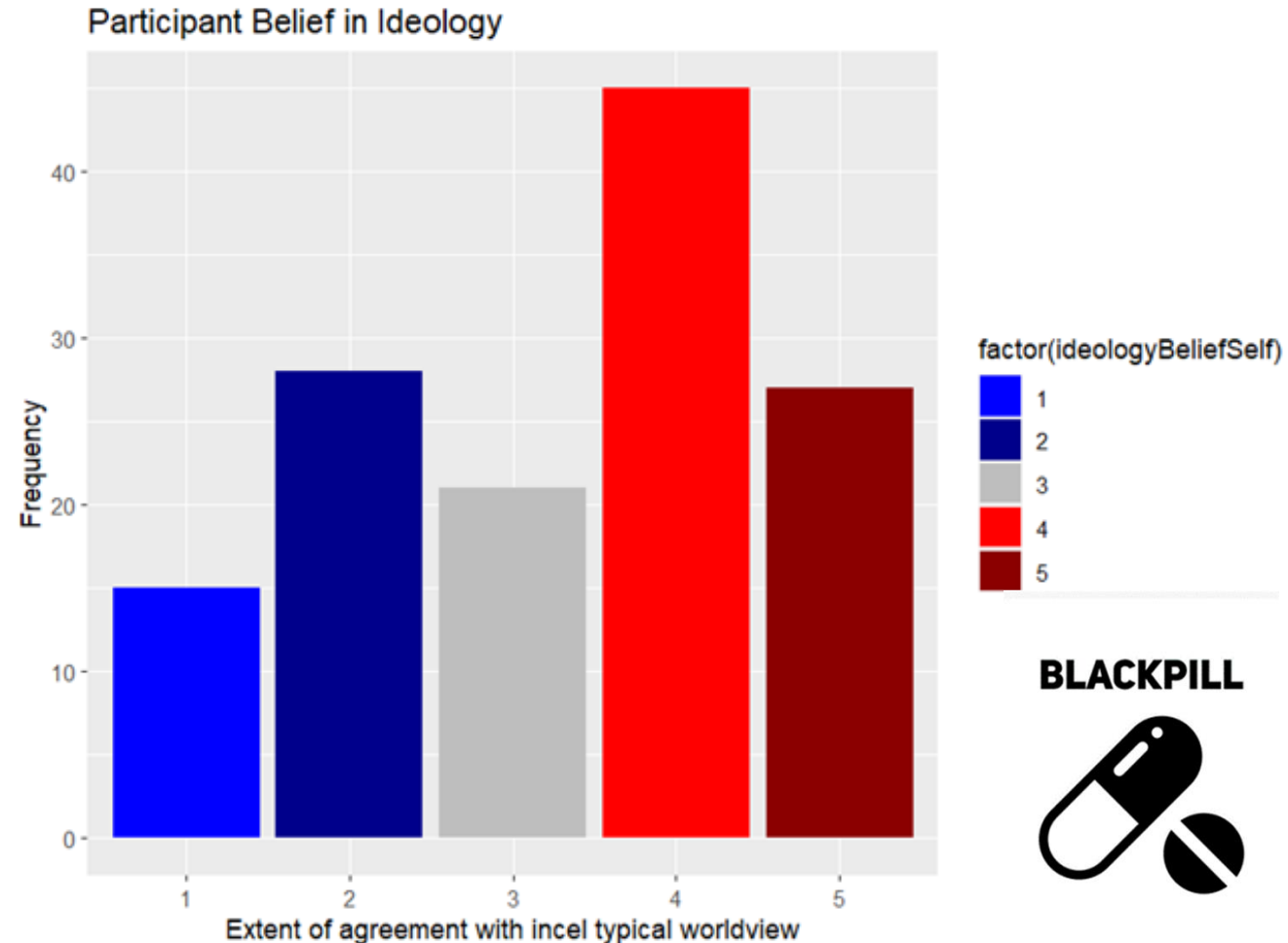
According to a 45,000-participant College Plus survey on respect, tolerance and open-mindedness on American campuses – the largest ever conducted – an appalling 62 per cent of students said it’s “at least sometimes acceptable” to shout down a speaker, and one in five students said that using violence to stop a campus speech is “sometimes acceptable.”

Incel networking

Characteristic	Anonymous social media	Registered social media	In Person	Telephone	Video calls	Discord	Messaging apps
Within the last year							
Ever used	308 (54.9%)	286 (51%)	99 (17.6%)	37 (6.6%)	36 (6.4%)	172 (30.7%)	99 (17.6%)
Often used (over 25%)	229 (40.8%)	191 (34%)	35 (6.2%)	6 (1.1%)	7 (1.2%)	88 (15.7%)	35 (6.2%)
Primary (over 50%)	182 (32.4%)	149 (26.6%)	27 (4.8%)	1 (0.2%)	6 (1.1%)	54 (9.6%)	20 (3.6%)
Within the last 2 weeks							
Time spent	3.95 (2.03)	4.68 (1.99)	2.30 (1.76)	2.16 (1.19)	2.36 (1.31)	3.08 (2.05)	2.83 (1.81)
People engaged	5.79 (2.69)	5.16 (2.70)	2.66 (1.86)	2.51 (1.26)	3.44 (2.37)	4.48 (2.48)	3.55 (2.4)
Interaction	2.42 (1.09)	2.50 (1.08)	-	-	-	-	-
Content generation	1.88 (0.91)	1.84 (0.96)	-	-	-	-	-
Radical people	3.13 (1.10)	2.71 (1.11)	2.00 (1.13)	1.97 (0.96)	2.17 (1.13)	2.48 (1.26)	2.24 (1.19)
Radical content	3.10 (1.15)	2.7 (1.10)	1.95 (1.07)	1.97 (0.90)	2.11 (1.14)	2.49 (1.29)	2.27 (1.18)
Feelings of support	3.44 (0.92)	3.20 (1.05)	3.47 (0.93)	3.50 (0.93)	3.72 (0.81)	3.58 (0.92)	3.67 (0.75)

Agreement with Incel Ideology

- Incels generally take the job of rejecting out of the hands of others...
- *“Some incels believe in biological determinism, more specifically in the 20/80 rule, which states that 80% of women desire only 20% of men. In this view, men who are usually good looking, muscular, tall, and wealthy, or have otherwise high status (e.g., "Chads") are popular among attractive, sexually promiscuous women (e.g., "Stacys"). Men who do not fit the description of a Chad are destined for a life of loneliness and will never have a willing sexual partner or a meaningful intimate relationship.”*



Can we predict harm?

Dual pathways of incel harm

Archives of Sexual Behavior

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-025-03161-y>

ORIGINAL PAPER



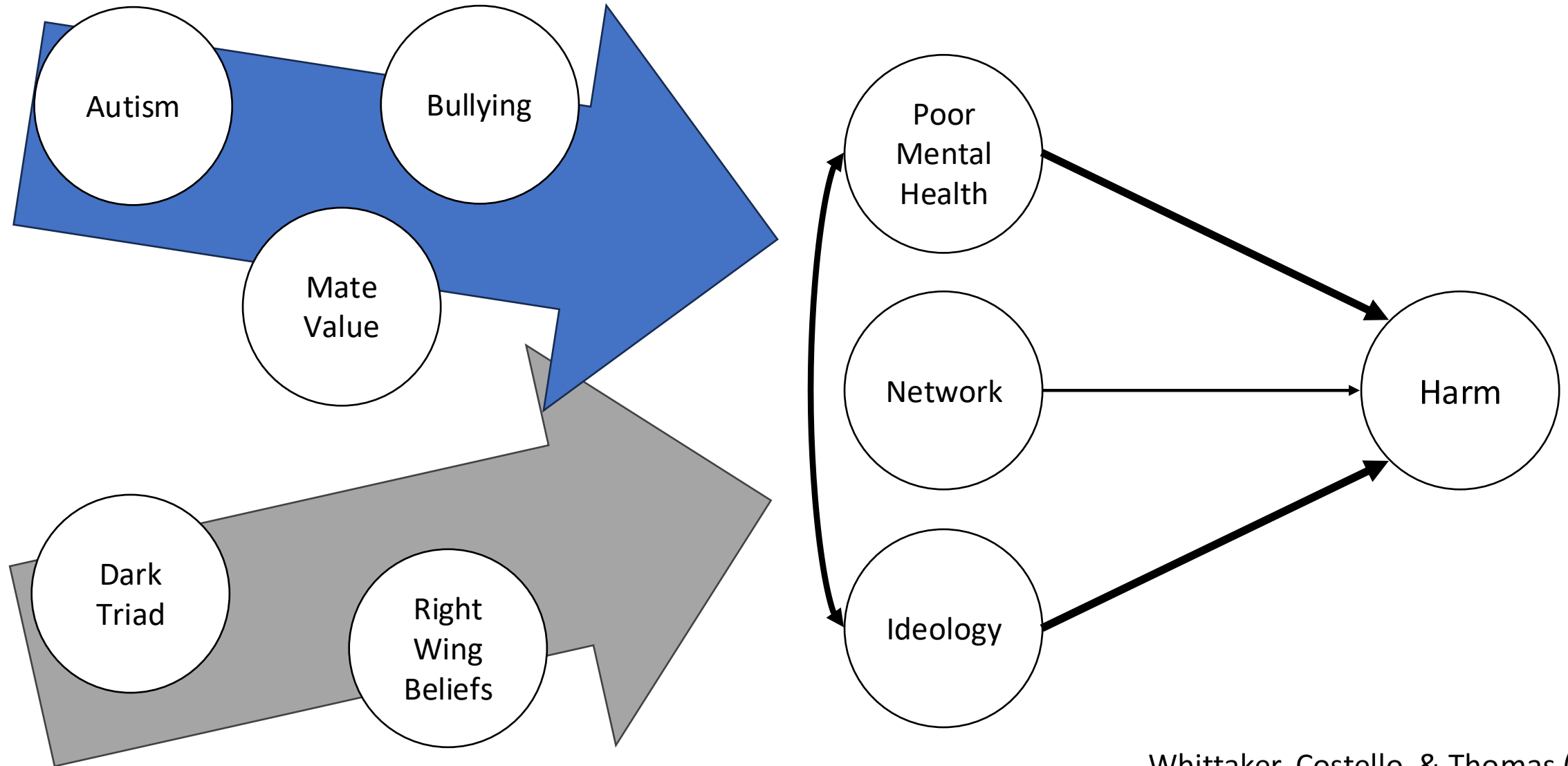
The Dual Pathways Hypothesis of Incel Harm: A Model of Harmful Attitudes and Beliefs Among Involuntary Celibates

William Costello^{1,2}  · Joe Whittaker³  · Andrew G. Thomas² 

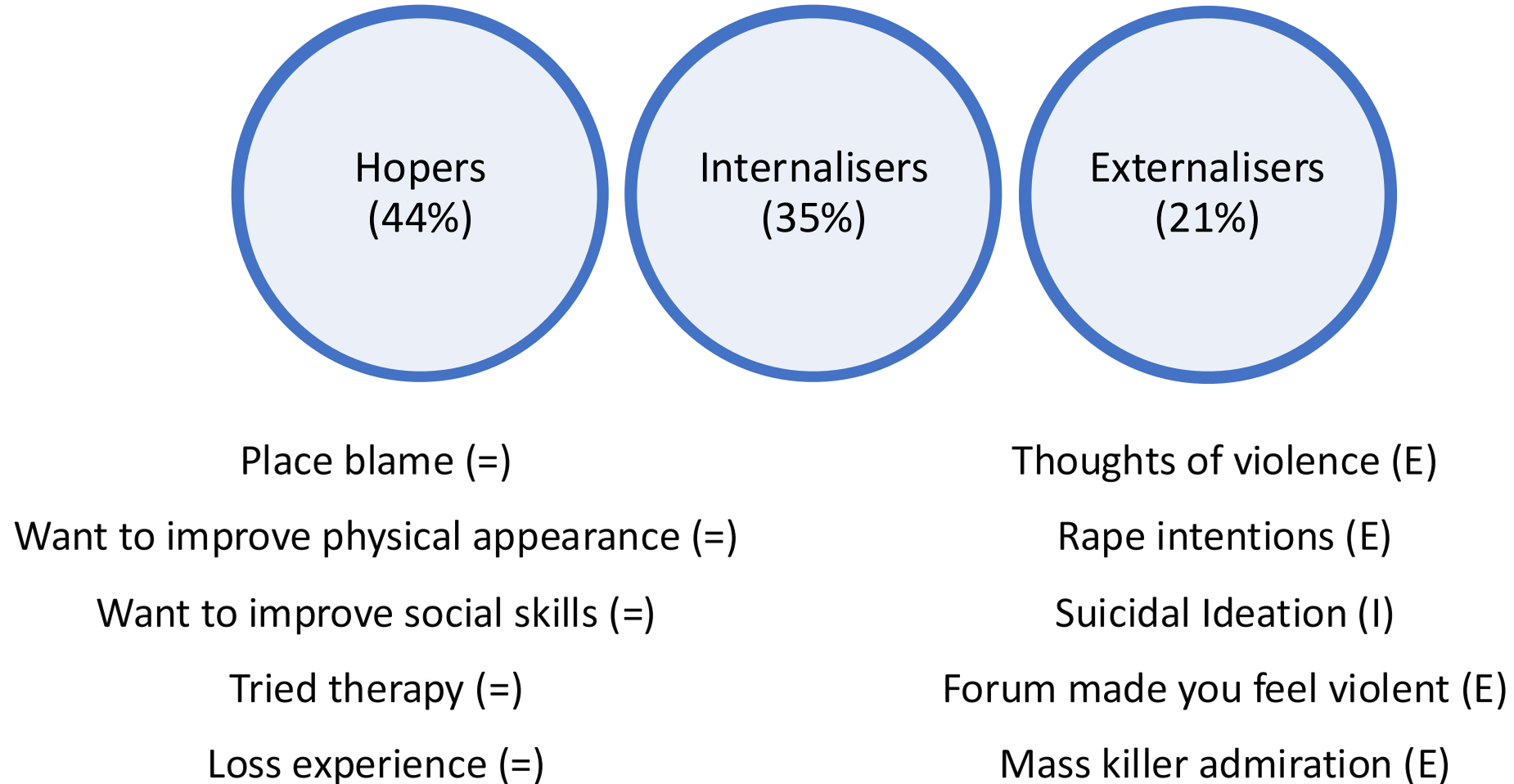
Received: 23 April 2024 / Revised: 25 March 2025 / Accepted: 31 March 2025

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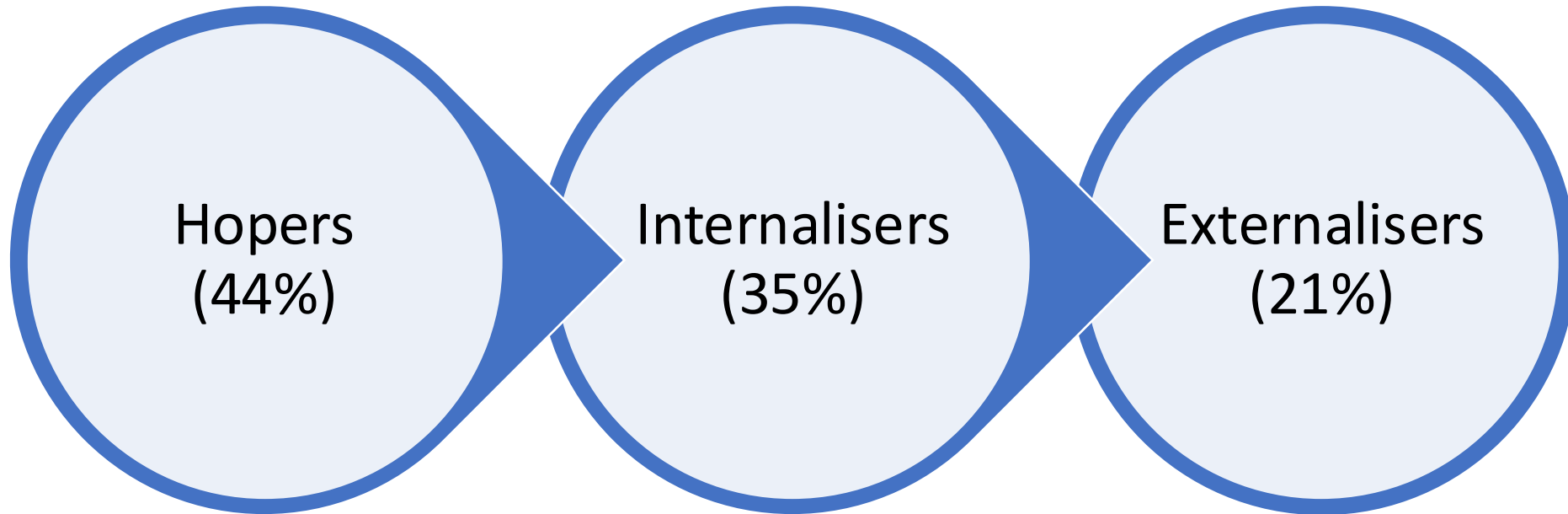
Mental health and ideology



Three “Types” of Incel



A potential developmental trajectory



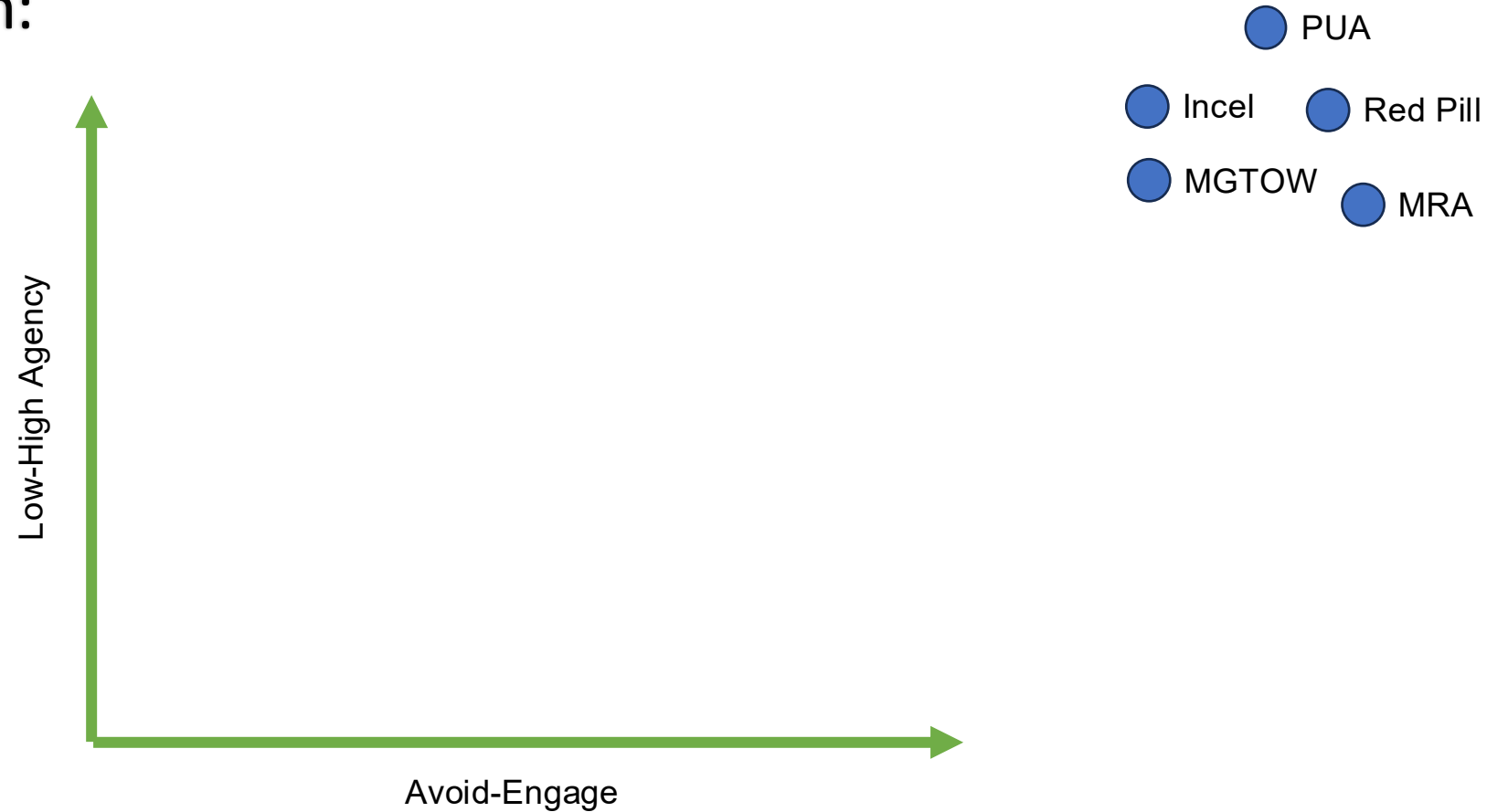
Is the level of harm what we'd
expect it to be?

Male Sedation

- Male sedation hypothesis (Costello & Buss, 2023)
 - Online virtual worlds (porn, video games) “pacify” single men
 - Offer counterfeit cues of sexual fulfilment, reducing motivation for risky/violent mate-competition
 - Porn may mimic “success” signals, lowering aggression and sexual coercion rates (we see -assault as +porn access)
- Modern incels form online communities around perceived romantic failure
- Incel spaces act as fatalistic echo chambers that discourage romantic effort
- Extreme inceldom resembles suicidality rather than outward violence

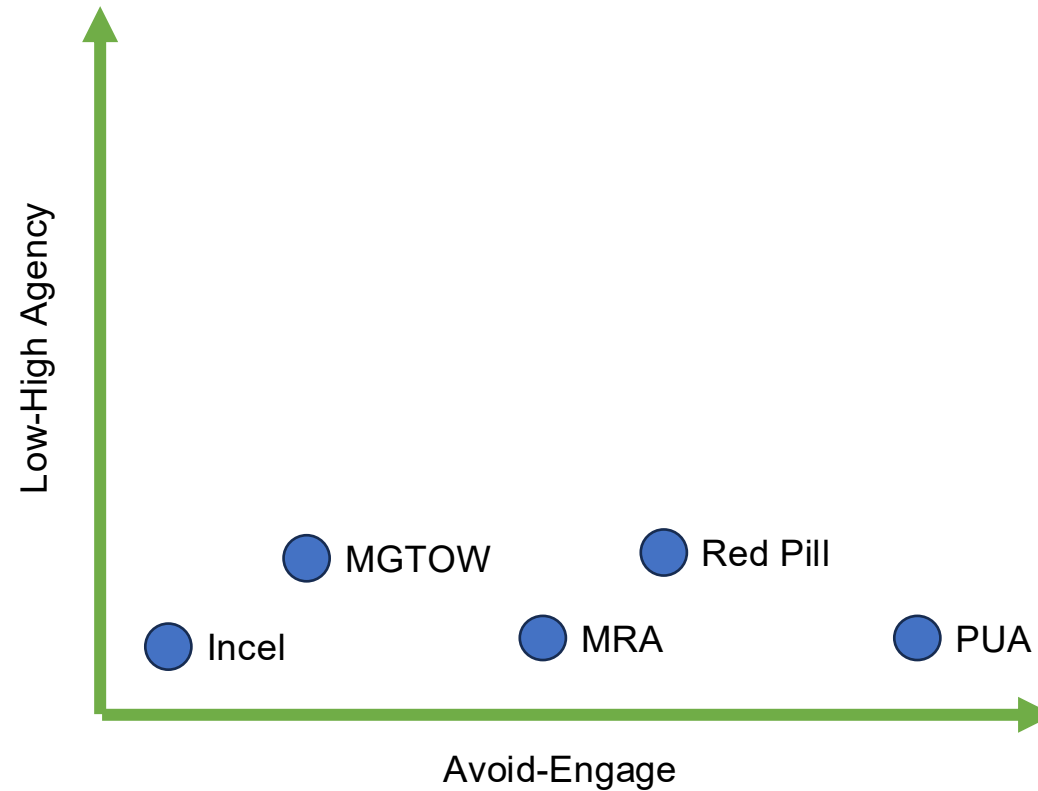
Black pill vs others

- My own addition:



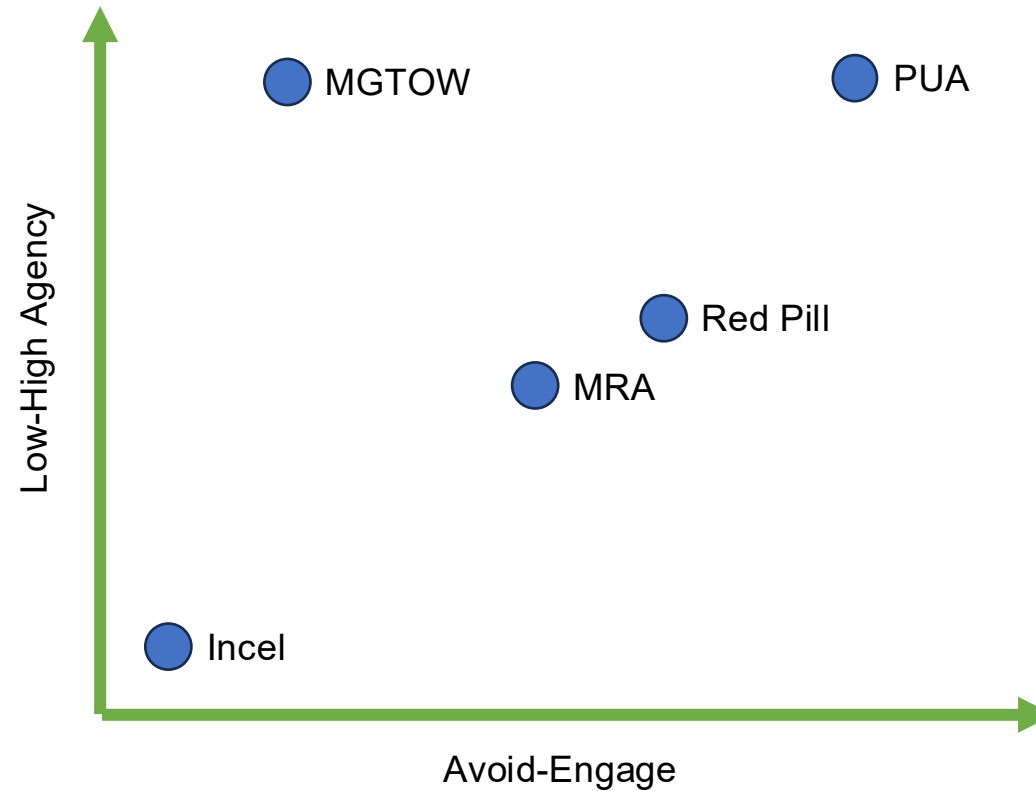
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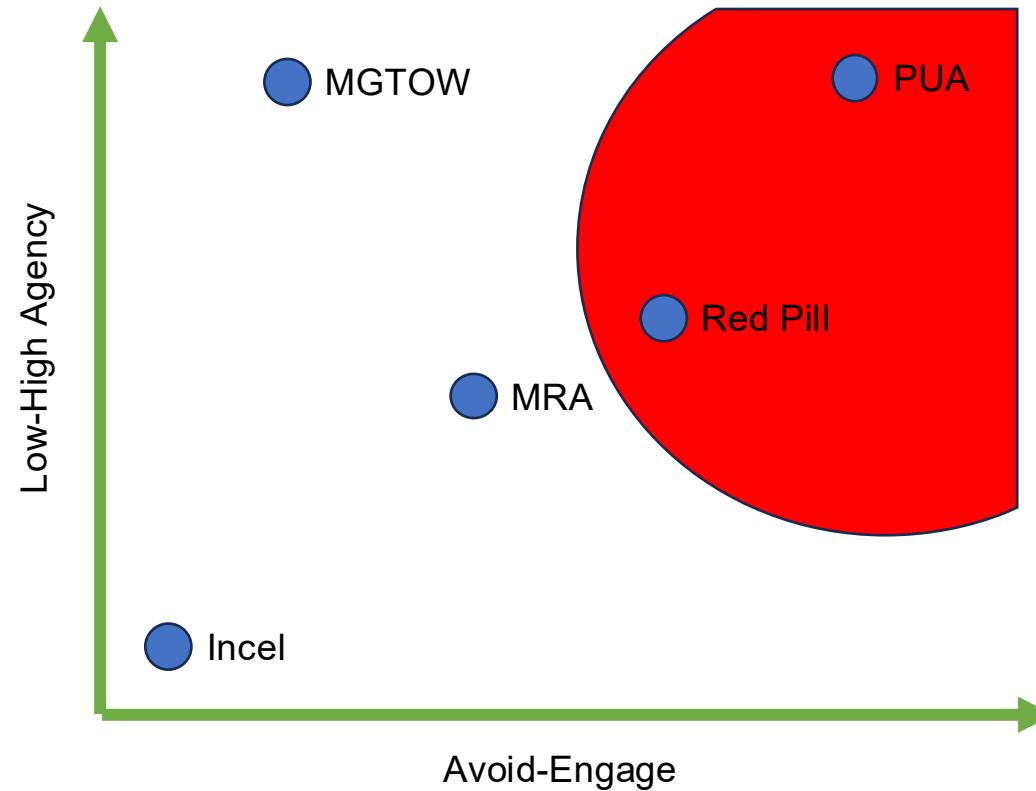
Black pill vs others

- My own addition:



Black pill vs others

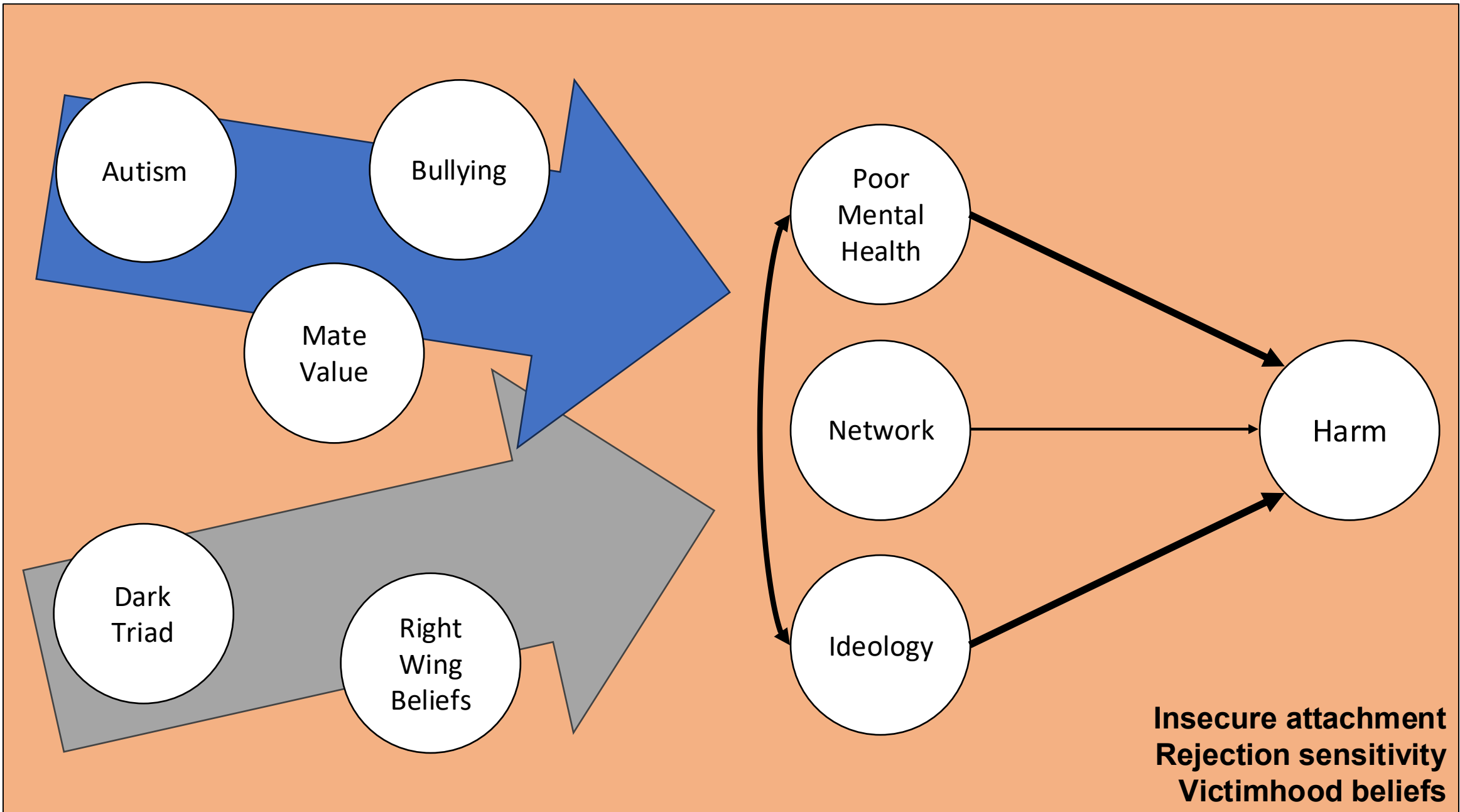
- My own addition:



Black pill vs others

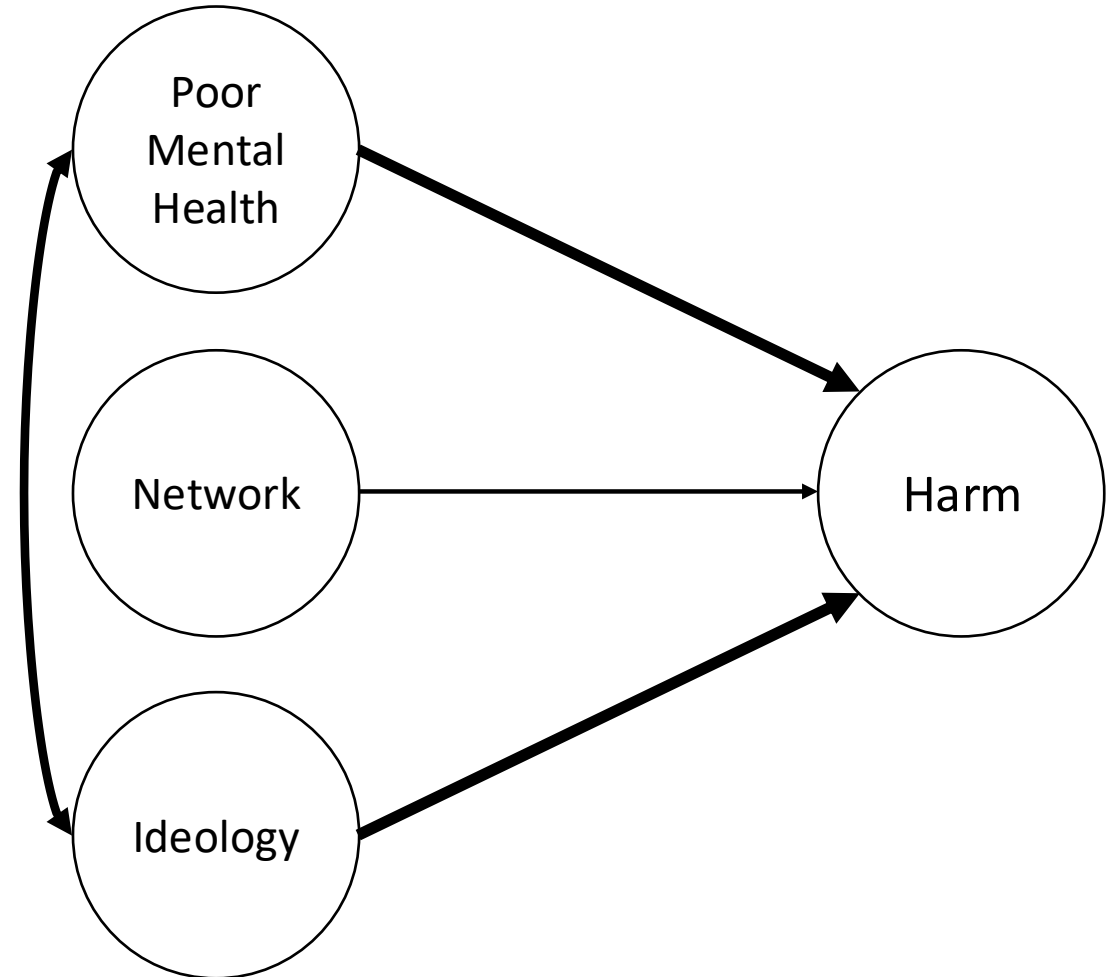
- Incels:
 - “Don’t try, it’s over for you”
 - “If you approach a woman, she’ll call the police”
- Redpill:
 - Women are so entitled
 - They are abusing me with their actions
 - “Women belong in the home, can’t drive, and are given to the man and belong to the man.” (Andrew Tate)

Intervention points



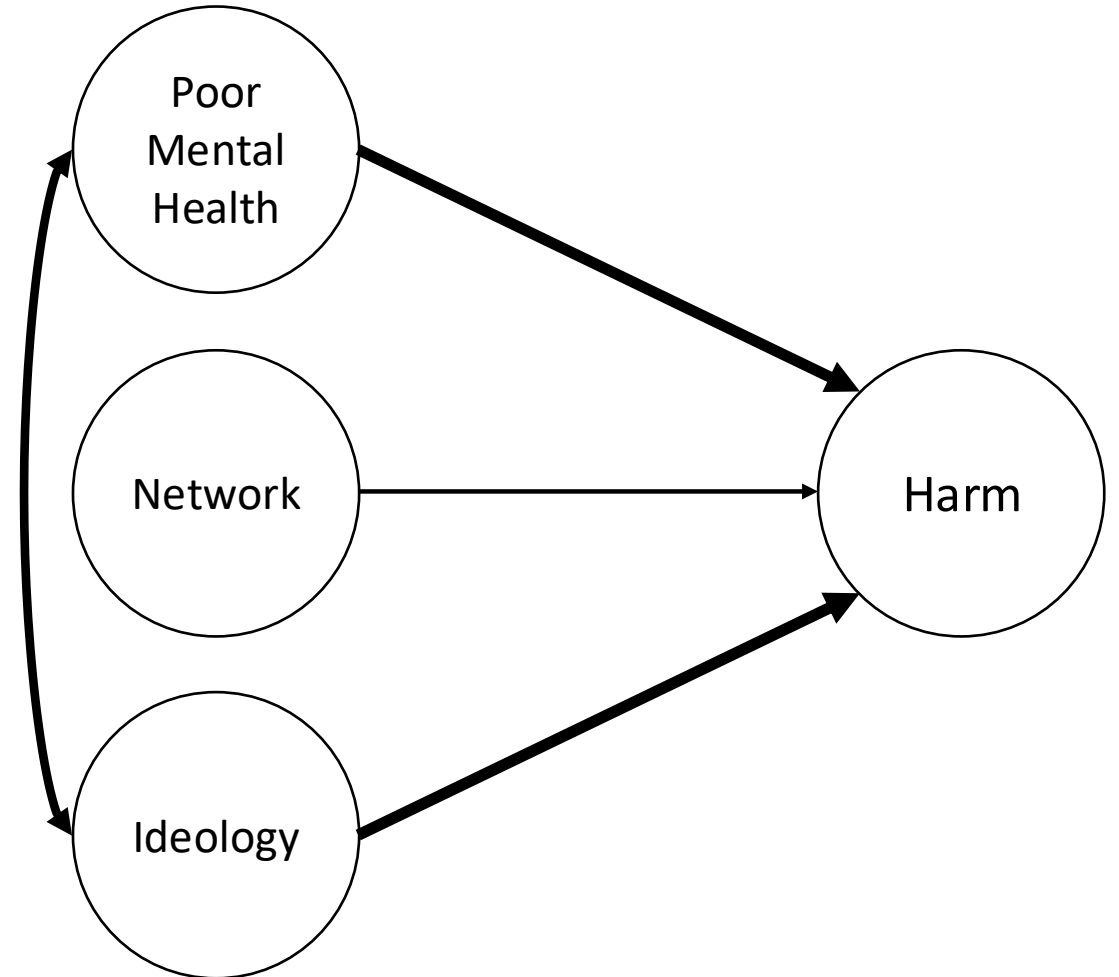
Intervention points

- Ideology very hard to challenge
- What works?
 - CBT for distorted thinking
 - Contact based interventions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006)
 - “EXIT” programmes (RAN, 2019) which include:
 - Counselling
 - Breaking social ties
 - Practical assistance
 - Security
 - Ideological deconstruction
 - Family/Social support

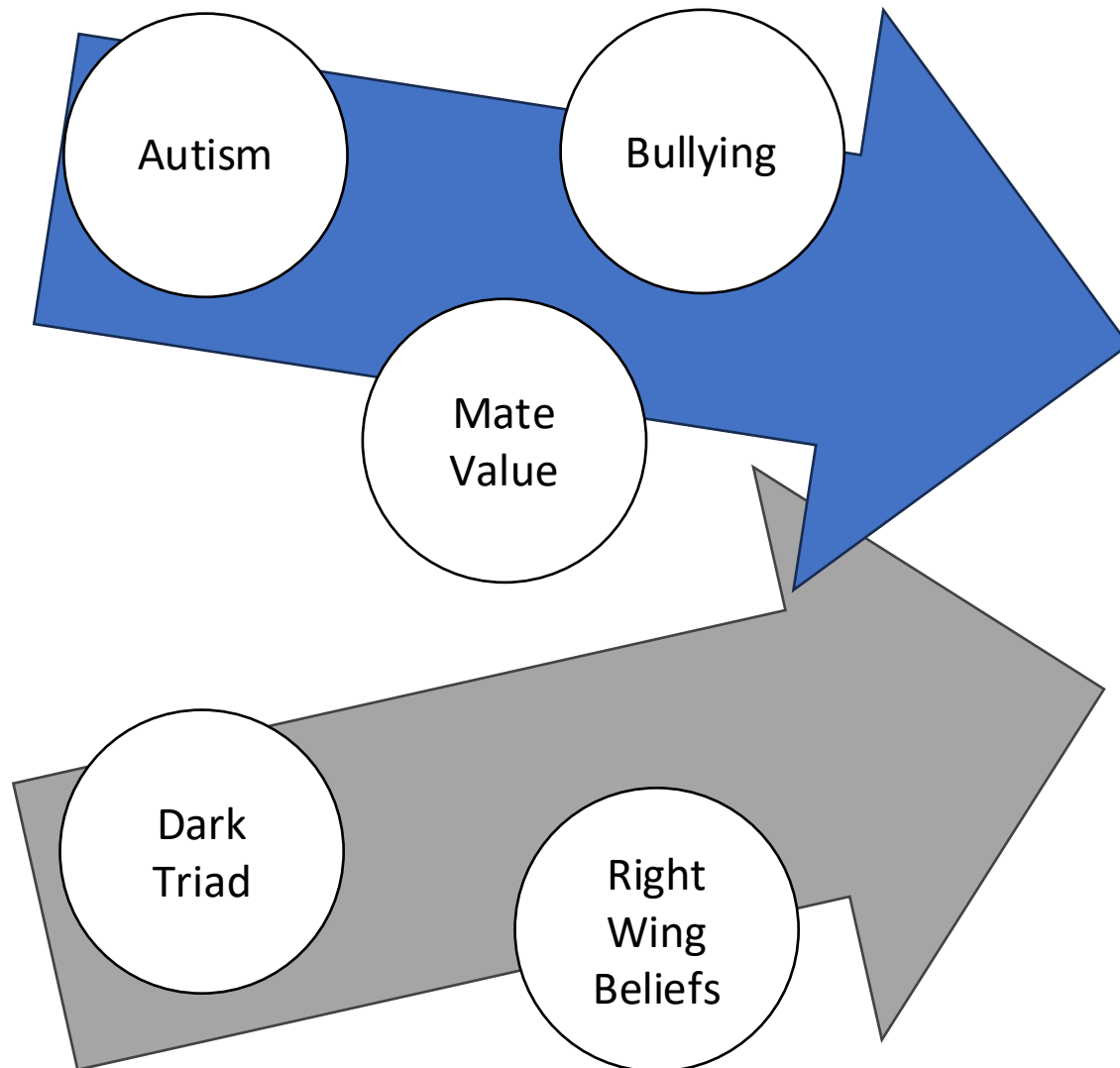


Intervention points

- Broader mental health support can be easier and more cost effective to implement
 - May also build skills to protect from ideology (cognitive distortions)
- But could be long-term
 - NHS CBT for depression = 6-8 or LL or 12-20 for HL. Average 8.2
 - For personality disorders? 20-40 (and beyond)
- All interventions require voluntary participation, can be very long-term work



Intervention points

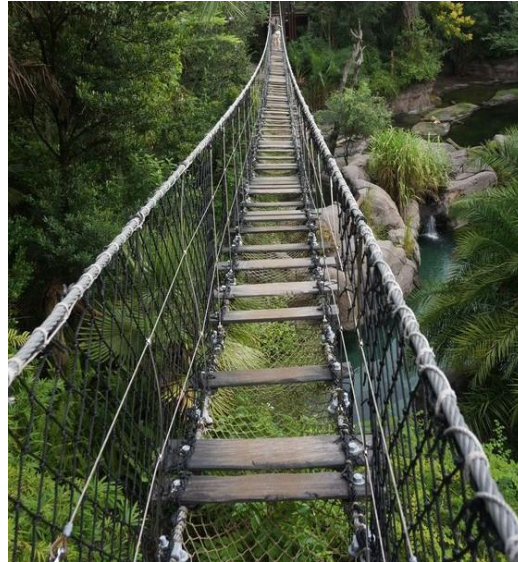


- What about the earlier stages?
- Pathway one
 - Social skills training
 - ASD specific support
 - Group involvement and confidence building
 - Sense of mastery and positive masculine identity
- Pathway two
 - CBT, DBT, Schema therapy
 - Forensic based programmes (thinking for change – CD+SS+PS)
 - Structured environments, rules and consequences (young)
 - Communities with pro-social norms

Intervention points



**Insecure attachment
Rejection sensitivity
Victimhood beliefs**



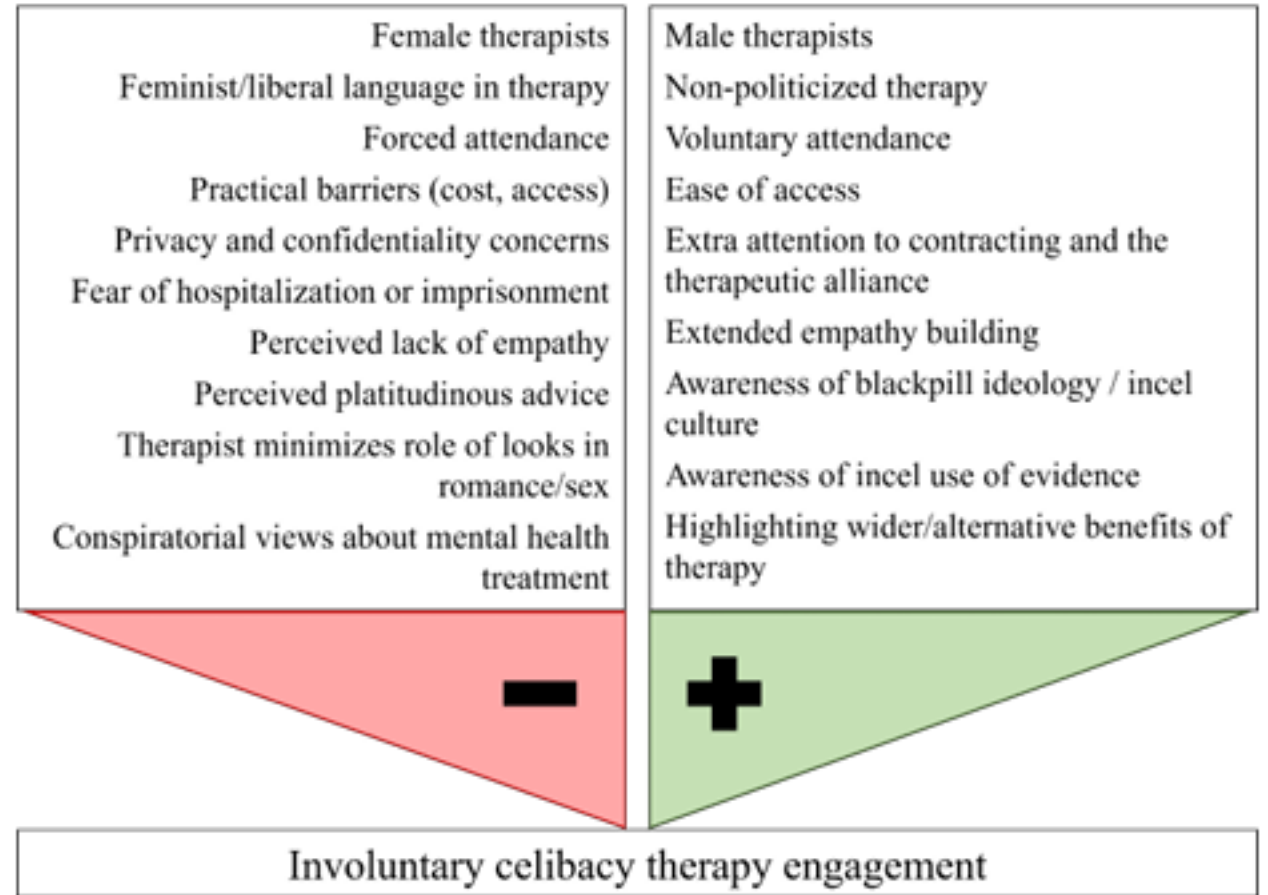
**Secure attachment
Rejection tolerance
Creator beliefs**

**→→→Secure adult relationships (Friends, family, partner, therapist)→→→
(see Clarkson, 2003)**

What are the barriers to
intervention?

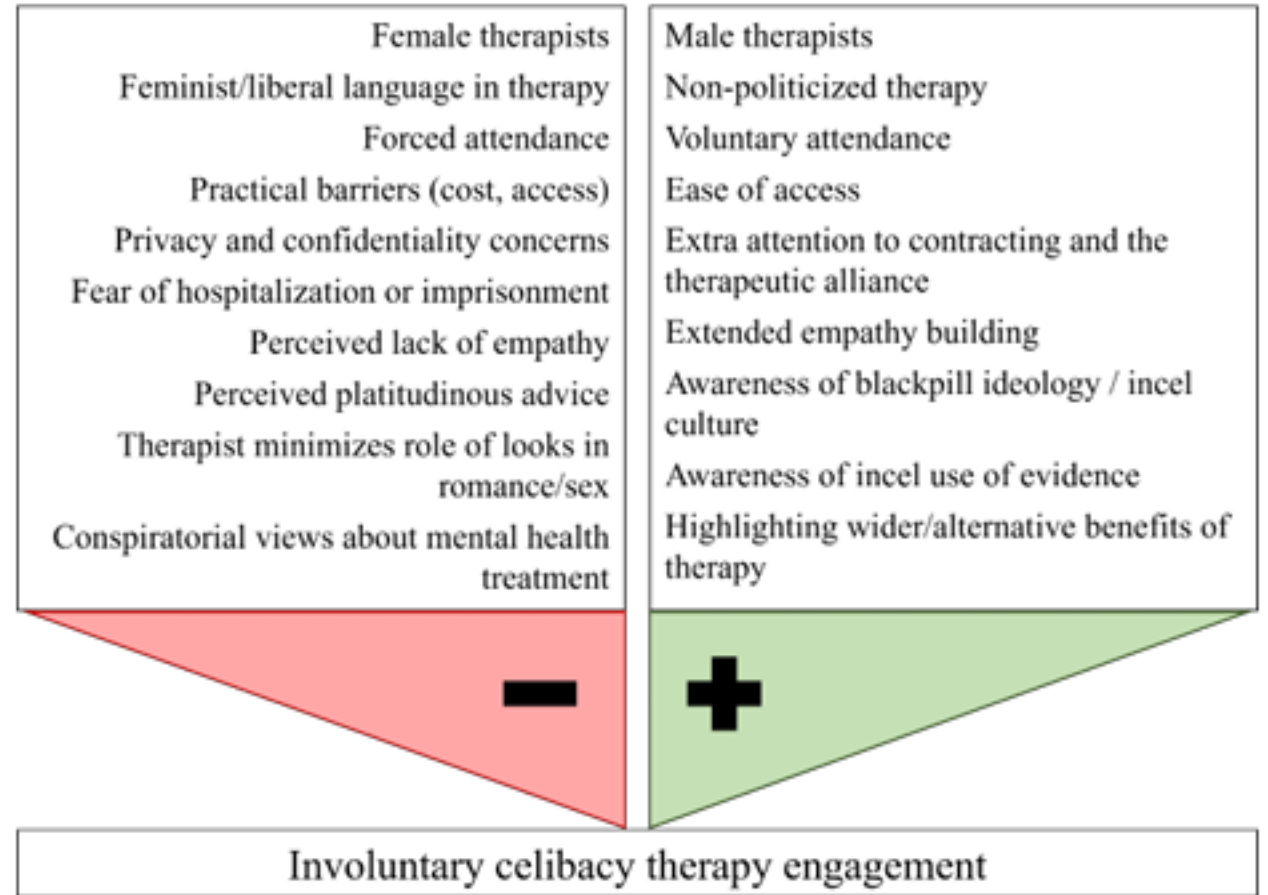
Engaging with incels for intervention

- Analysis of largest therapy thread on incels.is
- Among 89 therapy users, 68.5% reported negative outcomes, 7.9% positive
- None “forced into therapy” had a positive experience
- Blackpill ideology acts as a major barrier to therapy: “therapy can’t fix your face/height”
- Mental health as consequence not cause



Engaging with incels for intervention

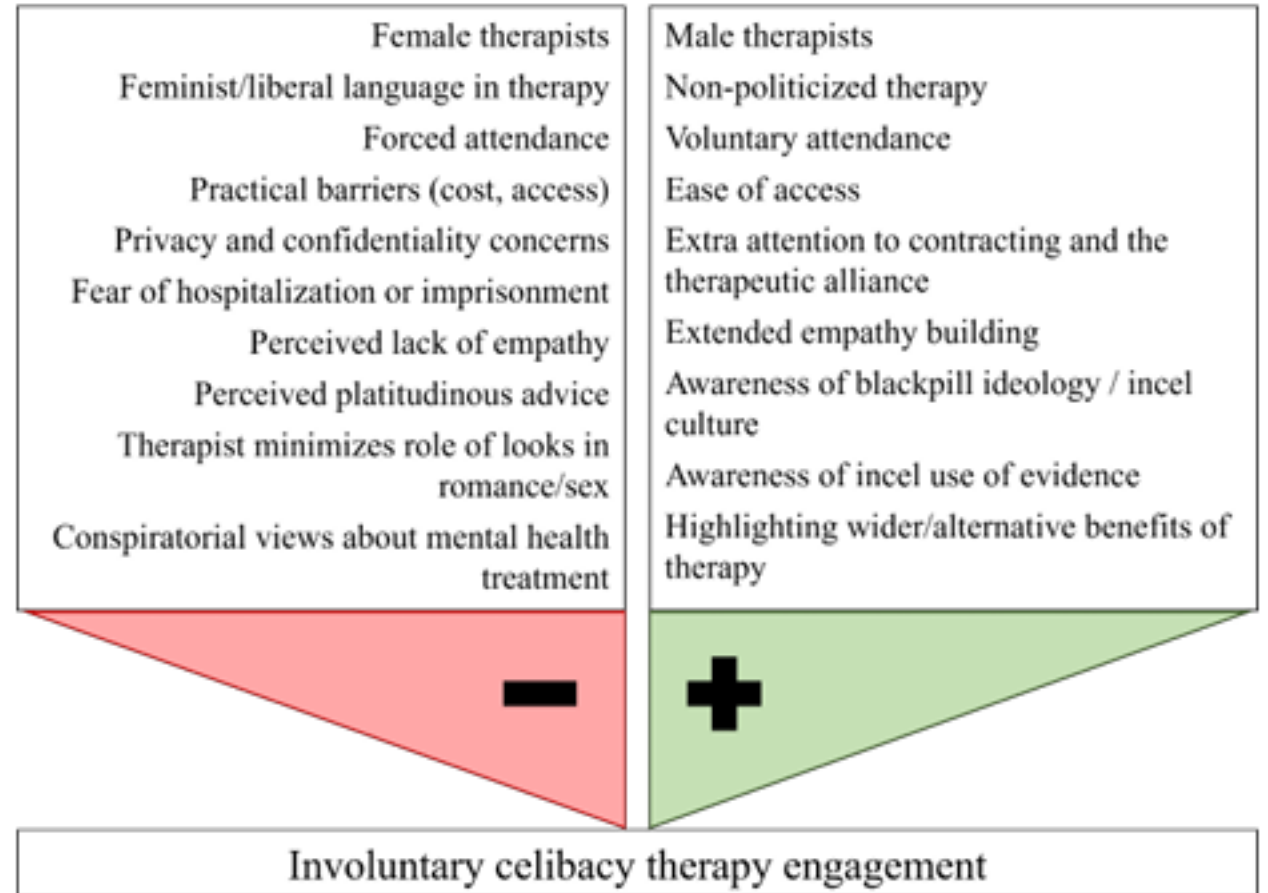
- Community attitudes: distrust, conspiracy theories, a “scam” / form of social control
- Female therapists are distrusted, sexualized, or viewed as hostile
- Worries about cost, lack of privacy, being reported to police or put on watchlists, and being hospitalized
- Feel they cannot speak honestly without being judged or punished



Engaging with incels for intervention

Andrew's advice:

- Attention to building empathy (high interpersonal victimhood)
- Be mindful of what incels say are barriers to engagement
- Particularly flippant advice
- Motivational interviewing skills
- Understanding vs condoning
- Gentle challenge / adding nuance
- Detach ideology from person



Therapeutic considerations

Treatment and intervention considerations

Generalized cognitive distortions

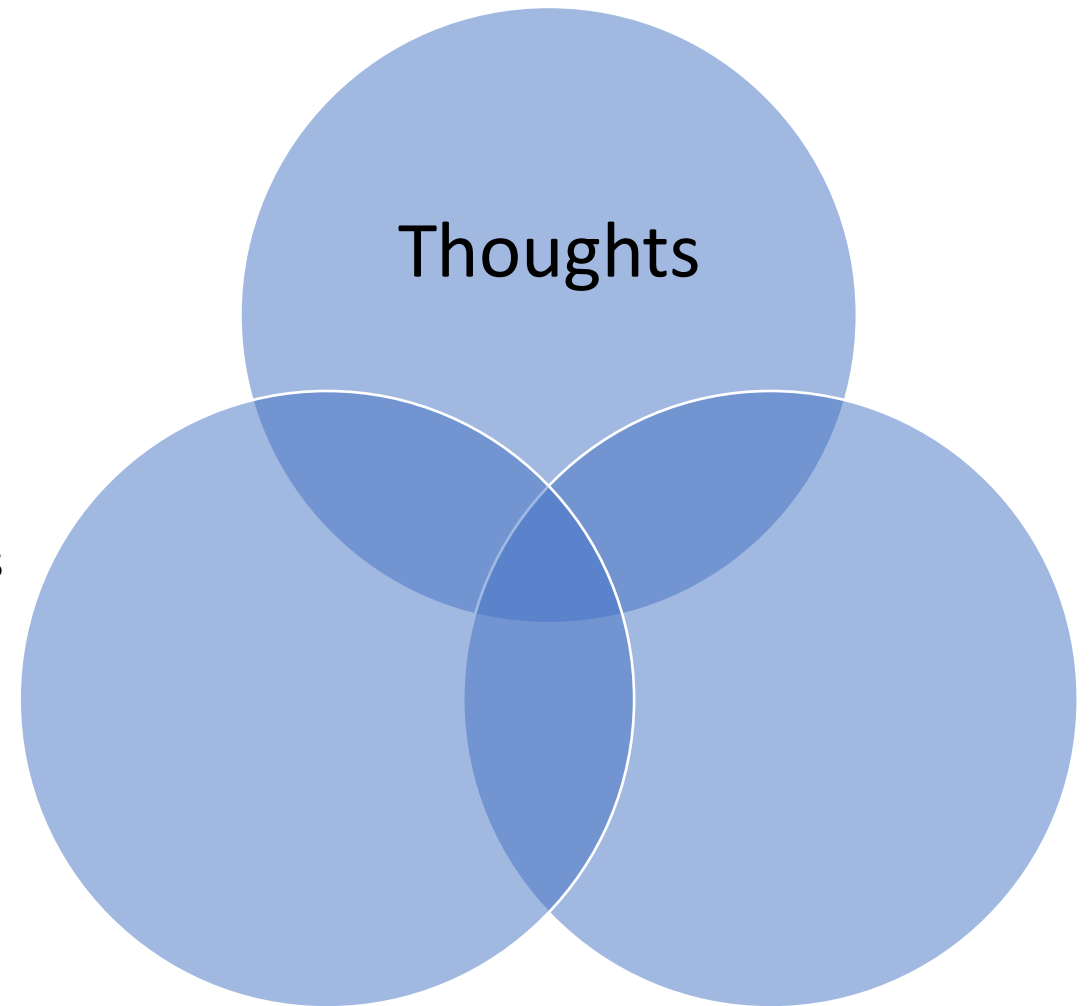
- Catastrophizing
- Black and white thinking
- Labelling
- Mind reading (rejection)

Specific cognitive distortions

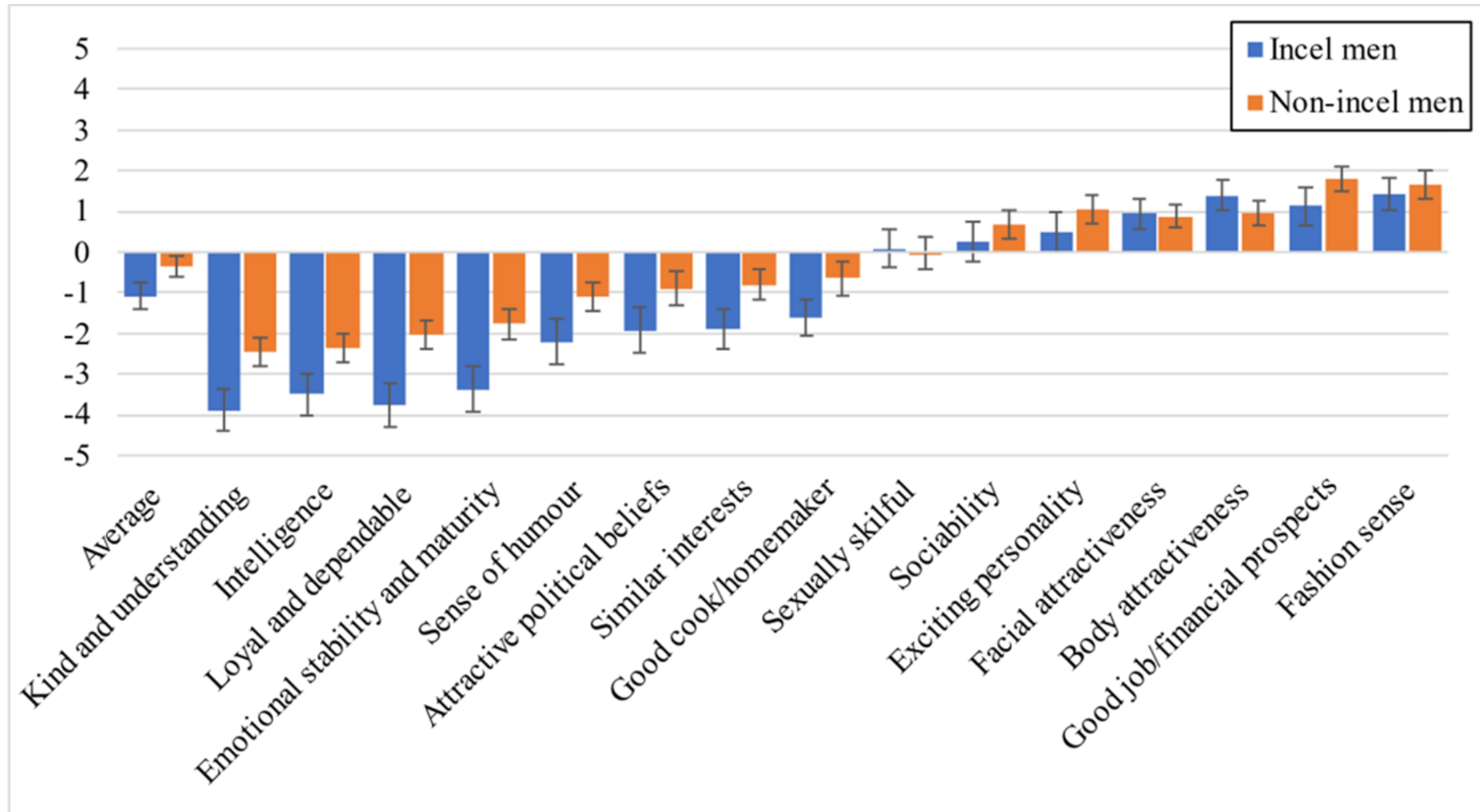
- Distorted other sex 'mind reading'
- Emphasis on physical attractiveness and social status
- Naturalistic fallacy
- Confusing mating contexts

Motivated reasoning

- Cherry picking evidence "revealed vs stated preferences"



Treatment and intervention considerations



Treatment and intervention considerations

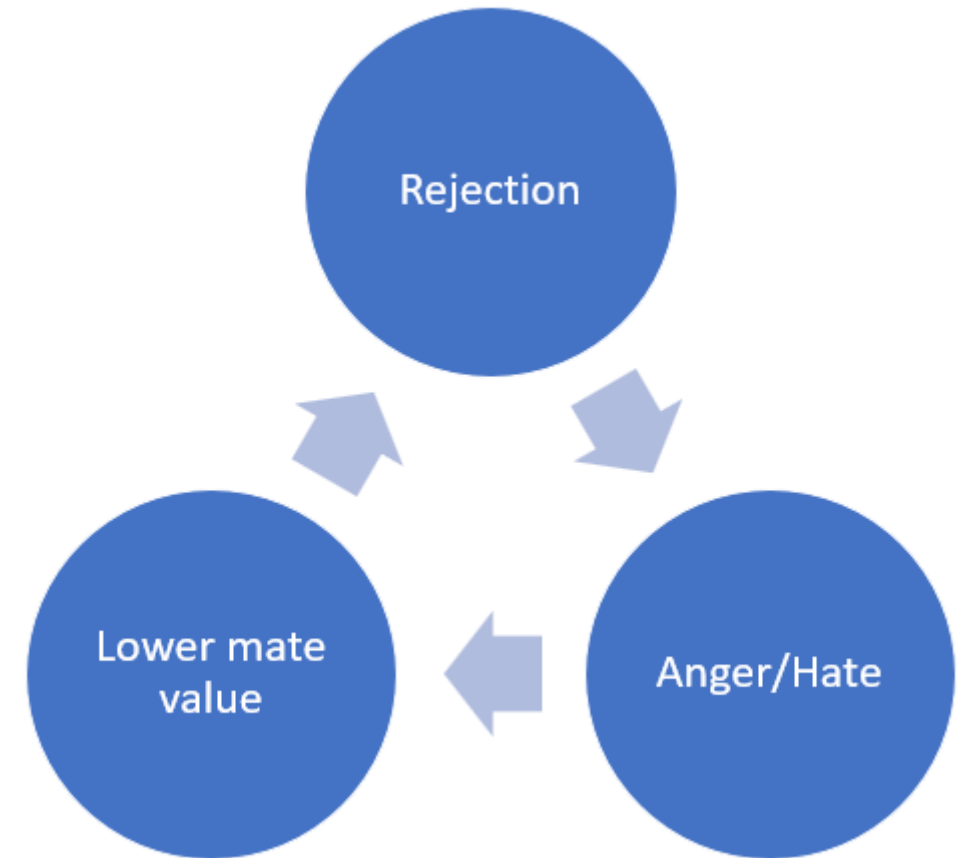
- Rejection-misogyny downward spiral

SEX

When Searching for a Mate Breeds Misogyny or Misandry

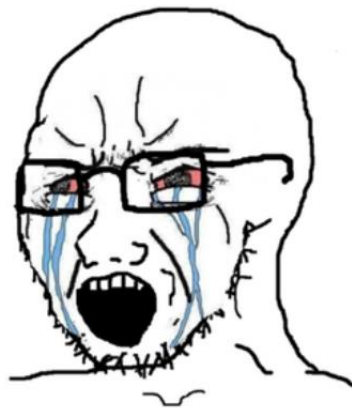
Escaping the cycle of rejection and opposite-sex hate.

Updated June 21, 2023 | Reviewed by Davia Sills



Treatment and intervention considerations

- John: "I asked Kelly out, but she rejected me. But I ain't mad, she was an ugly bitch anyway. It's her loss!"
- Peter: "Cope. You obviously wanted to date her. Otherwise you wouldn't have asked her out."



- I was rejected
 - But it isn't that big a deal
 - There will be other opportunities
 - It's not the end of the world
 - It says more about them than me
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- You were rejected
 - It is a big deal
 - There won't be any opportunities
 - It's over
 - You are unlovable, just accept it

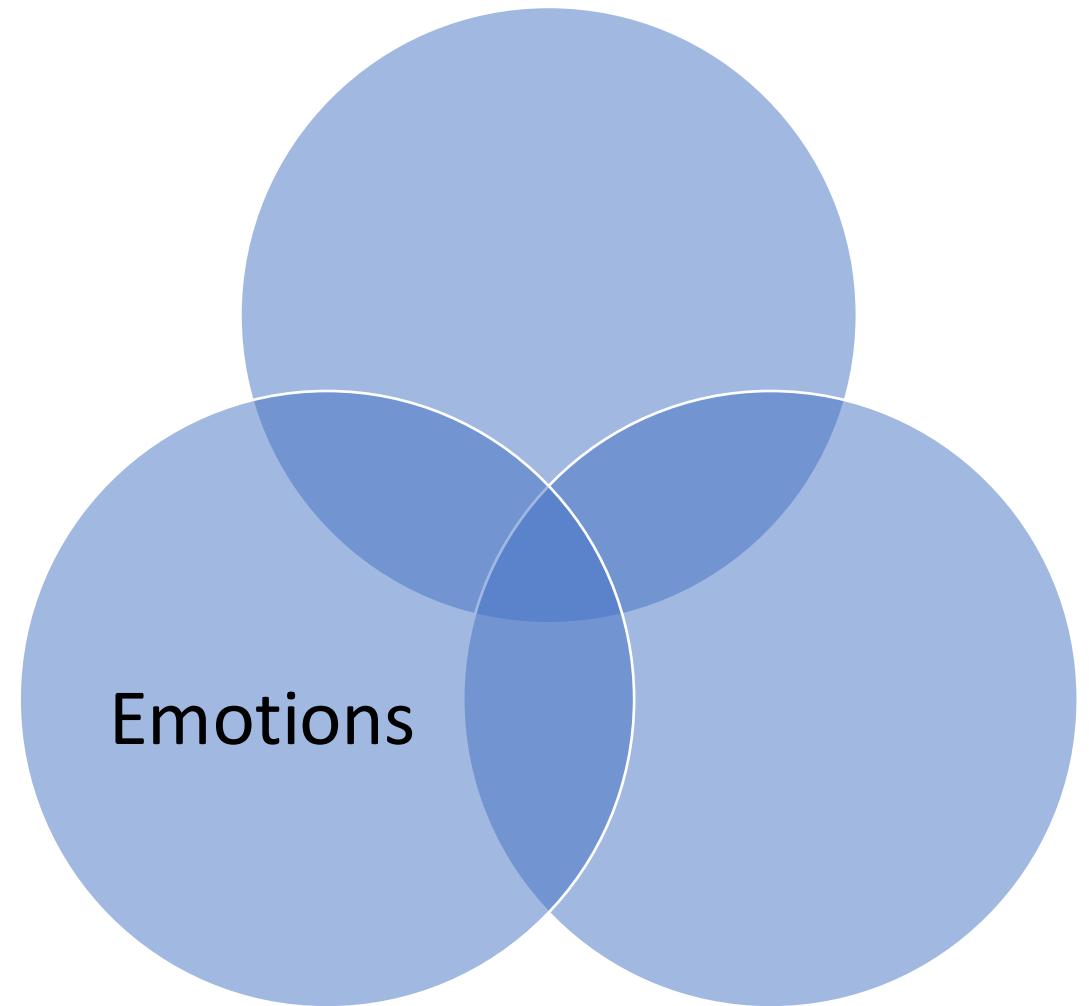
Treatment and intervention considerations

Emotions

- Anger
- Bitterness
- Need for “redemption”
- Hopelessness
- Threat (Victimhood)

Emotionally overregulated

- Cathartic expression online (disinhibition effect)
- Alexithymia



Treatment and intervention considerations

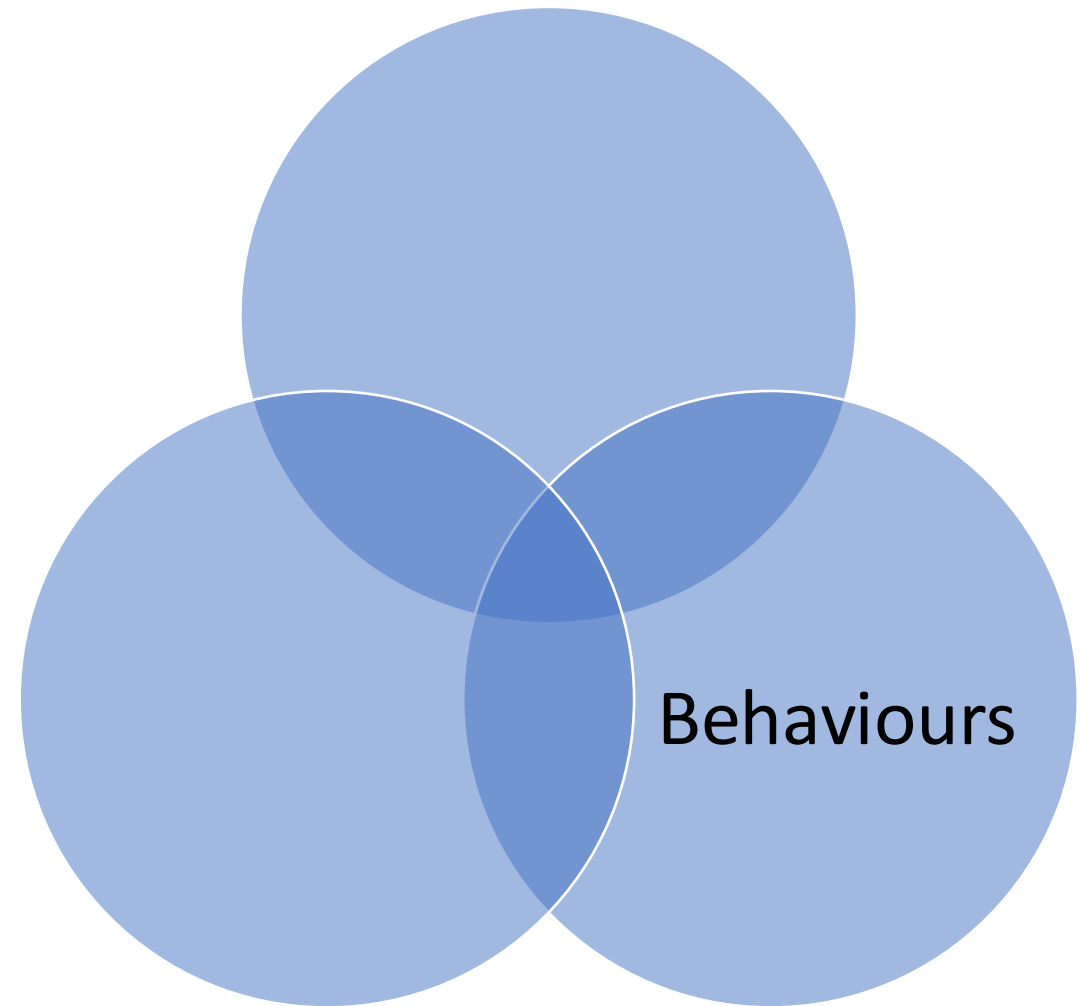
High internet usage

- Social withdrawal (Hikikomori)
- Lack of social status striving / building
- Forum use (Crabs in a bucket)

Online trolling

- Lashing out “shitposting”

Overlap with depression/anxiety



Work in progress

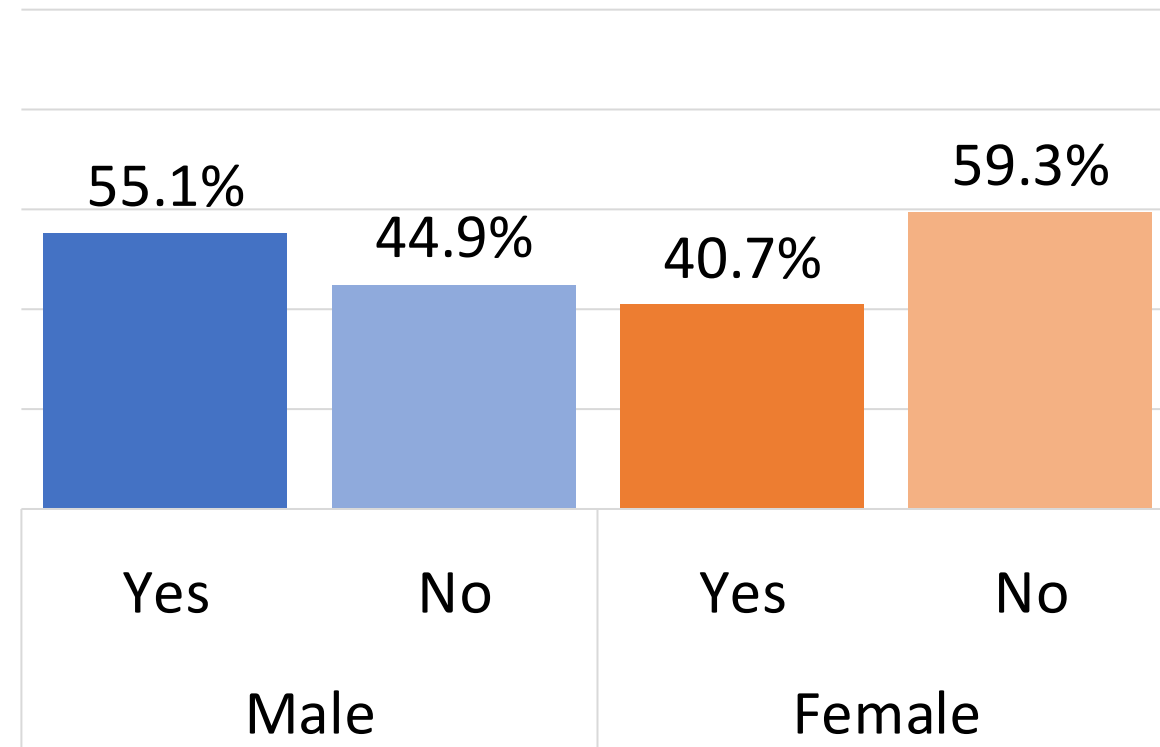
- Longitudinal vs cross-sectional
- Intervention (potential to piggy-back)
- Incel™ vs incel adjacent
- Training packages
- Formulation paper
- Beyond incels...



Work in progress

- “Thinking back about the times in your adult life when you have been single... Have you ever felt a **profound and enduring** state of unhappiness, uneasiness, and discontent about your singlehood?”

$N = 2,635$ (for illustration)



Work in progress

- Longitudinal vs cross-sectional
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