Reconsidering Trauma and Symbolic Wounds in Times of Online Misogyny and Platforms

Abstract: This article provides an exploratory discussion of the misogynist online incel community and its discourses around mental health. Incels' discussion of mental health conditions, trauma and victimhood is outlined in relation to Allen Meek's development of the concept of the symbolic wound. It is argued that incels' alleged trauma constitutes the construction of a symbolic wound as a marker of group identity as well as a means of shocking and potentially traumatising others. The concept of the symbolic wound is further developed through the psychoanalytic notion of dis/inhibition which shows how incels are torn between modes of desiring and symbolically destroying women. The collective identity of the symbolic wound and its (non)-relation to trauma can thus be more fragile and contradictory than has been discussed in the literature so far.
Keywords: Trauma, symbolic wound, incels, dis/inhibition

Introduction

The term 'trauma' is often voiced in relation to contemporary online cultures and politics. In light of our age of the information overload, constant stimuli and messages on social media, 24/7 engagement with digital technologies, Sigmund Freud's classic definition of trauma has lost nothing of its usefulness as an analytical prism: 'an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way' (Freud, 1961: 275). While there are many different conceptualisations of and debates around trauma in psychoanalysis and beyond, all traditions agree that trauma is characterised by defences against the traumatic event or experience that aim to block them from consciousness. In that sense, trauma is by definition something that is in tension with representation. The human subject does not fully recall the event that qualifies as traumatic. The word 'trauma' gives name to experiences, to something

that was previously thought of as repressed, unthinkable, unshareable or inexpressible. Yet, as trauma studies have shown for many decades, there is always some connection between trauma and questions of identity, representation, memory, and the discursive or textual (Kaplan, 2005). I take the above definition by Freud as a starting point for the arguments of this article as I critically explore how the incel community makes use of trauma narratives. I also develop the notion of trauma in relation to questions of collective identity, through the work of Allen Meek (2016) and Bruno Bettelheim (1955) on the notion of the symbolic wound. Trauma has often been conceptualised as a one-directional process which hits a passive individual. In critical response to such tendencies, Meek utilized the concept of the symbolic wound in order to inquire into how trauma (and associated ideas) become highly dynamic in digital culture, while nonetheless being able to enable a sense of collective identity. As he put it:

> What the term "symbolic wound" potentially contributes to our understanding of this shifting dynamic of suffering, perpetrating and witnessing is that wounds have symbolic currency, transmitting cultural meanings about social membership. (Meek, 2016: 104)

The article, then, considers trauma in relation to incels (a misogynist male online community) which implicitly and explicitly discuss that they have allegedly been traumatised and suffer from mental health conditions because of the general state of the world and women in particular. I maintain that the term 'trauma' is ill-fitted when it comes to the incel community and that they (ab)use it for purposes of constructing a symbolic wound as a marker of collective identity. I then introduce the psychoanalytic notion of dis/inhibition (Author, 2022) to show how the 'symbolic wound'-identity of the incel is contradictory and characterised by a simultaneous desire for holding onto and letting go of it.

The discussion in this short article is primarily exploratory and theoretically driven rather than empirical. This is done to give space to the conceptual development of the symbolic wound and how it relates to trauma (or its lack) and toxic communities which tend to be overlooked in trauma studies. The piece discusses some empirical data from Reddit and the 'Braincels' subreddit which was banned in 2019. As a result, the data is no longer accessible.

The original URLs of the quoted posts have nonetheless been included. The data, which was publicly accessible until the ban, was collected as part of a larger qualitative research project on incels and online misogyny (Author, 2022). That project did not consider questions of trauma. Informed user consent was not obtained as the data was public (Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Fuchs, 2018). Posts from various subreddits were organised into themes and analysed by drawing on scholarship in psychoanalysis and media studies.

Trauma and the symbolic wound as psychoanalytic concepts and psychoanalysis in general offer useful theoretical and methodological approaches to digital media, online platforms and phenomena such as incels (Author, 2022). Psychoanalysis troubles commonly held understandings of reason and irrationality, truth and fiction, and the known and the unknown. It is particularly useful because it places an emphasis on messy and contradictory modes of how individuals are implicated by and respond to social forces. It shifts the attention from rationality to contradictions, incoherencies, ambivalent, and seemingly nonsensical experiences, thoughts, fantasies and expressions. It also consists of a unique theory about the relationship between fantasy and reality that pays attention to emotional and affective investments in discourses, images and ideas (Author, 2019). While often taking film and literature as its examples and case studies, scholars in trauma theory have also begun to investigate digital media and the internet in particular (Meek, 2016; Richardson, 2018; Pinchevski, 2019; Menyhért, 2020). The digital, then, lends itself to psychoanalytic interrogations in particular ways, because networked devices and platforms are becoming ever closer to human bodies and identities insofar as they offer individuals unique and customized ways of expressing themselves, communicating with others and generally relating to the social realm (Author, 2019, 2022). A psychoanalytic approach stresses the unconscious, affective and contradictory moments and modes that shape and reveal themselves across digital technologies today.

The Symbolic Wound

The late trauma scholar Allen Meek discussed trauma and the media in a variety of contexts (e.g. Meek, 2010, 2016, 2018). Departing from Roheim's (1950) and later Bettelheim's (1995) concept of the 'symbolic wound' as a form of collective identity that is based on suffering, Meek (2016) explored the idea of collective trauma and how it manifests itself in contemporary digital culture. The notion of the symbolic wound that can be used for self-transformation, collective identification and group participation may act as a corrective to the dominant idea of trauma as necessarily rendering a subject passive and as being inherently negative, stressful, and disempowering. Trauma can lead to the emergence of new communities and collectives, as we have seen with the Black Lives Matter or #MeToo protests. For Meek, images of violence and suffering 'can not only distress or desensitize but also enhance and empower those who look at them' (Meek, 2016: 92). While he focussed on how the circulation of images and events that relate to trauma via social media can lead to progressive and healing moments for groups, I wish to draw on his ideas in a slightly different manner in order to discuss trauma that is mobilised or transformed in a destructive way. I therefore draw on Meek's development of Bruno Bettelheim's notion of the symbolic wound. For Bettelheim (1955), the symbolic wound originally referred to 'the cultural practice of subincision' (Meek, 2016: 96) by certain groups, such as Aboriginal peoples in Australia (Roheim, 1950), which takes place in order to enhance feelings of symbolic group membership and individual self-transformation. The concept of the symbolic wound thus encompasses actual wounding which serves 'higher' symbolic purposes. Bettelheim argued that the self-inflicted violence of those practices could be seen as traumatic to onlookers or outsiders, but what unites an external observer with a member of a people or community would be an experience of shared stress in undergoing / watching the act of subincision. This idea of shared stress that revolves around a symbolic wound which serves purposes of group identity, and which is explicitly linked to violence and trauma, is developed further in the next section through analysis of the incel community. While Meek primarily discussed how the symbolic wound comes to be expressed through distressing images (e.g. video

footage of violence shared by #BlackLivesMatter activists on social media), the notion is discussed in relation to textual narratives in this article. In drawing on the notion of the symbolic wound, the question explored here is not so much what constitutes as trauma, a question that is regularly explored in trauma theory (Meek, 2016; Pinchevski, 2019), but rather how assuming a particular identity is 'shaped by interior processes of imaginative investment' (Meek, 2016: 95). To that end, as Meek highlights, 'shock and trauma can also be a "gain", marking a transition into a new identity and increasing the power of the body and the group to sustain itself despite experiencing physical or psychological distress' (Meek, 2016: 103). Yet, as will be argued, those processes always remain fragile and contradictory.

Incels and Alleged Trauma

Incels, short for 'involuntary celibate', are a diverse and disparate community of highly misogynistic, anti-feminist men. Incels believe that the majority of 'attractive' cis women, who they call 'Stacys', are only interested in 'alpha' males (named 'Chads'). As a result, incels are allegedly destined to be forever alone for they cannot compete in the dating 'game' in the age of hook-up apps and social media platforms (Ging, 2017). Incels make active use of a kind of therapeutic vocabulary and frame themselves as ugly victims who suffer from mental health issues such as social inhibition, depression or anxiety (Author, 2022). They specifically use discourses around trauma and victimhood as means to rationalise their destructive and hateful narratives.[1] They have co-opted notions of trauma, resilience and empowerment which are used for their own purposes (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Incels often discuss their particular forms of suffering through terminology that evokes depression, isolation and alienation. The following post may illustrate this:

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[1] In discussing incels and trauma, I do not mean to excuse or rationalise their behaviour. The explicit and implicit use of the term does not mean that incels are necessarily and actually traumatised. Yet, at the same time, many incels detail mental health problems and specific conditions. However, it remains unverifiable if they all actually suffer from them and I maintain that trauma in its implicit usage by the community is too strong a term to describe their states of mind.

i want to feel wanted
i'm tired of being the one who has to be the dog begging, requesting the acceptance of a woman (of which never happens anyways). i spent years approaching girls, sniffing at them looking for a scrap of attention, only to be ignored and have to crawl back into a dark corner alone. sometimes they make it clear that i'm a bother and that i need to go away. oh it's so sad when you watch a fictional film of this happening to one dog, but when it happens to me in real life it doesn't deserve an ounce of sympathy. and if i cry at night because of my hunger pangs i'm told to shut up and smacked even further.
i'm 29 now. i will never feel wanted, let alone accepted. i will go through my entire life and i will never feel wanted by a girl. my whole life i will never experience it. do you understand that? a woman can barely go a day without the attention of feeling wanted. I WILL NEVER EXPERIENCE THAT MY ENTIRE LIFE. And you have the gall to try and dismiss my problems as though they are nothing and then even attack me for complaining about it? you cannot even go through a day of my life.[2]

Many other posts mention similar sentiments. Incels also often explicitly name mental health conditions they suffer from, such as depression, bipolar, borderline, or autism (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020; Broyd et al., 2022). In this context, Grace Sharkey has argued that incels exhibit infantile characteristics and often seem to lack the ability to come to terms with social change or their own agency in the world (Sharkey, 2022). Incels also regularly discuss the option of suicide, or as they term it to 'lie down and rot'. The world of incels is thus one of deep-seated pessimism, despair, hopelessness and fatality, symptoms one would associate with forms of clinical depression (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020). They are strengthened through the affirmation and circulation of the same narratives over and over again: incels are doomed and women, amongst other factors, have made their situation worse. The various mental health issues that incels discuss are responded to in two ways: by asserting that women should see and form relationships with incels, or by claiming that everything is doomed and incels are destined to be forever alone (a state they term the 'black pill'). It is of course impossible to verify to what extent incels really suffer from mental health issues or trauma, but I wish to take them seriously while nonetheless maintaining a critical stance.

Zooming out of the deeply personal narratives that incels often share, the figure of the incel, then, is constructed as one that has been left behind in neoliberalism while women and feminism became hegemonic and now allegedly control various positions of power in society,

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[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/Braincels/comments/c6cqsa/i_want_to_feel_wanted/

particularly the 'dating game' (Author, 2022). Such forms of identity construction are also linked to recent changes in neoliberalism. As Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser argue:

> Neoliberalism's social care deficit means there is no social support, only antisocial support. incels are mutated entrepreneurs—men of action, turning others into instruments, but now subtracting the creative from 'creative destruction.' Their techniques of disruption are increasingly techniques of pure negation. (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019: 5020)

As Bratich and Banet-Weiser go on to discuss, the increasing precariousness of neoliberalism ever since the 2008 financial crisis across many parts of the world has meant a renewed sense of instability and insecurity in relation to job security, welfare support, or rising costs of living for many individuals, not only men (see also Gerbaudo, 2018). Yet, some men respond to the increased pressure, anxiety and hopelessness they may be under by turning towards women and feminism as an alleged cause of such states. Debbie Ging has noted that incels and related communities of the manosphere are often cultural rather than political, as they focus on the personal: life experiences, relationships and mental health, rather than 'collective political action' (2017: 11). This may be the case, but I argue that there is a second layer to a community such as incels where apparent mental health issues are subsequently utilised and weaponised in order to set up an identity of toxicity and fatalism. Some further data can illustrate the explicit and implicit use of trauma by incels. 'Imagine being EXCITED for the future, no traumas, no worries holding you back.,' one user writes[3], 'I fucking hate myself for being such a loser compared to my brothers. I've accepted that I'll never be as good as them and am haunted by memories of them picking on me and thinking of me as no more that [sic] a little annoyance.'[4], writes another user. 'If i really think to myself you cant [sic] get no woman whatsoever, it makes me think life isnt [sic] worth living'[5], another incel post reads. Incels implicitly and at times explicitly frame their (sexual) failures and general hopelessness as traumatic. This is done both literally, as seen above, by mentioning the word 'trauma' or metaphorically by claiming injury, suffering, or other

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[3] (www.reddit.com/r/Braincels/comments/c6ffwa/daydreaming_about_the_life_i_would_have_wanted/)
[4] (www.reddit.com/r/Braincels/comments/98hz2h/my_chad_brothers/)
[5] (www.reddit.com/r/Braincels/comments/997w8l/the_advice_on_just_giving_up_youll_never_get/).

injustices that amount to the presence of a symbolic wound; all of which have allegedly been brought onto them by others, mostly cis women. Incels specifically employ notions of *victimhood* and self-pity and claim that they are the victims of female (sexual) empowerment, feminism and other social trends in Western societies (Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019). For them, the symbolic wound is a constitutive marker of their identity and without it, membership to the community is barred.

Trauma theory has often focussed on how trauma becomes collectively felt, negotiated, or repressed (Meek, 2016). It has been used as a concept in order to empathically and carefully inquire into the horrors that a people, or specific groups within societies have suffered from. The deployment of trauma by the incel community presents us with challenges, because incels seem not to be traumatised in the way that other groups are. For the most part, they have not repressed particular events or are unable to speak about them, as the Freudian (1961) definition of trauma reproduced in the beginning of this piece entails. Nonetheless, I claim it may be useful to analyse their narratives and ideology in relation to trauma because they use it purposefully to construct a particular masculinity that may be shaped by mental health issues but subsequently becomes characterised by toxicity and hatred. As I go on to discuss, incels' use of therapeutic language that evokes trauma, constitutes a different sort of symbolic identity than commonly researched in trauma studies. This perspective therefore makes a contribution to the field by highlighting how trauma and the symbolic wound can become weaponised. There has been some criticism of trauma theory being used as a universal concept (Radstone, 2007), or as aestheticizing trauma (Kansteiner & Weilnböck, 2010). In focussing on the implicit usage of the term by incels, a further perspective can be opened up that responds to those critiques and shows how (the language of) trauma is co-opted by different groups than normally discussed in scholarship. Additionally, in drawing on and developing the concept of the symbolic wound, I show how the incel identity that is based on notions of trauma and suffering as well as toxicity, remains contradictory and unstable – like any human identity, as psychoanalysis holds (e.g. Freud, 1949).

Incels illustrate how narratives around trauma, the symbolic wound and mental health can be used in particular damaging form for purposes of 'self-transformation and group participation' (Meek, 2016: 101). The perverse flipside to incels is that they often seek to traumatise others through their symbolic violence which has at times led to actual violence, such as mass shootings. Such practices are not dissimilar from those of terrorist groups like ISIS / Daesh that became infamous for sharing highly edited propaganda and execution videos online. In that sense, both incels and terrorists 'participate in a cultural system of image consumption attracted and repelled by shock and voyeuristic fascination' (Meek, 2016: 106). Incels use a similar regime of shock in their narratives of self-hatred, victimisation and misogyny. They *know* that 'normies', 'betas', 'Chads' and 'Stacys' may read their posts. Such narratives, and how they and misogyny generally are also visible on more mainstream platforms like Twitter and YouTube (O'Donnell, 2020; Patrick, 2022), may certainly be regarded as traumatic or 'triggering' for victims of rape, stalking or sexual harassment.

Many times, incel trauma is merely used to mimic what it actually entails. It becomes a collective idea (symbolic wound) around which incels form. In their endless discussions about the alleged horrible state of the world, their sense of trauma is both represented and *worked through* in the psychoanalytic sense, as incels acknowledge and value each other's experiences, and constantly (and perhaps compulsively) *repeated* as specific alleged traumatic incidents are narrated time and time again. 'Traumatic images, therefore, need not be understood as the literal trace of an event but can involve role-playing, imagination and fantasy shaped by' memories and desires, as Meek writes (2016: 99). A related question would be if the (symbolic) trauma of incels is heightened and 'transmitted' (Pinchevski, 2019) through their online fora and social media posts. Amit Pinchevski (2019, see also his article in this Crosscurrents section) has argued that media technologies transmit trauma in different ways, depending on the technology. In the case of the fora that incels frequent, they create particular archives in which they use a kind of language of testimony to record their own narratives. The usage of Reddit and other platforms is particularly noteworthy here as incels seek to post their own life histories and views about cis women into existence. The fact that

they post text, images, videos, or links is significant because such acts help to further constitute a multimedia universe of toxic masculinity. They turn their narratives into data which remains there for everyone to see.

Beyond Trauma: Dis/Inhibition as Defensive Power

The concept of trauma and how it is used in trauma studies often implies passivity, shock, or individuals or groups being overwhelmed (Meek, 2016; Pinchevski, 2019). Trauma constitutes 'wounds to social identity' (Alexander, 2012: 2), but what if trauma becomes the very marker of social identity in the case of the symbolic wound? The particular way in which incels claim to be traumatised and then subsequently weaponise it against others can be further explored through the psychoanalytic concept of dis/inhibition (Author, 2022). It also serves to further enrich the notion of the symbolic wound by paying attention to the psychodynamics and forms of interactions that take place within the incel community as its members constantly struggle with and negotiate the 'symbolic wound'-identity of the incel. The symbolic wound is an identity that ritualistically and periodically needs to reassert its core marker of identity. Recall that Bettelheim (1955) developed the concept based on Roheim's (1950) anthropological work on the subincision rites of Aboriginal peoples. Meek's discussion of the concept, while he points to the shifting and unstable qualities, also implies a stabilising function as the symbolic wound serves an 'affirmative value' (Meek, 2016: 101) for the group. Yet, psychoanalysis holds that identities are never completely stable or coherent. The particular construction, circulation and validation of incel masculinity is fused with the digital insofar as incels re-tell and repeat their alleged trauma, but they also embrace the incel identity as symbolic wound and a kind of collective response to their individual suffering. This identity is made up of specific building blocks which are rigorously defined and policed amongst the community (Ging, 2017). This expresses itself, for instance, in dynamics where incels regularly revoke the incel identity from certain users who allegedly do not qualify, because they lack the symbolic wound and are not ugly, depressed, suicidal, or unsuccessful enough (Author, 2022). Many of the narratives from incels can be described as *disinhibited*

(Suler, 2004) where the men engage in toxic, hateful and destructive fantasies of what women are allegedly like. The internet and their respective communities (for example in specific fora) enable such feelings of disinhibition to come to the fore as moderation guidelines are lax and forms of fetishistic transgression are part and parcel of the incel identity (Krüger, 2021). However, such moments of online transgression can only occur because there are also moments of inhibition within them. For Freud, the concept of inhibition denotes a conscious or unconscious turning away from a situation so as to avoid feelings of unpleasure, anxiety, or shame (Freud, 1949). Incels themselves use the term 'high inhib' to describe their forms of inhibition (e.g. anxiety or the inability to talk to women), yet they are completely disinhibited online: shameless, agentic, assertive. Incels talk time and time again of their hatred of Stacys and women in general, yet also articulate a strong desire to be recognised and loved by women, as shown in the post quoted earlier that is titled 'I want to feel wanted'. To reproduce parts of the quote once more, the user writes that he:

> will never feel wanted, let alone accepted. i will go through my entire life and i will never feel wanted by a girl. my whole life i will never experience it. do you understand that? a woman can barely go a day without the attention of feeling wanted.

Such dynamics can be named dynamics of dis/inhibition as they show the contradictions between desire and destruction that are at the core of the symbolic wound of the incel. The incel articulates a strong sense of loneliness and alienation which constitute moments of self-inhibition. The user pessimistically shuts down his own agency in writing that he will 'never' get to be with a woman in his 'whole life'. Yet, such dynamics are immediately countered with the claim that all women always get attention and are desired by others – a moment of disinhibition through which a sense of defensive agency is acquired by claiming how or what all women are allegedly like. Such narratives evoke the childish tone of incels identified by Sharkey (2022).

Such modes are further illuminated through the fact that any glint of optimism or hope expressed is very often shut down by other incels through reinforcing the black pill worldview:

'It's over', as one user writes, to which another simply replies: 'It never began' (see Krüger, 2021). Unlike the progressive groups Meek (2016) wrote about in relation to the symbolic wound (#MeToo or #BLM), the symbolic wound of incels is one of contradiction and one that is assumed and rejected at the same time. Incels dis/inhibit themselves on many levels but most fundamentally by articulating a desire for recognition and love which remains, to them and perhaps others, a fantasy. What if it *really* happened? What if incels really 'ascended', as they call it? What if they really became Chads? What if they were *still* not desired then? In falling back on the symbolic wound of aggrieved entitlement, incels are able to act out a form of symbolic power online that is characterised by dis/inhibition but remains firmly inhibited beyond the internet. It is the contradictory identity of being an incel that constitutes a comforting symbolic wound without having to make, or being unable to due to mental health issues, any changes to one's life.

Conclusion

In this speculative and perhaps slightly provocative article, I have developed the concept of the symbolic wound as a marker of group identity to show how it is grappled with by the incel community. Rather than being a stable form of identity shaped by trauma around which individuals can assemble, a further psychoanalytic discussion via the concept of dis/inhibition in relation to incels shows that their symbolic wound remains ambiguous. Incels are trapped between wishing to affirm it and leaving it behind altogether. This is perhaps something that unites them on some level with the more progressive groups mentioned by Meek such as the #MeToo and #BLM movements and further research could explore such connections.

Susannah Radstone has stressed that Western cultures lack adequate responses to trauma. Mediated representations of trauma, for instance, do not *contain* it, in the psychoanalytic sense. In the context of trauma, containing refers to a process of holding, acknowledging, and making sense of trauma, not in order to leave it behind altogether but to live with it. For Radstone, there is 'a defensive and fragmented psycho-social culture that lacks adequate containment and within which authority, responsibility and agency have

become increasingly complex and diffuse' (Radstone, 2000: 91). While Allen Meek (2016)

pointed to the liberatory and progressive functions of trauma and the symbolic wound, the

examples I have discussed in this article point to instances where trauma is misappropriated.

While there is a greater receptivity to trauma and testimony, real containment needs to result

in change so that future traumas are minimised and some symbolic wounds won't form in the

first place.

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