

Slippages in the Application of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Case Study of Incels

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Abstract

Although an important theoretical tool within the field of critical study of men and masculinities, mishandling of Connell's theory of multiple masculinities and subsequent developments frequently overlooks the relational and legitimizing components central to the hegemonic masculine construct, producing conceptual 'slippage'. This case study demonstrates such misapplication, examining four investigations within the emerging field of research concerning the antifeminist masculine performances and ideological constructs associated with involuntary celibates (incels). Each study lacks acknowledgement and demonstration of the political mechanics of relational legitimacy that define hegemonic masculinity, producing, instead, trait analyses of non-hegemonic dominant or dominating masculine behaviour resting on fixed, often toxic character types. As novel and emergent communities of men receive scholarly attention, it is important researchers heed repeated attempts to guide correct use of theory by engaging with the history and evolution of employed concepts.

Keywords

Incels, Hegemonic Masculinity, Slippage

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Introduction

The theory of multiple masculinities remains a cornerstone of the critical study of men and masculinities. This framework provides a sociological lens of gendered power employed across countless academic fields, analyzing numerous professions and settings (Messerschmidt 2012; Wedgewood 2009). In addition to a structurally hierarchical modelling of inter-relational competitive categories of masculinity, Connell's (1987, 1995) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity serves as a useful tool to understand the processes involved in unequal gender dynamics through the political mechanisms of relativity and legitimization. Whilst powerful, frequent misapplication of the concept has produced trait-based analyses of masculine behavior and hegemonic ideals resting often on fixed toxic character types (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Flood 2002; Messerschmidt 2018). Such misunderstanding results in the labelling of non-hegemonic dominant, or dominating, masculine performances as hegemonic, a term specifically intended to describe masculinities that legitimate unequal gender relations between men and women and among men (Messerschmidt 2019). This analysis aims to contribute to the work of several gender scholars including James Messerschmidt (2012, 2016, 2018), Mimi Schippers (2007) and Christine Beasley (2008), highlighting that this conceptual error continues as emerging male identities are analyzed through the lens of gender, demonstrating misapplication within the growing field of research of involuntarily celibate men, known as incels.

This novel, predominantly online homosocial subculture associated with extreme acts of mass violence has at its core a rigid sociosexual hierarchy, constructing immutable types of men in relation to their (hetero)sexual appeal based on stereotypical characteristics. Such violence resulting from the internalization of an extreme gendered ideology naturally draws and rightly requires academic analyses. Yet, as this case study will show, when ideology surrounding performances of incel masculinity is examined, dominant and dominating non-hegemonic masculine presentations of sexually aggressive and successful men, reflected in the gendered incel construct of 'Chad', have been misunderstood as hegemonic. Extreme, violent, dominant, and dominating behavior is not necessarily hegemonic, nor evidence of the legitimization of unequal gender relations. Failure to demonstrate how or if these traits legitimize unequal gender relations result in 'slippage' (Beasley 2008) in which fixed, often toxic, masculine character types are assumed as hegemonic. As the emerging field of inquiry into incels develops, we must ensure accurate framing and interrogation of the gendered constructs and related masculine performances that result, especially as calls for securitization of the incel identity increase.

This case study begins by first introducing the incel community, outlining the background and ideology of this predominantly digital, heterosexual, and homosocial identity, detailing current academic positions and lenses of inquiry, including the fields of gender and the critical study of men and masculinities. Following this, the conceptual history and subsequent development of the hegemonic masculine construct is outlined, first discussing the inception and composition of Connell's (1987, 1995) theory of

multiple masculinities and later reformulation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity by [Connell and Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#). Subsequent conceptual clarifications are then considered, stressing the importance in differentiating hegemonic masculinity from non-hegemonic dominant or dominating masculinities, via qualifying attributes of relationality and legitimacy inherent only to the hegemonic form. Discussions of conceptual slippage ([Beasley 2008](#); [Messerschmidt 2018](#)) are noted, describing the tendency for the concept of hegemonic masculinity to be incorrectly used to describe non-hegemonic masculine performances that contain toxic, often aggressive and/or violent personality or character traits, yet do not demonstrate the way in which such characteristics legitimate unequal gender relations. This conceptual difference, initially highlighted by gender scholars such as [Beasley \(2008\)](#) and [Schippers \(2007\)](#), and reiterated on numerous occasions by [Messerschmidt \(2012, 2016, 2018, 2019\)](#), remains crucial to understanding and elucidating the significance of hegemonic masculinity in maintaining unequal gender relations relative to non-hegemonic masculinities that do not, ensuring the conceptual framework remains salient and coherent.

Four empirical investigations of incels that have applied hegemonic masculinity in various ways are then examined through this lens of conceptual slippage. Each utilizes hegemonic masculinity to investigate incel toxic gendered discourse, ideology, and action, yet fail to incorporate the legitimating, and to some extent relational, qualities core to the concept – producing frameworks and resulting analyzes which fail to appreciate and explain how identified masculine performances and constructs reinforce inequality between men and women, or among men. Instead, these studies offer hegemonic masculinity as a specific type of man; usually violent, aggressive, and expressing sexual prowess or dominance. In offering a fixed, trait-based masculine caricature, without demonstrating how any of these characteristics affect unequal gender relations, these investigations represent the stubborn trait problem in masculinities literature, noted for over a decade, persisting despite repeated attempts to guide appropriate use of this foundational concept within critical study of men and masculinities.

The conclusion of this piece highlights the necessity to familiarize with the wider body of multiple masculinities literature when examining incel masculinity and associated constructs, ensuring that theoretical frameworks which incorporate hegemonic masculinity, as a means by which to describe and interrogate gendered behavior, do so in such a way as to avoid any conceptual slippage, maintaining academic currency and congruency ([Messerschmidt 2018](#)). Further, the oft overlooked nuance between non-hegemonic masculinities; dominant, dominating or otherwise, and those that relationally legitimize unequal gender relations becomes especially important when analyzing, and interrogating, emerging extreme masculine ideologies.

The Incel Identity

The following provides an initial and brief overview of the incel community, the ideology that undergirds the identity, and the subsequent and ongoing research related

to their actions and discourse. Although male involuntary celibacy is not a particularly novel phenomenon (Brooks 2021; Symons 1979), the male heterosexual identity of incels at the heart of this critique has relatively recent origins (Ging 2019). Emerging in the early 2010s, the incel community arose through digital platforms, message boards, and gaming culture (Stijelja and Mishara 2023; Van Valkenburgh 2021). Incels primarily coalesce around collective experiences of unfulfilled heterosexual sexual and romantic desire, as well as social isolation, rejection, adverse childhood experiences, deleterious mental health and neurodivergence (Daly and Reed 2021; Delaney, Pollet, and Cook 2023; Moskalenko et al. 2022).

This homosocial subculture primarily centers around antifeminist, misogynous ideology, situated within gender-essentialist biological determinism (Thorburn, Powell, and Chambers 2022). The community attribute their experiences of a prolonged lack of emotional and physical intimacy at the feet of purportedly hypergamous, genetically hardwired women, ostensibly facilitated by an unjust, feminist-usurped, gynocentric social order (Sugiura 2021). Incel ideological discourse obtains its validity and rigidity through radical dualism (Jaki et al. 2019), as a closed-off ingroup critical and vitriolic towards wider society, with concentrated animosity towards women. This adversarial positioning is embedded within the ‘blackpill’, a mutant offspring of ‘redpill’ philosophy inherent to other digital reactionary antifeminist movements bound within a loosely collective body known as ‘the manosphere’ (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Appropriated from the film *The Matrix*, taking the redpill in manosphere culture is to awaken to the reality of an unjust gendered reality, weighted in favor of women. While there are variations of this purported truth across the manosphere, the central tenets concern feminism and women in general as malevolent forces in a gynocentric and sociosexually hierarchical society, in which biological determinism (genetics and evolutionary biology) drive dating and mating behavior (Rothermel 2023; Vallerga and Zurbiggen 2022). The blackpill evolution of this philosophy central to incel belief evokes a nihilistic reaction; accepting the reality of a gynocentric society installed by feminism and mating dictated by a deterministic hierarchy, while refuting agentic capacity, proclaiming a defeatist attitude towards this social structuring. As a neoliberal (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019) technology of self (Burton 2022; Foucault 1988), the blackpill requires those ingesting to internalize victimhood and fatalism (Cottee, 2020) to construct identity. The world is understood through a blinkered, one-dimensional lens of marketized sociosexual interaction in which access and success is defined solely by physical determinants such as height, scapula breadth and facial congruencies, followed closely by material and social capitals (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2020). Within this sexual marketplace, incels place last, lacking the sexual, material, and social capital to affirm themselves as an attractive product, ubiquitously overlooked and ignored by women.

Based on these ideological permutations, incels rationalize expressions of misogyny and actualize gendered performances of symbolic, digital, and, on occasion, physical violence against women and men. Responsible for preventing incels from accessing the objects they seek most; sex and romantic intimacy, women take the brunt of this assault

as central antagonists, categorized into various tiers of attractiveness (e.g., ‘Stacy’, ‘Becky’, ‘landwhale’). These groupings are based upon adherence to stereotyped gendered perceptions of idealized performances of objectified and sexualized femininity (Menzie 2020). Men also receive systematic categorical ordering through a sociosexual hierarchy. ‘Chads’ embody the sexually successful, omnipotently attractive ‘alpha male’ coveted by all women, effortlessly engaging in sociosexual relations with any women they choose. Below Chad, ‘normies’ represent the majority of heterosexual men; average looking and able to obtain some romantic intimacy, albeit less frequently than Chad (O’Malley and Helm 2022). Incels place themselves at the bottom of this grading system; ‘subhumans’ irrevocably priced out of the dating sphere by their low to nonexistent sexual market value (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019). Lacking the attributes required to succeed in this marketplace, incels perform fatalistic resignation, channeling energy into the discursive derision of the sexually superior via congress predominantly in incel-specific forums (Cottee, 2020). While most rhetoric is contained in these homosocial spaces, incel community members and ideology also permeate heterosocial mainstream social media platforms and digital spaces, engaging in a variety of deviant behaviors (Brooks, Russo-Batterham, and Blake 2022; Ging 2017; Solea and Sugiura 2023).

Although mainly a digital manifestation (Jaki et al. 2019), the incel subculture has come under increased academic scrutiny following accumulating instances of associated real-world violence (O’Donnell and Shor 2022; Tastenhoye et al. 2022). As these acts of violence arose from a subculture with a structured and radical ideology, much debate regarding the classification of incel ensued. Some scholars question the validity of incel as a political movement (e.g., Cottee, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020), acknowledging the complexity of labelling incels as an extremist group, supposing associated violence as a form of liberating revenge rather than change potential. Contrasting perspectives assert incels as a terrorist group (e.g., Zimmerman, Ryan, and Duriesmith 2018), with positions suggesting a male supremacist collective (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021; Roose and Cook 2022), a “single issue terrorist group” (O’Donnell and Shor 2022, 12) and a “trans-national terror network” (Witt 2020, 667). Discussion is ongoing regarding the response to violence committed by those identifying with incel ideology, particularly whether calls for securitization obfuscate entrenched social structures which foster misogyny and patriarchy (DeCook and Kelly 2021; O’Hanlon et al. 2023). Complicating matters further, an increasing body of research that engages with incels via surveys and interviews reveals significant levels of adverse mental health conditions among the community, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, social isolation, neurodivergence, and histories of adverse life experiences (Costello et al. 2022; Daly and Lakovtsov 2021; Delaney, Pollet, and Cook 2023; Moskalenko et al. 2022; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2022). These findings suggest incel identity, their misogynistic rhetoric, and subsequent ideology represent a complex masculine performance.

The gendered narratives of power and oppression visible in the ideological rhetoric and violence associated with incels naturally drew the attention of scholars within the

fields of gender and the critical study of men and masculinities, applying, in various ways, Connell's (1995) theory of multiple masculinities and the hegemonic masculine construct. To frame the conceptual slippage central to this article, a background of the composition, development, and discussions around misapplication of hegemonic masculinity follow, preceding critical analysis of investigations which mishandle the concept.

Hegemonic Masculinity: From Inception to Slippage

The concept of hegemonic masculinity appeared first within a study of Australian High Schools, used to denote certain masculinities that produced and maintained inequality between different groups of students. In *Gender and Power*, Raewyn Connell (1987) laid the foundations for the development of a sociological theory of gender in which the concept of hegemonic masculinity was incorporated into a model of multiple masculinities and relations of power. Extensively theorized in the seminal work *Masculinities* (Connell 1995), the model of multiple masculinities continues to prodigiously advance the critical investigation of men and masculinity, providing a theoretical tool relevant to interrogate a diverse array of gendered social milieux investigated through numerous fields of inquiry (Wedgwood 2009; Yang 2020).

Connell's theory offered new insights that surpassed limitations of preceding apolitical sex role theory, providing a conceptual basis with which to better understand the resistance, tension and negotiation involved in the power relationships within patriarchy (Messerschmidt 2018). The multiple masculinities framework proffered a structured and hierarchical model of five categories of relative masculine performance operational within groups of men and between men and women. Hegemonic masculinity, the ascendant presentation of masculine performance in any sociopolitical setting, exists as a discursively central, culturally consented configuration of practice situated above any subordinate, complicit, marginalized, and protest performance. Subordinate masculinities denote configurations of action expelled from hegemonic masculine performance, with performers of such subordination experiencing political and social exclusion or symbolic and physical acts of violence. Complicit masculinities reap rewards produced by hegemonic masculinity without embodying associated performances nor challenging hegemony, thereby indirectly buttressing hegemonic forms. Any masculinity with discriminatory experiences determined by structural social barriers aside from gender, such as race or class, become marginalized, with consequential "hypermasculinities" (Messerschmidt 2018, 29) performed by such men lacking political and socioeconomic power, embodying protest performances. Atop this hierarchy, hegemonic masculinity also ensures the subordination of femininities socially positioned as inferior in relation to hegemonic forms (Connell 1987, 1995). The appropriation of Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony by Connell is key to the understanding of hegemonic masculinity's capacity to legitimize unequal gender relations. The historical change inherent to Gramsci's conceptualization recognized that power, or hegemony, is perpetually contested through various forms of resistance and,

crucially, requires consent of those in a subordinate position. Likewise, Connell's hegemonic masculinity reaches ascendancy not with force, but also through legitimizing consent of those in subordinate positions. Certain performances of masculinity gain stature within various local, regional, and global settings through cultural exaltation of particular, historically contingent configurations of action understood as necessary, useful, and superior which simultaneously discredits other performances. This authorization of hegemonic masculinities invalidates alternatives, as well as femininities, legitimizing unequal gender relations through the subordination of alternate performances considered relatively inferior to those consensually celebrated.

Another integral tenet of the construct is the absence of any conclusively fixed typology of a hegemonic man via accounts of relational resistance and historical change (Connell 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is a constantly evolving abstraction, reconfiguring in response to resistance from competing masculinities and femininities in whichever locale(s) these tensions occur. Encapsulating exemplars, fantasies, or aspirations, hegemonic masculinity is constantly subject to and engaged in change, with few men (if any) fully embodying the resulting contingent configurations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2018). Hegemonic masculinity does not describe a set of character traits; while certain aspects of masculine performances may be hegemonic, it is not the attribute itself that affords hegemonic status but rather a resulting capacity to legitimize unequal gender relations. It is this legitimizing mechanism achieved through the cultural exaltation of traits or characteristics, either materially or symbolically, *in relativity* to comparative alternatives that is a core defining feature of a hegemonic masculinity.

As research into men and masculinities advanced through the 1990s, hegemonic masculinity and Connell's broader theory of multiple masculinities found application in numerous fields, including media studies, education, criminology, nursing, politics, forestry, and clinical neurology (Messerschmidt 2018; Wedgwood, Connell, and Wood 2022). Given such widespread use, the construct received a variety of critiques and challenges leading to a reformulation by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) 10 years later, now considered "the signature statement on hegemonic masculinity" (Messerschmidt 2018, 46). In this revision, the demonstrable durability of the hierarchical and relational categorical dynamics of masculine (and feminine) performances established through extensive research ensured these tenets remained central to the theory. The legitimizing capacity of hegemonic masculinity - "the essence of gender hegemony" - and distinction between dominance and hegemony were equally stressed. Integral to the unequal gender relations achieved by hegemonic masculinity are "cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or de-legitimation of alternatives" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848), with the perpetually adaptive and reconfiguring nature of hegemony occurring as "a solution to [...] tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions" (853).

The reformulation emphasized the rejection of both perspectives of a trait-based approach to gender as well as conflation of dominant masculine presentations with

hegemonic forms. Reliance on trait models of personality in order to characterize the actual content of different configurations of masculinity led “to treatment of hegemonic masculinity as a fixed character type” (Messerschmidt 2018, 49) - often sexually aggressive, violent, self-centered, and misogynistic. These traits alone however only denote *dominant* masculinities; reflections of what it is popularly held to ‘be a man’ in a spatiotemporal moment. For a masculinity to extend beyond a dominant form into the realm of hegemony, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stress it is not the power, prevalence, or ubiquity of a masculine performance, but the demonstrable capacity to legitimate some men’s power over women and other men. This capacity is not achieved by traits themselves, but the cultural position they become situated in as superior to alternative, feminine coded characteristics associated with feminine or alternate masculine performances. If the traits bound in a particular performance are absent cultural consensual acceptance as useful or necessary, and thus superior to relative alternatives, they lack capacity to legitimize unequal gender relations through subordination of other competing masculine and feminine performances considered inferior. Despite this precise and specific reformulation of the core attributes of hegemonic masculinity, the rejection of fixed character types or trait-based utilizations, and the nuanced differentiation between hegemonic forms that legitimize unequal gender relations and non-hegemonic dominant masculinities, the theory continued to experience sustained misapplications as dominant and hegemonic masculinities continued to be confused (Messerschmidt 2012). This conflation would lead to further and extensive clarifying discussion of the hegemonic construct by Messerschmidt, and additional authors invested in the investigation of various masculine performances.

Following the Connell and Messerschmidt reformulation, various gender scholars highlighted the need to provide further clarification between hegemonic and non-hegemonic yet powerful forms of masculinity as to prevent misapplication of the theory. Schippers (2007) detailed non-hegemonic performances exhibiting masculine traits which failed to legitimate the inequality of men and women mistakenly designated as instances of hegemonic masculinity – such as muscularity, physical violence, sexual dominance, or simply performances by men in positions of power. Beasley (2008) described this mishandling as “slippage” (88), noting the misappropriation of the term hegemonic masculinity as a descriptor of dominant masculinities lacking the vital “political strategic function” (89). These powerful or common presentations of masculinity, based on status or specific masculine traits or typologies, Beasley claimed, required differentiation from the type of masculinity that encompasses a “cultural/moral leadership to ensure popular or mass consent” (88). Crucial to both of these authors’ positions on hegemonic masculinity is the requisite inclusion of the legitimization of unequal gender relations, absent in many theoretical (mis)applications.

An example of this slippage can be seen in Howson’s (2009) work on hegemonic masculinities of the global North in which certain traits, such as aggression, economic provision, and heterosexuality, are considered hegemonic. This analysis failed to confer the political mechanism in which these traits legitimate unequal gender relations. The capacity to provide for one’s family is not *itself* a characteristic that ensures the

maintenance of unequal gender relations, rather its hierarchal positioning, revered in relativity to caregiving roles often coded as feminine. Failure to consider and demonstrate this legitimizing capacity highlights how hegemonic masculinity is easily (and often) misunderstood as simply character types of masculine performance. Another example of this misapplication of the trait-based conflation of dominant and hegemonic masculinity came in Logan's (2010) analysis of male sex workers. In analyzing observed gendered expressions of dominance, aggression, and physical strength, these masculine traits were considered hegemonic, yet this conclusion failed to explain how these traits produced unequal gender relations.

In *Hegemonic Masculinities and Camouflaged Politics*, Messerschmidt (2010) agreed with the points made by Schippers and Beasley that many applications of the theory failed to realize and demonstrate the relational and legitimating essence of the construct, conflating particular characteristics of non-hegemonic dominant masculinities with hegemony. In multiple subsequent contributions to the subject, Messerschmidt (2012, 2016, 2018) stressed the political mechanism of legitimization as the core function of hegemonic masculinity; "embodying materially and/or symbolizing discursively culturally supported 'superior' gender qualities in relation to the embodiment or symbolization of 'inferior' gender qualities" that are "culturally ascendant to advance a rationale for social action through consent and compliance" (Messerschmidt 2018, 75–6). Hegemonic performances of masculinity are revered as necessary, useful, and superior to alternative subordinated actions and characteristics, this reverence allows these performances to become socially exalted, permitting unequal gender relations as a result. One classic example is the strength, violence, and aggression exhibited by soldiers. In this context these traits are consensually celebrated through nationalist discourse, characteristics considered necessary to protect national interests and ensure civilian safety. Feminine coded expressions of passivity and physical weakness are considered inferior in relation to these superior and exalted masculine traits (Connell 1995). Consequently, unequal gender relations are maintained through the respective exaltation and subordination of gendered qualities. Yet, performance of these traits in other situations, such as the violence and aggression present in an armed robbery, will remain a non-hegemonic masculine performance, lacking the legitimizing mechanism achieved through the contingent context of state warfare. Rather than exalted, this violence is culturally unauthorized, and, while as a trait remains prevalent in masculine performances, the absence of cultural consent through collective social reverence prohibits this performance from legitimizing unequal gender relations. Messerschmidt (2016) takes time to classify types of masculinity that fit into the non-hegemonic category. *Dominant* masculinity derives power from common appearance and reverence, acting as popular or common ways to 'be a man' at a particular time or place. *Dominating* masculinity accomplishes power through physical or discursive exercise of action over others, controlling people or events (the armed robber). The spatiotemporally static ensemble of traits found in these dominant or dominating performances are themselves not enough to confer hegemony, it is their relevance to historical social contingencies that produce a capacity to

legitimize unequal gender relations through relative cultural subordination of femininely coded alternatives rendered inferior.

With this specification clear, it becomes apparent how this common confusion with hegemonic masculinity, due simply to the nature of particular trait characteristics (aggressive, heterosexual, breadwinning etc.), in relation to culturally subordinated forms of masculine presentation (househusband, sissies, fags, wimps etc.) arises. Traits assumed to be hegemonic due to their dominant social positioning among men are mislabeled as hegemonic, as the legitimizing aspect of the construct is not considered or demonstrated within various gendered analyses of male behavior that elect to use the multiple masculinities framework. The application of Connell's construct, then, requires consideration of the defining standard of hegemonic masculinity *in totality*, alongside grasp of non-hegemonic dominant and dominating forms, ensuring sufficient theoretical specificity is appreciated to prevent misapplication.

In the 40 years since inception, hegemonic masculinity remains unrivalled as a theoretical construct with which to situate masculinities and understand the relationship between gender and power. However, despite clear and repeated communication of the key attributes of the political legitimizing mechanics in which certain gender features are rationalized and culturally accepted as superior in relation to lesser, often feminine, qualities, the concept continues to be mishandled through conceptual slippage. Traits and characteristics of dominant and dominating non-hegemonic masculinity continue to be labelled incorrectly. The following section details four studies involving incel discourse and action in which this conceptual slippage is apparent, demonstrating that despite the concerted efforts of Connell, Messerschmidt, Schippers, and Beasley, hegemonic masculinity continues to be misunderstood.

Conceptual Slippage in Incel Research

The gendered discourse inherent to the incel subculture has motivated a significant degree of scholarship centered around the masculinities of incels and associated ideological constructs. The following critical discussion details four such studies which appear to misapply the hegemonic construct; producing conceptual slippage via conflation of non-hegemonic dominant or dominating masculine character traits with hegemonic masculinity, failing to appreciate or demonstrate the relational and legitimizing mechanisms inherent to the concept within the subjects and concepts to which it is analytically applied.

Academic inquiry into the incel phenomenon which utilized the multiple masculinities model initially focused on the manifesto, actions, and perceptions of masculinity of the perpetrator of the Isla Vista mass shooting. In 2014, a 22-year-old male, identified herein as the Isla Vista perpetrator (IVP), murdered six and injured 14 civilians before ending his own life following the distribution of a 141-page manifesto detailing a subordinated masculine identity explicitly linked to sexlessness (Cottee, 2020). Entwined within antifeminist and misogynistic rhetoric, this autobiographical monograph proclaimed a biologically essentialist, sociosexual ideology reflecting the

incel community's worldview (Manne 2019; Srinivasan 2021). Although the IVP did not explicitly claim incel as an identity, the sensational visibility of violence guided by vitriolic misanthropy and misogynistic perceptions of a gynocentric, genetically determined sociosexual hierarchy provided an evidential framework for motivations of academic investigation under the categorization of incel.

One of these first scholarly endeavors employed a critical feminist framework to conduct a thematic content analysis of the IVP's manifesto. Vito, Hughes and Admire (2017) drew on Connell's (1995) masculinities framework and hegemonic masculinity to examine constructions of masculinity, sexuality, and race in relation to violence. Within the study's initial conceptual grounding, hegemonic masculinity is theorized without specifying the relational mechanism by which unequal gender relations are sustained: "While several different and competing masculinities simultaneously exist, one form is constructed as hegemonic or dominant, rendering other forms of masculinity as marginalized or subordinated" (87). This initial grounding provides a surface reading of Connell's work appreciating only the hierarchal nature of different masculinities, absent deeper explanation of the underlying mechanics that achieve this. Vito and colleagues go on to define enduring traits of hegemonic masculinity as "aggression, toughness, hardness, ableness, and competitiveness" asserting that "the physical embodiment of masculinity depends on strength, height and size". This interpretation of hegemonic masculinity is then extended to an extreme typification, suggesting "muscles are the ultimate characteristic of hegemonic masculinity" (88-89), adding that participation in hetero-sex is "a fundamental ideal of hegemonic masculinity" (89).

While some, or all, of these traits indeed may be present within various hegemonic forms, the authors do not explain *how* these features legitimize unequal gender relations, instead constructing a hegemonic 'type' characterized through specific masculine-associated qualities, a rejected conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Failure to show how these traits legitimate gender inequality produces instead a description of a dominant masculinity; a common and widespread encapsulation of masculine performance at a particular time or place (Messerschmidt 2012). The construction of hegemonic masculinity as a descriptive ideal bound within a set of masculine traits inherent to dominant Western masculinity misses the historically contingent, adaptive nature. Multiple hegemonic configurations may exist at local, regional, and global levels displaying benevolence, bisexuality *or* 'aggression, toughness, hardness, ableness, and competitiveness'. For Vito, Admire and Hughes, hegemonic masculinity is a fixed ideal, a character-type bound to muscles and hetero-sex. Yet the defining feature of hegemonic masculinity is not a trait typology, but how varying (and potentially contradictory when performed in different locales/regions) configurations of action relationally legitimate inequality between men and women and masculinity and femininity (Messerschmidt 2018). Assertion of a fixed ideal lacks the accompanying explanation of the mechanics that these attributes produce in buttressing unequal gender relations.

Consequently, subsequent analysis of the IVP's manifesto describes his awareness of regional ("society's", 99) hegemonic ideals of physical embodiment and sexual

pro prowess, and pressure to maintain or conform to these ideals. This suggests the presence of widespread character traits as regionally hegemonic; a static character type that instead again is describing elements of a dominant Western masculinity. In discussion of the IVP's claims of superior intelligence as evidence of dominance over "the tough jock-type men who conform to hegemonic ideals of embodied masculinity" (95) the authors fail to explain what exactly the nature of this embodiment of masculinity is that the jocks conform to and why it is hegemonic. That is, toughness and jock-ness are not automatically hegemonic unless there is a clear explanation of how these attributes legitimize unequal gender relations through explicit relation to other inferior feminized traits. Vito and colleagues highlight the manifesto's explicit detailing of the importance and desire to attract heterosexual romantic attention, which is suggested as "a defining part of hegemonic masculinity" (93). Yet, again, masculine heterosexual romantic interest *alone* is not fundamentally hegemonic, even if it is highly exalted and centrally discursive among heterosexual groups of men (Messerschmidt 2018). Although achieving (hetero)sexual success can confirm heterosexual masculinity (Pascoe 2011) and is prevalent in dominant Western masculinity, it is not necessarily inherent to hegemonic masculinity, lacking, as simply a trait, a legitimizing capacity to upkeep gender inequality (Messerschmidt 2016). Vito and colleagues conducted important work in explicating the worldview of one of the first incel ideology-driven mass shooters in the US through the lens of masculinity. However, a superficial reading of Connell's model, leading to construction of hegemonic masculinity as an assemblage of traits absent any explanation of the mechanism that legitimates gender inequality, confuses hegemonic masculinity with a dominant Western masculinity, preventing deeper analysis interrogating the pervasive effects of dominant portrayals of masculinity traits upon a subject enacting male supremacy – itself a dominating masculine performance. Consideration of the wider, more recent, associated literature (e.g., Beasley 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2012) could have ensured more accurate conceptualization of the construct, appreciating the differentiation between, and description of, non-hegemonic dominant (and the IVP's dominating) masculinities.

Additional research that analyzed the IVP also constructed a definition of hegemonic masculinity that overlooked updated conceptual specificity, again resulting in a trait-based characterization. Drawing on the IVP's manifesto, incel forum discourse and non-academic writings of organizations monitoring hate groups, Witt (2020) explores the community's hagiographic construction of the IVP as a saint and his manifesto in relation to incels' construction of masculinity. For Witt, the IVP and the wider incel community's inability to perform acceptable or desirable 'hegemonic ideals' leads to a perceived loss of masculine status, serving as a catalyst for the construction of a compensatory alternative masculinity within which violence and misogyny are integral.

Adopting Connell's (1995) definition of multiple, competitive, and hierarchal masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is conceptualized as a typified subject atop this structure: "an ideal man whose identity and social location are composed of all of the attributes that accrue privilege (white, upper-class, able-bodied, etc.)" (77), as the "ideal

hegemonic subject” with embodied traits of “sexual ability and prowess and [...] capacity to enact violence” (78). In recognition of the power that sexuality and violence hold as potential actions of masculine practice upon women and other subordinate men, Witt’s hegemonic masculinity, as an ideal holding these potentialities, becomes a type of man, exhibiting a set of dominant and dominating attributes. In only listing these demographics and traits, this fixed character type is again absent the requisite explanation of how these attributes and actions legitimate inequality between men and women. Descriptive traits of male action in relative isolation to political mechanics that produce unequal gender relations, even in toxic practices of domination, misconstrue the nature of Connell’s hegemony. Sexual prowess and violence (or the potential for) only become hegemonic in relational settings of interaction with femininities or subordinate masculine performances in which they can achieve a legitimating rather than purely dominating dynamic. Indeed, violence has been repeatedly discounted as a means to effectively achieve legitimate hegemony (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2018).

During the analysis of the IVP and incels’ process of masculine identity construction, Witt suggests that incels participate in a process of simultaneous affirmation of hegemonic masculine values of athleticism, heterosexual prowess, and attractiveness, whilst engaging in a distancing endeavor through rejection of these values and the people that embody them. Yet both the absence of demonstration of how these values legitimate unequal gender relations, as well as incels *rejecting* these ideals, suggests that, in fact, these are merely dominant masculine traits – as the derision of this masculine ‘ideal’ by incels in the locale analyzed erases any legitimizing quality indicative of hegemonic masculinity. As Beasley, Schippers, and Messerschmidt have reminded us, to be hegemonic, a particular masculinity must obtain cultural consent, maintaining unequal gender relations, including among men. Thus, in this highly localized digital forum, incels acknowledge, envy, but crucially reject, a culturally celebrated dominant masculinity, a consideration perhaps prevented in this analysis by engagement with Connell’s (1995) model at origin, resulting in hegemonic ideals conceived only as a powerful dominance typified by specific traits. As Witt focuses on the hierarchical interplay of masculinity, the confirmatory and constructive actions of toxic traits, and the perceived loss experienced by their absence, the conceptual grounding and elements of the subsequent analysis overlook the more recent literature pertaining to the importance of relational and legitimate components inherent to hegemonic masculinity. Again, as with Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017), hegemonic masculinity is presented as a fixed character type absent of any demonstration of how particular traits uphold unequal gender relations, instead discussing dominant masculinities.

As research of the incel community broadened, attention turned to the digital spaces incels congregated within. Initially Reddit hosted incel user-generated dedicated forums or ‘subreddits’, r/incel and r/braincels, prior to removal for breach of usage policy in 2017 and 2019 respectively (O’Donnell and Shor 2022). These fora provided ample textual data for numerous thematic content analyses, seemingly the most frequent

methodology utilized in the investigation of incels (Hart and Huber 2023). Investigations using this type of data also applied the hegemonic masculinity construct leading to further instances of slippage.

Maxwell et al. (2020) employed a critical feminist constructionist approach to explore the beliefs and attitudes of incels through a thematic analysis of one thread within the r/braincels subreddit. Framing their theoretical base, the authors employed Connell's (1987) theory of gender hierarchy. For the authors, hegemonic masculinity's legitimating capacity is recognized, in which it "validates the dominance of patriarchal masculinity over women and other types of masculinities", achieved through familiar traits such as "physical and sexual violence" (1854). However, as these characteristics are suggested as means to achieve dominance and control, this appears to suggest violent acts of domination are validated through the legitimization hegemony confers. While some performances of violent masculinity may carry cultural consent (e.g., soldiers), legitimacy of unequal gender relations is rarely achieved through physical or sexual violence (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Rather, acts of physical and sexual violence by men upon women lack the consensual reverence required to achieve a position as necessary, useful, and thus superior, authorizing such behavior and legitimizing unequal gender relations. Explicit acts of physical or sexual violence toward women, although traits included in some historical manifestations of hegemonic forms, have been expelled from more contemporary reformulations of hegemonic masculinity as persistent resistance via feminist political and social activism have challenged the prevalence of violence against women, with hegemonic forms adapting and reforming based on this historical contingency. This leaves such performances more akin to a dominating masculinity that 'runs the show' lacking the necessary consent (Messerschmidt 2018), be it in the immediate local context (in both a literal and conceptual sense) or at (most) wider regional levels. While abhorrent sexual violence performed by heterosexual men indeed dominates women, it does not produce inequality through a consensually *authorized* means necessary to legitimize unequal gender relations.

Conceptual slippage is further evident as the authors suggest "One particularly salient type of hegemonic masculinity is 'toxic masculinity'" (1854), described using Sculos' definition as an "interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with masculinity" (Sculos 2017 in Maxwell et al. 2020, 1854–55). The conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity concludes with the assertion that the "violence of hegemonic and toxic masculinities is in part, or in whole, a reaction to the threat of diminishing the idealized version of manhood" (1855). In this theoretical grounding, toxic traits of male behavior are posited as hegemonic without sufficient consideration and explanation of the need for cultural ascendancy through consent and conformity, instead describing a fixed, dominating, or reactionary character type. While Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) appreciate hegemonic masculinity permits the dominance of women to continue, on occasion through physical violence or engaging in toxic practices, it is not the violence or toxicity itself that is hegemonic, rather the effect of stabilizing unequal gender relations. That is, although hegemonic and

dominant/dominating masculinities are co-produced, as, for example, the former confers the latter two to prevalently manifest through the legitimization of unequal gender relations, traits of physical and sexual violence only exist in dominant and dominating masculinities and not hegemonic forms. And, while it may not seem to matter whether it is a dominant, dominating, or hegemonic masculine form responsible for an undesirable real-world outcome, the way in which types of masculinity are understood within incel ideological structures does. As a field in nascency, early work is important, as it often sets the foundational basis of proceeding exponentially increasing investigations reliant on and citing these primary contributions. Further, as it is important for academic rigor that we utilize the work of canonical thinkers correctly in conceptualization of new gendered social constructs, the framing of the research matter and subject(s) also matters greatly, especially given the evident call in certain academic and security spheres to consider incel ideology as extremism and terroristic.

Maxwell and colleagues do not demonstrate how toxic masculinity, according to their chosen definition, or violent masculine performances stabilize under equal gender relations, missing a core feature of the hegemonic construct, framing hegemonic masculine performance as an ambiguous character type based on assumed traits of violence and domination. Due to this theoretical misconception, the ensuing analysis leads the authors to assign hegemonic masculinity to the incel ideological construction of Chad. Recognized as a patriarchal ideal, Chad is understood as conventionally attractive, described though certain alpha male personality traits such as confidence and charisma and “most importantly, based on hegemonic masculinity, asserts dominance over men and women” (1867). Chad, in this analysis, becomes a trait-based masculine archetype within which his dominating character is exemplary of hegemonic masculinity. Such a conceptualization erroneously assumes that dominance equates to hegemony, lacking any explanation of the nature of Chad’s dominance in relation to other men and women, nor *how* this stabilizes unequal gender relations. Instead, it is assumed that hegemonic masculinity is simply dominance over others, omitting the way(s) in which such dominance legitimizes a hierarchal relationship among men and between men and women, defining instead a caricatured dominating masculine archetype.

Given the novelty of the the gendered constructions emerging from incel ideology, it is equally important that the research community frames concepts such as Chad correctly. In order that incels are theorized accurately, where they place themselves in relation to masculine constructs, and, crucially, what these ideological constructs represent, is a vital component of understanding incel masculinities. While it may seem a small difference, Chad representing hegemonic masculinity versus Chad as a dominating masculinity has important implications, especially given the rejection of this masculine construct many incels appear to exhibit, and the various claimed experiences of gendered subordination members of the incel community articulate. The ambiguity in understanding what exactly Chad represents may result from the absence of broader appreciation of other non-subordinate, non-hegemonic masculine performances outlined and clarified by Messerschmidt, a feature of other work seeking to define the ideological caricature of Chad.

Exploring a larger data sample, Lindsay (2021) reviewed daily posts within two major incel forums, [incels.co](https://www.4chan.org/nc) and [r/braincels](https://www.reddit.com/r/braincels/), over a 3-month period. Applying a constructivist approach, thematic analysis was applied to the dataset producing three key themes, the first of which concerned incels' perspectives of a 'hegemonic masculine ideal'. In establishing a theoretical framework, this hegemonic masculine ideal is extracted from Connell's (1987) initial conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity without incorporation of the defining relational or legitimizing aspects at the core of the current thinking around the construct. Resultantly, the hegemonic idealized subject involves fixed character traits of "whiteness, able-bodied, [and] socially, sexually and economically successful", attributes that "forms a dominant and unequal power relation to femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities" (Lindsay 2021, 30), a conception that fails to appreciate, nor explicitly include, the legitimizing and stabilizing nature operant within this power relation (Messerschmidt 2018).

This misconception may have occurred due to a recurring pattern in conceptual slippage, in which older literature is cited without wider reference or discussion of more contemporary material that has repeatedly qualified and contrasted hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities (e.g., Beasley, Schippers, and Messerschmidt). Lindsay includes discussion of Messerschmidt's (2019) article *The salience of 'hegemonic masculinity'* within which Messerschmidt reiterates that "Connell's original emphasis on the legitimation of unequal gender relations remains essential" (85). Interestingly, with little elaboration, Lindsay (2021) suggests Connell's original model is "contested by Messerschmidt" (30) and ironically succumbs to one of the critiques of application at the heart of Messerschmidt's work, positing a theoretical framework resulting in a trait-based hegemonic masculine ideal outlined above. Wider reading of Messerschmidt's earlier work would have perhaps prevented this confusion and the omission of key components of hegemonic masculinity in favor of a fixed character type.

Consequently, in discussion of the framing of Chad as the hegemonic ideal by incels, 'he' becomes a character type constructed upon a trait framework. For Lindsay, Chad "embodies two key performances of hegemonic masculinity: (hetero)sexual ability and prowess and the capacity to enact violence upon others" and "the aesthetic, physical and sexual components of hegemonic masculinity" (30/31). As with Maxwell et al. (2020), this descriptive positioning omits further explanation of how components of Chad as a hegemonic ideal legitimates gendered inequality through specific material or symbolic social relations or meanings. Possession of virility or propensity for violence, without relation to feminized traits or alternative masculine performances absent these qualities, does not go far enough to demonstrate how these may ensure unequal gender relations, especially given violence rarely achieves stable and authorized imbalanced gender relations (Connell 1995). As is common with the various investigations discussed, improper conceptualization leads to subsequent misunderstanding of gendered constructs in the subject material researched. While understandable that Chad may be considered hegemonic, given incels' relative subordinate placement of themselves to him, the traits used to describe him more accurately reflect aspects of dominant masculinities.

All four empirical studies described above have provided important contributions to the nascent field of research investigating and critiquing incels. Yet despite the provision of insight into the gendered ideology and actions of specific violent actors and discourse produced by the wider community, these particular endeavors have misinterpreted the multiple masculinities conceptual framework employed, leading to further instances of the misapplication of hegemonic masculinity within the field of critical study of men and masculinities. Utilizing only early work, without consideration and inclusion of key subsequent updates and clarifications that expand and refine the initial model, leads to theoretical grounding that omits intrinsic aspects central to the hegemonic construct. Adoption of the model of hegemonic masculinity without acknowledging or demonstrating the necessary legitimizing political mechanics results in conflation with traits of dominant or dominating masculinities, either as the hegemonic ideal of Witt (2020) and Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017), or the incel imagined Chad discussed in the work of Maxwell et al. (2020) and Lindsay (2021). These contributions to the growing body of incel research, while illustrative of facets of the community and ideology, demonstrate instances of inconsistent application of hegemonic masculinity indicative of the trait problem embedded in Beasley's (2008) slippage. Hegemonic masculinity is framed as a static character type or assemblage of traits absent recognition and demonstration of the legitimating essence of the concept, a practice that, as the canonical architects Connell and Messerschmidt and gender scholars Schippers and Beasley inform us, must be thoroughly transcended.

Given the relative infancy of incel research, and the community and ideology itself, it is crucial critical theory is applied appropriately when deconstructing and interpreting actions and thoughts of incel community members and constructs bound within associated gendered ideology. While tempting to ascribe violent, dominant, (hetero) sexually successful masculine performances to hegemonic masculinity, doing so not only misinterprets the theory from which the construct arose, but also compromises the necessary nuanced and clear understanding required of the subject matter at the heart of analyses. As Messerschmidt (2019) reminds us "Hegemonic masculinities are configurations of social practice that produce simultaneously particular social relations and social meanings, and they are culturally significant because they shape a sense of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" gendered behavior for co-present interactants in specific situations" (90), succinctly describing the guiding impetus behind the identification of behaviors and actions that denote hegemonic masculinity. If the research community is to apply this construct to the incel phenomenon, these mechanisms of relational legitimacy must be clearly interpreted, acknowledged, and applied.

For example, consider the centrality of Chad in incel ideology, a gendered construct to which individuals relatively and subordinately place themselves, it is crucial the construct is understood for what 'he' represents to the community. If the community both revere and *reject* his masculine performance, whether a caricature or otherwise, it cannot be hegemonic masculine traits incels see themselves as lacking, but simply those present in dominant or dominating masculine performances. Recognizing the sexual success of Chad, a trait not unique to hegemony, rather than his dominance, violence, or

aggression, is essential to conceptualizing the way incels understand, perform, and are affected by masculinity. As sexlessness lies at the heart of incel grievance, focus on non-hegemonic expressions of dominant masculinity would provide more insight into the gendered meaning incels heavily place on (hetero)sex and intimacy. If indeed hegemonic masculinity is operant in the influences upon, or actions and beliefs of, the incel community, the acceptableness in relation to unacceptable alternatives of the social practices involved in their ideology must be clearly illustrated to demonstrate the legitimacy of the social meanings that these perspectives produce.

Conclusion

Connell's (1995) multiple masculinities theory and inherent construct of hegemonic masculinity remains a robust model with which to investigate dynamics of power within the gendered social world. However, if the theory is to be effectively applied to novel masculine dynamics and presentations, it is crucial not to overlook important aspects of the model's development, avoiding losing sight of central tenets. Utilization of the theory must be done so in its entirety; any application of the conceptual framework of hierarchal and competitive masculinities must also appreciate the function and capacity of the apex presentation within gender hierarchies – the legitimization of inequality between men and women and among groups of men based on acceptable and unacceptable ways of performing in relational settings.

Research of incels that involves hegemonic masculinity must remain cognizant of both the defining features that constitute the constructs as well as the differentiations, rejections, and warnings of conceptual slippage that have arisen as a result of misapplication. Hegemonic masculinity exists not just in relation to non-hegemonic subordinate masculinity and femininities, but also non-hegemonic dominant or dominating masculinities, in a state of co-production permitting the prevalence of these latter two non-hegemonic forms. Easily conflated, dominant and dominating masculinities are not always hegemonic; hetero-sex, physical mass, and propensity for violence, however prevalent, as traits alone act only as descriptive characteristics of a frequently venerated and visible form of masculinity. The extreme nature of incel masculinity likely draws analytical attention towards the extreme aspects of masculine constructs such as Chad, drawing focus away from consideration of the requisite legitimizing capacity of hegemonic masculinities that ensure unequal gender relations, an inequality that toxic masculine traits do not necessarily produce. Traits and characteristics absent an observable function and influence upon the sphere of gender relations remain only as signifiers of these non-hegemonic masculine performances. Misapplication in this regard prevents nuanced analysis of the gendered dynamics operant in incel masculine discourse and ideology.

The need to understand incel subculture is paramount, and, given the nascency of this field of research, we must be sure through academic rigor to correctly set the foundational parameters of the subject matter lest early misconceptions lead to significant mis-theorizations, or conceptual inaccuracies further down the line as this

essential area of investigation progresses. Utilizing a model as powerful and widespread as Connell's requires consideration of the history and evolution that has afforded the theory such prominence and accolade in the field, ensuring academic consistency and congruency when applying the hegemonic construct to novel and emergent masculine communities.

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