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An Asian American Woman's Reflexive Account of Direct Research With Incels

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Abstract: Incels, or involuntarily celibate men, have been the subject of increasing attention around the world due to their ongoing association with high-profile violence, misogyny, and hateful online content. While prior researchers have focused on online forums as a resource to study incel issues, in my recent work I involved the recruitment and interviewing of incels using a phenomenological approach to better examine their experiences. Given the nature of incel forum discussions in which particularly Asian women were often maligned and degraded, I provide a reflective and reflexive examination of my identities in the context of this research. In this narrative, I describe my personal reactions to hurtful and hateful content and how I have navigated difficult or uncomfortable situations in interviews. I also describe how they have influenced my perspectives and what this means for the future of my work.

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1. Introduction

Concerns about involuntarily celibate men, or "incels," have garnered increased attention from law enforcement agencies, researchers, and news media. While they are most often associated with high-profile acts of mass violence, in recent years screenshots from forums and media representation have contributed to this online community's ongoing association with violence and misogyny. Recently, researchers have examined incels as an online community, with the majority using forums as a source of content for study (GING, 2019; MAXWELL, ROBINSON, WILLIAMS & KEATON, 2020; O'MALLEY, HOLT & HOLT, 2022). For the past three years, I have conducted interviews with incels as part of my research, using a phenomenological approach to examine their lived experiences (DE CHESNAY, 2014). [1]

In this article, I aim to engage in reflective and reflexive practices to evaluate my own experiences throughout the course of this research. While I have previously reflected on the ways that I have navigated various challenges of the methodological process, I specifically consider the way that my identities may shape the interviews, my interactions with participants, and my personal understanding of myself and this research. In discussing my path toward this specific research area, elements of my personal history and identity, and my personal experiences throughout the research process, I hope to provide insight about the ways in which I both affect and am affected by the work. Even more, by including elements of the conversations that have not been included in my previous publications about incels, I encourage readers to reflect on the emotional, relational, and interpersonal work that this type of research entails. It has been an ongoing, tedious process to learn to navigate these encounters, recognize how my race and gender affect the research, and ultimately, understand what it means for the work that I do. This is not to downplay other topics or methodologies, and I know that the personal nature of some research almost requires us to give a bit of ourselves away in the process. [2]

As much as I share in this article, there are still various experiences and interactions that I have not included out of concern for myself or the interview participants. However, the opportunity to consider the work that I do allows me to continuously contemplate my past experiences and my future trajectory in this gendered work. This is not an autoethnography, nor is it a how-to guide for research on incels; instead, it is a way to examine the role of my own identities—particularly race, ethnicity, and gender—and understand the role that they play when interviewing involuntarily celibate men. [3]

I begin by providing context and describing the way in which I started interviewing incels in 2019 (Section 2) and continue by highlighting the importance of reflexivity and reflection in such work (Section 3). Next, I share how various aspects of my identity potentially affected the interactions in the interviews (Section 4), while also outlining the research process and my own transformation, concerns, and experiences (Section 5). In the same section, I also offer examples of interview data to demonstrate these interactions, my internal reactions, and my

responses and how, collectively, they shaped the research. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on what this means for incel research moving forward, both for myself and others (Section 6). [4]

2. How I Came to Interview Incels

In 2017, I completed and successfully defended a dissertation on active and mass shooters. I had spent four years compiling data about 246 attacks and 251 shooters. Like any good research project, it created more questions for me than answers. I encountered many stories that led me to believe that many of the attackers had a history of problems with women, but since it was not the primary aim of my dissertation research, I simply put my head down and tried to finish. As I began a career as an assistant professor, I wanted to return to those questions I had about relationships and issues with women. I eventually fell down an internet rabbit hole and found myself learning as much as a I could about incels. I spent time on the forums, observing their conversation and online behaviors, much of which is rooted in misogyny, violence, racism, and homophobia. During this time, I familiarized myself with their language and vocabulary, learning about mogging, maxxing, and the host of racialized and gendered terms, among others. [5]

I initially began a content analysis to identify the emergent themes on one of the primary forums, but as I was working on the literature review for the article, I found a paper that addressed incel issues from a different perspective. I contacted the author, and he responded quickly. Incidentally, he was the creator and moderator of the forum I had been observing. I was lucky in that our first conversation was pleasant, and it inspired and empowered me to consider engaging incels in semi-structured interviews. [6]

I outline the approaches, challenges, and successes throughout the research process in another article, but to examine the personal effects of my research, in this paper, I focus on the importance of reflexive and reflective practices and how my own identities shape the nature of the research. While the main purpose of this exercise is to inform my own work, I hope that it may also encourage others to examine the way that people consider themselves as a part of the research relationship, how it might affect the interviews and the analyses, and what it means for qualitative work more broadly. If social science disciplines are to truly appreciate and find meaning in reflexive practices, there should be value in such articles to serve as examples and identify ways that readers and audiences can apply the work to their own research. Obviously, my experiences and identities differ from those who may read this and those who will engage in research about incels. However, there may be overlap in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, relationships, or perspectives, and if the experiences that I share do not necessarily apply to each specific reader, I hope that in some small way, it might contribute to the body of knowledge about qualitative methods, interviewing, and even phenomenology or masculinity work. [7]

Even more, I believe that the relatively new and novel nature of incel research means that we, as a small group of interdisciplinary scholars, consider and reflect

on our own approaches to the topic and the population that we study. On its face, there is little debate that the content of incel forums is often hateful, violent, and harmful, and there is a clear need to understand how we can mitigate the threat that individual incels and the online communities may pose in terms of violence, radicalization, and misogyny. Still, as researchers, we should investigate our responses to this, both methodologically and personally, and I identify how those feelings and views influence our work. [8]

As much as this manuscript is a conversation with myself—as a researcher, as an Asian woman, and as someone who wants to grow and inform her future research—there is also an implied conversation with readers, particularly those who are interested in or currently conducting incel research. It is my goal to utilize introspection, reflection, and reflexivity to demonstrate the care and concern I have for myself as a researcher who studies an emotionally taxing topic, the participants with whom I work, and this field of research. In the work and reflection that I do in this manuscript, I ask all of us to consider how *who we are* affects *who/what we study* and *how it is presented*, and ultimately, what it means for the future of this nuanced and unique field of study. [9]

3. Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

Reflection and reflexivity are two important pieces of qualitative research, particularly when the work is difficult, contentious, or emotionally taxing. Reflection is designed to question and evaluate our feelings and our processes which, in turn, informs our research. As BARRETT, KAJAMAA and JOHNSTON (2020) described, "... reflexivity is actually a combination of reflection (and its outcome, i.e., a defined action that comes about as a result of that reflection) and recursivity, where we consider those outcomes in context" (p.10). In the context of incel research, I not only examine how my own identities, experiences, and perspectives shape how I think about the work, but I also recognize the way that it affects my interactions with participants, qualitative analyses, and my reactions to the research. [10]

Using a phenomenological approach first forced me to conceptualize incels and their situation (inceldom) as a unique occurrence to examine their lived experiences and beliefs (DE CHESNAY, 2014; MOUSTAKAS, 1994), regardless of my agreement with their views. Prior to engaging with incels, I knew that I fundamentally disagreed with most of their views as I read them on the forums, but to understand and study this phenomenon, I would need to, in some sense, separate my own views from what I might hear. As ADU-AMPONG and ADJEI ADAMS (2020) explained, "[n]ot only do researchers have to introspect, they are being called upon to highlight the specifics of their personal experiences to account for the particularities of their research findings" (p.583). In addition, my role as the interviewer tasked me with organizing and retelling the participants' stories and understanding how I shaped those exchanges, since "the interview is a social interaction" (EASTERLING & JOHNSON, 2015, p.1553). [11]

Even more, I have been forced to reckon with the role that I am playing in crafting the incel narrative among researchers, within incel communities, and the public more broadly. There are many pre-conceived notions about incels (primarily based on the content of their forums and the ways they are portrayed in media reports), and, in many ways, much of the work that I have published challenges those ideas. I often worry that I will be labeled an "incel apologist" or even "a bad feminist" for portraying the participants in my study as men who are mostly lonely, depressed, and isolated[1]. While there is an increasing rate of studies and publications about incels, the work is still sparse relative to other areas in the social sciences, and much of the research squarely frames incels as a collective group of misogynists and potential extremists or terrorists. As BARKER (1995) wrote of her research and work on cults:

> "Like other scholars, I was offering an alternative perspective that questioned many of the existing secondary constructions and their taken-for-granted assumptions. I was affecting the data not only as part of a methodological procedure, but also as part of a political action" (p.291). [12]

However, as much as I would like the findings from my work to ultimately shape policy or prevention efforts, it can also potentially play a larger role in the way that incel issues are framed and addressed, perhaps in media reporting or public discourse. It is important to consider the narrative that is being told, even if it is a reflection of the qualitative data, and the consequences of such findings, particularly in the context of policy or future research. This, again, is an important piece of the research process, and one that can be considered throughout reflexive and reflective practices. [13]

The notion and practice of reflexivity is not one that is easy, and I have been forced to think critically about myself, my experiences, and my beliefs, especially in contrast to the men I have interviewed. While many expect and celebrate reflexivity in qualitative research, "[s]ome scholars consider the 'reflexivity talk' as a self-indulgent and narcissistic process, a kind of 'vanity methodology,' wherein academic people consume energies and time" (MORTARI, 2015, p.2). While I do center myself in this and similarly reflexive articles, I do so in the spirit of improving the quality of my research and sharing practices with others, because we work, function, and live in environments that both shape and are shaped by our existence, including our research practices. As RUSSELL and KELLY (2002) noted, "[i]n the absence of a reflexive stance, researchers might easily fail to notice the degree to which our respondents (and we) are changing before our eyes" (§26). In writing this piece, I aim to recognize that "[r]eflexivity is a continual process of engaging with and articulating the place of the researcher and the context of the research. It also involves challenging and articulating social and cultural influences and dynamics that affect this context" (BARRETT et al., 2020, p.9). [14]

1 This is not uncommon in the field of criminology and criminal justice across of a variety of research interests, as scholars have recently been forced out of their positions after reporting humanistic, meaningful research with a preventative focus.

Incels are a social world of which I am now part, not only because I engage with them, but because who I am (a researcher who is an Asian woman) is part of the rhetoric and discourse on the forums and in interviews. Recognizing my role in this allows me the chance to closely examine the research encounter from my own perspective and understanding the context in which the work takes place (MANDERSON, BENNETT & ANDAJANI-SUTJAHJO, 2006). [15]

4. Bringing Myself to the Interviews

In the following sections, I describe my research experiences in the context of who I am and the broader body of knowledge about incels. I begin by discussing my positionality and how it might affect interactions, and I outline personal challenges and feelings as I have engaged in interviews and content analyses. I conclude with reflections on what I have learned in the past three years, and the implications of this reflection and reflexivity in my future research. [16]

4.1 Positionality

For the better part of my life, people have called me a variety of things, including "diverse," "exotic," and my personal favorite: "culturally confused." I was born in South Korea in 1984, and at 10 weeks old, I was adopted by an Irish American family from New Jersey. I lived in South Jersey for the better part of 32 years (with the exception of the four years I spent at the University of Notre Dame), where I taught high school Spanish in Camden County, New Jersey, USA. So, summarily speaking, I am a cisgender, heterosexual Korean woman—raised in the United States by a white, Irish American family—who speaks Spanish and spent most of her career teaching at a school which, at the time, served mostly Black and Latino/a/x students. Since 2016, I have lived in Southwestern Pennsylvania as an assistant professor of criminology, law, and society at a small, Catholic, Benedictine liberal arts college which is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). I share this not for biographical purposes, but because GAILEY and PROHASKA (2011) explained, "[b]oth parties in the interview situation occupy several different social locations, including gender, race, age, and social class. When interviewing or being interviewed, we do not leave these positions behind; rather, they influence our actions during the interview process" (p.378). These identities and experiences are important because they shape who I am, and they are especially interesting when juxtaposing them with those of the men that I interview. Similarly, CREAN (2018) argued that "one of the most important tasks for a minority scholar, on a personal and professional level, is the need to manage multiple identities and positions in the research process through a reflexive practice and dialogue" (§32). [17]

As a Korean woman who was adopted, it is often difficult for me to fully understand what my race and ethnicity mean in terms of my identity since I have not felt particularly embedded in this culture or largely accepted by Korean or Asian people. I know that anti-Asian violence and racism in response to COVID-19 has forced me to examine my racial identity and feelings, and this has occurred mostly during the time in which I also conducted incel research (which

started in October 2019). As such, I cannot fully separate the interviews and anti-Asian attacks, because they both have been pervasive, concurrent experiences in my life. I know that while there is much literature about the hyper-sexualization of Asian women (CHAN, 2008; WOAN, 2008), it is also entwined with issues of the model minority, submissiveness, and perfectionism (DALY & SHAH, 2022; ROSHANRAVAN, 2018). These are complex in nature and issues with which I have grappled even before I engaged in this research, but NINH (2018) artfully described it as such: "What is to present sexually as an Asian American woman 'today'—in couplings across race, ethnicity, generation, and orientation—we cannot presume we know" (p.75). [18]

4.2 Not an insider, but (eventually) less than an outsider

Perhaps the most important, easily identifiable issue is that I began as a clear outsider from the incel community. The nature of most inceldom as it exists today is focused solely on the experiences of men. Many incels believe that women can engage in sexual activity whenever they please, and consequently, women cannot be "true" incels. Even more, on many incel forums and in group messages, women are explicitly excluded and not permitted to register, thus preventing them from engaging in online discourse. Thus, my gender precludes me from ever truly being an insider in this group even if I so desired. With the intersection of my gender, race, and ethnicity, I am not only an outsider, but these identities are displayed through my physical appearance. When I contact or interact with participants via social media, my photo makes these aspects of my identity obvious; thus, from the start of the research relationship, certain identities of mine are on display and become a part of the interaction. [19]

As I have continued to engage in the research, I am still an outsider in that I am not an incel, but I have become known in some incel circles, and my interactions with participants have encouraged them to refer others to me to share their stories. Even more, the recent publication of articles about incels using interviews or content analyses have led incels to follow or contact me on social media or send me emails offering to participate in the study. It seems that the nature of this work—from the interviews to the publications—has brought me to a place in which I am still not an insider, but the work and my interactions have earned me status, trust, and even honor among certain incels. As one interview participant told me as we began the interview, "You are probably the first woman in *years* who hasn't been a complete bitch to me about every little thing" (Personal communication, February 18, 2022). After we had concluded our conversation for the evening, I reflected on the way that my engagement with them—as a researcher who is an Asian woman—may disrupt some of their pre-conceived notions or counter their previous interactions with women. While I do not expect that I alone will transform any participants from self-proclaimed incel to, for instance, leader of a feminist organization, the research relationship may at least serve as one example of a positive interaction. [20]

I engaged in an ongoing online interview via social media messenger with that participant for nearly four days. I asked questions, and he provided insightful

answers—many of which I did not personally agree with—but I told him from the start that I had no intention of debating or arguing with him. As the interview concluded, he shared:

> "I actually admire and respect you as I have no other woman [in my life] outside [of] mi familia. You show integrity and honesty. You have honor and that is something that people of this country [the United States] including myself lost a long time ago" (ibid.). [21]

Throughout our interview, he discussed how he has been negatively affected by women and modern society, so to me, his compliments stood out because they reflected how a respectful research relationship can lead to trust, despite disagreement[2]. Even more, as a former neo-Nazi (whose interactions with various incels "cured" him of his racist ideals), these sentiments—particularly given my identities—were particularly surprising. [22]

As such, my status among incels has changed over time, and this evolution is important to note, as COUTURE, ZAIDI and MATICKA-TYNDALE (2012) explained how "the intersections of our ethnicity, race, gender, and so on and our socialization experiences all influence the nature of our discussions with participants, our analyses of the data, and even our own reflexive accounts" (p.102). In some ways, the aspects of my identity—which could have hindered my interactions with incels—make me that much more appreciative of the research that I have done. More so, my identities and how they are interpreted by the participants could have had a negative impact on my ability to conduct the interviews and thus the quality of the data (COUTURE et al., 2012); however, transparency and honesty in the research process have made me something less than an outsider, though certainly not an insider. [23]

4.3 Women interviewing men about sex

Even though I have earned this somewhat vague status among small groups of incels, there is still the issue of the content that we discuss in interviews. As a cisgender, heterosexual woman, talking to men about sex and relationships can seem complicated, particularly when the participants are lamenting about the ways that women have ignored or rejected them. PAWELZ (2018) argued that "[f]emale researchers face the clear situational risk of their interest in a respondent being misinterpreted as sexual desire, which would result in conflict" (§26). In addition, GAILEY and PROHASKA (2011), two female researchers, shared their experiences interviewing men about degrading sexual practices. They noted that gendered interview relationships can be difficult, as the

2 This has been another unique aspect of my identity and my personality that I have had to navigate through this process. Having grown up in New Jersey for most of my life, where aggression and short-temperedness are the norm, I am generally accustomed to pushing back and voicing my dissent or disdain, sometimes loudly and most often with profanity. In these interviews, however, I have had to push that natural inclination aside and work to quash my responses or not challenges those aspects with which I disagree. Ultimately, that can not only be a useful skill in these interviews and otherwise, but also another aspect of my identity which affects me personally.

interactions, like all others, may be rooted in conventional communication expectations. They shared, "[w]hen the interviewer is a woman and the interviewee a man, it becomes extremely difficult for the interviewer to subvert conventional etiquette because she jeopardizes the interview and the conventions of 'gendered' communication" (p.377). To this end, upon their reflection, they found that they had to evaluate and address the situations in which they may have felt vulnerable and even unsafe. [24]

This was certainly a consideration as I began my research, but through the interviews, I have come to realize that the nature of inceldom is linked to a deep-seated belief that women do not want to have sex with them for any number of reasons. As one participant told me, "I don't hate women for not dating me. I can't blame them. Why would they date an ugly man?" (Personal communication, January 18, 2020). Others have expressed similar sentiments, and for many whom I have interviewed, being an incel—as well as being shy, anxious, or insecure—generally inhibits their willingness to approach women. This also affected some participants' willingness to engage in phone or video interviews, preferring instead to conduct the interview via social media messaging. Therefore, the nature of these research relationships remains unambiguous, and to date, my interactions with them have never been misconstrued or misinterpreted as romantic or sexual interest. [25]

5. Doing the Work

In doing this research, I have observed often heinous online spaces, shared limited details about myself with participants, set boundaries with participants, and questioned the way that my online presence may pose a threat to the interview process. In this section, I discuss specific instances that have stood out to me during this research, and I describe the implications of them as I continue. [26]

5.1 The forum: How it helped the research, but harmed me

For both ethical and logistical reasons, I will not and cannot post on incel forums. In the earliest days of this research, before I set out to do interviews, I knew that pretending to be a man and an incel, and registering for an account to post and reply to others in forums would be unethical. While the ethics of covert research and the use of deception are often debated (SPICKER, 2011), this was not a practice that I thought would be reasonable. The option of registering and identifying myself as a woman was also not an option, as the primary forum I observed explicitly stated that they would ban women users. [27]

5.1.1 A foundation of knowledge

Because I could not directly participate in the forums, I chose to spend time reading discussions and familiarizing myself with the language they used (which required me to create a glossary of terms), informally identifying themes among the content, and learning about the variety of perspectives among users. This year-long observation of the online community eventually led to an extensive

knowledge and understanding of incel issues and rhetoric, which ultimately earned me some credibility with interview participants. [28]

As ADJU-AMONG and ADAMS (2022) explained, "[f]or the researched, researchers need to establish themselves as worthy of the time to be invested in the research" (p.585). In the interviews, participants often attempted to explain ideas or specific terms to me, and I responded by pointing out that I was familiar with them. In asking questions, I was also able to demonstrate my knowledge of these issues, thus assuring the participants that I had "done my homework" and tried to learn rather than expect them to teach me even the most basic or rudimentary of notions. In one interview, a participant expressed his surprise at the level of investigation I had already conducted:

> "Participant: Escortcels [incels who visit sex workers], I'm sure you've met one or two.
>
> DALY: Yeah, I've had a couple conversations with escortcels, and I've had some long conversations about SEAmaxxing [visiting Southeast Asia to find romantic relationships].
>
> Participant: Wow.
>
> DALY: Yeah, I've gotten into the weeds with this.
>
> Participant: Yeah, you know your stuff" (Personal communication, January 29, 2020). [29]

We continued the conversation about incels and sex workers, but we had a much more in-depth conversation about it because I already had a foundational knowledge of SEAmaxxing from the forums, which also helped in my interview with a popular proponent of the approach, or as incels call it, a "cope." [30]

5.1.2 The harm of the content

While reading the contents of the forums proved beneficial to me as I conducted the interviews and interacted with participants, there were also a host of negative feelings I experienced in doing so. Despite the research relationships I have now, I still cannot deny the vile nature of what exists in the online forums. At the time, the things I read were, frankly, unsettling, horrifying, and terrible, with much of it falling easily into hate speech classifications. To be certain, they still do, but for this exercise, I want to consider the ways that the content hurt me, how I became desensitized to it, and what it has meant for this research. [31]

I often spent hours on the forums, throwing myself into the topics, reading the articles that were linked to the posts, and trying to understand the allure of the site. When I initially started visiting, I was both shocked by the vile content and even somewhat amused by the absurdity of much of it. Often, my attention and clicks were drawn to the most outrageous, extreme, or violent threads. The discussions commonly focus on women, and users often frame them all as being vapid, promiscuous, and manipulative among other perceivably negative characteristics (GING, 2017; JAKI et al., 2019). More generally, in previous research related to incel forum content, this has been labeled "women as

naturally evil" (O'MALLEY et al., 2022) or some variation related to attitudes about women and misogyny (FARRELL, FERNANDEZ, NOVOTNY & ALANI, 2019; MAXWELL et al., 2020). While there are a host of threads related to inceldom, including discussions about Chads (conventionally attractive, sex-having men), their own mental and physical shortcomings, and society at large, the ones that stood out most to me were the seemingly endless criticisms of women. [32]

A brief visit to the most popular forums will confirm that the content is extreme in nature and is steeped with misogyny, violence, racism, and homophobia. As I scanned these conversations, I imagined incels as shadowy figures around the world who delight in typing the most horrendous, offensive posts that they could imagine, and it made me question the humanity of the world. Being a criminologist, I am generally pessimistic about most things, as there is no shortage of global and domestic social ills. I have no illusions of world peace and harmony, but this was a whole new level of hatred. For comparison, while far too many people are enraptured by the details of serial murderers, there is still an *abstract* notion of them as simply being fascinating to understand. Reading the forums, however, moved vague ideas of online deviance and violent aberrations directly onto my computer screen. Derogatory terms for women, such as "foids," "roasties," and "holes" horrified me[3], as I could not separate my gender from this work. Discussions of forced monogamy, the legalization of rape, and even the genocide of short women (so that they cannot procreate and produce short boys and men) forced me to confront the world in which we live and the hatred for women that exists in both physical and online spaces. [33]

Even more specifically, many threads demonstrate a specific disdain for Asian women, often referring to them as "noodlewhores." Primarily, this contempt seems to stem from observations and research suggesting that Asian women are the racial group most likely to engage in inter-racial romantic and sexual relationships[4]. These types of posts often hypersexualize or objectify Asian women, then chastise them, and ultimately reduce them to nothing more than their sexual behavior. As a post on the forum states, "Even though I want to fuck them, Asian women are literally the bane of my existence. They're all whores for white men, they'll literally sit there and tell you that themselves." Even more, the term "race traitor" is used often (for example, "Asian women love to push the yellow fever bullshit because it makes them seem less like race traitors"), harkening back to the days of anti-miscegenation and ideas of racial purity.[5]

3 For further analysis of this language on forums, see PELZER, KAATI, COHEN and FERNQUIST (2021).

4 There is a host of existing research about the general issues of interracial marriage, dating, and sexual preferences, often disaggregated on a variety of variables. However, MISHRA (2018) focused on eurogamy, the selection of Euro-American spouses, as a means of address racial and gendered power differentials. She argued that "In the case of Asian Americans in eurogamous marriages, the most important personal asset of the male being from Euro-American gene pool, as the ability to bring the Asian woman to the mainstream ... [thus reducing] the social distance between herself and the racially dominant group" (p.1999).

5 The examples in this section that offer evidence of Asian women as a topic of discussion among incels are from one of the primary incel forums. While I understand that citation of sources is a critical piece of academic writing, I have opted—with the editors' permission—to refrain from

Another post compared Asian women to other racial and ethnic groups, rife with racialized and sexual language:

> "i [sic] think asian foids are the only ones who don't prioritize men from their own race, like white foids most often stay with chad, black foids most often stay with tyrone [the term for Black Chads], arab girls are in Muhammad's harem, while noodlewhores are looking for white cock only." [34]

These types of posts were common, and coupled with the more general posts about women, they seemed to place a target on me, even from the confines of the internet. At the time that I was observing (around early 2019), we had not yet seen the start of the pandemic and the subsequent spike in anti-Asian violence, but nonetheless, it startled me to see racist and sexist language so boldly there for public display. In all honesty, it made me consider why I even wanted to do this work, but I eventually concluded that this simply reminded me of the urgency and importance of understanding this behavior and its implications online and in the world. [35]

5.1.3 Desensitization

COWAN and KHATCHADOURIAN (2003) found that women consider hate speech more harmful because of higher levels of empathy, but over time, I found that I was becoming less affected by the disturbing content. Suddenly, I was less bothered by terms like the derogatory terms for women and even the racial slurs. This is a concerning side effect of this research, although it also supports research from BILEWICZ and SORAL (2020) in which they found that "participants who were exposed to hate speech were less sensitive to derogatory language than the participants exposed to simply negative content that did not include hate speech" (p.9). While I noticed this change informally as I was reading daily, it became more apparent when a colleague and I were conducting a content analysis of incel suicide posts (DALY & LASKOVTSOV, 2022). We coded the data in a single Word document for the themes upon which we had agreed, one of which included "attitudes about women," and once we had each coded separately, we met to discuss coding disagreements and interrater reliability (McALISTER et al., 2017). In that meeting, we realized that I had overlooked several instances of negative references or slurs about women—most of which were explicit and clearly within the definition of the theme—and that was when I seriously considered the ways in which spending time on the forums was affecting my reading of the content. I discussed this with my coauthor, we addressed the disagreements, and then I coded the content again, paying special attention to this issue. [36]

Since then, I have certainly reflected on that process, the desensitization that I experienced, and what it meant and still means for me in my personal and professional life, including this research. In doing so, I have attempted to reflect on other ways that I may have become numb to the content and ideas (in addition

directing readers to this website both to respect the online community and to avoid any additional traffic on the site.

to the words), constantly assessing my own views to ensure that I have not started on a path of radicalization or changing my beliefs to align with those of the online incels. I recognize that I am still rightfully offended by other online content outside of incel spaces, and the interviews—along with this concern about my own desensitization—have led me away from the online forums, which I visit rarely now. In a unique, strange twist, the interviews with incels helped to remove me from the initial harm of the forums and the unexpected change in my sensitivity. [37]

Reflexively, it made me wonder if this is how incels feel when engaging with online content, and I started to think about the ways that incels navigate these spaces. Instinctively, it made me wonder if they experienced the same type of desensitization that I have, and in spending time on the forums, if they legitimately come to believe these ideas and utilize this language offline. In the interviews, it had made me cognizant of how rarely they actually use these terms or slurs in their responses. While they may sometimes refer to "Chads," "Stacys" (the female counterpart to Chad), and "normies" (sex-having people of average attractiveness), I have yet to interview anyone who uses overt racial slurs or derogatory terms for women in our conversations. This realization led me to consider the ways that they might separate online forum language (often used for shock-value and attention, known as "shit-posting") and regular conversations both in phone/video interviews and via social media messages. [38]

This led me to expand on my past research and consider the function of such language within the community and how incels justify its use. In more recent interviews, I have discussed the hateful and often-violent content and examined incels' attitudes about shit-posting. Thus, the reflexive practice of thinking about my own experience—which helped me to understand myself in the context of my research—led me to interpret their responses through this lens and ultimately resulted in research that studies another aspect of incels' experiences and attitudes. [39]

5.2 The interview relationships

While there have been many experiences that I could share about the topics and issues I have navigated in the interviews, in this section, I describe instances that have required additional considerations or sensitive approaches to maintain rapport with participants and my own well-being. There are certainly other examples, but for the purpose of space and brevity, I offer a few. [40]

5.2.1 Skepticism and sarcasm before trust

While the role of researcher makes access to and engagement with incels more difficult, it may also be inherently complicated due to my identities as a Korean woman, although none of the participants explicitly stated that. However, some participants have clearly been hesitant to engage in interviews with me, even if they were the ones who made contact first. Incels have often been suspicious (or openly hostile) to journalists and researchers, as they believe that they may have

nefarious intentions or aim to take quotes out of context. In explaining past negative experiences, the subsequent hostility, and how it might affect my research, one participant told me, "[y]ou just have to eat shit because of it" (Personal communication, November 14, 2019). While I am still unclear what "eating shit" may entail in terms of this work (although I assume it means "just deal with it"), I have often attempted to overshare my intentions and the purpose of the research, as well as offering published articles that I have written about incels to vouch for myself and my approaches. [41]

Perhaps one of the benefits of my gender—even among a group of men who are believed to hate women and espouse misogynistic beliefs—is the notion that women can and should be empathetic, caring, and even maternalistic. By communicating in ways that are kind and supportive, I can lean into the gendered communication techniques and expectations that are expected of women. To be clear, this is not a manipulation tool or deception, as I genuinely believe that the interview participants are worthy of respect and compassion as they share their time, emotions, and experiences with me. [42]

The opposite of this approach—remaining more detached and objective—could potentially hinder the interview relationship. As LERUM (2001) explained, "problems of objectivity are rooted in the larger issue of *emotional detachment*, which is facilitated by what I call *academic armor*" (p.467). Researchers and academics can protect their positions or jurisdictions (or in this case, the distance between the participants and me) through linguistic, physical, or ideological actions, but removing this armor and responding with bounded emotional interactions "can confirm or reaffirm researchers' broader social identities" (p.474). [43]

While I have never identified as an incel, I can still relate to the notion of dating struggles, though not the extent that many participants have. I was, for a significant part of my life, frustrated by the dating market, and I, too, experienced many instances of low self-esteem or feeling insufficient. In an interview, I can share statements like, "I can understand that" or "I know that can be difficult," while not presuming to have experienced the exact situation. Empathy and even a slightly similar comparison can create a trusting research relationship. GEMIGNANI (2011) argued, "[i]f the researcher is able to partially identify with the researched, the progressive increase in the ability to understand the participants' experiences results in a sense of shared constructions" (p.706). Though the experiences and outcomes between the participants and me are different, we can still relate in some sense. [44]

Additionally, I have also come to use honesty and humility to assure participants that they can share or respond in whatever they would like (even after we begin the interviews), and this often leads to appreciation from participants. When I affirmed a respondent's answer which seemingly contradicted common ideas about incels, he responded with: "I see. So thoughtful." The nature of online messages (and, in this case, a cultural and linguistic barrier) affected the way I could interpret his comment. The final period and the fragmented nature made

me question what he meant, so I directly addressed it, leading to an interesting exchange:

> "DALY: I'm not sure if that's sarcasm, but if it is, that's cool, too.
>
> Participant: Not sarcasm. I genuinely mean it.
>
> DALY: Oh, I appreciate that. Sorry I assumed it was sarcasm.
>
> Participant: That's why I say you're so thoughtful. You want to correct misconceptions about us. Hehe it's okay. There are many sarcastic dicks on the internet and it's sometimes hard for us to know who's not" (Personal communication, November 19, 2019). [45]

In this interview, I explicitly addressed his comment that I found unclear, reminding him that sarcasm was fine if that was his intention. He used that moment of candor to explain why he (and others) are skeptical of those with whom they interact, and his use of the word "us" in his last comment suggested a common ground between him and me. The interaction ultimately reflected on the purpose of the study and our interactions, and it continued long after that exchange. [46]

5.2.2 Setting boundaries and sharing information

At times, participants have asked me questions about my personal life or my perspectives as they related to the interview content. They have all generally been appropriate in the context of the discussions, but the degree to which I was willing to share was something that I had not necessarily considered when I started these interviews. I think I had initially envisioned interviewing men who thought they already knew everything about women and dating—and why, therefore, they are not successful—but I did not consider that many may have had limited experiences with women and may have viewed a conversation with me as a learning or sharing experience. [47]

In one instance, a participant asked if I would rate him based on his physical appearance. When I read the question, I thought about the myriad of ways that this could go wrong and the ethical issues that I had with it. I intuitively gave my initial reaction as a response:

> "DALY: I don't know if that's the best thing to do, because I don't put a lot of weight on physical appearance. I think that there are objectively attractive [traits], I guess, but everyone's preference is different.
>
> Participant: So that's a no?" (Personal communication, February 19, 2022). [48]

After his reaction, I was concerned that he would be disappointed or react negatively to my answer. I quickly tried to think of alternatives to the situation, even though, in my mind, my solution was no better. Once I had typed my first idea, I thought better of it, and followed it with another text when I realized that in this situation, honesty was the best policy.

> "DALY: I mean, I wouldn't want to give you a number or anything, but I can make comments about your appearance, I guess.
>
> DALY: Although I don't really feel 100% comfortable doing that" (ibid.). [49]

By setting this boundary and letting the participant know that I was uncomfortable (and hopefully modeling the same boundary setting for him), I let him know that there were limitations to our discussion, and he respected my decision. In many ways, both professionally and personally, it made me feel more confident, as I had the opportunity to express my hesitation and advocate for myself. Additionally, the participant responded positively, allowing us to continue the interview, and this helped to inform my reactions future interactions with him and other participants. [50]

That participant and others have also asked questions about my personal life, including whether I have children, my dating or marital status, and my preferences in men. Because I have communicated with many participants from my public Twitter account (rather than one that is unique to the study or masks my identity)[6], they are likely aware that I am an Asian woman. Even more, I have referenced or shared photos with my partner from that account, so if they did a brief search, the participants (and anyone else) would be well-aware that I am not in a relationship with an Asian man. I had read many of the discussions about Asian women on the forums, and as I discussed above, those stories affected me, but I had not prepared myself to discuss my personal relationships and experiences with participants. I had also not thought about the ways that my identities and relationship could potentially become a topic of conversation. [51]

In discussing common topics on the forums, one participant I recruited on social media noted, "[m]aybe you saw threads about Asian women being race traitors for dating white men and dumping Asian men. Those are the threads or comments about Western women of Asian heritage." Another participant had much to say about Asian women and their perceived attitudes about Asian men. When I asked him about the role of race in dating and relationships, particularly from his perspective as a Black man, we discussed his view of a racial hierarchy and women's racial preferences in dating with white men at the top and Black men further below. I told him that I was Asian (as we had not connected via social media) and then asked about where Asian men were positioned in that list. He responded:

> "Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. If I were Asian—an Asian man—I would be very angry. I've seen Asian women just shit on Asian men. I don't think there is any other race of women who shit on their men as much as Asian women do, and they get, like, joy out of it. It's like they go out of their way to shit on Asian men, and it seems like they want to rub it in Asian men's face that they prefer white men" (Personal communication, March 21, 2021). [52]

6 I discuss this decision in reflexive article under review. Briefly explained, it was to initially demonstrate an initial level of trust with potential participants.

This was a lot to process quickly, especially since this occurred on a Discord call rather than messaging. Internally, I knew that I had never done this, but I panicked for a moment, thinking about how my then-partner (now fiancé) would seem in this context and hoping he would not delve further. Essentially, my choice to be in a relationship with a bi-racial (Black and white) man could be seen as confirmation of this perspective, and I was unsure how to respond until an off-handed joke he made forced me to do so.

> "Participant: What would your white husband say?
>
> DALY: I'm actually not married, so ...
>
> Participant: I'm just joking. You don't have to answer that. But do you mind if I ask if you date Asian men? Or if you don't want to answer, is it too much of a personal question to ask you if that has made you swipe right on some Asian men now? Or have you kind of divorced yourself from this research?" (ibid.). [53]

I had to think quickly about how much information about myself I wanted to share and if his joke implied judgment or required a justification on my part. Here again, I decided that honesty was the best policy. In that moment, I decided to disclose three pieces of information: 1. I was adopted at a young age and raised by a white family; 2. the racial identity of my partner of three years; and 3. I had interest in Asian men in the past. [54]

While I had not intended to share pieces of myself with participants, I opted to do so because what I chose to share is part of my identity and aspects that I do not aim to hide from anyone, incels or otherwise. I have openly discussed these issues on social media, public events, and in writing, so these are things that I would feel comfortable discussing with anyone, including participants. In that exchange, the participant seemed to understand the context of what I was sharing—though I was not seeking approval for my life choices—and he went on to clarify:

> "Well, you're in the in west, and the majority of the people in the west are white, so I wouldn't want to blame you for being with one or two white men. It would be more a case of it you're excluding men. Then I would be like, well, I couldn't really blame you for your attraction. I would just be like, well, you're a part of why Asian incels exist" (ibid.). [55]

Even though he did not classify me in this category given what I shared, I was still taken aback by the implication that Asian women are responsible for their male counterparts around the world or that people of the global majority should be aiming to date only people of the same race or ethnicity[7]. Again, it is not my place

7 This is certainly a complex discussion about race/ethnicity, agency, and romantic practices that are rooted in culture, history, gendered expectations, and even personal preference. While these debates occur often among people of Color, the notion of "dating outside of one's race" has also been pointed out in my current and previous relationships. Even more, commentaries and a variety of perspectives appear when the issue arises in popular culture (see, for example, BURTON, 2022, for a thoughtful—and non-academic—analysis of two reality dating show participants and how their relationship and problems highlighted issues of race, gender, and proximity to whiteness).

to argue or debate with the participants, but this was something that I needed to consider and reflect on in my own time. [56]

Similarly, in another interview via Discord call, a white man from the Netherlands who advocates travel to Southeast Asia to find romantic relationships pointed out that "Americans are always obsessed with race." While he noted that he found it very sad, he continued by asking me about my relationship status and my partner's ethnicity. I again shared information about myself, including my history and relationship status, but in this case, he asked if I would be dating an Asian man if I had been raised by an Asian family. I told him that I could not speculate about this, to which he responded, "[y]eah, I don't believe that for a second." Before I could respond, he referenced research about Asian women's dating patterns:

> "We have a lot of data about this. You can go to Google Scholar, you can type in all kinds of keywords relating to dating and race and ethnicity and Asian, and the results will come up and you will see that Asian girls are the biggest—I'm going to use the term 'race traitors.' That's a term that is used." [57]

Because this was on a call, his disbelief and then the use of the term "race traitor" seemed to happen so quickly that I was barely able to respond. The conversation continued with a brief discussion about inter-racial relationships (not mine, but more generally), and then it progressed naturally to cultural differences between the Netherlands and the United States. At that time and now, reflecting on this, I obviously do not appreciate the use of the term or the racial and ethnic implications of anti-miscegenation attitudes. I would certainly prefer to spend my time not being judged based on antiquated, racist ideas or feeling the need to defend my choices, but at the same time, the ideas that these participants shared were not ones that were new or unheard of in my life. I have been addressing these issues throughout my life, and the experiences have taught me how to brush them aside while also feeling confident in my decisions and relationships. I do, however, worry that my situation can become another example to support their arguments (which would happen regardless of the interviews). Even more, by not challenging these ideas, I might be silently condoning them. As GAILEY and PROHASKA (2011) suggested:

> "Remaining silent certainly facilitates the interview process, but ... silence can serve as a form of reinforcement and affirmation. We certainly do not remain silent in our classrooms when students make remarks such as these, but how do we negotiate a situation where we are dependent on our participants for information?" (pp.378-379) [58]

At the same time, however, I think about the role of qualitative researcher—which is not only my work, but yet another part of my identity—and what it means for these interviews. As an Asian woman whose relationship is, therefore, a topic of conversation among incel communities, I accept it as a part of the research, even if it is one that might offend me. In response, however, I choose to reclaim ownership of my decisions, examine the experiences and context of my

relationships, and affirm the agency that I have as a woman who maintains a positive, healthy relationship. In doing so, I can recognize that my race and ethnicity, gender, and relationship status not only shape my approaches to the interviews and the way that participants respond, but in sharing this with them, it may open doors to conversations or responses that another researcher may not have accessed. [59]

6. Conclusion

The challenges of this work and the ways that my identities have influenced the interviews has made me realize the importance of reflection and reflexivity to maintain my own well-being and enhance the quality of the work. ROGERS-SHAW, CHOI and CARR-CHELLMAN (2021) described the challenges of such research and noted:

> "The vulnerability of doing significant research with marginalized populations comes from allowing oneself to become part of a community to describe it from the inside, but the dilemma is how to force oneself to remain outside enough to report on it" (§65). [60]

While I will always be an outsider because of my gender, I understand that I am, in some ways, on the inside, or as close as I can be, and how it may reflect a desire to be accepted and validated (O'REILLY, 2009), even if from members of a morally questionable group. Some would even say that my positive research relationships and my genuine respect for them is risky and may ultimately lead to overrapport[8]. However, in some ways, the most harmful parts of this research—the vile nature of the forums or the accusations of being a "race traitor"—are useful in that they keep a clear boundary and distance between the participants and me. They are a constant reminder of the worst parts of this community, while in the best moments, the interviews and experiences shared by participants provide me with new areas of consideration and perspectives about incels. Ultimately, my work is not aiming to persuade people that incels are right in their beliefs, or even that all of them (as in the forums) should be given a platform and heard. However, the research is allowing those I interview to share their experiences and perspectives—even when I or others may disagree—and moving beyond the forums to add to the body of knowledge about incels. [61]

The interviews themselves, even without the data, are an interesting counterpoint to many pre-existing notions about incels and their attitudes about women. As one participant noted:

> "Most people would be surprised to learn that if you actually have a conversation with most incels, it's going to be nothing like their expectations aha. We're all able to have civil conversation. I think it's good for a dialogue, too. It also breaks down that silly

8 "Overrapport"—formerly termed "going native"—refers to the possibility or process of overstepping or losing boundaries in the research process. O'REILLY (2009) described it as "the danger for ethnographers to become too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance" (p.82).

> idea that incels can't/refuse to speak to women at all without malice or whatever" (Personal communication, October 19, 2021). [62]

Nearly all the interviews have been pleasant and respectful, and I have learned and gathered important information to further explore issues related to inceldom. Though I highlight some of the more uncomfortable moments here, I share them to emphasize the intellectual and emotional effort that is required when discussing sensitive topics and considering my own identities. [63]

This is certainly not to say that all research interactions, especially with perceivably concerning groups or individuals, will be positive or safe. All researchers can and should, first and foremost, identify the worst-case scenarios and take active and passive precautions to protect themselves, their personal information, and discuss safety measures with their colleagues and Institutional Review Boards. However, when the research takes place, reflexivity can be an important piece of the process when considering the possibility of antipathy, overrapport, desensitization, and more. Reflective journals can assist in the process and be an important supplement to the empirical data. Additionally, reflexivity and reflection are undoubtedly key elements of qualitative research that provide insight, improve methodology and analysis, and allow for introspection; as such, scholarly journals, disciplines, and people in academia should recognize, celebrate, and publish the artifacts that demonstrate and share these ideas. Not only would our colleagues benefit from reading and applying specific elements of these processes, but the approach would also continue to encourage reflexivity as an important and expected research activity. [64]

In sum, through this exercise in reflection and reflexivity, I have come to understand the context of the data that I collect as well as the fact that who I am, how I engage, and what I share affects the nature of the interviews. GEMINGNANI (2011) argued that such research requires examination of our experiences "which will actively contribute to the construction of the researcher's subjectivity, and, recursively, to her performance, engagement, and satisfaction with the work" (p.703). The complexity of our identities, coupled with those of the participants, requires these exercises to better frame our research and methodologies to continue to engage and work in meaningfully informed ways. Regardless of the physical distance between the participants and me, I am still an Asian woman who interviews involuntarily celibate men, and these are parts of me that I cannot simply leave behind at the beginning of an interview. Instead, I can use these reflective and reflexive experiences to understand and consider how *who I am* affects how I interpret and present data about *who they are*, and what that means for all of us. [65]

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