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To cite this article: Luc S. Cousineau (2023) “Are there any other male friendly subs on here?”
- online men’s rights groups as simultaneous communities of care and hate, inclusion and
exclusion, *Leisure/Loisir*, 47:4, 681-702, DOI: [10.1080/14927713.2023.2252812](https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2023.2252812)


To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2023.2252812>

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“Are there any other male friendly subs on here?” - online men’s rights groups as simultaneous communities of care and hate, inclusion and exclusion

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ABSTRACT

Online communities provide spaces and places where (almost) anyone can find like-minded others. This is true of many digital leisure spaces and is especially true for men’s rights and other masculinist groups. In these groups, while they are engaged with acts of misogyny and supremacist discourses, some men meet the fundamental need ‘for meaningful social connection, to be part of a group, and to belong’ as well as to “heal” modern alienation.’ More than simple gatherings, when these groups for men form around a perceived alienation from the mainstream they become spaces ‘to which [people] belong’ and believe that they ‘can act together to create change.’ Southern’s definition of a community of care. This paper establishes these groups as communities of care where ~~care~~ exists under Derridian erasure. This makes them important avenues for anti-feminist and misogynistic ideologies, exclusion, and violence, but through cultures of leisure inclusion and belonging.

RÉSUMÉ

Les communautés en ligne offrent des espaces et des lieux où (presque) tout le monde peut trouver d’autres personnes partageant les mêmes idées. Cela est vrai pour de nombreux espaces de loisirs numériques et particulièrement pour les droits des hommes et d’autres groupes masculinistes. Dans ces groupes, alors qu’ils se livrent à des actes de misogynie et à des discours suprémacistes, certains hommes répondent au besoin fondamental « d’établir un lien social significatif, de faire partie d’un groupe et d’y appartenir » ainsi que de « guérir » l’aliénation moderne. ” Plus que de simples rassemblements, lorsque ces groupes d’hommes se forment autour d’une aliénation perçue du courant dominant, ils deviennent des espaces “ auxquels [les gens] appartiennent ” et croient qu’ils “ peuvent agir ensemble pour créer le changement”; la définition de Southern d’une communauté de soins. Cet article établit ces groupes

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 February 2023
Accepted 6 July 2023


KEYWORDS

Communities of care; men’s rights; reddit; erasure

MOTS-CLÉS

communautés d’entraide;
droits des hommes; Reddit;
effacement

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2023.2252812>

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comme des communautés de ~~soins~~ où les ~~soins~~ existent sous l'effacement derridien. Cela en fait des voies importantes pour les idéologies antiféministes et misogynes, l'exclusion et la violence, mais à travers des cultures de loisirs, d'inclusion et d'appartenance.

'It seems like every time a male friendly sub pops up they are shut down, and I am so happy that this one is still standing otherwise I have no idea where I would go on here to escape the buffoonery and bigotry. If you know of any, please let me know. It is seriously starting to affect my mood and stress levels'.

/u/Njaulv,/r/MensRights, September 29, 2022¹

Introduction

/u/Njaulv is one of almost 350,000 members of the */r/MensRights* community on the popular content aggregation website *Reddit.com*; one of the most popular websites in the world with over 50 Billion monthly views (*Reddit Inc, 2021*). One of the many hundreds of thousands of communities on *reddit,/r/MensRights* explains its focus by saying: 'At the most basic level, men's rights are the legal rights that are granted to men. However, any issue that pertains to men's relationship to society is also a topic suitable for this subreddit'. The group is made up of almost all men (most women who participate are quick to identify themselves as such), and the majority of users are from the United States, the UK, then with smaller contingents from Western Europe, Australia, Pakistan, and India. Posts in the community range from users reaching out for support in their feelings, 'Is it wrong to want to give up?'; to questioning how men and women are treated socially, 'How do you cope with hatred towards men in women-focused spaces?'; to broader social commentary that reflects their Western gender-traditionalist worldview 'The Sad Decline of the Relationships Between Men and Women In North America'.² Comments and replies are generally agreeable, conversation is generally civil when there are disagreements, and users are supportive of others who have been negatively affected by the issues highlighted in posts (e.g., users who feel disaffected with the child custody court system) (*Cousineau, 2021a*).

The quote from */r/MensRights* that opens this paper calls out for 'escape' and mental respite. The author allows themselves to be vulnerable and shares their feelings. This user is clearly looking for support from other users and looks to this community to find link-minded peers. Taken in isolation, this (presumed) man is looking for a friendly place where they can find support. But, along with support-seeking (and finding), */r/MensRights* and many men's rights activist spaces are simultaneously locations of

misogyny, male supremacism, and anti-feminism (Cousineau, 2021b; Mamié et al., 2021; Meszaros, 2021).

The (purposefully) left out beginning of the epigraph reads as follows:

I am so sick of almost every sub I am on just constantly having unchecked misandry and feminist ‘theory’ thrown around as if it is as valid as actual science and facts about reality. . . .

The user’s anti-feminist lead-in to a post calling for better equity, acceptance, and support belies the challenging duality of an oppressor feeling oppressed – someone seeking a caring community while simultaneously working to dismantle systems that build and provide communities of care for others.³

It is through this complex duality of being an oppressor and oppressed that I will frame a discussion about how men’s rights spaces are often sought out and serve as what I call communities of ~~care~~⁴ – locations where users feel elements of inclusion and belonging, but that do simultaneous work of relegation, oppression, and intra-group ordering. In this conceptualization, I put care ‘under erasure’ or *sous rature* (Derrida, 1974) to signify that while it is in some ways inexact, the word care remains necessary. Derrida’s *sous rature* has been used in this way by qualitative research scholars to work with and describe a problematized concept ‘because it appears necessary and, at the same time, cross it out because it is inaccurate’ (St Pierre, 2011, p. 613) quoted in (Kumm & Berbary, 2018). These men’s rights communities of ~~care~~ exist in a complex, (mostly) homosocial space that, like the locker room, combine deeply supportive action with negative feedback, mutual teasing, and the occasional slur (Curry, 1991; Gregory & Colgan, 2011). Practices and social expectations couched in understandings of hegemonic masculinity create spaces for acceptable (and socially unacceptable) behaviours. They become, like other male homosocial spaces, leisure communities that act as spaces of inclusion and belonging (care), while simultaneously organizing and coordinating members in anti-equity work as well as gendered and hierarchical ordering (~~care~~).

Leisure, inclusion, and men’s rights: a complex matrix

Contextualizing leisure through inclusion and belonging relies on the premise of leisure spaces providing the types of community that allow individuals to meet the fundamental need ‘for meaningful social connection, to be part of a group, and to belong’ as well as to “‘heal” modern alientation’ (Glover & Sharpe, 2020, p. 1, 4–5). Researchers in the field have done extensive work to demonstrate (and critique) leisure’s power to enhance personal, social, and spiritual well-being (Carruthers & Hood, 2004; Heintzman, 2020, 2022; Mannell, 2007; Pomfret & Varley, 2019), leisure’s

role in belonging (Fortune et al., 2021; Glover, 2017, 2018; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Lenneis & Agergaard, 2018), and leisure as an agent of inclusion (Gallant et al., 2020; Hindley, 2020; Hodgkinson & Hughes, 2012; Knee, 2019; Trussell & Mair, 2010), all of which are significant in helping to understand leisure's important role in the development of individuals and social order. Since the feminist turn in leisure research led by important scholars like Shaw (1985) and Henderson (1990, 1988), discussions of belonging and inclusion have largely (and rightly) focused on marginalized individuals and groups. But this (re)focus on marginalized identities has simultaneously created a setting where some of those who feel the 'modern alienation' Glover and Sharpe discuss in their chapter about leisure communities (quoted above) are those who have traditionally held power.

The alienation that needs healing from this perspective can be a refraction of the exclusionary nature of communities (Neal et al., 2019), and a response to feelings of exclusion from broadly acceptable social discourse. This means that those who have traditionally held and controlled space – so mostly White, heterosexual, able-bodied, not poor, men – feel a lack of control, and therefore excluded from discourse or disenfranchised (Manne, 2020). These feelings of disenfranchisement create self-identified subjects of exclusion, feelings of disconnection, and cause the disaffected to look for places where they can feel heard and 'accepted for who they are'. In this context I use *places* deliberately and in line with Gieryn's (2000) formulation of place as space inscribed with meaning and value, that 'stabilizes and gives durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action; embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities, memories' (p. 473). By searching for and joining/creating places that support their versions of cultural norms, identities, and memories, and where they feel heard, the (dis)enfranchised create their own communities of care – a kind of interstitial space that can at once support narratives of disaffection from the users while simultaneously preserving and promoting the cultural power that rests in their hands.

It is within this interstitial space of modern alienation and seeking connection where we find men's rights activist groups and other 'unloved' communities (Fielding, 1990). Unloved is a term that Fielding uses to describe subjects or participants in research that are contentious or 'hostile to research', rather than the more common 'conducive, whimsical, or at least nonthreatening' (p. 609) participants.⁵ More than simple gatherings, when these groups form around a perceived alienation from the mainstream they become places 'to which [people] belong' and believe that they 'can act together to create change'; Southern's (2007, p. 336) definition of a community of care. Men's rights communities, then, might be considered

a kind of community of care, in that, for some, they are safe places constructed for support, belonging, participation, understanding, connection, collaboration, and respect (Benner, 2000; Watermeyer, 2020).

Addressing our discomforts

The notion that men's rights activist groups can be seen as communities of care (in any way) is likely to make you uncomfortable. These groups hold deeply problematic views that see surges in popularity whenever events positively (e.g. #metoo) or negatively (e.g. overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States) affect women (broadly speaking) and/or feminist political action (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Hodapp, 2017). However, within these groups, members exhibit close connections, inter-group support, and commiseration. It is exactly the care and inclusion of the community that brings members into these leisure spaces, places them into a technological ecosystem that serves to inculcate and move their thinking toward supremacist ideologies (Cousineau, 2021c), and allows them to begin to see themselves in what Devries (2021) calls the 'collective avatar'; the disaffected man from a place where women are seen to be gaining (or have) influence or dominance over men.

This paper proposes that we might see online men's rights groups in quasi-anonymous internet space (and their fleshy counterparts) as leisure communities of care, making the argument that feelings of care and connection are essential to their appeal to prospective members and key to their ongoing success. It will show how these places are also important avenues for anti-feminist and misogynistic radicalization of some men who get involved, rendering them from caring spaces to communities of ~~care~~. It is through cultures of leisure inclusion and belonging that these communities of exclusion and violence (in many forms) come to be. Understanding these communities as communities of ~~care~~, and locations of soft *entrée* into misogynist and male supremacist ideologies, are key to active work in countering their brands of misogyny, their modes of recruitment, and their social impacts.

The genesis of the arguments here lies in my own identity as a cis-gendered heterosexual white man engaged with the critical study of communities where I could easily find a welcoming home. While my feminist and critical theory epistemological positionings preclude me from ideological acceptance in these groups,⁶ my physical presentation and male identities place me within the cadre of acceptable potential members. I look like I could be one of them – if we allow ourselves to generalize what a men's rights activist looks like. There is, therefore, a kind of shared identity between myself and the collective avatar of men's rights groups (the White male patriarch) that while fundamentally misaligned ideologically,

compels me to examine the phenomena that draw people ‘like me’ into their ranks. This compulsion extends from a multi-year digital ethnographic project exploring discourses of masculinity within men’s rights groups. Data shared here come from a combination of field notes and journals, observational data from 3 years of fieldwork, and systematic data collection of over 23,000 pieces of online content.

With this positionality in mind, I will begin by explaining the concept of communities of care and discussing its significance for personal and leisure communities that support inclusion and belonging. I will follow this with a brief, but essential, explanation of the loose collection of groups known as the men’s rights movement. In this explanation I will also examine the motivations of individuals who join these groups – an exercise that is essential to understanding why I see these spaces as communities of care. The last section of the paper will make the argument that theorizing these groups as communities of care, and using the extensive leisure literature on community and leisure outcomes, can allow specific and important insights into why individuals (particularly young men) are drawn into these groups, how we might counter those pathways towards misogyny and radicalization, and how we might better address the needs men seek to meet by joining these groups.

Communities of care

In research, the term community helps describe what binds people together, and what does that binding can vary a great deal (Glover & Sharpe, 2020). Kozinets (2010) in his work on online communities explains that community boundaries are ‘somewhat indistinct, but must be understood in terms of self-identification as a member, repeat contact, reciprocal familiarity, shared knowledge of some rituals and customs, some sense of obligation, and participation’ (p. 10). Leisure communities in particular are built around feelings of fun, membership and belonging, and ‘intangible social infrastructure’ that provides an ‘opportunity to belong’ and be with others who share our interests, identity, and values (Glover & Sharpe, 2020, pp. 2–3).

Communities of care are extensions of how we see more general communities in that they ‘foster a sense of belonging to something much greater than ourselves and thus extend our care beyond ourselves and our immediate relationships to others’ (Southern, 2007, p. 336). Grounded in a Care Ethics (Tronto, 2010, 2014), a community of care reaches ‘into public spaces, drawing on the interdependency of humans in order to tailor care that meets individual needs’ (Watermeyer, 2020, p. 1434) and ‘is thus about connection, support, belonging, understanding, participation, collaboration, respect – a safe space, in other words’ (p. 1435). The notion of safe space adds a layer of individuality to communities of care that render collections of loose ties

into what McCold (2004) calls micro-communities made up only of ‘people who, if given the opportunity, are most likely to share their perceptions and concerns with us, and whose opinions are most likely to influence our feelings and behavior’ (p. 156). So, while we can discuss the value and need for ‘communities of care’ in a general way, as is done in relation to virtual communities (Bers et al., 2007; Staufert-Reyes et al., 2022), youth health promotion (England & Cole, 1998; Forrest et al., 2018), or restorative justice (Bolivar, 2012; McCold, 2004), to understand the role of a community of care in bringing in specific members and creating belonging (as occurs with men’s rights groups), communities of care must be seen as discrete units with specific cases (McCold, 1996). To better situate men’s rights movement communities as discrete units and communities of care (and care), what follows will give an historical snapshot of the men’s rights movement

The men’s rights movement

The genealogy of the men’s rights movement is significant to help give perspective on its relationship to feminism, and the rise of its groups as what we can understand as communities of care. The modern men’s rights movement has roots in young men’s engagement with the women’s liberation movement (Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Fox, 2004; Hodapp, 2017; Kipnis, 1995; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). These young men were engaged with feminist action and organizations, and through their learning and application of feminist theory began to question the implications of gender structures as they affected men as well as women (Hodapp, 2017).⁷ For some of these men, the delicate balance of participating in feminist action and considering men’s issues resulted in critiques of gender and masculinities.⁸ For others, feelings of male exclusion from the gendered and oppression considerations of feminism caused them to split away and develop feminism-critical examinations of gender, gendered relationships, and especially men and masculinity (Messner, 2016).⁹ These early critiques have been developed and re-used over time through the continued writing of authors like Warren Farrell (1988, Farrell, 1996, 2005, 2012; Farrell & Gray, 2018), the work of other activists like Paul Elam (2019, 2017), and in providing foundational material for the continued development of men’s rights rhetorics.¹⁰

In his self-published book *The Men’s Rights Movement: From 1856 to the present*, Peter Wright (2017) uses a combination of his own writings, and the writing of Paul Elam and Robert Brockway (both prominent figures in the contemporary men’s rights movement), to make the argument that the men’s rights movement began long before the men’s liberation turn of the 1970s. Wright claims to trace the roots of the movement as far back as an article published in an 1856 edition of *Putnam’s Monthly* where an unnamed author makes a series of arguments that mirror (albeit with

a mid-19th century vernacular) many of the arguments made by current men's rights activists. Wright begins the journey of the men's rights movement there and carries the 'first wave' forward to 2009, where he claims a 'second wave' of men's rights activism began that serves to better tie together disparate elements of the movement (e.g. within the manosphere),¹¹ and pivots its focus away from men being able to live traditional roles and toward the right 'to be treated as human beings deserving of a variety of life choices and basic human rights' (Wright, 2017, *Welcome to the Second Wave* (Jan 2013) – para. 2). The academic consensus, however, is that the men's rights movement as we conceptualize it today has its roots in women's liberation. Christa Hodapp (2017) in her excellent book on the men's rights movement also marks the second wave at 2009 with the launch of the website *A Voice For Men*. While the timings presented by both Wright and Hodapp are complicated by the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s and Robert Bly's book *Iron John* (Bly, 1990), it is clear that the men's rights movement as we understand it today is a contemporary development.

Regardless of the roots of the movement, or a (mostly) agreed upon set of priorities, academics like Jonathan Allan (2016) argue that even by the mid-2010s the men's rights movement had yet to solidify its theoretical grounding. Allan explains the movement as 'reactive rather than politically advantageous', and that 'it has located its problem, namely women and feminism, but it has yet to outline a theory of its call to action' (p. 25). Whether you see the movement as 40 or 160 years old, its reactionary nature always positions it *contra*-something, and therefore defined not by its own socio-political positioning but rather its opposition – in this case to feminism. 'Reactive politics' writes Jack Halberstam (2012) 'are weak and defensive, are defined by the opposition, and tend to retreat into justifications instead of moving forward through provocations' (p. 169). While this is mostly true of the men's rights movement, when members move beyond justifications and through to provocations, those provocations can result in serious violence like that committed against U.S. federal judge Esther Salas and her family.¹²

However, we must be careful not to essentialize or oversimplify the movement either. Allan (2016) reminds us that 'the men's right movement quickly can be construed of as a kind of nostalgia for a simpler time of clearly defined patriarchal entitlement' (p. 26), but to take this construction of the movement as a nostalgic pining for traditionalism would be a mistake. Scholars favoured by the far right like Evola or Eliade, and many of men's rights more esoteric theorists, use 'tradition' as a kind of dog whistle for patriarchy (Bratich, 2022). The second wave of the men's rights movement has been especially successful in functionalizing affect in the same ways it has been used by other actors on the far right to generate connection and participation (Zembylas, 2021). The movement has, to great effect, 'co-

opted the language of affect, emotion, feeling, and the personal being political to meet its own ends. The men's rights movement, we might say, has appropriated the language of feminist consciousness-raising' (Allan, 2016, p. 26). It has incorporated a gender-flipped version of what Farrell (1996) calls 'female "victim power"' not to convince the world that 'we lived in a sexist, male-dominated, and patriarchal world', but rather a sexist, female dominated or '*bi-sexist*' world (p. 16).

Using theory to look behind the men's rights mask

In the writing and rhetorics of the men's rights movement, we see connections to both hegemonic masculinities, as well as what Ravecca et al. (2022) call a right-wing intersectionality, or the co-optation of intersectional theory to both mirror and reverse progressive intersectional theory. Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity is an important theoretical cornerstone given the men's rights movement's reliance on quasi-traditional, but also malleable understandings of ideal masculinity to ground its identity politics (Cousineau, 2021a). Connell's concept frames a (never-attainable) ideal masculinity that serves as both personal project and cultural signpost, against which the perpetual victimhood of men's rights and the larger manosphere as a whole can be juxtaposed (Boehme & Isom Scott, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity allows for, and necessitates, that some men (most men) are unable to meet certain markers of masculinity, and 'legitimizes unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 28). Men within these communities are drawn to this avatar of masculinity because it provides a signposted way of being – an idea of how to be a man that can be simultaneously worked towards and looked 'back' to as idealised gender traditionalism. In cultural spaces where these men feel cast aside, adrift, or otherwise underserved/valued, hegemonic masculinity provides a kind of target to strive for, even as that target is functionally impossible to achieve.

Implicated, then, in the discourses of victimhood, as well as supremacy, is the intersectional nature of the men's rights man. This is a specific type of intersectionality that simultaneously uses and counters what we might normally think of when discussing the intersections of identity; right-wing intersectionality. Ravecca et al. (2022) explain that right-wing intersectionality 'conceives social hierarchies as the moral anchor of society and defends them by attacking the theories and movements that challenge them', and because of this 'the resistance against redistributive policies, the promotion of the traditional family, and the assertion of the "natural" difference between men and women' are essential pillars of belief (p. 3). The assumption of the concept of intersectionality, and its acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of power, provides an essential set of tools that help to craft

the narrative that ‘something has gone horribly wrong, society has failed boys, and men are lacking’ (Allan, 2016, p. 28). The combination of hegemonic masculine ideals with a right-wing intersectional framework does essential affective work in stabilizing and victimizing the men of men’s rights (Allan, 2016; Zembylas, 2021). In doing so, it not only does the work of legitimizing the movement and its ideals to its members but also does some of the labour of setting up men who participate as needing caring and appreciative spaces – if for no other reason than to support or console them.

The final theoretical piece that ties men’s rights groups together and helps us to understand modes of care (but also radicalization) within men’s rights spaces is that of the collective avatar (Devries, 2021). Devries explains that the collective avatar can be seen as ‘a character – a way of acting or being – collectively constructed by an online community. Users embody this character in order to participate effectively in a certain online space, in turn re-affirming its features and characteristics’ (p. 239). It is ‘the collective product of ongoing interactions between human users, technological platforms and sociological conditions’ (p. 239). For the men of men’s rights, subscription to and reproduction of the narratives built into the core tenets of men’s rights activism are essential to ongoing and active participation in the community. Like other online ideological communities, dissent or questioning of the ideas that underpin their belief system are policed from within to help maintain community cohesion. This is both a relational and performative process where ‘users not only re-build the features of the collective avatar [through participation in it] but also re-build and concretize the features of their own (political) identity’ (Devries, 2021, p. 240). The shared identity provided by the collective avatar for members of men’s rights groups is as important as any other collective group or community identity – elements that are essential to the wellbeing generated for individuals through membership. As I will demonstrate in the following section, those essential elements of community that bring and hold these groups together are foundational elements in building them into communities of care.

Men’s rights as communities of Care – looking for care

Men’s rights communities provide both the group identity required for participants to identify with the collective avatar of the disaffected man and the individualized case-by-case support systems needed for individual and specific communities of care described in the literature. Because of this they are safe spaces to explore and act on personal feelings (Benner, 2000), and places that some people can find ‘the personal, emotional and material care and support we need to face problems and make difficult changes in our lives’ (McCold, 2004, p. 156).

The diversity of focus areas of the men's rights movement, while giving the ideology broad appeal to a variety of potential adherents, also allows for individuals to get involved or enter the community. For example, if a man comes to the /r/MensRights community on Reddit anticipating or involved in a custody court dispute relative to his children, there are hundreds of threads and thousands of posts and comments every year in this community which discuss and critique child custody systems (in various countries – but mostly the U.S.A.). These threads, although they are a relatively small part of the /r/MensRights community (much more of this discussion takes place in subreddits like /r/fathersrights, for example), they still provide support, direction, and places for discussion on child custody/support topics. In December 2022 alone there were 25 threads in /r/MensRights which referenced custody in their titles, with 357 total posts and comments. These included titles like 'Father Losing Custody Unfairly', 'Why should child Custody not be based on the best interest of the child standard?' and 'Child Custody rights? Nope'. Most discussions in these threads begin with support for the affected man; statements of support ('This guy is AWESOME!'), empathy ('If that doesn't show you how bad men have it vs. women in court, nothing will. Crazy'), and communality/camaraderie ('Now let's use that outrage to fix the system!').

The supportive and open spaces that are created within online men's communities appear to provide the same types of safe and mutually supportive environments described in the literature on men's homosocial leisure participation – like the work on men's sheds for example (Ballinger et al., 2009; Cordier & Wilson, 2014; Kelly et al., 2019; Ormsby et al., 2010). While outwardly conceptualized as places for men to come together to do stereotypically 'masculine' tasks (like woodworking or other tinkering) with shared tools and in shared space, research on men's sheds reveals that participants gain far more from the mutual support networks, social time, and homosocial emotional support than they do from the productive labour of tinkering.

I argue that the same is true for the men who come to /r/MensRights for support and discussion on personal issues. Broadly speaking, there are few places where men can go to speak freely and openly about their thoughts and feelings, especially when those thoughts and feelings are personal or vulnerable (Vaswani, 2014). When those thoughts and feelings also express disbelief in male power in the home, over partners, and in both public and private spheres, these spaces are less frequent still, and the title of this paper, taken from a post on /r/MensRights gives specific reference to this perceived difficulty. The internet and specifically places like /r/MensRights are safe places for this type of thought and discussion, so it is unsurprising, then, that men look to, and find, this type of support in this community.

Men's rights as communities of *Care* – finding *Care*

If all that men found in /r/MensRights and other communities like it were homosocial support networks and positive social interactions, then the work of this paper would be to establish them as esoteric but net-positive leisure communities – areas of ludic fun and mutual support. However, this is not all that men find there. In direct replies to original posts, or within the comment threads of supportive replies, currents of anti-feminism, system-blaming, and laments of lost traditionalism are quick to appear (the following are all replies to posts about custody rights):¹³

My life started to go downhill after the SlutWalk wave feminism affected me on campus. Then, my life was always in some sort of problem with women, especially in Toronto. I realized that I didn't have this problem while living in the Dominican Republic for a few months.

This is what happens when you let gender studies majors make decisions for the country

Good thing there are valuable women overseas who don't overvalue themselves and are actually interested in dating within their league. Fuck western women.

It is here where we can see the real impact of communities like /r/MensRights as leisure communities that appear as communities of *care*. The inclusion, sense of belonging, and social connection can help to build communities that simultaneously exist as pillars of (mostly) homosocial support, as well as purveyors of problematic social undercurrents and direct call-outs of men who choose other ways of being: 'The ultimate simp: Wifeguy – That's right, we have reached a new low. "Husband" is the entirety of your identity and you must spend all your time publicly praising your wife.'

Participants and members of /r/MensRights find consistent and persistent anti-feminist messaging in the community. In a sample of all posts from December 2022 there are over 3300 posts that reference feminism and none of them define contemporary feminism in a positive light. Beyond the kind of communal anti-feminism discussed here, there is more insidious work underway in the community; work that takes place in the discursive spaces of comment threads and replies rather than the headline posts. Like the gender traditionalist comments shared above, the draw towards far-right and more radicalized male supremacist thinking is always present – thinking that pulls men toward more oppressive ideology, less equitable world-views, and in extreme cases, deadly violence. Much of the lead-in to these viewpoints is couched in the community's belief in misandry, or a socially accepted and pervasive hatred or contempt for men and boys – a kind of antithesis to misogyny:

Schools train women to hate men and train men to hate themselves. They have in a way changed the term men to mean something evil . . . It gives men a point to rally on and direction for what we strive for . . . I feel we need innovation if we are going to win back the culture and discourage misandry.

Because the more artificially inferior men are, the more justified women are in grabbing more authority.

The belief in culture as misandrist and the creation of ‘artificial inferiority’ in men allows /r/MensRights users to contextualize women as simultaneously needing to degrade men to stoke their own fragile senses of self, and as operating a devious cabal with the goal of complete domination over a pre-established male under-class. ‘Massive inferiority complex coupled with a very fragile ego similar to that of a very ripe pumpkin. It can go splat at any moment’, says one user in response to questions about why women reject men. ‘Because that’s how [women] gain power’ says a user later in the thread, ‘by becoming the privileged class, and they know what they are doing and have been doing it very well’. These beliefs in misandry and the ills of women and feminism can lead some community members to the dehumanization of women, especially as sexual partners, and we see the infiltration of standard misogynist rhetorics like women as sexual objects, ‘She’s a pump, dump and gotta run from this crazy b*tch [*sic*] kind of girl lol’. Connected through a women-with-power=collapse pathway we also see the presence of far-right exclusionary politics in comments and replies that play on anti-woke,¹⁴ racist, and xenophobic ideologies; ‘That is insane. Sometimes I feel that walling off California would be more beneficial than a wall along our southern border.’ While these types of content are not the only types of posts in the /r/MensRights community, they are pervasive enough to support the assertion that these reddit communities, although not overtly far-right in their presentation, form part of a platformed pathway toward radicalization (Cousineau, 2021c).

Where belonging can move to hate

In this paper I have illustrated how men’s rights groups like /r/MensRights on Reddit are active and significant leisure communities for participants. They create similar experiences to other leisure communities, experiences that enhance health and well-being (Cordier & Wilson, 2014), create a sense of belonging (Fortune et al., 2021), and promote a sense of inclusion (Hodgkinson & Hughes, 2012) through the assumption of collective identity, solidarity, and mutual support – ‘I was abused, you guys helped me break free’. This is especially true for men who find these communities with existing feelings of social disaffection

or exclusion – ‘Done feeling ashamed and being silent...’; ‘I hate being a Man in a Women’s world’. The feelings of inclusion, of being listened to, understood, and supported – the belonging that is possible for men who feel disenfranchised or somehow marginalized in a world that tells them they are entitled (Manne, 2017) – is what makes these communities so attractive; it is what draws men of all kinds into reading and participating. These are safe places to question, to complain, and to rage, and these affordances not only create an affinity group with meaningful opportunities for connection (Gallant et al., 2020) but also a soft *entrée* into a pernicious network of platformed anti-feminism, misogyny, and pipelines toward radicalization that begin with the seeking of community and camaraderie and (can) end with gender-based violent extremism (Cousineau, 2021c; Munn, 2019).

The study of men’s rights groups as places with dual meanings is complex and potentially fraught. On the one hand, given that we can show these groups as communities of care, where members can come together to support those who are in need and/or struggling, they would seem to provide an important outlet for these men. This is especially true in cases where men choose to openly express their feelings to other men, something which we know happens infrequently and requires the attention of academics and leisure program designers alike (Cordier & Wilson, 2014; Pease, 2012). On the other hand, to acknowledge these spaces as communities of *care* (with care under erasure or otherwise) puts us at risk of being seen as legitimizing and supporting (actively or passively) the entirety of their discourse; much of which is sexist at best, and violently misogynistic or supremacist at worst. The duality at play here might compel you to apply something akin to a feminist ethics of care in your approach to research (or even non-research engagement) with this type of group. But as discussed elsewhere (Cousineau, [in press](#)), the decision to do so comes with implications that extend beyond our own interactions to the ways that the most people can live as well as possible (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). The duality at play in men’s rights groups must also force us to consider the implications of leisure’s inclusionary potential and how connections between inclusion, belonging, and extremism look almost identical to inclusion, belonging, and well-being. We should be on guard, both as researchers and leisure practitioners, to what our safe spaces and places of belonging can do, and attune ourselves to preventing them from platforming hate, misogyny, and male supremacy.

There are researchers who have done versions of this in the leisure literature specific to the far-right and reactionary right in the past. Spracklen (2013), as well as Woolley and Luger (2023) have described leisure as a potential vehicle for messages of hate – an assertion certainly backed up by Mowatt’s work on lynching as leisure (Mowatt, 2012) and leisure as a tool for racecraft (Mowatt, 2018). Along with these authors, scholars like Veal

(2021) and Williams (2009, 2017) have long called for leisure research to make purposeful strides in researching groups, activities, and leisure settings that are uncomfortable, ‘mysterious’, and ‘dangerous’. Tokarski (1996) wrote in this area, as has Stalker (2019) in their recent work on becoming assemblages, but leisure scholars writing directly and openly about the far-right or misogyny and their influence on leisure behaviour and policy is sorely lacking given the rising tides of far-right and right-wing extremism across the globe. The works referenced above demonstrate that /r/MensRights is not unique, and that other communities leverage the same politics of care to build community as well as bolster their numbers and influence. Vegas Tenold (2018) provides an excellent long-form description of this phenomenon with White supremacist ideologues and groups in his book *Everything You Love Will Burn*. Strides to building community, influence, and power as explained through the example of /r/MensRights are happening through leisure communities of connection – with pernicious and (often) dangerous outcomes.

We are left, then, with the question of what leisure practitioners and scholars can do? Here I will provide three recommendations that each of us can engage with in our own ways. The first of these is to be aware. Technologies are not benign, nor are the media and engagement platforms (read: social media, blogosphere, etc.) that we all connect with through networked digitality (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022). The impacts of digital technologies on race, gender, sexualities, self-expression, and many other elements of identity are well-documented (Abbate, 2012; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018), and while these are all cautionary tales, they should be reminders that individual experience with digital technologies is always already informed by offline social realities. This awareness must also extend into a recognition that studies of leisure spaces without critical engagement in the actions and implications of those spaces is a problematic erasure of the political and social implications of the ways that inclusion and belonging simultaneously spotlight and erase.

Second is to commit to a deeper understanding. Yes, /r/MensRights is a deeply problematic place (as are other communities like it), but it exists for a reason, and here I argue that an important part of that reason is to fill a void for men looking for emotional peer support in times of personal turmoil. It is well documented that leisure-based opportunities structured around sharing feelings and mutual support are fewer and further between for men than they are for women (see the work on men’s sheds for one example, e.g. Kelly et al., 2019). A more nuanced examination of participant motivation in communities like /r/MensRights tells us that many of these men do not feel that they have other, acceptable leisure spaces where they can express the same kind of vulnerability, and/or receive the same types of support as they can on /r/MensRights – the deleterious and misogynistic elements notwithstanding.

Lastly, use your awareness and deeper understanding to help address the issues that lead men (in the case of men's rights) and others (in non-gendered other spaces) toward ideological positions of hate and prejudice. Well considered and informed leisure practice, leadership, and scholarship can help to create spaces of positive support, identity building, and personal development that are currently lacking for many people (especially men – at least as they might perceive them). As the experts and policy setters across many fields (e.g. recreation, sport, parks and outdoor adventure) we have tremendous power for positive change, but we must choose to act in this way. I challenge you to be more aware, develop deeper understanding, and work in a way that helps us all act against hate.

Notes

1. Reddit.com uses the designations/u/and/r/to differentiate between individual user pages (for example www.reddit.com/u/Here_Comes_The_King is the page for rapper Snoop Dogg) and communities (www.reddit.com/r/MensRights is the Men's Rights community page).
2. For posts and comments that I quote in this paper (aside from the epigraph) I have excluded author attribution. While this contrasts with my approach in previous expository work on/r/MensRights and other reddit communities (see Cousineau, 2023), in this case providing author names adds little to the argument. All quotes are presented verbatim as they were posted online.
3. For further discussion on the challenges and nuances of these dualities, see the works of Nicholas (2017) and Dhananjaya (2022), among others.
4. Throughout this paper I will use the word 'care', as well as "~~Care~~" with a strikethrough, to differentiate the more broadly understood concept of care (plain text) and the concept of care under erasure (strikethrough text) explained above.
5. The subjects Fielding discusses in his 1990 paper are police.
6. This ideological acceptance goes both ways, where I find their ideological positionings deeply problematic, and they likewise find mine unacceptable.
7. Given the timeframe discussed here (1970s) I chose to use the language men and women rather than more contemporary reference to identities (e.g. man-identified person).
8. See, for example, Marc Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (Fasteau, 1974).
9. Some of the most prominent examples being the works of authors like Warren Farrell (1975) and Herb Goldberg (1976).
10. For longer and more thorough explorations of the genealogy of men's rights and other men's groups within the manosphere see Ging (2019), Gotell and Dutton (2016), Marwick and Caplan (2018), and especially Hodapp (2017).
11. Wright does not use the language of 'Manosphere' to make his point for second wave men's rights.
12. I no longer name perpetrators of misogynist violence in my writing, as naming them supports what Zach Bratich (2022) calls the culture of *inspo-violence* that supports and perpetuates these actions. For more on this relative to misogynist incel violence see (Cousineau, 2022).

13. Quotes below are taken from different threads on different dates in December 2022. Here and later in the paper I present multiple example quotes as single block quotes for easier reading. Examples are separated by short dash lines.
14. For context, the use of anti-woke here is meant to reflect both the intrinsic ties to black consciousness and anti-racist struggles, and the expansion of the term to include oppression and discrimination based on sexuality and gender (Cammaerts, 2022). Anti-woke has been used as a way of weaponizing socially progressive struggle into an 'insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction' (p. 735).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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