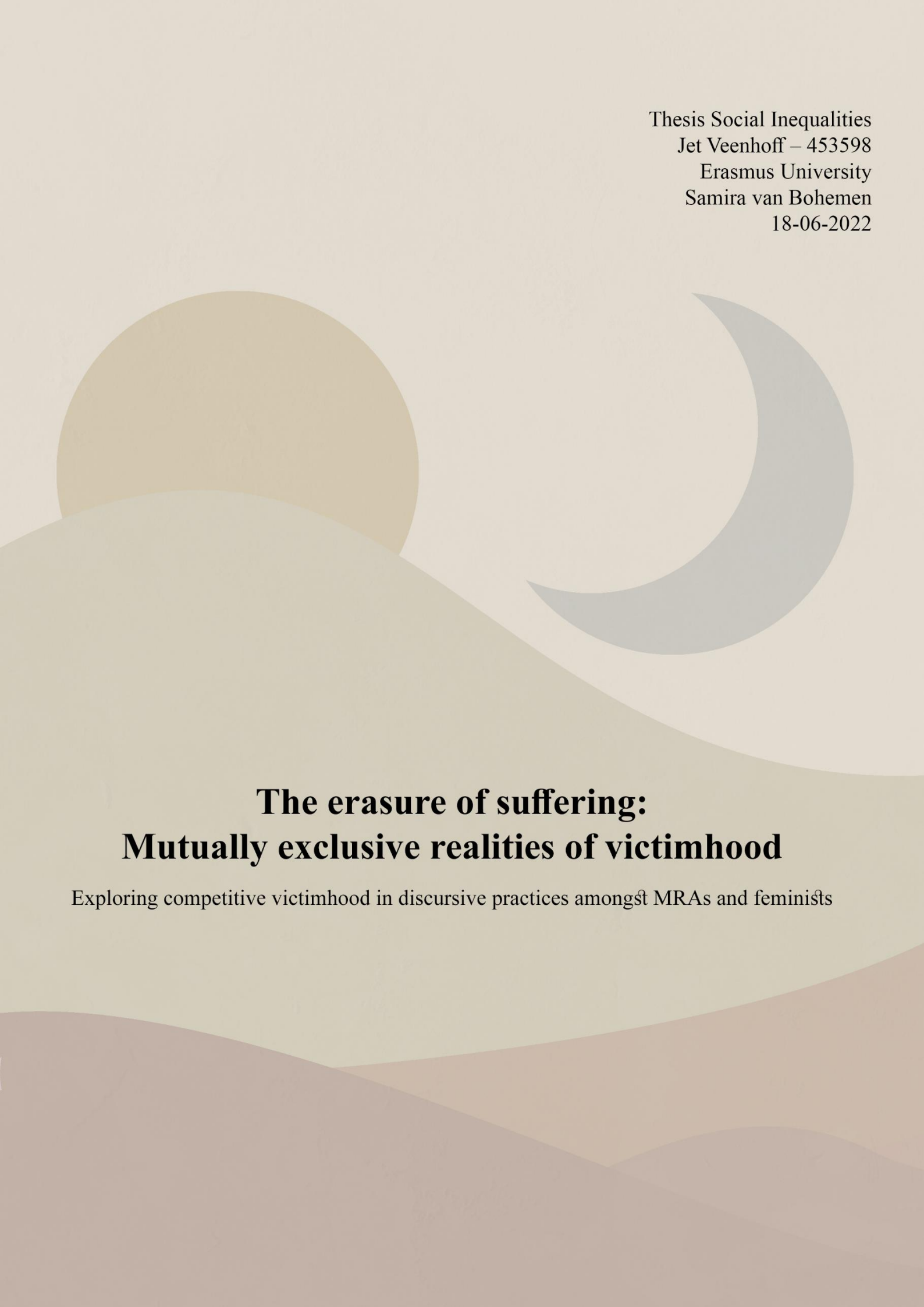


Thesis Social Inequalities
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The background features a stylized landscape with rolling hills in shades of beige and light brown. A large, solid gold sun is positioned on the left side, partially obscured by a hill. On the right side, a light grey crescent moon is visible against the sky. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and modern.

The erasure of suffering: Mutually exclusive realities of victimhood

Exploring competitive victimhood in discursive practices amongst MRAs and feminists

Abstract

This research has explored the ways in which MRAs and feminists employ discursive practices in their engagement in competitive victimhood by means of critical discourse analysis. In order to do so, this research has conducted a critical analysis of both texts written by MRAs on the subject of feminism and feminist texts on the subject of MRAs. This analysis was executed through the use of Atlas.ti and consisted of a round of coding in vivo, followed by a round of open coding.

On the basis of the analysis, this research has found that both movements engage in competitive victimhood by means of legitimizing their own victimhood and delegitimizing the other's victimhood. In doing so, their societal positions were found to be the most significant factor in the divergence between their discursive practices. MRAs were found to be engaging in competition over dominant discourse by claiming an underdog status and erasing female victimhood from their narrative. Feminists were found to be engaging in the protection of dominant discourse in which female victimhood is an accepted notion. This was executed through normalization of female victimhood and ideologically delegitimizing the MRA movement, consequently delegitimizing the notion of male victimhood. Moreover, in their self-perceptions as victims both movements are seen to be reproducing traditional gender roles. This occurred through the characterization of female victims as innocent and the characterization of male victims as accountable.

This research has shed a light on the mechanics of discursive practices in relation to competitive victimhood, in the hopes of creating an understanding of the power of language in reinforcing perceived differences and the subsequent erasure of suffering.

Keywords

Discursive practices, competitive victimhood, MRAs, feminists, (de)legitimization

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Suffering on a scale

I have always been fascinated by duality, oppositionality, and binaries. By the ways in which two things can exist in the same world, breathe the same air, feel the same breeze, and yet feel so vastly different from one another. And although drawing boundaries between ourselves and others helps prevent complete and total anarchy in our minds, it can also make others seem more different to us than they actually are (Romero-Rodriguez, Civilá, Agüaded, 2020). This process of othering lies at the basis of many perceived differences. In my interest in oppositionality, I was surprised to find that much of the difference between people seems to be *created* and reinforced by the ways in which we engage with language. How we speak and write helps shape our identity and our perceptions of others, and in that sense language is a key player in the construction of social hierarchies (Bazenga, Isabel, Hoorenman, Mulligan, Inmaculada, del Mar & Vera-Cazorla, 2020). In understanding language as such a boundary-drawing mechanism, we use discursive practices to establish dominant discourse, what is deemed acceptable and what is not, culminating in a process of in- and exclusion (Bilá and Ivanova, 2020).

My interest in opposition and another interest of mine, gender studies, have a tendency to meet at intriguing intersections. Perhaps due to the fact that the binary notion of gender is a considerable source of perceived difference as old as humankind itself. Although binary ideas of gender are seen to be unravelling, moments of opposition based on this binary are far from gone, one of these being the clash between women's and men's rights movements. If you are not spending your time on highly specific corners of the internet, the acronym MRA might have slipped past your radar. It stands for Men's Rights Activism, a movement existing mainly online consisting of a network of Reddit users and online activists (Allain, 2015). They aim to stand up for men, who they feel are being caused harm by feminism (Jordan, 2016). Feminist responses to MRAs involve theories of patriarchy, according to which men hold certain powers and privileges in society, often at the cost of women. The opposition between these two movements stems from the fact that they both see themselves as victims and the other as perpetrators, in essence they are competing over victimhood (Jordan, 2016 & Sterba, 1998). The crux of their narratives is that their own victimhood seems to be dependent on the opposing side *not* being victims. That is to say, they cannot both be victims *at the same time*.

So how is it possible that these two mutually exclusive narratives exist simultaneously? And how is such dissonance managed? This tension between the two movements, their engagement in competitive victimhood, and their use of discursive practices

are the subject of this thesis. For this reason, this thesis aims to answer the following question: *In what ways do MRAs and feminists employ discursive practices in their engagement in competitive victimhood?*

This thesis seeks to answer the abovementioned question through critical discourse analysis. This will be achieved by analyzing two sets of data, the first being written content by MRAs on the subject of feminism, and the second being written content by feminists on the subject of MRAs. By analyzing these texts, and comparing the two datasets, this research aspires to understand the differences and similarities in the ways in which these movements engage in competitive victimhood through discursive practices.

The relevance of this research is twofold. Firstly, there is a lack of research pertaining to (competitive) victimhood amongst movements (as opposed to individuals) and the consequences of competitive victimhood on such a scale (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi & Nadler, 2012). Moreover, there is an absence of research into victimhood in connection to discursive practices. However, much can be learned by examining the ways in which victimhood is expressed through language, as such research could assist in unravelling the mechanisms underlying the categorization of victimhood in society. Secondly, there is much research done on MRAs, focusing on the dangers of the movement and often written from a feminist perspective. Although it is important to understand the movement in order to move forward in a society with such clashing movements in it, it is more than necessary to analyze and understand the relationship between such movements and the ways in which they construct such clashing narratives. More research aiming to bridge gaps between opposing movements is necessary in order to create understanding and move forward to a more cohesive society.

To clarify, this thesis does not wish to weigh the suffering of the two movements, and decide who is the “rightful” victim. Rather, this thesis aspires to unravel why placement on a scale of suffering happens in the first place, and how this happens. In doing so, this research intends to elucidate the ways in which the comparing of suffering through discursive practices can lead to feelings of exclusion and give way to polarization, so that we can hopefully learn from and move on to more connective and empathic types of discourse.

Theoretical framework

Understanding MRAs: Roots in feminism, rising as opposites

Preceding any definitions and conceptualizations of othering and competitive victimhood, it is necessary to establish an understanding of the specific contexts of the two movements central to this thesis, MRAs and feminists. In order to do so, we firstly look into the history, characteristics and ideology of MRAs. This movement specifically has quite the history which, curiously enough, starts with second wave feminism. The 1960s saw the emergence of second wave feminism, in which a central point of discussion was the critique of the “female sex role”, which referred to oppression through traditional gender roles of women. Some men started to relate to this notion, which led to the creation of the men’s liberation movement (Coston & Kimmel, 2013). These men organized themselves through men’s liberation groups, workshops, and newsletters (Messner, 1998). The core belief of this movement was that traditional gender norms affected both men and women negatively (Allain, 2015). Moreover, men’s liberation saw this oppression as negatively impacting society at large through the forcing of hegemonic masculinity on all men (Sawyer, 1974). However, the feminist notion of patriarchy, in which men were seen to have some form of institutional power caused tensions, since combining both beliefs implied men were both privileged and oppressed by the same system (Messner, 2016).

This tension gave rise to differing perspectives on the cause of male oppression and the movement’s relation to feminism. Consequently, a split occurred. One branch became known as the mythopoetic men’s movement, seeking to embrace an “untarnished” masculinity through spiritual retreats and group therapy. The other branch can be seen as MRA in its infancy. This faction saw an enemy in feminism, both as a political strategy intending to gain power and a personal ideology condemning men (Coston & Kimmel, 2013). Ideologically, MRAs perceived the male sex role as more oppressive than the female one, as feminism was seen to have alleviated female oppression (Messner, 2016). This ideology in combination with a more hostile and reactionary attitude, led to anti-feminist and misogynist ideas within the movement (Jordan, 2016). Modern day MRAs rally around issues regarding father’s rights, alleged asymmetrical depiction of domestic violence, and false rape allegations (Messner, 2016 & Gotell & Dutton, 2016). With the MRA movement a new perception of masculinity emerged, one injured by feminism and disadvantaged by societal constraints (Jordan, 2016).

Feminist conceptualizations of MRAs: Incompatible worldviews

After having discussed the MRA movement it is important to note that much of the academic literature on MRAs is written from a critical feminist stance, which is why one must keep in mind an author's positionality (including this author), and untangle *feminist conceptualizations* of MRAs rather than take in academic literature on MRAs from a feminist position as neutral information. Moreover, this research recognizes the complexity, magnitude, and diversity of the feminist movement, which is exactly why only the most relevant intersections with the MRA movement will be expanded upon.

The main source of conflict between MRAs and feminists is patriarchy theory. Under the majority of feminist conceptions of patriarchy, men are seen to benefit from privileges and powers granted by this system (Sterba, 1998). Not only that, within a patriarchal system men are seen to contribute to the oppression of women (Allain, 2015 & Sterba, 1998). How then, can MRAs see men as victims of oppression? Salter (2016) explains these incompatible realities through the concept of power fields. An important principle within feminism is that the relations between the genders are produced in a field of power, in which men are the ones wielding this power.

From this definition of power within patriarchy as a starting point for social reality, MRA ideology is unworkable. Due to these incompatible worldviews, and the feminist perception that MRAs have an unimaginable conception of reality, MRAs tend to be described as dramatizing their issues and neglecting their personal privileges and positions of power. Moreover, the group is accused of aiming to maintain and increase their privilege and positions of power in relation to women by seeking out additional resources for themselves (Schmitz & Kayzak, 2016). An alternative feminist conceptualization of MRAs understands both men and women to be suffering under patriarchy. As Allain (2015) points out, patriarchy can also be understood as a system in which power is ascribed to structures and institutions, taking away responsibility for oppression from men as individuals.

Othering: You in opposition to me

It has become clear that MRAs and feminists often find themselves in adversarial positions, despite both identifying as movements fighting for equality. Exactly this perceived opposition whilst claiming similar goals is what makes their opposition an intriguing case. In order to explain how and why these two movements perceive such a distance between one another, this research will briefly dive into identity and reality construction through the mental framework of othering.

The theoretical concept of othering finds its roots in post-colonial theory. It implies an inherent dichotomy, the self and the other, a theory which stems from Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Brons, 2015). The idea of the self and the other suggests a binary manner of thinking as an inherent characteristic of identity and reality construction. We define ourselves and the world around us by comparing aspects of ourselves to those of others; "*The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa.*" (Staszak, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, the existence of this binary implies that we construct our social realities through classifying all that we encounter in our lives (Romero-Rodriguez et al., 2020). Othering in this sense is a practice of boundary-drawing with implications for our ways of thinking of and engaging with society. Expanding on this conception of othering by applying it to movements, we encounter the concept of in- and out-groups. Othering can then be described as constructing the identity of groups through classifying in- and out-group characteristics based on value; labelling characteristics of the in-group as desirable and those of the out-group as undesirable. When the perceived differences between 'us' and 'them' amongst groups occurs through dehumanization and/or amplification of otherness, the distances between these groups become larger. Brons (2015) describes this as a process in which the other becomes "radically alien", resulting in strengthening of the boundaries between in- and out-groups. These boundaries then serve to justify and/or naturalize exclusion and discrimination. This exclusionary ability of othering triggers certain feelings such as a sense of superiority and inferiority, fear or distrust of the other, and a lack of empathy towards the other. Such feelings and thoughts can ultimately result in demonization of the other, and eventually social polarization (Romero-Rodriguez et al., 2020).

In engaging with the social world from a mental framework of othering, the opposition between MRAs and feminists becomes a given. Within both movements' reality and identity construction, suffering is a key element. In negotiating this identity both movements look outside of themselves. Inevitably, this leads to the comparing and contrasting of their own and others' suffering and subsequent victimhood, setting an undeniable boundary.

Reconciling definitions of discourse: boundary-drawing powerhouse & social practice

After establishing the ways in which our minds create boundaries between ourselves and others, this research delves into the role of discourse in this process. Although some characterizations of discourse leave little agency for individuals in society to use discourse rather than being dominated by it, this research understands discourse and people as being in a relationship of interplay. This research's description of discourse and discursive practices therefore employs both Bleiker's (2003) definition of discourse as mechanisms determining our boundaries of thinking, and Bilá and Ivanova's (2020) interpretation of discourse as a social act which transforms thought to writing and/or speaking. Moreover, this research borrows from the field of discursive psychology in creating a deeper understanding of the relation between thought processes and discourse.

Bleiker (2003) describes discursive practices as mechanisms engaging in the creation of frameworks for our thinking. They determine the boundaries of what is thought, talked, and written. Subsequently, discourse determines social rules which influence the perceived legitimacy and validity of statements. Bilá and Ivanova's (2020) definition provides discourse with its boundary-drawing power through discursive practices, and individuals in society with the power to employ such discursive practices. Through the use of discursive practices, and the boundary-drawing that happens through established discourse, systems of exclusion are created. Within these systems certain types of discursive practice are accepted as hegemonic, whilst others are deemed unacceptable. In Bilá and Ivanova's (2020) description of discourse as "*some kind of fabric produced by homo loquens with two major interwoven threads, those of language and reality*" (p. 221) discourse is defined as a tool for reality construction, creating space for opposing realities to exist simultaneously and collide with one another. This leads us to the cognitive field of discourse theory. The creation of reality as a cognitive process and discourse are closely linked according to research in this field. Discourse is placed in between thoughts and reality. Individuals conceptualize their perceived reality into thoughts, attempting to grasp the world around them through categorization which happens in the processing of thoughts into language. When this reality is perceived to be hostile, this will be conceptualized into discourse revolving around being threatened, suffering, and victimhood. That is to say, the context-dependence of discourse can be explained by its relation to cognitive processes of thought and categorization.

In adopting a combination of the abovementioned characterizations of discourse, discursive practices, and systems of exclusion, both MRAs and feminists have the potential to compete over their victimhood through discursive practices in an attempt to legitimize the victimhood-discourse of their own movement. Through discursive practices of legitimization, the boundaries of victimhood can sharply be drawn to exclude the opposing movement. Interesting to add to this function of discourse is Ferguson's (1993) concept of "mobile subjectivities". This concept entails an interplay between individuals and discourse in which mobile subjectivities are employed through language in order to switch between different identities with regard to power statuses. They are used to escape discursive forms of domination. In such a situation of discursive domination, mobile subjectivities are employed to switch up and down the axes of power and resistance in an attempt to switch perceived identity and escape the dominant discursive framework. For MRAs and feminists in their engagement with competitive victimhood this would entail switching identities to a lowered status of power, in order to change the perception of their identities to a more powerless and hence more victimized one as a means of escaping the oppositions' discursive domination.

In relation to this is Jørgensen and Phillips's (2002) description of discursive psychology as an analysis of the ways in which individuals selectively employ distinct discursive practices relevant to differing social contexts, reminiscent of mobile subjectivities. Discursive psychology also employs the concepts of "cognitive dissonance", which can be described as a process whereby individuals experience tension between their cognitions as they seem irreconcilable with one another. They then attempt to reduce this tension by changing their cognitions so that they become reconcilable. In understanding discourse as a cognitive process and a tool for reality and identity construction, in combination with the mental framework of othering, a light is shed on the seeming irreconcilability of the victimhood of MRAs and feminists and how this is dealt with through discursive practices.

Victimhood as a tool: Mutual exclusivity & competition

After establishing an understanding of othering as the mental framework giving rise to us-them thinking and polarization, and discursive practices as the mechanisms engaging with and enabling such a mental framework, this research aims to discern the relation of these theories to the concept of competitive victimhood. In order to do so, it is vital to establish conceptualizations of both victimhood and competitive victimhood.

Jeffery and Candea (2006) describe victimhood as a type of tool, something to be used in order to gain a favorable starting position in political discourse and action. Consequently, victimhood can be used to fire up a debate and gain legitimacy for one's argument, inspiring political action. In fact, they have noticed a shift from political action being ignited through appeals of rationality and science towards appeals of victimhood and suffering. This implies a characterization of victimhood as a performance, in which it is less significant if one's suffering is "real" or "fake", but rather if the performance is successful. Political, legal, and social choices on the perception of "real" suffering shape the categories of victimhood and perpetratorhood, in addition to illustrating the impact of the perceptions of suffering on one's status as a victim (Lawther, 2022). Understanding victimhood as a type of performance, and this performance being a means to an end, lays the groundwork for engagement with competitive victimhood. This term was first coined by Noor et al. (2012), who describe the concepts as the following; "*a group's motivation and consequent efforts to establish that it has suffered more than its adversaries*" (p.3). When practiced, competitive victimhood entails that people show competitiveness in their understanding of their own victimhood in relation to a conflict group (McNeill, Pehrson & Stevenson, 2017). According to social psychology, such competitive processes are embedded within the nature of inter-group relationships, in line with theories on the categorization of social reality from the perspective of both othering and discursive psychology.

The mechanisms behind such competitive processes brings up an essential reason for engagement with competitive victimhood, namely social comparison (Noor et al., 2012). This concept entails a tendency to perceive others as a benchmark against which to compare one's in-group, in an attempt to elevate self-perception. This desire for positive self-perception may lead to skewed comparisons, in which the in-group is viewed in an excessively positive manner and the out-group is viewed in an excessively negative manner. This is accomplished through comparisons on the basis of categories in which the in-group excels and the out-group falls behind. In relation not victimhood, this happens by means of characterizing the in-group as innocent victims and the out-group as guilty perpetrators (Madlingozi, 2007). Being

perceived as perpetrators can be experienced as a threat to a group's identity. In response to which the claiming of victimhood functions as a method of increasing a group's "moral credentials" (Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe & Rothschild, 2012). In line with the logic of social comparisons, Kahalon, Shnabel, Halibi and Simantov-Nachlieli (2018) describe reasons for engaging with competitive victimhood on the basis of relative deprivation theory. According to this theory there can be a dissonance between the power and privilege that a group actually has and what the group feels it *deserves* to have. This dissonance can drive competition over resources, and in turn also drive competition over victimhood. This theory can help understand how both MRAs and feminists see their own victimhood as more legitimate than, and in opposition to, the victimhood of the other group.

Although social comparison theory explains how competition can be executed, it does not explain the necessity of such comparisons in the case of victimhood. This is the focal point of the second reason for engagement in competitive victimhood, moral typecasting. This concept involves a tendency to categorize moral actors into two mutually exclusive roles. The first of these being the agent, characterized by an active ability to do right or wrong, and the second being the patient, a passive target for right or wrong deeds (Noor et al., 2012). A similar dichotomy can be found in Madlingozi's (2007) conception of "good" and "bad" victims. Lawther (2022) describes the inner workings of the classification of "good" and "bad" victims as the following:

"victims of violent conflict or authoritarianism continue to be classified as 'good' or 'bad' along politically polarized lines and where value judgements of blame and responsibility act to determine one's recognition as a victim or not."(p. 521).

Within these two categories, "good" victims are blameless, they are *actually* innocent. "Bad" victims however are guilty or held responsible for harm (Madlingozi, 2007). Both the concept of moral typecasting and the notions of "good" and "bad" victims shed a light on the idea of victimhood as a mutually exclusive role, and hence explain how understanding one's own victimhood and another's as conflicting can lead to engagement in competitive victimhood, as seems to be the case for MRAs and feminists. Moreover, this mutual exclusivity has the potential to express itself in the designation of perpetrator roles, making it all the more pressing to understand the discursive mechanisms underlying competitive victimhood.

Research design

Methodology

In what ways do MRAs and feminists employ discursive practices in their engagement in competitive victimhood?

In aiming to answer the abovementioned question, this research intends to identify and compare discursive practices in content written by MRAs on the subject of feminism and content written by feminists on the subject of MRAs, and subsequently develop a theory on the relation between these discursive practices and competitive victimhood. Accordingly, this research will be using the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and employ a qualitative approach. This research intends to investigate and interpret the outcomes of interactions between movements in society, and their relation to one another, making it highly suitable for a qualitative approach. Within the nature of this thesis's research question there is an implication of language as a key player in the construction of social life, in line with CDA. In CDA, language is not seen as an impartial, purely descriptive tool, but rather as an active agent which helps produce different realities (Bryman, 2016 & Gill, 2000). Where discourse analysis can be seen as encompassing all analysis of discourse, CDA distinguishes itself by its focus on the reproduction of dominance and power within discursive practices (Bryman, 2016 & Kress, 1990). This is highly relevant for this research, as it aims to understand exactly such uses of discursive practices. One of the limitations of CDA is that it does not lend itself to clear and concrete rules in which research is to be done, due to the method's focus on meaning-making and the dynamic and subjective nature of said meaning-making (Tonkiss, 2012).

In navigating such a fluid method of analysis this research will use an understanding of CDA as a process of analysis which entails locating similarities, inconsistencies and overall strategies of language (or discursive practices) with which meaning is enacted and revealed. Such discursive practices will be identified through a method of theme-finding. This will be executed through identifying reiteration and the prominence of key terms, phrases and imagery which reveal what an author is attempting to put forth in the text. For this research specifically this means looking for terms related to conveying victim- and perpetratorhood. What ideas, representation and imagery are mobilized to invoke the abovementioned concepts? How is the discourse surrounding victimhood and perpetratorhood invoked and justified by its authors? Next to repetition and emphasis, the analysis will focus on association

and differentiation within the texts. This will be achieved by looking at the associations adopted to characterize different groups (Tonkiss, 2012).

Method of data collection

In order to come to meaningful conclusions this research has analyzed two different sets of data. The first set of data consist of blog posts, Reddit posts and comments written by members of the MRA community. 21 Articles and forum-posts have been collected, resulting in approximately 92 pages of data. This collection started on <https://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/>. This page is relevant as it is one of the largest sites of MRA activity online (Allain, 2015). Through browsing threads under the filter ‘feminism’ popular websites and bloggers and forums which discuss the relationship between MRAs and feminism. This combination of articles and forum discussions has been employed since these are the main platforms on which MRAs post their writings.

The second set of data consists of 16 blogs and articles which feature oppositional stances towards MRAs from a mainly feminist perspective, resulting in approximately 80 pages of data. Relevance of content was firstly determined by statements demonstrating such oppositional stances, identified through the use of phrases such as:

“...How Men’s Rights Movement in India Is Attacking Feminism” (Yogesh, 2019).

Moreover, relevance of content was determined by identifying author’s positionality as feminist or the presence of positions in line with feminism, identified through the use of phrases such as:

“...which might identify me, a feminist writer already known in local men's groups.” (Baker, 2021).

Methods of analysis

After data collection the collected texts have been analyzed through the use of Atlas.ti. Data analysis was initiated with a process of coding in vivo. This process functioned as a first cycle of the coding process which was aimed towards familiarization with the data with a focus on the linguistic performances within the texts. Sentences and paragraphs were then highlighted in order to identify discourse relevant in relation to competitive victimhood. This part of the coding process has benefited the research by drawing attention to meanings found in the data in relation to the research question (Manning, 2017). After this initial phase,

analysis proceeded through a round of open coding. In this part of the analysis, concepts were labelled in order to create an overview of relevant categories or themes found in the data. These themes were then used to interpret the data and constructing relevant conclusions.

Results

MRAs: Erasure of female victimhood & MRAs as the invisible victims

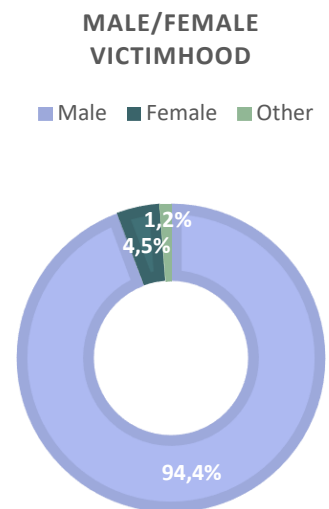
This research has found that in their discussion of one another, both MRAs and feminists engage actively in the legitimization of their own victimhood and the delegitimization of the others' victimhood. Within the MRA texts, delegitimization of female victimhood occurs through the erasure of female victimhood. Through multiple tactics MRAs aim to create a narrative in which female victims are excluded. Effectively, this is a passive approach to the legitimization of male victimhood, as it serves to create space for legitimacy and urgency of male victimhood. A more active approach aimed towards legitimization of male victimhood is performed by the creation of a narrative in which MRAs are "the invisible victim". By claiming an outsider status MRAs create a narrative in which they are powerless victims to a larger system.

Erasure of female victimhood

Male/female victims

During the analysis of MRA texts, this research has found a stark contrast between the mentioning of male victims and that of female victims. This is the first, and most straightforward, indicator of the erasure of female victimhood. In performing said erasure, the idea of female victims is omitted from the MRA narrative.

Victimhood was mentioned a total of 336 times in the MRA texts. Of these mentions, 94,4% were linked to male victimhood, and 4,5% were linked to female victimhood. Another tactic adding to the erasure of female victimhood is the ideological delegitimization of female victimhood. This is carried out through multiple tactics, the first being the use of quotation marks, indicating that the concepts in quotation marks are not taken seriously or implying that the concepts are not real:



“There has always been an aspect of feminism, even in 19th Century Europe, of man-hatred. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, wrote about how women are subjected to “domestic slavery¹,” by men.” (Schoenewolf, 2021)

¹ Italics added by author for clarification

Another method for carrying out delegitimization is the use of sarcasm:

“They can go to so many lengths just to paint women as *those powerless poor little victims*” (Somelo5er, 2022)

Of the very few references to female victimhood in the MRA texts, the vast majority is delegitimized. Moreover, female victims were found to be associated to negative associations and female privilege. This female privilege leads us to the next discursive tactic found in the MRA texts.

Power & privilege

A second tactic of erasing female victimhood is to associate women, and feminism, with characteristics deemed irreconcilable with victimhood. In the MRA texts this is carried out by mentioning instances of perceived female privilege and power. This revealing of female privilege and power is used to invalidate, and render invisible, female victimhood. This happens through directly mentioning perceived female privilege or power, for example:

“Feminists never demand equality. *They reserve all the privileges for women* that they think men have, but pick up none of the responsibilities.” (Halafax, 2022).

“Anybody worth their salt quite rightly identifies contemporary third wave feminism as a misguided *female supremacy movement, rather than one of egalitarianism.*” (IM, 2016)

However this also occurs indirectly by pointing out the results of perceived female privilege and power, through statements such as:

“Because the courts have a huge boner for *never punishing any of them for even the most despicable crimes*, especially against men.” (Mother-Key582, 2022)

What is interesting here is that in MRA literature, female privilege and power seems to be defined as a lack of accountability. Women are described as having less responsibilities and moreover, not being held accountable for their actions. This is often in opposition to men, who MRAs only mention as having privilege at the cost of carrying the burden of certain responsibilities. Moreover the revealing of perceived female privilege and power is used to delegitimize feminist ideology, shown by an overlap of these two tropes in the literature.

Through pointing out perceived female privilege and power, the idea that women are oppressed (in line with feminist ideology) is disproven. This establishes a narrative of feminism as deceptive, and further enables the erasure of the female victim:

“Though it may make the average feminist recoil, *the patriarchy is responsible for the privileged position that women hold*, hiding behind the shields and swords of men.” (Marshall, 2022)

“In contexts where *women already have more rights, privileges or advantages than men*, feminists demand even more for women – the exact opposite of the “equality” feminist propaganda claims to want.” (EricAllonde, 2022)

Overall, this tactic is based on the notion of moral typecasting, leaning heavily on the idea that those in power are unable to be victims. In revealing perceived power and privilege of women MRAs are attempting to cast them out of the category of victimhood.

Perpetratorhood & blame

The last method of erasing female victimhood is, similarly to the last one, built on associating women and feminism with characteristics unfit for victims. This last approach assigns women characteristics in line with perpetratorhood. In all the texts, women are described as a victim a mere 15 times, and described as perpetrators around 90 times. MRAs describe women, and feminism as a whole, as a “hateful cult”, “fascists”, and compare them to Nazi’s. This happens through statements such as:

“*Women would attack* any man who tried to speak out, in any public forum, with *strident, self-righteous anger*, telling such a man that he was just a sexist who couldn’t tolerate strong women” (Schoenewolf, 2021)

“I swear feminism could only have been [*sic*] thought up by *the most manipulative women* haha god *they are sneaky*” (Dry-Pianist1853, 2022)

Another more subtle discursive practice which further reinforces the image of female perpetratorhood is the ascription of blame, responsibility, and agency to women for the suffering of men (and society at large). By holding women and feminists directly responsible for harm, they are ascribed blame and placed in the position of the ‘bad guy’. This

responsibility and blame is further emphasized by revealing agency, showing an active stance in acting out said harm, in an attempt to emphasize their intentions. The attribution of blame and responsibility is found in statements such as the following:

“...feminists spent the next 200 years *campaigning* for women’s release from their restrictions, *they were very careful to avoid bringing about men’s release from their obligations and restrictions as a result.*” (Wallen, 2022)

“*feminist demands seek to destroy* the very foundations of western civilization” (EricAllone, 2022)

The revealing of agency more specifically is enacted through statements which attempt to illuminate an active stance, and hence, intent:

“*The goal of feminism* is to advance critical theory that ends up destroying our society from the inside.” (Matthew351111, 2022)

“...*this sleight of hand is used by the feminists* who imply and infer so we simply assume men did all of the killing.” (Dent, 2022)

By describing feminism as having a goal of ‘destroying our society from the inside’ and claiming they are using a ‘sleight of hand’, these statements create a narrative in which feminism is actively and deliberately seeking to do harm, and therefore undeniably a perpetrator.

MRAs as the invisible victims

Male victimhood, female privilege and competition

The sheer volume of male victims mentioned is a discursive tactic aimed towards legitimization. Moreover, the previously mentioned revealing of perceived female power and privilege functions as a double edged sword. In pointing out instances of perceived female privilege and lack of accountability and laying it down besides a narrative in which men suffer under their responsibilities, an image is created of a skewed superior-inferior relationship in which women come out on top. In the MRA texts, men were described as victims of female privilege specifically a little over half of the time:

“...an *incredibly disproportionate burden on male taxpayers for the equally disproportionate financial benefit gained by female users of government programs and recipients of government-funded financial aid.*” (Wallen, 2022)

“Women claim that since they have the vagina (etc), *they and ONLY they get to decide* on whether or not a child is born. *Talk about inequality...men have ZERO rights of parenthood*” (ignatztempotypo, 2022)

Additionally, in actively comparing male suffering and female privilege, male suffering is contextualized and emphasized. This competition is exemplified in statements such as:

“This ignores the present day legal situation which means that *it is perfectly OK to oppress men in ways that would be unacceptable to feminists*” (antifeminist3, 2022)

“In other words, let’s continue to *teach the boys in our schools about the toxic masculinity that bubbles and simmers in their genes and demand they respect anyone with female genitalia.* There will be *no such demands made on the girls* in our education system and of course no girl will ever be called upon to stand and apologize for the far too common murder of children by their mums.” (Dent, 2022)

In both the pervasiveness of male victims in the MRA texts, and in the contextualization of male suffering being caused by female privilege, MRAs describe their victimhood as being obscured by female privilege and in need of recognition.

The male victim as martyr, outcast and underdog

Another, more subtle, narrative employed in the MRA texts is that of ‘the powerless outcast’, which is combined with MRAs as ‘suffering for their cause’. Through invoking the idea of MRAs as underdogs, MRAs show their position as powerless to, and suffering under, a larger system that is disadvantaging them. Within the references towards MRAs as outcasts, the majority simultaneously characterizes MRAs as victims. This is expressed through statements like:

“From the 1960s until the present feminists have pressed *Western governments to pass more than a hundred new laws favoring women and disfavoring men*” (Schoenewolf, 2021)

“...the narrative metastasizing to this day in the mainstream consciousness since the advent of feminism. Malekind is declared as the fundamental historic culprit against femalekind as well as every conceivable problem in the world big and small.” (Meigs, 2022)

“Like many people in *our anti-male world*, Ms. McElvoy might also have been shocked to learn about the extent to which females exhibit dangerous behavior towards men.” (Patten, 2022)

In these statements, MRAs are described as outcasts by invoking images of large structures in society as having a hand in their suffering, such as Western governments and mainstream media. Moreover, in line with the idea of underdogs, MRAs invoke a narrative of martyrdom through describing themselves as benevolent, heroic, and brave whilst simultaneously pointing out how they are suffering under this role:

‘Women and children first!’ is often seen as *an outburst of affection from men*. “ (Wallen, 2022)

“Feminism declares war upon *the hairy, sweating and arched back which holds up humanity*, declares it evil, and self-righteously prods it until it falls, leaving nothing but chaos in its wake.” (IM, 2016)

Feminists: Delegitimization of male victimhood & normalization of female victimhood

After having discussed the results of the analysis of the MRA texts, this research now turns towards the opposing movement's texts. In the feminist texts, the legitimization of female victimhood occurs through the normalization of female victimhood. By ascribing female victims characteristics such as innocent, calm, and nice, they are molded into the accepted boundaries of victimhood. Moreover, the feminist authors are seen to be bonding with their audience, further working towards naturalization of their narrative. The delegitimization of MRAs as victims happens by means of showing disbelief towards MRA ideology, and by default the notion of male victims. Moreover, an image is created of MRAs as aggressive perpetrators, making it impossible for them to simultaneously be victims according to accepted notions of victimhood.

Delegitimization of male victimhood

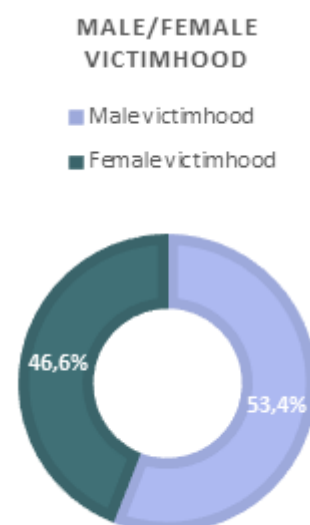
Male victimhood, ideological delegitimization & competition

In contrast with the MRA texts, the feminist texts mention male and female victims nearly evenly, as demonstrated by the graph on the right side of this page. However, the majority of these mentions of male victimhood is referenced in the context of delegitimizing MRA ideology and male victimhood. This delegitimization is executed by the use of quotation marks, and words such as 'believe', 'perceive' and 'claim'. Both are discursive practices which serve to question or delegitimize the statements connected to them. This happens through statements such as:

“men’s rights activists proclaimed that, well, actually, men were the real victims of gender discrimination.” (Lefkovitz, 2018)

“They are often fuelled by the belief that “they are victims of oppressive feminism, an ideology which must be overthrown often through violence.” (Fountain, 2021)

“They believe passionately in their own victimhood...” (Fell, 2014)



In delegitimizing MRA ideology, feminist texts are implying that their belief in their own victimhood and their actual victimhood are two entirely separate things, of which the latter is questioned. Moreover, this ideological delegitimization is combined with the comparing of suffering in order to delegitimize male victimhood. For example:

“Men’s Rights Activists reflect an ideology and global movement which set out to *question and stall women’s gains at all levels* [5], *believing these gains have been awarded at the expense of men.*” (McDonald, 2019)

“They quote all sorts of statistics about child custody and unfair alimony payments, *because in their minds, the single mother who has to choose between feeding the kids or paying the rent is a myth.*” (Fell, 2014)

In implying that statements made by MRAs are false and simultaneously comparing male and female suffering, the idea of legitimate male victimhood is undermined.

Perpetratorhood & negative associations

The vast majority of references to perpetratorhood within the feminist texts are in relation to MRAs or men generally. Of the 168 references to perpetratorhood, 94,6% is in reference to MRAs/men and 5,4% is in reference to women. Similarly to the MRA texts, feminists’ texts point out MRA perpetratorhood as a method of delegitimizing them as victims. This happens through similar discursive practices, for example the use of negative associations. These negative associations relate MRAs to extremism, hate/resentment, and aggression, all characteristics commonly associated with perpetratorhood:

“...suggested that A Voice for Men had endured protests and threats simply because it had the “audacity to question certain issues from a man’s perspective.” Missing from that coverage were *the group’s fierce tactics*, which have continued unabated.” (Blake, 2015)

“Some men, some small but *loud and dangerous number*, will become *violent by instinct*, threatened by any rustling in the trees.” (Rensin, 2015)

This tactic is highly similar, if not nearly identical, to the discursive practices in MRA texts aimed at creating a female perpetrator-narrative, the main difference being more subtlety found in the feminist texts. By linking MRAs to such associations, they are ascribed

characteristics in line with perpetratorhood. Such negative associations further reinforce the image of MRAs as perpetrators and marginalize the idea of male victimhood.

Normalization of female victimhood

Women as victims: innocence

In taking a deeper dive into the descriptions of female victims, it is interesting to look at the connections made between female victims and innocence. This research found the vast majority of statements referring to female victims simultaneously invoke imagery of innocence. The first method of connecting female victimhood to innocence is the direct claiming of innocence, which occurs through statements such as:

“I’ve watched *these innocent women* leapt upon—the *proverbial lambs to the slaughter...*” (Baker, 2021)

“The most public victims of last year's **Gamergate rage** — women like Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and Brianna Wu — *were not radicals*. Very few of the women who have found themselves violently threatened on the internet are.” (Rensin, 2015)

Moreover, female victims are often linked to positive associations. These characteristics are often characteristics in line with victimhood such as kindness, passivity, calmness etc. This is exemplified in statements such as:

“For the most part, *I just watched, speaking up occasionally to ask a question or present a different point of view*. Before long I was declared a dangerous feminazi, a deceptive bitch who had pretended to care, and then banned and blocked for not denouncing feminism as the group required we must.” (Baker, 2021)

“Yet she was harassed as if she'd proposed revolutionary insurrection, and so during the last week of August, Sarkeesian, *an ordinary woman with a message so innocuous that a sane world might deem it obvious*, was forced to flee from her home.” (Rensin, 2015)

In the first statement, written from the authors perspective, she describes how she acts calmly, which is met with foul language and shunning by MRAs. In doing this the author casts a stark difference between herself, behaving nicely, and shows how *regardless* of her good behavior she still falls victim to MRAs. In the second statement, Sarkeesian (a victim of MRA

harrasment), is described as having an ‘innocuous’ message which the author labels as ‘sane’. Here again, she is assigned characteristics in line with victimhood as she is described as having done nothing wrong. By firstly directly claiming innocence for female victims, and secondly ascribing them with positive associations in line with victimhood, the feminist texts aim to both legitimize and normalize female victimhood.

Tone of text: sarcasm and mocking

A second tactic with regard to the normalization of female victimhood can be found in the subtleties of the feminist texts, namely in their tone. This tone was identified through the tropes of sarcasm and mocking. Half of the statements written in such a tone also contained references towards the ideological delegitimization of MRAs. The discursive practices of both sarcasm and mocking are employed in three different ways, working together to achieve a narrative in which female victims are naturalized and MRAs are deemed delusional.

The first of these discursive practices is the use of mocking to construct the image of MRAs as crazy outsiders, creating distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’, in which feminists claim the position of ‘us’ along with the reader. Engaging in mocking implies a position in which an author expects or assumes readers to be on ‘the same side’. This mocking occurs through statements such as:

“Imagine a kid who got a cone with three scoops of ice cream in it. Good flavors, too. Like peanut-butter chocolate, plus a scoop of cookie dough. In a waffle cone. And then this child whines about the lack of chocolate sprinkles on top. Welcome to the men’s rights movement.” (Fell, 2014)

“Poor little boys are being left behind!” (Paradigm Shift, 2020)

“Many feminists and women laughed it off, when asked to comment on this. Lekha Adavi, an activist based in Bangalore, said, “I know. I saw this earlier. These men do exist and they are a joke.” “ (Yogesh, 2019)

Where the first tactic is a blatant ridiculing of MRAs to show exactly how different they are, the second tactic adds an element of delusion. This tactic aims towards not only showing that MRAs are different, but also that the author (and readers) can see a truth MRAs are unable to see (due to their difference). Not only is difference pointed out, value is added by implying that the insiders know better than the outsiders. This is executed through the use of sarcasm,

and happens through statements such as:

“...she told me, “I don’t hate feminists, I hate feminism,” *a distinction I find hard to appreciate.*” (Fountain, 2021)

“Obviously the gender wage gap can’t be due to prejudice, despite résumés being treated more favorably when they are titled with a male name than identical ones with a female name.” (Paradigm Shift, 2020)

The last discursive tactic occurs through pointing out difference, and attributing values on the basis of this difference, however this tactic is in reference to highly negative values specifically. Beyond implying to be better than an outsider, this method actively brands the outsider as dangerous and disgusting. This happens through statements such as:

“You just threw up in your mouth a little didn’t you?” (Baker, 2021)

“When you hear the term “men's rights activism,” what is the first thing you think about? *Is it degrading? Important? A joke? What do men’s rights activists even stand for?* The truth is that men’s rights activism was used to degrade feminism.” (Kurup, 2021)

The first statement is quite obvious, after a description of MRAs this statement is entered to imply that MRAs are disgusting. Not only that, but this question aimed at the reader directly (“*didn’t you?*”), implies a connection between the two. In the second statement, MRAs are suggested to be degrading and a joke, after which it is stated that men’s rights activism is responsible for female victims. Through such statements using both sarcasm and mockery, MRAs are assigned negative characteristics, and a bond is suggested between author and reader in which the author has claimed normalcy and contrasted this against the deviance of MRAs.

Discussion

After having laid bare the discursive practices employed by MRAs and feminists in their attempts to ‘win’ the competition over victimhood, this research now aims to further dive into the meanings and contexts of said discursive practices and answer the research question: In what ways do MRAs and feminists employ discursive practices in their engagement in competitive victimhood?

The main red thread in discursive practices found amongst both the MRA and the feminist texts is the high presence of both legitimization and delegitimization tactics. What is interesting, is the different focus found in these tactics, and explanations for these differences on the basis of differing social positions. A main finding of this research is therefore in line with Jørgensen and Phillips’s (2002) emphasis on discursive psychology as highly context-dependent, with different contexts leading to distinct discursive practices, as shown by the difference in discursive practices employed by MRAs and feminists in relation to differing societal positions. Moreover this research adds to the importance of different contexts the importance of subsequent differing social goals. A second relevant finding is the different self-perceptions of MRAs and feminists as victims evident from the analysis, and the way this connects to the reproduction of traditional gender roles.

MRAs as the underdogs

Starting with MRAs, an important method in their engagement in competitive victimhood revolves around the idea that MRAs are underdogs fighting the system, as described in the results section of this research. In comparison to feminism and feminists, MRAs are a minority, and the analysis has shown they are aware of this. Based on this societal position as a starting point, MRAs engage in competitive victimhood with the goal of convincing those within the system that feminism is a lie, and rather than men oppressing women it is the other way around. They aim to do so through specific discursive practices, in line with Bleiker’s (2003) theory that discursive practices help create the boundaries of what is thought, talked, and written. In aspiring to legitimize their victimhood and improve their situations, MRAs attempt to transform these boundaries to include their own victimhood through erasing the victimhood of women.

Engaging in such discursive practices and attempting to convince readers of your reality is no easy feat from this position, since readers are more familiar with a different one. This expresses itself in denying female victimhood in their writing by literally erasing female

victims from their pages, attempting to reveal female privileges as the cause of male suffering and casting feminism as a deceptive perpetrator. In order to justify their alternative reality, alternative from the one reinforced by dominant discourse, MRAs expand the distance between themselves and society by focusing on their perceived positions as outsiders. This vast distance allows them, as outsiders, to see a truth others are unable to see. Their discursive practices are twofold, in defending their alternative worldview, they actively engage in delegitimizing female victims through erasure and legitimization of their own victimhood by revealing their own suffering and position as outsiders. Their focus is on defending themselves against the dominant feminist discourse, resulting in overall more pronounced statements of legitimization and delegitimization next to more active comparing of men and women in order to support their worldview.

Feminists on high horses

As mentioned before, feminism is more widely accepted than MRA ideology, placing feminists in an entirely different position from which they engage with competitive victimhood. Interesting here is Bilá and Ivanova's (2020) theory on discourse, and how it has the power to draw boundaries and, as a consequence, create systems of exclusion. This research suggests that the power in these situations lies not only with the discourse, but also with the social actor. Based on dominant discourse, social actors and movements are ascribed power to negotiate the boundaries of victimhood. In the case of MRAs and feminists, this means that feminists are actively drawing these boundaries to exclude men and MRAs are attempting to redraw these boundaries to include their own victimhood. This is in accordance with Lawther's (2022) theory on the fact that what is deemed legitimate suffering, and what consequently shapes our notions of victim- and perpetratorhood, are on the basis of political, legal, and social choices, which MRAs and feminists seek out to influence through their discursive practices. This means that where the MRA literature attempts to convince their audience of their underdog status through emphasizing distance between themselves and society, the feminist literature aims to bond with their audience in order to diminish this distance. Where MRAs delegitimize female victims through invisibility, feminists delegitimize male victims through reinforcing the image of male perpetratorhood. Although both approaches are similar and have some moments of overlap, this is a relevant nuance.

This nuance is found in the fact that in their discursive practices feminists employ a more pronounced focus on MRAs as perpetrators. Less effort needs to be put into

delegitimizing instances of male suffering and legitimizing instances of female suffering, and although discursive practices with the aim of achieving these goals are present, they are not the focal point. The discursive practices in feminist texts focus on reinforcing already existing beliefs in relation to patriarchy theory, specifically the notion of men as oppressors. They achieve this by associating MRAs with perpetratorhood in nearly every mention of them. With regards to their own victimhood, legitimization is based on the assumption that female victimhood is an already accepted notion in society. Hence, differences arise between the more defensive legitimization by MRAs and legitimization on the basis of reinforcing the normalcy of female victims. The latter is executed through a passive attitude in mentioning female victims, especially when compared to the MRA literature, which is filled to the brim with examples of male victimhood. This normalcy, and the priorly mentioned bonding with the reader, is reflected in the general tone of the feminist texts. Through the mocking of MRAs and employing sarcasm, feminists invite the reader to ridicule MRAs along with them, as if to say anyone with common sense can see that these men are delusional. If the world is divided between us and them, MRAs are asking the reader to help in the fight against “them” whilst feminists are convincing the reader that they are a part of “us”.

Innocence & accountability

The second finding of this research revolves around the self-perceptions of MRAs and feminists as victims. The ways in which they construct their own identities as victims is telling of the ways in which they perceive their own and the other’s gender, and the characteristics associated with these. Glancing back at the theoretical framework, and the birth of the MRA movement, we remember that male involvement with feminism started due to interest in the concept of traditional gender roles and their oppressive characters (Coston & Kimmel, 2013). Interestingly, when looking at the types of victims MRAs and feminists portray themselves to be, these can be seen to be in line with traditional gender roles. Firstly, the feminist conception of the female victim in the texts analyzed is described as calm, nice, kind and innocent. This particular identity is highly reminiscent of gendered stereotypes describing women as passive and subordinate to men, and subsequently as “nice” (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Moreover, the contextualization of female victims and language used in the feminist descriptions of female victims often reveal a lack of agency (Gustafsson Sendén, Klysing, Lindqvist, & Renström, 2019). Although this lack of agency and abundance of innocence used to describe female victims is effective in legitimizing victimhood, it can also

be seen to reproduce traditional gender roles in which women are caged into a characterization of passivity, niceness, and innocence.

In the MRA literature descriptions of male victimhood revolve around suffering under burdens, carrying responsibilities and taking accountability. This type of ‘active’ victim is in line with the same stereotypical gendered notion of agency found in the feminist conception of female victims. On the flipside of women as passive, is the traditional male gender role which describes men as active agents, related to characteristics like independence, accountability, and responsibility (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2019). This is especially apparent in their comparison of male suffering and female privilege. In statements referring to this perceived gendered dynamic, MRAs describe women as not taking accountability and living more freely than men, as men do the “heavy lifting” in society and take on more responsibilities. So in describing themselves as suffering under traditional male gender roles, MRAs simultaneously use these roles to legitimize their own victimhood.

In understanding language as a tool used for social construction, MRAs and feminist use language not only to construct their respective identities as victims, but in doing so they inadvertently reproduce the traditional gender roles they were seeking to dismantle in the first place. In using language to create the categories for victimhood, and in reproducing traditional gender roles, the in- and exclusion of victims becomes a gendered practice disregarding the complexity and dynamic nature of victimhood (Jamar, 2021).

Conclusion

Glancing back at the introduction of this thesis, I mentioned the ways in which difference between people is created and reinforced by the ways in which we engage with language. Despite MRAs and feminists both being movements seemingly promoting equality, despite both parties only being human after all, the ways in which they *feel* different and subsequently *reinforce* this difference through their language use have been laid bare in this research. I urge the reader to keep in mind, in reading this thesis and in general, that although we might *experience* difference, to always question the relevance of this difference, and if it is even really there to begin with.

In answering the research question through critical discourse analysis, this research has found two relevant trends in the ways in which MRAs and feminists employ discursive practices in their engagement in competitive victimhood. Firstly, it has become clear that in understanding the type of discursive practices used by a movement, societal position is of grave importance. We have seen this in MRAs position as outcasts in society, introducing an alternative discourse, leading to a more defensive stance and active engagement in competitive victimhood. In the other corner, the feminists employ a more nuanced engagement in competitive victimhood due to societal acceptance of the notion of female victimhood. Rather than creating space for a whole new narrative, feminists aim to keep pre-existing discourse in place. They are not so much engaging in competition as they are in protection. Secondly, despite MRAs and feminists concurrent aversion to traditional gender roles, the ways in which they characterize their own victimhood seems to be reproducing exactly those roles they were against in the first place. With feminists describing female victims as innocent and MRAs describing male victims as responsible, both feminists and MRAs are using language to create categories of victimhood which further reproduce traditional gender roles, gendering their notions of victimhood.

In shedding a light on the findings of this research, this author hopes not only to have helped in creating more understanding around the concept of competitive victimhood and its performance through discursive practices, but also to have inspired future research to further understand and subsequently dismantle the idea of multiple types of victimhood as mutually exclusive. This mutual exclusivity is exactly what makes it so pressing to understand the mechanics of competitive victimhood, as it not only has the capacity to cause and reinforce polarization, but also the ability to erase real suffering.

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