



Scaffolding Bad Moral Agents

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Accepted: 20 September 2024
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Abstract

Recent work on ecological accounts of moral responsibility and agency have argued for the importance of social environments for moral reasons responsiveness. Moral audiences can scaffold individual agents' sensitivity to moral reasons and their motivation to act on them, but they can also undermine it. In this paper, we look at two case studies of 'scaffolding bad', where moral agency is undermined by social environments: street gangs and online incel communities. In discussing these case studies, we draw both on recent situated cognition literature and on scaffolded responsibility theory. We show that the way individuals are embedded into a specific social environment changes the moral considerations they are sensitive to in systematic ways because of the way these environments scaffold affective and cognitive processes, specifically those that concern the perception and treatment of ingroups and outgroups. We argue that gangs undermine reasons responsiveness to a greater extent than incel communities because gang members are more thoroughly immersed in the gang environment.

Keywords Scaffolded cognition · Responsible agency · Reasons responsiveness · Street gangs · Incels

1 Introduction

It's uncontroversial that our sense of what's morally acceptable and required is shaped by the moral rules, customs and expectations of our social environment. Recently this insight has been developed in ecological accounts of moral agency and responsible agency that stress the extent to which moral reasons responsiveness is a product of being held to account. Ecological accounts of responsible agency claim that moral reasons responsiveness depends on influences from the

social environment (Vargas 2018) and is scaffolded by the fact that humans as social beings are held to account by others (McGeer and Pettit 2015; McGeer 2019; Jefferson 2019; Jefferson and Sifferd 2023). What scaffolding means here is not just that people are motivated by positive and negative reactions to their behaviour during moral development, but that our very sensitivity to what is morally required depends on real and anticipated social audiences.¹

The phenomenon of scaffolding is also one focus of the literature on situated cognition. Many organisms perform some of their functions in close interaction with supportive structures in their environment. From the spider's web to the beaver's dam, such supportive structures are often the result of the organism actively selecting or intervening in its environment. According to the theory of the scaffolded mind, a scaffold is a part of the material or social environment that is employed by the organism in performing some kind of function (Sterelny 2010). Scaffolds enable the organism to perform functions which the animal would not be able to

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¹ This is first and foremost a psychological claim, but it has important normative implications. It provides a justification for our practices of holding each other to account. Rather than being punitive reactions akin to revenge that do more harm than good as some suggest; blame, resentment and punishment play an important role in developing moral agency (Vargas 2013, 2021; McGeer 2019; Jefferson 2019).

perform on its own (Sutton 2010), or they make the performance of some of the functions easier and more efficient (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

While there is not much crossover in the literature on scaffolding in moral responsibility theory and the scaffolded cognition discourse, there are obvious connections in the way individuals' dependence on their environment, particularly their social environment, enables capacities and abilities he or she would not otherwise have. However, there is now a growing recognition in both these literatures that this form of environmental scaffolding is not always a good thing. Organisms which heavily rely on their environment to regulate their emotions and morality are vulnerable to environments which undermine their abilities, be these moral, affective or cognitive. Thus, ecological accounts of moral agency also imply something that we are already well aware of from everyday life and psychological research, which is that social environments can corrupt. This corruption of moral cognition can occur when bad behaviour is not called out, as is the case when dishonesty or sexual harassment or other types of immoral actions are ignored or normalised. A more extreme version would be actively reinforcing harmful behaviour by rewarding it or punishing those who don't do the bad things demanded by their social environment.

The situated cognition literature acknowledges bad effects of organisms' dependence on their environment under the term 'hostile scaffolding'. As Kim Sterelny pointed out early on, scaffolding (Sterelny 2003) consists not only of beneficial props or the conditions chosen by the respective individual, nor solely of the carefully selected infrastructures, tools, and social support networks that individuals develop for themselves and their community. There are also forms of hostile scaffolding, environmental and social structures shaping cognition and emotion in the interest of others, not of the scaffolded person. One example by Timms and Spurrett (2023) is the way gambling casinos are designed to encourage extended gambling sessions.

In this paper, we focus on problematic environments that undermine responsiveness to moral reasons. We will investigate how ways of understanding harmful scaffolding in the situated cognition literature (cf. e.g. Heinrichs 2024) can inform our understanding of how reasons responsiveness and responsible agency are shaped or corrupted by real world and virtual social environments.

We will focus on two example sub-cultures or specific social environments, online incel cultures and street gang cultures. We chose the comparison groups of incels and gangs because they are similar in that they both negatively impact the reasons responsiveness of their members concerning specific others. This places them in a suitable comparison class. Nevertheless, they differ significantly in structure (degree of hierarchy, locality), the degree of harm

to others (association with increased crime), and in particular integration into their environment (online vs. offline). We chose an online and offline example because we were interested in exploring the commonalities and differences between environments that clearly encourage immoral behaviour but are otherwise quite different in the kind of environmental cues and affordances they provide. Specifically, the online environment is much more circumscribed and only affects one part of an individual's life. Individuals can stay anonymous and it is therefore easier to leave that environment. Online communities are also sought out by users in a way that gangs are not. We identify factors that play an important role in undermining moral reasons responsiveness across such different environments to pinpoint environmental factors that affect the nature and degree of individual reasons responsiveness.

We aim to answer the following questions - to what extent do these social environments scaffold and shape responsible agency? Do these environments undermine responsible agency because of the way they limit reasons responsiveness? We will argue that both forms of social environments provide affective scaffolding that influences reasons responsive agency by reinforcing certain values and closing off affective access to victims. However, we further show that gangs do this to a greater extent, as they take over a larger part of individuals' lives. Gangs are also harder to leave and are not sought out in the way incel communities are. Correspondingly, there is a case to be made that gangs affect moral reasons responsiveness to a greater extent than incel communities do.

The paper is structured as follows: We will begin by outlining briefly the way moral scaffolding is understood in the responsibility literature and then compare this to conceptions of scaffolding in the situated cognition literature, pointing out differences and commonalities. We will then look at how gangs and incel communities shape their members' reasons responsiveness through various forms of scaffolding.

2 Different Forms of Scaffolding

2.1 Moral Scaffolding

Both the extended mind literature and ecological accounts of responsible agency stress the importance of the world beyond the body in determining and shaping an individual's capacities. As Timms and Spurrett put it, cognitive scaffolding refers to "...something external—usually to body, but sometimes to brain—that somehow supports cognitive processes." (Timms and Spurrett 2023 p.54). Cognitive scaffolding is a large category that includes scaffolds as varied

as calculators, books, an organism's hands or social interactions that influence cognition or affect. The idea of scaffolded moral responsibility is focused on the social environment and often on an individual's reliance on their societal audiences to make them sensitive to moral norms. Scaffolded moral responsibility is frequently couched in developmental terms or as supporting a capacity for diachronic moral sensitivity, rather than synchronously supporting (or undermining) one's responsiveness to moral reasons (Vargas 2018; McGeer 2019). This suggests a contrast between ecological accounts of responsibility and situated mind theory, which often focuses on how cognitive scaffolding extends capacities synchronically.

The capacity for responsibility necessarily comprises cognitive components, in particular the capacity to recognize that an action is harmful, or that a moral rule is being violated, as well as affective components. Normally these include some form of empathy as well as emotional receptivity to blame.² So, for example, we need to recognise what moral rules apply in a particular context, recognise that our actions are hurtful to others and that others matter, and be motivated to act on behalf of others, a motivation that is positively affected by empathy and negatively affected by fear. These capacities are scaffolded by a person's social environment. Importantly for the discussion to follow, moral reasons responsiveness is taken to be a normative, objective notion in the moral responsibility literature (Wolf 1987), not merely a descriptive term for sensitivity to reasons endorsed within a specific moral community. This commitment to objective moral reasons is necessary for identifying morally wrong action as such. If there is no binding standard for wrongdoing, there are no grounds for holding people responsible if they violate moral principles those holding them responsible accept.

How do ecological accounts of moral agency and moral responsibility characterize the role of the social environment in supporting moral agency? First, they recognize that one's environment plays a pivotal role in a person becoming reasons responsive. If young Thomas pulls classmate Sienna's hair, the teacher might provide negative feedback via behavior (a glare, or giving him a time out) and by providing him with reasons against the action that rely on perspective taking ("How would you feel if she pulled your hair?"). Thomas is encouraged in this case to become sensitive to a moral norm: that pulling hair, or more generally, harming

others, is wrong. One way this sensitivity happens is by Thomas associating negative affect with the behavior – he learns to feel bad about hurting a classmate. He also learns to pay attention to cues that he is causing harm, and to consider his behavior if harm might be caused or has already been caused. Similarly, by praising good behaviour a model to aspire to is provided. Importantly, this kind of ongoing moral feedback does not just affect the person blamed, but signals what is acceptable and what is not to those who *observe* moral blame and praise. Classroom contexts are once again instructive here. When bad behaviour is called out and penalized by teachers, their primary goal may not be to induce repentance in Thomas, but to warn other children off that kind of behaviour.

Audience feedback thus seems to play at least two roles in our moral agency (Jefferson and Sifferd 2023). First, it gives us important information about what is right and wrong, what situations have moral implications, and how we might make morally correct decisions. Second, it motivates us to be sensitive to moral and social norms, and try to conform to them. The feedback we get about how we should feel about a certain situation or behavior is important to both learning normative standards and being motivated to meet them. Eventually some feedback from one's moral audience becomes internalized, which means that, even in the absence of a moral audience, we understand what feedback we are likely to get.

So far, we have highlighted the role of responsibility practices by a moral audience and forms of holding others to account. But the scaffolding of moral agency is broader than that. An influential discussion of the external factors relevant to responsibility can be found in Susan Hurley's 'The Public Ecology of Responsibility' (Hurley 2011). Hurley builds on the observation that rational behaviour, including acting for moral reasons, is in many cases enabled and sustained by a public ecology of social and environmental conditions and not the result of one individual's domain general deliberation alone. She provides a number of examples of decisional and behavioural biases and shortcomings in which unscaffolded thinkers tend to deliberate or act irrationally, such as framing effects and errors in social cognition. The framing effect in particular is politically and socially influential, because people react strongly to how a certain decision is framed and deliberate about the decision in these very terms. The example she provides is that "experienced doctors respond differently when a programme to combat a disease is described in terms of 200 people out of 600 being saved as opposed to 400 people out of 600 dying" (Hurley 2011, p. 196). Hurley infers that "[i]f rationality is enabled by interactions with a public ecology, and responsibility depends on rationality, then responsibility is also enabled by interactions with a public ecology." (Hurley

² There are long-standing debates in moral psychology and meta-ethics whether recognizing moral reasons is itself a purely cognitive capacity or requires certain emotional sensitivities. In particular, the role of empathy is a subject of much debate. We won't resolve this issue in this paper, but are sympathetic to Kennett's claim that while empathy may be the typical path to avoiding wrongdoing, it need not be, as the study of moral agency in neurodiverse individuals illustrates (Kennett 2002).

2011, p. 207) One important thing that Hurley's work brings out is that cognitive scaffolding can, at the same time, be moral scaffolding because it affects the way morally relevant information is noticed or acted upon. To see how scaffolded cognition and moral reasons responsiveness interact, we can look at how she suggests making use of the information that certain environmental cues are more suited to elicit desired behaviours than mere deliberation: "[S]omeone who doesn't wish to be influenced by gender or racial stereotypes and is discouraged to learn that deliberate efforts to suppress stereotypes can be counterproductive, may welcome the knowledge that concrete action plans linking a specific environmental cue to a cognitive response do tend to overcome stereotyped associations—and be happy to be influenced in this way" (Hurley 2011, p. 214). Assumed here is the norm that the agent should avoid bias in their moral reasoning. This shows the commitment of ecological responsibility theory to objective moral reasons that apply to everyone.

Manuel Vargas, too, stresses the importance of the social environment in shaping reasons responsiveness both diachronically and synchronically, pointing out how one's social environment shapes one's decision making: "If one has internalized oppressive norms or cultural scripts, these things shape one's deliberations about what actional possibilities are relevant in a given circumstance." (Vargas 2018, p. 125) Importantly, this is not the age-old problem of determinism rehashed, which simply states that we are the product of our history. Rather, ecological accounts pinpoint specific contributions that the environment makes by imposing costs on certain kinds of behaviour (cooperating with outgroup members) or shaping the perception of moral choices (for example in the way they dehumanize outgroups). Ecological accounts vary in how much they focus on the role of the scaffolding of emotions, the inculcation of norms, or the awareness of moral audiences as factors that affect moral agency. They also vary in the extent to which scaffolding is understood as diachronic and developmental or synchronic. But all stress the role of the social environment in shaping our moral reasons responsiveness, while being committed to the idea that it is possible to get things right or wrong, morally speaking. Reasons responsiveness is a normative notion which relies on the notion of objective reasons one is responsive to, rather than just a description of whatever one *takes* to be a reason.

2.2 Comparing the Notion of Scaffolded Responsibility to Affective and Cognitive Scaffolding

In contrast to the notion of scaffolded reasons responsiveness, the scaffolded mind literature is primarily focused on

external factors that synchronously scaffold specific cognition and affect. This stands to reason given the core claim of the scaffolded mind hypothesis that the realization of mental processes and abilities extends beyond the brain. While scaffolds have been discussed for a plethora of functions in diverse organisms, the focus of current research in philosophy is on cognitive and affective scaffolds. The core idea is that environmental support of cognitive and affective processes is widespread, and explanations of human mental life that do not take into account this environmental support will remain inadequate. What is relevant for our purpose is to point out that external scaffolding plays a role in very basic as well as in highly complex and culturally formed cognitive and affective functions. There is for example a pronounced effect of simple social scaffolds, in particular smiling behaviour of interaction partners on toddler's mood regulation, or the effect of simple memory aids, as well as regulation of the complex feeling of power or deficiency (Saarinen 2024).

The scaffolded responsibility story of internalization of moral norms and audience responses appears to run counter to the situated mind theorist's claim that we depend on our environment here and now. But this distinction is not as hard as it may look at first glance. Despite the scope for internalisation, real moral audiences remain crucial according to the theory of moral reasons responsiveness. McGeer and Pettit (2015) claim that even the most virtuous moral beings need on-going sensitivity to moral audiences to remain morally responsive. Social norms and narratives are continuously reinforced within a social environment. And within the framework of situated cognition approaches, niche construction theory has highlighted how environmental and social scaffolds do not merely help to realize and sustain cognitive function, but at the same time shape individual (or in the case of phylogenetic niches: species-) development (Laland et al. 2000). For instance, de Carvalho and Krueger (2023) introduce the idea of a developmental niche, where educators' behaviour and the way learning environments are set up help to support learning processes. So, there is a synchronic dimension of how the learning process is shaped by the environment in more or less beneficial ways for the individual. But this process will have ongoing diachronic effects which the child carries with it to new environments. Furthermore, as we stress above, the scaffolding of moral reasons responsiveness is not a process that is ever finished; our moral reasons responsiveness remains a fragile work in progress.

The way social environments impact any single person's moral agency is complex. Humans find themselves moving between many different moral audiences and environments, and which of them most strongly influences their reasons responsiveness will vary at different life stages and in

different life circumstances. This creates problems for reasons responsiveness as it can become patchy, depending on what social environment an individual is in. Furthermore, certain moral audiences discourage movement between moral environments as we will see in the case studies we explore in detail below. Members of street gangs, in particular, may be discouraged from having contact with other value systems that would undermine the gang's authority.

We explore the ways the social environments of gangs and incels impact reasons responsiveness and moral agency in the next two sections. They play both a diachronic role in shaping moral sensitivities, and a synchronic role in shaping moral behavior. They also show how context influences reasons responsiveness via affective and cognitive scaffolding. The two social environments of gangs and online incel communities are of particular interest because embeddedness in these communities can result in members having *less* sensitivity to the moral norms embraced by the wider society. Scaffolding within these communities often encourages bad behavior.

Before moving to a detailed discussion of gangs and incels, we want to highlight another dimension on which bad moral scaffolding in situated cognition literature appears to differ from cases of morally bad scaffolding in the responsibility literature. Theories of situated cognition claim that hostile scaffolding is bad because it is detrimental to the individual. By contrast, the notion of 'scaffolding bad' that we have invoked declares moral scaffolding as bad because it leads to immoral reasoning and behaviour according to some objective standard of moral wrongness. This moral badness might in principle be beneficial to individuals in prudential terms. It therefore looks like there might be two quite different notions of badness at play. While moral badness is indeed specified independently of what is bad for the individual in specific circumstances, we argue that it comes with specific deficiencies in moral reasoning and is also detrimental to the individuals themselves in the medium to long term in the two examples we discuss.

3 Gangs as Social Environments that Scaffold Bad Values and Undermine Reasons Responsiveness

Street gangs are different from most groups that teens join. We will focus here on American street gangs, which are informal organizations that can be identified via certain group processes (Decker et al. 2013). Gangs can imbue their members with a sense of belonging and self-worth, and in this way the colours and symbols of a gang are worn with a pride similar to that of a soldier, university alumnus, or a sports fan. However, unlike an alumnus or fan, gang

membership can govern almost every aspect of a member's life: their work or economic projects, their time spent socializing, and their relationships, including both friendships and romantic relationships. Once a member is recruited (Densley 2013), their street gang can provide security in a dangerous neighborhood, as well as economic opportunities in circumstances where jobs are difficult to secure.

The key elements of organization within gangs mirror many of society's other institutions. They include the presence of leadership; regular meetings; differentiated roles; coordinated activities; rules, codes and norms with sanctions for violators; and rites of passage (Levero and Matsueda 2019, p. 800–801). The primary purposes of street gangs include maintaining respect and status for the group and the individual, controlling territory and resources, advancing and maintaining a sense of family or camaraderie, and economic objectives, such as drug trade (Levero and Matsueda 2019, p. 801). These aims strongly shape the cognitive and affective scaffolding members experience, and gang members' sensitivity to reasons and corresponding behavior is impacted in ways related to these wide-ranging aims. Specific norms and rules of the gang provide a framework that defines expected behavior, violations of membership, and sanctions for violators. Meetings provide important opportunities for direct feedback likely to have affective impact and support group identification and achievement of goals, and individual performance in such meetings scaffold specific forms of affectivity and behavior. Jan Slaby demonstrates this kind of phenomenon with the example of corporate environments or the military where the "contributory affects, expressions, interactions, performances of the individual employees" shape the dynamic within the group which in turn exerts profound formative influences on the affective experiences and affective engagement of the individuals that regularly dwell therein" (Slaby 2016, p. 8).

A specific example of scaffolding within street gangs concerns gang signs and symbols. Unlike typical social statuses that adolescents tend to display, common symbols of gang membership are meant not only to identify members, but to have an affective impact on outsiders by "intimidat[ing] others and intimate a penchant for crime and delinquency, especially violence" (Decker et al. 2013 citing Felson 2006). Importantly for our argument, gang symbols also have an affective and cognitive impact on members (not just on outsiders). Identifying oneself as a gang member affects how they are treated by other gang members and rivals and how that person is expected to treat others. The solidarity created by gang symbols and processes is important to the retaliatory nature of gang violence, as "it produces expectations and interactions that create a collective identity among gang members" (Decker et al. 2013). An attack on one gang

member is typically perceived as an attack on the gang itself; and retaliation is required.

Gang rites, which can be understood as important and solemn customary observances of a group, are also important means of cognitive and affective scaffolding. Initiation rites in particular tend to involve physical beatings – sometimes called being “beaten in” – and involve symbolism that helps to define the moral boundaries of the gang and increase gang solidarity (Leverso and Matsueda 2019, p. 801–802). This process is similar to those of other groups, such as the military or fraternities in the U.S. Leaving a gang can also require a group process, a “beating out.” Joining a gang entails significant costs, although few (of the mostly teenagers) joining a gang are likely to understand the extent to which being in a gang dictates their opportunities and actions. The cost of leaving a gang, however, can also be very high.

From an outside perspective, gang members engage in irrational actions that involve very high levels of risk. Decker et al. (2013) note that the influence of a gang on individual choice and action must be significant to overcome the many reasons against such (often criminal) behavior that have been reinforced in other social environments. Gangs can operate as epistemic echo chambers, where outside views on morality in particular are discounted as irrelevant or mistaken (Nguyen 2020).³ This influence is stronger in some cases than in others. The bond between gang members, according to Decker, is “built on a common normative orientation and shared activities” (Decker et al. 2013, p. 384). Perceived gang organization and gang identity is positively correlated with the length of time a person spends within a gang (Leverso & Matsuda 2019). This means that the more organized the gang is perceived to be, and the more an individual identifies with the gang, the longer a person meets the expectations of a gang and continues as a member.

The social and moral norms embraced by street gangs seem complicated and idiosyncratic compared to those of other moral communities. Gang morality is quite unique in that violence is considered acceptable if directed at members of other gangs or as a part of gang ritual. However, the same violence may be considered wrongful if it is taken against a fellow member without approval by the gang leadership. Similarly, property crimes committed to further

gang interests might be required, but theft of property from fellow gang members is forbidden. The behaviour modeled and encouraged through affective influences such as ingroup approval and disapproval are likely to reshape the individual’s reasons receptivity; what they recognise as a moral reason, and their reactivity; and what reasons motivate them to act.

In general, gangs often make members less likely to see the interests of certain outgroups as reason-giving; while reasons related to the interests of other gang members remain intact. This can usefully be compared to a case where there are intra-individual factors undermining an individual’s ability to see others’ interests as reason-giving, as in the case of psychopathy, which is considered a neurodevelopmental condition (Blair et al. 2005; Shoemaker 2015). In the case of gangs, the inability is selective, it applies to outgroup members, not ingroup members, and is continually reinforced by the social environment. Street gangs are somewhat unique in that their influence can supplant the moral scaffolding provided by family, schools, and other moral audiences. Persons are normally a part of several moral and social groups; but often these groups are morally complementary. This is often not the case with street gangs.

The mechanisms of affective scaffolding that support feelings of self-worth as tied to group identity in gangs closely mirrors the way Coninx and Stephan characterise affective scaffolding in radical groups. Their description of such scaffolds comes very close to the rites and rules of street gangs:

“Such scaffolding may diametrically modulate the affective repertoire of the members of different social subgroups. For example, the agent may use structures, narratives, or rituals to enable self-confidence, faith, and feelings of belonging in the members of their own subgroup while reinforcing in others the internalization of their own worthlessness and inability, in order to increase their feelings of exclusion and hopelessness” (Coninx and Stephan 2021, p. 58).

While they do not explicitly mention gangs in this context, the parallels to the kind of mindshaping and indoctrination we see in gangs are clear.

Decker notes that within a gang niche, group processes “enable members to do things – particularly engaging in violence – they would not normally do” (Decker et al. 2013, p. 383). This is an intriguing observation when we think of scaffolding as a way of extending human ability. Given the reasons responsiveness framework, we see the way gangs shape moral agency as resulting in a deficit, a lack of responsiveness to objective moral reasons. But clearly, from the point of view of scaffolded agency, certain human emotions

³ A related notion which we will discuss below in the context of incels is that of an epistemic bunker. We do not believe epistemic bunkers are the correct categorisation for insulation from other views that people in gangs experience. Furman (2023) introduces the notion of epistemic bunkers as spaces where groups insulate themselves against external views in order to create “safety in a hostile environment” (Furman 2023, p. 199). The safety of epistemic bunkers is often emotional safety. The problem external views pose for gangs is not that they threaten individual safety, but that they threaten commitment to the gang.

and reactions – such as aggression – are dialed up and others are suppressed. Scaffolding bad moral agency involves not just an absence, but a scaffolding of targeted aggression and a sustained value system that prizes and reinforces a *different set of values*. This different set of values initially seems to benefit gang members economically and regarding their safety, at least in the short term.

One question that arises in this context is whether it would not be more appropriate to say that, rather than lacking reasons responsiveness, gang members are responsive to a different set of reasons. We have already indicated above that we take there to be correct moral reasons that these agents are not responsive to. An obvious worry concerning this approach, which is dominant in the moral responsibility literature, is that we as evaluators might also be mistaken in the values by which we hold gang members accountable. This is a fair point, but as a matter of practical necessity, holding responsible presupposes a commitment to values that we hold ourselves and others to. Furthermore, the reasoning processes of gang members that sanction violence to outgroup members but not to ingroup members are clearly flawed in that they don't generalise moral principles they take to be binding in their own context. Even when we look at whether the value system they endorse serves them well prudentially, we need only look at the premature mortality rate among gang members to see that any advantages are short term (Pyrooz et al. 2020). In this context, we could see some of the indoctrination that goes on in gang membership as a form of hostile scaffolding, whereby the mind set encouraged is beneficial to gang leaders, but not to members.

Taking these considerations together, we can see that social infrastructure of gangs affects horizons for action through the peer influence of the group. Group affiliation and approval makes violence and inordinate risk-taking seem like acceptable and expected behaviour. This does not mean that responsibility is completely undermined. There is an external environment which does not condone gang violence, and gang members will be aware of that. But that social environment is not the main environment of gang members' day to day life. If we take seriously the thought that we depend on others, particularly our immediate social environment for moral scaffolding, it follows that in some gang members' responsibility is reduced. Using responsibility theorist David Brink's language, gang members may not have a fair opportunity to avoid wrongdoing due to their moral scaffolding – it is much more difficult for them to be law-abiding (Brink 2021).⁴ This is a troubling result in two ways: one is that this does not decrease the harmfulness of

their actions. The other is that if moral feedback is what shapes moral agency, it seems that gang members are in dire need of more influential moral feedback that highlights the wrongness of their actions. Another factor worth highlighting is that responsible agency need not (and probably is not) undermined across the board, because gang members may well still be reasons responsive in other areas of their life, for example their interactions with siblings or parents. As Vargas (2018) points out, ecological accounts of moral agency entail that reasons responsiveness and responsibility can be patchy. There is of course a further empirical question as to how far the influence of the gang reaches into different aspects of life, potentially affecting reasons responsiveness.

Leaving aside the question of responsibility and culpability, what this discussion highlights is the need for a change of environment and for people to become emotionally invested in a broader range of social environments. Changes in reasons responsiveness can only be expected if the environment supports rather than undermines such change. Recovery from addiction is instructive here, as that, too, normally requires avoiding the environments associated with previous drug abuse (Levy 2006). If they survive long enough, many gang members do eventually age out of the gang as the importance of other things outside of the gang grows. Such “pull” factors include marriage and parenting (Leverso & Matsuda 2019). But there is a further question of how the process of leaving a gang can be facilitated and accelerated.

4 Incels and the Scaffolding of Negative Emotions and Violent Misogyny

We now turn to a different form of morally problematic community, online groups of incels. Incels, short for involuntarily celibate, are (normally young) men who come together in online communities where they exchange messages and reinforce each other's frequently deeply misogynistic world views. Over the last ten years, they have garnered significant media attention because of a small number of deadly attacks. In 2014, Elliot Rodger killed two of his (male) housemates, two women in a nearby sorority house and himself. In 2021, Jake Davison killed five people, including his mother and himself. He had a long-standing fascination with firearms, mass shootings and the incel movement. Several other killings have been linked to the incel movement.

The comparison between incels and street gangs is instructive for the question how social groups scaffold bad moral agency, as there are important similarities and differences. Like gangs, incel communities are mostly made up of young men and group identity is fostered through ingroup specific terminology (Moonshot 2021). However, incels

⁴ Sifferd 2023 argues that gang member's normative competence may be so undermined by the gang environment that they should be offered a partial excuse and not be held fully responsible by the criminal justice system.

are not recruited but normally seek out online communities and fora, which are often anonymous. Thus, their identity as members of that group is more partial and separate from their everyday life. A small number of people spend a lot of time online in these communities, for them, the online community dominates their cognitive and emotional scaffolding by simply replacing interaction with the outside environment. But according to a recent survey, numbers of people who spent more than 33 hours a week on incel related internet platforms and social media was vanishingly small (Whittaker et al. 2024).

How do online incel communities scaffold individual members' reasons responsiveness or lack thereof? Like gangs, incel communities come with their own argot. They share an ingroup vocabulary, and one can now find glossaries for incel terminology online. Attractive men and women are known as Chads and Stacy's respectively, less attractive ones as Betas and Beckys. 'Redpilled' individuals understand what incels take to be the true power structures when it comes to mate choice, where less attractive men are at a fundamental disadvantage in finding a partner. 'Blackpilled' individuals take this stance even further and believe there is nothing they can do to improve their prospects of finding a partner (Moonshot 2021; Pelzer et al. 2021). These communities are dedicated to the discussion of problems in finding a partner and propagation of incel ideology complete with its own language, and they reinforce both a group identity and the misogynistic ideology of incels.

A parallel with observations by Osler and Krueger regarding pro-anorexia (AN) websites and online communities is useful here. Both communities and their terminology center around a particular set of beliefs and goals (regarding sex or weight, respectively). Osler and Krueger note that pro-anorexia online communities don't just provide information on how best to lose weight but provide support and validation for their members. This is particularly important for individuals whose real-world environment rejects and pathologises their views, values and priorities. "Users offer encouragement and support for fasting, sympathise when someone is facing pressure to eat from outsiders, share their own stories and experiences in solidarity and as inspiration to others. This is not a static informational space. It is instead a dynamic interactive space that works as an ongoing form of scaffolding for AN values and practices—scaffolded practices that are often reciprocal between members" (Osler and Krueger 2022, p. 887).

While the dynamics of incel websites are no doubt quite dissimilar to pro-anorexia sites in many ways, there are also marked similarities. Young men seek out these websites as a form of support network and to find others who share a world view that is frowned upon in their everyday life. Edwards (2023) argues that incels see incel communities as

a form of support group for people with the same kinds of problems as theirs and the way they use ingroup/outgroup language reinforces group identity and cohesion. "Their discursive construction of a threatening, inhuman "them" (femoids, foids, etc.) that they are united against enables individual incels on their computers or smart devices to experience themselves as a part of a "we," as well as the feeling of being understood by others in a similar situation" (Edwards 2023, p. 217). Incel communities might therefore be considered epistemic bunkers in the sense introduced by Furman (2023), which offer psychological safety by insulating individuals from an environment perceived as hostile. As Furman notes, the cost of this is further polarization and a skewed and incomplete epistemic diet.

A recent report by Whittaker, Costello and Thomas (2024) finds that most incels say that they feel a sense of belonging with their online incel communities. Another study found that 69.9% of incels polled reported that they felt a sense of belonging and 74.6% said they felt understood by their incel community (Speckhard et al. 2021, p. 102). It appears that incels seek out online communities to alleviate the loneliness and social isolation they experience, as well as to validate their world-view. But that is precisely part of the problem, because the world-view incels subscribe to is deeply nihilistic. By surrounding themselves with a community that holds equally nihilistic views they not only reinforce this view they also cement the emotional problems that lead them to seek out these platforms in the first place. "[T]heir loneliness becomes intimately connected to collectively justified and encouraged anger with clearly defined and categorized targets" (Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023). Rather than alleviating negative emotions related to persons outside the community, these are further reinforced, alongside problematic beliefs and values.⁵ The environment thus not only undermines moral reasons responsiveness, but it is frequently detrimental to incels medium term well-being and reinforces existing emotional problems.

What should we say about the effect of incel communities on the moral agency and responsibility of their members? A set of problematic world-views are reinforced, which leads to incels being further alienated from the values of their real-world environment. Both explicit beliefs and the othering language label others in dehumanising ways that affect moral reasons responsiveness. If women are femoids who are driven by non-rational instincts to seek only attractive men and are unable to care for beta men and at best exploit

⁵ Furthermore, loneliness and depression tend not to be alleviated in the medium term but reinforced. One rather shocking aspect of incel platforms is their glorification and support of suicide. If an incel decides that life is no longer worth living, they are more likely than not to be supported in this decision by their online community.

them (Chang 2020, p. 10), then threatening women online seems less morally problematic.

While incel communities clearly have morally and prudentially undesirable effects on their members, we argue that the incel community undermines reasons responsiveness to a lesser extent than gang-membership. In contrast to the active recruitment of gangs, incels normally decide to seek out communities with similar views on women as theirs. Furthermore, the community is not part of their immediate, non-digital environment. Unlike gang members, incels are not immersed in a social and moral community that dictates their moral understanding across many different areas of life. It therefore seems that the level to which incel communities undermine reasons responsiveness is lower. Interestingly, Whittaker and colleagues note that, for incels, sexist ideology and poor mental health are much stronger predictors of harm than networking, i.e. the extent to which incels are integrated into the community (Whittaker et al. 2024). In other words, exposure to the incel community does not seem to be a prominent cause of harmful behaviour. Mental health problems and their effect on the moral agency and responsibility of incels are clearly a topic that needs careful consideration which we cannot provide in this paper. We merely mention mental illness as another important aspect that has been identified both as a reason for people seeking out incel communities and a factor increasing the risk of violence.

How does the fact that incels are members of different overlapping communities that give them different kinds of feedback, influence their reasons responsiveness cross-situationally? Teenagers and young men often receive moral feedback from their parents, peers, school community, and, in some cases, their church or other community groups (coaches, for example). One hopes this includes information about and modeling of values relating to gender relations and sexual practices; although this feedback might differ somewhat across each community.⁶

In general, we expect a full moral agent (an adult) exposed to multiple moral audiences to synthesize the moral feedback they have access to, and to move away from moral understandings that are biased, oppressive, or violent towards others. We want them to generalize moral norms and not exempt certain persons or outgroups from moral treatment. When a person has access to feedback from multiple sources, they have the tools to compare them. By contrast, gang members may not have access to multiple sources of feedback - they often drop out of school and become isolated from their parents and other community groups. This

means that they can be immersed in an environment that severely limits their sensitivity to moral reasons, and their reasons responsiveness may be impacted in a global way. But this is less likely to be true of most incels. Most incels have regular interactions with women (though these may not be close interactions), and in general, the problematic environment is less encompassing than for gang members. This brings up the possibility of reasons responsiveness being diminished within a fairly narrow area of behavior due to (im)moral scaffolding. Incels participate in and are subject to cognitive and affective scaffolding that can impact their understanding of the moral wrongness of actions taken toward women. Most incels don't end up committing crimes (unlike gang members). As online forums only make up part of their lives and they have increased access to other moral feedback and understandings, they restrict immoral behaviour to hate speech in strict boundaries. Thus, both wrongdoing and impaired reasons responsiveness will normally be very local, restricted to specific online contexts. Furthermore, because of the feedback available in other areas of life, the extent to which reasons responsiveness is undermined will frequently not be enough to provide mitigation for responsibility.

5 Conclusions

Ecological theories of moral agency and responsibility stress the importance of the environment for developing and maintaining sensitivity to moral reasons. Our social environment and the audiences that provide feedback seem to be especially important to moral behavior. Situated cognition theories of affective and cognitive scaffolding similarly claim that the environment, including one's social environment, can determine and shape an individual's capacities. Environmental scaffolds impact both the information one can draw on in decisions or actions, and how a person feels about them.

In this paper we used these theoretical frameworks to explore two environments that encourage immoral ideas and acts. Our discussion of street gangs and incel communities illustrate just how strongly reasons responsiveness relies on a moral ecosystem that shapes people's beliefs, emotional responses, and what they take themselves to be answerable for. As Susan Hurley (2011) points out, rationality and reasoning capacity are always influenced by our social environment. In the case of incels and gangs, a highly partisan way of thinking and feeling which does not apply rules of behaviour consistently is fostered.

However, the two different environments do this to different extents. Members of street gangs are often recruited and then immersed within their gang community and

⁶ Unfortunately, for some young men, the internet may be the main source of information and models when it comes to sexual relationships in particular. This is more likely to be the case for the details of intimate sexual relationships than gender roles more broadly.

its material environment. Gang membership frequently becomes the most important part of the member's identity, and it is outwardly signaled to others. Members are strongly incentivized to commit immoral acts that achieve the gang's goals and that discount the moral status of nongang members. These actions are "easy to hand" and immediate, and when this action is taken it is praised and rewarded. Because a gang member's social and material environment can be almost entirely subsumed by gang culture, different moral values and norms can seem remote and unimportant. Attempts to counter the influence of the gang environment on reasons sensitivity may require "pull" factors that motivate a gang member to leave the community (including the pull of relationships or communities outside the gang, such as marriage or a church community). These pull factors must compete with a members' sense that the gang benefits them in the immediate term.

Members of the incel community, on the other hand, tend to seek out membership, and membership is often not outwardly displayed. The incel community also promotes values and norms that are more specific to a particular group or realm of action. In contrast to gang membership, because the incel community is online, members are not fully immersed in a material environment shaped and dominated by the incel community and must typically spend much of their time operating within other communities (family, school, or jobs, for example). This sets an effective limit for the incel's community's influence, insofar as it can only shape a minor part of the person's cognitive and emotive scaffolds. While gang membership is visible through physical signs and reinforced by material triggers such as gang colors or territorial markings, incel communities have fewer such scaffolds, most notably the argot of incels. The cost of leaving the incel community is lower than leaving a gang; indeed, former members of incel groups may be praised or rewarded by outsiders because they have left.

Our discussion of gangs and incel communities contributes to the understanding of scaffolded human abilities by showing how two current strands of literature are more closely related than has previously been acknowledged. Theories of scaffolded responsibility and situated cognition differ in their focus on the diachronic as opposed to the synchronic scaffolding of cognitive, affective and – in the present case – moral abilities. It has, however, turned out that this different focus rests on a solid base of shared assumptions concerning the role of external factors and their influence on the development of responsible agency. Both approaches explain how the cognitive and emotional abilities of moral agents are shaped by their social environments at the moment of action and in the long-term. And both provide a theoretical framework to consider the ways in which persons in certain environments can be less sensitive to moral

reasons. The importance of social environments in validating and enforcing immoral thinking and decision making also points to the importance of support networks that help individuals exit problematic communities while providing the sense of belonging and support they experienced in their previous community. In the case of incels, one such community is the subreddit r/IncelExit, which provides an alternative online forum for those wanting to distance themselves from incel communities and ideologies. While it is intuitive that our social environment makes a difference to our values and actions, it is worth pausing to realise just how strongly moral agency is shaped by the social environments we find ourselves in or that we seek out.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank David Spurrett and two anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback on our draft and David Jefferson for excellent proofing.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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