

# **Shedding a different light on MGTOW**

An anthropological exploration of the emic perspective of belonging  
to Men Going Their Own Way

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## **Abstract**

In contrast to how anthropologists usually study groups that we readily sympathize with, this thesis sets out to create an understanding of one of the most anti-mainstream groups in Sweden: Men Going Their Own Way. Through combining an engaged fieldwork with extended interviews, I aim to explore the emic experience of finding, being, and practicing MGTOW. With the aid of certain theoretical frameworks and concepts concerning feelings of tension and frustration, processes of discipline and exclusion, and acts of everyday resistance, my informants' experiences and accounts are understood and contextualized. In addition to contributing to a very thin field of academic knowledge production around MGTOW, I hope to nuance the polemic debate through which "the other" is perceived.

**Keywords:** the manosphere, MGTOW, masculinity, resistance, minority, the other

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## 1. Introduction

*It is one thing, I learned quickly, for an anthropologist to offer the natives' point of view when the subjects are hidden in the highlands of New Guinea and have little impact on the lives of the assembled audience. It is quite another to describe the world view of people from the same culture whom some people in my audiences considered to be 'the enemy' (Ginsburg 1989:222)*

Having studied anthropology for five years, it struck me that the vast majority of the chosen literature departs from opinions, ideologies, and worldviews to which there is a generally positive attitude. But what about the other ones? Since we anthropologists tend to highlight those groups in society that are on the same side of the political spectrum as ourselves, and those we readily sympathize with (Pasiëka 2017); “how are we to understand movements which we do not like at all” (Edelman 2001:311)? Knowing more about those we like and less about those we do not, indeed sounds “intellectually, politically, and socially dangerous” (Teitelbaum 2019:422). Are we missing something here?

Incorporating anti-feminism, biological determinism, and a general aversion towards romantic interactions with women into their values, Men Going Their Own Way (henceforth MGTOW) is certainly one of the most anti-mainstream groups in Sweden. The general tendency to highlight opinions that support your own, while simultaneously denouncing those opposite, has not only sparked an academic discourse, but also one in media<sup>1</sup>, in which scholars and opinion leaders are expressing concerns about this tendency for both the Swedish society<sup>2</sup> and Western academia<sup>3</sup>. However, talking to the “wrong minority” has not gone unnoticed<sup>4</sup>, and the question of how to manage deviating opinions within academia in a modern liberal democracy has never been more relevant than it is today.

### 1.1. Aims and research questions

Although communities such as MGTOW have received increasing scholarly attention in the last few years, MGTOW is severely understudied. To my knowledge, there are only a handful

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.svd.se/blev-avbokad-igen--hade-pratat-med-fel-personer>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.svd.se/orden-du-inte-far-saga-pa-uppsala-universitet>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/academics-are-really-really-worried-about-their-freedom/615724/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kulturdebatt/sa-trivialiserar-navid-modiri-en-hogerextrem-propagandist/>

of studies that treat MGTOW as their sole focus. The main aim of this thesis is, therefore, to fill the major knowledge gap concerning MGTOW. Furthermore, as none of the previous studies apply anthropological methods, our understanding of MGTOW is based on a rather narrow outside perspective. Although these studies all generate important and fruitful discussions about the online platforms' ideology, rhetoric, and structure, something is missing. What does a MGTOW actually think? Therefore, this study aims to fill the major knowledge gap concerning MGTOW, and more specifically, contribute with an emic perspective. With this I hope to nuance the picture of a MGTOW.

Furthermore, previous studies present MGTOW as a coherent international community - without incorporating any perspectives on local specificities. I am interested in Swedish MGTOWs and how the wider Swedish society affects their experiences of being MGTOW.

With that said, I also intend to compare my study with others and investigate whether anthropological methods might yield a different picture than those given by other disciplines. In light of the previously mentioned discussion surrounding the management of deviant opinions in contemporary society, I would like to contribute to a broader debate within both academia and society on how to interact with - and perceive - "the other".

My research questions can therefore be formulated: Why do people turn to MGTOW? What is it like being MGTOW? How is MGTOW expressed and practiced in everyday life? With an analysis of the studies' empirical data, these questions will be discussed with the aid of theoretical concepts stemming from the *masculinity in crisis*-argument, Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, and James Scott's idea about resistance.

## *1.2. Organization of the thesis*

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the main problem of my research, its aims, and its research questions. The following section provides a short contextual background, an overview of existing research, and a brief introduction to the MGTOW ideology. This is followed by an exploration and a discussion of the chosen methods. Afterward, relevant theoretical frameworks are introduced. Next is a presentation of this thesis' empirical material combined with a discussion and analysis, followed by concluding comments.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Previous research

#### 2.1.1. Feminist anthropology

Even if equality between men and women is taken for granted in modern anthropological institutions, this has not always been the case. Up until the mid-twentieth century, discussions of women in the anthropological literature were often limited to introductory chapters or not seen as “real” scholarship (Lewin 2006:5). Despite major achievements from female anthropologists, women were generally marginalized, dismissed and excluded from prominent aspects of the discipline (McGee and Warms 2012:405). In the 1960’s and 1970’s however, this situation began to change.

Inspired and shaped by various social improvements such as the women’s liberation movement and anti-Vietnam War activism, a feminist anthropology finally took shape (McGee and Warms 2012:405). Through focusing their research on the experiences of women, feminist scholars aimed to challenge both the disciplinary and the societal androcentric worldview. Several different theoretical perspectives were used in order to analyze the seemingly universal inequality between men and women, and Lewin (2006) describes this period as an establishment of an *anthropology of women*, aimed at making women a visible and distinct cultural actor.

The tendency of viewing all women as somewhat similar, with common interests and experiences, shifted as the *anthropology of women* morphed into an *anthropology of gender* by the 1980’s (Lewin 2006). Critical voices regarding the universal claims of a seemingly all-white group of scholars resulted in an intersectional approach, where other features such as race, ethnicity, and religion were incorporated into the analysis of women’s experiences (McGee and Warms 2012:565).

More relevant to this thesis, however, is how the view on gender evolved. Here, feminist researchers began to use gender as a set of meanings and relationships related to, but not equivalent with, biological sex. Instead of seeing sex and gender as interchangeable, or “women” and “men” as natural and given categories, gender started to be understood as a social construct, strictly structured by power relations (Lewin 2006:18; McGee and Warms 2012:565). Therefore, in order to realize new possibilities for women, but also for other



groups facing inequality, the existing male-biased constructions needed to be reconceptualized and reinvented (Delanty 2005:124).

As the research was broadened from a relatively narrow focus on women, to an interpretation of how gender, and other social categories, intersect with notions of power and inequality, the modern feminist anthropology was established (Lewin 2006:20). Although modern feminist anthropology includes a vast array of research areas, gender and power still maintain central concerns of the discipline (Gellner and Stocket 2006). One recent addition to the paradigm is the study of men and masculinities, in which central concerns are the way male dominance is sustained, how different types of masculinities are performed and enacted, and to what degree this affects both men and other groups in society.

Feminist anthropology spurred out of notions of marginalization, exclusion, and dismissal, as women started reacting towards the prevalent androcentric bias. Now, about 50 years later, it seems as if the tables have somewhat turned, as more and more men feel that *they* are victims of a woman-focused society. A description of the way these men have been studied, how this relates to feminist anthropology, and how my study relates to these topics will be the focus in the two next sections.

### 2.1.2. *The Manosphere*

Today, Western society has generally accepted the core ideals of gender equality. As these have improved circumstances for many people, there are those that do not agree with them, and instead see them as threats. Compromised of various websites, blogs, and online forums, *the Manosphere* is an umbrella term for different Internet communities arguing that men are increasingly exploited and disadvantaged in a gynocentric society. These include Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Pick Up Artists (PUAs), Involuntary Celibates (Incels), and this thesis' object of study, Men Going Their Own Way.

Although these communities share strong anti-feminist sentiments, they differ in how they relate to what they believe is an increasingly feminization of Western culture. Whereas MRA focus on changing social legislation which they deem as discrimination towards men, MGTOW generally espouse the abandonment of an increasingly gynocentric society. PUAs on the other hand, use strategies and techniques in order to maximize their sexual endeavors with women, and Incels are united by strong feelings of rejection and rage as they blame their

state of unwanted celibacy on women's liberation (Ribeiro et al. 2020). These differences aside, the Manosphere should be understood as the context in which MGTOW operates.

This strong opposition towards feminism has received increasing scholarly attention during the past few years. Michael Kimmel (2013) understands these expressions stemming from an *aggrieved entitlement*: that one's "birthrights" as a male are being robbed as power in society is more equally distributed than before. Another highly influential concept within the study of the Manosphere is Connell's (1995; 2005) concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, explaining how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women and other groups. More specifically on the manosphere is Lilly's (2016) much-elaborated thesis, in which she analyzes how gender is represented in the online discourse of the manosphere. She points at how all the four previously mentioned subcommunities use traditional gender norms as a way of disparaging women. These findings correspond with other studies of the manosphere, such as those investigating expressions of misogyny within these communities (Jane 2018; Marvin and Caplan 2018; Farrell et al. 2019, Van Valkenburgh 2018, etc.), and those theorizing different constructions of masculinity (Ging 2017, Coulling 2019, Cannito et al. 2021, etc.). Although the main focus of these studies is the Manosphere, MGTOW is often mentioned. What this collection of literature concludes is as important as it is clear: MGTOW's various online platforms carry severely misogynist content, as traditional notions of masculinity reassert male dominance.

### 2.1.3. *Studies on MGTOW*

Despite this recent upheaval in studies concerning the Manosphere, works that have MGTOW as their main research focus are nearly non-existing. Those studies that do put MGTOW in sole attention, however, follow the same trails as the aforementioned. Wright et al. (2020) seek to understand the structure, participation and content of the official MGTOW forum and how this contributes to the propagation of misogyny. They do so by a quantitative analysis of the participation on the forum, a content analysis of its comments, and through visits to other online MGTOW platforms. Wright et al. find that participation on the forum is highly skewed, as 0.23% of all registered accounts create 50.8% of all the posts. Discussions primarily centered on women and MGTOW themselves, portraying the former in openly misogynist ways.

In the same vein is the study by Jones et al. (2019). This study suggests a link between the MGTOW ideology and a harmful masculinity in which women are seen as subordinate and men as dominant. This connection is being made through analyzing the comments made by three of the most active MGTOW users on Twitter; users that are understood as key influencers, holding significant power and influence within the network (ibid.). Furthermore, the authors note an interesting contradiction between the ideology of MGTOW and its members' rhetoric: if MGTOW ideology urges men to stop interacting with women, how come much of their dialogue centers around women? The argument put forward is that misogynist harassments function as the only clear way of demonstrating your MGTOW identity, since the philosophy centers itself around what *not* to do (i.e. not to have relationships with women).

Next in line are two master theses, both examining MGTOW platforms online. Hunte (2019) investigates the conversational themes and the linguistic identity on the MGTOW forum on Reddit, while theorizing its users' construction of masculinity. As previous studies, this thesis shows that topics are mostly centered around women, and that men on this platform enact a masculinity meant to dominate women and alternative masculinities. In doing this, Hunte (2019) offers a detailed overview of the forum on Reddit, whilst relating it to wider notions within the Manosphere. In the second thesis, Aler (2020) analyses and compares the discussions and themes on Twitter and the official MGTOW forum. Exploring how MGTOW targets mainstream discourse in online spaces through its misogynist content, the author argues that MGTOW as a group utilizes Twitter and the official forum in different ways. Twitter offers an arena in which members can interact with opposing publics and recruit new members, and the forum is a place where in-group sentiments are strengthened. Although all these aforementioned studies point to important themes surrounding the discourse, structure, and rhetoric on MGTOW online platforms, there seems to be something missing.

Incorporating a slightly different approach is Lin (2017). In order to understand how MGTOW platforms affect members' identity formation and articulation of views, the author approaches the community in a similar way as I do. Through *following* the phenomena by looking at different platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube, Lin (2017) discusses the misogynist content on these forums, the origins of the community, and the different levels of being a MGTOW.

More importantly, though, is the fact that she decides to actually *interact* with these men as a way of creating empirical data. Being interested in how MGTOW is related to on an

individual level, Lin (2017) reaches out to a number of men on Reddit to ask them how they feel, think, and act in relation to MGTOW. The interesting point is how these responses suggest a more nuanced and diverse picture of the MGTOW-community than the previous studies offered. Take, for example, the quote by the users Meanodeano: “*When we already have to hide our identities in order not to be seen as vicious misogynist neckbeards by wide society, we end up being defined by our more vocal and most shameless members*” (Lin 2017:86). As soon as the online surface of MGTOW is being scratched through an interaction with its members, hidden and interesting aspects are generated, such as a potential connection between the popular image of MGTOW and its more vocal members. However, as an emic perspective is neither within Lin’s, nor *any* of the aforementioned studies’ scope, these aspects remain disregarded.

Virtually all studies of MGTOW have been conducted either through, or in relation with, a feminist framework. This has yielded important insights about MGTOW, such as the dangers in passive online harassments and how a certain understanding of masculinity tends to dominate other understandings. Therefore, studying MGTOW through a feminist anthropological lens could be understood as the most relevant, important, and analytically productive approach. However, after studying my material data, I concluded that this framework is not the best suited one. Analyzing my empirical data with a feminist anthropological approach would not only run the risk of neglecting those experiences of exclusion and resistance that I encountered in the field. It would, potentially, also form the analysis of MGTOW in the same vein as those studies before me. Therefore, in order to generate new knowledge about MGTOW, I am not using a feminist anthropological perspective.

Van Valkenburgh (2019) argues that the academic discourse around the Manosphere assumes that men who participate in these communities are inherently misogynists, deeming them pathetic, pathological, and perverse. Whether this assumption is founded on the theoretical frameworks applied in the given research, preconceived notions about “good” and “bad”, or the lack of any interaction with these men, I leave for others to speculate. What I do know is that my material, based on extended and often intimate interactions with these men, created a completely different understanding. What insights could be generated if asking *different* questions to the empirical data, and having a *different* approach to these men?

As one can tell, none of the studies above is anthropological. The current research focuses on the ideology, rhetoric, and structure of various online MGTOW platforms, but we have very

limited knowledge about MGTOW from the inside. Moreover, we know nothing about how these men found MGTOW, the experience of being MGTOW, or how they express and practice MGTOW values. Through an anthropological study aimed at exploring the emic perspective of being MGTOW, I hope to nuance our understanding of the men who choose to participate in these communities.

Additionally, previous studies present MGTOW as a coherent international community, without incorporating any local specific perspectives. I am interested in Swedish MGTOWs, and how the wider Swedish society affects their experiences of identifying with MGTOW. Unfortunately, due to the limited size of this thesis, I am not able to incorporate a comparative perspective between different national branches. Hopefully, future research could add to this perspective in asking how certain experiences and expressions of MGTOW might be context dependent.

Before discussing how I approached these men, and how I decided to analyze my empirical data, I offer a brief introduction to the ideology of MGTOW.

## *2.2. Brief introduction of MGTOW*

Although the ideology of MGTOW will indirectly be discussed in various ways in the analysis, it is not the central focus of this study. In order to give some background to the following chapters however, I here present three major concept and ideas that are central to the community. As I will show in this thesis, what is communicated online does not necessarily represent the opinions of my interlocutors. Therefore, I have chosen themes that both correspond with previous research on MGTOW platforms, as well as with my informants' ideas. For a more elaborate discussion on the online ideology, see Hunte (2019).

The first central concept within MGTOW is that society is increasingly gynocentric. The successful institutionalization of feminist ideals in wider society has created a situation in which women are privileged and rewarded, and men rendered expendable and inherently dangerous. According to Lin (2017), MGTOW believe that modern women have been corrupted by feminism into an exaggerated state of entitlement. During my interviews, many of my informants kept going back to this subject, referring to this process as “brainwashing”.

Hunte (2019) notes that also men are blamed for being a part of the conspiracy. Emanuel<sup>5</sup>, one of my informants, says that men often choose to follow the behavior that the gynocentric order encourages, leading them to assume the priority of women.

Emanuel states that gynocentric order creates “dishonest romantic intentions” in men and women, introducing the second central concept within MGTOW: the biological nature of gender. Within these communities, masculinity and femininity are seen as the “true essence” of men and women – stable, innate, and primordial (Lilly 2016:71). The idea is that men and women tend to gravitate toward two opposite behaviors. These behaviors are perceived as natural, stemming from biology - rather than from culture. Often during my fieldwork, I heard that there is a “true male/female nature”. As Jones et al. (2019) and Hunte (2019) notice however, the accounts of femininity and masculinity are far from neutral. Within MGTOW, men are often described as competent, logic, and independent, and women are often described as manipulative, hyperemotional, and dependent.

The third core tenet of the philosophy of MGTOW is the focus on individuality. Often, I was told that MGTOW is about going *your own* way, rather than adhering to any rules or prescriptions. When asking one of my informants what MGTOW encourages, the answer was simple: “Only go your own way”. The importance of individuality is also noted in other studies (Jones et al. 2019; Lin 2017; Wright et al. 2020), pointing to the difficulties in defining both the community and its members.

In conclusion, MGTOW views modern Western society as being indoctrinated by feminism. The wide-spread institutionalization of feminism has created a gynocentric order, deeming women inviolable and men disposable. Being surrounded by rules and regulations regarding how to think and act in accordance with feminist ideals – ideals that override our “natural behavior” – MGTOW sees no other alternative than to *go their own way*. What this entails in a practical sense is rather diversified, pointing to the highly individualistic core of MGTOW.

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<sup>5</sup> Out of respect for my informants’ privacy, all of their names are fictitious

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participant observation

Like in any other anthropological research, I intended participant observation as the core method in my study. Since my focus concerns belonging to MGTOW, this method is highly appropriate since it can be used as a tool to study and present the perspective of a distinguished group of social actors (Aull Davies 2008:80). Participant observation can be especially effective when doing research in your own native community, due to minimal language barriers and shared cultural knowledge (ibid.). Furthermore, studying distinct social groups with this method offers the ability to interact with the participants, generating an understanding of feelings of belonging, networking, sense-making, and knowledge (Salman and Assied 2009:90).

However, Spradley (1979:50) notes that certain concepts and expressions might get neglected when applying this method in your own community. As MGTOW platforms are based online, the majority of its followers have a certain jargon when expressing their feelings and experiences. During my fieldwork, my partner, who is quite Internet-savvy, kept editing my messages to potential informants simply because “I didn’t know the appropriate lingo”. On the same note is Aull Davies (2008:111) in stating that shared social status does not guarantee mutual understanding: me being a student at Stockholm University was twice met with despise due to its “Marxism and gender agenda”. As Kozinets (2019:53) clearly highlights, thinking that spatial proximity leads to a sense of community is rather naïve. Having noticed these difficulties in the initial phase of my fieldwork when sending out messages in order to find informants, I had to find a balance between being a student from university, versus being an interested outsider.

Dewalt and Dewalt (2010:13) describe participant observation as a way of collecting data in a naturalistic setting of the people being studied. Studying MGTOW, which is predominantly active online rather than offline, what does “naturalistic setting” mean? Although being useful for my research in a more abstract sense, the application of participant observation turned problematic as there was no physical field. As a way of trying to solve the problem of participating in something that existed online, I started *following* MGTOW, as well as becoming *engaged* with MGTOW.

### 3.2. *Following and engaging in MGTOW*

When researching Russian street demonstrations via social media, Gray (2016) argues that she did not conduct traditional research on her object of study; instead, she *followed* it. Using Twitter as a springboard, she found herself having multiple platforms running simultaneously on multiple devices. Through the snowball effect, she then managed to find relevant sites and connect with interesting personalities. This resonates with the concept of *follow the metaphor* (Marcus 1995), a way of construing the field wherever it takes you.

To generate empirical data, I also made use of the concept of *engagement* (Kozinets 2019), through which one becomes involved in an activity or a field. Accordingly, observing online communication and interactions as they unfold provides a deeper understanding of the content of the community (ibid.:246). This concept allows the researcher to place him/herself in a spectrum of intellectual, social, and emotional involvement – and this is exactly what I did.

As a way of *following*, and *engaging* in MGTOW, I became a member of the five biggest MGTOW-related groups on Facebook and the MGTOW-forum on Reddit. I also registered an account on Twitter and observed several threads in which MGTOW was discussed and became member of three different Swedish forums which had mentioned MGTOW.

Furthermore, I spent an extended amount of time on YouTube-channels, watched documentaries and various explanatory videos concerning the philosophy behind MGTOW. All in all, my field was in front of my computer, as I emerged myself into the world of MGTOW.

However, as MGTOW should not be understood as an autonomous and independent Internet phenomenon, but rather in close connection to the society of which it is a part, my fieldwork expanded. Seeing how nearly all my acquaintances got an upset look or made a ridiculing comment about the topic of my study, I realized that my field was not only restricted to the digital sphere; it also contained my own surroundings. If these were the reactions of merely studying MGTOW, what would the reaction be if identifying with MGTOW? Through using insights generated from the digital fieldwork, together with my own observations and experiences, I gathered empirical data into what it might be like affiliating with MGTOW.



### *3.3. Interviewing & finding informants*

Although the combination of the aforementioned methods was helpful in generating a general overview of MGTOW, my real interest was located in the more personal and individual aspects of identifying with the community. Therefore, as a way of generating more relevant empirical data, I conducted interviews.

Since being anti-feminist in Sweden is rather stigmatized, I realized that gaining trust would be one of the key challenges during the fieldwork. When becoming a member on MGTOW groups on Facebook, I had to answer a few security questions, just to assure the group that I had good intentions. Many times, I had to reassure informants that they would be anonymous in the study. The ethnographic interview, in which the researcher slowly introduces new sets of elements which corresponds to the aims of the study and ideally seen as a friendly conversation (Spradley 1975), was therefore of relevance here. This type of conversation resonates with what Aull Davies (2008:105) refers to as non-structured interviews, vis-à-vis semi-structured interviews, and structured interviews.

In addition to non-structured interviews with my informants, I made use of semi-structured interviews. In these, some topics or elements are formulated in advance which naturally steers the conversation into a desired way (Aull Davies 2008:106). Since I was interested in making sense of my informants' realities on their own terms, rather than through preconceived notions, semi-structured interviews were suiting as they are fairly open-ended and not restricted to any preconceived notions of the researcher (ibid.). The fact that a combination of these two interviews enables a relation beyond the interview itself (ibid.) was also of high value in my study.

I interacted with approximately 70 people online on the previously mentioned Internet platforms. I always introduced myself as a researcher and started the conversation slowly with non-structured questions, just to warm things up. If the person was interested in talking about MGTOW, I asked for a more formal interview. In the end, I got five informants through Facebook and six through Twitter. Additional informants were found through other platforms, such as Reddit and private blogs. In total I had nine full length interviews, two of which were follow-up interviews. Half of these took place at bars, restaurants and cafes, and the rest were conducted through Skype. I also had extended chats with eight different people, which both contained structured questions and a more day-to-day conversation. Furthermore, I used what I had been observing on the aforementioned internet platforms to contextualize what my

informants described in the interviews, which I believe gave my informants a reassurance that I was being seriously interested.

### 3.4. Reflexivity

Before the fieldwork, I was slightly concerned about how the fact that I have a male partner could affect the relation between my informants and me – a worry that fellow university peers, friends, and literature on MGTOW also confirmed. I even wondered if I should remain anonymous. In hindsight, however, this concern might reveal more about the prejudice and stigma members of MGTOW experience rather than of the worldview of the participants. This is a topic that will be elaborated on later in the thesis.

Being a man definitely aided me in the research process. Otherwise, I would not have been approved as a member of any MGTOW-group on Facebook, and I do believe that it facilitated the first interaction between my informants and me. Since a common ground within the community is biological determinism, this shared quality made them lower their guard and possibly see me as a potential comrade.

A difficulty I experienced was the way knowledge is created within the MGTOW-sphere. The general message is being spread through certain channels and blogs, but also through personal stories and experiences from men that are posted on these websites. When hearing almost outrageous stories, I found myself thinking “How do I know you’re not lying?” or “Can you back that statement with statistics?”. I then came to think of the actual purpose of my anthropological field work - was it a pursuit to understand my informants’ worldview, or was it an evaluation of it according to certain facts and figures?

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I found myself agitated and emotionally disturbed by what I saw on various MGTOW channels. Here, I tried to apply Razsa and Kurnik’s (2012) discussions on *becoming*. The almost overtly reflexive attitude to the worldview of their informants lead them into existential insights which temporarily forced themselves to reject their own worldview and go to their informants’. They call this as being epistemic humble about “the other”, rather than understanding him/her through metanarratives or preconceived notions of justice, “good” and “bad”, or oppression.

Out of approximately 70 interactions (messages, comments, threads) and various platforms, I managed to get in contact with 16 men in total. These were all living in Sweden, with the

majority of them being born in Sweden. Since I was interested in the experience of being MGTOW in Sweden, the ethnicity of my informants was irrelevant, as long as they had been living in Sweden for a few years. Furthermore, my informants were quite heterogenous in terms of prior education, age, and interests.

#### 4. Theoretical framework

Here, I provide an overview of theoretical frameworks and concepts used in this study. I begin with an overview of the *masculinity in crisis*-argument, which is followed by Foucault's ideas on *discourse* and Scott's concept about *resistance*. How these relate to each other is elaborated further on in the analysis.

##### 4.1. *Masculinity in crisis*

Being interested in how my informants found MGTOW, I noticed fairly quickly that many of them had experienced some kind of disruption, or inner turmoil, before finding the community. Some of these negative feelings were related to psychological issues, while others were connected to their romantic interactions with women. In order to understand these feelings of disruption, I am seeing them through the lens of *Masculinity in crisis*.

Discussions about a masculinity in crisis are widespread and somewhat fragmented. However, they all center around how wider social and economic changes in Western society have shifted the meaning of masculinity, and what it means to be a man, as traditional values of society and civil life have been challenged during the last decades (Morgan 2006:112). Groups previously excluded from the society all demanded a reevaluation of their position in society, as changes in the labor market, family life, and the positions of women confronted the patriarchal family (Castell 1997). The argument is that these transformations all together have disrupted conventional notions of masculinity, thus prompting a contemporary 'crisis of masculinity'.

More specifically, the main argument is that the origin of these feelings of crisis is due to the conflict and contradictory nature of the existing male roles. Accordingly, men are confronted by opposing demands and expectations in their socialization and in adult life, creating a number of pressures and tensions. Michael Kimmel (2010) argues in the same lines: as young men today find themselves in a society that obstructs their ability of becoming traditional breadwinners, and simultaneously encourages emotional responsiveness and vulnerability, many experience confusion, anxiety and stress.

The relation between these two roles is highlighted in the literature on the male sex role identity, forming the foundation of the *masculinity in crisis* argument (Lemon 1992). Accordingly, in order to acquire a secure identity as a man, prevalent norms and expectations surrounding masculinity need to be fulfilled. However, the problem is that there seems to be

two different male roles: the “traditional” male role, and the “modern” male role (Pleck 1976). The traditional archetype is built on oppressive and outdated notions of men as “self-made” (Kimmel 2002): independent, unemotional, and successful, whereas modern ideals of manliness instead encourage vulnerability, interpersonal skills, and emotional intimacy (Pleck 1976). Although rendered obsolete, different imaginations, stereotypes, and popular images withhold the traditional requirements of manhood, creating a symbolic straitjacket for men. As a result, increasing number of men face difficulties in their everyday life as they try to push beyond traditional concepts of masculinity (Lemon 1995). Not only does the traditional concept of masculinity constrain male behavior – it also seriously damages men as it forces them to live up to an impossible oppressive masculine image of always being strong, silent, unemotional, and athletic (Pleck and Sawyer 1974:173,17).

This theoretical framework highlights the difference between a “traditional” and a “modern male role”, something that I will make use of in understanding some of my informants’ accounts of their feelings of disruption. Interestingly enough, viewing my ethnographic material through this dichotomic lens offered another picture than what this literature proclaims. I will show how my informants’ feelings of crisis were generated out of a fulfillment of the “modern male role”, rather than out of the conflicting and contradictory nature of the “traditional” and the “modern male role”.

#### *4.2. Michel Foucault and discourse*

For many years, the term ‘discourse’ has been widely used within social science as an analytical component. Although applied extensively, Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) state that the concept has become vague and lacks a fixed meaning. However, the underlying meaning of the word is the idea that language is structured by different patterns that form people’s utterances when they engage in different domains of social life. For example, when people engage in a ‘medical discourse’, the division between “healthy” and “sick” clearly structures the engagement. The authors continue in offering a preliminary definition of a discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (ibid.:1). As there evidently are multiple aspects of the world, there exists numerous amounts of discourses. Although this definition of a discourse works as an introduction to the matter, it lacks certain aspects which are important to this chapter. Therefore, I turn to the Foucauldian concept of discourse.

Foucault's interest in discourse is connected to knowledge. For him, discourse is a social system that produces and forms knowledge. Discourse is that process which makes information about a certain domain accessible and attainable. What there is to know about 'health' is readily available in the 'health discourse'. Not only does it present available information, but it also *forms* and *creates* knowledge through a collective acceptance and understanding of the discourse as "true", or as factual. It is in this sense that discourse is *constitutive* of knowledge, as it enables different ways of knowing (Edwards 2008:22). Furthermore, a Foucauldian discourse has productive force, generating meaning and action through influencing how ideas are put into practice. It builds representations and shapes action, making different ways of knowing the world and of acting in it possible (ibid.).

However, the importance of Foucault lies in his connection between discourse and power:

In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse (Foucault 1980:93)

Here, Foucault makes it clear that the function of discourse in society is not to neutrally present a body of information to its receivers. Instead, discourse is strongly linked to the exercise of power, as it serves to ensure the reproduction of the social system through creating a conceptual terrain in which knowledge is formed and produced (Hook 2001:42). As discourse structures 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak', Foucault (1979:49) shows how the production of social positioning and subjectivity within a social order is closely connected to the prevalent power dynamics.

Moreover, discourse has a constraining effect. In order to eliminate and disqualify other meanings and interpretations which could undermine the meaning and power of the predominant discourse, Foucault (1981:53) notes that: "In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures". As Foucault investigates in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), the aim of these different procedures is to normalize and homogenize the bodies and subjectivities of those it dominates. By pre-determining the constitution of knowledge and of action, a discourse creates a reality to which subjects are restricted to. That which does not conform to the articulated "truth", that which is outside of discourse, is rendered deviant and abnormal.

Furthermore, the effect of these procedures is to make it impossible to think outside of them (Hook 2001).

Foucault (1981) discusses the myriad ways through which discourse exercises its discipline and regulatory force on its objects. In order to better understand the emic experience of being MGTOW, I am relating my informants' experiences with two mechanisms by which a discourse invalidates and disqualifies alternative meanings: *the prohibition of speech*, and *the opposition between reason and madness*. It should be noted here that I am not investigating whether there is a discourse or not. Moreover, not only does the Foucauldian framework enable me to highlight notions of social exclusion and internal deviance, but it also introduces an opposition towards dominant norms. This is the focus of the following section.

#### *4.3. James Scott and resistance*

In order to understand my informants' way of exercising the philosophy of MGTOW, I am using James Scott's ideas about resistance. In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1985), he puts forth critique against what usually counts as "real" resistance in social science. He states that the knowledge production surrounding oppositional acts has been centered around large-scale, protests movements, which pose a visible threat to the dominant ideology within a society. Scott (ibid.:xv) argues that most subordinate groups throughout history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open and organized activity due to the circumstances within which they find themselves. In other words, to openly oppose the status quo has been too dangerous, and the resistance has thus remained invisible. Therefore, in order to cover a different kind of resistance; one that is not as dramatic and confrontational as riots and demonstrations, Scott turns to what he calls "the everyday forms of resistance" (Scott 1989:33).

As Scott bases his research on the class struggle between the rich and the poor in a rural Malaysian village, the forms of resistance he has in mind often mirror that specific context. He focuses on how peasant societies respond to the domination of the rich, with a focus on unobservable acts of rebellion and cultural resistance. He finds all sorts of small actions, such as theft, poaching, smuggling, desertion, false compliance, in these rural and factory settings (ibid.:xvi). Although sometimes being context-specific, the focal point in these small acts of

resistance is how they avoid outright defiance by being quiet, disguised, and anonymous. As they are more ordinary, indirect actions of opposition, they often exist under the radar of the dominant group.

Scott (1985) argues that these forms of resistance reflect the conditions and constraints under which they are generated. He shows how an open, collective defiance would seriously threaten the livelihood of the peasant population. In other words, “everyday forms of resistance” is well suited to groups or people in society who run the risk of facing social sanctions if venting their disapproval publicly. This is an important point in Scott’s work, as it connects the type of resistance available to the subordinates to the context in which they find themselves.

Closely linked to the idea of resistance is Scott’s notion of “transcripts” (public and hidden). As a way to describe the open interaction between the rich and the poor, Scott uses the term *public transcript* (Scott 1990:2). The public transcript is a conventional pattern of speech and behavior that the dominated hides behind in order to avoid conflict and social sanctions. Like a performance, the public transcript is shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful: the necessary lines may be spoken, and the necessary gestures may be made (ibid. 4). However, the public performance, or that which Scott calls “onstage” behavior, does not tell the whole story.

As subordinate groups produce a certain public transcript in the presence of the dominant, Scott names the discourse that takes place “offstage” as *hidden transcript* (ibid.:4). It consists of those speeches, gestures, and practices that contradict what appears “onstage”. Created for a different audience than the wide public, the hidden transcript can reveal what subordinates actually think through “off-stage conversations”, far away from the eyes and ears of those dominating (Scott 1989:59).

Now, as anyone clearly notices, there are some major differences between the rural context in Malaysia and the context in which my informants are located. I would like to make it clear when using this theory that I am not equating my informants experience with the peasants’ in Malaysia. I do not see my informants as a *weak* group in society, being *subordinated* to a *dominant* group. Neither do I claim that they lack any productive means of opposing the current status quo, or that they run the same risk as the Malaysian peasants in openly confronting it. However, as I show in *Being MGTOW*, the experiences of openly identifying with MGTOW are highly connected to notions of exclusion, social stigma, and imputation.



Therefore, seeing my informants accounts of how the enactment MGTOW-values is done next to Scott's ideas about resistance do not only generate an understanding of the practice of MGTOW as resistance, but also connects it to Foucault.

Scott clearly describes this opposition as a *peasant* struggle against *class* relations in his book. However, he also states that “everyday forms of resistance are, it should be clear, not a peasant monopoly” (Scott 1989:52), but a strategi deployed to “thwarting the claims of an [...] opponent who dominates the public exercise of power”(ibid.). Who is this opponent in the context of my study? I am not understanding the opponent of MGTOW as any specific person within the Swedish society holding remarkable power, like the peasants in the rural society in Malaysia see the local elite. Instead, what they resist are those dominant and established norms they believe are being imposed on them by a force that is similar to that which Foucault calls a *regime of truth*.

## 5. Finding MGTOW

In this chapter, I explore different paths to MGTOW. Why do people turn to MGTOW? Here, I am taking part of several different men's own stories of how they were introduced to the community, and how they later on came to identify with it. The main finding is that all these stories demonstrate, although not always explicitly, feelings of disruption and tension. These feelings are then related to three different theoretical discussions that all broaden our knowledge of why people decide to adhere to MGTOW.

### *5.1. Innate aversion to romantic relationships*

On the first day of fieldwork, I make myself a big cup of coffee and open the Internet browser on my computer. Getting in contact with men identifying with MGTOW is a bit of a challenge, but after having gained access to several Facebook groups, I start sending out messages to potential informants. The first to answer is Danny, an outspoken middle-aged Irish man who has been in Sweden for the past 16 years. We agree on a Skype-interview, in which I am greeted with a thick Irish accent and a cheerful mood. After having discussed his future plans of becoming a full-time day trader, I ask Danny how he found MGTOW. He says that the idea of bachelorhood has always intrigued him. Accordingly, Danny has always had sort of inner aversion to romantic relationships: already before having heard of MGTOW, he was interested in bachelorhood. At several times during the interview, Danny explains his interest in MGTOW as a sort of natural and innate preference that he was born with. Danny takes pride in his decision about being single and repeats the words “relationships are not for me” without any emotional attachment.

This sort of natural and innate interest in MGTOW is something also Simon enhances in his account of finding MGTOW. Simon is an anonymous man living in the northern parts of Sweden, who I find on Reddit. He tells me, through an extended chat, that he is a natural born MGTOW without any interest in women except sexual urges and with a permanent reluctance to women. Therefore, when he first found out about the community a few years ago through the Internet, it felt like a natural step for him to take.

The above descriptions of Danny and Simon finding MGTOW bear notions of a “natural” and “organic” process, as if it was bound to happen no matter what. However, the more I talk to them, the more I sense feelings of frustration and tension. Over Skype, Danny describes with

a disappointed tone in detail all his previous failed relationships, that nothing ever worked out, and the difficulties they generated for him. Simon says that he has not always gone his own way, and uses past tense when he describes women, as if a specific event or situation made him change his perspective. Using a rather hostile and upset tone in his messages, he states that: “They [women] were all so full of shit; so fake, all of them”.

Danny and Simon’s accounts of finding MGTOW can be related to Lofland and Stark’s (1965) classic sociological theory of how people come to leave a conventional worldview for a more obscure and deviant one. Despite being a relatively old theory, it is still being applied in modern research (see Toseland 2019) and is, in some cases, of relevance in my study. Although the theory is based on a study of how people convert to a small religious movement in the U.S., the authors argue that its terms are comprehensive enough to account for a conversion to deviant perspectives in general. Instead of giving the theory a prominent place in my study, I simply aim at relating parts of my informants’ accounts to it as a way of creating a few insights regarding the process of adhering to a deviant worldview.

The somewhat hidden feelings of frustration in Danny and Simon’s stories of finding MGTOW could be related to the first condition in the conversion theory, in which potential converts experience a strong discrepancy between the current circumstances and an ideal state, generating feelings of tension and frustration (ibid.:864). Danny is clearly disappointed in his previous relationships, leaving him disheartened and frustrated. Simon, on the other hand, seems to have been severely hurt or wronged in the past, leading him to acquire a general negative perception about women.

The second aspect of Danny and Simon’s accounts are related to the second stage in Lofland and Stark’s (1965) conversion model: the type of problem-solving perspective the individual chooses to apply. Through applying MGTOW principles in a way that suited them – pointing to the highly individualistic aspect of MGTOW - they chose to “put the problem out of mind” (ibid.:868). For Danny, MGTOW is simply bachelorhood, thus eliminating potential future tension as he, through MGTOW, rejects romantic involvements with women. Although Simon has a more radical understanding of MGTOW, adhering to its principles in *his own way* is also a way of protecting himself from re-experiencing the previously felt tension.

By taking this path, we see how Danny and Simon turned to MGTOW as a way of protecting themselves from re-experiencing previously felt tensions regarding female interactions.

Another way of finding MGTOW can be seen in the next path, as Leonardo and Khan struggled with a collection of more intense disruptions.

## 5.2. *Mental health issues*

Leonardo, originally from Brazil, is a thirty-five-year-old man whom I find on the Swedish MGTOW site on Facebook. After having introduced myself and the research topic on Messenger, I ask him for a physical meeting. When we meet at a bar in central Stockholm, the air is filled with timidity and insecurity. Our two interviews are intimate and personal as he shares emotional stories from his past, and Leonardo comes across as vulnerable, speaking with a lowered voice without meeting my eyes. When describing his way of finding MGTOW, there is a lot of agony and frustration to his words. I understand that Leonardo has experienced much of that discrepancy between an ideal world and the current world he finds himself in, which characterizes the first condition in Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. Although Leonardo and I never explicitly talk about romantic relationships the two times we meet, he conveys a sense of resignation in terms of women. While looking down, he says he rarely talks to people and that he does not think he is attractive. People usually say that he is shy, and he notices that "some men seem to be really lucky with women".

Comparing himself to other heterosexual men is not the only factor behind Leonardo's tension. He tells me that moving from Brazil to Sweden was a real culture shock: people behaved differently and were not as socially inclusive as in Brazil. In that same period, he also lost his job, which evidently had its economic consequences. His prior emotions of frustration and tension only increased as he unsuccessfully went for advice to his surroundings: "All I heard was that everything was my fault, that everyone was blaming me. They said: why are you always so negative and pessimistic?". Furthermore, in the end of our second interview, Leonardo mentions that his upbringing was problematic, and that he doubts himself a lot. Naturally then, the loss of employment and lack of partner and friends in the new foreign culture, were Leonardo's own fault in his eyes. As feelings of frustration, loneliness and devaluation culminated, Leonardo went into a depression.

The depression created an emotional need for Leonardo to find a new explanatory framework through which his current life situation could be seen. During this period, he spent a lot of time on the Internet trying to find a narrative that did not blame *him*. It was in this period that

he found MGTOW. When I ask him to describe his reactions when first reading about MGTOW, he says with an excited tone:

Usually what you hear is that the fault is ours [men's], and that we should improve ourselves. Then I saw MGTOW. They started saying that women also, they should too. They too have responsibility! They need to improve too!

He says that the MGTOW community provided him with emotional support and a sense of belonging in displaying similar stories from other men. As the quote above shows, MGTOW also offered Leonardo feelings of relief and liberation since it lifted the heavy burden of being entirely and exclusively accountable for all his previous shortcomings. Leonardo says that he spent a significant amount of time researching the community, and interacting with its members, before becoming a devoted MGTOW.

Danny and Simon found a relatively easy way out of their difficulties through finding MGTOW early on. As Leonardo's choice of problem-solving method, namely looking for guidance in his surroundings, was not as successful, he consequently went through the third condition of Lofland and Stark's (1965) theory of conversion: a *seekership* (ibid.). As Leonardo was desperately trying to find a new explanatory narrative online concerning his life situation, he "search[ed] for some satisfactory system of [...] meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent" (ibid.:868).

The depression that Leonardo went through resembles the fourth condition of the conversion theory. Here, all the previous tensions and deprivations accumulate into a situation which the individual perceive as a "turning point" (Lofland and Stark 1965:870) in their lives. As all attempts of solving the tension seem to fail, the individual realizes that new involvements or actions need to be taken.

In order to fully adhere to a deviant perspective, Lofland and Stark (1965) argue that the individual needs to develop an affective bond with the given community. Leonardo did not create any explicit bond with any MGTOW individual, but instead saw the community as a whole providing him with well-needed emotional support. As Leonardo did more and more research on MGTOW, he also fulfilled the theory's last condition, which is based on an intensive interaction between the given community and the individual.

Another informant I found through Facebook was Saif, a 28-year-old man from Australia who moved to Sweden five years ago to take a master's degree in tourism. When we meet at a café in Stockholm, Saif is wearing a Strength-Camp wristband: a community helping people

becoming stronger mental and physical versions of themselves. Seeing the wristband and experiencing a general air of frustration and injustice that characterize Saif's stories, I get a feeling of defeat.

Saif's story of finding MGTOW involves the same characteristics as Leonardo's. Where the latter dealt with numerous deprivations, Saif's tension was centered around prior romantic experiences. When he tells me about his previous sexual relations, he sighs and says he has been heartbroken many times. With shame in his voice, he explains: "I would always look for women, do my best but always be a fool, be a clown... Just to get their attention. This never turned out well".

Like Leonardo, Saif's turning point coincided with mental health issues. Going through another breakup generated a depression for Saif, as he would repeat negative stories about himself in his mind. Experiencing a general lack of empathy in his surroundings, these stories revolved around him being lonely, and that no one would ever love him due to how he approached women. He realized that something needed to be done and went online in order to find answers, where he discovered MGTOW. The most compelling aspect of MGTOW was that instead of looking for women all the time, they would work on themselves.

For Leonardo, MGTOW offered liberation as it shifted focus from himself, onto women: he was not the only one responsible for his current life situation. Saif, on the other hand, found liberation in MGTOW through the opposite, as it shifted focus *from* women, onto himself. Another important aspect was the emotional support and empathy that he found in the online community. Saif describes his first reaction of MGTOW:

I always felt I was the only one doing this stuff to women and making a fool out of myself, and then it turns out with MGTOW 'Oh God, it's not just me – it's a bunch of people'

After these affective bonds had been created, an interest was sparked, and after Saif spent an increasing amount of time researching MGTOW, he decided to adhere to the community and its philosophy.

In this path to MGTOW, mental health issues play an important part. MGTOW as a community offered both Leonardo and Saif well-needed feelings of liberation, empathy, and a sense of belonging. In the next trajectory, the initial feelings of disruption and tension functioning as a gateway to MGTOW did not come from depression or loneliness. Instead, they were generated by the enactment of a specific male behavior.

### *5.3. Enacting the "modern male role"*

Before discussing this path to MGTOW, I offer a short introduction of its main characters: Emanuel, Hugo, and Kenneth. The two former form a curious and intellectual part of my informants, as they constantly refer to scientific theories when discussing their ideas. They speak with charisma and authority, read a lot, and are politically engaged. Emanuel is a busy family father and the co-founder of a Swedish self-help site for men, and Hugo is in his thirties and aims at soon finalizing a philosophical blog. I had one interview with Emanuel on Skype. Hugo turned out to be one of my key informants, as two 2,5-hour long interviews were combined with several extended conversations on Messenger. There is also Kenneth, a middle-aged man whom I talked to on Messenger. Instead of relating his ideas to broader concepts and narratives, Kenneth kept his answers very short and brief.

When I ask Emanuel, Hugo, and Kenneth how they found MGTOW, they all start their stories by recounting how they approached women in romantic relationships. Emanuel tells me that in his twenties, he was a typical "nice guy": always trying to accommodate the needs and expectations of his girlfriend. Whenever he was interested in a girl, he would try to connect emotionally with them before actually making a move. When in a relationship, he would usually follow some general principles he thought would guarantee a successful relationship: try to always agree with, and acknowledge, your girlfriend, and try to open up about your own problems and issues as much as possible.

Kenneth also mentions that he was practicing an attitude in relation to women that he had been taught since childhood. According to it, men should be sensitive and emotional, offering women empathic support, and a shoulder to cry on. As he tried to communicate this, Kenneth would always put the sole attention on the woman he was dating, trying to fulfill all her needs. On the same note is Hugo, recounting a relationship ten years ago in which he "tried to do everything right". In his mind, this incorporated being honest and open about his problems, and to show his girlfriend a lot of affection and sympathy.

Emanuel, Hugo, and Kenneth's own words used to describe their behavior resembles Pleck's (1976) definition of the "modern male role". In this role, the focus is on sensitivity, being attuned to others' feelings, and having compassionate relationships with people in your surroundings. In romantic heterosexual relationships, emotional vulnerability and tenderness is expected. The modern male expresses his feelings completely and dares to be weak in front of both women and men. When in a relationship, he expects that the woman can soothe his

wounds and provide with mental support whenever he is facing difficulties, and he is encouraged to show patience, understanding and gentleness in his communication (Pleck and Sawyer 1974:173-174). Emanuel, Hugo, and Kenneth's previous conduct in relation to romantic relationships can therefore be seen as an enactment of the "modern male role".

The main argument behind the *masculinity in crisis* concept holds that men are experiencing difficulties to live up to new contemporary expectations of what constitutes masculinity. Kimmel (2010) argues that media images and same-sex peer groups often set unrealistic and outdated standards of manhood, creating a "misframed masculinity" that works as a straitjacket for men. The consequence of this is that men find themselves in an identity crisis, as they experience conflicting and contradictory demands made of them (Lemon 1992). Although Emanuel, Hugo, and Kenneth mention that they were aware of a more conventional understanding of male behavior, such as being dominant or suppressing feelings, this was perceived as obsolete and archaic. The identity crisis that this framework proposes seems to have been non-existent for my informants, as the "modern male role" was perceived as self-evident and natural, rather than being in competition with more traditional ideals.

Therefore, what started as the first disruption in Emanuel, Hugo and Kenneth's lives were not difficulties of fulfilling the needs and expectations of the "modern male role". Instead, as the following accounts will demonstrate, it was the actual fulfillment of the "modern male role" that generated feelings of tension and frustration.

### 5.3.1. *Feelings of disruption*

When Emanuel's first long-term girlfriend said that he was being too nice before breaking up with him, he could not really comprehend it. He says that as a young Swedish man, this sentence was almost absurd – "how can a guy be *too* nice to his girlfriend?!". After a few years, he started noticing a pattern in all his failed relationships: he was constantly showing a vulnerable and affectionate side of himself. Accordingly, he was trying his best to live up to what he believed would guarantee a good relationship. Realizing how these prescriptions seem to fail him in making him a "*too* nice partner", Emanuel became confused and frustrated.

Hugo and Kenneth's accounts demonstrate the same pattern. Surprisingly for Hugo, "doing everything right" did not lead to any success in his relationship. In fact, it only deteriorated it,



to the point of him and his girlfriend having to break up. Since Hugo had been intensively in love with this girl, the break-up caused him a broken heart and a depression. During the next couple of years, he also decided to live in celibacy because of this. Although not as dramatic, Kenneth also describes how the fulfillment of modern ideals only caused him a broken heart and bitter frustration:

Women often say they want a sensitive guy who always offers a shoulder to cry on... I did everything they told me to, but they would always go to the guy who did the exact opposite

The aforementioned accounts shed light on what initiated the first feelings of tension, frustration and stress in Emanuel, Hugo and Kenneth. What sparked this process was not contradictory demands made at them, or difficulties in fulfilling contemporary expectations due to unrealistic and outdated notions of manhood, which the MIC-framework suggests. In their eyes, it was the actual enactment of the “modern male role” that caused them misery. After having realized that their prior behavior only led to heartache, they all started researching alternative perceptions of manhood, which led them to start practicing a different approach. What this approach consists of, and how it correlates to the “traditional male role”, will be the focus of the next chapter.

### 5.3.2. *Enacting the “traditional male role”*

Emanuel’s realization surrounding the pattern of his previous failed relationships put him in a disorientated state. To clear his mind, he went on a trip to Italy, during which he spent a lot of time wondering what masculinity actually was. By chance, Emanuel came in contact with an information community that helped heterosexual men becoming more successful in the dating sphere through applying a certain mindset to sexual dynamics. However, as this approach was radically different than his usual, he remained highly skeptical of it, calling it “fake bullshit”. Although doing more and more research about this new approach, Emanuel doubted it a long time and never put it to practice. Then he tells me about this one date.

Throughout the first half of the evening, Emanuel was his usual self towards the woman he was dating, applying the type of behavior he had learnt was appropriate: showing a kind, affectionate and devoted side of himself. However, with time, the woman became increasingly uninterested, causing Emanuel to intensify his kindness, affection, and devotion since this was, in his eyes, how to succeed with women. As the date only deteriorated and the

woman became more interested in her phone than in Emanuel, he suddenly remembered some of the guidelines in the new approach: be less emotional and soft, and more assertive and outspoken. Emanuel decided to change his attitude and tried telling the woman in a forceful tone: “Put away your phone or I’ll leave”. Before discussing what happened next, a comparison will be made between this new behavior, and that of the “traditional male role”.

Within the “traditional male role”, four major themes can be identified. In the first one, there is a tendency to discourage qualities and characteristics that are stereotypically associated with women, such as feelings of tenderness and emotionality (Pleck 1976; Brannon 1976). Emanuel’s shift in attitude towards the woman on the date suggests a harsher stance than before – a stance that also Hugo and Kenneth demonstrate in their stories. The two latter say that they nowadays act according to a more “manly” mindset. Accordingly, this entails being assertive, independent, and rational.

Hugo went through a similar process as Emanuel, as he stumbled upon new information regarding masculine behavior in romantic interactions after having been heartbroken and depressed. Similar to the latter, he was highly skeptical towards this information in the beginning, as it completely opposed his previous approach. Although being doubtful, Hugo practiced the advised techniques in bars and cafes during a long period of time.

The second theme of the “traditional male role” revolves around success, status, and competence (Brannon 1976). Many of the techniques Hugo tried seemed to communicate status. One of these was to link two different groups of people at a bar that did not know each other, through a sort of social engineering. Accordingly, this would demonstrate social competence and achievement, important tenets in the “traditional male role” (Pleck 1976). Kenneth, who also left his old patterns of behavior when he realized they did not generate any success, also states the importance of clothes as a way of communicating status and accomplishment.

Several times during our interviews, Emanuel, Hugo and Kenneth say that they nowadays restrain from showing affectionate feelings towards women, and instead try to remain rational and calm. The “traditional male” suppresses affect and vulnerability, and remains calm and reliable, without any emotional outbursts (Pleck 1976; Brannon 1976). Hugo says that both him and the woman he is dating are better off with him being more independent and neutral about things, and Kenneth says that he aims at controlling his feelings and staying neutral towards women.

Furthermore, characteristics of the fourth theme of the “traditional male role” include adventure and daring, and a willingness to take risks even when reason and fear suggest otherwise (ibid.). Hugo says that many of the methods he was trying put an emphasis on not adhering to feelings of hesitation and doubt, or the fear of being rejected. Accordingly, in order to succeed in the methods, one must reject certain natural impulses that generate insecurity. Kenneth agrees with this and says that breaking old patterns of behavior could be frightening and uncomfortable but is vital if one is to accomplish success in dating. Although Brannon (1976) argues that an important aspect of the fourth theme is an aura of aggression and violence, this was an aspect that I did not manage to find in my material.

The above accounts suggest that the new behavior Emanuel, Hugo and Kenneth enacted can be understood as that of the “traditional male”. In it, neutrality, independency, and courage forms fundamental guidelines behind behavior, as vulnerability, emotionality, and insecurity are rejected. And with it, social status and accomplishment are conveyed through a certain conduct and attitude. Changing their behavior from one that resembled the “modern male role” into one more in line with a “traditional male role” was an important step for Emanuel, Kenneth, and Hugo, in their path to MGTOW. Now, what did this shift in attitude and conduct actually result in? This takes us back to Emanuel’s date.

### *5.3.3. Notions of mastery and illumination*

It was as if the sentence “Put away your phone or I’ll leave” bore some magic quality to it. The woman left her phone in her pocket, became interested in Emanuel again, and they went happily home together. After this successful experience, he tried applying the same approach to new dates, and, to his astonishment, it worked really well. Emanuel says shamefully: “It’s not something I’m proud of, but I tried it a lot of times and it worked tremendously well...”. On the same note is Hugo, who tells me that this new approach, through the techniques he practiced, was incredibly successful, and that they worked almost every single time. Later on, he even became a dating coach for heterosexual men who experienced difficulties in dating. Kenneth also experienced the same progress in dating as soon as he left his old pattern of behavior and started applying the new approach. Nowadays, he perceives himself as an expert in dating and romantic interactions.

Being fascinated by the success of this new approach, Emanuel and Hugo started doing research on why the advice seemed to work so efficiently. They both ended up in a world of evolutionary and social psychology, studying different texts about the biological differences between men and women. In our interviews, they continuously refer to different scientific theories that seem to explain the rate of success through presenting a biological preference for certain behavior. Emanuel and Hugo's accounts correspond with studies of MGTOW (Hunte 2019; Jones et al. 2019) which show that there is a wide interest in evolutionary and social psychology within the community, often presenting the ideology as scientifically rational. As I aim to understand my informants' worldview on their own terms and according to them, rather than judging it as based on either "true" or "false" statements, I refrain from speculating the inaccuracy of these claims, as other researchers do (Wright et al. 2020; Ging 2017; Van Valkenburgh 2018, etc.).

Emanuel and Hugo's accounts can be related to Toseland's (2019) study about the British "Truth Movement". The "Truth Movement" is a loose assemblage of people arguing that the world is being conspired by a hidden and malign elite, and that widely accepted narratives concerning health, society, and science are constructed in order to serve the people in the upper echelons of society. As Toseland (2019) investigates how some of the members came to identify themselves with the movement, he describes one of these as an "intellectual" waking up narrative. In this trajectory, the process starts with personal research, through which a new behavior and a different orientation to the self and others are enacted (ibid.:98). Here, the aim is to re-educate the self, and leave previous understandings behind. As Emanuel and Hugo spent an increasingly amount of time researching explanations behind the success of the new approach, they slowly but steadily abandoned the "modern male role" behavior.

Furthermore, the emotional tone within the "intellectual" waking up narrative is best characterized as one of illumination and enlightenment (Toseland 2019:96). After having realized the failures of practicing the "modern male role", and after having experienced the success of practicing "the traditional male role", strong notions of enlightenment and mastery occurs. Kenneth says that the success led him into realizing "what women *actually* want"; a realization also Emanuel formulates in saying: "When you apply these general principles onto the sexual dynamic between men and women, you realize 'Holy shit – it works! Men and women actually want this!'" As the insights led Emanuel, Kenneth, and Hugo into having more successful dating experiences, a true sense of mastery was generated. Not long after these realizations, they all found MGTOW through researching more in regard to biological

differences between the sexes, and the discrepancies between the “traditional” and the “modern male role”.

Pleck and Sawyer (1974) see the “traditional male role” as working as a symbolic straitjacket for men, forcing them to fulfill an oppressive masculine image of being unemotional, successful, and assertive. Not only are these ideals constraining for men - but they also limit their ability to be human since they hinder men from fully expressing intimate feelings (ibid.). Although the accounts of Emanuel, Kenneth, and Hugo not necessarily lead to any conclusions or generalizations, they do tell a different story.

#### *5.4. Conclusion*

This chapter explored different paths to MGTOW. All of these were initiated by feelings of disruption and tension, feelings created by different reasons and through different actions. Why people turn to MGTOW could therefore be concluded as stemming from experiencing frustration and tension in one way or another. Seeing how we now possess information surrounding the experience of finding MGTOW, what is it like being MGTOW?

## 6. Being MGTOW

In this chapter, I discuss a central part of my research: what is it like being MGTOW? I am demonstrating that being MGTOW is fashioned by an opposition towards dominant and established norms, a perception about a prevalent anti-male sentiment within Swedish society, feelings of social exclusion and misrepresentation, and an intense focus on feminism. This is done through applying a Foucauldian framework that highlights how the *docile body* is constructed, and how a discourse disqualifies alternative meanings. Moreover, through emic accounts, I discuss and nuance a phenomenon that seems to be of fundamental importance to the MGTOW experience, namely the *Red pill rage*.

### 6.1. Resisting docility

The realizations surrounding the difference between practicing the “modern male role” and the “traditional male role” do not only produce notions of mastery and illumination, but also produce strong emotions of deception and of misguidance. When Kenneth says: “what women *really* want”, he points at the discrepancy between the previously applied approach to heterosexual dating and the newly acquainted one, in terms of results. For Kenneth, Hugo, and Emanuel, this was surprising as they were applying the “right approach” which they have been “taught from a young age”. For them, the “modern male role” is the norm.

The notion of the “modern male role” being the norm within society is prevalent among my informants. Emanuel says that in Sweden, gender roles are blurred because of the government’s special understanding of male and female:

Here, men are supposed to be like women, and women are supposed to be like men. Men should focus on the family, be emotional intelligent and caregiving, and women should focus on their career, be assertive and independent

Joakim, another intellectual and politically engaged man I get in contact with through Twitter, argues in the same lines. During our meeting at a restaurant in Stockholm, he argues that Sweden tries to overcome and conquer certain natural aspects of human behavior through policies and legislation, a process that has developed into a widespread critique of traditional masculine traits.

Another man who identifies himself as MGTOW is Jari, whom I find posting political content related to MGTOW on Twitter. In our online interview, he states that this ambition already starts at pre-school, where there is an explicit critique towards traditional understandings of both male and female. He mentions how terms such as “boys” and “girls” are discouraged in these educational spaces, and points at the debate generated after the Minister of Education in 2018 argued that these words promote a division based on sex, which counteract a gender-neutral school<sup>6</sup>. Instead of seeing more neutral terms such as “children” or “pupils” as generating a more inclusive environment, Jari sees propositions like these as an establishment of rules by which everyone needs to abide. Although Jari is provoked by the ways in which these “rules” challenge the biological importance of sex, I sense in our conversation that the real frustration lies in how these propositions are seen as being imposed on people, as they alter, what he argues, the natural course of things.

According to Anton, a young man from Stockholm who I found on Twitter, this way of creating a norm of being critical of traditional understanding of male and female is also highly present within higher education. In a long message, he expresses his concerns about how these ideas are put forth as natural and given within social science, as they are present “in all literature lists”. Anton sends me a link to the Swedish Research Council<sup>7</sup> which states that in order to get funded on most research projects, a critical gender perspective needs to be at least considered and thought upon in the application. He continues and says that through this, people are taught into thinking a certain way. Anton, as Jari, argues that this way of thinking is being imposed on people, as a way to make us conform to certain ideals and behaviors.

Furthermore, the experience of there being a correct and desired way of relating to notions of male and female is not only related to the educational system. Emanuel’s experience is that media constantly communicates what the correct and desired way of behaving is, in portraying the ideal man as being attuned to his feelings and wanting to take care of the household. I notice that this topic creates quite a lot of emotions in my informants, as Emanuel says with frustration: “It’s as if there is *one* way of behaving as a man!”. In addition is Roger, a middle-aged man from southern Sweden whom I have two extended Skype-interviews with. When he is not taking care of the animals on his farm, he either paints for upcoming art exhibitions, or uploads videos on his YouTube-channel, which has over 40.000 followers. In our first interview, Roger gets noticeably irritated when he tells me about two

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dagensjuridik.se/nyheter/stopp-slentrianmassig-konsuppdelning-i-skolan-ny-laroplan-i-sommar/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vr.se/soka-finansiering/krav-och-villkor/beakta-kons--och-genusperspektiv.html>

friends who indirectly lost money due to the current parental leave system. The father, who earned the most, had to take out his 90 days of parental leave – even though they both wanted the mother to stay at home with the children, and the father to be at work. In Roger’s eyes, the father and mother, as the leaders of the family, had absolutely no say in how they dealt with these 90 days: it was not up to them to define the role of the father in the parenthood. Instead, it was the government, through legislation, that defined what constitutes a father. Roger feels a sense of hopelessness in face of what he describes as an all-encompassing push for complete compliance and ends with: “All this mess is about streamlining people into a certain form of desired behavior”.

After hearing many similar stories like these from other informants, I get the impression that all of them feel as if they are trapped in a multifaceted system, in which rules and regulations form standards of behavior of how to act and think, as a man. Emic descriptions such as those above further points to a connection between this standard of behavior and that of the “modern male role”. In other words, there is a pervading experience in my informants of being surrounded by various societal institutions, which all attempt to form them into a behavior which resembles that of the “modern male role”. Not only do they share the notion of being trapped in a system, but they also collectively reject this behavior, aiming at finding their own way of being.

As a way of highlighting how the MGTOW experience is fashioned by an opposition towards dominant and established norms, I see these experiences through a Foucauldian lens.

In *Discipline and Punishment* (1995), Foucault sets out to analyze the history of the modern penal system. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, punishment was ceremonial and a public spectacle, aimed at reestablishing the authority of the King among the people who stood as witnesses to it. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this began to change, as state officials wanted power to operate more efficiently – rather than disciplining its citizens through punitive acts directed at the body, the state began to discipline its members at a distance with a much ‘higher’ aim. Through a ‘political investment of the body’ (Foucault 1995:25), the citizen became an independent agent through which the interests of the state were expressed. To be a good citizen was connected to utility and submission: “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (ibid.:26).

In order for the citizen to become a useful body, they had to be disciplined. Discipline is a form of power exercised on bodies, involving a set of techniques, such as surveillance,



penalty, and examination, that are applied by institutions. One of these institutions is the prison. Foucault (ibid.:236) argues that the prison is the disciplinary institution in its perfection, as it manages to supervise, correct, and control behavior simultaneously. Another disciplinary instrument is the school, wherein individuals are constantly compared and surveilled through examinations. Whenever the desired knowledge or behavior is expressed, the student is rewarded. Whenever the undesirable knowledge or behavior is expressed, the student is punished. The school also forms an effective establishment of coercion, as it produces a standardized knowledge which every individual needs to adjust to, and express (ibid.:184). Rather than acting in isolation, the prison and the school are linked to other institutions, “which all tend [...] to exercise a power of normalization” (ibid.:308), creating an impressive disciplinary system. In conclusion, the aim of this discipline is to produce what Foucault (ibid.:136) calls a “docile body”: a body that enacts the appropriate and desired behavior.

Seeing my informants’ accounts through this framework generates an understanding of the MGTOW experience as one based on a critique of norms. Roger’s frustration regarding being in a system that “streamlines people into a certain behavior”, and Anton’s thoughts on how one specific type of thinking is “being imposed on people” point to the Foucauldian idea of how numerous social institutions tend to exercise a power of normalization, in which the aim is to produce a “docile body” that enacts the desired behavior. As Roger, Anton, and others reject this desired behavior, they reject what is currently the norm. The critique and the rejection of the “modern male role” can therefore be understood as a way of *resisting docility*: a way of resisting conventional and established norms of behaving, acting, and thinking.

Foucault exemplifies the “docile body” with the soldier in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century: “the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed” (ibid.:135). Resisting docility; the decision of *not* agreeing to be ‘constructed’, resembles Foucault’s understanding of resistance. In order for an individual to break free from the disciplinary subjection from the state, they need to withdraw his or her consent of being ‘constructed’ in that specific way (Lorenzini 2016:72). By rejecting the “modern male role”, a decision has been taken to detach themselves from the form of subjectivity that the disciplinary techniques aim to impose on them. To resist docility should therefore be seen as a big part of the MGTOW experience.

However, as the following chapters will show, openly opposing the form of behavior, acting, and thinking that is considered to be the norm is not as easy as it may sound. Through another

disciplinary force, namely discourse, these alternative ways of being and acting are presented as unacceptable and unreasonable. This leads me to the next chapter in which I will relate my informants' perception of a pervasive anti-male sentiment in Swedish society, with Foucault's notion of discourse.

## 6.2. *Anti-male sentiments*

In one way or another during my fieldwork, all of my of interlocutors mention that they perceive widespread anti-male sentiments in the Swedish society. Immediately when we start talking on Twitter, Anton says that the last few years, he has noted an increasing amount of animosity towards men in general. In his eyes, media constantly portrays men as inherently violent, malicious, and power-seeking, and academia presents the majority of men as constituted by a "toxic personality". Jari argues that men are always seen as the root to all evil, and Danny says in an irritated voice: "Society is so anti-male. We get fucking hammered day in day out!". In our Skype-interview, the tone gets agitated when Emanuel says:

Only the last months you can find at least 60 texts in different newspapers that state that Swedish men are inadequate, failed, not enough equalitarian, not enough intelligent, not enough compassionate... Swedish men are constantly criticized in media, movies, academia...! (...) Swedish men get it - 'we're not needed!'. This is what society tells us: you are superfluous, take too much space, and are too loud

The perceived anti-male sentiment often produces frustration and anger in my informants, as Danny and Emanuel's accounts demonstrate. A more personal impact is showed by Roger, who, in our intimate interview on Skype, opens up regarding his way of understanding the way men are talked about:

If you are constantly told that there is something wrong with you and that you need to change, it almost becomes like an oppression: what you are is not good enough. To be good enough, you will have to change. (...) I don't think that's healthy at all... I think it creates seriously bad emotions...

Now, as I showed *Finding MGTOW*, my informants do not view all "versions" of masculinity as being under attack. The perception is that there is one correct and desired way of behaving and acting as a man, which is that of the "modern male role". As I mention in *An introduction to MGTOW*, both MGTOW as a community and my interlocutors lean towards an essentialist view of male and female behavior, which corresponds to that of the "traditional male role". Therefore, the communication of the "modern male role" functions in their eyes *also* as an

anti-male sentiment, in opposing, rejecting, and transforming the ‘true nature’ of men. As a result, the general impression within my informants is that there are widespread anti-male sentiments not only in media and popular culture, but also within different social institutions.

To better understand the emic experience of being MGTOW, I am relating my informants’ perception of a widespread anti-male sentiment with Foucault’s idea about discourse. A discourse in his sense is an assemblage of systematic and coherent expressions, accounts, and concepts within a particular domain (Mills 2004), a description that fits well with Anton and Emanuel’s impression of the media coverage of men. In noting how these sentiments also seem to exist within the educational system, my informants point to the constitutive force of a discourse in *creating* and *structuring* knowledge. To Foucault, knowledge is not just a mere reflection of reality, but instead constructed by discourses (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). The institutional settings are here important since Foucault views them as authorizing any given discourse (Edwards 2008). Several times during my fieldwork, I am told that the perceived anti-male sentiments were initiated within academia, and later on accepted and seen as “true” by the wider public. Now, my aim is not to investigate if there *is* an anti-male sentiment discourse in Swedish society, but rather to relate my informants’ experiences to this discussion in order to better understand them.

What this section demonstrated is that a major tenet within the MGTOW experience is a perception of wide anti-male sentiments. A connection was also made between the perceived anti-male sentiments and the feelings of being trapped in a system where the “modern male role” is presented as the only way of enacting male behavior. These experiences were then related to Foucault’s concept of discourse. Following the decision to relate the perceived anti-male sentiments to the notion of discourse, the next two chapters will view the experience of being MGTOW through two mechanisms by which a discourse invalidates and disqualifies alternative readings and interpretations. The first is the prohibition.

### *6.3. The prohibition*

After having told me what he finds the most intriguing with the philosophy of MGTOW, I ask Leonardo what his favorite MGTOW-channels are on YouTube. He brings his phone up and starts typing in text in the search function of You-Tube. Whilst doing this, he mutters: “Oh, what did that channel change their name to...”. I ask him what he means by this, and he says

that there are plenty of MGTOW-channels online, but since they often get deleted, many of them change the name to something else. Leonardo elaborates and says that as soon as the word MGTOW comes up, the video will be flagged as disturbing, misogynistic, or sexist, no matter the content. Accordingly, MGTOW is on the wrong side of things, as if it is banned from public discourse. Leonardo speculates that this might be because MGTOW often “reveals the true nature” of men and women.

The notion of there being a sort of ban about central topics within MGTOW, is a recurrent theme whenever I talk to my informants regarding their experience of identifying with the community. As Hugo tells me about “the gynocentric reality” of contemporary society, he says that he is frustrated about the fact that this aspect is never up for debate. He continues stating that to talk about these things in public is like paining a target upon your back. In our Skype-interview, Roger tells me in an astonished and irritated voice that there are some topics you just have to avoid in society. One of these is how boys and girls behave differently according to their biological differences: “It is as if our society won’t accept that there are biological differences. Since they *cannot* and *must not* exist, it is forbidden to discuss or highlight”. These experiences, together with Leonardo’s statements of MGTOW being banned from public discourse, can be related to Foucault’s discussion about *the prohibition*.

In order to eliminate and disqualify other meanings and interpretations which could undermine the meaning and power of the predominant discourse, Foucault (1981:53) notes that: “In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures”. To clarify: in order for the perceived anti-male sentiments to have its desired function, other understandings that might pose a threat to its meaning must be disregarded. The first of these procedures is the system of exclusion, of which “the prohibition” is a part. The prohibition is described as such:

We know quite well that we do not have the right to say everything, that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever  
(Foucault 1981:53)

Leonardo and Roger’s statement regarding MGTOW “revealing the true nature” of men and women by presenting biological differences between the sexes should be understood through the widespread belief within the community that there is a “true essence” of men and women<sup>8</sup>. More importantly, concepts like these could be seen as posing a threat to the perceived anti-

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<sup>8</sup> See *Introduction of MGTOW ideology*

male sentiments, as they oppose the idea of male behavior as something constructed or formed. Just as the prevalent norms of male behavior pose a threat to undermine my informants “true male nature”, so do the topics concerning biological explanations behind male behavior to the empirically perceived discourse containing the anti-male sentiments. Therefore, any topic surrounding MGTOW is perceived as *prohibited*.

When Leonardo elaborates on his experiences of being MGTOW, he points to how this prohibition seems to have personally affected him. “I keep my opinions about MGTOW really private. I don’t even browse it at work. These things you must keep to yourself, I always avoid topics related to MGTOW”. As it turns out as nearly all of my informants avoid central topics and arguments related to its philosophy, the constraining effects of discourse are highlighted. The pressure to conform to the prohibition, through silencing some of their interests, seems to form a big part of the experience of being a MGTOW.

Furthermore, the notion of a ban does not only have a constraining effect in regulating that which cannot be said. Leonardo ends the discussion with “You could say that I am living a double life between MGTOW and my normal life, where I behave differently”; a quote that shows how the pressure from the prohibition not only silences and restricts the MGTOW experience, but also how it forms a certain behavior. Through “living a double life”, Leonardo has enacted a behavior that works in accordance with the prohibition. The prohibition can thus be understood as a productive force, forming its objects into a certain way of behavior, which highlights the way discourse “shapes action, making different ways of knowing the world and of acting within it possible” (Edwards 2008:34).

However, discourse is not something that exists in and of itself. Rather, a discourse can be seen as a set of “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972:49). In other words, a discourse is simultaneously constituted by rules, of which the prohibition is a part, those practices they generate, and that which is presented as knowledge. As Mills (2004) notes, discourse is a process, or a social system, which produces something certain effects.

In this section, I discussed my informants’ experience of a ban surrounding certain topics around MGTOW as one of these effects, namely the prohibition. The perceived prohibition impacts the experience of being MGTOW in creating a constraining pressure to conform into silence, and, for some, to live a “double life”. The next chapter will juxtapose my

interlocutors accounts with another effect of discourse: the opposition between reason and madness.

#### *6.4. Opposition between reason and madness*

The secondary rule within the exclusionary system which eliminates and disqualifies other meanings and interpretations that could undermine the power of the predominant discourse is the opposition between reason and madness (Foucault 1981). The point of this rule is to make it impossible to think outside of it. To be outside of it is, “by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension and therefore reason.” (Hook 2001:42). In other words, that which does not conform to the prevalent discourse, which I relate to the perceived anti-male sentiments, is rendered deviant, abnormal, or mad.

Discussing the term *madness* in relation to Foucault demands a short introduction to his thoughts on the matter. In *Madness and Civilization* (1988), Foucault analyses the relationship between madness and society through the concept of social exclusion (Peters and Besley: 2014). Relevant here is how this relationship is constituted by a various set of techniques, such as banishment and confinement, aimed at creating a dichotomic understanding separating reason from unreason, sane from the insane, and us from them. The main function of these “formulas of exclusion” (Foucault 1988:7) was to exclude “abnormal” people that in one way or another posed a threat to the stability of society.

What happens if you break the “prohibition”? You are rendered deviant, mad, and insane. Although many of my informants agree to the notion of living a double life, I asked all of them what happened if they started talking about MGTOW, or topics related to the philosophy, to their friends or out in public. Kenneth says that those few times he has said anything about MGTOW, the reaction has always been a special one. He says that people always get a certain look on their face, as if he was being ridiculous and out of his mind. Hugo, among others, has also noticed the way people treat him whenever he voices opinions, and Anton argues that whenever he has engaged in a discussion surrounding any MGTOW-related topics, he has been deemed bizarre and peculiar.

Furthermore, the way in which the experience of identifying with MGTOW relates to the division between madness and reason can be seen in the rejection of the madman’s speech. When I ask Anton to elaborate on these discussions, he states that it is rarely the actual

content of the discussion that triggers labels such as “insane” or “mad” to be uttered. Here, an interesting relationship occurs between the label of the madman and the grounds on which the label is being constructed on. Foucault (ibid.) notes that “It was through his words that his madness was recognized: they were the place where the division between reason and madness was exercised, but they were never recorded or listened to“. Anton sees the labelling of him being a madman as initiated by his words, but not by the meaning of them. Here, his words are vital as it is through them his madness is recognized. However, since they are not being listened to, they do not have the same currency as others.

The way words of mad men define their madness, yet simultaneously “are considered null and void, having neither truth nor importance” (ibid.:53) can also be seen in how Simon describes his experience of speaking out about his affiliation to MGTOW:

When MGTOWs actually do confirm their status as an MGTOW into the open, most people just tell us: ‘So, you are gay?’, ‘Who hurt you?’ and so on. Nobody is really worthy of even knowing that you are a MGTOW since all you get are shitty replies back, making fun of you, ignoring everything you could had said, because they didn’t listen to a word you said in the first place

During my fieldwork, I managed to get a glimpse of this arbitrary meaning of the madman’s speech through my own eyes, as being both rejected but also functioning as a signpost to their “madness”. Interestingly, it seemed as if everything centered around one word: “feminism”. When explaining that my object of study is critical to feminism, this was either ridiculed as being irrational or absurd, or met with emotions of anger – even if that was all that was said. A professor at my university mocked the idea in front of the class with a derogatory “Oh, the evils of feminism!”, generating laughter and agreeing nods. When I mentioned my research to my physiotherapist, she smiled and, with a condescending voice, said “Oh, so you’re hanging out with Trump supporters?”. Small talks with colleagues and acquaintances often escalated into outbursts like “How can you even talk to them?!”, or “I’m sure they’re all pathetic!”. These observations do not only point to how the madman’s speech is arbitrary. More importantly, it seemed as if the act of being against feminism spurred a strong reaction everywhere in itself, creating a radical all-encompassing understanding of my informants.

In order to clarify my argument, a short repetition might come useful. I related the perceived anti-male sentiments to Foucault’s notion of a discourse. Consequently, my informants’ experience of a ban, as well as that of being labelled mad, were related to the prohibition and the opposition between reason and madness, which, in Foucault’s theory, function as mechanisms through which the discourse is protected and secured. Now, how can feminism

through this theoretical framework be understood? Where does it fit in the experience of being MGTOW? Before exploring that matter, I will demonstrate the centrality of feminism through a few more ethnographic examples.

#### *6.4.1. The centrality of feminism*

As my fieldwork progressed, I noticed that there was a connection between my informants' experiences of being seen as deviant and odd, and feminism. As Simon ends his above quote with "Also, the herd mentality spread the word fast around the groups, making you the target.", he points at the ways the labelling of madmen refers to a social exclusionary practice which aims at drawing a border between "us" and "them" (Raffsnoe et al. 2016:104). After about an hour at the café, Saif opens up and starts telling me his experiences of being the "target" in his university class:

Some of the girls [in class] somehow found out that I was against feminism so they would not invite me... It was so unfair. They were not sharing notes, not communicating... They didn't even want me in the group, they wanted to kick me out. I did my own part, but it still wasn't enough for them. ... If I was supporting feminism, they would not have done that... And it hurt me a lot. Just because I have my own little... you know... ideals of not supporting feminism like you do, you just exclude me from the group and kick me out

The division between the sane and the mad not only has the function of rejecting the speech of the madman, or socially excluding him. As Raffsnoe et al. (ibid.:113) state, the social confinement of "the other" also aims at correcting his behavior through an internalization of his own deficiency and the insufficient nature of his existence. This, accordingly, creates a self-censuring and self-controlling behavior (ibid.:114). Saif states that he actually started wondering if there was anything wrong with him during this period, as he had such a hard time at university. As he rhetorically asks the question "I wonder how things would have turned out if I was a feminist?", he carefully remarks how the exclusionary practice of madmen could "install a self-moderating consciousness of guilt, which could lead them back on track" (ibid.). Here, Saif makes a connection between being a supporter of feminism as a way to undo the label of "the other": as a way to lead him back on track. In his eyes, to be sane is to be a feminist. To be insane is not to be a feminist.



#### 6.4.2. *Feminism as a truth regime*

A connection between feminism and the first mechanism through which discourse eliminates potential threats – the prohibition - is being explicitly made several times by my informants. Leonardo, Hugo, and Roger connect the ban of MGTOW on YouTube, the idea about the gynocentric society, and the biological differences between the sexes as challenging to feminist currents in society. For example, Roger’s comments about the biological differences between boys and girls were made after having told me that toy stores are being accused of being “evil” when putting traditional boy toys in a separated section, away from traditional girl toys. Accordingly, the idea that behavior is biologically inherent, rather than socially constructed, would seriously undermine the feminist project of creating different gender norms through teaching girls to play with boy toys and vice versa. Thus, in their eyes, the prohibition of this topic does not only function to secure the anti-male sentiments, which I relate to the notion of discourse, but also as a way to “protect” feminism from criticism.

A connection between feminism and the second mechanism through which discourse eliminates potential threats - the opposition between reason and madness - is also being made by my interlocutors. I show my informants The Guardian’s<sup>9</sup> illustration of the typical MGTOW: an angry and lonely man, sitting in front of his computer in the dark. Leonardo says that the media always depict MGTOW in a sensational and very negative way as a way to rule out all of its content as incomprehensible and absurd. Joakim extends this argument further by stating that the angry picture of MGTOW corresponds to the way society, through media, ultimately aims at conserving the feminist ideology, rather than to portray the community “as it is”. When Hugo speculates about the picture, he says:

I see this as a misrepresentation. It goes outside the feminist narrative and then people react with anger and hostility, which in turn, make them into saying that we are the ones who are angry and hostile. It becomes like a defense mechanism for society: we are the ones who are sick!

Also here is the perception that the opposition between reason and madness functions not only to secure the anti-male sentiments, which I relate to the notion of discourse, but to “protect” feminism. To Foucault, the logic produced by a discourse relates to a much broader structure of knowledge, something he calls a *regime of truth* (Foucault 1977:13). A regime of truth is never constant, but always temporal, generating its legitimacy through certain discourses

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/aug/26/men-going-their-own-way-the-toxic-male-separatist-movement-that-is-now-mainstream>

found in scientific and social institutions, such as universities, media, and schools (Lorenzini 2015:2). Earlier in this text, I asked where feminism can be localized in Foucault's framework, and in the MGTOW experience. Seeing my informants' experiences and accounts through this theoretical angle, feminism can be understood as that broader structure of knowledge which the anti-male sentiments correspond to. As a result of this, the experience of being MGTOW is highly connected to feminism, as feminism is perceived as that force which has a similar power in society to the Foucauldian *truth regime*.

In the last section, I related my informants' experiences of being labelled "angry" to Foucault's discussion on the production of discourse. The centrality of feminism was highlighted, and I also showed, on the basis of my informants' experiences and accounts, how feminism can, through this theoretical context, be understood as a *regime of truth*. In the next part, *Red pill rage*, I discuss a phenomenon that seems to be fundamental to the MGTOW experience, and furthermore show another possible understanding behind the emic experience of being labelled mad or angry.

### 6.5. *Red pill rage*

During my two months fieldwork, I get the impression that many MGTOWs are in fact angry and enraged. The majority of the post in the different Facebook groups communicate betrayal, rage, and disappointment, as men from all around the world share personal stories. On Twitter, the tone is often agitated and upset whenever comments from MGTOWs are posted, and on YouTube, the mood in the uploaded videos bear notions of resentment and bitterness. Then one day I stumble upon the concept of *Red pill rage*.

The term "red pill" relates to a scene in the movie *Matrix*, where the main character must choose between a blue pill or a red pill. Taking the blue pill means continuing living in the delusion of the mainstream narrative, blissfully ignoring the hidden secrets of the world. Taking the red pill means being exposed to the awful realities of life, ultimately revealing a previously concealed truth. The previously concealed truth in MGTOW's case is the belief that society has become gynocentric because of the successful institutionalization of feminism. Thus, being MGTOW is closely connected to digesting the red pill.

Digesting the red pill is understood as something that *exposes* you to the truth, rather than *revealing* it. In discussing the process of adhering to a philosophy based on alternative

knowledge, Toseland (2019:96) notes that the dominant understandings of the self and the world must be challenged in order to *re-educate the self*. Moreover, Van Valkenburgh (2018) shows how this re-education is filled with notions of deception and of misguidance as the act of taking the red pill shows how “everything you were taught, everything you were led to believe is a lie” (ibid.:87).

Therefore, taking the red pill generates intense feelings of rage and resentment. Emanuel states that the anger most men feel after having taken the red pill depends on the realizations of having wasted their lives on trying to live up to false ideas (i.e. enacting the “modern male role”). Hugo clarifies and says that the *Red pill rage* is a stage in which men feel betrayed, misguided, and fooled by the official narrative concerning men and women: they have been trying to do the “right” thing without knowing how things really work. Furthermore, The *Red pill rage* seems to be a very common phase, being mentioned every now and then on the various MGTOW-platforms on social media.

Leonardo is the first person I talk to about this rage. After the initial feelings of liberation, he says that he reacted with anger and resentment when he realized he had been living a lie. When I ask him about the process of digesting the philosophy of MGTOW at a pub, a feeling of heaviness enters the conversation as Leonardo takes a deep breath before answering:

When you find out about these things, there is rage and anger. You find out that it is not about you, that everything is not your fault. You really feel like society is screwed up and that the world owes you something. (...) I think it is natural to be angry when having lived a lie

Moreover, the rage and hate within the MGTOW community has also been noted outside it. In analyzing the content of comments on MGTOW platforms online, Ribeiro et al. (2020) conclude that MGTOW forums are one of the most hateful forums within the manosphere. On the same note is Lin (2017:93) who views MGTOW spaces online as filled with anger and aggression. International media has also picked up on this notion, depicting MGTOW as an enraged man<sup>10</sup>.

However, the *Red pill rage* seems to be slightly overestimated when I mention it to other informants. Danny, Simon, and Joakim describe their reactions when starting to digest the philosophy of MGTOW as rather emotionless and distant, as the process centered on an acknowledgement of their previous experiences, rather than of an exposure of a hidden truth.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/aug/26/men-going-their-own-way-the-toxic-male-separatist-movement-that-is-now-mainstream>

Others, like Kenneth and Joakim, describe the initial process of research as something exciting and fascinating. When I ask about the first phase of reading about MGTOW, neither one of them mention any rage or bitterness in their accounts. Although the *Red pill rage* is a common phenomenon that all of my informants have heard about, it seems as it is rare to actually go through one.

### 6.5.1. *Misogynist online content*

In the content online, I notice that there is a lot of focus on what women do. The MGTOW platforms I am engaging with put a lot of emphasis on describing women in a remarkably pejorative manner. Words such as manipulative, selfish, and entitled are often used to describe women who are understood as adhering to feminist ideals. The tendency of highlighting what they perceive is negative female behavior is present on the Facebook-groups I am member on, and on the Reddit forum. If glancing at MGTOW through these platforms, one slowly but steadily start realizing why the word “misogynist” is a common word to describe the content of the philosophy.

The misogynist side of MGTOWs content online has been rightfully noted by a range of scholars. Lin (2017) argues that MGTOW consistently display cynicism and resentment towards women across its different platforms, a view Farrell et al. (2019) agree with in showing that the MGTOW-forum on Reddit displays severe notions of hostility and aggression towards women. Through a quantitative analysis of the content on the official MGTOW forum, Wright et al. (2020) found that the most commonly discussed topic was women. The majority of these comments, 61%, portrayed women in misogynist ways (ibid.). In the same vein is Jones et al (2019), showing that posts on Twitter from MGTOW users often include harassments aimed towards women. Thus, it seems as if identifying with MGTOW is clearly related to bearing misogynist views.

However, when I confront Hugo about the misogynist content, he hints at another explanation behind the overload of female focus online. In his opinion, there is an initial phase of frustration when finding MGTOW, which triggers you to mentally repeat and experience hurtful patterns of behavior and observations. This initial phase that Hugo is mentioning could be translated into the *Red pill rage*, as Leonardo tells me that during his period of anger and

resentment, he used to visit different MGTOW platforms on an everyday basis as a way to channel his rage towards society and women.

### 6.5.2. *Vocal minority*

When I ask Leonardo about the common idea of MGTOW as being angry and misogynist, he claims in an irritable fashion that this picture applies to all the keyboard activists who endlessly argue for why their opinions are the correct ones. After having said this, he notes with a bit of shame in his voice “Maybe I had this phase too, during my red pill rage...”. Here, a connection between the label of MGTOW as madman, the misogynist content of MGTOW platforms online, and the *Red pill rage* is made. Thus Leonardo, engaged with and created online content when he was feeling the absolute worst during his temporary *Red pill rage*.

Furthermore, the practice of consuming, and creating, online content, does not seem to be that common when I ask other informants: only one seems to post on a regular basis on MGTOW platforms. The idea about a vocal minority producing online content is interestingly enough being supported by Wrights et al. (2020). They note that although the MGTOW forum seems to be very popular, judging by the number of posts, the participation in it is highly skewed: 0.23% of all the registered accounts produced more than half of the content.

Although produced by a vocal minority, the misogynist aspect of the online content is something that should be condemned. Jones et al. (2020) note that the misogyny produced by the MGTOW forum contributes to a normalization of these beliefs, reinforcing harmful gendered views within society. By relating the discussion to Arendt’s (1963) phrase ‘banality of evil’, they highlight how everyday acts of gendered violence contribute to a misogynistic culture in which women are dehumanized and severely insulted. Several times during my fieldwork, I had to shut down whatever platform I was using, as the words “whores”, “sluts”, or “skanks” made me feel very uncomfortable.

As time passed, I realized that not only is the online content created out of a rare and temporary phase, it is also frowned upon. Leonardo says he grew tired of consuming the hateful content within the Reddit and Facebook groups because of the childish and misogynist tone, and that he no longer visits them. Saif says that he does not appreciate the hostility towards women, and Roger gets notably irritated when I bring up the subject: “There are

many assholes online. The misogynist part of MGTOW is absolutely pathetic – it doesn't represent anything of my own views.”.

Therefore, the misogynist sentiments on MGTOW platforms online does not necessarily relate to the experience of being a MGTOW. What about the practice of creating online content? Danny has strong emotions about this. “They just upload videos ranting about women all day. Why?! A MGTOW shouldn't be sitting on the forum all day, that's not going your own way. That's sitting on Reddit”. Hugo, among others, gets a tiresome facial expression when this topic comes up and says that commenting on women online as a MGTOW is a phase that should pass, as it off-centers the attention. Thus, it seems as there is a heavy internal critique towards not only the misogynist aspects of online content, but also the act of creating online content.

The internal critique within MGTOW can be understood through the process Toseland (2019:126) describes as a second awakening. In his study, he shows that “waking up” narratives within the Truth Movement often involve a sort of double awakening, through which a separation is made between the first and the second awakening.

*There's two types of awakening. There's the first awakening these people will have, where they realize the world of politics, finance, and government, and media, is all bollocks. It's full of propaganda. That's the first one. The second one is when they realize the truth movement is full of shit as well. And then they realize that the only solution is to take the stuff from it that works from them, and live a good life, with that knowledge (Sheridan in Toseland 2019:127)*

Here, the second awakening regards the realization of MGTOW *also* being “full of shit”, as the misogynist content created by “keyboard activists” on forums clearly upsets my informants. Through the former mentioned statements by Roger, Danny, and Hugo, being MGTOW is related to having experienced the second awakening, leaving the online content behind.

It is therefore highly unfortunate that Jones et al. (2020) equate the content produced by the vocal minority, which could be seen as those not having experienced the *second awakening*, with the core ideology and beliefs of MGTOW. The conclusion is that MGTOW as a group is dangerous as these ‘super posters’ normalize subtle online harassment towards women (ibid. 15). Since these active users “help to set the tone and topic of the debates”, they hold “significant power and influence within the network” (ibid.:6). My findings surrounding the internal critique of both the misogynist content, and the process of producing it, can be understood as showing the opposite: the vocal minority does *not* have significant power and

influence within MGTOW. Instead, the practices of these ‘super posters’ are rather looked down upon, as they are considered still being within a certain phase of *Red pill rage*, focusing on female behavior.

## 6.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed several different experiences of being MGTOW. I argue that one experience can be understood as *resisting docility*: a way of resisting dominant and established norms. Furthermore, the experiences of perceived anti-male sentiments were related to Foucault’s discussions on discourse. As a result, the experiences of my informants were related to the two mechanisms by which a discourse invalidates and disqualifies alternative meanings: the prohibition, and the opposition between reason and madness. On the basis of my informants’ accounts and experiences, and through this framework, I argue that feminism can be seen as a *truth regime*. Furthermore, I explored and nuanced both the emic understanding of the *Red pill rage*, and the etic understanding of MGTOW as a misogynist man in front of his computer. Now, how do my informants resist the perceived *truth regime* they find themselves in? That is the topic for the next chapter.

## 7. Practicing MGTOW

In this chapter, I explore how MGTOW is expressed and practiced in everyday life. Here, I build on both previous studies of MGTOW, and those findings I present in *Being MGTOW*. I show how the expression is formed by a common rule of never publicly revealing your affiliation with the community and offer several interpretations of this rule. Instead of understanding the internet expression as a reflection of a “true” MGTOW practice, I am guided by emic accounts of how the value is placed in the self, rather than in their surroundings. These accounts are discussed and analyzed through Scott’s notion of *resistance*, but also related to other research. Through this, I am nuancing the picture of a MGTOW, as well as highlighting my argument that the practice of MGTOW should be seen as an act of resistance.

### 7.1. Expressions of MGTOW

#### 7.1.1. The golden rule of MGTOW

Halfway into our chat session on Reddit, I ask Simon what types of actions and practices that define a MGTOW. The reply is quick and short: “Well first of all, the golden rule for every MGTOW is ‘Never speak about MGTOW IRL’. Ergo, most MGTOW keep it a secret from everyone else, and behave just like anyone”. He tells me that whenever there is a situation in which feminism is brought up, he nods in agreement as a way to protect himself from potential backlashes. On the same note is Danny, who says that a general advice within the community is never to reveal the MGTOW-part of you, as “no sane man would do this”. Here, I am also reminded of Leonardo’s description of keeping these ideas in private, ultimately leading him to living a “double life” between MGTOW and his normal life. The aversion of unveiling their affinity with the community in public proves to be a common theme among my informants in how they express MGTOW.

“The golden rule” within MGTOW should be understood in relation to what has been shown in *Being MGTOW*. As a way to avoid those exclusionary practices being discussed in the previous chapter, the rule works as an effective strategy in creating an alternative version of my informants. The focal point in the strategic practice of it is how it produces a behavior that conceals their MGTOW-identity, and instead offers a type of performance which Scott (1985;



1990) conceptualizes as *the public transcript*. Accordingly, as a way to avoid conflicts and social sanctions in the presence of authority, the subaltern<sup>11</sup> hides behind a typical conduct that conforms to prevailing norms of behavior. When Simon nods in agreement as a way to protect himself, he enacts “a performance of deference and consent” (Scott 1990:3), a performance that is “more or less credible [...], speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him” (ibid.:4). Therefore, “the golden rule” of how MGTOW is expressed can be related to creating a public transcript.

Simi and Futrell’s (2009) study of how members of one of the most radical, deviant, and stigmatized movements – the U.S. white power movement – manage the interactional tension they face in everyday settings offers a different understanding. As embracing an Aryan identity contrast sharply with contemporary integrationist attitudes and multicultural ethics, the members of the movement constantly run the risk of facing public scorn and indignation. In order to reduce the chance for unwanted disputes, they often cover their identity to “get along” with others (ibid.:90), like those within MGTOW. However, instead of seeing this concealment as part of the *public transcript*, in which the practitioners abide to conventional expectations and desires, Simi and Futrell (2009:91) understand it as a type of veiled, identity-based everyday resistance. As their “calculated conformity” (Scott 1985) to mainstream beliefs centers on the power to resist other’s labels of who they are and should be, and functions as a way to secure a continued, risk-free membership without conflicts, the concealment of their activist identity is instead seen as a form of resistance. Through this idea, “the golden rule” enables Simon, Leonardo, and my other informants to sustain themselves as MGTOW safely.

To complicate things even more, I offer another lens through which the concealment of the MGTOW identity can be understood. When I ask Danny if he would like to tell his friends about MGTOW, he replies that there is no need for him to do that, or to “write MGTOW on a toilet door”. This is because everyone makes up their own mind and do their own thing. In the same vein is Kenneth who explains that after all he does not care if another man is MGTOW or not, and that finding MGTOW should come out of an individual’s *own* interest and path, instead of those of others. The importance and preachment of individuality within MGTOW has also been noted by Wright et al. (2019) and Lin (2017), as autonomy, independence, self-government, and self-rule are core principles among their informants. When Hugo says “[...]”

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<sup>11</sup> I am not seeing MGTOW as a subaltern per se. See discussion under *Theoretical frameworks*

since MGTOW is about *me* and not anyone else, why would I want to share my identity with the whole world?”, he connects the focus of individuality to a non-interest in revealing that he himself is a MGTOW.

Whether the concealment of identifying with MGTOW is part of a public transcript, an act of everyday resistance, or only the result of the importance of individuality, it either way forms a big part of how MGTOW is expressed “onstage”. Moreover, according to Scott, in order to recover more than just the public performance, it is necessary to “move backstage, where the mask can be lifted” (Scott 1985:287). Therefore, in order to get the full expression of MGTOW, we must look elsewhere.

### 7.1.2. *Internet platforms as hidden transcripts?*

Being produced for a different audience and under different circumstances of constraint, Scott (1985, 1989, 1990) names the discourse that takes place “offstage” as *hidden transcript*. Here, subordinates can talk among themselves without the restraining presence of the dominant, something Scott (1989:59) exemplifies with a neighborhood quartier in which only members of the subaltern live. Here, in the backstage of village life, gossip, character assassination, and rude nicknames all form part of the hidden transcript (Scott 1985: xvii).

What Scott describes as “the backstage of village life” could be seen as the various Internet platforms on which MGTOW is based. Instead of publicly expressing their animosity towards the current social state of affairs, MGTOWs articulate their dissent on various online platforms. Here, an anonymous critique behind the back of the dominant can safely and openly be expressed, often resulting in disrespectful insults. To name the misogynist character of the hidden transcript as creating “rude nicknames” is, as I have mentioned previously in this study, an understatement.

Moreover, Scott (1989:59) argues that instead of only looking at the “on-stage” behavior, these “off-stage conversations” provide a fuller picture of the subaltern’s defiance, since the hidden transcript offer insights into what the subordinate *actually* thinks. However, to see the online content on these platforms as a hidden transcript, through which members finally find the comfort to express their inner opinions, creates a skewed understanding of members of MGTOW. One example of this is Jones et al.’s (2019) argument that there is only one clear way for members to demonstrate their MGTOW-identity: by producing misogynist

harassments. As I showed in *Misogynist online content* however, the production of online harassments is not only widely condemned within MGTOW, but also a practice that only a vocal minority adheres to. Furthermore, according to the study, MGTOW members use homophobic harassments as a way to enforce heterosexuality as the “only acceptable form of masculine sexuality” (ibid.:14). Before meeting with my informants, I thought I had to hide the fact that I have a male partner. Now, after having interacted with them, I realize that that fear was far from realistic.

The tendency of equating the online content with the inner values of a MGTOW is unfortunately a common academic practice, creating a picture of men within these spaces as inherently misogynist and pathetic (Van Valkenburg 2019). Here, one of Scott’s (1985, 1990) main arguments comes to mind. As the public transcript typically provides convincing evidence for the reproduction of dominant values, a misleading picture of the subordinate group will prevail, often to the benefit of the current ruling class. These discussions fit neatly in the Foucauldian notion of how a *truth regime*, through discourse, aim at eliminating alternative meanings which could undermine the power and legitimacy of the current structure of knowledge, deeming some members of society as mad.

So, how does one tackle these issues of authenticity in relation to the knowledge production of “the subaltern”, or of “the other”? Scott (1985, 1990) argues that we need to get a privileged peek backstage in order to move beyond the public transcript. As I have shown however, a peek on what could be understood as the backstage, namely the Internet platforms, is not enough either as it generates a misleading picture of MGTOW. Being a true anthropologist, Scott (1985:284) urges the researcher to actually *interact* with the people studied between four eyes, something I see as a *real* privilege in studying alternative worldviews. Therefore, next in line is an extended ethnographic part which is founded upon my informants’ own words about how they practice the MGTOW-philosophy.

## 7.2. *Practicing MGTOW in everyday situations*

### 7.2.1. *Placing the value in oneself*

For Leonardo and Saif, who both found MGTOW in a period of depression and loneliness, MGTOW is utilized and understood through notions of self-empowerment and guidance. Leonardo says that through MGTOW, he went away from the fatalistic loop of thinking “no

woman will ever love me”, into realizing that self-improvement is more important than other people’s opinion about him. Nowadays, his personal ambition is finding happiness and satisfaction independently of external factors, such as women. On a similar note is Saif, who, while lowering his voice in our intimate meeting at a café, says that MGTOW provides him with a mental shield whenever he feels he is the only one in the world. He appreciates the support given within the community when someone goes through a hard time, and that the core philosophy has led him to work on himself. When I ask him how he utilizes insights that MGTOW has offered him, he replies:

Well, now I see myself in a different light. Whenever I am down, I use a bit of that shield, or little bit of that armor I have built up. I now value myself as a person, and MGTOW certainly deserve some credit of that

Saif and Leonardo’s accounts are connected to valuing oneself. Nearly all of my informants state that they now, through MGTOW, place their value in themselves, or that they “play by their own rules”. For Joakim and Daniel, a man identifying himself as MGTOW who I talk to on Twitter, this translates into not abiding by any terms and conditions but their own, and for Hugo, the placement of value in himself means following his own principles and convictions with integrity and a strong belief. In a similar vein are Danny and Anton, who try to put themselves first and always aim at looking out for their own well-being.

For many of my informants, practicing MGTOW functions as a way to neutralize many of the negative feelings generated by the perceived anti-male sentiments, which I demonstrated in the previous chapter was a big part of the MGTOW experience. During our extended conversation on Messenger, Kenneth says that through MGTOW, he managed to find that confidence and comfort in being a man that somehow got lost during the past years. This way of exercising MGTOW values also corresponds to the way Roger and Danny in a way restores a broken confidence of being a man. They tell me that whenever they read overtly negative accounts of masculinity in their everyday life, Roger and Danny think of those positive aspects of masculinity that MGTOW often highlights. Roger says:

In situations where masculinity is devaluated and frowned upon – which happens quite often – I definitely have MGTOW in the back of my mind: the fact that masculinity *is* something positive, and that it actually does contribute to this civilization!

On the same note is Danny:

Whenever I hear or read something like ‘Oh, all men are pigs, all men need to change, all men are aggressive, all men are disgusting, I usually think of MGTOW – we, men, are actually fucking great!

### 7.2.2. *The practice of MGTOW as resistance*

Now, why should this be seen as resistance? As has been noted elsewhere, gynocentrism is one of the most important tenets within the MGTOW ideology. In their eyes, there is a systematic gynocentric bias against men in modern society, in which feminist ideals encourage the value on women, rather than on men. As the poor peasants in Malaysia gather around arguments about the damaging social and economic consequences of capitalism (Scott 1985), my informants gather around arguments about the negative consequences of gynocentrism which they perceive as prevailing in today's Swedish society. When my informants then place the value in themselves, they refuse to accept, and therefore resist, that dominant systematic bias within which they find themselves in. To unite behind “a particular version of the facts, behind a particular set of claims, behind a particular worldview” (ibid.:236) in order to reject the dominant ideology is an opposition Scott names *symbolic resistance*.

The way Roger and Danny practice MGTOW mentally whenever men or masculinity are being described with pejorative labels can also be connected to how the poor in Scott's ethnography reject the categories the elite attempts to impose upon them. Scott (1985) shows how the poor villagers indirectly reject and oppose labels such as lazy, unreliable, and dishonest through creating a different discourse when these descriptions come up. In this way, the villagers decisively reject the elite's attempt to relegate them to a permanently inferior status (ibid.). Roger and Danny's accounts of how they immediately enact a different understanding of men and masculinity whenever they come across degrading descriptions do bear resemblance. Through a mental exercise of MGTOW-values, which works as a way to resist pejorative labels of themselves, they “refus[e] to accept the definition of the situation as seen from above and the refusal to condone their own social [...] marginalization” (ibid.:240). This, according to Scott, is a key part of “everyday resistance”.

In conclusion, practicing the MGTOW philosophy mentally in everyday situations is done in different ways. For some, it restores a broken self-image due to previous hardships in life, providing with hope and assurance. For the majority though, it functions as a mental shield towards the perceived anti-male sentiments in society. Binding them together is the practice of putting an emphasis on yourself as a man, which in their eyes stand in sharp contrast to the feminist society in which the value is placed on women. It is here that the practice of MGTOW should be understood as a resistance towards what they experience as the dominant

broader structure of knowledge, that which Foucault calls *regime of truth*. Through placing the value in themselves, rather than in women, an everyday resistance to established and mainstream norms, have been enacted. Furthermore, through placing the value in themselves, they *go their own way*, in their own way. Now, what do this entail in a more practical sense?

### 7.2.3. *Four levels of MGTOW?*

According to many online platforms, there are four levels of practicing the MGTOW-philosophy. The first level includes men who have started realizing the gynocentric aspect of governmental policies and jurisdiction, but who argue that the benefits of long-term relationships with women are bigger than the disadvantages. The second level consists of men who are interested in short-term interactions with women, but abstains from marriage, long-term relationships, and cohabitation. In the third level, men do not believe in dating at all, and limits the contact with women as much as possible. The final level of being a MGTOW is to completely step out of society. As the state, with all its feminist social institutions, is seen as gynocentric, the only place for a true MGTOW is in solitude. As a result, a true MGTOW hunts and provides for himself, far away from any civilization. These levels or steps were often mentioned throughout my online fieldwork, especially the last one, often being understood as the epitome of a MGTOW. Academic research has also noted a prevalent preference regarding how to enact a “true” MGTOW identity (Lin 2017; Hunte 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2020, etc.).

However, my informants’ reaction to these different levels of being a MGTOW tell a different story. In our Skype-conversation, Danny scoffs at me when I mention these steps you should take in order to become a true MGTOW, because they take away the individual aspect. “If you put it down into steps, some people will say ‘Oh no, I’m not a MGTOW’ just because they can’t follow all steps. Or they act only according to these steps”. Leonardo says that there are no steps to be taken, nor any rules surrounding the practice of MGTOW. When I ask Jari if MGTOW encourages any practical actions, he replies: “What MGTOW ‘encourages’ is an odd question. It is not a monolith. They do what they want and chose what they want. Life’s too short to guide other people”. As Danny, he ends his statement through saying that it is about finding *your own way*.

Although a discrepancy between the sort of official narrative of exercising MGTOW and how members actually practice it has been noted elsewhere (Wright et al. 2020; Lin 2017), it has been left untheorized and unexplained. Through an anthropological study from the inside, answers to these questions can start to unfold. The statements from my informants above point to that process of *second awakening* which is mentioned in the chapter *Red pill rage*. Instead of uncritically accepting the ideas and concepts which various MGTOW platforms advocate for, a big part of my informants' MGTOW-experience is to become critical of them. The reluctance of adhering to rules regarding desired manners of conduct, either if they refer to a specific type of male behavior or becoming a "true MGTOW", therefore has strong effects on how my informants understand and make use of the values communicated. Furthermore, this adds to the argument about the importance of individuality within the MGTOW philosophy, which gets expressed in its practice. Having nuanced the picture of what a "true" MGTOW does, what is actually the core practice of MGTOW?

#### 7.2.4. *Interaction with society and women*

The first I ask about these matters is Simon. In our conversation on Reddit, his tone is pessimistic and harsh. He is not interested in a longer interview, and after a few days of chatting, he states abruptly that the conversation is over. Simon says that he believes relationships with women are inherently destructive, and that all men should give up the idea of having one. These statements should be understood through the notion of how society is seen as gynocentric, ultimately producing a world in which men are exploited to the benefit of women. He describes both women and men in his surroundings, those who fully adhere to the state sanctioned male and female roles, as "being full of this, so fake – all of them". Just before ending our conversation, he states his goal in life:

When I have polished my survival skills enough, I am moving out of the grids of society. I am leaving it all behind in the future and I hope that nobody will ever see me again

Although not as radical, Danny also lives on his own. He constantly reduces the dramatical aspect of MGTOW, as he sees it only as another word for bachelorhood. For him, it does not matter how you interact with society, as long as you live a single man's lifestyle - in your own way. Towards the end of our interview, Danny gets upset when telling me about an incident at work where he had received a warning from his manager after having complemented a woman's looks. He says that in these situations, women's words are like law because of all

the feminist policies and legislations. Therefore, since “workplace is a very dangerous place for a man”, Danny generally stays away from women at his company, and strictly avoids situations where he is left alone with a woman due to a fear of being wrongly accused of anything. The workplace is to Danny what society in general is for Simon: a context where feminist ideals are seen as encouraging a gynocentric order, in which women are prioritized over men. Thus, it leaves them no alternative than to keep minimum contact with these zones, and in relation to these places, to *go their own way*.

When I set out my fieldwork, I thought that everyone I would meet would be like Simon or Danny – not wanting to have anything to do with women, or even fulfill the popular image of a MGTOW as a hateful, misogynist man. However, all of my informants except for Simon and Danny still have an interest in romantic relationships with women and see themselves having a heterosexual partner in the future. The focal point here is not whether or not they want to pursue a romantic relationship, or which “level” of MGTOW they are in, but *how* they relate to a potential partner. My informants *do* want a romantic relationship, but with other guidelines than what the, in their eyes, gynocentric and feminist society encourages. Instead of prioritizing the needs of their potential partner, they now prioritize the needs of themselves. Thus, practicing MGTOW in relation to women is strongly linked to how MGTOW is exercised mentally: as a way to *symbolically resist* (Scott 1985:236) the dominant ideology within which they find themselves in.

The act of prioritizing oneself, rather than the woman, can also be seen as an everyday form of resistance, as they both are intended to mitigate or deny the claims made by the dominant social order (ibid.:32). Now, there might be a big difference between the poaching, theft, and smuggling through which the poor peasants in Malaysia oppose the local ruling elite, and my informants’ way of opposing the gynocentric order simply by thinking a bit differently. However, Scott (1989) argues that everyday forms of resistance can be expressed in countless different ways since the resistance is always context specific. What gives them their unity is that these acts of cultural opposition are quiet, disguised, and seemingly invisible, and under the radar of the dominant society (Scott:1989:37). Therefore, privately and silently prioritizing yourself in meeting women can be understood as an everyday resistance.

Joakim expresses this resistance in:

Instead of following the female list of requirements that has become the norm today, I look at what *I* want out of a relationship. Sure, that reduces the number of possible partners, but it has to be on my terms these days



Daniel, Hugo, and Kenneth all point to how they nowadays focus on their own conditions and demands when meeting women, rather than abiding to the women's which they did in the past. Leonardo and Anton say that they are more or less indifferent to women and treat them just like anyone else instead of putting them on a pedestal. The latter says: "I'm just not idealizing women anymore. I'm just not giving them the attention that they seek, and that everyone is telling them that they deserve". Instead of uttering this out loud, or explaining their priorities, this always happens unobserved, nodding to the key characteristics of everyday resistance: a concealment of the act itself (ibid.:54).

Another way of exercising MGTOW, in relation to women, is being aware of, and reacting to, different warning signs in female behavior. These signs are fundamental, as they are as seen as foretelling situations in which the potential relationship is built on how well the woman's, and hers only, needs are fulfilled. Some of these are acts when women try to form men into a certain behavior or when women act "overtly entitled", something Saif argues is in line with what the feminist society encourages. The important part here is that my informants, like Saif, see these types of different behavior as normal and promoted by the feminist society. Through being aware of them, and reacting to them, a hidden and indirect resistance to the dominant ideology has been made.

#### *7.2.5. Self-improvement and the act of "giving out free red pills"*

Practicing MGTOW is not only about women. As other studies of MGTOW have shown (Jones et al. 2019, Hunte 2019, Wright et al. 2020, etc.), a big part of the discussion online centers around self-improvement and finding hobbies. This is something I noticed occurs offline as well, as many of my informants mentioned that they have taken up several interests, hobbies, and activities since they started identifying with MGTOW. Danny has, since finding MGTOW, finally picked up on his interest in day trading, and spends all of his time outside of work in front of his three computer screens. Kenneth says that he, through MGTOW, learnt the importance of becoming better at something, and that he now assesses more control of his physical form and of his financial situation. Other forms of mentioned hobbies were video games, biking, and starting a blog. Hunte (2019:67) argues that these hobbies work as a means for men to focus on themselves as opposed to pursuing relationships with women, an argument that my findings do not support. Instead, I argue that the search for hobbies is a natural result of the core exercise of MGTOW – to place value in yourself – and, as has been

shown previously, that it does not exclude romantic relationship with women. Although not being a textbook example, also this part of practicing MGTOW could be seen as a form of resistance.

One act of resistance that is more obvious is the practice of what Simon describes as “giving out free red pills”. After having explained how he never reveals his affiliations to MGTOW, he says: “However, it’s okay to give out free red pills here and there so people can start judging for themselves about the current fucked up state of modern society”. Instead of explicitly and directly expressing MGTOW-values, giving out free red pills is a way of conveying them behind a protecting veil of ambiguity. I am told that one way of doing this is to use sarcasm: to blame all the ills of society strictly on men, or to claim that all women, no matter what, should be praised, and that all men, no matter what, are power seeking pigs. Using a high level of sarcasm, these comments aim at making the receiver aware of the absurdity of them, and through that develop a more critical stance towards feminism.

On a similar note is Kenneth, who says that he sometimes presents small pieces of dispersed and cryptic information surrounding MGTOW to men in his surroundings, as a way to “plant MGTOW-seeds” in them. He adds that since he does not want to reveal his MGTOW-identity, but still feels an urge of expressing his values, it is important that the message is neither too obvious, nor too vague. The point of these “free red pills” is to communicate MGTOW-values, while simultaneously hiding behind ambiguity, sarcasm, and uncertainty. As a way to avoid potential backlashes, the receivers of these messages are meant to put the pieces together *themselves*, rather than by Kenneth or Simon.

The practice of “giving out free red pills” can be understood as an everyday form of resistance through its ambiguous and cloudy character. Scott (1989:55) argues that many forms of everyday resistance are intended to have a double meaning so that they cannot be treated as a direct, open challenge to the prevailing dominant social order. He shows how many of the folktales of peasant culture oppose the ruling class through disguised forms of aggression, such as ridiculing or indirect threats. However, as they are veiled, they do not offer the authorities a clear-cut occasion for retaliation (ibid.). Through the usage of sarcasm and ambiguity, Simon and Kenneth can safely enact a form of resistance towards feminism without facing the public scorn an open opposition would result in.

Furthermore, Simi and Futrell’s (2019) discussions about how Aryans express their activist identity can be fruitful here. In order to adjust their commitment to white power beliefs with

the efforts to avoid extreme everyday stigma, Aryans devise different techniques to accomplish a balance between who they are and how they portray themselves. As Simon and Kenneth, they constantly guard their expressions, while exploiting the limited opportunities to minimally display their deviant opinions (ibid.:102). The authors call this a strategic search for *expressive balance* (ibid.). Kenneth's thoughts about the "neither obvious, nor vague" content of his cryptic messages fits neatly in this context.

One of the techniques the Aryans apply in their search for expressive balance is a passive display of movement symbols, such as tattoos and clothing (ibid.:104). The authors show that the display of these symbols is not actually directed to their surroundings, as a means of recruiting members or instilling fear, but rather directed towards themselves. The passive display is in fact seen as an honorable and personal way of challenging normative conventions. With it, a sense of self-esteem and authenticity is reinforced as it is seen as a way of persisting ideological opposition, while simultaneously attending to other's resentment of them (ibid.). When I ask Roger to elaborate about the practice of planting MGTOW-seeds in others, he says that it is not really about persuading anyone into MGTOW, an answer that draws upon the highly individualistic aspect of MGTOW. Rather, he says: "I guess it's also for myself in a way... It feels good to know that I'm not buying the whole mainstream narrative". The practice of giving out free red pills can thus also be understood as a way of *internally* resisting the dominant social order, thus pointing to my argument about why it should be seen as a resistance.

### 7.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated and discussed various expressions and practices of MGTOW among my informants. "The golden rule of MGTOW" forms the public expression as it aims at preventing a reproduction of previous experiences of social exclusion, which *Being MGTOW* showed is a big part of the MGTOW experience. Building upon my findings in the previous chapter, I argue that the internet expression of MGTOW should not be taken as representative of the whole community. Rather, through emic accounts, I demonstrated how much of my informants' practices centered on a placement of value in oneself. Throughout the chapter, I argue that these should be seen as acts of resistance since these acts, in their eyes, oppose those dominant and established norms they feel are being imposed on them.

## 8. Concluding comments

This thesis' main aim was to contribute to a rather thin body of knowledge concerning MGTOW. Seeing how all previous research on the community investigates the online content of MGTOW platforms, I wanted to nuance our knowledge about the community and the various men composing it, by presenting an emic perspective. My intent was not only to explore the emic perspective, but also to present the experience of being MGTOW in Sweden. This was done by conducting a ten-week-long anthropological fieldwork composed of a thorough engagement with the community and multiple extended interviews with men identifying as MGTOWs. Another aim was to investigate whether an approach like this, namely from the “inside”, would generate different empirical material than one from the “outside”.

In *Finding MGTOW*, I presented and discussed why my informants turned to MGTOW. Whether these paths stemmed out of a seemingly innate and natural aversion to women, mental health issues, or an enactment of a specific male behavior, it was concluded that turning to MGTOW correlates highly with feelings of disruption, tension, and frustration. Different theoretical frameworks and concepts aided me in exploring the background and development of these feelings.

The subsequent chapter, *Being MGTOW*, demonstrated how the experience of identifying with MGTOW is fashioned by an opposition towards dominant and established norms, a perception about anti-male sentiment in Swedish society, feelings of exclusion and misrepresentation, and an intense focus on feminism. These experiences were related to a Foucauldian framework which enabled me to highlight notions of social exclusion, internal deviancy, and resistance within my informants.

The last chapter, *Practicing MGTOW*, discussed various expressions and practices of MGTOW values. Here, I demonstrated that these are connected to my findings in the previous chapters: the “golden rule of MGTOW” aims to prevent previously felt exclusion and that the online content should not be taken as representative of my informants. Instead, with the aid of Scott's ideas about resistance, I argue that the practices of MGTOW can be understood as acts of resistance since these acts, in their eyes, oppose those dominant and established norms they feel are being imposed on them.

My study contributes to current literature on MGTOW and the manosphere strongly on the basis of its methodology. By applying different methods than those of previous research, aimed at generating an emic perspective, new empirical findings have been presented which nuance and broaden our previous understanding of a MGTOW as a misogynist, homophobic, and pathological man. Instead of forming our understanding of “the other” through observing and analyzing certain online practices from a distance, I have shown that an actual *interaction* with them can yield a completely different picture. Therefore, I urge future researchers on the topic to do the same.

With this thesis, I also wanted to contribute to broader discussions within anthropology and society about understanding and perceiving “the other”. How might anthropological ethics and methods expand and nuance our knowledge about them? A first step for us anthropologists is to actually research them. In researching “the other” and people on the margins, we anthropologists tend to focus on those groups that we sympathize with (Pasieka 2017). Edelman (2001) points to this severe flaw within the discipline in asking how knowledge is supposed to be generated about those groups that we do not like. Only seeking out to those arguments and ideas that confirm and accept your own is simultaneously a topic beyond this thesis and a central one to it.

The study of social groups can help anthropology confront central prejudices, contradictions, and blind spots (Osterweil 2014). Pasieka (2017; 2019) calls for a more profound anthropological contribution to the public debates by rethinking the meaning of empathy. On a similar note, Teitelbaum (2019) harshly criticizes the traditional anthropological quest for morally bound knowledge production, in which preconceived notions of “good” and “bad” prevails. What I have tried to accomplish in my study is to move away from such dichotomies by actually interacting with MGTOWs, temporarily perceiving them through their own eyes. After seeing my inner beliefs being thoroughly challenged, what started as a journey of emotional frustration ended in a grounded notion of humbleness towards “the other”. I hope that this thesis has been able to, at least to some extent, shake conventional truth claims by relating the emic perspective of MGTOW to broader discussions on discipline, exclusion, and truth regimes. Anthropology has a special force in looking above and beyond naturalized paradigms – let us not do the reverse and strengthen them.

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