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This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Men and Masculinities* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version [Mooney-Somers, J & Ussher, JM (2010) Sex as commodity: Single and partnered men's subjectification as heterosexual men. *Men and Masculinities*, 12(3): 353-373] is available online at <http://jmm.sagepub.com/content/12/3/353.short>

# Sex as commodity: Single and partnered men's subjectification as heterosexual men

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## Abstract

Drawing on a discursive analysis of individual and group interviews with heterosexual men, this paper examines how men take up and resist discourses of sexuality and gender to (re)produce a recognisable heterosexual subjectivity. We begin by exploring the commodification of sex in men's accounts, and the various practices men undertake to obtain sex. We then draw on differences that emerged between single men and partnered men's accounts, to argue that the contexts in which men (re)produce sexual subjectivity have significant implications for how they negotiate the discursive positions available to them. Three themes are explored in this section. In 'just sex', single men work to fix the meaning of the sex they are pursuing/having, thus resisting alternative meanings offered by women. In 'more than just sex', single men articulate a romantic discourse where sex is part of an emotional relationship. Finally, in 'accounting for the lack of sex' partnered men undertook work to remain recognisable as heterosexual men in the absence of sex. This paper explores the difficulties, dilemmas and ambivalences produced by the project of subjectification, and how men resolve or accommodate them.

**Keywords:** men, heterosexuality, subjectification, relationships, discourse analysis.

Describing the discursive frameworks within which heterosexual subjectivity and sexual practice are constituted has a rich history. Wendy Hollway's analysis of heterosexual men and women's talk about romantic relationships (1984a; 1984b) has become a popular model for exploring discourses implicated in the construction of heterosexuality. Several discourses have been documented, from the ubiquitous male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b) to discourses of reciprocity in sexual relationships (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1992), and orgasm (Nicholson, 1993) and coital imperatives (McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Potts, 2002). How men and women negotiate these discourses in the negotiation of sex and relationships has also been examined. Feminist researchers have explored how men's and women's construction of gendered subjectivity re-produces gendered power imbalances (Gavey, 1992; Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). Other researchers, against a backdrop of HIV/AIDS, considered the implications for safer sex, of the negotiation of these same discourses (Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1994; Holland, 1991; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, & Thomson, 1990; Kippax, Crawford, Waldby, & Benton, 1990; Waldby, Kippax, & Crawford, 1993). Researchers continue to examine the construction of heterosexual sex in men and women's accounts, with some focused on the possibilities for promoting sex-without-intercourse as a safer sex practice (Braun et al., 2003; Flood, 2003; Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; McPhillips et al., 2001). Reflecting the feminist framework that many of these researchers work within, issues of power and gender relations have remained a central concern in discursive work around safer sex.

A small number of studies have focused exclusively on heterosexual men and on differences across men, rather than between men and women. Examples of this work includes research examining heterosexual behaviour, HIV salience and risk practices with young Glaswegian men (Wight, 1994, 1996), and Australian work exploring the sexual cultures of heterosexual men in an attempt to understand why they do not use condoms (Flood, 2003). Both of these authors have argued that their work contrasts with previous research on differences between women and men. Their exclusive focus on men produces a more diverse understanding of masculine sexuality than the usual predatory account (Wight, 1994, 1996) and demonstrates that men draw on more than simply dominant discourses and meanings (Flood, 2003). This critique, that literature examining differences between men and women fails to reflect the diversity of masculine sexuality, calls for more research examining heterosexual men's sexual cultures and more complex and diverse accounts of heterosexual men's sexuality.

Turning to younger men and adolescent boys, we find work on the enactment of discourses around heterosexual masculinity. These studies provide a sophisticated account of how adolescent boys and young men produce a recognisable masculine identity through their adoption of the subject positions available within discourses of heterosexuality (see for example, Allen, 2003, 2004; Chambers, Ticknell, & van Loon, 2004; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Redman, 2001; Renold, 2003; Wight, 1994). Research with 10 and 11 year old boys, for example, shows how being 'a proper boy' means "investing in and projecting a recognisable (and hegemonic) heterosexual identity" (Renold, 2003, p. 190). This was achieved through practices including the objectification of girls, descriptions of an imagined heterosexual future, talk about heterosexual sex and "sexualised forms of harassment toward girls" (p. 190). Similar work with older young men (17-19 years old), demonstrates that while some subject positions have legitimacy over others and are seen as 'normal', there are also moments where young people resist the traditional account of heterosexual male sexuality by rejecting intercourse as the primary motive for being in a relationship. These moments, were, however, invariably fleeting (Allen, 2003). These examinations of masculinity in school-aged boys and young men demonstrates "how hegemonic masculine performances are inextricably linked to dominant notions of heterosexuality" (Renold, 2003, p. 276). However, while many agree that "sexuality is the central site in men's struggles to become masculine" (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1994, p. 124), there is a little close analysis of how *adult* men construct a sense of themselves as heterosexual men through their negotiation of dominant discourses of sexuality and gender.

Shifting our focus to the burgeoning field of masculinity studies, we find many of examples of adult men's negotiation of discourses or notions of masculinity, and in particular of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a specific dominant formation of how men should be (Johnston & Morrison, 2007), usually understood to be constructed "in opposition to women and subordinated men" (Gough, 2001a, p. 169). This is not an account of how 'real men' are, but an exemplar (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As with any hegemony, hegemonic masculinity's exact nature is not static. However, particular characteristics seem to be taken as a given: heroic, independent, aggressive, unemotional, and heterosexual. We see this in the range of cultural representations put forward as embodying hegemonic masculinity; with characters such as Rambo, Rocky or the Terminator mentioned (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). There has been some criticism at the lack of theorising around hegemonic masculinity at the level of the individual man (Wetherell & Edley, 1999); that is, how individual men transform this exemplar in the "the day to day circumstances of their lives" (Johnston & Morrison, 2007, p. 661). A number of studies have responded to this by examining individual men's negotiation of the norms of hegemonic masculinity (Gough, 2001b; Johnston & Morrison, 2007; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In an examination of Irish masculinity, Johnston and Morrison claim to provide a "more nuanced, individualised account of the ways in which men come to interpret notions of masculinity" (2007, p. 661). This close analysis of

individual men's accounts of doing gender allows researchers to explore how dominant or hegemonic versions of masculinity are enacted, adapted, resisted, and contested. In their 1985 article outlining the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Carrigan, Connell, and Lee state: "The most important feature of this masculinity, alongside its connection with dominance, is that it is heterosexual" (as cited by Whitehead, 2002b, p.89). Yet in this close analysis of men's negotiation of hegemonic masculinity *heterosexual* appears to taken-for-granted and left unexplored. Thus, the sexual and relational as a site where men negotiate hegemonic masculinity, day to day, remains unexplored.

Despite this research on the construction of sexual and gender subjectivity within a discursive framework of heterosexuality, the exploration of heterosexual male sexual subjectivity is largely limited to adolescence and early adulthood, to sexual health and the prevention of disease, and to gender power relations. In an extensive review of contemporary social science research on sexuality in the United States, Diane di Mauro cautions that limiting sexuality research to social problems and disease, means "there is a dearth of information about populations not considered to be at risk and a tremendous lack of baseline data about sexuality across the life span" (1995, p. 18). An area where we might expect to address di Mauro's call, masculinity studies, has produced interesting analyses of adult men's gender subjectivity but less around men's sexual subjectivity. Consequently, there is a relatively limited literature on how adult men negotiate dominant notions of heterosexuality *and* masculinity in their production of a sexual subjectivity.

This paper explores heterosexual men's production of sexual subjectivity. We build on previous work on men's interpretation of cultural notions of masculinity to examine how men negotiate culturally dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity. By exploring men's talk around sex, sexuality and their relationships with women, we provide an account of one group of men's re-production of heterosexual masculinity and the conflicts, ambivalences and resistances that are produced in this process.

The central proposition of subjectification or subjection, as described by Foucault (1988) and developed by Rose (1996), Butler (1997) and Davies (2001), is that in order to experience himself as a subject, a man must take up specific kinds of knowledge as knowledge about himself. These regimes of knowledge, and the 'truths' they produce about male sexuality, constitute the conditions of possibility within which a particular kind of heterosexual male subject is intelligible. It is only by submitting to these 'truths' - by taking them up as the 'truth' about himself - that an individual man become recognisable as a heterosexual male subject. We are drawing here on the poststructuralist conception of subjectivity as "the condition of being a subject, dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practise and produced by these (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984, 1998, p. 3). There has been some critique of this perspective, namely that it suggests that subjectivity is *merely* an effect of discourse see (Burr, 1995). Theorists have argued that discourse theory does not account for why people invest in certain positions and not others (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), or account for people adopting one 'troubled' subject positions (Wetherell, 1998). The introduction of psychoanalytic concepts to account for how discourse is structured at the individual level by those working with the psycho-social framework is a response to this (see Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Hollway & Jefferson, 1998, 2000). However, poststructuralist theorists (such as Davies, 1997) argue that this is not necessary; indeed some consider these two perspectives as incompatible (Henriques et al., 1984, 1998). This is an ongoing debate. Our interest in this paper is in exploring the relationship between men's sense of themselves as heterosexual men and cultural notions of heterosexual masculinity. Subjectification is one way to approach this. Thus, our question becomes, how through enacting certain cultural representations as knowledge about himself, man can be recognisable to himself, and to others, as a heterosexual male subject. A psycho-social approach would frame this question, and answer it, very differently.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Twenty five individual interviews and four group interviews with 20 heterosexual men were conducted in Sydney, Australia. Of the 45 men interviewed, 25 identified as single and the remaining 20 were in de facto or married relationships. The men ranged in age from 18 to 63, with half being aged less than 25 years. Ninety percent of the partnered men were older than 26 years, and 72% of the single men were aged less than 25 years. In terms of ethnocultural background, just over 50% described themselves as Australian and 20% as Asian, this reflects the make up of the region where this study was conducted, Western Sydney. The interview sample was well educated, with half having or currently studying for a university qualification.

### *Methods*

This analysis is based on individual semi-structured and narrative interviews and group interviews conducted with self-identified heterosexual men about their experiences of sexuality. The first author conducted interviews with men recruited through a study website, community organisations, media advertisements and snowball sampling; all of these men were unknown to the interviewer. A number of male and female peer interviewers recruited men from their social networks for individual interviews, and recruited established friendship groups for group interviews. This method was used to increase the diversity of the sample and to ensure a mix of interviewer-interviewee dynamics. The relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee included stranger and acquaintance, as well as same and different gender, age, class, sexuality and ethnocultural background.

### *Analysis*

Data generated through group and individual interviews was analysed together. Whilst there is a different dynamic in interviews involving a group of men compared to interviews between two people, both involve the performance of masculinity and the resulting interviews are always the product of an interaction. Where focus groups differ is that they de-centre the interviewer as the data was generated through the interaction of group members. This is particularly useful for demonstrating the dominance of particular positions and how alternate perspectives are negotiated (privileged or silenced) within a group<sup>i</sup> (see for example Chambers et al., 2004; Frith, 2000).

Once the data was collected and transcribed, it was analysed using the discourse analytic technique thematic decomposition (Stenner, 1993). This technique identifies the thematics in a narrative by “separate[ing] a given text into coherent themes or stories” (p. 114), and then traces the subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) that individuals take up and resist within those themes. This was a useful and appropriate method for the current analysis as it allowed the identification of the storylines in the interviews, the subject positions available within these storylines, and how men negotiated these subject positions. In common with most discourse analytic techniques, this strategy involved a close reading and rereading of the interview transcripts to identify patterns (H. Marshall, Stenner, & Lee, 1999). In the initial analysis phase, discussions regarding interpretation of interview data occurred between the peer interviewers and the first author; similar discussions between the first and second authors occurred throughout the analysis process. The personal histories that each brought to these discussions allowed for reflection on the role of our individual positions in the interpretation of data<sup>ii</sup>. The final analysis presented in this paper is a reading produced by two women; we come to the data with different perspectives and different relationships to both heterosexuality and masculinity. Like any discursive analysis, our analysis is “located – it comes from some ‘position’ and is, therefore, always-already incomplete” (Stenner, 1993, p. 130)<sup>iii</sup>.

## Results

Our analysis begins with an account of the context in which the men in our study construct their sexual subjectivity. We do this by elucidating the dominant representations of heterosexual male sexuality that emerged from the interviews. We would argue that this account constitutes what this group of men “take to be natural and inevitable” (Rose, 1996, p. 2) about men and their sexuality. This account consists of a set of ‘truths’ that men must take up to be recognisable, to themselves and to others. Whilst these ‘truths’ draw on a range of cultural discourses around gender and sexuality (some of which were mentioned earlier), the specific nature of this account is local to men living in an urban location (Sydney, Australia), and historical, in that it was current in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Four hegemonic ‘truths’ of heterosexual male sexuality*

The expression of a desire for sex - for more sex - was like a mantra in the interviews. There was the repeated suggestion that men were not getting enough, which men often quantified as a specific amount of sex or as a general desire for regularity. The ideal was not for better sex - more pleasurable, enjoyable, intense, connected, or meaningful sex – it was simply more. A clear evocation of the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984b), it was rare for men to spontaneously explain *why* they desired sex/more sex, it simply was what defined ‘man’. A few men did go further, evoking a reproductive imperative, or construing men’s sexual needs as a basic physiological need through comparisons with food and water. Within this ‘truth’, women were repeatedly positioned as denying men sex, with the denial of sex often framed as a serious matter that could threaten man’s health, or his very survival.

A second ‘truth’ in the interviews was sex as a bodily experience. The desire and subsequent satisfaction were embodied experiences, with everything else - emotion, connection, relating and meaning - categorised as ‘sexuality’. The meaning of sex for these men appeared limited to the physical, the body and often only to the genitals. This framing silences the relational dimensions of sex. Within this ‘truth’, women were often reduced to “obliging prop” (Kippax et al., 1990, p. 538), a thing that aroused and then satisfied a male sexual need.

A third ‘truth’ acted to reinscribe gender differences in the experience of sexuality. According to the men we interviewed, men experienced sex as physical and superficial, for women it was a deeper emotional experience. Across the interviews, these differences were largely attributed to physiological differences in/on the bodies of men and women. Sex was defined as coitus and this practice was drawn on to explain why bodily differences might produce different experiences. An alternative explanation for differences in the experience of sex were the social and political constraints on women (which men positioned themselves as being free from), a framing which constructed male sexuality as the pure expression of a physiological drive.

A final ‘truth’ evident in the interviews was a positioning of men as needing to exercise control over their sexual drive or they would find themselves transgressing social conventions. This ‘truth’ repeatedly drew on a paradoxical characterisation of male sexuality as something that involved control over the sexual body/sexual drive and yet was simultaneously uncontrollable (Potts, 2002). In some men’s accounts, there was the persistent threat of a male sexuality out of control, with suggestions that without exercising control men would act like animals, or behave sexually inappropriately. A crucial aspect of this ‘truth’ was the control men needed to exert over their bodies, and specifically their penis; descriptions of the loss of an erection or control over the male body during intercourse were stories of the failure of control.

Having briefly described the taken-for-granted ‘truths’ of heterosexual male sexuality that emerged in the accounts of this group of urban Australian men, we can turn to the exploration of the

practices of subjectification: “the processes through which we are subjected, and actively take up as our own the terms of our subjection” (Davies et al., 2001, p. 167). The following section of analysis examines how men negotiated the ‘truths’ of male heterosexuality in order to become, and remain, recognisable as heterosexual male subjects. The first theme, ‘sex as commodity’, is overarching and was evident across all the interviews.

### ***Sex as commodity: Becoming recognisable as ‘heterosexual man’***

Jim: in order to ahmm (...) to have sex with a girl you've got to please her.  
(Individual interview with a single man aged 35)

Within the taken-for-granted account of heterosexual masculinity, being a man means both wanting and having sex. A significant amount of talk during the interviews was around the work men have to do to gain access to sex. Sex was objectified in these accounts; a thing that men got from women, in return for giving women something they wanted (usually, but not always, something other than sex or sexual pleasure). Within the ‘sex as commodity’ theme, men repeatedly positioned women as gatekeepers - withholding sex until the appropriate work or practices have been enacted. This is a common positioning in both popular culture (Mooney-Somers, 2005) and men’s talk, where in the heterosexual sexual script women block access to sex (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Seidler, 1989).

During interviews, men repeatedly described themselves as having to work out women’s demands and then work to fulfil them. Men described various practices they enacted to secure access to sex: buying drinks; paying for taxis; showing an interest/getting to know a woman; supporting women financially and emotionally. These practices were a central feature of the performance of a recognisable heterosexual masculinity, a performance that enacted the unquestioned desire for sex/more sex described earlier. Men also described sex related practices: trying to understand women’s sexuality; buying sex toys; giving sexual pleasure. Most of these sexual practices appeared to be based on men’s assumptions about women’s sexual desires, rather than on conversations with individual women about their desires. However, they do suggest multiple positioning of women, both as gatekeepers to sex and as desiring subjects. Women were often positioned as active and knowing participants in a system of sexual exchange – a heterosexual social order that demands men undertake sex related practices, and only then would women grant access to sex.

Regardless of relationship context, men overwhelmingly construed themselves as competent, as having mastered the practices that signify them as heterosexual male subjects. The performance of the ‘truth’ men want sex/more sex, enacted by doing ‘work’ to secure sex, can be read in many of the interviews as sufficient in terms of men’s successful performance of heterosexual masculinity. That is, it was not always necessary to ‘get’ sex:

Fred: well I don't know why it's not happening. (...) I don't know whether I've bought her the wrong sex aids or (...) or underwear or (...) nighties or anything like that [...] but when she does put something nice on I certainly let her know that, that's nice, you look really nice in that, so as to give her, an encouragement. So, I try and (...) see it from her side as well, (...) but whether I've done something wrong or whether it's just (...) mother nature taking it's course I've got no idea. [...] but I want to try, I've been trying for years.  
(Individual interview with a partnered man aged 63)

For this man, who had been married for 40 years, the list of things he had done to access sex was lengthy, and he positions himself as quite determined. There is no space within this account for his partner to not want sex; her willingness to have sex should follow his performance of the required practices. The only available explanations are his insufficient mastery, “I’ve done something wrong”,

or her failing body, “mother nature taking its course”. Many narratives from partnered men focused on the denial of sex by their partners, and suggested that (some) men do need to account for occasions where their ‘work’ has not resulted in sex.

Single men’s performance of these practices was oriented more broadly at ‘women’ rather than partners. The practices described by these men feature the same notions of exchange, with men undertaking work to satisfy women and an expectation that sex will be granted when sufficient work is done. We can see in the following extract from a group interview:

- I: Back to the drink thing, why do you think you have to buy drinks? Is that something implied?
- Jack: It's a respect thing
- Robbie: It's like, if you're worth buying a drink, then I'm buying you drinks
- Will: Chicks like it when you buy drinks
- Robbie: They're flattered by it
- Jack: It's a cheap version of actually, it's a cheap quick version of sitting and bloody, sitting down and getting to know them
- Matt: It's a shortened version of a relationship
- Hassad: I've also noticed how many girls (get) blokes to buy them drinks and stuff
- Jack: I don't do it
- Robbie: Jack's right, it's a shortened version of a relationship, in a relationship you gotta buy the flowers, you gotta buy the chocolates. You've got anniversaries, you've got Valentine's Day; it's the condensed version man. Here's a Vodka Cruiser [bottled premixed alcoholic drink], this is Valentine's Day, its red you know, and then you buy the next one.  
(Group interview with single men aged 19-21)

In this group interview with young single men, the men showed themselves to be competent, and worthy, subjects. They know what a man has to do for sex and demonstrate their knowledge of women - “chicks like it when you buy drinks... they’re flattered by it”. The men explicitly position these practices as a knowing performance. The men’s talk also suggests that knowledge of women and their desires, allows men to subvert the system of exchange and access sex more quickly (or cheaply), with the implication that women will be fooled by this performance. Robbie’s list of different coloured drinks as supplanting relationship rituals circumvents the conventional practices men enact to access sex: marking Valentine’s Day, buying flowers or chocolates, or having a relationship. Seal and Ehrhardt (2003) have documented similar practices in interviews with American men, which included “the mention of compliments, sweet talk, promises of emotional and relational commitment (regardless of truth), and generalised sexual hints” (p. 303). Here sex becomes part of a system of exchange, obtained by mastering and enacting a specific set of practices. The success of this performance is access to sex, something controlled by women:

- Mark: The female runs the sex in the married couple’s life. If the female doesn't want it then the male definitely won't get it.  
(Group interview with partnered men aged 23-41)

Men can understand the system, can be a knowing performer in it, can even ‘cheat’ it, but to get the desired reward - sex – they are always dependent on women to provide access. The presence of economic tropes and notions of exchange in men’s accounts, suggests a fair system where doing the required work results in an expected outcome. However, women could use their power capriciously: “they had what I wanted so it’s like you know demand and supply, the price went up” (Jim, individual interview with single man aged 35). In an account where men’s need for sex is incontestable, this makes women very powerful indeed; a positioning that produced considerable resentment:

- Robbie: Women control the sex, which is a bad thing  
 Jack: No they don't  
 Robbie: Yes they do, they control the sex man  
 All: (laughter)  
 Robbie: Women are the most powerful creatures in the world because they control the sex. I can have all the fucking money in the world, I'm Bill Gates, but I don't control the sex.  
 (Group interview with single men aged 19-21)

Resentment when women resisted men's seduction efforts, was also present in Seal and Ehrhardt (2003) interviews, with men describing feelings of being unappreciated and not rewarded for their efforts. We would suggest that there is something more going on here. Robbie's suggestion that even if he were a rich and powerful man (Bill Gates), he would still not control access to sex, suggests a significant experience of powerless and dependence in relation to women.

### ***'Just sex': single men regulating the meaning of sex***

A recurrent theme in the single men's interviews was 'just sex'. For men taking up this account, the meaning of sex was tightly regulated such that it only signified an opportunity to have a physical need met. Here, sex was construed as meaning nothing or having no meaning; that is, no social or emotional significance beyond a physical act which satisfies a male sexual need. Men evoked this account by referring to "just sex", "nothing more than sex" and "only sex", signalling the kind of interaction they wanted, as well as what they were not interested in. The 'just sex' theme is about the practices single men enacted to regulate the meaning of sex, suppressing some significations and the expectations of men they engender.

Within the single men accounts, 'just sex' was the sex they had with women they didn't want a relationship with, didn't want to see again, didn't like or didn't really know<sup>iv</sup>; that is, with "just anyone". Within this account, the focus is on the sex and not on the interaction with a woman:

- Sach: I'm probably there just for the act, as opposed to anything else. Like there's no sort of emotion or (...) ahmm. (...) Yeah like I just don't feel that I need to go that far, like, like I don't need to make that extra effort cause ahmm at the end of the day (...) ahh I don't think I'll be seeing them, or it's no longer term thing  
 (Individual interview with a single man aged 25)

The need to fix the meaning of sex is necessary because within the discourses of heterosexuality, sex can mean or signify other things. The most relevant competing discourse is perhaps the have/hold, which positions sex as special, significant and meaningful, signifying connection, commitment and love (Hollway, 1984b). There was a sense in the interviews that clarifying the meaning of sex as 'just sex' was sufficient to fix its meaning. Not doing so would leave the meaning of a sexual encounter open; a woman may believe the sex signifies commitment, connection, or is the start of a relationship. A man risks being positioned as a bastard if he allows woman to think a relationship is a possibility when 'really' all he wants is sex (Holland et al., 1994). Thus, establishing sex as 'just sex', by naming it as such to a sexual partner, is an action designed to foreclose alternative meanings and avoid potentially negative consequences for these men. In the following extract, Jack takes up a moral position; explaining to his sexual partner what he wants fixes the meaning of the encounter and manages her expectations:

- Jack: You sit there, you just had a great night together, you take her back to your bedroom, you start getting it on. She's says 'look, I don't sleep around' or 'I don't fuck blokes on the first date' I say, I reckon that's sweet, just lay down, massages and bloody (demonstrates



hands moving over a woman's body) just have a great night all night. And the next day, just as long as you bloody bring it on, saying oh that's sweet, an establishment, before you start anything, just say, you know, I want a girlfriend, I don't want a girlfriend, I'm not interested in this. As long as you make it clear the night before. Then it should (be) sweet. [...] There's no way that I can just fuck someone and just turn away, and walk away, that's just fucked.

(Group interview with single men aged 19-21)

In the extract above, timing was important; establishing the meaning of the encounter should occur before it takes place. However clarifying the meaning of sex – and managing a woman's expectations - was not a given for all the single men we interviewed. We can see this in another extract from the same group interview; the interviewer has asked what the men want out of a one night stand:

Will: Someone who's half decent looking, and really won't give a shit and you probably won't see after that [Matt: Yeah] and it's so easy at the end of the day, (inaudible) leaving straight afterward

Jack: I can't do that. If I sleep with a bird, I have to be fucking friends with them the next day [...]

Jack: Whatever the circumstance, whatever the outcomes, I cannot walk away, I've done it fucking countless of times and it just feels like shit

Will: I can't wait to get back and tell the boys

(Group interview with single men aged 19-21)

Will describes the 'just sex' scenario - no future/no responsibility - and his mastery of it: he finds it easy to leave after the sex. Jack has difficulties enacting this: he complains that has to be "fucking friends", he "cannot walk away". Both of these acts signal his failure to fix the meaning as 'just sex', something which demands a lack of emotional investment in the other. His swearing makes it clear that being friends (an emotional investment) with a woman he has had sex with, is not desirable. While Jack positions himself as someone who has often behaved in this way, the consequences of this have been psychologically uncomfortable - "feels like shit". In both of the extracts above, it is possible to read Jack's account as resistance to the demands of 'just sex'. While positioning his actions as a failure, Jack simultaneously construes the demands of 'just sex' as unacceptable; he does emotionally invest in his sexual partner. The cost of the resistance is that he must endure the ridicule of his peers. Will's statement that he will "tell the boys" reminds us how important male peers are in terms of bestowing recognition as a heterosexual male subject, especially in the lives of young men (Holland et al., 1994; Renold, 2003; Wight, 1994).

### ***"More than just sex": single men imagining future sexual relationships***

Single men's talk of 'just sex' evoked the stereotypical characteristics of masculinity as independent and unemotional; men do not need or want anything more than sex from their interactions with women. There was, however, a parallel theme running through some of the single men's interviews, with talk of a time in their lives when they would want more than 'just sex'. In these accounts, the focus on sex shifted from sex with *any* woman to sex with a *particular* woman, someone the man felt comfortable and happy with. Men referred to a sense of trust and being known by a woman. Within this account, sex was often referred to as "deep and meaningful" with regular references to emotions and feelings that were conspicuously absent in the 'just sex' theme. In the following extract, a young man talks about the beginnings of a new dating relationship:

Sach: I look at this girl and I think, oh wow, you know, you are someone I could probably be really, really serious about and possible even marry [...] I feel heaps comfortable with you (...) compatibility seems really good, and ahmm we're both (...) eager to please each

other and like (...) what we've done so far is fantastic, and I think (...) it's sort of like, the whole cake as opposed to just a bit of it (laughing) (I: yes) it's icing and everything.  
(Individual interview with a single man aged 25)

For others, the desire for something more than sex was talked about in future terms. The concept of life stages, which evokes a sense of a natural order, was an important part of this account:

Victor: I guess it really depends where you think you are, at which stage in your life you are in and some people may be more emotionally mature at certain stages, so their needs and expectations as mentioned before, are probably different. Sex may not just be a physical thing for them, whereas for other people at that stage it may well be. And I think that for a lot of men later on its part (...) it may become part of their relationships not just a relationship that was just sex.  
(Group interview with single men aged 24-26)

In the developmental model of male sexuality evoked here, being young, or sometimes lacking maturity, was positioned as being associated with a desire for "just sex", "for fun". Men progressed to a stage where "sex means more than just sex" or "may not just be a physical thing". In a study 15 to 18 year old men, Redman (2001) reports that adopting a romantic discourse was part of constructing an adult identity: "the boys investments in serious romance - with its emphasis on the connotatively adult attributes of commitment, mutuality emotional intimacy, and penetrative sex - can be understood as part of their attempt to work themselves into a new age-related cultural identity" (p. 191). The implication that 'just sex' is limited resonates with representations of male sexuality in men's lifestyle magazines, where being single is positioned as appropriate for young men, but not for older men. If men get older and continue to resist the inevitable emotional commitment to a woman, they will become (or will be seen by others as) sad, isolated and desperate (Mooney-Somers, 2005).

### ***Accounting for the lack of sex: older partnered men maintaining appropriate subjecthood***

The men in relationships interviewed for this study were typically older than the single men with 90% being aged over 26 years. Most were in long-term cohabiting relationships and they were often fathers. Their accounts were not about regulating the meaning of sex, but about regulating the meaning of the absence of sex in their relationships. These men must work to maintain their position as recognisable heterosexual male subjects in a situation that threatens their access to the signifiers of heterosexual masculinity. For the most part, leaving the relationship was not positioned as a viable option (often because of children). These men then must also account for staying in a 'sexless' relationship where they are not having their needs met - needs that are, as has been repeatedly shown, unquestionably positioned as the core 'truth' of male sexuality. Two strategies, or lines of action, emerged in partnered men's accounts.

### ***Women as barriers***

Men focused on the reasons why sex was not happening, this usually entailed reframing it as due to their partner's actions. Many accounts began with an evocation of the notion that sex declines when men get married, or when a relationship becomes serious:

Daniel: she'd come over on the weekends and it was like, (sound of clapping hands) it was really hot, ahmm, and it kind of started (laughing) to slow down as soon as she moved in with me (laughing).  
(Individual interview with a partnered man aged 48)

Men positioned the decline in sex as being due to their partner's lack of interest in sex, or unwillingness to provide access to sex. In many accounts, it was simply taken for granted that women have little or no interest in sex. A variation on this was ascribing sexual needs to women but suggest that they were latent and needed to be uncovered, evoking a discourse of sexual skill that positioned woman's sexual responses as dependent on a man's skill (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 1986). A few men gave accounts that focused on the stresses of modern life:

Mark: there's always an excuse; "I'm tired" cause they have been to work, they're sore, "been with the kids all day I just want some time out"  
(Group interview with partnered men aged 23-41)

Whilst domestic stresses had the potential to affect men as well as their partners, men usually drew on contrasting accounts of woman's sexuality as vulnerable and unpredictable, and man's as driven and unyielding. Some men suggested their partners used domestic stress as an excuse to deny sex (echoing the notion that women control sex); this is a positioning that inevitably prioritises male sexual needs over women's own needs and desires (sexual, or otherwise). A very common explanation for the lack of sex was a partner's changing (aging) body, illness or an ongoing psychological issue. During his interview, Fred talked about how his wife's diabetes, and then later her menopause, resulted in a decrease in sex:

Fred: AHH, they weren't quite as flamboyant as they used to be, prior to that. But since she has been diagnosed with diabetes [...] It's virtually nonexistent (...) ah last year for example, there was about six occasions (...) ahh to me, I'm not happy with that.  
(Individual interview with a partnered man aged 63)

Where an issue was ongoing, there was often a kind of reality testing. Men compared their partner's responses or behaviour to how they imagine they themselves would behave, or to their knowledge of other women. Regardless of which discursive practice was engaged in, these men successfully constituted themselves as recognisable subjects within the 'truths' of heterosexual male sexuality, by positioning their partner as the explanation for the lack of sex. Indeed, the very act of providing an account of the lack of sex in their relationships, allowed these men to take up the 'truth' that men want sex/more sex as the 'truth' about themselves.

### *Sexual substitutes<sup>v</sup>*

A second strategy, adopted by some men, was of seeking fulfilment of sexual needs elsewhere. As has already been suggested, the core 'truth' of heterosexual male sexuality is the desire for sex with a woman, with coitus the fundamental practice. According to Margaret Jackson, one of the principles of the scientific model of sexuality is that "if the (male) sexual drive is denied legitimate outlets, it will find satisfaction in illegitimate ones" (1987, p. 72). In the following extracts, men draw on this notion of a male sexual need requiring satisfaction, to account for masturbation and/or their going outside their relationship for sex:

Daniel: if things didn't work out right, if she were, like there were times when you would just kind of miss out, basically, and that was that for that month. (I: Hmm, hmm) That was it you could forget it. (...) AHMM (...) [exhales heavily] so consequently I have to say that I've been auto-erotic for a lot of my marriage (...) [I: Hmm] (...) ahmm (...) and that's been kind of (...) a coping mechanism  
(Individual interview with a partnered man aged 48)

Brendan: I just gave up bothering to ask. I got fed up with the ahh, the Christmas, birthday, anniversary, and her birthday, times of the year. And then it had to, constantly, to say

ahh, okay, let me see, will you be home at eleven o'clock Friday night, if I'm still awake then maybe, and I, I thought, bugger this and I couldn't be bothered. [...] [a woman he met in an internet chatroom] says "oh what are you doing online, isn't tonight your night", and I said "yeah, well the fucking agenda changed, cause the ice-queen's not interested" (...) you know [I: Hmm] and then (...) it was just, ah yeah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and I said "I might come and see you some time" (...) and I must have got her on a few glasses of wine, and she's gone, "yeah when", ha, and I said (...) I looked up where she lived and (...) I said "forty five minutes", and she goes, "yes okay" [...] I thought well, I've been pushed to it, as far as I'm concerned (...) I just had enough I'm not going to be on a roster, I'm not bloody interested  
(Individual interview with a partnered man aged 35)

These men constituted themselves as particular kinds of subjects and legitimised sexual practices that, within a discourse of monogamy, are morally or socially transgressive. In the second extract, Brendan does a lot of discursive work to construe his conduct as reasonable. He asserts that he is not going to work to access sex anymore, a refusal that is made acceptable by his explanation that the lack of sex is his partner's fault which he has tried repeatedly to rectify. In both extracts, the tone is of a man pushed to his limit, unable to take this unreasonable situation any longer. In the first extract, Daniel describes masturbation as a "coping mechanism", while Brendan frames his extramarital sex as something he was "pushed to". Again, we see women positioned as unreasonably controlling access to sex.

### **Discussion**

In this paper, we presented an account of a specific dominant heterosexual masculinity and an analysis of men's active negotiation of the conditions of possibility that this account produced. We argued that it is within this set of 'truths' that men reproduce themselves as recognisable subjects; this is the process of subjection. The analysis examined the work men did to become a recognisable subject, the discursive and material practices they mastered, the meanings and knowledge they took up as their own. An important feature of this analysis was an exploration of the difficulties, dilemmas and ambivalences produced by the project of subjection, and how men resolved or accommodated them.

Becoming recognisable as a heterosexual male subject was neither a simple nor a straightforward undertaking. Whilst the notion of a driven sexuality was a taken-for-granted 'truth' about men, for the men interviewed in this study it is clear that this was not sufficient to guarantee a recognisable heterosexual subjectivity. As Weedon notes, subjectivity is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon, 1987, 1997) p33. Within this conception, male heterosexual subjectivity it is a continuous project of (re)producing appropriate knowledge about the self, of enacting appropriate practices, and regulating meaning such that undesirable or threatening significations are suppressed (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). Within the sex as commodity theme, men enacted the 'truths' of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity – primarily, men want sex - by doing work to secure it. The practices they described rendered them recognisable as heterosexual male subjects. However, the commodification of sex also produced dilemmas that threatened men's access to the signifiers of heterosexual masculinity. These dilemmas differed for single and partnered men and required them to draw on discursive resources to foreclose alternative meanings and remain recognisable as heterosexual male subjects.

For single men, the dilemma was that sex could signify a desire for a relationship; hegemonic masculinity requires men deny or suppress the desire for intimacy (Seidler, 1985, 1989). Thus, most of the single men's accounts focused on fixing the meaning of sex as nothing. We are not suggesting that these men got nothing out of the sex they did have; it is clear that men wanted something quite

specific - usually the physical act of coitus, physical pleasure or release. For partnered men, an absence or scarcity of sex could signify a lack of desire for sex. Thus, men in relationships also worked to fix the meaning of sex - or the lack of it. The expression of a desire for sex combined with the accounting for the absence of sex, shored up men's access to the signifiers of heterosexual masculinity.

In the accounts presented here, the positioning of women was crucial to men's subjectification as heterosexual men. Both single and partnered men marshalled discourses around sexuality and gender to position women as giving sex a different meaning or as being the barrier to sex. In the single men's accounts, women wanted more when men wanted 'just sex'; in the partnered men's accounts it was women who didn't want sex, when men wanted more. Moreover, the repeated characterisation of women as controlling access to sex, and thus controlling men's access to the signifiers of heterosexual masculinity, demonstrates women's central role in heterosexual men's "struggles to become masculine" (Holland et al., 1994, p. 124). This has conflicting implications for women. On the one hand, rendered powerful in their control over the precisions commodity 'sex', on the other, made responsible for men's access to the subjecthood through sex, their own desires (and autonomy) are potentially negated.

The different contexts in which men are negotiating the hegemonic truths of male sexuality are important to understanding the complexities of men's sexual subjectivities (Whitehead, 2002a). While the relational context seems likely to be one of the most relevant contexts to men's production of a sexual subjectivity, others such as class, ethnicity, and health status, would also be worth exploring. The construction of sexual subjectivity was, however, a qualitatively different experience for single men than for partnered men; age complicates this. Most of the single men were younger, and the partnered men older, which raises two significant questions. To what extent are the differences documented here due to life experience or aging? For example, many of the accounts from partnered men featured aging, illness or death, and an apparent growing disparity in sexual interest and desire between partners. As noted in the opening of this paper, there is some interesting research on the specific experiences of emerging adults. The experiences of men in middle age and beyond, has received less attention. Discursive research has tended to focus on issues around the aging body and sexual dysfunction, increasingly in the context of sexual pharmaceuticals such as Viagra (Katz & Marshall, 2003; B. L. Marshall, 2006; Potts, Grace, Vares, & Gavey, 2006). Whilst unquestionably an important focus, given the increasing medicalisation of men's sexuality (Potts et al., 2006), this work needs to be balanced by explorations of older men's subjective experience of sexuality, which do not inevitably focus on sexual problems. As our analysis shows, this research would need to take seriously the differences between men in long-term relationships, those who are now widowed or divorced, and the never married.

The second question raised is to what extent are these differences due to cultural change? The 'more than just sex' theme, for example, featured a perfect sexual and relational future with an idealised woman with whom the man would have an idealised relationship - trusting, comfortable, committed *and* filled with sex. This is, in many ways, not so far from the fairytale promised in popular culture aimed at women (Ussher, 1997). Are young men's articulations of a desire for a relationship with 'more than just sex' a cultural shift, as has been suggested by some authors (Flood, 2007)? While there is discursive research suggesting that this is not something new (Hollway, 1984a; Wight, 1996), men taking up this romantic discourse has generally been seen as resisting hegemonic masculinity where any expression of need, vulnerability or dependence on another is unacceptable (Seidler, 1985, 1989). Its appearance here, where it was for most of the single young men a desirable inevitability, suggests it may be part of the dominant account. Louisa Allen suggests that resistance to dominant discourses of heterosexuality in the young men she interviewed was indicated by their assertion that they would stay in their relationship "even without sexual activity" (2003, p. 227). It is

interesting to speculate on how those young men would account for this if the situation transpired. Our analysis suggests that men do stay in relationships - "even without sexual activity" - but that this situation required men undertake considerable accounting if they are to remain recognisable as heterosexual male subjects. So, what happens next for the young men in our study? There is some evidence that on entering a relationship, men shift from enjoying their positioning within this romantic discourse, to feeling subjected to it (Wight, 1996). The accounts from partnered men in our study were not of commitment, understanding or mutuality; they were characterised by disappointment and resentment. Does this represent a similar trajectory to that described by Wight? This would suggest that the differences between the single and partnered men do not represent a cultural shift but a shift in subject positions. Whilst our analysis cannot answer these questions, it does reinforce the multiple and dynamic relationships that men have to culturally hegemonic notions of heterosexual masculinity throughout their lives.

There was a sense in the individual interviews that many men in relationships were not happy. The accounts here are from men who volunteered for an interview about their sexuality, they came from a larger survey study where men reported very high levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction (Mooney-Somers, 2005). It may be that the men who opted for an individual interview were looking for an opportunity to talk about and perhaps explore the possibility of changing their situations. We are not claiming that the accounts presented here are representative of all heterosexually-identified men. Rather, it is our argument that the taken-for-granted account of heterosexuality male sexuality that is central to this analysis is something that all men have to negotiate; even those who reject it do so under considerable pressure to conform. The analysis presented here then, demonstrates how *some* men resolved this. How different men resolve the dilemmas and conflicts produced by the dominant account of heterosexual masculinity, and how men resist or create spaces to resist, whilst remaining recognisable as heterosexual male subjects, deserves continuing investigation.

### **Acknowledgements**

An Australian Research Council SPIRT grant funded the doctoral paper that this paper comes from. FPA Health was the industry partner on the grant and we thank Dr Edith Weisberg for her input. We would like to thank all the men who participated in interviews and shared their very personal experiences.

We would also like to thank Dr Emilee Gilbert and the journal's anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

The National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research is core-funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

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<sup>i</sup> Our analysis did not explore regulation of subjectivity within group interviews. Chambers, et al. (2004) conducted this kind of analysis to examine peer regulation and policing of teenage sexual identities. Analysing our group interview data, to examine adult men's regulation of sexual identities, would be a worthwhile direction for our own work.

<sup>ii</sup> A detailed examination of the first author's experience of interviewing men and analysing the resulting data can be found in the PhD thesis that this work is taken from (Mooney-Somers, 2005).

<sup>iii</sup> An anonymous reviewer's alternative, and less critical, reading of some of our data reinforces this point.

<sup>iv</sup> Interestingly, none of the men talked about purely sexual relationships that they had with women who were equally invested in 'just sex', nor did they talk of women friends with whom they had ongoing sexual relationships (i.e. fuck buddies).

<sup>v</sup> A note about terminology; the term *substitutes* should not be read as privileging intercourse within a relationship over the sexual practices the men recount. The term refers to the men's own characterisation of the sexual practices they were engaged in - masturbation, extramarital sex, paying for sex - as in lieu of sexual relations with their life/romantic partner