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'I'm putting a lid on that desire': Celibacy, choice and control

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Abstract
Sex is constructed as an important (even essential) part of 'normal' adult functioning, and for men in particular. While sexual abstinence may often be valued among adolescents, 'celibacy' among adults is considered problematic, associated with losses in health, well-being and general quality of life. Despite this, for various reasons, some people choose to deliberately avoid sexual activity (often conflated with coitus) with another person, even though they might continue to desire it. This article presents interview data detailing nine men's accounts of their choice to be 'celibate' or deliberately giving up sex for a period of time. Using thematic analysis, it presents two primary themes. First, that sex (despite the choice to be celibate) is still an imperative, and second, that celibacy becomes necessary as sex itself can be constructed as a problem. The analysis also examines how accounts of 'choice' and 'control' are used to define celibacy as a form of resistance to the power of the male sex-drive discourse, and yet simultaneously build upon hegemonic forms of masculine sense making such as a self-control, autonomy, and in some cases outright misogyny.

Keywords
Celibacy, male sex drive, masculinities, masculine sense making, self-control

Sex, sex everywhere?

If the tropes of 'culture watchers' and anecdotal evidence can be seen as authoritative (just for a moment), then sex, within the western world, is apparently everywhere. It has become a truism that sex is pervasive; that it leaks across the covers of magazines marketed at both men and women, that it sells products, is equated with health, happiness and well-being and, for some, is constructed as the driving purpose of their lives. Within a consumerist society where the consumption of goods

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and services is constructed as the most important thing a good citizen can do, sex is treated as another thing to consume (see Attwood, 2006; Cline, 1993 for commentary on this), a wide-open space of choice and opportunities for fulfilment. Sex has, to a large degree, become seen as an imperative to the basic function of a mature individual's identity, without which a person is deemed incomplete (Gavey, 2005; Giddens, 1992; Plummer, 2003) and it is certainly considered essential to the functioning of any intimate relationship (Gavey, 2005; Jackson and Scott, 2004).

What then does this mean for those who, for one reason or another, are not having sex? Is this 'incompleteness' the experience of every person not having regular sex, or not in an intimate relationship? Some people simply have no interest in sex (see Scherrer, 2008 for discussion on asexual identity), however they might enjoy intimate relationships. Others may not be interested in intimate relationships, either permanently, or for a period of time, choosing to be 'single' (see for instance Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007), while not necessarily 'missing out' on having an active sex life. Then there are those who have specifically articulated a deliberate choice *not* to have sex, identifying with the historical label 'celibate'. Although there tends to be some blurring between the 'states' of asexuality, singleness and celibacy (and further blurring at the line between voluntary and involuntary celibacy), the identities that form around them are largely defined by variations in factors such as desire for sex (however that might be constructed), interest in intimate relationships and the growing distinction made between sexual and intimate relationships. This article is largely interested in the latter group of people (in particular men) who have identified, for one reason or another as celibate, constructing their identity as the product of a *choice* to give up sex (and who may or may not be in an intimate relationship).

Celibacy in the lives of men has received very little academic attention outside of the sphere of clerical celibacy (see for example, Phipps, 2004; Qirko, 2002; Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003; Southgate, 2001) or where 'choice' has played less of a part (e.g. Burgess et al., 2001; Donnelly and Burgess, 2008; Donnelly et al., 2001). This seems to fit within a theme that Gutmann (2007) has commented upon, suggesting that across disciplines 'relatively little has been written about heterosexual men *not* enjoying sex, not enjoying it often and not missing sex when they do not have it' (2007: 31).

Celibacy as a problem?

Often when the issue of celibacy is raised, it is done so as if it is inherently problematic. A virtually impossible restriction on 'natural' desires that when bottled will only 'spill over' given enough time. Many of the notions of celibacy being problematic tend to be justified in the light of relatively recent sexual abuse scandals, particularly in relation to the Catholic Church's male clergy. This more institutional nature of celibacy has often been portrayed as problematic and a precursor for these scandals (see for instance Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003). This has often been structured as the consequence of 'forcing' those interested in the

religious orders to maintain 'unnatural' vows, especially when the person in question is a man.

Although there is a strong correlation between religion and the term 'celibacy', it has also become a part of the common lexicon used to describe the state of not having sex for a given period of time (Abbott, 2000). However, even when removed from religious boundaries, celibacy is still considered problematic. Some empirical research on the absence of sex in people's lives seems to maintain this sense of it being 'abnormal'. Research on 'involuntary' celibacy has framed the 'state' as causing 'unhappiness, anger and depression' (Donnelly, et al., 2001: 167) and as having the potential to disrupt a person's individual development and the 'normal' sexual trajectory they 'should' be following. The 'involuntary celibate' is defined by these authors as 'one who desires to have sex, but has been unable to find a willing partner for at least *six months* prior to being surveyed' (Donnelly, et al., 2001: 159, italics mine).

Siegal and Schrimshaw's (2003) research with older adults (ages 50–68) with HIV/AIDS, who had chosen to be celibate to prevent further transmission of the disease, also seemed to be loaded with these sorts of assumption. Celibacy was presented as a negative alternative even when there is a desire to avoid spreading the disease or re-contracting it. Although they make the qualification that they are hoping to challenge factors such as 'misinformation, lack of information or irrational fear and anxiety' (Siegal and Schrimshaw, 2003: 189) in making a choice to be celibate, sex is considered of such high value to 'quality of life' that avoiding it is constructed as a state needing 'interventions' (Siegal and Schrimshaw, 2003: 189). Rather than critically assessing the way in which we construct quality of life and social support as the problem – especially in the light of a chronic disease – celibacy is treated simply as a negative life choice. It also assumes that 'sexual satisfaction' must entail a sexual partner, that an individual cannot enjoy their 'sex life' alone.

Celibacy as a problem . . . Especially for men?

The problematic nature of celibacy, especially when it is articulated as 'voluntary' seems to be even more applicable when the focus is men. Many writers have argued that dominant (or hegemonic) masculinities (which are by 'default' heterosexual) are implicitly constructed as sexually motivated (e.g. Connell, 2005; Flood, 2003; Kimmel, 1996; Korobov, 2004; Mooney-Sommers and Ussher, 2010; Potts, 2002; Segal, 1994). A coital imperative (Jackson, 1984; McPhillips et al., 2001) also pervades constructions of what 'real' heterosex looks like; it is often still argued that it is 'unthinkable that mature heterosexuals could have sex without having intercourse' (McPhillips, et al., 2001: 229). A willing choice not to seek (particularly penetrative) sex or even to forgo the *possibility* of engaging in (any form of) sexual activity with another appears to run contrary to what it means to be a 'real' man.

The understanding of the male sexual drive (Hollway, 1984) as ultimately natural has validated everything from unsafe sex (Potts, 2002) to coercive sex and even defining rape as a product of evolution (see Gavey, 2005 for a critique of this).

Feminist and pro-feminist poststructuralist research, has argued that this sense of naturalness is constituted within discourse and that even descriptions of 'feeling' a physiological 'drivenness' should not be taken at face value (see for instance Flood, 2003). This is not to say than men's embodied experiences of feeling sexual 'need' should be completely discounted as figments of imagination, but rather treated as a feature of sociocultural production within men's lives and bodies that needs ongoing interrogation.

The purpose of this article is to explore the notion of the male sex drive through the lens of accounts from men who have given up sex (often, but not always conflated with intercourse) for a period of their lives.

Study details

This article reports on data from an interview study with nine men who had chosen to be celibate. They ranged in age from 22 to 73 (mean age 36) and the average length of their periods of celibacy was 11.5 years, ranging from six months to their 'whole life'[1] up until the time of the interview. All of the men identified as heterosexual and all identified themselves as Pakeha[2] or of other European ethnicity, except one who identified as New Zealand Chinese.

The participants were recruited using a range of methods: word of mouth through researcher networks, posters, a media release and radio interviews. The interviews were all conducted by myself. Interviews were semi structured and lasted between 45 minutes and almost two hours, with approximately half of these done face to face and the rest by phone.[3] Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the University of Auckland, or at a place where the participant felt comfortable being interviewed. The interviews consisted of a range of topics, from general definitions and understandings of 'having sex' and 'celibacy' to descriptions of experiences. Individual interviews focused on specific, detailed descriptions about the experiences of being celibate, including the participant's motivations for choosing celibacy, difficulties they may have experienced and benefits they felt they may have gained.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to include hesitations, speech repetitions and overlapping talk, but not the finer-grained features of speech and interactional style. Text was occasionally restructured slightly (i.e. through deletion of text and punctuation) in order to create ease of reading without altering the meaning or suggestions of extracts. When an ellipsis (. . .) appears it is an indication that part of the transcript has been omitted, typically large chunks of text that were not relevant to the analytic point being made.

In this article I apply a form of thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006), with influence and insights from a critical discursive psychology of masculinities (see Edley and Wetherell, 2009; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1999, 2008, 2009). This analysis was applied to the data to explore the question of how celibacy is shaped, upheld by and/or disruptive of contemporary constructions of masculinity and heterosexuality. The analysis done within this article aims to identify the

latent aspects of the data, which refers to going 'beyond the semantic content of the data' and starting 'to identify the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). As such, it is explicitly social constructionist in its approach, seeking to describe patterns of talk that seem to be socially produced. This thematic approach is also concerned with recognising that people are simultaneously both the creators and created products of language (Billig, 1991).

Where 'discourse' is referred to in this article, I will be explicitly referring to the broader Foucauldian or 'macro' understanding of discourse (Wetherell, 1998), or shared 'organised systems of statements that provide socially understood ways, or rules almost, for talking about something and acting in relationship to it' (Gavey, 2005: 84). The most prominent discourses referred in the rest of this article will be those that inform neoliberal notions of choice and responsibility, and the previously mentioned discourse of 'celibacy as a problem'.

Data were subject to multiple readings and codings to identify broad themes associated with descriptions about celibacy and sex. I will discuss two primary themes that these men used in order to describe their deliberate choice not to have sex. First, (and perhaps less promising in terms of disrupting or offering alternatives to the dominant discourses of heterosexuality), sex for many of the men was felt to be an imperative and that it was viewed as natural. This imperative felt by men to have sex, however, was constructed as controllable through celibacy, but only if the celibacy was explicitly chosen. Second, sex was often described by the men as having the potential to be problematic unless it has specific controls set in place to manage its unruliness. Two 'kinds' of account of a sexual drive or sexual imperative were also repeatedly given. The first emphasised the sexual drive as physical, a biological drive that comes from within, and the second presented it as a kind of sexual pressure from outside, usually associated with 'society'.

'Against everything in your body you choose not to have sex': Sex as an imperative for men

Celibacy was defined extremely broadly by the men in this study. For some it was abstinence from all forms of sexual activity (including masturbation), for others it was simply penetrative sex they were avoiding. The boundaries between what was voluntary and involuntary celibacy also shifted – sometimes within a single interview – as men made sense of the lack of sex in their lives. Unlike religious celibates, for these men there were no criteria or textbook definitions. However, they *all* argued that for celibacy to be celibacy it had to be chosen and it had to involve giving up sex (whatever that meant for them, but most commonly coital sex).

One of the themes extracted from the interviews involved the men describing their impressions of existing stereotypes of celibacy and celibate men. Their descriptions, in the main, suggested it was an unusual choice because giving up sex was an extremely difficult thing to do. For instance, one man, Jonathan, had

come to view his own experience of celibacy as abnormal. He argued that his motivations for choosing celibacy in the first place (giving up sex in order to focus upon his study of philosophy) had resulted in him having mental health difficulties. He articulated an extremely negative view of the experience, suggesting it 'screwed up like ten years of my life' and laughingly gave it 'one star out of five'. He also commented that he decided the 'voluntary' aspect of his celibacy was over and he was now 'involuntarily' celibate (and certainly for much longer than Donnelly et al.'s, 2001 six month criterion). The change he felt occurred when he 'came to recognise' the power of his sexual drive and the 'problems' it was causing:

> Jonathan: In practice to be telling the truth, I think it's more the fact that I just came to recognise that um wasn't going to be able to hold out against my sexual desires, and it was more than that to be fair I mean desire for the whole intimacy package *by which*, which is an increasing component I have this idea that I was so devoted to my subject that I would be able to dispense with all that stuff with my iron hard will, and I just kind of realised . . . that basically I needed it like anyone else did and I think that was what the crucial point in my making that shift in attitude really I just realised I wasn't as superhuman as I realised. (32, Caucasian)

Despite being celibate for over 10 years, he described his position on celibacy as having shifted to one that reflected the discourse of 'celibacy as a problem', and ratifying the male sex drive as it pervades general discourse about men and sexual restraint (Mooney-Sommers and Ussher, 2010). More explicit in his description of the difficulties 'caused' by his sexual drive than many of the other men in the one-to-one interviews, Jonathan argued that his own sexual drive was such that he was unable to control it with his 'iron hard will'. Jonathan commented that while celibacy 'worked' for him initially, eventually it became something he was unable to sustain.

Jonathan also conflated a desire for sex with desire for intimacy in his account ('desire for the whole intimacy package'). A search for the intimacy sex offers can often be constructed as unusual amongst younger men (Mooney-Sommers and Ussher, 2010; Terry and Braun, 2009). However, some research has demonstrated that men speak of 'safe spaces' (such as within long-term relationships) where they can question dominant (and often homosocial) constructions of male heterosexuality (see Holland et al., 1998; Terry and Braun, 2009) and perhaps celibacy offers this same opportunity. While Jonathan seemed to be implying his desire for intimacy was the most important feature in his interest in stopping his celibacy, he relied on similar language to that used when speaking of the male sex drive, articulating an almost equivalent 'drive' for intimacy. A desire for intimacy in this account was constructed as needing 'release' in the same way that a desire for sex does.

Martin, who described his motivation for celibacy as to 'not cheat' on his partner while he was studying in another country for an extended period of time, ratified the description of sex drives as difficult to constrain. When asked whether

he felt that giving up beer (a pleasure he had earlier equated with sex) was similar to giving up sex, he suggested the latter was a much more difficult task:

> Martin: I wouldn't say there's a natural drive for alcohol or for beer but there is a natural drive for sex and um you can partially relieve that with masturbation but umm it will stay it will still be there and so it's harder to um you know not have sex than not want a drink. (26, European)

When asked why he thought that was, Martin relied, much like many of the other men, on constructions of him wanting sex as 'natural'. He argued that the choice not to have sex is unnatural:

> Martin: Sex is really necessary to my life I guess and I couldn't imagine not having sex forever and I need to have sex and [laughs] I think it's a natural thing and um I mean I can imagine other people having relationships without sex and I mean these those people that don't want to have sex until they get married and kind of Christian reasons and I can tolerate all this, but it's not me. (26, European)

For Martin, the choice to abstain from sexual activity with women was a 'pragmatic' one. He spoke of being interested in protecting his relationship with his partner. He also described his decision not to have sex as one of 'gritting his teeth' and holding on until his partner (who was in another country at the time of the interview) arrived in New Zealand. Within Martin's talk was a reliance on a particularly virulent form of the male sexual drive discourse; being away from his partner put him at risk of 'slipping' because of his need for sex. In order to prevent this happening he had to think of himself as celibate during this time.

Perhaps in order to justify his own concerns with 'cheating' he spoke of struggling with something that all men in his position would have. In this way he relied on the self-positioning of 'ordinary' masculinity (see also, Korobov, 2009; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). He further reinforced the notion of 'difficulty' by speaking of similar situations where he had been unable to resist 'cheating' in the past because he had not made a clear decision to be celibate. While this sort of account broadens 'typical' definitions of 'celibacy' somewhat (in that it was a temporary state created by the absence of his partner), Martin's account portrayed an investment in the term's applicability to his situation.

Andrew described a similar picture of 'gritting your teeth' in his early days of celibacy; a period he suggested was less defined by 'choice' and more by the 'norms' associated with Christian youth groups:

> Andrew: um to the degree that previously it *was* simply about not having sex just at all costs. There's this huge society pressure, and this huge temptation, and against all odds and against all reason and against everything in your body you choose not to have sex. (31, NZ European)

As in Martin's account, Andrew described an important sense of temporariness to the celibacy at that stage of his life. For Martin it was being reunited with his partner, in Andrew's description of his early experiences it was the possibility of marriage that created an 'endpoint' to the celibacy.

These sorts of account seemed to emphasise the power of the male sex drive discourse more than disrupt it. Celibacy was constructed as something (especially in Martin and Jonathan's accounts) that should not be risked for long periods of time, it is simply too difficult. All three of these accounts framed celibacy and being celibate as an identity that seemed to have little in common with institutional celibacy, rather focussing on it as a personal choice that helped shape their lives in different ways. What was common to these three accounts was the lack of apparent choice. Each of the men spoke of some degree of constrained choice, limited by social and geographical locations. Much more positive accounts seemed to arise in the talk of men who argued that choice was 'essential' to 'real' celibacy.

'Choice' gives some control over sexual desire

Many of the men who had chosen celibacy made much of the conscious choice to give up seeking sex (and in some cases even an interest in sex), suggesting that without the choice factor they were simply just not 'getting any' (i.e. 'involuntary' celibacy). Andrew suggested the reason why some men (and his 'earlier self') found their experiences of celibacy particularly difficult was the lack of 'real' choice. He argued that his 'abstinence' became 'celibacy' when his individual choice became more defining than Christian norms:

> Andrew: you're just not having sex at the moment . . . [you] don't happen to run into a sexual partner for six months you don't get to call that being celibate 'cause it wasn't a conscious choice. Or you're stranded on a desert island you're not celibate, there was no choice involved. (31, NZ European)

Andrew argued he was able to express a more positive view of his current experience of celibacy when he could describe it in terms of choice. With a much greater sense of agency, he suggested the factor of choice made not having sex more viable:

> Andrew: without that choice there's all this noise all the time. There's all of this pressure trying to find someone, trying to sleep with someone. Does that person like me, do I like that person, could I get that person in bed if I tried etcetera. When you get married hopefully that takes that noise away, that indecision away and when you make the choice to be celibate hopefully it does the same thing it takes the noise away 'cause the decision is made in advance. (31, NZ European)

Choice played a major part in almost all of the accounts of men who had chosen, and especially among those who enjoyed celibacy. For some of these men at least,

it enabled a certain sort of detachment from the pressure they had initially felt to be having sex. Don commented that after making a distinct choice not to pursue sex or sexual relationships in his early fifties that he felt much more able to be selective in his choice of intimate partners after this period. He also claimed choosing celibacy enabled him to enjoy the lack of sexual activity in his life:

> Don: I'm quite happy not to have sex with other people but I might flirt, I might go out for a meal go to the movies with somebody, but not sex (GT: OK) and I was quite happy doing that and I felt, after trying for a while I thought I don't actually *need* sex un- unless the right woman comes along kind of thing and you know–and I know that I actually went away and said well I *am* still very sexual but . . . I don't have to have this. (69, European)

Don reported not feeling particularly burdened by any feeling of being sexually 'driven' during his period of celibacy. This was a factor that he suggested at an earlier point in the interview had enabled him to be more selective of his partners and not focused on women as sexual objects. In stark contrast to this position he identified as his 'own', he described other men he had come to 'despise' for their 'bloody excuses' of always needing sex. This perhaps highlighted some reflexive recognition of the socially formed nature of men's sexual drives and that this drive does not always need to be constructed by men as all-encompassing and overwhelming. It may also be a form of reflexivity that he has been able to come to because of the time between his experience of celibacy and the interview itself. In other words, this 'perspective' he offers may not have been so clear while he was experiencing celibacy as a younger man (see Terry and Braun, 2009 for similar findings).

What was important in Don's account was the acceptance that while he was still 'sexual', he was not driven by this. He constructed his choice as giving him the space to recognise that his sexual 'needs' were not as important as he had previously thought (or even experienced). Perhaps, also within the subject positions available for men, the portrayal of a 'still existing' sexual desire was still deemed necessary to establish, maintain and protect their sense of masculine identity. However, this account, as did many others, presented celibacy as a valuable form of sexual expression for men, a form that is perhaps not as widely validated as it could be.

Bernard, like Don, was an older man at the time of the interview; however, his experience of celibacy was much more recent than Don's. He expressed a similar position to Don's, although his was couched more in terms of not wanting to be 'drawn in' by a woman's sexuality at the expense of other 'more important' characteristics:

> Bernard: I can appreciate women for their intelligence, their sociability, their company, minus the sex factor and that means they have to perform better in the other areas to hold my attention 'cause otherwise I'm not going to give them my time. I *am* a

> person sought after by women because I've always got something to say, always got a point of a view I'm a respected person in my community, a professional, two kids I'm proud of, a home I own . . . I'm financial I got something to say, I'm a spiritual person and I'm a good friend but only to someone who I consider has some decent values as a female, and most haven't I'm sorry to tell you. (73, European-born New Zealander)

Repeated within Bernard's interview, more so than in many of the other men's, was the constant reminder that he *did* still desire sex, he had simply chosen not to have it so as to make sure relationships occurred on his terms. This was possibly a reflection of his age at the time of his celibacy, as vehemently articulating the problems he had with many women strategically located his celibacy as voluntary, possibly pre-empting any questions about his virility. Bernard repeatedly emphasised that he was still *sexually* attractive to women, however, he had chosen not to make himself sexually *available*.

The choice to be celibate, while described in different ways by Bernard and Don, was framed as giving them the space to assess their relationships without them being 'reduced' to sex. They both spoke of doing something that Roger, another interviewee, described as 'getting his head on straighter' or not allowing their lives to be defined by their sexual drives. Choice was integral in their descriptions, because without it, they argued, they were continuously dealing with 'sexual pressure' from 'society' or from the drives located within their own bodies.

In Roger's account, even more so than in Don's, was an ambivalence to the 'need for sex'. In contrast to Martin's comment about drinking beer, Roger suggested that making his choice to be celibate had left him with no sense of having a deficient life in any way (although that depends on how one views ice cream!):

> Roger: not having sex is kind of kind of like not having ice cream. I can't say I don't miss it but I don't have a problem with [that] I don't need to put anything else in its place, I don't think I mean, I, it's not something I've really thought about to be honest. (48, Caucasian)

Although there was a lot of variance in the reasons for, and length of time that the men were celibate, choice was a common theme in their accounts. Choice was also constructed in different ways and as having different implications (i.e. from abstaining from intimate relationships completely to abstaining from 'asking for sex' within a relationship where their partner showed no interest in it), however in all the accounts it served as a rhetorical device that allowed the men to justify the lack of sex in their lives and for the majority of them (Jonathan and perhaps Martin excluded), to describe a subjective sense of happiness and enjoyment of the state.

Overall, however, the message continued to be reinforced that, for the 'average' man, not having sex for an extended period of time is both difficult and contrary to the 'naturalness' of their sexual drive. The prevalence and power of the male sexual drive discourse has the potential to constitute the sense of a man's personal

sexuality as a need that must be 'managed' or 'controlled' rather than simply ignored or treated with ambivalence. Alan justified his choice not to have sex to members of his friendship group in the following way:

> Alan: it's contrary to what you actually desire you know in terms of your instincts and what your appetite is and it's actually withholding. It's actually denying that because it's you've got to accept that everyone wants, it's not like I don't want to have sex . . . but it's the fact that I'm putting a lid on that desire. (22, Pakeha)

The phrase 'putting a lid on that desire' portrays men who give up sex as attempting to stand in the face of an irresistible force. However, it draws out the following questions: Why do some men feel the need to put the brakes on the sexual imperative rather than rolling with it? Aside from religious conviction that sex should be confined until marriage, why would a man who benefits from the status quo of heterosexual practices and the discourses that uphold them, reject the place of sex in his life?

Writers such as McIntosh (2003) and Connell (2005) have suggested that men as a group tend to be supported and reinforced by many of the social structures in society, and are therefore less likely than women to want to change them. While it is clear that not all men benefit equally from this share of power, the majority of men who are complicit with hegemonic masculinity garner a degree of privilege by being so (Connell, 2005). It is typically marginalised groups that do not have the same access to resources that want to change the 'way things are'.

All of the men within this study were 'marked' by traits normally associated with hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand (i.e. all were white, heterosexually identified and had reasonable incomes), and yet they suggested that some key dominant constructions of heterosexual masculinity were not working for them. This sort of challenge to such constructions highlights the dangers of homogenising heterosexual men and masculinities, even for those men whose lives otherwise demonstrate privilege.

The next section in this article deals with another broad theme, and one that contrasts strongly with the notion of *celibacy as a problem*. It is the suggestion that for many men sex can be problematic, and that a choice to be celibate can provide an opportunity to negotiate heteronormative and alternative discourses in the formation of their identities.

Fixing sex?

Tied quite closely with many of the celibate men's motivations for their choice not to have sex was the way in which they had found sex and sexual relationships problematic. There were as many different variations on this theme as there were interviews, but for many of the men I interviewed, reports of sex as creating difficulties for themselves or others was common. Don, for instance, talked of

his 'disillusionment' with casual relationships, which he described as being more than a one night stand, but not lasting 'more than a month or so':

> Don: I first went celibate eighty sevenish I was kind of a bit disillusioned with what had happened in between the failure of my second marriage in seventy seven so it was a ten year period when I did have quite a lot of partners and at that point I can't stop I don't need this this is not getting me anywhere uh I feel vaguely they weren't one night stands but they might not last more than a month or so and either a dump or a dumpee be you know [laughs] one of us would get fed up with the other one and you'd think, awww shit there goes another one down the tubes you know . . . it's not what [either] of us were looking for obviously umm and I think I got sort of vaguely disillusioned cynical and thought well if somebody nice turns up it's different I'm not going to paint myself into a corner but unless that happens. (69, European)

In this extract Don implicitly equated relationships that have been begun primarily as sexual encounters with failure. This was a common sort of formulation throughout the interviews, which relied on a view of sexually premised relationships as superficial, not allowing as much 'depth' or as valuable a 'connection' in comparison to relationships 'grounded' in other areas of intimacy. There was also an implicit assumption that relies on the male sex drive being so strong that it 'hooks' or 'traps' men into being with a woman in the absence of any other kind of connection they might want from the relationship and for Don at least this is not ideal. At a surface level, this seems to work against the tropes of authors such as John Gray (1995) who have suggested that 'great sex' is foundational to a 'great relationship', especially for men. However, the formulation still relied on the premise that a relationship at some point does need great sex, it just should not be the defining aspect of it. Andrew also spoke of a relationship that started causing problems for him when it became sexual:

> Andrew: yeah so in some ways there wasn't a whole lot of emotional attachment. I mean, I liked the person enough to get physical and being with each other was kinda cool but in some ways it was um it was um an unhealthy relationship given what I specify as a healthy relationship. (31, NZ European)

Andrew described the principles of a 'healthy' relationship as involving a decision not to engage in intercourse with a person unless he was in a long-term monogamous relationship with them, preferably (but not necessarily restricted to) marriage. He also suggested that sexual intimacy needed to be positively correlated with commitment (i.e. the greater the commitment the greater the intimacy 'allowed'). Andrew's description of this relationship suggested that it started with a sexual component, which, similar to Don's account, was reported as being problematic. Andy, who had reported that his experience of relationships was 'limited' (i.e. his current partner was his first intimate relationship after a number of years being celibate), relied on an interpretation of other people's experiences to also

suggest that relationships where people had 'gone in for sex' were guaranteed to fail:

> Andy: I've just seen so many problems with it, that people walk in and out of relationships and the primary cause has been they gone in it for sex and it hasn't worked and um yeah it busted things up they've had kids and left kids and the kids get messed up and the whole thing. (40, European)

Damien's account, in contrast, was situated within the context of his (ended) marriage. He related his experience of being 'rejected' by his partner for sex as being 'hurtful'. He described a steady reduction in sex over the last few years of his marriage until it 'happened' once a year on average, with those times being 'awful'. He defined his experience of celibacy as initially involuntary, until he purposefully decided not to ask for sex, find sex elsewhere, or try to raise 'sexual energy' in the relationship. He described the relationship as having 'other problems' but the hurt caused by sexual rejection as being the primary motivating force for deciding not to engage in sexual activity with other people:

> Damien: later though on though in the marriage it became . . . an active decision, because I was the one asking for it and the I guess the male ego getting in there of asking for it and being sort of well told no and then being hurt by refusal so it became actively much easier not to ask and then not to then not to be hurt so it so it was an active sort of decision then to say it's easier not to ask not to and not to be told no so (GT: mmn) so it sort of got to the stage where stage of if you don't ask then you don't get hurt. (51, European)

While this account has more in common with stories of 'involuntary' celibacy within a relationship (see for instance Donnelly and Burgess, 2008), Damien argued that his voluntary choices to remaining monogamous and the decision not to 'bother' his wife for sex allowed him a sense of control over the situation ('if you don't ask then you don't get hurt').

As with all of the sub themes, the need to control complication was articulated in different ways, but was particularly consistent within the interviews and quite clearly tied to the concept of choice. The following section will discuss this in more detail.

Controlling complication

Within many of the accounts, sex was constructed as making things more complicated than simple platonic relationships. Many of the men described the way that sex seemed to take a relationship to a new level (either through their experience or through observation), complicating things to some extent. The choice to be celibate then can be understood as a form of control over these complications, giving the men the space to avoid relationships because of their commitment to avoid sex.

The notion of a male sexual drive was such a powerful discourse in these men's lives that they framed themselves as needing to actively avoid both sex and relationships in order to gain control over their 'second brain' (Potts, 2002).

Roger's description of his difficulty with sexual relationships stemmed from what he felt was a hidden assumption that once a relationship became sexual then certain things were expected of him:

> Roger: umm I guess I was realising that I was had some pretty strong allergies to certain aspects of the relationships I'd had–it felt like umm sex was almost creating problems in the relationship for me and partly that it was setting up a situation where rightly or wrongly I felt like I was starting to become property or that I had a some sort of set of obligations that I didn't really understand or had signed up to and a sense of umm being needed and in ways that were not sort of lightly discharged or put off or optional or anything like that. (48, Caucasian)

Roger seems to be articulating both an experience of the have/hold discourse (Hollway, 1984) in practice and of a need to resist it. He described a sense of being needed by his female partners that he said he found repellent. He reported that this sense of being needed only seemed to arise when the relationship became sexual. The have/hold discourse suggests that women allow men to have sex with them in exchange for secure relationships, for Roger this had created a sense of being 'trapped'. He added that for him this sense of sex having 'consequences' took away from or burdened the pleasure of sexual experience. Roger described his experience of celibacy then as an avoidance of this added, hidden complication that he had found within the context of previous relationships. In contrast, and after more than 10 years of celibacy, Jonathan commented that he had significantly changed his position to one of desiring relationships. He blamed his struggles with mental health and an 'emotional breakdown' on the lack of intimacy in his life. Rather than seeking sex for sex's sake however, he was insistent that his first experience of sex be found within a secure long-term relationship:

> Jonathan: I picked up the idea that [clears throat] possibly its more enjoyable I–I when that kind of trust exists there between partners that it's safer from the point of view of STDs and all that kind of stuff–and suppose another sort of practical fact for me is you know now I'm so ridiculously old and have had no sex [laughs] I mean this is something that I'm obviously going to be more than a little bit self-conscious of when I come to a situation of having sex and you know practically I mean a one night stand situation I mean I think if the other partner found out that I haven't had sex they'd probably scoff and you know bugger off. I think my from my personal point of view I'm much I'm better off taking it slowly essentially. (32, Caucasian)

Jonathan, being 32 at the time of the interview, argued that his lack of experience at that age would make for difficulty in a one-off sexual encounter. Potts (2002), among others, talks of the notion of 'sexpertise' or the construction that men

should implicitly know what is expected from them in sexual encounters and to provide skill, even when they have no sexual experience. Jonathan described this pressure as anxiety-provoking and he emphasised the safety and level of trust he would expect from a committed relationship, which would allow him control over his worries and fear.

This sort of description of some committed relationships as providing similar security and control to celibacy was also a common thread of discussion. For the majority of the men, the decision to shift from a celibate state would require at least the probability of a long-term committed relationship. Andrew, Don and Bernard, in the following extracts, describe the way in which the problematic aspects of sexual relationships are controlled for them by emphasising commitment first and sexual intimacy later:

> Andrew: I suppose it depends on what level of intimacy you're talking about and that's where probably that's where sex before marriage would come into it um it's like–for me level of intimacy has to coincide with level of commitment. In a relationship an ultimate level of intimacy goes with ultimate level of commitment. (31, NZ European)

> Don: and if I did and I think I consciously thought it doesn't mean that I'm not male or that I'm not sexual or anything like that it's just a kind of lifestyle choice in a way and it can only be ended by meeting exactly the right person and carefully sussing them out before committing to another sexual relationship after of course an increasingly long break of years. (69, European)

> Bernard: I love sex but I'm unless I've got [coughs] a really, really committed relationship I'm not going to play the sex game because then I want it and I don't want to become addicted to something I can't control my I'm too into keeping today, *wow*, totally in my hands not waiting for the phone to ring not waiting for the email to come through I don't want that unless it's a committed relationship then I'll be all in. (73, European-born New Zealander)

Discussion

Sex, across the interviews in this study, was described in different ways as being an imperative for men, particularly within the context of intimate (rather than platonic) relationships. These accounts, of men who have deliberately given up sex, however, suggested that some men may experience sex as problematic in certain contexts. Within the stories of the men I interviewed, celibacy was presented as one way of allowing them control over something they had constructed as otherwise uncontrollable. At the very least, they suggested that celibacy gave them a chance to focus on other non-sexual aspects of their relationships with other people and build intimate relationships on that foundation.

What these accounts offer us, are descriptions of men making a choice in order to exert control over their sexual desires. Such accounts, although not necessarily providing alternative subject positions for the *majority* of men, do provide some small disruption to the position that men's sexual desires need to be expressed with a sense of urgency and consistency. These men, many of whom, had indicated they had gone quite long periods without a sexual partner, although generally quite direct in articulating their desire for sexual activity, were more interested in providing a sense of control to sexual expression. There are some positive implications for this perspective, however, there is also some question as to *how* alternative these accounts are when they contain such traditionally masculine components as 'self-control', autonomy and in some cases outright misogyny.

Conclusions

Certainly there is a lot more untapped potential in the study of celibacy (and other such identities as asexuality), especially as it arises in the experiences of men and disrupts notions of an 'all-powerful male' sex drive. As Potts (2002) has suggested, offering celibacy as a normalised sexual alternative, to both men and women irrespective of sexual preference has liberatory value. Along with other 'outlaw' events (i.e. built from alternative discourses and subject positions), accounts of celibacy may well open up the potential for enlarging definitions of sexuality and particularly sexual expression. Accounts such as the ones in this article have the potential to help increase the common-sense lexicon of sexuality to include celibacy as an option for more than clergy within Catholic circles and as associated with the 'keeping pure' movement amongst young Christians.

While such issues as class, education and race were not discussed in this article, there is perhaps some expectation that these sorts of intersection will provide men with greater access to the discourses and subject positions that enable such 'outlaw' sexualities. Neoliberal discourse emphasises the value of choice and individual identity (Rose, 1996), and as these sorts of discourse are more readily available and taken up by those within privileged social categories (Hodgetts et al., 2004), it is likely that the choice to be celibate remains one that only relatively privileged men with reasonable 'masculine capital' (Anderson, 2009) may feel capable of making.

This is but a small step in helping to understand the myriad ways in which heterosexual men can experience their sexuality (even without having sex), and was limited by being a relatively small, homogenous/non-representative sample (by ethnicity, class and income). Accumulated evidence provided by further research in this and similar areas (such as male asexuality) has the potential to unsettle and even disrupt 'taken-for-granted' assumptions associated with heterosexual masculinities.

Notes

1. This was estimated at 16 years based upon the New Zealand age of consent (16) and his age at the time of the interview (32).
2. Pakeha is the Maori term for New Zealanders of European descent and is occasionally a disputed term, particularly by those to whom it is applied. This was evidenced in the way men of the same ethnicity referred to themselves using a number of descriptors, including the ethnicity blind 'New Zealander': a term generally only used by white New Zealanders to describe their ethnicity. Because of this discrepancy, the men's *self-described* ethnicity will be used at the end of the extracts.
3. One of the issues I faced when recruiting men, was that some of the prospective participants were a little reticent about face-to-face or even phone interviews.

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