



“I Wanted to Feel Like a Man Again”: Hegemonic Masculinity in Relation to the Purchase of Street-Level Sex

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This article examines the narratives of men who purchase sex from street-level providers in a mid-sized city in Western Canada. We explore what men’s stories tell us about how masculinity is constructed in relation to street sex work. These men narrated their purchase of sex as attempts to exercise or lay claim to male power, privilege, and authority; at the same time, research reveals how tenuous this arrangement is for men. Study participants drew on conventional heterosexual masculine scripts to rationalize their actions and behaviors. Their stories reveal that their purchase of street-level sex is motivated by a sense of failure to successfully align with classed and gendered norms of hegemonic masculinity in which the purchase of sex was an attempt to “feel like a man again.” In this article, we move beyond the notion that static “types” of men purchase sex, highlighting instead that sex work customers are complex social actors with multifaceted reasons for purchasing sex but that are nonetheless inseparable from socially valorized forms of masculine comportment. We conclude that hegemonic masculinity is not only injurious to some men, but also to the sex workers on whom it is enacted.

Keywords: street level sex, sex work customers, hegemonic masculinity, classed and gendered scripts

INTRODUCTION

It has become customary in the sex work “customer” literature to begin with a statement about how the “demand” side of the sex industry is woefully understudied (Sawyer et al., 2001; Monto, 2004; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015). However, while it is true much less is known about buying than selling sex, there is a growing body of literature that attempts to understand who purchases sex, and for what reasons. This scholarship has started to address a range of questions concerning the men that purchase sex, including understanding the demographic features of this population, as well as the socioeconomic determinants and psychosocial motivations for purchasing sex.

Most of this research has focused on the experiences of men who buy sex in off-street venues, including escort agencies, massage parlors, and through online or print ads. This focus on off-street venues reflects in part the fact that men who purchase street-based sex comprise a hidden and hard-to-access population. In addition, while this literature has started to explore some of the motivations that underlie men’s motivations to purchase sex, what is still missing from these studies is a sophisticated understanding of how gender, especially dominant and hegemonic notions of masculinity, shapes these motivations.

This article addresses this gap by reporting from the results of a qualitative research study that had two purposes: first, to develop and pilot strategies to recruit members of this hard-to-reach population, and second, to use a narrative approach to uncover and map the complex social relations and discourses of men who buy sex from street sex workers. Using two different recruitment strategies including street sex worker referrals ($n = 7$) and local web-based classified advertisements ($n = 6$) we recruited 13 men who bought sex from the street at least once between 2012 and 2014 to participate in in-person, narrative style interviews, conducted by the first author. The interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach; this approach revealed, first, how hegemonic notions of performative heterosexual masculinity shaped how the respondents themselves understood their motivations to buy sex, and second, the important role that feelings of inadequacy, failure, and vulnerability play in motivating men to purchase sex. For those respondents that provided complete narratives we did a secondary narrative analysis which takes the story as the object of investigation.

We begin below with an overview of the customer literature, setting our work in context with particular attention to masculinity theories vis-à-vis sex work customers. We then provide a high-level overview of the findings of the study, including a discussion of recruitment and interview strategies. We then present three of the stories of our respondents, selected as being representative and emblematic of the narratives provided by the men that we interviewed. We conclude with a brief discussion that highlights how masculinity is discursively negotiated in relation to sex work, and street sex work in particular.

Literature Review

The growing consensus in the empirical literature is that the people most likely to purchase sex in Canada and the US are white, middle-aged, and middle-classed men (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 1994; Monto, 2004; Pitts et al., 2004; Lowman and Atchison, 2006; Sanders, 2008; Atchison, 2010; Atchison and Burnett, 2016). Two large Canadian surveys completed in the past decade indicate that approximately 70% of sex buyers identify as White, are on average 41 years of age, and tend to have a slightly higher than average educational attainment and income (Atchison, 2010; Atchison and Burnett, 2016). Approximately 1/3 of sex buyers report having a completed university degree, 2/3 indicate they are employed full-time, and they, on average, report earning between \$60,000 and \$79,999 per year (Atchison, 2010; Atchison and Burnett, 2016). These studies further find that just less than half of men who purchase sex are married, although another 25% report having regular non-commercial sexual partners (Monto, 2004; Lowman and Atchison, 2006; Atchison, 2010; Atchison and Burnett, 2016).

This portrait of the “typical” sex buyer becomes complicated when recruitment strategies are considered. The above-mentioned national survey data was derived from convenience samples of men in Canada who volunteered to complete self-administered surveys. Many were recruited through purposive and viral sampling, primarily through advertisements posted on escort review boards and classified advertising websites (Atchison and Burnett, 2016). Such recruitment strategies are aimed at

obtaining a maximally diverse sample but given their focus on web-based recruitment tend to skew toward off-street buyers. This is supported by the researchers’ own 2010 analysis of 861 research participants, in which only 3.3% reported exclusively purchasing sex on street whereas 35.4% exclusively purchased sex off street. When men were asked where they *preferred* to buy sex, 10.6% indicated the street while 43.1% indicated off street including escort agencies and massage parlors (Atchison, 2010). This suggests that such research underrepresents the men who cannot afford the higher cost of off-street sex.

A slightly different and more diverse portrait of who purchases sex emerges when the data gathered from captive samples of men enrolled in “John school” programs are considered. These are men charged with prostitution-related offenses who are required to attend, either as a condition of their sentences, or as an alternative to criminal convictions, programs that seek to change their attitudes toward women and sex work (Sawyer et al., 2001; Busch et al., 2002; Monto, 2004; Gordon-Lamoureaux, 2007). These samples of men tend to be less well educated and include a much higher representation of visible minorities and/or immigrants (Busch et al., 2002; Wortley et al., 2002; Hail-Jarvis, 2016). For example, a study of 366 men enrolled in diversion programs in Canada indicates only 18% have a completed university degree, and although the majority are employed full-time (81%), only 19% earn 60,000 per year or more (Wortley et al., 2002). Although these men were not asked their “race,” almost half reported that English was their second language (49%), suggesting a significant portion of these men were immigrants to Canada and possibly members of ethnic minority groups (Wortley et al., 2002).

Critics have suggested that the data from these studies is skewed given that these samples have been criminalized and are more likely to reflect the demographics “of the neighborhoods and individuals that are most targeted by police “sting” operations and other anti-prostitution initiatives” (Wortley and Fischer, 2002, p. 378) than a representative sample of men who purchase sex. Given these men’s less privileged social locations, as well as punitive laws combined with public attitudes and the stigma and discrimination associated with street-level sex, it is little wonder that it has been challenging for researchers to recruit men who purchase street-level sex for in person research.

The absence of literature on men who purchase street sex may also represent a bias on the part of researchers who see them as a less relevant population to study. Support for this claim lies in the literature that suggests the street-based sex work economy is a “marginal and declining sector” (Bernstein, 2001; Weitzer, 2009; Huff, 2011). Street-level buyers are often framed as unsophisticated, only in search of quick, impersonal, sexual release (Bernstein, 2001). Given that off-street sex work interactions are more likely to be considered a “meaningful and authentic form of interpersonal exchange,” some researchers may consider these buyers a richer site for academic inquiry (Bernstein, 2001, 401; see also Weitzer, 2009; Huff, 2011). And yet, given that street-level sex work persists despite the burgeoning of online sex work environments, and that street-level workers consistently report the highest rates of harassment and violence (Church et al., 2001; Plumridge and Abel, 2001; Monto, 2004; Shannon et al., 2009; Weitzer, 2009), it would seem that

this is a vital and perhaps more pressing population of men to understand in greater depth.

What we know about what motivates men to purchase sex comes from a variety of sources including large quantitative datasets. Joseph and Black (2012), for example, analyzed a sample of 1,180 men enrolled in an American John school to learn more about the relationship between gender, violence, and buying sex. They asked men questions designed to elicit their support for rape myths and their likelihood of committing sexual assault and concluded there were two “types” of masculinities associated with the purchase of sex: “consumer masculinities” and “fragile masculinities” (Joseph and Black, 2012). Men who fit their consumer model purported to find the purchase of sex titillating, a recreational activity in which they are provided with a wide variety of partners and sex acts without the responsibilities of conventional committed heterosexual relationships. These are men who embrace hegemonic masculine discourses and believe that women are sexual objects who are there to satisfy their sexual needs and desires. On the other hand, they describe men who fit within the fragile masculinity model as those who feel less comfortable with, and attractive to, women and are generally unsuccessful in the sexual marketplace. The authors conclude that while common sense might indicate that men who fall within the consumer masculinities category might be more dangerous to women—in that the associated qualities more closely match traditional understandings of sexually aggressive and dominant masculinities—it is men who fall in the fragile masculine category who are the most likely to support rape myths and commit sexual assault (Joseph and Black, 2012). In other words, men who feel emasculated by women tend to harbor more aggression toward them. This finding builds on that of Busch et al. (2002) who, using a similar data set, found that “less masculine” men are more likely to be violent, “perhaps in an effort to act in a more stereotypically manly way” (p. 1095).

Such studies are important for emphasizing the role of gender in shaping men’s motivations and experiences (Monto and McRee, 2005; Joseph and Black, 2012). This shifts the emphasis away from psychological reasons for purchasing sex toward a broader understanding of how social context produces gender-based norms and inequalities. At the same time, this and other similar type studies tend to produce essentializing “typologies” (see for example, Sawyer et al., 2001; Busch et al., 2002) that are based on essentialized ideas of an “unwavering masculinity” (Bernstein, 2001, p. 396). Such characterizations do not acknowledge the way in which gender is relational, produced and reproduced in relation to “other masculinities or femininities, through struggles for power and resources with a wider system of gender relations” (Lupton, 2000, p. S34). Further, and as already noted, these insights are drawn from non-probabilistic samples of men who have been criminalized for the purchase of sex, mandatorily enrolled in “reeducation,” and who likely feel compelled to participate in research in order to signal their willingness to be reformed (Lowman and Atchison, 2006). Under such conditions it is unlikely that men would challenge the conventional gendered scripts made available to them. Instead it is likely that they would tailor their masculine self to the situation and audience at hand (Arendell, 2003).

Other research that provides insight into the discursive rationales of men who purchase sex include anonymous user-generated data gathered from escort review boards—online venues where customers report on their sex work encounters, evaluate individual sex workers, and discuss their considerations and strategies for purchasing sex (see for instance, Holt and Blevins, 2007; Pettinger, 2011; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012). Analysis of these forums highlight how men explain their purchase of sex by drawing on familiar gendered scripts that men have a biological imperative for sex and are entitled to women’s bodies. These gendered discourses are rationalized within the consumer logic of supply and demand, whereby the purchase of sex is a legitimate expression of consumer choice (Bernstein, 2001; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Pettinger, 2011). At the same time, this research reveals that men are motivated out of a desire for “bounded intimacy” (Bernstein, 2001)—i.e., desire for an “authentic” meaningful connection albeit within a bracketed space of no real commitment or responsibility (Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015). This is interpreted as men’s desire to maintain the heterosexual fantasy of having a “girlfriend experience” without the “hassle” (Huff, 2011). Men on these sites were most satisfied by sex workers who embodied erotic, esthetic, and emotional ideals including “clichéd femininity”—i.e., sexy and flirtatious while remaining sweet and attentive—and who place few boundaries on what they won’t do (Pettinger, 2011; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012).

What is missing in these studies is a sophisticated understanding of how gender shapes men’s motivations. In some of these descriptions masculinity is glossed over, and treated as a fixed entity, rather than a performance that is negotiated within different terrains of power and control (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It is relevant, for instance, that the men who post to these review forums are writing for an audience of like-minded but anonymous men. Not only are men likely to exaggerate their claims to hegemonic masculinity within these kinds of homosocial environments, but the venue specifically calls for men to sexualize and objectify women (Allen, 2005; Nixon, 2009). As a result their comments are unlikely to reveal more than what is considered culturally relevant and meaningful within such settings. Furthermore, while the above studies note that street sex customers sometimes post to these sites, the majority of the data comes from men who solicit sex from indoor independent and agency-based providers and is unlikely to gain insight into masculine hierarchies crosscut by class, race, and dis/ability.

There is also a small body of qualitative research that attempts to understand men’s subjective experience of purchasing sex (Holzman and Pine, 1982; Plumridge et al., 1997; Bernstein, 2001; Sanders, 2008; Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015). The bulk of this research similarly focuses on the customers of indoor workers and again privileges the experiences and worldviews of middle-class men who desire intimacy and regular relationships with sex workers in off-street locations. Huysamen and Boonzaier’s (Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015) study of 14 South African men who purchase sex, for instance, found that men’s motivations for purchasing sex parallel dominant discourses of heterosexuality and conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. Here as in other studies, the authors point to the inherent contradictions of men’s desires. They want non-committal sexual pleasure on demand at

a low price, but they want it to feel authentic, intimate, and as non-commercial as possible (Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015). While these men are willing to acknowledge that they pay for sex, they do not want to experience it as commercial *at the time*. A key way they are able to maintain this fiction is by focusing on the “mutuality” of the exchange (Plumridge et al., 1997). Men will highlight in their narratives, for instance, the sexual responsiveness of sex workers as evidence of their pleasure and desire. This is significant for men as it proves their “sexual competence” (Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015, 550). In a commercial sexual exchange, it becomes particularly important as it allows men to lay claim to conventional masculine appeal—as sexually voracious, but also sexually desirable and skilled (Sanders, 2008). This allows them to gloss over the aspect of the exchange that threatens their masculine identity. Huysamen and Boonzaier summarize by saying,

We suggest that by paying female sex workers for sex and, indeed, through talking about doing so in interviews, these men were ‘doing’ a certain, dominant kind of male (hetero)sexuality. We further suggest that for these participants, the client-sex worker transaction represented more than just an avenue for ‘relief’ from their sexual urges. It represented a context where they sought to gain affirmation of their masculinity, sexual skill and sexual desirability to women, a reinforcement of hypermasculinity (2015, p. 551).

These comments, which focus on “affirmation” and “reinforcement,” suggest that hegemonic masculinity is well within the grasp of these men. Purchasing sex is just further validation of their masculine identities. While we hear little from the men themselves in this article, they are positioned as White middle class men living in a South African context. What is interesting to consider is how that privilege might have determined the cultural and sexualized scripts they were willing to draw on.

Masculinity is not one thing, but a wide range of embodiments, behaviors, practices, relationships, and ideologies that are used to define who men are, and who they are not (Connell, 1991; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; West, 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Hollander, 2014). At the same time it is widely agreed that certain masculine embodiments are valorized over others. Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity “that a society views as most important to being male” and which “work in relationship to elements society views as being antithetical to maleness” (West, 2001, 372). In North America, hegemonic masculinity is closely associated with a range of what might be considered “positive” and “negative” attributes including, for instance, physical strength or resilience, wage labor and the ability to provide, heterosexual desire and potency, fatherhood, and emotional stoicism balanced with “appropriate” displays of aggression. At the same time, caution Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity cannot be reduced to an assemblage of traits, but is rather “a pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set role of expectations or an identity) that allows *men’s dominance over women to continue*” that is always relational (832, emphasis added). Furthermore, as a discursive

set of ideals, hegemonic masculinity is something to which men aspire. It is a moving target that is rarely reached and not easily maintained. It is therefore better thought of as a “perpetual quest” whereby “men are ceaselessly at risk of being considered insufficiently masculine” (Joseph and Black, 2012, 488). Within this context men must constantly perform hegemonic masculinity, a process that is more challenging for some than others.

A key site at which men prove their masculine worth, and where they may find their masculinity threatened, is in the context of paid labor. This context is central to masculine identity, status, and power because “employment provides the interrelated economic resources and symbolic benefits of wages/salaries, skills and experience, [and] career progress” which in turn confers power, privilege and authority (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, p. 6; Riessman, 2003). Not all men are afforded the same economic opportunities, and hegemonic masculinity is therefore interpreted and realized based on one’s position within the labor hierarchy (a hierarchy that intersects with other hierarchical systems of oppression, namely race, sexual orientation, and ability but which are not discussed here given space constraints). For instance, during industrialization, men who worked manual labor jobs were seen as quintessentially masculine and occupied a position of discursive respectability in relation to middle class men (Nixon, 2009). Demonstrations of physical strength, endurance, and resilience engendered respect and were a source of pride which in turn translated into power and authority in the home (Nixon, 2009). For many occupying this class position, “manual labour [was seen as] imbued with a masculine tone and nature that rends it positively expressive of more than its intrinsic focus in work” (Willis, 1977, 148 as quoted in Nixon, 2009, 309). Overtime and with deindustrialization manual labor became less valorized. As mechanized systems replaced manual labor jobs, a middle class, more “intellectual,” masculinity emerged as more powerful (Nixon, 2009). In response, working class men’s claim to power and authority in the home and elsewhere became increasingly insecure and many struggled to adapt (Carrigan et al., 1985).

Connell (1991) discusses this in his study of young men who “exist on the fringe of the labor market” (145), and who have therefore failed to live up to basic societal expectations of what it means to be a man. It is difficult for men living in poverty to “construct hegemonic masculinity in a subordinated class situation where the claim to power that is central in hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by the facts of economic and cultural weakness” (Connell, 1991, p. 165). One response is for men to perform what has been referred to as “protest masculinities” which includes “a pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings, sometimes among ethnically marginalized men, which embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). Central to these masculine enactments are “fucking and fighting” (Connell, 1991, p. 167) or as Groes-Green (2009) states, “it seems that sexuality and violence emerge as bifurcated reactions to the problem of an unstable male authority brought about by unemployment and poverty” (p. 424). Specifically, men who have few marketable skills, and consequently can’t find work, often lose

the institutional benefits of patriarchy and therefore the performance of masculinity becomes paramount. In response, men may engage in “masculinizing practices” (Frank, 2003), which include performances such as acting tough, inviting aggression, asserting heterosexuality through sexual bragging and conquest, and belittling women. While this may look different in other social-culture contexts [see Hollander (2014), for some African men’s response to state collapse] in a North American context, violence and sexual conquest are considered legible masculinizing practices. This is relevant for understanding men who purchase street-level sex because as our sample demonstrates, many occupy low socioeconomic class positions which shapes their choice in sex work venue and their sex work interactions. We suggest this has implications for understanding the disproportionate levels of aggression and violence experienced by street-level sex workers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The lack of attention to men who buy street-level sex led our research team to develop a qualitative research study with two primary purposes. First was to determine and test recruitment methods for interviewing the hidden and hard-to-reach population of men who purchase street-level sex. The second was to contribute to understanding the complex social relations that shape street purchasers’ decisions to buy sex. This project received ethical review and approval from the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board. Here we report on narrative interviews with 13 men who bought sex from the street at least once between 2012 and 2014. Men were recruited through two different recruitment strategies including street sex worker referrals ($n = 7$) and local web-based classified advertisements ($n = 6$). The benefits and challenges of these two approaches require a separate article length discussion, but in sum the former recruitment strategy proved challenging as it took a period of five months to complete a small number of interviews whereas the later strategy yielded more potential participants than could be accommodated with all interviews completed in two weeks. Advertising online, but doing so through local classifieds rather than online escort review forums, proved to be a successful way to recruit men who purchase street-level sex into research.

Participants

Mirroring what is found in the literature, the men who participated in this research study were primarily White ($n = 12$) and middle aged (mean 41). However, this was the only point of concordance between our sample and demographics that have been reported in the literature. Recall that Atchison’s (Atchison, 2010, 2016) two large surveys of men who purchase (primarily) off-street sex in Canada found that these men had slightly higher than average incomes and educational attainment, and that close to 3/4 of respondents were either partnered or married. In contrast, almost all of our respondents were single ($n = 12$). What’s more, few could be properly described as “middle-class.” The majority ($n = 10$) described working class backgrounds and reported struggling with mental health and addiction. Almost half experienced acute periods of poverty and homelessness in their lifetime ($n = 6$). Further, unlike the men described in the

literature who largely report full-time employment, two-thirds of our sample were unemployed ($n = 9$). Those that described their past or current work history described performing skilled and unskilled manual labor jobs ($n = 12$). This sample thus looks more like the captive samples of men enrolled in “John schools” (Wortley et al., 2002) and at the same time further underlines that the population of men who buy sex on the street are more likely to come from socio-economic disadvantage. It should be noted, however, that relative to street sex workers these men are relatively privileged—i.e., from a sex worker perspective these men’s ability to access the disposable income to purchase sex may distinguish them as middle-class thus maintaining the kind of gendered power dynamic that generally characterizes the sex-work transaction.

Procedures

Interviews averaged 1.5 h in length and took a semistructured interview format that was designed to elicit narrative responses. A narrative approach to data collection was chosen as it enables people to tell their own stories in a way they find significant. It encourages research participants to move beyond stereotypical scripts and behaviors and articulate subjective tensions and contradictions, which can reveal “the deepest structures of the social world” (Bourdieu et al., 1993, p. 511, as cited in Riessman, 2003, p. 24). Given the interview focus on masculinity, it is noteworthy that these were cross-gender interviews, conducted by a White female researcher with significant experience interviewing vulnerable populations on sensitive subjects related to sexuality and sex work. Although close in age to most participants, the researcher’s higher level of education means that she was likely perceived as occupying a more privileged class position than participants. These men’s narratives were therefore performed within a bracketed space in which “social structures of inequality constrain lives and possibilities for narrating them” (Riessman, 2003, p. 8). Unlike the narratives of men shared in other studies, these men by and large did not enjoy the status and privilege associated with White middle-class masculinity. In particular, the identity and status of the interviewer may potentially have thrown into greater relief the challenges that marginalized men face in narrating and performing hegemonic or normative masculinities (Connell, 1987), a possibility that we expand on further in our findings.

Measures

While generally narrative style interviews only provide minimal guiding questions, allowing the participant to construct their own story (Riessman, 2003), our interview guide included both guided and targeted questions. This was strategic so as to allow men to provide reflexive accounts of their lives, while asking opportunistic questions of a rarely studied research population. Practically this involved inviting participants to talk about anything they thought was important or relevant at the start of the interview and then moving to broad questions that included, “Can you tell me about the first time you purchased sex?” and “What is purchasing sex about for you?” These were followed toward the end of the interview with more specific questions about their understanding and opinion of sex work laws as well as demographic questions

regarding their age, citizenship, marital and employment statuses. This semistructured narrative approach proved to be useful as some men found general open-ended questions discomfiting, and would only respond to specific questions. In the end, this mixed format was useful as it allowed us to accommodate men's differing communication styles, while producing highly relevant and rich data with consistent themes. For example, regardless of whether men provided complete stories of their lives, or snapshots in response to specific questioning, we found consistently that these men grappled with feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, and achieving hegemonic masculine norms.

Our initial analysis drew on grounded theory in that themed categories were revealed inductively, through careful and repeated review of data, rather than using a fixed category system derived *a priori* from the literature (Moertl et al., 2010). In other words, we did not code the data for themes found in the literature, rather themes developed from our analysis of the stories these men told. Once key ideas and concepts became apparent, and a more nuanced understanding of how gender shaped these men's motivations was revealed, we took a narrative approach to those interviews that were told as complete narratives. This secondary focus on stories highlights what is meaningful and significant to the person telling the story and, in the process, reveals them as complex social actors who defy simple categorization and abstraction (Riessman, 2003). We relied on the analytical steps outlined in Fraser's (Fraser, 2004) seven step approach to narrative analysis, with particular attention to questions outlined in step five, "linking the personal with the political" (p. 193). Thus, we queried relationships between the stories and specific discourses, in this case hegemonic masculinities, so that we could consider how the stories confirm or resist these discourses. As Riessman (2002) notes, "individual narratives are situated in particular interactions, but also in social, cultural, and institutional discourses, which must be brought to bear to interpret them" (p. 256).

By giving these men voice to tell their stories in this way, we see how they grapple with contradictory ideas about what it means to be a "man" while occupying marginalized social locations. In the end, we did a complete narrative analysis of five of the more complete stories, of which we highlight three here (due to space constraints).

RESULTS

A grounded theory approach allowed us to tease out two significant social processes operating at the juncture of participants' relationship to hegemonic masculinity. Every participant referenced the idea that sexual desire is a rationale for purchasing sex, making it a numerically dominant category. This echoes findings from other studies which indicate men draw on hegemonic heteronormative scripts to justify the purchase of sex (Sanders, 2008; Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015). The second major social process is the interaction between feelings of inadequacy, failure, and vulnerability and men's motivation to purchase sex. In order to explore these complex relationships, we highlight the stories of three of the study participants in some considerable detail. While these stories were chosen in part to exemplify the social processes

observed in the interviews, focusing on three narratives in details allows us to place their decisions to buy sex within the social and cultural context of their own lives. Their stories illustrate some of the dominant, overlapping and very often, contradictory discursive constructions of masculinity the men across our sample employ to rationalize their purchase of street-level sex.

Warren

Warren is 41 and single. He is the only person from an ethnic minority who participated in the study. Although unemployed at the time of the interview, he was well-groomed and wearing expensive and trendy sports attire. When asked to describe the first time he had purchased sex, Warren provided a long and detailed account of his early life with little prompting. He describes growing up in a stable Catholic household where he was afforded many opportunities. He was someone who did well academically at the private school he attended, and earned a scholarship for university. He talked about how, during his high school years, he only had sex with two girls, both of whom he was in committed relationships with at the time. All this changed when Warren started dating his third girlfriend. Shortly after they began dating, she moved across the country to attend college and asked Warren to go with her. Even though it was a major sacrifice, Warren was in love and decided to follow. As he describes that time in his life,

I lived in the same house since I was born to age nineteen, so to give up your little Jordan collection you had when you were thirteen, your little first place trophy for that, everything. Sort of box it up, get rid of it, put it in storage, jump in a truck and sort of drive out here from [province] without *any* friends who you grew up with, cub scouts, anything like that. That was really, really tough for me [...]

This story is elaborated on significantly and is returned to at several points in Warren's story. He describes sacrificing a "good," and as he describes later, "Rockwellian" life, for a woman who would hurt him deeply.

The betrayal began when Warren read his girlfriend's diary. In it he learned that she didn't love him and that she had invited him to move with her to ease the transition to a new school and province. On top of this revelation, Warren learned that his girlfriend had been lying about her sexual history. Rather than being sexually limited in experience as Warren had been led to believe:

She had had threesomes, been with girls, and to me—not that I was this very sheltered Roman Catholic kid, but that was just, very, very shocking to me. And that's, sort of where I guess, like in a sense, just became unhinged. Sorry, unhinged is totally the wrong word there. Just sort of gave up on that whole Rockwellian romantic white picket fence sort of notion, 'this is going to work out, we're both going to graduate.'

He pinpoints this as a pivotal time; one that he feels fundamentally changed the direction of his life when he says that:

I was just super, super crushed from the girlfriend, kind of thing. We'd go out to a bar, or a club- [...] And we'd go out there, and I'm new to the city. I don't- honestly, I don't know anyone besides my girlfriend, and she'd sort of leave me alone [...] And I was just sort of left alone in a corner. And I'm not the- and this hurt. Obviously. Being alienated, this and that, thinking, hey, I'd get some introductions, I'd expand my social circle of friends and sort of not having that. And I can't- sort of sitting across from you and talking to you about it, I can't, honestly, even explain, sorry, how that felt to give up absolutely everything I had- [...] And so I've known you since you had baby teeth to since you had your acne breakout, since you got your heart broken by your first boyfriend, to since you got accepted to [university]. [...] So that was a big deal. To read that journal, diary entry- to be alienated like that in a bar. To physically feel that, it kind of did more to me than I could sit across here and explain to you [...] And this is years, years ago [...] You know what I mean? Like *years* ago.

Warren goes on to explain that this is when he began to purchase sex, first from indoor sex workers, and later outdoor sex workers as well.

I just went on a spree- and sorry to say it like that, just on, "Hey, I'm alone, I'm here" and I think almost each night, if not sometimes twice a night, I would go and I would use an escort. And I felt great about it! Like I don't know why, but I just felt really, really great about it. If it was almost- [...] and I hate to say it like sort of in a revenge sort of sense, but it was such a feeling, of sort of emptiness, that I created for myself [...] and I came out, it was an escort agency on like [street address] around that area. And I came out, had just 'done the deed' if you will, so you've sort of got that release, those endorphins kind of flowing, and the snow was falling, I was just waiting for a cab to get back home. And I felt great. It was sort of like a rebirth.

Later in the interview when he was asked to describe in more detail why purchasing sex made him feel so good, Warren said,

[...] you know what, actually, and I just recalled this right, I think in my head I wanted to catch up to her number: twenty. That she had been with twenty guys and twenty girls and threesomes. And I felt very, very inadequate coming out there, being out of my element- and sorry, I should've brought that up. It's just been so long since I've actually had that conscious thought of why this is the reason, but I think that was my reason. By the time she got back [from her xmas holiday back home] I wanted to have as many sexual partners as she did, you know, and sort of be on her level.

Warren's account makes clear that he locates his desire to buy sex as part of a strategy to even the playing field and to reassert his

self-esteem but even after they eventually broke up, he continued this pattern. He describes easily finding new girlfriends but each time there was an argument or things started to "go wrong," he would go on another "spree." In his words:

I know I was with three girls from an escort agency, street level worker, and I don't recall, it could've been another escort agency. But three girls, go home, and still go have sex with [girlfriend]. And for me and my- and I said this in another class, written down [...] that, "Joke's on you, ha-ha". Really, really malicious. Always protected. But wow, really, really...poor display in behavior in human ethics on, God, so many levels. Horrible.

It is significant that Warren had no problems meeting or as he describes, "hooking up with girls." As he describes, and as was observed, he was physically fit, conventionally attractive (he described having been a model), well spoken and sociable. While he would also go out and have non-commercial sex with women as well, he often turned to paying for sex. As he describes:

Like when I said, like, if something was going wrong in a relationship- I was generally always in one- boom, I'm going to kind of go out and, "Joke's on you, while you're sitting there thinking about me-I'm sorry for this, "Balls deep in some other girl". Did I have to pay for it? Unfortunately, yeah, so it's not like a real score or anything like that. It's... but, you know, while you're kind of doing that or cussing me out in your head, at least I'm doing something totally different. So it was sort of that little victory of winning to me, which is obviously maladaptive.

Over the course of the interview, Warren describes purchasing sex hundreds of times and although initially positive those experiences became increasingly negative for him. He told more than one story of being "duped" and "manipulated" by sex workers. One particularly detailed story involved paying for sex on the street and then having the sex worker steal money out of his wallet. When she runs away, Warren gives chase all the way to her apartment where he attempts to kick her door down to collect his money. These events resulted in Warren being arrested and later charged although he was able to pay restitution rather than serve jail time.

At this point in his narrative, Warren decides it is time to tell "the story" the one that he had been foreshadowing throughout our interview. As he says:

So this one killed me. And I'm going to get into this story now, the one I said I'd delve into. Hopefully that's cool. Hopefully it doesn't bother you. Hopefully, like you leave this room not thinking like, "Wow, I was sitting across from this guy and I had no clue", so I'm going to apologize. I was thinking to myself, *should I say this when I come into the room?* Just so you feel secure and everything.

To protect Warren's anonymity the next part of his narrative is condensed and summarized. He begins by telling about a special occasion a few years previous. He wanted to go out and celebrate and so he met up with two female acquaintances at the beginning of the night, had some drinks, and had non-commercial sex with them. He then took them out for dinner and to some local bars. His expectation was that both women would go home with him at the end of the night and have more sex. However, at some point in the night both women disappear. Warren describes feeling disappointed, hurt, and angry. He goes on to describe meeting a third unknown woman at the bar, going home with her, and having what he believed was consensual unpaid sex. However, after sex the woman asked for money. To Warren this was unconscionable and only compounded his earlier feelings. He responded by paying the woman, but also detaining her so that she spent a full hour in his company. Days later he was arrested on a series of charges. He then describes, in detail, going to court and being convicted. He did several years in prison and was placed on a sex offender list. Warren feels strongly that he was innocent of all charges, but because of his naiveté about the legal system and his poor legal representation, he was forced to enter a guilty plea. Warren finished his interview by saying that:

I've been guilty of a lot of things in my life. And honestly, on full accountability, I'm not shy in saying things. This is just one thing I did not do.

In sum, Warren describes a life full of potential that went horribly array following a sequence of events that began, in his telling, with the damage done to his self-confidence by a cold and capricious woman. These events, from his perspective, culminated in him being wrongly accused of a crime he says he didn't commit.

Bill

Bill is a White, retired, 74-year-old man who is married with grown children. He started out his story by distancing himself from the purchase of sex work by saying, "I'm not doing that anymore." He was uncomfortable talking about his history of purchasing sex and did not provide a linear narrative. What he was comfortable talking about was a sex worker with whom he had formed an emotional attachment and who led him to change his ways:

Well right now, I'm not doing that anymore. The one girl that I- became a friend of mine and...it took a long time for her to trust me, like, as a man, as a friend [...] But she has now, and I'm happy as hell because she is so much better now than she was when she's not doing street drugs or whatever. She's still taking drugs from the hospital because she's been sick, quite sick. But this is why I'm doing it, because I like to help, if I can. I guess I start...doing this, was just a few years ago. I guess I don't know why, maybe trying to prove I was a man, because I'm getting old. [...] But that's ridiculous. And then you start feeling guilty. I have a family too. And then...with this girl here, you know, she's- Christ, she's like my daughter, "What the hell was I doing?" like it's

unbelievable. So...now I just want to help her anywhere I can.

His attachment to this particular woman was formed over a period of a couple years often in a context of heightened emotions. For example, he describes one memorable moment this way:

Before I get into the apartment, I found her there. Just about dead. I had to call the ambulance and the boyfriend's in the other room hollering- wouldn't even open the door for her. Like... give me a break. I wanted to kick the shit out of him. I found the guy disgusting. He's- maybe he's lucky that I wasn't a few years younger, maybe I'm getting too passive. I should've beat the shit out of him, really. He's a terrible human being as far as I'm concerned. How do you do that to somebody, someone you're supposed to love or like, or whatever.

As Bill began to care about this woman he began to regret purchasing sex but at the beginning he found it exhilarating. As he describes his first experience:

Bill: Kind of scared. Kind of excited. I guess I thought I was a man again. I thought, whatever, I don't know. It changes. Reality sets in again, and you go, "Just what the hell are you doing?" At first it was, yeah... maybe I was doing it just for excitement; maybe, I don't know what the hell, really. And it's not like- my wife's a wonderful person; it's just...I get- it would be devastating to her if she knew that. But it would kill her.

Interviewer: So when you- I'm really interested in this part where you said it made you feel like a man again. Was it because you were...?

Bill: Well you thought you were wanted from a young girl. Well, those... which, that's what they're doing. That's what they're doing.

Although Bill was aware that their interest in him was contrived, it made him feel good. When asked about why he purchased sex for the first time, he suggests that he had missed feeling sexually desired by women:

Retired. I don't know, I just...thought, "What the hell's it all about?" That's the whole thing. You just...wonder if- what it would be like to be with another woman. I wasn't with another one for years.

The fact that Bill purchased sex shortly after he retired is significant as he frames his first time purchasing sex as occurring at the point when his life began to spin out of control. As he says:

Bill: And then I started getting bitchy too, and snarly. Like I was when I was drinking before. It wasn't a good time anymore, it was- bad tempered, aggressive, asshole. Like I didn't go around hitting that many people, but I

would've if they got in my way. Even when I was seventy. Like give me a break!

Interviewer: Is that how you were feeling after you started buying sex?

Bill: Well not after I started, but in and around the same time, because of the way I was feeling. Like, because I was- because I wasn't going to [AA] meetings and I wasn't straight in my Goddamn head anymore, like I wasn't grounded. I- all those old things came back. I was doing things, like, sex and gambling. I never gambled in my life, and I started gambling. I thought, "What the hell?" I racked up like...embarrassing really...over three credit cards maxed out.

To help explain why he started gambling and purchasing sex after retirement, Bill attempts to provide some context by saying that:

Bill: I don't know what the hell I was doing. I was not... and then when I started, I didn't know myself anymore. Like when I quit drinking, I quit drinking because I became- I bottomed out, I became something that I hated, despised. I hated cowards, and I hated bullies. And I became that. Became a coward and a bully. So that- I was an [skilled laborer] all my life. [...] And I drank hard, and I like fighting. Stuff like- complete idiot. And guys would all come together, we were tight. And I certainly wasn't a bully, I never picked on anybody smaller than me or weaker than me, or anybody I thought that I could take on or whatever, I wouldn't do that. Even if somebody kicked me in the ass that was smaller, or a girl. I would never hit a girl. [...] And I'm married, and I started drinking when we moved here. I wasn't worth that much because I was a boomer, I worked all over North America and I was spending too much time here. And then my wife seen me drinking all the time, I couldn't bullshit that anymore. So I tried quitting, I couldn't quit. And then had an argument with her, and she got mad and went in the bathroom and locked the door. I put my fist through the door, opened the door, grabbed her by the hair, put my fist in her face...and the look. My kids, are looking at me. Eyes bugged out of their head. I thought, "Ho, what have I become?"

What Bill describes is a fairly typical working class lifestyle for a man of his generation. He was the sole provider for his young family. His identity revolved working in a male dominated trade where he spent a lot of his leisure time with his male coworkers drinking and fighting. This led to his life spiraling out of control and so to save himself and his marriage he quit his job and started attending AA. Eventually both he and his wife had to find jobs to make ends meet but in the end, his wife and children were proud of him for the changes he had made. He became, as he described, a dependable and loyal husband and father for 25 years, until he retired. Once he stopped working, he again felt out of control and in response he started gambling, and later purchasing sex:

Bill: I just was bored, or whatever, and thinking about...well, specifically, the sweet little girls that walk around, not 'young', but you know.

Interviewer: So did you just drive downtown and hope to find someone?

Bill: I pulled over, and a girl walked- she was a good-looking girl too, and she says, "Do you want a date?" I didn't know what it is. I said, "Sure". That was it.

Shortly thereafter Bill began regularly paying for street-level sex, as often as four times a night. This went on for a period of several months until he met the sex worker described at the outset. Through the relationship he formed with this woman he began to see the purchase of sex as wrong and misguided. He makes this clear when he says,

And I started feeling that. I couldn't do it anymore because that's what I thought, I was taking advantage of these kids [sex workers]. It was making me sick.

At this point Bill again decides it's time to make some changes in his life. He starts going back to AA meetings, he tells his wife about the gambling debt and quits gambling all together. He was less quick to stop purchasing sex because as he said, "I loved doing it with her" but overtime this became unpalatable as well. Now Bill's focus is on being a nice guy, someone who helps sex workers out wherever he can. As he describes,

I don't know. I just have a place in my heart for these girls that are really...it's...and some phone me, and ask me how I- if I'm around, I'll always give them ten or twenty dollars, but I'm not going to partake in anything anymore.

He has also come to take on a paternalistic role with the sex worker he formed an emotional attachment too, he describes speaking to her daily to ensure her safety,

I make her phone- say goodnight. Like at the end of the night, so I know that she's safe. Because I went through a lot with her. And...now she got her apartment, so, "Just let me know you're home safe".

In sum when Bill retired, and his sense of purpose and self-esteem began to erode, he began engaging in activities that he felt would reaffirm his masculine identity. Overtime neither the gambling nor the purchase of sex was sustainable, and he got "his head on straight." Now he has taken on a paternalistic role in the lives of the women he once paid for sex.

Eric

Eric is White, divorced, and in his early 1940s. He is currently unemployed and described himself as an "addict." At the time of the interview he was thin and appeared to not have showered recently. He was friendly and easy to talk to but fidgety and nervous. He was also very emotional. He oscillated between expressing intense grief, frustration, and anger. When asked if there was anything he wanted to start off saying, he explained that he had been "around *it* since I was thirteen years old."

And I'm talking like, running away with girls from my school and... us joining, in equal agreement, to her prostituting herself. It wasn't really me being a pimp, but, I was there to protect her from anyone that would hurt her because we were a couple, right. We were more boyfriend and girlfriend and trying to survive in the cold winters of [province]. Like, and those girls are standing out there in hardly any clothes to try and make some money, but, the dangerous part too, is like, the older men see what we're doing and come manipulate and take advantage of- right- and that's where it just gets, like, out of hand and scary and chaotic, right.

In these early memories, Eric describes his life as tumultuous, as just trying to survive. The girls who were selling sex were vulnerable and he was there to help protect them.

[...] when things got rough at home I would run away and [name], we would break into abandoned- not abandoned- but like, not rented apartment buildings, the ground level ones. We'd break into them and at least we could steal a pot from a house, break and entering, cook some ravioli and sleep in the closets right, and have a shower in the morning even though there's no shower curtain. We didn't care, we didn't have to clean up the mess. But, you could at least get warm that way too, right, a hot shower warms you up when you're in minus thirty-two with wind chill. And we're talking teenagers. It's like we don't dress too smart either for minus thirty-two too, so, like, it's fucking stupid sometimes. Like I didn't even have a winter coat sometimes, like, I would sell it for drugs. And then the girls would go and sell their self to buy us a new winter coat. Like, that's how thoughtful they are, right, look after us first, not themselves.

This vivid picture of what poverty looked like as a young boy, was, as it turned out, the defining characteristics of Eric's entire childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. As he got older he says he just became more "reckless." While many of Eric's stories were told with a measure of pride as they demonstrated his resourcefulness and street smarts, others were interwoven with stories of his own, and others, physical and emotional abuse.

Eric spent a significant amount of his teens and twenties in detention centers and jails in part because of his association with "a big time pimp" whom he describes as controlling a prostitution ring made up of a wide age range of women as well as, "he had about four little boys too that broke into houses" of which Eric was one. His job was to "just shut the fuck up and do what [the pimp] said." He describes being treated like the women and girls but, "we just didn't get some of the abuse that they got, right, because we were men." He describes these experiences, as well as others, in terms of feeling belittled and humiliated. This is evident when he once more talks about "the big time pimp" that used to lock him in a bathroom with some of the women,

I think it was a humiliating thing because, like, I wasn't matured yet, so because the other thing was is, they were very...like, the girls treated us so good. Like, would flirt with us and tease us, but the guy pimps, the older guys, they didn't like that shit right because they felt like one day we're going to grow up and want to take over their business, right. So they had to abuse us to keep the fear going.

And years later when he describes the "friend" who introduced him to purchasing sex, he describes,

He's this good looking kid and he didn't do drugs and stuff, he went to escort agencies and massage parlors and fucked girls every which way he could. And like we got along as friends, so I think he- because I had a really nice girlfriend that everyone wanted, but she didn't like none of my friends. So I think it was more of a...he was trying to humiliate me again. Like a lot of humiliating because I didn't mature until I was fucking, twenty-two, in jail. In jail, in adult jail. Like I went to adult jail and I didn't even have hair under my armpits yet. And I was so scared...

As well, when he talks about doing manual labor almost a decade later with a group of other men he describes himself in relation to the group,

[L]ike I'm the lowest on the totem pole, right. So, all the journey men, all the people that make the money and have the wives and kids and the fucking nice truck and boat...and fuck, they're making us fucking arrange it [escorts] and fucking pretty much pay for it too, and, "I'll get you back"... fuck.

While these stories speak of Eric's feeling of powerlessness in relation to other men, he is quick to intersperse these comments with others that suggest that these other men were envious of him. For example, above, he describes having the girlfriends "everyone wanted." Later when talking about his manual labor work, "Like I made more money than fucking a lot of them, but I was the boss's favorite guy, right, because I was funny and he liked me the most."

Eric also positions himself throughout his narrative as sexual voracious. In particular with comments such as, "Yeah, and I got addicted to it. Like fucking, because it was like, the best thing I had ever fucking done." He also describes himself as sexually skilled.

Eric: I can guarantee they [sex workers] enjoyed it just as much as me.

Interviewer: How do you know?

Eric: Because I'm not a selfish lover. Like, I...I've always been that way in life. Because when I was young, I had such cute girlfriends, the sex was so fast. Like fuck. And then I'd get back in [juvenile detention], masturbating and staring at this college girl that looks pretty, and you know. I don't know, I just...I started learning

tricks that- to make it last longer and...like I wasn't selfish. I wanted to make the women happy first, and that's a girlfriend, a prostitute, like anyone. And I was addicted to, like, sex... all of it. Like I was addicted to...I was a womanizer for a while there.

In his stories, Eric is favored by women, he is the guy with whom they all want to spend time. His stories of paid sex take on an almost mythic character with him at the center of a group of doting, attractive women,

I thought I was only going to get a massage and maybe a hand job because I heard stories of older men at house parties and stuff, and after hours talking about it and bragging. But fuck, it was nothing like that. It was like... the way I can say how it felt is like, the Roman days, how the warriors would come back and sit around in the tubs and get pampered by the women and eat fruit and drink wine. You know, have your choice of what you want, because you're... the best.

Elsewhere, he describes sex workers in more obviously negative terms. He describes having a lot of power over sex workers.

Prostitutes are naïve. Easy to manipulate; easy to... because they're so broken, right. It's kind of like, even like... a sickness I had for a while and that's why I don't go to AA and stuff because women in recovery are weak, they're vulnerable, they're... looking for anyone to make them feel better than they feel that day and I just take advantage of that so bad, being homeless or an addict and fucking life, way more fucked up than hers, but I would say all the right things and see where the line can come back. "Oh, I got a job, I can look after you", fuck, don't got no job, fuck, out stealing shit and playing cards in a casino and bringing home some money once in a while [...] And it's sick. I hate it man. I'm disgusting.

In other moments, Eric describes himself as:

And again, I'm not bragging- I had a real bad ego problem, because it made me feel good, because I'm so broken that back then I had to mask myself and fucking make myself feel good so I could put a smile on my face because I was miserable. I wanted my wife back. I didn't want to be there. The only reason I was there was to [...] make my parents proud for fucking once. And... [cries] I thought, fuck, I could get my wife back and I didn't.

When Eric was asked what he believes the difference is between men who buy sex and men who don't, he had a lot to say. He spoke at length about how sex workers are vulnerable targets for what he describes as violent and disturbed men, men he partly identifies with because as he shared "violence arouses me." At the same time, Eric is searching for something more meaningful. He states at the end of the interview that:

So like, there's so many varieties of people that go out and want sex. Me? I don't even want bitches right now, I want... I want a fucking relationship. Like, fuck. I wasted so much time with fucking, trying to be something I wasn't ...

In sum, Eric has lived a difficult life, one that is filled with traumatic stories of violence and abuse. He has a long and complicated relationship with sex workers whereby he has alternatively been their friend, customer, and exploiter.

DISCUSSION

These men's narratives not only provide insight into how masculinity is discursively negotiated in relation to sex work, and street sex work in particular but are also deeply revealing of the complex relationships that these men have with hegemonic masculinities. Each of the three respondents rationalized their purchase of sex by drawing on conventional heteronormative masculine scripts. Warren describes himself as heterosexually desirable and voracious throughout his interview. This is emphasized through accounts of his physical appeal and the hundreds of commercial and non-commercial sexual encounters to which he referred. When speaking about having sex with women, he makes jocular references that include: "doing the deed" and going "balls deep." This kind of hegemonic masculine language extends to sex workers whom he specifically refers to as "using" to bolster his self-esteem.

Bill, although less immodest, also speaks of sexual desire and conquest. He describes the thrill of driving downtown and seeing sex workers whom he describes as "sweet young things." He found it exciting that he could purchase the services of beautiful women, and he reveled in the fiction of being desired. This was pivotal in helping Bill reestablish his sense of masculine worth in the context of aging. He laid claim to other facets of hegemonic masculinity in his narrative as well, in particular male aggression. Not only does he refer to being "aggressive" he makes repeated references to physically assaulting, or wanting to physically assault other men. At the same time, he is careful to make this coherent with his chivalric values. He emphasized that he would never "hit a girl" or even "smaller guys" and is derisive toward men who treat women poorly.

Eric too positions himself positively in relation to heteronormative hegemonic masculinity, specifically in terms of sexual need. He talks, for example, about having been a "womanizer," and as being "addicted" to sex. He signals his desirability through stories of having physically attractive girlfriends that other men covet. He also emphasizes his special status with women—e.g., young sexually exploited women who looked after his needs before their own and sex workers later on in life who paid his way. He suggests he is sexually skilled when he talks about the mutuality of his commercial sexual encounters and specifically when he "guarantees" they "enjoyed it as much as me." Like Bill, he also asserts his hegemonic masculinity through stories where he protects women. He noted this early on when he said: "I was there to protect her from anyone that would hurt her."

While other studies have drawn similar insights, noting that men purchase sex as a confirmation of their masculinity and heterosexuality (Pettinger, 2011; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012; Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015), what this research reveals is the tenuousness of this arrangement. These men are each reflexively aware that their behavior toward women, and sex workers specifically, has been egregious in the past. Warren describes his behavior explicitly as “horrible” and “maladaptive”; Bill is filled with regret over his “ridiculous” behavior and wonders, “what was I thinking?”; Eric too describes his behavior as predatory and “disgusting.” At the same time, the men situate this behavior within a normative masculinities frame; this means that their own self-understandings of their motivations to purchase sex, and their behaviors toward sex-workers are simultaneously given a negative and a positive valence.

It is significant that this more nuanced understanding of men who purchase sex occurred within a specific research setting, a cross-gender interview context where a female researcher held a higher class position as compared to her male participants. While there is a substantive literature looking at how hegemonic heteronormative masculine scripts are often heavily or over emphasized in interview settings by men interviewed by women—e.g., male participants will seek to mitigate the unequal power of the researcher/researched dynamic by sexualizing, minimizing, and belittling female interviewers (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001; Allen, 2005; Pini, 2005; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011)—what is revealed in this paired intersection of gender and class are narratives with a confessional tone wherein men revealed the contradictions and challenges marginalized men experience in narrating and performing hegemonic normative masculinities. Unlike much of the research on men who purchase sex, this interview context revealed the brittleness of these men’s claims to hegemonic masculinity. This becomes particularly apparent in the part of their narratives when these men describe what happened in their life that led them to purchase sex in the first place.

For all three respondents, deciding to purchase sex was in their recollections, linked to a form of trauma or injury to themselves as men. The way that these origin stories are framed suggests that they see the purchase of sex as not only a deviation from normative sexual codes, but one that requires an explanation (or an origins story). They speak often of failing to establish or clearly assert their power, privilege, and authority as men. They described insecurity as compelling them to purchase sex, if not each time, then certainly the first time. Warren is the most explicit when he recounts feeling inadequate and wanting to “measure up” to the sexual standards set out by a girlfriend. He justifies his behavior throughout his narrative vis-à-vis a formative experience with a “bad” woman. Warren was not alone here, many men in our larger sample narrated their initial decision to purchase sex as a response to the actions of selfish and capricious women who undermined their efforts to be “good” men. Implicit here is the idea that good men are made through the love and commitment of good women. They are in turn broken by those that do not fulfill their (real or imagined) promise. This was certainly the case for Warren, each time a woman slighted, disappointed, or undermined him he responded with both symbolic and physical forms

of aggression. He rationalizes these actions as a logical response to the damage done to his masculine identity. Specifically, he engages in typical “masculinizing practices” (Frank, 2003) that allow him to lay claim to a valorized masculine sense of self: the sexually potent man driven by urgent biological need (Joseph and Black, 2012).

Bill is less reflexive about why he started buying sex but he clearly links it to retirement and growing older. By juxtaposing stories of the past and present he suggests that he lost his sense of purpose and identity when he quit working and, seeking to reclaim it, he reverted to the man he used to be, someone whose identity is firmly anchored in a masculine working class habitus (Nixon, 2009). This process of reclaiming his masculine identity included reacquiring the disposition and demeanors of his earlier working class habitus, which he describes as becoming “snarly,” “aggressive,” and “bad-tempered.”

Eric’s stories are perhaps the most transparent, in that they highlight repeatedly feeling emasculated by other men. This came through in stories where he emphasizes his lack of physical maturity to other men, in which he was exploited by more powerful men, and how he was often the “low man on the totem pole” in each social setting he found himself in. It is clear that Eric rarely felt he had the power in those moments to establish or assert his masculinity. He attempts to reclaim a sense of hegemonic masculine mastery by telling stories (“bragging”) in which he positions himself as smart and resourceful, funny, and desirable. Perhaps more so, he attempts to reclaim masculinity by telling stories that diminish the worth of women and that, in turn, elevate his own sense of power and importance.

The stories these men told elicit both empathy and repugnance for the individual men, and also for the harms associated with hierarchical gender roles and ideals. For each of these men, hegemonic masculinity could be considered destructive in their lives. Warren by his own accounts had every opportunity in life, and despite this, wound up in jail and listed as a sex offender, ultimately (albeit not solely), in his efforts to assert heteronormative ideals. Since being released from prison, Warren has been socially isolated and unable to find employment. Bill has managed to get his life back on track, but in his efforts to feel like a man again, he lost his family’s life savings, and risked his marriage. Eric has a particularly tragic and complicated story, with no definitive point when his masculine identity was threatened. At the same time, there can be no doubt that a sense of inadequacy and insecurity has had a significant impact on his life decisions; his pain, hurt, and anger is palpable. In this, this research illustrates how damaging hegemonic masculinity can be to the men who lack access or adequate resources for its successful performance. As Connell (1987) have noted, as a gender position, hegemonic masculinity speaks more to an absence of female characteristics than a presence of male characteristics; it is thus inherently fraught and performative. The performance of masculinity requires an ongoing investment; men who are socially located in ways that distance them from accepted markers of hegemonic masculinity (high-status jobs, for instance) must necessarily invest more energy in attempting to perform it.

CONCLUSION

To date the sex work customer literature has largely focused on the discursive rationales of one group of buyers, men who purchase off-street sex. This scholarship has begun the task of understanding how men tend to draw on dominant hegemonic masculine scripts (i.e., sexually voracious, skilled, and entitled) to explain and justify their choices. What this literature is lacking is a more sophisticated understanding of how hegemonic masculinity is an aspirational practice. As we have shown, the purchase of street-level sex can both confirm and undermine their sense of manhood.

While we have shown how hegemonic masculinity is disempowering for some men, we have also highlighted how potentially dangerous hegemonic masculinity, as an aspirational practice, is to the women against whom it is exercised. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, hegemonic masculinity is what “allows men’s dominance over women to continue” and is always performed relationally, against a backdrop of femininity. Men who feel insecure about their masculinity are more likely to engage in compensatory behaviors to reaffirm their masculine status (Joseph and Black, 2012). This is particularly the case in societal contexts where gender inequities and violence are considered normative (Jewkes, 2002) and can be exacerbated by personal contexts of unemployment and poverty (Kimmel, 2005). Joseph and Black (2012) suggest that men who seek reassurance of masculine selves through the purchase of sex make sex workers responsible for the maintenance of their fragile masculine identity. If the sex worker fails to maintain “the illusion,” they are placed in conflict and potential danger. This perspective is supported by Farley et al. (2015) who observe in their comparative study of men who purchase sex and those that do not, that men who buy sex are likely to score higher on “hostile masculinity,” including hypersensitivity to perceived threats to self-worth and aggression against women (Malamuth and Thornhill, 1994). This was certainly the case for Warren who went to prison because of the violence he committed against sex workers. Eric, while indicating he has not been physically violent against women, describes intentionally preying on “damaged” women in recovery and exploiting their vulnerability for his own gain. At the same time, not all men who purchase street-level sex are violent toward sex workers. Bill for example is explicit that he has never shown any aggression toward sex workers (or women generally). But he acknowledges that he has exploited women he identifies as vulnerable—i.e., substance using, with serious, even life-threatening health problems, and in what appear to be an abusive relationship—in a bid to exercise a preferred claim to hegemonic masculinity.

To date, there has been little research that gives voice to the men who purchase sex, and more specifically the men who purchase street-level sex. In allowing these men space to tell their stories in the way shared here, we have gained a more nuanced understanding of who they are. Rather than fixed character “types,” these men emerge as complex social actors with contradictory motivations and behaviors in relation to the purchase of sex and hegemonic masculinity. While this research confirms extant buyer literature that suggests men purchase sex as an exercise of masculine power, authority and entitlement and that they draw on familiar heteronormative discourses to justify their purchase

of sex—they speak of sexual desire and entitlement, boast of their sexual prowess, and they use sexist and in some cases misogynistic language to talk about women and sex workers in particular—it is not this straightforward. There was a great deal of fluidity, for instance, in how these men portrayed themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity. In one moment, they describe caring for and protecting women, and in the next, they speak of using and exploiting them. They exhibited a reflexive awareness of the toxicity of some of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously valorizing these traits, highlighting their vulnerability in relation to these norms.

Given some of their reflexivity around their motivations and behaviors, this research further indicates that these men may be open to education and messaging about the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity and its harms to in particular to sex workers. Given that these men are more precariously positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity on account of the broader structural inequalities some of them face, this might seem counter intuitive. As Connell (1991) and Frank (2003) have written, these are the men who tend to be most wedded to the performance of hegemonic masculinity and most likely to engage in compensatory behaviors, especially in an interview setting (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001; Allen, 2005; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). Yet, this research revealed that when given the opportunity, these men could be thoughtful about their inadequacies and shortcomings, thereby advancing our understanding of men who purchase sex, and how gender shapes the sex work encounter.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants gave oral, audio-recorded informed consent in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. The protocol was approved, and regularly reviewed, by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LS is responsible for the conception of the work, acquisition and analysis of data, and for drafting and revising the intellectual content. She gives final approval of the version to be published and attests to the accuracy and the integrity of the work. SS and HH are responsible for the conception of the work, interpretation of the data, and for revising the intellectual content. They give final approval of the version to be published and attest to the accuracy and the integrity of the work.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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