

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF MALE  
SUBJECTIVITY IN HETEROSEXUAL CASUAL SEX  
ADVICE



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ABSTRACT

*This working paper draws on a larger project on the social construction of heterosexual casual sex, to examine some issues related to the representations of male (and female) sexual subjectivities in casual sex advice literature.*

BACKGROUND

Talk and representations of casual sex have become commonplace in contemporary Western culture, appearing in media representations and increasingly visible as form of sexual practice among heterosexuals (Farvid, 2011). This has led to increased academic attention to researching this, at times taboo, topic (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Herold, Maticka-Tyndale, & Mewhinney, 1998; Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Mitchell & Latimer,

2009; Paul, 2006; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000; Young, Penhollow, & Bailey, 2008). Casual sex is typically defined as one-off or brief sexual encounters between strangers, friends, acquaintances, and ex-partners, where there is ostensibly no longer-term investment in the future of the relationship (Farvid, 2011). Casual sex is underpinned by permissive, neoliberal, post-feminist and traditional discourses where men's and women's casual sex are constructed in complex and contradictory ways (Farvid, 2011). For example, while young women are increasingly invited to embody an active and desiring sexuality, their participation in casual sex is often discussed in derogatory ways, particularly within news media (Collins, 2011). Women's casual sex is often portrayed as problematic in ways that men's casual sex is not. Indeed discussions of men's casual sex are glaringly absent in mainstream media.

#### BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

This particular talk examined the construction of masculine and feminine heterosexual subjectivities, in casual sex *advice* literature and online advice material, from a Foucauldian and feminist post-structuralist theoretical perspective (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). From this perspective, subjectivity is seen as *ways of being* or types of identities that are offered to men and women within a particular cultural milieu, which they can then take up, play with, or resist altogether. Initially, a detailed literature review of current research in the area of sex advice in popular media was provided. This research on sex advice states that sex/sexuality was depicted as biologically determined, men and women were represented as naturally different and this difference was portrayed as *normal* and *healthy* (Crawford, 2004; Gill, 2009; Potts, 1998). Indeed a *discourse of essential difference* (Crawford, 2004) was evident in advice literature and relationships were depicted as *work* (Boynton, 2003) if men and women were to get along. There was a prioritisation of men's supposed sexual needs and

desires (Tyler, 2008) and an emphasis on individual choice and self-transformation (Gill, 2009), which hinders social critique and a social change agenda (Kitzinger & Walters, 1993).

#### DATA

The data analysed were derived from a) advice articles on the Internet and b) self-help books about casual sex. These forums provided information and advice regarding casual sex to a gender-neutral audience as well as advice exclusively aimed at women or men. Overall, the Internet material produced 385 pages of data. The books analysed were *The Happy Hook-up: A Single Girl's Guide to Casual Sex* (by Alexa Joy Sherman and Nicole Tocantins, 2004, published in the United States) and *Brief Encounters: The Woman's Guide to Casual Sex* (by Emily Dubberley, 2005, Published in the United Kingdom), both of which were written for a general audience of (heterosexual) women. The third book was *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (by Neil Strauss, 2005, published in the United States), which is written as an investigative tale and pickup guide for men. In this working paper I concentrate on some discussions that were had regarding *The Game* and the construction of male subjectivities. These books were carefully selected from a range of possible self-helps books/pick up guides on casual sex, based on their sales figures. *The Game* was by far the most popular book in this genre. It has featured on the New York bestseller list and sold over 2 million copies in online sales alone (1.5 million - Amazon U.S.A. and over 600,000 on Amazon U.K.).

#### ANALYSIS

In the presentation, I first discussed the ways in which pre-casual sex grooming (such as washing the body, removing bodily hair, applying makeup) was constituted as a gendered practice. Women were given a plethora of detailed advice on how to beautify their bodies in preparation for casual sex, whereas men

were given succinct and direct advice only pertaining to cleanliness. This advice highlighted the continued relevance of some longstanding feminist concerns regarding the links between beauty, femininity, female sexuality and the non-egalitarian gender system that creates this (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 2002).

Four distinct subject positions were identified and discussed: *the strategic man; the performing man; the sassy woman and the vulnerable woman*. This talk was well-received and the members of the group were engaged and provided good feedback and discussion points. Some of the most useful and interesting outcomes of the seminar was a discussion around my analysis of *the strategic man*.

#### THE STRATEGIC MAN

Advice regarding casual sex directed at men usually involved providing men with a list of strategies on *how to secure/obtain casual sex or how to manipulate a social situation to meet and attract women* (*The Game*, p. 15). Advice given was about getting someone's attention and/or contact details in pursuit of (casual) sex:

*Within minutes...our professor of pickup was at the bar, making out with a loud, tipsy girl...I noticed that he used the exact same openers, routines, and lines – and got a phone number or a tonguedown nearly every time* (*The Game*, p. 32).

*I'd turned a new corner in my game. Once I'd gotten the number of a woman, it was easy to meet and have sex with her* (*The Game*, p. 212).

A set formula for acquiring casual sex appeared in both *The Game* and online accounts. Men were advised that if they followed this formula, with some practice they were *guaranteed* casual sex. *The Game* offered a linear pickup method premised on *find, meet, attract, close* (p. 20).

Men were to approach women in quite specific ways:

*Make Contact: There's nothing creepier to a woman than a cold stare that lasts longer than a few seconds, so if you are really sizing her up, do so subtly. Creepy guy status is something you want to avoid. You also want to make sure that your attraction is known, but don't be too aggressive (NZ9).*

This presents a man *in charge* of the process of contact. Men were often depicted as the agents within casual sex advice literature. Men approached women, women were rarely depicted or advised to approach men; men were the ones who *choose* which women to approach for casual sex, based on *their* assessment of the women's physical appearance. The female body was a body on display, subject to the scrutiny of the male gaze and evaluated for its heterosexual sexiness and sexual desirability. Women had a permanent visibility that men did not.

The strategic man was also instructed on how to increase their chances of a *hook up* by targeting certain women:

*The beauty is that these days, even nice girls will sleep with you for one night...Try to find girls who've just been dumped, or just dumped the boyfriend. Probably better to find the one who's just dumped the boyfriend and wants revenge. Any girl who's celebrating something – a birthday, a wedding. Girls whose friends are getting*

*married, they're very desperate to have sex, because they're very depressed. They'll latch onto the first thing they can find while they're drunk. Girls who're having a birthday, just turned 30 – also very depressed and thinking that their life's going nowhere (AU6).*

Here men were told to approach women who are *less* likely to deny their casual sex advances, due to their emotional vulnerability. The subjectivity offered to men was one where sex is more important than being a morally good human being. The scenario depicted in such *advice* constitutes an unethical sexual exchange (see, Beres & Farvid, 2010; Carmody, 2005), where the woman is portrayed as being taken *advantage* of.

In moments like this, the (permissive) discourse (Hollway, 1989) that supposedly underpins casual sex as an egalitarian, fun, and free endeavour is revealed as necessarily only partial. The domain of casual sex appears to be premised on (traditional) gendered scripts of men as the *hunters* and women as the targets of their actions. Women are hence [still] portrayed as the *object and prey* (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 642), but now explicitly in relation to *casual* sex (rather than for example, dating or sex). Men are not positioned as (ethically) culpable for such behaviour.

#### FEEDBACK

One of the comments regarding this line of analysis was that I had perhaps not considered the ways in which such advice constructs men as *lacking* something (e.g., prowess and sexual desirability) and hence constructing a subjectivity that is vulnerable and fragile in some way. The cultural emphasis on men to be sexually successful (i.e., to procure sex at any possible opportunity) potentially produces a context where masculine anxieties around sex attainment become possible. Indeed, the supposed acceptability to espouse such problematic strategies gives

credence to the importance of sex attainment for men. The pickup techniques talked about, for example in *The Game*, were said to have been developed by once nerdy *losers* (what the book refers to as *non-Alpha males*) who could not *naturally* attract sexually desirable *alpha females*, hence having to resort to such manipulative pick-up techniques. Although men's subjectivity might be constructed as fragile or lacking in some way, the target for remedying this *lack* was depicted as the unknowing woman, not the men themselves. When female subjectivity is positioned as lacking (e.g., through discussions of how to beautify and perfect the body and its appearance) it is the women themselves who are the targets of their own bodily alteration: the work is done on the self to resolve supposed feelings of inadequacy. The inferiority and *lack* are issues that become externalised for the men and internalised for the woman and this has implications for the possible ways men and women experience themselves as (sexual) beings. This is an important point to consider in relation to how we can theorise the links between gender, vulnerability, casual sex and agency, while giving space to exploring what this means in relation to masculinity and male subjectivity. Further work needs to be done on examining the relationships between masculinity and vulnerability in critical sexualities studies.

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