

## "It takes a man to put me on the bottom": gay men's experiences of masculinity and anal intercourse

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### **Abstract**

In anal intercourse between gay men, men who are typically insertive ('tops') are often perceived as, and may identify as, more masculine than those who are typically receptive ('bottoms'). 'Versatile' men, who may adopt either position, may be perceived as more gender-balanced and may transcend the gender-role stereotypes associated with self-labelling as top or bottom. The aim of this study was to explore how gay men's beliefs about masculinity were associated with their beliefs about the gendered nature of sexual self-labels, and their behavior in anal intercourse. Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 17, UK-based gay men. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis identified that perceptions of tops and bottoms as gendered social identities varied depending on the extent to which gay men subscribed to the mandates of 'hegemonic masculinity', the dominant masculinity in Western society. The findings also suggested that some gay men differentiated between top and bottom as social identities and topping and bottoming as gendered behaviors. This had implications for gay men's behaviors in anal intercourse. It is suggested that future efforts to engage with gay men about their sexual behavior should account for their beliefs regarding the gender role stereotypes associated with gay sexual self-labels.

The sexual positions available in anal intercourse between men are steeped in gender role stereotypes: men who are insertive in anal intercourse ('tops') may identify as and be perceived as more masculine than their anally-receptive sexual partners ('bottoms': Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Kippax & Smith, 2001; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017a). The influence of any variable on sexual positioning in anal intercourse warrants research attention, because anal intercourse may carry a risk of HIV transmission, especially for the anally-receptive partner (Patel et al., 2014). Masculinity is one such variable that may influence positioning practices in anal intercourse between men. However, a literature review undertaken by Dangerfield, Smith, Williams, Unger and Bluthenthal (2017) identified only eight peer-reviewed articles measuring gay men's sexual positioning identities and behaviors that focused on the gender stereotypes associated with them. The purpose of the present study is to contribute to this small body of literature by examining how gay men's beliefs about the sexual positions available in anal intercourse, and their own behavior, are related to their beliefs about and subjective experiences of masculinity.

### **Gay men and masculinity**

Whether men experience themselves as or are perceived as masculine may depend on the extent to which they endorse and embody socially-constructed expectations of what a 'real man' should be like (Thompson, Pleck & Ferrara, 1992). In contemporary Western societies, the most valued way of 'being a man' is to embody what Connell (1995) refers to as 'hegemonic masculinity', a particular value system where men acquire hegemonic status through their authority over women and other men. Hegemonic masculinity is linked to the display of attributes that are associated with normative masculinity, including physical prowess (de Visser, Smith & McConnell, 2009); economic power (Edley & Wetherell, 1999), and heterosexuality (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is a culturally-exalted expression of manhood that resides at the top of the gender hierarchy (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005). All men in Western societies such as the United Kingdom are positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity: men who do not – or cannot – embody it inevitably occupy alternative, culturally-subordinated masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Connell (1995), gay masculinities are subordinated because homosexual pleasure is conflated with femininity, and hegemonic masculinity is positioned in polar opposition to all that is feminine. Consequently, anti-femininity and homophobia are the lynchpins of hegemonic masculinity.

On the one hand, research has identified that some gay men are content with incorporating both masculine and feminine characteristics into an alternative, more balanced expression of gender (Wilson et al., 2010). However, other work has demonstrated how the behavioral experiences and practices of some gay men are associated with endorsement of hegemonic masculinity. For example, in certain fields of gay culture there is a ubiquity of anti-effeminacy that mirrors the homophobia characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, and may reflect some gay men's endorsement of the superiority of men and masculinity over women and femininity (Borgeson & Valeri, 2015; Clarkson, 2006; Eguchi, 2009; Taywaditep, 2001). Gay men's beliefs about what it takes to be a 'real man' may be associated with their sexual behavior. For example, men who more strongly endorse hegemonic masculine ideals are more likely to engage in condomless anal intercourse (Wheldon, Tilley & Klein, 2014). Consequently, some gay men may construct their sexual identities and adapt their sexual behaviors as a function of the extent to which they endorse hegemonic masculinity, and therefore define masculinity in terms of its heteronormative form.

## **Existing research on gay sexual positioning**

### *Gay sexual self-labels and position preference*

To communicate a preference for one position in anal intercourse, gay men often self-label as 'top' (insertive) or 'bottom' (receptive: Hart, Wolitski, Purcell, Gomez & Halkitis, 2003; Moskowitz, Rieger & Roloff, 2008; Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlberg, 2000). Men who are inclined to take either position in a given occasion of anal intercourse often self-label as 'versatile' (Hart et al., 2003; Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlberg, 2000), although not all versatile men have an equal proclivity for being insertive and receptive (Lyon, Pitts & Grierson, 2013).

Research has pointed to the importance of not conceiving sexual self-labels as static, exclusive categories. Top and bottom self-labels may reflect position preferences, but they do not necessarily determine the position adopted in every occasion of anal intercourse (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Wei & Raymond, 2011). Self-labels are liable to change with time: gay men 'learn' their ideal self-label over several years (Moskowitz & Roloff, 2017) and may orient further towards top as they age (Pachankis, Bittenwieser, Bernstein & Bayles, 2013). Furthermore, there may be diversity in psychological and behavioral practices within the categories: for example, Moskowitz & Roloff (2017) distinguished between different types of bottoms, who have an array of reasons for identifying as and being a bottom.

### *Tops, bottoms, gender and power*

The meanings of sexual self-labels are embedded in discourses of gender and power. Men who label as tops are commonly ascribed characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity – power, dominance and physical strength – whereas bottoms are often defined as passive and effeminate (Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Santana & Bauermeister, 2012; Kippax & Smith, 2001). Gender role stereotypes may influence assumptions regarding other men's sexual self-labels such that men who possess physical characteristics associated with

hegemonic masculinity are more likely to be perceived as tops than bottoms, whereas more feminine gay men are assumed to be bottoms (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017b; Tskay & Rule, 2013). Furthermore, when other men's self-labels are known, gender role stereotypes may influence perceptions of their masculinity irrespective of any other masculine attributes the men may display – bottoms are perceived as less masculine than tops who possess the same stereotypically masculine characteristics (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017a).

However, research into the association between gender and sexual positioning in anal intercourse has yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies have highlighted the potential for bottoms to have power in anal intercourse because as the receptive partners, they control both the physical pleasure experienced by tops (Kiguwa, 2015), and the degree of power tops are afforded during the sexual encounter (Hoppe, 2011). Further, it has been found that some gay men reject the notion that sexual positioning in anal intercourse is a gendered experience, viewing the gender role stereotypes associated with sexual self-labels as heterosexist constructions of man-as-penetrator and woman-as-penetrated (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004)

Nevertheless, traditional discourses of gender and power influence some gay men's experiences of anal intercourse: tops tend to report feeling more dominant and controlling during intercourse and may have stronger masculine identities than bottoms, and bottoms often claim to feel more submissive and vulnerable during intercourse, show a preference for more masculine sexual partners, and are more likely than tops to have displayed feminine traits in childhood (Gil, 2007; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2016; Weinrich et al., 1992). Furthermore, gay men who identify as 'bears' – who typically have large physiques and hirsute bodies and are therefore more closely aligned to hegemonic masculinity ideals – are less likely to report receptive intercourse than those who identify as 'twinks', gay men characterized by youthful looks and slim and hairless bodies (Lyons & Hosking, 2014).

*Versatility in sexual positioning*

Versatility in sexual positioning may offer some men the opportunity to eschew the gender role stereotypes associated with sexual self-labels. Kippax and Smith (2001) identified the power-sharing possibilities associated with versatility, especially for gay men in long-term relationships, and others have identified interpretations of versatility as a more egalitarian, turn-taking arrangement between sexual partners (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Johns et al., 2012). For some, versatility may reflect a desire to balance both masculinity and femininity as part of an alternative gender expression (Johns et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2010).

However, other work has identified how for men who identify as versatile, sexual position negotiations are strongly influenced by gender role stereotypes, and may be guided by the comparative masculinity of the sexual partner. In casual sexual encounters particularly, the relatively more masculine partner – i.e., the partner who is more ‘macho’, more aggressive, more muscular or who has a comparatively larger penis – is more likely to be insertive, and the partner who is perceived as comparatively more feminine – as indicated by a smaller physical frame, a less aggressive demeanour and a smaller penis – is more likely to be receptive (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Johns et al., 2012; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Importantly, perceptions of comparative masculinity have been shown to influence sexual positioning decision making even among men who self-label as either top or bottom (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Wei & Raymond). Gendered scripts of behavior in anal intercourse may therefore influence some gay men’s position selection in a given sexual encounter and override their position preferences. This finding may have sexual health implications, since HIV transmission risk is greater in receptive than insertive anal intercourse (Patel et al., 2014), and men who bottom are more likely than tops to be HIV-seropositive (Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2000; Wei & Raymond, 2011).

## **The present study**

The purpose of this study was to bridge a gap in the research on gay sexual positioning by investigating how gay men's subjective experiences of masculinity, against the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, are associated with their beliefs about the gendered nature of sexual self-labels, their experiences of identifying with a given self-label, and their experiences of engaging in insertive and receptive anal intercourse. To the authors' knowledge, the present study approaches these issues for the first time with a UK-based sample, which is relevant given that ideals of masculinity are culturally-defined (Thompson, Pleck & Ferrera, 1992). A greater understanding of the relationship between masculine identity, beliefs about masculinity and positioning in anal intercourse may contribute to efforts to reduce the HIV burden that disproportionately affects gay men.

## **Method**

### **Data collection**

Twenty-one semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted between July and December 2016. Eighteen were held via Skype, either with or without video, according to the participant's preference. Three interviews were held face-to-face, one in the participant's home and two in a private room at the host institution. The duration of each interview was approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The key interview questions are presented as supplementary material. Each interview was tailored to the concerns of the individual participant: questions were not asked in a particular order nor necessarily phrased in the same way. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author was responsible for transcription and for checking the accuracy of the transcripts against the recordings.

### **Analytic approach**

Data were analysed using a discourse-dynamic approach to subjectivity (Willig, 2000), operationalized according to the procedures for Interpretative Phenomenological



Analysis (IPA: Smith, 1996). At the core of IPA lie the philosophical traditions of phenomenology – how people experience the world – and symbolic interactionism, the perspective that subjective meaning-making is a consequence of interpretation, and of interaction with the social world (Smith, 1996). IPA is an idiographic approach, focused on the experience of specific individuals involved in specific situations (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). However, IPA researchers examining data from more than one participant also have the opportunity to examine commonalities between participants' verbal accounts, which identify shared understandings of the phenomenon under examination (Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 1999; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is distinguished from other phenomenological approaches because it goes beyond the description of experience. A key concept associated with IPA is the 'double hermeneutic' – the understanding that if people's sense-making is an interpretation of their own experiences, then the researcher's attempts to make sense of the participant's interpretation is also interpretative (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). For the IPA researcher engaged in analysis, the emphasis on both phenomenology and interpretation means 'giving voice' to the participants – describing how the phenomenon under examination is experienced – and also 'making sense' of the participants' experience, exploring *what it means* for that individual participant to experience the phenomenon in the way described (Larkin et al., 2006).

### **Data analysis procedure**

The procedure for IPA outlined by Flowers, Hart and Marriott (1999) was used as a guide. Both authors were engaged in the first stage of the analysis, which was to read and reread each transcript, making brief notes of initial impressions, until a high degree of familiarity with the transcripts was reached. They then proceeded with the next step of the analysis, which involved examining the descriptive content and the use of language in one transcript, paying particular attention to the presence of contradiction, justification,

explanation, repetition, changes in voice and unusual phrasing. Each observation made was given a label summarising its content, and was treated as an emergent theme. Identifying descriptions of experience represented the process of phenomenological analysis and reading between the lines, establishing why and how something was reported in the wider context of the transcript, fulfilled the interpretative aspect of the analysis.

After the authors had met to identify areas of agreement and divergence in their analysis of the first transcript, the first author continued to identify emergent themes in the remaining transcripts. Once all transcripts had been coded into emergent themes, the first author produced a detailed 'participant profile' (see Supplementary Materials) for each participant, which incorporated both descriptive and interpretative comments. The participant profiles were used alongside the lists of emergent themes to identify themes that recurred between participants. These recurring themes were grouped together into overarching themes, in an iterative process of finding theme labels which best captured a collection of emergent themes that were shared between participants.

At each stage of the analysis, the authors attempted to disregard their own preconceptions, expectations and experiences of the phenomenon in question in order to 'see' the world from the perspectives of the participants, although it is acknowledged that the interpretation of others' accounts is necessarily influenced by the standpoint of the person interpreting (Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 2009).

## **Participants**

Twenty-one self-identified gay men who were based in the UK were interviewed. Participant demographic information is provided in Table 1. The data from interviews with four men were excluded from the analysis. In three cases, this was because participants did not provide sufficient detail about their experiences for an IPA approach to be employed, and in one case, because the audio recording was not of a high enough quality to permit accurate

transcription – a consequence of poor Skype connectivity. The 17 men whose data were retained were aged between 20 and 42 years (median = 32). Although Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommend a sample size ranging from four to 10 for an IPA study, a larger sample was selected in order to capture the diversity of gay men's experiences relating to identity and sex, including age-related and generational differences in early gay experiences (Dunlap, 2016).

Some participants were recruited purposively from the sample of a previous questionnaire study (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017a). Other participants self-selected in response to recruitment advertisements placed on gay community pages on social media sites. A number of participants were recruited via snowball sampling, where men who had already been interviewed provided the researchers with the contact details of other men who had expressed an interest in taking part. Recruitment materials and all pre-interview correspondence with potential participants referred to a study about 'Experiences as a gay man', and stated that interviewees would be asked about their experiences of sex with other men.

All participants completed a short pre-interview questionnaire which asked the questions: 1) 'In a perfect world, if it were only up to you, which sexual role would you consistently adopt in sex with another man?' 2) 'In reality, with actual male sexual partners, which role do you consistently adopt?' The answers to these questions reflected the participants' position preferences and the positions they adopted most frequently in actuality (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). The response options were 'bottom' / 'versatile' / 'top' for both questions. The option 'I do not have anal sex / do not have anal sex frequently enough to answer' was also provided. No participants selected this response option. All participants who completed the pre-interview questionnaire were interviewed. Participants' responses to these two questions are provided in Table 1, and in the Results section of this paper: For

example, 'Reza (23; top/vers)' indicates that 23-year-old participant Reza stated in his pre-interview questionnaire that he was ideally top and versatile in actuality.

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' employing university. Participants gave written informed consent. A £10 gift voucher was offered to acknowledge the time they had given. Each participant was reminded at the start of his interview that he could choose to not answer any given question, could withdraw from the interview at any time, and could ask for his data to be withdrawn, without penalty, at any point within one month following their interview. Names and references to other people and places were changed to pseudonyms at the point of transcription. In the extracts of the transcripts presented in this paper, three spaced full stops indicate that some of the interview content has been omitted for brevity and clarity. Words and phrases in brackets were added by the authors.

Table 1: *Participant demographic information*

	Age	Relationship status	Highest academic attainment	Ideal position in anal intercourse	Typical position in anal intercourse
Sahib	20	Single	Undergraduate	Bottom	Bottom
Craig	33	Partnered (M)	High school	Bottom	Bottom
Geoff	36	Single	High school	Bottom	Versatile
Ben	24	Single	High school	Versatile	Bottom
Ross	32	Partnered (M)	Postgraduate	Versatile	Versatile
Adam	33	Partnered (M)	Postgraduate	Versatile	Versatile
Ryan	22	Single	Postgraduate	Versatile	Versatile
Jack	22	Single	Undergraduate	Versatile	Versatile (Top)
Arman	35	Partnered (M)	Postgraduate	Versatile	Versatile (Top)
Rob	35	Single	Postgraduate	Versatile	Versatile (Top)
Andy	23	Partnered (M)	High school	Versatile	Versatile (Top)
Pete	30	Single	Postgraduate	Versatile	Top
Evan	39	Single	Undergraduate	Versatile	Top
Carl	42	Partnered (NM)	Undergraduate	Versatile	Top
Reza	23	Partnered (M)	Postgraduate	Top	Versatile
Dale	31	Single	Postgraduate	Top	Top
Mike	38	Partnered (NM)	Postgraduate	Top	Top

*Note:* M = monogamous / closed relationship; NM = non-monogamous / open relationship. Ideal and typical positions reflect participants' responses in a pre-interview survey. Bottom = anally-receptive; Versatile = receptive or insertive; Top = insertive. (Top) = In their interviews, these participants reported being typically anally-insertive.

## Results

The analysis identified two overarching themes relating to how beliefs and experiences of masculinity were associated with identities and behavior in anal intercourse among gay men: Beliefs about masculinity and sexual positions as gendered identities; and beliefs about masculinity and sexual positions as gendered behaviors. Both themes are described below and supported with illustrative quotations.

### **Masculinity and sexual positions as gendered identities**

All participants acknowledged the stereotypic gender role discourse wherein tops and bottoms were constructed as contrasting identities: tops had more of the attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity – dominance, confidence and physical strength indicated by muscularity – whereas bottoms were more passive by nature, ‘camp’ in their behavior, and had slimmer, less muscular physiques, and were therefore more feminine. Several participants suggested that other people determined men’s likely sexual self-label based on perceptions of their masculinity and femininity – masculine men were tops and feminine men were bottoms – although not all participants agreed that the gender role stereotypes were valid. Gay men who had more essentialist interpretations of masculinity were more likely to endorse the stereotypes, as illustrated by Ross (32; vers/vers):

I've met people on Grindr [a gay dating app] and been very surprised to see that they're a bottom, they're kind of muscular, very masculine in appearance, but are, ‘Yeah, no, I'm 100% bottom.’ And it just, in my mind there's this kind of mismatch between appearance and preference . . . And you just think to yourself, ‘Oh, OK. Right. That, that isn't what I expected.’ And you just kind of do that immediate stereotyping of people, of ‘You're muscular, you go to the gym, you run, you're very masculine in appearance, therefore you're likely to be in control, the man, top.’

With his traditional beliefs about masculinity – defined by muscularity, gym patronage and sporting prowess – Ross was incredulous that men who fit his profile of masculinity could identify as committed bottoms. Ross' conflation of 'top' with 'the man' implied that his understanding of the penetrative and penetrated roles in anal intercourse was constructed within a discourse of heterosexual intercourse: If the top is 'the man' who, in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, has control over women in sexual relations, then the bottom must be the woman. From Ross' perspective, it was surprising that a man who was the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in terms of his appearance aligned himself with a sexual position he associated with women. Like other participants, Ross knew that appearances do not always reflect reality (a 'mismatch'), but within the gender role discourse, men who were counter-stereotypic were a source of incredulity.

To self-labelled versatile Ross, being perceived by other men as a top himself was paramount. He feared being perceived as a 'screaming queen' should his desire to bottom on occasion be known, and therefore described himself in masculine terms when using gay dating apps ('I would present myself as a top who was quite masculine, who could hold a conversation about football'). Therefore, some participants' beliefs about top and bottom as gendered identities – and/or their expectations that these were beliefs held widely by others – were strong enough to guide aspects of behavior outside the domain of anal intercourse. Geoff (36; bottom/vers) – who defined masculinity in stereotypical terms but was mostly unconcerned about being perceived as masculine himself ('that's not the kind of journey I'm on') – explained how context-dependent displays of 'campness' served to attract compatible sexual partners:

I think if it was a choice, I'd like to be perceived as a bottom. Which I guess links back to what we were saying earlier, about when the campness comes out. Late at night in a gay bar is probably the height of my campness, 'cause it's always last ditch,

‘Ok, right, let’s get it out and shake the booty!’ [Laughs] . . . If per chance Mr Right was in the bar, I wouldn’t want him getting the wrong impression!

It was important to Geoff that he communicated his self-label effectively in gay spaces, where there was the possibility of meeting a sexual partner: Drawing on his belief that other people perceived camp men as bottoms, he utilized campness to convey his bottom identity, lest there be any ‘wrong impressions’ (i.e., he were perceived as a top) if he behaved in a masculine way. Campness was, in certain contexts, an important aspect of Geoff’s repertoire of being gay. On the other hand, for Andy (23, vers/vers), who had strong, traditional beliefs about masculinity with which he aligned himself closely, being perceived as a top was paramount, notwithstanding his versatile label and inclination to bottom on occasion:

I would feel worse if I was perceived as a bottom . . . I guess it would be important for me to be perceived as a top, I don’t want to be seen as just, as just a bottom.

*I: Right. Can you explain why you, you wouldn’t like that as much?*

So I think that if I was perceived as a bottom, that’s seen as a more effeminate thing I guess. And obviously as we’ve discussed prior, it’s quite important for me to come across as masculine. In [city] there’s always a shortage of tops, I feel, there’s a lot of bottoms there, so I don’t want to be just put aside as saying, ‘Oh, that guy is definitely a bottom,’ I think that’s quite a bad thing.

The pervasiveness of the top/bottom gender role discourse meant that should Andy be perceived as a bottom, this would preclude him from being perceived as masculine, which would threaten his strong masculine subjectivity. Being assumed a top would be favourable to Andy, not only because it would accord with his masculine identity, but also because it



would distinguish him from other gay men, who he believed were most commonly bottoms. Andy's concern that he might be 'put aside' if he were perceived as 'just' a bottom implied that from his perspective, bottom was an unfavourable and/or stigmatized identity, an observation echoed by other participants, including Ryan (22, vers/vers):

Them saying, 'You're a bottom' is kind of the same thing as saying 'Oh, you're camp as hell as no way are you butch enough to top.' I think overly camp people are put down a lot in the gay world and seen as less of a status.

From Ryan's perspective, camp gay men faced prejudice in the gay community, where 'butch' – or traditionally masculine men – had higher status. The gender role discourse surrounding top/bottom identities was so pervasive that the label 'bottom', with its connotations of femininity, could be used as an insult and a means to subordinate: a script of hegemonic masculinity at play between gay men. Ryan claimed that he embodied an 'alternative masculinity' to 'society's definition' and did not endorse the notion that tops and bottoms could be identified on the basis of their degree of masculinity or femininity. Like other participants who had less traditional, less essentialist interpretations of masculinity, he was critical of the gender role stereotypes and drew attention to their inadequacy for defining top and bottom identities:

I don't come across as butch and, like, that masculine and people just assume, 'Oh God! OK, so you're camp and slim, you must be a bottom.' People are a bit stupid like that. . . . I just think it's a bit, it's a bit weird really. Like, it's got nothing in common, your personality and way you look and your sexual desire.

Ryan's critique came from an informed position: as he explained later, he was 'camp as Christmas', and was perceived invariably by other men as a bottom, when in actuality he

had an equal proclivity for being a top. With his insider knowledge, Ryan distanced himself from the ‘stupid’ people who thought that sexual self-labels could be predicted on the basis of masculinity and femininity. Unlike them, he knew that appearances could be deceptive, that the feminine-is-bottom stereotype was not valid, because sexual position preferences were unrelated to observable gendered characteristics. It was not only men who self-labelled as versatile who dismissed the relevance of the gender role stereotypes associated with top/bottom identities:

Dale (31; top/top) – You do, like, all the voguing<sup>1</sup>, and then, like, do a death drop<sup>2</sup>. So that’s, that’s, yeah. So, like, that isn’t the most masculine thing in the world at all. But like, I don’t give a shit. It’s kind of me, and it’s fun. So being a top doesn’t define or play to masculinity, really.

...

I’ve always felt masculine during sex, even if I, I think the last time I bottomed was maybe, like, six years, even then I still felt quite masculine and comfortable in myself.

As he revealed elsewhere in the interview, Dale’s masculine subjectivity was associated with his history of working in masculinized contexts (‘I think a lot of the careers I’ve done have shaped my masculinity’), and he embraced behaviors that he understood were non-masculine (‘I want to bust out a slut drop<sup>3</sup> or, like, vogue down the street’) as part of an alternative masculinity that was not related to his top self-label. Dale felt masculine irrespective of whether he was a top or a bottom, because not even voguing, death dropping or slut-dropping were obstacles to his subjective feelings of masculinity. Dale disrupted the hegemonic masculinity script of gay anal intercourse through his claim to a masculine

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<sup>1</sup> Dancing in a manner that imitates the movements of fashion models

<sup>2</sup> A dance move characterized by a sudden backwards descent to the ground

<sup>3</sup> A dance move involving a sudden squat to the ground followed by an immediate return to a standing position

subjectivity in general terms, which he experienced in defiance of normative ways of doing masculinity. Being a top was not a gendered social identity to Dale because his gay masculinity was achieved outside of stereotypic gender discourses.

Craig (33; bottom/bottom), reconciled the stereotypic gender role discourse surrounding being a bottom, his alignment with hegemonic masculinity, and his bottom self-label, by differentiating himself from other, 'lazy' bottom men:

I'd probably use 'active bottom' [to describe myself] for example, 'cause I'm quite keen on portraying myself as not just being a lying-on-your-back kind of bottom.

...

It doesn't affect my masculinity, because I'm not the kind of person to just lie there.

With his strong masculine subjectivity, it was particularly important to Craig that he presented himself in the interview and beyond – for example, in his presence on gay dating apps – as an 'active bottom', lest his bottom self-label detract from his alignment with hegemonic masculinity in both how he perceived himself and in how he hoped others, including the interviewer, would perceive him. Craig made seven references to 'not just lying there' during the interview – a discursive strategy that enabled him to navigate the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity discourse that in other domains of his life was so influential. (Earlier in the interview, Craig described himself as an 'Average Joe', and located his masculinity in terms of whether he passed as heterosexual.) In the discourse of top/bottom as gendered identities, Craig offered an alternative position for himself, as a bottom who subverted the hegemonic masculinity discourse by being 'active' in sex, which he explained later meant positioning himself physically on top of the insertive partner. From the perspective of some gay men like Craig, tops and bottoms were gendered identities, but not in the way constructed by the stereotypic gender role discourse: gender scripts of anal intercourse could be contested and reconfigured.

## **Masculinity and sexual positions as gendered behaviors**

### *Topping and experiences of masculinity*

Even if they did not endorse the gender role stereotypes of *being* a top and bottom, many participants embraced the connotations of masculinity and femininity associated with *topping* and *bottoming* as behaviors. The *act* of topping was often constructed in a discourse of hegemonic masculinity as active, dominant and controlling, irrespective of whether tops themselves were regarded in gendered terms. Further, engaging in the act of topping influenced the subjective experience of masculinity for some participants. For example, Adam (33, vers/vers), who did not endorse 'hard gender lines' and did not have a strong masculine identity ('my gender identity is me'), nevertheless experienced an increased sense of masculinity when he engaged in topping:

I guess it's not what I want to be saying, but it [topping] probably does make me feel more masculine. [Laughs] Yeah, sort of in charge of the situation I guess . . . That's not the way I'd like to feel, or describe it, it's just kind of the way it seems to be.

*I: Where do you think that feeling comes from then?*

Well, the act of penetration. . . it seems to be a dominant act, doesn't it?

Adam was conflicted because, as he stated during the interview, he did not believe sexual self-labels could be predicted reliably on the basis of gender role stereotypes, and he did not endorse hegemonic masculinity, yet he experienced the act of topping as a masculine behavior. Dowsett (1996, p. 9) suggested that the word 'penetration' is bound up in heterosexual constructions of sex, and obscures the 'radically different intentions, sensations, and contexts associated with that sexual activity for men'. It might therefore be unsurprising that Adam used the phrase 'act of penetration' in his rhetorical question that intended to rationalize his discordant feelings about topping and his beliefs about masculinity. The

discourse was irresistible: 'penetration' was something done by heterosexual men, and to experience it as masculinizing was inevitable

For Reza (23, top/vers) the extent to which topping contributed to a 'general feeling' of masculinity was associated with the number of sexual partners he had at a given time:

[Topping] does kind of make me feel more masculine just 'cause you're, like, more dominating and stuff. 'Cause, like, obviously to me, the more masculine you are, the more, like, dominating or, like, controlling or, like, in charge, like that sort of thing. It does make a difference, like, being in a relationship, how, like, masculine or, like, dominating you feel sort of thing, 'cause you're only, like, to me it would be, 'I'm dominating one person,' whereas if you're single and you're sleeping around and stuff, you're more masculine to more people.

With an interpretation of masculinity anchored in a hegemonic masculinity discourse, feeling masculine was for Reza contingent on dominating other men, even though (as he explained elsewhere) his top self-label was associated with pleasure and comfort rather than masculine identity. For Adam, Reza and other gay men who did not experience themselves as particularly masculine in other domains, feeling masculine was relational and context-dependent, contingent on the subordination of other men in the domain of anal intercourse. Topping provided temporary subjective experiences of masculinity for men who did not normally feel particularly masculine.

The masculinising effects of topping were also felt by men who already experienced a strong masculine subjectivity. For example, Craig experienced a 'surge of dominance' when he topped, which would 'reassert' his strong sense of masculinity – an example of what Connell (1995) refers to as 'body-reflexive practice', where masculine subjectivity and bodily

practices are reinforced reciprocally. For Andy, the conflation between topping a man and being insertive in heterosexual intercourse influenced his experiences of masculinity:

I definitely feel the stronger I can be and the most dominant I can be, the most manly I'd feel [when topping]. 'Cause I guess it would be the closest thing to, I guess, having sex with a woman.

Committed to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which was irrevocably heterosexual, Andy identified topping as the vehicle through which it may be most successfully appropriated. Andy experienced himself at his most masculine when he was topping because topping emulated the sexual behavior of a heterosexual man, and therefore allowed Andy to emulate hegemonic masculinity.

Not all participants framed the masculinizing effects of topping in terms of the hegemonic masculine ideals of dominance and subordination. Experiences of masculinity were for some participants related to the experience of facilitating the pleasure and comfort of the receptive partner, as illustrated by Rob (35; vers/vers):

I want to make sure the bottom's having a really good time [when I top]. And if that means going slower, then it's kind of like being a bit more responsible for, like, how you're, kind of, so I suppose that's the kind of the, the increase in masculinity there, is you, kind of, you should give a shit about the person that, that's, you know, on the bottom.

Rob experienced topping as masculine because he had control over the pace of the sex, and therefore the enjoyment and comfort of the bottom. Although still positioned within a hegemonic masculinity discourse, it was Rob's concern for (rather than control of) the receptive partner that was masculinizing. His sense of responsibility for the more vulnerable

bottom was in keeping with his interpretation masculinity in hegemonic masculinity terms, and his identity as a hegemonically masculine man ('alpha male').

However, it might be argued that Rob's account, and those of the other participants described above, was influenced by the availability of a particular discourse of penetrative intercourse in a context where participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of masculinity. Bersani (2010, p. 28) argued against assuming that sexual inequalities are influenced inevitably by social inequalities (i.e., those between men and women, reproduced by hegemonic masculinity), suggesting instead that power dynamics are inherent in human bodies, which are not 'belatedly contaminated by power from elsewhere'. In other words, the experiential inequalities between the top and the bottom in anal intercourse between men (i.e., the 'dominant' top and the 'vulnerable' bottom) might be influenced by the power dynamics inherent in the relations between the penis and the anus, which participants may have made sense of by referring to experiences of masculinity. Rob framed the bottom as someone who should be 'given a shit about' because he believed that as the top, he had the 'responsibility'; Andy felt 'stronger' when he topped, and Craig more 'dominant'. As the participants knew, these terms were associated with masculinity, but the experiences of topping that provoked these feelings may have been embodied *power* experiences, rather than experiences of masculinity *per se*. This might help to explain why Adam described topping as 'masculine', when he had already rejected masculinity as a concept relevant to him.

#### *Bottoming and experiences of femininity and masculinity*

Whereas topping was associated with only masculine perceptions and experiences, there was greater diversity in both perceptions of bottoming and the gendered experiences of bottoming, irrespective of whether the stereotype of bottom femininity was endorsed. Several participants related the feminizing effects of bottoming to the lack of power the bottom had during anal intercourse. However, the relationship between bottoming and power was

complex, and interpreted in different ways. For Sahib (20; bottom/bottom), it was associated with the bottom's vulnerability:

When I bottom, I automatically feel, like, very submissive to whoever I'm doing it [with] . . . 'cause he's in me, I'm like, 'He can hurt me.'

Sahib described a power relationship between the top and the bottom. An awareness of the top's position of power to cause pain to the bottom subordinated Sahib when he bottomed, and this happened 'automatically': the inevitability of psychological submission when control over his body was relinquished. Sahib's discourse adds further weight to the suggestion that experiences in anal intercourse are influenced strongly by embodied experiences relating to power. Some participants framed the powerlessness associated with bottoming in positive terms, as Ben (24; vers/bottom) illustrated:

Most of the time I'll be, like, 'Yeah, I want to bottom.' I just love the feeling. Yeah, in a way it's kind of like I love the feeling that someone is in control, does that make sense?

. . .

I also know that I love doing it as well 'cause if I can hear and see that a guy is enjoying it, I know the fact that my body is making him feel like that, that's what makes the electricity come and just, my whole body starts to shake and tingle.

For Ben, powerlessness had value – it was eroticized, a source of sexual pleasure. There was a power hierarchy at play, but it was not fixed: Ben also *acquired* power as a bottom because it was *his* body that was responsible for affording pleasure to the top. The implications of bottoming in terms of both the loss and the acquisition of power were both embodied and psychological experiences.



Other participants also suggested that bottoming need not be associated with a loss of power and was not inevitably related to feelings of submission. Some had strategies for overcoming the physical vulnerability associated with bottoming that might lead to submission:

Craig: If I was to bottom, the first thing I'd want to do is be on top of that person . . .

And obviously, I would then control, because yeah, ultimately someone's penetrating me in an intimate area, I don't want them to be just shoving it in and letting me think of England . . . So for me, that's an active side of it, to be an active bottom because I want to take control of it.

From Craig's perspective, it was 'obvious' that he would control the sex as a bottom-on-top, because it was he who was in the vulnerable physical position. It should also be 'obvious' to the interviewer, because being a bottom-on-top accorded with the masculine identity Craig had constructed throughout the interview. The message was clear: bottoming could be masculine as long as it was 'active', and Craig was masculine when bottoming. It might be argued that irrespective of whether it is a woman or another man who is 'on top' of a man during receptive intercourse, it is the insertive man who possesses the physical power, as expressed via the thrusting of the penis (Bersani, 2010). It seemed that this was not lost on Craig – after all, when he bottomed he was '*penetrated* in an intimate area' [emphasis added]. Describing himself as an 'active bottom' was a discursive strategy employed by Craig to quash any assumptions that the power during intercourse did not belong to him.

The potential for masculine experiences when bottoming was also identified by Pete (30; vers/top), who acknowledged the construction of bottoming as feminine within the stereotypic gender role discourse, but provided alternative interpretations:

When I'm on bottom, I feel like I, like, surrender almost. It's like I just want to be, like, be soft and hold and just kind of be passive.

...

I remember thinking this the last time I was getting fucked. I was, like, on my back, screaming, and I was like, 'Oh my God, I'm taking it up the ass, this is fabulous!'

...

There seems to be this kind of societal thing, of, like, taking it up the bum is somehow less manly.

*I: What's your opinion on that?*

Doesn't get more manly does it, than getting fucked by a man?!

With little concern for his own masculine identity ('I don't feel particularly masculine, I feel like me most of the time'), Pete's experiences of bottoming did not have a profound influence on his sense of masculinity, but he was eager to refute the widely held perception of bottoming as a less masculine behavior. Although Pete associated bottoming with passivity ('getting fucked') and deployed a femininity discourse to describe his experiences ('on my back, screaming') he did not frame the behavior as feminine. From his experience, bottoming was 'taking it' and being able to withstand anal penetration was masculine. The hegemonic masculinity discourse was disrupted by Pete because there was no inequality in anal intercourse, and being 'fucked by a man' was the epitome of a masculine behavior. Pete's discourse is reminiscent of Dowsett's (1996, 2000) reference to the 'active' or 'desiring' anus. Dowsett (1996, 2000) suggested that although it is the penis that is typically ascribed agency in sexual intercourse, the anus can be viewed as active in that it consumes the penis, demands pleasure, and liberates men from heteronormative sexual scripts. If the anus has agency, then receptive anal intercourse can be constructed as 'manly', just as Pete described it.

*Top/bottom choice and relative masculinity*

There was a great deal of fluidity in the position adopted in a given instance of anal intercourse, including among the minority of men who self-labelled as top or bottom. Gendered scripts of topping and bottoming influenced many participants' position choices in a variety of different ways, and the extent to which these scripts influenced sexual behavior varied between participants. Beliefs about others' perceptions of own masculinity often influenced the position taken, even among men who did not feel particularly gendered. For example, others' perceptions of Arman (35; vers/vers) as masculine often led to him topping in casual sexual encounters:

I used to get loads of messages from bottoms. So there. I must have been doing something that was masculine.

. . .

*I: How would the fact that they've assumed you're a top impact on how you actually have sex with that person, if at all?*

. . . If they wanted me to top then I think again, that whole persona comes out on my side as well . . . You adopt an ego don't you? An alter ego. And you become this, you become a top . . . You kind of find out what limits they have, if they say they've got no limits and they like it really rough, like slapping, choking, all that stuff, so it's like, 'Ok, I'll do that.'

With a versatile self-label and no particular preference for either position, Arman was happy to fulfil other men's expectations that he would top, recognising that they perceived him as masculine but, without a strong masculine identity, having only a tenuous understanding as to why. Topping was acting for Arman: others cast him in a role and he responded appropriately to how he was positioned in the gender role discourse, temporarily embodying a dominating, masculine top identity.

Perceptions of others' masculinity relative to self-perceived masculinity guided the position choice for several participants. In the case of self-declared 'alpha male' Rob, position choice was strongly influenced by the masculinity of the sexual partner:

They can be the, like, the biggest, most muscular, kind of most manly guy, but if they're not man enough to put me on the bottom then I don't care what position they are, they're going on the bottom.

...

I went, 'No, I'm versatile. I'm fifty-fifty. You can literally drop me and I'll land on the, I'll land on the edge of the coin, not, you know, not on heads or tails.' And that's when I say, 'It takes a man to put me on the bottom in fairness.'

From Rob's perspective, a sexual partner would need to convey a package of masculine attributes, beyond physical characteristics alone, in order to be deemed 'man enough' to bottom for. Although he had reported being typically versatile in his pre-interview questionnaire, it became clear during the interview that Rob was far from 'fifty-fifty'. Accustomed to being the alpha-male in other masculinized social contexts – 'even within the rugby group' – Rob reserved bottoming for men who were even more masculine than himself, who were powerful enough to control the sexual encounter and 'put' him on the bottom. Otherwise, and in most occasions of intercourse, it was Rob who controlled the allocation of positions, and he was sufficiently powerful to override others' position preferences: he would put his less masculine partner on the bottom.

Reza was one such man whose strict preference for one position – in his case, top – was disrupted by his understanding of the gender scripts associated with topping and bottoming, and an awareness of his own masculinity in relation to others':

There was this guy that I was sleeping with for a while . . . and I used to always bottom with him.

. . .

I always felt like he was more dominating, like, it would always be on his terms sort of thing. Like, I would only go round when he said so sort of thing, so I guess in that sense I felt like that I couldn't really, do you know, be, like, dominating when we were having sex either.

For Reza, a subordinate position in a romantic relationship spilled over into the realm of anal intercourse. He had described previously a resolute preference for topping, but the combination of his stereotypic beliefs regarding tops and topping, bottom and bottoming, his endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, and his perception of himself as less masculine than his sexual partner, were sufficient for him to renege on this strong position preference.

Not all of the participants' sexual behavior was affected by perceptions of relative masculinity, even if they were able to locate their own masculinity in relation to others'. As a self-identified 'camp' gay man with a slim physique, Ryan acknowledged that if he were to top for a more masculine man it would appear as an incongruous arrangement, 'like a Chihuahua fucking a husky'. To Ryan, sex could look 'queered', even absurd – his vivid and humorous imagery was intended to unravel the gender scripts in anal intercourse between men that might constrain other men's behavior. Gender was of no concern to Ryan, especially in the domain of anal intercourse. He concluded, 'I've had sex with really, really, butch men and I've topped them, and it's fine'.

For Ben it was the sexual pleasure derived from subverting the power relationship between a top and a bottom, combined with his perceptions of his own and his partner's masculinity, that guided his sexual positioning on occasion:

I just loved the feeling of a twink overpowering a bear instead of the other way round.

...

I think it's a fetish personally. 'Cause obviously bears, they're masculine, they're butch and very manly, very able to overpower a twink. But knowing a hairless twink who's not butch is able to make a bear feel the way he feels when being bottomed, I don't know, it just makes me want to do it even more.

As a self-identified 'twink' – young, slim, hairless and feminine – Ben was aware that in the gender stereotypic discourse of topping and bottoming, he was positioned as a bottom for the more stereotypically masculine 'bear', a gay man commonly characterized by a larger physique and more hirsute body (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017b). His belief that tops had masculine power afforded a 'fetish' quality to his experiences of topping a more masculine man than himself. Ben embraced the gender role stereotypes associated with tops and bottoms – tops should be more masculine and bottoms more feminine – but he nevertheless subverted the gender script that prescribed positions on the basis of relative masculinity. The dominance of the hegemonic masculinity discourse meant that hegemonic masculinity was Ben's reference point for understanding what positioning practices *should look like*, but his own behavior was not always guided by the gender scripts that it prescribed. Further, fashioning sexual practices that contested these gender scripts was a source of sexual pleasure.

### **Discussion**

The IPA approach used in this study allowed for a discourse-dynamic approach to studying gender and sexual subjectivity (Willig, 2000). This permitted identification of social discourses relating to gay sexual self-labelling and detailed examination of how gay men's beliefs about masculinity and their identification with hegemonic masculinity were related to

their understanding and experience of sexual positioning in anal intercourse. Many gay men use sexual self-labels as a means to position themselves in relation to other men within discourses of gender and power (Kippax & Smith, 2001; Hoppe, 2011; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). In accordance with previous findings, the results from the present study suggest that these discourses influence some gay men's sexual positioning behaviors (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Johns et al., 2012). The findings presented here extend current understanding of gay sexual positioning in three key ways. First, the results suggest that gay men's expectations and experiences of positioning in anal intercourse are at least in part associated with how they define gender and the extent to which they identify with a hegemonic interpretation of masculinity. Second, some gay men may have strategies for challenging the gender scripts of anal intercourse that are influenced by hegemonic masculinity, even if hegemonic masculinity is ostensibly endorsed. Third, gay men may distinguish between sexual positions as potentially gendered social identities (i.e., sexual self-labels) and sexual positions as potentially gendered behaviors.

As found in previous studies, some gay men contested the gender role stereotypes associated with top and bottom self-labels while others embraced them (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004). The extent to which the participants in this study engaged with and positioned themselves within the stereotypic gender role discourse was related to their endorsement of and identification with hegemonic masculinity. As prior research has identified, the behavior of some gay men is influenced by their aspirations to align with hegemonic masculinity (Taywaditep, 2001). However, some reject aspirations to hegemonic masculinity and incorporate both masculine and feminine behaviors and attributes into their gender expression (Wilson et al., 2010). In this study, participants who opposed essentialist interpretations of masculinity or who were less concerned with maintaining a masculine identity were more likely to challenge the gender role stereotypes and seek alternative constructions of tops and

bottoms. These men often acknowledged the existence of gender stereotypic discourses of masculine tops and feminine bottoms but positioned themselves and others outside of them. From their perspective, sexual self-labels could not always be determined with reference to gender role stereotypes and self-labelling was not always associated with gender identity. Consequently, men who contest top and bottom gender role stereotypes may experience no need to present to others a self-label of top or bottom, nor to adopt a particular self-label in response to concerns regarding their masculine identity. Self-labelling for such men is likely to be influenced by other considerations, such as pleasure, comfort and sexual anxieties associated with adopting a given position (Hoppe, 2011; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2016; Pachankis, Bittenwieser, Bernstein & Bayles, 2013).

On the other hand, men who defined masculinity in essentialist terms and who identified and/or wanted to be perceived as stereotypically masculine, were more likely to apply a gender stereotypic understanding of tops as masculine and bottoms as feminine, irrespective of their own sexual self-labels. For these men, the belief that they and other gay men were positioned within a stereotypic gender role discourse influenced both their sexual practices and non-sexual behaviors. In line with hegemonic masculinity, some were intent on avoiding femininity and presented a top self-label to other gay men. Therefore, a versatile or bottom man with a strong masculine identity might self-present as a top in order to maintain the appearance of masculinity. Concern for being perceived as either a top or a bottom, and utilizing certain gendered behaviors to appear as one or the other, are predicated by the belief that tops and bottoms are discernible on the basis of gendered attributes. For some gay men, negotiating a sexual identity may be closely tied to maintaining a particular gender identity.

That some self-labelled versatile men were concerned with being perceived as tops to protect their masculine integrity refutes previous research findings that have represented versatile men as more gender-balanced, and versatility as an opportunity to escape gender



stereotypes (Johns et al., 2012). It highlights the importance of accounting for masculine identity when examining position preferences, and of distinguishing between self-labels as sexual position identities and as positioning behaviors. Many participants in the present study made stark distinctions between self-labels as social identities and topping and bottoming as behavioral practices: top and bottom often represented notional stereotyped identities rather than descriptions of people who topped or bottomed. Self-labels may not only be longitudinally fluid identities (Moskowitz & Roloff, 2015; Pachankis et al., 2013), but also reflect short-term, context-dependent desires to be perceived in a particular way by others. This observation can help to explain why, as previous research has found, top and bottom self-labelling is not always concordant with sexual positioning in actuality (Wei & Raymond, 2011).

The study's findings indicate that to focus solely on the meaning to gay men of top and bottom self-identification is to obscure the complex psychosocial implications of engaging in the acts of insertive and receptive anal intercourse, in *doing* topping and bottoming and not only *being* a top or a bottom. It follows that men who engage in stereotypic gender role discourses to make sense of sexual dynamics between men might interpret their own experiences of anal intercourse in accordance with gender role stereotypes, as identified by the discourse-dynamic approach adopted in this study. However, for some, the act of engaging in topping and/or bottoming had implications for (albeit temporary) subjective experiences of gender, irrespective of whether the gender role stereotypes were endorsed, and regardless of masculine identity.

Many participants described the masculinizing effects of topping in hegemonic masculinity terms: topping made some gay men feel dominant over and in control of other men, and mirrored the sexual intercourse that heterosexual men engage in, particularly in relation to the penetrating penis. Bottoming was associated with subjective experiences of

non-masculine passivity and vulnerability, and also of masculinity. Bottoming could be experienced as masculine because it demonstrated that anal penetration could be withstood, because bottoms could be 'bottoms on top', and because they could acquire power by controlling the top's pleasure (Dowsett, Williams, Ventuneac & Carballo-Diéguez, 2008; Hoppe, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity may be at the centre of some gay men's interpretations of masculinity, and may define the gender scripts associated with anal intercourse, but the findings suggest that some gay men are active in deconstructing these gender scripts and challenging the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity discourse. Some participants' accounts suggested that bottoming was not intrinsically passive: It has been suggested previously that in anal intercourse, the anus demands pleasure from the penis just as the penis requires the anus for its pleasure – the relationships are reciprocal, not necessarily hierarchical (Dowsett, 2000). Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the discourse that all gay men engage in when making sense of the dynamics of anal intercourse, because neither partner necessarily experiences subjugation.

This queering of hegemonic masculinity was also observed when some participants discussed sexual position decision making, in relation to comparative masculinity. On the one hand, and in accordance with what has been found previously, sexual position decision making for versatile men was often related to the comparative masculinity of the sexual partners, such that the man who it was agreed was the more masculine would top on that occasion, whereas the less masculine man would bottom (Carballo-Diéguez, 2004; Johns et al., 2012). Such a negotiation necessitates reference to stereotypic gender scripts in order to appraise one's own masculinity and that of the sexual partner, and may suggest that heterosexual constructions of sexual intercourse guide some gay men's sexual behavior (Carballo-Diéguez, 2004; Johns et al., 2012). On the other hand, it was suggested that these gender scripts could also be unravelled, so that less masculine men could adopt the top

position with a more masculine partner. Perceptions of comparative masculinity were not irrelevant – the understanding that the sexual behavior subverted hegemonic masculinity was an intrinsic part of the experience.

Although the gay men who took part in this study were recruited from across the UK and the sample was fairly diverse in terms of age, the generalisability of the findings is questionable given the small opportunistic sample, and the possibility that the gay men who took part were uniquely interested in being interviewed about their experiences of sex. The purpose of IPA is to describe phenomena and interpret how those phenomena are experienced and understood by a given population (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Although it cannot be concluded that the findings presented here represent the experiences of all UK gay men, due to the consistency of the accounts it may be tentatively suggested that many gay men understand and experience sexual positioning in anal intercourse in ways similar to those discussed in this paper.

A second limitation is that this study did not examine how top, bottom and versatile identities extend to encapsulate preferences for and engagement in other sexual behaviors between gay men. For example, Moskowitz et al. (2008) found that men who labelled as top were more likely than bottoms to report a willingness to engage in other insertive sexual behaviors, such as insertive fisting, urination and sex-toy play, which may be associated with masculine dominance over a submissive partner. Future research might address how masculine identity is associated with preferences for being receptive or insertive across a broader range of sexual behaviors.

A third limitation is that bisexual men and other men who have sex with men without identifying as gay (MSM) were not recruited for the present study. IPA studies focus on small homogeneous groups who experience the same phenomena in a similar way (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and in this study, only self-identified gay men were recruited. It has been

found previously that sexual self-labels reflect degrees of 'gayness', to the extent that men who identify as top are considered less gay than those who identify as bottom (Johns et al., 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017b). Further, bisexual men are less likely to bottom in anal intercourse than men who identify as gay (Agronick et al., 2004). Therefore, future studies might involve samples of bisexual men and/or MSM to examine how top and bottom and topping and bottoming are experienced in relation to masculine identity by these groups of men.

The study's findings may have some important sexual health implications. Efforts to engage with gay men in issues relating to their behavior in anal intercourse might in future account for their beliefs about and subjective experiences of masculinity. Quantitative research has already demonstrated that men who aspire to be hegemonically masculine are more likely to engage in condomless anal intercourse, which is an HIV-risk behavior (Brennan et al., 2015). Future qualitative research might be oriented to examining how beliefs about masculinity are associated with condom negotiations between gay men. Prior research has identified gender-related relationship power as a key variable in condom use within heterosexual relationships – heterosexual women with low relationship power are significantly less likely to report using condoms in intercourse than women with high relationship power (Pulerwitz, Amaro, de Jong, Gortmaker & Rudd, 2002). Further, it has been found that men who endorse the mandates of hegemonic masculinity are less likely to report a willingness to use condoms with regularity (Noar & Morokoff, 2002). Taken together, these findings suggest that it is often the men in heterosexual relationships who determine whether a condom is used in intercourse, and this is related to their masculine power over their female partner. If this observation were to be applied to relationships between gay men, it might be proposed that tops would be more likely than bottoms to guide condom use, and therefore that sexual health messages regarding condom use should be

oriented to targeting men who are typically insertive in anal intercourse. However, the findings from this study imply that bottoms can also feel powerful (and masculine) in anal intercourse, meaning that condom use negotiations between gay men may be more complex. As the data in this study suggest, stereotypic gender scripts associated with anal intercourse are powerful, as much as they are also queered. Therefore, one practical implication of the findings may be to design sexual health messages that draw attention to bottom men's possibilities for power, and therefore for being active in condom use decision making.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that beliefs about masculinity and masculine identity may be associated with sexual self-label presentation, self-label identification, position decision making and experiences during anal intercourse. Gay men who endorsed hegemonic masculinity and who valued their own expressions of masculinity were more likely to view sexual self-labels as gendered in hegemonic masculinity terms. Many of the participants in this study conceptualized sexual self-labels as distinct from positioning practices, which were often described as gendered experiences. Stereotypic gender scripts even guided the sexual positioning behavior of gay men who were unconcerned with their own masculinity and who did not endorse hegemonic masculinity. However, the study identified many examples of where participants challenged the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity discourse, by queering the stereotypic gender scripts it prescribes. This suggests that some gay men may be active in producing novel configurations of gender in anal intercourse.

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