

Not That Kind of Slut: Whorephobia in Sex-Positive Discourse

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Abstract

Written from the perspective of a sex worker and academic, this paper explores why cultural ideologies surrounding sex-positive discourses have not extended to sex workers. Monetization of emotional and reproductive labour is examined as the key difference between casual sex and sex work. Social objections to remuneration of feminized labour are evaluated. Further work under qualitative models will be necessary to test theoretical integrity.

Keywords: sex work, reproductive labour, Marxist feminism, gender studies

Introduction

Sex positivity “can be understood as an ideology that promotes, with respect to gender and sexuality, being open-minded, non-judgmental and respectful of personal sexual autonomy, when there is consent” (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017, p.216). The sex-positivity movement, borne out of the advocacy of liberal feminist and queer theory discourses, has significantly altered the social stigma concerning human sexuality. However, as with most social movements, the intersectionality of social privilege has not uniformly delivered indemnity from stigma. Marginalized bodies, such as persons of diverse abilities, people of colour, transgendered persons and sex workers still experience tremendous stigma. This article presents an emerging theory surrounding the stigmatization of sex work from a Marxist-feminist perspective. Private ownership systems as well as excess production turn society away from gender equality and towards patrilineal inheritance structures. An analysis of society’s rejection of women using their own bodies’ reproductive

surplus value is best understood using a theory that comprehensively addresses capitalism, ownership structures and gender roles.

Momentum Towards a “Hook Up Culture”

Although prevalence rates of casual sex in North America range considerably between cohorts, the most recent academic findings suggest a lifetime incidence rate of 60-80% within adult populations (Braun & Farvid, 2017). Historically, incidence levels of what would now be considered casual sex were much lower¹. In the late sixties, these rates were estimated with a lifetime prevalence of 17%, increasing to 51% by 1980 (Whyte, 1990). The increased normalization and integration of heteronormative casual sex has significantly reduced the stigma surrounding “hook up culture.” The culture of hooking up refers to the serial non-committed and casual sexual relationships facilitated by online dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr. Like many other sociological advances in a hegemonic system, the majority of the social protection is afforded to white, able-bodied, heterosexual men. Gender remains a huge predictor of stigma from sexual practices (Braun & Farvid, 2017), with a lingering social presumption that “nice girls don’t engage in hook up culture” (Whyte, 1990).

While the double standard endures, women continue to have casual sex which is generally enjoyable for them (Lee & Moran, 2014). However, researchers Braun and Farvid acknowledge that compared to men, women “were severely constrained by discourses of gender difference in casual sex” (2017, p.75). Indeed, women expressed more anxiety towards reputation preservation, or avoiding “slut shaming”. While the gendered rhetoric of the post-war era is muted considerably, it must be acknowledged that access to sexual liberation remains linked to gendered notions of acceptable sexuality.

Who Has the Right to Pleasure?

The right to sex-positivity remains enshrouded by the intersectionality of privilege and oppression. Women, in general, face more stigma than their male counterparts (Allison & Risman, 2013). While there is little literature available on racialized hook up culture, it appears that there may be differences in perception (Allison & Risman, 2013). The racialization of sexuality is also apparent in pornography, where “porn...[secures] a consensus about race and desirability that ultimately works to [racial] disadvantage” (Nguyen & Williams, 2004, p.224).

The further one departs from the patriarchal archetype of sexuality, the more stigmatized one’s sexuality becomes. Weeks (2003) contends that normative sexuality is becoming increasingly accepted if it conforms to the “whats, hows and whos” that are perceived to be normal or desirable within a culture. This is further evidenced in the treatment of disabled persons as having no agency within human sexuality. Ableism informs the ideology that sex must be performed in a certain array of acceptable physical acts, and that the disabled should have no autonomy to repurpose sexuality to meet their needs (Sakellariou, 2012).

By examining the treatment of our most marginalized individuals, it becomes clear that sexual liberation is a privilege. While the de-stigmatization of casual sex presents a significant cultural shift from the post-war attitudes, such freedoms are not universal.

Sex Work, Whorephobia and #thotaudit

“Thot” is an acronym slang term that translates to “that hoe over there” and is used predominantly in young adolescent vernacular to describe salacious or attention-seeking behaviour. This term is not exclusively used for sex workers. In mid-November 2018, the hashtag #thotaudit started trending on Twitter. This hashtag was a call to action to report sex trade workers to tax agencies, to collect whistleblower commissions on any taxes assessed from undeclared incomes (Chung, 2018). Online sex workers such as cam girls and women who sell nude images on social media platforms were targeted.

What culminated from #thotaudit was socially significant as it represented the largest public unified action against sex workers in the digital age. Many of the sex workers who were targeted fell victim to a process of “doxing” (Alptraum, 2017), where their legal names, birthdays, pictures and various identity cards were posted online for the public to view. This exposure can result in identity theft, harassment, stalking and social stigma from being “outed” as a sex worker. Beyond the obvious misogyny of this action, there is speculation that it was inspired out of resentment of sex workers’ ability to monetize pleasure.

Whorephobia is the hatred or stigmatization of sex workers. Some sex workers believe the word “whore” to be indicative of cultural violence (Young, 2015). Aptly described as the verbal representation of rape culture, the word whore is a visceral and textured slur meant to address a womanhood that is divergent from patriarchal expectations (Young, 2015). Sex workers are the apex of contra-patriarchal womanhood. Whorephobia is an ideology purveyed by men and women alike. Even more telling is the existence of whorephobia within feminist discourse. It seems sex workers are universalized as sub-human victims.

In the era of Tinder, Bumble and the relative acceptance of casual sex (Braun & Farvid, 2017), the objection to monetization of sex seems illogical. Apart from the abstinence-based leanings of the religious right, casual and premarital sex have permeated our cultural and social practices. The puritanical arguments surrounding morality are generally rejected (Whyte, 1990). It is estimated that, by high school, over 30% of teens have shared nude images without compensation (Rosin, 2014), with that prevalence increasing in adulthood. Sex workers’ enterprise, both virtual and physical, does not seem to deviate markedly from the liberal sexual activity promoted under sex-positive discourse. However, sex workers continue to face tremendous whorephobia.

The Ownership of Emotional Labour

Marxist-Feminist discourse has isolated the concepts of women’s emotional, domestic and reproductive labour. The constitutive surplus value of this labour is generally supposed from reproduction, where women are responsible for breeding more workers (Gutierrez-Rodriguez,

2014). Traditionally, the rhetoric surrounding women working inside the home is that they are a cost centre. What has been previously ignored is that without the unpaid emotional and reproductive labour of women, all economies would suffer (Luxton, 1997). The domestic, emotional and reproductive labour of women is then re-thought as a long-term profit centre. Marxist analysis focuses on the surplus value of labour—the difference between the proletariat remuneration and the market value of labour outputs. Women provide one of the greatest contributions to surplus value: their bodies. If patriarchal capitalism lost access to the unpaid reproductive labour of women, the economic consequences would be devastating.

The social stigma attached to sex workers is less about morality than it is about capitalism. The objection society faces to sex work is not about the *sex* and all about the *work*. The legitimization of sex work as true labour applies value to reproductive and emotional labour that was previously unquantified. Understandably, this provides a challenge to the current status quo of late capital, which still depends significantly on this unpaid labour. The fact that sex workers continually must defend their trade as true labour speaks to the devaluation of human capital and feminization of certain work (Folbre, 2003).

Once a social order is achieved, society works by all means necessary to achieve stasis. Essentially, society becomes held together by an implicit social contract (Rousseau, 1762), wherein “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body” (Rousseau, 1762, p.15). In this capacity, all members of society become moral “judge and jury” of their peers, subconsciously and consciously exiling those who depart from the maintenance of the status quo.

Conclusion: A Theory Under Capital

Whorephobia is the collective response to a potentially destabilizing societal shift in the entitlement to women’s bodies. As Rousseau has argued, a society will tend to discipline its defectors through ostracization, stigma and imprisonment. All three of these methods of coercion are seen in the treatment of sex workers. Cumulatively, one can see how the largest obstacle to the universal legalization and acceptance of sex work is the very economic framework that

supports its function. Capitalism and the market forces of supply and demand are the catalysts to relatively high remuneration for sex workers. After all, their resource is scarce.

Linking the objection to sex work to that of morality or lack of sex-positivity is a loss leader. Reduction to a pure act of sexism is also overly simplistic. The stigmatization of sex work is a symptom of social contract maintenance. Rejecting the possibility that women should be remunerated for emotional and reproductive labour reaffirms the economic exploitation of women's labour that maintains our current social order.

Endnotes

¹From Martin King Whyte, *Dating, Mating, and Marriage* (New York, 1990), 27. Casual sex in this context was defined as having multiple partners beyond the person you eventually ended up marrying.

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