

Additional reflections on sex work stigma

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My essay, “Resistance to sex work stigma,” was both a critique of the literature on stigma and a preliminary set of theses for reducing and ultimately eliminating stigma from the lives of those who participate in sexual commerce. The article was not intended as the final word on the subject, and was instead designed to raise essential questions and catalyze discussion of ways of challenging and breaking the stigma syndrome. I had hoped that the article would generate supplementary proposals, not considered in the article, to further the project of destigmatization. Some of the commentators have indeed offered constructive feedback.

Teela Sanders argues that many practitioners who provide support services to persons in the sex industry also fight against public disapproval and attempt to re-educate others, including agents of the state. At the micro level, they do this in the course of their daily work; at the meso level, the mission statements of some service-providing organizations explicitly condemn the Othering of and discrimination against sex workers (Oselin and Weitzer, 2013). Sanders recognizes that not all service providers play this role; some NGOs in the “rescue industry” seem committed to increasing stigma of sex workers, not fighting it. But service organizations that are committed to harm reduction and take a non-judgmental position on sex work can also function, through their interactions with state agencies, as another source of destigmatization.

Sanders also highlights the importance of legal reform as a foundation for contesting stigma. Not only is this extremely important, but it is also evidenced by legal liberalization in other spheres, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage in Ireland, America, and elsewhere. Although legal reform does not automatically dilute public stereotypes, over time it can help to chip away at those prejudices. Of course, the *kind* of legal reform is crucial. Regressive laws have recently been passed in Canada, France, and Northern Ireland – criminalizing clients. But there have also been some important recent initiatives in the direction of decriminalization (e.g. Amnesty International, 2016; Home Affairs Committee, 2016).

Victor Minichiello, John Scott, and Cameron Cox highlight some ways in which stigma affects male sex workers and why scholars and activists need to include them in research and in struggles for rights. Despite the growing body of research on male sex work (e.g. Laing et al., 2015; Minichiello and Scott, 2014), both the literature and political debates remain skewed toward female sex workers – as if

male sex workers don't exist (see Dennis, 2008). Minichiello and his coauthors make the important point that some academic studies ignore the larger social forces that shape sex work and indirectly stigmatize sex workers by virtue of focusing on those who have troubled family backgrounds, are drug addicted, have HIV, engage in crime, or have psychological "pathologies." Some careless authors make the mistake of implicitly generalizing findings on these dimensions to sex workers in general, forgetting to confine their conclusions to the specific sample examined in the study. Clearly, researchers need to be more cognizant of how their selection of certain research questions over others may skew knowledge and indirectly stigmatize sex workers, and more careful in confining their discussion to the individuals studied rather than making broader generalizations.

The commentary by Wendy Chapkis is baffling in many respects, distorting and misrepresenting the arguments in my article. She claims that I have "failed to build on past proposals," yet not one of these previous proposals is mentioned in her essay. Instead of providing readers with specifics, she tells us to consult "30 years of feminist, queer, and critical race theory." It is telling indeed that the keyword here is *theory*, rather than any empirical research or concrete, practical strategies for combating stigma. The few writings she cites are from the 1980s to mid-1990s. Despite being quite dated, it would be fine to mention these works had Chapkis informed us exactly how the authors proposed ending stigma. We see nothing of the sort in her essay except the incredibly vague call to abolish "gendered, sexual, racial, or class inequalities..." Because sex work stigma "cannot be eliminated without challenging racist attitudes and structures" and class inequality, it appears that we must wait until these arguably more fundamental problems are resolved before sex work stigma can be resisted and reduced.

Chapkis claims that I "never ask which interests benefit" from stigmatization of sex work. Apparently she missed the following part of my article:

It is important to note that any such normalization efforts will be opposed by established institutions. If the national legal context is one where prostitution is criminalized, the legal order itself compounds stigmatization and the authorities have a vested interest in treating sex work as deviant. On top of this, we know that mainstream social institutions and many powerful, well-organized interest groups are committed not only to blocking any normalization of commercial sex, but also to *perpetuating and intensifying* stigmatization. The anti-prostitution movement is strong and growing in most parts of the world, bolstered by its successful conflation of prostitution with trafficking... And there is a growing anti-pornography movement as well, which has succeeded in imposing new restrictions on erotic material and performances in some nations – Britain, Iceland, India.

My article did not ignore the social forces responsible for stigmatizing sex work, and such forces have been previously studied in depth (Weitzer, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). But this is not the only part of Chapkis's commentary where she falsely accuses me of "never" addressing something that should be addressed. And there

are other weird claims as well, such as the notion that my “focus is entirely on ‘normalization’ not ‘liberation’.” This may be a distinction-without-a-difference, and Chapkis fails to identify what the difference is. With regard to my concrete proposals for reducing and ending stigma, she claims that “the effect of such strategies would be, at best, to shift stigma, not to eliminate it.” Shift stigma onto whom? Perhaps shift means “reduce” here and, if so, I believe that such reduction is a laudable short-term goal, with elimination the ultimate objective. And how does Chapkis know what “the effect” of my proposals might be? Is there a nation where my entire package of policies/practices has been maximally implemented, and then found to have little impact?

Jo Phoenix agrees with Chapkis that we need to privilege the “gendered, raced, or classed” dimensions of sex work, and she believes that these and other differences trump stigma. She should know from my previous writings that I am well aware of the ways in which sex work is structured and varies demographically and in other ways. In fact, I have long advocated what I call a *polymorphous paradigm* in the field of sex work, which highlights structural and experiential differences among sex workers, their clients, and their managers (Weitzer, 2009, 2012). Phoenix misrepresents my argument, writing that it “is too simplistic to claim” that privileged upscale sex workers experience the same level of stigma as young, homeless, drug-addicted street workers. Nothing in my essay even comes close to assuming that the scope and intensity of stigma is uniformly experienced by all sex workers. Indeed, I point out that it varies along several dimensions, yet is nevertheless experienced throughout the sex trade, albeit in different degrees.

Phoenix makes some other bizarre claims. She imagines that my essay is somehow a “defense of neo-liberal economic policy on prostitution.” Phoenix writes, “Weitzer does not seem to recognize that the political drive to destigmatize sexual commerce without also critiquing neo-liberal consumer capitalism is, in effect, arguing for an approach in which market forces become the ultimate regulator of sex work.” She adds, “Taking Weitzer’s logic to its extreme” the only beneficiaries of my proposed strategies “will be those individuals and corporations who own and control the industry . . . Surely the real fight is against the profound material inequalities that mean that . . . money can be made from women’s bodies.” First, what about money made from *men’s* bodies? Second, does her critique mean that consumer capitalism must be abolished before we can begin to destigmatize sex work? Phoenix apparently believes that targeting stigma *per se* is a fool’s errand and that “the real fight” should focus on the inequalities fostered by capitalism. This lofty utopian prescription does a disservice to all the sex workers who will have to wait to lead freer lives until “fundamental” changes occur in the economic order. Phoenix takes the radical view that sex workers cannot benefit from targeted destigmatization efforts, such as those proposed in my article. How does she know that such stigma contests have no hope of even *reducing* stigma and are doomed to fail?

I must add that I think it is disingenuous to take someone’s argument “to its extreme” when there is no basis for doing so. This is a lame tactic, used to counter

something that was never said or implied! Similarly, Phoenix alleges that I make a number of “assumptions” that, again, were never made. Her overall approach is to distort what I wrote and then substitute her personal opinion of what the problem consists of and what “the real fight” should target, thus avoiding any substantive consideration of the sociological and practical issues that I raised in the article. I am not as bothered by Phoenix’s condescending tone (labeling me “naïve” and “simplistic”) as I am by her failure to *seriously engage with my article*, rather than what she reads into it.

What stands out in the essays by Phoenix and Chapkis is their attempt to *privilege* their perspectives and to present them in an absolute (either/or) fashion, rather than recognizing that at least some of our points may be *complementary*. Rather than cavalierly dismissing my analysis and proposals, the other commentators offer insights and identify additional ways of studying and resisting stigma.

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