

Resistance to sex work stigma

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Abstract

Stigma is ubiquitous in sex work and is well documented in studies of sex workers. But rarely have scholars examined the vital question of whether, and if so how, stigma can be reduced or eliminated from any type of sex work (commercial stripping, pornography, prostitution, etc.). After a brief review of the issues related to stigma, this *Commentary* proposes a set of preconditions for the reduction and, ultimately, elimination of stigma from sex work.

Keywords

Commercial stripping, pornography, prostitution, labeling theory, stigma

Stigma is one of the most important problems in sex work. It is omnipresent in sexual commerce, although its substance and intensity vary somewhat by gender, by occupational sector, and by national context. Research on sex workers, their managers, and their clients offers abundant evidence of the harmful consequences of stigmatization.

Stigma has been described as an imputation of inferior status to those who have either a visible discrediting trait (e.g. physical disability) or some perceived moral defect. Erving Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” but what is key is not the attribute itself: instead stigma is a product of a relationship between at least two actors, not something inherent in a type of behavior or physical condition (Goffman, 1963: 3). It applies to entire categories of people (e.g. gays, drug dealers) as well as to specific individuals. It is manifested in public opinion polls, media representations, political discourse, face-to-face encounters, and the ways in which individuals internalize stereotypes, conceal their stigmatized identity, and lead double lives.

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Goffman's landmark book, *Stigma* (1963), offers a compelling analysis of key dimensions of stigma. But the book has a striking deficiency: It says almost nothing about the possibility of *resistance* (by individuals or collectivities) nor does it consider whether stigma can be *reduced or eliminated* over time. These lacunae were mirrored in the original formulations of labeling theory, which ignored the possibility of defiance on the part of individuals who are labeled deviant – what John Kitsuse (1980) later called “tertiary deviance” and Edwin Schur (1980) examined at the group level in his discussion of “deviance liberation movements.” Goffman and the founders of labeling theory seem to have assumed that once an individual or category of people had been stigmatized, it is internalized by them and is basically permanent.¹ This stickiness is perhaps a function of the time period when Goffman and the early labeling theorists were writing (1951–1963) insofar as they saw few examples at that time of resistance by stigmatized individuals or a broader identity politics.

Instead of defiance, Goffman focuses on the ways in which individuals *manage* stigma: concealing it from others (“passing” for normal); selectively revealing it to some confidants (“covering”); isolating themselves within a group of similarly stigmatized others; withholding biographical information about themselves; or otherwise coping with what he called a “spoiled identity.” Stigmatized individuals are presented as resigned to their devalued status, and their agency consists of creatively limiting exposure. Another striking feature of Goffman's book is a neglect of the *origins and functions* of stigma toward particular categories of people – for instance, the ways in which stigmatization reinforces conventional norms and promotes dominant interests by legitimizing established power hierarchies (Link and Phelan, 2001; Schur, 1980). Examination of the structural causes of stigma might have led Goffman to explore the corollary ways in which stigma can be reduced. Instead, we are left with a rather static analysis, one where individuals internalize others' discrediting attributions and cope with them in daily life.

Two prominent literature reviews mention the issue of change, but only in passing and with skepticism regarding the potential for eroding stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido and Martin, 2015). And the few studies that have examined resistance are largely limited to the individual social-psychological level (e.g. Thoits, 2011) and ignore the larger question of how stigma can be reduced or eliminated vis-à-vis an entire category of people (exceptions include Anspach, 1979; De Young, 1988; Estroff et al., 2004; Schur, 1980). A recent book discusses programs designed to reduce stigma toward the mentally ill, including the World Psychiatric Association's 1996 initiative, *Open the Doors Global Program to Fight Stigma Because of Schizophrenia*, and similar national campaigns (Stuart et al., 2012). Such programs seek to disseminate knowledge, decrease prejudice, and end discrimination against those with a mental illness. These programs have been targeted less at the general public than specific groups such as youths, journalists, police, health officials, and policy makers. Such programs appear to have had some success in reducing stereotyping among the targeted groups.

Stigma in sexual commerce

The field of sex work mirrors the larger scholarly literature in that stigma itself is rarely problematized. Again, the default is to treat it as an immutable constant, not a variable, and to assume that it is utopian to imagine its erosion.

Stigma is a universal in the sex work arena: well-documented in research on pornography, prostitution, and commercial stripping as an obstacle that sex workers and their associates confront on a regular basis. It varies in intensity, being generally more severe in prostitution (especially street prostitution) than in commercial stripping and porn. It varies somewhat by society, with some nations taking a more tolerant approach than others, although stigma remains an occupational hazard for sex workers in all nations (Abel and Fitzgerald, 2010; Weitzer, 2012). It is easier for migrant sex workers to shield themselves from the kind of stigma that is of most concern to them – discovery by family and friends in their home country – than for domestic workers who live with the daily threat of detection from people they know (Scambler, 2007). But the black cloud of stigma affects migrant sex workers as well. And it persists even after a person stops selling sex (e.g. Sallmann, 2010). Its omnipresence is evident in the ways sex workers lead their work and personal lives: typically concealing the type of work they do from their families, acquaintances, neighbors, and even some friends; denying that they are involved in sexual commerce when asked; using pseudonyms at work and fabricating personal biographies; and leading double lives in other ways (Abel and Fitzgerald, 2010; Koken, 2012; Koken et al. 2004; Morrison and Whitehead, 2005; Sanders, 2005). Some analysts may view these techniques as implicit resistance (Sallmann, 2010), but I argue that coping is best seen as a form of stigma management rather than defiance. The few exceptional prostitutes who have “come out” in public only illustrates that the prevailing coping strategies are those of passing for normal or very selective disclosure to trusted others.²

Associates of sex workers are also stigmatized: their partners, family members, clients, and third parties who assist or manage them (e.g. Birch 2015; Hammond, 2015). Brothel owners, strip club managers, porn distributors, and other third parties are often reluctant to reveal the nature of their occupation to strangers. Individuals involved in illegal enterprises are forced to operate in the black market or to conceal the source of their income in opening bank accounts, from the tax authorities, and in other dealings with conventional businesses. But even legal owners, managers, and other third parties routinely grapple with stigma (Weitzer, 2012). And finally, we know that some researchers who study sex work have been stigmatized – subjected to derogatory comments and unfounded allegations,³ marginalization from colleagues, altercations at professional meetings, and an exceptional level of scrutiny by institutional review boards – sometimes resulting in denial of permission to conduct research on the basis of unfounded presumptions about the proposed study (Dewey and Zheng, 2013; Hammond and Kingston, 2014; Siegel and de Wildt, 2015).

While this literature documents the existence of stigma throughout the sex work arena, it mirrors Goffman by focusing almost entirely on how individuals *manage* their tainted identities, rather than inquiring about whether, and if so how, some of them actively resist expressions of prejudice and outright discrimination in face-to-face encounters or collectively as members of organizations that seek to change popular attitudes and public policies. There is a separate research literature on sex workers' rights organizations in different countries, which documents group-level struggles for normalization. These organizations are discussed later in the article.

Reducing stigma

Destigmatization is both an academic and a political issue. Politically, we can identify a set of practical strategies for fighting stigma, based on the tactics of deviance liberation movements (Schur, 1980). Academically, we can identify a set of preconditions for reducing, and ultimately eliminating, stigma from a category of people. Link and Phelan (2001) point out that such change requires a multifaceted approach, but they say nothing about what these changes might consist of. At the *individual level*, resistance by a sex worker may take the following forms: announcing that he or she had full agency when entering sex work; is currently in control of his/her working conditions and interactions with clients; defines the work as a service profession like any other or as a form of support or therapy for clients; denial of harm; condemnation of the stigmatizers; or distinguishing their echelon (e.g. escorting) from what they consider disreputable forms of sex work (e.g. street prostitution). Evidence of each of these practices is scattered throughout the literature on sex work but, again, these efforts tend to be confined to the psychological or individual level (e.g. Koken et al., 2004; Morrison and Whitehead, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Thompson and Harred, 1992). Isolated acts of resistance by individuals may have little or no impact on the wider society, and can also be dangerous for the resisters if their actions provoke attacks from others.

At the *societal level*, philosopher Lars Ericsson (1980: 362, 366) writes that reducing stigma requires allowing prostitution "to function in a social climate freed from emotional prejudice... In order to improve prostitution, we must improve our attitudes toward it." His argument is somewhat limited – neglecting the crucial question of *how* to improve societal attitudes – but it does highlight a central requirement for normalization. Fundamental and widespread attitudinal change is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for destigmatization. In the following, I outline some additional preconditions for reducing stigma.

Neutral language

Derogatory names must be erased from public and private discourse for normalization of any stigmatized condition or behavior to occur. As Michel Foucault observed, power relations are embedded in language, with dominant groups typically engaging in "naming and shaming" of subordinates. Words such as whore,

hooker, harlot, john, and punter should be replaced with worker, provider, client, and manager. It should be noted that discredited groups sometimes expropriate pejorative terms: they may call themselves “whores” or “johns” for purposes of shock value and to reclaim and invert negative identifiers. Examples include the 1985 World Whores Convention in Brussels; the Hookers Ball dance events that COYOTE sponsored in San Francisco in the 1970s; the magazines *Whorezine* and *Johnzine* published by American sex workers in the 1990s; and Chester Brown’s (2013) defense of clients in his book *Paying For It: A Comic Strip Memoir about Being a John*. It can be argued that those who participate in sexual commerce should be free to call themselves whatever they wish. But to reduce stigma, others should cease using derogatory terms because of the asymmetrical power relationship that their usage reproduces over time.

The mass media

For the most part, there is a *negativity bias* in mass media representations of sex work. The news media highlight worst cases of abuse, conflate prostitution with human trafficking, and rarely offer a positive (or even neutral) picture of sex workers and their clients. Television newscasts, newspapers, and online news reports often center on victimization, nuisances, street prostitution, trafficking, arrests, or raids on prostitution “rings” or businesses (Farvid and Glass, 2014; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006; Van Brunschot et al., 2000). News reports and magazine articles seldom offer a contrasting picture, although some prominent outlets have done so on occasion (e.g. *Economist*, 2014; Goldberg, 2014). Most documentaries also highlight economic exploitation and physical victimization, depicted with the help of extremely emotive imagery. And the same slanted representations pervade the entertainment media. Some feature films and television shows romanticize sex work, but these are exceptions to the dominant framing as sordid cautionary tales (Campbell, 2006).

Destigmatization requires a more balanced portrayal than what is typically depicted in the media. For example, documentaries on prostitution can portray a range of settings, echelons, and workers’ experiences, rather than focusing exclusively on a single type, usually presented disparagingly. By examining radically different arrangements in several nations, the A&E channel’s documentary *Red-Light Districts* (1997) and the National Geographic Television documentary *Prostitution* (2010) highlight cross-cultural variation – which may help reduce sweeping, stigmatizing generalizations. CNBC’s documentary *Dirty Money: The Business of High-End Prostitution* (2008) and National Geographic’s *American Escort Girls* (2014) also contain positive representations of individuals who work in the escort sector. And the Showtime and ITV2 television series, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, includes both erotic and routine aspects of escorting in addition to encounters with a variety of clients, which may also have some normalizing effect on audience perceptions of the escort sector. The mass media can also be used as a vehicle for public education, including evidence-based Public Service

Announcements or paid advertisements on television. An example of the latter is the advertisements placed in the Canadian media by the advocacy group, Stepping Stone, in 2011 (Griner, 2011). And the Red Umbrella Project has conducted training sessions for sex workers when they engage with the media, to help them counter the standard caricatures and better advocate for their rights.

Decriminalization

The experience of the gay rights movement shows that the repeal of discriminatory laws is vitally important but hardly sufficient for normalization. This applies to sex work as well. In places where commercial stripping, pornography production, and prostitution are legal and regulated by the state, stigma persists, even if in a diluted form. Gallup polls show that only 29% of Britons (in 2008) and 31% of Americans (in 2013) think that viewing pornography is “morally acceptable” (Gallup, 2015). The state of Nevada legalized rural brothels in 1971, but three decades later only a slim majority of Nevadans (52%) supported retaining this system, and only 35% endorsed the idea of permitting legal brothels to operate in the city of Las Vegas – where they are illegal under state law (cited in Weitzer, 2012: 51). Stigma persists as well in nations that have more recently decriminalized prostitution (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands), although it may be somewhat muted in such places compared to nations where criminalization reigns supreme.⁴ In the sex work area we should expect cultural lag in the aftermath of legal reform: it can take considerable time for social norms to mesh with legal norms. Decriminalization is a *necessary, but not sufficient, condition* for destigmatization.

Industry mobilization

The owners and managers of erotic businesses can play an important role in supporting destigmatization and lobbying for rights. The pornography industry in the USA, for example, has its own advocacy organizations and legal support network (Voss, 2015). Owners of legal brothels and escort agencies in some countries also have organizations that advocate not only for their own interests but also for sex workers to the extent that their interests overlap (Weitzer, 2012).

An important caveat is that some of the interests of business owners may conflict with those of sex workers. The former naturally pursue their economic interests, which may conflict with those of sex workers. They may find themselves in alignment on some issues – such as fighting what they consider to be unwarranted regulations – but may be opponents on other issues, such as whether the owners should be compelled to provide social security benefits to workers. Still, the quest for destigmatization will be advanced to the extent that owners of erotic businesses advocate for industry normalization and insofar as industry elites (e.g. Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt) publicly support sex workers’ rights and contribute resources to end legal and social discrimination.

Sex worker activism

Policy change can be a top-down process, orchestrated by the state. Some legislators have initiated decriminalization bills with little pressure from the beneficiaries (e.g. in Nevada, Czech Republic, Western Australia). But legal change has also been catalyzed from below – by individuals and organizations. To be successful, research shows that sex worker rights groups require:

- savvy or charismatic leaders who are able to withstand counterattacks;
- sufficient resources (material, personnel);
- connections to media organizations;
- alliances with other organizations and social movements; and
- widespread support from beneficiaries (sex workers, clients, business owners).

Sex worker organizations in some countries have enjoyed one or two of these factors (e.g. a charismatic leader) but not all of them. Such organizations tend to be grossly under-funded, lack strong leadership, recruit few sex workers as members, are marginalized by potential allies (women’s organizations, labor unions), and have few connections to mainstream media (Gall, 2010; Jenness, 1990; Majic, 2014; Mathieu, 2003; Oselin and Weitzer, 2013; Weitzer, 1991; West, 2000). Sex workers lack solidarity across the sex work hierarchy; many view their work as temporary, are disinclined to activism; and most perceive little advantage in unionization, especially if they are self-employed (Gall, 2010; van der Poel, 1992).

There are important exceptions. The New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, for example, played an instrumental role in the process leading up to parliamentary decriminalization in 2003, and continues to influence policy via its permanent seat on the nation’s Prostitution Law Review Committee, which periodically reviews policies and practices related to prostitution. Regarding allies, in 1973 America’s premier women’s rights organization – the National Organization for Women (NOW) – passed a lengthy decriminalization resolution declaring that NOW “opposes continued prohibitive laws regarding prostitution, believing them to be punitive” and “therefore favors removal of all laws relating to the act of prostitution” (NOW, 1973). Such support from an influential mainstream organization did little to advance the quest for sex worker rights in the USA (NOW engaged in no subsequent reform efforts), but this kind of support can nevertheless be considered vital for destigmatization purposes. Amnesty International, the World Health Organization, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the UN’s Global Commission on HIV and the Law have advocated decriminalization, which if well publicized, might help to challenge the stigma associated with sex work. In May 2016, Amnesty International formally endorsed decriminalization as a way of reducing victimization and marginalization of sex workers. The decision was widely publicized and is regarded as a major victory for the sex worker community (Amnesty International, 2016).

Some recent actions illustrate the ways in which sex workers have tried to destigmatize sex work, in conjunction with other goals. In 2001 a San Francisco organization that provides health care to sex workers (the St James Infirmary) placed advertisements on city busses that included photos of sex workers and quotations intended to challenge stereotypes: “sex workers rights are human rights,” “sex work is real work,” and “someone you know is a sex worker” (Schreiber, 2015: 256). In September 2015 the Scottish sex worker organization Scot-Pep launched a proposal (with Scottish Parliament member Jean Urquhart) for legislation that would decriminalize prostitution, along the lines of New Zealand’s model. The Prostitution Law Reform (Scotland) Bill challenges the Scottish Government’s current position that sex work is tantamount to “commercial sexual exploitation” and seeks to repeal the laws against soliciting, client kerb-crawling, and brothel-keeping. The bill would permit more than one sex worker to operate within the same premises (current law restricts this to one worker) and would increase penalties against those who coerce sex workers. In November 2015 the English Collective of Prostitutes, along with sex worker rights advocates from other nations, testified at a special symposium on decriminalization in the British House of Commons.

Lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of prostitution laws are another strategy pursued by sex worker activists. A major court case of this nature was successful in Canada in 2013, when the Supreme Court ruled the nation’s three prostitution laws unconstitutional.⁵ A similar legal challenge was recently mounted in the USA, challenging California’s prostitution laws. Insofar as the public is aware of these legislative and judicial efforts, as covered in the media, the initiatives may have some effect in challenging popular misconceptions regarding sex work.

Other recent events move policy in a more repressive direction. Legislation by the French Parliament is a case in point, with the Assembly and Senate proposing different bills in 2013 and 2015: One would implement the Swedish system of client criminalization while the other rejects this and would enhance penalties against prostitutes who solicit on the streets. The client criminalization bill, which passed in April 2016, was opposed by a variety of organizations and more than 70 French celebrities, and the vast majority of the French public opposes client criminalization.⁶ Hundreds of sex workers staged a protest on the streets of Paris condemning the bill, and one activist (Franceline Lepany) declared, “This bill seeks to even further stigmatize prostitutes.”⁷ Sex worker activists have also been active in opposing client criminalization bills in Canada in 2014, the European Parliament in 2014, and Northern Ireland in 2015. Each measure passed despite vocal opposition from critics. But their impact on sex work stigma may be mixed, because each initiative provoked opposition from sex workers and their supporters – resistance that may help to enlighten the public and generate greater support for sex workers’ demands.

The academic community

The academic community can play an important role in destigmatizing unconventional behavior. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed

homosexuality from its compendium of mental illnesses (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), and the World Health Organization followed suit in 1990. Professional and academic associations can help reduce stigma by passing resolutions in support of marginalized groups or by directly sponsoring anti-stigma campaigns, as several mental health organizations have done. This kind of intervention is rare in the sex work arena, but there is at least one prominent example: In October 2011 the board of directors of the Society for the Study of Social Problems passed a resolution declaring its formal support for: “(1) bipartisan legislation to decriminalize prostitution, (2) public education regarding the costs of policing sex workers, and (3) normalization of the occupation.”⁸ Other scholarly and professional associations could pass similar resolutions, which can be widely publicized afterwards.

Scholars can intervene in other ways, such as writing columns for news sources, appearing on talk shows, and publicizing research findings that challenge prevailing fallacies. This happens to some extent now – e.g. scholars participated in the UK Parliamentary symposium mentioned earlier – but more robust expert involvement would offer an evidence-based corrective to policies based on myths regarding sex work.

Conclusion

This list of preconditions is not exhaustive but it does cover major areas where change is needed. As noted earlier, stigma is frequently mentioned by scholars and activists in the sex work field, but it is typically not problematized as a variable subject to change. This *Commentary* is intended to catalyze more direct analyses of the conditions for reducing stigma for all participants in sexual commerce.

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 (Weitzer, 2007). 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 – (Attwood and Smith, 2010; Burke, 2015; Helgadóttir, 2014). But since stigma is not inherent in any kind of behavior and is instead a social construction, it can be countered and deconstructed. And such destigmatization can have important consequences for other aspects of sex work: If prostitution is allowed “to function in a social climate freed from emotional prejudice” (Ericsson, 1980: 362), it then becomes “imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control” (Overall, 1992: 716). This essay has outlined some preconditions for broader normalization.

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Notes

1. Goffman (1963: 7) writes, “The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact.” He mentions, but only in passing, some examples of attempts by representatives of a stigmatized category to give voice to their shared feelings (Goffman, 1963: 24–27).
2. This applies less to individuals whose work is highly visible, such as porn stars and webcam performers, who are already “out” by virtue of their on-screen appearances.
3. After 50 scholars signed a letter to the Rhode Island state legislature (in the USA) opposing a new prostitution law in 2009 (Associated Press, 2009), two anti-prostitution activists attacked the motives of the academics, who were labeled “sex radicals”: “The sex radicals are targeting Rhode Island for their own extreme sexual libertarian agenda of preventing any legal limits on any sexual behavior” (Brooks and Hughes, 2009: 3). The academics’ letter, which I co-authored with Elizabeth Wood, contains nothing that would justify this conclusion and was instead organized around the principles of harm reduction and labor rights (Letter to Honorable Members of the Rhode Island State Legislature, Re: Prostitution Law Reform Bill, 31 July 2009).
4. The World Values Survey documents more tolerant attitudes toward prostitution in nations that have legalized prostitution than where prostitution is illegal (see Weitzer, 2012: 80). Even in countries where criminalization is the norm, however, public opinion may change over time: according to the World Values Survey, the view that prostitution is “never justified” has decreased substantially in the USA: from 63% in 1981 to 40% in 2006: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp> (accessed 25 May 2015).
5. *Bedford v. Canada*, ONSC 4264, Ontario Superior Court of Justice, 28 September 2010. The case was heard by an appeals court in 2012 and culminated in a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 (*Canada [Attorney General] v. Bedford*, 2013 SCC 72, Supreme Court of Canada, 20 December 2013).
6. In five polls taken between 2011 and 2013, 70% to 82% of French respondents disapproved of the idea of criminalizing clients, and a 2013 poll reported that 74% of the French public favored the “reopening of brothels” in the country (Weitzer, 2015).
7. This was quoted in France24.com (accessed 3 June 2015).
8. Resolution 3, Sex Work: available at: <http://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/pageid/1516/m/392#R3> (accessed 20 May 2015).

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