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Outpricing the Competition: How the Sexual Marketplace Invades the Workplace and Creates a Sexual Double Bind for Women

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“...one of the greatest tools, or weapons, we have as women is flirting...”
- DiSesa's (2008, p 105)

Introduction

Controversy seems to surround women who express their sexuality at work. A Harvard librarian lost a lawsuit in which she claimed she was denied promotions because she was seen as a ‘sexy girl’ (Associated Press, 2005), a banker was fired because her sexy appearance was distracting to her male colleagues (Martinez, 2010), and most recently, conversations about a sports reporter’s negative experience in a male locker room revolved around her sexy attire (Sheridan & Hartenstein, 2010). Women’s engagement in sexualized expressions is prevalent, complex, and may be both beneficial and detrimental to them. Indeed, expressions of sexuality can damage or enhance their work relationships with their colleagues (e.g., Lerum, 2004), influence how others perceive them (e.g., Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005), improve their personal well-being (e.g., Salzinger, 1997), and enhance or diminish their work outcomes (e.g., Bradley, Chan, Brief, & Baskerville, 2005; Chan-Serafin, Brief & Watkins, 2010; Loe, 1996).

We contend that women who express their sexuality at work may sometimes benefit because of a societal marketplace that places a value on women’s sexuality. The sexual marketplace dictates that women’s sexuality is worth more than men’s, so women can demand a premium for their sexuality and men must exchange favors with women to gain access to them sexually (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In the workplace context, this means that women may use their sexuality to influence men who control valuable resources. We review the extant research addressing women’s expressions of sexuality at work to explain (a) why some women express their sexuality at work and also (b) why some sexual displays can be advantageous while others detrimental for the women who exhibit them. The objective of this paper is to illustrate the reasons underlying women’s sexual expressions at work as well as highlight the often opposing societal, organizational, and individual factors that position women in a sexual double bind.

Expressions of Sexuality Defined

We define social sexual behavior as intentionally expressed behaviors (here initiated by women) that have sexual connotations and that may or may not be performed for the purpose of achieving a desired goal. These behaviors are not limited to acts of an intimate nature and can include behaviors that are directed towards acquaintances, strangers, or even customers. We are excluding sexual harassment (SH) from our review because a very small proportion of perpetrators of SH are women (O’Leary-Kelley et al., 2009). Also, SH often has less to do with sexuality per se and more to do with power/reactions to identity threats (see Berdahl, 2007). Woman can express their sexuality through their appearance, verbal and nonverbal communications, and interpersonal behaviors, including, but not limited to, flirting, engaging in sexual conversations, or having sexual relations (e.g., Chan-Serafin et al., 2010). These expressions may be designed to elicit the sexual desires of others, to demonstrate or feign the woman’s own sexual desires, or simply to express a personal style or behavioral preference as defined by the woman.

Women’s Sexual Double Bind

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In the next part of the paper, we discuss reasons underlying women's sexual expressions at work. Specifically, we will identify the societal, organizational, and individual factors that influence women's decisions to express their sexuality in the workplace. According to evolutionary psychology, women may attempt to use their sexuality in order to acquire valued resources. Specifically, women are selective in their sexual activity to ensure that they can appeal to a mate who can provide essential resources to ensure their offspring's survival (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). In Darwinian fashion, the women who were the most sexually attractive (and fertile) had their pick of the strongest and most able man to provide them with the resources that they lacked, and men are most attracted to women who embodied youth and reproductive potential. Because a woman's physical attractiveness is the resource that appears to be most valued and important in a man's decision to enter a relationship with her, those women who possess "...qualities that are valuable to men are in a position to actualize their mate preferences" (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, p 227). Beyond mate selection, women from an early age are taught that their sexuality can be an effective means to receive favors, resources, and attention from men (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). That is, society indicates that women can exchange their sexuality for valued resources from men. This perspective would suggest that women who are able to capitalize on their attractiveness and sexuality may choose to do so to ensure their 'survival' and access to resources in the workplace (e.g., Chan-Serafin et al., 2010).

However, the same sexual marketplace that enables women to use their sexuality to gain favor also dictates that their sexuality is less valued if it is too widely used. That is, virtuous women may flirt to gain advantage, but promiscuous women are devalued. Women are therefore pushed into being sexual and pulled from being too sexual, leaving them in a double bind. On the one hand, strong social norms preserve the evolution-based binary by penalizing women, and praising men, who are sexually expressive and active. Women are considered to lose their value as the number of their sexual partners increases, whereas men may even be rewarded for their sexual conquests (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). On the other hand, ubiquitous messages consistently suggest that women should aim to be sexually attractive to men while institutions control and exploit women's sexuality for profit. Organizational norms, for example, may pressure women to express their sexuality at work because sexuality is perceived to be related to the job (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Retailers (e.g., Hanser, 2005), waitresses (e.g., Lerum, 2004; Loe, 1996) and secretaries (e.g., Pringle, 1989) are examples of occupational groups where the expression of female sexuality is encouraged. Furthermore, societal norms and practices provide many examples of how women's sexuality is a valuable resource that men want and that can be exchanged for outcomes they may lack (e.g., the "trophy wife" who gains status and power through her husband). As a result, some women are likely to use their sexuality to attain desired resources (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). The dual nature of social sexual behavior by woman raises the question of when can women effectively use their sexuality at work and when are they faulted or penalized for doing so.

Women's Expressions of Sexuality as a Double-Edged Sword

Evolutionary and sexual marketplace exchange arguments suggest that women can use their sexuality to gain desired resources, but they may also explain why men and other women react positively and/or negatively to these sexual expressions. There are a number of career, personal and interpersonal costs and benefits (e.g. access to networks, receipt of work-related favors, negative perceptions) that accrue to women who effectively express their sexuality at work. Women who express their sexuality may enjoy feelings of confidence, self-esteem, and receive attention and favors from others. On the other hand, male and female observers may

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3 react negatively to sexualized behaviors. Women who appear to strategically use their sexuality
4 at work may be criticized because they are perceived as manipulative and promiscuous, which
5 leads them to be devalued by both men and women. If women are supposed to be the vigilant
6 gatekeepers of their sexuality and should only give the key to suitable partners, then some men
7 might perceive that there must be something wrong with women who are too generous with their
8 sexuality. From the perspective of her female co-workers, a woman who uses her sexuality to
9 obtain valued resources from men poses a threat to other women in the workplace who might be
10 competing for these resources. We highlight the dilemma that women often find themselves in
11 because their sexuality may prove to be both advantageous and detrimental with several cases.
12 For example, a female banker, was recently fired for being “too sexy”, was initially forbidden
13 from “wearing sexy outfits or heels deemed “too distracting” for male coworkers” (Martiniz,
14 2010). Assuming that women are dressing in compliance to the norms of the organization, we
15 argue that the onus of self restraint and respectable behavior lies with others. Further, we discuss
16 how women’s aversion to other women who engage in sexual behaviors could stem from
17 feelings of competition, envy, or a fear that they themselves will begin to be perceived in sexual
18 terms.
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23 **Implications**

24 Our review of women’s workplace expressions of sexuality offers important implications
25 for research and practice. Practically, we offer insights that may help managers, women, and
26 their colleagues better understand and manage women’s sexualized expressions and mitigate the
27 negative consequences that may follow. For instance, we hope that this review offers female
28 employees and managers more insight into how their behaviors may influence others and have
29 implications for their personal and organizational outcomes. At the same time, it directs male
30 employees’ and managers’ attention to the roles that they might play in maintaining cultures or
31 social structures in which these behaviors can produce undesirable effects. We hope to bring to
32 light how the conflicting messages that women often receive outside of the workplace can enter
33 the organizational context and affect women’s engagement in sexual behaviors and the
34 consequences that follow.
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39 **Summary**

40 The primary objective of our review is to illustrate the paradoxical forces that compel
41 women to use and rely on their sexuality at work and the conditions under which such
42 expressions can either benefit or harm the woman who exhibits them. The relevance of, and
43 interest in, this review on women’s sexual agency at work are far-reaching given its
44 interdisciplinary roots. Thus, we expect this paper to appeal to the primary audience of
45 executives, non-specialist academic readers, scholars and business students (both at the
46 undergraduate and MBA level) interested in a variety of topics including organizational
47 behavior, gender, power and politics, and human resource management and practice. We hope to
48 stimulate discussions and debates surrounding women’s workplace sexual expressions in both
49 the academic and organizational spheres to increase our understanding about women’s sexual
50 expressions and its impact on the women themselves, organizations, and the people with whom
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