

The Double Standard: The Line between Pleasure and Stigma in American Culture

The double standard is a social concept that emphasizes a sexual freedom for males, and social sanctions for women for the same type of behavior. The idea of a double standard will be fleshed out within this paper in the ways that it affects women within their actions and views about sex and their sexual identity within American culture.

There is a gendered line between socially acceptable pleasure and stigma within American society. In recent articles, a bias against women's sexual pleasure has been documented in contrast to men's through ethnographic and quantitative data (Kreger and Staff, 2009). Women are more likely to be discouraged and stigmatized for demonstrating sexual behaviors and participating in sexual acts. These stigmas can then lead to a change in sexual identity amongst women. The double standard can also affect women outside of obvious sexual behaviors and activities, going into common day situations.

Sexual behaviors and the judgments attached to those actions are an area where the gendered double standard reveals itself. According to a study by Kreager and Staff (2009) there are gender specific norms that dictate appropriate sexual behaviors. For example, men are rewarded for multiple sexual partners and activities. Women, however, are held up to a different set of ideals, and are judged harshly and only allowed to behave in a sexual manner within a limited scope; for example, only when they are within a committed relationship. The authors find that these norms differ by sex through attitudinal surveys and ethnographic research of student respondents within a nationally representative sample. The number of acceptable sexual partners, the conditions that sexual acts occur

within, and the motives behind sexual acts are examined. Kreager and Staff (2009) write, “We found strong gender differences with regard to sexual behavior, such that increased numbers of sexual partnerships were positively associated with boys’ peer acceptance but negatively associated with girls’ peer acceptance. Boys with many sexual “conquests” are thus expected to be well-liked at schools, while permissive girls are predicted to have low status in school-based networks, regardless of whether or not their sexual behaviors occur within “romantic” relationships” (156). Gender is not the only aspect that plays into this result. While men were found to have the highest positive association for sexual conquests, this was particularly true for disadvantaged teen boys, showing that this gendered normative behavior is affected by socioeconomic status and places the information within a social context (Kreager and Staff, 2009). The difference between how men and women perceive their own sexual exploits also differ. Sakaluk and Milhausen (2012) found that both men and women were likely to endorse traditional sexual behaviors, although men tended to support these traditional behaviors slightly more than women. While women are less likely to judge themselves as harshly as men, there is still an open judgment occurring over sexuality. These judgments and stigmas can change the ways that women view sexual acts and themselves for participating in them.

When there is a double standard for sex and expectations regarding sexuality, women can experience a confusion of sexual identity. Judgments and stigma by peer groups, friends, or family are not the only things responsible for this confusion. Media also can have a large impact on identity. Sexualized images of women saturate media outlets, and girls are encouraged to dress and behave in a way that indicate their sexual availability, however, they are then judged for indicating that they are sexually available. These cultural

norms teach girls that their bodies and the way they present themselves are important measures of their self-worth from an early age, in addition to sending a confusing message about how they should form their sexual identity (Kim and Ward, 2012). Media is a large tool in the formation of the identity, because it is so relatable and found in everyday life. Teenagers, particularly teenage girls, are extremely susceptible to these connections between their life and images within ads that the media presents, also known as “bridging experiences” (Kalof, 1999). Advertisements can be extremely effective in conveying cultural norms in regard to sexuality. Women’s roles in advertisements are far narrower than men’s. Unless it is an ad selling household appliances or beauty products, men by far dominate advertising space. Women are also more likely to be given passive parts within an advertisement, being cast in a role that is traditionally feminine, or be asked to play up their sexuality (Turner et. al, 2008). Turner et. al (2008) found that women are more commonly used than men when using sex to sell a product in print advertisements, and that these ads were more than likely geared towards a male audience. Advertisements geared towards women or gender-neutral audiences, however, are less likely to use female sexuality as a marketing tool. While men will sometimes be used in a sexual way during advertisements, this normally only occurs when they are paired with a women in the advertisement. On their own they are much less likely to be sexually objectified. These trends within advertisements demonstrate a sexual double standard by confining women to a limited scope of roles within the media, broadcasting what is found desirable and acceptable within American culture. Women are not only offered less developed characters and time on screen, but are also used sexually to sell products, placing an image out in the

cultural sphere for women and girls to interpret. These cultural scripts are not just found in overtly sexualized outlets, however. There can also be latent results of a double standard.

Sexuality within the context of American culture can be a confusing and frustrating line to walk with different social constructions. As mentioned before, women are pressured to present themselves in a sexual manner, without actually being sexually available unless they are in committed relationships. This double standard can occur outside of obviously sexual situations, however. Shelly Ronen (2010) explores the sexual connotations of dancing at college parties, also known as “grinding”. While dancing is not a strictly sexual act, there is a sexual connotation and possible repercussions for it. According to Ronen, grinding is not only a dance style, but a significant act that can socially construct meaning and influence behavior. Throughout her research, Ronen notices a style of approach for dancing that indicates a gender inequality. She writes, “The interactional dynamic is one in which men directly initiate, while women indirectly cool out unwanted approaches... these beliefs lead to expectations that men will be agented and competent, while women will be communal and pleasant... As a result, men initiate and women either accept or cool out as kindly and indirectly as possible. By doing this, men and women reproduce the institutional gender system that internationally prohibits women’s access to heterosexual agency and pleasure, privileging men’s pleasure and confirming their higher status” (p. 373). While an argument can be made that grinding is just a form of dancing, Ronen found evidence to support that the acts do hold a latent sexual script by dictating how men are supposed to act (dominant by asking for the dances) and how women are supposed to respond to their advances (either accepting or cooling their attempts in a positive and pleasant way). A sexual freedom is indicated within this situation for males (being able to approach partners

and decide who they find attractive and want to dance with), while women take the more passive role of either accepting or denying advances from men. This indicates a stigma against women being too sexually dominate about seeking partners, demonstrating that acts that are not inherently sexual can still hold important sexual aspects and expectations for men and women

The double standard is an important aspect of American culture in terms of sexuality. It can dictate appropriate sexual norms for genders, how people should feel after a sexual experience or how they may be judged for that experience, and it can apply outside of directly sexual situation, holding latent importance and underlying messages. Female pleasure and sexual assertiveness are stigmatized; creating a sharp line of contrast between what is acceptable within male and female sexuality. The double standard affects all sexes by dictating what is and what isn't culturally appropriate, making it an important line between pleasure and stigma.

References

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