

## Normative Male Sexual Socialization: Harmless Fun or Sexual Trauma?

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For reasons he only partially comprehends, a 16 year old young man (boy) finds himself with four older buddies entering a dark, seemingly abandoned, and forbidding tenement building in the Roxbury “slums” of Boston. Soon, he will have his first experience of sexual intercourse and it will be with a woman he does not know, certainly does not respect, and who, in turn, seems to have nothing but contempt for him and his friends. He will be the last of the five to “have sex” with her and he will do so despite his distaste for the smells of the environment, the fear of the several large and fearsome “pimps” who are overseeing the encounter, and the quaking of his legs and arms. Within two minutes the process is over and he is no longer “cherry.”

This encounter with prostitution is a very far cry from the glamorized portrayals of *Pretty Woman*, *Irma La Douce*, and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (much as the reality of topless bars is dissonant from the claims of elegant encounters in “Gentlemen’s Clubs” and as the human suffering of pornography addiction are contrary to claims of enlightened sexual freedoms touted by Hugh Hefner). Although that encounter is certainly only one of many, some of which might not as exploitative and psychologically destructive, it is the type of encounter that is too rarely discussed. The reasons for this silence, as well as the reasons for the encounter taking place at all, are the purpose of this presentation.

First, why does it take place at all? Based upon the opportunities I have had through academic research, through clinical practice, and through my personal life to study and listen to men (more so with heterosexual men than gay/bisexual men) as they discuss their most private thoughts and experiences with sexuality, I have formulated explanations for why this seemingly outrageous activity takes place.

Primarily, this experience of sex is deeply rooted in the destructive normative processes of male sexual socialization. It is an outgrowth of how we men are taught to think about women and sex, how we are classically conditioned by common masturbation practices, how we are operantly conditioned (rewarded) for sexual conquests (real or fantasized), how we struggle to integrate intimacy with sexual desire, and how we unwittingly participate in the insidious eroding of our capacity for sensuality. In several writings, Ron Levant and I have referred to these phenomena as “non-relational sexuality” or the Centerfold Syndrome (Brooks, 1995; Levant & Brooks, 1997). Basic to this formulation are the conceptualizations that many men’s approach to sexuality becomes characterized by (a) voyeurism; (b) objectification of women’s bodies; (c) the need for validation from women; (d) trophyism; and (e) the fear of true intimacy.

There is little doubt that, in general, men differ from women in terms of sexual attitudes and behaviors. [i.e., the old joke that women balance many reasons to consider sex with a partner – men think about finding a place]. Extensive research has documented that men think about sex more often, have more explicit sexual fantasies, masturbate more frequently, purchase more autoerotic materials, think more positively about “casual sex,” and have more sex partners than do women. (Levant, 1997) These

findings are so harmonious with conventional wisdom about gender differences in sexuality that few challenge them and most all accept them as inevitable aspects of biological differences and evolutionary survival strategies. Others of us, however, argue that: a) this view is far too dismissive of the significant role of historical sex-based differences in access to power and influence; b) this view gives far too little credit to radical differences in sexual socialization between genders; and c) the “essentialist” views of sexuality are basically irrelevant – i.e., cultures continually strive to help individuals shape their biological or “animal” instincts in socially appropriate expressions.

The “men will be men” view of male sexuality is only one factor in the perpetuation of men’s non-relational sexuality. A second major factor, of course, is economic - prostitution and pornography generate huge profits for their purveyors. This fact, of course, is buried within shrewd and creative propagandizing and public relations efforts that not only claim these activities are harmless, but that they actually provide social benefit. These absurd rationalizations are too numerous to document here.

The third, and most immediately relevant explanation, for men’s non-relational sexuality, is rooted in two critical aspects of contemporary men’s lives – (a) many men’s alexithymia or inability to fully appreciate their inner lives; (b) men’s broad conspiracy of silence regarding their (our) sexuality. In the first case, we men are just beginning to understand the many ways that “gender role strain” creates pain in our lives. In the second case, we men have resolutely avoided open exploration and discussion of our deepest thoughts, desires, and fears regarding women and sexuality. At certain times in the recent past, the darkest aspects of traditional male sexuality have exploded onto the

front pages of the news – U.S. Senators, Supreme Court nominees, priests, sports heroes, and a sitting U.S. President have been accused or convicted of sexual misconduct. At such times, these men have usually been viewed as “falling from grace” or as “aberrant males (formerly thought to be above such behavior). This perspective – what Louise Silverstein and I have referred to as “aberrant male theory” (Brooks & Silverstein, 1995) – attempts to explain men’s sexual misconduct as a product of *undersocialization*, rather correctly understanding it to be a product of *oversocialization*, i.e., complete adoption of the most extreme elements of traditional male sexual socialization.

What then are the implications of this perspective? To this point in time, the “heavy lifting” in this area has been carried out by dedicated feminist scholars and social activists. Oddly enough, they have sometimes been joined in a surprising partnership by religious leaders committed to elimination of the *sins* of pornography and prostitution. These groups have been stalwart, but they need the support of a third set of voices – the voices of men’s studies scholars and activists who will break the conspiracy of silence and challenge complacent assumptions – pornography and prostitution represent crimes against women, *and* they are not “harmless fun.” They are profoundly destructive to men's lives as well as to our loved ones. We men’s studies scholars need to commit ourselves to an agenda of research that demonstrate the multiple ways and paths that non-relational sexuality harms men. We need to inspire a national discussion that challenges the rationalizations of those who market prostitution and pornography. We need replace the anachronistic rituals of young men’s lives with true mentoring into responsible and compassionate masculinities. Only then will we find avenues to reintegrate our sexuality with our humanity.

## REFERENCES

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