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From Hook-ups to Headaches: Theorizing the Emotional Labor of University Women’s Sexual Decisions

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Using qualitative methods within post-structural theory, this paper demonstrates how women make sense of their sexuality within the context of university life and the emotional work they undertake. As the first opportunity where students live and learn independently of authoritative figures, the site provides space to explore women’s negotiation and resistance to different forms of authority. College is a particular discursive environment for regulating ideas of sex as it is a contested space of limitations and new freedoms muddied with the influence of peer groups, romantic relationships, sexual identity exploration, and alcohol and drug experimentation. Therefore, this site serves as a catalyst for emotional labor as it allows for women to further investigate, experience, and engage with their sexuality.

Within this paper, I use the term “discourse” as a way of understanding the structural connections of college life, and experience prior to, that shape the participants’ talk. This cultural analysis uses data from open-ended, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with approximately nineteen white women from multiple class positions at a small, public, doctoral-granting university in the Northeast. The participants ranged from sophomores to seniors; one identified as bi-sexual, and the remainder as heterosexual.

Analyzing the sexual discourse that women employ with each other in these conversations allows us to interrogate how women’s sexual experiences are regulated for them and by others in a patriarchal society. “Whether in the classroom or on the street, at work, at home, the young female’s sexuality is negotiated by, for, and despite the young woman herself” (Fine, 1988, 35). For example, women perform emotional labor when discerning how they “feel” about the situation compared to how others (e.g. parents, friends, partners) “feel” about their decisions.
In this paper, I utilize Ann Ferguson’s conceptualization of sex/affective production (labor) and sexual symbolic codes that she takes up in her book, *Blood at the Root* (1989), as a tool to illuminate my concept of emotional labor. Ferguson discusses the theoretical concept of sex/affective production for the good of maintaining a capitalistic system; her concept of “labor” involves the work that women perform in the home, in the workplace, and in their families. How she imagines this system “organizes all material work and services by defining what is culturally acceptable as man’s and woman’s work” including work that they do in and outside of the home, physically and emotionally. Sex/affective production systems “perpetuate social domination by creating and maintaining a set of sex/affective desires, and a set of norms to regulate them” (Ferguson, 1989, 89), much like the norms we set for women’s sexual behavior.

Ferguson also outlines in her argument that men in power cannot agree upon “the symbolic line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women that can maintain the hierarchal flow of sex/affective energy from women to men on *male* terms”. Therefore, she argues that “feminists have a unique historical opportunity to influence the creation of sexual symbolic codes…if we can take advantage of the disarray in patriarchal sex/affective production” (Ferguson, 117). I believe that by investigating how sexual symbolic codes are imagined and maintained, particularly at a time where they are constantly in contestation of where those lines can be and are drawn, can help further the understanding of the emotional work involved in women’s sexual decision-making.

I argue that “emotional labor” takes precedent over women’s desires and sexual pleasures as they work to position themselves sexually in college so that it is “appropriate” and acceptable to others. Rooted in these women’s discourse, I claim that
emotional labor stems from historically and socially specific scripts, or sexual codes, that work to regulate the female body, inform women of what it means for them to be “sexual” and shapes how we understand women to be emotionally. Therefore, I interrogate the role of “emotional labor” and sexual codes found embedded within their discourse; how the categories of guilt, acceptance/rejection of self and the desire to please others informs their decisions and emotional work in college.

According to an anthropological study done on undergraduate student life at Rutgers University, students believed how they came of age in college was because of what they learned among themselves independently from authoritative figures (Moffat, 1989). For example, “coming of age” included “passage rites” such as alcohol and sexual experimentation. Therefore, university life can offer women the space to “come of age” where they are able to explore sexually via the “values and understandings” [‘codes’] they bring from other realms of their life “that generate a system of meaning and practice” in response to the complexities they may face within the context of the university (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, 7). For example, “Andrea”, a 19-year old white woman who identifies as bi-sexual, utilized her entrance to college as an “excuse” of why she decided to have sex for the first time with her high school boyfriend:

“...I kinda wanted to get the experience before I went to college...I felt like 18, you know, was a proper age...my mom actually did [have sex], when she was 19. So it was right around the time she did it too, so it was kinda like I felt it was right. And going to college felt like an adult, I was an adult. I mean 18 is legal age, and it was just with someone I love and I just wanted to do it and see what happened.”

“Eva”, a 19 year-old white, heterosexual female, defines what sex means to her now that she is in college:

“[Now] I feel like that intimacy is established with whoever it is that I’m having sex with, like I don’t need to, like that intimacy is definitely achieved during sex, for the most part, so,
that’s not why I have sex [now]. The goal is just to, I don’t know, I guess just feel fantastic with someone you really care about.”

In contrast, “Diana”, a 20-year old, white, heterosexual female negotiates the emotional attachment she feels to sex:

“I think that coming into college I just kind of assumed that it could be whatever you wanted, that I could do whatever…[but] emotions get too tied with things for it to be whatever I wanted”.

Furthermore, I found that college was a site of sexual negotiation and experimentation for these women. Even if they were not having sex per say, they were hearing and talking with their friends about sex. Some women understood college as a “clean slate”; an opportunity to meet others away from a “home” that would not necessarily judge them for who they are sexually. However, these women instead found themselves having to negotiate their sexual selves amidst the “road blocks” along the way; the sexual codes that inhibits their sexual choices or causes them to regret those choices after the act. For example, “Eva” talks about her perceptions of what she thought sex should be like in college and how she negotiated others’ reactions to her choices:

“I got this concept that you go to college and life is good and you’re powerful if people are sexually attracted to you, and you can have sex with anybody you want and it’s no big deal. Guess what I did!? The first two weeks of school I did that. And it, fucked me up, I’m not gonna lie, like it was…awful, you know?…I lost a lot of really potentially good friends because the boy [I had sex with], told everyone. And then another night…I ended up getting drunk and this other guy took advantage of this opportunity and we slept together so it was a messy situation, it was just awful and I just lost a lot of friends. I just realized that getting men to wanna have sex with you, it doesn’t mean you’re powerful…it doesn’t mean that you are even respected.”

Eva’s conversation alludes to her labor in negotiating her sexual choices based on her perceptions of college life as a “clean slate” and the sexual roles that she is expected to maintain as a female. On the other hand, “Callie”, “Andrea” and “Tina” talk about their personal choices and how they’ve come to understand who they are while in college. “Callie”, a 19-year old white, heterosexual, female, states:
“Like, I went through high school and I watched all my best, really close friends go through really awful relationships and I was like that’s not me, like I prefer to focus on myself and where I’m going and what I’m involved in and it just wasn’t important to me, and like that’s still how I feel here [in college]...like, it will happen eventually and if the right person comes along, then I’ll make it work...but right now, I’m just concentrating on me still, I guess.”

“Tina”, a 20-year old, white, heterosexual female, says:

“the Health Center here[college] is really good... and there’s just a lot of people you can talk to here about it [sex], and maybe its also because they haven’t known me as long...so it’s a little different, but I just feel, its....like this is a better atmosphere...in high school it was weird to talk with your friends about it...but in college its pretty common...my sexuality has changed because I’ve become more aware about different things because I can ask friends what they’re doing.”

In agreement, “Andrea” states:

“Everything’s more open here [in college], I mean you got a lot of resources, a lot more people from different backgrounds coming together...so you find out who you really are with that and kind of breaks you out of your shell a bit.”

Here, these young women agree that college is a new opportunity for them to encounter what they want (i.e. “concentrating on me”), to become more comfortable when talking with peers and to investigate resources that are made available to them. While others, like Eva, found college to be an environment for re-adjusting their sexual behaviors based upon peer and partner judgmental feedback. Overall, these excerpts demonstrate how these young women employ different ways in negotiating who they are sexually while they are at college and the emotional labor that is involved.

There are different gender roles assigned to sexual interactions based on how we come to understand codes and qualities we are “assigned”. According to Ann Ferguson, our ideological understanding of female sexuality is to resist male sexuality as it is a “driven, aggressive force that can not be controlled once it is put in motion” and women’s sexuality “is and should be more emotional and less physical in its direction” (85) and women are to blame for being unable to fend off male sexual aggression. For example, “Emily”, a 19-year old, white, heterosexual female states:
“like girls just don’t talk about it [sex]…I think that kind of goes into culture…girls aren’t supposed to want to have sex, they’re supposed to be the quiet subdued ones and if they are talking about it, it…you know, [it] goes against everything like that…that’s how everyone has been brought up for so long that girls, like they’re breaking out of it now, but when I was growing up I think that’s why girls just didn’t talk about it and guys were”.

She also reflects on her choice to have sex with her boyfriend in high school:

“Like it wasn’t about sex, it was about…I don’t know, connecting on a deeper level, I guess…its just that, that extra intimacy…and if I felt like…we were doing too much exclusively for pleasure than I would just start feeling uncomfortable about it, you know, and stop doing it so often. You know, it wasn’t enjoyable for me, because I just felt guilty.”

The way that “Emily” talks about her guilt for enjoying sex “exclusively for pleasure” demonstrates the emotional work she undertakes during and after sex because of the ideological sexual codes that have been set for her and other women. However, she also recognizes that there is an opportunity present for women, as they seem to be “breaking out of this culture”, to establish new sexual boundaries for themselves.

Ann Ferguson’s idea of sex/affective production, and in particular, a difference of gender roles relative to sexuality, opened up a new way for me to think about how I understand the emotional labor that the women in my study undertake. For example, Ferguson states that “though the content of masculine and feminine sexuality changes in different modes of sex/affective production, gender sexual dualism perpetuates a taboo against the ideal of sameness and reciprocity in sex/affective encounters…that facilitates the acceptance of dominant and subordinate roles in these areas and supporting the patriarchal control of women by men” (1989, 86). The emotional labor that this paper is concerned with also holds its own gender duality when it comes to understanding how men and women make decisions relative to sex and their sexual pleasure. For example, “Emily’s” excerpt below outlines how she thinks about her own sexual pleasure relative to “emotional attachment”: 
“Like you can have sex with someone during the night and it feels, like you know, you have an orgasm, whatever, you’re pleased, he did everything right, but then the next day if there’s no emotional connection, than its just like, you just feel alone and its like, well, why did I have sex with them, if you know, nothing else is going to happen, he doesn’t feel that way, so like if you have the emotional connection, than that sorta, may not lead into a relationship but on some level it’s a relationship because there are emotional connections tied into it and its not just the physical, it’s the mental, emotional and physical.”

I believe the way that “Emily” talks about her sexual choices expresses her thoughtfulness as she describes the “work” she takes up while making sexual decisions, in particular the emotional connection that she desires in a sexual relationship.

By analyzing this data, we are able to see that these women may be poised to come into their own sexual revolution as some are able to recognize the progression and re-invention of sexual codes that are already in place and the historical context that has been provided for them prior to attending college. By talking with each other and negotiating the nuances of “independent life”, their sexual life has been cracked open for further exploration. It is not my intent to critique how these women think about sex as I believe that their discussion surrounding their sexual-decision making is overall productive and thoughtful. I am concerned with why they think about it in the ways that they do and how this might shape a larger theoretical foundation for future research. I believe that educational and theoretical movements towards providing others with an understanding of how young women make sexual decisions will help in the overall construction of young females sexually and socially (Fine, 1988).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


