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# “Good Girls”: Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus

Elizabeth A. Armstrong<sup>1</sup>, Laura T. Hamilton<sup>2</sup>,  
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## Abstract

*Women’s participation in slut shaming is often viewed as internalized oppression: they apply disadvantageous sexual double standards established by men. This perspective grants women little agency and neglects their simultaneous location in other social structures. In this article we synthesize insights from social psychology, gender, and culture to argue that undergraduate women use slut stigma to draw boundaries around status groups linked to social class—while also regulating sexual behavior and gender performance. High-status women employ slut discourse to assert class advantage, defining themselves as classy rather than trashy, while low-status women express class resentment—deriding rich, bitchy sluts for their exclusivity. Slut discourse enables, rather than constrains, sexual experimentation for the high-status women whose definitions prevail in the dominant social scene. This is a form of sexual privilege. In contrast, low-status women risk public shaming when they attempt to enter dominant social worlds.*

## Keywords

stigma, status, reputation, gender, class, sexuality, identity, young adulthood, college women, qualitative methods

Slut shaming, the practice of maligning women for presumed sexual activity, is common among young Americans. For example, Urban Dictionary—a website documenting youth slang—refers those interested in the term *slut* to *whore*, *bitch*, *skank*, *ho*, *cunt*, *prostitute*, *tramp*, *hooker*, *easy*, or *slug*.<sup>1</sup> Boys and men are not alone in using these terms (Wolf 1997; Tanenbaum 1999; White 2002). In our ethnographic and longitudinal study of college women at a large, moderately selective

university in the Midwest, women labeled other women and marked their distance from “sluttiness.”

Women’s participation in slut shaming is often viewed as evidence of internalized oppression (Ringrose and Renold 2012). This argument proceeds as follows: slut

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<sup>1</sup>“Slut.” *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved December 18, 2013 (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slut>).

shaming is based on sexual double standards established and upheld by men, to women's disadvantage. Although young men are expected to desire and pursue sex regardless of relational and emotional context, young women are permitted sexual activity only when in committed relationships and "in love" (Crawford and Popp 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Schalet 2011; Bell 2013). Women are vulnerable to slut stigma when they violate this sexual standard and consequently experience status loss and discrimination (Phillips 2000; Nack 2002). Slut shaming is thus about sexual inequality and reinforces male dominance and female subordination. Women's participation works at cross-purposes with progress toward gender equality.

In this article, we complicate this picture. We are unconvinced that women would engage so enthusiastically in slut discourse with nothing to gain. Synthesizing insights from social psychological research on stigma, gender theory, and cultural sociology, we argue that women's participation in this practice is only indirectly related to judgments about sexual activity. Instead it is about drawing class-based moral boundaries that simultaneously organize sexual behavior and gender presentation. Women's definitions of sluttiness revolve around status on campus, which is largely dictated by class background. High-status women employ slut discourse to assert class advantage, defining their styles of femininity and approaches to sexuality as classy rather than trashy. Low-status women express class resentment—deriding rich, bitchy sluts for their wealth, exclusivity, and participation in casual sexual activity. For high-status women—whose definitions prevail in the dominant social scene—slut discourse enables, rather than constrains, sexual experimentation. In contrast, low-status women are vulnerable to public shaming.

### INTERPRETING SLUT DISCOURSE AMONG WOMEN

We outline three explanations of women's participation in slut shaming. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, in part because the concept of status is central to all three. We treat status as the relative positioning of individuals in a hierarchy based on esteem and respect. This approach is fundamentally Weberian and consistent with (often implicit) definitions of the concept in social psychology (see Berger, Ridgeway, and Zelditch 2002; Ridgeway 2011; Lucas and Phelan 2012). Those with high status experience esteem and approval; those with low status are more likely to experience disregard and stigma. While status systems among adults often focus on occupation, among youth they develop in peer cultures (e.g., Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Milner 2006). Since the publication of Coleman's (1961) *The Adolescent Society*, research on American peer cultures has found that youth status is informed by good looks, social skills, popularity with the other gender, and athleticism—traits that are loosely linked to social class (Adler and Adler 1998). In this case, status is produced and accrued in the dominant social world on campus—the largely Greek-controlled party scene (also see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

From a social psychological stigma approach, sexual labeling is primarily about distancing the self from a stigmatized, and thus low-status, sexual category. Another approach suggests that labeling regulates public gender performance. A final, cultural approach suggests that labeling facilitates the drawing of class boundaries via distinctive styles of performing gender. Individuals at both ends of the status hierarchy seek to apply their definitions of stigma, but only high-status individuals succeed in the spaces where status is produced.

### **Sexuality, Stigma, and Defensive Othering**

Social psychologists view the attribution of negative meaning to a human difference as initiating the stigma process (see Link and Phelan's 2001 model; also Lucas and Phelan 2012). The focus of most contemporary work in this tradition is on how individuals cope once a "social identity, or membership in some social category, calls into question his or her full humanity" (Crocker 1999:89; see also Jones et al. 1984). Research on the management of stigma offers insight into how the stigmatized respond to their situations (Goffman 1963; Major and O'Brien 2005; Killian and Johnson 2006; Saguy and Ward 2011; Thoits 2011). One strategy involves deflecting stigma onto others (Blinde and Taub 1992; Pyke and Dang 2003; Payne 2010; Trautner and Collett 2010). This process, referred to by Schwalbe and coauthors (2000) as "defensive othering," helps explain women's participation in slut stigma. The perspective suggests that women—as subordinates to men—fear contamination and thus work to distance themselves from stigma. This model corresponds with the taken-for-granted approach described at the start of the article.

The framework outlined by Schwalbe et al. (2000) and applied by a variety of scholars makes several assumptions: subordinates accept the legitimacy of classification while distancing themselves from the stigmatized category. There is a clear line between subordinates and oppressors, with some people stably located in the subordinate category. Distancing is seldom fully successful; those engaged in defensive othering do not escape the subordinate position, much as they would like to. Oppressors define the categories and the meaning system, while subordinates react "to an oppressive identity

code already imposed by a dominant group" (Schwalbe et al. 2000:425).

In this case, however, the above model does not fully apply. As we will demonstrate, women's criteria for applying the slut label were not widely shared. There appeared to be no group of women consistently identified as sluts—at least by women. Everyone succeeded at avoiding stable classification. Yet slut stigma still felt very real. Women were convinced that actual sluts existed and organized their behaviors to avoid this label. Thus, an explanation that ends with women's attempts to evade slut stigma by deflecting it onto other women is unsatisfying. We employ a discursive approach to explain how individual efforts to deflect stigma reaffirm its salience for all women.

### **Gender Performance and the Circulation of Stigma**

The "doing gender" tradition suggests that slut stigma regulates the gender presentations of all girls and women (Eder et al. 1995; Tanenbaum 1999). The emphasis is on how women are sanctioned for failing to perform femininity acceptably (West and Zimmerman 1987). This suggests that slut stigma is more about regulating public gender performance than regulating private sexual practices.

Taking this approach further, Pascoe (2007) draws on Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990) to analyze the circulation of the fag epithet among adolescent boys. She shows that the ubiquitous threat of being labeled regulates performances by all boys, ensuring conformity with hegemonic masculinity. Boys jockey for rank in peer hierarchies by lobbing the fag label at each other in a game of "hot potato." Fag is not, as Pascoe (2007:54) notes, "a static identity attached to a particular (homosexual) boy" but rather "a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other."

Pascoe's discursive model, when extended to our case, suggests that slut discourse serves as a vehicle by which girls discipline themselves and others. It does not require the existence of "real" sluts. Just as any boy can temporarily be a fag, so can any girl provisionally fill the slut position. Slut discourse may even circulate more privately than fag discourse: girls do not need to know they have been labeled for the discourse to work. The fag label does not hinge on sexual identity or practices; similarly, the slut label may have little or nothing to do with the amount or kinds of sex women have. In the same way that the "fluidity of the fag identity" makes it a "powerful disciplinary mechanism" (Pascoe 2007:54), so may the ubiquity of the slut label.

Just as masculinities are hierarchically organized, femininities are also differentially valued. Labeling women as "good" or "bad" is about status—the negotiation of rank among women. Men play a critical role in establishing this rank by rewarding particular femininities. Women confront a double standard that penalizes them for (even the suggestion of) sexual behavior normalized for men (Crawford and Popp 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). We emphasize, however, that women also sexually evaluate and rank each other. Women's competition is oriented toward both attention from men and esteem among women. We challenge literature in which femininities are seen as wholly derivative of masculinities, where women passively accept criteria established by men.

Status competition among women is in part about femininity. Yet other dimensions of inequality—particularly class and race—intersect with gender to inform sexual evaluation. For example, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women are often stereotyped as "jezebel, whore, or 'hoochie'" (2004:89). Class and race

have no necessary connection with sexual behavior yet are taken as its signifiers. Performances of femininity are shaped by class and race and ranked in ways that benefit women in advantaged categories (McCall 1992). Respectable femininity becomes synonymous with the polite, accommodating, demure style often performed by the white middle class (Bettie 2003; Jones 2010; Garcia 2012).

This suggests that high-status women have an interest in applying sexual stigma to others, thus solidifying their erotic rank. Such an explanation is partial as it does not account for why other women engage in slut shaming. We need a framework that accommodates the interests of all actors, no matter how subordinate, in deflecting existing negative classifications.

### ***Intersectionality, Moral Boundaries, and the Centrality of Class***

A third approach highlights the symbolic boundaries people draw to affirm the identities and reputations that set them apart from others (Lamont 1992). In some cases, boundaries have a moral dimension, distinguishing between the pure and the polluting (Lamont and Molnár 2002; see also Gieryn 1983; Stuber 2006). Individuals in distinct social locations work simultaneously to favorably differentiate their groups from others.

Lamont's (1992, 2000) work—which attends to how people draw class boundaries—suggests that both affluent and working-class Americans construct a sense of superiority in relation to each other. She finds that working-class Americans often perceive the affluent as superficial and lacking integrity. Stuber (2006) extends her work to American college students, showing how classed meanings are situated constructions arising in interaction. She notes that the class discourse of less affluent students tends to

be more elaborate and emotionally charged than that of their wealthier peers. Similarly, Gorman (2000) found that middle-class and working-class individuals offered negative portrayals of members of the other social class. The narratives of the more affluent revealed contempt, while those of the working class indicated class injury.

Scholars focusing on class, race, and intersectionality have observed that social differences are often partly constituted in the realm of sexuality (Wilkins 2008). Ortner claims that “class differences are largely represented as *sexual* differences” (1991:178; quoted in Trautner 2005:774, Trautner’s emphasis). Similarly, Bourdieu (1984:102) argues that “sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity.” In *Women Without Class*, Bettie (2003) shows that differences primarily about class (and race) were interpreted as exclusively about gender and sexuality. Teachers saw the “Chica” femininity performed by low-income Latina girls as revealing sexual promiscuity and the femininity of middle-class white girls as indicating sexual restraint. Similarly, women from marginalized groups often emphasize sexual difference to mark class boundaries (Skeggs 1997; Wilkins 2008).

This model suggests that women’s deployment of slut discourse may be partly about negotiating class differences. It may define moral boundaries around class that also organize sexual behavior (i.e., how much and what kinds of sexual activity women engage in and with whom) and performances of femininity. The positions women take, and the success they experience when definitions conflict, may be influenced by prior social advantage. This perspective suggests that no group is entirely subject to, or in control of, slut

discourse: all actively constitute it in interaction.

In what follows, we use insights from all three perspectives to develop a more complex explanation of women’s slut-shaming practices. We argue that women use sexual stigma to distance themselves from other women, but not primarily on the basis of actual sexual activity. Women use slut discourse to maintain status distinctions that are, in this case, linked closely to social class. Both low- and high-status women define their own performances of femininity as exempt from sexual stigma while labeling other groups as “slutty.” It is only high-status women, though, who experience what we refer to as sexual privilege—the ability to define acceptable sexuality in high-status spaces.

## METHODS

Our awareness of women’s use of slut discourse emerged inductively from a longitudinal ethnographic and interview study of a cohort of 53 women who began college in the 2004–2005 academic year at Midwest University.<sup>2</sup> We supplement these data with individual and group interviews conducted outside the residence hall sample.

Below we describe the ethnographic and interview procedures, the participants, our relationships with them, and how we classified them into status groups aligning closely—but not entirely—with social class. We also address the social desirability issues acute in sex research, most notably women’s underreporting of sexual behavior (Laumann et al. 1994; Alexander and Fisher 2003). Several aspects of our design allowed us access to information women often kept secret.

<sup>2</sup>We refer to the university with a pseudonym.

### ***Ethnography and Longitudinal Interviews***

A research team of nine, including two authors, occupied a room on a residence hall floor. When data collection commenced, the first author was an assistant professor in her late thirties and the second author a graduate student in her early twenties. The team included a male graduate student, an undergraduate sorority member, and an undergraduate from a working-class family. Variation in age, approach, and self-presentation facilitated different types of relationships with women on the floor (Erickson and Stull 1998).

The floor we studied was located in one of several "party dorms." Affluent students often requested this residence hall if they were interested in drinking, hooking up, and joining the Greek system. Few identified as feminist and all presented as traditionally feminine.

Floor residents were similar in many ways. They started college together, on the same floor, at the same school.<sup>3</sup> All were white, a result of low racial diversity on campus and segregation in campus housing (see Hurtado et al. 1999). All but two identified as heterosexual and only one woman was not born in the United States. This homogeneity, though a limitation, allowed us to isolate ways that social class shaped women's positions on campus and moral boundaries they drew with respect to sexuality and gender presentation. Assessment of class background was based on parental education and occupation, student employment during the school year, and student loans (see Table 1.2 in Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Of the sample, 54 percent came from upper-middle or upper-class backgrounds; we refer to these women as

affluent. The remainder grew up in working, lower-middle, or middle-class families; we refer to these women as less affluent.

Women were told that we were there to study the college experience, and indeed, we attended to all facets of their lives. We observed throughout the academic year, interacting with participants as they did with each other (Corsaro 1997). We let women guide conversations and tried to avoid revealing our attitudes. This made it difficult for them to determine what we were studying, which behaviors interested us, and how we might judge them—minimizing the effects of social desirability.

We also conducted five waves of interviews—from women's first year of college to the year after most graduated. We include data from 189 interviews with the 44 heterosexual women (83 percent of the floor) who participated in the final interview. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours.

All waves covered a broad range of topics, including partying, sexuality, relationships, friendships, classes, employment, religion, and relationships with parents. The first wave included a question about how women might view "a girl who is known for having sex with a lot of guys." This wording reveals our early assumption that the slut label was about sexual activity and generated little discussion when women stayed close to the prompt. Later we realized that this, too, provided data. Aware that we were attempting to ask about "sluts," many women offered a definition of a "real" slut, as if to educate us. We also draw on the frequent, unsolicited use of slut discourse emerging from discussions of college sexuality, peers, and partying. Women were most concerned with the slut label during the first year of college, as status hierarchies were being established.

<sup>3</sup>At the start of the study, 51 women were freshmen, and 2 were sophomores.

The second author collected most of the interviews, as women felt more comfortable around her. Some even sought her out for consultation about private sexual issues (e.g., assistance with a pregnancy test that needed to be done outside of a sorority). When asking about sex, she always attempted to respond neutrally or positively. A number of women commented that it was a relief to talk about sex without fear of judgment. One noted, "You are someone who I feel I can tell anything to because you have no bias or whatever. It's kind of nice. I always look forward to when I get to talk to you, and [my freshman year roommate] does too" (Morgan Y5).

Despite our efforts, women still seemed to worry about revealing "too much" sexual activity. For example, one woman, when asked the number of sexual partners she had in college, was reticent to disclose specifics:

*Naomi:* Roughly . . . this is so embarrassing. Roughly, like, 12?

*Second Author:* Why is that so embarrassing?

*Naomi:* It's, it's, it's still a big number up there. (Y4)

Her hesitation suggested that she rounded down.

### **Classification into Status Groups**

We classified women according to participation in the Greek party scene, which was the most widely accepted signal of peer status on campus. We categorized 23 women as high status and 21 as low status.

High-status women exhibited a particular style of femininity valued in sororities. The accomplishment of "cuteness"—a slender but fit, blonde, tan, fashionable look—required class resources. Women also gained admission on the basis of "good personalities"—indicated by extroversion, interest in high-end fashion, and familiarity with brand names

(see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013 for more). Sorority membership was almost a requirement for high status: only four women managed to pursue alternative paths into the party scene. One benefited from her relationship with an athlete, another from residence in a luxurious apartment complex with a party reputation, and two capitalized on dense high school networks.

Status fell largely, although not entirely, along class lines: the 23 high-status women were primarily upper class and upper middle class, in part because they had time and money to participate. Most were from out of state, which corresponded with wealth due to the high cost of out-of-state tuition. Some middle-class women who successfully emulated affluent social and sexual styles were also classified as high status.

The remaining 21 women were excluded from the Greek party scene. Fifteen lower-middle-class and working-class women lacked the economic and cultural resources necessary for regular participation and were low status by default. They shared this designation with six middle-class to upper-class women who did not join sororities. These women had few friends on campus and expressed attitudes critical of the Greek party scene. They did not perform the gender style that would have increased their status. Two identified as lesbian, and the others viewed themselves as alternative or nerdy. For these women, compliance would have been challenging and uncomfortable.

We also analyzed data from four group interviews (24 women total) and 21 individual interviews. The first author, usually accompanied by a research assistant, conducted the group interviews with five to seven intimate friends in their own homes. Two of these were among high-status women in sororities, and two were with low-status groups (self-identified feminists or senior



women living in off-campus housing). Supplemental individual interviews with senior women were, in contrast, as close to anonymous as possible: the graduate student interviewer and participants had no prior relationship, and interviews occurred only once. Participants, who were generally more sexually active than the residence hall sample, selected into the interview knowing it focused on sex.

**Data Analysis and Presentation**

We used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to organize and process interview transcripts and ethnographic notes. We identified patterns and looked for counterexamples. Group differences, particularly by status and social class, were subjected to a rigorous process of comparison. We developed and tested hypotheses by writing theoretical memos, checking them against multiple data sources, and refining theories. The involvement of the third and fourth authors brought new perspectives and additional means for ascertaining reliability.

The source of each data piece is identified in the text. FN (for field note) and the date of the observation mark ethnographic material. All longitudinal interviews are flagged with the interview wave and a pseudonym assigned to the participant (e.g., Lydia Y3). We also indicate group interviews where relevant and use unique numbers to designate supplemental individual interviews (e.g., S05).

**SLUT BOUNDARY WORK**

The results are organized in three sections. First, we discuss how women simultaneously produce and evade slut stigma through interaction and their investment in this cultural work. We then show that status on campus, organized largely by social class, shapes how women define

sluttiness. High- and low-status women draw moral boundaries consistent with their own classed styles of femininity, effectively segregating the groups. As we discuss in a final section, low-status women sometimes attempt to enter the dominant social scene. There they find themselves classified according to high-status standards, which places them at risk of public sexual stigma. In contrast, high-status women are exempt from public slut shaming. This, we argue, is a form of sexual privilege.

**Producing Slut Stigma Through Discourse**

Years after high school, two young women became angry as they revisited instances when abstinence failed to protect them from slut stigma:

*Woman 1:* I was a virgin the first time I was called a slut.

*Woman 2:* I was too.

*Other Woman:* Really?

*Woman 1:* Yeah, because no one knew [I was really a virgin].

*Woman 2:* They all thought I slept with people. That's what my volleyball coach said to all my friends, that I was the one that was going to be causing trouble when I get older, and now every one of my friends has had sex with like a hundred people!

*Woman 1:* Or are pregnant or have been pregnant.

*Woman 2:* Yeah, exactly.

*First Author:* What were they responding to?

*Woman 1:* Like, if masturbation were to come up . . . I wouldn't be afraid to talk about it. I think people got the wrong idea from that.

*Woman 2:* In high school, they called me a cocktease. I didn't do anything but . . . I have always been the open one. (Off-Campus Group)

As was often the case, slut stigma was disconnected from sexual behavior. Yet

rather than challenge the use of this label, these women, like others, endorsed it. They argued that the accusations were problematic because they were inaccurate. They even suggested that their friends who had sex with “like a hundred people” or “have been pregnant” were more appropriate targets—deflecting stigma onto someone else.

Conversations in which women discussed and demarcated the line between good and bad girls—labeling others negatively while positioning themselves favorably—were common. All but three women, or 93 percent, revealed familiarity with terms like *slut*, *whore*, *skank*, or *ho*. *Good girl*, *virgin*, or *classy* were used to indicate sexual or moral superiority. Women drew hierarchical distinctions within groups as well as between ingroup and outgroup members. Friends were easy targets, as women believed that they knew more about their sexual behavior than that of other women. As we discuss later, though, public slut shaming was commonly directed at members of the opposing status group.

These cases might be seen as textbook examples of defensive othering—a common strategy for managing stigma. Yet aspects of slut stigma differ from what social psychological models of stigma predict. The criteria for assigning stigma were unclear and continually constructed through interaction. Women were both potential recipients of sexual stigma and producers of it—simultaneously engaged in both defensive and oppressive othering. As one insightful woman put it, “I feel like you’re more likely to say [slut] if you maybe feel like you could potentially be called that” (Abby Y1). There was no stable division between stigmatized and normal individuals.

It was rare for the slut label to stick to any given woman, a requirement for status loss and persistent discrimination across situations. Most labeling occurred

in private and was directed at targets unaware of their stigmatization. As one woman reported about her friend’s sexual relationship,

She just keeps going over there because she wants his attention because she likes him. That’s disgusting. That to me, if you want to talk about slutty, that to me is whoring yourself out. And, I mean, I hate to say that because she is one of my best friends, but good God, it’s like how stupid can you be? (S06)

Often the labeled were women viewed as sexual competition. As Becky told us,

My boyfriend, girls hit on him all the time, and during Halloween he told me this story about a girl who was wearing practically nothing. . . . She went up to him [and he asked,] “What are you supposed to be?” And she said, “I’m a cherry. Do you want to pop my cherry?” She lifts up her skirt and she’s wearing a thong that had a cherry on it. That’s skanky. That’s so skanky. (Y1)

Whether friends, enemies, or as detailed below, women in the other status group, targets served as foils for women’s claims of virtue.

The labeled woman did not even need to exist. Women sometimes referred to others who were so generic, interchangeable, or socially distant as to be apocryphal—the “mythical slut.” For instance, sorority women in a group interview explained how serenading, a common Greek practice, was “ruined” by a “complete slut” who purportedly “had sex with a guy in front of everybody.” As in similar stories (Fine 1992), the connection to the “slut” was tenuous: no one actually knew her—only of her. Her behavior, being particularly public in nature, was used to delimit the acceptable.

Defining the self as a good girl required ongoing boundary work. An exchange between Whitney and Mollie, roommates who completed the first-year interview together, provides another example:

*Whitney:* There's like, some girls that are big sluts.

*Second Author:* How do you know if a person's a slut? What would be the definition?

*Whitney:* They just go and sleep with a different guy every night. Like this girl. Anna has sex with a different guy every single night and every single weekend. It's so . . . I don't understand how someone could not have any more respect for themselves. It's like, you enjoy this. She's like whatever . . . I could never let myself do that.

*Mollie:* I couldn't either.

*Second Author:* How did you know her?

*Whitney:* I met her through a friend. She's cool, but . . .

*Mollie:* Neither of us are like that, and I can't think of any of our high school friends that are like that either.

Whitney and Mollie achieved a working definition of the slut, applied the label to someone else, and evaded stigma by distancing themselves—and their friends—from her. These processes occurred simultaneously. They built the definition as they went, attributing improbable actions (having "sex with a different guy every single night and every single weekend") to a conveniently absent target. Anna's supposed transgressions defined the stigmatized trait and concurrently categorized Whitney and Mollie as normal.

Although this was a fluid process—over which women exercised considerable control—they were deeply invested in it. Most believed in a real difference between good and bad girls and regulated their behavior accordingly. As a participant in the feminist group stated, "A lot of it is socialization. . . . There's nothing keeping me from doing it. But emotionally I'm like

. . . good girls don't do this." Some bargained with themselves, following self-imposed rules meant to preserve good girl identities. Tara recalled the agony of waiting until her first serious relationship seemed official enough to make sex okay, noting, "I need to wait 14 more days . . . then that will be enough time" (Y3).

Women feared public exposure as sluts. Virtually all expressed the desire to avoid a "bad reputation. I know that I wouldn't want that reputation" (Olivia Y1). At times they seemed to be assuring us (and themselves) of their virtue. As one anxiously reported, "I'm not a fast-paced girl. I'm a good girl" (Naomi Y1). In the context of a feminist group interview, one woman came close to positively claiming a slut identity: she proclaimed that she was done with her "secret life of being promiscuous" and was "coming out to people now. . . . I'm promiscuous, dammit!" Yet she proceeded to admit that she was really only "out" to her friends, noting, "I don't tell some of my friends—a lot of my friends. That's why I really love my feminist thing. I reserve it, as people aren't going to judge me." Even she feared public censure.

### ***Class and Status Differences in Moral Boundaries***

As noted earlier, high-status women were largely affluent, from out of state, and—with few exceptions—sorority members. In contrast, low-status women were mostly less affluent, local, and on the margins of campus life. Class differences in conceptions of appropriate femininity were at the heart of women's sexual and moral boundaries.

*The high-status view: classy versus trashy.* For affluent women, a primary risk of sex in college was its potential to derail professional advancement and/or class-appropriate marriage. Hooking up,

particularly without intercourse, was viewed as relatively low risk because it did not require costly commitment (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). When asked who hooked up the most on campus, Nicole responded, "All . . . the people who came to college to have a good time and party" (Y1). Women even creatively reframed sexual exploration as a necessary precondition for a successful marriage. As Alicia explained, "I'm glad that I've had my one-night stands . . . because now I know what it's supposed to feel like when I'm with someone that I want to be with. . . . I feel bad for some of my friends. . . . They're still virgins" (Y1).

High-status women rejected the view that all sexual activity outside of relationships was bad. They viewed sexual activity along a continuum, with hooking up falling conveniently in the middle. Becky's nuanced definition of hooking up is illustrative. She argued that "kissing [is] excluded"—minimizing this favorite activity of hers in seriousness. As she continued, "You have kissing over here [motions to one side] and sex over here [motions to the other]. . . . Anything from making out to right before you hit sex is hooking up. . . . I think sex is in its own class" (Y1).

This view hinged on defining a range of sexual activities—such as "hardcore making out, heavy petting" (Becky Y1), mutual masturbation, and oral sex—as not "sex." "Sex," as women defined it, referred only to vaginal intercourse. Hannah described herself as a virgin to both researchers and her mother, despite admitting to oral sex with a hookup partner. She joked with her mother about a missed period, "Must be from all the sex I've been having. And she's like, uhhhh. . . . I was like, Mom, I'm just kidding. I'm still a virgin" (Y2). Hannah was not alone. Research suggests that many young Americans do not define oral-genital contact as "having sex" (Backstrom,

Armstrong, and Puentes 2012; Vannier and Byers 2013).<sup>4</sup>

Vaginal intercourse outside of relationships was viewed as more problematic. Becky, for example, judged those who engaged in extrarelational intercourse. When asked how often she hooked up, Becky emphasized participation in low-to middle-range activities: "I mean, I wasn't like a slut or anything. There'd be weekends I wouldn't want to do anything except make out with someone, and there's weekends I wouldn't want to do anything, like maybe a little bit of a kiss" (Y1). When the discussion turned to vaginal intercourse she—like most women—mentioned only sex with her boyfriend.

Yet having vaginal intercourse in a hookup was sometimes permissible—as long as women did not do so "too many" times or "too easily." As Tara claimed, "I think when people have sex with a lot of guys that aren't their boyfriends that's really a slut" (Y1, emphasis added). She was vague about the number, unable to articulate whether one, five, or 50 hookups with intercourse made a woman a slut. Another woman, who had more sexual partners than her friends, claimed that the number of partners was irrelevant. She noted, "Slutty doesn't mean how many people [you slept with]. It just means how easy you are. Like, if a guy wants it, are you gonna give it to him?" (Abby Y1).

To high-status women, looking "trashy" was more indicative of sluttiness than any amount of sexual activity. Women spent hours trying to perfect a high-status sexy look without crossing the line into sluttiness. This was often

<sup>4</sup>Sex educators typically treat the defining of "oral sex" as "not sex" as a classification error in need of correction by better education about the importance of seeing sex as an entire range of behaviors (Remez 2000).

a social exercise: women crowded in front of a mirror, trying on outfits and accessories until everyone assembled approved. As Blair described, "A lot of the girls when we we're going out . . . they're asking, 'I don't look slutty, do I?'" The process was designed to protect against judgment by others, although it also provided personal affirmation. For Blair, the fact that she and her sorority sisters asked these critical questions signaled that they were "classier. . . That's important" (Y1).

Blair was not the only woman to contrast a desirable, classy appearance with an undesirable, trashy appearance. For instance, Alicia noted, "If my house is considered the trashy, slutty house and I didn't know that and someone said that [it] would hurt my feelings. [Especially] when I'm thinking . . . it's the classy house" (Y1). *Classy* denoted sophisticated style, while *trashy* suggested exclusion from the upper rungs of society, as captured in the phrase "white trash" (Kusenbach 2009). They rarely referred to actual less-affluent women—who, by virtue of their exclusion from social life, were invisible (see Fiske 2011). Instead, women used labels to mark gradations of status in their bounded social world. By closely aligning economic advantage and moral purity, women who pulled off a classy femininity were beyond reproach.

The most successful women were those who constructed a seamless upper-middle-class gender presentation. Sororities actively recruited these women. As Alicia continued,

Let's say I'm president of the house or something and I [want to] keep the classy [sorority] name that we've had from the previous year then [we need] more people with that classy [sorority] look. . . . The preppy, classy, good girl that likes to have fun and be friendly. You know, the perfect girl. (Y1)

Similarly, when asked to define her sorority's reputation, one sorority woman responded with a single word, "classy," on which another focus group member elaborated: "I think we would be the girl next door."

The "perfect girl" or "girl next door" indexed the wholesome, demure, and polite—but fun-loving—interactional style characteristic of affluent white women (Bettie 2003; Trautner 2005). Alicia's use of the word *preppy* offered another class clue: this style originated on elite Eastern college campuses and was exemplified by fashion designers like Ralph Lauren, known for selling not only clothing but an advantaged lifestyle (Banks and Chappelle 2011). The preppy female student displayed confidence in elite social settings and could afford the trappings necessary to make a good impression.

Accomplishing a classy presentation required considerable resources. Parent-funded credit cards allowed women to signal affluent tastes in clothing and makeup. Several purchased expensive MAC-brand purple eye shadow that read as classy rather than the drugstore eye shadow worn by at least one working-class woman. As Naomi told us, "I'm high maintenance. . . . I like nice things [laughs]. I guess in a sense, I like things brand name" (Y1). Without jobs, they had time to go tanning, get their hair done, do their nails, shop, and keep up with fashion trends. By college, these women were well versed in classed interactional styles and bodywork. Many had cultivated these skills in high-school peer cultures as cheerleaders, prom queens, and dance squad members.

High-status women also knew the nuanced rules of the party scene before arrival. Most had previous party experience and brought advice from college-savvy friends and family with them. Becky described one such rule, about attire:

[Halloween is] the night that girls can dress skanky. Me and my friends do it. [And] in the summer, I'm not gonna lie, I wear itty bitty skirts. . . . Then there are the sluts that just dress slutty, and sure they could be actual sluts. I don't get girls that go to fraternity parties in the dead of winter wearing skirts that you can see their asses in. (Y1)

As she noted, good girls do not wear short skirts or revealing shirts without social permission. She was aware that women who dressed provocatively were not necessarily "actual sluts," but her language suggested belief in such women's existence, necessitating efforts to avoid being placed in this category. Another woman highlighted ways that dress and deportment could be played off each other. She noted that it was acceptable for women to "have a short skirt on" if "they're being cool" but "if they're dancing really gross with a short skirt on, then like, oh slut. You've got to have the combination" (Lydia Y1). Women lacking familiarity with these unstated rules started at a disadvantage.

In general, classy girls did not get in trouble, draw inappropriate attention, or do anything "weird." For instance, one supposed slut was "involved with drugs, and she stole a lot of stuff, and her parents sent her to boarding school" (Nicole Y1). Others were described as having "problems at home with their families and stuff" (Nicole Y4). In one case, a slut was remarkable for "eat[ing] ketchup for dinner [laughter]. [First Author: Like, only ketchup?] Right, she has some issues" (Erica and Taylor Y1). These activities were not sexual. Instead, they represented failure to successfully perform an affluent femininity, with sexual stigma applied as the penalty.

*The low-status view: nice versus bitchy.* The notion that youth should participate in hookups was foreign to less-affluent

women, whose expectations about appropriate relationship timelines were shaped by a different social world. Many of their friends back home were already married or had children. Amanda, a working-class woman, recalled, "I thought I'd get married in college. . . . I wanted to have kids before I was 25" (Y4). Hooking up made little sense uncoupled from the desire to postpone commitment. As one less-affluent woman noted,

Who would be interested in just meeting somebody and then doing something that night? And then never talking to them again? . . . I'm supposed to do this; I'm supposed to get drunk every weekend. I'm supposed to go to parties every weekend . . . and I'm supposed to enjoy it like everyone else. But it just doesn't appeal to me. (Valerie Y1)

Lacking access to classed beliefs supporting sexual exploration, less-affluent women treated sexual activity outside of relationships as morally suspect. As lower-middle-class Olivia explained,

I have really strong feelings about the whole sex thing. . . . I know that some people have boyfriends and they've been with them for a long time, and I understand that. But I listen to some people when they talk about [hooking up]. . . . I know that personally for me, I would rather be a virgin for as much as I can than go out and do God knows who and do whatever. (Y1)

As discussed in the Methods section, not all low-status women lacked class advantage, but even low-status women from affluent families opposed hooking up. As upper-middle-class Madison noted, "I just don't [hook up]. . . . I'm not really into that kinda thing, I guess. I just don't like getting with random people" (Y1). Similarly, upper-middle-class Linda

described herself as "very sexually conservative" in contrast to her "liberal" floor, in part due to their participation in hooking up (Y1).

Some low-status women were confused about hooking up, as they were excluded from the social networks where the practice made sense. When asked for a definition, Mary, a middle-class woman, responded, "Good question. I honestly, I couldn't tell you what some of their. . . I mean I've heard them use [the word] and I'm kind of like, well what does that mean? Did you have sex with them or did you just make out with them or . . . ?" (Y1). Working-class Megan had not even heard of hooking up until we asked her about it. She equated hooking up with an alleged sorority hazing ritual in which "they would tie the girls up naked on a bed and then a guy would come in and they would have sex with them" (Y1).

Without insider cultural knowledge, low-status women did not make the same fine-grained distinctions between types of sexual activity outside of relationships. For these women, the relevant divide was whether the activity occurred in a relationship or not. They assumed that hookups, like most committed relationships, involved vaginal intercourse. A roommate pair explained:

*Heather:* A lot of the girls . . . they're always like oh you hooked up.

*Stacey:* We're not used to that. Hooking up means you guys fucked. . . I'd be like omigod and everyone else's like what? And I'm like you guys hooked up? They'd be like so?

*Second Author:* You thought everyone was having random sex?

*Stacey:* [I felt like saying] you slut.

*Heather:* At first we were like, what is this place? (Y1)

These two women would briefly (and unsuccessfully) attempt to befriend affluent partiers on the floor. This provided

them with more information about the complexities of hooking up, although they did not alter their own sexual practices.

Low-status women maintained a distinction between themselves and those who hooked up. As Olivia noted,

My friends are similar when it comes to things like [sex]. We don't think of it as doing whatever with who knows who. . . I'm sure there's more people that are like me, but I know there are people who just do it casually. They don't think of it as anything 'cause a lot of them have done it before. For them it's different. (Y1)

Her explanation, using us-versus-them language, divided college women into two groups and implied her group was superior.

The judgment low-status women passed on their high-status peers was about more than sexuality. They often derided sorority women and those who attended parties. As Carrie described, "[My sister] who goes to [private college] is in [a sorority]. Umm, hello. All those girls are sluts. Sorry, they were. All they did was drink and go to parties. She's not like that so she deactivated" (Y1). Linda referred to women in the Greek system as "the party sluts" (Y4).

Underlying this disapproval was a rejection of their partying peers' interactional style. Madison, right after she transferred to a regional college, explained what she disliked about many women on the floor:

Sorority girls are kinda whorish and unfriendly and very cliquey. If you weren't Greek, then you didn't really matter. . . I feel like most, if not all, the sorority girls I met at MU were bitches and stuck up. [In response to the indignation of a friend from another school, who was present during this segment of the interview:] I

met [Sasha's sorority] sisters and they're really nice. (Y3)

Madison equated sluttiness with exclusivity—being bitchy, stuck up, cliquey, and unfriendly. She contrasted this with the desirable trait, “niceness,” which she was obligated to attribute to Sasha and her friends.

Niceness, also described as being “friendly,” “laid back,” or “down home,” referenced a classed femininity in which social climbing, expensive consumption patterns, and efforts to distinguish oneself as “better than” others were disparaged. Madison rejected high-status femininity, despite her own affluence. She explained,

Most of the girls . . . they seem to be snotty. There were a few girls that are just like [my friend's and my] level, where we aren't gonna be, oh we have money, we're gonna live better than you. But there are a few that definitely you could tell they had like an unlimited income. They went shopping all the time. (Y3)

Similarly, Stacey—who was from a lower-middle-class family—remarked bitterly, “There's a lot of rich bitches in sororities, and they have everything that their daddy gives them. . . . I mean, they probably saw on TV we're the number one party school, like, four years ago and they're like, ‘Daddy, Mommy, I wanna go there!’” (Y3/Y4). Sluttiness and wealth were often conflated. As Alana reported, “Some people think [this dorm is where] the whores are. You know, oh those ‘Mac-slutts in MacAdams. . . .’ People think [it's] like the rich people. . . . Their stereotypes might be true” (Y1).

These women expressed considerable class and status vulnerability—even animosity. Their private commentary was pointed, directed at specific high-status women. As Fiske (2011) suggests, those at the bottom of a hierarchy tend to be

excruciatingly aware of those above them, whereas those with status attend less to those below them. Lacking language to make sense of the class differences that permeated social life at Midwest University, the slut label did cultural work. Low-status women conflated unkindness and perceived promiscuity when they called high-status women “slutty.” Their use of the term captured both their reactions to poor treatment and the unfairness of others' getting away with sexual behavior they viewed as inappropriate (and for which they would have been penalized). Slut discourse was thus employed in privately waged battles of class revenge. As we discuss below, this animosity had few consequences for high-status women.

*Status, Affluence, and Competing Boundaries.* Slut discourse helped establish and maintain boundaries between high- and low-status women. Midway through college there were no friendships crossing this line, despite the cross-group interactions necessitated by living on the same floor. Women enforced moral boundaries on uneven ground. Most cases of conflict occurred when low-status women—lured by the promise of fun, status, and belonging—attempted to interact with high-status women, especially in the party scene. There was not much movement in the other direction: high-status women had little to gain by associating with low-status women.

Women rarely labeled others publicly. We recorded only five instances in our first-year residence hall observations. None of the women carried a negative reputation outside the situations where labeling occurred. These interactions, however, were among the most explosive and painful we witnessed. Targets were low-status—and, in four cases, less-affluent—women who attempted to make inroads with high-status women.



High-status women valued a muted, polite, and demure femininity. This contrasted with the louder, cruder, overtly sexual femininity exhibited by Stacey and Heather, a working-class roommate pair who, early in the year, attempted to associate with partiers on the floor. As field notes recount,

Whitney . . . came out into the hall as Heather and Stacey (applying finishing touches to her tube top) came out. Both were in tight pants (one black one brown?) and tight tops. They had plenty of makeup on (this was clear from far away) and tall heels. . . . They were headed for another dorm to say "hey" to a guy that Stacey had met. Whitney made a comment about how dressed up they were to just say "hey." [The girls] laughed it off and very loudly yelled something about going to "whore around." (FN 9-15-04)

In this incident, high-status Whitney implicitly passed judgment on Heather and Stacey, whose clothing and demeanor violated high-status norms of self-presentation. The two women immediately understood that their behavior was being coded as sexually deviant. Ironically, their attempt at saving face—by joking about "whoring around"—likely made Whitney's comment seem even more warranted in the eyes of their affluent peers.

Several months after the hallway incident, Stacey was watching a television show with several high-status women who lived near her:

One of the characters was hooking up with somebody new and Stacey said, "Slut-bag!" Chelsea said, "Stacey?" as if to imply jokingly that she had no right to call this woman a slut. Stacey was clearly offended by this and said indignantly, "I am NOT a slut." Chelsea, seeing her take it so badly, said that she really didn't mean it that

way and that she was joking but Stacey stormed off anyway. (FN 1-13-05)

Stacey attempted to apply her own definition of slut to the actions of the television character, calling her out for hooking up. Chelsea rejected this, turning the label back on Stacey, who was offended. Later, a lower-middle-class woman attempted to defend Stacey. She remarked, "It's not like Stacey sleeps around anyway." The damage had already been done though. None of the other women in the room chimed in to confirm Stacey's virtue.

In another instance, the "wrong" choice of an erotic partner landed working-class Monica a label. As we recorded,

Monica's really open flirting and sexuality with Heather's brother was looked down on by people on the floor. Many rolled eyes and insinuate[d] that she was being slutty or inappropriate. This guy (both because he was someone's brother and because he was clearly working-class—not in a frat or middle-class) was the wrong object. (FN 2-10-05)

From the perspective of high-status women, good girls only flirted with affluent men who had high status on campus. This disadvantaged less-affluent women, who were often drawn to men sharing their class background. These men were not in fraternities or necessarily even in college.

Monica's dalliance with Heather's brother might have escaped notice had she not also made brief forays into the party scene. Monica and her middle-class roommate Karen—who worked her way into the high-status group—ended the year in a vicious battle, flinging the slut label back and forth behind each other's backs. Monica, however, was singled out for judgment by shared acquaintances. Prior to their dramatic split, Monica and Karen often kissed each other at parties—

a form of same-sex eroticism often intended to appeal to men (Hamilton 2007). Several floormates decided in conversation that Monica was “somewhat weird and ‘slutty’ . . . [while] Karen’s sexuality or sluttiness never came up. . . . It wasn’t even a question” (FN 3-8-05). Monica lacked friends positioned to spread similar rumors about Karen. Unexpectedly, Monica left shortly before the end of the year and did not return to Midwest University.

Monica’s, Stacey’s, and Heather’s experiences illustrate the challenges women from less-advantaged backgrounds faced if they attempted to break into the party scene. They were also at risk of acquiring sexual stigma back home, where they were judged for associating with rich partiers. For instance, Monica’s hometown acquaintances started a virulent rumor that she had an abortion while at Midwest University. This suggests that people in her hometown shared the construction of sluttiness we described above, viewing affluent college girls as sluts in contrast with down-to-earth, small-town girls. Monica had been tainted by association.

In contrast, the only affluent woman to be publicly shamed was from the low-status group. She had angered many of her floormates with her blatant and public homophobia. They retaliated by writing derogatory comments, including the slut label, on the whiteboard posted on her door. Aside from this case, affluent women were virtually exempt from public shaming by other women, whether at school or at home, where their friends’ definitions were roughly in sync with their own.

This freedom from stigma is particularly remarkable considering what we ascertained about women’s sexual activities (see Table 1). All but one high-status woman hooked up during college in between committed relationships. Some low-status women also hooked up, but usually only once or twice before deciding

**Table 1.** Participation in Hookups and Relationships by Status Group

Status Group	Low	High
Little to no sexual or romantic activity	5	0
Relationships only	8	1
Relationships primary but also hookups	1	3
Hookups and relationships	7	19
N	21	23

it was not for them. Nearly two thirds of this group did not hook up at all. A few low-status women left college without having had vaginal intercourse, but no high-status women refrained from intercourse entirely. Most low-status women limited their sexual activity to relationships. Low-status women reported to us, on average, roughly 1.5 fewer sexual partners (for oral sex or intercourse) during college than high-status women. These patterns underscore the disconnect between vulnerability to slut stigma and sexual activity.

From the perspective of low-status women, the sexual activities of high-status peers were riskier than their own strategy of restricting sex to relationships (or avoiding it altogether)—yet high-status women evaded the most damaging kind of labeling. As long as they were discreet and did not, as one put it, “go bragging about the guys I’ve hooked up with,” high-status women experienced minimal threat of judgment by others (Lydia Y1). Upper-middle-class Rory, who with more than 60 partners was the most sexually active woman we interviewed, explained, “I’m the kind a girl that everybody would like talk shit about if they knew. . . . I have this really good image. Hah. And people don’t think of me that way. They think I’m like nice and smart, and I’m like yeah” (S07). Casual sexual activity posed little reputational risk for savvy,

affluent women who maintained a classy image.

## DISCUSSION

Slut discourse was ubiquitous among the women we studied. Sexual labels were exchanged fluidly but rarely became stably attached to particular women. Stigma was instead produced in interaction, as women defined their virtue against real or imagined bad girls. The boundaries women drew were shaped by status on campus, which was closely linked to class background. High-status women considered the performance of a classy femininity—which relied on economic advantage—as proof that one was not trashy. In contrast, low-status women, mostly from less-affluent backgrounds, emphasized niceness and viewed partying as evidence of sluttiness.

Both groups actively reconstituted the slut label to their advantage. Despite this, they were not equally situated to enforce their moral boundaries. High-status women operated within a discursive system allowing greater space for sexual experimentation. When low-status women attempted to participate in high-status social worlds, they risked public slut shaming. At the same time, their more restrictive definitions lacked social consequences for higher-status women. This, as we argue below, is a form of sexual privilege. Low-status women resented the class and sexual advantages of their affluent peers and unsuccessfully used sexual stigma in an attempt to level differences.

### *Class, Race, and Moral Boundaries*

The behaviors of women and girls are often viewed through the lens of sexual and gender inequality, particularly where sexual practices are concerned (Bettie 2003; Wilkins 2008). Certainly, sexual double standards are real and may guide men's use of the slut label against women

(Crawford and Popp 2003). But equalizing sexual standards—while undoubtedly an important goal—would not necessarily eliminate slut shaming, which assists women in drawing class boundaries.

As other scholars have noted, there is a tendency for women to be viewed as "without class" (Bettie 2003). Women may themselves interpret their differences as being about sexuality, or gender style, when they are at root class differences (Bettie 2003; Wilkins 2008). Yet like men, women on both sides of the class divide actively construct a sense of group superiority. Those with limited resources also nurse—and try to avenge—class injuries. In this case, slut discourse conveys intense feelings about a form of inequality for which there is little other language.

The white women in this study operated in racially homogeneous social worlds, making it easier for us to see class-based processes. Race is not absent from their accounts, however. The notion of the "girl next door" and even the "nice" down-home girl are both racialized. Had we also studied the small nonwhite student population on campus—who, like less-affluent women, were excluded from the predominately white Greek system—it is likely that we would have recognized moral boundaries drawn around race. Indeed, Garcia's (2012) Latina participants viewed "sluttiness" as primarily white (also see Espiritu 2001).

### *Sexual Privilege*

Classed resources provided affluent white women with more room to maneuver sexually. They drew on the notion that young adulthood should be about exploration to justify sexual experimentation in non-committed sexual contexts (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Slut discourse, rather than constraining their sexual options, ensured that they could safely

enjoy the sexual opportunities of the party scene. Those without the time, money, and knowledge needed to effect a “classy” appearance lacked similar protections. It is thus unsurprising that women who hook up on residential college campuses are more likely to be affluent and white (Owen et al. 2010; Paula England, personal communication with second author, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

The definition of sluttiness offered by the low-status women in our study does, however, have a place in youth culture. See, for example, this definition of “sorostitute” (a play on prostitute) from *Urban Dictionary*:

You can find me on campus in the SUV my daddy bought for me. . . . I never leave my sorority house without my letters somewhere on me. I date a fratdaddy. I don't care that he cheats on me with other sorostitutes because I cheat on him too. . . . Looks are all that matter to me. I spent money that was supposed to be for books on tanning and manicures. I have had plastic surgery. I'm always well dressed. I pop my collar and all of my handbags—my Louis [Vuitton], my Kate Spade, my Prada—are real. If I look like this, frat boys will want me and other sororities will be jealous. I look better than you, I act better than you, I AM better than you.<sup>6</sup>

The circulation of this term suggests that our participants are not alone in attempting to label affluent sorority women as slutty.

<sup>5</sup>Paula England's Online College Social Life Survey of 21 four-year colleges and universities includes maternal education as the measure of social class. These data indicate that women whose mothers have either a BA or an advanced degree report significantly higher numbers of hookups than those whose mothers have a high school degree or less. White women also report significantly greater numbers of hookups than women in all other racial/ethnic categories.

Sexual privilege, however, involves the ability to define acceptable sexuality in ways that apply in high-status spaces. High-status women in our study were deeply embedded in the dominant social scene on campus. Over the years, they moved into positions of greater influence—for instance, later selecting the women who joined them in elite sorority houses. They did not care what marginalized individuals thought of them as these opinions were inconsequential both during college and beyond. As gatekeepers to the party scene, however, high-status women had considerable power over low-status women who wished to belong. It is in this context that the sexual activity of advantaged women becomes invisible.

This is not to downplay men's power in sexualized interactions or deny the gendered sexual double standard faced by women. Yet we differ from the classic framework posed by Connell (1987), in which no femininity holds a position of power equivalent to that of hegemonic masculinity among men (but see Schippers 2007). We argue that women are actively invested in slut shaming because they have something to gain. They are not simply unwitting victims of men's sexual dominance. The winners—those whose femininities are valued—enjoy sexual privilege. This is a benefit also extended to men who display a hegemonic masculinity (DeSantis 2007; Sweeney 2013). It indicates the importance of attending to dynamics within—not only across—gender.

### **Stigma at the Discursive Level**

The questions generally answered by social psychological research on stigma—who the labeled and labelers are, how deviants are labeled and respond to stigma—are indeed important. A focus

<sup>6</sup>“Sorostitute.” *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved December 18, 2013 (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=sorostitute>).

on the individual level does not, however, provide a complete picture of stigma processes. Our work, building on that of gender scholars and cultural sociologists, points to the value of examining how stigma is constituted and circulated.

A discursive approach suggests that the social psychological model of "othering" might be constructively reworked (Jones et al. 1984; Crocker et al. 1998; Crocker 1999). Subordinates may succeed in generating alternative public classification systems or subtly reworking dominant ones. For example, the actions of low-status women are not exclusively devoted to adapting to meaning systems established by high-status, socially dominant women on campus. Instead, they produce their own discursive system demarcating the line between good and bad girls in a way that benefits them.

The process of othering may thus provide ongoing opportunities for reclassification, potentially along entirely different dimensions than designated by oppressors—even if alternative frames are difficult to sustain. Othering may be not only oppressive or defensive but also confrontational or challenging. Indeed, the example of the sorostitute suggests cultural resistance to classification systems exempting affluent, high-status college women's sexual behavior from stigma.

To see this process, stigma research must be explicitly intersectional, looking at how dominants and subordinates draw on dimensions of stratification to define within-group hierarchies. Here, for instance, women draw on classed understandings of femininity and acceptable sexuality to deflect sexual stigma and define themselves as morally superior. Without a classed lens, it is easy to miss the competition among women that motivates women's participation in slut shaming.

Attention to how sets of categories are constructed and organized also generates

questions for future research. We might ask why and when some discursive systems—not others—are in play. This focus introduces room for multiple, competing ways of constituting stigma. It raises questions of power and status in the successful application of stigma—that is, whose definitions of deviance are more influential? At the level of discourse, it is also easier to see variation across types of stigma. Why are some forms particularly rigid and likely to stick, while others—like the slut or fag labels—more fluid and able to constrain the actions of all individuals, not just a recognizable group of deviants? Attention to the discursive level makes it easier to detect additional, subtler bases for stigma and better ascertain its operation.

These questions may be difficult to answer in the laboratories where much social psychological research on stigma is conducted (Hebl and Dovidio 2005; Trautner and Collett 2010). An expanded focus necessitates a parallel openness to ethnography, interviews, and other qualitative methods, alongside conventional approaches. Qualitative techniques are often ideal for studying interactions within and across social groups and capturing the processes through which discourse is created and circulates.

As we noted in the introduction, some research—notably Pascoe's (2007) analysis of the circulation of the fag epithet—pushes in this direction. Yet research traditions often develop separately, even when similar concepts are explored. For example, Pascoe's research neither cites nor is cited by scholars studying stigma. This limits production of knowledge across subfields—for example, social psychology, cultural theory, and gender theory—that would benefit from greater dialogue. Our research highlights the potential of cross-fertilization and calls for more work in this vein.

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