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## Commentary: Response to Weitzer 'Resistance to sex work stigma'

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Ron Weitzer's two books and many articles documenting the diverse material conditions under which sex work is performed have enriched scholarly understandings of adult commercial sex and made important contributions to efforts to end the criminalization of those practices. In his essay in this issue of *Sexualities*, Weitzer takes on a related concern: the enduring stigma associated with sex work. As he usefully observes, decriminalization is a necessary but not a sufficient step toward ending stigma; changes in social attitudes are needed as well.

Yet strangely, Weitzer appears to believe that this represents a new direction in sex work studies. "Rarely," he argues, "have scholars examined the vital question of whether, and if so how, stigma can be reduced or eliminated from any type of sex work". This is true only if we disregard more than 30 years of feminist, queer, and critical race theory – written both by sex work activists and by more conventionally credentialed scholars – analyzing whore stigma and proposing strategies to resist, subvert, and undermine it. Weitzer's lack of engagement with that literature leads him to present a short list of "practical strategies" (he acknowledges that they are not meant to be "exhaustive") that not only fail to build on past proposals but are problematic in their proposed execution. The effect of such strategies would be, at best, to shift stigma, not to eliminate it.

Though Weitzer reminds us that "stigmatization reinforces conventional norms and promotes dominant interests by legitimizing established power hierarchies", he fails to consider what the ideological and material function of whore stigma is. For this reason, he never asks which interests benefit and what norms are

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reinforced by the stigmatization of sex work and sex workers; as a result, none of his proposals focus on challenging gendered, sexual, racial, or class inequalities.

Despite his suggestion that effective strategies to end sex work stigma should be based on the tactics of “deviance liberation movements”, his focus is entirely on “normalization” not “liberation.” For example, as a form of resistance to stigma, he notes that individual sex workers might tell stories about prostitution involving “full agency” to distinguish their work from “disreputable forms of sex work (e.g. street prostitution)”. “Derogatory words” like “whore” could be replaced by more neutral terms such as “sex worker,” and prostitution could be reframed as “a service profession” or “therapy for clients.” And sex worker activists, under charismatic and well-resourced leadership working in collaboration with sex work management, could more effectively “advocate for industry normalization”.

But any categorization of some sex workers as “disreputable” – and other workers, in a patriarchal, racist, capitalist, carceral state, as having “full agency” – reinforces the problem of stigma rather than resolves it. Similarly, the tired and highly flawed project of “normalization” relies on moving the line separating reputable and disreputable, not erasing it. Already in 1994, in her book *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism: Prostitution, Adultery and Abortion*, Laurie Shrage proposed that stigma could be reduced by professionalizing the sex trade through the creation of a system “where prostitutes themselves would be licensed, much like other professionals and semi-professionals” with licensees claiming a specialized skill set involving “some number of college-level courses” (1994: 159). This strategy might reduce stigma but only for those able to claim membership in the professional class. Unlicensed “amateurs” (turning tricks in order to survive or to supplement inadequate income) would continue to suffer from whore stigma as women who have “too much sex” with the “wrong people” for the “wrong reasons” without state sanction.

Shrage, despite embracing professionalization, at least was not unaware of the problems of trying to eliminate stigma through the redemptive power of respectability. Drawing on the pathbreaking 1984 work of Gayle Rubin (“Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality”), Shrage noted that an alternative strategy would involve shifting the focus away from stigmatized sexual practices, including commercial sex, to focus instead on the limitations and “cultural origins of socially mainstream sexualities . . . ‘respectable sexualities’ – such as heterosexual, middle-class marital sexuality and male sexuality” (Shrage, 1994: 81). A similar insight appears in a 1997 essay on “Sex Radical Politics” by sex worker and scholar Carol Queen. Queen argues that “anti-whore sentiment grows out of the conviction that there is only one kind of appropriate sex and that all others are sinful and/or abusive” (Queen, 1997: 131). To end whore stigma, she notes, it’s not enough to confront stereotypes about prostitutes and prostitution; it is equally important to challenge “our culture’s demonization of non-procreative, non-monogamous sex” (1997: 180).

Scholars have also pointed out that it is crucial to challenge other interconnected forms of oppression, including racism, as Gail Pheterson explains in her excellent

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**Wendy Chapkis** is a Professor of Sociology and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Southern Maine. Her publications include three books, *Dying to Get High: Marijuana as Medicine* (co-authored with Richard J Webb, New York University Press, 2008); *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (Routledge, 1997); and *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (South End Press, 1986). She is also the author of numerous articles in the areas of gender and sexuality studies, as well as drug policy reform. Her current research includes examining best practices in managing HIV transmission in the US adult film industry; efforts to destabilize the category of "cisgender"; and contemporary challenges to policies of prohibition in the US war on drugs.