

THE WALK OF SHAME: A NORMATIVE DESCRIPTION

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ON A GIVEN SUNDAY MORNING IN CITIES ACROSS AMERICA, women and men will perform the “walk of shame.” Although both sexes exhibit the behavior, the women seem particularly stigmatized and obvious. Look for her — she is the one who is still wearing the micro-mini skirt, the backless shirt, and the six-inch heels. It’s Sunday morning but she doesn’t look like she is heading for church. No, those are the same clothes that she wore to the bar last night in an attempt to look attractive to the opposite sex. And it seems to have worked because she appears to have spent the night somewhere besides home.

Although this phenomenon existed when I was in college, I was unaware of it. Perhaps it was less obvious because my undergraduate education took place in a town that did not have much of a vibrant night life and the student body was widely dispersed through town. I was first told of this when I taught at a large northeastern university while studying for my doctorate. My students told me that it was common for people to mercilessly taunt women who returned to their homes in their clubbing attire, especially if they were returning home to the dorms. When I asked a colleague who had attended that university as an undergraduate about the walk of shame, he explained that he and his roommates would eat breakfast every Sunday at a restaurant located on a major thoroughfare on which students would likely be walking home or to the dorms and look for both men and women doing the walk of shame. For them it was breakfast and a show.

Although it has been discussed in the popular media, the walk of shame seems to have largely escaped scholarly scrutiny.¹ This essay considers how the descriptor “walk of shame” functions to discipline female sexual practice by reinforcing gender stereotypes and punishing women who transgress socially constructed norms. I examine how the term is used in popular culture and the norms that these uses prescribe. The language that we use to describe an action serves a normative function, especially when negatively valenced.

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As such, I conclude with a call for language strategies that redefine female sexual practice in a more positive way.

The Walk of Shame in Popular Culture

As S. I. Hayakawa observes, "The ignoring of contexts in any act of interpretation is at best a stupid practice";² thus it is useful to see how the term walk of shame functions in popular culture. Writing in *Cosmopolitan*, Sarah Morrison describes the walk of shame: "What makes those slinks back to safety so totally unbearable is that most of the time, all we're dressed in is our skimpiest manhunt ensembles and last night's makeup. Hell, we might as well be wearing a sign that says 'I just came from a sexy sleepover.'" American culture has a love/hate relationship with sexuality. We celebrate it, yet we keep it hidden and taboo. The walk of shame transgresses these norms and provides observers with a sexuality that is at once *too* manifest. Knowledge of the woman's sexual experience can no longer be denied by the observer; everyone recognizes what her appearance reveals of her actions from the night before. As Laura Baron notes, "Everyone knows black, patent leather stilettos, jeans, and sequins isn't a morning jogging outfit."⁴

Gina B. provides this account of the walk of shame:

I encountered my first Walk-of-Shamer in college. My suitemate, Miss Bedhead, crept in at 6:30 A.M. looking like she'd been run over by a truck. Her revealing party clothes that were sexy at midnight would've gotten her arrested for streetwalking in the daylight. The back of her bob was sticking straight up. Her lipstick was smeared all over her chin, and a crusty trail of drool seemed indelibly etched across her cheek. After she took a long shower and several painkillers, we dragged Miss Bedhead to breakfast, where she inhaled an abundance of coffee and absorbent carbs. She didn't have much to say, except: "I can't believe I hooked up with him!!" Personally, I had no problem with the hookup — I couldn't believe she actually walked around on campus looking like that.⁵

This account exposes two very different kinds of concerns. On the one hand, Miss Bedhead expresses remorse over an unplanned one night stand. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied that alcohol played a major role in this encounter. Miss Bedhead may have other concerns on her mind as well if the sex was unprotected. A study by Karen Ingersoll *et al.* notes that college aged women often tend to use contraception ineffectively and that "combining binge drinking or regular

drinking with using contraception ineffectively results in the risk of alcohol exposed pregnancy (AEP)⁶. Women who have drunken, unprotected sex may also face other physical and psychological consequences, such as contracting sexually transmitted diseases, possible change in one's reputation, or an altered relationship with the sexual partner⁷. Women who have drunk too much alcohol may also find themselves the victims of unwanted sexual contact,⁸ thus Miss Bedhead may not have even given consent. The author, on the other hand, is concerned with the fact that her suitemate presented herself on campus in such a way that she looked like an abused prostitute. In short, the author considered the larger community of those who may see her suitemate and judge her by that appearance. The sexual encounter would be known by relatively few individuals; when one walks about campus advertising the encounter, it may be known by many more (although much less likely at 6:30 A.M.).

The walk of shame has become such a part of popular culture that there is even a product devoted to making the walk of shame more tolerable. Urban Aid offers the "Shame on You Kit," which includes a toothbrush and toothpaste, a one-size-fits-all thong, three condoms, one "emergency" phone card, a packet of pain reliever and a leave-behind note⁹. That these kits are geared only to women is telling. Urban Aid does not have a male version, although this may simply be consistent with their motto, "just what a girl might need." But making the walk of shame a female problem only reinforces masculine values. Anthony Clare notes that the ideal female partner for the typical man is "constantly available, forever lubricated, ever ready, in a state of perpetual desire but immediately dispensable on completion of the act."¹⁰ A woman who quietly gathers her things upon waking up and slips out into the dawn as the man continues to slumber becomes invisible, an alcohol-induced wet dream. She provides sex and disappears without a trace. In this action, she attains — if not the constantly available, lubricated, and ready components — the dispensable component of the formula of male sexual desire. As such, the walk of shame reinscribes already existing double standards concerning male and female sexualities and negates female sexual desire.

The Walk of Shame as Normative

Dan Hahn and Robert Ivie (1988) write, "Naming a situation . . . discloses our attitude toward it, and that disclosure, in turn, circumscribes our expectations, observations and responses."¹¹ It is illustrative that the operative term in the walk of shame is "shame." Some have argued that the notion of shame itself seems bound up in the experience of being female. William Miller notes that humiliation is "richly gendered as feminine,"¹² and Sigmund Freud declares that shame is "a feminine characteristic par excellence," attributing it to "concealment of genital deficiency."¹³

This is especially so in the case of relationships; Jennifer Manion writes, "The situations about which women are most prone to feeling shame are those of a decidedly moral nature, namely those related to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships."¹⁴

The notion of the walk of shame as inherently shameful reveals much about our society's conceptualization of feminine sexuality. Allan Brooks explains that "the value of general semantics is that it can examine issues dispassionately, regardless of their substantive content."¹⁵ Therefore, let us evaluate the walk of shame in terms of lower levels of abstraction. The behavior in question is as follows. An attractively dressed woman walks home in the morning. She may or may not have spent the night with a person with whom she had sex; we really have no way of knowing. The shame comes in the implication; here we see the biblical imperative to "abstain from all appearance of evil."¹⁶ Thus, even if the woman did not engage in a sexual encounter, the walk of shame gives the appearance that she has.

Even if the woman in question had participated in a sexual encounter the night before, the question of why this act would be considered shameful remains. Here the double standards of female/male sexuality are implied, standards that are learned from an early age and reinforced through discursive practices. Chambers, Tincknell, and Van Loon found that "adolescent boys reinforced the sexual double standard in which girls who 'slept around' were sluts, whereas no equivalent terms were used for boys," and that the fourteen-year-old boys in their study were "invested in the virgin/slut dichotomy to define and police the boundaries of what they regarded as a legitimate, passive femininity."¹⁷ They also found that adolescent girls took part in verbally policing other girls' sexuality through terms such as "slut."¹⁸ It should come as no surprise that girls participate in reinscribing socially accepted, largely masculine views of sexuality. Young women are constantly barraged with prescriptive views of feminine sexuality. Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun note that "adolescents' magazines teach girls how to become heterosexually 'feminine,' and women's magazines advise on how femininity should be moulded, sexualised, and practiced as one gets older."¹⁹ In their study of women's magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Cleo*, which presumably celebrate the sexually liberated woman, Farvid and Braun found that "women were not constructed as 'inherently' sexual in the way that men were. Rather, female sexuality was (implicitly) constructed as 'catching up' to (an ever present and pre-existent) male sexuality, which ostensibly constitutes 'real' sexuality."²⁰ Perhaps this is one reason why men are not as severely sanctioned in the walk of shame. Men need not negotiate the virgin/whore paradox; rather, they must contend with a norm of hypersexuality. When promiscuity and a constantly ready and willing erection are the tokens of masculinity, not acting on sexual impulses would be shameful.

The shame in the walk of shame comes not only from the notion of female sexuality, but from the woman's indulgence in random, presumably hedonistic, anonymous sex. Women are taught that they should want relationships rather than anonymous sex. Shannon Gilmartin notes that "'Hook ups,' or casual sexual interactions that are familiar to many undergraduates today (Paul & Hayes, 2002), leave some women feeling awkward and disappointed (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), feelings no doubt engendered by the 'proper' code of feminine conduct (women are not supposed to act on their desire, especially outside of a romantic relationship)."²¹ Such beliefs are reinforced in popular media. In their study of women's magazines, Farvid and Braun note that the message reinforced is that "men need sex, and women, although now 'sexual,' still need/want relationships with men."²² In practice, Gilmartin found in her study of college women that "By the end of their sophomore year, women spoke of sexual activity as something that neither led to nor went hand in hand with romance. Women no longer described physical intimacy as a means to emotional closeness . . . physical intimacy could sustain a relationship in its own right."²³ These women chose a strategy of disassociation in order to cope with behaviors that were out of sync with socially prescribed norms of femininity. Erving Goffman writes, "Most important of all, the very notion of shameful differences assumes a similarity in regard to crucial beliefs, those regarding identity."²⁴ Women have been socialized into a shared understanding of what constitutes proper feminine sexuality and thus recognize the walk of shame as evidence of transgressing these norms, of being a "bad girl."

Sexuality is performative and the walk of shame is one way that sexual roles are revealed. Goffman states that for each role there is a self-image, and that "a self, then, virtually awaits the individual entering a position; [she] need only conform to the pressures on [her] and [she] will find a me ready-made for [her]."²⁵ Such roles are defined by the constant interplay between society and the individual. As the individual internalizes these beliefs, values, and actions of a particular role, they become his or her own beliefs, values, and actions. As such, the socially constructed nature of these ideals becomes transparent to the individual. Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson explain that because our view of the world is transparent, in order to change our view we must do so from a higher level of abstraction, but that this level of abstraction "seems to be very close to the limits of the human mind and awareness at this level is rarely, if ever, present."²⁶ This is why the breaking down of abstraction is often the first step in understanding how these norms and values come into being and remain in force.

By defining it as shameful, the walk of shame negates feminine sexual desire by punishing women who transgress societal norms. But women are always and already caught in a paradox—they are expected to be sexy and sensual, yet when

they act on these societal imperatives, they are ridiculed. This reinforces the idea that women are meant to be objects of desire, yet they are not able to act on their own desires. Media messages teach girls that adolescent sexuality is acceptable, even desirable, thus they learn early on that they should be sexual beings.²⁷ Yet Gilmartin notes that “if women admitted to ‘caring’ about sexual intimacy or ‘needing’ sex or being sexually curious, they forfeited their claims to femininity, ergo their carefully put disinterest.”²⁸ A woman must choose to be sexual or feminine — she cannot have both. The walk of shame tacitly acknowledges that women have sex but punishes those who do so openly. Discretion allows women to maintain the paradox of sexy, yet virginal — and discretion is crucial in the walk of shame. Léon Wurmser argues that the “goal of hiding as part of the shame affect certainly serves to prevent further exposure and, with that, further rejection, but it also atones for the exposure that has already occurred.”²⁹

Wendell Johnson states, “We tend to regard as maladjustment any form of sexual behavior that does not conform to the accepted moral code.”³⁰ This moral code is a product of the language that we use to describe particular sexual practices. Notions of how men and women should behave sexually are often taken for granted because, as Judith Butler observes, “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.”³¹ Embedded within the notion of the walk of shame exists a prescription for female sexuality. For women, the act of seeking pleasure for its own sake — especially in the form of sexual activity — is shameful. It is not the sexual act itself or walking home alone that is considered shameful. Rather, it is the inference we make concerning the behavior. Sex between married partners is sanctioned by society and even encouraged for the propagation of the species or the nation, but promiscuity is frowned upon. We cast judgment upon the behavior with a knowing wink, assuming that we know what the woman was doing the night before. But perhaps we protest too much. Kenneth Burke notes that “when the attacker chooses for himself the object of attack, it is usually his blood brother; the debunker is much closer to the debunked than others are.”³² The woman becomes a scapegoat for the sexual sins of all who see her. Albert Bandura suggests that people engage in “advantageous comparison,” justifying their own transgressions by comparing them to those of others.³³ Thus the walk of shame may be a mechanism by which others can revel in the belief that the inadequacies of another surpass one’s own.

Strategies for Resistance

Hayakawa notes that “the first steps in sex education, whether among adults or in schools, are usually entirely linguistic.”³⁴ The term walk of shame is one such term of sexual education. But just as societal norms are created through language

and action, they can be dismantled through language and action. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that "sexuality and nutrition are channeled in specific directions socially rather than biologically, a channeling that not only imposes limits upon these activities, but directly affects organismic functions. . . . The social channeling of activity is the essence of institutionalization, which is the foundation for the social construction of reality."³⁵ Seemingly mundane actions may have far reaching effects. At the most basic level, men and women should resist the urge to use terms such as "the walk of shame." Feminist scholars have described how language affects women's self image, especially where it concerns their sexuality.³⁶ Victoria Pitts writes, "Reclaiming or resistance ideology implies that social inscriptions on the body can be rewritten, and the body—especially the female genitals and breasts—can be reclaimed."³⁷ Women can each alter their own world, and those of others, as they redefine practices and elements related to sexuality and gender roles.

Education and attitude shifts are other ways that women and girls can potentially escape the paradox of feminine sexuality that is defined as being sexual while simultaneously being not sexual. Fiona Stewart found that "young women can successfully resist traditional modes of femininity and that this is more likely when they are similarly critical of the status quo of hegemonic or institutional heterosexuality."³⁸ It is not enough to play the game or not play the game—women must begin questioning the rules of a game established on masculine-based sexual norms. Such questioning can lead to a greater understanding of both male and female sexuality. However, such actions must not be solely the responsibility of women—men must also take an active part in tearing down sexual double standards.

Michel Foucault explains that "liberty is a practice."³⁹ If women and men are both to be emancipated from the current norms of sexuality, both must work together to eliminate double standards and work toward equality for the sexes. Men and women must question the norms to which both women and men are held, but this is not enough; such questioning must be combined with actions. Norms are held in place not by a nebulous system, but by each of us. In his study of self managed teams, James Barker describes the idea of concertive control, a system in which each member of the organization polices each other: "In concertive control, then, the necessary social rules that constitute meaning and sanction modes of social conduct become manifest through the collaborative interactions of the organization's members. Workers in a concertive organization create the meanings that, in turn, structure the system of their own control."⁴⁰ This idea of concertive control can be extended to society in general. In order to change these socially constructed meanings, men and women must change their interactions. The walk of shame may seem an inconsequential matter but linguistic practices that work to police female sexual behavior in this way are links in the chain of female oppression. These chains can—and should—be

broken through critical evaluation of sexual norms and a redefinition of female and male sexual behavior. But before we can act, we must first begin with how we think about these norms—in short, we must begin with the very words we use to define ourselves, our actions, others, and our relationships. As Johnson writes, “When wisdom comes, as very occasionally it does, it reveals itself in the wry smile with which we admit that the tracks we follow are the tracks that we ourselves have made.”⁴¹

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