

High-status co-eds use 'slut discourse' to assert class advantage

May 28 2014

A new study suggests that high-status female college students employ "slut discourse"—defining their styles of femininity and approaches to sexuality as classy rather than trashy or slutty—to assert class advantage and put themselves in a position where they can enjoy sexual exploration with few social consequences.

"Viewing women only as victims of men's sexual dominance fails to hold women accountable for the roles they play in reproducing social inequalities," said lead author Elizabeth A. Armstrong, an associate professor of sociology and organizational studies at the University of Michigan. "By engaging in 'slut-shaming'—the practice of maligning women for presumed sexual activity—women at the top create more space for their own sexual experimentation, at the cost of women at the bottom of social hierarchies."

Titled, "'Good Girls': Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus," the longitudinal ethnographic and interview study, which appears in the June issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly*, considers a cohort of 53 women (51 freshmen and two sophomores) who lived on the same college dorm floor in the 2004-2005 academic year at a large, moderately selective university in the Midwest. As part of their analysis, Armstrong and her co-authors supplemented data on cohort members accumulated over the course of their college careers with data from individual and group interviews with other female students.

"Fear of being judged often constrains women's sexual

experimentation," Armstrong said. "However, we found that high-status women worried less than low-status women about being judged negatively. High-status women conveniently defined the criteria of judgment among women in ways that defined the sorts of sexual exploration they sought as acceptable."

According to Armstrong, participation in the Greek party scene was the most widely accepted signal of peer status on campus, and status fell largely along economic lines as high-status women were primarily from upper and middle class backgrounds while low-status women were from lower-middle-class and working-class backgrounds.

"Surprisingly, women who engaged in less sexual activity were more likely to be publicly labeled a 'slut' than women who engaged in more sexual activity," Armstrong said. "This finding made little sense until we realized that college women also used the term as a way to police class boundaries. High-status women, who were from affluent families, defined themselves as classy compared to other women whom they viewed as trashy or slutty. Less affluent women—and others excluded from high-status circles—equated 'sluttiness' with exclusivity, materialism, and shallowness."

When low-status women attempted to participate in high-status social worlds by attempting to befriend and go out to parties and other social events with high-status women, they risked public humiliation.

"One of the ways that high-status women signaled to those trying to break in to their social groups that they did not fit in was by engaging in public 'slut-shaming,'" Armstrong said. "This often took the form of calling other women out for their dress or deportment, as a way of making it clear that they did not fit in with the high-status group."

Low-status female college students also engaged in "slut discourse" in an

effort to level differences between them and their high-status peers, but this behavior had little impact. "High-status women barely recognized the existence of those they considered low-status," Armstrong said.

In terms of the study's policy implications, Armstrong said it is important to recognize that "slut-shaming" is a form of bullying. "In a few recent cases, 'slut-shaming' has played a role in the suicides of girls and young women," Armstrong said. "We hope that our findings are constructively used in campaigns against bullying. We suspect that these campaigns are more likely to be successful if they help young people arrive at deeper understandings of the social processes involved in this type of bullying."

Armstrong's co-authors were Laura T. Hamilton, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California-Merced; Elizabeth M. Armstrong, a doctoral candidate in social work and sociology at the University of Michigan; and J. Lotus Seeley, a doctoral candidate in women's studies and sociology at the University of Michigan.

Provided by American Sociological Association

Citation: High-status co-eds use 'slut discourse' to assert class advantage (2014, May 28)
retrieved 9 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-05-high-status-co-eds-slut-discourse-assert.html>

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