

Sex-Positive Feminism and Related Topics

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Course Description

This micro seminar is all about sex-positive feminism. Sex-positive feminists center dialogue around the idea that people have full autonomy over their sexuality and what they do with their bodies. They believe all sexual decisions are okay as long as they are safe and consensual. Sex-positive feminists acknowledge complicated relationships with sex and intersectionality and the power dynamics that stem from the objectification and commodification of women's bodies in our patriarchal society (Jani). There will be an introduction day centering on sex-positive feminism and bodily autonomy, a day to focus on sex work and workers, another to focus on queering sex, another on the misconceptions surrounding people with disabilities' access to and participation in sexual acts, the next to focus on sex education's flaws, and the last will be on BDSM and kink practices. This course will be for mid-level to advanced WGSS and other related-major students at universities as the primary texts can be quite academically dense and unfortunately it was difficult to find more accessible texts that address the intended topics. Because of this, something the class will discuss will be that the students and their peers need to be some of the people to make this information increasingly publicly accessible and less filled with academic jargon. I selected texts by reading through them myself to see if their content either blatantly met or lacked the informational content that I wanted to include in the microseminar. I checked the authors' backgrounds and identities before deciding on a text. This was in order to do my best to include a diverse range of authors and to include BIPOC and queer voices to speak for their own communities.

Course Goals

Students who complete this course successfully will be able to answer:

- What are the origins of sex-positive feminism? Where is it today and do we think it has progressed in a positive and productive manner?

- Why is sex work so stigmatized and what institutions perpetuate this stigmatization further?
- How does the infantilization of disabled people harm them and limit our perception of them as capable, adult persons capable of sexual desires and acts?
- How do able-bodied peoples' perception of disabled people influence what the majority of society believes about what is and isn't acceptable sex?
- Where does sex education go wrong? How do we want institutions to change? Also, where does it go right, and what programs can be modeled to help failing ones?
- What beliefs are the biases and misunderstandings around BDSM and kink practices centered around? (heteronormativity, charmed circle, homophobia, power-dynamics, etc)

Course Schedule

Introduction to Sex-Positive Feminism

o Texts/Resources:

- *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* by Gayle Rubin
- *Adventures with the "Plastic Man": Sex Toys, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Politics of Women's Sexual Pleasure* by Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank
- *Beyond Barnard: Feminism, Liberalism and the Sex Wars* by Lorna Bracewell
 - "Introduction" Pages 7-10
 - Chapter 4 "Sex Radical Feminism and Liberalism" page 119-top of 136
 - Pages 142-147 on the ACLU's report on sexually-oriented speech under the First Amendment
 - "Conclusion" on pages 152-top of 156

o Today's Goals/Explanation of Class:

Leading sex-radical feminist theorist Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex* was a huge contribution to sex-radical feminist theory and provides students with a foundational basis to utilize for their

next couple of classes. Both I and queer scholars much more knowledgeable than I am see this text as a great basis to start students at when talking about sex-positive feminism. I really appreciate that it hits so many topics; such as sexuality in many cultures, the history of sex work, sex laws (age of consent, religion and marriage, pornography), discussion of feminist antipornography ideologies, and sexual liberation. I would use the Charmed Circle as a key point of discussion both in this class as well as for the rest of the semester to connect subjects and in order to see the recurring themes such as heteronormative ideals, patriarchal ideals, colonialist mindsets, etc. *Plastic Man* provides insight into the differences in perception in queer and straight people's sex lives and differing sex toy stigmas in ways students may not have heard about before. *Beyond Barnard* sets up the 1982 conference at Barnard College called "The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality" which started the "sex wars". It also addresses the overlaps and conflicts certain sides had with liberalism at the time. Judith Butler attended this conference and said "the clear purpose of the Diary – and of the Barnard conference– is to dislodge the anti-pornography movement as the one and only feminist discourse on sex" (Butler 1982).

I would ask questions such as:

- "Where do we see conflicting aspects of the Charmed Circle in daily life and who is that judgement aimed at/coming from?"
- "Who lead both sides of the "sex wars?"
- "What are the main ideas in Rubin's *Thinking Sex*, and are these ideas still very relevant today, or do parts of them need to be altered to adjust what we would now consider sex-positive feminism?"

Sex work and workers

o Texts/Resources:

- *Sex Wars Revisited: A Rhetorical Economy of Sex Industry Opposition* by Alison Phillips
- *The Feminist Ethic of Care: Mothering Among Sex Workers in Mumbai* by Rebecca J. McCloskey, Sharvari Karandikar, Rebecca Reno, and Megan Espan~a
- *Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research* by Jacqueline Comte

o Today's Goals/Explanation of Class:

To gain new perspectives and insights into various aspects of sex work and sex workers' lives. To see what past and current scholars have to say about these topics in relation to feminism. The class will work to put these articles or at least parts of them through a sex-positive feminist lens. All of the texts are recent, published within the last eight years. This is really important in order to get up to date information that considers current events and developments in legislation or a country's laws around sex work. *Sex Wars Revisited* allows readers to get a basic understanding of what the sex wars were and a couple of the main groups involved in them. *Decriminalization of Sex Work* excellently explains the differences and values of the three main feminist discourses around sex work(ers): abolitionism, sex-positive feminism, and decriminalization. This will be great for students new to the subject to read and use as a basis of thought and to examine intersections of different opinions; all who name themselves feminist. *The Feminist Ethic of Care: Mothering Among Sex Workers in Mumbai* focuses primarily on why sex workers work in their field and their reasons for continuing in it, due to a deep need to care for their children and other family members. It offers personal quotes that are important to read in order to connect with the research subjects.

Students will aim to answer questions such as:

- “How does perspective on sex workers change based on location?”
- “What common judgments and assumptions are made about sex work and where do these come from/who is voicing them? Are any/all of them institutions?”
- “Where do we see sex work and similar practices like OnlyFans and pornography sites in the Charmed Circle?”
- “How do we see this work being de-stigmatized today and what can we do to help?”

Queering Sex and Examining Heterosexual Sex Practices

o Texts/Resources:

- *Power and Pleasure : Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Heterosexual Sex* by Lauren Stewart
 - First “Introduction” Section
 - 13-top of 18 “Homophobia” and “Gender & Homophobia” sections
 - Page 50 “Gender Confusion and Cultural Intelligibility”
 - 78 Discussion: “Pegging is Risky Business”
 - Page 92, Section 5 “I’m Not Homophobic, but...”
- C. Jacob Hale - *Leatherdyke boys*

o Today’s Goals/Explanation of Class:

This class will focus on how people do and can “queer” sex and sex practices to destigmatize and destabilize them from the heteronormative, patriarchal, and colonial contexts they exist in in the US today. *Leatherdyke Boys* delves into genderplay, gender queering, and queering sex. In a section from the text, “we can see that a question that presupposes that a person has a unitary gender status across cultures with varying gender categories is conceptually misguided... we might do well to speak of a person’s gendered status in a given cultural location, at a given time, and for a given purpose” (232). *Power and Pleasure : Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Heterosexual Sex* primarily focuses on the taboos and attitudes around pegging, but also offers a view into many other aspects of the heteronormativity and homophobia found in heterosexual sex and includes a section on some female partners’ reactions to being asked to peg their partners. Through this homophobia is finally addressed through women too, at least in the context of pegging, and that acknowledgement and small study opens up new avenues for students to critically examine who “can be” homophobic, and in what ways that homophobia can differ or be constant in various genders.

Questions asked will be:

- “Where, if at all, do we see these types of sex on the Charmed Circle?”

- “What are the central aspects of heteronormativity that permeate non-heterosexual sex acts?”
- “What does it mean to queer sex?”
- “What does it mean to destabilize normative sex ideals and practices and how can this be done?”

Addressing Disability Stigma

o Texts/Resources:

- <https://tufts.kanopy.com/video/sins-invalid-unashamed-claim-beauty>
- *Sex and Disability*, co-edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow
 - Introduction
 - Ch. 1 “A Sexual Culture for Disabled People”
 - Ch. 9 “Normate Sex and its Discontents”
 - Ch. 14 “Is Sex Disability: Queer theory and the Disability Drive”

o Today’s Goals/Explanation of Class:

This class is all about learning about and addressing stigma around disabled sex. The *Sins Invalid* video has incredibly impactful visual displays and performance as well as audio that makes an enormous impact on the viewer. It addresses the stigma that people with disabilities cannot or do not want to engage in sexual acts. It also emphasizes that non-normative sex practices are not wrong. *Sex and Disability* discusses many aspects of the stigma around disabled sex and digs into a couple people’s personal narratives. It works well as an intro to several topics within the realm of sex and disability, while also being able to be academically taken apart, examined, and analyzed by higher level students. I hope the students learn that as long as sex is safe and consensual it shouldn’t be stigmatized or disputed because everyone deserves bodily autonomy and normalized sex ideals are not necessarily the correct ones, nor are the only bodies capable of having sex able-bodied ones.

Questions asked will be:

- “Where, if at all, do we see these types of sex on the Charmed Circle?”

- “Who’s job is it to destigmatize non-normalized sex?”
- “What tones, actions, words, etc, were used in *Sins Invalid* in an impactful way that destabilize normative notions of sex?”

Sex Education

o Texts/Resources:

- *Queering Sex Education: Rural Sex Educators' Perceptions of Queer Issues* by Jennifer M. DeCoste
 - 12-26 (Intro)
 - 27-33 (section of “Normative Experience of Sex Education”)
 - 99-mid 104 (“The Data”)
 - 114-142 (“Emerging Themes”)
 - 152-167 (“Answering my Research Questions”)
 - 171-174 (Limitations of the Study)
- *What's missing? Anti-Racist Sex Education!* by Amanda Whitten & Christabelle Sethna
- *What's Missing?: Discourses of Gender and Sexuality in Federally-Funded Sex Education* by Leah Beth Curran
 - Introduction
 - Chapter 4 “Missing Positivity”
 - Chapter 6 “Missing Mutuality”
 - Chapter 8 “Missing Equity”

o Today’s Goals/Explanation of Class:

Learning about sex education concerns from multiple perspectives, and using that knowledge to propose and discuss important changes to sex education in the US. *Queering Sex Education* is great because it demonstrates critical thinking about queerness in sex education, addresses issues of continuity through programs, and highlights rural voices that are frequently unheard. *What's missing? Anti-Racist Sex Education!* offers a great argument to students on what changes are needed in order to being to make anti-racist changes to sex education, from an

author of color in Canada, critiquing her own district as well as others, and their performative actions in recent years. *What's Missing?: Discourses of Gender and Sexuality in Federally-Funded Sex Education* provides thought-provoking topics students can use as a jumping off point for discussions, including gender bias and differentiated sex education information based on gender, religious bias in sex education, homophobia and erasure, and denial of the possibility and importance of female pleasure. It also has really interesting and relatively current policy implications at the end of each chapter which will be very useful to start in class discussions on action to take to improve sex education curriculum.

Questions to propose to students from this class include:

- “What practices in your own sex education did you like, which did you not?”
- “What barriers are in place of changing sex education curriculum?”
- “Can we see aspects of missing links in sex education in *Thinking Sex*, such as patriarchal standards/ideals?”
- “How does access to sex education on the internet and through social media change and help or hurt adolescents?”

BDSM and Kink Practices

o Texts/Resources:

- *Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of The Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities* by Robin Bauer
- *Exploring Women's, Trans, and Queer BDSM Subcultures* by Brandy Simula
- *BDSM Role Fluidity: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Investigating Switches Within Dominant/Submissive Binaries* by Katherine Martinez

o Today's Goals/Explanation of Class:

This class' aim is to destigmatize and investigate kink/BDSM practices inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community. This includes looking into the patriarchal, colonial, heteronormative influences on stigma and perceptions of these practices. It also includes the ways in which BDSM practices advocate for consent in much stronger ways than typical heteronormative

practices do and more than sex education teaches. *Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of The Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities* is a great text for these higher level students to study because it contains both academic theory as well as more basic knowledge in order to reach its conclusion, and Bauer frequently acknowledges his privileges and the limitations of the study. *Exploring Women's, Trans, and Queer BDSM Subcultures* is a quite short overview of another of Robin Bauer's pieces and helps support the previously mentioned text. *BDSM Role Fluidity: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Investigating Switches Within Dominant/Submissive Binaries* has notions of accidental gender-conformity that I would like students to challenge and examine through their lens of choice in order to further analyze the results of the study and its assumptions.

Questions asked will be:

- “Which of these themes or topics do we see in the Charmed Circle? Which are excluded altogether?”
- “Where have we seen discourses on consent or the lack of them in our past classes?”
- “How is consent positioned in the BDSM community and how does it differ from consent in heteronormative sex?”
- “How does BDSM play allow LGBTQ+ people to experiment in different identities and how is this influential today?”
- Activity: create your own LGBTQ+ Charmed Circle or something similar in theme such as a Charmed Circle for BDSM practice, or an updated, present-day one on stigmatized sex based on the idea that LGBTQ+ folks are more widely accepted and acceptable sex practice have shifted in recent years

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