
SEX EDUCATION, SEXUAL LABOR, AND EDUCATION: THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL PEDAGOGIES

Caitlin Howlett
Indiana University

This paper interrogates education's relationship to labor through a consideration of sex education's relationship to sexual labor. Beginning with a basic question—why does sex education exist as a federally funded project?—I examine sex education's relationship to normativity and sexual labor throughout its history as a federally funded program. Doing so reveals at least three ways sex education has been and is connected to sexual labor: by its relationship to prostitution and the stigmatization of sex workers, particularly non-white, female sex workers; by promoting marriage, as itself a kind of sexual labor; and by reducing sexuality to a commodity, thus producing sexual workers and consumers. At stake, then, is the possibility of taking seriously the significance of sexual labor to the stories we tell about sex education, the stories sex education tells about human value, and the possibility of imagining a future of sex education that promotes more nuanced conversations about the relationship between work, labor, sexuality and education beyond the dehumanizing influence of neoliberalism.

In order to explore the purpose of sex education as a federally funded program, and to understand its relationship to labor, I will utilize the work of queer of color scholar Sara Ahmed. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed offers a framework for exploring normativity and oppression through a consideration of orientation. She argues that normativity can be understood through an analysis of the way idealized social and political objects can orient bodies and spaces to create normative lines for humans to follow. Objects are conceived of here as ways of being, or identities, the attainment of which promise a person recognition, inclusion, or social worth.¹ In order to attain them, however, one's behavior and thought must be oriented toward that object. This is the structure of normativity: objects are made available to certain people as products of repeated historical investment in them as valuable and worthwhile to pursue, and failing to orient oneself toward such a valued object often results in being open to the moral judgment of others as somehow inadequate.² A hierarchy of human value is thus established, wherein those who maintain orientation are seen as better and more valuable, and those who fail most are seen as least valuable, within the context of the object's parameters.

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 44 and 49.

In order to sustain collective orientation, though, Ahmed shows how certain dominant discourses, institutions, and polices are often put in place or repeatedly invested in, either formally or informally, to enact what she calls “straightening.” Straightening devices are those socially, politically and culturally reinforced ways of being that ensure the reproduction of normative social forms. These devices require the “repetition of actions” such that, finally, “our body takes the shape of this repetition.”³ For example, speaking of compulsory heterosexuality as a normative object, Ahmed shows how the requirements needed for proper orientation dictate much of socially acceptable behavior across the Western world. However, insofar as there have always been people for whom such orientations are experienced as unnatural or undesirable, particularly queer people, there exist many straightening devices that work to hold compulsory heterosexuality in place as a valued normative object, and to straighten people towards it.

As this example suggests, the process of straightening is often a violent one. Compulsory heterosexuality, Ahmed argues, causes those who resist its demands to experience violence in “the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, the ‘straightening devices’ and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms.”⁴ Later, speaking of straightening devices that serve racism, she argues that the use of hostile gazes, requirements of submission, restricted mobility, and objectification, are all dehumanizing experiences that ought to be read as violence.⁵ Straightening devices therefore establish a “political economy that is distributed unevenly between others,” maintaining the hierarchy of human value demanded by the object, and, further, normalizing these forms of violence as necessary to the process.⁶

While Ahmed’s analysis is primarily ethical and political, I argue that this framework has clear epistemological implications. Specifically, such processes of normativity establish hierarchies of human value and thus enact violence in large part through the assertion of hierarchies of knowledge, or epistemological hierarchies. Ahmed is clear that objects and orientations structure thought and demand the privileging of certain logics and ways of knowing, suggesting that part of the way value judgments are made is through claims about what counts as knowledge. Therefore, part of the act of straightening is aligning the subject’s thought with the ways of knowing that preserve the places of idealized objects, which allows the subject to be deemed rational, intelligent, and a trustworthy knower. For example, those properly oriented and closest to the achievement of compulsory heterosexuality are often considered more rational knowledge producers by a variety of institutions, and

³ Ibid., 92.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Ibid., 113–39.

⁶ Ibid., 140.

thus most justifiably deserving of the rights and privileges offered by compulsory heterosexuality, with the opposite being true that those most resistant and defiant are deemed most irrational. In this way, epistemological hierarchies are at work in the normative process of orientation, and in justifying the use of straightening devices. Understanding the ways that epistemological assumptions underlie the political and ethical dehumanization of the prostitute opens up new questions about the future of sex education, particularly regarding its relationship to the very idea of education. What, then, do we learn about the purpose of sex education when we explore its history through this framework of orientation and straightening?

SEX EDUCATION AND THE PROSTITUTE

The first thing we learn about the purpose of sex education through this framework is also its first relationship to sexual labor. While sex education had been a topic for decades before the federal government stepped in with something to be called “sex education,” it was not until World War I, when the rates of venereal disease were climbing at such drastic rates among soldiers, that it became considered a matter of national and public health, sparking federal investment in the project.⁷ As a result, in 1917, the Commission of Training Camp Activities was created, made up of branches of the War and Navy Departments. However, if we look closely at the federal government’s interest in sex education, we see that it was not only disease that was the problem, but a particular form of labor.

In speaking about the Commission, its new Chairman, Raymond Fosdick, writes that American soldiers in their training camps are surrounded by a particular kind of “evil,” prostitution.⁸ This group of laborers, Fosdick argues, threatens the “rational” work of soldiers and their becoming good citizens, fathers, husbands, and men: “While we are developing the work inside the camps because it is necessary to keep the men rational, it is also necessary to establish a rational environment in the communities near the camp.”⁹ President Woodrow Wilson lent his support to the Commission, addressing the need for sex education in a “Special Statement” in the introduction to an early manual on sex education, *Keeping Our Fighters Fit for War and After*. He asserts, “The Federal Government has pledged its word that . . . the men committed to its charge will be returned to the homes and communities that so generously gave them with no

⁷ Alexandra Lord, *Condom Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 18.

⁸ Raymond B. Fosdick, “The Commission on Training Camp Activities,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 7, no. 4 (February 1918): 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

scars except those won in honorable conflict.”¹⁰ This is a direct reference to prostitution, as it was the effects of prostitutes on their lives that threatened the soldiers’ honor. Sex education would help straighten them, orienting them away from prostitution and back towards their soldiering work, also preventing the disruption of their family lives caused by prostitution, and legitimizing the epistemological position of the soldiers and government.

This logic was also assumed by many in the medical and science industries, including Prince A. Morrow, leader of the American Social Hygiene Association, who overwhelmingly cites the prostitute as the person most responsible for the crisis sex education was meant to dissipate. In a publication from the *American Journal of Sociology*, he directly associates venereal disease with prostitution, and cites the social conditions that prostitution enables as in need of being cured just as much as those diseases. He further declares that the health of the nation is at stake if the prostitute and her “illegitimate sexual relations” that disrupt the American family are not dealt with.¹¹ Further, he blatantly asserts his own epistemological superiority, arguing that medical knowledge is the “most important department of human knowledge.”¹² This leads him to claim that, given her lack of such knowledge, the prostitute does not need, or does not deserve, sex education—she is central to the professed need for federally funded sex education, but, at the same time, dehumanized and excluded from that education, as it is “pure women,” the “innocent members of society,” and not “women of the streets” who should be and are capable of being educated alongside soldiers.¹³ If we return to the framework of orientation, then, sex education was envisioned as necessary for orienting American citizens away from the sexual labor of prostitution. And, if the purpose of sex education is to prevent the ignorance that allows for the spread of disease, we begin to see how the prostitute comes to stand in for that ignorance—in order for “general enlightenment,” “rationality,” and “the safeguarding of marriage from venereal infections”¹⁴ to be achieved, “efforts should be directed not to making prostitution safe, but to prevent the making of prostitutes.”¹⁵

However, we also begin to learn something about the more privileged, guiding object of sex education in these moments. If what is bad is being a prostitute, what is good becomes being a part of the American family, asserted here as sex education’s privileged object. Further, as Morrow’s work indicates, the stability of the American family depends upon the creation and maintenance

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson, “Special Statement,” in *Keeping Our Fighters Fit: For War and After*, Edward Frank Allen (New York: The Century Co., 1918), preceding the table of contents, par. 1.

¹¹ Prince A. Morrow, “Prophylaxis of Social Diseases,” in *American Journal of Sociology* 13, No. 1 (1907): 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

of a particular kind of woman: pure, ideally white, innocent, married, reproductive, and unscathed by the diseases her husband may or may not carry. The strength of the American family is thus held in place in this discourse through a particular notion of womanhood, arguably an additional object requiring sex education's straightening work. Not only must the prostitute be turned away from, then, but the federal government must also make efforts to orient human behavior toward the perpetuation of the white American family through the idealization of a particular view of female sexuality, and both are upheld by sex education.

We can therefore see how sex education emerges as a straightening device aimed at orienting American citizens away from becoming or participating in a certain kind of labor: sexual labor. To sell one's sex for money is to be seen as so horrible that one is excluded from any attempts to improve the situations in which prostitution is prevalent. The exclusion of the prostitute from the realm of legitimate behavior therefore depends upon a normative discourse about the relationship between work and sex. Finally, sex education is able to justify these claims about human life through the assertion of an epistemological hierarchy. To be a prostitute is to demonstrate oneself as so intellectually lacking and irrational as to be left out of the process of education completely. From the perspective of the object of marriage and family, prostitution is the most irrational project one could embark upon, a determination that allows for the exclusion of the prostitute from being treated as having human value. This allows us to understand sex education as constructed in direct opposition to the humanity of the prostitute and, as a result, to an entire class of laborers, therefore emerging as a violent straightening device that is epistemologically and ethically dependent upon sexual labor.

MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL LABOR

Within this history, then, lies the second argument: sex education's relationship to marriage suggests participation in sexual labor, historically and contemporarily. Sex education emerged as a straightening device to move Americans away from a particular form of sexual labor and towards another sexual relationship, thus marking its dependence on it. What is the relationship between sexual labor and the idealized object of marriage, then? We have good reason to understand marriage, historically and contemporarily, as an economic relationship. For example, as sex work scholar Elizabeth Bernstein has argued, from an economic or market perspective, sex work and prostitution have been central to the construction of marriage as the privileged economic unit of capitalism.¹⁶ Additionally, Gayle Rubin's work convincingly argues that prostitution and marriage belong on the same continuum of "exchanges of sex for money."¹⁷ Historian Stephanie Coontz has also carefully outlined the ways

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 116.

¹⁷ Gayle Rubin, *Deviations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 83.

in which contemporary discourses that assume marriage has always been about love and personal fulfillment do not cohere with much of human history. She notes, in fact, that “The primary functions of marriage through most of history were to acquire advantageous in-laws, to make trading alliances with other groups or to exchange partners in order to ensure peace, to distinguish legitimate heirs from illegitimate ones, and to expand the family labor force.”¹⁸ While she also details the many ways in which marriage has evolved over time, and has recently expanded in meaning to represent the possibility of “personal freedom and mutual commitment,” especially as those allowed legal access to it has expanded, she argues it remains deeply tied to the possibility of economic stability, making it increasingly more “optional” for women.¹⁹ In each case, the point is that marriage has always had a fundamental relationship to the exchange of female reproduction for money, and that capitalism has taken advantage of this, so much so that marriage certificates in America today are primarily economic documents, regardless of the participant’s own philosophical understanding of the relationship between love and marriage.

In the case of sex education, we can see how its early idealization of marriage reflects this. Part of the concern for the disruption of the American family caused by prostitution is about labor. It disrupts the ability of soldiers to provide for their families and the possible reproduction of the family. In this way, it also disrupts the reproductive labor expected of the married wife. As a result, sex education’s construction of marriage is directly connected to sexual labor. Part of sex education’s role as a straightening device is thus to orient people towards certain forms of sexual labor and away from others. If this is taken seriously, then, as we look at contemporary policies, the presence of this normative and epistemological hierarchy of sexual labor must be taken as a sign of the continued participation in sexual labor itself.

Each of the four major policies enacted to distribute national funds for sex education in schools in the past three decades, which began with Reagan’s inaugural Adolescent Family Life Act (1981/84), can be seen as maintaining this hierarchy, particularly in terms of its privileging of marriage. For instance, in AFLA, the rhetoric regarding how sex education is to combat the stated problem of increasing rates of children born out of wedlock revolves around the idealization of heteronormative marriage and family life as necessary for economic independence—sex education must assert the value of heteronormative marriage, and “strong family values and close family ties” as the best context for sex, as this is the only way to combat “higher risks of unemployment and welfare dependency.”²⁰ In the 1984 amendment to AFLA, the threat of unmarried mothers to the state and economy is reasserted, and it is

¹⁸ Stephanie Coontz, “Marriage is Not What it Seems,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 96, No. 1 (2016): 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. No. 97-35, 95 Stat. 579 (1981).

argued that there will be significant “cost to society in terms of public expenditures for health, social services, and public assistance, and the loss of what would have been future economic contributions of teen parents” if sexual activity isn’t postponed until marriage.²¹ Marriage maintains its status as an idealized space for balancing sex with economic stability, and women, particularly women of color, are overwhelmingly targeted as needing moral, economic, and intellectual straightening through sex education for this status to be solidified.

Title V of the Social Security Act of 1996 and the Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program, which first allotted funding for sex education in 2001, mark the infamous sharp turn towards abstinence education and further conflate family financial stability with, now more than ever before, the heteronormative married couple.²² In the Social Security Act, abstinence until marriage is articulated as the only way to maintain economic and national stability.²³ CBAE deepened the government’s commitment to abstinence, and thus to marriage, requiring all programs funded through it to adhere directly and completely to its definition of abstinence, or the abstaining from sex until marriage, in order to secure funding.²⁴ While both programs expired in 2010, Obama’s Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) re-funded programs for Title V’s abstinence education—and thus the commitment to an increasingly economic understanding of marriage—to up to the same amount that it funded the U.S.’s first federally funded comprehensive education program.²⁵

PREP, enacted as part of Obama’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2009, which is generally seen as a comprehensive and liberal approach to sex education, requires adolescents to be educated “comprehensively” about both abstinence and contraception.²⁶ It also asserts the need for accurate and age-appropriate information to be given to children, acknowledges students as potentially sexually active at the time they are in schools, and highlights the significance of cultural context to sexual activity.

²¹ The Adolescent Family Life Act, S. Rep. No. 98-496, at 4 (1984).

²² Separate Program for Abstinence Education, 42 U.S.C. § 710 (1996); and Marcela Howell, “The History of Federal Abstinence-Only Funding,” *Advocates for Youth*, updated 2007 by Marilyn Keefe, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/fshistoryabonly.pdf>.

²³ Separate Program for Abstinence Education.

²⁴ *Domestic Abstinence-Only Programs: Assessing the Evidence, hearing before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform*, 110th Cong. (April 23, 2008) (statement of Charles Keckner, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Full text at <http://www.hhs.gov/asl/testify/2008/04/t20080423a.html>.

²⁵ Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, H.R. Res. 3590, Sec. 2953, 111th Cong. (2010).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Each program funded is therefore required to address at least three of six “adulthood preparation subjects,” which, generally, are: healthy relationships, including friendship, marriage and family; adolescent development, accounting for “racial and ethnic diversity”; financial literacy; parent-child communication; educational, career, and financial success, including work-place productivity; and healthy life skills, with a focus on decision making and communication.²⁷ From the perspective of a concern for marriage and the traditional family, this program does not ultimately disrupt that idealization. Further, as discussed below, it can be seen as deepening the importance of normative sexual relationships—of which marriage is still the ultimate object—to one’s ability to reproduce in a way that does not disrupt one’s connection to the national economy, and, more basically, to being able to work and make money.

The goal of sex education, in each of its federally funded iterations, is therefore to maintain the heteronormative, monogamous, married couple as the privileged object, and the woman, often a racialized category best sexually limited in marriage, as central to the privileging of that object. This is structured over and against the life that sex education seeks to eradicate: one that is touched by disease, one that has within it the potential for pregnancy outside of marriage, one that disrupts the heteronormative family, one that is guided by desire and impulse against enlightenment notions of rationality, and one that undermines the raced and classed ideal of marriage. While she is not named, is there anyone who embodies this in the public imagination, historically or today, more than the prostitute? At the very least, there is no room for the life of the prostitute to be counted as legitimate, let alone human, in any of these discourses. In fact, it is still those for whom sexual behavior is directly used to reap economic benefits or stability who are stigmatized here. Not only, then, is sex education a continued site for the establishment of a hierarchy of labor, and a commitment to marriage as an idealized economic sexual relationship and form of labor. It must also be seen as doing so violently, through the straightening of behavior it demands from students, and the exclusion and dehumanization of those who stand to disrupt its very idealizations—all justified through claims of what counts as knowledge, information, intelligence, and, of course, education.

SEXUALITY AS A COMMODITY, AND THE LINGERING IMPORTANCE OF PROSTITUTION

Finally, these contemporary policies reveal the development of a third way in which sex education remains connected to sexual labor: by reducing sexual activity and behavior to a commodity, and students to sexual laborers, defining laboring in part through the ability to control sexual behavior. As contemporary policies assert clearly, part of the importance of sex education has become not just maintaining marriage as an idealized site of sexual labor, but of conceiving of sex and sexuality themselves in terms of economic exchange and

²⁷ Ibid.

the capacity to labor. We can read this increasingly neoliberal nature of the federal government's definition of its subjects in the policies discussed above.

Take AFLA: even in its discussion of the reasoning for beginning federal funding for such programs, the government's concern with the strength of the economy emerges. The problem is understood almost entirely in economic terms—economic consequences and rates of unemployment are the final threats of unbridled female sexuality.²⁸ PREP, too, despite its relationship to comprehensive education, returns us to Reagan-era use of the economy to justify control of one's family life and sexual activity. The view of the individual is thus increasingly grounded in an understanding of one's capacity to labor for profit and to participate in neoliberal norms of responsibility and independence. PREP, despite its broadening of the kinds of sexual lives that are legitimized, still only legitimizes sexuality and sex through an understanding of the individual as a rational capitalist consumer of, as Nancy Kendall has powerfully shown, both information and sex.²⁹ Sexuality remains, in the eyes of the federal government, something to be negotiated primarily in terms of its relationship to the economy and job market. In this way, subjects of sex education are straightened into sexual laborers—through entrenched ideals of heteronormative sexual behavior, they learn to view themselves primarily as laborers, where sex and sexuality exist as commodities, always ready to be marketed and exchanged in whatever way is most synchronic with profit, ideally through marriage.

What does the reduction of sex education to a commodity suggest about the original story about prostitution, then? In taking the historical role of prostitution seriously, we ought to inquire into her contemporary absence. First, if we return to a consideration of orientation, we can see how the original normative and epistemological structure of sex education remains intact: to be a prostitute, or to directly associate income or profit with sexual exchange, is still to be seen as so bad that her existence as a human or as a knowledge producer is all but impossible to address in schools today. In general, as both a straightening device and as one that continues to delegitimize entire ways of being in the world, sex education thus continues to enact violence. Secondly, though, keeping the prostitute in mind also exposes the deep contradictions and instability of sex education's assertion of the relationship between sexual behavior and one's capacity to labor. In the process of erasing the prostitute from consideration of what counts as legitimate human sexual behavior and knowledge, sex education has reaffirmed the value of sexuality primarily in terms of its relationship to labor, economic growth, and national profit, and students of this education in terms of their ability to act as knowledgeable sexual consumers.

²⁸ Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act.

²⁹ Nancy Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 226–27.

LOOKING AHEAD: QUESTIONING THE FUTURE OF SEX EDUCATION

From this perspective, we ought to question sex education's very existence. If we take this framework seriously, sex education reform will ultimately fail to confront sex education's violent normalization of human behavior if it does not address the views of human subjectivity, sexual labor, and epistemological groundwork upon which sex education depends. This requires, I think, challenging each way sex education remains tied to sexual labor. To be clear, this should not be done for the sake of continuing to delegitimize the lives of those who participate in the sexual activities stigmatized here. Instead, the purpose of this challenge is to begin to dismantle the epistemological assumption underlying the entire normative and epistemological hierarchy of human labor at work in sex education—that to be deemed sexually “educated” or “knowledgeable” is grounded in normative ideals of capitalist subjectivity and laboring. The process of dismantling this assumption, and preventing the violence that it enables, then, rests on rejecting an economic framework for sexual knowledge altogether. Comprehensive sex education cannot, I think, do this on its own; to take sexuality's relationship to education seriously would mean challenging what constitutes knowledge in all subjects. We've already seen in many ways how science, literature, history, math, economics, and government are all not only implicated in this, but how sexual labor is itself connected to each of these projects.

Taking sexuality's relationship to education seriously also requires making visible precisely those issues that are all but impossible to discuss in schools today—the many ways in which sexuality is practiced as economic exchange *and* the many ways in which it is not. The problem in terms of the latter, I think, is that we are so uncomfortable with such ideas and possibilities, especially when discussed in proximity to children. But we must refuse to let these fears continue to act as an excuse for the marginalization of non-normative sexualities, relationships, and understandings of love and care, or for the continued maintenance of hierarchies of knowledge and value that dehumanize entire groups of people. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, this requires imagination: “the here and now is a prison house. We must strive in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there* . . . we must dream and enact new and better pleasure, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”³⁰ Following this radical imaginary work, I argue that we need to set aside the limited discourse about sex education as a debate between abstinence or comprehensive education, as well as the concern for what is practical and possible in schools. Instead, we must rethink alternative forms of sex education that work to disrupt its central relationship to sexual labor and neoliberal subjectivity. More specifically, if we want to work to disrupt these relationships, and conceive of kinds of educative moments

³⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1, emphasis original.

regarding sex and sexuality that aren't always mediated by capitalist norms and values, then we must establish alternative epistemological relationships between sexuality and education themselves.
