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# P E R S P E C T I V E S

## **Women's Sexual Agency at Work: A Review, Integration and Agenda for Future Research**

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*"Enter most organizations and you enter a world of sexuality...this can include a mass of sexual displays, feelings, fantasies, and innuendoes as part of everyday organizational life..."*  
- Hearn & Parkin, 1995, p 3

In addition to research that shows that a significant number of female workers have participated in social-sexual behaviors (e.g., Salzinger, 1997), women's expressions of sexuality can damage or enhance their work relationships with male and female colleagues (e.g., Lerum, 2004), influence how they are perceived by others (e.g., Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005), improve their personal well-being (e.g., Salzinger, 1997), and enhance or diminish their work outcomes (e.g., Bradley, Chan, Brief, & Baskerville, 2005; Loe, 1996). We propose to review and summarize the extant research addressing women's expressions of sexuality at work to explain (a) why some women express their sexuality at work and also (b) why some sexual displays can be advantageous while others detrimental for the women who exhibit them. Our review will consolidate and synthesize quantitative and qualitative research from different disciplines, including sociology, psychology and management, to present an integrated model (see Figure) of the antecedents, moderators, and consequences for women's displays of sexuality at work and to highlight fruitful avenues for future research as well as implications for management practice. Interest in this area has surged over the past few decades (both in the popular press and academic circles), but we are unaware of a systematic review that examines women's sexual behavior at work. The aim of our review is to fill this gap in the literature.

The scope of our review will include studies related to women's sexuality at work that we will organize to document the antecedents, moderators, and consequences of women's sexual behaviors at work. We restrict our analysis to women's sexual agency, as opposed to men's, because the expressions of sexuality as well as the antecedents and consequences of these behaviors likely differ for men and women. We intend for our review to be the catalyst for future

## Women's Sexuality Review-2

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3 work on different forms of sexual behaviors at work from the perspective of women. Social  
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5 sexual behavior in our review will be defined as intentionally expressed behaviors and  
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7 expressions (here initiated by women) that have sexual implications, meanings, or goals. They  
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9 are not limited to acts of an intimate nature and can include behaviors that are directed towards  
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11 acquaintances, strangers, or even customers. We are excluding SH from our review because a  
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13 very small proportion of perpetrators of SH are women (O'Leary-Kelley et al., 2009) and also,  
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15 SH may have less to do with sexuality per se and more to do with power/reactions to identity  
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17 threats (see Berdahl, 2007). However, we do consider SH as one of the potential negative and  
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19 unintended consequences of women's social sexual behavior. Woman can express their sexuality  
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21 through their appearance, verbal and nonverbal communications, and behaviors, including, but  
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23 not limited to, flirting and wearing seductive clothing. These expressions may be designed to  
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25 elicit the sexual desires of others, to demonstrate or feign the woman's own sexual desires, or  
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27 simply to express a personal style or behavioral preference as defined by the woman.  
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35 In the first part of our paper, we review research on the factors that explain why women  
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37 express their sexuality at work. For example, women have been found to express their sexuality  
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39 at work because it is directly related to the requirements or expectations of their job (Gutek &  
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41 Morasch, 1982) such as with retailers (Hanser, 2005), strippers (e.g., Price, 2008; Trautner,  
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43 2005); flight attendants (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Mills, 2006), waitresses (e.g., Lerum, 2004;  
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45 Loe, 1996) and secretaries (e.g., Pringle, 1989). Further, because sexuality has been construed as  
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47 a more valuable resource than male sexuality, women are more likely in the position of 'selling'  
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49 sex to attain desired resources (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Thus, women who have less power  
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51 may be motivated to use their sexuality as an influence tactic. Our next section reviews research  
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53 on the consequences of women's expressions of sexuality, which has suggested both positive and  
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3 negative outcomes. Our review will fully examine the career, personal and interpersonal costs  
4 and benefits (e.g. access to networks, receipt of work-related favors) that accrue to women who  
5 express their sexuality at work. In the third section of our paper, we review research examining  
6 individual and contextual factors that may influence the relationship between women's  
7 expressions of sexuality and outcomes. For example, organizations or industries that are male-  
8 dominated (e.g., Ely, 1995), service-oriented (e.g., Hall, 1993), or sexually charged (e.g., Loe,  
9 1996) may not only determine the enactment of sexual workplace behaviors, but also how others  
10 react and whether such behavior is positively or negatively evaluated.  
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22 A theoretical contribution of our model is that it synthesizes findings from different  
23 disciplines into a general framework from which testable hypotheses can be derived. Also, given  
24 that very little is known about why some women decide to express their sexuality while others  
25 choose not to, the model presents possible moderators that might explain these differences. A  
26 practical contribution of our model is that it can help offer female employees and managers more  
27 insight into how their behaviors may influence others and have implications for their personal  
28 and organizational outcomes. At the same time, it directs male employees' and managers'  
29 attention to the roles that they might play in maintaining cultures or social structures in which  
30 these behaviors can produce undesirable effects. The relevance of, and interest in, this review on  
31 women's sexual agency at work are far-reaching given its interdisciplinary roots. Thus, we  
32 expect the review, theoretical model, and directions for future research to appeal to scholars in  
33 various areas (e.g., gender, politics, human resource policy and practice) as well as the non-  
34 specialist academic reader due to the nature of the behavior being explained. Further, this article  
35 should be germane to any management class that covers material relating to organizational  
36 behavior, power and politics, and human resource management.  
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Figure 1

## Model of Women's Expressions of Sexuality in Organizations

