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RITUAL APPRAISEMENT IN WHITE SINGLES'

BARS: FROM A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Mary Jo Deegan

The University of Chicago

Singles bars provide a unique opportunity to observe sexual norms and mores in action. This set of expectations is particularly visible in these spots because they accentuate the mobility and "meat market" aspects of selection of dating partners. The meat market bargaining process is an important part of this ritual introduction, and it is a major organizing concept in the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

These data have been gathered by participant observation in singles' bars weekly for one year, and periodically for 5 years. The bars covered were located in Kalamazoo, Benton Harbor, and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Chicago, Illinois. About 30 different bars were included in this survey at various points in time, reflecting changes in atmosphere with changes in time and management. Key characteristics of the populations frequenting the bars ranges from young, executive and stewardess types, to student groups, to black and white young people, and to urban populations, to semi-rural populations with a heavy mixture of local college graduates.

The focus of this paper is on white singles' bars

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"Young" is closely approximated by the "under 30" categorization which is not strictly chronological but fairly accurately reflects a 20's culture which is bounded by "over 21" and "under 30."

and it is written from a woman's perspective. The sociology of black bars involves a different relationship between members of the clientele, ways to establish self-identity, and dancing which plays a larger role in assessment of potentially interesting partners. The threat of violent exchanges is greater, in general, with one of the most obvious reasons being the location of many black bars in ghetto areas. Therefore, this analysis is restricted to predominantly white singles bars.

The methodology for collecting information includes the observation of male appraisal norms and subsequent violations of these social norms by the author. With the bar's atmosphere of loud talking, open appraisal of bodies by males, and flaunting of sexuality by females, it may superficially appear that there are few strict codes of conduct underlying these mannerisms. These rules do exist, however, and most people abide by them.

THE MEAT MARKET RITUAL

This ritual appraisal of the opposite sex may be approached from two distinct points of view: the male's and the female's. Therefore, they are analyzed separately, here.

Basically, the male meat market ritual appraises the female on various attractiveness ratings. One of the primary scores is obtained with a high rating on the body; this means medium to large breasts, small waist, medium to full hips, and well shaped legs. Other considerations then become clothing, carriage of the body, way of dancing if dancing is done there, face, hair (preferably long), and of course estimated approachability and availability for later sexual encounters. This ritual is akin to buying a good piece of meat at the market which becomes the definition of the process almost by its own logic.

The words used in assessment carry this "meat market" analogy. These include being a fresh piece of meat, wanted to be eaten, and for a man, being well-hung. Also, the popularization of this concept arises through the women liberation's use of the term in connection with beauty pageants. Being labeled as a side of beef is closely analogous and vividly conveys the similarity of being non-human and sub-human. 2

Blatant assessment of the female's bodily assets are part of the male method of encounter. This strategy is backed up by the male's dominance of

This interpretation of cattle reflects the cultural attitude towards animals, and it is not intended as a value statement of their intrinsic worth.

standing by and/or sitting at the bar which provides a good visual span of the movement and placement of women.

By comparison, the female counterpart of this ritual is subtler and more complex. Keys to male attractiveness include body build; broad shoulders, small waist, and narrow hips, and height, preferably 3-6 inches taller than the woman, as well as facial characteristics. Dancing is evaluated, but less severely than the women's since the female often still waits to be asked to dance and is often a better dancer than the white male.

Since desirable factors in a male include his socio-economic status and potential ability to finance "good" dates (i.e., expensive ones) there is a greater need to not confine assessment of bodily and physical attractiveness to the "desirability" rating of a male. This means that even "scrounges" may be potentially interesting if they may have a good car, apartment, or taste. This structural limitation on open appraisal gives a weaker support to emphasis on bodily attractiveness.

This less blatant appraisal is reinforced by other "feminine" traits which favor "demureness" in eye contact. Operationally, this means that women do not openly stare at a man and appraise him without openly inviting a male approach or rejection.

Schooled from childhood in the manners of "being nice" and not being so "immature" to measure people in strict physical concepts, women are taught to grow out of this adolescent stage. Men, on the contrary, are taught to sharpen their skills and to look on an ever increasing number of women as part of their "available" field of conquest. This means that the older a man gets, the more experience in appraisal he gets, the more success in this approach he receives (even allowing for rejections), and the number of eligible women increases. It is into this network of sophistication and support that the younger woman enters without social norms of open aggressiveness and/or equal appraisal systems available.

Actual encounters between the sexes take place after this assessment process and are not considered in this paper. Instead, the next topic of interest is the effect of violations of this ritual act and the norms governing it.

VIOLATION OF THE MALE MEAT MARKET NORMS

The author upon reaching the age of 21 immediately joined the mad scramble to go to singles bars. Being slightly marginal in her approach, she went to Chicago and tried out various personalities and stories on unsuspecting males. The initial participa-

tion was done on the basis of having fun and being non-involved--ritual bar hopping. This behavior was in direct contrast with many of my friends who approached these situations with ambivalent feelings of dread and enjoyment, and questions of attractiveness and desirability. Originally, the "bar system" was treated by me as a game to be conquered, I demonstrated how anyone could get selected by playing it correctly. This includes dressing provocatively but within a limit of not being openly available. Avoidance of sprayed and "ratted" hair was to be advised since this was associated with "easy girls" and prostitutes. Low-cut outfits went in the same category as well as overly tight clothing. Problems of access to a female are high barriers for the male since many women go in groups. This is necessary not only for safety in getting home, but also because a single woman is automatically suspected of being at the bar in order to go to bed with a man she'll "pick up" at the bar. ("Good girls" meet men.) There are few places, if any, where a woman can enter a bar alone and not receive a proposition from a male which when refused is countered by the male feeling indignant since the woman obviously "signaled"

this desire to be picked up. Large numbers of males come and go alone; they observe, drink, and talk, but these options are not available to women. This grouping behavior exhibited by women is, in turn, looked upon condescendingly by the men.¹ Women always stick together, are afraid to be independent, etc. are common male myths to account for this rational, structured pattern of responses to toher social contingencies. This norm, therefore, sets up a whole array of rituals which involve getting rid of the other girls, or approaching a whole set of women who may hear the refusal if there is one. Breaking into this circle is difficult and may cause a whole group of women to remain unapproached during the evening if they sit at a table.

One violation of the social norms is for a woman to go alone to a stand-up bar. This was done by the author and the men were told that I was looking for someone interesting to talk to. This brought the unexpected reaction of being flustered, sitting up straight, and trying to engage in serious conversation; something that is very rare for initial encounters

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This is interesting and direct contrast with Lionel Tiger's hypothesis that men gather in groups and that this is an indication of their natural "bonding" which leads to power and strength. He feels this does not happen with women and takes the jump from social norms to biological capacities. See Men in Groups. New York: Random House, 1969.

in singles bars. The author received a large number of dates as a result and the response by the men was that this was a really great thing to do! This positive re-enforcement of the then informal methodology led to further pushing of the norms.

One irritating facet of attending a singles bar for a woman is to get the meat market stare. Particularly painful is the long rows of groups of men who engage in this blatant assessment. This can lead to a large number of women's non-participation in this method of meeting available members of the opposite sex. This is also partially responsible for the depression at attending bars because everything is so "Superficial" and "Anti-human." The situation was reversed by the author's returning a blatant boobs and ass assessment with a penis one. Other similar or analogous evaluations can be made by looking over their head if they are shorter, or sideways glancing at their rear, and concluding by either a non-response or slight shaking of the head in a sideways motion. Also effective in reversing these "appropriate" assessments is to turn one's back immediately following this reaction.

The male response to these behaviors is strong. There is often blushing, spilling of drinks, anger

which is forcefully suppressed and furtive looking to see if anyone has observed this encounter.

A milder form of female norm breaking includes staring back. When the discovery is made that a male is appraising a female, the usual response is for the eye contact to cease and be focused elsewhere. Often there is no outward indication that contact has occurred although the participants suspect or know that it has. This process is reversed and staring and eye contact continued after discovery of appraisal. This led to a number of milder reactions similar to those mentioned above. If the male would take this as encouragement by the female, and the contact was not seen as desirable, eye contact would be broken and the male would continue to walk in the same direction but change his goal, thus saving face.

Non-hostile eye contact can be used by the female to indicate interest in the male, but this is not a social norm taught to many American females. Thus, the author could single out a desirable male, look at him, letting him break contact as often as he felt necessary, until he would respond openly with a "Who me?" by verbal mouthing or pointing to himself. Positive affirmation of this fact was viewed positively by many males. This form of "flirting" is not common due to the social norms often accepted in these bars.

WHY GO?

Singles' bars have very poor reputations for meeting desirable "steady" dates. No one expects to meet "anybody decent" there, and there is a long ritual of disaffirming any interest in meeting a serious dating partner there. Everyone goes for "fun." This, of course, is untrue and most women will readily admit with a little prodding that it would be nice to meet someone there.

Males have a myth that "nice girls" don't go to these bars and they are interested in looking over the situation or getting an easy lay. Also there is the opportunity to obtain liquor, but since these bars charge more than "local" type bars and pubs, drinking per se is not a prime group factor for going to these bars. Actual participation in this subculture by the author has shown that large numbers of males are also interested in meeting women to date and have human exchange and interaction.

This denial of a major role of singles bars; i.e., meeting and finding attractive members of the opposite sex, allows for the neutralization of the threatening aspects of attending the bar. Many people do not meet people to date at these bars. Aggressive males "on the make" seem to predominate because they are interested in making their mark and not

in the number of refusals encountered along the way. Shyer men have a more difficult time entering the system and fear refusals: and, therefore, their views seem underrepresented in female assessment of the male populations' interests and characteristics. On the other hand, "nice girls" do not know how to approach men in such a social setting, and, subsequently, they do not know how to give reassurance or support to the hesitant male.

The "liberated" women at these bars rarely ask men to dance first or initiate conversations in an effort to meet a man they find interesting. Women who would not be interested in maintaining such ritualized games do not attend these bars, although it is necessary to break these norms to avoid stereotyped female passive, dependent behavior. It is important to note, too, that the above analysis of ritual meat market behavior is rapidly changing in some meeting spots that are frequented by counter-culture people. The division of drug versus liquor consumption helps maintain these distinctions between the "straighter" singles bar clientele and "heads" and "street people."

The segregated interactions between members of the female sex are particularly noticeable. Women as groups don't initiate contacts with other women in groups. This would make approaches from men even less likely. Therefore, other women are perceived as threats to obtaining male initiated overtures of interest. Since women don't come in alone, meeting of new female friends is non-existent. Since men do come alone, though, they do have an opportunity to meet other men. Comparisons of the available women can be exchanged. This also serves to bolster weak egos which do not feel ready to enter the foray described above.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been a social-psychological analysis¹ of the ritual appraisal of women and men in white singles bars. This has involved the violation of "etiquette" norms in these bars and the subsequent responses and consequences of these actions have been noted. These findings represent a female perspective

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This is also similar to work which is being done by some people in urban anthropology.

which has been underutilized as a methodological and theoretical approach to courtship patterns. The discovery of the norms which maintain the structure for interaction with its resultant patterns of interaction and distorted perception of the primary role of singles bars; i.e., to meet members of the opposite sex, were examined through the use of the concept of the meat market appraisal utilized by both sexes to evaluate each other.

It is also important to note that there is no assessment of "prostitution" bars, strip joints, topless bars, etc. With the emphasis on the desire to "swing" in the singles bar setting, it is patently obvious that there are other more openly sexual encounter spots for obtaining this type of contact and exchange. The singles bars do participate in this sexual mating/swapping/swinging behavior, but to a far smaller degree than that assumed in popular culture and everyday life. Few males and females leave together after meeting in a bar, and often there are large numbers of men and women who don't even talk to members of the opposite sex in the course of the evening.

Self-selection of participants is phenomenal. There are rarely any women who look over 30 years of age. The number of older men is higher, but even

here the number is small. The socially attractive "magazine" type looks predominate with the women making a greater effort at grooming than the men.

Feelings of depression and non-participation are cited by both sexes and people who really openly "enjoy" going to bars are in the minority. Participation in this cycle of bar hopping is often limited to a year or two. This may be due to entering a more permanent alliance with another member of the opposite sex, but it is suggested that it is also due to becoming "tired" of the game.

Casualties in these bars are high and yet they remain a significant part of pop culture's swinger image, and a re-enforcer of male and female "traditional" images and patterns of behavior. Participation in this subculture is favorable to idealized "futuristic" norms favoring rapid change, instant intimacy, and non-commitment, but it is rarely analyzed as a fairly traditional source and method for meeting desirable members of the opposite sex.