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SHORT COMMUNICATION

SPHINXISM AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON: THE OPPOSITE REACTION TO MORAL PANIC TOWARD WOMEN'S PLIGHT AND PREDICAMENT

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ABSTRACT

The article offers the term Sphinxism to describe a phenomenon whereby various modes of women's predicament is ignored by social agents; Sphinxism is a term we coin to describe cases in which a woman experience sorrow, however some people do not make any effort to help her on the micro or the macro level. We show that instead of expressing moral panic toward misbehavior against women, culturally inscribed social representations of women entail reactions of indifference, steadfastness and unshakeability by witnesses of women's suffering and plight. We demonstrate our concept of Sphinxism in empirical data showing the failure to help women who seek life partners but live in a prolonged singlehood. A research project conducted by us involved interviews with twenty-five Israeli Jewish matchmakers. Findings suggest that religious Jewish individuals' attitude is not monolithic and reflects either moral panic or sphinxism toward older singles. We draw on these findings and generalize to other women's sources of plight such as conjugal violence, sexual harassment and discrimination at the labor market.

INTRODUCTION

The sphinx is a monumental sculpture of a mythical creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. There are several sphinxes monuments however the most famous one is the Sphinx of Giza which is located on the Giza Plateau on the west bank of the Nile in Giza, Egypt. The face of the Sphinx is generally believed to represent the Pharaoh Khafre. Its size is 238 feet (73 m) long from paw to tail, 66.3 ft (20.21 m) high from the base to the top of the head and 62.6 feet (19 m) wide at its rear haunches. This a limestone statue of a reclining sphinx, is estimated to have been built by ancient Egyptians of the Old Kingdom during the reign of the Pharaoh Khafre (2558–2532 BC). The face of the sphinx is static and obviously can never move or react to any factors in its environment. According to Philosopher Blanchot (Holland, 1995), one of the interpretations of the gaze of the sphinx is the relationship of one to an Other. Any occurrence or spectacle in front of it entails no responses or changes in its facial expression, leaving the impression of an indifferent and unshakable "character" of the sphinx, which seems detached to its surrounding. We therefore wish to coin the term *Sphinxism* to describe a phenomenon whereby various modes of human beings' predicament is ignored by social agents. Specifically, we focus on *Sphinxism* as a highly charged concept which has much potency in describing cases in which a woman experiences sorrow, however nobody makes any effort to help her on the micro or the macro level. Instead of expressing moral panic (Cohen, 1972) toward misbehavior

against women, culturally inscribed social representations of women entail reactions of indifference, steadfastness and unshakeability by witnesses of women's suffering and plight. In a similar vein, we call *sphinxist gaze* a behavior of witnessing women's plight as well as unfair treatment without trying to prevent the wrong doing or help the suffering woman. The verb '*sphinxisize*' aptly describes the avoidant attitude while witnessing an occurrence of a woman being mistreated, abused or humiliated. For example, *Sphinxism* constitutes a failure to help women who seek life partners but live in a prolonged singlehood owing to difficulties in finding a suitable one (Bokek-Cohen, 2016). A research project conducted by us involved interviews with twenty-five Israeli Jewish matchmakers, who told us about members of their community that demonstrate a *sphinxist gaze* at never married older women and refrain from introducing young single men to them despite the great significance of marriage and family typical of their society (Engleberg, 2009; Bokek-Cohen and Ravitsky, 2017). We draw on these findings and generalize to other women's sources of plight. For example, over the past five years there was a great rise in the number of sexual assaults in Israel. Although some sex criminals were put in jail, most people who witness verbal sexual harassment of women by their bosses or colleagues remain silent and pretend as if they do not feel that something is wrong with this behavior (Bowman, 1993; Quinn, 2002). Another example is the *sphinxist gaze* at women who are discriminated against in the workplace. Much ink has been spilled about how women receive unfair treatment in rewarding and/or promotion decisions at the labour market (Marshall, 2003; Heilman, & Eagly, 2008; Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009). We conclude

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with some personal reflections and comments regarding the term of *sphinxism* we introduced above. We hold that the *sphinxism* is a negative phenomenon and we stress that people should be educated and advised to refrain the *sphinxist gaze*. For a better world as well as for the improvement of the wellbeing of mankind in general, and that of women in particular, witnesses of women's predicament should better replace it with an empathetic gaze and a more proactive attitude and predisposition toward helping the *sphinxized* women worldwide.

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