

Unpacking sexually transmitted ethics

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

In a recent interview with an online publication, I used the term [“sexually transmitted ethics”](#). I wasn’t referencing published work, and yet, while the phrase mightn’t have a scholarly history, I don’t believe the concept to be totally new.

The article I was quoted in, in part, questioned why audiences are polarised by figures like PR queen [Roxy Jacenko](#).

Among the many explanations I proposed for the divisiveness – and there are, indeed, *a deluge* - I named sexually transmitted ethics: that the company one keeps – in Jacenko’s case: the man she chooses to sleep with – can negatively impact her reputation, her brand.

[My quote was then reprinted](#) today in an article on Huma Abedin (who I have written about [here](#))
. In light of this, I thought I’d take a few words to expand on the thinking behind my use of the term.

Jacenko’s husband, Oliver Curtis, was jailed in 2016 for insider trading. His dodgy dealings – his making of money through trading with access to non-public information; think Martha Stewart – forced onlookers to question a) how much Jacenko knew about his transacitons and b) whether her lifestyle was propped up by his ill-gotten gains.

Jacenko came from money and has made a motza on her own: my view is that it’s highly problematic to think that her lifestyle exists purely because of her criminal husband. Truth however, has little currency in 2017 and in the wash-up Jacenko comes to be connected to the dodgy, to the deceitful. Think Carmela Soprano.

Sexually transmitted ethics of course, has a much richer history than Jacenko.

Women have always been thought of – have been *valued* – in the context of the men in their

lives. That women have their father's surname until they get their husband's highlights the transfer not only of mere ownership from one man to another – an archaic idea, sure, but one with tangential relics nonetheless – but more so, one of affiliation: she is now associated with a new surname and a whole new patriarch.

And when that man does something wrong, the woman often becomes collateral damage: she gets implicated in a scandal because it is often impossible to conceive that she didn't know *something*

: that she didn't know, for example, that he was cheating; didn't know he was molesting their daughter; that he was keeping a second family in the basement; that he was murdering sex workers; that the back shed full of brand new runners *wasn't* some savvy eBay deal.

It often seems completely preposterous that the woman doesn't know how the man she shares a mattress with actually spends his time.

And we seem to focus on this idea – what she knew, when she knew it – rather than questioning all the reasons why a woman might have known something but didn't do anything. Or might have speculated by didn't probe.

Because we don't have sympathy for women who are in situations with men who are - in varying degrees - awful.

Because even if a woman's Manolo Blahnik's aren't being paid for by dirty money, even if she didn't push in that knife, bury the body or play any part whatsoever in his shenanigans, we assume that there's *something* to be revealed about her own ethics. That to sleep with a man who could do this - to share a life with such a person - must reveal *something* about her. That she's another of his hapless victims at best, or a mercenary at worst.

Jacenko and Abedin have already been mentioned in this article, Hillary Clinton is another excellent illustration of a woman whose reputation has suffered enormously for the sins of her husband. This isn't the only reason she lost the 2016 election, no, but one might argue – I

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certainly would – that the court of public opinion was so much harder on her for choosing to stay with Bill than we ever were about where he stuck his pecker (#).

Of course, this is all an extrapolation of the idiom “if you lie down with dogs you get fleas”. But it’s also an extraordinarily gendered concept. Women, by virtue of them still being construed as inescapably linked to the men who fathered them or, more commonly, the men who’ve penised them, suffer this disproportionately. Men might get screwed over by women, sure, but because we think of men as a contained unit – as independent agents, rather than figures propped up by their ladyfolk – the public is nowhere near as harsh on them if ever such a story becomes public.

This isn’t an argumentative essay. While I think women are often victims of the men in our lives, equally, there exists a complicity spectrum relevant here, charting completely unknowing as one end through to complete complicit at the other. In fact, truth be told, if I had more time and words at my disposal, perhaps instead of a spectrum I’d propose a multi-axis model where one axis charts knowledge, the other factors in freedom to act. But that’s a task for another day. Here, I’ve chosen just to elaborate on a few words I used in an interview which I think points to a much broader gendered phenomenon.

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(#) For clarity, I am referencing Libby’s (Kathy Bates) quote, “He’s poked his pecker in some sorry trash bins”, from the excellent film [Primary Colors \(1998\)](#) which is about the Clintons.

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